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# How Rural School Social Workers Perceive Elementary Nonattendance: Underlying Causes, Practical Interventions, and Role Identification

Anita M. Larsen  
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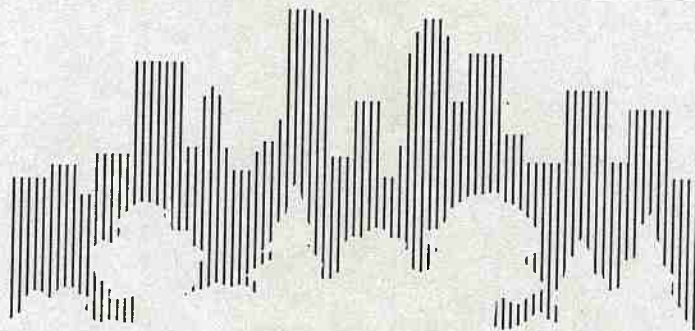
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## MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK THESIS

Anita M. Larsen

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Underlying Causes, Practical Interventions,  
and Role Identification

**MSW  
Thesis**

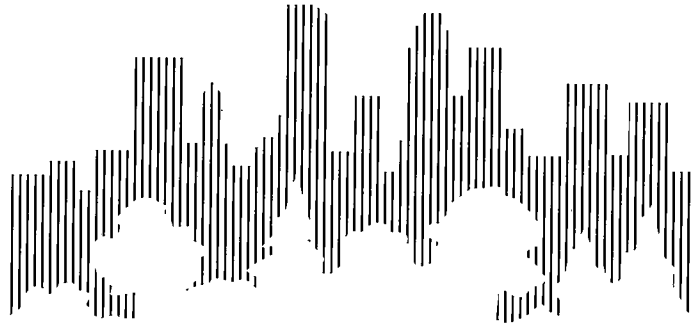
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**How Rural School Social Workers  
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Underlying Causes, Practice Interventions,  
and Role Identification**

by

**Anita M. Larsen**

**A Thesis**

**Submitted to the Graduate Faculty**

**of**

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**in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree**

**Master of Social Work**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

**March 1996**

MASTERS OF SOCIAL WORK  
AUGSBURG COLLEGE  
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

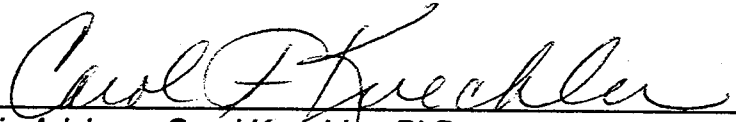
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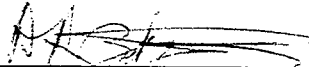
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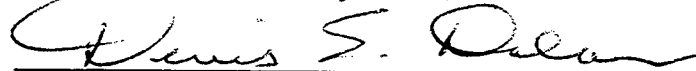
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*Thesis Reader - Denis Dolan, MSW, LICSW*

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the children, families, schools, and communities affected by Elementary Nonattendance and to the school social workers who work with them to promote opportunities for success and the best quality of life .

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### HOW RURAL SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS PERCEIVE ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE: UNDERLYING CAUSES, PRACTICE INTERVENTIONS, AND ROLE IDENTIFICATION

METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH

ANITA M. LARSEN  
MARCH, 1996

This research study explored what school social workers in rural Minnesota are doing to address elementary nonattendance. Elementary was defined as any grade between kindergarten and fifth, and rural was defined as outside the 7 county Twin Cities metropolitan area. The research design utilized a self-administered survey questionnaire distributed to 118 school social workers. Of the 76 returned surveys, 62 met the criteria for inclusion in the research. Findings from quantitative and qualitative data indicate that school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance as a problem and that contributing factors include the child, family, school, and community. The roles and intervention strategies utilized by school social workers to address elementary nonattendance varied. Implications for school social work practice, policy, and research about elementary nonattendance are presented.



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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### Overview of the Problem

The problem being explored in this thesis is elementary nonattendance, more commonly termed truancy. Minnesota compulsory attendance law M.S. 120.101 requires that every child between seven and eighteen years of age shall attend school (Minnesota Education Code, 1994). Despite its foundation in compulsory attendance law, the definition of truancy varies greatly (Hersov & Berg, 1980; Sommer 1985). Minnesota Statute (1994) 260.015 defines "habitual truant as a child under the age of 16 years who is absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for seven school days if in elementary school or one or more class periods on seven school days if the child is in middle school, junior high, or high school" (p. 1115).

In this study, truancy will be defined as absence from school without an acceptable reason, regardless of whether parents know or approve (Hersov & Berg, 1980). The court and school personnel define what constitutes "acceptable reason". Elementary nonattendance, in this study, is defined as absence from school without lawful excuse (illness, family death, family holiday, family crisis, religious observance, inclement weather) . When a child is under the age of twelve, the terms "nonattendance" and "educational neglect" are used more frequently than truancy (Altmeyer, 1957; Barth, 1984). Children in this age range do not usually exhibit the antisocial behaviors characteristic of older truant students, rather they do not attend due to school refusal, school phobia, and/or separation anxiety (Guevremont, 1991). It should be noted that the term school phobia is no longer used in the DMS IV and is now classified under separation anxiety, but because the literature used the term school

phobia, it will be used as it appears in the literature.

Truancy and nonattendance are serious social problems (Altmeyer, 1957; Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, & Wright, 1984; Rohrman, 1993). On any school day 8% of the nation's school age population are truant from school, and in urban areas this figure can rise dramatically to 30% (Rood, 1989). For the last 12 years, Americans have ranked "pupil lack of interest/truancy" as one of the top 10 problems facing schools (Rohrman, 1993). Since the 1970s, truancy has been earmarked as the most persistent problem that administrators face (Rohrman, 1993). Children who are likely to drop out of school or engage in other at-risk behaviors can be identified by third grade or earlier (Levine, 1984). Children who are chronically truant and educationally neglected face many challenges later in life. Adults who were truants as children often must cope with illiteracy, social alienation, poverty, and political powerlessness (Farrington, 1980; Robins & Ratcliff, 1980).

Statistics addressing truancy and nonattendance in Minnesota are difficult to find. In 1993, The Truancy Work Committee of Hennepin County compiled data on truancy in Hennepin County. They reported that in 1992, 1,172 truancy citations were filed with Hennepin County Juvenile Court. Minneapolis Public Schools student population in 1991-92 was reported around 43,000. The average daily attendance (ADA) for the Minneapolis Public Schools during the 1991-92 school year was 90 percent, with elementary schools having higher average daily attendance than secondary schools. Therefore, on any given day 4,300 students were not in school (August, 1993). According to a Star Tribune report, during the 1991-92 school year, 133 elementary student's in Minneapolis public schools were reported to truancy workers, averaging 22 days of absenteeism each (Chandler, 1993). The

average daily attendance (ADA) in the State of Minnesota during the 1993-94 school year was 94% (Department of Education, 1995).

Minnesota Statute (1994) 626.556 defines neglect as "failure by a person responsible for a child's care to supply a child with necessary food, clothing, shelter, education or medical care when reasonably able to do so or failure to protect a child from conditions or actions which imminently and seriously endanger the child's physical or mental health" (p. 921). Educational neglect is further defined as failure by a person responsible for the child to take steps to ensure that the child is educated in accordance with Minnesota State Law and absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for seven schools days if in elementary school (M. S. 626.556, 1994).

In 1991, The Department of Human Services reported 3,103 substantiated cases of neglect involving 5,612 children, 252 of whom were victims of educational neglect (Department of Human Services, 1995). In 1993, 3,353 substantiated cases of neglect were recorded involving 6,573 children in Minnesota (Department of Human Services, 1995). The number of determined victims of educational neglect was 597. These statistics from 1991 through 1993 show a 50% increase in the number of children suffering from educational neglect in the State of Minnesota.

The 1974 Children's Defense Fund Report documented the widespread nature of the problem of truancy. The report included data from over 6500 families in nine states. Analysis of data indicated that children from every racial group and income stratum are truant. However, some factors appear to be related to higher truancy: rural communities, low income and unemployed households, families with little education, and minority groups (Children's Defense Fund, 1974). The report emphasized that the 1970 US census data,



which indicated that over 750,000 elementary school children were not attending school, were probably understating the truancy problem.

Chronic truancy has serious implications for society as a whole. An educated, literate, and trainable population of young people is essential to maintain our economic and cultural institutions and to sustain a viable society (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). Individuals who do not attend school may fail to learn basic literacy skills, take part in the socialization process inherent in school experiences, and develop habits such as timeliness and reliability which are important prevocational skills (Barth, 1984). Programs designed to deal with the problem of chronic truancy may preclude the need for other more costly social services for adults. Thus truancy and nonattendance needs to be a major concern for educators and school social workers (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989).

Despite the costs that accrue to the individual truants as well as to society, according to Benda (1987) "there remains a paucity of theory and empirical work on nonattendance: defining the problem, causes and characteristics, and effective intervention strategies" (p. 7). According to Parker and McCoy (1977) the elimination of poor attendance at an early age may prevent the development of more intractable and costly truancy during late childhood and adolescence. For the child, regular attendance at the early elementary level may allow for the better acquisition of basic academic and social skills. Stronger academic and social skills could prevent or minimize the occurrence of serious academic, social, behavioral, and emotional deficits and subsequently alleviate the increasing demand for extensive therapeutic and educational remediation (Parker & McCoy, 1977).

## **Significance for Practice**

Truancy is not a new problem. As early as 1872, the problem of “early school leavers” was causing concern for school officials (Altmeyer, 1957; Rohrman, 1993). Chronic absenteeism is often a symptom of underlying problems within a child’s life (Altmeyer, 1957; Galloway, 1985). These problems may reflect unresolved issues within the student, the home, the school, or the community (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Levine, 1984; Nesbit, 1957). While there may be services available to address these issues, they are not delivered in a comprehensive way; therefore, their effects are often short-term and disjointed (Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994; Eaton, 1979; Guevremont, 1991).

The connection between nonattendance and truancy and social work is complex. Social workers work with individuals, families, and communities directly impacted by truancy (Allen-Meares, 1985). Building trust, respect, communication, and collaboration between school-home-community is a major focus for social workers (Allen-Meares, 1994; Costin, 1969). This partnership will influence attendance and a child’s success (Dupper, 1993). The role of the school social worker in addressing nonattendance and truancy varies. Social workers understand the social problems that affect or result in nonattendance and truancy: illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, political powerlessness, alienation, social deviance and crime, economic dependency, and racial discrimination (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). Social problems and nonattendance are interactive and interconnected. Social workers use their skills, knowledge, and expertise to develop interventions, policies, and practices that reduce and eliminate nonattendance and educational neglect (Altmeyer, 1957).

School social workers ought to be immersed in the prevention and

intervention of nonattendance to ensure a child's success and learning (Barth, 1984; Ziesemer, 1984). School social workers can support parents and encourage the community to see the need for partnership in learning (Allen-Meares, 1994; Nesbit, 1957; Weinberg & Weinberg, 1992). Research has demonstrated that if parents value education and attendance, children will too (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). Parents who believe education is important are more likely to insist on regular daily attendance which increases learning potential. Moreover, educating a child takes the entire community: the child, the family, and the school. This learning partnership takes many forms: flexibility in work schedules to meet education and family needs, 'family friendly' employment practices, family values, community and business practices that support parents, and family education, to name a few. School social workers have the skills and expertise to build a learning partnership between the family, school, and community. Families, schools, and community in partnership can reduce nonattendance and truancy, thereby increasing a child's success and learning.

### **Purpose of this Research Study**

The purpose of the research is to answer the question: What are school social workers in rural Minnesota doing to address elementary nonattendance? The research explored four areas: 1) do school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance as a problem in their school; 2) what do school social workers perceive as the underlying causes of elementary nonattendance; 3) what role, if any, do school social workers play in addressing elementary nonattendance; and 4) what do school social workers do to intervene in elementary nonattendance? Focusing on the rural population was a result of the findings cited in the Children's Defense Fund Report (1974) that stated a

factor that influences higher truancy may be rural communities as well as this researcher's interest and experience in rural school social work.

Much information exists addressing junior and senior high truancy, but little focuses on elementary nonattendance (Altmeyer, 1957; Barth, 1984; Rohrman, 1993). This research will contribute new knowledge and understanding about elementary nonattendance by surveying rural school social workers and obtaining their perception of the problem, underlying causes, practice interventions, and social work role identification.

In the following Chapter, the existing literature in relation to elementary nonattendance and truancy is reviewed and discussed.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this Chapter, a review of the existing literature will be discussed according to four topics: Truancy and Nonattendance; Conceptual Frameworks; Conceptual Approaches to Causes and Interventions; and School Social Work. No previous studies addressing school social workers' perceptions related to elementary nonattendance were found in the literature search, but research on social work and truancy was located and will be described. An attempt will be made to link what is known about truancy with how to address elementary nonattendance.

There has been limited literature published related to elementary nonattendance. Extensive literature exists on truancy, however, much of it covers from 1950 through the early 1980s. Literature on truancy indirectly addresses elementary nonattendance through the emphasis on earlier identification and prevention. Only two articles reviewed were longitudinal in nature; thus literature addressing the effects of elementary nonattendance long-term is limited. Literature on mandatory reporting as it related to educational neglect and compulsory attendance was also limited in the review of the literature.

How school social workers perceive and address truancy and elementary nonattendance in the 1990s is missing in literature. Only a few articles address school social work and truancy within the last five years. The role of the school social worker in addressing the issue of nonattendance has not been explored much in literature. Barriers to addressing truancy and nonattendance are addressed indirectly in the sections on conceptual

approaches to causes and interventions and role of school social worker.

## **Truancy And Nonattendance**

### **Overview**

In this section key definitions will be highlighted and discussed as well as Minnesota Law as it applies to truancy, compulsory attendance, and educational neglect. A discussion of the characteristics of nonattenders and truants, effects of nonattendance, and dropouts follows.

### **Definitions**

The term truancy has been used in different ways by different writers. Consequently, conclusions about one group of "truants" do not necessarily apply to another (Galloway, 1985). Truancy, when narrowly defined, applies to unjustified absence from school without the parents' knowledge or permission (Hersov & Berg, 1980). Absence may be justified when there is a physical illness, family holiday, death, family emergency, religious observance, or inclement weather. Truancy is most often used more loosely to refer to absence from school without an acceptable reason, whether or not the parents know and approve (Fogelman, Tibbenham, & Lambert, 1980; Robins & Ratcliff, 1980). Schultz (1987) defines truancy as excessive unexcused absences. Some view truants in the context of a wider conduct disorder classification used by psychiatrists (Cooper, 1984).

School refusal and the DMS IV diagnostic label "separation anxiety" (Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 1994), previously called school phobia, refer to a syndrome with four main features: unwillingness to attend school, staying home when not at school, parents who know about and disapprove of their child's absence, and severe emotional upset at the

prospect of having to attend (Hersov & Berg, 1980; Berg, Nicholas, & Pritchard, 1969). Although many of the children who show this syndrome have additional symptoms of emotional disturbance and problems with adjustment, some have no other signs of psychiatric disorder (Fogelman, Tibbenham, & Lambert, 1980).

Children who complain of physical symptoms in the absence of organic pathology to avoid attending school have been labeled as having school phobia. Although truancy has been differentiated from school phobia, the term “school phobic” continues to have multiple meanings and represents an oversimplification of nosology (Berganza & Anders, 1978). School phobia has been discussed for more than 55 years (Broadwin, 1932; Johnson, Falstein, Szurek & Svendsen, 1941). Most studies suggest that it is an expression of a serious emotional disorder (Chotiner & Forrest, 1974) and one of the few emergencies of child psychiatry (Miller, 1972; Edlund, 1971).

The prevalence of the school phobia syndrome has been reported to be 17 per 1,000 school aged children (Kennedy, 1965). Both sexes are equally affected (Miller, 1972) with age and birth order (oldest and youngest; first born and last-born) being important determinants. Socioeconomic status, religion, and ethnic group have not been related to a heightened incidence (Berg, 1972; Miller, 1972). Children in certain grades seem vulnerable to the onset of symptomatology. Kindergarten and first grade, the fourth grade, and the seventh grade all show peaks in incidence of school-phobic symptoms, suggesting either multiple etiologies or the existence of critical developmental periods that make a child more susceptible at these times (Berganza & Anders, 1978).

### **Minnesota Law**

Minnesota Statute 260.015 defines “habitual truant” to mean a child under the age of 16 years who is absent from attendance at school without

lawful excuse for seven school days if the child is in elementary school or for one or more class periods on seven school days if the child is in middle school, junior high, or high school. Subdivision 9 addresses the presumptions regarding truancy or education neglect. If the child is under 12 years old and the school has made appropriate efforts to resolve the child's attendance problems, a child's absence from school is presumed to be due to the parent's, guardian's, or custodian's failure to comply with compulsory instruction laws. In the case of children under 12, school personnel are mandatory reporters and must report the educational neglect under the Reporting of Maltreatment of Minors Act, Minnesota Statute, Section 626.556.

County social service departments handle cases of educational neglect, while the county attorney's office handles truancy of children over 12. A child's absence from school without lawful excuse, when the child is 12 years or older, is presumed to be due to the child's intent to be absent from school unless rebutted on clear and convincing evidence that the absence is due to the failure of the child's parent, guardian, or custodian to comply with compulsory instruction laws, sections 120.101 and 120.102.

### **Characteristics of Nonattenders and Truants**

Research has documented numerous characteristics of truants. The characteristics include reference to gender, age, socioeconomic status, race, academic ability and performance, behavior, and self-esteem.

First, there are traits based on gender. Levanto (1975) reported that boys have greater absentee rates than girls during the first 3 years of high school. Similar results were found by Galloway (1982), where high school boys were truant twice as often with parental consent. Contrary to these two findings, Rood (1989) found that girls have a higher truancy rate during the first 3 years of



secondary school than boys. Another reported gender difference is that female truants demonstrated less antisocial behavior than male truants and females had more variable attitudes and behaviors (Zieman & Benson, 1981). Zieman and Benson (1981) also found that truant boys perceived their school experience more negatively than truant girls. It should be noted that this particular study included only 75 students from one school.

Age, socioeconomic status, and race are other variables related to truancy. Rood (1989) explains that with an increase in age, there is a concurrent increase in truancy. Socioeconomic status (SES) is another characteristic that is associated with truancy (Farrington, 1980). A study by Reid (1982) found that truant students often come from disadvantaged or low-income families, but the sample studied was from a group of deviant students in a small scale exploratory study. Another demographic variable is race. Levanto (1975) and Levine, Metzendorf, and VanBoskirk (1986) found a higher proportion of black students to be truant (73.9%) than white students (26.1). Likewise, Rood (1989) reported that whites have a much lower truancy rate than minorities.

