

OUR VOICES

Star Editorial Board Report: Truancy

A DAY OFF? Mark Ayler, a neighborhood resource officer with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, talked with the mother of a child picked up in a truant sweep last month. Students were not charged criminally but instead taken to the Metro North District headquarters. They saw a judge and then were taken home by a parent or back to school.

MATT DETRICH / The Star



ONLINE: CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION



TalkBack: Have a question or comment about this editorial? Go to IndyStar.com/opinion, click on the editorial headline and then post a comment at TalkBack. We'll post answers to your questions online Thursday and will publish a sample of your comments in next Sunday's Voices section.

Audio: Listen to a short audio clip of Marion County Superior Court Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry speaking on the wide range of children who come through her truancy court. Click on Indystar.com/opinion.

Databases: Want to know how your child's school fared on this year's ISTEP? Did schools in your district make Adequate Yearly Progress? Check out The Star's databases on the Data Central page of IndyStar.com

Too many empty seats in classrooms

Thousands of students are chronically absent from county schools

Ten-year-old Wesley, a student in Decatur Township's Lynwood Elementary, is the personification of an educational crisis.

His brown hair is closely cropped and he's wearing a hooded jacket as he stands before a Marion County Superior Court commissioner. Wesley is in family truancy court because he's racked up nine unexcused absences so far this school year. (The Star generally does not fully identify defendants in the juvenile justice system.) If he skips school one more day, he'll join thousands of other Marion County students listed as chronic absentees.

Wesley is in court with his mother and four siblings. Sisters Kelsey and Jennifer have each missed 14 days this school year without a valid excuse. Older brother John recently completed probation for truancy and battery charges.

Their mother, Joyce, says she's struggled to force her children to attend school. She says she even quit her job last year to focus on getting John and his sisters to school. When it comes to Wesley, however, she admits that, "I don't have an excuse for him (not attending school). I really don't."

It's a story frequently repeated in Marion County schools. A Star Editorial Board analysis found that about 13 percent of students in the county's public schools — roughly 16,000 children — recorded 10 or more days of unexcused absences in the 2005-06 school year.

First of a series

The high absentee rate is occurring amid an environment of intense accountability for teachers and administrators. Teachers can lose their jobs and even entire schools can be shut down if standards aren't met. But the frequency with which students miss school begs a couple of questions: Can children learn if they aren't in the classroom? And should educators be held responsible for ensuring that students are in school, a job that primarily is parents' responsibility?

"Truancy is a symptom of a problem, not the problem itself," says Gaylon Nettles, the state Department of Education's chief attendance officer. "There is some reason why this kid didn't go to school."

As was the case until recently with Indiana's high dropout rate, official numbers released by the state Department of Education mask the extent of chronic absenteeism. According to the state, the attendance rate in Indianapolis Public Schools, the county's largest district, is 94 percent. Marion County's other 10 school districts report attendance rates of 90 percent or higher. The Department of Education touts a statewide attendance rate of 96 percent.

The reality is dismal. In Wayne Township, about one in three students qualify as chronic absentees. In IPS, about 18 percent of students recorded 10 or more unexcused absences last school year.

WHERE THE KIDS AREN'T

Official attendance rates mask the fact that thousands of students in Marion County are chronic absentees. Wayne Township Schools had the highest truancy rate in the county last school year.

District	2003-04		2004-05		2005-06	
	Attendance rate	Truancy rate	Attendance rate	Truancy rate	Attendance rate	Truancy rate
Wayne Township	96%	23%	96%	25%	95%	31%
IPS	95	18	95	18	94	18
Speedway	97	1	97	12	96	14
Pike Township	97	13	97	11	96	14
Decatur Township	95	17	96	10	95	10
Franklin Township	96	6	96	7	96	7
Warren Township	97	3	96	3	96	6
Lawrence Township	97	3	97	4	96	5
Perry Township	96	5	96	4	96	4
Beech Grove	96	4	95	3	96	3
Washington Township	97	1	97	2	97	2

Note: Truancy rate is the percentage of a school district's enrollment that is chronically truant or has more than 10 days of unexcused absence.

Sources: Indiana Department of Education, Star Editorial Board analysis

EMILY KUZNIAR / The Star

And while chronic truancy is most often associated with high schools, it's occurring at every grade. Fourteen of the county's 31 middle schools had truancy rates of 10 percent or higher last school year. At 26 of IPS' 51 elementary schools, up to 18 percent of students were chronically absent.

Students who frequently skip school are at high risk of dropping out, tumbling into poverty, or worse, prison.

A sixth-grader attending school less than 80 percent of the time has only a 1-in-10

chance of graduating from high school, according to a study by Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz and Lisa Herzog of the Philadelphia Education Fund. Balfanz found similar results among IPS middle school students in a study he's conducting for Achieve Inc. and the state Department of Education.

