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# Truancy Intervention Protocols in Olmsted County

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# Truancy Intervention Protocols in Olmsted County

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

# TRUANCY INTERVENTION PROTOCOLS

## **Abstract**

Truancy has historically been dealt with through punitive measures and associated with specific social groups. Contemporary research has shown that truancy is a complex issue that is not necessarily associated with any group and has a variety of underlying causes. These causes can include mental or chemical health issues, child protection issues, other family factors, or problems within the school. Participants from schools within Olmsted County, Minnesota were interviewed to assess the effectiveness of their truancy intervention protocols. Based on these reports, successful protocols incorporate flexibility into a standard process to benefit the student, the family, and the school. Successful programs understand the needs of each individual student and do whatever is necessary to support the student and family. Effective programs require a commitment of a team of school and county staff. A significant amount of time, teamwork, and communication goes into the process—from first identifying the at-risk students through finding a viable solution to each case and aim to avoid excessive punitive measures. This type of program was effective for both suburban and rural schools and should be considered by any schools continuing to experience issues with truancy.

*Keywords:* truancy, intervention, protocols

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### Truancy Intervention Protocols in Olmsted County

Truancy continues to be a problem throughout the United States. From the time school attendance became mandatory in the later part of the 19th century, truancy has been a problem (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). Studies have shown that truant students are less likely to graduate, earn a smaller income, and are more likely to engage in risky behaviors including drug use and committing crimes (Garry, 1997).

In the U.S., the legal definition of truancy varies by state. Because of these differences, habitual or continual truancy can be broadly defined as missing a specified amount of school within a specified time frame. In Minnesota, middle and high school students are considered truant if they miss at least three class periods on at least three days in a school year without a valid excuse (Minn. Stat. ch. 260A, §1, 2014). The state requires that each school district notify parents and guardians when a child becomes continually truant and what resources are available to help resolve the truancy (Minn. Stat. ch. 260A, §2, 2014). There is no statewide mandate on a protocol for addressing truancy issues. Therefore, school districts create their own protocols for intervening with truant students. Minnesota Statute 260A, sections 03-07 (2014) offer remediation options that may include school attendance review boards, truancy service centers, county attorney intervention, or some combination of the three.

The Ramsey County attorney's office has implemented a Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) (Ramsey County Attorney, 2015). TIP is a three-step program designed to increase attendance by working with the student, parents, school, and county attorney. Step one involves the county attorney meeting with parents to review the importance of children being in school. If attendance does not improve, a Student Attendance Review

Team (SART) meets to create a plan to address the absences. In the third and final step, “the County Attorney will take legal action against the student, the parents, or both” (Ramsey County Attorney, 2015, para. 4).

Within a single school, the reasons for truancy may vary widely between students. Identifying an effective protocol to reach out to students and their families is vitally important in resolving truancy. During the 2014-2015 school year, a school district in Olmsted County piloted a modified version of the Ramsey County TIP program in a middle school and a high school with the hopes of correcting ineffective methods. Based on an interview with the district truancy coordinator, the pilot was overwhelmingly successful in reaching out to the families. Each of the first two steps in the piloted protocol resulted in reduction of the number of truancy cases by about half. In the piloted protocol, once a case has been identified, an individualized treatment plan was tailored for each student.

The purpose of this study is to survey school staff within the public high schools and middle schools in Olmsted County, Minnesota to identify themes in the current truancy intervention protocols. School staff eligible for this study will include administrators, counselors, social workers, or any other school faculty member currently involved in the current truancy program. There are seven school districts with at least a portion of their borders contained within Olmsted County. Six districts can be described as rural while the remaining district is suburban. Because truancy is only defined for students ages 12-17, only high schools and middle schools will be evaluated.

In this study, the following research questions will be examined: (1) what are the current truancy intervention protocols, (2) how effective are the current protocols, and (3)

what makes them effective? Identifying common effective elements across different districts will provide validating evidence. It is also likely that effective elements used in a limited number of districts may be beneficial to others and could be incorporated into their existing protocols.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout the literature, the risk factors of truancy are well established. A significant amount of research has also been presented on potential interventions. In general, the risk factors and interventions tend to fall within or across four main domains: (1) student-based, (2) family-based, (3) school-based, and (4) community-based (Sutphen et al., 2010). One problem when assessing the findings is that the definition of truant and habitually truant varies across states. Furthermore, the time at when court ordered petitions are filed varies by school district.

While reviewing the literature it also became clear that the definition of truancy varied across papers. Kearney (2008) stresses that further research into truancy needs to continue but that teams involved in the research process should collaborate to create standard, comparable definitions for habitual truancy and outcome measures to increase the generalizability of any findings.

Truancy research is further complicated by the multitude of professions that are impacted by truancy. Social workers, school administrators, psychologists, sociologists, law enforcement, and others view truancy through a specific set of beliefs and notions which mean research presented by each of these fields may differ. As we will see in detail later in this section, truancy has many potential underlying causes and these causes may impact members of different professions in different ways. While the four general



domains have been identified, each episode of truancy is unique to a particular student, and the most effective intervention for a particular student will involve only the necessary professionals.

To begin to assess what schools are doing to prevent and resolve truancy, it is helpful to see where Minnesota's truancy definition and policy falls when compared to those of other states. Following this comparison, each of the four previously stated general causal domains will be examined. In addition to established empirical findings supporting the causes, potential treatment intervention protocols for those domains will be discussed.

### **Inconsistent Definitions**

There is not a federal definition for habitually truant and each individual state sets up its own definition and rules for enforcement. Simple comparisons of truancy rates across states are impossible as the standard of measurements differ. Even across school districts, definitions can differ as some may count a skipped class as a full day absence (Kearney, 2008). Reviewing the information gathered by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the range of habitually truant varies from two or more occurrences in a year to twenty or more per year (Frey, 2011). Minnesota Statutes state that a child is habitually truant if they have seven or more unexcused absences, (Minn. Stat. ch. 260A, §1, 2014) giving Minnesota the 12th strictest among the 22 states summarized by the ECS (Frey, 2011). Because all research studies investigating truancy take place in a specific environment with a certain set of rules, careful consideration must be made of any findings to ensure it is comparable to other studies.

Unfortunately, empirical evidence of truancy intervention programs is limited, partly due to the varying definitions across studies. Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, and Kelly (2013) did a systematic review of the literature to identify empirical studies that reported sufficient data to determine effect sizes. Between 1990 and spring 2009, only 28 articles met their inclusion criteria. Based on these findings, the reported mean increase in school days is 4.69 days (Maynard et al., 2013). Again, Kearney's (2008) idea that further research should use standardized definitions becomes important. Identifying standard definitions would allow for standard tracking and reporting tools useful for developing research that could eventually lead to the corroboration or the refusal of the mean 4.69 day increase (Maynard et al., 2013).

### **Domains of Risk Factors and Interventions**

Four general domains of risk factors and interventions have been identified. The four domains are student-based, family-based, school-based, and community-based. Resolving truancy problems would be easier if each case was completely contained in a single domain, it is common to find elements from each domain present in truancy cases. For the sake of discussion, each domain will be presented. A discussion of overlapping themes follows the individual summaries.

**Student-based domain.** Some influences of truancy are directly attributable to an individual student. These elements include, but are not limited to, mental and physical health, personal attitudes towards school, and risky behaviors.

***Physical and mental health.*** The physical and mental health of the student can play a role in truant behavior. Kearney (2008) conducted a review of recent literature and was able to identify a list of medical and psychological problems linked to absenteeism.

