

A BEST PRACTICES REVIEW

Truancy Reduction Efforts

August 2000

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL	1
SUMMARY	3
INTRODUCTION	7
State Truancy Laws	8
Comparisons with Other States	10
Changes in Truancy Rates	11
Effects of Truancy	13
Causes of Truancy	13
SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO REDUCE TRUANCY	15
Attendance and Truancy Responsibilities	15
Defining Excused Absences and Recording Attendance	16
Notification of Absences and Habitual Truancy	16
Sanctioning Truants	18
School Day Scheduling	18
Administrators' Opinions on State Truancy Laws	19
Barriers to Addressing Truancy	20
MUNICIPAL RESPONSES TO TRUANCY	23
Habitual Truancy Ordinances	24
Driver License Suspensions	24
Simple Truancy Ordinances	25
Advantages of Municipal Truancy Ordinances	26
Effectiveness of Municipal Ordinances	27
TRUANCY ABATEMENT CENTERS	29
Truancy Abatement Center Operations	29
Truancy Abatement Center Procedures	30
Funding Sources	31
Effectiveness of Truancy Abatement Programs	32
Effects on Truancy and Attendance	33
Effects on Juvenile Crime	35
Other Measures of Effectiveness	37
Determining the Need for a Truancy Abatement Center	38

APPENDIX I – BEST PRACTICES LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

APPENDIX II – MUNICIPALITIES CONTACTED REGARDING TRUANCY

APPENDIX III – TRUANCY STATUTES IN SELECTED MIDWESTERN STATES



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August 9, 2000

Senator Gary R. George and
Representative Carol Kelso, Co-Chairpersons
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator George and Representative Kelso:

We have completed a best practices review of local government operations, as directed by s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats. Efforts to reduce truancy in Wisconsin public schools are the topic of this review.

On average, approximately 15,600 students are truant from school on any given day, and nearly one-third of absences in the 1998-99 academic year were caused by truancy. To address the problem of truancy, state statutes were significantly modified in 1997 Wisconsin Act 239, which expanded the definition of habitual truancy and provided municipal governments with additional options for addressing both simple and habitual truancy. Many of the local governments with which we spoke have moved to strengthen their truancy ordinances as a result, and most local government officials, school administrators, and law enforcement officials believe the changes assist municipalities in addressing truant behavior.

We found, however, that the statutory changes intended to reduce truancy have not yet resulted in lowered truancy rates. The proportion of students classified as habitual truants increased significantly during 1998-99, the first year for which the expanded definition of habitual truancy applied: 74,569 students, or 8.7 percent of the total enrollment in Wisconsin public schools, were classified as habitual truants in that year. In the previous year, 59,304 public school students, or 6.9 percent of the total enrollment, had been classified as habitual truants. It is important to note that changes to truancy laws occurred relatively recently, and improvement in truancy rates may occur in the future as municipalities take advantage of the increased number of options provided by the changes.

Schools, municipal courts, law enforcement agencies, and community organizations play a role in addressing truant behavior. Our review describes several best practices used by these organizations.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us by the Department of Public Instruction, local government officials, school administrators, truancy abatement center staff, and law enforcement agencies.

Respectfully submitted,

Janice Mueller
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SUMMARY

On average, approximately 15,600 students, or 1.6 percent of those enrolled in Wisconsin public schools, are truant on any given day. Approximately 31.1 percent of total absences in the 1998-99 academic year were the result of truancy. Truancy has negative effects on students who miss classroom instruction time and are therefore less likely to complete high school; on the community, as truant students may engage in delinquent behavior while not in school; and on the schools, which must devote resources to addressing unexcused absences and attempting to reduce truancy.

Students may fail to attend classes for school-related reasons, such as poor academic performance; for family-related reasons, such as being needed at home to care for younger siblings; or as a result of individual circumstances such as drug use, pregnancy, or social difficulties with classmates.

To address the problem of truancy, the Legislature enacted 1997 Wisconsin Act 239, which:

- changed the definition of habitual truancy from five or more unexcused absences in ten consecutive days or ten per semester, to five unexcused absences per semester;
- permitted municipalities to enact ordinances against simple truancy, defined as a single instance of truancy, rather than against habitual truancy only, and increased the number of sanctions against habitual truancy available to municipalities; and
- increased sanctions for parents who fail to ensure that their children attend school.

Between academic years 1993-94 and 1998-99, the number of habitual truants in Wisconsin public schools increased by 62.3 percent, while enrollment grew by only 4.0 percent. In 1993-94, 45,936 students, or 5.6 percent of Wisconsin's public school enrollment, were classified as habitual truants. By the 1997-98 academic year, the habitual truancy rate had increased to 6.9 percent, or 59,304 students. It increased further during the 1998-99 academic year, to 8.7 percent or 74,569 students, largely as a result of the changed definition of habitual truancy.

The problem of truancy is particularly evident in several of Wisconsin's largest school districts. For example, 32.3 percent of Milwaukee Public Schools students were classified as habitually truant in the 1998-99 academic year. Overall, the ten largest school districts in Wisconsin represented 27.6 percent of statewide enrollment in 1998-99, but 66.3 percent of habitual truants in that year.

We spoke with representatives of 23 school districts regarding the recent changes to truancy law and found that their opinions of the changes were mixed. Some educators believed that the changes were positive overall because the lower threshold for habitual truancy allows schools and the municipal and circuit court systems to intervene earlier. Others perceived the changes to be ineffective because they believe:

- that defining students as habitual truants does not address the underlying reasons for truancy;
- that sanctions and consequences available under the new law are not effective in changing students' behavior; and
- that too much time can elapse between a student's truancy and the resulting sanction because some counties are unable or unwilling to devote resources to prosecuting truancy violations, which can require a significant amount of time.

Schools are responsible for initial efforts to address truancy and, as a result, have several statutorily required duties related to truancy. These include defining excused and unexcused absences, recording attendance for each class period, notifying parents of unexcused absences and students' habitual truancy status, and completing and documenting required steps before beginning proceedings against habitual truants. We include several best practices for meeting these requirements most effectively, including efforts to contact parents directly, to notify parents when their children are in danger of being classified as habitual truants, and to use the municipal court system to speed the process of sanctioning habitual truants.

Municipalities can address simple and habitual truancy through the use of ordinances. Action under municipal ordinances can allow for earlier intervention and swifter consequences for truant behavior than action taken under state statutes in circuit courts, particularly if the county is unable or unwilling to devote resources to prosecuting truancy cases. For that reason, we suggest that municipalities consider the use of municipal ordinances against both simple and habitual truancy.

Suspending driving privileges is one means of sanctioning truant students. In calendar year 1999, a total of 1,617 driver licenses were suspended for truancy; in comparison, 74,569 students were classified as habitual truants in the 1998-99 academic year. The number of students whose licenses have been suspended has declined in recent years; reasons for the decrease are unclear.

