

Quiet Conflicts: Attendance Violations in a Public High School

Linda M. Goulet

University of Massachusetts Boston

Masters Project - Dispute Resolution

March, 2003

Correspondence regarding this paper should be addressed to Linda M. Goulet,
1 Fitchburg Street, C301, Somerville, MA 02143.

Abstract

Many public high schools today are faced with the problems of high rates of student absenteeism. Tardiness, class cutting, and truancy contribute to the loss of many hours of the instructional time deemed so important to academic continuity and student success. This study is an investigation into one suburban high school's response to these violations of the attendance policy. A review of attendance data accumulated over a four-year period indicates that many days of student absence were the result of suspensions for these attendance violations and for skipping the detention that often serves as a first consequence. Interviews with school and community personnel reveal mixed opinions as to the effectiveness of suspension as a consequence for these violations, as well as the under-utilization of alternatives to deter such behavior. Central to this study were the weekly meetings of The Attendance Group, whose members were frequent offenders of the attendance policy. Students openly discussed the conflicts that contribute to their tardiness, cutting, truancy, and skipping detention.

This study indicates that suspension is not effective in changing the behavior of these students; that it has harmful effects on student engagement and motivation; and that it does little to resolve the conflicts that cause students to stay away. It suggests instead, that if we are to help students attain success and engagement in the school community we must regard attendance violations as expressions of conflict; provide opportunities for students to voice their feelings about these conflicts; and provide them with appropriate modeling of conflict resolution and problem solving strategies.

Foreword

Over the past two years, as I have worked on this Masters Project, I have frequently turned down invitations for weekend trips to the country, vacations, and even rounds of golf with the refrain “Thanks, but I have to work on my project.” By this time, almost everyone has asked what I am writing about and what I am planning to do with a Masters in Dispute Resolution.

I initially told people that I planned to write about a student mediation program which I had hopes of starting at the high school where I currently teach. I felt that, with all I had learned through my course work at the university, I would have the skills and competencies to start such a program. I would describe the group’s process and write about the findings in my Master’s Project.

Very soon into my project, however, I began to see that there was a tremendous amount of groundwork to be done before the school staff, administrators, and even the students would accept the concept of a student mediation program. Everyone (perhaps due to past practice) just assumes that conflicts are resolved through the school’s disciplinarians (usually the assistant principals) and punishments are handed out according to specific guidelines outlined in the Student Handbook or by the administrators on a case-by-case basis. Physical fights, verbal altercations with teachers, inappropriate behavior in class; the overt conflicts are well known. Likewise, the consequences for these violations of the rules; namely detention and suspension are also well known. These conflicts are swiftly ‘resolved’ through a trip to the administrator’s office.

To me, what is not known and what fails to be recognized are the less obvious, “quiet conflicts” – those ‘voiced’ through student absence. I am convinced that these

quiet conflicts - truancy, class cutting, leaving or walking out of the building, tardiness, and cutting office detention - require closer scrutiny. These are conflicts that go unresolved, that result in disengagement from the school community and a loss of the promise of maximum teaching and maximum learning for our students (cf., Opotow, 1994). When we add to these absences the consequence of out-of-school-suspension, we contribute to this disengagement. These quiet conflicts therefore became the focus of my work.

Acknowledgments

Throughout this project I have received invaluable support, guidance, and encouragement from so many of my colleagues, classmates, friends and family. I am very grateful for all their patience and interest in my work. Although I cannot thank everyone here, there are several I must acknowledge. Special thanks to Jim Walker and Debbie Goebel, who edited my many drafts, asked and answered critical questions, and provided direction and clarification when I needed it most. I am also grateful to Paula Marini and Robert Ostermeyer, whose technical skill and limitless assistance helped pull all the parts together.

I especially wish to thank my advisor, Susan Opotow, who has inspired, coaxed, challenged, and guided me throughout this process. Her important and compassionate work on class cutting has provided a foundation for this paper, and her enduring interest in my own research and findings encouraged me to complete a project of which I can be proud. Finally, I could never have finished this project without the untiring patience, understanding, and emotional support of Debra Olin. Her constant good humor and healthy perspective have allowed me to get through this process with my sanity relatively intact.

The Quiet Conflicts: School Attendance Violations

Table of contents

Introduction		6
Significance of School Absence		11
Prevalence of school Absence	12	
Absence and dropping out	13	
Attempts to correct the problem	14	
Connections to school leaving	15	
Complicating the issue	16	
The High School		18
Organization	19	
The culture	19	
Conflict management	21	
The Quiet Conflicts-Some Definitions		23
Definitions	23	
Complications	28	
The contradiction	29	
The Present Study		31
Study 1. Attendance data	32	
Study 2. The interviews	41	
Study 3. The meetings	53	
Analysis: The Quiet Conflicts		69
Divergent interests	70	
Responses to conflict	71	
Interdependence	76	
Settlement or resolution?	79	
Conflict Outcomes	80	
Conclusions		81
References		84
Figures		89
Tables		94

Although I have been working with adolescents for more than 25 years, I am continually looking for ways to better deal with the daily business of being a teacher in a public high school in the 21st century. Spending my days in a building with close to a thousand hormonal adolescents, all trying with varying degrees of success to deal with mostly forty-, fifty-, and sixty-something adults, I witness a multitude of conflicts.

As a Special Needs teacher, in the Resource Room I often have the opportunity to listen to students as they talk about their conflicts with teachers, with administrators, with the rules. Consistent with Sampson's (1993) observations, common to many of these complaints is the students' lack of voice, the feeling that they are not heard, that their opinion is not considered. These complaints come from hurt feelings, a perception of unfairness, a feeling that no one is listening, that no one cares. My experience in teaching, as well as in researching this project, is that these kids will speak honestly when they trust that they will be heard. The issue of student voice is critical. What *they* say about why *they* miss school and classes is poignant and legitimate. This exploration into the students' "truths" about attendance violations raises questions about the efficacy of a policy that not only excludes them from dialogue, but also misses valuable opportunities to teach them more positive and productive lessons in conflict resolution.

Since 1997, when I began my course work in the Dispute Resolution Program at the University of Massachusetts, the importance of conflict and its resolution has become salient in my work with teenagers. What has also become clear is that there is a type of conflict in the high school that is not noticed, not recognized or not attended to: conflicts that contribute to school absence (cf., Opatow, 1994). My feeling is that our students, in fact, are frequently not heard when it comes to these conflicts. They are often assumed to

be guilty; and willful as well. Their perspective is not considered; their interest is not important.

In teacher/student conflicts the student's point of view is rarely accepted or taken seriously. In these conflicts it is difficult to take a step back, evaluate the situation and refuse to react impulsively. This is what Ury (1993) calls "going to the balcony" and it is important in order to appreciate the student's point of view (p. 38). In the heat of the moment, a resolution process may be the furthest thing from a teacher's mind. But once the encounter is over, it is often helpful and perhaps even necessary to ask a third party to assist the student and teacher in getting back to the working relationship necessary for learning; to transform the conflict from its perception as a problem to an opportunity for teaching and learning (Baruch & Folger, 1994).

The conflicts that arise with our students, particularly around attendance, appear to be their problem. On the face of it, they do not make sensible choices when they cut a class, or skip school (Fallis & Opotow, 2002). They only postpone the inevitable. But, perhaps we have forgotten how a look or an offhand remark can hurt our feelings, or how important it can be to be there for a friend, or how embarrassing it is to be unprepared or put on the spot. These are some of the conflicts students find themselves involved in which make school or class a tough place to be at that moment. They absent themselves from, and because of, these kinds of conflicts. At the time, and to them, these are valid reasons for missing school, cutting class, or skipping detention (Opotow, Fortune, Baxter, & Sanon, 1998). Although the unauthorized absence is the behavior we notice, it is often a reactive event to a conflict we do not see.

In his studies of operant behavior, Skinner (1953) found that we are much more likely to do something if it has immediately reinforcing consequences than if we have

been advised to do it. Even though we frequently advise kids to do the ‘right’ thing (go to school, to class, or to detention) they still may choose the more reinforcing behavior (sleeping in, cutting with a friend, going home). In order to change these behaviors we need to acknowledge and understand that there are competing and more reinforcing consequences in play for those students not taking our advice.

In the spring of 2000, the county District Attorney’s Office sent out a request for proposals to address absenteeism and tardiness, “warning signs that often portend more serious school conduct problems” (District Attorney letter, 2000). A colleague and I were asked by the principal to contribute ideas to this *truancy prevention* program; a proposal was written; and a small grant awarded for the 2000-2001 school year. Funding for this grant was made possible by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety, through the Edward Byrne Memorial Truancy Prevention Grant Program.

As I began to do some preliminary work I thought this would be an interesting topic for my project. I began to think more about truancy as an expression of conflict, i.e. “an action that is incompatible with another action prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures, or in some way makes the latter less likely or less effective” (Deutsch, 1973, p. 10). Deliberate and repeated absence like truancy is frequently a student’s attempt to resolve a conflict. Unfortunately, truancy represents a conflict with the rules; and its consequence (detention or suspension) adds yet another conflict over the initial issue. Truancy (and the suspension that follows) “are simultaneously conflict resolving and conflict creating behaviors” (Khaminwa, Fallis, & Opotow, 1999, p. 187). But these are quiet conflicts, and thus do not get the same notice or attention that the more boisterous, disruptive conflicts do.

As I interviewed the administrators in charge of discipline, I found that there were mixed opinions about the incidence of truancy, the level of importance given to it, and how it is handled vis-à-vis discipline. In discussing truancy, other violations were brought up such as class cutting, leaving the building, unauthorized absence from class, and tardiness. We are very aware of the incompatibility of these actions with our rules for attendance and our goals for student learning - but we seem less interested in understanding the conflicts that precipitate student absence. What would change, I wondered, if these types of violations were regarded as expressions of conflict, rather than simply as offenses or violations to be punished?

My focus in this paper, as well as my interest as a teacher, lies in the fact that, ironically, the consequence for these attendance violations is sometimes, perhaps even frequently, out of school suspension, especially for repeat offenders. This is a troublesome consequence for what seems to be a painfully obvious reason: it adds to the offending student's absence from school thus increasing the likelihood of failure. It seems that we are conditioned to suspending students for breaking rules, and parents appear to be conditioned to accepting the school's authority to do so. As a teacher I find this particularly frustrating because while suspended, these youngsters are frequently at home alone, unsupervised, and once again absent from the learning process.

Students absent themselves from school or class or detention for a reason. Those who repeat their cutting, skipping and truancy are allowed to do so because we have missed the point. They are speaking to us with their absence, and we do not seem to be listening. Whatever unresolved or underlying conflict may already exist is only exacerbated by the additional absence (the suspension) from classes, the piling on of more missed work, and the increased possibility of failure. This paper proposes that if

we want to change these behaviors we need to ask *the students* what it's about (cf., Sanon, Baxter, Fortune & Opotow, 2001). By suspending kids for school absence, however, we not only reduce any chance for dialogue, but we appear to contribute to the likelihood that they will begin to see school attendance as pointless and fruitless (cf., Opotow, 1991).

The following is a qualitative research study in three parts. First, is a look at the attendance rules at The High School¹ as outlined in the Student-Parent Handbook; second, is an analysis of the data on out-of-school suspensions for attendance violations at The High School; third, is an experiment in giving voice to a collection of student offenders of the attendance policy.

This study addresses the extent to which out-of-school suspension offers an effective deterrent to truancy, class cutting, tardiness or skipping detention. Does out of school suspension make a difference? To whom? How is it evident?

This question raises other important questions about school life. What positive effect comes from giving students voice? Can we help students stay in school, improve their attendance, and improve their grades, by increasingly providing them with appropriate alternatives to withdrawal? Can we find ways to encourage attendance for these offending students, rather than looking to discourage absence with punishment? This paper proposes that although these “quiet conflicts” may be interpreted as expressions of student rebellion, they also speak to student frustration, alienation and disengagement (cf., Khaminwa, Fallis, & Opotow, 1999). We need to be listening.

¹ To protect confidentiality the school at the center of this report is referred to as The High School or THS.

The Significance of School Absence

As we hear in the media every day, education is vital to our strength as a country and to the future of our children as successful citizens. Beginning with the class of 2003 Massachusetts students will have to pass the MCAS tests, in order to earn a high school diploma. On January 8, 2002 President Bush signed into law his long sought Elementary and Secondary Education Act which provides that all states must test all students in reading and math in grades three through eight in an effort to have “no child left behind” (Goldstein, 2002). While all this testing may be helpful in holding our students to a higher standard, it also increases the pressure on our students to perform. Missing valuable instructional time, whether due to a day of truancy or a day of suspension becomes extremely costly. As parents and educators we clearly have a responsibility to help prepare our children to become better thinkers, better writers, and better problem solvers. And in truth most of us believe that we must raise our educational standards in order to prepare our youngsters to compete in the global economy. Obviously essential to this preparation is attendance in school.

While earning that high school diploma may get more difficult, it has lost none of its importance. It is regarded as a significant accomplishment; the first major milestone in a young life; a stepping off point on the road to the future, a commencement. And it will likely remain a point of comparison and competition with other industrialized nations around the world. Attaining one’s high school diploma is extremely important. Again, attendance in school is crucial to that end.

An important aspect of students’ access to education is the amount of time actually spent in the classroom. When students are absent from school, arrive late, or cut class, they forgo opportunities to learn. Furthermore, when students

disrupt classes by being late or frequently absent, they interfere with other students' opportunities to learn (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996 p.3)

Given the apparent seriousness of exit exams and the importance of the diploma it appears that attendance in school is a fundamental ingredient for any chance at success in these high stakes times. In fact, a recent report from Minnesota found that students who had no more than 8 unexcused absences were more than twice as likely to pass state tests on their first attempt (Pugmire, 2001). Indeed, attendance *is* important.

Prevalence of School Absence

School absence is a major issue and cause for concern in almost every urban area in our country. In neighboring Boston, for example, 44.8% of high school students were absent 16 or more days in the 1996-97 school year (Boston Bar Association, 1998). Truancy, or selective absence from school, is considered one of the most serious problems faced by educators, a terrible threat to student success, and a first step toward a lifetime of problems (Garry, 1996). In 1990, daily public high school absenteeism averaged just over 8% nationally. Still, twenty-nine per cent of high school teachers in 1991 felt that absenteeism was a serious problem in their school (NCES, 1996). Good attendance correlates highly with school engagement, and absenteeism, the most common indicator of disengagement is closely associated with school leaving (Rumberger, 2000).

The incidence of chronic absenteeism is problematic in schools locally, nationally, and globally. A search in Lexis-Nexis, using keyword *truancy*, turned up over 230 articles written in a three-month period. These are stories from Scotland to Japan, Great Britain to South America of the regularity with which students skip school. For schools everywhere student attendance is a real problem. Research studies have been

conducted in large American urban schools where numbers of daily absence (truancy) reach as high as 40%, and result in dropout rates as high as 50% (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). This connection between truancy and school leaving is made repeatedly in the literature. And so it should be. Absence from class precludes student learning, leads to missed work, contributes to failure, diminishes self-esteem, and increases the likelihood of dropping out. When we speak of 'at-risk' kids, we mean those at risk of dropping out.

In addition to those who just don't come to school, there are those who come late to school, skip classes while they are in the building, leave the building during the course of the day, and skip the detention assigned for these violations of the attendance rules. They seem oblivious, unaware, and uninterested in the notion that regular attendance is necessary if they are to get their diploma; and that earning that diploma is of paramount importance if they are to 'make it' in America.

Data collected and analyzed in several Boston and New York high schools suggests that deliberate and selective student absence (class cutting) contributes to a process of dropping out of school in slow motion (Fallis, 2000; Khaminwa, Fallis, & Opotow, 1999). Although these studies focus on the urban public schools, where issues are complicated by poverty, size, and diverse populations, they again highlight the issue of student engagement and raise the question of school attention to these attendance violations. Student and guidance counselor accounts of how often classes are cut are quite staggering (Fallis, 2000). In these large urban systems the problem of school and class attendance is overwhelmingly real and has expensive and far-reaching effects on the quality of education offered and the quality of education received (Rumberger, 2000).

Absence and Dropping Out

We know the facts about those who leave high school without a diploma. They will make \$300,000 – 500,000 less in lifetime earnings than a high school graduate (Current Population Reports, 1998). More often than not, positive connections are made between dropping out of high school and crime, addiction, under-employment, poor health and other societal malaise (Dorn, 1996; Kortering, Hess, & Braziel, 1997). In spite of this evidence there continue to be large numbers of students who do not successfully finish high school. Between October of 1999 and October 2000 more than half a million young people left school without graduating (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). In fact, figures on school leaving range from 4 to as high as 16 percent when considering students who are no longer working toward a high school diploma (Balfanz & Legters, 2001; Condition of Education 2001; Lee & Burkam, 2000).

