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2013

## Chronic Absences, Truancy, and Dropouts

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### Recommended Citation

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Kristin Kennedy

April 1, 2013

## Chronic Absences, Truancy, and Dropouts

### Introduction

As concerns for the U.S. education system continue to grow and gain national attention, there are a variety of options that are offered to assuage the situation. Problems in education include dropouts, chronic absenteeism, and the growing concern that American students are falling behind their global counterparts. Globally, American students are falling behind academically considering the United States is ranked 21<sup>st</sup> among industrialized countries in the proportion of students who finish high school (Rumberger, 2011). Along with concerns for graduation rates, there is national attention to push American students harder in order to keep up in the global economy. As Rumberger observes in his article, “Solving the Nation’s Dropout Crisis” many schools are raising high school graduation requirements to push students towards being “college ready.” For example, the state of Tennessee implemented the Tennessee Diploma Project in 2009 to update what students need to learn to succeed in the twenty first century (Tennessee Department of Education). However, addressing non-curricular factors such as truancy and chronic absences can greatly improve American students’ education and graduation rates. The less time students spend in school, the more likely it is for them to fall behind their peers in class. This paper will examine other measures taken by schools to improve graduation rates and provide students with incentives for staying in school. Measures that will be examined throughout this paper are the implementation of early colleges, online credit recovery, and

expansion in social services. In this paper, there will also be an analysis of reasons why students are missing school and eventually dropout.

Various federal, state, and local measures have been taken to try and improve the education that high school students are receiving, which many times include flooding funds into math and science education. Russell Rumberger points out that many of the current grants do not appear to be addressing the nation's "dropout factories" (Rumberger, 2012). A dropout factory is the term used for schools "that have senior classes with 60 percent or fewer of the students who started there as freshman" (Balfanz, 2004). There is much reason for concern for the number of students who are excluded from a high school diploma. The cohort high school dropout percent for Tennessee in 2010 was 11.7 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation). This percentage leaves many students left out of graduation. According to the research of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Tennessee still ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> in education for 2012. This leaves Tennessee in the same category for education as many other Southeastern states.

This paper will also contain information about the state of truancy and dropouts within Knox County, Tennessee. In the last section of the paper, it will report the initiatives and condition of Knox County's reaction to these issues.

### Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absences can be defined as students who miss more than 10 percent of the school year or missed a month of school (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). Chronic absenteeism differs from truancy and average daily attendance. Average daily attendance is simply how many students are in school on a given day. Thus, average daily attendance could be high for a given day, but students are still chronically absent because they are absent on different school days (Balfanz and

Byrnes, 2012). Truancy also differs from chronic absenteeism because chronic absenteeism generally includes both excused and unexcused absences, therefore showing how many days a student is out of class regardless of the reason. There are high correlations between student attendance and student achievement. One example of this was found in a Baltimore study which found a strong relationship between sixth grade attendance and the percentage of students graduating either on time or the year following their expected high school graduation (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). This can also show the importance of supporting students when they are transitioning from elementary to middle school as well as from middle to high school. If students are not given the adequate support in transition, it will increase their chances of falling behind in that new stage of schooling.

Another concern that may not always be accounted for in data collection is the impact of students missing one class various times. For example, a student could miss two full days of class but misses his or her last class of the day 10 times for doctor's appointments, sickness, or other reasons. Although the student did not miss any of her other classes that many times, the student will still be eight days farther behind than in her other classes.

Balfanz and Byrnes report three categories of explanations for why students miss school. The first category is for students who cannot attend school due to conditions out of their control such as need to work, involvement in the juvenile justice system, and illness. Students who will not attend school make up the second category for reasons such as bullying, unsafe conditions, or harassment. The last category is for students who do not attend school because either they or their parents do not see the value of attending school (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). Examining the reasons for why students are missing school can be very important in determining what will be effective in keeping students attending school.

One problem that needs to be addressed is absences that stem from bullying or harassment. Bullying may be more of a problem in the more affluent schools because many students in low income schools are in survival mode (Boring, 2013). These students may also be less likely to focus on bullying if they are concerned with their own day to day survival needs. These students may be better able to stand up for themselves. Many schools do not address bullying as an excuse for absences because it can become used as an excuse when it is not applicable. The policy regarding bullying is to report the bullying so it can be addressed rather than using it as an excuse to miss school (Boring, 2013).

The Chronic Absenteeism Report conservatively estimates that out of the 50 million students enrolled pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in American public schools, five to seven and a half million students each year do not attend regularly (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). Through the research done at Johns Hopkins University, it can be deduced that these patterns of chronic absences start in kindergarten and continue to increase as students reach high school. The twelfth grade is where chronic absenteeism often reaches its highest rate; thus, many students who drop out as seniors were oftentimes chronically absent before dropping out. Another factor to consider in this finding is that many graduating students have missed significant amounts of school (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012).

