Truancy

Prevention and Intervention

June 2012

A Guide for Parents and Foster Parents

Developed with funding from the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

# Pre-Test

1. The United States has the highest graduation rate in the world.
2. Parents and guardians of West Virginia children can be jailed if their children are often truant.
3. Students who are often truant are likely to drop out.
4. At least 75% of West Virginia dropouts are eventually incarcerated.
5. Over a lifetime, a high school graduate earns $10,000 more per year than a drop-out.
6. 7000 West Virginia students drop out of school every year.
7. A high school dropout can join the military.
8. Drop-out and truancy rates decrease when there is greater access to vocational/technical programs.
9. Teachers can predict by 4th grade which students are likely to drop-out.
10. West Virginia students cannot legally leave school until they are 17.
11. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources can remove a child from their parents’ custody because of truancy.
12. West Virginia law defines truancy as 5 or more unexcused absences.
13. Bad parenting is the only reason children are truant.
14. Truancy rates in West Virginia are slowly declining.

# The Problem

“The truancy habit can lead students to drop out of school before graduation. That is usually the beginning of a lifetime of trouble that can include unemployment, drug dependency, crime, and incarceration. Our state jails and prisons are overflowing. We can’t afford to wait another minute to address this problem, or to allow another young life to be wasted.—Supreme Court Justice Robin Jean Davis.

West Virginia Judiciary Judical Projects: Truancy http://www.courtswv.gov/court-administration/truancy/truancy.html

## Discussion: The state constitution guarantees every child a free education. Some West Virginia judges believe that truancy at the elementary level is a violation of a child’s civil rights and should be viewed as child maltreatment. What do you think?

The West Virginia Judiciary is leading an intensive effort to tackle the truancy and drop-out problem. The State Legislature, in turn, is demanding that school systems develop prevention and intervention programs tailored to their districts. Both stress that efforts need to involve not just schools, but parents, communities and state agencies; and recognize that there isn’t a “one size fits all” solution. In short, this is everyone’s problem.

# Truancy is Expensive

A high school dropout, nationwide, earns $10,000 less than a high school graduate. In West Virginia, a high school dropout is likely to be unemployed. 7000 West Virginia students drop out every year. Nationwide, 7000 students drop out every day.

Dropouts are almost certain to participate in criminal activity. 75% of West Virginia dropouts will eventually be incarcerated. 70% of the United States prison population are dropouts. In West Virginia, it’s 80%. Worse, the prison population has grown so fast in West Virginia, that we can’t keep up and we can’t afford to build more prisons. Consequently, prisoners are being warehoused in regional jails where they receive no rehabilitative services such as remedial education.

West Virginia State Legislature: The High School Graduation Improvement Act 18-8-6.

Costs related to increased criminal activity (police, lawyers, court, juvenile detention, prisons, insurance, probation, rehabilitation) are increasing as the dropout rate increases. On average, it costs $58,000 per year to house a juvenile offender. Adult prisons are more costly. In contrast, in 2009, the cost per student in the public schools was $12,780. Additionally, West Virginia schools lose federal money when students are not in class.

(West Virginia Kids Count 2011 Annual Report.)

High school dropouts, particularly in West Virginia, will need to rely on public assistance and Medicaid costing taxpayers millions in a time when we can least afford it. Those with prison records are even less likely to be employable.

# Reasons for Truancy

There is no single cause for the truancy problem. Some reasons for truancy include:

* Lack of interest in education and alienation from school
* Falling behind academically in school
* Fear of violence on the way to school or at school
* Alienation from authority
* Lax parental supervision
* Lack of parental support for education
* Drug and alcohol abuse
* Working long hours while attending school, resulting in chronic exhaustion
* Lack of significant consequences for failure to attend school
* Problems at home that require supervising younger children or helping dysfunctional adults

Truancy, Encyclopedia of Children’s Health, http://[www.healthofchildren.com/T/Truancy](http://www.healthofchildren.com/T/Truancy)

While truant, students are likely to engage in risky and/or illegal activities. They are more likely to use drugs and alcohol; and are often involved in criminal activities such as vandalism, burglary, shoplifting and assault. They are also more likely to be a victim of crime.

