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**AUTHOR: Kelly Anne Duffy-Kariam, B.S.W. (McMaster University),
B.A. Sociology and Gerontology (McMaster University)**

SUPERVISOR: Sheila Sammon, Associate Professor

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**TRUANCY AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING:
EVALUATION OF AN ATTENDANCE INCENTIVE PROGRAM**

By

KELLY ANNE DUFFY-KARIAM

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ABSTRACT

The issue of truancy and early school leaving has been a longstanding social problem. The current high school drop out rate of thirty percent has government officials and educators very concerned about the future of our youth. A prevalent theme in the truancy literature is the impact that poverty has on children and families. but, there are many additional factors that contribute to truancy and understanding them assists in developing strategies and programs to address this problem. Research indicates that one caring adult and/or supportive environment can be a key factor for children overcoming tremendous adversity. Schools can be a place where children find caring adults and supportive environments. This qualitative study examined staff perceptions of the impact of an Attendance Incentive Program developed by an Attendance Counsellor in Southern Ontario. The findings of the study showed that Attendance Incentive Programs can, not only be an effective way to address truancy, but also provide positive outcomes. These included greater academic success, student pride, team building among staff and students and positive connections established between the school community and the business community who support the program. A significant matter in question is the sustainability of this particular program as it depends largely upon the efforts of the Attendance Counsellor. A recommendation for continued growth and development of the program includes the soliciting of parent and community volunteers to become involved and take on some of the numerous responsibilities. Although, the findings cannot be generalized to larger school populations they do reveal positive outcomes. Therefore, attendance incentive programs should be considered as an intervention strategy to address truancy.

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INTRODUCTION:

Truancy has been a long standing social problem. This is an important issue because it leads to early school leaving and lost opportunities for youth. Thirty percent of Canadian youth fail to graduate from high school (Ferguson, 2004, p. 78, Livingston, 2005, p. A16). Social workers, attendance counsellors, and educators struggle with strategies to promote attendance. In examining the truancy literature, it is recognized that there are many factors that impact upon children not attending school. It is important to understand all these factors in order to identify ways to address this issue.

As a social worker in education, I have particular interest in this subject area. I work daily with students who are not attending classes and are at risk of not completing high school. In my experience, I have seen that there is a correlation between children struggling with attendance in elementary school and the pattern continuing in high school resulting in early school leaving. I have chosen this topic of study to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the issues encountered by children and their families. It is hoped that I will be able to share this knowledge with my colleagues in education to assist in developing better programs, policies and interventions.

The problem of ensuring children go to school each and every day is not a new issue. It has, however, become more of a public interest as a result of concern for the current drop out rate. Compulsory Education in Ontario was legislated in the year 1871 (Neff, 2004, p. 6 – 7). In order to enforce regular attendance truant officers were hired to ensure that children were attending school, and not roaming the streets where there was potential for

them to get into mischief (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 33, Wardhaugh, 1990, p. 737 and Richardson, 1980, p. 161). Those students who did not attend were labeled as “truants”. There were many negative connotations attached to this label, which will be discussed later in this paper. The profile of a truant, interestingly enough, has remained relatively stable over time, and the difficult task of assisting this population is still a challenge.

Poverty is a prevalent theme in current truancy literature. There is a strong correlation between poverty, truancy, delinquency and early school leaving which will be explored in this paper. Recent data on poverty revealed that there are enough people living in poverty in the City of Hamilton to fill Copps Coliseum hockey arena (with a seating capacity of 18000) five times over (Fraser, November, 2004). The literature supports that single women with children make up the majority of poor families (Fraser, November, 2004). Families who are poor encounter many barriers to proper health care, nutrition, housing, access to adequate day care and securing full-time stable employment (Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Allen-Meares, 2002, p. 126). Undoubtedly, families who are having difficulty finding money to pay for housing, clothing and food may not always be focused on getting their children to school. The emotional, financial and psychological stressors experienced by these families cannot be ignored. Eradicating poverty and addressing this very large issue is not an easy task and beyond the scope of this paper. It is, however, important to identify and recognize poverty as a causal link to truancy and early school leaving.

There is reason to have hope. The research consistently supports that one caring adult relationship and/or supportive environment can have a positive impact on children who struggle with adverse circumstances (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 241). Children can do incredibly well despite facing major challenges like poverty, racism, family despair, unemployment, addictions and mental health issues (Bosworth and Earthman, 2002, p. 299, 300, Minnard, 2002, p. 233 and Ungar, 2004, p. 346). Schools can be one of the key supportive environments because children spend the better part of their day at school. It can be a place where they potentially experience the presence of caring adults through educators, school administrators and parent volunteers. Schools can be a place where a child has an opportunity to learn in a safe environment; where a child can grow and develop positive peer relationships and friendships; where individual and community needs can be identified in order to develop appropriate strategies to address concerns. The more resources and supports in a child's life the better the chances of that child overcoming adversity, despite the odds stacked against him/her (Minnard, 2002, p. 235, Laurensen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 241).

This paper analyses an Attendance Incentive Program in Southern Ontario designed to address truancy. It examines staff perceptions of the impact of the program on children socially and academically, as well as, the impact on the school environment. This research further explores the relationships among students, parents and school staff,

and the relationships and partnerships developed in the community at large. In view of the present drop out rate for our youth, there is no time like the present to look for new and creative ways to address the problem of truancy and early school leaving.

For organizational purposes, this paper will be divided into chapters. Chapter One: Enactment of Compulsory Education, The Truant Officer and The Truant; Chapter Two: Poverty: A Prevalent Theme, Factors Impacting Truancy, The Education Act, , Programs and Strategies and Resiliency and Protective Factors; Chapter Three: The Attendance Incentive Program, Chapter Four: Methodology, Data Analysis and Limitations; Chapter Five: Research Findings; and Chapter Six: Analysis/Discussion, Implications for Future Research and Practice, and Conclusions.

CHAPTER ONE:**Enactment of Compulsory Education:**

There were a number of factors in the nineteenth century that influenced the move toward legislating compulsory education. Firstly, there was concern that “destitute” children, whether they were homeless or lacking parental supervision, were roaming the streets of urban areas and there was a potential for them to engage in public mischief (Neff, 2004, p. 4). Secondly, orphanages identified a need to provide, not only, lodging, but also an education for these children (Neff, 2004, p. 3). Thirdly, there was a desire by middle class parents to have their children educated (Neff, 2004, p. 5). Imposing mandatory education was not only to achieve some form of societal order and control, but simply an extension of popular demand by parents to have their children educated.

Providing lodging for homeless children and orphans was said to have been the nineteenth century institutional response to social problems (Neff, 2004, p. 3). It was believed, that by housing children, it would keep them off the streets and therefore they would not commit delinquent youth crimes (Neff, 2004, p. 3). One of the primary mandates of orphanages was to provide these children with a formal education (Neff, 2004, p. 3). Children were taught what was believed to be necessary life skills they would require (Neff, 2004, p. 26). “All of this was consistent with the crime prevention mandate, as free, compulsory education itself was sold by contemporary supporters in part as a panacea for crime” (Neff, 2004, 4).

It is also important to note, during the early nineteenth century, many parents sought education for their children. Parents would come together and build schoolhouses employing teachers themselves (Neff, 2004, p. 4). These schools became known as “common schools” and became partially funded under the 1816 Common Schools Acts (Neff, 2004, p. 4). These schools developed into the public schools we know today (Neff, 2004, p. 4). Parents had to pay part of the cost but it was said to be an affordable sum even for the working class (Neff, 2004, p. 5). Still there were families who lacked the finances, skills and motivation to take advantage of this opportunity for their children (Neff, 2004, p. 5).

The development of state-funded education in Ontario was also therefore driven by the fact that there was a desire by middle class parents to have their children educated (Neff, 2004, p. 6). The fact that most people valued and sought education for all, and in particular for their own children, was a major factor for the successful development of state-run and state-funded education system in the last half of the nineteenth century (Neff, 2004, p. 5). Some argued that education should be made available to all despite ability to pay (Neff, 2004, p. 6.). However, payment for education was only one barrier to universal education, securing the regular and punctual attendance of all children of school age was a problem (Katz, 1972, p. 432). There was a common belief that regular attendance at school was “the keystone of popular education” and that children who did not go to school would get into public mischief and commit crimes (Katz, 1972, p. 432). Although, compulsory education was legislated in Ontario in 1871, this did not eliminate

the issue of some children not attending school. It was possible to substitute the name of almost any other North American city when a Judge in Toronto, Ontario told a grand jury that

the streets of Toronto, like those of too many other towns, still present the miserable spectacle of idle, untaught children, male and female – a crop too rapidly ripening for the dram shop, the brothel and the prison – and that too under the shadow of spacious and admirably kept school houses, into which all may enter free (Katz, 1972, p. 432).