Absences from school for major injuries, cancer, or HIV/AIDS seem completely expected. However, Kearney (2008) reports that asthma has become a common cause for absences. Kearney also reports that somatic conditions are associated with anxiety truant students with the conditions ranging from 26.5% (Egger, Costello, & Angold, 2003) to 79.4% (Honjo et al., 2001) in two different studies.

In a prospective study of two schools in Ontario, Canada, Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro (1998) found that truant students had lower self-esteem and more anxiety than non-truant students. Student health and attitudes play a role in student attendance. Mental health issues, learning disabilities, and physical health issues are all associated with truancy (Lawrence, Lawther, Jennison, & Hightower, 2011; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). DeSocio et al. (2007) and Corville-Smith et al. (1998) both report factors such as low self-esteem, high anxiety, depression, and a feeling of helplessness are underlying causes for student absenteeism.

***School refusal behavior.*** One cause of school absenteeism is student refusal behavior. Students who have increased stress and anxiety levels while at school characterize school refusal behavior (Lauchlan, 2003). The added anxiety may come from a variety of sources – social interactions, relationship with the teacher, and so on. One key difference between school refusal behavior and truancy is that the parents of students with school refusal behavior are fully aware of their child's absence from school whereas the parents of students who are truant are commonly not aware of the absence (Lauchlan, 2003). The distinction here is subtle and sometimes complicated to notice.

As a method to identify school refusal behavior, Haight, Kearney, Hendron, and Schafer (2011) validated parent and child survey tools called the School Refusal

Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R). Determining if absence from school is from school refusal behavior can help identify the appropriate interventions (Haight et al., 2011). Making students feel more comfortable at school by providing coping mechanisms for their stress could be crucial in this subset of students (Haight et al., 2011).

*Personal attitudes towards school.* Attwood and Croll (2006) found an association between truancy and negative school attitudes. Interviews with 17 students showed annoyance with classmate behavior and a lack of appreciation for the curriculum were reasons for staying away from school. Some of the students reported that they had issues with authority figures as well.

Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, and Peters (2012) found four distinct classes of students. Latent profile analysis revealed achievers, moderate students, academically disengaged, and chronic skippers. The achievers consisted of students who had higher levels of school engagement and higher grades. The moderate students were engaged in school but had average grades. The main difference between the disengaged and chronic skippers was the number of absences since both were not engaged in school and both had lower grades. Treatment plans in each of these groups would be vastly different – adding more challenging coursework would not be effective in bringing back chronic skippers.

Get Schooled is a national non-profit organization that believes students can invest in their future by making positive changes in their own lives (“Skipping to nowhere,” 2012). Based on their research with students, students do not believe parents will notice they skipped and that skipping school will not have a significant impact on their education (“Skipping to nowhere,” 2012). The Get Schooled foundation works to

educate students on the long-term impact skipping school can have and it helps to increase self-motivated changes.

*Engagement in rebellious behaviors.* Flaherty, Sutphen, and Ely (2012) reviewed urinalysis data from arraigned students who were truant within a two-year span. A small positive association of substance abuse was found between the student with truancy problems and the caregiver. Flaherty et al. (2012) state the findings from other studies indicate that substance abuse and truancy are related but that the relation is reported in both directions – substance abuse leads to truancy and truancy leads to substance abuse. While substance abuse may not necessarily be causal, resolving truancy may remove some opportunities for students to be using drugs.

Logistic regression was used by Henry (2007) to identify potential univariate associations with truancy. This analysis used the Monitoring the Future (MTF) data set. The MTF has a multistage sampling scheme that seems to allow a more representative sample. In this study, truancy was defined as skipping school one or more times within the four weeks prior to the survey (Henry, 2007). Despite the different definition of truancy, cigarette smoking, alcohol use, intoxication, and marijuana use were found to be positively associated with being truant (Henry, 2007).

Kearney (2008) does note that in many of the studies looking at these factors, the causality is unknown. The author does not doubt that some link exists, only that further research is required to determine if the behaviors lead to truancy or vice versa (Kearney, 2008). Assessing the causality direction in this area will be difficult as it is unreasonable to randomize children in a prospective study and instruct a group of them to use illicit drugs or engage in other risky behaviors. One can hypothesize that reducing the number

of truant students would have some effect on reducing the number of students experiencing these behaviors though the actual amount remains unknown (Kearney, 2008).

**Family-based domain.** Sometimes, a student may want to be in school but elements within the family unit are the limiting factor. Factors such as racial/ethnicity background, family make-up, parental attitudes and involvement, parental health, and socio-economic status have been associated with truancy (DeSocio et al., 2007; Garry, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2011; McNeal, 1999; Teasley, 2004).

McNeal (1999) used the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to look at 1988 eighth graders and their longitudinal follow-up data. Within this group, race/ethnicity, single-headed household, parent-child discussion, parent involvement and monitoring were all significant predictors for truancy (McNeal, 1999). Among the race/ethnicity comparison, blacks and Hispanics were more likely to be truant compared to whites but Asians were not. While there are certainly associations between race and socio-economic status, it is plausible to consider parental and cultural views of education explaining at least a small portion of the difference (McNeal, 1999).

There are a number of reasons parents may not be involved. Studies have found that parents may have limited time due to working multiple jobs or taking care of other relatives (DeSocio et al., 2007; Garry, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2011; Teasley, 2004). Another reason for a lack of parental involvement may be cultural views of the importance of education – if the parents did not need an education, then why should their kids need an education. As the curriculum has shifted over the years to match the needs of the workforce in a global market, teachers are relying on parental involvement to help

with homework and their children's progression through school. If the student is not getting the necessary support at home or school, self-esteem could drop which could lead to an increase in truancy as identified in previously mentioned studies.

The analysis of the MTF data (Henry, 2007) supports these findings as well. Students in families with lower levels of parental education, family make-up of one or fewer parents, and longer periods of unsupervised time were found to be more likely to be truant than students having parents who graduated college, live with both parents, and were more regularly supervised, respectively. Attwood and Croll (2006) also found less parental involvement associated with truancy. Parents who are college graduates are more likely to see the importance of education and are more likely to be able to make time to be involved with their children's school activities (Attwood & Croll, 2006).

The dynamics of the parental-child relationship impact whether a student attends school. Within a set of truant high school students in Ontario, Canada, truant students had more perceived issues with parental acceptance, consistent discipline, parental control, and family conflict when compared to grade, gender, and school matched regular attendee controls (Corville-Smith et al., 1998).

Other family related causes of truancy have been identified as well. Studies have found that some students miss school because they are the ones assigned to care for relatives. Also, some students work to help support their family (DeSocio et al., 2007; Garry, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2011; Teasley, 2004). Family mobility is also a cause as students feel less attachment to their new schools (Attwood & Croll, 2006; DeSocio et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2011).

**School-based domain.** Schools can also be part of the truancy problem.

Relationships between students and teachers and inadequate attendance policy enforcement may increase truancy.

One significant factor identified across many studies is the teacher-student relationship (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; DeSocio et al., 2007; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Attwood and Croll (2006) suggest based on their interviews with students who are truant that there are two types of negative relationships – anti-authority and teachers not fulfilling expectations. The students with truancy problems in this study felt alienated by the teachers and indicated a lack of support and experiencing an environment that was not conducive nor nurturing.