Through the research gathered by the Chronic Absenteeism Report from Johns Hopkins University, there is not a notable difference of attendance in geographic areas or between the genders. However, the primary characteristic of those students who miss large amounts of school is living in or near poverty (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). According to the Chronic Absenteeism Report, these students in poverty are also those who gain the most from daily attendance. Balfanz and Byrnes report that improving the attendance of students in poverty alone will drive

up academic achievement and high school graduation rates without any other specific improvements in the American education system. As Susan Sparks reports in her study of chronic absences, young students who are chronically absent increase their chances of being retained. The chances of older students dropping out increases with the more chronic absences they accumulate (Sparks, 2011).

Most will agree that missing class is not the most efficient way to succeed in school, but there is a significant advantage to attending school particularly in high-poverty situations (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012). As observed in the Chronic Absenteeism Report, students in high poverty situations benefit the most from attending school which also provides the conclusion that they suffer the most from absences. According to Rumberger, the United States also has the highest child-poverty rate in the industrialized world. Rumberger also asserts that more fundamental goals need to be targeted in order to alleviate the dropout crisis, such as improving the lives of American children and strengthening the communities in which they live.

Part of the discussion regarding absenteeism needs to involve school intervention. Schools have been attempting to restructure the way they handle absences to better accommodate students who miss frequently. Christi Cardwell, former high school teacher at Fulton High School in Knoxville, TN reflects on the initiatives that Fulton High School took to prevent students from feeling like they were too far behind to succeed in school. Fulton instituted policies that students could not receive zeros for assignments (Cardwell). If the student was absent and missed a test, the student could take a similar test to receive partial credit, thus preventing the student's grade from plummeting more.

There seems to be a strong correlation between chronic absences and involvement in the juvenile justice system (Sparks, 2011). There could be many reasons behind this correlation, however, it is important to note that this might be a result of the way the law handles truancy. Truancy is considered a status offense, meaning that it is an offense that only a youth can commit. Once a child is charged with truancy, a hearing is required in juvenile court where the judge can decide to put a child on probation. If school is missed, a violation of probation, the child is determined to be delinquent for violating probation instead of for being truant (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). According to the research of Kronick and Hargis, non-attendees tend to be at home watching television, instead of engaging in delinquent acts when they are not in school (Kronick and Hargis, 1998).

If truant students are not committing crimes, then why does the law treat them as criminals? The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act that was passed in 1974 created the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Hughes, 2011). This act sought to separate juveniles from adult criminals and deinstitutionalize status offenders by emphasizing treatment instead of detention. In 1980, the Valid Court Order exception was included in the legislation. This VCO exception gives courts the authority to hold status offenders once they have violated a direct order (Hughes, 2011). This provision allows for status offenders to be prosecuted if they violate their probation, such as the example of the truant student as given earlier. D'Lorah Hughes, an associate professor at the University Of Arkansas School Of Law, cites how the Valid Court Order Exception is anything but an exception considering how it leads to the detention of thousands of status offenders (Hughes, 2011). For example, in Arkansas, there were 1464 uses of the VCO exception in 2010 which means that over the course of that year, 1464 status offenders were confined for violating a court order (Hughes, 2011). Punitive

measures for status offenders, particularly for truant students, does not embrace the ideology of rehabilitation that the juvenile justice system is supposed to embrace, which could be why many judges and advocates are calling for the VCO exception's removal from the JJDP. According to Hughes, most judges who originally supported the VCO exception are now advocating for its removal (Hughes, 2011).

Attempts to reduce truancy, a status offense, has plagued the school systems, law enforcement, juvenile courts, legislatures, and families since education became compulsory in the United States. Regarding the status of our current system for handling truancy, Dean Rivkin, professor of law at the University Of Tennessee College Of Law, postulates that students and parents are the focus of truancy prosecutions in our current system (Rivkin, 2012). During the past thirty years, the reliance of truancy prosecutions has dramatically increased. Between 1987 and 1996 there was a 92 percent increase of truancy petitions. There was also a 67 percent increase from 1995 to 2007 in truancy petitions (Rivkin, 2012). Rivkin advocates for a change in the way our system handles truancy. Taking note of the dramatic increase in truancy prosecutions, he points out, "the justifications for continuing to prosecute students for truancy are contrary to the general goals of state-sanctioned crime and punishment and to the ostensibly rehabilitative purpose of the juvenile court" (Rivkin 2012).

