

# Combating Truancy Delinquency Need of an Action Plan

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**Abstract:** *Truancy delinquency among school and college going students is a very serious problem world over; which is often not recognized, treated and controlled with due seriousness it deserves, especially by parents as well as by school/college authorities and the regulatory bodies in India. Later truancy misconduct results into serious educational, social, law enforcement and other problems. Moreover, it also results into wastages of precious public resources spent on education at different levels. While in other countries, various comprehensive and strict measures are taken to arrest the menace of truancy incidences among students with active involvement of parents, community and law enforcement agencies; perhaps no such remedial measures have so far been taken in India either by state, or regulatory bodies, or community or parents to tackle the critical problem of truancy, which incidentally creeps from primary school level itself and continues thereafter even up to higher education level. In the larger public interest, therefore, much needs to be done in India by all stakeholders concerned perhaps on the lines suggested by authors.*

**Keywords:** Truancy delinquency, oppositional defiant disorder, stakeholders, foreign experiences, synergy.

## 1. Introduction

Education, widely recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for peaceful social transformation, is a matter of serious passion with perseverance and requires exclusive attention of students at every stage in their education pathways. Regular mode of education, the most prominent mode of education the world over, fosters quick learning within the given learning enabled environment which provides ample opportunities to students to have an 'eye to eye' contact with teachers on regular basis and seek clarifications, if any, at different points of time throughout the course of study. Punctuality in attending classes is, therefore, utmost necessary and critically significant for students pursuing studies through regular mode of education. Research findings have well supported the common conviction that classroom punctuality strengthens and enforces learning processes of students, which results into their better academic attainments than those who prefer to stay away from selected and/or whole lot of scheduled classes and miss (absent/bunk/truant) classes intermittently or regularly for different reasons, personal or otherwise. In addition to punctuality in regularly attending the scheduled classes, researches have also demonstrated that many background variables including parental socio-economic status, learning enabled environment at academic institution and at home and also a host of other variables too have direct or indirect bearings on academic attainments of students.

## 2. What is Truancy?

Truancy is often defined as an 'unapproved absence' of

student from educational institution i.e. school/college, usually without the parents' knowledge or approval. Truancy, therefore, typically describes absences caused by students of their own sweet/free will, and usually does not refer to legitimate 'excused' absences, such as on medical grounds (Stoll, 1996). It also refers to students, who attend schools/colleges but do not regularly attend the scheduled theory and/or practical classes. Often truants are in and around the school/college but apathy on the part of the authorities' concerned and poor interface between schools/colleges and parents, in reality encourage and promote incidences of truancy among students. Meaning of truancy has often been defined in the policies and guidelines/information brochures of the institution(s). Pursuant to such policies/guidelines, in some schools/colleges incidences of chronic truancy do result into ineligibility of truant students to appear in examinations or receive credits even for the classes attended or both, until and unless the time lost to truancy is made up through a combination of measures i.e. detention, fines, or extra assignments etc. Thus truancy is an educational, social, and law enforcement problem; and a symptom, if not recognized, treated and controlled at the initial stages itself will lead to higher incidences of dropping out, drug abuse or infatuation, street corner gang activities, delinquency, unemployment, emotional problems, incarceration, and poverty in adulthood. Acknowledging the wider ramifications of truancy misconduct, it is predictable as a significant marker on the developmental pathways of truant students, which in turn results into decreased school performance, expulsions, dropouts, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, vandalism,

violent juvenile crime, status offences, gang participation, teenage pregnancy, detention, foster care, or juvenile corrections (Malcolm et al, 2003). Therefore, truancy among students at every stage of education must be taken up with all seriousness by all stakeholders in the larger interest of the society and also with the object to reduce educational wastages at all levels of education, which developing countries like India can hardly ill afford.