Improving the student-teacher relationship can help some students with truancy problems stay in school. DeSocio et al. (2007) investigated the impact of pairing students up with teacher mentors. Using a single high school, DeSocio et al. (2007) randomized students to a teacher mentor intervention group or to a control group. Teachers were invited to be mentors to the truant students and were provided training and instruction on how to be supportive. The mentors were encouraged to work as liaisons between the student and other teachers. This study compared the intent-to-treat group ( $n = 29$  enrolled &  $n = 37$  unable-to-enroll) to the controls ( $n = 37$ ). The students within the intent-to-treat group were more likely to remain enrolled in school than the controls. The outcome of this study, not dropping out prior to the end of the school year, differs from habitually truancy, although, does lend support that teacher-student relationships can play a key role in resolving truancy problems.



Consistent discipline by parents can play a role in truancy, as well as consistent enforcement of attendance policies. Sutphen et al. (2010) and Teasley (2004) both report inconsistent enforcement or bad policies in general as risk factors. DeSocio et al. (2007) describes how poor attendance record keeping was observed in their tested high school which confounded the school's absentee data. In this school, some students were tardy and did not follow the late check-in procedure while others were present for first period role call and then were absent from later classes (DeSocio et al., 2007).

In an analysis of surveyed elementary schools, Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found some practices were correlated with increasing attendance and reducing absenteeism. These practices included rewarding students for attendance, keeping open communication with families including having specific school contacts, and having after-school programs. Again, the findings of this study have some limitations which merit discussion. This was an analysis of a convenient sample of elementary schools that responded to the survey request (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). The generalizability of these findings to secondary schools across the country is unknown. However, these findings seem consistent with the identified family- and school-based risk factors previously discussed. Providing after-school activities may help students with difficult home environments. Effective communication has been shown to solve problems – parents are much more likely to be involved in programs which they know exist and when they who to contact.

**Community-based risk factors.** A student's community can have an impact on truancy. Lower socio-economic status and higher rates of violent crimes, substance abuse, and family mobility have been shown to associate with an increased rate of

truancy (Garry, 1997; Sutphen et al., 2010; Teasley, 2004). Communities where little parental involvement is common are associated with truancy (Kearney, 2008).

Communities with higher rates of crime are also likely to have an increased rate of truancy (Jones, Lovrich, & Lovrich, 2011). If one considers the idea that children are impressionable and observing negative events within their community, it seems reasonable that children will mimic and absorb those negative values, behaviors, or attitudes as normal. Having after school programs broadly, whether done by the school or other groups within the community such as The Boys and Girls Club or YMCA, are one way to reduce the number of unsupervised children.

**Multiple domains and variety of students.** Many potential factors influence truancy and frequently the underlying cause for an individual truant may incorporate elements from more than one domain. Several studies have found associations with factors in multiple domains (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Henry, 2007; McNeal, 1999; Sutphen et al., 2010; Vaughn et al, 2013). Some studies have even tried multivariable approaches to reduce the number of potential predictors (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Maynard et al., 2012; McNeal, 1999). The findings of these studies generally support the notion that multiple domains must be considered and that students with truancy problems truly are a heterogeneous group (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Bimler & Kirkland, 2001; Corville-Smith et al., 1998; Henry, 2007; Maynard et al., 2012; McNeal, 1999; Sutphen et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2013). According to Corville-Smith et al. (1998), the authors state that, “truancy is a complex phenomenon involving the joint effects of multiple factors” (p. 637). Teasley (2004)

recognizes the multidimensionality of truancy and recommends that social workers look at each case independently to be able to address the individual needs of each student.

Bimler and Kirkland (2001) had “experts” in truancy rank 73 causal statements that lead to the research team identifying 10 themes. The themes were grouped into three general styles. The three styles make sense based on findings in other studies – students having problems with truancy have an unsupportive family environment, are not motivated, and are more invested in social relationships than education (Bimler & Kirkland, 2001).

Corville-Smith et al. (1998) also tried to identify a reduced model for predicting truancy. This study found school perceptions, parental discipline, parental control, self-concept, conflict, and social competence reach statistical significance in the reduced model. A review of these predictors illustrates that multiple domains are important – personal characteristics, family factors, and school factors. While this study showed their model did a good job discriminating the truant and regular attendees, no validation cohort was tested to assess the generalizability of the model (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Because only 27 pairs of truant and regular attendees were included in this analysis but a large number of potential risk factors were included in the model, it is quite possible there was over-fitting of the model and the reliability or validity of some of the predictors could be suspect (Corville-Smith et al., 1998). Despite this issue, the results are in general agreement with the findings of other studies like the analysis done by Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, and Abdon (2013) which showed student characteristics, parental involvement, school engagement and other externalizing behaviors were important.

Kearney and Graczyk (2014) suggest a response to intervention approach to truancy. Their proposal would include three tiers – universal, targeted, and intensive intervention. The universal tier includes the general education of all students and parents about the importance of things like school attendance, parental involvement, and programs available (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). All students are assessed a few times per school year to try and identify those having difficulties attending school. Those with truancy problems were moved to the targeted tier and are followed up on more frequently. Peer mentoring or counseling may be activities done for these students (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The set of students who continue to have problems would move to the intensive tier and be followed regularly. At the intensive tier, the school could intensify the programs at the targeted level or begin the process of seeking legal consequences (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

This particular approach is interesting as the universal stage takes a proactive approach to trying to identify students with truancy problems. Instead of waiting until a student has missed so much school that it has become a burden to catch up, ongoing support could be provided and it could be possible to keep students more current in their coursework. Kearney and Graczyk (2014) also point out that this type of program is compatible with other programs. Schools would be able to identify within each tier what protocols or programs are effective in their particular situations.

Lawrence et al. (2011) reported results of an early intervention treatment program within a southeastern U.S. school district. Once a student reaches five unexcused absences, parents are notified via a warning letter. If further absences continue, a meeting takes place between the student, parents, and school staff during which time the

student and parents are educated on the importance of school attendance. If things are still not resolved, notifications from the state attorney are given to the student and parents and another meeting takes place – this time including a uniformed detective (Lawrence et al., 2011). Parents must sign a contract at this meeting indicating they are aware that legal consequences may be pursued if the absences continue. Lawrence et al. (2011) reported that the participating elementary schools within the district saw a reduction of habitual truants between 22 and 68 percent. The authors do point out that while there was an overall positive trend, not all schools saw a decrease in truancy rates and some schools actually experienced an increase in truancy (Lawrence et al., 2011). This finding is important as it reiterates the idea that there is no one-size-fits-all program. In order to have effective programs, school districts must consider the heterogeneity of students with truancy problems.

There are many possible reasons some schools did not have positive results in the early intervention study (Lawrence et al., 2011). Even though the protocol in this published study was not successful overall, it is possible that certain stages were more effective than others. Unfortunately, this could not be assessed because stage specific data was not presented. For example, it is unclear how many families attended the first or second meetings at these schools (Lawrence et al., 2011). While the protocol seems reasonably sound in trying to get parents involved, the lack of provided data makes it unclear how successful these individual steps were. While not explicitly stated in the study, it is possible that the community these schools service may be inherently different from the communities of other participating schools. The early intervention program was instituted at a school district in the largest county of the state (Lawrence, et al., 2011).

This increases the likelihood that the communities are diverse in some ways. School districts may need to consider alternatives to a one-size fit all protocol for the entire district.

Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Fink, Hall, and Huffer (2008) attempted to look at the impact school social workers can have on truancy in secondary schools in a mid-western school district. In the study, they tracked the number of times a social worker intervened and categorized it into a group corresponding well with the four main domains – student, family, school, and outside agencies (Newsome et al., 2008). The most common interventions were one-on-one meetings with the student. Using a prospective design, the students who received the interventions from the social workers did not experience a decrease in truancies compared to the matched controls. While the number of truancies did not decrease, some scores on the School Success Profile Measures did increase for the experimental group (Newsome et al., 2008). School satisfaction, self-esteem, and academic performance all increased (Newsome et al., 2008). One potential solution to increase the effectiveness of the social worker interventions could be to partner them with other early intervention programs.