Another problem with truancy prosecutions is the responsibility that it places on the student or the student's parents (Rivkin, 2012). For children under age 13, the parents are prosecuted for the child's truancy while truant students ages 14 and up are prosecuted for truancy (Pasko, 2013). Educational neglect is the term for the charge brought up against parents when his or her child violates local compulsory education laws (Rivkin, 2012). Rivkin reports the ambiguousness of educational neglect because of the various parties involved in a child's

education. Each state's statutes declaring the parent's role in compulsory education are different, thus complicating how parents are prosecuted. Rivkin finds an inherent problem with this because when states can prosecute parents for educational neglect, it shifts the focus away from the school's involvement in the child's truancy. Rivkin advocates that schools and other agencies involved need to shift the burden of student attendance from parents for student's absences to develop a system better suited to truant youth. While there needs to be less blame on the student/parent in the situation shifting the blame solely on the school will present a similar problem now but on the opposite extreme. There is a need to find a collaborative system with responsibility on both the school and the student/parent that will be more effective in keeping students in school.

There are significant consequences to prosecuting a student for truancy. Rivkin shows the potential repercussions of prosecuting students for truancy such as incarceration, court involvement, probation requirements that force students to meet "unrealistic school performance standards," and mental health effects (Rivkin, 2012). Consequences within the school environment can be especially detrimental for a student who is prosecuted for truancy. Once a student is labeled as a truant, the student might face additional problems in peer relationships and with teachers and administrators. Inclusion in the juvenile court system might cause tensions with other students and isolate them from peers. Truancy prosecutions can cause students to miss even more school because of court hearings and meetings with a probation officer, putting them farther behind in school. Along with this inclusion in juvenile court, it potentially labels them as a troublemaker or a criminal in the eyes of school administration or teachers. The social stigma associated with being a trouble maker can breed an unfavorable or unsupportive school

environment for the truant student. The result of this might further hinder the student's desire to attend school.

On the other hand, truancy may not damage the reputation or create unfavorable social stigmas for truant students. Christi Cardwell, the high school coordinator at Emerald Youth Foundation, was a teacher at Fulton High School in Knoxville, TN for several years before leaving public education. In her experience with high school students, she claimed truant students are generally not suffering in peer relationships as much as one might think. In urban communities, truant students are still living in the same neighborhoods with students who attend school regularly. Cardwell even noted how if a teacher wanted to know the real reason behind a student's absence she would ask her students who were more likely to know (Cardwell, 2013). Lindsey Pasko, a mental health intern at Knox County Juvenile Court, reflected that the stigma truancy attached to each student vastly differs based on the individual student. She relates that for some truant students being involved at Juvenile Court is a badge of honor and earns a certain amount of respect with their peers. Some of these students have no identity so the "badge" associated with juvenile court gives the student some sort of identity even if it is negative. However, for other students, especially in smaller communities, involvement in juvenile court can be an embarrassing experience (Pasko, 2013).

Prosecutions of truant students detract from the overall rehabilitative goal of juvenile court. Rivkin advocates truancy reduction programs which advance the rehabilitation of truant students. Unfortunately these programs are not implemented before court proceedings (Rivkin, 2012). Court proceedings lack the support that many students need to prevent reappearance in the juvenile justice system. Rivkin cautions, "When dealing with youth, punishments must be carefully crafted to the needs and developmental levels of youthful defendants" (Rivkin 2012).

Rehabilitation is difficult to achieve in many juvenile courts because there are not sufficient educational and social service programs available to prosecuted students.

Outside of classroom effects, VCO's can have a detrimental effect on the youth's behavior problems. As Hughes points out, if prosecution following the use of the Valid Court Order Exception leads to detention, this will not resolve the causes of juveniles committing status offenses including truancy. Detention might actually aggravate the issues that caused the juvenile to commit the status offense (Hughes). As Rivkin points out, there is no evidence that VCO positively impacts the behavior of these juveniles; instead it can aggravate their behavior problems by exposure to youth serving time for more serious offenses.

The system that Rivkin advocates for dealing with truant youth is one similar to the special education model. Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, students who are eligible for special education are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is specific to the student's educational needs. The IEP provides services including parent counseling, social work services, counseling, and even services to provide them with support in postgraduate transition (Rivkin, 2012). Some scholars are advocating for this system to be applied to truant students who are excluded from school, similarly like students with disabilities were excluded before IDEA. Overall, the policy prescriptions related to truancy need to focus on decriminalizing students. Treating students as criminals for status offenses will generally not put students on the path to graduation.