Many truants have academic and behavioral problems in the classroom, are unpopular with peers, and engage in delinquent activities (Nielsen & Gerber, 1979). When compared to attending students, the truant has lower educational ambition and is less concerned with skipping school and poor grades. The truant receives less parental supervision than students attending regularly. According to Eastvold (1989), truants typically have low self-esteem, feel powerless in school, and subsequently may become resentful of school and peers. Truants did not engender much respect from other, better attending students (Eastvold, 1989).

## **Effects of Nonattendance**

Chronic nonattendance can have serious lifelong consequences. According to Schultz (1987) "regular attendance is a necessary if not sufficient condition for school learning" (p. 112). A student who is frequently absent is likely to fall so far behind his or her classmates that catching up is all but impossible, thus leading to further truancy. According to one truant officer in a large metropolitan area, students who drop out before graduating from high school often have been "fading out" since the elementary grades (Keegan, 1985). The problem is especially serious if the student is handicapped by learning or behavior problems (Levine, 1984). Appropriate special education services can only be provided if the student attends school regularly.

Long-term effects of truancy have been documented by Robins and Ratcliff (1980). They studied a cohort of black males in St. Louis between 1930 and 1934. All had average IQ, and upper socioeconomic groups were over sampled. Approximately 235 men were interviewed in 1934, and with their consent, social service and school records were abstracted. Individuals who had been chronic truants were identified and compared with non truants in the sample. The findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Truancy during elementary school was a strong predictor of truancy during high school.
2. There was a high correlation between truancy and deviant behavior during adolescence.
3. Of those who began their truancy in elementary school and continued to be truant in high school, 75% failed to graduate.
4. As adults, the truant group earned less money, exhibited more deviant behavior, and had more psychological problems than non truants.

In summary, according to Robins and Ratcliff (1980) “high school truancy is a particularly good predictor of very low earnings, and a reasonably good predictor of adult deviance” (p. 80).

Excessive absenteeism impacts not only truants, but the rest of the school population as well. Since many state school funding formulas are based on average daily attendance, a high rate of truancy within a school or school system results in a reduction of available resources for all students. DuFour (1983), for example, reported that a successful truancy program in one district resulted in an increase of \$329,596 in state aid. A school official in a suburban Chicago district estimated that each absent student costs the district \$7.50 per day (Harms, 1983).

The problem of truancy also has implications for the maintenance of societal values. Birman and Natriello (1979) and Rohrman (1993) point out that widespread unauthorized absence threatens the legitimacy of schools as cultural institutions. If truancy becomes acceptable, school may lose their status as significant contributors to the process of education and socialization of young people. Furthermore, truancy is illegal. Whatever one’s opinion of mandatory school attendance laws, as long as these statutes are on the books, they must be enforced by law. Failure to do so, according to Rohrman (1993), can only result in an erosion of respect for the law.

### **Dropouts**

The truant-dropout population is large and heterogeneous. One of the main characteristics of truants who subsequently drop out is academic failure, defined as “failure in reading or failure of a grade level” (Okey & Cusick, 1995, p. 247). Elliott and Voss (1974) found that the strongest predictors of dropping out (aside from academic failure) are school normlessness and social isolation,

exposure to the dropout process in the home, and commitment to peers. These are similar to findings by Howard & Anderson (1978) and Rumberger (1987) who characterize students who drop out as irregular attenders who have disruptive and rebellious attitudes toward authority, perform below potential, have an excessively stressful home life, change schools frequently, exhibit low self-esteem, and experience the absence of a father.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1993) reported that 14.8% of Americans aged 24-25 have not completed high school and are not currently enrolled (p.252). Among Caucasians, the rate is 10.4% , among African Americans it is 14.1%, and among Hispanics it is 45.5%. Drop-out rates are also higher for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, from single-parent families, and from families who migrated to the United States. Gerics and Westheimer (1988) and Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, and Rock (1986) have attempted to predict dropping out among students currently in school instead of studying them after they have dropped out. These researchers report that students who eventually leave school come from poorer and less educated parents, do less homework, are absent more, have lower grades and test scores, and pose a greater share of the school's discipline problems (Okey & Cusick, 1995).

Okey and Cusick (1995) concluded from their study of 12 families whose children dropped out of school that there is a perspective about school within the families that is influenced by the families' educational history, beliefs about school, the families' experience in school, view of the families' place in society, the place of education in life, and child-rearing practices. This study showed that from the families' perspective, schools are unpleasant, oppressive, unfair, and biased. What schools offer is of little social or economic value to these

families therefore, dropping out makes sense (Okey & Cusick, 1995).

Kaplan and Luck (1977) stated that “absenteeism, academic failure, and early school departure are links in a long chain of interconnected problems” (p. 43). Other researchers concur that dropping out is a progression of factors that begins at the elementary school level and leads up to the student’s final decision to drop out (Barrington & Hendrickson, 1989; Peng & Takai, 1983).

Gage (1990) noted that at-risk students must be identified early and given help to improve their attitudes toward school and their self-esteem. Mann (1986) stressed that the best way to prevent students from dropping out is to provide successful educational experiences at the elementary school level: “The earlier we start, the less damage and the greater the dividend” (p. 311). A study by Bloom (1981) strengthened the argument for early prevention. Based on the findings of his study, Bloom concluded that the early years are the most crucial, and that if the battle for essential skills is not won before the fifth grade, a student can automatically be identified as at-risk of school failure.

Research and experts suggest that a more effective approach to reducing the dropout rate must include a shift from the current emphasis of intervention and recovery programs at the secondary school level to an emphasis on early identification and prevention programs at the elementary school level (Bloom, 1981; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Mann, 1986). Rush and Vitale (1994) used a checklist survey completed by elementary schoolteachers to determine a profile of the most significant factors that caused elementary school students to be at risk. The eight factors that place elementary students at risk were; a) academic risk, b) behavior and coping skills, c) social withdrawal, d) family income, e) parenting ability, f) language development, g) retention, and h) attendance. The researchers suggest that by developing a better

understanding of these factors, educators can become better equipped to develop policies, to design support systems, and to develop prevention programs that positively address the factors significantly affecting at-risk elementary students (Rush & Vitale, 1994). Early identification can thus assist educators to increase the number of students who ultimately graduate.

## **Conceptual Frameworks**

### **Overview**

The conceptual frameworks covered in this section are Developmental Theory, Family Systems Theory, and the Ecological Perspective. These frameworks provide lenses through which the problem of nonattendance may be examined and understood.

### **Developmental Theory**

A conceptual framework to be considered when dealing with elementary nonattendance and truancy is developmental theory. Erickson (1963) identifies the developmental tasks of the primary school-age child as industry versus shame and doubt. Productivity, accomplishment, and psychosocial competence become central aspects of their work, friendship, and play (Bond & Compas, 1989). Their behavior, activity, social experience, and well-being become increasingly energized by the driving forces of achievement and competence motivation (Noshpitz & King, 1991). In school children learn both the academics of the formal curriculum and the psychosocial skills of attending class, mastering course work, and interacting socially with peers and teachers. They respond to the demands and opportunities of the school environment by developing intrapsychic, interpersonal, and achievement strategies designed to facilitate academic mastery and social survival (Bond & Compas, 1989).

Mastery of both course work and the school environment is confirmed by teachers, peers, and parents and produces a sense of accomplishment, self-esteem, and belonging. A sense of their own importance and significance results from interpersonal school experiences such as the acceptance, attention, and affection of others as they engage in their academic work (Mack & Ablon, 1983).

### **Family Systems Theory**

Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, and Wright (1984) propose that family systems theory is most useful in providing a framework for dealing with the context of truancy. Truancy is likely a symptom of other problems in addition to the act of unexcused school absence, according to Berger (1978). To address this complexity, it is important to have a theoretical base for understanding the context of truancy that accounts for both context and relationships (Keeney, 1979). Truancy comprises a context of actions involving the interactional relationships among the child, family, school, and community concerning the issue of chronic unexcused school absence. The use of the term "interactional" in describing these relationships implies that members within the system both define and are defined by the other members of the system. This places an emphasis on the reciprocal and systemic nature of relationships.

Rather than focus on the truant child as sick or incomplete, family systems theory provides a model that calls for an evaluation of the interactions between the child and significant other persons in the child's environment (Abrams & Kaslow, 1977; Guerin, 1976; Reiter & Kilmann, 1975). Systems theory suggests that the truant child could be experiencing interactions in the parent-child relationship or the teacher-child relationship that prevent receptivity to the educational process (Cimmarusti, James, Simpson, & Wright, 1984).

Likewise, even though the school and the family are separate systems, there is a relationship between them and the child; the child is a part of both systems.

### **Ecological Perspective**

A review of the literature indicates that since the mid-1980s an ecological approach has emerged as the unifying theoretical perspective for the field of school social work (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986; Fine, 1992; Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992). This perspective focuses on the social ecology of the school community. Using this approach, the school social worker's practice encompasses the range of social interplays that occur among micro-, meso-, and macrosystems within the school environment rather than on individual pupils.

Ecology is defined as a "collection of reciprocal and interrelated forces around us" (Fine, 1992, p. 7). Social ecology can be characterized as the interactions, transactions, and mutual relationships that occur among social systems in an environment (Allen-Meares et al., 1986). It is a perspective of process rather than stasis. Thus, school social workers' practice is not focused on individual "problem" pupils but on the range of social interplays that occur among systems within the school environment. The student's immediate ecological environment consists of microsystems, such as the family, the classroom, the neighborhood, and the playground, and the mesosystems, comprising the interrelationships between two or more of the microsystems (Clancy, 1995). The ecological perspective requires practitioners to consider more phenomena than any other model (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989).

In this study an ecosystems perspective is used as a conceptual framework for organizing and understanding the reported causes of truancy: the individual child, the family, the school, and the community (Barth, 1984; Cnaan



& Seltzer, 1989; Elliott & Voss, 1974; Goff & Denetrak, 1983; Levine, 1984). This will be discussed in detail in the next section. An ecological approach requires a shift away from linear thinking focused on simple cause and effect relationships to complex sets of causes that interact to create a variety of effects. There probably is no one cause or even a limited set of causes or characteristics that determines a child's potential for becoming truant (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). Based on the ecological perspective, practitioners in schools are expected to broaden their understanding of causes and intervention for truancy to include a complex set of personal and environmental factors and their interactions.

Allen-Meares (1985) used the ecosystems perspective to analyze children's behavior disorders in school and concluded that the ecosystems perspective allows for a multidimensional view of life situations and of the relationships between children and the important subsystems within which they must function. A multi-causal approach requires attention to all possible causes and characteristics specific to the child and the child's environment as a basis for understanding the unique etiology of nonattendance (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989).

## **Conceptual Approaches To Causes and Interventions**

### **Overview**

Truancy is identified in the literature as a complex problem having many diverse causes. Finding the causes and factors associated with nonattendance is not simple (Levine, 1984; Nesbit, 1957). Traditionally, truancy has been viewed as a problem with a single cause. This traditional single cause view is limited because it postulates a linear cause of truancy; that is, it assumes that something wrong in one area (child, family, school, community) causes the

problem of truancy (Keeney, 1979; Meyer, 1983). Rarely is there only one reason for nonattendance; and often the obvious reason may not be the only cause of nonattendance (Barth, 1984). Chronic absenteeism is seen in the literature as a symptom of the underlying problems within the child's life (Altmeyer, 1957; Galloway, 1985; Levine, 1984, Rohrman, 1993).

The quest for causes and factors related to absenteeism focuses on the child, the family, the school, and the community (Altmeyer, 1957; Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Nesbit, 1957; Rohrman, 1993). Specifically, Rohrman (1993) organized truancy and nonattendance into four categories: 1) personal deficits (the child), 2) chaotic family life (the family), 3) unsupportive school environment (the school), and 4) lack of community support (the community). This categorization is similar to classifications used by Levine (1984), Barth (1984), and Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht (1994) and provides the structure for this section of the literature review.

In the literature, how the causes are defined influences the intervention strategies developed. Historically, interventions for truant behavior have been targeted at three areas: 1) the individual truant, 2) the family of the truant, and 3) the educational institution (Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Rohrman, 1993). Interventions focused on these domains are incorporated into the sections described above. Multi model interventions which address a combination of intervention strategies will also be addressed. Missing in the review of literature were community intervention strategies.

### **The Individual Child**

#### **Individual-Based Causes**

This conceptual approach to understanding the causes of truancy sees it as the maladjustment of the individual. Tyerman (1968) has claimed that "many

instances of truancy, especially persistent cases, can only be understood as a result of, or as a form of emotional disturbance or maladjustment" (p. 75). Stott (1966) used the "Bristol Social Adjustment Guide" to claim that truants were three times more maladjusted than non-truants from the same neighborhood. According to Brown (1983) there are a number of problems with this "maladjusted truant" model. One of the major problems is that many of the studies used children who had been "processed" to varying degrees by the authorities and therefore were not representative of truants in general. Carroll (1977) and Galloway (1980), by using a wider population of children, found that "with respect to maladjustment no differences were found to exist between truants and non-truants"(p. 38). Brown (1983) suggests that the apparent symptom of maladjustment could, in certain cases, be a function of the situation in which the truants are found, rather than anything that is intrinsically wrong with them.

A great deal of research has been conducted to identify the personal characteristics of truants. Some children come from positive home environments and attend good schools but become truant because of disabilities, mental illness, mental retardation, and learning problems (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). According to Levine (1984), factors involving the individual student that contribute to truant behavior include school phobia, poor social and emotional functioning, ethnic and racial dissonance, failure to learn, a learning style not in pace with classroom, learning disabilities, and health problems. Differences in academic ability and achievement have also been found between truants and non truants. Farrington (1980) found that teachers describe truants as having poor skills in reading, vocabulary, arithmetic, English, and verbal reasoning.

Attitudes and feelings of the nonattender toward school also contribute to nonattending behavior (Rohrman, 1993). According to Barth (1984) truants consider themselves less powerful, less virtuous, less physically attractive, and less competent than regular attenders. Rood (1989) explained that many truant students experience an inability to feel a part of their school culture. In addition they feel frustrated with school work because they perceive the school's expectations are too high (Rood, 1989). Coladarci (1983) and Willis (1977) found that quite a few truants have no perception of future relevance of school attendance.

#### Individual-Based Interventions

In this approach the individual is the focus of attention. According to Costin (1969), traditional theories of deviance single out the individual as the source of individual-institutional (social) dysfunction. Methods of intervention based on this assumption, therefore, select the truant child for the focus of treatment. Mercer (1965) states that casework constitutes a method-oriented, therapeutic approach to the problem of social dysfunction. The focus of interest is restricted only to the behaviors that become identified as deviant with the equally narrow goal of changing them so that further interference by society is unnecessary (Becker, 1963). According to Costin (1969) "the analysis and consideration of antecedent conditions and contingencies that might evoke and reinforce such patterns of action is less important than the immediate reduction of individual dysfunction" (p. 276).

Intervention strategies used with individual students to address nonattendance and truancy include individual counseling, behavior modification and contracting, self-esteem building, classroom modifications, supportive instruction, problem-solving, and social skill development (Barth,

1984; Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994).

Miller (1986) used an in-school suspension program with 25 truants where the intervention consisted of counseling, biography-writing therapy, and contingency contracting. This therapeutic approach resulted in more positive attitudes toward school attendance, improved attendance, and greater insight by the students into their attendance problems. Miller (1986) stated that these results indicate that it is helpful, when dealing with truancy, to demonstrate cognitively to students what is wrong with their behavior and how it is counterproductive to their own well being, and also what can be done to solve their problems and modify the truant behavior.

Grala and McCauley (1976), demonstrated that supportive instruction (involving extra tutoring, acceptable places to do homework, and attention from the experimenter) was effective in improving attendance among ten participants. The small sample population and lack of control group are limitations to this study. Brooks (1974) completed a small scale study with two truant students using contingency contracting of attendance chart with daily reinforcement. Contingency contracting also reinforces the importance of students taking responsibility for their actions (Brooks, 1974). Brooks concluded that contingency contracting can be effective because it is economical, time-efficient once the initial contract is made, and easily monitored.

## **The Family**

### **Family-Based Causes**

This second conceptual approach to understanding the causes of truancy is derived from the large number of studies which have indicated that children who are truant or not attending are greatly influenced by their family.

Children spend more hours at home than at any other place. Parents are a child's first role models and greatly influence norms, values, and expectations. Parents can serve as productive models or as destructive models who behave in negative or rejecting ways and set demands that contribute to their children becoming truant (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). Benda (1987) states that family is the most important source of a child's attitude toward school attendance; parents' values and ambitions play a large role in children's school attendance.

Family variables play a key role in chronic nonattendance and truancy. Levine (1984) summarizes several of the family factors that are important: parental knowledge of truancy and nonattendance, family attitude towards education, family income, family parental situation, child abuse or neglect, and parenting skills.

Researchers have found that truant children lack strong emotional ties with a responsive and responsible adult (Doss & Holley, 1985; Friedman et al., 1985; Tyerman, 1968) and that they often perform the domestic chores of parents or siblings (Doss & Holley, 1985). Home life of nonattenders is characterized by overcrowded living conditions, frequent relocations, and weak parent-child relationship or overindulgent, overprotective parent-child relationship (Rohrman, 1993). Coladarci (1983) and Barth (1984) also found that children who become truant often stay at home during the school day to resolve domestic conflicts. Other causes of nonattendance according to Barth (1984) may be cost of clothes, lunches, work materials, school trips, and child care for younger children.

Researchers have demonstrated that truants often come from homes with low incomes (Blythman, 1975; Farrington, 1980; Galloway, 1983; Tyerman, 1968), where the father does unskilled or semi-skilled work (May, 1975;

Tyerman, 1968), or is unemployed or irregularly employed (Blythman, 1975; Farrington, 1980; Hersov, 1960; Tyerman, 1968). Under these conditions a number of social stressors occur that threaten to overwhelm the parents and the truants. Alcoholism (Hersov, 1960), violence (Farrington, 1980), mental and physical illness (Galloway, 1980; Hodge, 1968), and family disorganization (Tyerman, 1968) were found among the families of truants. Placed under this stress, families may find it difficult to stay together. Some studies found that truants came from homes in which at least one parent was missing (Elliot & Voss, 1974; Hodge, 1968; Tyerman, 1968).