Heilbrunn (2003) reported on the effectiveness of different interventions. Based on the data retrieved in Denver, about 68% of initial court hearings worked and students were back in school following the court appearance. Heilbrunn (2003) also states that the impact of “tough courts” cannot be assessed but they could work as a deterrent as well. Unfortunately, the case model systems did not have the adequate tracking to report official numbers. The social worker interviewed felt about 50% of students improved their attendance after meeting with them.

## **Summary**

Understanding the basis of each truancy case is essential in identifying the most appropriate and effective intervention. Each individual truancy case can vary widely from the next and being able to evaluate each case separately is necessary. The research shows that students with truancy problems are a heterogeneous group and no single intervention plan is going to be effective in each case.

In order to assess and successfully intervene in each case, communication with the student and family will need to be strong. Given that the students are missing school, connecting with the student may be difficult. Likewise, if the reason the student is truant due to family matters, reaching parents or guardians may prove to be time consuming as well. Successful programs for truancy intervention are going to require significant collaboration between the students, families, schools, and the community.

The goal of this study is to identify common themes across current truancy protocols within Olmsted County school districts. The prior research has shown that truancy problems arise from a multitude of sources and that no two cases are identical. Understanding why certain methods are effective or ineffective at one school may be beneficial to other schools in the area.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Truancy is an issue of interest to practitioners in many different fields. Social workers, teachers, school administrators, psychologists, and law enforcement officials could all be involved in a truancy case at some point during its life cycle. It is critical to recognize that the perceptions of people from each of these realms may be quite different. As the research shows, truancy cases are unique, and though there are general patterns

and associations that emerge, each student with truancy problems need to be assessed individually.

One way of looking at truancy is through the ecosystems theory. The foundation behind ecosystems theory is that an individual cannot be observed in a vacuum – the environment plays a crucial role (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). Mattaini and Huffman-Gottschling (2012) state that, “The ecosystems perspective should be understood not as a practice model . . . , but as a framework that tells one how to look at cases – a process that must happen prior to deciding what to do” (p. 299). Consider the four general risk factor domains – student, family, school, and community. These systems are not independent; they are very much interdependent. Ecosystems theory allows for the simultaneous review of the system as a whole with the benefit of permitting interventions to be introduced into any of the systems (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). For example, a student may not be able to get to school because she or he does not have transportation. Instead of intervening for one particular student, the community could implement a carpooling program that could benefit additional families.

A second theory that influenced this research project is person-centered theory (PCT). In Rogers-based PCT, a person has the ability and desire to change for the better and reach self-actualization (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). In this proposed study, it is assumed that students experiencing episodes of truancy do want to make things better for themselves, however there may be factors within the environment that are disrupting the process. By removing these barriers, a student would be allowed to continue the process of building toward self-actualization. The development is of a supportive and empathic relationship which is applicable in understanding truancy among



students (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). While school funding may be impacted by high absentee rates, this proposed study assumes that school staff, social workers, and other people related in the truancy intervention process have the well-being of the student as a central, motivating factor.

While these theories have their strengths when discussing truancy, they are not without their limitations. Ecosystems theory does not provide a specific guide on how to resolve problems that can lead to many possible solutions (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). Person-centered theory also believes that a person should be self-motivated to change and that the interventionist's role is not that of a problem solver (Mattaini & Huffman-Gottschling, 2012). While every piece of these frameworks does not align perfectly, they do provide a basis for developing the research plan.

These frameworks influenced the interview questions. Participants will be asked questions specifically targeting the risk factors within the four domains. Furthermore, participants will be asked to describe the background/position of their fellow truancy team members. The goal will be to assess the different perspectives that may be present within the team. Students with truancy problems are a heterogeneous group so it will be beneficial to see if the intervention team is also diverse.

To determine the current approaches being used by the public high schools within Olmsted County, qualitative interviews will be conducted with the school staff. The methodology behind these interviews and the data analysis plan follows in the next section.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

In this section, the researcher describes how this qualitative study was designed. The researcher sought to understand themes across current truancy protocols in the schools districts within Olmsted County, Minnesota. Grounded theory was utilized in this study to identify the themes from the participant interviews (Padgett, 2008).

### **Sampling Procedure**

The researcher identified the seven public school districts that are at least partially contained within Olmsted County. Across these districts, there are a total of seven public high schools, seven middle schools and two secondary schools. Only the largest school district in the county has more than one public high school or middle school. The enrollment at the schools in the district ranged from about 320 students to over 1,600 students (Minnesota Department of Education [DOE], 2015). Excluding the schools in the largest district, the highest enrollment was about 620 students (Minnesota DOE, 2016).

To maximize the information obtained, purposive criterion sampling was used to identify a person knowledgeable with the truancy program within each high school and middle school (Padgett, 2008). Eligible participants were required to have an active role in the current school truancy program. No specific titles were required to be eligible so the range of titles could have included school administrators, social workers, or law enforcement officials. Because purposive sampling is not random, and the participants were required to be involved in the truancy program, the information gathered during the interviews was likely to be more relevant to the study (Padgett, 2008).

To identify the eligible subjects, the researcher first reviewed each school website searching for information regarding the school's truancy program. This information

included the policy itself as well as potential contacts. If no information was found or no contact was clearly listed, the researcher called or e-mailed the school office and inquired who the appropriate contacts would be using a standardized script (see Appendix A). Once the list of eligible contacts was generated, the researcher contacted potential participants by e-mail or phone and provided an overview of the study. The researcher informed them that the primary method of interviewing would be face-to-face but that other interview methods that allowed for the audio recording of the interview, such as Skype, would be available if necessary. The questionnaire was also provided to the participant at this time (see Appendix B). As a final option to address the problem of not having time for an interview, potential participants were given the option to complete a survey with the interview questions as long as the research could contact them once to clarify their responses or ask further questions based on the initial responses. The participant was given one week to decide whether or not to participate in the study, sign the consent form, and schedule the interview.

### **Data Collection**

School level demographic data was collected using the Minnesota Report Card (MRC) tool published by the Minnesota DOE. The MRC contains publicly available data including enrollment counts, and racial and gender breakdowns of student populations amongst other factors.

Data was collected through interviews or via a survey with each participant. The interviews were semi-structured (Padgett, 2008) and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The questions included some demographic information about the respondent and then some free response questions targeted to truancy within the school district (see Appendix

B). Probing follow-up questions were asked by the researcher as to further expand upon or clarify a particular answer. All of these questions were created specifically for this study, therefore, there is no information on the validity and reliability of the questions. Prior to the interview, the questions were given to the participant to allow time to formulate meaningful responses. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were primarily done face-to-face and completed somewhere off school district property. However, when necessary, telephone interviews were conducted or surveys were received in lieu of the in-person meeting.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Participants were provided information regarding the study in advance. This information included a description of the study, the consent form (see Appendix C), and the list of interview questions. Participation in this study was on a volunteer basis only, and participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Interviews with the subjects were conducted in a private, mutually agreed upon location not on school district property. Each interview was audio-recorded. Following the interview, the audio recording was transcribed for analysis. After the transcription was complete, the audio file was destroyed. All paper files were stored in a secure location and all electronic files were stored on a password-protected laptop. The transcribed copies of the interviews will be destroyed at the end of the study, approximately May 31, 2016.