Internationally a number of expressions in English language are often used to refer to the truancy behaviour among students. According to Webster's dictionary, the word truancy is of "Celtic origin meaning vagabond, idler, the vagrant, one who shirks duty, and one who stays out of school without permission." In South Africa, the slang used is 'bunking', 'skipping' or 'jippo'; in Jamaica, 'skulking'; in Australia truancy is called 'wagging', 'ditching', 'skipping school', 'jigging', 'dogging' or 'bludging'. In England it is called 'bunking off', 'skiving' or 'twigging'. It is called as 'wagging' or 'on the knock' in Wales, 'sagging' in Liverpool, 'bunking' or 'cutting classdoggin', 'skiving' or 'puggin' in Scotland and 'on the hop', 'on the bunk', 'mitching' or 'dosing' in Ireland. In US and Canada expressions used for truancy behaviour include '(playing) hooky', 'ditching', 'skipping', or 'cutting class'. More so, truancy has also been a subject of popular culture; perhaps most famously Ferris Bueller's Day Off, which is entirely about the titular character's (played by Matthew Broderick) day of truancy in Chicago with his girlfriend and best friends. Truancy has also been the title of a novel (2008) about a student uprising against a dictatorial educational system.

### 3. 3. Why Students go Truant?

Researchers have identified many reasons the students become truant. These include lack of interest in education and alienation from the school/college, falling behind academically, fear of violence on the way to/from school/college or at school/college, alienation from school/college authorities, lax parental supervision, lack of parental support for education, drug and alcohol abuse, working for long hours prior to attending school/college resulting in chronic exhaustion, lack of understanding of significant consequences of failure to regularly attend school/college, domestic problems requiring supervising/caring of younger siblings or helping old and/or dysfunctional adults etc. Researchers have confirmed that truancy is typically symptomatic of factors like family problems, school/college environment, social environment, education needs, economic needs, economic status and mental health of student (Gabb, 1994).

Researchers have identified certain specific reasons pertaining to school/college, family, and community and also from the students' perspective (Kinder et al, 1996; S. Dhruv et al, 2012b), which leads to truancy among students. Reasons often mentioned by students for not attending the scheduled classes regularly included:

- Class room teaching is not interesting;
- Faculty do not come prepared to class in time;

- Faculty does not provide notes etc. useful for examination purpose;
- Faculty favor only certain students;
- Faculty is not audible in the classroom;
- Faculty do not have control on students, who disturb classes;
- Given assignments are not completed in time;
- Students are afraid of certain faculty members;
- Frequent changes of subject faculty by the authorities;
- Frequent changes in time-table and lack of communication/coordination between and among faculty;
- Lack of adequate and proper seating arrangements in classrooms; and
- Lack of physical infrastructure (proper ventilation and light/AC/OHP/LCD) in classrooms.

Surprisingly truancy is a strong and reliable predictor of delinquent behavior, especially among male students. It has been well established that students who are habitual truants are more likely to engage themselves in undesirable or antisocial behaviors such as street gang membership, marijuana use, alcohol use, inhalant and hard drug use, high-risk sexual behavior, cigarette smoking, suicidal behaviors, theft, and vandalism. Truant girl students are more likely to become pregnant and dropout of school/college at different stages. Most habitual truants eventually enter juvenile court system. As adults, habitual truants generally become more unemployable and develop marital problems and are jailed far more often than non-truants. Thus it is evident that truancy is a gateway to serious violent and non-violent crimes in life. Law enforcement agencies have often linked high rates of truancy to high rates of daytime burglary and vandalism. In addition, habitual truants are more likely to join street corner groups like gangs and actively participate in violent crimes and various forms of assaults (Egger et al, 2003). Truancy/skipping school/college is, therefore, an indication of a serious cry for help and a signal that student indeed is in serious trouble and need help/counseling from parents, family and the school/college. This seriousness of the problem is well appreciated by psychiatrists, who consider truancy as one of many symptoms of oppositional defiant disorder especially when truancy begins before the tender age of 13.