In suburban schools more like The High School, where attendance violations seem limited to a relative few (see Figure 2) and dropout numbers appear low (see Table 1), these attendance incidents enlist even less system-wide attention than is paid in city schools. Perhaps the literature as well as the media lead us to think that truancy and dropping out are the problems of urban, poor, minority school systems. Since we have such small numbers of truants and class cutters in our school, it is easy to view the students as the problem, to see them as beyond our ability to change. They come from dysfunctional families, from poverty, or from an urban school system to ours. We perceive the truants, cutters, and even the dropouts as such a small problem that we miss the big opportunities we have to help them succeed.

Attempts to Correct the Problem

To combat truancy, communities have called on police, social workers, the courts and computers (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997). Millions of dollars have gone into truancy

prevention programs to try to understand what can be done to keep kids from skipping school. In some states parents are being brought to court and fined when their kids skip school. A program in Japan even suggests jail time for parents of truants.

These types of programs cite “the need to intensively monitor, counsel, and strengthen the families and communities” of truants in an effort to respond to the problem (Garry, 1996). This is a tall order in a country in which education has never been the highest priority. And the coordination of the multiple community agencies required to monitor, counsel, and strengthen families and communities in any meaningful way is expensive if not far-fetched. In most school systems, the financial limits on current resources that support large classes, overcrowded schools, and high rates of school leaving are already there. Money for extra programs such as those which might support interventions to help kids stay in school is only available through grants, which are most often under-funded and short-lived (Gately & Troy, 2000). The funding source that supported the program for this report, for example, provided \$55,000 for 35 public school systems, and was already in its third and final year. Once the grant money was gone the district was without the capital to continue the program; nor was there any administrative interest in the results of the program or its continuation.

Connections to School Leaving

Barclay and Doll (2001) made an extensive foray into the early studies on dropouts and found that although many indicators and precursors to dropping out have been established over the past forty years, there continues to be little progress in substantially reducing the numbers. Most dropout prevention research focuses on two areas; predicting who will drop out and describing who did drop out. Much of the literature shows that studies which continue to examine the relationship between dropouts

and “fixed demographic characteristics...are not useful in thinking about intervention programs to promote school completion among affected groups of students” (Doll & Hess, 2001, p. 353). While their study suggests that more research is necessary, Barclay and Doll advise that new research must focus on studies that evaluate the types of programs that sustain school engagement as well as school completion. The problem is that there are not many program evaluation studies. Many of the programs developed to combat school absence blame a student’s lack of school completion on poor academic history, under-educated parents, or the economically depressed community in which they live. These immutable conditions will not change during the time we have the student in our schools. The work to be done is to find ways to keep kids coming to school.

Current research suggests some of the ways that schools affect student leaving. School size is a factor often cited as related to rates of dropout (Lee & Burkam, 2001; McPartland, 2001); and student composition, i.e. numbers of free and reduced lunch and percentage of minority and non-English speaking students is linked with dropout numbers (Balfanz & Legters, 2001). Though these factors may be important in urban schools, they have less relevance in The High School where we have less than a thousand students, and a small minority population. What does resonate is the research on engagement in both the academic and social aspects of school. Engagement is found to positively influence student attendance and behavior, while a lack of involvement in academic and social activities can influence and contribute to dropping out. Students with fewer positive connections to school are more likely to have attendance issues and discipline problems (Rumberger, 2001). Certainly the place to begin to deal with the issue of school attendance should be the school itself, and the student.

Complicating the Issue

Given that student absence indicates a level of disengagement and increases student discipline problems; out of school suspension seems ill advised generally, and especially so in the case of attendance violations.

The nature of punishment is that it presents a consequence unpleasant enough to extinguish or at least discourage the behavior's repetition. We prefer to call the rules at school, our Discipline Policy. The word discipline comes from the Latin *discere*, meaning to learn (Webster, 1977); and for some students, because a day of suspension is a punishment, it may discourage further truancy through the lesson they have learned (see Figure 4). But for many students, particularly those already expressing ambivalence through their attendance behavior, a day of suspension is a day off. When they repeat the behavior it is clear that these students are not learning the same lesson. On the surface they may seem fine with a day off, but it is my experience that when given the opportunity to voice their feelings about being suspended, students say that the school authority "doesn't care" about them, is "kicking" them out, is unfair.

As we suspend students for truancy, cutting classes, and skipping detention we contribute to their disengagement and increase the likelihood that they will leave school before graduation (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000). The present study suggests that these attendance violations represent "quiet" conflicts which students are not encouraged to voice; that the most basic conflict resolution strategies can be used to more effectively deal with these kinds of rules violations. Until these incidents are handled with strategies that at least invite dialogue and negotiation, the conflicts will go unresolved. As they go unresolved, the rate of absence increases rather than decreases. And in our efforts to teach students that school attendance is of paramount importance, we begin to function at cross-purposes with our own goals to educate them.

This study encourages THS and all high schools to regard school attendance violations as evidence of conflict, rather than simply as an offense against the rules. If we do, it might change what we are able to envision as solutions. If we look to understand these absences as shared problems rather than punish them as isolated infractions we might change the dynamics of the problem. If we treat students as parties to a conflict and give them a voice in the process, we might discover some new opportunities for resolving the absence issue. Can these changes in thinking happen in a school such as THS? To answer this question, a closer look at the context for this paper is offered.

The High School

The context for this research is a comprehensive public high school in a community of about 25,000 just outside of Boston. Since the eighth grade was moved to the high school building five years ago, the student population has remained constant, between 950 and 975 students. There are four private high schools in the area and a vocational/technical school, which draw approximately 15% of the town's high school-age population. Of those who attend The High School, about 8% represent racial or ethnic minorities, less than 7% participate in the free or reduced lunch program, and about 17% receive special needs services.

THS employs over 100 people: a principal, two assistant principals, fourteen director/coordinators, three guidance counselors, two nursing staff, two library staff, eight secretaries/clerks, around the clock custodial staff, five teacher aides, and seventy-two full-time teachers. There is no racial minority representation among the staff. All members of the building staff are white, primarily of Western European descent. Despite an influx of new hires over the past several years, the racial and ethnic makeup remains

the same, and the vast majority of teachers are veteran staff with more than twenty years at THS.

Organization

Like many public high schools THS is organized along hierarchical lines. Levels of authority are apparent. The principal has autonomy within the building and has final authority in most matters at most levels within the confines of the school (with the exception of contract issues). The assistant principals oversee matters of discipline for students by grade, as well as supervise a number of departments' directors and coordinators. The directors and coordinators supervise the teachers in their respective subject areas. Teachers work with and report primarily to their department heads or coordinators, except in matters of student discipline where referrals are made directly to the administrator for that student. Although it is not surprising, it is important to note that the district's organizational chart does not include students.

As is true for most high schools, THS is an organization in which order is a high priority. We are organized along bureaucratic and hierarchical lines, and for the most part, people are collegial. Most staff and students go along with the program established by those above them, and if there is grumbling it is fairly quiet and kept behind closed doors. Our building is clean, our halls are quiet, and our students are well behaved. It is and it feels like a safe place.

The Culture

At The High School, our focus quite naturally is on academic success for all students. In their words, the school administration also seeks to create "a secure, cooperative learning environment where the emphasis is on mutual respect." Essential to the idea of security, cooperation, and mutual respect is the issue of conflict resolution.

During my course work, I have written several papers on how conflict is perceived and resolved at THS. I have heard in detail from each of the administrators how he defines the conflicts that arise in the school and what he considers conflict resolution. The general idea seems to be that *students* have conflicts, *administrators* resolve them. As defined in Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary (1975), a conflict is "a fight, battle, struggle; sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests or ideas" (p.383). At THS, it is this type of conflict that is considered to occur between students. There is in fact, little physical violence in the building. Since fights in the building are kept to a minimum, administrators do feel that these types of conflicts are getting resolved at THS. Others may take issue with this assessment, but the fact remains that absent a conflict resolution model or peer mediation program at THS, it does fall on the administrators to resolve the conflicts that come up, as they see fit.

Four years ago, I was asked by an administrator to mediate a dispute between two young women. A concerned parent had asked the Assistant Principal for an in-school intervention, since the girls had classes and activities in common. Although the students, the parents, and the administrator were quite satisfied with the outcome, there have been no further requests for mediation. In fact there are several faculty members who have some training and interest in the mediation process as a means of conflict resolution. Still, mediation and conflict resolution remain underutilized alternatives to the punishment that is often seen as the resolution of a problem.

It is difficult to know how many other conflicts have been mediated during the past few years, but there have certainly been serious disputes among students. A first-year teacher and I conducted a mediation between two groups of girls - at their request. They had become concerned that the administration cared only that their fight not happen

at school; but the girls didn't really want to fight anywhere, they wanted to talk. When mediations like this one do occur they are most often serendipitous, spontaneous, voluntary, and undocumented: a concerned staff member intervenes as a mediator in order to avert a conflict that threatens to get out of control. This is conflict resolution and it needs to be more than accidental.

There are many conflicts, however, that go on throughout the school day that do not get resolved on any level. Conflicts that keep students from coming to school, contribute to their arriving late, prompt them to cut a class, leave the building, or skip detention are conflicts that might be dealt with quickly and effectively if they are given their due. These "quiet conflicts" do not affect just the students, but have far reaching consequences for the ultimate success of our mission to provide all our students with a meaningful education. It seems that often, in our efforts to maintain order, we do not take the time to deal with the conflict inherent in school attendance violations. We want the students to go by the rules or suffer the consequences. We want compliance. If we change the rules for one we'll have to do it for everybody. We have the rules to maintain order in the building. Certain behaviors can not be tolerated.

Conflict Management

Schools are hierarchical institutions where authority maintains strong roots, and the power is at the top. It is generally felt that we can and should control our students, and for the most part we do. We know what they need and what they need to do to get it. We provide the structure. They just need to follow the rules.

The conflict management system at THS can be characterized as authoritative-reactive and rights-based (Constantino & Merchant, 1996). The rules for discipline are listed in the handbook; the administrators are in charge of enforcing them. Mundane

rules, those concerning hats, passes and hall behavior are enforced by most of the adults in the building, some with admittedly more zeal than others. Community conflict management is the domain of the principal in theory, and he is called on to deal with more complicated issues; but the two assistant principals are more directly involved in day to day student conflict management. Decisions made over disputes among students are handled on an ad hoc basis, but the punishment is prescribed. It is in the handbook. Classroom clashes between teacher and student sometimes result in a student being sent to the office. These are handled efficiently by the student's administrator. After speaking with the student, he determines the rules violation and hands out the punishment. Thus, the conflict between the teacher and the student is resolved.

At THS it is very important to keep order and avoid conflict. We are able to do this because we make the rules in the handbook extremely clear. In this way the level of conflict at THS is managed by a high degree of control and structure. This type of system may not resolve the conflicts implicit in behaviors like truancy, cutting, tardiness, and skipping detention, but these violations of the attendance rules are dealt with swiftly and firmly.

The Quiet Conflicts: Some Definitions

The grounding for most of the conflicts students have in any school is provided in the handbook. Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 71, Section 37H stipulates that the rules pertaining to student conduct must be reviewed annually, published, and made available to students and parents on the first day of the new school year. Students at THS receive a copy of the Student-Parent Handbook on the first day of school with instructions to read it, and return a signature page verifying that a parent has also read the handbook.

Definitions

School handbooks provide hints of the institution's culture and climate, and of the administrative attitudes that exist in a given school. The language used gives tone and texture to the more factual context provided in the earlier description of our school. To that end, the rules and definitions concerning the attendance violations that are the focus of this study are included here, and quoted verbatim. To fully appreciate the importance placed on attendance, both the rules and their consequences are listed.

Attendance. School begins at 7:35 a.m. and ends at 2:10 p.m. each full day. The handbook states that "all students...are expected to attend all assigned classes, academic support class, and lunch each day." They must attend each of 5 classes scheduled daily, and may not leave the building without expressed written authorization. A student who is absent without a parent note or documentation; tardy for homeroom (where attendance for the day is taken); misses or cuts a scheduled class; or leaves the building without permission has violated the attendance rules. These violations are explicitly outlined in the student handbook.

Absence. As stated in the handbook, “when a student is absent for any reason he/she is required to return to school with a note from his/her parent/guardian explaining the reason for and the dates of the absences.” The attendance policy further states that “any student who has six or more absences from class in any marking period will receive no credit for that subject for that term. Any student, who has eighteen or more absences from class in a yearlong course, will receive no credit for that course. Advisory notes are sent to the parents at the 3rd and 6th absence.” The parent contact at the third and sixth absences is well-intentioned and perhaps good policy, but as a practical matter simply does not happen with any consistency. And while the advisory note may be effective in informing a parent of a student’s past absences, it is grossly ineffective in preventing further absence or in fostering positive efficient communication among the parties.

There is a distinction between unexcused absence (limited to five per term and seventeen per year), and excused absence which is theoretically without limit. A parent note does not excuse an absence, but simply attests to the fact that the student missed school. According to the handbook, “a doctor or nurse practitioner’s note will excuse absence from class provided that the note is written on the doctor’s or nurse practitioner’s stationery and presented no later than two weeks after the student’s return to school; or (with proper documentation) for court appearances and death in the immediate family or death of a classmate.”

Considering that over forty million Americans today are without healthcare, it is unlikely that visits to the doctor are uniformly available to all students. Parents are often without the means to get medical care in every case in which illness results in school absence. But, despite the stringent scrutiny with which such notes are examined, some students do get absences excused many months beyond the deadline and for questionable

ailments. The apparent unfairness of these cases is often a topic for discussion among those students who struggle to stay within the guidelines and are not able to see a doctor each time they are sick (or do not have a doctor in the family).

Tardiness. The handbook states “the warning bell for homeroom rings at 7:32 a.m. Students must be... in their seat when the order bell rings at 7:35 a.m. If a student is late for homeroom, he/she will be recorded as tardy by the homeroom teacher.” Students who are late for homeroom must sign in at the office, where up to two tardies per term will be allowed. The handbook is emphatic on this point: “No student late for school is to be allowed in class without a stamped pass from the office. Students failing to follow this procedure will receive no credit for any class that they attend that day.”

In regard to the consequence for further tardiness, the handbook is clear: “On the 3rd, 4th, and 5th tardy students will be assigned after-school detention.” The school bears responsibility for enlisting parental assistance and support in getting students to school on time and acknowledges this in the handbook as well. “The parent/guardian will be informed by telephone by an Administrator whenever a student reaches five tardies. Whenever a student is tardy on six occasions, an in-school conference with the parent, student, and administrator involved will be scheduled immediately.” This rule has a history of inconsistent application across the grades. In the eighth and ninth grades the fifth tardy in the term may elicit a call to the parent, and there may be a conference on the sixth, frequently by phone. In the upper grades these follow-up steps tend not to happen. The office secretaries keep records on the number of homeroom tardies a student has acquired. They notify the student of their detention and the administrator of the number of tardies. Parental contact is the domain of the administrator; serving the detention is the responsibility of the student.

Late to class can also lead to trouble for students: “A student who is tardy to class will be referred to the office where he/she will be issued a warning. A subsequent tardy to that class will result in two office detentions.”

Cutting. There is not a specific definition of cutting in our handbook. In her extensive work on class cutting Opatow (1995) defines it as occurring when a student comes to school, is marked present for the day, then selectively misses a particular class or activity. This definition is implicit in the Student-Parent Handbook in its list of nineteen “breaches of discipline...severe enough to be cause for suspension: Cutting of regular assigned classes, study halls, detention, and lunchroom (1-3 days).” Cutting also then would include “being in an area of the school or in the presence of a staff member, other than that to which/whom the student is assigned.”

In addition to suspension, academic sanctions are imposed for cutting class. “Any student who misses a class two times in any marking period by cutting shall receive a failing grade for that term.” Again the school makes an effort to assume responsibility with the following: “as a result, such a student may be referred by an Administrator, at his discretion, to a school agency such as Guidance, Clinic, Director, etc. for evaluation.” With all due respect to administrative discretion, it is unlikely that the two assistant principals know each of their four to five hundred students well enough to make such referrals unilaterally. In fact, in the past several years admittedly few such administrative referrals have been made. In addition, informal interviews with guidance counselors reveal that few referrals involving class cutters or truants have been made in recent years.

Truancy. Oddly enough, the word truancy is found nowhere in the Student-Parent Handbook. Without a specific truancy rule, administrative discretion becomes the last word. The absence of a written rule however, raises questions as the presumed

unimportance of truancy, its perceived low incidence, and its susceptibility to individual administrative judgment.

Leaving the building. Listed as another of the violations serious enough to warrant suspension, the handbook asserts that “we have a strict policy against students leaving the school premises. The only time students are allowed to leave the school premises during school hours is when excused by the school nurse for sickness, when excused by an Administrator with proper documentation, or when accompanied by a member of the faculty with proper arrangements (Violation: 1-3 days).”