### **Data Analysis**

To assess the generalizability of the findings, all public middle and high schools within Olmsted County had publically available data retrieved from the Minnesota Department of Education Report Card tool (Minnesota DOE, 2016). Because of the

number of participants, schools were combined into two groups—one for the six participating schools and one for the ten non-participating schools. The student characteristics available were summarized using median and range. The participating schools were compared to the non-participating schools using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

The transcribed interviews were assessed using grounded theory methodology. In this method, the reviewer noted key findings in line with the text next to the raw data (i.e., the statement by the respondent) (Padgett, 2008). Once all the interviews had been coded, the codes were reviewed and grouped into themes and sub-themes using content analysis (Padgett, 2008). To validate the themes, the themes were compared against the transcribed interview to ensure the theme fit the intent of the respondent (Padgett, 2008).

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

One strength of this study is the inclusion of all the public high schools and public middle schools within Olmsted County. Because truancy protocols can and could vary by district, it was possible to get a wide range of different interventions or protocols by looking at all the districts. By having one district with three high schools and three middle schools, this study could assess the differences that can vary between schools under a single district policy.

There are some limitations to this study. First, only public schools were evaluated. Private schools and alternative learning centers are present in Olmsted County, and their students may come from a different background than the public high school students being represented in this study. Secondly, the researcher and the researcher's sibling attended schools within one of the districts included in the study. Next, the researcher is currently an employee at an elementary school in one of the

districts. Lastly, the researcher has done prior research into this topic at one of the schools included in this study. This prior research helped in the development of the interview questions.

### **Findings**

In this qualitative study, the researcher invited the 7 middle and 7 high schools and 2 secondary schools within districts that service Olmsted County students to participate in this study with the intent of identifying the effective and ineffective pieces of different truancy protocols. Contacts at each of the schools were identified and invited to participate in the study. From the completed interviews, themes and sub-themes were identified. The first main theme was flexibility of the process. Successful systems need to be able to adapt to the needs of the school as well as to the needs of the students. Commitment was another major theme present through all of the interviews. Time, teamwork, dedication, and effective communication were the subthemes presented as being important in resolving instances of truancy.

### **Participants**

Representatives of six schools across three school districts agreed to participate for an overall response rate of 38%. Three (50%) of the interviews were completed in-person, two (33%) were completed telephonically, and the last participant (17%) provided a response via survey. Among the five in-person and telephone interviews, the median interview lasted 44 minutes with a range of 32 to 67 minutes. To keep the participant's identity secret, each participant's identifiable information was changed so his or her thoughts could be presented in this paper.

All six participants were non-Hispanic Caucasian and males (50%) and females (50%) were equally represented. Four participants (67%) were primarily from high schools compared to two (33%) middle schools. One (17%) of the six participants was a social worker and the remaining five (83%) were all assistant principals. The median amount of time spent in their current role was 5.5 years (range: 1.5-19). Four (67%) of the participants had earned their master's degree.

Summary measures of the students at the participating schools were compared to the students at non-participating schools using publically available data from the Minnesota Department of Education Report Card tool (Minnesota DOE, 2016), and the results are presented in Table 1. The median enrollment at participating schools was 823 (range: 400 to 1583) students compared to a median of 459 (range: 259 to 1295) at non-participating schools which was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level (Kruskal-Wallis  $X^2 = 3.4$ ;  $p = 0.065$ ). The participating schools had higher median proportions of special education students (11.1% versus 9.25%, Kruskal-Wallis  $X^2 = 5.2$ ;  $p = 0.023$ ) and homeless students (1.2% versus 0.3%, Kruskal-Wallis  $X^2 = 4.7$ ;  $p = 0.030$ ) compared to the non-participating schools.

### **Flexibility in the Process**

All the respondents indicated that a general process for handling instances of truancy is in place at their schools. Schools could be flexible in the how they worked through the process provided certain benchmarks were reached. Respondents also stated that the process allowed for dealing with the factors related to each particular case and that the goal was to support the student and the family.

**Variation across schools.** Representatives from multiple schools within a single district participated in this study. This allowed for comparing and contrasting how a single district-wide plan was implemented at the school level. Before presenting the similarities and differences within the schools, it is worthwhile to describe the general process.

The process begins at the first unexcused absence. This includes either missing a single class period or an entire day of class. Student attendance is taken each period and once an excused absence is logged by the tracking system, a notification is sent to the administrative staff to assign a detention or study hall and a communication of some form—text message, telephone call, or e-mail—is sent to the student’s guardians. Once a student acquires three unexcused absences, a letter from the administration and the county attorney are mailed home. Robert from Trapezoid School stated that:

[O]nce a kid gets to three unexcused absences, we have an automated message that goes home. Every time there’s an unexcused absence saying hey your kid missed period two this day and it was marked unexcused...but once he gets three unexcused absences I recorded my own ... message that says, “Hey. This is Robert at Trapezoid School. Just wanted to let you know your child is starting to have more unexcused absences. We would encourage you to talk to your child about this matter. Attendance is very important—the number one indicator of high school graduation. If you have any questions, I encourage you to call us at the school and please setup an appointment with your administrator.”

Following the fifth unexcused absence, new families reaching this level are invited to an information meeting lead by the county attorney in where the importance of school



attendance is stressed while introducing families to potential resources. The seventh absence triggers an invitation to an individual meeting with key staff in the program. This staff includes the school administrator, counselors, social workers, county attorney, and other staff or people that have a relationship with the student. At this meeting, the family, student, and truancy team agree on a plan and sign a contract with a specified plan in place. If at any point along the process, an intervention has been successful, the student will remain at that stage until graduation. However, if a student's attendance does not improve following the contract, the truancy team can then submit a request to file a petition to court through the county attorney's office.

Protocols of schools outside of this district were similar. These schools also used a missed class period or an entirely missed day as an unexcused absence. These schools also have a student support team to try and resolve issues for students experiencing attendance problems. The teams at these schools also include the social worker, counselors, administrators, psychologists, and others. Truancy court is considered the last resort for these schools as well as Donald noted, "And then obviously there is the filing of a truancy after a letter or two and meetings and home visits and things like that. But that's hopefully our last resort when it comes to truancy." Therefore, many of the schools in Olmsted County are using a similar procedure to assist their students with attendance problems.

While the process has its specific benchmarks for letters and meetings, each school team has the flexibility to track and confirm that the required number of absences has been met to move to the next tier. For the third unexcused letter, Teresa at Triangle School said:

[Diamond School] is automatically sending a letter to those who missed three days. It doesn't matter if it's the day after that third excuse comes in or not. We don't do that at our level because most of the time it's a parent that's not calling them in or whatever [it] might be. So we still have time to look at it as an elementary thing—let's communicate with their families first. So we see the print off from the report but we don't send the letter just because. We wait to talk about it on Friday. My secretary will bring that report along and say I've got 17 new families that are supposed to get three-day unexcused but our system isn't advanced enough to take out the kids that are already in the program. So three-fourths are already in there and then the other fourth, they are new ones so we weed through that report. If there's a student that has chronic illnesses if we don't have doctors notes or hospital notes, one of us will reach out to the family so then by the next week then will check did we get those documents.

Tiffany at Square School concurs with Teresa that automatically sending letters would not be perceived well by the families her school serves:

If I just counted one, two, three unexcused absences and started having [informational meetings] or started sending out the letters, I would have all of [my area] upset with the school district because I'm not getting the right kids for the right reasons.

Each of the participants indicated that they have found some way that works for them to identify the benchmarks appropriately for their school.