Parent's own personal experiences in school may affect their child's attendance. Tyerman (1968) claimed that many parents had justifiably bad memories of old and depressing schools that were inadequately equipped and badly staffed. Hence most failed to show "sensible interest" in the education of their children and were not, therefore, insistent they went to school (p. 70). Galloway (1980) came to a similar conclusion that parents know and approve of their child's absence or are unwilling or unable to insist on their child's return to school because of their own poor experiences in school.

Though there is considerable debate about parental interest in education, only two studies actually ask parents about their views on the subject of truancy (Okey & Cusick, 1995; Mitchell & Shepherd, 1980). The view of parents as the cause, portrayed in the literature about truants, should be taken with caution. It is a view presented by teachers, researchers, and other commentators without parent's input.

#### Family-Based Interventions

When the cause of truancy is identified as family-based, intervention focuses on the families of the truant. Interventions have typically attempted to

either alter a family situation or simply achieve more parental involvement in their child's education. Family intervention strategies cited in literature included family counseling, parental involvement in education, social reinforcement of parent, phone calls, letters, conferences, parenting skill development, and referral.

One strategy is family therapy. Bryce and Baird (1986) report that family therapy for truants enables families whose growth and development has come to a standstill to resume its development. It is also important to involve parents in the education of their truant child. Chapman (1991) describes one such project where parents and teachers learned how to work together in ways to improve academic success and attendance by parent/teacher workshops, conferences and educational trainings. The outcome of the project was increased attendance, parental involvement in school, and communication between home and school (Chapman, 1991).

Some intervention programs have used social reinforcement of the truant's parents to improve attendance. Sheats and Dupleburger (1979) conducted a study where chronically absent elementary school students were assigned to either the principal-contacted group or to the secretary-contacted groups. When a student was truant, parental contact by the school, regardless of who contacted them, served to improve attendance among students when compared to attendance rates of the previous school year. Phone calls, letters, and conferences with parents also have been used to reduce nonattendance (Guevremont, 1991). Parenting skill development and referral to outside agencies for service also appear in literature as family intervention strategies (Guevremont, 1991; Rohrman, 1993).



## The School

### School-Based Causes

The third conceptual approach to understanding the cause of truancy focuses on the school itself. Many authors (Galloway, 1974; Fogelman, Tibbenham & Lambert, 1980; Reynolds, Jones, & St. Leger, 1976) concerned themselves with "objective factors" such as the size of the school, the adequacy of its buildings, the turnover of staff, and the efficiency of attendance monitoring. Other authors look at the social processes and educational ethos of the school. Boyson (1974) and Schultz (1987) see truancy as a result of changing and deteriorating educational methods and standards. Reynolds, Jones and St. Leger (1976) looked at some aspects of traditional teaching which supported the maintenance of rules and use of corporal punishment and concluded that it led to conflict between teachers and pupils. The result of less effective teaching and delivery of learning is "vandalism within it, truanting from it and delinquency outside it" (Reynolds et al. , 1976, p. 288).

School-age children generally spend five to seven hours a day in school. The school culture itself may put excessive stress on some children. Aspects of school that may affect children in this way include overly restrictive rules (Doss & Holley, 1985; Polk & Schafer, 1972) and uneven or unfair application of rules in school (Coladarci, 1983; Elliot & Voss, 1974). Use of suspension and expulsion as punishment also may increase truancy (Children's Defense Fund, 1974; Levine, 1984; Waltzer, 1984; Ziesemer, 1984). A more subtle contributor is a teachers' tendency to discourage "hard-to-deal-with students" through lack of attention and harsh criticism (Barth, 1984; Elliott & Voss, 1974;). Many truants reported that they received no personal attention in school (Coladarci, 1983; Ziesemer, 1984).

High levels of turnover and absenteeism among teachers also may contribute to truancy (Barth, 1984, Coladarci, 1983; Elliott & Voss, 1974). Some teachers are inadequately trained to work with children (Coladarci, 1983; Levine, 1984). At times the racial gap between teachers (usually white) and students (often minorities) increases truancy because of misunderstandings and value differences (Felice, 1981; Richardson & Gerlach, 1980).

Within the school system, teachers are not the only potential contributors to truancy. Violence in the school yard (Bayh, 1975; National Institute of Education, 1978) and low-quality physical environment (Byrne, 1981; Duke & Meckel, 1980; Polk & Schafer, 1972) are only two examples. Low level of personal academic success in school, such as a low grade point average or placement below grade level, also contribute to increased chances of truancy (Byrne, 1981; Rohrman, 1993). Three other elements that contribute to truancy are inadequate reporting, recording, and follow-up (Levine, 1984; Polk & Schafer, 1972).

#### School-Based Interventions

Intervention programs targeted at the school system, consider truancy to be a school-based problem and conduct research accordingly (Brown, 1983; Rohrman, 1993; Schultz, 1987). School-focused intervention strategies that appear in literature include home visits, phone contact/letters, support groups, contracting, consultation and training of staff, mandatory reporting, monitoring and recording of absences, assessment of nonattendance, and referral to outside agencies (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Schultz, 1987).

Barber and Kagey (1977) attempted to improve attendance at an elementary school which consistently had the lowest attendance in the county. Attendance steadily dropped from about 95 to 93% during the first 3 months of

school, which served as a baseline. Beginning in December, daily attendance charts were posted in each classroom, and a gold star affixed behind the name of each student who was present that day. The children (grades 1-3) were also allowed to attend a party and gain admittance to four "fun rooms" non contingently.

In January, February, March, and April access to the monthly parties and fun rooms was made contingent on regular attendance. Pupils who had a perfect attendance record for the month were allowed to leave class early to attend a 10-minute party and four 15-minute sessions in the fun rooms. Children who missed one day of school were allowed to attend three 15-minute sessions; those with two absences, two sessions; and those with three absences, one session. While waiting to be released to the fun rooms, the students worked on extra assignments. Students with more than three absences for the month remained in the work room for the entire period.

During the introduction phase (December), when charts were posted and the children were allowed to sample the reinforcer non contingently, attendance rose to just over 94%. Attendance during the 4-month intervention period steadily rose to nearly 97%. The April 1973 attendance was 6.07% higher than the corresponding month for 1969. Furthermore, the target school's attendance rate for April was the highest in the county (Barber & Kagey, 1977).

Morgan (1975) compared three procedures to increase attendance in two elementary (K-5) schools with predominantly low socioeconomic populations. The sample included 89 students who had excessive unexcused absences. The sample was divided into three treatment groups: 1) material plus peer social reinforcement treatment group, 2) material reinforcement treatment group, and 3) teacher social reinforcement treatment group and one

control group in each school; these were randomly stratified according to grade level. Daily attendance charts were used with a baseline taken prior to implementation. The results of this study showed increased daily attendance by participants who experienced a combination of material plus peer social reinforcement, material reinforcement, and teacher social reinforcement as a means of improving school attendance (Morgan, 1975). Material plus peer social reinforcement showed the most effectiveness, followed by material reinforcement, then teacher social reinforcement.

Many schools have tried to revise their overall attendance policy to decrease truancy rates (Byrne, 1981; Duckworth, 1988; DuFour, 1983; Duke & Meckel, 1980; Kube & Ratigan, 1992). Duckworth (1988) found from his review of school truancy policies and practices that some of the most important components in truancy reduction plans were a) installing a system of monitoring and recording absences, b) creating an alliance with teachers and parents committed to reducing truancy, c) maintaining consistency in imposing penalties for repeat offenders, d) creating and supporting intervention programs, and e) having patience and perseverance through the early stages of implemental problems.

Tuck and Shimbuli (1988) reviewed truancy programs in the United States and found that truancy intervention plans work well when they include the development and implementation of local school plans for approaches to truancy, the installation and operation of automatic telephone dialing systems, the expansion and improvement of attendance staff and monitoring, and the establishment of a student-attendance service center.

Other strategies to build stronger truancy and nonattendance school intervention practices recommended by Miller (1986) included creating a make-

up work policy for all absentees, scheduling attendance assemblies, involving truants in extracurricular activities, considering alternative schedules, monitoring, and rewarding or publicizing good attendance. Involving teachers in the development of truancy and nonattendance practices is critical because teachers implement the practice and ownership in development may ensures utilization. Miller (1986) offers several ways in which teachers can be part of an intervention: maintain accurate attendance records, create a pleasant environment, create a classroom-attendance reward system, and consider the individual student's capabilities.

## **The Community**

### **Community-Based Causes**

The last conceptual approach to understanding truancy is based on the argument that the truants' anti-social values, provided by their parents, are reinforced by similar values found in their community. There is support for this view, particularly in older studies. Tyerman (1974) claimed that 90% of his truants lived in streets where education was considered a burden. Galloway (1980) found that schools with the highest rates of absenteeism were those in deprived areas. Communities send conflicting messages to children and families because they often fail to enforce attendance policies (Byrne, 1981; DuFour, 1983; Kube & Ratigan, 1992; Ziesemer, 1984).

Societal variables are also involved in the etiology of truancy (Trouw, 1985). Birman and Natriello (1978) discuss three societal explanations for truancy. The first is the correspondence argument that societal norms or pressures seem to cause school to be structured to encourage absenteeism with certain student groups (minority or lower-SES students). The second explanation is the citizenship argument that states society as a whole, and the

school specifically, fail to recognize the needs of students who are fulfilling requirements outside the educational system. The final societal reason is the articulation argument that students see the institution of school as less likely to fulfill their needs than other societal institutions so they put less effort into school (Birman & Natriello, 1979).

Not only are children part of their family and the larger society, but they are also a reflection of their environment. Only in the past decade has more emphasis been put on the ecological models of intervention in social work through which human behavior is also viewed in the context of its social and physical environment (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). Environmental components that contribute to truancy include pressure from friends and neighbors to dropout (Doss & Holley, 1985; Levine, 1984) and localized attitudes that school is irrelevant for life (Coladarci, 1983). Frequent contact with older criminals and availability of alcohol and drugs also are contributing factors to truancy (Coladarci, 1983; Elliott & Voss, 1974). Availability of paid positions for unskilled youngsters may stimulate the tendency to quit school and go to work (Doss & Holley, 1985).

### **Multi Modal Interventions**

From the 1950s through the early 1980s, the causes and treatment of truancy focused on either the individual child, the family, the school, or the community. This approach is limiting because it implies a linear cause of truancy or that something is wrong in only one area. Because the child, the family, the school, and the community are all involved in creating a context of truancy, intervention that addresses these issues of context and relationship may offer the best possible outcome (Cimmarusti, James, Simpson & Wright, 1984).

A review conducted by Brown (1983) reveals research that focused on an approach to truancy which included the school's contribution while also taking into consideration the limits and merits of the truant and the truant's family. Brown (1983) found that while much research tends to use the school as the major focus in intervention, the multi modal approach integrates individual and parental intervention and is more effective.

An investigation by Rodgers (1980) examined an intervention approach that consisted of establishing a buddy system between students, while schools maintained contact with parents and sponsored contests based on attendance. The results of this study indicated a 2-5% increase in attendance (Rodgers, 1980). Another truancy intervention program studied by Nevetshy (1991) included not only an in-school discipline program, but also cooperation and contact among parents, students, teachers, administrators, and counselors in both middle and high school. The Nevetshy study found that during the first year, 17 of the 36 students in the program had improved their attendance and academic standing enough to be graduated from the intervention program (Nevetsky, 1991).

Truox (1985) suggested that a multi modal approach to truancy intervention should include the following elements: a) schools must assess the needs (social, emotional, academic, behavior) of students, educators, and administrators before instituting a program to reduce truancy; b) a cross section of school personnel, students, and community must be involved in developing the program; c) students must be able to direct and develop a program in school where peer pressure is a major influence; d) policies must be specifically directed towards habitually absent students; e) programs and policies must be evaluated frequently. As with other multi modal approaches, the effectiveness of

the policy or program is due to its targeting the individual truant, the parents, and the school system (Truox, 1985). Effectiveness is demonstrated by increased daily attendance and academic improvement.

### **Summary**

School social workers who assess truancy and its causes need to understand the child, family, school, and community as interrelated sources. According to Cnaan & Seltzer (1989) in a complex causality analysis, “intervening variables should be accounted for and their unique interactions with the causes should be considered” (p. 181). Multicausality, as defined by Barker (1995), encompasses the view that a given disorder or social phenomenon is the result of many factors operating simultaneously and, in many cases, somewhat independently of one another. Factors that contribute to truancy affect urban students differently than suburban students, black students differently than white students, boys differently than girls, and elementary school children differently than secondary school children (Levine, 1984, Barth, 1984, Rohrman, 1993).

To implement a multi causal approach, the school social worker must evaluate each set of relevant causes in relation to the environmental context and the developmental stage in which they exist (Bond & Campas, 1989; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Levine, 1984) . Such an evaluation would include considerations of age (biological and psychological), effects of peers and family, local culture, physical setting, and personal abilities and interest (Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). This combination of causes and factors serves as a basis for assessment (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Levine, 1984).

Because the implications of truant behavior affect the individual and society as a whole, effective intervention practices and policies are important.



To create real change, school social workers must design innovative practices that are inclusive of all systems that affect pupils' lives (Clancy, 1995). Multi modal approaches involving the individual, family, school, and community provide a structure that addresses all aspects of this complex issue.

## **School Social Work**

### **Overview**

This section addresses the history of school social work and the role of school social workers. Limited research exists on the role of the school social worker in addressing truancy, and no research was found on the role of the school social worker in addressing elementary nonattendance.

### **History of School Social Work**

As a field of practice, school social work is nearly a century old, just a few years younger than its parent profession. Simultaneously inaugurated in three eastern U.S. cities around 1906 (New York, Boston, and Hartford, Connecticut) early school social workers (referred to as "visiting teachers") were employed by outside agencies to work in the schools (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986). During the next four decades, both privately and publicly supported demonstration projects promoted the growth and expansion of school social work (Costin, 1969). The relationship between school social work and education became formalized in the 1940s and 1950s, when public school boards began to assume greater responsibility for financing their own social workers to address the needs of students and their families (Winters & Easton, 1983).

Many social, political, and economic factors influenced the development of school social work (Allen-Meares, Washington, Walsh, 1986). Some specific

influences were the influx of immigrant children and the problems of providing education for them; the depression, which brought attention to the fact that such basic necessities as food and shelter had to be provided before learning could take place; the mental hygiene movement, which influenced the service in the 1920s to emphasize treating the individual child. The expansion of the service, in the aftermath of racial violence, gave attention to group work and system change strategies during the 1960s and 1970s (Allen-Meares, 1990; Winters & Easton, 1983). Throughout the history of the service, school social workers have worked with schools, families, and communities.

During the 1960s many parents felt alienated from the educational institution. Claims of inequality, related to poverty and racism, were directed at public education. In 1965 Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to provide aid to local school to improve the education of children from low-income families. School social workers needed to reach larger numbers of children (Allen-Meares, 1977). The American Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 expanded protective mandates and intensified services to a population of learners who were not previously eligible for services (Minnesota Department of Education, 1994). With these changes social work practice needed broader approaches and methods to bring school and community together to facilitate the educational process and develop social competence (Allen-Meares, 1988; Borrowman, 1989; Radin, 1989).

During the past two decades, federal and state mandates to reform schooling in the United States and to guarantee certain pupil groups equal educational opportunities have proliferated (Levine & Mellor, 1988). These mandates have had a profound influence on school social work services. The

social context in which schools exist has become more problematic and stressful for many pupils and their families. There have been increases in poverty, mental illness, and reports of child abuse and neglect (Children's Defense Fund, 1985). These environmental factors play a critical role in the educational process. Such conditions counteract even the best educational systems and the most well-intentioned federal mandates.

The enactment of legislation such as P.L. 100-297 (1988) is critical in that it recognizes such contemporary problems as truancy, underachievement among minority groups, educational deprivation of low-income children, the acquired immune deficiency syndrome epidemic, and drug abuse (Allen-Meares, 1990). P.L. 100-297 also recognizes the importance of family involvement in education with the new dimension of prevention and partnership with other services in the community (Allen-Meares, 1990). P.L. 100-297 offers redirection and expansion of service. This directive involves education for prevention, collaboration, teaming, consultation, and more macro-level intervention program efforts by school social workers (Edelman, 1988; Schinke, Bebel, Orlandi, & Botvin, 1988).

Torres (1996) recently completed a study on the status of school social workers in America. Torres mailed a 14-item questionnaire in February 1990 to the chief educational officer of each of the 50 states and seven additional U.S. education jurisdictions. Forty-five of the 57 surveys were returned. Minnesota reported having 395 school social workers employed with job title of school social worker (Torres, 1996). The average number of school social workers per educational jurisdiction was 274. Minnesota responded that the most common school social work job-related activities, tasks, and functions were casework, liaison, assessment and testing, consultation, referral services, and

interdisciplinary team member (Torres, 1996). These results suggest limited comparability with a recent study on school social work entry-level tasks conducted by Allen-Meares (1994) (Torres, 1996). In Minnesota, truancy was not identified on the job-related activities, tasks, and functions list (Torres, 1996).

From this overview of the history of school social work it can be seen that the responsibilities and expectations of the school social work profession have grown and expanded greatly since its modest beginning. Having social work services in the school is important as the link between the child, family, and community is critical in addressing truancy and elementary nonattendance

### **Role of School Social Worker**

“School social workers share a common goal to enhance the manner in which students learn both academically and socially in the educational setting” (Straudt & Kerle, 1987, p. 6). It is expected that school social workers offer services to students whose emotional and social problems interfere with their learning. School social workers are in the school to assist school personnel in meeting the needs of these students. Because school social workers work in a host setting and are most often the only social work staff in the building, it is critical that they define their role to other professionals in the educational institution: principals, teachers, and other school staff (Freeman, 1995; Link, 1991). With a clearly defined role, school social workers will be better able to work with students, families, and the community (Radin, 1989).

School social work is a complicated array of roles and tasks. The school social worker is expected to alert schools to the special needs of individual students and the surrounding community (Monkman, 1982). One role is direct work with individual students and their families (Allen-Meares, 1980). Another

role is consultation that may address student needs and school policies and procedures (Chavkin, 1985). Providing education, information, and referral are also roles of the school social worker (Nelson, 1990). Liaison with agencies, collaboration, community resource development and systems change work occurs as well (Nelson, 1990). Prevention activities (Radin, 1989) and work with such special needs as truancy, adolescent pregnancy, special education, child abuse, and preschool screening (Constable & Montgomery, 1985) are also done by the school social worker.

The tasks school social workers perform involve either direct or indirect work with students. Tasks include referral, casework, group work, consultation, and community organizing (Chavkin, 1985; Nelson, 1990; Radin, 1989). The school social worker can address families in need and begin the necessary foundation building between family, the school, and the community systems (Benda, 1987). School social workers are obligated to help make school a rich and stimulating experience for young people and a place in which they can prepare themselves for the world (Costin, 1984).