In Knox County, TN, the process for intervening in truancy seems to be lenient. Regarding the absence policy in Knox County, students are allowed 10 excused absences from parent notes throughout the year for sickness, parent sickness, death in the family, and other

circumstances. Students are also allowed unlimited medical notes for excused absences. Students are allowed three unexcused absences before a parent receives a phone call. After seven days, a letter is sent to the parents of the student so they are warned of the consequences of the student's truancy (Boring, 2013). When a student's absences reach nine, the school social worker at Austin East reports that he makes a visit to the home of the student to see if the student is at home. Once a student's unexcused absences reaches 10, the school social worker holds a "pre-court" as an intervention of the truant student. "Pre-Court" notifies the parents and involves a meeting at school where the child, parents, and social worker meet to discuss why the student is absent from school (Boring, 2013). During this meeting, the student and parents sign a contract to confirm that the student must come to school and understand the consequences if he/she does not. Usually Knox County Juvenile Court will not charge a student with truancy until the student reaches 15 because of the large amount of truancy cases dealt with across the county. If unexcused absences persist from this point, the student if over age 14 is charged and brought to truancy court (Pasko, 2013). Once a student is in front of the judge for truancy, parent written notes for absences are no longer allowed (Boring, 2013). At the point in court, probation is assigned to the student.

#### Decriminalizing students: ending zero tolerance

Along with the end of criminalizing students for truancy, there needs to be a shift from the zero tolerance policies that contribute to the criminalization of young people. As a result of zero tolerance discipline, more than 3 million youth are suspended from school each year (Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2012). Recently, there has been increased national attention on the effects of zero tolerance policies in further harming students and increasing the school to prison pipeline. Research from groups, such as the Council of State Governments and the

American Psychological Association, have acknowledged correlation between this type of discipline and retention, involvement in juvenile justice, and dropping out. With increased knowledge of the harm that criminalizing students causes, states such as California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Louisiana have passed bipartisan policies to bring awareness to zero tolerance policies and implement different policies to avoid the use of suspensions as discipline. Proponents of positive approaches to discipline see the need for the federal government to encourage positive methods of discipline (Dignity in Schools Campaign, 2012). This movement in part seeks to give a voice to students who are pushed out by exclusionary discipline policies. Another part of the conflict over school suspensions is the racial disparity between those who are expelled or suspended. The Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights' survey found in 2012 that African American students are more than three and a half times more likely than white counterparts to be suspended (Walker 2012). The disparity in school suspensions detracts from the school as a place for every student to learn. Punitive discipline further detracts from the goals of a school to provide a positive learning environment for children.

One positive of this movement towards reducing juvenile detention is the juvenile detention's rate has fallen to its lowest level since the late 1970s (Sullivan, 2013). Since status offenses make up the majority of juvenile detention there has been an increased focus on reducing confinement rates since these are offenses that would not be illegal for persons over eighteen years of age. Fortunately for Tennessee, there have been strides by advocates such as Rivkin to remove the punitive discipline for students on status offenses. Reported as recently as March 2013, Tennessee has showed a 66 percent decline from 347 confinements per 100,000 to 117 per 100,000. With leaders such as the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County,

initiatives have been launched in order to keep nonviolent offenders out of incarceration and promote cost effective measures to rehabilitate offenders (Sullivan, 2013).

### Curriculum

To gain perspective on why there is such a demand for reform in the American education system, one must begin to understand what the situation looks like. A common complaint of the public education system is large classroom sizes that prevent students from feeling comfortable and from building strong relationships with peers and the teacher. An aspect of classrooms that does not seem to be addressed as often is the structure of the classroom. Students are grouped by their chronological age, however, the range of achievement spanning over a chronological age are not restricted (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). With our system's focus on the lock-step curriculum and grades, students are required to progress with their age group or grade in school. When students do not meet the curriculum of their group, they are retained to repeat the grade with another group. This retention does not account for the fact that the student may not learn at the same speed as other students. The fixed time periods that accompany our curriculum do not account for the long term difference in learning speeds, leaving slower paced learners will eventually fall behind their peer group again (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). Retention presents a problem for the student as well as society as a whole: costs an extra year of study for that student and taxes can increase as a result (Bornsheuer, 2011). Research has shown that there is no long term benefit for retention, and specifically has shown "that although students might perform better immediately after grade retention, the gains are lost within a two to three year period" (Bornsheuer, 2011). Our current system makes it easy for high performing students to continue to succeed while low achieving students fail (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). Low grades do not stimulate failing students to succeed when they do not have the skills to make better grades. One

problem in the high school education is when low performing students make it to high school, teachers do not have the “expertise or inclination” to work with high school students with weak academic skills (Bornsheuer, 2011).

Another problem within the curriculum is the emphasis on test scores. Rivkin holds that with the emphasis of test scores, federal standards are not “flexible enough to accommodate the needs of chronically absent students for educational interventions and programs” (Rivkin, 2012). A complaint of high stakes testing is the influence on how classrooms function; an increasing problem is the increase of teachers teaching to a test which greatly restricts students from learning the skills needed for academic success in the future (Bornsheuer, 2011).