As another means of addressing truancy, several communities in Wisconsin have established multi-agency programs that include youth service centers commonly known as truancy abatement centers. Truancy abatement centers provide counseling for truants apprehended by local law enforcement officers. Centers are currently located in Milwaukee, Sheboygan, Racine, Eau Claire, and Appleton. Start-up funding for truancy abatement centers is typically provided by federal grants administered by the Wisconsin's Office of Justice Assistance. Funding for their continuation may be provided by local law enforcement, municipalities, and schools. While the primary goal of the centers is to address truancy, an important secondary goal for some is to reduce daytime juvenile crime associated with truancy.

Although truancy abatement centers attempt to reduce truant behavior and increase school attendance, the number of juveniles counseled by a truancy abatement center is small in comparison to the number of habitual truants in a school district. Therefore, it is perhaps unrealistic to expect changes in a school district's overall habitual truancy rate to result from establishment of a center, although individual students' attendance rates may be improved.

The success of truancy abatement centers in reducing daytime juvenile crime is more clear. The Milwaukee, Sheboygan, and Racine centers have compared daytime juvenile arrests before and after their inception, and while it is important to note that crime rates in general have been declining throughout the state, there is some evidence to suggest that daytime juvenile arrests in those cities have decreased since the centers began operation.

We include suggestions for additional types of analysis truancy abatement centers can use to determine their effectiveness, as well as considerations for communities that may be interested in establishing centers.

INTRODUCTION

As directed by s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats., the State Auditor conducts periodic reviews of local government operations to identify practices that may save money or provide more effective delivery of government services. A five-member advisory council, representing counties, cities, villages, and towns, assists with the selection of topics for these “best practices” reviews. In contrast to performance evaluations, which identify problems or weaknesses in government operations, best practices reviews seek to build upon successful local efforts by identifying cost-effective approaches to providing government services.

The subject of this review is truancy abatement efforts and was selected with the assistance of the best practices local government advisory council, whose members are listed in Appendix I. Although Wisconsin’s truancy laws apply to students in both public and private schools, this report focuses on truancy and attendance in public schools.

In conducting our review, we examined:

- school attendance policies and procedures;
- statutorily required actions that schools must take in response to truancy;
- the use and effectiveness of municipal truancy ordinances; and
- multi-agency truancy programs, including truancy abatement centers.

In preparing our review, we talked to representatives of 23 school districts, including 11 who were selected because they indicated in an Association of Wisconsin School Administrators survey that they were willing to discuss their efforts to reduce truancy. We also visited four youth service centers, commonly known as truancy abatement centers, at which truants apprehended by local law enforcement officers during school hours receive counseling. The school districts and truancy abatement centers we contacted are indicated on the map in Appendix II. In addition, we interviewed school administrators, school district officials, caseworkers, law enforcement officials, nonprofit program administrators, municipal judges, and a juvenile court intake worker, and we reviewed national literature related to school attendance and truancy.

State Truancy Laws

Simple and habitual truancy are defined in state statutes.

Section 118.16(1)(c), Wis. Stats., defines truancy—which is referred to as “simple truancy” in this report—as any absence of part or all of a school day for which a pupil’s parent or guardian has not provided a valid excuse. Statutes define a habitual truant as a student who is truant on five or more days in one semester. Each school district is responsible for determining which absences may be excused, such as those due to illness, and which may not be excused.

Nearly one-third of all Wisconsin public school absences are the result of truancy.

On average, 15,600 students, or 1.6 percent of those enrolled in Wisconsin’s public schools, are truant on any given day. As shown in Table 1, 31.1 percent of all absences were the result of truancy in the 1998-99 academic year. In comparison, 35,000 students, or 3.6 percent of all enrolled students, have excused absences on an average day; these absences accounted for 68.9 percent of total school days missed. Unexcused absences have accounted for an increasing percentage of all absences since the 1993-94 academic year; however, it is not clear how much of the increase can be attributed to actual increases in truancy and how much is the result of better record-keeping on the part of school districts. For example, implementation of the Learnfare Program for teenagers in 1988 and for younger children in 1994 caused Milwaukee Public Schools to improve attendance record-keeping, which may have resulted in additional students being classified as habitual truants.

Table 1

Unexcused Absences in Wisconsin Public Schools
1993-94 to 1998-99

<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>Percentage of School Days Lost to Unexcused Absences*</u>	<u>Percentage of All Absences That Are Unexcused</u>
1993-94	1.1%	20.6%
1994-95	1.6	27.8
1995-96	1.6	29.9
1996-97	1.6	29.2
1997-98	1.7	31.4
1998-99	1.6	31.1

* Enrollment figures used by the Department of Public Instruction to determine rates of excused and unexcused absences are based on counts of students taken at various points throughout the year.

Many of the current truancy-related statutes were originally enacted as 1987 Wisconsin Act 285, which took effect July 1, 1988. The act included the first statutory definition of a habitual truant and required schools to notify parents or guardians of students' status as habitual truants. It also allowed municipalities to enact ordinances against habitual truancy and required each county to establish a truancy committee, consisting of representatives from school districts, the county district attorney's office, local law enforcement agencies, the juvenile court intake unit, the county department of social services, and the circuit court system.

Subsequent to 1987 Wisconsin Act 285, the Legislature made additional changes to truancy statutes:

- 1993 Wisconsin Act 16 allowed school boards to establish youth service centers for truants taken into custody by local law enforcement;
- 1993 Wisconsin Act 56 allowed school district administrators to designate specific school district or social services agency employees who may take truants into custody and described to whom truants may be released; and
- 1997 Wisconsin Act 205 allowed schools to refer habitual truants to teen court programs in which students are judged by their peers.

Significant changes to Wisconsin truancy law took effect in 1998.

In 1997, the Legislature enacted 1997 Wisconsin Act 239, which took effect on July 1, 1998, and modified statutes affecting the definition of a habitual truant, allowances for municipal simple truancy ordinances, meetings of county-wide truancy committees, and sanctions on parents for violating compulsory schooling laws, as shown in Table 2.

The most significant of these changes were the expanded definition of a habitual truant, which increased the number of students with the classification in the 1998-99 academic year, and the expansion of municipal options for truancy ordinances. The new law allows municipalities to enact ordinances against simple truancy and gives them the option of issuing citations or levying other sanctions at the first occurrence of truancy, before habitual truancy occurs. Municipalities also retain the ability to enact ordinances prohibiting habitual truancy; however, the change in statutes has expanded allowable sanctions to include forfeitures of up to \$500 for the first offense, curfews, and mandated counseling.