Children who attended school regularly therefore deemed as “normal” and those children who did not go to school were seen and as being “deviant” (Wardhaugh, 1990, p.741).

Truant Officer and the Truant: Then and Now:

To review the historic etiology of the truant officer is to discover many distasteful stereotypes. He/she was viewed as a “decrepit tyrant”, a person whose job was to scare children and drag them to school by force (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p.31). When the public began to move toward approving compulsory education and enforcement laws became more efficient, the role of the truant officer was to police and enforce this law (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 33, Wardhaugh, 1990, p. 737, Richardson, 1980, p. 161). Many officers were retired police and military persons who were inclined to focus on law enforcement (Wardhaugh, 1990, p. 737). Very large caseloads led to very little “social casework”. Truant officers were often criticized for their inability to work effectively and efficiently (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 33). Officers, who returned truants to the classroom, were often greeted with resentment by teachers for returning “rebels” to overcrowded classrooms (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 33).

The job of the truant officers was difficult because very often they were dealing with “young casualties, the rejects and rebels of the larger society” (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 34). Study after study indicated that truants were largely poor, typically male, often suffering from mental health challenges, and many came from broken homes (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 34, Reid, 198, p. 132). They were often from diverse cultural backgrounds that differed from mainstream and thus may have held values that differed from the values that were honored in schools (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 34). Because of these factors, laws against truancy were not going to resolve the reasons why these children did not come to school. To summarize, much of the environment that assisted in producing truancy was effectively beyond the control of both the truant officers and the truant, yet few officers made the suggestion in favour of basic structural changes in society (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 34).

At the turn of the twentieth century, as part of the broader concern for child welfare, the concept of attendance work began to change. The relationship between truancy and poverty, illness and cultural differences were beginning to be examined in more depth (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 36). A change in ideology occurred through the work of psychologists and social workers (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 36). “School attendance was seen, not only as a police issue, but as a matter of wise legislation, organized compassion and reform and efficient coordination of the institutions that dealt with children and youth” (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 42).

In 1954, the Ontario Association of Counselling and Attendance Services (OACAS) was formed in the Province of Ontario (A Guide for Attendance Counsellors in Ontario, June 1999, p.3). The OACAS is a professional organization that promotes high service standards. This organization provides ongoing professional development through yearly conferences both at a provincial and regional level.

Today attendance counsellors, or truant officers, (title used interchangeably) are diversified in their qualifications and backgrounds, but are skilled individuals working with children, families and school personnel in the school system (A Guide for Attendance Counsellors in Ontario, June 1999, p. 4). Some Boards of Education employ strictly only attendance counsellors, others employ social workers who also wear the hat of attendance counsellors. As in the past, those who perform the duty of enforcing regular attendance are dealing with large caseloads with fewer and fewer resources (Tombolini, Hamilton Regional Representative, OACAS, May, 2003).

In analyzing this historic picture of the truant officer it can be said that they were undervalued. Firstly, the truant officers were not well respected. They were viewed as individuals with little education. Many were retired military personnel, whose job was to snatch up the “filthy, vicious, deviant children” who did not go to school. Over the years, the truant officers continued to advocate for respect (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, 36). Many truant officers, in the very early years, had multiple jobs to support themselves (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, 36). Today, as mentioned, many truant officers or attendance counsellors are skilled professionals with college and/or university

backgrounds. Many boards now employ school social workers whose responsibilities include attendance investigating.

Prior to the nineteenth century, the definition of a truant was “one who begs without justification, a sturdy, beggar, a vagabond, an idle rogue or knave” (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p.37). One school master in Boston wrote the mayor describing truants as “dirty, miserable and ragged boys from wretched parents” (Tyack and Berkowitz, 1977, p. 37). As discussed, when early researchers used the term truant it was to describe a certain stereotype with pathological overtones. Truant children were constructed as “deviant” or “delinquent” persons. The profile of a truant and the negative stereotypes largely still remains today.

CHAPTER TWO:

Poverty: A Prevalent Theme

It is important to address the issue of poverty because research has demonstrated that presently, as in the past, there is a correlation between poverty, truancy, delinquency and early school leaving. Research indicates that high school drop outs are more likely to come from families with low socio-economic status who face structural disadvantages (Janosz et al, 1997, p. 734, McCluskey, et al, 2004, p. 216, Lagana, 2004, p. 212). Some of these disadvantages include single parent families with a low level of education, large family size, and other family members who dropped out of school (Janosz, et al, 1997, p. 734, McWhirter et al 2004, p. 102). Drop outs are more often boys than girls and tend to be ethnic minorities (Janosz, et al, 1997, p. 734).

The increase in families and children living in poverty alone is a great concern. Children of young parents and those living in single parent, female headed households, are at greater risk of living in poverty (Garis, 1998, p. 1082, McWhirter, et al, 2004, p.25). Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, children living in female headed homes were five times more likely to be poor (Hayley, 2003, p. 1). Twenty-six percent of Canadian families lived in poverty in 2000, up 1.5 percent from 1995 (Hayley, 2003, p. 1). Of the Canadian families living in poverty, 57 percent were single parents and most of them were mother-only parent families (Hayley, 2003, p. 1).

Mother-only families have significantly increased during the past three decades (Zhan and Sherraden, 2003, p. 191). In a recent article published in the Hamilton

Spectator, it was noted by Statistics Canada that the chance of a single mother being unemployed were close to seven times higher than for an unattached man (MacLeod, September 2005, p. A14). Experts identified that single mothers do not have access to affordable day care and are penalized by employers for extended time away from the workforce while raising their children (MacLeod, September 2005, p. A14). Many of these women are forced to rely on social assistance which leads to inadequate housing, lack of educational opportunities, etc. In essence it keeps single mothers poor.

According to Statistics Canada, almost 20% or 95,370 of Hamilton residents are living on incomes below the poverty line (Fraser, November 2004, p. 1). This includes almost 25% of all children under the age of 12 (Fraser, November 2004, p. 1). Among female led, lone parent families, 81% of those with children younger than 6 years of age were living in poverty as were 71% of those with children 6 – 9 years (Fraser, November 2004, p. 3).

Poor children and families have few resources, choices and developmental opportunities and this contributes to family stress, stigma, despair and isolation (Hughes, 1995, pg. 780). Low-income parents, parents of color, and recent immigrants have historically found it difficult to obtain needed supports and services (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, 416). Services are often offered at inconvenient times and at difficult to access locations which create barriers (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 417). Further, many families are not even aware that there are services available (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 417). Working your way through complex and fragmented systems and services

is difficult, not only for people who are poor, but even more difficult for new immigrants who are both poor and do not speak the language (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 417). There is also a correlation between poverty and child maltreatment and it is argued that people become involved in the child welfare system because there is little to no help available (Hughes, 1995, pg. 780).

There is a large body of literature that suggests strong links between poverty, truancy and delinquency (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217, Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 95, Teasley, 2004, p. 119, Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). Substance abuse, crime, violence and gangs are among the problems frequently experienced by families living in poverty-stricken urban areas (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 415). Studies have reported that truancy can be seen as a “gateway” to more deviant behaviors and crime (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217). In adolescence, truancy has been directly linked to serious delinquency, violence and substance abuse (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217). Police Departments have reported an increase in day time crime as some students who are not in school are engaging in criminal activity (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217).

When examining school attendance and delinquency, poor school attendance leads to failure to graduate from high school (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217, Lagana, 2004, p. 212). In a study looking at high school completion and truancy by Robins and Ratcliffe (1980), it was determined that 75% of chronic truants failed to graduate from high school compared with 3% of non truants (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217). School dropouts when compared to high school graduates are three and a half times more likely to be arrested (Dupper and Poertner 1997, p. 416).

Truancy leads to lost opportunities for youth in terms of negative occupational consequences, including relegation to lower status occupations, less stable career patterns and higher rates of unemployment (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 218, Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 95, Lagana, 2004, p. 212). High School dropouts may find that, when looking for employment, they lack the necessary skills or qualifications to secure a well paying job and the opportunity for advancement is limited (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 218). Those students that leave high school without graduating have higher rates of unemployment, are more likely to receive public assistance and have less earning potential than those that complete their high school education (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 218). Compared to high school graduates those who do not complete high school are twice as likely to be unemployed and living in poverty (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416).