Some of the schools let the student tracking software handle tracking the various interventions while others reported using other documents to track at-risk students and

interventions. While Teresa and Tiffany use shared documents at their schools to track students within the truancy program, Brian at Rhombus School utilizes the school's student tracking software because it allows the teachers to check-in on where students are in the process:

Now we can put in our truancy interventions into that so that teachers can see where they're at in the intervention process. So it'll say [information meeting] or attendance letters sent. Because a lot of questions we get are, "Hey I haven't seen this kid. Does anyone know that? Is anything being done?" That's common and ... you don't really understand what the people are doing behind-the-scenes and that's okay because they're doing the most important job teaching our kids so we'll take care this part of it.

Another difference across the schools is who is responsible for which piece.

While Brian and Teresa are more involved with the actual interventions (like home visits for example), Robert feels it is best to handle oversight of the process and reports while continuing to think about the bigger picture while delegating the implementation of the interventions to his staff, as he is responsible for the attendance of the entire student body. As Robert stated:

So you know it's not a one-man show by a long shot and, at least in my role, the trick of it is to keep my hands off on in some instances. My role is to look at the machine in total and say, "Where are the squeaky wheels at? Which places need replacement parts? Which places need to become bolstered or strengthened? Which places don't work anymore and we need to get rid of?" That's the role I am attempting to adopt.

No matter how each of the schools decided what tools to use for tracking or how to delegate the application of the intervention, all of the respondents indicated that the main goal is to help the student or the student's family.

**Supporting the student and the family.** The consensus among the respondents was that while punitive measures may deter students from skipping the occasional class, resolving absences among the habitually truant required identifying and offering support to address the underlying cause. Truancy is usually only a symptom of that underlying problem and that it is necessary to understand why each student is missing school. It is also important to inform families what resources are available to them.

Students may miss school or be disengaged during class for a variety of reasons. Students not attending school could have mental or chemical health concerns, personally or with their guardians. The student could be in a home with verbal, physical, emotional or sexually abuse. The student could be in a family that is transient or could be being raised by their grandparents. All of these situations come with their own obstacles and supporting the family requires flexibility in the process. As Robert points out:

[A]ttendance is just if a kid is not going to school. I'm becoming more and more convinced that that's not the problem. It's just a symptom of a different one. And going to school, I mean if you think about it, going to school and going from class to class to class and thinking and learning and participating in socially appropriate ways—that's very high on Maslow's Hierachy of Needs...[T]hat's self-actualization. Whereas some of the kids who are struggling with attendance, they don't have a place to sleep. They don't know where their next meal is.

Other respondents mirrored Robert's assessment and felt it was necessary to see the bigger picture of where school falls in line from the student's perspective.

Participants also felt it was necessary to point out that from their experience in order to correct attendance issues, they needed to support the student and the family in anyway possible. Through the course of her interview, Tiffany shared a success story of one student who is now attending school on a regular basis after the school worked with student to find a solution that met her needs:

Right now I'm working with someone that we did a half-day with, and now they had IEP today ... to look at bringing her back to full days. And everybody; the student wanted it; the family wanted it so we were really worried about the student. A lot of anxiety. A lot of physical problems because of it. But if you really just take time and go slowly and work with them, many times that's all you need. Obviously a lot of these kids have therapy on the side and that sort of thing too.

Parents are receptive when they realize the school is trying to help and not dole out punishment after punishment. While there are detentions assigned for unexcused absences, the real focus is trying to help get the student to school everyday.

A common consequence of missing school is that assignments are not being completed and turned in so these students typically earn lower grades. A couple of respondents highlighted the importance of reevaluating how grades are assigned. As Donald reported:

It's not just the kid not doing the work because they don't want to; they don't want to be bad students. There's a lot of things that happen to our kids when they

are not in our building that affect them permanently and through trauma and how are we meeting those needs? When we say, “You know what? You didn’t get your homework done.” And then give them a zero. How are you supporting them through that?

Others reported that some students missed schools and then were disengaged from classes because the teacher had already informed the student there was no way that they could pass the class.

In order to have that flexibility and get the support for the students, everyone involved in the program must be committed. That commitment is crucial to resolving attendance issues for each student.

### **Commitment**

Handling students with truancy issues is a difficult task. Schools must be able to accurately identify the students having issues. Tracking attendance every period of the day can be complicated when some students may be in a workroom getting additional assistance with a different class and do not show up for a period. The effective teams also involve a variety of staff including social workers, counselors, administrators, administrative assistants, a judge when the cases go to court, and possibly others. Each member of the team must be dedicated enough to devote the time necessary to do their piece and forthright enough to have difficult, honest conversations when necessary.

**Time.** Throughout the interviews, time was one of the biggest barriers to an effective program. Some of the schools that participated have over 1,500 students in their building and tracking attendance for six periods a day is a logistical challenge, even with

computerized software. Even with computers, a teacher could submit the attendance and a student comes late from tutoring but is marked late or unexcused.

All of the participants indicated that they had dedicated time devoted strictly to truancy amongst their other commitments that could vary from parent meetings to teacher evaluations or student discipline. Regular meetings are scheduled for the attendance teams to meet and review the students on the list. Additional time though is needed to work through the full list of students and after hour or weekend time is also spent as an illustration of the commitment required for an effective program.

**Teamwork and communication.** As Robert had stated, these protocols are not one-person shows. It requires an entire team to meet the needs of a student and family, as no two cases are exactly the same. Everyone involved in the process needs to communicate effectively with each other and with the student and family.

One example of a difficult conversation and truth came from Teresa when thinking of how things with the county judges have changed:

[The judges] were very forthright. We don't know what schools look like today. We don't know what your close program is. We don't know what your level III program is...When I took a sixth-grade student got to court....the boy couldn't read or write. Couldn't tell me two-plus-two equals four. Missed almost six years of his education and the judge said, "You know you just need to go home and read more." He didn't know that the boy was in a level III program; he didn't understand. And now looking back on it, we didn't give [the judges] the tools to make a good judgment.

For comparison, now the schools have a form they fill out and present to the county attorney to send to the judges so the judges are informed of what interventions have been tried and what the team's recommendation is when the student appears in court.

Being able to reach the student's family with the letters or phone calls is also vitally important to the process. Tiffany reported that she had success making phone calls on Saturdays:

I find people more Saturdays. I don't know if they don't think the school is going to call them and they pick up the phone then. I get a lot of people on Saturdays than I get during the week.

However, there are still instances when the attendance team staff have difficulty reaching the families as Robert pointed out: "We'll have five numbers in the system for a kid and all of them are disconnected or all of them are wrong numbers. And the address that we have isn't correct. Or the e-mail. Nobody checks their e-mail." This is why the informational meetings that occur after five missed absences is an opportunity to communicate and build relationships with the parents and let them know what services are available. As Robert put it:

Really the most effective part of that meeting is after the PowerPoint gets shut down, I have school staff in there. Myself, another administrator, a school counselor, our school social worker, our truancy coordinator, the county attorney. We've got six or seven professionals related to attendance there, and we just go after parents and families because we got them there right now and the question is simply "What's going on and what can we do to help?"

## **Summary**



The students experiencing truancy in Olmsted County are a heterogeneous group with a variety of underlying causes for their attendance problems. Each of the schools that were interviewed has implemented an intervention program that focuses on resolving the root cause and supporting their students and families. These programs are difficult to implement, as the time and resources needed to maintain them is significant. While time is certainly a barrier, the commitment of people involved in the program to make a positive impact in their students' lives allows them to overcome the obstacle.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the truancy intervention protocols currently being implemented in a single county in southeastern Minnesota. The main question to address was what makes current intervention protocols effective or ineffective. The following section of the paper will discuss how the findings of this study compare to prior research, discuss the strength and limitations of the study, assess the implications to social work practice and policy, and conclude with some thoughts for future research. The two primary themes identified in the study were flexibility in the process and commitment. Effective intervention programs must be flexible to meet the need of the student as well as the structure of the school. Significant time and resources go into maintaining a successful program and commitment by every team member is crucial for continued success.