Parents Guide to Truancy developed by the Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin-cgi/p/downloadfile/d/2`474/n/off/other/1/name/parentsguidetotruancy.pdf/

Habitual truancy and the likelihood of dropping out of school are closely linked. The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network lists the following characteristics to identify students who are potential dropouts:

* Poor attendance
* Low grade point average
* Low standardized test composite scores
* Number of grade retentions (held back)
* Number of discipline referrals
* Educational level of parent
* Special program placement
* Number of school moves (transfers)
* Low reading and math scores
* Ethnic/gender distinctions
* Language spoken in the home
* Number of suspensions
* Interest in school
* Participation in extracurricular activities
* Pregnancy/teen parent
* Number of counseling referrals
* Family status (single parent family, family size)

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network http://www.dropoutprevention.org/

# Prevention

The most effective method of dealing with truancy is to stop it before it starts. Students who are habitually truant in high school often developed the habit in elementary school.

Poor academic progress is an indicator of both truancy and dropping out. A child who cannot read at grade level, is older than classmates due to having been held back, or struggling academically is at risk. Education research shows that if a child is not reading at grade level by the 4th grade they may never catch up. At that grade level, teachers can predict which students are not likely to graduate. Experts across the board from educators to legislators identify school readiness as a key factor to satisfactory academic progress. Early learning opportunities such as Head Start and Pre-K are very effective in helping parents prepare children for school.

## Pre-School and Elementary School

The West Virginia Department of Education identifies 5 developmental areas to consider when evaluating school readiness:

1. Health and physical development,

2. Social and emotional development,

3. Language development and communication,

4. Cognition and general knowledge, and

5. A child’s individual approaches to learning.

<http://static.k12.wv.us/oel/docs/Is%20My%20Child%20Ready%20for%20Kindergarten_DRAFT.pdf>

**West Virginia Department of Education**

**Ready-for-School Checklist – Is My Child Ready for Kindergarten?**

The following indicators of school readiness are designed to you in preparing your child the transitional period of Kindergarten entry. The list of indicators is a guide to skills and experiences which are defined as developmentally appropriate for each domain. Each child develops differently in his or her own way, so the indicators should be viewed as typical daily experiences accomplished through everyday routines and activities with your child.

**Health and Physical Development**

My child:

* Identifies and makes healthy food choices
* Participates actively in games, outdoor plan and other forms of exercise that develop large muscles
* Has daily experiences incorporating healthy habits, including hand washing, covering mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing, and using and disposing of tissues
* Colors, paints, scribbles, works puzzles, practices self-help skills with snapping, lacing, buttoning, and zipping and other activities that help develop small muscles
* Receives regular medical. dental and vision care
* Has had all necessary immunizations

**Social and Emotional Development**

My child:

* Demonstrates independence and makes choices
* Adjusts to new situations and interacts with adults who are dependable and consistent
* Has opportunities to be with other children and is learning to play cooperatively
* Uses words to solve problems and resolve conflicts; seeks adult help when needed
* Can follow simple directions up to three steps
* Can follow simple directions and rules for play
* Is learning to complete tasks, and activities
* Is curious and is motivated to learn
* Expresses basic needs and feelings appropriately
* Respects and shows concern for others.

**Language and Literacy**

My child:

* Has many opportunities to talk and listen to adults and children
* Is able to gain meaning by listening to a variety of situations such as one-on-one conversations, story time and play
* Is speaking in sentences with more than 5 words; speech is intelligible
* Is read to everyday
* Is learning about print and books Can hold a book upright and turns the pages of a book correctly
* Realizes that print proceeds from left to right
* Knows that words are what you read
* Knows that words have meaning
* Has opportunities to tell stories and re-read common books
* Is beginning to recognize rhyming words
* Is beginning to understand and use tenses – present, past and future
* Recognizes and uses common opposites, such as big-little, hard-soft, wet-dry.
* Has daily opportunities to draw and use writing utensils
* Is learning to recognize and write her name
* Has opportunities to draw, listen to and make music and to dance
* Has opportunities to explore various environments local to the community and have hands-on experiences– to see and touch objects, hear new sounds, smell and taste foods and watch things move
* Uses letter like shapes, symbols and letters to convey meaning

**General Knowledge**

My child:

* Is able to say his/her first name and know if they are a boy or a girl
* Has opportunities to notice similarities and differences
* Is learning to relate activities to times of the day and order of daily events
* Is encouraged to sort and classify things
* Is learning to count to ten and beyond
* Is encouraged to ask questions and solve problems
* Is learning words to describe directions, order and positions, such as up, down, first, second, in front, and behind
* Is learning to identify and name shapes and colors
* Show ideas and feelings through play. Uses creative play like music, dance and drama to express him or herself