There is a strong correlation between truancy and the path toward crime. Chronic truants are 12 times more likely to commit a serious assault as students who regularly attend school and 21 times more likely to engage in

larceny, burglary or vehicle theft, according to University of Colorado researchers David Huizinga and Kimberly Henry. Marion County Superior Court Commissioner Kelly Rota-Autry, who oversees the truancy court, notes that, in most cases, families that come into her court already have one child who has gone through the juvenile justice system, either for truancy or other charges.

Solving the attendance problem is a key part of improving the state's trend of low educational achievement. Yet, despite the emphasis put upon attendance by the federal government's No Child Left Behind Act, attendance data in Indiana — and nationally — is slipshod.

The state formula for calculating attendance rates can mask what's really happening in classrooms. A school can appear to be doing well even if it has a significant problem with truancy.

Until recently, teachers tracked student attendance on paper. As Wayne Township Superintendent Terry Thompson points out, that meant that schools were operating "a day behind," thus losing track of absent students.

The lack of statewide policies on attendance outside of what is considered "habitually truant" means that districts have wide leeway on what is considered an excused absence. In some districts, absenteeism may be undercounted as students call themselves in sick or skip school, with their parents' permission, for a vacation.

All of this has consequences

Voices

"I would almost describe us as desperate to get [students] in here.

And that's how we feel about it. And it's an aggravating problem."

Dan Wilson, principal of Lynhurst 7th and 8th Grade Center, about the school's truancy problem.



in students' lives. During a series of focus groups involving high school dropouts, conducted last year by the state Commission for Higher Education, participants said they missed on average 30 days of school the year they dropped out.

"They don't say one morning, 'I'm just dropping out.' They've been sending this message," says Higher Education Commissioner Stan Jones. "It's something we're not paying enough attention to."

Monday: Wayne Township has the worst rate of truancy in Marion County.

Kudos

The Race for the Cure will be over by the time this paper comes out. But the benefits from the effort to raise awareness of breast cancer and money to find a cure will last long after the race as Indiana University School of Medicine researchers receive a grant from foundation behind the fundraiser, the Susan G. Komen for the Cure, to offer access to its database of blood, saliva and breast tissue of women who don't have the disease. Such a move will allow other researchers to figure out the reasons why some women get the disease — and ultimately, lead to treatment that can stem this silent killer.

Outrage

Wendell Anderson probably thought the early Monday morning he walked into work at a Kroger supermarket on the Southside would be an ordinary day. Instead, it was his last. The 58-year-old died after being shot in the chest by a man with whom he briefly talked as he heading into work. Anderson's wife, children and friends have lost a devoted family man, friend and coworker to the kind of senseless violence that's making Indianapolis an increasingly unsafe place to work and live. His death is another sad reason why stemming rising crime must be on top of the agenda of city officials.

NIGHTLINES

Jimmy Kimmel: It's been 24 hours since Ryan Seacrest told Sanjaya to get out and go home. But now I have zero interest in "American Idol!" It's like "Nightmare on Elm Street" without Freddy Kruger.

David Letterman: Listen to this: John Edwards, presidential hopeful John Edwards, had a \$400 Beverly Hills haircut. That's a lot of dough. I mean, honest to God, ladies and gentlemen, this hairpiece didn't cost me \$400 . . . But here's the worst part: Earlier tonight, Edwards hosted a dinner to raise money for a facial.

◆ They say that John Edwards gets expensive facials. What is the deal with Democratic candidates? A male candidate gets facials and the female candidates wear pantsuits.

Jay Leno: John Edwards has a new campaign slogan. "Shampoo, Rinse, Repeat."

◆ On Capitol Hill Attorney General Alberto Gonzales raised his right hand, swore to tell the truth, and then everybody had a good laugh and went back to what they were doing.

◆ Fifty-two years ago today Albert Einstein died. Einstein's brain was later studied by researchers, who kept his brain inside a portable beer cooler. Einstein's brain was in a beer cooler. Which, I believe, is the closest that Einstein ever got to attending a NASCAR race.

◆ There was a scary moment yesterday for Newt Gingrich. At first Newt got worried when he heard the IRS this year was cracking down on cheaters. Then he realized: guys who cheat on their taxes, not their wives.



5

The percentage of middle school students in Indianapolis Public Schools taking Algebra I courses; 22 percent of 8th graders statewide are taking the course before reaching high school.

Why it matters:

A strong academic foundation in middle school not only prepares those students for the challenges of high school — and improves their chances of graduating from high school — and eventually, the rigors of college. As the district looks at improving academic performance among students, getting more middle school students into Algebra I courses is a must.