### 4. Does Truancy Matter?

Human behaviour is not something, which can be easily developed overnight. It is basically a more or less pre-determined pattern of thoughts, actions and reactions. Changes in behaviour is difficult and not impossible and can be attained and sustained only through well-planned interventions and sincere efforts of the change agents and also with the strong willpower of the person concerned to change/modify/alter her/his behaviour slowly but steadily. Truancy, therefore, is such a behaviour among students, which generally has deep roots since schooling days and if not checked, controlled and effectively monitored and that too regularly by parents, teachers and educational institutions with utmost patience, love and proper understanding may

result into a permanent attribute of one's personality. Parents and teachers strongly believe that regular class room attendance at all levels of education is decisively important because it positively relates to participative involvement in educational and other extra-curricular attainments, and the child safety (R. Kumar et al, 2006; K. Vedmitra et al, 2012b). Thus truancy really matters a lot for all concerned.

In education scenario the world over, it is unbeatable to deny the hard facts that educational institutions especially at primary levels serve as nursery to nurture, nourish and supply students to graduate, post-graduate, doctoral, post-doctoral and other specialized programmes/courses. These programs sharpen, polish and groom students by enriching their subject matter knowledge, skills and attitudes so necessary for business world in the present day competitive knowledge economy. Over a period of time such reservoir of human resources by virtue of their sheer hardcore rich and varied work experiences, exposures and interfaces found themselves gradually but radically transformed as 'talent' in their chosen field of specialization and operation. The war for 'talent' results into 'talent mobility' and 'brain drain'. Against this larger picture, focus on attracting and regularly retaining students in classrooms for grooming them as potential human resources cannot be permitted to lose sight even in dreams by parents, community, educational policy planners and educational administrators. Since fragmented and one agency approach is not likely to produce any amount of tangible results, therefore all stakeholders are required to join hands to attain synergy in their efforts. Lessons learned world over to combat the menace of truancy at various levels of education will certainly prove handy to authorities concerned in planning and executing 'zero truancy incidences' programs.

Truancy delinquency among young students communicates to all concerned that students need appropriate response to support and empower them so as to move constructively in life. Initially while most primary truants may feel that they are glad to have missed school but secondary school level truants, in contrast, say they were bored and staying away had not been worth it. Truancy therefore, needs to be viewed very seriously from the very first such instance itself as it also affect other students in class because when truants return to school/college, they disrupt the ongoing academic schedule and demand teachers' attention, which causes resentment among other students especially when such truant students go unpunished by authorities concerned. Many teachers also feel that truants add to their workloads through extra classes and remedial coaching as they try to help truants to catch up and cope with regular students (K. Vedmitra et al, 2012a). Moreover, truants desperately need such help to become integrated into the mainstream and move forward along with other students but at the same time teachers are also afraid of their poor examination results reflecting adversely on institution's reputation. Indisputably truancy also causes harm to the entire education system. In fact most harm is done to the truants themselves. Though they are generally a minority but their return certainly disrupt other students, divert teachers' attention and frustrate/demoralize teachers as well as students attending

classes regularly.

Truancy is indeed costly. There is a large cost factor associated with truancy. It is not only tragic for the family of the truant but also the society as it has to bear the economic and social cost in terms of lost human potential. The larger the number of students truanting, greater is the wastage of public resources. Despite of the fact that only a small proportion of students may be regular truants; parents, teachers and other professionals are often required to spend a disproportionate amount of their time, energy and other resources for encouraging their good classroom attendance. Many professionals also see close links between truancy, disruption and exclusion, viewing them as representative of a 'fight or flight' response to schools/colleges in which they felt alienated. Others believe that truancy leads to more tangible forms of delinquency e.g. theft, criminal damage, robbery with violence, abusive conducts etc. There are also some evidences to suggest that once established, truancy may become hereditary – persistent truants tend to marry persistent truants and tolerate truancy in their children. It may be possible that relationship between truancy and various forms of delinquent behaviour is one of common effect, rather than of cause and effect relationship. For most students, skipping school used to be a one-time lark and again dropping out from education stream is easier than catching up again. Researchers have studied various independent variables which have bearing on truancy, educational attainments and other dependent variables (Kinder et al, 1995). These studies have found that birth order, family size, parental educational investment, child quality, child gender and other variables greatly influence the educational attainments of students at different levels of their schooling.