A landmark study by Costin (1969) stated that school social workers placed too great a focus on the traditional individual clinical casework method. Costin called for a wider use of systems theory and group work (Allen-Meaures, 1977; Fisher, 1988; Chavkin, 1985). This study advised school social workers to place more emphasis on the school as a system and focus on institutional change.

During the 1970s school social workers were oftentimes thought of as home-school-community liaisons (Allen-Meaures, 1994). In 1977, Paula Allen-Meaures replicated the 1969 study by Costin and found that school social work was in transition. In 1977, the practice of school social work was somewhere in

between the traditional individual casework model and the systems change model. School social work, as it is defined by Allen-Meares (1977), ignored the social change element needed to solve such problems as increasing truancy and nonattendance, poverty, and racial segregation. Allen-Meares (1977) recommended that school social workers give more attention to these issues and be the leaders to make change. Addressing truancy, poverty, and segregation in the curriculums, and evaluating and developing new interventions strategies were also recommended (Allen-Meares, 1977).

The first National Conference of School Social Workers was held in 1978. The field of school social work became more professionalized when the National Association of Social Workers' board of directors developed a set of standards for the practice of social work in schools (Hancock, 1982). There has been a growing literature base in school social work since about 1976. In 1978 the NASW began the publication of *Social Work In Education* (Fisher, 1983).

School social workers have unique training that allows them to work with school staff and the community to assess the need for programs, policies, and services on an individual and systems basis and then build a consensus around intervention strategies. The need for programs, policies, and services to address and intervene in truancy and nonattendance is appearing in literature (Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen, Dynlacht, 1994; Rohrman, 1993). School practitioners need to direct efforts at the macrosystem level through state and national organizations of social workers, teachers, and other school staff to influence educational programs and policies that impact and promote attendance (Ziesemer, 1984). To create real change, school social workers must design innovative practices that are inclusive of all systems that affect pupils' lives (Clancy, 1995).

## **Summary**

School social work has gone through many changes in the past century. The role of the school social worker has changed in response to the issues and needs being presented. This literature review identified no specific role for school social workers in addressing truancy and elementary nonattendance despite a long history of involvement with the schools and children who do not attend (Barth, 1984).

School social workers have skills and knowledge about children, families, school environments, and communities that can impact effective understanding of the causes of elementary nonattendance and effective intervention strategies. School social workers and their school districts need to see reducing nonattendance as a valuable activity because school attendance in the elementary years appears to foretell much about a child's educational, vocational, and social future, making the reduction of nonattendance crucial and very much a school social work issue (Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen, Dynlacht, 1994; Levine, 1984).

## **Summary of Literature Review**

This Chapter discussed four main areas that are integral to understanding elementary nonattendance: characteristics and effects of truancy and nonattendance; conceptual frameworks useful in understanding truancy; conceptual approaches to causes and interventions; and school social work's historical and contemporary role in alleviating truancy. From the literature review it is clear that truancy and elementary nonattendance issues are complex and have impact on not only the child but also the family, school, and community. The literature addresses the impact each of these systems has on the issue and

the importance of an ecological perspective to understanding and intervening in truancy. The literature confirms that rural communities struggle with nonattendance and truancy and school social workers have a role in addressing and intervening in the issue. Asking rural elementary school social workers how they perceive the problem of nonattendance, causes, intervention strategies and role will build upon what is supported in this literature review.

In the following Chapter, the methodology for the research will be discussed and key terms will be identified and defined.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Research Question**

The primary question for this research is: What are school social workers in rural Minnesota doing to address elementary nonattendance? The purpose of this study was to explore how rural school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance and its underlying causes, to identify current practice interventions, and to explore and clarify the social work role in addressing elementary nonattendance.

#### **Operational Definitions**

Key terms for this research are as follows: school social worker, rural, perceptions, role, interventions, elementary nonattendance, truancy, educational neglect, and compulsory attendance. The terms are defined as follows:

**School Social Worker**: An individual who is currently in the position of a school social worker in rural Minnesota, who serves any grade (s) between, and including, kindergarten through fifth, and who is currently a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association. School social workers specialize in social work oriented toward helping students make satisfactory school adjustment and in coordinating and influencing the efforts of the school, the family, and the community to help achieve this goal (Barker, 1995).

**Rural**: Outside the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area including Minnesota School Social Workers' Association membership regions 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9.

Perceptions: Individual school social worker's personal and professional attitudes and beliefs about the services they provide in their position in relation to working with elementary nonattendance.

Role: A school social worker's description of what kind of services they perform in their position. Services may include, but are not limited to, counseling, referral, assessment, group work, consultation, advocacy, and/or training.

Interventions: Action (s) taken by individual school social workers to intervene in elementary nonattendance.

Elementary Nonattendance: Absence from school by a child under the age of twelve, without lawful excuse (illness, family death, family holiday, family crisis, religious observance, inclement weather).

Truancy: Absence from school without an acceptable reason, whether or not the parents know or approve (Hersov & Berg, 1980).

Educational Neglect: Failure by a person responsible for the child to take steps to ensure that the child is educated in accordance with Minnesota State Law. Absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for seven school days if in elementary school (M.S. 626.556, 1994).

Compulsory Attendance - Every child between seven and eighteen years of age shall attend school (M.S. 120.101, 1994).

### **Research Design**

The design for this research is exploratory in nature. This study utilizes a combination of quantitative and qualitative information to answer the research question. The purpose of the research is to answer the question: What are school social workers in rural Minnesota doing to address elementary nonattendance? This research will contribute new knowledge and

understanding of elementary nonattendance by surveying rural school social workers and obtaining their perception of the problem, underlying causes, role identification, and practice interventions.

### **Subject Selection**

The data were gathered using a purposive sample of school social workers because of their knowledge about elementary nonattendance and their positions as rural school social workers. From a list provided by Minnesota School Social Workers' Association (MSSWA), rural school social workers working outside the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area were identified. Approval was granted by the Full Board of the MSSWA to conduct this research. Please refer to Appendix A for a copy of this letter. Due to financial and time considerations, it was decided not to include school social workers who were not members of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association.

Minnesota School Social Workers' Association membership is organized by regions. Because the researcher was interested in what rural Minnesota school social workers are doing to address elementary nonattendance, only social workers in the membership regions outside the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area were included in the study. The regions included were as follows: 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9. Current membership in those regions was approximately 120. Membership was not divided by elementary and secondary school social work; therefore, screening criteria was included on the questionnaire to identify eligible participants.

The total sample consisted of 118 individual rural school social workers. The number of the total sample (118) is approximately one-third of the total Minnesota School Social Workers' Association membership (MSSWA, 1995).

The unit of analysis for the research consists of individual school social

workers in Minnesota. The sample selection criteria were as follows:

1. Individual must be currently employed as a school social worker in a school (s) in rural Minnesota which serves any grade between and including kindergarten through fifth (elementary), and;
2. Individual must be a current member of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association.

An individual social worker's eligibility was verified by screening items identified as questions one and two on the survey questionnaire. Prior to the initiation of this research, approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board of Augsburg College (95-07-2). Please refer to Appendix B for a copy of this approval letter.

### **Instrument Design**

The instrument used for this study was a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed to obtain information about what school social workers in rural Minnesota are doing to address elementary nonattendance. The questionnaire consists of twenty-five open-ended and closed-ended questions, with the majority of the questions being closed-ended. The two questions addressing reasons for persistent absenteeism were replicated, with minor revisions, from a study done by David Galloway in 1976 (see questions six and seven in Appendix C). The other twenty-three questions were designed by the researcher as a result of reviewing the literature.

Piloting of the questionnaire was done with three social work professionals, none of whom were eligible for this study. This process allowed the researcher to refine and clarify questionnaire items, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the instrument.

The self-administered questionnaire was organized into sections

addressing problem identification, causes and contributing factors of elementary nonattendance, reasons for persistent absenteeism, role of the school social worker in addressing elementary nonattendance, classification of service provided, and intervention strategies. Demographic information was also gathered in order to better define the study respondents and to explore differential responses.

Definitions of elementary nonattendance, educational neglect, and truancy were provided on the first page of the questionnaire to clarify terminology. The first two questions on the questionnaire addressed membership in the MSSWA and employment as a school social worker in grades kindergarten through fifth outside the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area to screen for eligible study participants. Subsequent ordering of the questions on the self-administered questionnaire was done with the intent to draw the interest of school social workers to complete and return the self-administered questionnaire (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). Background information regarding the school social workers was placed at the end of the self-administered questionnaire where it might be considered less threatening (Rubin & Babbie, 1989).

### **Ethical Protection**

This research study was approved and supported by the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association. An approval letter from the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association was provided by the association President (Appendix A). A research proposal, requesting approval for the use of human subjects in research, was approved by the Augsburg College Institutional Review Board on October 31, 1995, before any research commenced (Appendix B).

The cover letter accompanying the self-administered questionnaire explained the purpose of the research study and sponsorship, as well as the procedures involved with this research study. In the cover letter, a comment was included informing the school social workers that the completion and return of a self-administered questionnaire to the researcher in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided would indicate their consent to participate and conclude their role in this research project. Participation in the research was described as being completely voluntary with the data remaining confidential. Instructions on the questionnaire indicated that the school social worker should not place any identifying information on the questionnaire or returned envelope. School social workers were also informed that they would not have to answer any question (s) they thought may threaten their anonymity. Please refer to Appendix C for a copy of the cover letter.

The President of MSSWA affixed mailing labels to survey packets provided by the researcher and mailed them. The researcher did not have access to current MSSWA membership names which provided additional protection to participants. Completed and returned self-administered questionnaires were kept in a locked file in the researcher's home when not being reviewed. All data collection instruments were destroyed at the end of the research project.

### **Data Collection**

The cover letter and a self-administered questionnaire were mailed to 118 rural school social workers by the president of the MSSWA on December 28, 1995. The President of MSSWA affixed mailing labels to survey packets provided by the researcher and mailed them. A follow-up postcard prepared by the researcher was mailed by the MSSWA on January 15, 1996.

The self-administered questionnaire was a one-time commitment on behalf of the school social worker and was anticipated to take approximately twenty (20) minutes to complete. Once completed, the self-administered questionnaires were returned to the researcher in an enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. Completed and returned self-administered questionnaires were kept private in a locked file in the researcher's home.

Self-administered questionnaires returned between December 30, 1995, and January 28, 1996, were included in the analysis for this study. Ten additional surveys were received after the follow-up postcard was mailed. Of the 118 rural school social workers, 76 responded for a 64% return rate. According to Rubin and Babbie (1989), "a response rate of at least 60% is good" (p. 340).

### **Data Analysis**

Upon receipt of a returned survey a number was assigned, which was used to identify a particular respondent throughout the analysis process. Findings are presented in narrative form and illustrated with tables and figures in the following Chapter. Comparative analysis was completed on several key variables with cross tables developed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data and content analysis was conducted on the open-ended question on the survey questionnaire.

To conduct the content analysis, the responses for the open-ended question were indexed and then subdivided according to key themes, patterns and categories that emerged from the data. Several of the respondents gave more than one answer to the question, and each of those responses were individually classified according to the key categories. The key categories were then further subdivided to account for the variety of reasons given within a response.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

Of the 118 survey questionnaires mailed out, 76 were returned, and 62 of those met criteria for the research. This resulted in an overall return rate of 64%, and a return rate of 53% for those who met criteria for the research. Of those survey questionnaires that met criteria for the research, only four chose not to answer one or more of the close-ended questions. In addition, forty-six of the sixty-two respondents chose to answer the open-ended question. Findings will be presented by reporting demographics first. Other findings are organized by categories: problem identification, contributing factors, reasons for persistent absenteeism, role of school social worker, service delivery, intervention strategies, and barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance. The computer program utilized to process this data and create tables and figures was ClarisWorks 4.0 data base and spreadsheet.

Cross-tabulation according to Weinbach and Grinnell (1995) refers to the process of putting the values of two nominal level variables into a table. Using percentages "equalizes" the size of the two variables or groups thus allowing easier comprehension and comparison of findings (Weinbach & Grinnell, 1995). In order to interpret the relationship between variables in this study, the researcher utilized the Excel 5.0 program to compute pivot-tables also known as cross-tables. The dependent variable of elementary nonattendance (is it a problem?) will be analyzed by gender, level of education, years of experience, primary type of service, and number of schools served. The primary type of service will be related to number of schools served. Contributing factors of elementary nonattendance will be analyzed by gender, level of education, and



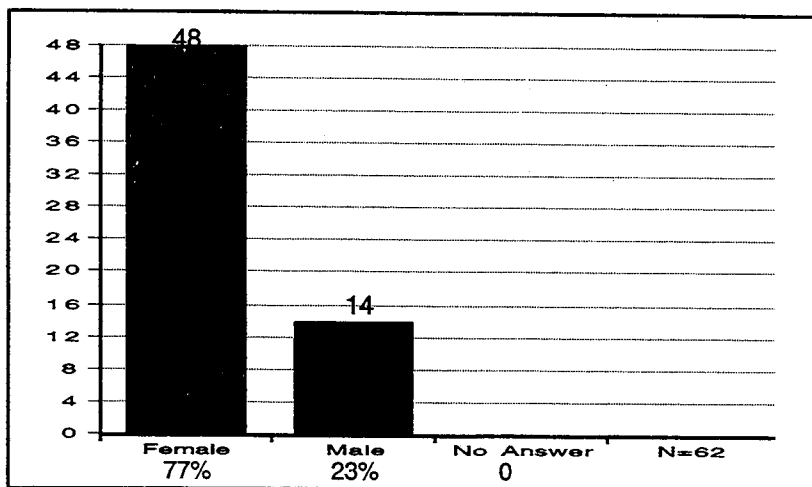
years of experience.

Two questions on the survey questionnaire screened respondents for the eligibility criteria for the research. One question asked “Are you currently a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers’ Association, and employed as a school social worker in Minnesota for a school which serves any grade between kindergarten and fifth”? Eighty-four percent (n=64) answered “yes” to the question; 16% (n=12) answered “no” to the question. The second question asked “ Do you work in a school district outside the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan area?” Ninety-two percent (n=70) answered “yes”; 8% (n=6) answered “no”. Eighty-two percent (n=62) of the respondents met the criteria for the study and are included in the analysis and presentation of findings.

### **Background Information of Study Participants**

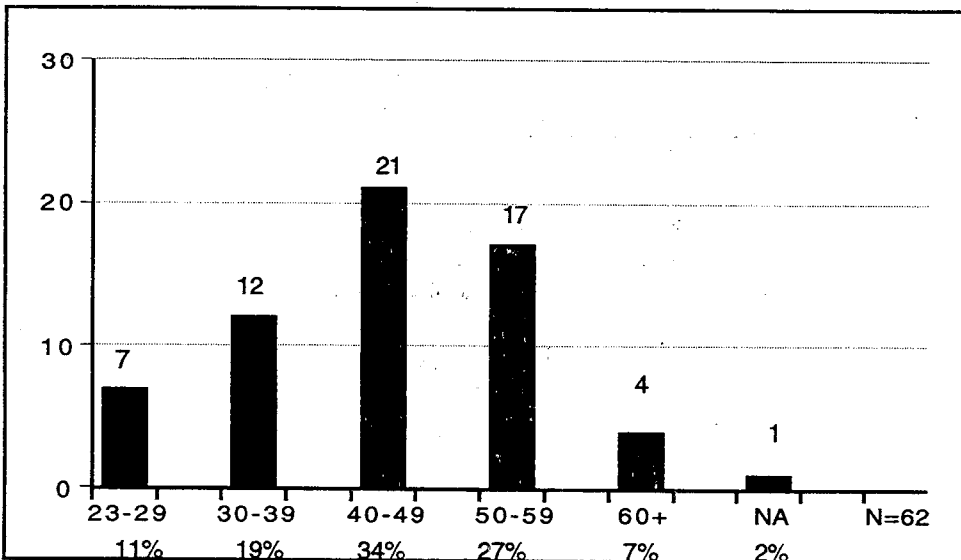
Respondents were asked eight questions related to demographic information in an attempt to better describe the survey population. Figure 1 identifies gender. Seventy-seven percent (n=48) of the respondents were female; 23% (n=14) were male.

**Figure 1**  
**Gender of Respondents**



Respondents were asked their age. As indicated in Figure 2, 34% (n=21) are between the ages of 40-49; 27% (n=17) are between the ages of 50-59; 19% (n=12) are 30-39 years of age; 11% (n=7) are between the ages of 23-29; 7% (n=4) are over the age 60. Two percent (n=1) gave no answer.

**Figure 2**  
**Age of Respondents**



Respondents were asked to identify their highest level of education. Five main categories were provided, as well as an “other” category. As indicated in Figure 3, 37% (n=23) of the respondents reported that they have an B.S.W.; 30% (n=19) have an M.S.W.; 18% (n=11) have an M.A./M.S.; 15% (n=9) have an B.A./B.S.

**Figure 3**

**Level of Education**

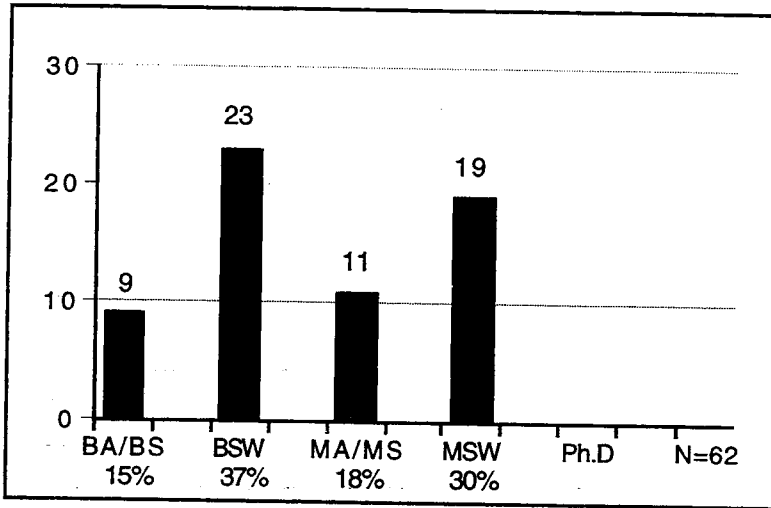


Figure 4 provides the racial/ethnic composition of study participants. No categories were provided. Ninety-five percent (n=59) identified themselves as being European American, Caucasian or White; 2% (n=1) identified themselves as being African American; and 3% (n=2) chose not to answer the question.