Skipping detention. Another attendance violation, which can be cause for suspension, is skipping detention. Students are to attend detention on the day it is assigned unless the appropriate administrator agrees to other arrangements. Failure to serve detention is considered cutting (see above), and may result in suspension “(1-3 days).” This is perhaps the most troublesome of the rules in the handbook, since it is the most frequently violated (see Figure 3). Over the past three years, on average over 140 suspensions a year have resulted from cutting office detention because an unfortunate policy has evolved around the enforcement of detention, and the consequences for skipping it.

The policy for skipping detention has in recent years been somewhat different for the underclassmen as compared to the sophomores, juniors and seniors. The eighth and ninth grade policy is that upon missing an assigned detention, a student is given one warning to attend the next time. Failing that, a follow-up call is made to the parent, and ultimately a suspension may be assigned. For upperclassmen, the penalty for missing the assigned detention is more prescribed; a doubling of the time owed. Although this policy appears nowhere in the handbook, it has existed for several years and is commonly

accepted as ‘the rule’. Most often, the doubling happens without informing the offender. Students are assumed to know the consequence, and daily detention lists are posted in the school foyer. The unwitting result of allowing the accumulation of multiple detentions is that an unofficial currency for detentions has developed. When a student accumulates a debt of at least five detentions, he can clear that debt with a day of suspension. This way the number of detentions is reduced or considered paid off.

Although the attendance violations cited above certainly may and frequently do result in suspension, often in the first instance at least, offenders are given a number of detentions to serve. Clearly, this is administrative discretion at work as the assistant principal exercises his authority to deal with such offenses as he sees fit. In fact, the 2001-02 Student-Parent Handbook contained a new caveat to the Discipline Code: “NB: as circumstances warrant discipline will be effected on an individualized basis.”

Complications

The handbook states that tardy to school or class, cutting, leaving the building, truancy, as well as six other offenses “carries a penalty of office referral or detention.” This is where matters can get more complicated and the suspension numbers get muddied. The problem is that whatever the number of detentions assessed for whatever violation, detentions not served lead to suspension. The daily detention roster is often well in excess of 30 students while only 10 to 15 students show up. The remaining 15 to 20 students now risk suspension through the system of doubling. And the suspension on the books will be listed as a suspension for skipping detention even though the initial detention may have been tardiness, cutting class, or truancy.

The problem with this system of exchange - detentions for suspension – is that it may actually appeal to a student who is not particularly engaged in school, and may even

appear fair to “pay” for the five detention hours missed. But it is illogical to think that a detention debt should be paid with important instructional time lost through a day’s suspension. Allowing students to equate valuable instructional time with time spent in detention (or sitting at home, suspended) devalues classroom instruction in particular and education in general. The fact that it also contributes to a student’s disengagement from school makes such an equation ludicrous and shortsighted.

A number of students, however, appear to like this system, as they consciously and purposely skip detention in anticipation of a day off school. Those who have after school jobs skip detention until the administrator catches up with them, at which time they take the suspension. I asked one such student, whose detentions were piling up, to stay for extra help in math, in an effort to prevent his inevitable suspension. “You need the help and it will count toward the detentions you owe.” His reply? “That’s OK, Ms. G. I have to be at work at three today. I’ll just take the suspension.”

The Contradiction

Reading through these policies, it is quite clear that at THS we place a very high value on attendance. Attendance is required at the rate of over 87 percent, with maximum class absence limited to five per term and seventeen per year in order to earn credit for the course. At THS students receive no credit in any course in which unexcused absences exceed these numbers. In fact a plea is made to parents emphasizing the importance of attendance:

Parents are responsible for scheduling student vacations in accordance with the published school calendar. To do otherwise gives the impression that daily attendance in school is not of the highest priority, thus education is not a priority.

This is an erroneous message!

And further to students:

All students at The High School are required to attend all assigned classes, academic support class, and lunch each day. A student who develops a pattern of frequent absences from school can never make up the learning that went on during the classes he/she has missed.

Given these admonitions one might question the validity and the rationale of suspending students for not attending. Each of these attendance violations can result in one to three days of suspension, and they frequently do. Whether the result of repeat offenses, increasing administrative frustration, or lack of alternatives, suspension for cutting a class, excessive tardies, leaving the building, skipping detention, and even truancy is not uncommon. In fact, the handbooks from five area high schools show a similar tendency to suspend for attendance offenses.

I question the wisdom of suspension as a consequence for missing school since it does little to look for the causes or resolve the problems that contribute to the violation. My assumption is that students offend the attendance policy because of specific conflicts they have with the rules, with specific teachers or administrators, or with their own personal interests. A student stays away from school for a reason, she cuts a class for a reason, he arrives late to school for a reason. Seeing these offenses as conflicts, listening to kids talk about why they make the choices they do, can be helpful in developing policies which discourage these attendance violations without harming the students (Sanon, Baxter, Fortune, & Opotow, 2001). Our role as educators puts us in a position to help students learn, to help them change these patterns that lead to disengagement from school. Conflict theory provides some insight into ways of understanding and resolving some of the problem behaviors students present us with, and illustrates why our response

to attendance violations is not always successful in improving attendance. If we are to recognize these issues as conflicts it is important to understand the definition and characteristics of conflict as they apply here.

The Present Study

This paper reports to a large degree on perceptions resulting from 18 years of teaching in this suburban public high school. The perspective is that of an insider, a participant-observer as opposed to an objective or impartial outsider. Although the attempt is made to maintain objectivity, the information that results from these methods, like all methods, is open to interpretation.

In January of 2000, then Principal Jackson (a pseudonym, as are all names in this report)) wrote in a request for proposal to the County District Attorney, “[The] High School has a problem with the attendance of a significant number of our students.” He proposed an after school support group for students with a history of truancy, to be led by the peer leadership advisors working in concert with the town’s attendance officer and the director of the Youth Commission. Jackson’s proposal was for a daily group session with the 2 counselors, as well as a series of six four-hour workshops for their parents. The proposal was energetic, and well directed in its three-pronged focus -- school, home, and community. Unfortunately, the funding for this ambitious Truancy Grant proposal fell far short of the resources necessary to run such an extensive program. We were interested in running a program nonetheless. As the Peer Leadership advisors mentioned above, Jack Wilson and I had been involved in discussions of the grant beginning early in 2000. In my role as a Special Needs teacher, and Jack’s as a Junior/Senior English teacher, we each had seen too many students leave school without earning their diplomas.

We were convinced that since there was nothing specific in place to deal with truancy, whatever program we could offer them would be of some benefit to some students.

The findings for this study are based on several processes: Study 1, the collection of attendance data from four of the previous six school years; Study 2, semi-structured interviews of the two assistant principals, the youth commissioner, and the truant officer; and Study 3, weekly meetings of a student attendance group.

Study 1. Attendance Data

Attendance Data: Methods

Data on attendance and its violations were compiled from four out of the past six school years: 1996-97, 1999-2000, 2000-01, and the first half of the 2001-02 school year. As a member of the faculty, some access to some data was readily available, and some data was inconsistently available due to changes in the discipline and record-keeping systems over this time period.

For the 1996-97 year, specific data on attendance violations had been collected for an earlier project through the review of in-school and out-of-school suspension records filed in the assistant principals' offices. This data allowed for tallying specific attendance violations, i.e., the number of suspensions for excessive tardiness, class cutting, leaving the building, cutting detention, and truancy; and whether the offense had resulted in an in-school suspension or an out-of-school suspension.

From September 1999 through June 2001 the daily, quarterly, and annual publication of absences, tardies, excused absences, and suspensions provided a rich resource for data collection. In fact, the thirteen-page list of suspensions published at the end of the 99-00 school year provided some of the impetus for this project. Daily attendance reports featured the cumulative total absences of each absent or tardy student,

as well as suspensions. This format provided daily exposure to the names of those who were tardy, absent, or suspended. The year-end report provided total numbers of suspensions by name, grade, and dates, but no specificity as to the offense.

A change in the daily schedule which began in September 1999 led to in-school suspension being all but eliminated as a disciplinary consequence. As a result, suspension notices for skipping office detention contained no specific information as to the original offense. At the conclusion of the 2000-01 school year, I was given access by the assistant principals to their discipline logs. Attempts were made to match data from the lists with information in discipline logs in order to find the reason for suspensions. These sometimes led to confusing or inconsistent totals. From these I was sometimes able to cull a more detailed accounting of the number of attendance violations which resulted in detention as compared with those which resulted in suspension.

In September of 2001 a new computerized attendance and record-keeping system was put in place. Because cumulative data on suspensions was no longer published quarterly or annually, assessing the number of suspensions and their repetition became dependent on being issued suspension reports over the high school Intranet. Inconsistencies in this new system and structural changes to the new databases made data less useful and harder to access, thus the numbers for 2001-02 reflect only the first two terms. The result is a projection of numbers for the 2001-02 school year based on doubling the data collected in the first and second terms. Trends in the previous two years, however, indicate that this would very likely under-represent the actual numbers.

Dropout numbers were collected for this study from three different sources. Each time a student transfers, leaves, or is discharged from the high school a withdrawal form is filled out by the appropriate administrator. Pertinent information includes the reason

for leaving listed by code numbers or explained in words. These records were available in the administrative office for grades 10, 11, and 12 but included all school departures regardless of grade.

The other two sources for dropout information were the annual end of the year reports required by the Massachusetts Department of Education. The more recent of these reports were available in the Principal's office, while those of the earlier years were found on the Department of Education website.

Attendance Data: Results

The results of much of the data collected for this project are illustrated in Figures 1 through 5. Since the student population at The High School has remained fairly stable over this period comparisons are made from one year to another.

Students suspended. Figure 1 compares the number of students suspended out of school each year with the number of students enrolled.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The low number of students suspended out of school in 1996-97 reflects the fact that in-school suspension was in place as a disciplinary alternative. The number of students suspended out of school has increased each year, from 67 in the 1996-97 school year, to 128 during 1999-00, to 162 in 2000-01, and to 102 in just the first half of 2001-02.

While the range of enrollment varies only slightly, from a low of 937 to a high of 962, the proportion of students suspended rose consistently; from 6.9 percent to 13.7 percent to 16.9 percent in the three years for which complete data was available.

These numbers, however, represent the total number of students suspended, and therefore run the gamut of suspendable violations, from the most serious threats to personal or community safety to the more benign offenses of the attendance rules which are the focus of this study.

Attendance violation suspensions. The majority of offenses for which students at THS are suspended involve breaches of the attendance rules, as shown in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Figure 2 compares the number of suspensions for these offenses (truancy, class cutting, tardiness, leaving the building and cutting office detention) with all other suspensions. These included fighting, larceny, violations of the drug/alcohol policy, inappropriate behavior or language, disrespectful behavior, insubordination, continued disregard of school rules, and many more.

The number of suspensions for 1996-97 is noticeably higher. In-school suspension was in effect and was a frequent consequence for attendance violations. There were 197 in-school suspensions including 83 for class cutting, 60 for excessive tardiness, and 25 for walking out. Another 47 incidents of cutting class and leaving the building resulted in out-of-school suspension.

In 1996-97 fifty-seven percent of the 431 suspensions were for attendance violations in the 96-97 school year. But this proportion has grown each of the years since then. In the first half of the 2001-02 school year, more than two thirds of the suspensions were for attendance violations.

Detention suspensions. Detention is the most common consequence for minor infractions of the rules. In most cases the number of detentions assigned is an indication of the severity of the offense. Information collected for this study however, indicates that in the three most recent years, these detentions are served infrequently at best. Figure 3 reflects this in its comparison of suspensions for skipping detention with suspensions resulting from all the other attendance violations (tardiness, class cutting, leaving the building, and truancy).

Insert Figure 3 about here

During the 1996-97 school year, when in-school suspension was last in use, a very small number of students (29) were suspended for not serving after school detention. Since September 1999, when the consequence for skipping detention became suspension out of school, the annual number of detention suspensions has dramatically increased and appears to have stabilized at just below 150 per year.

An in-depth look at the 2000-01 discipline logs provided more specific information in regard to this higher number of suspensions for skipping detention. During this year there were 66 incidents of cutting class. Of these, 24 resulted in out of school suspension, while the remaining 42 were given from 2 to 5 days of detention. Of the 22 students caught leaving the building, 14 were suspended and 8 were given from 2 to 4 detentions. It was not possible to tell which of these students ever served detention and which eventually were suspended for skipping the detention assigned for another attendance violation.

Multiple suspensions. Data collected by reviewing discipline logs as well as end of the year reports revealed a number of students who are suspended more than once.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Figure 4 illustrates the number of students who are suspended two or more times each year compared with those who are suspended only once. The three years for which the numbers were available show a steady rise in both multiple and single suspensions. These repeat offenders were most often students who did not serve detention, repeatedly cut classes, or persisted in their truancy. These are the students who appear to be at greatest risk for leaving school without a diploma.

Dropouts. In reviewing yearly withdrawals, there were inconsistencies in the numbers I found in withdrawal files compared to those of the official end-of-the-year reports. Dropouts, as defined in the Massachusetts Department of Education School and District Profiles, are “students ages 16 and older who leave school prior to graduating for reasons other than transfer to another school.” Table 1 below shows the comparison of the official numbers with those of this research.

Table 1. Comparison of official dropout numbers with withdrawal records.

School year	Official numbers of dropouts	Findings of this study
1999-2000	13	21
2000-2001	12	19
2001-2002	20	22

Source for official numbers: Massachusetts Department of Education Reports.

These numbers, while inconsistent, still represent a relatively low number of dropouts each year. It is important to note, however, that at least 45 and perhaps as many as 62 students have either officially left school (signed out) or left unofficially (just stopped coming) during the 1999-00 to 2001-02 school years; and all had a history of attendance violation suspensions. Given that individual student files are confidential it was not possible to track whether these students had been considered, counseled, or punished as truants prior to their leaving school but many of them had been suspended repeatedly according to end of the year reports. Of the nineteen I found who left school in the 1999-00 school year 15 had been listed on the end of the year suspension roster. The 2001-02 withdrawals list included 18 names of students who repeatedly skipped detention, cut class, or were truant.

Truants. The most difficult numbers to discern and accurately report on in all this data are the numbers for truancy. There seems to be no cogent compilation of the number of students who have been truant, since the descriptor 'truant' often is used interchangeably with 'cut.' This appears to be an area of some discretion on the part of the administrators. During the two-year period from September 1999 through June 2001, records indicate that there were only 15 students cited specifically for truancy whose consequence was suspension. The database for 2001-02 lists 56 entries for truancy; 26 of these resulted in suspension.

Total suspension days. Figure 5 illustrates a comparison of the number of suspensions to the number of days of suspension.

Insert Figure 5 about here

The number of suspension days has steadily risen for the years considered here. For the year when in-school suspension was in effect the ratio was 1.1 days per suspension. The ratio for the first two terms of 2001-02 was 1.8 days.

Attendance Data: Discussion

In reviewing the attendance violations records I found that volumes of data are being collected; that the information on violations is not collated in a particularly useful way; and that the numbers of violations are not reviewed as evidence of a need for change.

The data resulting from this study clearly indicates several troublesome trends at THS: an increasing number of students being suspended, and repeatedly; a large number of suspensions of students who are purposely absent from school; and the apparent ineffectiveness of detention as a consequence for minor infractions of the rules. Why is this happening?

Part of the difficulty lies in the record keeping. It was not possible, for example, to truly ascertain whether truancy is or is not a problem at THS. An accurate number of truanancies is difficult to track, given the confusion over whether cuts are the same as truancy and the fact that they are listed only as individual disciplinary events rather than in the aggregate. While I can name students for whom truancy has been a factor in their school leaving, it was difficult to find data to show it. In fact, some of the records I saw confirmed only a small number of truanancies, while the discipline logs cited the truancy descriptor liberally for what might be considered tardiness, cuts, or leaving the building.

Suspensions for skipping detention effectively mask the presence of other problems, when there is no listing in the record as to the original offense. Students get detention for other infractions, but when they fail to serve their time the offense of record becomes 'cutting detention.' This manner of recording discipline infractions obscures and precludes an informed, comprehensive view of the behaviors which lead to the detention in the first place, i.e. frequent tardiness, truancy, and class cutting.

In regard to detention it is interesting to note the data on in-school suspension. The low number of suspensions for detention in 1996-97 (when in-school suspension was in effect) compared to the more recent high numbers seem to indicate that students served their detentions in order to avoid the undesirable consequence of in-school suspension.

Of great concern, and clear from the data is the fact that the majority of students get suspended for behaviors that violate the attendance rules. For having skipped school, cut class, arrived late, or left early, students are punished with a day of suspension. The number of students who get suspended each year is growing, and these suspensions are costly in terms of lost instructional time. Each suspension results in a student being sent home i.e. sent home for not coming to school. For any student, but especially for the repeat offenders, these absences break up the continuity necessary for school success. And these suspensions do appear to have a connection with school leaving. Many of the dropouts each year have been caught up in the pattern of tardiness, detention, suspension, excessive absence, failure, and withdrawal from school.