Table 2

Changes in Truancy Statutes Resulting from 1997 Wisconsin Act 239

	<u>Before 1997 Wisconsin Act 239</u>	<u>After 1997 Wisconsin Act 239</u>
Definition of a habitual truant	A student who missed part or all of five days in ten consecutive days, or part or all of ten days in a semester.	A student who misses part or all of five days in a semester.
Municipal ordinances	A municipality may enact an ordinance prohibiting habitual truancy.	A municipality may enact an ordinance prohibiting simple truancy in addition to prohibiting habitual truancy. A variety of sanctions for simple and habitual truancy are available.
County-wide truancy committees	A county-wide truancy committee must have convened and issued a report in 1988.	Committees must meet at least every four years to review and make recommendations on the truancy plans of the school districts in the county.
Sanctions for violating compulsory schooling law	Parents or guardians faced a fine of up to \$500 and/or imprisonment for up to 30 days.	For the first offense, parents or guardians face a fine of up to \$500 and/or up to 30 days' imprisonment. For the second offense, they face a fine of up to \$1,000 and/or imprisonment of up to 90 days.

Other state efforts to address truancy include the Children at Risk program, which provides \$3.5 million in annual funding to school districts based on the number of students identified as at risk of not graduating from high school for reasons that include habitual truancy.

Comparisons with Other States

To determine how Wisconsin's attendance and truancy statutes compare with those of other midwestern states, we contacted Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio. Comparisons are summarized in Appendix III. Overall, Wisconsin has been one of the most active states in enacting legislation requiring schools to take certain actions against truancy and in providing options for schools and municipalities to sanction truants and their parents or guardians. Wisconsin is the only

state that statutorily limits the number of pre-excused absences a school may grant to no more than ten days per student per academic year. In most other midwestern states, school boards are responsible for setting attendance policies, and the state imposes no restrictions on the types or number of absences permitted.

Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota have defined habitual truancy in statutes.

Wisconsin is the only midwestern state that specifically permits the creation of local ordinances against both simple and habitual truancy. Wisconsin and Ohio are the only midwestern states to require school attendance until age 18. Only Wisconsin, Illinois, and Minnesota define habitual truancy in state statutes. In Illinois, a habitual truant is a student absent without excuse for at least 10 percent of the previous 180 school days. In Minnesota, a high school student can be classified as a “continuing truant” by missing three or more periods on three days without an excuse.

Changes in Truancy Rates

In the past five years, the number of habitual truants increased by 62.3 percent, while enrollment increased by 4.0 percent.

The percentage of students who meet the definition of “habitual truant” has risen steadily over the last six academic years, as shown in Table 3. As noted, much of the increase from 1997-98 to 1998-99 likely resulted from the expanded definition of habitual truant included in 1997 Wisconsin Act 239. The increase in earlier years is most likely a reflection of both changing attendance patterns—students are absent without excuse more frequently—and improved attendance record-keeping on the part of school districts. The number of habitual truants in Wisconsin has grown by 62.3 percent from 1993-94 through 1998-99, while total enrollment has grown by 4.0 percent over the same period.

Although truancy can be a problem in any school district, the state’s ten largest school districts experience a disproportionate share of truancy. In 1998-99, these districts accounted for 27.6 percent of statewide enrollment but 66.3 percent of the state’s habitual truants. There is, however, considerable variation among the ten districts, as shown in Table 4. Milwaukee Public Schools had the highest rate of truancy: 32.3 percent of its total enrollment in the 1998-99 academic year.

Table 3

Habitual Truants in Wisconsin Public Schools

<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>K-12 Enrollment*</u>	<u>Habitual Truants</u>	<u>Percentage of Enrollment Classified as Habitual Truants</u>
1993-94	826,633	45,936	5.6%
1994-95	840,897	50,331	6.0
1995-96	851,914	57,553	6.8
1996-97	859,359	57,094	6.6
1997-98	861,588	59,304	6.9
1998-99**	859,374	74,569	8.7

* Enrollment figures used by the Department of Public Instruction to determine habitual truancy rates are based on counts of students enrolled in school on the third Friday in September.

** 1997 Wisconsin Act 239, which expanded the definition of a habitual truant, took effect on July 1, 1998.

Table 4

Habitual Truants in the Ten Largest Wisconsin School Districts
1998-99 Academic Year

<u>School District</u>	<u>K-12 Enrollment</u>	<u>Habitual Truants</u>	<u>Percentage of Enrollment Classified as Habitual Truants</u>
Milwaukee	93,368	30,129	32.3%
Madison	24,747	2,168	8.8
Racine	21,211	5,069	23.9
Green Bay	19,308	3,634	18.8
Kenosha	18,948	4,091	21.6
Appleton	14,325	498	3.5
Waukesha	12,819	243	1.9
Eau Claire	11,147	1,279	11.5
Oshkosh	10,521	458	4.4
Janesville	<u>10,517</u>	<u>1,855</u>	17.6
Total	236,911	49,424	20.9
Statewide Total	859,374	74,569	8.7

Effects of Truancy

Truancy has negative effects on the student, the school, and the community.

Truant students are not only likely to fail to maintain academic pace with their peers, they are at risk of becoming involved in delinquent activities or of dropping out of school. According to a 1994 report by the National School Safety Center, up to two-thirds of daytime burglaries are attributed to truants. Truants may also become involved in retail theft, vandalism, other property crimes, and assaults.

Truancy also requires schools to devote resources to contacting and meeting with parents and guardians, meeting with and disciplining truant students, and preparing documentation of habitual truancy for referral to the municipal or circuit court systems. School administrators responsible for attendance and truancy indicated that between 25 and 75 percent of their time is generally devoted to these matters. In addition, clerical personnel are required to contact parents or guardians by telephone or letter when students are absent without excuse, as well as to maintain absence and truancy records. Administrators stated that between one and four clerical staff at each high school are typically needed to perform these duties, depending on enrollment.

Causes of Truancy

Truancy can result from difficulties with school or within the family, or from individual problems.

School administrators we spoke with indicated that truancy can be caused by:

- school-related problems, such as doing poorly in classes and deciding not to attend as a result, or difficulty with a traditional classroom setting;
- family-related issues, such as being needed to care for younger siblings at home or not being required by parents to attend school regularly; and
- individual difficulties, such as drug or alcohol use, pregnancy, or social problems with classmates.

In general, administrators believe that truancy in elementary school students is more often the fault of parents or guardians who do not send their children to school, while middle and high school students are more often truant as a result of their own decisions.

Because the reasons for truancy vary, it is reasonable to expect a variety of approaches to addressing truant behavior, including:

- legislation, such as increasing fines for truancy or providing additional municipal options for sanctioning truants;
- community-based intervention approaches, such as truancy abatement centers; and
- school-based alternatives to the standard classroom model, such as alternative schools that encourage students with educational difficulties to remain in school and attend regularly.

This report examines Wisconsin's efforts to address truancy through legislation, the implementation of statutes by schools and local governments, and the establishment of truancy abatement programs. It suggests best practices for schools, municipalities, and truancy abatement centers to improve their truancy reduction efforts. It does not review efforts by schools to develop specialized education programs to encourage students who would otherwise be truant to attend school more regularly.

SCHOOLS' EFFORTS TO REDUCE TRUANCY

Under state law, schools have several responsibilities to address truancy, including monitoring attendance, notifying parents of absences, and taking steps to sanction habitual truants. Some methods developed by schools to meet these responsibilities appear to be more successful than others.