<http://static.k12.wv.us/oel/docs/Is%20My%20Child%20Ready%20for%20Kindergarten_DRAFT.pdf>

During the pre-school and elementary school years, parents and guardians should:

1. Be sure to obtain well-child care and medical intervention when necessary
2. Provide adequate nutrition
3. Provide at home learning activities – reading, drawing, counting, designated homework time, physical activity
4. Ensure child is getting enough sleep

## Middle School

Nearly every person who has ever undertaken parenting a child in middle school has expressed frustration. This period of child development is challenging for everyone, particularly the student. It is a period of hormonal fluctuations, rapid body changes including changes in the brain, and constant comparison to peers by the self and peers. Children still need the same supports they did in elementary school (health care, nutrition, sleep, in-home learning), but they also need a mixture of boundaries and freedom. Like every age, this mixture doesn’t correspond to a calendar date, but is developmentally driven. Provide more privileges as a child proves to be more responsible. Be firm about rules, but heavy with praise when it’s warranted.

It is common for children of this age to lose motivation in school.

“Younger children tend to believe that the harder you try, the smarter you’ll get. . . As children move into their early teens, they may begin to believe that ability is fixed and compare their ability to that of others—the harder you have to try, the less able you must be. This view can dampen motivation. Why try hard if it won’t help you do well?”

Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/adolescence.pdf

The things that contribute to poor academic motivation at this age include:

* Biological Changes – example: worrying about why I’m 4’2” and my best friend is 5’10
* Emotional Concerns – example: preoccupation with physical insecurities or being excluded from a group
* Social and Peer Pressure – example: girls aren’t good at math, school isn’t cool
* A shift in how your child views his ability
* Short attention spans
* Undeveloped work ethic

To encourage motivation

1. Be a good role model. Parents need to demonstrate they value learning and hard work
2. Let your child know that sustained effort over time is the key to achievement. Teach him to set high goals and work hard to achieve them.
3. Steer your child towards appropriate classes and suitable activities. Young teens need opportunities to excel and be useful. Success can be a powerful motivator and boredom may be a sign that your child hasn’t enough opportunities to develop her talents.
4. Offer support. Insincere praise for poor effort is no help, but young teens need to be reassured they can do something.
5. Find strengths and build on them.
6. Communicate with your child’s teachers, counselors or school principal when necessary. A drop in grades is not uncommon when students go from grade level to another. But if your child’s grade drop is extreme or if it persists for more than one marking period, get in touch with someone at the school.
7. Hold realistic expectations and make sure your child knows, deep in his heart, that you love him for what he is and not for what he does.
8. Be patient. Many young teens need the gift of time to develop the maturity that allows them to complete homework assignments and chores with a minimum of supervision.

Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/adolescence.pdf

## Discussion: Should adults admit they think having to learn algebra is useless. Admit to calling in sick when they just didn’t feel like going to work? Do kids notice when they give up on a task they find too hard?

If your child is struggling academically, work closely with school personnel. One area to consider is an undiagnosed learning disability

Signs of Learning Disabilities

* Often reverses letters in writing, such as writing *felt* for *left*.
* Has trouble learning spelling strategies, such as using information from prefixes, suffixes and root words.
* Avoids reading aloud.
* Avoids writing compositions.
* Has trouble with handwriting or avoids it altogether.
* Grips a pencil awkwardly.
* Has trouble recalling facts.

If your child’s grades have plummeted or he or she seems depressed, is rapidly gaining or losing weight, or displays extreme mood swings, especially if these behaviors are sudden, it’s necessary to rule out drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness, eating disorders, bullying or other school violence. Early intervention is key to solving problems.

The U.S. Department of Education, Helping Your Child Through Early Adolescence <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/adolescence/adolescence.pdf>

## High School

To prevent truancy in high school, the focus is still on academic achievement balanced with positive relationships with peers and adults. However, this is about the time students start questioning the relevance of what they’re learning – *When am I going to use this in the real world?*

By high school, a student’s strengths and weaknesses are better defined. At this stage of education, our children are being asked to make decisions about academics based on career goals – the *real world* is looming. Much of what is being offered to parents and students to help with these decisions assumes the student plans on attending college. Several years ago, a Youtube video titled “Did you know?” went viral. The video reported astounding statistics about education, our ability to compete internationally, and the rapid pace of technological change and how it affects education. The video has been updated several times, because the changes are happening so rapidly that even information only a few years old is hopelessly outdated. We are sending our students into that world.