Factors Impacting Truancy:

Factors that influence truancy are many. Too often research has focused on only one area, however, more recently the interrelationships between factors have been studied (Cimmarusti, et al, 1984, p. 201, 202, Corville-Smith et al 1998, p. 630, McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 216, and Teasley. 2004, p. 118). For discussion purposes factors can be categorized as related to the individual, the family, the school and the community (Cimmarusti, et al, 1984, p. 202, Corville-Smith et al 1998, p. 630, McCluskey et al, 2004, P. 216 and Teasley, 2004, p. 118, 119, 120).

Individual/Personal:

Students who are truant are often characterized as having decreased social, cognitive and problem-solving skills (McCluskey, 2004 et al, p. 216, Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). They are more likely to experience health, psychological/emotional and learning difficulties (McCluskey, 2004, p. 216, Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). McCluskey et al discuss that these areas of functioning can impact the school experience and contribute to truancy. Cognitive skills can affect coping and self-perception, and social skills can influence the ability of children to develop positive relationships with peers and teachers. Children with reduced cognitive or social skills have greater difficulty adjusting to school which can increase absenteeism. Students who find their school experience to be unpleasant and not rewarding are more likely to skip school (2004, p. 216). All of these factors can contribute and lead to an adolescent dropping out of school (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416).

Some children struggle with mental health challenges which contribute to non-attendance. There are children who outright refuse to come to school. Studies that examine school refusal behavior indicate that the diagnostic characteristics of both severe separation anxiety and major depression tend to overlap (Kearney, 1992, p. 270). This suggests that there is some sort of underlying relationship between the two diagnosis (Kearney, 1992, p. 270). It also suggests that it can be difficult to pinpoint the source of the problem when these characteristics overlap. Bernstein and Garfinkel, in their research, concluded that it was very difficult to separate the symptoms of anxiety and

depression and to further determine which disorder was primary or secondary (1986, p. 240).

Adolescents who do not attend school are more likely to report lower academic self-concept and higher prevalence of anxiety and neuroticism (Corville-Smith et al 1998, 631). They are also more likely to engage in antisocial activity in the classroom (Corville-Smith et al, 1998, p. 631) and be diagnosed with conduct disorders (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 216). The literature also reports that children living below the poverty line are more likely to suffer from behavioral and emotional problems compared to children whose families do not endure financial hardship (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p. 62). Children living below the poverty threshold are more likely to experience learning difficulties and developmental delays (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p. 62).

Parent/Family:

Factors that are linked with truancy include: family socioeconomic status, parenting skills, child abuse and neglect, family social supports and outside community supports (McCluskey et al, 2004, p 216). Parents who are poor are less likely to be healthy both emotionally and physically than those parents who are not poor (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p. 66). Parents' irritability and depressive symptoms are linked with more conflictual interactions with adolescents which can lead to less satisfactory emotional, social and cognitive developments (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p. 66). Parents who are poor are more likely to be worried about adequate shelter, putting enough food on the table and paying their bills. The constant worry about money is taxing on people. This can be very stressful leading to emotional upset. Poor families

who line up at the food banks to secure food may experience a sense of humiliation and feelings of inadequacy relating to their inability to provide for their families. There is also the negative social stigma of being on welfare.

There has been a concerted attempt by governments to move single mothers from relying on welfare to putting them into the paid labour force (Evans, 1996, p.152 and Cancian and Meyer, 2000, p. 69). The idea is great in theory but for this to happen there has to be appropriate supports in place. The immediate concern is that many of these women are poor with little education and no skills. Lack of adequate training, full-time decent paying employment opportunities and lack of adequate day care are structural barriers for these women. These barriers keep women oppressed.

Parents who have few outside supports, limited resources and who suffer from mental health challenges are more likely to have a difficult time getting their child to school than non-poor families (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 216). They are often dealing with their own daily challenges and there are times when they are unable to care for the welfare of their children. A child's absence from school can be an indicator that parents or guardians are overburdened and the family lacks the necessary and needed social and financial supports (Barth, 1984, p. 155). They may feel a sense of powerlessness and shame. Some seek professional assistance that is often marked with frustration because of long waiting lists. In Hamilton, Ontario, the wait to be seen by a children's service is six to nine months (Contact Hamilton, Intake Worker, 2004).

School:

School characteristics that have been linked with truancy include such things as curriculum, student/teacher relationship, safety of school environment and school suspension policies (McCluskey, et al, 2004, p. 216). According to Kronick and Hargis, when a student drops out of school, the curriculum is always a factor (1998, p. 11). It may not be the primary factor but it is always a contributing factor (Kronick and Hargis, 1998, p. 11 and Ziesemer, 1984, p. 168). One study found that the curriculum does not always stimulate student interest or it appears to the student that it is unlikely to hold any future benefit (Corville-Smith et al, 1996, p. 632, McWhirter et al 2004, p. 105). Longitudinal studies show a correlation between not attending school in middle and high school with academic difficulty in one subject area (Teasley, 2004, p. 119).

The student-teacher relationship is a critical determining factor of student academic motivation and attitude toward school (Eccles et al, 1993, p 94). Students who do not come to school regularly are sometimes labeled as “not caring” or as “troubled”. Some teachers may have a sense of relief that they do not have to deal with a student who is constantly behind and in need of assistance (Barth, 1984, p. 153). Relationships between students and teachers that are conflictual and strained appear to be related to truancy (Corville-Smith et al, 1998, p. 631). Students who feel a sense of connection to their teacher are less likely to skip school (McCluskey, et al, 2004). Some research indicates that teachers who are supportive of their students, have high expectations in the classroom and offer praise to students also encourage good attendance (Barth, 1984, p. 155, McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 216).

Many children are afraid to attend school because they are being bullied. In a study in 2001 by the Kaiser Foundation et al, three quarters of the teens interviewed reported that bullying is a regular occurrence at school (Coloroso, 2002, p.12). Eighty-six percent of children between the ages of 12 and 15 said they get teased or bullied at school (Coloroso, 2002. p. 12). Poor children report being teased and bullied because they often lack the “cool stuff” that other children have available to them (Interview Grade 6 Student, H.W.C.D.S.B.). According to the National Association of School Psychologists, 160,000 children in the United States miss school every day because they fear they will be bullied (Coloroso, 2002, p. 50).

Children need to come to school and feel a sense of security and safety. After the family, schools can be the second most important place in the lives of children and adolescents (Mitchener and Schmidt, 1998, p. 336). Children spend a large part of their day in school during the academic year. Schools offer students the greatest opportunity for furthering their search for meaning and for promoting development (Mitchener and Schmidt, 1998, p. 353). Through the school staff, structures, and practices, schools can provide students with the trust and opportunities they need to achieve a sense of competence, and to enhance a sense of self and of belonging to a larger community (Mitchener and Schmidt, 1998, p. 353). Creating an environment of safety rests largely with both the administration of the school and the individual teachers. Policies and practices need to be consistent, clear and promote a positive, safe environment for all. Children need to be educated around the issue of bullying and to be made aware about their responsibility to make their school environment a safe and pleasant place.

The current zero tolerance policy for bullying, in all school boards across the Province of Ontario, states that any child causing “harm” to another will be subject to the possibility of suspension (Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, Safe Schools Manual, Revised September, 2005). Harm can be physical or verbal, direct or indirect. There are problems with this policy. In my experience, often those students who have been victimized repeatedly by a bully, and who cannot take any more abuse, releases pent up anger and frustration with a physical or verbal attack. The victim has tried to use strategies like ignoring and walking away but they don’t work. When they retaliate they are often the one who gets suspended. This hardly seems like a fair policy but it is difficult for the victim to prove that he/she has been subject to abuse when it goes on behind the watchful eye of adults.

School principals have the authority to suspend students who are truant. Research demonstrates that this policy often contributes to students leaving school altogether (Kronick and Hargis, 1998, p. 26). Suspending students for not attending contributes to the disengagement of students and this sends a message to the student that they are not welcome (Kronick and Hargis, 1998, p. 26). Research indicates that highly punitive programs that place the problem of truancy on the individual have proven to be ineffective (Teasley, 2004, p. 123). Zero tolerance policies, have done more to alienate students and contributes to disengaging them from school altogether (Teasley, 2004, p. 123 and Baker and Jansen, 2000, p. 47). When a student is suspended they get behind in their school work, and this can contribute to a sense of hopelessness and further disconnection from school.