Attendance and Truancy Responsibilities

In general, an effective approach to addressing attendance and truancy should emphasize several principles:

- Timeliness of action - Several school administrators indicated that it is important to establish a close link between truancy and the resulting negative consequence so that students understand their truancy will be addressed.
- Early intervention - Several school administrators stated it is important to intervene early, so that fewer days of instruction are lost and the student does not develop the habit of being truant.
- Personal contact with parents or guardians - Many school administrators indicated personal contact is important because it gives responsible adults a chance to speak with school personnel.
- Assurance of contact - Because truant students can circumvent systems that notify parents of truant behavior, administrators believe it is important to be certain that parents or guardians have, in fact, been notified of truancy-related issues.

Individual schools commit differing levels of resources to addressing truancy.

Definitive evidence does not exist to indicate which methods best reduce truancy and improve attendance. School administrators identified a number of methods that, in their judgment, are most likely to have a positive effect. Administrators also noted that most efforts to combat truancy require staff time and other resources. While some schools devote considerable resources to addressing truancy, others may not wish or be able to do so. In part, the level of commitment depends on other competing priorities, the seriousness of the truancy problem in the school, and the community's attitude toward school attendance.

Defining Excused Absences and Recording Attendance

School boards are responsible for defining excused absences.

By statute, school boards are responsible for establishing written attendance policies specifying the reasons for which absences may be excused, and a written copy of the attendance policy must be given to each student. In general, school boards in Wisconsin have established similar attendance policies, which permit excused absences for student illness, family emergency, medical and dental appointments, death or serious illness in the immediate family, religious holidays, school-related functions such as field trips, and special circumstances such as college visits or family vacations. All of the schools we contacted provide written copies of attendance policies to students, and many include this information in a student handbook and academic planner.

The State requires that teachers submit daily attendance information for all students under their charge. Elementary schools take attendance at the beginning of the school day, while all of the middle and high schools we visited take attendance during each class period. Software programs are often used to track attendance, determine when students have met the definition of habitual truancy, and generate letters to parents or guardians regarding absences.

Notification of Absences and Habitual Truancy

Schools are required to notify students' parents or guardians of unexcused absences by the end of the second school day following the absence. Statutes permit the contact to be made personally, by telephone, or by letter, but s. 118.16(2)(c), Wis. Stats., specifies personal contact and telephone calls should be attempted before contact by mail. Schools must maintain written records of the telephone calls.

Most of the schools we contacted are able to meet notification requirements for unexcused absences.

The majority of schools we visited indicated they are able to notify parents or guardians of unexcused absences within the required time period. Some school administrators reported, however, that the cost of notification for each individual absence can be considerable. Administrators in larger districts also indicated that computerized autodialers are often used to place the telephone calls to parents and guardians because their use requires less staff time.

However, some school administrators also stated that autodialers were not as effective for notification and often frustrate parents or guardians. Because the autodialer simply begins providing its prerecorded message when the telephone is picked up, schools have no means of determining whether or not the responsible adult was the party receiving notification of the unexcused absence. For example, some students have provided incorrect telephone numbers so that autodialed calls are made to local

businesses instead of their homes. In addition, autodialers do not enable a parent or guardian to immediately speak with a school employee regarding the child's absence.

A strong effort to contact parents or guardians personally may be a deterrent to truancy.

Most administrators we spoke with agree that direct personal contact with parents is the most effective method of notification. Some schools make a strong effort to contact parents or other relatives on the day of an absence and will try to reach several different contact persons or will call parents at work in order to speak with someone directly. Administrators at Appleton Area West High School indicated this approach lets adults know the school cares about their children and provides the school with an opportunity to speak with parents or guardians directly at the time of the absence, as well as to clear excused absences immediately.

Schools are also required by s. 118.16(2)(cg), Wis. Stats., to notify parents or guardians when a child meets the legal threshold for habitual truancy. The notice must be sent by registered or certified mail and must provide the following information:

- the adult has a legal responsibility to cause the child to attend school regularly;
- the parent or child may request curriculum modifications and the child may be eligible for enrollment in a program for children at risk;
- the adult is requested to meet at a specific time with school administrators regarding the child's truancy; and
- penalties may be imposed on the adult if he or she does not cause the child to attend regularly.

Early notification of impending habitual truancy allows parents and guardians to intervene.

Some schools send letters prior to the five-absence threshold to explain the definition of habitual truancy and notify parents or guardians that their children may reach that status with additional unexcused absences. Altoona High School sends such a letter after three unexcused absences and requests a meeting with parents at that time. The Beloit School District sends such letters after two unexcused absences. Notifying parents and guardians before the threshold for habitual truancy is reached is considered a good step for schools to take, because the adults may not be aware of the recent changes in truancy laws and because the lowered threshold results in a greater number of children meeting the legal definition of habitual truant with a smaller number of absences.

Sanctioning Truants

Schools use a variety of methods to sanction students who miss all or part of a school day, including detention time or in-school suspension, additional assignments, prohibitions on participation in extra-curricular activities, removal of work-release privileges, and lowered class participation grades. These methods are typically used for occasional truants.

Schools are required to try to address the causes of habitual truancy before referring students to court.

Habitual truants are sanctioned in different ways, including referrals to municipal or circuit court. However, before referring a student to the county human services department or the municipal court system for possible prosecution as a habitual truant, a school is required by statute to take the following steps, which must be documented:

- attempting to meet with parents or guardians regarding the truancy;
- providing an opportunity for educational counseling and determining whether a change in the student's curriculum would resolve the truancy;
- evaluating the student to determine whether learning problems are contributing to the truancy; and
- determining whether social problems are contributing to the truancy, and taking appropriate action if necessary.

Section 118.16(4)(b), Wis. Stats., prohibits schools from denying a student course credit solely because of non-attendance. However, a course grade may include a participation or attendance component, so non-attendance can be considered in grading. A student may also be denied credit for examinations or other school work due on days for which the absence was unexcused. Administrators we spoke with indicated that participation scores were used by some teachers as a component of overall grades in a course.

School Day Scheduling

Block scheduling may help to reduce truancy.

We spoke with several school administrators who indicated that the scheduling and structure of the school day can have an effect on truancy. For example, the use of a block schedule, rather than the more traditional hourly schedule, has reduced truancy problems in some schools. A block schedule has longer class periods (typically 1 ½ hours), and many courses are taught for only one semester rather than the entire academic year. Block schedules may reduce truancy because:

- students may have an incentive to attend when more instruction time would be missed; and
- with fewer class periods, students are moving through the building fewer times, which gives them less opportunity to leave the building.

Administrators at Evansville Community High School and Black River Falls High School indicated that the use of block schedules has reduced their truancy problems. An administrator at La Crosse Central High School estimated a move to block scheduling could reduce attendance problems by as much as 70 percent.

Several administrators we spoke with indicated that an open campus policy, which allows students to leave campus during their lunch period, can contribute to truancy because students are tardy in returning from lunch or simply do not come back. Administrators at Little Wolf High School in Manawa indicated that closing the campus during the lunch period has reduced the truancy problem in the school significantly.