Some would say that our annual suspension days (500) would be considered inconsequential when compared with the total number of school days for the 950 students enrolled at THS. Our principal informed me, and he is correct, that this would represent just two tenths of a percent of total school days as suspension days. While this is true, it

is irrelevant when considering that each suspension day represents a real absence for a real student who, in order to pass, cannot exceed 17 absences.

In what often feels like a suspension culture, where students brag about how many times they have been suspended, and administrators relish catching students for cutting class (and then suspending them), the focus of our mission seems to have been lost. We have become conditioned to the high number of suspensions. Without a more informed view, we continue to believe that we are changing students' behavior through these suspensions. In fact, this research suggests they may be changing ours.

Analysis of this data seems to imply that no one is concerned about the growing regularity of suspensions; no one has noticed the increasing number of students on the daily detention list; the growing number of cuts, and perhaps even a rise in truancy does not seem to have anyone's attention. For answers I sought interviews with the school personnel whose job it is to be concerned with attendance and discipline issues at THS.

Study 2. The Interviews

The Interviews: Methods

In preparation for the work that I would be doing with the grant group, separate interviews were conducted with each of the two assistant principals (school discipline), the school attendance officer (truancy/court), and the town's youth commissioner (community/court). These interviews were conducted over a five week period in October and November of 2000. The assistant principals as well as the attendance officer were interviewed in their offices. The youth commission director and I met in the Guidance suite. The sessions were 45 to 75 minutes in length, and were taped and transcribed.

These were semi-structured explorations into questions about truancy; its definition, its frequency, its perception as an issue of importance at The High School, and

its consequences to students. The participants in the interview process (n=4) were white males, who have worked together in their current positions for the past eight years. Each has a different role in relation to the students. These roles are described in more detail in the narrative that follows. It is important to note that while truancy was initially to be the focus of this project, the results of the interviews led me to research the broader issue of attendance violations including, in addition to truancy, tardiness, class cutting, leaving the building, and skipping detention.

It was difficult at times to maintain a sense of formality in the interviews, as I have worked with each of these men for more than ten years. But as an insider, there was also a political element (the assistant principals are my superiors, after all), and I felt somewhat constrained from being as direct with my questions as I might. In addition, knowing what I do about the disciplinary procedures may have kept me from digging deeper into some of the statements made by the interviewees. Although I had formulated specific questions ahead of time, answers frequently drifted off to other tangents.

In preparation for the upcoming grant program, and in an effort to understand the recent surge in suspensions, each interview began with a discussion of the issue of truancy and often moved to other matters of concern. Questions were raised as to truancy's definition, and its frequency at our school; its perception as a problem in the community; and the consequences for students. Each of these men seemed to have a different perspective on truancy. In fact, the interviews began to highlight the lack of a unified vision of the concept as well as differences in the perceived incidence of truancy at THS among the four.

The Interviews: Results

Defining truancy. Perhaps because truancy is not specifically defined in the Student/Parent Handbook, each of the assistant principals thinks of it somewhat differently. Assistant Principal Thomas, who works with the 8th and 9th graders, says “a truancy is a student that is absent from school unauthorized.” Assistant Principal Wendell, who works with 10th, 11th, and 12th graders, defines a truant as “a student that just doesn’t show up in school.” Both assistant principals refer to the truant student in terms of the long term, habitual, chronic, hard core truants who miss many days in a row. Thomas mentioned 15 consecutive unexcused days as a way of characterizing chronic truancy, while in nearby Boston, a student who has accumulated 16 or more unexcused absences during the entire year is defined as a truant (Boston Bar Association, 1998). It is important to add that at THS a student who has missed 15 consecutive days, has by definition failed at least one term due to absences, and is only 3 absences away from failing most courses for the year. Of note here is, in contrast to the handbook’s vaunted specificity, the inconsistency with which *truancy* and *unexcused absence* are defined.

Truancy, however, also includes other attendance violations according to AP Thomas: “I’d say I look at cutting classes and leaving the building as forms of truancy.” In discussing the upcoming Truancy Grant and the possibility of working with a group of students on their school attendance problems, Thomas continued:

A truancy issue can also be tied into a tardiness issue and that to me is more of an issue than truancy...I think if you tie the tardiness issue onto the truancy issue, you can tie them in, but they are different. You know the truancy[sic] is a kid that just doesn’t want to be here. The tardiness issue is a kid that eventually will

become truant because of the whole sequence of events that may lead to staying home.

In a separate interview Assistant Principal Wendell had reached a similar conclusion regarding the tardiness/truancy connection:

Tardiness gets to be related to truancy because...the student doesn't want to pick up detention and so therefore the student will turn around and cut office, cut homeroom...feeling as though, if I do get caught what's going to happen to me is they're going to give me detention.

At times, it was very difficult to separate the concept of truancy, as I had understood it, from these other ideas of cutting, tardiness, and leaving the building. The lack of clarity here is problematic in enforcing the rules around these violations. As stated earlier in this paper, and directly by the assistant principals, the lack of definition allows for latitude in dealing with each individual student, but responding to each incident individually may obscure the presence of a larger problem more apparent with a broader view. This broader view seems available to two persons who provide outside support to the school community, Attendance Officer Ned Ross and Youth Commissioner Carl Trent.

Our attendance officer and police liaison to the high school is Ned Ross. He is closely involved with the daily attendance of our students, and especially those who are court-involved. He arrives at school each morning and reviews the list of absentees who are not accounted for. When he gets the list it has already been edited to account for those students whose parents have called in to report them absent. To the administrators' credit, this practice of parents calling the school when their child is absent has become the norm, and a surprising number of parents do call the school to notify us of their

child's absence. Standard practice involves knowing where each student is, so Officer Ross takes the list and makes calls to the parents of each missing student, not already accounted for. Although tedious, this has been the policy for many years. Officer Ross and both administrators feel this has been effective in keeping the number of trancies down. AP Thomas feels strongly: "They send their kids to school, they think they're in school. If they're not, I think they should know about it." Thanks to the efforts of Officer Ross, it has become common practice when a parent does not call in a student's absence, to expect a call from him. Both parents and students are aware of this policy. Students have been heard to say "I tried skipping once, but Officer [Ross] called my mother and got me grounded."

In addition to calling those not accounted for on the absence list, Ross also makes note of any student who has reached or gone over the limit of five absences for the term. He calls this to the attention of the administrator, because although he does not know if any of these absences are excused, "at least I've called it to their attention, where they have to come back to me with an answer." He alerts the administrator to a possible problem, but only suggests that it may be the time to act. He lets the administrator make the decision, "because it is a school problem." It is clear that Officer Ross is concerned when he notices these high numbers of absences, and wants to find out as quickly as possible why a student is not coming to school.

Officer Ross maintains that truancy is not really a problem at THS. He says that he has not had to make as many calls as in the past. "Do I have as many skippers as we used to have? I don't think so, because, I'll tell you, they know I'm going to call that house every day."

Carl Trent is the director of the Town Youth Commission. He is present in the high school cafeteria every day at all three lunches, where he interacts with school staff and students alike. His position as a community worker and liaison to the Courts puts him in contact with students who are court-involved. He is a man of unwavering compassion, respected by both adults and students throughout the community. His work involves coordinating court imposed community service with juvenile offenders enrolled at THS. In addition to their court-involvement these students frequently have poor relationships with school adults. Although initially kids see him as just another adult, after a few hours of community service they begin to understand that their school or court problems are not problems for him.

Community service hours, we look at that as an opportunity, not just to get physical...that the leaves will get raked or the litter picked up, but that gives me 30 hours to kind of form a bond with that kid.

He accepts these youngsters at face value and makes no judgments. By the time a youngster has completed thirty hours of community service, they have often gained a positive relationship with an adult.

As an outsider, Trent seems to have a wide purview of the implications of student disengagement from school and feels that truancy is indeed a problem.

I think kids want attention. They thrive on attention. They're looking for people to recognize and support them. If they're not getting it in a positive way they'll maybe get it in a negative way.

When it was suggested that truancy is not a serious problem in our community, he easily named several students he knew to be frequently truant from school; one who had just recently dropped out, and two with perennial attendance problems. The way he sees

it “truancy to the ultimate is probably the kid that’s just about ready to drop out of school, the kid that’s at the end of the line.”

Frequency of truancy. Both administrators indicate that there are a number of youngsters who are “just not coming to school.” When asked about how many students each year struggle with school attendance, AP Wendell responded as follows:

I don’t know, to tell you the truth I never really sat down and added them up. It just seems as though you’re dealing with a few and you have some success, in which case they kind of drop out of the picture. There are still a few on the table that you are working with, and then a few others jump on the table and then they jump off the table. So you’ve always got people on the table. To turn around and say that you know this number of students during this specific year, I don’t know.

When asked about the accessibility of numbers of truanancies for this or previous years AP Thomas said:

“I could easily look in my files on the computer database that we set up of truancy from school, sure.”

“So, the data will be there?”

“Yes, in other words, I can probably tell just by looking at homeroom rosters, who our truancy problems are. And that’s probably easier for me to do than to go through all the files.”

So, is it easy to get this information? Or not?

Consequences for truancy. After not finding truancy anywhere in the handbook, both assistant principals said that the absence of a prescribed consequence for truancy gives them the latitude to make individual calls in each case. Each ultimately referred to the “cutting” rule as covering incidents of truancy. In the handbook, under the heading

'Discipline Code' is a list of 19 offenses considered severe enough to be cause for suspension from school. Included among them is "Cutting of regular assigned classes, study halls, detention, and lunchroom (1-3 days)." They regard these offenses as forms of truancy, since they are unauthorized absences from school.

Assistant Principal Thomas noted that truancy could be a suspendable offense of one to three days depending on whether or not it is the first offense, "so there is not something that says you *will* be suspended out of school one day for being truant." And both agree that suspension is not the best consequence for an individual who is truant. In fact, AP Wendell asserted that suspending a student for not coming to school is "not helping the kid. If you're keeping him out then what you're doing is you're rewarding him with more truancy and you're calling it a suspension."

Assistant Principal Wendell feels that truancy is frequently a reflection of another conflict. There may be some specific reason why a particular student stays away from school: emotional problems, motivational issues, or interpersonal conflicts. He feels that these cases are best dealt with individually through work with the student, the parents, and the counselors to try to help the student get back to school. He asserts that if there is a standardized response to truancy "it is discussion, it is talking with the student... with his parents... with his teachers to find out what is going on."

Each assistant principal cites efforts to use other consequences such as office detention, sending students to counselors for help, offering opportunities to make up work in order to earn credit, and extensions of deadlines. Students are offered opportunities to attend summer school or waivers on absences at the end of the year if judged by the administrators to made enough of an effort. Failing that, administrators say

they work with the youngsters by sending them to their guidance counselor to formulate a plan for an alternative to that diploma which can only be earned through daily attendance.

Both affirm that these options are pursued in earlier trancies and only as a last resort does suspension become the consequence for skipping school. AP Thomas explains it this way:

You want to try and devise a penalty, so yeah, the kid is going to be inconvenienced, but you don't put them out of school for being truant. Unless, always say unless, it gets to a point where you have a student that's been truant or cutting classes. You work out a schedule where they'll do detention, they'll do this, they do that, and they don't follow through on that. That's a last resort.

Being outsiders perhaps provides Officer Ross, and the Youth Commissioner, Carl Trent, with a broader view of the obvious contradiction inherent in punishing any truancy with out of school suspension. When questioned regarding the use of suspension to deter truancy or class cutting, Trent had this to say:

If you look at the daily attendance here and you see a kid with 8 absences, or 20 absences...what does that mean? Isn't there a red flag... We'd like to see something more pro-active than just punishment.

And Officer Ross was also quite clear:

I would rather see a young person be in school. Because when you give them out-of-school suspension, unless it's something very serious, but I mean, they cut a class, you're playing into their hands because they're getting an extra day off... There are more ways to make the young person accountable without letting them go home and sleep for a couple of days... To me I think you're defeating your purpose when you keep them home, but that's only my own impression.

The Interviews: Discussion

All four of these men spoke with feeling about the dangers of truancy, that it often represents or masks other problems; and all four connected it with the undesirable consequence of a youngster's dropping out of school. The paradox is that truancy, although not seen as a big problem in The High School, is clearly seen by each of these men as a huge and significant problem in the lives of individual students. So how can they suspend students for truancy and why do they not see a problem?

The lack of a clear definition of truancy is problematic in terms of identifying it as an issue of concern. This is not just a problem at THS in terms of school-wide record keeping on attendance and its violations; it is a problem for our students. Clarifying what is meant by truancy can help us understand whether or not we have a problem, and help our administrators see it more clearly. If the definition is 15 consecutive days of unauthorized absence, hopefully the administrator would be aware of how many cases of truancy he had.

The administrators' assertion that truancy is not a big problem is also called into question when we recall their perception of cutting class, leaving the building, and even tardiness as forms of truancy. But if these violations are in fact, variations on truancy, then it seems that we have a larger, more amorphous problem; and we need to figure out what it is and how to deal with it, keeping our educational mission in mind.

Adding to the ambiguity that obscures our vision of truancy as a problem, is the administrative 'latitude' allowed by the absence of a definition of truancy in the handbook. Administrators are free to exercise their authority when they discipline students for these attendance violations. Both spoke of suspension as the "last resort" in dealing with truants, and tend to think that several detentions will suffice as a

consequence in most cases. But if those detentions are not served; if the student repeats his class cutting or truancy, he is most often suspended – not for cutting or truancy; but for continued disregard for school rules, insubordination, disrespect, disobedience, or skipping detention. This has the effect of minimizing the number of suspensions for truancy that appear in the record, and blurring our perception of the problem as serious.

This practice is also confusing in terms of keeping accurate information about truancy and its incidence. If we use the terms truancy and cutting interchangeably; if tardiness and leaving the building are also considered truancy; then the information in our databases is not very useful. Assistant Principal Thomas mentioned having a truancy database; but he seemed to feel that it would be more difficult to access the file than to go through the twelve or fifteen homeroom rosters of the 250 eighth and ninth graders. A system such as this is ineffective if the information is not easily available for viewing and reviewing. The inability to access the information in the files seems to permit us to say that we do not have a truancy problem.

In discussions on the frequency of truancy, neither Assistant Principal Thomas nor Assistant Principal Wendell felt that truancy, per se, was the biggest attendance problem they faced. They described class cutting, leaving the building, and especially tardiness as more pressing issues which, they conceded, may lead to truancy. Thomas referred to the “sequence of events” which may lead to truancy. This sequence involves a student’s third tardiness; detention; skipping detention; suspension; failure; and disengagement from the learning process. We know how it goes.

It is interesting that although both assistant principals connect cutting and tardiness with truancy, they seem not to continue that connection to its logical end. That is, they do see tardiness as a form of cutting, and cutting as a form of truancy. They are

opposed, at least in principle, to suspending students for truancy. They appear to be sensitive to the idea that truancy may be a sign of a deeper conflict and that suspension may not be the appropriate resolution. But they seem much less willing to see cutting, tardiness, or leaving the building as evidence of a conflict. It is perceived to be the responsibility of the student to be here on time and go to all her classes - as if these violations are purely willful acts, not representative of the deeper conflict assumed in the case of truancy.

The administrators feel that they give students many opportunities to avoid suspensions for their attendance violations. Both say they offer students chances to make up work, get extra help, even waive absences in some cases. When it doesn't happen they seem disappointed, frustrated, or angry that the student has not changed. Part of the problem is that there is no systematic monitoring or mentoring in place to see that a student's efforts are reinforced. The administrator feels he is doing all that can be done to help the student.

What is missing is collaboration with other members of the staff who are also involved with the student who has attendance issues. As a Special Needs liaison for 20 to 25 students each year, I have rarely been called in on a discussion of possible truancy or an impending suspension for one of my charges. Notification of a student's suspension from school is often not received until after the fact, when it is too late to advocate for the student or discuss alternative solutions. If the administrators are to succeed in turning student behavior around it will be necessary to enlist the help of other staff involved with the student. The attention and involvement in the small successes that students have on a daily basis must be reinforced. The administrators cannot do this alone, or with rules alone. If they enlist others in the process, the chances for helping our kids stay in school

and at school increase. Officer Ross and Carl Trent provide valuable lessons through their dealings with students as individuals who are experiencing conflict in their school lives.

The perspective of the administrators appears in sharp contrast to that of the youth commissioner and the truancy officer. As the keepers of authority and control in the school, both administrators seem to hope for change through the establishment of firm consequences for these attendance violations. Youth Commissioner Trent and Officer Ross see these attendance issues as individual problems that require individual attention.

Officer Ross told of three students who had serious attendance problems and were very close to dropping out of school their senior year.

I went to all three young people's houses. As a police officer? No. As a concerned parent because I brought up three of my own. And you explain to them in the language they understand. I don't blow a nice picture, I don't blow a dark picture, I just tell them the truth. ... The three of them did make it last year, which I'm very proud of. And all three of them are in college this year.