The risk of students leaving school early is greater in some ethnic minority groups (Janosz et al, 1997, pg. 733). They are unfamiliar with the educational system and many have difficulty communicating because of language barriers. Curriculum is often not inclusive of the new immigrants' cultural experiences and ethnic students may feel isolated and alienated which may contribute to truancy (Teasley 2004, p. 121). School may not be their first priority as they may have to climatize to a new culture and, in many cases, may be dealing with the trauma they left behind in their home country. Clearly, students from ethnic minority groups would benefit from a curriculum that reflects their own unique experiences, and teachers can enhance diverse populations' learning, and sense of belonging if the curriculum reflects who they are and where they come from (Teasley, p. 2004, 124).

Studies indicate that school discipline and suspension policies can be discriminatory toward ethnic minority groups and people of color. One British study showed that teachers used excessive discipline toward boys who were black only to avoid any perceived threat to school authority and classroom management (Graham and Robinson, 2004, p. 659). There were many examples cited in this study where boys who were black would be sent to stand outside the classroom, told to stand up straight in assemblies, and be singled out and instructed to stand by the wall or outside the staff room during playtime (Graham and Robinson, 2004, p. 660). The study also demonstrated how teachers were influenced by powerful stereotypes that many black children are involved with crime (Graham and Robinson, 2004, p. 660). Teachers believed that boys who were black were in danger of growing up and becoming

criminals, which resulted in the over disciplining of these children (Graham and Robinson, 2004, p. 660). The over disciplining of these children produced an image among their peers as being “bad”, and as a consequence, they were more likely to be drawn into fights (Graham and Robinson, 2004, p. 66). Under the zero tolerance for violence policies, this would result in suspensions, which we know push children out of the learning environment altogether.

Other marginalized students who are at risk are gay and lesbian students, poor students, students with disabilities and students of color.

Community:

When looking at the larger community, the presence of delinquent peers, street gangs and interracial conflict are thought to have an impact on school attendance (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217). The evidence supports the fact that parental influences are stronger when children are younger but once children reach adolescence the influences of their peer group takes on a greater importance (McCluskey et al 2004, p. 217). As previously noted, there is a correlation with respect to adolescents who are truant and the increased risk of participating in delinquent and risky behaviors (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 217). When children are hanging around and have nothing to keep them occupied in a positive sense then there is a greater opportunity for them to find trouble.

It is an important fact that poor parents are often confined to their choice of neighborhoods and schools (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997, p. 66). They may have to reside in an area where there is high crime and unemployment with few resources for

child development, such as safe play areas for children, day care and after school programs (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan 1997, p. 66, Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Allen-Meares, 2002, p. 126). The schools that tend to be in need of the most repair are often located in centre cities where the population is predominantly poor (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). As a result of the above there are major implications for children and their families.

The Education Act:

The policies and the language in the Education Act (EA) is an important piece of legislation to examine. The EA clearly states that “every child who attains the age of six years on or before the first day of school in September in any year shall attend an elementary or secondary school on every school day from the first school day in September in that year until the child attains the age of sixteen years” (Education Act, June 2001, p. 34). The Education Act also states that it is the duty of the parent or guardian to “cause” the child to attend school (Education Act, June 2001, p. 36). If the child is ill for longer than a three day period the parent must provide written documentation by an attending physician (Hamilton-Wentworth Attendance Protocol, Revised 2002). A principal has the authority to suspend a student for persistent truancy (Education Act, June 2001, p. 36). Every board must employ at least one attendance counsellor who is responsible to ensure the regular attendance of each and every student in that board (Education Act, June 2001, p. 38). Parents or guardians of a child who fail to “cause” their child to attend school are guilty of an offence and on conviction are liable to a fine of not more than \$200.00 (Education Act, June 2001 p. 41).

Suspending students for truancy often further isolates them and they get further behind in their school work. It does more to disconnect children than improve the situation. As previously discussed, there is a correlation between truancy and poverty. Fining those unable to pay, or threatening to fine those who are dealing with many stressors in their life, further isolates them from the school system.

Clearly, attendance counsellors have tremendous authority over the children, and the families of children, who do not attend school. The legislation dictates that it is the parents' responsibility to get their children to school every day and on time. This legislation does not account for other social problems that impact and contribute to truancy and early school leaving. It will take more than education to improve the barriers to education for many of these families. To ignore these structures would be a disservice to children and families.

It is very likely that the pressure on parents to ensure that their child attend school will only continue. The current Ontario Liberal Government is putting in place, and will soon legislate, the expansion of compulsory education to age eighteen (Livingston, September 3, 2005, p. A16). The governments' plan is to offer students more co-op and on the job training (Livingston, September 3, 2005, p. A16). This is an effort to not only curb the thirty percent drop out rate but also to address the decline of people entering trades sector positions (HRDC, 2005, p. 1). This is also recognition that some children do not learn in a regular classroom but could develop technical and trade skills that are better suited for them. The current Premier of Ontario, Dalton McGuinty, admits that this strategy is to assist students who may struggle with the traditional curriculum, but be

interested in skilled trade opportunities like automotive or hair design (Livingston, September 3, 2005, p. A16). Apprenticeships can be the key to developing a specialized trade for these students (HRDC, 2005 P. 2). Students who want to leave school at age 16 will be offered programs such as trade apprenticeships, and on the job training (Livingston, G., September 3, 2005, p. A16). They will be able to work on sharpening skills that match their interests. If students are engaged in their learning and experience success then it is likely to be an effective approach. In my own practice, I have had students who struggle academically but spend hours in their home garage working on the family car because this interests them and gives them satisfaction. These students would likely desire such programs to be in place. They may see a chance for opportunity and success and there would be more likelihood that they would attend school.

It will take a tremendous effort to develop and secure these types of programs with community businesses. Extra money will also be needed to employ a person to coordinate and manage this program in every high school. The focus appears to be on students in grade eleven and twelve and there needs to be a concerted effort to get the message to young students in elementary school that these programs will be viable options and available to them. Connecting with children in their early years will assist in keeping them interested and excited about attainable goals and opportunities. This could very well lead to decreased truancy. Some method of evaluation is needed to monitor the success of this initiative.

The problem of truancy is complicated and beyond the scope of this paper to address all of the issues. There are, however, a considerable number of strategies and programs in place to deal with this problem which will now be examined.

Programs and Strategies:

There are many current programs and strategies to address truancy. Some of these include: phoning home, text messaging or emailing parents when a child is absent (New Zealand Government, 2004, p.1) school/police partnerships (White et al, 2001); financial penalties through court systems, families ordered to participate in counselling, supervised work programs or community service (Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, August 2000, Ziesemer, 1984) and early intervention programs (Barth, 1984, McCluskey et al, 2004, Ford and Sutphen, 1996, Baker and Jansen 2002). These programs and strategies are not an exhaustive representation, but are meant to provide the reader with a snapshot of some current ways of addressing truancy.

In New Zealand efforts have been made through a pilot project to implement text messaging when children are not at school. Parents receive emails or text messages with the idea that they would immediately be made aware that their child is truant (New Zealand Government, 2004, p. 2). In Ontario, elementary school secretaries call home daily if a child is absent and parents of high school children receive automated voice messages from the school. Parents likely appreciate knowing if their child has not attended class, however, a simple phone call will likely not eradicate the problem of chronic truancy as it does not address the root of the problem. There is also an assumption that parents own computers and answering machines. Poor families are at a

great disadvantage because owning technical equipment is often a barrier for them. Therefore, for the many families that do not own these pieces of equipment, this strategy would be unsuccessful.

Increases of youth violence in the community and the fear of violence in schools prompted some jurisdictions in the United States to identify children at risk (White et al, 2001, p. 507). For example, in West Contra Costa Unified School District in California a Police/School Truancy Recovery Program was developed. The purpose was to keep youth in school and off the streets during school time. Enforcing compulsory attendance was a priority (White et al, 2001, p. 511). Parents are contacted immediately if their children are caught skipping and required to pick their child up at the Police Station. Parents can be fined a maximum of \$500.00. Children serve in-school suspensions where they are expected to complete school work (White et al, 2001, p. 511). While the student is serving the in-school suspension, a teacher will make contact with the student in an attempt to determine if there are underlying issues at home or school (White et al, p. 511). Both the police and the school monitor attendance. White et al, studied 178 students randomly over an 18 – 21 month period. These were students who had been picked up by the police. The study found that students got into trouble less, skipped school less and improved their grades slightly when pre and post data was compared (2001 p. 527).

The West Contra Program uses the strategy of fining parents. Fining parents who are, by and large, poor when their child is not attending school, does very little to assist families. It does not get at the complicated issues as to why children are not attending

and does not address the struggles of this population. This approach could possibly further isolate and frustrate marginalized families. Many cannot afford to pay fines and this could add to their existing stressors. The White et al article, 2001, suggests that educators meet with the students and try to determine whether or not there are underlying issues, but it does not indicate what type of assistance would be available. As previously discussed, the wait time for services in communities can be lengthy and teachers are, by and large, not trained to conduct individual and/or family counselling. However, police presence can be positive in that the children get to know the police officers. Students learn that their attendance is being closely monitored and perhaps that someone cares about them.