Administrators' Opinions on State Truancy Laws

School administrators' opinions on the recent changes in truancy laws were mixed.

By enacting recent changes to state truancy laws, the Legislature intended to reduce truancy and provide schools and municipalities with additional flexibility in addressing truancy at the local level. We found that school administrators' opinions on recent law changes were mixed.

Some school administrators commented that the changes to the law were positive because:

- the lowered threshold for habitual truancy requires schools to monitor individual students' attendance more closely to determine if truancy is becoming a significant problem;
- schools can begin judicial intervention efforts with truant students earlier, before significant amounts of instruction time have been missed; and
- schools have greater flexibility to sanction students because they can request that students be cited for simple truancy as well as habitual truancy.

On the other hand, some school administrators believed the law changes have had a limited effect because:

- the changed definition for habitual truancy is not meaningful for some schools in which the truancy problem is so large that only those students who have gone significantly beyond the threshold for habitual truancy will be referred for further action;
- the sanctions and consequences available under state law often do not affect student or family behavior;
- some counties are unable or unwilling to prosecute habitual truancy violations because of competing priorities or a belief that prosecuting truancy is not a high-priority use of limited resources; and
- changes to the truancy laws have a more limited effect on juveniles' behavior if too much time elapses between the act of being truant and its consequences, and often weeks or months can pass before a truant student is referred to municipal or circuit court and appears before a judge.

For example, school administrators in Stoughton and Racine indicated that several months can pass between a student reaching the level of habitual truancy and the point at which he or she faces municipal or circuit court-ordered fines or sanctions, and during that time it is likely the student will continue to be truant.

Barriers to Addressing Truancy

Some administrators cite a lack of resources as a barrier to addressing truancy successfully.

A lack of resources can present a barrier to effective truancy programs. Some schools, citing substantial costs, do not follow statutory requirements to notify parents or guardians after each unexcused absence and, instead, send a notification letter only after several unexcused absences.

Registered and certified letters notifying responsible adults of students' habitual truancy status represent another use of administrative resources to address truancy. Although the cost of a single registered or certified letter is small, large school districts such as Milwaukee Public Schools, which must send thousands of such letters, indicate the cost is burdensome.

Facility limitations may present another barrier to truancy reduction. Some schools must have an open campus during the lunch period because cafeteria facilities are too small to provide for the entire student body. Administrators at Eau Claire Area North High School, Green Bay

Area East High School, and Bayfield High School, for example, expressed frustration at the small size of their cafeterias and their resulting inability to have completely closed campuses.

School administrators cite uninvolved, uninterested parents and guardians as another hindrance to the effectiveness of school-based truancy programs. Although most parents and guardians of truants are interested in improving their children's attendance, school administrators say some appear unconcerned about their children's truancy. Some also actively enable their children to avoid school by reporting them as ill or otherwise providing an excused absence. School administrators indicate that the younger the truant, the greater the likelihood that the parent is the cause of the truancy.

Some school officials believe the compulsory schooling age of 18 contributes to truant behavior.

Finally, during our discussions of truancy and attendance in Wisconsin public schools, several school administrators expressed frustration with the current compulsory school age law. Some educators believe the requirement that students attend school through the term in which they turn 18 is a good public policy because it helps to keep some students in school longer. However, many educators who expressed an opinion about the law believe that some students who are forced to remain in school when they do not want to attend are disruptive to other students or become habitual truants.

MUNICIPAL RESPONSES TO TRUANCY

Wisconsin statutes permit municipalities two means of sanctioning truants: local ordinances prohibiting habitual truancy, which became permissible under 1987 Wisconsin Act 285, and local ordinances prohibiting simple truancy, which were made permissible by 1997 Wisconsin Act 239. As shown in Table 5, simple and habitual truancy ordinances have been enacted in the majority of Wisconsin's ten largest cities.

Table 5

Truancy Ordinances Enacted in Wisconsin's Ten Largest Cities

<u>City</u>	<u>Simple Truancy Ordinance</u>	<u>Habitual Truancy Ordinance</u>
Milwaukee	X	X
Madison	X	X
Green Bay	-	X
Kenosha	-	-
Racine	X	X
Appleton	X	X
West Allis	X	-
Waukesha	X	X
Oshkosh	X	X
Eau Claire	X	X

Although habitual truancy ordinances are more common, municipalities are increasingly enacting simple truancy ordinances as they search for additional means of addressing truancy. Administrators in some communities have found that municipal ordinances, which are enforced under the municipal court system, not only increase local control but also increase the timeliness with which truancy is addressed.

Habitual Truancy Ordinances

School administrators in 17 of the 23 communities we contacted indicated that their communities had enacted habitual truancy ordinances. However, we were not able to determine the total number of Wisconsin municipalities with habitual truancy ordinances.

Municipal sanctions for habitual truancy may include:

- suspension of a driver license for between 30 days and one year;
- a fine of up to \$500 plus costs, assessed against the student, the parent or guardian, or both;
- an order to participate in counseling, a supervised work program, or community service work;
- home detention;
- an order to participate in an educational program;
- revocation of the student's work permit;
- an order for the student to be placed in a teen court program, which requires the student to be judged and sanctioned by a group of his or her peers;
- an order to attend school;
- an order placing the student under formal or informal supervision for up to one year;
- an order for the parent or guardian to participate in counseling, or to attend school with the student; or
- any other reasonable conditions, including a curfew.

Driver License Suspensions

Habitual truants may have their driving privileges suspended.

Habitual truants may have their driver licenses suspended by either the municipal or the circuit court. In communities with municipal ordinances against habitual truancy, the municipal court may suspend a habitual truant's driver license, while the circuit court may suspend the licenses of habitual truants referred to the county. In both cases, licenses can be suspended for a period of between 30 days and one year. If a

habitual truant is not old enough to drive, the courts have the option of postponing the date by which the truant may obtain a license.

The number of driver license suspensions for truancy is small compared to the number of habitual truants. As shown in Table 6, there were 1,617 driver license suspensions for truancy in calendar year 1999, compared to 74,569 habitual truants in the 1998-99 academic year. Although there is increased emphasis on addressing truant behavior, the number of driver license suspensions for truancy has decreased from 2,353 in 1996 to 1,617 in 1999, or by 31.3 percent. The reason for the decline in the use of license suspensions as punishment for truancy is not clear.

Table 6

Driver License Suspensions for Truancy
1996 to 1999

<u>Year*</u>	<u>License Suspensions for Habitual Truancy</u>	<u>Habitual Truants</u>
1996	2,353	57,553
1997	1,662	57,094
1998	1,834	59,304
1999	1,617	74,569

* License suspensions are recorded by calendar year and truancy figures by academic year. Calendar year 1996 corresponds to the 1995-96 school year.

Simple Truancy Ordinances

Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton, and Eau Claire are among the communities that have enacted simple truancy ordinances since 1997 Wisconsin Act 239 became effective in 1998, and many of the communities we spoke with are considering such ordinances. As with habitual truancy ordinances, we were not able to determine how many Wisconsin municipalities have simple truancy ordinances.