Officer Ross had made it a point to check in with these students each time he saw them all through the year. It was probably helpful and meaningful to each of these youngsters to know that he would.

Study 3. The Meetings

At the conclusion of the interviews, therefore, it had become abundantly clear that the issue to work on in our group was not simply truancy. We decided that our focus would be on preventing truancy by targeting students who were missing important school time through chronic tardiness, frequent class cutting, and repeatedly skipping detention (cf., Riley & McDaniel, 1999).

A detailed chronology of the events and important players in the development of this program is compiled in Table 2. Included in this preliminary work were the interviews (discussed in Study 2); the meetings with parties who helped develop a list of students appropriate for participation; and planning initial activities for our truancy group.

Insert Table 2 about here

The Meetings: Methods

Setting up. With input from the youth commissioner, the attendance officer, the assistant principals, and the office staff, we compiled a list of 34 students -- the truant, the tardy, the class cutters, the detention skippers -- those we hoped might benefit from some intervention. We collected first term report cards and reviewed them for absences, tardies, and failing grades. On the surface at least, there appeared to be a fairly direct relationship between the poor academic performance of these students, and their poor attendance habits. In our next meeting we drafted a letter of invitation to the 34 students on our target list: seniors (n=7) , juniors (n=3), sophomores (n=4), freshmen (n=17), and eighth graders (n=3). The large number of freshmen was a combination of both first-time ninth graders (5) and those who were repeating the year (12).

For the introductory meeting, the following invitations were delivered to homerooms for distribution to each of the targeted students.

Dear _____,

We are inviting you to attend a brief meeting about an informal discussion program we hope you will be interested in. We would like 10 minutes of your time to explain the details. We will provide refreshments.

The meeting will be held in A203 at 2:20 today. After the meeting, you can decide whether or not you wish to participate. If you are interested, but cannot make this meeting, please get in touch with one of us.

We hope to see you there!

As I inquired throughout the day, it was clear that some of the students had not received our invitations (they had been late for homeroom), so I invited them personally to the meeting. As the day went on several students came to us with inquiries as to what this was about. In each case, we provided encouragement to attend without divulging too much, just as we had in the invitations.

While it may appear that we were being coy in not revealing the purpose of the meeting, our hope was to foster an air of curiosity and interest. We felt this might be difficult to sustain for a meeting 'tomorrow' or 'next week.' Although we expected some reluctance, we knew from experience with adolescents that food is a powerful motivator. Our hope was that the combination of refreshments and natural curiosity would bring students to the meeting.

The group. The Truancy Group (a.k.a. The Attendance Group) met from January to June 2001. A series of eighteen weekly meetings were held for students who had been repeatedly disciplined for attendance violations during the first term. The students' level of involvement in the education process and school community was perceived to be tenuous. The purpose of the group was to hear from them what they saw as the problem, to understand why, in spite of failing and frustration, they still came to school, and to see whether giving them voice could make a positive difference.

Meetings were held each week at the same time as detention (2:15 to 3:10) and counted as detention time. The meetings were voluntary, and although we had our specific list of 34 students in mind, participation was open to any student. There were few formal structures for the meetings: the time, the location, and the promise of cookies and soda.

Over the course of the 18 meetings, 21 students participated. Membership by grade was as follows: eighth graders (n = 2), freshmen (n = 5), “sub- sophomores” (n = 7), sophomores (n = 3), juniors (n = 2), and seniors (n = 2); and by gender, boys (n = 9) and girls (n = 12). Parenthetically, the term sub-sophomore is an unofficial denotation used by students to name their second year in high school. Although they have not yet earned enough credits to attain full sophomore rank and must report to a freshman homeroom each morning, they no longer consider themselves freshmen.

With the exception of three first generation American students of Latino descent (2 boys and 1 girl), the remaining eighteen students were American of European descent.

Frequent paper and pencil tasks were employed during group meetings in order to collect specific information, focus an activity or provide think-time for discussion. I kept process logs following the meetings.

The Meetings: Results

Introductory meeting. The first meeting was scheduled to begin at 2:20. By two-thirty there were eight students in attendance although only seven had been sent invitations. The eighth came with a friend, saying he “just wanted to see what this was about.” There were four freshmen (2 boys, 2 girls), and one senior boy, one junior girl, one sophomore boy, and one eighth grade boy. The cookies and soda seemed to be a

draw; but besides being hungry they were definitely curious. There were questions coming from all of them at once.

We took a few minutes to explain that this was a program for students who are having trouble getting to school on time, if at all, staying in school all day, or attending all their scheduled classes. Our concern was that whatever the reason, the result of these tardies, cuts, or absences seemed to be frustration and failure in their classes. We explained that attendance at the group was voluntary, that conversations would be confidential, and that they would be free to talk openly about their frustrations with school; that the group was for them. They asked questions about how often we would meet, for how long and how many cookies they could have. We then asked them to put down in writing “three things that make it difficult for you to get to school, be here on time, or go to all your classes,” and “three reasons *you* think you should come to school.”

As they quietly wrote their responses, one young man asked, “Are we going to share?” Another asked if she could “write down more than three reasons?” Although we had planned a 10-minute introductory meeting, there was great interest on our part, and no resistance on theirs to talking about themselves. As they shared their answers, it was clear that these kids wanted to talk. There was a flurry of “cooperative overlapping” (Tannen, 1994) as the kids supported each other’s ideas, with their own). It was a challenge to hear them as they all talked at once. Their responses to the first question regarding the obstacles to their attendance at school were as follows:

Things that make it hard to get to school

Personal Things	School Things
<p>I am a deep sleeper and don't like to be awakened when I'm sleeping. I'd rather sleep. Sleep is good for me. need more sleep getting up in the morning want to sleep longer being sick (2) missing TV shows can't figure out what to wear it's cold [my sister] makes me late long walk to school, no one to drive me, no ride lazy (4) I get in a lot of trouble just don't feel like going I don't plan on going anywhere in life with education</p>	<p>don't like teachers don't like school (3) don't like going to school there's no point, I fail everything. classes I have classes are boring don't want to go to classes the people in my homeroom long walk to [my] homeroom</p>

While there was bravado from two of the younger boys, there was a fair degree of honesty as the students admitted that for them, getting here everyday, and on time was difficult. They described in some detail these personal and school-related obstacles which consistently interfere with their getting to school, and impede their success in school once they arrive. But they spoke as if they were beyond changing these behaviors. This would become the focus of many discussions in the weeks to come. We went on to discuss the second prompt.

Reasons I think I should come to school:

Positive Reasons	Negative Reasons
<p>to graduate to make a future out of my life</p>	<p>to not get too many absences to not get in trouble</p>

<p>to go to college</p> <p>to learn and be educated</p> <p>to get a good education</p> <p>to make it in life</p> <p>for education</p> <p>for responsibility</p> <p>to learn to be punctual</p> <p>to see the girls</p>	<p>to not fail</p> <p>not to get yelled at</p> <p>to be in a place we can't be in trouble</p> <p>to not be in this room</p>
--	---

As to why *they* think they should be in school every day, the students gave both positive and negative responses. The need for a diploma, the idea that eventually they want to graduate was raised by those who were already sophomores, juniors and seniors. The 13-year-old eighth grader wrote “none, none, none” for the three reasons he thinks he should come to school. One sub-sophomore added to her list, “But basically, I don’t think I should be here, I think I should have a full-time job.” This student, although earning passing marks in quite a few of her classes, was earning no credit, i.e., she was failing because of her absences, cuts, and suspensions. Sadly, this very capable student was suspended for three days midway through the third term for being “antagonistic toward school rules.” She dropped out of school soon afterwards.

At the close of this initial meeting, we asked about others who might like to attend this group and were told that four ninth grade girls had wanted to come but had to attend the smoking cessation program for the next two weeks. We asked that they pass on the information they had received.

Before the group began to break up we asked if they would be interested in meeting again the following week. Most were in agreement and a discussion followed as

to the best day. As the meeting began to break up at 3:20, several asked whether this would count for detention time. There is an unwritten policy that allows time spent in extra help after school to be counted as detention time. Clearly this meeting would be considered extra help, so I quickly contacted each assistant principal and was assured that the students would get detention credit for attending the meeting. They were quite pleased with the idea. This was a high note on which to adjourn. We were very encouraged by this first meeting of the Truancy Group; hereafter to be called The Attendance Group.

Subsequent meetings. The group met every Wednesday for the remainder of the school year, eighteen meetings in all. Word of mouth brought new members to the second meeting and to later meetings as well. Table 3 lists the dates, number of students in attendance, and primary focus of the discussion for each meeting.

Insert Table 3 about here

We spent time establishing some ground rules for the group. In order to get credit for detention they would need to be there by 2:20 and would have to stay until 3:10. They agreed to this but wanted a caveat: “Anyone can leave at 3:10 if they need to, but others can stay.”

We talked about confidentiality and our hope that people would be honest and open about the topics we would discuss, but with the understanding that personal issues discussed would go no further. We raised the idea of respectful listening, because there seemed such urgency to their being heard. They each had so much to say and each remark elicited a spontaneous burst of comment, agreement, support, and personal

recollection. The students acknowledged and approved these concepts as rules for the group.

Attendance. Attendance at individual meetings ranged from 3 to 11 students. Of the 21 students involved, nine attended at least half of the meetings. This core group consisted of one senior, two juniors, two sophomores, two sub-sophomores, and two freshmen.

During the early weeks of the program new students would arrive, most often brought along by one of the members. Three of the girls (all on the target list) had missed our first meeting because of a mandated smoking cessation program. One sophomore girl (also on the target list) attended the 8th meeting, and then attended all but two meetings the rest of the year. On at least twelve occasions students were absent from the group because of suspension. Among the 21 students who attended the group, thirteen of them had been targeted on our initial list.

Four students came only once. Three accompanied friends to the meeting because they had detention and we had the food; the other was a 9th grade girl who was the only introductory meeting attendee to never return to a meeting. Two girls, one junior and one sophomore attended only when they had detention, but one came to nine meetings, the other to fourteen. Both these girls had previously been suspended for chronic tardiness.

One boy, not on our original list, came with a friend to the first meeting, and subsequently attended more than half our meetings. (He never had detention, but had often been suspended for his infractions of the attendance policy.) This young man, like several others came regularly and willingly for the socializing and conversation, for the personal attention, and for the chance to voice their feelings about school matters that

concerned them. But it was clear that for most of these students, this became *their* club, *their* version of an extracurricular activity.

Student Conflicts

From January to June we talked about the conflicts that repeatedly arose for these students in their school lives. The discussion centered primarily on four areas of conflict: conflicts over the academic expectations of their teachers; conflicts with individual teachers and administrators; conflicts with the rules; and personal/emotional conflicts that spilled over into school. Although we were prepared with a topic for each meeting, we generally deferred to the students, and through their discussions, formulated a question on which to focus. The following overview provides examples from the group's discussions of each type of conflict.

Conflicts over expectations. When asked how long attendance has been an issue for them, the students had little difficulty remembering when or why they started staying home from school. For one young man "I was fine up to fifth grade, I had good attendance." One of the girls replied "By fifth grade I was already having trouble." When asked why then, they each talked about homework. "If I didn't do my homework, I didn't want to go. I remember a report I had to do once..." There was agreement from another group member, "Yeah, I would usually just pretend to be sick."

Conflict over expectations had not changed for many of the students in the group. Several stated clearly and emphatically that they often miss school on days when they have a project due, or a big test, because they know they are not prepared. "I didn't really understand what he wanted me to do" and "I don't really get math so what's the point of taking the test, if I'm going to fail anyway?" They say they stay home or arrive late to avoid expected conflict with a teacher. When asked about this, the students say they

know that staying home or cutting class doesn't change anything. They know there are other options available, but don't seem able to pursue them or to negotiate for themselves. Said one boy, "I don't even know why I always do that.

Conflicts with Authority. In discussions on class cutting, students brought up several reasons why they skip classes. Frequent among these are student/teacher interactions. Group members often expressed frustration with certain teachers, with whom they have a history of conflicts. "I can't stand Ms. S. She's so mean to everybody. I don't even know why she doesn't like me. A friend of mine heard her saying things about me to another teacher and when I asked her about it straight to her face, she sent me to the office. That's not right!" When asked what came of her trip to the office, she spoke of how empathetic the administrator was, "He knows how bad she is." We may know how bad some people can be, but it doesn't help the child much if we only agree with them. Unless someone helps a student resolve the conflict between teacher and student, we can only expect the conflict to continue and the student to be on the losing end. It was obvious in this case that although this incident had happened some weeks before, it was still not resolved in this girl's mind. Getting herself to this class would continue to be a problem, not to mention trying to learn in such a hostile environment.

Another student spoke at length about having once cut his science class earlier in the year. He exclaimed, "now he hates me or something, I can't do anything in there, I get kicked out." Misunderstandings and suspicions in the minds of either teacher or student will surely increase the possibility of more conflict. In this instance, one of the students suggested "maybe you could ask Ms. G to talk to him. I had a problem with a teacher who couldn't stand me and ever since she talked to her for me, it's been

completely different. Now she loves me!” Here was a student advocating the use of a third party intervention in the hopes of helping to resolve this conflict.

Rules conflicts. Every student is issued a handbook at the beginning of the school year. It is assumed that they know the rules. Well yes, they should. But, the rules are not always the same for everybody. The subject of suspension came up in many of our meetings; the following example is telling (S=student. F=facilitator)

S1: Hey, what’s the deal with suspension? Why do you get suspended for cutting a class?

S2: You got suspended for that? I got detention.

S1: How many nights did you get?

S2: I got 2 nights but I never went.

F1: Well, what happens if you don’t go to detention?

S3: Eventually you get suspended, so you get the whole day off!

S4: Yeah, who cares if you get suspended. You don’t have to do the detention and you get to sleep late, and watch TV all day.

F2: Do your parents let you sleep all day?

S4: They’re not home.

S2: I got suspended, but I had to do ISS (in-school suspension).

S4: What do you mean? We don’t have in-school suspension!

Apparently we do have in-school suspension for some students, but which ones? Some students get suspended for cutting; others get detention. Some get suspended out of school for not going to detention; others serve in-school suspension. Arguably, one rule for all is an unrealistic concept. But implicit in a policy of dealing with each student individually is the danger of charges of unfairness.

Interest-based conflicts. Personal issues and problems at home and matters beyond the control of a child to change often mix badly with the rigidity of school. One participant said she had been having trouble getting to school since second grade when her mother went to work. “She went to work at four in the morning, so when she would call to get me up I just wouldn’t go.” This conflict which began at home has obviously gone unresolved for many years. This girl earned good grades despite her frequent absence and was moved along through school. The attendance rules at the high school level however are stringent and enforced. Now, although she may be able to pass academically, she fails due to her absences. In our meetings, she often said “I’m passing everything, I’m just failing on absences” as if that somehow changed the fact that she was earning no credit toward graduation.

Several members spoke of issues at home that made getting up and out of the house difficult. Our senior boy said “my bed talks to me and I can’t wake up.” One student cited daily arguments with her mother for a ride; another spoke of a daily battle with her mother over getting out the door. This young woman, whose mother actually walked her to school each day, attended her first meeting, our eighth, halfway through the third term. Her name had been on our initial list, but she came now, brought in by a friend. When she mentioned being tardy sixty-eight times, a regular member welcomed her with “well, you sure came to the right place.”

Student jobs, appointments, and family obligations can interfere with serving detention. Administrators are flexible depending on the student, the timing of an attempted negotiation, and whether the student is a repeat offender of the rule. But, negotiating with an administrator you’ve had numerous run-ins with requires a degree of

confidence and self-esteem not available to these students. Most expressed the opinion that “it wouldn’t do any good anyway.”

The final meeting of The Attendance Group was two days before exam week began. By that time our only senior had graduated, one sub-sophomore had dropped out to get that full-time job, and two students had been suspended early in June for the remainder of the year. Most of our students had made some positive changes in their attendance patterns, reducing the incidence of tardiness, class cutting, and skipping detention, thus reducing suspensions out of school. One of the juniors had been hanging on to her last absence since February and took it on a beautiful, sunny day in June.

Through the following year, although we did not continue the group, members frequently came by to talk with us about how they were doing. Unfortunately, the same methods were in place for attendance violations. Several members of the group did eventually leave school in 2002, but they had continued their relationships with the group members and the facilitators, and perhaps they left THS with a little more self-esteem.

The Meetings: Discussion

The central question of whether or not suspension is a deterrent to further truancy was clearly answered by the members of The Attendance Group. The students with their histories of suspensions said clearly and unequivocally that the threat of out of school suspension did not and does not deter them from skipping school, class, or detention, or help them get to school on time. They are adamant in saying that there are other, more pressing reasons for their absence, and that a day of suspension does not address those issues.