**Figure 4**

**Ethnicity of Respondents**

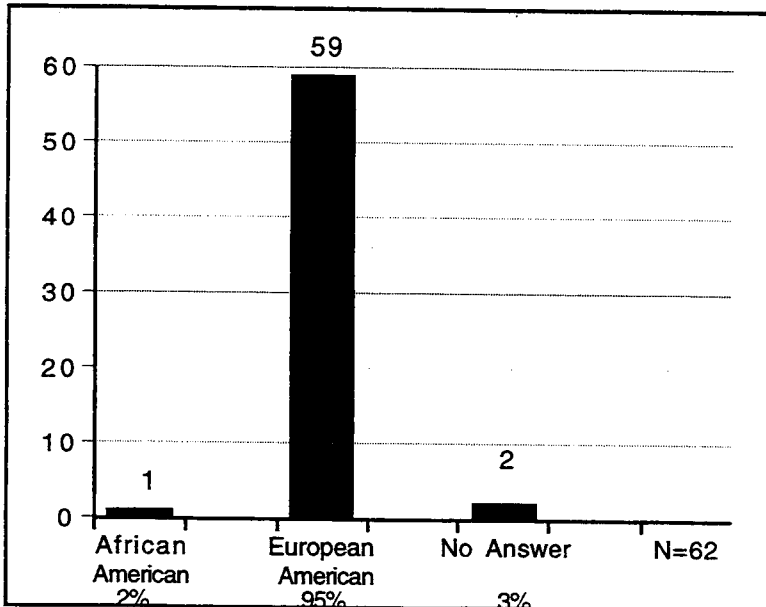


Figure 5 shows how long the study participants have been school social workers. Four categories were provided. Fifty-three percent (n=33) have been school social workers for over eight years; 18% (n=11) have been school social workers for three-five years or six-eight years; and 11% (n=7) have been school social workers for zero-two years.

**Figure 5**  
**Number of Years as a School Social Worker**

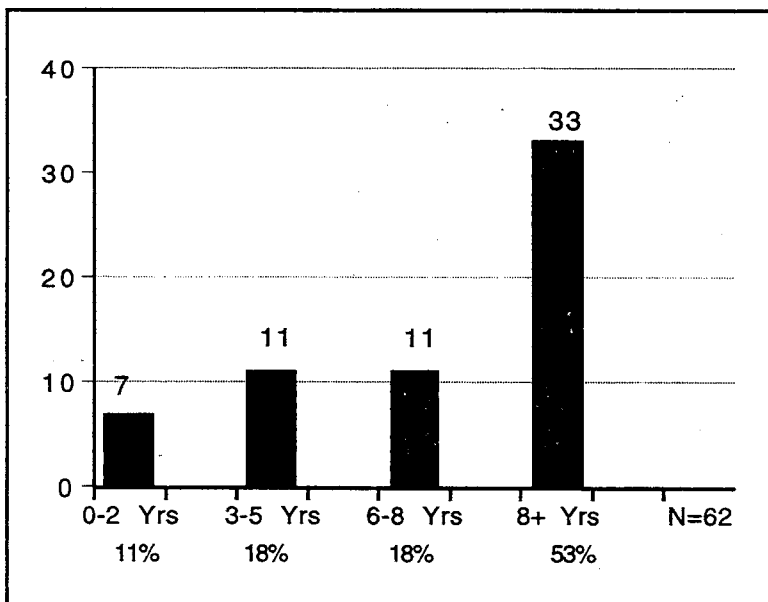


Table 1 shows the relationship between respondents years of experience and level of education. Seventy-three percent of the study respondents (n=24) with more than eight years experience hold a Master degree, 64% of the respondents (n=7) with six to eight years experience hold a Bachelors degree while 82% of the respondents (n=9) with three to five years experience have a Bachelors degree. All respondents (n=7) with zero to two years experience hold a Bachelors degree, 100%. The table illustrates that study respondents with more than eight years of experience have a higher educational level than respondents with less experience.

**Table 1**

**Level of Education by Years of Experience**  
**(N=62)**

<b>DEGREE</b>	<b>YEARS OF EDUCATION</b>			
	<b>0-2 yrs</b>	<b>3-5 yrs</b>	<b>6-8 yrs</b>	<b>8+ yrs</b>
BA/BS	1 (14%)	1 (9%)	1 (9%)	6 (18%)
BSW	6 (86%)	8 (73%)	6 (55%)	3 (9%)
MA/MS	0	0	1 (9%)	10 (30%)
MSW	0	2 (18%)	3 (27%)	14 (42%)
TOTAL BACHELORS	7 (100%)	9 (82%)	7 (64%)	9 (27%)
TOTAL MASTER	0	2 (18%)	4 (36%)	24 (73%)

Table 2 identifies the number of schools served by respondents. All 62 respondents answered the question, with the total number of schools served being 184 schools. The mode was 4 schools with 17 responses; median was 2.5 schools; average number of schools a social worker works in was 2.97 schools (184/62).

**Table 2**  
**Number of Schools Served by Respondents**  
**(N=62)**

	No. of Schools Served by Respondent	No. of Respondents
	1	15
	2	16
	3	9
	4	17
	6	1
	7	3
	15	1
Total	184	62
Mean	2.97	
Mode	4	

Tables 3 and 4 identify the types of schools served: elementary (K-5) and/or secondary (6-12). A total of 130 elementary schools were served by the 62 respondents. The mode was 1 school with 28 responses; median was 2 schools; and the mean or average number of elementary schools served was 2.10 schools. A total of 85 secondary schools were served by the 61 respondents, 1 did not answer the question. The mode for secondary schools was 0 and 1 schools with 22 responses for each; median was 1 school; and the average number of secondary schools served was 1.02 schools.

**Table 3**

**Elementary Schools Served (K-5)**

	No. of Schools Served by Respondent	No. of Respondents
	1	28
	2	18
	3	9
	4	2
	5	2
	6	1
	7	1
	8	1
Total	130	62
Mean	2.10	
Mode	1	

**Table 4**

**Secondary Schools Served (6-12)**

	No. of Schools Served by Respondent	No. of Respondents
	0	22
	1	22
	2	14
	3	2
	4	1
	7	1
Total	85	62
Mean	1.02	
Mode	0 & 1	

Respondents were asked to identify the location of the school (s) served and the student population of the ELEMENTARY school. Four cities (St. Cloud, Duluth, Moorhead, and Rochester) were provided with an “Other City” category. All 62 respondents answered the question. The location of schools were as follows: four in Duluth, three in Rochester, two in Moorhead, one in St. Cloud, and the other 52 were outside these cities. The average elementary student population in a school was 407 students.

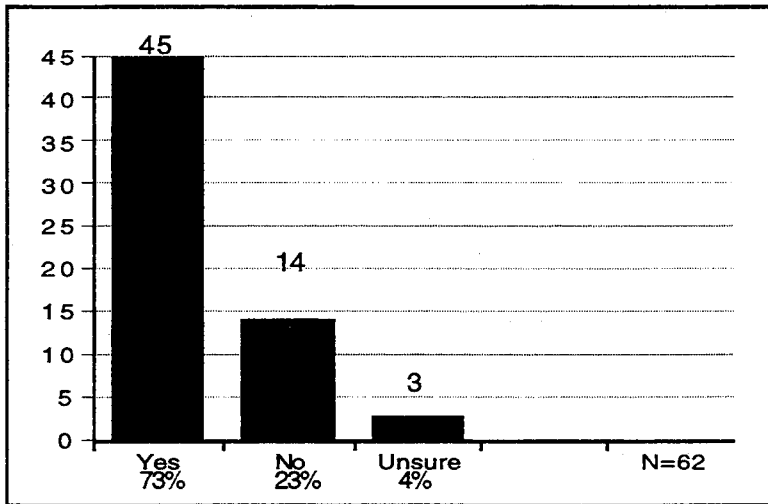
### **Problem Identification**

Respondents were asked “Is elementary nonattendance a problem in your school (s)?” As indicated in Figure 6, 73% (n=45) of the respondents reported that elementary nonattendance is a problem in their school; 23% (n=14) did not believe elementary nonattendance is problem in their school; 4% (n=3) were unsure whether it is a problem. Thirteen of the respondents answering “no” or “unsure” did explain their answer. Some of the comments were as follows: “We have very few children who miss. . . There are no students who are consistently absent. . .It is an issue with a few students but in general it is not a problem. . .School wide records not kept or I have not seen this data. . . For the most part, attendance is good, but for a few children, attendance is a problem, less than 1%. . .The number of kids is small but on the increase. . .It is not a wide-spread problem, we have significant concerns about nonattendance for only 4-5 students out of 550. However it is a “problem” for each of those students”. See Appendix D for all the responses.



**Figure 6**

**Respondents Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**



The perception of elementary nonattendance as a problem was related to gender of the respondents with results indicated in Table 5. Seventy-nine percent of the male respondents reported elementary nonattendance as a problem while 71% of the female respondents saw it as a problem. Elementary nonattendance is not a problem as perceived by 23% of the female respondents and 21% of the male respondents.

**Table 5**

**Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE by Gender (N=62)**

Gender	Is Elementary Nonattendance A Problem			Totals
	Yes	No	Unsure	
Female	34 (71%)	11 (23%)	3 (6%)	48 (100%)
Male	11 (79%)	3 (21%)	0	14 (100%)
Totals	45	14	3	62

Perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance and the level of education of the respondents is shown in Table 6. A higher proportion, 84% (n=16) of the respondents holding a Master in Social Work saw elementary nonattendance as a problem than those with a Bachelor of Social Work, 61% (n=14).

**Table 6**

**Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE by Level of Education (N=62)**

Level of Education	Is Elementary Nonattendance A Problem			Totals
	Yes	No	Unsure	
BA/BS	6 (67%)	1 (11%)	2 (22%)	9 (100%)
BSW	14 (61%)	8 (35%)	1 (4%)	23 (100%)
MA/MS	9 (82%)	2 (18%)	0	11 (100%)
MSW	16 (84%)	3 (16%)	0	19 (100%)
Totals	45	14	3	62

Table 7 shows the relationship between the perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance and years of experience of respondents.

Respondents with eight or more years, 88% (N=29) and zero to two years of experience, 72% (n=5) as school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance as a problem more than respondents with three to five years and six to eight year of experience.

**Table 7**

**Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE by Years of Experience (N=62)**

Yrs of Experience	Is Elementary Nonattendance A Problem			Totals
	Yes	No	Unsure	
0-2 yrs	5 (72%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
3-5 yrs	5 (45%)	6 (55%)	0	11 (100%)
6-8 yrs	6 (55%)	5 (45%)	0	11 (100%)
over 8 yrs	29 (88%)	2 (6%)	2 (6%)	33 (100%)
Totals	45	14	3	62

**Contributing Factors**

“In your perception could the underlying causes of truancy be the same as the underlying causes of elementary nonattendance?” Sixty-two, or 100% indicated they believed the underlying causes of truancy could be the same as the underlying causes of elementary nonattendance.

Respondents were asked “Which of the following in your view are contributing factors in elementary nonattendance in your school; unsupportive school, chaotic family, lack of community support, child’s personal deficits or other?” Respondents were directed to check all that apply. As indicated in Table 8, 98% (n=61) identified chaotic family life as a contributing factor to elementary nonattendance; 55% (n=34) identified child’s personal deficits as a contributing factor; 18% (n=11) identified unsupportive school as a contributing factor; 16% (n=10) identified lack of community support as a contributing factor in elementary nonattendance, and 21% (n=13) identified “other”.

**Table 8**

**Contributing Factors in ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**  
**(N = 62)**

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS	n	PERCENTAGE
Chaotic Family Life (Family)	61	98%
Child's Personal Deficits (Individual)	34	55%
Unsupportive School (School)	11	18%
Lack of Community Support (Community)	10	16%
Other <sup>a</sup>	13	21%

a. Comments included: lack of home and school connectedness, communication and support, support systems too far away, illness of child or other family member, and cultural inhibitors and differences

How responding school social workers perceived the contributing factors of elementary nonattendance was analyzed by gender as reported in Table 9. Male respondents identified individual contributing factors (71%), higher than female respondents, 50%. A slightly higher percentage of female respondents identified community contributing factors (19%) than did the male respondents (7%) which was also the case in school contributing factors, females, 19%, males, 14%.

**Table 9**

**Contributing Factors in ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE Identified by Gender (N=62)**

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<b>CONTRIBUTING FACTORS</b>				
<b>GENDER</b>	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>School</u>	<u>Community</u>
	yes	yes	yes	yes
Female	24 (50%)	46 (96%)	9 (19%)	9 (19%)
Male	10 (71%)	14 (100%)	2 (14%)	1 (7%)

---

Tables 10 and 11 report how study respondents perceived contributing factors of elementary nonattendance in relationship to level of education and number of years of experience as a school social worker. School social workers with a Master of Science/Art reported the individual (64%) and family (100%) as the strongest contributing factors while respondents with six to eight, and over eight years experience scored individual (64%) and family (100% and 97% respectively) high. School was not a contributing factor according to Master of Science/Art respondents (91%) while Master of Social Work respondents reported community not a crucial factor in elementary nonattendance at 89%.

**Table 10**

**Contributing Factors in ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE Identified by Level of Education (N=62)**

---

DEGREE	CONTRIBUTING FACTORS			
	Individual	Family	School	Community
	yes	yes	yes	yes
BA/BS	4 (44%)	9 (100%)	2 (22%)	3 (33%)
BSW	12 (52%)	22 (96%)	4 (17%)	3 (13%)
MAMS	7 (64%)	11 (100%)	1 (9%)	2 (18%)
MSW	11 (58%)	18 (95%)	4 (21%)	2 (11%)

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**Table 11**

**Contributing Factors in ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE Identified by Years of Experience (N=62)**

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YEARS	CONTRIBUTING FACTORS			
	Individual	Family	School	Community
	yes	yes	yes	yes
0-2 Yrs	4 (57%)	6 (86%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)
3-5 Yrs	2 (18%)	11 (100%)	2 (18%)	1 (9%)
6-8 Yrs	7 (64%)	11 (100%)	2 (18%)	1 (9%)
8+ Yrs	21 (64%)	32 (97%)	6 (18%)	7 (21%)

---

## **Reasons for Persistent Absenteeism**

Respondents were asked to rank three parent-focused reasons for absenteeism in elementary school. As shown in Table 12, 50% (n=31) ranked number one: “parent unable or unwilling to insist on child’s return to school.” “With parents’ knowledge, consent, and approval” was ranked second by 45% (n = 28) and 74% (n=46) ranked third “truancy”. Several respondents did not answer part or all of the question.

**Table 12**  
**Parent-Focused Reasons for Persistent Absenteeism**

REASON	RANK						Missing	
	1		2		3		n	%
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Parent unable/unwilling to return child to school	31	50	29	47	1	2	1	1
With parents’ knowledge, consent and approval	28	45	21	34	10	16	3	5
Truancy	2	3	9	15	46	74	5	8

Table 13 shows the ranking of the four child-focused reasons for absenteeism in your elementary school. Sixty percent (n=37) ranked “mixed - part of the child’s absence is due to illness but other factors are also relevant” as the number one reason given; 39% (n=24) ranked “psychosomatic illness” as the second reason; 34% (n=21) ranked “separation anxiety” as the third reason given; 53% (n=33) stated the reason given the least frequent “socio-medical”. Several respondents did not answer part or all of the question

**Table 13****Child-Focused Reasons for Persistent Absenteeism**

REASON	RANK									
	1		2		3		4		Missing	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mixed (illness and other factors)	37	59	11	18	6	10	3	5	5	8
Psychosomatic illness	4	6	24	39	22	36	9	14	3	5
Separation anxiety	12	19	16	26	21	34	8	13	5	8
Socio-medical reasons	6	10	7	11	8	13	33	53	8	13

**Role of the School Social Worker**

In response to a list of roles associated with responding to truancy, study participants were asked if they thought these same roles apply in addressing elementary nonattendance; 100% (n=62) answered “yes”.

To identify the role of a school social worker in addressing elementary nonattendance, twelve response categories were specified. Respondents were asked to check all that apply. Table 14 identifies roles in order of frequency with “intervention” the most frequently reported with 97% (n=60), “consultation” and “referral” 95% (n=60); 92% (n=57) checked “team member”, and 90% (n=56) checked “assessment”. The role used the least by respondents were “leadership” and “policy-making” with 42% (n=26).



**Table 14**

**Social Worker's Role in Addressing ELEMENTARY  
NONATTENDANCE  
(N=62)**

ROLE	n	PERCENTAGE
Intervention	60	97%
Consultation	59	95%
Referral	59	95%
Team Member	57	92%
Assessment	56	90%
Liaison	50	81%
Prevention	48	77%
Casework	46	74%
Community Collaboration	42	68%
Leadership	26	42%
Policy Making	26	42%
Other <sup>a</sup>	3	5%

a. Comments included: driving children to school, support parents, and link between school and home.

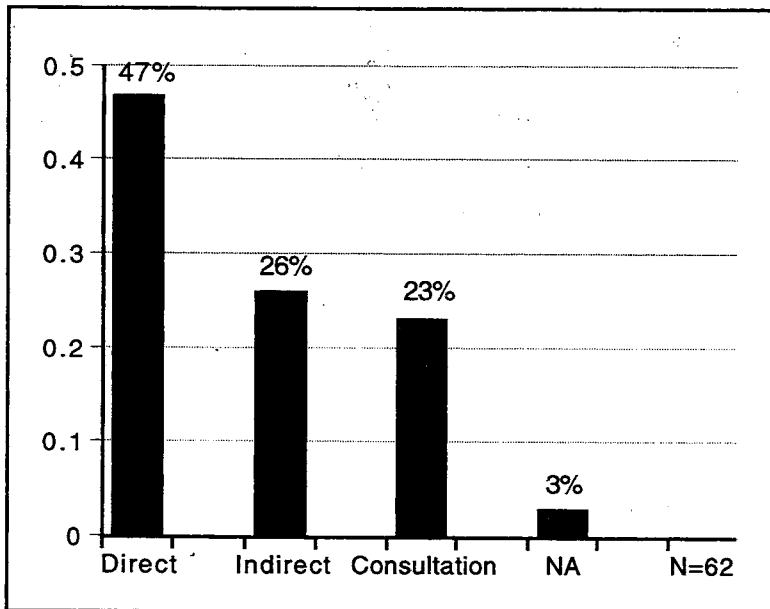
In analyzing the study respondents who answer “no” to the roles of intervention, consultation, and referral it appears that four out of the five hold Bachelor degrees with varying years of experience: one with 3-5 years experience, two with 6-8 years experience, and two at 8 plus years experience. All study respondents who identified leadership or policy making as social work roles held BA/BS or BSW degrees. The respondents who identified leadership or policy making were fairly evenly spread across the years of experience categories.