Even if a student is achieving at a college preparatory level, they may balk at the idea of more school, or find it difficult to choose a career. Arguably, not everyone is suited to college or a student may wish to serve in the Armed Forces for several years prior to college. Some students envision a career requiring a trade school. Other students have unreasonable expectations as to the type of job they can obtain with just a high school diploma. In fact, the 2010 West Virginia Kids Count Annual Report shows 39,000 high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 are not enrolled in school and not working.

Many students find this process of deciding what to do in *the real world* stressful and can become overwhelmed.

Students who are academically weak are especially vulnerable to this pressure.

It is overwhelming.

Students need to be assured that they are still young and nothing is written in stone. The State of West Virginia Community College and University System has programs in place for remedial education to bring academically weak students up to admission standards. Thousands of college students change their majors every day. Thousands of people who have been out of school for years, sometimes many years, enroll as college freshman each year. What is vital is that they not limit their choices by failing to complete high school. Employers, including the Armed Forces, are not as accepting of the GED as they once were.

Meanwhile, high school students are still experiencing many of the stressors and insecurities that emerged in the middle school years. In spite of their protests that “I’m not a child,” they still need guidance and support, rules and boundaries, praise and the knowledge that they are loved for who they are and not for what they do. Parents still need to be involved with school personnel as well as monitor friends, jobs and other extracurricular activities. If their child’s behavior undergoes a radical negative change, this is an important warning sign that should be dealt with immediately.

To further prevent truancy, the State of West Virginia has raised the compulsory school age to 17. People under the age of 18 cannot get a driver’s license without proof of graduation or proof of satisfactory progress in school. Students cannot drop out of school until their 17th birthday and if they do drop out, they must surrender their driver’s license. The State Legislature has noted that raising the age of compulsory attendance has had no effect on truancy rates and other experts argue that there is no proof that tying a driver’s license to academic performance is an effective truancy diversion or dropout prevention method.

West Virginia State Legislature: The High School Graduation Improvement Act 18-8-6.

## Discussion: Should kids be steered towards college preparatory classes with an expectation that they will attend college? Should we allow students to think that a high school diploma is enough to earn a living wage?

# Intervention

Something went wrong somewhere and your student has been skipping school. Since there is no one reason for why a student skips school, there is no one single answer to solving the problem.

Be sure to rule out vision, hearing or other health problems including pregnancy. For pregnant students or students with children, programs are in place to make accommodations including the provision of daycare to ensure graduation.

In addition to truancy, bullying is a significant problem in schools. If your child is not going to school out of fear, no strategy will work until the fear is removed. Policies and procedures are in place to report and intervene in bullying incidents. Bullying can occur for any reason, but some of the common reasons are: religion, race, sexual orientation, disability or different in a way perceived as negative.

County Superintendents are charged with the responsibility of deciding how parents are notified of unexcused absences. Many counties have an automated calling system that leaves voice mail informing the parent that the child was absent one or more days. Most counties send a letter after 5 unexcused absences. In some areas, notification of truancy is hand-delivered by law enforcement personnel.

If you suspect truancy and have not been notified, check with the school. It’s too easy for a student to intercept phone calls and mail.

West Virginia has declared truancy an epidemic in the state. In some counties, the numbers are staggering – nearly 50% of students with 20 or more unexcused absences. This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that school officials have been mandated to devise intervention strategies to get truant students back on track. The bad news is parents are being fined and/or jailed for habitually truant students. Students are being removed from their home and placed in the State’s custody pending school attendance and performance improvement.

If the problem, or part of the problem, is poor academic skills, there are options. Meet with school personnel, social workers and other members of your child’s Multiple Disciplinary Team (MDT) to make arrangements for testing and an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Ask about alternative schooling options if you think your child would benefit from a nontraditional classroom. In light of the truancy problem, West Virginia has noted the success of alternatives such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), “credit recovery” options, Techademics, GEAR UP, and other programs designed to help at-risk students. Truancy rates are lower when students have greater access to CTE and other alternative programs. Many students who are truant or drop out want to go back to school, but don’t know how they’ll ever catch up, are embarrassed to be several years older than their classmates, and/or convinced their situation is hopeless. Alternative programs were designed with these students in mind. In the past few years, the truancy rate has slowly declined, but the dropout rate has increased. It will take some time before truancy prevention and intervention affect the number of students dropping out.