Municipalities may now fine students for the first instance of truancy.

As noted, simple truancy ordinances allow for earlier intervention because a student can be cited for even a single instance of truancy. Municipal sanctions for simple truancy may include an order for the truant student to attend school and a fine of up to \$50 plus court costs for the first violation. Subsequent violations committed within 12 months may result in a fine of up to \$100 plus costs, for a maximum of \$500 per semester. The fines may be assessed against the student, the parent or guardian, or both, but in practice they are usually assessed against the student.

Advantages of Municipal Truancy Ordinances

Municipal ordinances offer greater local control and more timely sanctions for truant students.

Municipal ordinances against simple or habitual truancy have two primary advantages: speed of enforcement and greater community control. For example, local ordinances can allow truants to be cited more quickly by local law enforcement, and some municipal courts hear cases in a matter of weeks. In contrast, when habitual truancy cases are referred to counties for prosecution in circuit court, sanctions may be applied months after the truancy or not at all, depending on the county's willingness or ability to prosecute truancy violations.

Administrators in the Racine Unified School District found that up to six months passed between the time a habitual truant was referred to the county for prosecution and the time sanctions were applied. Meanwhile, the student continued to miss school. In contrast, Racine's ordinance allows law enforcement officers to cite truants relatively quickly and results in more timely appearances before a judge. Administrators in the Tomah School District indicated that by using the municipal court system, they are able to bring habitual truants before a judge in approximately three weeks, while prosecuting habitual truants in circuit court takes five to seven weeks.

Because of competing priorities for county resources, some counties limit the number of habitual truant referrals they accept from schools. In these cases, a municipal ordinance may be the only means of ensuring court-ordered sanctions for habitual truants. For example, the Dane County Human Services Department is able to handle only a small number of habitual truancy referrals each year and accepted 14 referrals in the 1999 calendar year. In contrast, in the 1998-99 academic year, there were over 3,800 habitual truants in Dane County public schools. In response, the Stoughton Area School District has moved to sanction habitual truants under a municipal habitual truancy ordinance rather than attempt to work through the county.

Effectiveness of Municipal Ordinances

School administrators in several cities indicated that municipal ordinances can be effective in reducing truancy rates. For example, the City of Stoughton enacted a habitual truancy ordinance in January 1994, and school district administrators evaluated the effect of the ordinance by examining truancy statistics for the 1996 graduating class. The number of class periods skipped by that group of students decreased by 88.8 percent between the 1993-94 and 1995-96 academic years, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Unexcused Absences Among Stoughton High School Class of 1996

<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>Number of Habitual Truants</u>	<u>Number of Unexcused Class Period Absences</u>
1993-94	32	11,436
1994-95	50	14,403
1995-96	11	1,286
Percentage Change between 1993-94 and 1995-96	-65.6%	-88.8%

School district administrators in Stoughton believe the number of unexcused class period absences did not drop immediately following enactment of the ordinance because students did not understand at first that their unexcused absences could result in an appearance before the municipal court judge and possible loss of a driver license.

Municipalities will have to determine if using the municipal court system to prosecute truants is locally warranted or accepted. For example, some community members have raised concerns about truancy ordinances, particularly those for simple truancy, because they believe:

- truancy is not a serious enough problem to warrant being criminalized with the possibility of fines or other sanctions;
- police time spent enforcing truancy ordinances reduces enforcement time available for more serious crimes;
- students who have legitimate reasons to be absent from school may be stopped by police; and
- fines for truancy will be paid not by the truant but by the parent or guardian, who will therefore be punished while the truant fails to learn from the experience.

School administrators and municipal officials should also consider the additional workload a municipal ordinance will impose on law enforcement agencies and the municipal court. For example, school administrators in Stoughton indicated that during the school year, approximately one-third of the municipal court's time is devoted to truancy, and the municipal court added a half-time clerk in 1999, in part to address increased workload from the municipal truancy ordinance.

TRUANCY ABATEMENT CENTERS

Some municipalities, law enforcement agencies, and school districts have worked together to organize truancy abatement centers, which provide short- and long-term counseling for juveniles who have been found off school grounds during the school day and which serve primarily truant youth rather than students who have caused disruptions in the classroom or been adjudicated delinquent. Such centers require investments of time and resources, but they have been received positively by communities and are believed to be somewhat effective in reducing daytime crime. However, their effectiveness in reducing overall truancy has not been documented.

Truancy Abatement Center Operations

Five truancy abatement centers are now operating in Wisconsin.

Five truancy abatement centers currently operate in the state:

- Milwaukee's Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression (TABS) Program, which is located in the Boys and Girls Clubs of Milwaukee;
- Sheboygan's Truancy Abatement and Crime Suppression (TACS) Program, which is located in the Boys and Girls Club of Sheboygan;
- Racine's Aggressive Truancy Abatement Program (ATAP), which is located in Safe Haven, a local nonprofit organization for teens;
- Eau Claire's Truancy Abatement Program, which is located in the Professional Services Group, a for-profit counseling center with which Eau Claire County has contracted; and
- Appleton's Truancy and Runaway Assessment Center (TRAC), which is located in the Boys and Girls Club of the Fox Valley.

As shown in Table 8, the centers vary in size and days of operation during the academic year.

Table 8

Truancy Abatement Centers in Wisconsin

<u>Location of Center</u>	<u>Start Date</u>	<u>Number of Staff</u>	<u>Days of Operation per School Week</u>	<u>Number of Juveniles Counseled in 1998-99</u>
Milwaukee	November 1993	12.0	5	3,778*
Sheboygan	August 1997	3.0	3**	158
Racine	April 1998	2.0	5	449
Eau Claire	September 1999	4.0	5	N/A
Appleton	February 2000	2.5	5	N/A

* Includes juveniles who may have been counseled by TABS staff more than once during the academic year.

** On average.

It is important to note that the centers have somewhat differing goals. For example, centers in Milwaukee and Sheboygan emphasize both truancy abatement and crime reduction, while the centers in Racine and Eau Claire are primarily focused on reducing truant behavior. The Appleton program is focused on the problems of truancy and runaway children. The varying emphases of the programs result from the differing concerns faced by each community.

Truancy Abatement Center Procedures

Local law enforcement officials, schools, municipalities, and truancy abatement center staff all play a role in operating the centers. They follow these general procedures:

1. Law enforcement officers question juveniles seen away from school during regular school hours. If a juvenile is believed to be truant, he or she is transported to the center.
2. While at the center, juveniles are searched for weapons, drugs, or other illegal items and then counseled briefly by center staff, who attempt to determine the underlying reason for the truancy. Counselors obtain school attendance records before they begin counseling, so that they can use the information during the session. The Milwaukee center has on-line access to student records, while the other centers contact schools by telephone or e-mail to obtain attendance information.