## Service Delivery

Two questions focused on the type of service: direct, indirect, and consultation, currently provided by respondents in their overall practice and specifically related to addressing nonattendance. The average amount of time spent in direct service was 47%, indirect service was 26%, while consultation was 23%, 3% gave no answer.

**Figure 7**

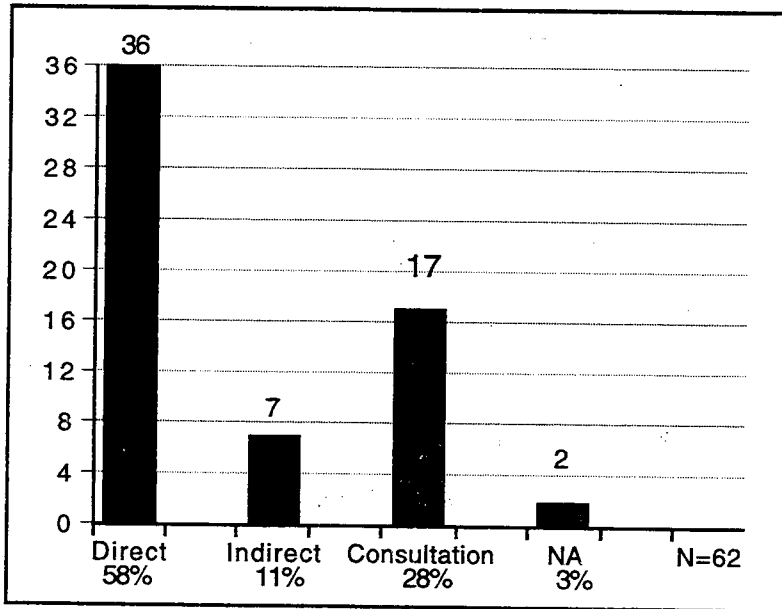
### Type of Service Provided by Respondents



The same three categories of service were provided to describe the primary type of social work service provided to address elementary nonattendance. Respondents were instructed to check only one. As noted in Figure 8, 58% (n=36) checked, "direct"; 28% (n=17) checked, "consultation"; 11% (n=7) checked, "indirect"; and 3% (n=2) gave no answer.

**Figure 8**

**Type of Service Provided to Address ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**



The relationship between the perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance and primary type of service provided to address the issue is indicated in Table 15. A higher proportion of respondents who provided consultation as the primary type of service to address elementary nonattendance identified it as a problem. Eighty-two percent provide consultation (n=14), 72% (n=5) provide indirect, while 67% (n=24) provide direct service.

**Table 15**

**Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE by  
Primary Type of Service  
(N=62)**

<b>Is Elementary Nonattendance A Problem</b>				
<b>Primary Service</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Consultation	14 (82%)	2 (12%)	1 (6%)	17 (100%)
Indirect	5 (72%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)	7 (100%)
Direct	24 (67%)	11 (30%)	1 (3%)	36 (100%)
No Answer	2 (100%)	0	0	2 (100%)
<b>Totals</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>62</b>

The findings in Table 16 show the relationship between respondent's perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance and number of schools served. All the respondents (n=5) who served six, seven, and eight schools responded that elementary nonattendance was a problem (100%); 83% (n=14) of the respondents who served four schools and 80% (n=12) of those who served one school also identified nonattendance as a problem. Respondents who served two schools indicated it was less of a problem, 50% (n=8).

**Table 16**

**Perception of the Problem of ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE by  
Number of Schools Served  
(N=62)**

<b>Is Elementary Nonattendance A Problem</b>				
<b>No. of Schools</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Totals</b>
One	12 (80%)	2 (13%)	1 (7%)	15 (100%)
Two	8 (50%)	7 (44%)	1 (6%)	16 (100%)
Three	6 (67%)	2 (22%)	1 (11%)	9 (100%)
Four	14 (83%)	3 (17%)	0	17 (100%)
Six	1 (100%)	0	0	1 (100%)
Seven	3 (100%)	0	0	3 (100%)
Fifteen	1 (100%)	0	0	1 (100%)
Totals	45	14	3	62

Also explored was whether the type of service to address elementary nonattendance was related to the number of schools the respondent served. Table 17 indicates that respondents who served two schools utilized direct service, 75% (n=12), to address elementary nonattendance while respondents (n=3) who served seven schools utilized indirect (33%) and consultation (33%). The one respondent who served fifteen schools utilized the indirect (100%) service model.

**Table 17**

**Primary Type of Service by Number of Schools Served (N=62)**

No. of Schools	Primary Type of Service				Totals
	Direct	Indirect	Consultation	NA	
One	8 (53%)	3 (20%)	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	15 (100%)
Two	12 (75%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)	0	16 (100%)
Three	5 (56%)	0	4 (44%)	0	9 (100%)
Four	11 (65%)	1 (6%)	5 (29%)	0	17 (100%)
Six	0	0	1 (100%)	0	1 (100%)
Seven	0	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	3 (100%)
Fifteen	0	1 (100%)	0	0	1 (100%)
Totals	36	7	17	2	62

**Intervention Strategies**

Five question related to intervention strategies were used to address elementary nonattendance. Respondents were given the four domains (individual, family, school, community) cited in literature on truancy and asked “Do you believe these same intervention strategies apply in addressing elementary nonattendance?” Ninety-seven percent (n=60), answered “yes” they believe these same intervention strategies apply in addressing elementary nonattendance and 3% (n=2) answered “no”.

When asked about intervention strategies used **with individual students** in addressing elementary nonattendance, seven individual strategies were identified and respondents were asked to check all that apply. As indicated in Table 18, 94% (n=58) checked “problem-solving” and 92% (n=57) checked “individual counseling” while the least frequent individual strategy reported was “classroom modifications” 63% (n=39) .

**Table 18**

**INDIVIDUAL STUDENT Intervention Strategies to Address  
ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE  
(N =62)**

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES	n	PERCENTAGE
Problem-Solving	58	94%
Individual Counseling	57	92%
Self-Esteem Building	53	85%
Behavior Modification (contracting)	50	81%
Social Skill Development	48	77%
Classroom Modifications	39	63%
Other <sup>a</sup>	6	10%

a. Other strategies included working with parents, small groups, and referral.

Seven intervention strategies used **with families** to addressing elementary nonattendance were identified and respondents were asked to check all that apply. The top three family strategies utilized as noted in Table 19 were “conference with parent”, 98% (n=61), “phone contact/letters” 97% (n=60), and “referral to outside agency”, 90% (n=56) . The least utilized strategy was “family counseling” at 40% (n=25).

**Table 19**

**FAMILY Intervention Strategies to Address ELEMENTARY  
NONATTENDANCE**  
**(N =62)**

INTERVENTION STRATEGY	n	PERCENTAGE
Conference With Parents	61	98%
Phone Contact/Letters	60	97%
Referral To Outside Agency	56	90%
Parenting Skill Development	37	60%
Parental Involvement In Education	32	52%
Family Counseling	25	40%
Other <sup>a</sup>	3	5%

a. Other strategies included providing educational literature, assertiveness skill building, resources, and referral.

Eleven **school** intervention strategies to address elementary nonattendance were identified and respondents were asked to check all that apply. Table 20 shows the results with “phone contact/letters” and “consultation with staff” the most frequently utilized school interventions at 95% (n=59) while the least frequently used strategy was reported as “staff training/education”, 37% (n=23).



**Table 20**

**SCHOOL Intervention Strategies to Address ELEMENTARY  
NONATTENDANCE**  
**(N =62)**

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES	n	PERCENTAGE
Phone Contact/Letters	59	95%
Consultation With Staff	59	95%
Home Visits	57	92%
Referral To Outside Agency	56	90%
Mandatory Reporting	52	84%
Monitoring/Recording Of Absences	49	79%
Assessment	49	79%
Contracting	37	60%
Support Groups	26	42%
Staff Training/Education	23	37%
Other <sup>a</sup>	2	3%

a. Other strategies included assist parents with bringing child to school and team planning.

Eight intervention strategies used **in the community** to address elementary nonattendance were identified. Respondents were asked to check all that apply. As Table 21 indicates the most frequently used strategy in the community was “social service programs” at 73% (n=45) followed by “educational neglect” at 54% (n=34) and “court involvement” at 53% (n=33). The least used community intervention strategy was reported as an “attendance counselor”, 10% (n=6).

**Table 21**

**COMMUNITY Intervention Strategies to Address ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**  
**(N =62)**

INTERVENTION STRATEGY	n	PERCENTAGE
Social Service Programs	45	73%
Educational Neglect	34	54%
Court Involvement	33	53%
Collaboration/Partnership	28	45%
Public Awareness	20	32%
Task Force	15	24%
Attendance Counselor	6	10%
Other <sup>a</sup>	2	3%

a. Other strategy identified as community law enforcement.

**Barriers To Addressing Elementary Nonattendance**

The only open-ended question asked respondents to identify barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance in their school. Of the 62 completed surveys, 46 respondents answered the question (see Appendix D for responses). Major themes or categories emerged from the data, and Table 22 represents the ten most frequently cited barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance in schools.

**Table 22**  
**Barriers To Addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**  
**(N=46)**

BARRIERS	n	%
Lack of Time and Resources	10	22%
Lack of Legal Mandates and Court Involvement	10	22%
Denial of the Problem and Fear of Parental Alienation	10	22%
Determination of "Excused" and "Unexcused"	9	20%
Parent Permissiveness	7	15%
Lack of Policies and Procedures	7	15%
Communication	6	13%
Conflicting Values on Importance of Education	6	13%
Cultural and Language Barrier	5	11%
Lack of Understanding to Causes of Nonattendance	4	9%
Other	4	9%
None	3	7%

Ten respondents cited time and resources as a barrier to addressing elementary nonattendance. Most of their responses addressed a lack of time to monitor and intervene as well as limited resources such as services and personnel. Examples of answers given by respondents were as follows; "Time - mine and teachers is the biggest barrier", "Lack of personnel to monitor and follow-up on concerns" and "Not having the county services, programs, and case managers within or close to the communities being serviced is a barrier".

Comments regarding legal mandates and court involvement were

concerned with a lack of response by the court and attendance laws not addressing children under age seven. Comments made were “Courts seldom do anything with truancy issues . . . Law only effects those seven years and older and the court system does not see attendance as a priority and therefore it is not properly addressed and the problem becomes more serious, courts get back logged”. Another comment was “If consequences aren’t imposed when it gets to court and followed through then students and parents get the message it doesn’t matter”.

Denial of the problem and fear of parental alienation appeared in comments like “Hesitancy of teaching staff to deal directly with the parents regarding attendance concerns . . . Staff fear parental reaction . . . Community is closed and participants don’t see a problem and Principals is often reluctant to have anyone report parental neglect related to attendance issues for fear of alienating family”.

The determination of “excused” and “unexcused” absences was discussed as a barrier with respondents seeing this determination very difficult to make by school personnel. “Parents ‘excusing’ absenteeism and our inability to prove truancy. . . Schools are reluctant to determine excused and unexcused and report maltreatment. . . Very hard to challenge parent’s excuses and Parents are given sanction to excuse children.”

The theme of parent permissiveness appeared in the responses to barriers. “Parents excusing children for any reason and allowing them to stay home . . . The age of the child places the burden on parents/care givers - neglectful parents/care givers hide or protect and enable nonattendance or their own stressors make them unable to take ‘responsibility’. . .and families moving a lot so don’t enroll or make children attend regularly.”

Lack of policies and procedures to address nonattendance was cited as a barrier by seven respondents. "Lack of consistent monitoring and response to nonattendance . . . It does not affect every teacher therefore to have a school wide (elementary) based policy/program is difficult to receive support for . . . . Need stronger regulations and enforcement from administrators and parents and Lack of truancy procedures and policies in place at elementary schools."

Communication as a theme was addressed in comments such as "Lack of relationship between home and school personnel . . . . Lack of telephone service which causes delays in communicating . . . . Families move a lot and we don't have addresses . . . . It takes a certain amount of tact not 'stepping on the toes' of teachers and administrators while at the same time encouraging them to modify their attitudes, requires a lot of tact".

Another barrier to addressing elementary nonattendance cited by six respondents was conflicting values on importance of education. "An increasing number of parents do not see the importance of a strong parent-teacher alliance . . . . Many do not have high expectations for their child regarding good attendance, missing only when absolute necessary, making up academic work, etc. . . . Parental values that don't reflect school as important . . . . and Need to educate parents on the importance of education and attending school."

Cultural and language barriers were identified. Examples include: "Families moving a lot. . . . Cultural and language barriers in non-English speaking families and we do not have interpreters available . . . . Cultural awareness of importance of education on the parents part . . . . cultural differences in the times families go to sleep and wake up."

Understanding causes of nonattendance was cited by four respondents as a barrier. The comments related to the assessment of reasons for

nonattendance and a lack of information from long-term follow-up studies on the consequences of elementary nonattendance.

Comments under "Other" included "Difficult topic to address . . . Frequent moves . . . Lack of consistency . . . and Focus and attention is on curriculum development very little on 'people' development". Three respondents cited that there were no barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance.

### **Summary Comments**

The final section of the survey questionnaire invited respondents to add any additional comments or thoughts not covered in the survey. Seventeen respondents did respond. Please refer to Appendix D for the responses. Several of the respondents expressed support and encouragement for the research, and other individuals asked that the results of the survey be published in the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association newsletter. A sample of the comments or thoughts that were offered on the surveys are as follows:

"You need the support of the administrator and good documentation of attendance."

"One of my major focus' this year has been attendance issues - updating and educating staff, encouraging follow through RIGHT AWAY!"

"I have found that students with elementary attendance problems continue to have problems in secondary schools with less chance of remediation."

"In our area, more children seem to be missing school as parents move from town to town. Children are pulled out of one school but often not enrolled in another for 1-3 weeks. These absences are not often reported."

"Policy making needs to be correlated between state policy and definition of truancy and elementary school policy on attendance to become effective."

“Parental attitudes regarding attendance are key to absences - set patterns for grades 6-12 attendance”.

“My concern is primarily with the inconsistent response by county social service agency regarding educational neglect. Depending on the director, we get information that is often contradictory (whether proof of intent of neglect is required for services)”.

“I see families in higher stress than ever before (my social work spans 20 years or more). Nonattendance or truancy is one element of this. It seems families have less time together, face more challenges, and have little support from extended family or community. These issues come together to form symptoms such as nonattendance”.

The following Chapter presents a discussion and analysis of limitations of the study, summary of findings related to literature, and implications for social work practice, policy, and research.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### **Overview**

This chapter will cover the limitations of the study as they relate to external and internal validity and survey instrument design. Key findings will be highlighted and discussed as they relate to problem identification, contributing factors, persistent absenteeism, role of the school social worker, service delivery, intervention strategies, and barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance. Relevance of the findings to the research question and implications for practice, policy, and research will conclude the chapter.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

The primary limitation of this research involved the external validity of the study, which is decreased due to the lack of representativeness of the sample (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). Due to time and financial considerations, the invited sample only included those school social workers who are members of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association. Because the researcher was interested in the rural perspective, the sample size was reduced even further. In an attempt to increase the number of respondents, a follow-up reminder postcard was sent two weeks after the initial mailing of the survey questionnaire. Respondents were also given three weeks to return the survey and a self-addressed, stamped envelope was provided for return of the survey.

A limitation of the survey instrument is that 96% of the questions, 24 of the 25 questions, were closed-ended in nature. As discussed by Rubin and Babbie (1993) this may have hindered a respondent's ability to answer each of the questions in a natural way, and ultimately limited the amount of information



that was received. The researcher did offer one open-ended question, several “other” categories with requests for comments and a section for additional comments and thoughts as a means to balance the impact of this design on the findings.

Another limitation is that the researcher did not survey all elementary school social workers in Minnesota but just rural school social workers in Minnesota. In addition, teachers, administrators, other school personnel, students or parents were not included. Because the research explores whether or not elementary nonattendance is perceived as a problem any additional data obtained from these sources would be helpful and should be a considered for further research.

Internal validity of this study may have been improved by including triangulation. According to Rubin and Babbie (1993) the findings of this study have no ability to show cause and effect and are based solely on perceptions, which are susceptible to response bias. The survey questionnaires did not ascertain the professionals’ level of knowledge with the issue thereby impacting the validity of the research (Rubin & Babbie, 1993). Including in-depth interviews and field observations with the sample population in the methodology of this research would have increased the overall internal validity.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Problem Identification**

One key finding of this study, illustrated in Figure 6, is that responding school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance as a problem in their school. This finding would indicate a need for continued education and future

research on elementary nonattendance since the problem does exist. Several of the school social workers who answered “no” or “unsure” commented on their uncertainty about the term “a problem”. What constitutes “a problem” was not defined in the survey questionnaire which may have led social workers to respond with a “no” or “unsure”. Some of the comments that supported this uncertainty: “there are very few cases - a couple in each school I serve - but when it exists it is definitely a problem”; “it is a problem in that it exists but is not a school wide problem in that it does NOT exist in every grade.” Please see Appendix D for a complete list of respondents’ comments.

The comparative analysis of the perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance by gender, level of education, years of experience, primary type of service, and number of schools served, offered some interesting results. The researcher did not hypothesize the relationship between the perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance and gender which Table 5 seems to illustrate.

The researcher speculated that an advanced level of education would ensure a better understanding of the complex issues of elementary nonattendance which appears to be depicted in Table 6. The assumption that more years of experience will increase understanding and knowledge about the problem of elementary nonattendance seems to be illustrated by findings reported in Table 7, although new graduates with less experience may also have more awareness of the problem according to the findings.

The researcher was surprised by the findings in Table 15 which portray that a higher proportion of responding social workers who provide consultation see the problem, 82% (n=14), than direct service providers, 67% (n=24). Perhaps this result reflects that direct providers are monitoring and intervening

in nonattendance thereby not reporting it as a problem because it is being addressed.

### **Contributing Factors**

Another key finding of the research is that responding school social workers unanimously (100%) agree that the underlying causes of truancy could be the same as the underlying causes of elementary nonattendance. What is known about the causes of truancy could be used as the foundation for exploring the causes of elementary nonattendance. This finding would support adapting and applying the existing literature on causes of truancy to better understand and intervene in elementary nonattendance.