Navigating the school system can be difficult. Be polite, be persistent, and put it in writing.

West Virginia Judiciary Judical Projects: Truancy http://www.courtswv.gov/court-administration/truancy/truancy.html

# Summary

West Virginia has recognized the social and economic costs of its truancy problem and is implementing new programs and procedures to prevent and intervene in order to reduce the dropout rate. The schools and legislature are looking at things they can do to solve the problem, but nothing will work without the help of parents and guardians.

The primary method of solving the truancy and drop out problem is to prevent it. This is best done through early childhood educational experiences including preschool, prenatal and well baby care, adequate food, housing and transportation, engaged parents, appropriate education curricula and community support of children and families.

Since there is no one reason for the truancy/dropout problem, intervention methods must be varied to best suit the situation.

*The Parents Guide to Truancy* offers the following:

1. Set Boundaries: Talk to your children about the role education plays in future/life success.
2. Ask Questions: Take an active interest in your children’s schoolwork.
3. Stay Informed: Know the school’s attendance policy, the time school starts, the difference between an excused and unexcused absence, and share the information with your child.
4. Be Prepared: Prepare your child with required supplies and clothes.
5. Schedule Time: Set a time for your child to go to bed, wake up, have a healthy breakfast, arrive at school, and complete his/her homework.
6. Plan Appointments: Plan visits to the doctor or dentist after the school day ends.
7. Plan Vacations: Always talk with the school before you plan our holiday or vacation.
8. Be Alert: Look for early signs of a child’s decision that school is not worthwhile.
9. Look for Alternatives: If your child tells you he or she is bored at school, pursue support outside the school such as music lessons, sports clubs, neighborhood or church-related groups, or mentors. Seek out and enroll your child in a tutoring program, if necessary.
10. Be Pro-Active: Check in with his or her teachers on a regular basis.
11. Maintain Your Routine: Stick to a regular schedule for homework, bedtime, and waking up.
12. Provide Incentives: Reward good attendance.
13. Talk about Consequences: Be sure that your child knows if he or she skips school, there will be consequences to pay such as losing television or video game time, limiting time with friends, or the loss of other other privileges.
14. Seek Advice: Speak to to other parents and guardians who have experienced the same issues and problem.
15. Monitor Behavior: Look for negative behavior changes.
16. Talk about Expectations: Talk with your child about acceptable and unacceptable behavior and grades.
17. Have Consistent Expectations: Relaxing the rules for even one assignment or day can give a mixed message.
18. Communicate with Your Child: Ask your child how you can help.
19. Be Supportive: Encourage your child to take an active role in the school by joining clubs or participating in sports. Teach them when and how to ask for help.
20. Educate Yourself: Understand what your child is expected to learn at each grade level.

Parents Guide to Truancy developed by the Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin-cgi/p/downloadfile/d/2`474/n/off/other/1/name/parentsguidetotruancy.pdf/

# Post-Test

1. The United States has the highest graduation rate in the world. (False – 18th.  Thirty years ago, we had the highest.)
2. Parents and guardians of West Virginia children can be jailed if their children are often truant. (True. Truancy is now viewed as epidemic and more judges are exercising this option.)
3. Students who are often truant are likely to drop out. (True)
4. At least 75% of West Virginia dropouts are eventually incarcerated. (True)
5. High school graduates earn $10,000 more per year than do dropouts. (True)
6. 7000 West Virginia students drop out of school every year. (True)
7. A high school dropout can join the military. (Sometimes true, sometimes false. The Air Force won’t accept dropouts or those with a GED at all. The others admit a very small percentage of individuals with a GED, but only in times of increased recruitment needs or if an individual has demonstrated a needed skill. If recruited, individuals are placed in a classroom setting to assess and improve where needed. The Army has developed a program to accept dropouts and place them in an Army-run GED program.)
8. Drop-out and truancy rates decrease when there is greater access to vocational/technical programs. (True)
9. Teachers can predict by 4th grade which students are likely to drop-out.
10. West Virginia students cannot legally leave school until they are 17. (True)
11. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources can remove a child from their parents’ custody because of truancy. (True)
12. West Virginia law defines truancy as 5 or more unexcused absences. (True. Medical personnel report that if a child is missing 7-10 days a year due to illness this is far too much for an average child.)
13. Bad parenting is the only reason children are truant. (False)
14. Truancy rates in West Virginia are slowly declining. (True)