Thus the possible causes and factors contributing to truancy are numerous and diverse in nature. In nutshell, truancy is a three-fold problem. There are factors stemming from the child, family, the school and the community. Therefore, the causes of truancy are complex. Truant students invariably identify a combination of home, school and individual factors which cause them to skip school/college. In view of the complexity of the genesis of the problem, truancy problem is unlikely to be resolved through a single approach. Truancy has been found to start at young age as many students begin truanting in primary schools and continue to do so in secondary schools and thereafter. Therefore, early detection and effective intervention would be worthwhile to prevent students developing and sustaining this undesirable habit. Interestingly truancy among students remains an unrecognized problem especially at the early stages of their education. Unfortunately in India truancy by and large is not recognized as a problem at all and even if recognized is taken very casually by parents and the authorities concerned. Surprisingly each stakeholder keeps on passing the bug to other and exclusively held other responsible for development of this undesirable behaviour in students. Thus the causes of truancy are contested. Parents and the students usually stress school-related factors as the main cause of truancy, but teachers and the schools/colleges strongly believe that parental education, their attitudes and home environments

are more influential, dominant and determinant factors and therefore must be taken note of in devising any intervention program/strategy for arresting truancy delinquency (Baker et al, 2001).

### 5. Truancy Delinquency: Pandora Box of Problems

It is evident that in a student’s life truancy is normally not an isolated problem and has multiple ramifications leading to a complex set of personal, social, legal and professional problems. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry published a comparison from a study highlighting high incidences of different problems in respect of truant behavior of students. Accordingly, under each problem area mentioned hereunder, first percentage relates to truant students and the percentage given in parentheses is for non-truant students:

**Table 1:** High incidences of different problems in respect of truant behavior of students

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Truant Student</i>	<i>Non-truant Student</i>
All psychiatric disorders	25.4 percent	06.8 percent
Oppositional defiant disorder	09.7 percent	02.3 percent
Conduct disorder	14.8 percent	01.6 percent
Depression	07.5 percent	01.6 percent
Confliction relationships	16.2 percent	08.7 percent with peers
Living in poverty	31.3 percent	19.1 percent
Single-parent household	45.9 percent	21.8 percent
Lax parental supervision	31.5 percent	06.7 percent
Mother currently diagnosed	11.9 percent	05.5 percent as depressed
Parents teenagers at time	15.3 percent	08.4 percent of birth

Truancy is thus a stepping stone to delinquent and criminal activity. Truants are often found engaged in vandalizing cars, shoplifting, and scrawling graffiti on public buildings.

### 6. Lessons from Foreign Countries

In some foreign countries, certain specific policies/intervention strategies are implemented by authorities to effectively handle recurrence of the incidences of truancy through active involvement of educational institutions and parents. For instance, various Sections (Sections 36, 39 and 40) of the 1994 Education Act of USA contain such stipulations. Under Section 36, it is the duty of parents of any student of compulsory school age group to ensure that student receives full-time education suitable to age, aptitude and ability, either by regular school attendance, or otherwise. According to the provisions of Section 39, a student aged between 5 and 16, who fails to attend school and does not have a legitimate reason for being absent from school is called a truant. Under this Section, three acceptable reasons for absence from the school include sickness or other unavoidable reasons relating to the student, religious functions at home and the distance of the school from the student’s residence and further no suitable arrangements for transport have been made/available. Under Section 40, action may be taken against parents of such students, who fail to attend school regularly and they may also be taken to juvenile court. The Act says that only the schools and not

parents may authorise absence of a student from school.