### Criticisms

Russell Rumberger confronts the nation’s dropout problem with specific measures he believes need to be taken in order to alleviate these problems. He criticizes our nation’s past reform movements that were targeted at improving graduation rates. In 2008, the federal government reviewed twenty two dropout prevention models only to determine that none were proven effective in raising high school graduation rates (Rumberger, 2011).

Rumberger points out flaws in high schools nationwide pushing for every student to be college ready by raising standards in math and reading. This not only makes it harder for students to graduate high school but also might not be beneficial to every student. According to projections by the Center for Education and the Workforce out of Georgetown University, less than two thirds of job opportunities in the United States between 2008 and 2018 will require postsecondary education (Rumberger, 2011). Currently, the definition of college ready defines success narrowly without providing deeper development for individual students. Similar to

Rumberger's critique of high school success standards, Kronick and Hargis in *Dropouts* criticize the limited scope of expectations for students because this means not every student will succeed by the school's standards. The authors of *Dropouts* also seek to remind the audience that forcing a student to learn a certain curriculum will not ensure they become successful scholars.

Rumberger calls for defining high school success "where students achieve a sense of competency by demonstrating mastery in an area that most interests them" (Rumberger, 2011).

Other curricular problems that many feel need to be addressed include the restricted standards for success as mentioned earlier, but also for many students there is a lack of incentive to stay in school. According to Kronick and Hargis, student involvement in school activities gives students an incentive to stay in school. Cheri Boring, lead counselor at Austin East, noted that school activities such as basketball and the magnet dance program give students an incentive to stay involved in school. These extra-curricular activities that make up the hidden curriculum that keeps students interested in coming to school but she noted that clubs could be stronger (Boring, 2013). One downfall of stressing extra-curricular clubs does not give students an incentive to be engaged in school activities but rather to only use school so they can be involved in clubs.

Another common complaint of students or parents regarding school is the lack of quality teachers. While there is no doubt that teachers are an important part of the push for school reform, some focus needs to be placed on revitalizing the role of school counselors. Barton observes, "The role of guidance counselors has largely been ignored in the education reform movement of the past two decades" (Barton 2005). The majority of time spent by counselors is focused on scheduling students for classes, preparing students for postsecondary experiences, and student attendance. Many counselors do not have the time to pay closer attention to the students who are

at risk for dropping out. School counselors are also limited in the sheer number of counselors that are able to work with students. On average there is one guidance counselor per 500 students, increasing the difficulty for guidance counselors to have personal intervention methods with students who are at risk for dropping out. There are fewer counselors per students in schools where less than half of the students are college bound (Barton, 2005). As Barton demonstrates in his analysis, services that would improve retention are not available or are only available to a limited extent. He also shows how most programs are targeted at post secondary education rather than the transition for students to work programs who have no desire for further education past high school (Barton, 2005). With the increased number and importance of standardized tests, school counselors are increasingly used to administer tests, taking away from the time spent on counselor activities. There needs to be revitalization in school counselors' role in schools to allow them to do the work they were hired to do.

### Failure of School Reforms

As noted before twenty two dropout prevention programs were reviewed by the federal government in 2008, and none were proven to raise high school graduation rates (Rumberger, 2011). This fact can be discouraging but it raises the question of why are many school reforms not effective in what they promise to do? Henry Levin discusses the unsuccessful school reforms as a result of the lack of congruence in school reforms and the school culture they are forced into (Levin, 2001). As he points out, schools are run on stable tradition and expectations while school reforms focus on the skills that must be changed but not the tradition. As Levin points out, "if they (schools) are not persuaded that change is needed in the first place or that the school is fundamentally flawed, it is unlikely they will direct their efforts towards transformation" (Levin, 2001). Levin's main point of contention is that school reforms that are incongruent with school

culture will fail. One example he gives is a school that teachers who are used to highly structured classrooms with high teacher authority will find it hard to change classroom style to “more participative and democratic forms of pedagogy” (Levin, 2001). The responsibility for school reforms needs to be placed on the school personnel so that the school can take into consideration its school culture. The state must recognize that schools will reject outside ideas from being implemented because of the nature of tradition and structure in schools. Reformers cannot change the shape of the school from the outside. The individuals who make up the school culture need to be involved in reform in order for reforms to be successful. Reforms that recognize this are responding to let reform interested schools make information about reforms accessible to the members of the school community. These receptive schools will ultimately decide specific reforms by a vote of the school staff. This environment is more likely to accept reform because the school is open to change. This is not a perfect system since sometimes the “buy-in” vote could have been unclear by the principal or school district. If the vote was fair, the staff may not have been supplied with the resources to understand and implement the reform model. The process adopted by the accelerated schools process is the empowerment strategy. This strategy focuses on the school staff, parents, and students to agree on goals and a process to achieve them.