A valuable strategy of the West Contra Program is the idea of an in- school suspension where children are still connected to the school and the understanding is that school work is important and there are no compromises. Finally, teachers who approach students on a one to one basis can also determine if the student is struggling academically, and whether or not extra support is needed in this area. This can also be an opportunity for the teacher to get to know the child more personally. It can be a beginning point to developing a caring relationship between both student and teacher.

In Wisconsin, a comprehensive program has been developed. The Wisconsin Legislature in 1997 enacted the “Wisconsin Act 239” which decreased the definition of habitual absences from ten consecutive unexcused absences to five; permitted municipalities to enact ordinances for one truancy; and increased the number of sanctions against habitual trancies available to municipalities (Spectrum, Fall, 2000, p. 13). This

piece of legislation permitted increased sanctions to parents who failed to ensure that their children attended school (Spectrum, Fall 2000, p. 13). Sanctions for habitual truancy may include: a fine of up to \$500.00 against the student, parent or guardian or both; an order for the student and/or parent to participate in counselling; a supervised work program or community service; and/or home detention (Spectrum, Fall 2000, p. 13).

Ordering families to participate in counselling is good in theory but lengthy waiting lists, transportation barriers and language barriers often hinder this process. It also assumes that counselling is the “fix it” and further that the problem is with the parent or child. Supervised work programs could be a viable alternative as long as students buy into it. If the student is interested in or able to express what type of work environment they would enjoy then this option could prove to be an effective approach. On the other hand, if they are not interested the likelihood of them attending on their own accord would be small and there would have to be some type of enforcement in place.

Community service sanctions can provide students with valuable experience. They may also have the opportunity to work with adults who can provide praise and encouragement for their efforts. However, if the students are not interested in the place of service or view this approach as providing them with little value they may not attend. If they do attend they may be disruptive to others and cause other problems. Allowing students to be involved in choosing where they would like to work or do community service gives them a form of control over the situation.

In the Province of Ontario, students are mandated to conduct forty hours of community service over their high school career. This is part of the curriculum and

expectation. Students are able to choose where they would like to do their community service, thus they are an active member in the process.

Home detentions, as already stated, further isolate students from the school environment. It impacts upon them socially, and contributes to them falling behind in school work. These outcomes can increase the likelihood that the student may not want to return to school. This is also a problem for parents who work and cannot afford babysitting when their child is home. This policy allows suspended teens the opportunity to roam the streets unsupervised and can put them at greater risk for getting into trouble in their community.

In an effort to address current drop out rates some communities across the United States are moving toward making the school the “hub” of the community (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). Family resource centres and services are being developed in an attempt to revitalize impoverished communities (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). Some social services are being made available on school site or within the neighborhood. Schools are becoming the single access point for many services. These services include: health, recreation, job development, child development and care, education and housing (Dupper and Poertner, 1997, p. 416). These schools supplement increased academic resources with a host of community partners (Goldschmidt, Walsh. and Sayles, 2004, p. 40). These community schools develop “intentional communities” with the children and the families of the school, as well as, the external community in the neighborhood (Goldschmidt et al 2004, p. 40, 41).

This type of program was also developed in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in April 2001. The program was entitled “The Centre City Education Program”. The program provided increased academic support, parental involvement, and partnerships with the community. It was evaluated positively in 2004 (Memorandum to Board of Trustees from McBeath, A., Superintendent of Edmonton Schools, February 24, 2004, p. 1). Results indicated that over a two year period the attendance remained relatively stable in the seven schools. It was suggested by the program evaluators that there needs to be more time to effectively evaluate the attendance piece. However, results on provincial achievement tests indicated that there was an increase in the percentage of students achieving the acceptable standard in three of the four subject areas tested: Language Arts, Science and Social Studies (Memorandum to Board of Trustees from McBeath, A., Superintendent of Edmonton Schools, February 24, 2004, p. 2).

Evaluation of parent satisfaction with the Edmonton program indicated that parents were “extremely satisfied” with the program, as well as their child’s level of achievement and attitudes toward school and behavior toward others (Memorandum to Board of Trustees from McBeath, A., Superintendent of Edmonton Schools, February, 24, 2004, p. 4). The participation rate of the parent survey was said to be extremely high; 371 completed surveys representing 618 students from the seven participating schools (Memorandum to Board of Trustees from McBeath, A., Superintendent of Edmonton Schools, February, 24, 2004, p., 4). Overall, the results identified many positives that included increased parental involvement at school, community partnerships, motivated staff and students.

These are examples of strategies and programs that involve a commitment and coordinated effort from many individuals within education, social services, community businesses and families in order to bring such an endeavor from just a good idea to a sustained reality. Commitment is a key term because it means not only commitment in time and resources, but a commitment to ensuring adequate and sustained funding. There must also be the appropriate space available in the school and in the community in order for these programs to be realized.

There is a body of research that supports early intervention programs to improve attendance (Baker and Jansen, 2002, Barth, 1984, Ford, and Sutphen, 1996, and McCluskey et al, 2004). All of these studies suggest there is a correlation between not attending school in the elementary years and truancy and early school leaving. Those students who do not attend in elementary school are more likely to become high school drop outs than those who did not have this problem early on in their school career (Barth, 1984, p. 152, Ford and Sutphen, 1996 p. 96). Elementary school intervention programs can positively impact children and families that are struggling with attendance before they become too severe and harder to reach (Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 96).

School social workers and attendance counsellors are in unique positions where they can assess individual students' and family needs and provide counselling, consultation, advocacy and appropriate resources to these families (Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 96). They have the ability to develop and implement school wide programs to promote and reward good attendance (Ford, and Sutphen, 1996, p. 96). However,

difficulties in implementing such programs are related to workload issues for workers, and scarcity of available resources.

In the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic Board there is one Alternative Education Program. It is a place for students sixteen years of age and older who do not fit into “traditional” school settings. These students very often enter the alternative program with few credits. Attendance has been a major issue in their previous high school. These are students who are often dealing with serious issues in their life such as poverty, teen parenting, homelessness, addictions and poor academic achievement. At this school, there are low teacher-student ratios and a number of community resources on-site such as parenting groups for teen parents, addiction counsellors, and increased social work support. This is a place where students can learn at a different pace with many supports in place. All of the teachers get to know the students well and this promotes healthy relationships.

Given the research on truancy, there needs to be a focus on students of all ages who do not fit into traditional school settings. These students often end up in grade nine skipping one class, which leads to meeting other students who are not going to class, which then leads to skipping days at a time. Expanding alternative education programs to include those students struggling in the early years may be a worthwhile consideration.

The Hamilton-Wentworth Public Board has three elementary alternative education sites for grades 6 – 8, and high school programs. These programs accept students who do not fit into their current school setting where their home school has tried unsuccessfully to assist the student. These students are struggling academically,

socially/emotionally and behaviorally and appear to be disengaged from school. Most of the students have some kind of diagnosis, for example, ADHD, OCD, ODD, and Bipolar Mood Disorder. At the secondary level there is assigned teacher time to work with the “at risk” population. Some high schools operate their own alternative education program. It is often these students deemed “at risk” who have attendance issues and are at the greatest risk of leaving school early (Bates, M., Social Worker, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Personal Communication, October 11, 2005).

The Ontario government in 2003 put a report entitled “Building Pathways to Success”. A working group was comprised of educators, governmental policy makers, business leaders and representatives from the Ontario Parent Council Association. They came together to discuss what could be done to assist students “at risk” of not graduating from high school. This document looked at re-defining what “success” meant. In the past, “success” was associated with post-secondary education, but in efforts to re-define this term, “success” could mean graduating from high school and entering the work force. The Ontario report recognized that those students who choose the “work path” after high school need support and opportunities to engage in work experiences during their high school years in order for them to develop appropriate skills. Increasing co-op and apprenticeships programs that are focused on the trade sector is part of this initiative. The target population addressed in this document is students from grade 7 – 10 (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Various initiatives are just getting under way in school boards across the Province. There is a commitment from the Province both verbally and financially to

assist students' "at-risk", however, an evaluation of the success of this approach is too early to determine.

Despite children who are said to be "at risk" of not completing high school and developing into healthy and competent adults, there are children who are said to be "resilient" and overcome enormous barriers. These children often do very well in their adult lives. We now look at the resilience and protective factors literature to provide a framework and to enhance our understanding of how this happens and what makes our efforts to work with this population so important.