This study's findings, as shown in Table 8, reveal that responding school social workers viewed the family as the most significant contributing factor to elementary nonattendance (98%). A little over half (55%) viewed the individual child as a contributing factor while only a few (18% and 16% respectively) viewed the school and the community as contributing factors. It would be interesting to see if a category "all the above" would have changed the response results. School social workers may have thought they could not "check all the categories" even though the instructions stated check all that apply.

These findings may indicate a single cause or linear perspective which is inconsistent with an understanding of multi causality and practicing with an ecosystems perspective. Truancy and nonattendance are not the result of a single contributing factor in most cases (Barth, 1984; Levine, 1984; Rohrman, 1993). The literature on causes of truancy and nonattendance supports the use of an ecosystems perspective (Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). Because respondents appear to view contributing factors in a linear perspective, further education

about how to use a systems perspective in understanding and addressing elementary nonattendance may be useful.

The comparative analysis of the perception of the contributing factors of elementary nonattendance (individual child, the family, the school, and the community) by gender, level of education, and years of experience, offered interesting comparisons but did not show any substantial results that would warrant clear conclusions.

The researcher speculated that an advanced level of education may influence how contributing factors are perceived, but Table 10 does not clearly support that, although Master of Science/Art respondents did score the highest in all categories. The assumption that more years of experience will increase understanding and knowledge about the contributing factors of nonattendance seems to be supported by findings reported in Table 11.

### **Persistent Absenteeism**

The questions addressing reasons for persistent absenteeism were replicated, with a minor revision, from a study done by David Galloway in 1976. The findings of this study, as illustrated in Table 12, were consistent with Galloway's study (1976). School social workers ranked the primary parent-focused reason for persistent absenteeism to be "parent unable or unwilling to return the child to school," with the least likely parent reason for absenteeism as "truancy," as Galloway (1976) reported. This finding is critical because it illustrates the fact that elementary age children are not absent due to truancy; parents have knowledge and often have consented to the absences. Persistent absenteeism is due to parents' inability or unwillingness to get the child to school; therefore, this finding supports including family intervention as an overall strategy.

The primary child-focused reason for persistent absenteeism identified by study respondents and illustrated in Table 13 was “mixed - illness and other factors”, consistent with Galloways (1976) study findings. “Psychosomatic illness” in this study was ranked a very close second. These findings concur with the literature that nonattendance is not due to a simple, singular reason but is multi-dimensional and complex (Bell, Rosen, & Dylancht, 1994; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Galloway, 1976;Rohrman, 1993).

### **Role of the School Social Worker**

School social workers seem to agree (100%) that the same roles apply in addressing elementary nonattendance as truancy. Literature on the role of the school social worker is vast, but very limited literature exists specific to role of the school social worker in addressing truancy (Straudt, 1991). The roles identified in the survey questionnaire were taken from studies not specific to truancy but to general school social work. The top five roles identified in this study (intervention, consultation, referral, team member, assessment), as illustrated in Table 14, are consistent with roles identified by Costin (1969) and Allen-Meares (1977) as critical to effective school social work practice.

The roles of “leadership” (42%) and “policy making” (42%) were the least frequent of the twelve roles given. This finding is consistent with other research studies that show school social workers tend not to identify with the role of change agent and therefore may be less likely to perform leadership and policy making roles needed to solve problems such as poverty and truancy (Allen-Meares, 1977; Costin, 1969). The researcher did analyze the study respondents level of education and years of experience by how they responded to the roles of leadership and policy making and did not find differences to warrant further exploration. The findings related to the role of the school social worker concur

with other research indicating that school social workers give priority to work with individual students and families, consultation, assessment, referral, and activities related to teaming (Allen-Meares, 1988; Straudt, 1991)

### **Service Delivery**

The primary type of service provided by the responding elementary school social workers in rural Minnesota as illustrated in Figure 7 is direct service (47%), which according to Allen-Meares (1988) is the most common service model. In addressing specifically the problem of elementary nonattendance, as portrayed in Figure 8, the service model used most frequently was also direct (58%). Research literature addresses the direct service model with the child, family, and school (Allen-Meares, 1990; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Levine, 1984). The consultation model (27%) would involve working with teachers and school personnel, community collaboration, task force membership, and development of policy and procedures which is also reported in literature (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994).

The comparative analysis of the primary type of service by number of schools served revealed, as illustrated in Table 17, that the indirect and consultative service delivery are utilized when many schools are served whereas direct service to address the problem is used when only a few schools are served by one school social worker. Levine (1984) and Allen-Meares (1990) found that the model of service changes when the school social work is working in many buildings or settings and time is limited.

### **Intervention Strategies**

Survey results indicate that the overwhelming majority (97%) of responding school social workers believe that the same intervention strategies used to address truancy would apply in addressing elementary nonattendance.

Two social workers responded with a “no” which would indicate they did not believe the same intervention strategies would apply. Asking for a reason for this response would have been beneficial to clarify the reasoning and possibly explore other avenues of intervention strategies.

Interventions used by elementary school social workers to address nonattendance were divided into strategies with individual students, with families, in the school, and in the community. The literature addresses strategies in this format with the understanding that the best intervention strategies are multi modal in nature (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994).

The findings in Table 18 indicate that a variety of individual student strategies are used by responding school social workers to address elementary nonattendance, which is discussed as critical in the literature (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989). These findings support the perception by school social workers that the contributing factor of nonattendance is strongly related to the individual child (55%), as illustrated in Table 8.

As illustrated in Table 19, a key finding related to intervention strategies used by responding school social workers with families was the overwhelming majority (98%) use a conference with parents to address elementary nonattendance; all but two (97%) use phone calls and letters as a means to address the issue with parents. School social workers also use referral to outside agencies (90%). Family counseling (40%) may have not been checked as an intervention strategy due to a misunderstanding of the intent of the question. The perception by school social workers may have been that “they” do the family counseling. In many rural communities, family counseling is not easily accessible or affordable, thereby limiting the use. It would be expected that family intervention strategies would be many and used frequently since the

perception by school social workers is that the main contributing factor to elementary nonattendance is the family (98%).

School and community interventions were used by less respondents than strategies used with individuals and families. This finding is congruent with the perception of school social workers that the contributing factors of elementary nonattendance are not school (18%) or community (16%) as reflected in Table 8. As Table 20 reports school strategies focus on the family (95%), consultation with staff (95%) and referral to outside agencies (90%). A disturbing finding is that mandatory reporting, which is the law, is only used half the time (52%). Several comments made by school social workers on the survey indicate a possible lack of understanding of mandatory reporting law related to educational neglect. Staff training and education (37%) would assist with better monitoring and early identification of elementary nonattendance by teachers and administrators. Findings related to support groups (42%) and staff training/education (37%) not being utilized as often correlate with the literature (Allen-Meares, 1988; Costin, 1969) on role and task of school social workers.

As appears in Table 21, community strategies with social service programs (73%) are the most utilized. Again, educational neglect (54%), a form of mandatory reporting, is reported used a little over half the time. Court involvement (53%) is used less frequently with elementary age children (age 12 and under) since the statute stipulates county social services referral prior to court action. Interesting, but not surprising, is that few rural communities utilize attendance counselors (10%).

### **Barriers to Addressing Elementary Nonattendance**

As presented in Table 22, survey results indicated that the majority of the perceived barriers to addressing elementary nonattendance relate to ten



themes. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the individual child, the family, the school, and the community fitting with the contextual framework and interventions discussed in the review of literature (Cimmarusti, Simpson, & Wright, 1984; Cnaan & Seltzer, 1989; Levine, 1984).

### **Summary of Findings**

Overall, the findings offer insight and information about how school social workers in rural Minnesota perceive elementary nonattendance and the underlying causes, current practice interventions, and what role they have in addressing the problem. Through the findings of this research, it is shown that rural school social workers in Minnesota are involved in addressing and intervening in elementary nonattendance and face barriers within the school, family, and community. In addition, school social workers assume a variety of roles, including those of service provider, intervention specialist, consultant, team member and liaison, in addressing elementary nonattendance in rural Minnesota schools.

The survey findings are consistent with the literature which indicates that a link can be made between truancy and elementary nonattendance. School social workers perceive the causes of truancy to be the same as elementary nonattendance (100%), intervention strategies to be similar (97%), and the same roles to apply (100%). The majority of school social workers see elementary nonattendance as a problem (78%), which is congruent with truancy literature (Barth, 1984; Bell, Rosen, and Dynlacht, 1994).

No previous research which specifically focused on how school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance and its underlying causes, practice interventions, and role identification was found; therefore, these study findings add to the overall knowledge in regard to working with this population

of children. Overall, the literature review and the research findings support the importance of addressing elementary nonattendance in rural settings.

### **Relevance to Research Question**

The research question of this study is “What are school social workers in rural Minnesota doing to address elementary nonattendance?” The findings are helpful in that they build a foundation for better understanding elementary nonattendance and underlying causes, current intervention strategies, and the role of the school social worker in addressing the issue. This foundation includes a conceptual link between truancy and elementary nonattendance. The findings show an awareness that the problem of elementary nonattendance does exist (73%), that intervention strategies addressing the child, family, school, and community are being utilized, and that school social workers do have a variety of roles in addressing elementary nonattendance.

It is only possible to address and intervene in elementary nonattendance if it is acknowledged as a problem. Understanding how school social workers perceive the underlying causes of elementary nonattendance as well as their personal and professional framework is also crucial. One way to obtain the documentation of the problem of elementary nonattendance and truancy would be to contact the U.S. Department of Education. At a state level, the Department of Children, Families and Learning collect this information about Minnesota schools. As was discussed earlier, the recognition of the problem of elementary nonattendance by policy makers remains a crucial issue since services are rarely offered if there is no documentation of a problem.

## **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

### **Overview**

Many challenges face school social work practitioners. School social work began in the early 1900s, and the profession of social work continues to grow within the schools (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1986). Truancy has been a problem addressed in junior and senior high for many years. Nonattendance of elementary age children can be better understood by reflecting on what is known about truancy. This creates an opportunity for elementary school social workers to develop practice guidelines for their position which address and allow them to intervene in cases of nonattendance and educational neglect. In the following section ten practice guidelines developed on the bases of the literature and study findings will be defined in the context of practice, policy, and research.

### **Guidelines Related to Practice**

#### ***1. Practice with an ecological perspective (strengths) and family-centered approach.***

Practice is most effective when one looks at strengths and builds on them. This facilitates respect, understanding, and empowerment. Family-centered practice involves the ecological perspective (analyzing human behavior and social functioning within an environmental context), competence-centered perspective (methods and strategies that promote effective functioning of child, parents, and family), developmental perspective (understanding of growth and functioning in context of their families and environment), and permanency planning orientation (maintain in home or if necessary, outside placement) (Pecora, Whittaker & Maluccio, 1992).

This conceptual framework for understanding the causes of elementary nonattendance is important and impacts the intervention strategies utilized. From the findings of this study, it is unclear how well school social workers understand the complex and interrelated causes of nonattendance. Increased education and training of school social workers about this perspective and the complex interrelated aspects of elementary nonattendance, its causes and interventions, is critical in order to more effectively impact nonattendance. Nonattendance is a social work issue because school social workers have the skills and expertise to effectively work with the systems that are impacted: the child, family, school, and community in addressing and preventing nonattendance.

***2. Develop knowledge and understanding about the multiple causes of elementary nonattendance and intervention strategies to prevent and eliminate educational neglect.***

Make nonattendance and reporting of educational neglect a priority in school social work practice. Know the research and issues related to nonattendance and truancy. Understand that nonattendance is a symptom of other issues; child, family, school and community. Be aware of barriers that prevent attendance. Understand that nonattendance and educational neglect are a result of larger social problems. The loss of opportunity resulting from poor attendance is reflected in increased dropout rates, crime, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, political powerlessness, and social isolation (Farrington, 1980; Rood, 1989).

Although knowledge about factors that influence elementary nonattendance is growing, there is still much to learn if the problem is to be understood and corrected. No single, clear-cut explanation of the cause and effect of nonattendance can be obtained from the existing literature and

research. Because many variables are involved, the situation often is viewed as hopeless. School social workers can counter that idea by identifying potential dropout and nonattenders early and starting programs targeted to their needs.

**3. *Develop trust and respect with the child and their family.***

Many families with school attendance problems do not trust or respect the educational institution. School social workers should understand this dynamic and show the family through actions and support that a partnership between school and home is possible and in their child's best interest. School social workers need to listen attentively to the family. According to Rohrman (1993) the misunderstanding between families and school is a result of different ideas about what constitutes "quality education". This results in mistrust. Most parents want what is best for their child but coming to agreement and understanding of what that is takes time, respect, and trust. Cultural values need to be respected and understood as well.

**4. *Provide direct social work services to children and their families experiencing attendance difficulties.***

Offer individual, group, and family services. Do home visits. Develop individual attendance contracts, parent support groups, and after school activities to build self-esteem and acceptance. Coordinate peer tutoring and mentorship programs for children experiencing attendance problems. Monitor and intervene on all children identified as having poor attendance. Utilize technology to assist such as E-mail and call-in devices.

School social workers can assume leadership roles in identifying at-risk children and families and organizing school, family, and community resources to insure that students attend school and that schools respond to the needs of students (Benda, 1987)

**5. Provide staff inservice on elementary nonattendance; causes, dynamics, research, assessment, interventions, policy and procedures, and program options.**

Develop a building “team approach” that is proactive and preventive. Stress the need for children and their families to feel valued, respected, and welcomed into each classroom and school building.

Rural school social workers may experience more barriers in addressing and intervening in elementary nonattendance due to the rural location and availability of services. Opportunities for education, training, and networking specific to the issues of nonattendance may not be as available in the rural settings. The Minnesota School Social Workers’ Association may be one way to provide support and information to social workers around the State.

**6. Develop a community collaborative “team” to address elementary nonattendance.**

If a community task force addressing truancy and nonattendance does not exist, form one. Members should include personnel from: school (administration, board of education, & school social worker), county attorney, child protection, law enforcement, juvenile justice, probation, mental health, family based services, parents, city leaders, business owners, and any other community agencies and organizations that work with children and families. School social workers have the skills to work with diverse systems to provide direction in strategy building and the development of innovative interventions to address the problem on a home, school, and community level.

**7. Provide information to families and the community about the long-term impact of nonattendance and educational neglect.**

Raise community awareness about the value of attending school and getting an education through newsletters, media, and public forums. Get

support from school boards, civic groups, churches, community task force, and other community agencies to assist with sponsoring this media campaign.

### **Guidelines Related to Policy**

#### ***8. Participate in the development of policy and practice interventions.***

School social workers have the expertise to assist with development or revisions of attendance policy. Policies should reflect current research and practice knowledge. School social workers advocating for children and families should be aware of classroom and building practice that may be inhibiting attendance. Providing consultation to change climate and practice is then necessary.

At the policy level, elementary nonattendance has roots in the compulsory attendance laws. It was not until the 1995 legislative session that a bill was passed reducing the age of compulsory attendance to five or when the child is first enrolled in school. This legislation mandates earlier intervention and prevention before the patterns of nonattendance are entrenched. The enforcement of compulsory attendance laws and educational neglect are needed as shown from the findings of this study. With increased awareness and understanding by school social workers, educators, parents, social service agencies, and county attorney offices, it is envisioned that elementary nonattendance will be reduced and eliminated.

Lack of time and resources was a barrier to addressing elementary nonattendance according to the respondents of this study. Addressing funding to eliminate this barrier and examining creative solutions is recommended. It is critical for school social workers to document the need, approach school

officials and lobby local legislators. Working with local community agencies in collaboration and policy development may open other avenues for grants and initiatives to address early intervention and prevention of nonattendance.

**9. *Stay informed on legislation impacting attendance, truancy, and educational neglect.***

Understanding of the intent and mandates of statutes will allow for more effective practice and intervention strategies. Advocate for earlier intervention on nonattendance of elementary age children and the need for services. Legislative action on social welfare reform impacts many families thereby impacting the children who may be at risk for nonattendance.

**Guidelines Related to Research**

**10. *Expand the written knowledge and research base on elementary nonattendance and educational neglect .***

Future research is needed about elementary nonattendance. There is limited research that specifically addresses elementary nonattendance: the scope of the problem, underlying causes, effective practice interventions, and role of the school social worker. Longitudinal research on the long-term effects of elementary nonattendance is needed. Research needs to include the perspective of parents and children who have problems with nonattendance in elementary school. A more comprehensive examination of school social workers' perception, rural and urban, is recommended.



## **Summary**

This thesis includes a clear and detailed literature review and study findings about what rural school social workers in Minnesota are doing to address elementary nonattendance. Its findings expand the information, knowledge, and understanding about elementary nonattendance and educational neglect. Children and their families who have problems with nonattendance will be better served when school social workers understand the complex dynamics of the social problem and use the recommended practice, policy, and research guidelines.

This research has produced a number of interesting findings in relation to school social workers and their perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance. It was the hope of this researcher to generate awareness and understanding of elementary nonattendance. Introducing elementary nonattendance to the minds of parents, educators, school social workers, child welfare personnel, and the community will ensure a better understanding of its importance in being addressed and the development of effective intervention strategies to reduce nonattendance and ensure student success.

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APPENDIX A  
LETTER OF SUPPORT



# Minnesota School Social Workers' Association

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Region X Rep.

Harold MacDonald  
Newsletter Editor

6324 25th ST. NW • MAPLE LAKE, MINNESOTA 55358 • (612) 963-5806

October 18, 1995

Dr. Rita Weisbrod  
Chair of the Institutional Review Board  
Augsburg College  
2211 Riverside Avenue, Box 186  
Minneapolis, MN 55454

Dear Dr. Weisbrod;

On behalf of the Minnesota School Social Work Association, I'm writing to let you know that our association is very supportive of Anita Larsen's research project.

We give Anita permission to explore what school social workers are doing in rural Minnesota to address elementary nonattendance. We understand this research will explore school social workers' perception of the problem of elementary nonattendance, underlying causes, role identification, and practice interventions.

We agree to assist Anita in utilizing our association membership for her subject population. We understand that Anita's research will include a mail survey questionnaire. We also understand that Anita will survey only school social workers who serve rural Minnesota (defined as outside the 7 county twin cities metropolitan area) which includes our membership regions 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9.

As the Minnesota School Social Work Association President, I will affix the mailing labels of our current association membership in regions 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, to stamped survey packets provided by Anita. I will mail the survey packets out. Anita will not have access to the names and addresses of this membership population. The surveys will be returned directly to Anita in the self-addressed stamped envelopes provided in the survey packet. In the cover letter it is explained that participation in the survey is complete voluntary and will in no way affect current or future membership with our association.

We look forward to Anita sharing the results of her research with our association. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need additional information or have any questions.