3. The juvenile's parent or guardian is notified and asked to come to the center to speak with the counselor about the truant behavior and any underlying issues that may be troubling the parent or guardian. If a parent or guardian cannot come to the center or cannot be located, centers will generally either require the juvenile to remain on site until the end of the school day or have the police transport the juvenile to school.
4. If a juvenile appears to be at risk of further truancy or has problems underlying the truant behavior, counselors may ask him or her or a parent or guardian if longer-term, more intensive counseling would be helpful. Truancy abatement centers have information and access to services that may help youth and their families address underlying causes of behavioral problems.

The establishment of a centralized truancy abatement center can greatly increase law enforcement agencies' involvement in truancy reduction efforts for two reasons:

- creating a single drop-off point allows officers to transport students quickly without requiring them to determine which school the student attends; and
- center staff are available to address any time-consuming issues that may arise during truant counseling, such as if the truant is a runaway or is experiencing abuse in the home, thus allowing law enforcement officers to return to patrol duty more quickly.

Funding Sources

Funding sources for the five existing truancy abatement centers vary. Federal juvenile justice grants administered by the Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance provided start-up funding for four of the centers, while the Eau Claire center has been funded by Eau Claire County since its inception. Federal grants typically provide funding for two years, with municipalities required to provide some matching funds.

The Sheboygan program exhausted its funding in 1998-99 and is now supported by the City of Sheboygan and the Sheboygan School District. The Racine program exhausted its funding in April 2000; operations are being continued through the end of the academic year with funds provided by the sheriff's department and the nonprofit organization that operates the program. It is not clear if the program will continue in the future. The Appleton program will exhaust its funding in February 2002.

and plans to use funds from the local school district, sheriff's department, and municipalities to continue the program.

Milwaukee Public Schools is mandated by s. 119.55, Wis. Stats., to fund operation of the Milwaukee center. Milwaukee Public Schools assumed funding responsibility in July 1996 after initial federal grant funding expired. Table 9 shows the funding levels and sources for the five centers in Wisconsin.

Table 9

Funding Sources and Amounts for Truancy Abatement Centers
1999-2000 Academic Year *

<u>Center</u>	<u>Funding Amount</u>	<u>Current Funding Source</u> **
Milwaukee	\$600,000	Milwaukee Public Schools
Sheboygan	60,000	City of Sheboygan and Sheboygan School District
Racine	123,000	Federal grant and local matching funds
Eau Claire	Not available	Eau Claire County
Appleton	115,000	Federal grant and local matching funds

* Funding year may not correspond to academic year, as some programs began in the middle of an academic year.

** Federal grants typically provide 100 percent of total funding in the first year and require municipalities to provide a 25 percent match in the second year.

Effectiveness of Truancy Abatement Programs

Truancy abatement programs have a primary goal of reducing truant behavior, but a secondary goal for some centers is reducing daytime juvenile crime. Although their methods vary, all centers evaluate changes in students' attendance and daytime crime statistics. In general, the effect of the centers on overall attendance and truancy is small; the effect on daytime crime is somewhat greater.

Effects on Truancy and Attendance

Truancy abatement centers can counsel only a small portion of a school district's habitual truants.

Truancy abatement centers track students' attendance following center visits to determine their effect on attendance rates. As shown in Table 10, the number of juveniles counseled by a truancy abatement center is small in comparison to the number of habitual truants in a district. It should be noted, however, that not all students counseled are already habitually truant.

Table 10

Habitual Truants and Juveniles Counseled by Truancy Abatement Centers 1998-99 Academic Year

<u>Center</u>	<u>Number of Juveniles Counseled</u>	<u>Number of Habitual Truants</u>
Milwaukee	3,778*	30,129
Sheboygan	158	404
Racine	449	5,069

* Includes juveniles who may have been counseled multiple times by TABS staff.

Note: The Eau Claire center did not begin operation until September 1999, and the Appleton center began operation in February 2000.

Evaluations of student attendance completed by centers indicate that there is some short-term effect on attendance for some students, but lasting improvements in truant juveniles' overall attendance rates typically have not occurred.

Milwaukee - Milwaukee's TABS Program tracked attendance for an annual sample of students in elementary, middle, and high school who visited the TABS Center between the 1993-94 and 1997-98 academic years. Table 11 summarizes the attendance information for the first year in which TABS operated and the last for which attendance information was available. As shown in Table 11, attendance in the days following a visit to the TABS Center is generally highest for elementary students and lowest for middle school students.

Table 11

Attendance after Milwaukee TABS Center Contact*
1993-94 and 1997-98 Academic Years

	<u>1993-94</u> <u>Academic Year</u>	<u>1997-98</u> <u>Academic Year</u>
First Day after TABS Contact		
Elementary	95%	65%
Middle	77	52
High	57	59
Fifteenth Day after TABS Contact		
Elementary	84	65
Middle	75	53
High	55	55
Thirtieth Day after TABS Contact		
Elementary	84	73
Middle	73	50
High	61	53

* Number of students in sample was 178 in 1993-94 and 667 in 1997-98.

Table 11 also indicates that the effectiveness of TABS intervention may be declining over time. For example, during the 1993-94 academic year, attendance for elementary students was 95 percent on the first day following TABS contact. In the 1997-98 academic year, 65 percent of elementary students attended school the first day following TABS intervention. It is not possible to determine the reasons for the decline in attendance; it may result from the more serious nature of the truancy problem in Milwaukee. Staff and police officers at the center report that the students now being counseled by the program are younger, have more serious individual and family-related problems, and are missing greater amounts of school.

Sheboygan - The TACS program evaluated attendance for 27 students who were counseled by its staff from March 1 through May 31, 1999. During the seven school days immediately preceding to their visits to TACS, these students were truant a total of 181 class periods. During the seven school days following TACS intervention, they were truant for 103 class periods, or 43 percent fewer periods.

Racine - ATAP evaluated students during the first nine weeks after it began operation on April 1, 1998. A total of 356 students were brought to the center a total of 426 times; 85, or 24 percent, were not truant from school for the remainder of the academic year.

Eau Claire - In the two-week period following a visit to the center, 51 percent of students who received counseling improved their attendance by 25 percent or more. Of students that completed or were enrolled in long-term counseling, 85 percent increased their attendance by at least 25 percent during the duration of the program.

Effects on Juvenile Crime

Truancy abatement centers appear to reduce juvenile crime.

Truancy abatement centers' success in reducing daytime juvenile crime is somewhat more clear than their effects on truant behavior. The Milwaukee, Sheboygan, and Racine centers have compared daytime juvenile arrests before and since they began operation. While it is important to note that crime rates in general have been declining throughout the state, there is some evidence to suggest that daytime juvenile arrests have decreased since the centers began operation.

Milwaukee - The TABS program found that the number of burglaries reported to have occurred during the hours in which TABS operates decreased during the period during the 1996-97 and 1997-98 academic years but increased during the 1998-99 academic year, as shown in Table 12.