Members of the group repeatedly questioned the rationale of missing school for having cut a class, or skipping detention. They see it rather as an administration trying to

fail them because the suspension just adds another absence from class. It is interesting that even they find it an illogical response to their behavior. They feel that the suspensions is a much more personalized, extreme punishment: that they are being suspended in an effort to get them out of the teacher's class or the administrator's hair.

The issue of fairness was raised in many of our meetings and deserves attention. It is true that administrative discretion in these attendance matters may be the right idea; after all, each student should be treated as an individual. But, it requires care and some objectivity to avoid charges of unfairness. From the students' perspective, however, it frequently looks unfair. Some students get suspended for cutting; others get detention. Some get suspended out of school; others serve in-school suspension. Some serve community service hours for ten detentions owed; others get suspended two days for insubordination. Administrators can and do change the consequences for attendance violations in certain situations, for certain students. What determines this individualizing of the rules? Is flexibility and negotiation available for all? It is the reality of different situations for different kids that raises the question of fairness for students on the margins. They see themselves being treated differently, and as we heard in our meetings, they often do take it personally. The students with the good grades do have a better chance of avoiding suspension than these students who do poorly in school.

The Attendance Group discussions also made it clear that we need a better way of resolving student conflicts with teachers. The relationship between these students and their teachers is crucial to their chances for success in school. But these relationships are frequently the source of conflict; conflict that does not get resolved through a student's decision to skip class or an administrator's decision to punish. Often, the reality for these students is that the teacher *is* always right. Even if the teacher is at fault, the student

needs to make the adjustment. The inherent power imbalance in any student-teacher or student-administrator conflict works hard against the student.

In my position as a Special Needs liaison, I am often faced with conflicts that arise between teacher and student when expectations are not met, events or intentions are misperceived or students are out of line. These are situations in which “mediation” can be successful. As in most conflicts, each side feels that the other is completely at fault. It is rarely clear exactly what happened. But rather than try to figure that out, I have found some success in a form of ‘shuttle’ mediation between the two parties. It works because each party has a need to talk about the problem; and once they have been heard there is an opportunity to rethink a solution. It may also work because the goal is to come to a resolution that works for both parties, at the same time maintaining a productive working relationship with both the student and the teacher. Unless resolved the conflicts only grow in importance and negatively impact the performance of a student who is already on the academic margins.

Much too often these students expressed feeling rejected and let down by the school, which they ironically hoped, would be a source of fairness, compassion, and tolerance. Their comments in meetings poignantly indicate that this is what they lack and still hope for. One of the heart-wrenching factors that surfaced in this group is that these students have such a limited connection to the school community while having so much they could contribute. They are athletes but they don’t play on the school team; they are artists and poets but they don’t contribute to the school newspaper; and they are musicians, but they don’t participate in the music program. They are perceived by many as the kids who don’t do anything, the bad kids, and the kids who don’t like school. And they don’t. But, they have also come to see the school as not liking them. In their words,

they get in trouble “for doing nothing.” They get sent to the office when another student might not. They feel misunderstood; like no one does care about them; like no one listens to them. It is difficult to convince them otherwise when they are sent home so frequently.

But they do have important things to say, and should be heard. The students in The Attendance Group began the program with few expectations, but they came to expect that at their Wednesday meeting they would have a chance to voice their opinions and feelings about the conflicts that they are faced with at THS.

Analysis: The Quiet Conflicts

The attendance violations described in this report are frequently interpreted as willful acts of non-compliance. Students are seen as breaking the rules, defying authority, and simply choosing to absent themselves from the academic opportunities offered at THS. But it is also possible that these behaviors are a response to earlier conflict situations. The following analysis is offered as a rationale for viewing these violations of the attendance rules as evidence of conflict. It is hoped that the concepts discussed below can inform our response to these behaviors and prevent our further complicating the conflicts represented by attendance violations.

The interpersonal conflicts that go on in a public high school are many, and include those between students, teachers, and administrators. Rubin and Levinger (1995) provide a framework from which to define and understand different kinds of conflict through their discussion of its common characteristics across all levels of analysis. This framework provides that all social conflicts share similar properties in terms of how they begin, how we respond to them, how they can be ended, and what kinds of outcomes we might expect. Despite the myopic interpretation of attendance violations as purely acting-out behavior, these offenses, when analyzed through this theoretical lens more

clearly represent conflict. Using the characteristics outlined by Rubin and Levinger (1995) the following discussion illustrates that conflict is inherent in these attendance violations. Regarding them as such can shed light on the reasons our students behave as they do, help us understand why we respond to their behaviors as we do, and perhaps lead us to changing our current limited reactions.

Divergent Interests

Conflict “derives from a perceived divergence of interest, ...a perceived incompatibility between goals...a difference in values and beliefs” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 15). Is there such a divergence of goals, beliefs or interests in a student’s unauthorized absence from class, detention, or school? Certainly the student’s interest in being elsewhere is incompatible with the school’s interest in his presence in class. A student’s inability to foresee the implications of his non-attendance differs from the adult perception and belief in the importance of a diploma. The incompatibility of these differing perceptions leads to student violations of the rules, and non-compliance with the rules leads to punishment as a direct consequence. Since the adults make the rules, it is easy to see the student as the party in conflict; the party with the deviant interest. But what is to be made of our response to this conflict? When we suspend the student for not coming to school, we too begin to deviate from the very goals and values we are trying to foster.

In addition to the differences in perceived goals and values “the parties involved often misperceive their mutual problem” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p .15). We see the problem simply as non-compliance with the rules. The students speak of personal issues such as: their relationships with certain administrators, teachers or students; administrative issues such as strict rules; personal feelings of frustration and

dissatisfaction with school; boredom, a sense of inevitable failure, and hopelessness (cf., Sanon, Baxter, Fortune & Opotow, 2001). The consequence of suspension, however, represents a fundamental and perhaps mutual lack of understanding of the interdependence between the students and adults in the school community. The perception that the problem lies solely with the student is erroneous if we consider that our success as a high school is dependent on the success of each of our students.

Responses to Conflict

For any conflict between two or more parties there is a limit to the number of ways of responding: domination, capitulation, withdrawal, inaction, negotiation, and third party intervention (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). At The High School the administrative response to attendance conflicts and the student's subsequent response is generally limited to domination, capitulation, withdrawal, and inaction. Negotiation and third party interventions are arguably infrequent on all levels of conflict, but particularly at THS, and especially in regard to attendance offenses.

Domination. Domination occurs when one side tries to impose its will on the other. At the risk of stating the obvious, the imbalance of power between a student and an administrator provides well for this response to conflict. An administrator has psychological dominion over both the teacher and the student. The teacher who turns in a student for cutting his class is no longer involved in the incident as it is now the domain of the administrator. What may have begun as, or could be traced to an unfinished or ongoing conflict between teacher and student, is now in the hands of the administrator. Although not a party to the initial conflict, he now dominates the situation and makes the call as to its consequence. Having used his administrative power, the assistant principal is considered to have resolved the conflict.

Capitulation. When it comes to conflict between students and adults at THS, capitulation is the expected response; i.e., the student is expected to unilaterally cede to the adult what the adult demands or expects. In general at THS, the students are quite compliant and tend to capitulate at the time of their meeting with the administrator; anything less is considered insubordination. They are often agreeable to the consequence for having cut a class, skipped school, or repeatedly missed detention. They generally agree to the suspension, although they may have quite a bit to say later about why they did what they did. Many students at THS have learned that there is little genuine two-way communication and even less tolerance for argument.

Withdrawal. When one side “abandons the conflict, refusing to be a party to it any longer,” he has withdrawn (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 17). The student’s withdrawal from the conflict may begin with chronic tardiness to school and class, but can result in detention. A reluctance to serve detention will lead to suspension, and suspension leads to further disengagement. Both administrators suggested that these behaviors can and do escalate to include skipping classes and staying home. While the initial conflict remains unresolved, the result can be a student who just stops coming to school. This can lead to the most extreme form of withdrawal from school-related conflict: dropping out.

Similarly, school adults may also withdraw from the conflict. An administrator may not always have the time to follow up on a particular student who may have been accumulating a large number of detentions and is not reporting to the office when called. A teacher withdraws when he fails to report a student’s cut or continued absence from class. Whether deliberate or circumstantial, it can be said that the adult has also withdrawn from the conflict process when he stops ‘attending’ to this student who is

repeatedly absent from class, school, or detention. Withdrawal is a possible solution for either party involved in the conflict.

Inaction. Often “one side deliberately does nothing in the hope that the passage of time will favorably change the situation” (Rubin & Levinger, 1995, p. 17). Inaction is the response to conflict for the student who does not serve the detention time owed for his first infraction of the tardiness, cutting or truancy rule. Students are aware of the consequence of missing detention. They are aware that the detention list is posted in the school foyer. They choose not to look at it. Attendance Group members reported that they “never look at the list,” almost as if their not seeing it means it is not there. They forget about it until they are called to the administrator and given a suspension. They are often shocked at the number of detentions they owe.

When teachers do not report cuts, when administrators allow students to accumulate detention penalties unchecked, they share in the responsibility for the impending conflict. A student who thinks that no one has noticed that she skipped detention, that no one knows she cut a class, that no one has figured out that she was truant is tempted to go on as if she did not. Our inaction allows a conflict to continue unresolved, allows absences pile up, and adds to a student’s present and future problems.

Negotiation. This occurs when two or more interdependent parties use the give-and-take of offers and counteroffers in an effort to build a mutually acceptable settlement. Attendance conflicts, like most violations of the handbook, are not often negotiable, but there are some exceptions.

Although, not generally negotiated over the original offense, detention debt offers some possibilities for deal making. Several years ago a faculty member suggested that extra help time with a teacher might be more productive for students than sitting in

detention. A policy was put in place that credits extra help time toward detention debt. Another colleague offered to take students to an urban shelter for homeless women, where their five-hour commitment to work takes care of ten hours of detention. Local community service eliminates detention debt at a similar rate. Administrators have accepted middle-school tutoring, washing desks, and even talking with a counselor in exchange for detention hours owed. However, these alternatives are under-utilized and appear to be available only if the offender initiates the negotiation. They are not available to those who are not savvy about the possibility of negotiating. And these negotiations are available for the punishment only, having little or no relevance to the original conflict.

It is true that some negotiations are available to some select students. Those who have parent or teacher advocates are in a better position to avoid suspension. All parents are called before an impending suspension, but some lack the confidence to negotiate with a school official. When an administrator tells this parent that his son or daughter is going to be suspended, the parent usually complies. Although alternatives to suspension may be agreed to when requested by a parent or advocate, they are not generally offered.

A parent can and probably should negotiate for an in-school consequence for her child's truancy or cutting, but many do not. Those who do successfully negotiate an alternative to suspension can help make school personnel more responsible for school behaviors while reinforcing the validity of our attendance rules. When students are given alternatives to suspension it is often, according to one administrator, because he's "really a good kid", or "I know her parents." It is unfortunate that we don't know all the parents, and too bad we don't see the good in every student.

More and private negotiations are also sometimes worked out with students as they are given opportunities to make up work missed due to cuts or truancy, or have previous absences waived or excused. These students get these chances because the administrator understands that there are other important considerations: “She’s got it rough, I thought I’d give her a break,” or “He’s got some other problems right now.” In these situations there may be a greater chance for success given the sincere effort and commitment on the part of the administrator, and it’s perception by the student.

In regard to negotiating agreements with students, both administrators expressed pessimism about the chances for success in these types of negotiations. Both seem to feel that the students most often fall short in holding up their end, and frequently fail to follow through. Negotiations are perceived as requiring too much supervision, and as something that simply does not work most of the time. Perhaps that is why we use them so rarely. Or might it be that because we use them so rarely they have limited success?

Third-party intervention. An individual who stands apart from the conflict helps the parties identify issues and move toward settlement. In fact, the mere presence of a third party neutral, even if they do not talk, helps to moderate the tone of the parties and their behavior becomes more controlled (Ury, 2000). This does not happen often at THS. For some teachers the idea that they would sit down with a student in the presence of a third party to discuss a conflict is untenable. For their part, the students in such a situation might also be sensitive to the obvious power imbalance of sitting in a meeting with two adults. The administrator, however, has the opportunity to assume the third-party role and the authority to recommend or require such a meeting with a neutral third party. Conducted with care, this process can be especially beneficial in the case of class

cutting. A meeting of the student, the teacher, and the administrator could be helpful in getting to why the student might be cutting a particular class.

Interdependence

A combination of cooperative and competitive motives drives all conflicts. Whether the parties have a cooperative or a competitive orientation determines the course that each conflict will take (Deutsch, 2000). A greater degree of cooperation is necessary particularly when conflicts are characterized by interdependence. The following discussion highlights the degree to which this interdependence between students and school personnel is important, and deserving of our attention.

Deutsch states that there are various types of interdependence between parties that affect their relationships and guide their behaviors and responses in a conflict situation. He describes the fundamental dimensions of this interdependence as cooperation versus competition, power distribution (equal versus non-equal), task-oriented versus social-emotional, and formal versus informal (1985). These dimensions of interdependence are utilized here in analyzing the relationships between administrator and student or teacher and student that have an impact on the response and outcomes of attendance conflicts at THS.

Cooperation versus competition. Although in the ideal, the interdependence between administrator and student is cooperative, when students break the rules there is a competitive dimension to the interactions. The inherent conflictual nature of the violation of a rule set forth by the administration sets up a competition over differing values and beliefs, in which there may be hostility, clashing motivations and incompatible goals. These competing values can result in accusations of unfairness on one side and selfishness on the other. Yet, in a cooperative relation such a rule violation

might initiate a more collaborative effort in which the administrator works with the student to reach an agreeable solution or consequence.

Power distribution. At the risk of stating the obvious, the imbalances in the distribution of power are pertinent in the day to day functioning of the school. Interactions between the adults and students in the building clearly reflect the power distribution as unequal. This is apparent as administrators work to resolve the problems that arise throughout the school day, most of which originate within the classrooms. The controlling nature of the school itself, with its bells for beginning and ending class, the 5 minute passing time, the 22 minutes for lunch, and dismissal at 2:10, makes it painfully obvious to the students that they have little power or autonomy in the school environment. Students are made aware on a daily basis that their roles and acceptable behaviors are different from those of the adults. They express these differences in questions like “why can they... but I can’t...?” They know that in a conflict between themselves and a teacher “who are they going to believe? Why do they ask me what happened when they always believe the teacher anyway?”

Task versus social-emotional orientation. Our school community depends on task-oriented relations where the members of the community each have a job to do. In simplest terms, maintaining order is the job of the administrator, and following the rules is the job of the student. A violation of the rules is seen as a student not doing the job; not being a responsible member of the community. The students’ point of view is equally limited. The social-emotional aspect of school relations often takes precedence over the tasks required as a student, thus creating conflicts over whether to leave at 2:10 or go to detention; take the test or cut the class. In the words of one of the Attendance Group members, “The only reason I come is not for education, but for socially.”

Formal versus informal. The characterization of interdependence as a formal or informal relationship has relevance in the school environment where the times, activities and locations of the interactions among community members are largely predetermined and somewhat rigid. Thus, the nature, quality, and incidence of interactions between the administrator/teacher and the student in this bureaucratic system is quite formal. There is little room for flexibility and informality in such a system, especially taking into account that this is a hierarchical community of unequals, and one in which students feel especially disenfranchised.

One could argue that for many of the attendance rule-breakers, there is a reluctance to participate fully in the community, a lack of commitment to the formal bureaucracy, a refusal to buy into the rules package, and an inability to correctly assess their lack of power. It is likely that these students are blind to the fact that they will not win if they get into a competition in their interactions with the administrator. By the same token, however, the administrators or teachers might also become, through the competitive dimension, blind to the fact that they too cannot win if the student continues to absent himself from school. Unfortunately cooperation is not the natural relationship between these unequal parties, but the onus of making a stronger cooperative effort seems to lay with the more powerful adults in the community rather than with the students.

It seems possible that a greater awareness and understanding of this interdependence can lead us from competition to cooperation, from our differing positions to mutual interests, from suspensions to mutually productive outcomes. This new perspective might provide mutual gains for both individual students and the school authority by reducing the number of school absences resulting from the consequence and repetition of attendance violations.

Settlement or Resolution?

A question that arises from this report is whether, in these matters of attendance, we want short-term settlement or long-term resolution. All conflicts end in settlement or resolution. Settlement indicates behavioral change, while resolution implies an accompanying attitude change as well (Rubin & Levinger, 1995). One can achieve settlement and have some success in changing behavior with effective disincentives, negative consequences, and even punishment. But resolution can lead to more permanent and meaningful change that results in learning – which in turn contributes to attitude change. Of concern in this paper is whether suspending students out of school for attendance violations is effective in either settling or resolving attendance conflicts.