### **Comparison to Prior Research**

The findings of this study mirror those in the literature review. As in previous published research, students with attendance problems come from a variety of backgrounds and are truant for a variety of reasons, and the Olmsted County programs

are designed with flexibility to be able to help each student individually. To effectively resolve truancy, punitive measures alone are not adequate and the underlying root cause must be identified and support around the student and family must be put in place.

Participants indicated the underlying cause of the truancy could come from the student, the family, or through recordkeeping mistakes at the school which is line with previous research. As Kearney (2008), Corville-Smith et al. (1998), and DeSocio et al. (2007) have found, chemical issues and anxiety or other mental health issues are a common underlying cause of truancy and that was corroborated among the schools in Olmsted County that were interviewed. Previous papers have shown that race and socio-economic status associated with truancy, however the anecdotal evidence from participants indicated there was no preponderance in any specific racial or socio-economic group. The respondents did mention that English as a second language can be a barrier to effectively communicating the attendance policies to some families. Students in Olmsted County could be absent because of domestic violence in their home or because the students are homeless. Because the students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, an effective program must be flexible in how it resolves truancy at an individual student level.

The truancy intervention programs in Olmsted County are were also similar to a previously reported program. Olmsted County schools send letters to the families, have informational meetings, and have county personnel involved much like the program described by Lawrence et al. (2011). Unlike Lawrence et al., none of the schools interviewed here reported any negative impacts of this kind of protocol at the student

level. The programs in Olmsted County required a significant amount of time and effort both during and outside of regular school hours.

The Olmsted County programs are designed with the student's best interest in mind. While punitive measures are in place to deter the student that may occasionally skip a class, the bulk of the programs have tiers setup to try and identify the real issue that is leading to truancy. The attendance teams work with student and family to offer support in any way they can to pave the way for the student to attend school regularly. Tiffany shared an example of allowing a student to attend for only half a day to address her anxiety. Others stressed the importance of bending over backwards to meet the needs of the student. The participants genuinely wanted their students to succeed and would do anything at their disposal to help them. This perspective justified all the extraneous stress and effort that went into keeping the program running.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This qualitative study included interviews with people directly involved in their school's truancy intervention protocols. The respondents in this study came from three different school districts with one school district contributing multiple respondents from multiple schools. This allowed for the assessment of variability in protocols across school districts as well as within a single district. One of the major findings was the effectiveness of the program within a single district where each school implemented the same protocol with different setup and structure.

One limitation of this study was the response rate across all the schools in the county. Only slightly more than one-third of the schools agreed to participate in the study. While the response rate was low, based on the publically available characteristics,

the participating schools' student populations were similar to the students within schools that did not participate in the study in most categories. The fact that participating schools had higher proportions of students receiving special education and experiencing homelessness may mean that these schools could potentially have more students with attendance issues. However, as no individual school level data on actual truancy rates was available, this cannot be proven.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Time and resources were identified as barriers to maintaining and optimizing the intervention protocols. All of the schools within the county need access to the same set of county personnel. This includes county social workers, the county attorney and attorney staff, and judges. As these new protocols continue to assist additional students and families, additional county resources could become more overburdened as well. As stated previously, mental health issues are an increasing cause of truancy. Being able to recognize and diagnose students with mental health issues is going to become increasingly more important. While some schools will have the ability to hire school therapists, social workers have an opportunity to provide aid in this area as well. Social workers working in schools or with students can take additional education focusing on mental health. Having social workers in schools with clinical backgrounds or expertise would allow them to potentially serve multiple roles and increase efficiency.

Another consideration to note is that while this study did not indicate racial and ethnic impacts on truancy, the research states otherwise. Prior studies have found disparities in the proportion of students who are truant and come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Maynard et al., 2012; McNeal, 1999; Vaughn et al., 2013).

Day-to-day, social workers and all school staff must improve their communication. Community members must be aware that the purpose of the truancy program is to assist students and their families so that the student can appear in school each day. Everyone must stress that the goal of the program is not punitive in nature.

The suburban school district in the county is significantly larger than the rural districts and the suburban district has more students experiencing truancy because of the larger student population. As the county offices are located mainly in the city served by the larger district and the larger school districts has a higher level of funding, access to the county staff may be more readily available to the suburban students than the rural ones. Some of the rural school districts also draw students from multiple counties further complicating the issue of which county has jurisdiction over a particular student. Social workers at schools in multiple counties should lobby for the neighboring county officials to talk and discuss what is working in their respective county processes.

### **Implications for Social Work Policy**

There are macro and mezzo level implications for social policy. First at the macro level, truancy is a state level issue. The general community is unaware of how significant a problem truancy is and how it impacts students, families, schools, and the community. The definitions of truancy can vary greatly across states (Kearney, 2008; Frey, 2011). Currently, Minnesota Statute 260A (2014) allows for the formation of the student attendance teams and to allow the county attorney to resolve truancy issues without going to court. The findings in this study indicate that it was beneficial to intervene with the student sooner rather than later. A couple of respondents indicated a need to have supports for students at the elementary school level as well. An increased

awareness of the effectiveness of the team approach that focuses on support needs to occur. Social workers in the state should be advocating for mandatory support services at all school levels. These supports could include clinical social workers, therapists, or behavioral specialists. As stated in the prior section, if these support team members can have a clinical background or familiarity with mental health and behavioral issues, one of the increasing causes of truancy can be addressed.

This study also identified implications at the mezzo level. Community awareness of available county programs and resources is important. One of the districts is using large group meetings to let the families of students reaching the first tier know the importance of school and to communicate that the school and county want to be supportive. Full community awareness may help families seek out support prior to attendance becoming a problem for their children. One way for social workers to help with awareness would be advocating for an information table at open houses and parent-teacher conferences. Increasing the visibility of the social workers at the school may help students or families initial contact earlier. Even if students or families do not feel they need assistance now, having seen the table may be something remembered later on when help is needed.

Another mezzo level change would be building relationships with the county judicial system. One district has generated a standard report to be able to handoff to the judges prior to truancy court hearings. Providing consistent information with explanations on what interventions have previously been attempted and any other pertinent information regarding the student (mental or behavioral issues, IEP's, etc.) will

help judges make more informed decisions without repeating interventions that were already ineffective.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As several of the participants pointed out, how to modify assigning grades for students who experience attendance problems is one area where further research is needed. Punishing them for not turning in assignments that were missed may not be the best way to keep these students engaged in school. School administration and teachers need to work together to determine the benefits of continuing to use participation points in their respective classes. While some classes such as mathematics can have student learning assessed via completed assignments and tests, a course in speech or debate inherently requires students to be present to participate and demonstrate skills. In math for example, one future study could assess the relationship between standardized test scores and grades earned in class by stratifying on whether or not class participation and attendance is included in the assignment of the course grade. Further subset analysis could be performed assessing students with varying levels of attendance problems against each other to see how important reflective class participation is to knowing the expected mathematical skills.