In USA, the fine for truancy can range from \$250 to as much as \$500. In some cities teenagers found roaming on streets during school working hours are sometimes even handcuffed. Many states appoint local truancy officers, who have authority to arrest habitually truant students and bring them to their parents or to school they are supposed to attend. However, such truancy regulations are generally enforced by school officials under the context of parental responsibility. Nowadays the new automated calling systems i.e. Connect Ed allows automated notification to parents when a child is not marked present in computer in the school. In United Kingdom, failure to secure regular school attendance of a registered student is a criminal offence for parents. Authorities may also direct removal of such student believed to be absenting from the school without any consent of the school. This is known as "truancy sweep".

In Canada, a police officer who suspects a student is deliberately missing the school for no legitimate reason has the authority to take that student to school he or she is supposed to attend. In Australia, schools generally keep a close understanding with local police to combat 'wagging'. The nearby police station monitors areas around the school and looks for truancy students. In most cases students are returned to schools. Under the law, Australian Government can also take action against parents of truant students by withdrawing child support payments to them if the child is caught absenting schools multiple times. Recently schools have started a system whereby if students are not marked as 'present', school computers will automatically SMS the parent(s) of the child and notify absence.

In Germany, parents of such students absenting from school without a legitimate excuse are notified by schools. If parents refuse to send student to schools or are unable to control them, local child services or social services officers may request police to escort student to school concerned and in extreme cases can petition a court to partially or completely remove student custody from parents. Parents may also be fined in cases of refusal to cooperate with authorities. In Denmark, some welfare benefits can be confiscated for a specified period of time if student does not attend school regularly. In Finland, a truant student usually gets detention in a comprehensive school. Police is not involved in controlling truancy but teachers monitor school area and sometimes nearby areas during recess to restrict unauthorized leaving of students from school premises. If the student is found absent for a long period of time, parents can be fined by authorities. Anyway, imposing fine is the only way to force parents to put students into schools.

As evident, while in foreign countries much seriousness has been attached to the problems of truancy among students at all levels of education, not much has been done in our country to arrest truancy menace among students. It is apparent that ever growing incidences of truancy undoubtedly result into substantial wastage of scarce resources of the nation. Studies conducted by NCERT have well established that truancy among young school going

students leading to schools dropouts incidences is more or less a major problem in almost all the states in country. In some states, school dropout incidences have been reported to the extent of even 50% from first to fifth standards. Such high rate of school dropout incidences results not only into colossal wastage of public resources but also irretrievable loss to student concerned, family and the society. However, various policy initiatives and intervention measures taken by states lately to attract and retain students in schools have started paying rich dividends over the years and the incidences of dropping out from schools, especially of the girl students, have come down noticeably.

Education being in the concurrent list of the Indian Constitution, perhaps there is no Central or State legislation in the country to compulsory prescribe, enforce and monitor punctuality in attendance of the students at various levels of education – primary to higher education. Absence of such a comprehensive regulatory framework provides more than enough leverage to educational institutions to bend/relax existing set of provisions and guidelines relating to the requirements of minimum prescribed percentage of students' attendance in classes (R. Kumar, 2004; R. Kumar et al, 2006). Therefore there is an urgent need to seriously ponder over this perennial problem of truancy at all levels of education by the authorities concerned and draft legislation to drastically reduce such a substantial national wastages within the given timeframe, if not totally eliminating the same (S. Dhruv et al, 2012a). The proposed Indian legislation may be drawn based on the lessons learned from the experiences of different countries, who have been successful to a larger extent to arrest the menace of truancy among students from the initial stages of education itself.