Resiliency and Protective Factors:

Children who flourish despite facing challenges such as poverty, racism, family despair, unemployment, mental health challenges and addictions have been described as being "resilient" (Bosworth and Earthman, 2002, p. 299-300, Minnard, 2002, p. 233, Ungar, 2004, p. 346). Resiliency literature highlights the importance of replacing the stigmatizing, pathology laden discourse when dealing with "at risk" children and youth and replacing it with strength based vocabulary and positive interventions that assist individuals in overcoming major challenges (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 240). A belief that children, despite their circumstances, can beat the odds is part of a resiliency and strength based perspective (Laursen, and Birmingham, 2003, p. 240). According to the research, "children need at least one significant and caring adult in their life who can provide support for healthy development and learning, engender trust and love, and convey compassion, understanding, interest and respect" (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 240).

One of the first researchers to provide hard data on positive outcomes of caring relationships with children facing hardships was Norman Garmezy (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 240). The resilience of children who are especially challenged is enhanced when the family, the school, the community and the peer group provide such protective factors as caring relationships, opportunities, expectations, and support (Laursen and Birmingham, 2003, p. 241). Individual protective factors are said to be most powerful when combined and integrated with others (Laursen, and Birmingham, 2003, p. 241). As with risk factors, protective factors seem to have a cumulative effect – the more supportive resources in a child’s life, the greater the chance for success (Minnard, 2002, p. 235).

Researchers have demonstrated that the most widely cited protective factors for children are optimization of academic and social competence, a caring and supportive adult and a supportive school environment (Minnard, 2002, p. 235). School is a place where children spend hours per week and with the appropriate protective supports there is an opportunity to nurture children and assists families who experience hardships.

It may take a “village” to raise a child but a caring adult can mobilize a village in order to create an environment where children and families feel safe, wanted and welcomed. Through the efforts of one caring adult a grass root Attendance Incentive Program was developed in Southern Ontario.

CHAPTER THREE:**The Attendance Incentive Program:**

The Attendance Incentive Program (AIP) was pioneered and developed by one attendance counsellor in a medium sized city in Southern Ontario. In this particular board there are three attendance counsellors in total. The other two attendance counsellors do not participate in the program. The attendance counsellor operates the AIP in one high school and six elementary schools.

This researcher became familiar with this program while attending a workshop sponsored by the Ontario Association of Counselling and Attendance Services in Spring 2004. School social workers and attendance counsellors struggle with ways to assist children and families who do not come to school and recognize the complexities of this issue. This program is an attempt to deal with these complexities.

The program offers rewards to students with perfect attendance. Rewards are in the form of tangible goods. There is a glass display cabinet in the school that houses many prizes for the children to view during the month. There is also a class reward for the overall best attendance and each month the winners get to keep the “school mascot” which is named by the students. The mascot is a large stuffed animal or toy. There are monthly award assemblies. Parents are invited to the assemblies. Prizes are donated through the community. The campaign to solicit prizes is accomplished through letter writing campaigns and word of mouth.

This researcher had the opportunity to visit the research school site on an assembly day. There was excitement and energy in the school. There was a steady stream of children coming in and out of the secretary's office which created a buzz in the air. They were asking if the attendance counsellor (which they all knew by first name) had arrived at the school. They wanted to help set up for the assembly. The counsellor arrived with many parcels and children quickly helped to bring the prizes to the gym. The gym was set up with prizes on a big table.

After morning announcements classes began to arrive in the gym. It was obvious that parents had also come to the assembly. The counsellor began the assembly by welcoming all the students and then turning to two audience members and telling the children that these two individuals had donated and continue to donate prizes for the children to win. The guests were greeted with a warm applause. The counsellor then began the assembly by discussing the importance of attendance. Questions such as why do we need to come to school every day and on time were asked of the children. A child responded "so we can learn". She told the children that as adults we must come to work every day and on time so that we will have a job and get paid. Then the names of the students one by one were called and the kids made their way to the prize table in an orderly fashion to pick up a gift. Toward the end of the assembly the suspense was building as to which class won the mascot. When the winner was announced the students let out a loud cheer and there was laughter on everyone's face. The whole gymnasium was cheering – it was quite a sight.

I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to actually see the program during this phase. Attending the assembly that day left me with a visual imprint in my mind. This was of happy children who were excited and attentive and let out roaring cheers.

The School Site:

The school was built in 1919 and was one of the city's first elementary schools in the area. The school is located in an urban area and is surrounded by old stately homes and subsidized housing. There are many single parent and low socio-economic families in the community. The school has been involved in the AIP for four years. There was, at the time of the study, 245 active students. The school is transitory and families are known to leave for short periods of time and return to the neighborhood . The school is a place where many grandparents and parents in the community have attended over the years(source from attendance counsellor, who cannot be identified, but also this information was verified by the school principal, secretary and other educators in their interviews). Many families may have continued to reside in the same area because of subsidized housing opportunities.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology:

The purpose of this study was to determine staff perceptions of the impact of a school based Attendance Incentive Program. This paper will examine not only the impact on truancy but other possible outcomes as well. These outcomes include such things as: the impact on relationships between teachers, students and parents, the development of partnerships between the school, community and parents and the impact, if any, on the student in terms of perceived satisfaction and/or pride.

Information was gathered through one on one interviews. The study took place in one school setting. Permission to conduct the study in a school setting was granted by the School Board. The request was reviewed and cleared by the School Boards' internal Ethics Committee. The school site chosen was one of the pioneer schools to first receive the AIP. The Principal of the said site was approached and informed about the study. The Principal, after hearing about the study, agreed to have the school be the research site.

A "letter of information" was delivered to all staff outlining particulars about the study including who the researcher was, the purpose of the study, the assurance of confidentiality and the right to decline or withdraw from the study without reprisal at any time. Participants were made aware that the study was approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Review Board and were provided the name of the professor supervising the project and the name of the researcher and appropriate contact numbers.

Sample questions were also provided to give potential participants an idea of what they would be asked (see Appendix I). Participants also signed a “Consent to Participate Form” on the day of the interviews (see Appendix II). This form provided a more thorough overview of the project and again highlighted the rights of the participants. It gave participants an opportunity to ask any questions and decline to be interviewed at that time if they felt uncomfortable in any way.

The issue of confidentiality and anonymity was again highlighted. Participants were made aware that their identity and the identity of the school would be, to the best of the researcher’s ability, kept confidential. No participants refused to participate.

The research was a qualitative design and open ended questions were developed as a guide (see Appendix III). A qualitative design allowed for detailed impressions of the impact of the AIP. The interview questions addressed both the advantages and the disadvantages of the program. It also focused on, not only the impact the program had on truancy, but additional impacts were also explored. These included possible impacts on the school environment, the community and the families.

All interviews were taped with the exception of one individual who declined a taped interview but agreed to participate. All taped interviews were transcribed word for word by the researcher. The non-taped interview was recorded by hand and the participant was asked to speak slowly in order to achieve accurate information. The participant had no problem with this request and wanted the accuracy of the responses recorded as well. The number of questions asked was purposely kept to a minimum. The researcher was sensitive to the fact that those who work in education are very busy and

lunch and recess breaks are often filled with a number of duties and errands that the staff must attend to.

Eight staff members agreed to participate. Five of the staff were educators, one educational assistant, the school principal and the school secretary. Interviews lasted approximately fifteen minutes to thirty minutes in length. The researcher went to the school on two occasions to interview staff. All interviews were conducted during school hours over the staffs' lunch period and recess breaks which appeared to be the most convenient time for them. Participants were made aware that their school would receive a copy of the research from the researcher upon completion.

Data Analysis:

The analysis began by transcribing word for word the participant's interviews. Each transcript was read carefully and in its entirety several times. This researcher chose to examine each question at a time and identified concepts, themes and any discrepancies in the data. A coding sheet was developed and various concepts and themes were color coded and documented.

The researcher declared an interest in truancy and early school leaving in the introduction. In my profession, as a school social worker, I constantly work with students who struggle to come to school. Examining effective programs to address this issue is important. The desire to analyse the Attendance Incentive Program was to realistically and honestly assess **both** the successes of the program and its limitations. This was accomplished by listening carefully to school staff who had direct involvement with the program.

As with any research project, this study has limitations which need to be identified and acknowledged before proceeding to the research findings.

Limitations:

It is important to note the limitations of this research before discussion of the findings. The first limitation to consider is that the study was conducted in one school setting and therefore, like any qualitative study, cannot be generalized to other school settings. Each individual school is a unique culture even though there may be similar characteristics in school communities. It is also important to note that rural school settings would also present different challenges than urban areas.

