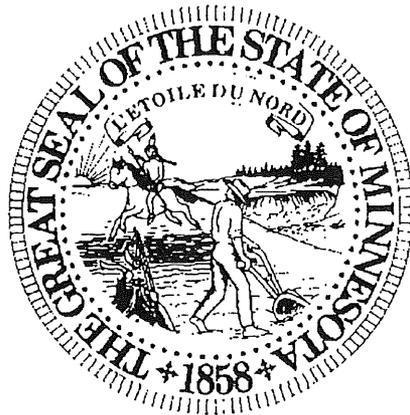


# TRUANCY REDUCTION GRANTS

## PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF TWO PILOT PROGRAMS



Office of Minnesota Attorney General  
Hubert H. Humphrey III  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 1995 Minnesota Legislature authorized funding for at least two programs designed to improve school attendance and reduce truancy. The Minnesota Commissioner of Public Safety, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Education, was charged with administering the program and awarding grants. In the fall of 1995, two grants were awarded: one to the Ramsey County Attorney's Truancy Intervention Program and one to the Blue Earth County Community Based Truancy Action Program.

Although it is premature to judge the success of these programs, early results are quite positive. The Ramsey County program has intervened with over 1300 students 34 schools and three separate school districts. The program begins with a formal meeting in which students who have attendance problems and their parents meet with an Assistant Ramsey County Attorney to learn about the law. For most students, that meeting serves to successfully address the truancy problem. Follow-up in the form of a School Attendance Review Team hearing was required for only 7.7% of the students who attended the initial meeting. Of the students who attended these hearings, formal petitions in juvenile court were required for 37.5%. That represents only 2.9% of the overall program participants. While the program has been in effect for only four months of experience, the initial results give cause for optimism.

The Blue Earth County Community Based Truancy Action Program represents an intensive, multi-county, multi-disciplinary approach to truancy. Four different entities (Community Corrections, Human Services, Law Enforcement and the School District) from two separate counties (Blue Earth and Nicollet) came together to establish a Model School. The school has a capacity to serve 12 at-risk students in grades seven through nine. Not only does the school tailor its academic programming to the needs of individual students, it also emphasizes attendance and behavioral requirements. The results have been positive. The average attendance rate has increased to 86%, up from an attendance rate of 10% to 50% at the student's home school. Some youths are transitioning back to their original schools. In addition, standardized tests indicate academic growth.

These preliminary results show that intensive individualized efforts appear to hold great promise in addressing the problem of truancy. A detailed description of the two pilot programs and those initial results is attached.

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## Authorization

In 1995, the Minnesota Legislature made significant changes in truancy law, establishing a new chapter, Chapter 260A, focusing on truancy. Section 260A.01 of this chapter defines the purpose of truancy programs and services as follows:

The programs in this chapter are designed to provide a continuum of intervention and services to support families and children in keeping children in school and combating truancy and educational neglect. School districts, county attorneys and law enforcement may establish the programs and coordinate them with other community-based truancy services in order to provide the necessary and most effective intervention for children and their families. This continuum of intervention and services involves progressively intrusive intervention, beginning with strong service-oriented efforts at the school and community level and involving the court's authority only when necessary.

Accordingly, the legislature established a truancy reduction grant pilot program (Chapter 226, Article 3, Section 63 of the Laws of Minnesota for 1995). The program is summarized below:

- The purpose of the program is to establish a pilot program to help school districts, county attorneys, and law enforcement officials work together to improve school attendance and reduce truancy.
- The programs should be designed to reduce truancy and educational neglect, and improve school attendance rates by:
  - providing early intervention and a continuum of intervention;
  - supporting parental involvement and responsibility;
  - working with students, families, school personnel and community resources to provide appropriate services that address the underlying causes of truancy; and
  - providing a speedy and effective alternative to juvenile court intervention.
- The commissioner of public safety, in conjunction with the commissioner of education, is responsible for making awards.
- At least two grants must be awarded for the 1995-96 school year, one for a program in the metropolitan area and one for a program outside of the metropolitan area.
- The attorney general is required to make a preliminary report on the effectiveness of the pilot programs as part of its 1996 annual report on school safety, and a final report as part of its 1997 annual report.

A total of \$100,000 the first year was appropriated for truancy reduction pilot programs.

## Current Status

The Minnesota Commissioner of Public Safety has awarded grants for two truancy reduction pilot programs. The first is to a program of the Ramsey County Attorney's Office. The second is to the Blue Earth County Model School's program. The awards of \$50,000 each became available in the early fall of 1995. While the full impact of the state award will not be fully evident until both programs have further experience, the preliminary information about these programs is very positive. Presented below is a description of each program together with a report of its progress.

### Ramsey County Attorney's Truancy Intervention Program (TIP)

The Ramsey County Attorney's Program is modeled after a highly successful program in the City of Los Angeles. The Ramsey County program began in September of 1995 and now has approximately four months of experience. It involves 34 schools in three separate school districts.

The program consists of a three-step process of intervention designed to compel students and their parents to address the problem of truancy in cases where initial school efforts have not succeeded. The three steps are listed below:

- First, the county attorney's office works with the schools to identify students who have three to five absences. The parents of these students are then invited to a large group meeting at which an assistant county attorney discusses the legal and social consequences of truancy.
- Second, if school attendance does not improve after the parent meeting, the county attorney's office convenes a School Attendance Review Team (SART). This meeting, attended by both the student and the parent, involves a specific discussion about the legal ramifications of truancy. More important, it includes negotiation of a contract with both student and parent regarding improvement of attendance.
- Third, if attendance still fails to improve, the county attorney's office files a truancy petition with a expedited hearing date.