## 7. Attesting Truancy Menace

While truancy delinquency is a matter of grave concern particularly to parents, educators, mental health professionals and society at large but punctuality in attending classes has generally been observed as first casualty among many students. While institutions across the country do in-principle insist upon punctuality in class room attendance, but in practice only a very few are really rigid in observing punctuality in attendance. Though normally 75% attendance is prescribed by the regulatory authorities as eligibility criteria to be adhered with for granting permission to appear in examinations (theory as well as practical), but for variety of reasons this mandatory turned obligatory requirement is by and large observed more in breach than in practice. Generally only a very few students, who are falling short of attendance, are detained by the institutions for appearing in examinations or promoting to the next higher grade; while other such erring students are somehow permitted to appear in examinations or promoted to next higher grade after imposing certain amount of financial and other penalties. This leniency generally showered on such erring students and that too starting from primary school level onward drastically dilutes the basic purpose of attracting and regularly retaining students in classes for having them the first hand learning opportunities and experience. This is indeed a pathetic and an indefensible cruel joke with the

future of the country.

Various anti-truancy programs have been suggested by researchers in order to keep students in classes. It has been found that communities in which anti-truancy programs have been successful, uses a combination of incentives and sanctions to keep students in classes. Second, schools/colleges have firm policies on truancy and all students and parents/guardians are made aware of the sanctions to be imposed on absence without an excuse. Third, parents take responsibility for keeping their children in schools/colleges. Fourth, root causes of truancy are addressed comprehensively and in totality as such causes are complex and varied. These generally include drug use, membership in a peer group of truants/gangs, lack of directions in education, poor academic performance, and violence at or near school/college premises. And finally, a much closer link and effective coordination and communication between and among multiple stakeholders - schools, law enforcement agencies, juvenile courts, family court officials, and social service agencies lead to workable solutions for arresting truancy. Some communities have even authorized police to patrol neighborhoods where truant youth are likely to spend school hours. Daytime curfews are also effective in some cities, where school age students can be questioned if they are on streets during school/college hours.

## 8. Summing Up

Early strategies to seriously address and arrest truancy problem primarily included monitoring attendance; supporting emotional, social and/or behavioural needs; and providing an alternative curriculum or learning enabled environment to students. However, with growing realisation that truancy is not a 'blanket' phenomenon and truant students have different reasons, greater focus needs to be placed on individual students. Therefore, recent emphasis is on individual intervention strategies including pupil support with comprehensive self-training by investing in the process of positive change, and the mentoring schemes for gradual refinement by reducing self-defeating behavioural patterns. Proactive support extended by the Schools/Colleges, which is so crucial in arresting the menace of truancy misconduct among students and for ensuring good classroom attendance, needs to be warmly appreciated and encouraged through instituting group awards, individual awards, support for improvements in school ethos and necessary infrastructural facilities, closer link between primary/secondary schools and higher education institutions, and building good relationships with parents through frequent interface. Moreover, parents are also required to regularly monitor attendance of their wards and should be in more close touch with educational institutions on regular basis and render their all possible help and support for ensuring regular attendance of their wards (R. Kumar, 2003).

Presently a variety of truancy arresting strategies are employed. The fact is that complexity of truancy is such that it does not lend itself to any one simple strategy for addressing the problem. Parents and schools/colleges should

therefore encourage good attendance and simultaneously deal effectively with the cases of poor attendance. These measures may include electronic registration systems, truancy sweeps, contact parents and support students for regular attendance. Multi-agency working is very strongly advocated for achieving optimal results and therefore parents and schools/colleges are required to work with other agencies including Educational and Career Counselors in order to attain synergy for addressing the complexity of truancy menace. Schools/colleges also need to change, though individual and system change is generally itchy and uncomfortable and involves sustained and sincere efforts and struggle. Many persistent truants have been found reported that they were bored with school/college and look for a change. In addition, it has also been reported that they were more easily truant when taught by ad hoc/temporary teachers. A stronger focus on adopting healthy human resource (HR) practices relating to attracting and retaining well qualified and experienced staff, developing appropriate curricula, teaching pedagogies/styles and school/college ethos is, therefore, also strongly needed. Some persistent truants might also benefit from alternatives to school system. Additionally, greater emphasis is necessarily to be placed at individual school/college following the realization that truancy incidences varies from institution to institution, despite similarities in intake. The mandate in the national interest should therefore be that no student be left truant at any cost.

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