Behavior change without attitude change occurs when one party acquiesces to the other's demands. The administrator talks to the student about what she should do, and what she should not do; he doles out the punishment and sends the student on her way. Given the power asymmetry in this dynamic, the student usually just goes along with the administrator. But, this type of agreement is rarely durable. Students, who cut class or skip school, only get caught some of the time. The suspension for the absence from class does not change the student's attitude about skipping. And it is not just our students who are not learning from these events. The administration, in continuing to suspend students for these violations, has begun to settle for the small behavior change that comes from the conflict's limited settlement, i.e., the student cannot cut a class or skip detention if he is not permitted to be in school.

The only learning to come out of this interaction is that the student will try harder to avoid getting caught in the future. While the student may be resentful over the suspension, it signifies the end of the surface conflict and besides, she is going home.

Concurrently, the suspension allows the administrator to feel the issue is settled since the problem of a student's skipping has been solved. The problem is not, however, resolved.

The Attendance Group has been an attempt to operate at the level of resolution. In engaging students in the process of airing their feelings, discussing issues, and problem solving, the possibility becomes available for achieving behavior change or settlement first, and attitude change or resolution later. Students who process their behaviors through discussions with adults where listening, coaching, and counseling occur, can begin to understand their own behaviors and cooperate in getting more satisfying resolutions to the conflicts they encounter.

Involved in resolving any of these attendance conflicts will be behavioral and attitude changes on the part of the students, teachers, and administrators. We must remember that every conflict has two sides. We must maintain our diligent pursuit of these students and with our support bring them to a level of success. We must assume that there may be an underlying reason why a student chooses not to complete a project or show up for the test, and help them get past that. That is our role as educators.

Conflict Outcomes

Conflict exists on a continuum; it can be destructive where both parties lose or where one wins and the other loses; or it can be constructive where both parties win, and come away with a better understanding and awareness of their common interests. The conflicts with students over attendance issues can be destructive, as evidenced by the high number of suspensions at THS, which lead to absence and potential failure. These suspensions do nothing to resolve the conflicts that precipitate a cut class, leaving the building, and skipping detention; and their impact on student interest, motivation, and engagement in school is clear. For some students all we have to do to draw them in is

demonstrate our interest in their success. Listening to students is necessary if we are to understand what gets in the way of their regular attendance in school. Constructive conflict resolution can contribute to enhancing the relationships these students need to develop if they are to succeed in school.

Conclusions

The conclusions derived from this study may seem uncomplicated, even obvious, but they are important nonetheless. As a result of the preceding research, investigation, and analysis of the quiet conflicts at THS several general points emerge.

School attendance issues -- truancy, class cutting, and tardiness, and the ensuing detentions and suspensions -- continue to be among of the most pressing problems confronting schools today. While higher, more dramatic numbers are pervasive in urban schools, there seems to be a common thread as to the type of student committing these offenses: the uninvolved, disengaged, and conflicted students who are often judged to be uninterested in academic success.

Efforts to stem the rising tide of school absence seem to rely on two sources: the Student-Parent Handbooks, which outline each school's attendance policies and the consequences for its violations; and individual administrators who use their discretion in deciding on appropriate consequences for behavior, based on the particular situation for a particular student.

While each of these measures is well intentioned, there are often gray areas that lead to deep frustration and misunderstanding for everyone involved. Some students get breaks while others do not. Some teachers think the administrators are too harsh, some think they are too soft and inconsistent in their adherence to the rules. And, as shown in

this study, frequently the “settlement” of these individual cases ultimately results in a suspension out of school.

Frustration and misunderstandings occur when administrators fail to understand why students do not change their behavior; when students fail to understand the logic and impact of suspension; when teachers become exasperated because students are absent from class for these disciplinary actions. Everyone in the school community suffers as more of our students fail to graduate because of school absence, and the pressures of exit examinations heighten the importance of school attendance. We cannot simply leave these students behind.

The current study has sought to address this national dilemma, by looking closely at one suburban school. I have spent countless hours listening and talking with students to discover the conflicts that precipitate the incidence and patterns of non-attendance. Using the resources of my training in dispute resolution, the Truancy Prevention Grant, and the 18-week program of meetings with students, I have gleaned two important points of information. First, that unauthorized student absence (non-attendance) does have identifiable causes if we will listen to the students; and second, that these causes are not being addressed in the most effective or productive way for either the school or the student.

The current study strongly indicates that there are quiet yet profound conflicts that go on in many students’ school lives every day, which negatively impact their ability and motivation to attend school on a consistent daily basis. Through meetings and discussions with the administrators, the attendance officer, the youth commissioner, guidance personnel, teachers, and the chronic offenders of the attendance policy

themselves, I have discovered what these conflicts are; how they go unattended; why they go unattended; and the reasons they should be both heard and resolved.

In this report, some of the conflicts that lead to student absence have been discussed, and surely there are more. Those that have roots in difficult relationships, questions of fairness, and misunderstandings must be looked at carefully. These issues go unattended when students are spoken to rather than spoken with. Students are asked to listen as busy administrators try to deal with discipline efficiently and effectively. There seems to be no time for students to voice their feelings about the reasons they cut a class or skip detention. But, there needs to be time. And our administrators do not have to and should not try to resolve every issue alone. Input and advocacy from other members of the school community can and should be sought in a greater effort to resolve the conflicts that lead to school absence.

These quiet conflicts also go unattended because students do not have the skills and confidence to advocate for themselves, nor do they always understand why they stay away from class or school. If we want them to learn new ways to deal with their conflicts, then we will have to teach them how. Adult modeling of conflict resolution behaviors will go far in teaching students the value of resolving rather than simply settling their conflicts.

Clearly our current policy regarding the enforcement of the attendance rules is not positively changing student attendance behavior. In fact, from what the students of the Attendance Group have said we are often doing more harm than good. If we want these students to develop positive alternatives to their tardiness, class cutting, detention skipping, and truancy, then we must provide a more effective consequence by developing an array of alternatives to suspending them out of school.

References

- Balfanz, R. and Legters, N (2001). How many central city high schools have a severe dropout problem, where are they located, and who attends them? Estimates using the Common Core of Data. Paper presented at the Conference on Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? Cambridge, MA.
- Barclay, J. & Doll, B (2001). Early prospective studies of the high school dropout. School Psychology Quarterly,16(4), 357-369.
- Baruch, R. and Folger, J (1994). The promise of mediation: Responding to conflict through empowerment and recognition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boston Bar Association (1998, July 30). Boston Bar Association Task Force On Children In Need of Services: Report on Truancy. Boston, MA: Author.
- Brooks, K., Schiraldi, V. and Ziedenberg, J (April 2000). School house hype: Two years later. Justice Policy Institute and Children's Law Center.
- Constantino, C. & Merchant, C (1996). Designing conflict management systems: A guide to creating productive and healthy organizations. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J.W (1994). Research Design: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Deutsch, M (2000). Cooperation and competition. In M. Deutsch and P. Coleman (Eds.) The Handbook of Conflict Resolution. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Deutsch, M (1985). Distributive Justice. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Deutsch, M (1973). The resolution of conflict. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Doll, B. & Hess, R (2001). Through a new lens: Contemporary psychological perspectives on school completion and dropping out of high school. School Psychology Quarterly,16(4), 351-356.
- Dorn, S (1996). Creating the dropout: An institutional and social history of school failure. Westport, CT: Preager Publishers.
- Fallis, R. & Opotow, S., (2002). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? In C. Daiute & M. Fine (Issue Eds.),. Youth perspectives on injustice and violence. Journal of Social Issues, 58(2).
- Fallis, R (2000). An analysis of social influence in class cutting: Student-counselor negotiations. Masters Project, Graduate Program in Dispute Resolution, University of Massachusetts Boston.
- Garry, E (1996). Truancy: First step to a lifetime of problems. Bulletin, Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1997.
- Gately, J. & Troy, C (2000, November 4). Why is Boston Absent in a Truancy Effort? The Boston Globe, p. A19.
- Goldstein, Andrew. January 8, 2002. Time.com.
- Gullatt, D. & Lemoine, D (1997). Assistance for the school administrator concerned about student truancy. A professional research article. Educational Resources Information Center.
- Khaminwa, A., Fallis, R., & Opotow, S (1999). Cutting class in high school: Counsellor-student interactions and negotiations. Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 9(1), 185-197.

- Kortering, I., Hess, R., & Braziel, P (1997). School dropouts. In G. Bear, K. Minke, & A. Thomas (Eds.) Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives (pp. 511-521). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- Lee, V., & Burkam, D (2001). Dropping out of high school: The role of organization and structure. Paper presented at the Conference on Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? Cambridge, MA.
- McPartland, J. & Jordan, W (2001). Essential components of high school dropout prevention reforms. Paper presented at the Conference on Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? Cambridge, MA.
- Lightfoot, S.L (1983). The good high school: Portraits of character and culture. New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc.
- Opotow, S (1991). Adolescent peer conflicts: Implications for students and for schools. Education and Urban Society, 23(4), 416-441.
- Opotow, S (1994). "Breaking Out": Cutting in an Inner-City High School. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA
- Opotow, S (1995). The "cutting" epidemic: How high school teachers respond and adapt. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, New York, NY.
- Opotow, S., Fortune, L., Baxter, M., & Sanon, F (1998, June). Conflict, coping, and class cutting: Perspectives of urban high school students. Presented at the Biannual meeting of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, Ann Arbor, MI.

- Pugmire, T (2001, January 30). Schools tackle low test scores by pushing attendance. National Public Radio: All Things Considered (transcript).
- Rubin, J. & Levinger, G (1995). Levels of Analysis: In search of generalized knowledge. In B.B. Bunker & J.Z. Rubin (Eds.), Conflict, cooperation, and justice (pp.13-38). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rubin, J., Pruitt, D., & Kim, S (1994). Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rumberger, R., (2001). Why students drop out of school and what can be done. Paper presented at the Conference on Dropouts in America: How severe is the problem? Cambridge, MA.
- Sanon, F., Baxter, M., Fortune, L., & Opatow, S (2001). Class cutting: Perspectives of urban high school students. In J. Schultz & A. Cook-Sather (Eds.), Student voices: Middle and high school students' perspectives on school and schooling. Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sampson, E (1993). Identity politics: Challenges to psychology's understanding. American Psychologist,48(12),1219-1230.
- Skinner, B. F (1953). Science and human behavior. New York: Macmillan.
- Tannen, D (1994). Gender Discourse. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ury, W (2000). The Third Side: Why we fight and how we can stop. New York: Penguin Books.
- Ury, W., (1993). Getting past no: Negotiating your way from confrontation to cooperation (Revised edition). New York: Bantam Books.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Current Population Survey (CPS). March, 2001.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Current population reports. Series P-60. "Money income in the United States: 1998."

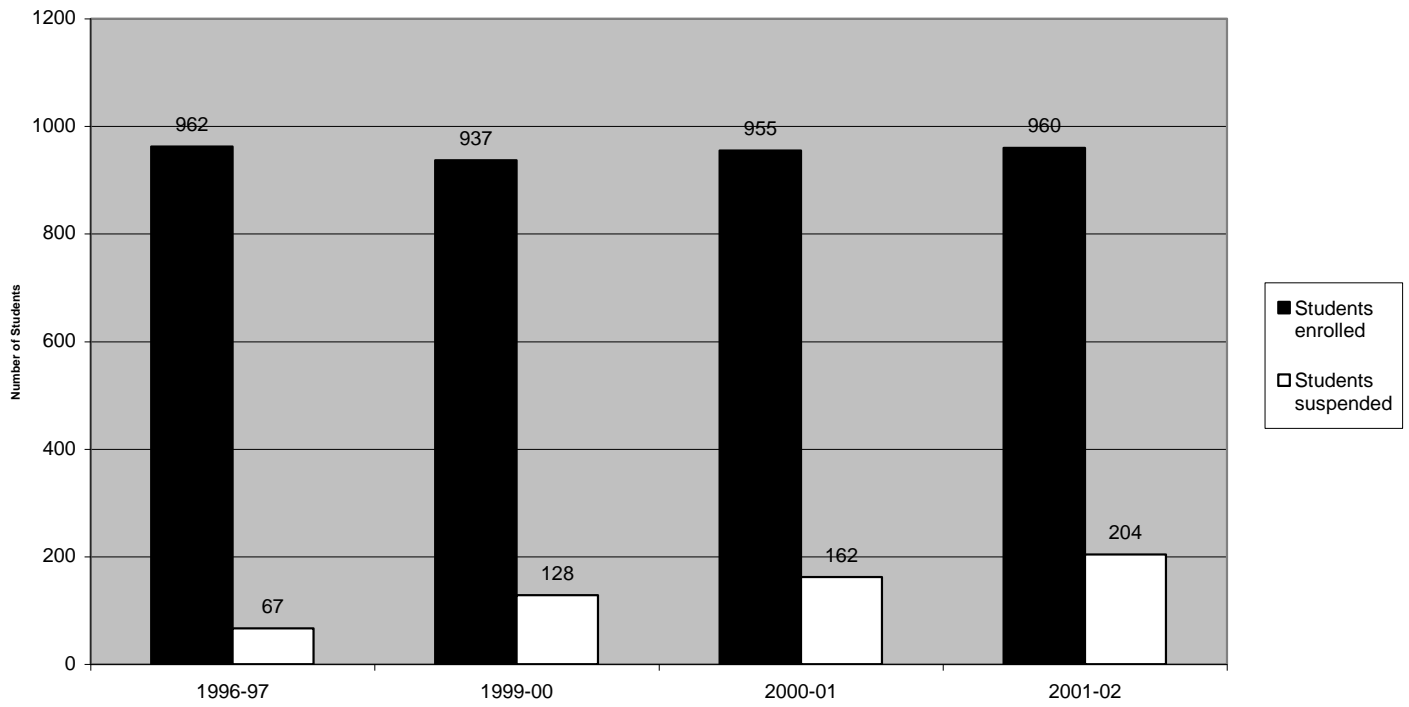
U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. The Condition of Education, 2001. NCES 2000. Washington, D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. The Condition of Education, 1995. Student Absenteeism and Tardiness. School and Staffing Survey, 1990-91 (Teacher and School Questionnaire). June 1996.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. The Condition of Education, 1995. Washington, DC: 1995. School and Staffing Survey, 1990-91 (Teacher and School Questionnaires). June 1996 (p. 4)

Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged, Second Edition (1977). J.L. McKechnie (Ed.). William Collins & World Publishing.

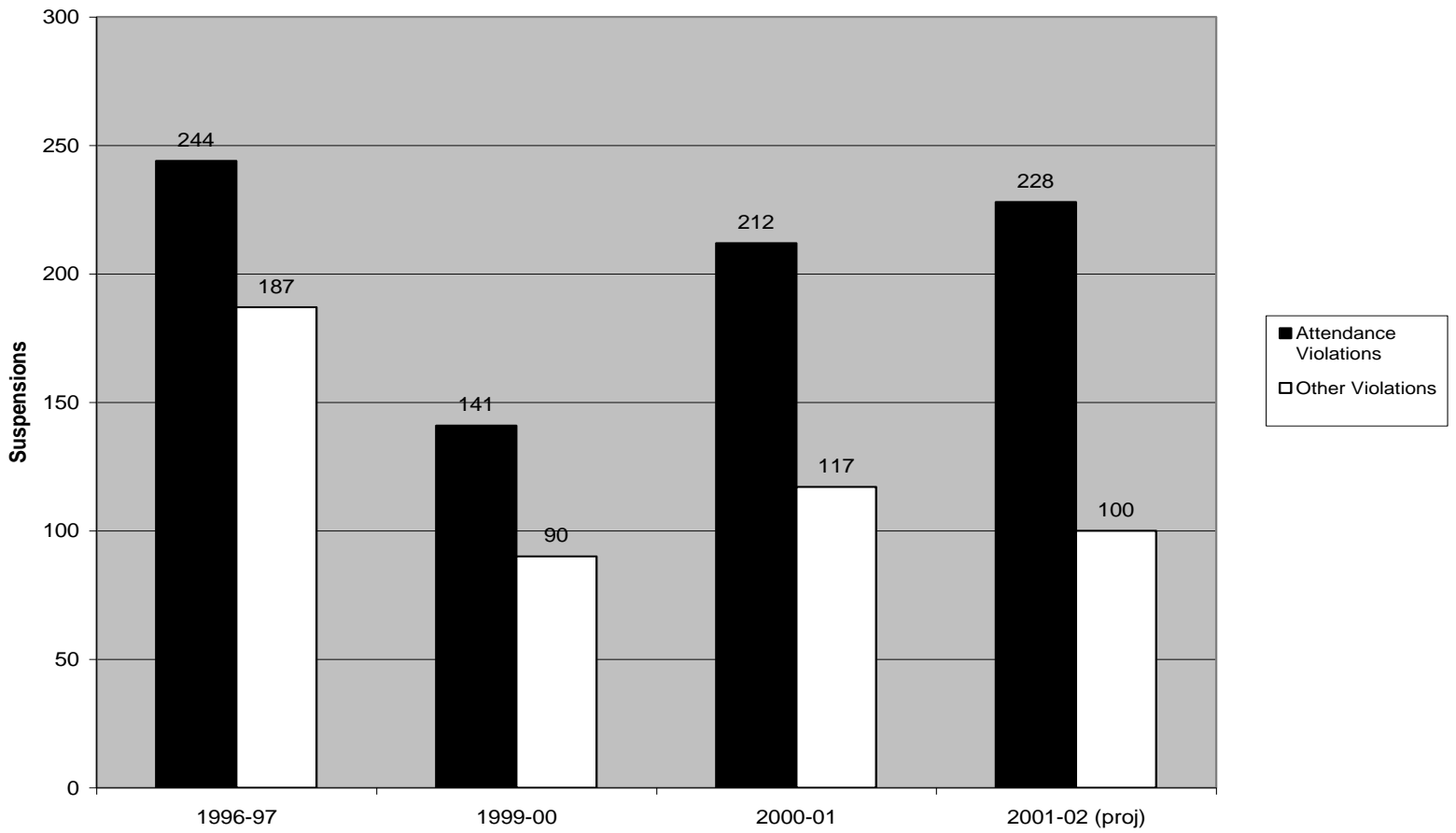
Figure 1. Students Enrolled v. Students Suspended



Note 1. Compares number of students given out of school suspension to number of students enrolled.