An important step to implementing successful school reform is strong leadership from the administration to guide the school towards new goals. In Jody Isernhagen’s analysis of the administrators’ role in Title 1 school reform, leaders are essential in school reform because they influence every aspect of the school’s organization. As Isernhagen points out, strong leaders develop a clear focus of schools to reforming school culture; they also are the most important part of the “recruitment, retention, and development of effective teachers” (Isernhagen, 2012). Leaders will face obstacles of changing the school culture because of engrained behavior

patterns of others in the school community. However, for successful and positive reform, this will require schools as a positive work environment and employing the strengths of reform (Isernhagen, 2012).

### The Cost of Dropping Out

The problems that stem from dropping out have an individual cost for the drop out and a societal cost. With the increasing demand for an educated workforce, the gap between earnings for dropouts and graduates is growing. The earnings of male dropouts in 1972 were 85.3 percent of the earnings of graduates. In 2002, dropouts' earnings fell to 77.3 percent of graduates (Barton, 2005). With the changing economy, there is more demand for education and technology. Economically, dropouts are at a disadvantage when it comes to employment and earnings. Within the twenty to twenty five year old age group of dropouts less than six out of ten are employed. In this same age group, three out of ten of these dropouts are not in the labor force at all. A male dropout must make \$22,903 on average to keep a five person family around the threshold of poverty. As Barton points out with this statistic, "the average full time employed dropout in this age group working full time for a full year, is hovering around poverty level earnings in terms of supporting a family" (Barton, 2005). Dropouts are more likely to be involved in criminal activity. In some states, anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of the prison population is school dropouts (Bornsheuer, 2011). Factors influencing the high dropout rates include absenteeism, low grades, disciplinary problems, frequent school mobility, and if a student is retained two or more grades (Barton, 2005). How the systems are working to compensate or alleviate some of these risk factors will be described in the next section.

### School system role in Truancy and Dropout Reduction

One of the most important ways Rumberger poses to solve the dropout situation in our nation is by providing greater human and social resources to families and communities. For example, research by the California Dropout Research Project, shows that providing adequate health care to students will help improve academic performance. The mental health issues of students can be attributed to reasons students may leave school (California Dropout Research Project, 2010). Providing students with support groups can also be effective in encouraging at-risk students to stay in school (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). Students who are experiencing trouble in school would be grouped with successful peer mentors that would work with them on various sets of skills. Some of these skills that would be taught through peer support groups are social skills and survival skills. This would aid students in communicating effectively and appropriately with others as well as learning decision making. Peer mentors could also aid potential dropouts in study skills (Kronick and Hargis, 1998). Another step that Kronick and Hargis recommend to intervening with potential dropouts would be to establish work study programs. These programs would help students understand the importance of gaining work skills. It would also help students to understand the transition from school to the job world.

One measure that is taken in order to provide students with incentives to stay in school is through early colleges where high school students can potentially earn an associate's degree and their high school diploma simultaneously. Another advantage of these schools is that the instruction is focused on allowing students to succeed: lessons last twenty minutes and afterwards allow for more class movement, student presentations, and students using technology (Adams, 2012). Students are also pushed to participate and interact in the classroom which enjoy smaller student to teacher ratios. The new STEM early college program at North Carolina A&T began this August with three tracks for students which include renewable energy, engineering,

and biomedicine (Adams, 2012). This program will allow for students to be prepared for the demands of the new workforce's transition from manufacturing to STEM jobs. Measures taken in Guilford County, NC undoubtedly help students who are high achievers or who already excel at school, but the question remains of what benefit is this to students who are at risk for dropping out. However, Adams explains that the majority of Jobs for the Future Early College initiative's students are low-income and non-white. These students also are graduating at a rate of 93 percent compared to 76 percent graduation rate of other students in their district (Adams, 2012).

One method of helping students to keep students on the track to graduation is by allowing online credit recovery courses. As Michelle Davis points out in her analysis of credit recovery classes, the traditional option for students who fail a class is summer school or retaking the class the following semester (Davis, 2011). The chief technology director of the Los Angeles Unified School District, Themistocles Sparangis, advocates online recovery courses for several reasons. He claims the online recovery courses are student centered, allowing students to set their own pace without condemnation from peers (Davis, 2011). Another positive to online credit recovery is the immediate feedback students receive. They are able to test out of information they know and move on to focus more on concepts they do not understand. While this is an effective, student-centered strategy, Sparangis also realizes that online credit recovery is not the most effective measure for all students. Some groups of students may benefit more from live instruction than online learning. The online recovery credit courses are part of an effort to find out what will motivate students. While this seems to be an effective idea, there is not much evidence yet on its effectiveness (Davis, 2011). These measures taken by schools might be

helpful in pushing students who are at risk for dropping out but excel or enjoy school; however, it fails to give incentive for students who simply do not enjoy any aspect of traditional school.