The second limitation was that the sample size used to obtain information for the research was small. This again was due to time constraints of the project and the scope of this paper. The participants in the research study were all staff members of the school. As previously stated, five were educators, one was an educational assistant, one was the principal and the final participant was the school secretary. Although it was important to try to achieve balanced perspectives from all staff members, various themes can be constructed through the eyes of specific professionals within the school. For example, educators may view the program in one way and educational assistants may view the program through an entirely different lens. The findings will reflect general information obtained in an effort to maintain anonymity as promised to the participants. For future research, it would be beneficial to look at a much larger sample size of various disciplines within more than one school setting.

Thirdly, the participants were all staff members and it is important to note that it would also be of great value to interview students, parents, community participants and senior administration from the Board of Education. This would expand the findings and achieve a more global perspective of the effectiveness of the program. It is particularly important to gain the perspectives of the children and parents as they are the people for whom the program was developed and their input is valuable.

As there are limitations in all research there are also reasons to conduct studies. It is this researcher's opinion, that while only one site was explored, and the sample size was small, there is useful information to be drawn from this study. There is no program quite like the AIP that I have been able to review, and therefore exposing this program gives practitioners new strategies and tools to use when working with children and families who struggle with truancy. It also may provide new hope to address this very serious issue for all professionals who work with this population.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Research Findings:

Please note that for the purpose of this paper the Attendance Counsellor will be referred to as **Beatrice** and the school mascot as **Billy Bob**. All participants in the study perceived the Attendance Incentive Program (AIP) as positive. There were several themes that developed from the research. There were variations as to why participants perceived the program to be effective. The following is an illustration.

Impact of Incentive Program:

The majority of participants believed the program to be positive because it promoted and encouraged good attendance. The incentives were said to be a good motivator. Even the smallest of trinkets were potential treasures for the children. One participant reported that Beatrice had given all of the participant's students "banana pins" for displaying such a good effort. They had never won the prized Billy Bob that they had worked and continue to work so hard for. They wore this token worth \$1.50 for three weeks. Studies have verified that penalizing children for not attending results in increased absenteeism (Baker and Jansen, 2000, p. 47). Incentive strategies can be effective ways to reduce absenteeism by replacing the punishment for not attending with rewards and incentives to come to school (Baker, and Jansen, 2000, p. 47, Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 95).

Participants in the study also recognized that children respond positively to incentives. The placing of prizes in a display cabinet in the front foyer of the school is

strategic and children were said to come to the cabinet eyeing possible prizes that they could potentially win at the monthly assembly. It was identified through the research that Beatrice also does “one to one work” with children who are really struggling with attendance. One educator shared that one of her students had worked with Beatrice and was very proud to show off his stickers for good attendance. This particular child was excited and proud to receive stickers. The prize of stickers which may seem small to some is huge to others.

All participants stated that, by and large, all of the children love the school mascot “Billy Bob”. Some students are known to put pressure on their fellow students to come to school so they will have a chance to win Billy. One participant cited that when the attendance is taken in their class some of the children will rejoice if there is perfect attendance and say “maybe we will win Billy Bob this month”. One participant stated that Billy Bob was a “status symbol”. To win Billy Bob appears to be a very special thing. The only negative thing said about Billy Bob was that he needed a bath.

Pride vs. Prize:

Tying into the incentive was examining whether or not it was about the “pride” or the “prize”. It was overwhelmingly stated that the children feel a sense of pride when they win an individual prize. They bask in taking the prize back to their seat to show their peers how well they have done. It appears to be a “feel good” moment in their life. Participants could not say enough about the prize of all prizes, Sir Billy Bob. Billy Bob gives children pride when they win. It fosters excitement in the environment. Participants noted that seeing the children so excited is infectious. Watching children

cross their fingers would bring smiles to everyone. Some classes who have won Billy Bob take turns having Billy sit at their desk. This is said to be a hit with the children.

As noted earlier, this researcher had the opportunity to participate in an assembly. There were roars and cheers when the winner of the school mascot was announced. Everyone in that gymnasium appeared to be sitting on the edge of their seats waiting for the announcement. There definitely was a haze of excitement and anticipation in the air.

Academic Improvement:

The program was said by some to be positive because, as a result of good attendance, marks had improved. One example was cited by a teacher who monitored her student's progress and could see a correlation between attending school and academic improvement. Another participant stated that the program motivates and encourages kids to come to school and, because of that, there would not be huge gaps in their learning. It was said that it is not easy for a child to make up for lost learning time. This finding is consistent with research. In one study where students were involved in an attendance incentive program it was identified that many of the participants' grades had improved as a result of attending school more (Baker and Jansen, 2000, p. 52). In another study good attendance was found to be directly correlated to good grades (Chapman, 2003, p. 10). This is a significant benefit of the program. It is reasonable to assume that if a child attends school regularly that, not only their marks would improve, but their sense of self-confidence would be affected positively as well as they would feel good about their achievement.

It is important to note that one educator did not see a correlation between attendance and academic improvement. It was stated that “I have no comment on correlation between attendance and grades – sounds like it should make sense but cannot say it does – at least in my class” This individual was a senior grade teacher. Further exploration into this area in terms of late and early intervention strategies might prove useful for future research.

Improved Attendance:

All participants perceived that the AIP positively impacts truancy. This is consistent with research which has shown that attendance incentive programs can improve absenteeism in schools (Ford and Sutphen, 1996, p. 99). Although there was no hard data available in this study, there were specific examples shared. One participant reflected on a family who came to the school with poor attendance and then noticed a marked improvement in attendance. This individual perceived that the AIP was a major factor for the improvement. Another example was cited where the teacher monitored the student’s attendance once a one to one program was put in place. The participant stated:

“I had a student in my class who was consistently absent and late..... missing almost a month or more in the first term and the second term, and because of the program that Beatrice implemented he has been here consistently the entire third term....”

Again a significant improvement was perceived to be as a result of Beatrice’s involvement.

Every participant was in favour of an AIP program to address truancy. One participant noted that “every little bit helps these children”. Another suggested that in

schools where truancy is a major problem you definitely need something that would draw children and keep them in school. It was also mentioned that the kids identify with it.

The children ask when Beatrice is coming and work hard at winning Billy Bob. A

participant who spoke about a child whose attendance had improved markedly because of the program stated that not only did this child's academics improve but the participant believed that this child felt that they had a "place" in the classroom,

".....for my one student I spoke about previously.....his self-esteem even seems to be higher.....he seems more sure of himself, he seems more like he has a place in the classroom community um rather than missing all these days..."

There are social benefits of coming to school and fitting in and developing appropriate social relationships.

School Environmental Impact:

Participants overwhelmingly supported the idea that this program has been responsible for the promotion of a team environment amongst the **children**. The children work as a team to win the mascot and they look forward to the assemblies. The working together to get the beloved mascot is felt in any grade from JK to grade 8. Billy Bob has been described as "gold" and the winning of a "trophy".

The familiar phrase from many of the participants was "**excitement**". The children are excited at the possibility of winning the mascot. Some children stand in front of the prize display cabinets talking about the prize they would like to win. The children ask "when is Beatrice coming to the school?" Beatrice is part of the school in a big way. It was articulated that on one occasion Beatrice was ill and the assembly had to be cancelled. Children in that particular class were disappointed. The participant

explained to the researcher that “you would have thought that the year end trip was cancelled”. One participant described the program as “fun”. The kids have fun and know they have a chance to win a prize or, even better, Billy Bob.

There was also a theme that the program and the assemblies bring the children together as a school community. Studies have revealed that students who perceive their school as a community are more academically motivated, have higher achievement levels, are absent less and engage in less disruptive behavior (Minnard, 2002, p. 241). The assemblies allow the children to come together and celebrate both school and personal achievements.

There were some drawbacks of the program identified and cited by some participants. There can only be one winner in each class per month. The teacher is responsible for breaking any ties among their students. One participant expressed that “it is not an objective process” and “it is difficult for some students to win at all because of numbers of students and number of months in school year”.

Another issue identified was that if a student is genuinely ill they cannot win the individual prize and this of course affects their class chance to win Billy Bob. This was said to cause disappointment amongst classmates and this could also impact the students negatively. Beatrice stands by her word that for students to win they must have perfect attendance. You cannot be absent under any circumstances. There is the potential for some students to come to school even if they are ill because they do not want to be absent. One participant reported that that “the kids that are legitimately ill – it might

adversely affect them if they think that it is wrong to stay home if they are sick and think they should be here”.