The results of this process demonstrate that a system of graduated intervention is successful. Reports to date show that because students appear to be responsive to the initial steps of the intervention, more intrusive measures such as truancy petitions can be avoided. Specific information is provided below:

**Step One** As of January 9, 1996, the county attorney's office had identified 1,345 students with three to five absences and sent letters requesting parents to attend meetings about the problem. Meeting attendance varied by school district with 91% attending in the Mounds View District, 89% in the White Bear Lake District and 60% in the Saint Paul District.

**Step Two** Of the 1,345 referrals to the initial meeting, follow-up was needed with only 104 (7.7%). Follow-up took the form of School Attendance Review Team hearings.

**Step Three** During the program, there have been 39 petitions filed in Juvenile Court. This represents 2.9% of the total program participants and 37.5% of those who completed a SART. The office has been able to expedite these cases. In the past, there was a four week waiting period; through this program it has been reduced to two weeks.

One advantage of TIP is that the same county attorney works with the students and their parents throughout the entire process. That county attorney is also the one that presents the petition in juvenile court.

Although it is early in the program, the Ramsey County Truancy Intervention Program appears to be promising. Great care has been made in the development of the program and its implementation. The initial success has been based upon hard work and significant coordination with the schools.

### **Blue Earth County Community Based Truancy Action Program**

The second grant was awarded to Blue Earth County Program called the Model School for chronic truants and behavior problems. The school was established in 1993 and is housed at the Blue Earth County Law Enforcement Center. It represents a well-coordinated effort of Blue Earth and Nicollet County Community Corrections, Human Services, Law Enforcement and the School District. The school is designed to meet the behavioral and educational needs of chronically delinquent and truant students from all three Mankato Middle Schools.

The school has five employees who work with an extensive group of volunteers. The maximum student capacity is 12 at-risk students in grades seven through nine. Curricula is designed to stress reading and mathematics. Art, Social Studies, English, Life Skills, Physical Education and Industrial Arts are also included. Because of its small size, staff are able to tailor the curricula according to individual needs.

The first objective of the Model School is to ensure mandatory attendance. The students attending the Model School have had average attendance rates of 86%; their average attendance rate in their home schools had been 10 % - 50%.

The second objective is to modify the behavior of problem students so they can return to their original school. To “graduate” from the Model School, a student must meet the following four criteria:

1. Thirty days of appropriate behavior, measured by accumulating 80% of the possible behavior points available to be earned;

2. An attendance rate of 90% or better for 30 days;
3. Successful completion of 90% of their assignments for 30 days; and
4. During this time, there can be no interventions for the student's behavior or attendance by other agencies.

Early last year the Model School had a transition rate of 50% (6 of 12 students). In December of 1995, students attending the school earned 36 credits in addition to the credits earned in the transition process. Standardized tests indicated academic growth for the students while attending school.

The Model School appears to have achieved its objectives of improved school attendance and behavior improvement. This program represents a very intensive effort to work with at-risk students.

### **Conclusion**

Although it is early in the life of both of the pilot programs, the preliminary results are quite encouraging. A final report about these programs will be submitted to the 1997 Legislature. However, these preliminary results indicate that intensive, individualized efforts appear to hold great promise in addressing the problem of truancy.

## APPENDIX I

### Sec. 63. TRUANCY REDUCTION GRANT PILOT PROGRAM.

Subdivision 1. ESTABLISHMENT. A truancy reduction grant pilot program is established to help school districts, county attorneys, and law enforcement officials work collaboratively to improve school attendance and to reduce truancy.

Subd. 2. EXPECTED OUTCOMES. Grant recipients shall use the funds for programs designed to assist truant students and their families in resolving attendance problems without court intervention. Recipient programs must be designed to reduce truancy and educational neglect, and improve school attendance rates by:

- (1) providing early intervention and a continuum of intervention;
- (2) supporting parental involvement and responsibility in solving attendance problems;
- (3) working with students, families, school personnel, and community resources to provide appropriate services that address the underlying causes of truancy; and
- (4) providing a speedy and effective alternative to juvenile court intervention in truancy cases.

Subd. 3. GRANT ELIGIBILITY, APPLICATIONS, AND AWARDS. A county attorney, together with a school district or group of school districts and law enforcement, may apply for a truancy reduction grant. The commissioner of public safety, in collaboration with the commissioner of education, shall prescribe the form and manner of applications by July 1, 1995, and shall award grants to applicants likely to meet the outcomes in subdivision 2. At least two grants must be awarded: one to a county in the seven-county metropolitan area and one to a county outside the metropolitan area. Grants must be awarded for the implementation of programs in the 1995-1996 school year. At minimum, each applicant group must have a plan for implementing an early intervention truancy program at the school district or building level, as well as a county attorney truancy mediation program under Minnesota Statutes section 260.07.

Subd. 4. EVALUATION. The attorney general shall make a preliminary report on the effectiveness of the pilot programs as part of its 1996 annual report under Minnesota Statutes, section 8.36, and a final report as part of its 1997 annual report under that section.

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