In conclusion, the findings from this study are similar to previous studies. Students are truant for a variety of reasons and a rigid protocol will not be effective in helping to resolve student attendance issues. The underlying cause for each student must be identified through communication with the student and his or her family so an appropriate plan can be put in place. While only about a third of the schools in the county agreed to participate in this study, similarities in programs existed across all the

participating schools. Because there were multiple schools from a single school district implementing a single protocol, school specific variations were assessed. It is important that more school administrations recognize that being able to identify students at-risk for attendance problems and work to put support systems in place to keep them coming to school on a regular basis. The effectiveness of this supportive truancy intervention program has previously been shown to be effective in an urban setting. This study has shown that the programs are successful in suburban and rural areas. School districts across the state and the country should evaluate whether or not their current procedure for resolving truancy is effective and, if not, consider building a tiered approach with an attendance team that can put supports at the student and family level in place to keep the student attending school regularly.



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Table 1

*Comparing Student Characteristics Between Participating and Non-Participating Schools*

	Declined Schools (N = 10)	Participating Schools (N = 6)	p <sup>a</sup>
Total Enrollment	459 259 - 1295	823 400 - 1583	.065
Race			
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.4% 0.0% - 1.1%	0.4% 0.2% - 0.6%	.588
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.0% 0.2% - 15.0%	8.5% 0.3% - 12.5%	.386
Black	1.9% 0.0% - 19.7%	11.6% 1.9% - 17.9%	.051
Hispanic	2.49% 1.2% - 10.7%	6.7% 1.6% - 15.1%	.193
White	93.9% 57.9% - 96.9%	69.1% 63.4% - 95.2%	.233
Special Education	9.25% 7.72% - 12.9%	11.1% 9.8% - 20.5%	.023
Free/Reduced Priced Lunch	18.7% 11.6% - 48.4%	32.1% 14.1% - 42.2%	.159
English Learner	0.5% 0.0% - 12.7%	4.3% 0.0% - 13.6%	.226
Homeless	0.3% 0.0% - 1.2%	1.2% 0.3% - 2.3%	.030

*Note.* Median and range values are presented in each row.

<sup>a</sup>p-values from Kruskal-Wallis test

## Appendix A

### Telephone and E-mail Script

Hello [Name],

My name is Casey Larson, and I am a MSW graduate student under the supervision of Catherine Marrs Fuchsel, PhD., LICSW, LCSW in the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas. I am contacting you because of your involvement in your school's truancy program. As part of my degree, I am conducting a research project looking at the effectiveness of truancy prevention and intervention programs in Olmsted County. My goal is to interview a staff member currently involved in truancy programs from at least one school in each of the districts at least partially contained within Olmsted County. Eligible staff members can include administrators, social workers, counselors, law enforcement officials, or other school faculty members as long as the person is actively involved in the truancy program at your school.

Participants in this study will be asked to complete an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. This interview will be conducted face-to-face or over the phone/internet and will be conducted at your convenience at a location away from school district property. The interview will be recorded and transcribed so themes can be identified and coded. Alternatively, the survey questions may be e-mailed to you and you can e-mail your responses in lieu of participating in an in-person or telephonic interview. After receiving your responses, I may e-mail you additional questions to clarify items in your original response.

Please let me know if you have any questions or if you are interested in participating in the survey.

Sincerely,

Casey M. Larson  
(XXX) XXX-XXXX  
XXX@stthomas.edu

Under supervision of Catherine Marrs Fuchsel, Ph.D., LICSW, LCSW

**Appendix B****Interview Questions****Truancy Intervention Protocols in Olmsted County**

Please complete these questions and bring them to the interview.

**Part I: Demographics**

1. Gender:       Male       Female
  
2. Race:  White       Black       Asian/Pacific Islander  
 Native American/Alaskan Indian  
 Other Race, Specify \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Ethnicity:       Hispanic/Latino       Not Hispanic/Latino
  
4. Highest Level of Education:  High School Graduate  
 Associates Degree (2 Year College Degree)  
 Bachelor's Degree  
 Master's Degree  
 Doctorate  
 Other, Specify \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. State your current title: \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. How long have you been in your current role? \_\_\_\_\_

**Part II: Truancy-Related Questions**

1. Please describe how prevalent you believe truancy is within your school. Please note any trends over the last 5-10 years.
  
2. Please describe your role in the current truancy intervention process. How has your role changed over time?



3. What is the current standard intervention plan at your school? Please consider the following:
  - a. Are there specific individual, family, school, or community plan(s)?
  - b. Who handles truancy cases – social worker, police liaison, other?
  - c. What is the protocol for deviating from the standard plan?
    - i. Who makes the final decision regarding a deviation?
  
4. Is there any communication between the staff at the schools regarding truancy intervention program?
  - a. If yes, please discuss the following:
    - i. What is the purpose of the communication?
    - ii. Who initiates the communication?
    - iii. Do you feel the communication is successful? Why or why not?
  
5. Within your school's truancy intervention program, how is a successful intervention defined?
  - a. What statistics are kept regarding truancy?
  - b. Please describe, in detail, the reporting procedure.
  
6. When was the last time the intervention plan was changed?
  - a. Can you describe the types of faculty involved in the latest change?
  - b. What internal barriers were faced in implementing the change?
  - c. What external barriers were present?
  
7. Please describe the students who are truant using this list of common correlates as a guide:
  - a. Gender
  - b. Race
  - c. Socio-economic status
  - d. Family structure
  - e. Physical Conditions
  - f. Cognitive or Social Impairments
  - g. Risky Behaviors
  
8. Rochester Schools are implementing a new Truancy Intervention Protocol to deal with truancy based on a program developed in the Twin Cities.
  - a. What are your personal thoughts about the TIP protocol?

## Appendix C

### Unsigned Consent Form

#### Truancy Intervention Protocols in Olmsted County INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

**Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating truancy intervention protocols. This study is being conducted by Casey M. Larson, a graduate student at St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas under the supervision of Catherine Marrs Fuchsel, PhD., LICSW, LCSW, a faculty member in the School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because of your work with students who are truant. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to identify and then compare and contrast the truancy intervention protocols in Olmsted County school districts. Approximately 8 to 12 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, the researcher will contact you with more detail regarding the study. If you are interested in participating, the researcher will provide you with the consent form and the interview questions. After one-week, the researcher will contact you to follow-up on your interest in the study. If you agree to participate, you will then be asked to review and sign the consent form and an interview will be scheduled. The interview could be completed via survey, a telephone interview or an in-person interview. The telephone and in-person interview will last approximately 45 minutes and take place in a mutually agreed upon location not on school district property. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The survey will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and your responses will be e-mailed to [casey.larson@stthomas.edu](mailto:casey.larson@stthomas.edu). If you complete a survey, the researcher may contact you with questions to clarify your original responses. The time to complete the follow-up questions may vary but anticipate spending about 15 minutes to complete them.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

You will be providing information about the school district where you work. It is possible that this information may reveal that the school district has policies or protocols in place which may be detrimental to having an effective truancy intervention program. To minimize the potential risks, all final data analysis will be aggregated so that no individual school is singled out in the presentation of the results.

The potential benefits to this study include a reduction in the number of students having problems with truancy in the community. This study aims to identify effective and ineffective methods or protocols across the different school districts in Olmsted County, Minnesota. Other schools could adopt the methods identified by this study to help reduce truancy.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written

reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results in a locked file cabinet in my home office and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 17, 2016. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you. Access to the audio-recordings of the interview will be limited to my advisor and myself. The audio files will be stored on my password-protected laptop. Following the transcription, all audio files will be deleted from my laptop.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

**New Information:**

If during course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Casey Larson, at XXX-XXX-XXXX. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Catherine Marrs Fuchsel (XXX-XXX-XXXX) will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

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I consent to participate in the study and I agree to have my interview audio-recorded

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Signature of Participant Date

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Signature of Parent, Legal Guardian, or Witness Date  
(if applicable, otherwise delete this line)

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Signature of Researcher Date