### Dropout Situation in Knox County and Proposed Reforms

Vine Middle School represents some of the challenges that many schools in at risk communities face. In the Support our Schools Report from March 2013, it communicates several out of class problems and how they affect the school. People in the neighborhood report that the police make them feel threatened in their own community. One YWCA worker reports that over half of the children that participate in YWCA programs have one parent incarcerated. Many students are transferred to Vine as a result of behavior problems from other schools. Some teachers at the school will not let students use the school's instruments (Support our Schools, 2013). All of these problems highlight that Vine Middle School, as well as other failing schools are treated as the problem rather as part of the answer in education reform.

The dropout situation in Knox County is not as severe as the nationwide average based on the reports from the Tennessee Department of Education. However, the disparities in graduation rates between different sides of the county are apparent. Farragut High School and Bearden High School boast over 90 percent graduation rates in 2012. Farragut High School was the highest graduation rate in Knox County at 95 percent and a dropout rate of only 2.4 percent. The dropout situation becomes obvious in Austin East High School and Fulton High School. Austin East High School had the lowest graduation rate in the county in 2012 at 83.5 percent (Tennessee Department of Education, 2012).

In Knox County, Austin East High School has taken extensive measures to bring up graduation rates. Cheri Boring, lead high school guidance counselor at Austin East, reports that

the graduation rate in Austin East has risen from around 60 percent 15 years ago to 82 to 84 percent now. Austin East is proactive in the monitoring of students. In the ninth grade, weekly academic and attendance progress is tracked which has brought improvements in both areas at Austin East (Boring, 2013). Report cards are now sent home every three weeks and Austin East holds a parent night every three weeks for parents who are concerned about their child's academic progress. While there are certainly barriers in parents' ability to attend these meetings, Austin East is attempting an increased parent involvement in the school. Austin East is also providing ways for students to make up credits for classes they have failed. As mentioned earlier, online credit recovery is increasingly available to students in public high schools. This is one of the methods being used by Austin East to counter dropout rates. Also offered are afterschool recovery classes such as biology and algebra offered as a fifth period class following the conclusion of the regular school day (Boring, 2013).

Kim Christodoulou, guidance counselor at Fulton High School in Knox County, TN, agrees with many of the same concerns that Boring has with her students. Both stressed the importance of freshman year in regards to students' path towards graduation, as well as tracking grades, and encouraging parental involvement and students' involvement in school activities. At Fulton, Christodoulou reports that academic interventions are held for students who are not passing their classes. This can include tutoring or time to make up missing work (Christodoulou, 2013). The school has also restructured to try and provide additional support for freshman. Five years ago Fulton restructured to form Freshman Learning Communities where students in each small learning community have the same core teachers and principals for two years to help build relationships with faculty and students (Christodoulou, 2013). There has also been a mentor program where tenth graders mentor the incoming ninth graders. However, Christodoulou

reports that there are questions if sophomores are ready for that responsibility and not much research has been done on the effectiveness of this program.

Extracurricular activities are an important part of keeping students motivated to stay in school (Boring, 2013). One of the advantages of Austin East is their role in keeping students in school is the success of the performing arts department as well as popular football and basketball programs. Boring reports that clubs could be stronger in other sports and in academic clubs.

### Nonprofits role in Truancy and Dropouts

Various nonprofits and other organizations seek to support students to stay in school and graduate. Many of these organizations exist to serve at risk students because of the increased difficulty in circumstances and barriers that prevent some from finishing school. At Emerald Youth Foundation, Emerald Youth supports students academically from elementary to postgraduate employment. For each age range there are different obstacles faced in regards to encouraging students to stay in school. Emerald Youth plays an active role in the academic development of the students. Tutors are matched up with students based on their needs in certain subjects which provide the student with academic support and the role of a mentor investing in their personal development. According to Christi Cardwell, Emerald Youth's high school coordinator, Emerald seeks to provide high school students with a network of support that may or may not be available through their home life. A new program that Emerald is implementing is called Work Keys and Key Train which is an online program that will enable students to learn practical work skills (Cardwell, 2013).

One of the important factors reported by the Austin East social work department is the strength of Project Grad's presence in Knox County Schools (Boring, 2013). At Project Grad the

program's focus is "to impact generational change through education" (Project Grad Knoxville). This is accomplished through college/career access, social services support, community engagement, and support for students. The main goal is to increase academic achievement in all grades and improve high school graduation rate, and increase enrollment and success in higher education. One of the most important programs from Austin East's perspective is the summer institute offered to students. This program allows students to participate in a summer institute where the first summer students take a Pellissippi class in a college format. The following summer the students participate in summer institute at UT where participants live in the dorms and pick college classes. Through this program, high school students are able to see what the college experience is like. It also shows the students that college is a tangible goal to seek (Boring, 2013).