Note 2. Numbers for 2001-02 are projections based on actual first and second term totals.

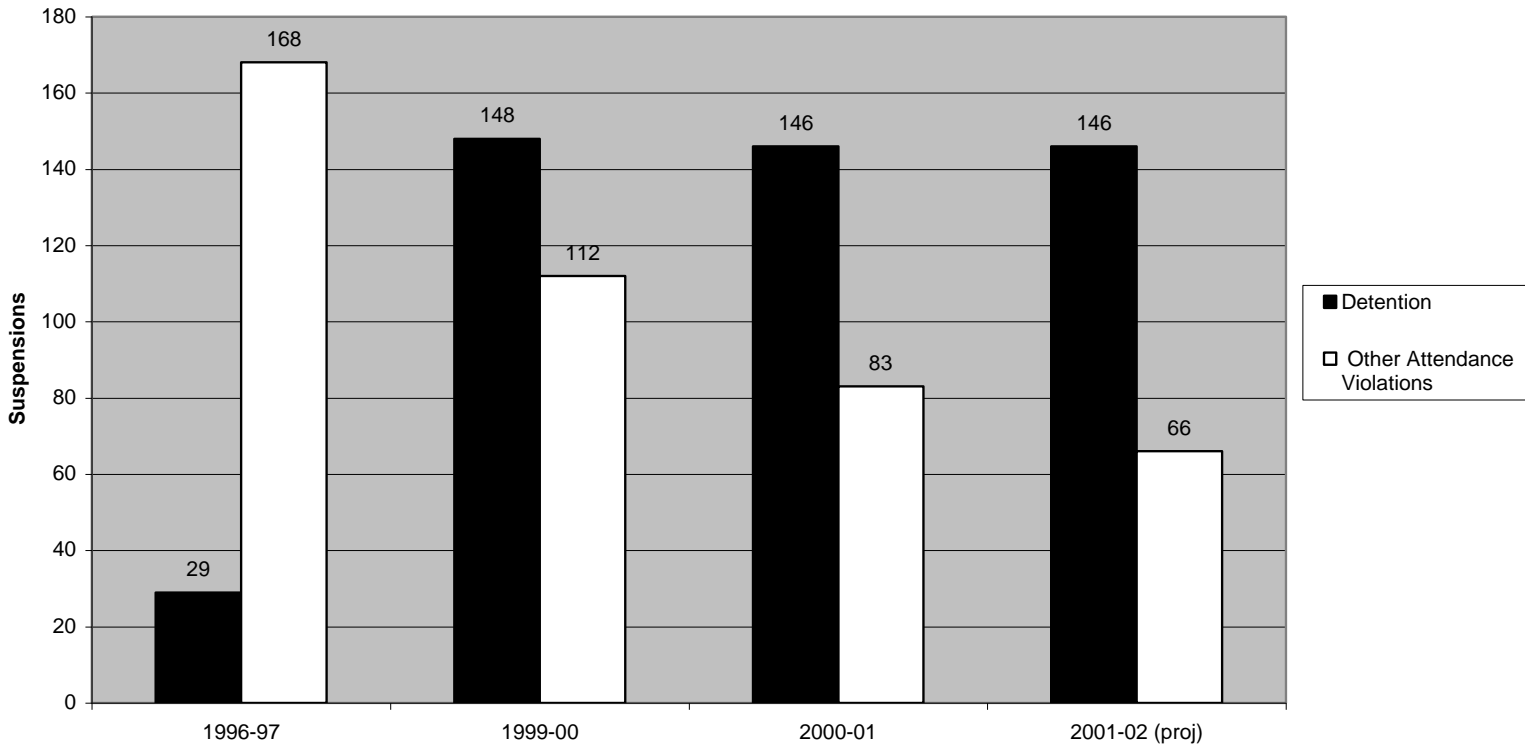
Figure 2. Attendance Violations Suspensions v. All Other Suspensions



Note 1. Other suspensions include insubordination, inappropriate behavior or language, fighting, harassment, etc.

Note 2. Numbers for 2001-02 are projections based on actual first and second term totals.

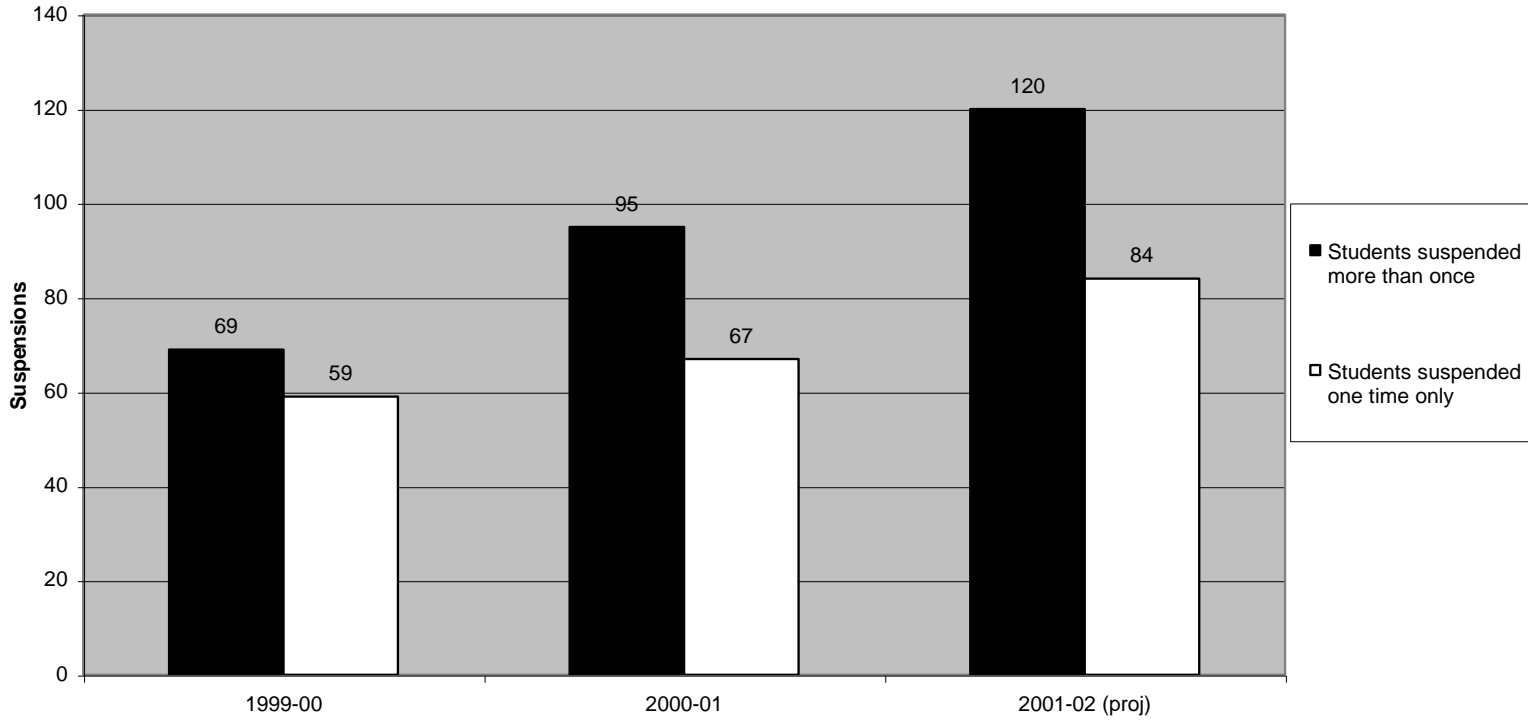
Figure 3. Detention Suspensions v. Other Attendance Violations



Note 1. Other attendance violations include tardiness, cutting, leaving the building, and truancy.

Note 2. Numbers for 2001-02 are projections based on actual first and second term totals.

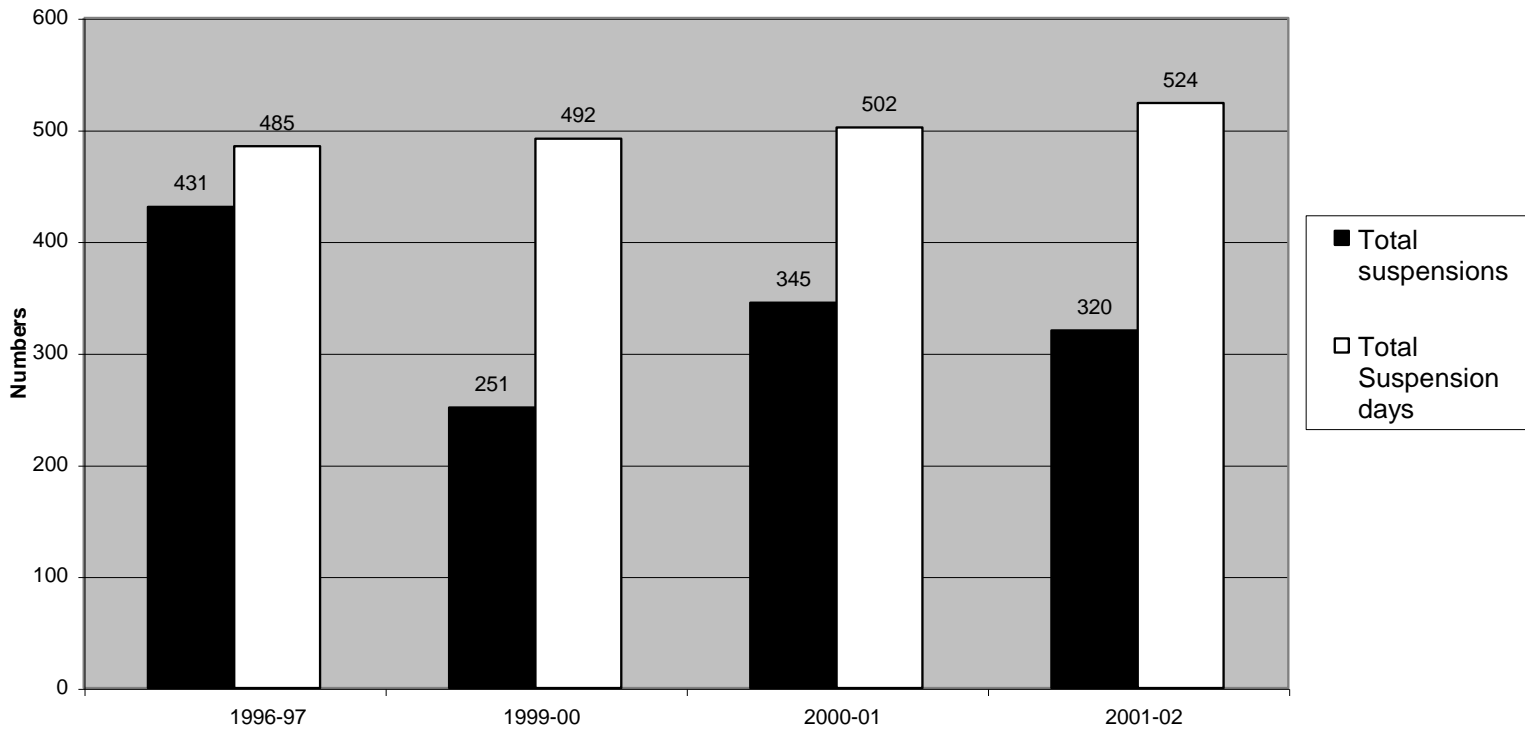
Figure 4. Multiple v. Single Suspensions



Note 1. Compares number of repeat offenders to those suspended only once in a year.

Note 2. Numbers for 2001-02 are projections based on actual first and second term totals.

Figure 5. Total Suspensions v. Total Suspension Days



Note 1. Compares number of suspension events with the number of suspension days each year.

Note 2. Numbers for 2001-02 are projections based on actual first and second term totals.

Table 2. Genesis and Development of the Truancy Group

Date	Meeting with:	Description	Purpose
10/4/00 pm mtg 1 hr	Ron Wendell Assistant Principal For grades 10,11,12	White male, late 50's former Foreign Language teacher	Interview Information gathering regarding truancy in grades 10, 11, and 12
10/13/00 am mtg 40 min	John Thomas Assistant Principal for grades 8 and 9	White male, late 40's Former Athletic Director, coach Has a daughter in the high school	Interview information gathering regarding truancy in the 8 th and 9 th grade
10/30/00 pm mtg 30 min	Jack Wilson English teacher, certified School Adjustment Counselor	White male, early 50's Co-facilitator, co-developer of the Grant group, Co-advisor of Peer Leadership Has a son in the high school	Initial meeting to discuss implementation of the Truancy Group Grant
11/6/00 pm mtg 1 hr	Jack Wilson		2 nd planning meeting, development of ideas and questions for the group
11/9/00 am mtg 45 min	Ned Ross Attendance Officer Juvenile Officer for the Town	White male, late 50's, Liaison between the Police Department and School Department	Interview Information gathering regarding perspectives on Truancy as a problem at school
11/9/00 pm mtg 45 min	Carl Trent Director, Town's Youth Commission	White male, early 50's, Community Service liaison Juvenile Court and Schools	Interview Information gathering regarding Truancy, as a community problem
11/13/00 pm mtg 1hr	Jack Wilson		Planning and Development Initial list of names from daily attendance reports
12/1/00 am mtg 50 min	AP John Thomas Jack Wilson		List development: 8 th & 9 th grade attendance problems
12/5/00 pm mtg 30 min	AP Ron Wendell		List development: 10 th , 11 th , & 12 th grade attendance problems
12/7/00 am mtg 15 min	Cheryl Rogers Secretary to AP Wendell	White female, 50 Former Special Needs secretary Parent to two high-schoolers	List review of prospective 10 th , 11th, & 12 th grade Truancy Group members Input, feedback, omissions
12/7/00 pm mtg 15 min	Jane Talbot Secretary to AP Thomas	White female, late 40's Former Library aide Parent of two past graduates of THS	List review of prospective 8 th and 9 th grade Truancy Group members
12/11/00 pm mtg 1hr	Jack Wilson		List review and compilation Parent notification letter
12/15/00 pm mtg 25 min	Carl Trent Jack Wilson		Parent letter discussion Review of list
12/18/00 pm mtg 1 hr	Jack Wilson		List compilation, homeroom check Draft letter to students
1/8/01 pm mtg 1 hr	Jack Wilson Carl Trent		Finalize list Final draft letter to students

Table 3. The Attendance Group Meetings. January – June 2001

Date	Number of Students		Focus of Discussion
	M	F	
1/11	5	3	Introductions. Reasons I don't come to school. Reasons I think I should.
1/17	6	3	Why I'm here. Individual stories.
1/24	4	6	The rules are stupid! What's up with suspension for cutting a class?
2/1	5	3	Attendance as a problem. When did it start for you?
2/7	6	5	More history. Tardies. School starts too early!
2/14	3	1	What about reminders? What do we call this group? Report Cards.
2/28	4	3	Positive changes, progress, and probation.
3/14	4	4	The detention-suspension connection. No detention, plus a day off!
3/21	4	2	Different treatment from and toward different people. Nice v. mean.
3/28	3	6	Different rules for different kids. Suspension v. "cooling off" days.
4/4	2	4	Detention is a zoo. Personal responsibility v. ratting someone out.
4/11	2	1	Incomplete for the term-second chances from some teachers.
4/25	4	4	Report cards. How did everyone do? Don't give up.
5/2	3	3	Rules about absences -excused, unexcused, suspensions.
5/9	2	5	Day to day choices and long term effects. What about graduation?
5/30	2	4	Billy's last meeting-graduation next week! Questions & reflections.
6/6	1	4	Consequences, motivations, improvements, plans.
6/13	1	4	Exam schedules, summer plans.