Table 12

**Number of Burglaries Reported During TABS Operation Hours
1995-1999**

<u>Time Period</u>	<u>Number of Reported Burglaries</u>	<u>Percentage Change from Previous Year</u>
August 1995–June 1996	1,587	
August 1996–June 1997	1,447	-8.8
August 1997–June 1998	1,073	-25.8
August 1998–June 1999	1,270	18.4

Although daytime burglaries did increase, TABS staff report several positive effects on crime in the 1998-99 academic year:

- 742 arrests were made as the result of TABS stops by Milwaukee police officers: 650 of those stops resulted from current criminal activity, and 92 resulted from outstanding warrants for previous criminal acts;
- 21 weapons were confiscated from juveniles stopped by TABS officers; and
- 84 missing children were located as a result of TABS stops.

Sheboygan - In order to measure the effectiveness of the TACS program, the Sheboygan Police Department analyzed patterns of juvenile arrests for crimes that occurred during school hours. Arrest data from the academic year before TACS began were compared to data from the 1997-98 and 1998-99 academic years. Sheboygan administrators determined that juvenile arrests for crimes committed during school hours decreased by 2.4 percent in the 1996-97 academic year and 28.7 percent in the year after TACS was established. In addition, Sheboygan administrators examined the number of juvenile arrests for selected crimes—burglary, theft, and vandalism—that occurred during school hours. Table 13 shows the decrease in the number of juvenile arrests for those crimes from 1996-97 through 1998-99.

Table 13

Juvenile Arrests in Sheboygan for Crimes Committed During School Hours

<u>Type of Crime</u>	<u>1996-97 Academic Year</u>	<u>1998-99 Academic Year</u>	<u>Percentage Change</u>
Burglary	18	4	-77.8%
Theft	98	63	-35.7
Vandalism	38	27	-28.9

Racine - To determine the effectiveness of ATAP, administrators analyzed crime statistics for the period from January through September of 1997 and 1998. As shown in Table 14, administrators found that during the academic year when the center was in operation, the number of daytime burglaries fell by 27.2 percent. During the months that the truancy program did not operate, the number of daytime burglaries fell by 0.9 percent.

Table 14

Racine Daytime Burglaries
1997 and 1998

	<u>1997</u>	<u>1998</u>	<u>Percentage Change</u>
During months program was operating	114	83	-27.2%
During months program was not operating	<u>107</u>	<u>106</u>	-0.9
Total	221	189	-14.5%

Racine law enforcement officials also indicated that officers have twice apprehended truants with guns, and they estimate that one in ten stops finds drugs or alcohol in truants' possession.

Other Measures of Effectiveness

Truancy abatement centers could consider additional analysis to determine their effectiveness.

Truancy abatement centers have developed several measures of effectiveness, and these provide some indication of the centers' effects on reducing truancy and daytime juvenile crime. However, other types of analysis may provide additional meaningful information. Therefore, evaluations of center effectiveness may wish to focus on the following principles:

- determining attendance patterns both before and after a center's intervention;
- determining juvenile crime rates before and after establishment of a center;

- conducting long-term evaluations of students' behavior to determine what, if any, lasting effects center intervention may have; and
- surveying parents and guardians, students, and teachers to determine which aspects of center intervention are the most effective in reducing truant behavior.

Currently, two of the truancy abatement centers evaluate students' attendance at several points (for example, the first, fifteenth, and thirtieth days) following a visit to the center. Although this type of analysis provides information on attendance after an intervention, it does not provide a comparison to behavior before counseling by center staff.

Centers will have more useful information with which to assess their efforts if they use an approach similar to the one used for evaluating their effects on juvenile crime: determine the number of class periods or days students were truant before and after an intervention and compare this information. Because truancy can be defined as a failure to attend school regularly, centers should also consider looking at students' attendance each day after center intervention, rather than choosing points in time at which to evaluate attendance.

Determining the Need for a Truancy Abatement Center

Truancy abatement centers reflect the most aggressive community response to truancy. They are also the costliest. Communities interested in establishing truancy abatement centers as a means of addressing truancy and juvenile crime should consider the following:

- Does the community consider truancy a significant issue? For example, the City of Sheboygan established a truancy abatement center even though its habitual truancy rate in 1997-98—the first year of its program—was 3.0 percent, while the statewide average habitual truancy rate in that year was 6.9 percent.
- Is daytime juvenile crime a significant problem? Have local businesses expressed concern about juveniles loitering near their establishments during school hours?

- Have other attempts to curb truancy resulted in little success?
- Is it likely that the community can continue to fund a program after any initial grant funding is exhausted?

Appendix I

Best Practices Local Government Advisory Council

Betty Balian, Town Board Chair
Town of Lebanon (Dodge County)

Daniel Elsass, Governmental Affairs Unit
University of Wisconsin-Extension
(Originally Appointed as City Administrator, City of Baraboo)

Anne Spray Kinney, Executive Director
Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewage District
(Originally Appointed as Director of Administration, City of Milwaukee)

Vacant
County Representative

Vacant
County Representative

Appendix II

Municipalities Contacted Regarding Truancy



Appendix III

Truancy Statutes in Selected Midwestern States

<u>State</u>	<u>Definition of Excused Absences</u>	<u>Notification of Unexcused Absences</u>	<u>Definition of Habitual Truant</u>
Wisconsin	Determined by school boards; students are allowed a maximum of ten pre-excused absences	Yes, school must notify parent or guardian within two days	Student with five or more trancies a semester
Illinois	Some excused absences defined in statute	Yes, school must try to call parent or guardian within two hours	Student who is truant 10 percent or more of the previous 180 school days
Indiana	Some excused absences defined in statute	Not required	School boards set the definition of a habitual truant
Iowa	Determined by school boards	Not required	Not defined
Michigan	Determined by school boards	Not required	Not defined
Minnesota	Determined by school boards	Not required	A continuing truant has been truant three or more periods in three days
Ohio	Determined by school boards	Not required	Not defined

<u>State</u>	<u>Municipal Truancy Ordinances</u>	<u>Compulsory Schooling Age</u>	<u>Sanctions for Truancy</u>
Wisconsin	Allowances for both simple and habitual truancy ordinances	18	For parent or guardian, up to \$1,000 fine or 90 days' imprisonment; student may be referred to juvenile court
Illinois	Not specifically permitted	16	For parent or guardian, up to \$500 fine and/or 30 days' imprisonment; student may be referred to juvenile court
Indiana	Not specifically permitted	16	Parent or guardian may be charged with a misdemeanor; student may be referred to juvenile court
Iowa	Not specifically permitted	16	For parent or guardian, up to \$1,000 fine and/or 30 days' imprisonment; student may be referred to juvenile court
Michigan	Ordinances against truancy specifically permitted	16	For parent or guardian, fine of up to \$50 or imprisonment for up to 90 days; student may be referred to juvenile court
Minnesota	Not specifically permitted	16	Parent or guardian may be charged with a misdemeanor; student may be referred to juvenile court
Ohio	Not specifically permitted	18	Parent or guardian may be fined \$100; student may be referred to juvenile court