Sincerely,

Judy Bialka, President  
Minnesota School Social Work Association

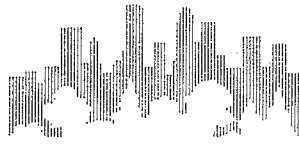
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**APPENDIX B**

**CONSENT LETTER:  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

# AUGSBURG



C • O • L • L • E • G • E

October 31, 1995

TO: Anita Larsen

135 Skyview Ridge Road, Little Falls MN 56345

FROM: Rita Weisbrod, IRB Chair

RE: IRB application: How rural school social workers perceive elementary nonattendance..."

Your application has been approved with the acceptance of conditions requested . Amendments noted in your letter of Nov. 3 are acceptable.

Your IRB approval number is

95 - 07- 2

This number should appear on all consent forms and letters to research subjects.

If there are any substantive changes to your study which change your procedures regarding the use of human subjects, you must report them to me in writing so that they may be reviewed for possible increased risk.

I wish you well in your project and hope that it produces useful information and achieves your research goals..

**APPENDIX C**

**SURVEY COVER LETTER  
AND QUESTIONNAIRE**

January 2, 1996

Dear School Social Worker,

I am a graduate student at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, MN. and am working toward a Masters degree in Social Work. As a part of my masters thesis, I am conducting a research project on what school social workers are doing in rural Minnesota to address elementary nonattendance.

The purpose of my study is to gain new knowledge and understanding of elementary nonattendance. This research will explore school social workers' perception of the problem, underlying causes, role identification, and practice interventions.

You are invited to participate in this research project by completing a survey. I will also be inviting all other members of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association to participate, who are currently working as a rural school social worker in a school (s) which serves any grade between kindergarten and fifth. This survey was mailed directly to you by the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association therefore I do not have knowledge of your name or any other identifying information.

The survey will take approximately twenty minutes to complete. If you choose not to answer a particular question, please move on to the next question. Your participation in this survey will allow me to gather more accurate information regarding the views of school social workers in the State of Minnesota.

Please be assured that you will remain **completely anonymous** in this process. In any presentation of the data in this study, it will not be possible to identify any of the participants. Only the researcher will have access to the completed surveys. All data will remain confidential and will be kept in a locked file. The data will be kept until completion of the study. To ensure anonymity, please do not place your name or any other identifying information on the survey.

Do not feel obligated to participate in this study unless you wish to do so voluntarily. Participation will in no way influence your current or future relationship with Augsburg College, the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association, or your employer. By completing and returning the survey, you have given your consent to participate. If you agree to participate, please complete the enclosed survey and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope provided. Only surveys received by January 23, 1996 will be included in the study.

Please feel free to contact myself, or my thesis advisor, Dr. Carol Kuechler, at any time with any questions that you may have regarding this research project. Dr. Kuechler can be reached at (612) 330-1439.

Thank you for your cooperation.

*Anita M. Larsen, LSW*

Anita M. Larsen  
MSW Student - Augsburg College ( IRB # 95-07-2)  
(612) 632-5517 (home)  
(612) 632-9261 (work)

## **SURVEY ON ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**

**January 2, 1996**

### **Instructions**

Either a pen or pencil may be used to complete the questionnaire. Most of the questions in the survey can be answered by simply checking the response that reflects your perspective; other questions ask for written responses. If you choose not to answer a particular question, please move on to the next question. Please do not put your name or any identifying information on the survey or the return envelope.

At the end of the questionnaire, there is space for you to offer comments. Any additional comments that you would like to make would be appreciated, and are helpful in better understanding the concerns and interests of school social workers related to this issue. IRB approval number 95-07-2.

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study.

### **Definitions**

**ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE:** Absence from school by a child under the age of twelve without lawful excuse (illness, death, family holiday, family emergency, religious observance, inclement weather).

**EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT:** Failure of a person responsible for the child to take steps to ensure that the child is educated in accordance with Minnesota State Law. Absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for seven school days if in elementary school (M.S. 626.556, 1994).

**TRUANCY:** Absence from school by a child over the age of twelve without lawful excuse, whether or not the parents know and approve.

### **Survey Questions**

1. Are you currently a member of the Minnesota School Social Workers' Association, and employed as a school social worker in Minnesota for a school which serves any grade between kindergarten and fifth? (Check One)

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

2. Do you work in a school district outside the seven county twin cities metropolitan area? (Check One)

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

If you answered "No," to either questions please STOP! You have completed the questionnaire. Please place the questionnaire in the envelope provided and mail it back as soon as possible. Thank you!

If you answered "Yes," please continue answering and go to question 3.

-1-



\*Please answer the following questions by checking the response which best reflects your perspective. The questions should be answered in relation to the **elementary school (s)** in which you are currently employed.

3. Is ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE a problem in your school (s)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

if no, please explain \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

According to literature the underlying CAUSES OF TRUANCY include; unsupportive school environment (the school), chaotic family life (the family), lack of community support (the community), and personal deficits (the child).

4. In your perception could the underlying CAUSES OF TRUANCY be the same as underlying CAUSES OF ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

5. Which of the following in your view are contributing factors in ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE in your school?(check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) unsupportive school      \_\_\_\_\_ b) chaotic family life  
\_\_\_\_\_ c) lack of community support      \_\_\_\_\_ d) child's personal deficits  
\_\_\_\_\_ e) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

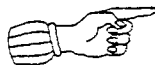
From literature the reasons for persistent absenteeism (excluding prolonged organic illness) are listed below.

6. Which of the following PARENT FOCUSED reasons are related to absenteeism in your elementary school (s)?

\* Rank in order of frequency (1 most frequent reason given, 3 least frequent reason).

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) With parents' knowledge, consent, and approval  
\_\_\_\_\_ b) Parent unable or unwilling to insist on child's return to school - child is at home with parents' knowledge but not with their active consent  
\_\_\_\_\_ c) Truancy - child is absent without parents' knowledge or consent

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7. Which of the following CHILD FOCUSED reasons are related to absenteeism in your elementary school (s)?

\* Rank in order of frequency (1 most frequent reason given, 4 least frequent reason).

\_\_\_\_\_ a) Socio-medical reasons - child is excluded from school for reasons such as infestation, scabies, etc.

\_\_\_\_\_ b) Separation anxiety - child may be exhibiting school refusal, school phobia - nonattendance is associated with separation difficulties

\_\_\_\_\_ c) Psychosomatic illness

\_\_\_\_\_ d) Mixed - part of the child's absence is due to illness but other factors are also relevant (please explain) \_\_\_\_\_

According to literature the ROLE of the school social worker in addressing TRUANCY involves; assessment, intervention, prevention, casework, team member, consultation, referral, liaison between home, school, and community, community collaboration/partnership, leadership, and policy-making.

8. Do you believe these same ROLES apply in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_

No \_\_\_\_\_

Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

9. What is YOUR ROLE as a school social worker in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check ALL that apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ a) assessment

\_\_\_\_\_ b) intervention

\_\_\_\_\_ c) prevention

\_\_\_\_\_ d) casework

\_\_\_\_\_ e) consultation

\_\_\_\_\_ f) team member

\_\_\_\_\_ g) referral

\_\_\_\_\_ h) liaison

\_\_\_\_\_ i) community collaboration

\_\_\_\_\_ j) leadership

\_\_\_\_\_ k) policy-making

\_\_\_\_\_ l) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

10. Estimate the percentage of time you spend in each category of service (100%).

\_\_\_\_\_ a) direct

\_\_\_\_\_ b) indirect

\_\_\_\_\_ c) consultation

11. What best describes the PRIMARY type of social work service you provide when addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check one)

\_\_\_\_\_ a) direct

\_\_\_\_\_ b) indirect

\_\_\_\_\_ c) consultation

-3-



According to literature the INTERVENTION STRATEGIES provided by school social workers in addressing TRUANCY are; individual focused, family focused, school focused and community focused.

12. Do you believe these same INTERVENTION STRATEGIES apply in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

13. What INTERVENTION STRATEGIES have you used **with individual students** in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) individual counseling      \_\_\_\_\_ b) behavioral modification (contracting)  
\_\_\_\_\_ c) self-esteem building      \_\_\_\_\_ d) classroom modifications  
\_\_\_\_\_ e) problem-solving      \_\_\_\_\_ f) social skill development  
\_\_\_\_\_ g) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. What INTERVENTIONS STRATEGIES have you used **with families** in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) family counseling      \_\_\_\_\_ b) parental involvement in education  
\_\_\_\_\_ c) phone contact/letters      \_\_\_\_\_ d) parenting skill development  
\_\_\_\_\_ e) conference with parent      \_\_\_\_\_ f) referral to outside agency  
\_\_\_\_\_ g) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

15. What INTERVENTION STRATEGIES have you used **in your school** to address ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ a) home visits      \_\_\_\_\_ b) phone contact/letters  
\_\_\_\_\_ c) support groups      \_\_\_\_\_ d) contracting  
\_\_\_\_\_ e) consultation with staff      \_\_\_\_\_ f) staff training/education  
\_\_\_\_\_ g) mandatory reporting      \_\_\_\_\_ h) monitoring/recording of absences  
\_\_\_\_\_ i) assessment      \_\_\_\_\_ j) referral to outside agency  
\_\_\_\_\_ k) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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16. What INTERVENTION STRATEGIES have you used in your community to address ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE? (check all that apply)

- a) educational neglect       b) social service programs  
 c) attendance counselor       d) court involvement  
 e) task force       f) collaboration/partnership  
 g) public awareness of importance of attendance and education  
 h) other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

17. What barriers, if any, are there in addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE in your school? (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Background Information**

18. Gender:  Female       Male

19. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ Years

20. What is your highest level of completed education?

- Bachelors of Arts or Science (B.A./B.S.)  
 Bachelors of Social Work (B.S.W.)  
 Master of Arts/Science  
 Master of Social Work  
 Ph.D.  
 Other (Please Specify) \_\_\_\_\_

21. What is your ethnicity (eg. African American, American Indian, European American, etc.)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

22. How long have you been a school social worker?

\_\_\_\_\_ 0 - 2 years

\_\_\_\_\_ 3 - 5 years

\_\_\_\_\_ 6 - 8 years

\_\_\_\_\_ over eight years

23. How many schools do you serve? \_\_\_\_\_ school (s)

24. How many of the schools you serve are elementary(K-5)? \_\_\_\_\_ school (s)

How many of the schools you serve are secondary (6-12)? \_\_\_\_\_ school (s)

25. LOCATION OF SCHOOL  
(check **one** location for each school)

STUDENT POPULATION (elementary)  
(Estimate number of students in each school)

**City Of**

**Elementary School**

St. Cloud   Duluth   Moorhead   Rochester   Out of city

\_\_\_\_\_

School # 1; \_\_\_\_\_ students

\_\_\_\_\_

School # 2; \_\_\_\_\_ students

\_\_\_\_\_

School # 3; \_\_\_\_\_ students

\_\_\_\_\_

School # 4; \_\_\_\_\_ students

\_\_\_\_\_

School # 5; \_\_\_\_\_ students

**Please add any other comments or thoughts you'd like to share that have not been covered in this survey.**

Upon completion of this survey, please place it in the envelope provided and mail back no later than **JANUARY 23, 1996.**

Thank you for your participation in this survey!!

**APPENDIX D**

**QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES**

## Questionnaire Responses

### Problem Identification

**SURVEY QUESTION:** Is ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE a problem in your school? If no, please explain.

### **RESPONSES**

Of the 500 some students K-6 we have one 6th grade student who has an attendance problem.

We have very few children who miss.

There are no students who are consistently absent.

It is an issue with a few students but in general it is not a problem.

School wide records not kept or I have not seen this data.

For the most part, attendance is good, but for a few children, attendance is a problem, less than 1%.

The number of kids is small but on the increase.

It is not a wide-spread problem, we have significant concerns about nonattendance for only 4-5 students out of 550. However it is a "problem" for EACH of those students.

It occurs very little, maybe one family several years.

We have not seen nonattendance in our elementary school unless for illness, family emergency or a family trip.

Nonattendance only with certain families - because it is a small school it is easier to handle.

Rarely does it become a problem because I am able to deal with it in the inception stages.

There are VERY few cases (a couple at each school I serve) but when it exists it is definitely a problem. So I'm unsure what you are defining as a problem, it is a problem in that it exists but is not a school wide problem in that it does NOT exist in every grade.

Kids come to school - parents make them- kids what to.

While there are students in this category, they are not in the majority at this time (very few). The higher grades reflect more blatant cases.

Sometimes for some students.

### **Barriers to Addressing ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE**

**SURVEY QUESTION:** What barriers, if any, are there in addressing  
ELEMENTARY NONATTENDANCE in your school?  
(please specify)

### **RESPONSES**

Lack of parental knowledge, relationship with school personnel; lack of telephone service.

Assessment of reasons for nonattendance.

Courts seldom do anything with truancy issues.

Law only effect those seven years and older.

1) Increasing number of parents who do not see the importance of a strong parent-teacher alliance; also those who do not have high expectations for their children regarding good attendance, missing only when absolutely necessary, making up academic work, etc. 2) the issue of "lawful excuse." In my experience, if a parent gives an excuse it's lawful!

TIME! 10/hr/week/district is NOT enough for all School social worker service.

1)Lack of consistent monitoring and response to nonattendance. 2) Lack of personnel to monitor and also to cover all at risk children. 3) hesitancy of teaching staff to deal directly with parents regarding their concerns.

Parents excusing children for any reason.

Staff fear of parental reaction; time shortage to address concerns and follow through.

No mandatory attendance law with age seven regardless of whether child is enrolled.

Cultural and language barriers in non-English speaking families - we do not have interpreters available.

Families moving a lot and not having current addresses in the city for them, also no English speaking parents.

I do not live in the communities I work in - that also makes a difference. Also not having the county services, programs, case managers within or close to the communities being served.

Need to see as a priority issue (the problem almost always indicates high risk) Time for addressing issue. Information from long-term follow-up studies on the consequences of elementary nonattendance.

Parental values that don't reflect school as important.

Cultural awareness of importance of education on the parents part - parents "excusing" absenteeism and our inability to prove truancy - parents allowing children to stay home.

Community is closed and participants don't see a problem. Parents willing to cover for child.

Policy in place for elementary nonattendance.

It does not affect every teacher therefore to have a school wide (elementary) based policy/program is difficult to receive support to do this.

Coordination of services between agencies.

Language and cultural barriers. Parents who are not available.

Principal is often reluctant to have anyone report parental neglect regarding attendance issues for fear of alienating family.

An unwillingness by some staff to follow a structured process.

Time - mine and teachers is the biggest barrier.

Difficult to determine that it is nonattendance when parent gives excuses - not enough time to verify EVERY absence.

The age of the child places burden on parents/care givers. If neglectful those parents/care givers hide or protect and enable nonattendance or own stressors make them unable to take responsibility.

It takes a certain amount of "tact"; not "stepping on the toes" of teachers and administrators while at the same time encouraging them to modify their attitudes, requires a lot of tact.

Court system does not see it as a priority and therefore it is not always properly addressed and problem becomes more serious or gets back logged.

In this large school with many families moving in and out, parents sometimes don't know who to go to for assistance beyond classroom teacher.

Need stronger regulations and enforcement from administrators and parents.

No consistent truancy policy or someone monitoring absenteeism of students.

There are no ways of requiring parents to honor attendance laws - courts and social services do not get involved unless there are other factors present.

Lack of time on the part of the school and myself, cultural differences - we have had a large amount of migrant families who have stayed to settle in our community. I have worked a lot on educating our new families on the importance of education and attending school. The children will come - usually around 10:00 am after the families have awoken. Cultural differences in the times their families go to sleep and wake up.

Overwhelming focus/attention on curriculum development - very little on "people" development.

Lack of consistency.

We don't always get a lot of support from the courts, they are overloaded. Parents and school can have the same concerns but if consequences aren't imposed when it gets to the courts and followed through, students get the message it doesn't matter.

Priority of the area not high, lack of truancy procedures in place, schools reluctance to determine excused and unexcused and report maltreatment, parents threaten to home school.

Not always being informed of attendance concerns until it's a crisis. Also the amount of time I have in each school, as I serve the high school in those districts.

Some families do not have telephones - causes delays in communicating with parents. Also parent's excuses are accepted without much questioning - very hard to challenge parent's excuses.

Laws concerning neglect (educational) are not as supportive, parental advocacy is powerful. Parents are given sanction to excuse children.

Often move, so students get lost, very typical.

We have not devised a workable plan for reporting daily absences - we rely on teachers to report problems.

### **Summary Thoughts and Comments**

**SURVEY QUESTION:** Please add any other comments or thoughts you'd like to share that have not been covered in this survey.

### **RESPONSES**

You need the support of the administration and good documentation of attendance.

You are now obligated to fill out all research surveys that come your way - Happy New Year.

One of my major focus' this year has been attendance issues - updating and educating staff, encouraging follow through from the right away.

This is my first year as elementary school social worker - have worked previously with high school level - new assignment this year.

I have found that students with elementary attendance problems continue to have problems in secondary schools - with less change of remediation.

Please publish summary in MSSWA newsletter - Thanks.

In our area children seem to be missing school as parents move from town to town. They are pulled out of one school but often not enrolled in another for 1-3 weeks. These absences are not often reported.



Thanks for doing this. I have worked hard to help establish elementary attendance policies and procedures as the students are almost consistently high risk for future school problems. In spite of my involvement in this issue, I found it difficult to answer some of your questions (it's hard to develop a questionnaire) so I don't know if many answers will be consistent with the intent of your questions.

In your definitions are they consecutive days or can they be on separate occasions.

Policy making needs to be correlated between the states policy and definitions of truancy and elementary school policy on attendance to become effective.

It would be helpful for us to have an administrator supported plan for dealing with attendance district-wide. One or two buildings have a well thought out procedure but it would be good.

Our current attendance policy is new this year as I am fairly new in this district. We are trying to greatly decrease the elementary nonattendance but have not been following the current policy long enough to see how effective it is.

I see families in higher stress than ever before (my social work spans 20 years or more) nonattendance or truancy is one element of this. It seems families have less time together, face more severe challenges, and have little support with extended family or community. These issues come together to form symptoms such as nonattendance. Will you publish a summary of results in the MSSWA newsletter? It would be interesting - Good Luck.

As the only social worker in the elementary schools there is not enough time to follow-through with attendance issues and the principals of each school must be very active and aggressive.

Parental attitudes regarding attendance are key to absences - set patterns for attendance in grades 6-12. Best wishes.

My concern is primarily with the inconsistent response by county social service agency regarding educational neglect. Depending on the director, we get information that is often contradictory (regarding: whether proof of intent of neglect is required for services).