#### Proposed Policy Recommendations

The goal of this research is to provide a picture of the problems of truancy and dropouts in America's education system. Through discovering the harm that comes from the VCO exception, one of the most important policy recommendations that this research would recommend is the elimination of the VCO exception when dealing with status offenders and the overall decriminalization of students. Eliminating this criminal status for juveniles would decrease the school to prison to pipeline and would prevent juveniles from being detained for status offenses. Currently the system places responsibility solely on the parents or student for absences, but there needs to be a more comprehensive system to increase the school's involvement in preventing truancy and rehabilitate truant students. To maintain this level of decriminalization in Tennessee and across the country, continued collaboration will have to be maintained among juvenile courts, school administration, and social services.

One important measure for determining if a student will drop out of school is retention rates (Bornsheur, 2011). As Bornsheur describes, when a student initially is retained the student performs better but these gains are lost over a two to three year period. Because of the importance of ninth grade in determining if a student will graduate from high school, there needs to be support systems implemented into schools to provide students with the academic support to keep students from repeating ninth grade and place them on the path towards graduation. As mentioned by both school counselors at Austin East High School and Fulton High school, peer mentor programs would be advantageous to promoting students to come to school and be engaged in the school experience. Social programs need to line up more effectively with schools in order to provide the most effective support for students. Options need to be considered such as extending the school day to accommodate the needs of students and parents. The community schools model shows that comprehensive reform can positively benefit students. At Pond Gap Univeristy Assisted Full Service Community School in Knoxville, TN, 34 percent of students decreased their absences (Espiritu, 2011). Once students are attending school at Pond Gap, 43 percent improved grades in core subjects in the consecutive grading periods (Espiritu, 2011). This evidence shows the importance of tailoring a school to meet the needs of the school community will be met with success.

On the curricular level, there needs to be a stronger reading component to early intervention programs to ensure that the effectiveness will last beyond third grade where instruction shifts from oral to written. There needs to be concentration on engaging students in reading and fostering a love of reading. William Labov, sociolinguist from the University of Pennsylvania, states that including a game like structure to a reading program “provides the motivation needed for discouraged readers who are alienated from the usual classroom

procedures” (Labov, 2010). Another point to consider in implementing policy is to forge a greater relationship between universities and their surrounding community such as the Reading Initiative at the University of Pennsylvania.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of this research was to give an adequate picture of how truancy is handled as well as insight into why students are absent from school and eventually what leads to students dropping out of school. Chronic absenteeism is a problem in the United States since 50 million students from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, five to seven and a half million students each do not attend regularly. Increasing attendance of students in poverty alone will drive up academic achievements and high school graduation rates alone. This paper seeks to give reasons for absences so they can be addressed in order to drive up graduation rates.

Truancy is a status offense that is handled through school intervention first then is moved to juvenile court once enough unexcused absences accumulate. From this point juveniles are assigned probation which requires them to attend school; truancy past this can lead to potential lock up as part of the Valid Court Order exception. This VCO exception leads to the detention of thousands of juveniles across the country for status offenses (Hughes, 2011). Rivkin and others have found that this does not benefit the students positively and it can be seen as a contributor to the school to prison pipeline. Juvenile Courts do not feel like truancy should be the responsibility of the court while schools see it as an offense that must be handled by the courts. With this blame game, the students are the ones who suffer in the hiatus between juvenile courts and schools intervention.

As this research shows, there are many curricular and non-curricular factors that contribute to the 24 percent dropout rate across the country (Annie Casey Foundation, 2012). These pathways can include truancy and involvement in the juvenile court. Another problem that comes in the discussion of dropouts is retention versus social promotion. Social promotion will obviously not solve the academic problems of the student but retaining a student more than one time will greatly decrease their chances of graduating. Many students become victims of the lock step curriculum where some students are guaranteed to fail. Non-curricular issues can include students' concerns over basic necessities being met or mental health problems that need to be addressed. A large section of this research showed some of the intervention models that have been adopted throughout the country and what needs to be done in order to assure that graduation improvement programs are effective.

#### Further Research

If there was time for further research in this project, it would be important to investigate the effectiveness of at risk youth transition programs particularly from elementary to middle school and then again from eighth grade to ninth grade. Along with this idea, it would be beneficial for future research to examine the effectiveness of peer mentor programs in retention rates and eventually graduation rates. Another area of interest in further research might examine the effectiveness of decriminalization across Tennessee in graduation rates.

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