Impact on Parents:

Some participants revealed that they thought the parents “loved” the program. The program was identified by all as being part of the culture of the school. It was also shared that the program brings parents to the school to see their child win a prize. It is a “feel good” thing for parents. Research indicates that parents living in poverty are less likely to be involved in their children’s schooling and feel a sense of alienation (Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Allen-Meares, 2002, p. 126). This strategy may be perceived by parents as being a welcome invitation to come to the school.

By and large, participants did not hear anything from the parents in relation to the program. They did identify that there are times when parents attend the assemblies. One participant revealed that it is only the “academic” portion that they deal with respect to parents and therefore, have never discussed the AIP with parents. It would be beneficial to explore in a follow-up study why so many participants are disconnected from the parents with respect to the AIP.

Impact on Staff:

Participants stated that there is a positive spirit generated amongst the staff. There is talk in the staff room as to who will win Billy Bob. There is friendly competition with some teachers encouraging their students and adding their own incentives. More than one participant stated that one teacher added the extra incentive of a pizza party. It was reported by one participant that “ a colleague offered an additional pizza party if his/her

class won. So there is a lot of fun with it”. This was joked about in the staff room. Participants also stated that the friendly competition and the discussions about the program tend to happen closer to assembly days. One participant again highlighted that the AIP is part of the culture of the school. The fact that Beatrice is so visible and recognizable says a lot about the impact of the program. Overall, it is believed that the AIP assists in creating a positive environment for everyone at the school, students and staff alike.

Community Impact:

There is a marvelous connection to the community that has been developed. Beatrice regularly brings community donors to the school on assembly days. The children and staff get to see who in the community is supporting their school. The businesses get a chance to see the children excited about the assembly. The students publicly thank these businesses with thunderous applause orchestrated by Beatrice. Beatrice has even sent students out to these local businesses who then participated in outdoor clean up of the grounds. This shows to the students that they play a role in keeping the grounds clean. It also shows businesses that once again the children are thankful for their support. This is all in an effort to build partnerships between local business and the school community.

It was noted that keeping children in school keeps them off the streets where they cannot get into mischief in the community. Bringing community partners to the assemblies puts a face to the businesses. It demonstrates to the children that there are people in their community who care about them.

Sustaining the Program:

All of the participants stated that they would advocate in some way to keep the program operating if it were at risk of being discontinued. They reviewed some of the highlights of the program and again spoke about the excitement in the school environment. Participants, by and large, suggested that they would advocate in an attempt to secure more support from parents and the community at large. They did not suggest that they would be willing to assist in running the program but believed in the value of it continuing. One of the participants reported that if the school was in jeopardy of losing the AIP “I think there would be concern. I think there would be general advocacy, yes, for anything that allows kids recognition but not sure what we could really do”. Another participant stated “Uhm yes I don’t know how I might do that....Don’t personally have a lot of control...program has a history, but not sure if we lost Beatrice how it would continue to run”.

There are a few issues. Staff suggested they would advocate to keep the program. Some participants clearly were unsure as to how they would advocate and said that they themselves have little control as to whether or not the program would continue. Clearly, no staff member suggested their own personal involvement.

Safety:

One participant mentioned that when children are in school they are SAFE. “Well, any way to get them to school means that they are safe. They have to be in school”. This is a very important point. This would be an area for further exploration. Schools can be safe havens for children and part of a positive resource for them.

Further, the literature supports the fact that when children/adolescents are not in school there is greater potential for them to be out in the community roaming the streets. They run a greater risk of getting involved with delinquent activities (McCluskey et al, 2004, p. 214 and Teasley, 2004, p. 117). They also run the risk of getting hurt themselves.

CHAPTER SIX:**Analysis Discussion:**

One of the glaring challenges with respect to the AIP is the question as to whether or not the program would continue if Beatrice were to leave the school or become ill. Clearly, it was articulated by some of the participants that this is “Beatrice’s Program” and one participant reported that this is Beatrice’s “Foundation”. This is both a testament to her work but also indicative of who the program belongs to. It was also mentioned by many participants that Beatrice is recognized by everyone in the school. She is very visible. This message was conveyed in a positive way that students and staff are, by and large, happy to see her. There is clearly a positive association when they see Beatrice in the school. It is quite rare for the entire school to know their attendance counsellor.

However, clearly staff thought the program was positive and part of the school “culture” but they would not jump in and assist if the school was in jeopardy of losing the program. This raises the question that if the participants felt that it was such an effective program why is there is no willingness to help out in order to sustain the program if necessary? Do the benefits outweigh the work to implement or assist in implementing? Perhaps staff view the program as being an attendance counsellor’s role and not part of their job? Has staff been invited to participate in the program? These questions need further exploration.

There is also the issue of burn out. To organize such a program in multiple schools can be taxing personally. The energy level and time it takes is no doubt a

consideration. It may not be realistic that Beatrice could sustain her energy level and enthusiasm over many years. Further, if Beatrice were to fall sick, others may not know how to continue to run the program because it has always been operated for them. The program is entirely dependent on Beatrice which leads to a false sense of security

This researcher soon became aware that Beatrice does much more than just a school wide AIP. She implements one-on-one programs with hard to reach children. She has give away days every year where parents come and take household items and clothing. This brings parents to the school and allows them to see Beatrice as a person who cares about their children and them. Beatrice is the Southern Ontario “Oprah Winfrey” (Oprah Winfrey is a popular talk show host in the United States who focuses her acts of kindness on the poor and oppressed in society). There is great potential for the parents to see Beatrice as a positive influence instead of the school. The majority of participants reported that they did not talk to the parents about the AIP. There was some sort of disconnect between these participants and the parents. Perhaps the parents only come into the school for the give away days and if they are made aware that their child is going to win a prize at the assembly. It was highlighted in the literature that often poor parents are disconnected from their children’s school (Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Allen-Meares, 2002, p. 126), but Beatrice’s initiatives have very possibly been instrumental in bringing parents to the school. This may be a golden opportunity for the school principal to provide coffee and cookies in the staff room for parents after these assemblies. This could potentially be the beginning of building positive communication between the school and parents.

The process of the teacher breaking ties when there is more than one student with perfect attendance can be subject to teacher bias. The teacher could pick a student whom they favour. This could be both real and perceived particularly by the children. There could also be a further drawback where some children begin not to care because they feel they have little chance to win. One solution to eliminate potential bias, or perception of bias, is to put all children's name in a hat who have perfect attendance each month and draw. This way everyone has an equal chance every month.

Research from the literature review support the fact that student attendance was correlated with better grades and this is an important finding. Most participants could see a relationship between school attendance and academic success. Children who come to school every day have better academic outcomes, and therefore have a better sense of self and feel more confident. Children who come to school everyday potentially have a greater sense of belonging to the school environment. They are relatively safe and less likely to get into mischief in the community.

Participants largely reported that they believed that it was more about the pride of accomplishment than the chance to win a prize. This was said to be true of both the individual and classroom prize. It was stated that winning Billy Bob was a "status symbol". This symbol represented a group accomplishment. It would be interesting to determine whether or not the intrinsic values of pride and accomplishment would continue if the student were to move to another school where the program is not offered, or when the student moves on to high school.

The idea of a school mascot alone appears to be a very positive idea. Everyone wants “Billy Bob” including the teachers. The benefit of children working together for a common goal is a team building lifelong strategy. Learning to work with a team and in a team is a skill everyone needs to acquire. The concept of “excitement” was very prevalent in participants’ responses. The excitement of possibly winning the mascot, or winning an individual prize or watching a student win or a parent beam is a very special sight. There is definitely a sense of energy and great pride in the building on assembly days.

One of the downsides of the AIP may be for those students who never win the mascot because their particular class may have high absenteeism. They may feel a sense of disappointment. They may also resent the children who they believe “cause” their class to lose. This could have further negative implications on children who are struggling to come to school. If they are harassed or challenged about their attendance by other children they may feel increased anxiety and want to stay home altogether. Similarly, those students who never win individual prizes may also be disappointed as previously discussed. It is harder for the young children in the primary division to control their attendance. Parents may keep their children home for many reasons. The child may feel discouraged about the program and sad they cannot win a prize. This is where the individual work with the student and family is best suited.

Beatrice recognizes community donors to the AIP in a very unique way. They do not receive the traditional “thank you for your donation card” but are invited to the school to meet the children they have helped. The business might even get a surprise visit from

school children cleaning up their yard to just say “thanks”. The goal of community development is to “stimulate local initiative by involving people in community participation specifically the process of social and economic change; build channels of communication that promote solidarity; and improve the social, economic and cultural well-being of community residents” (Arai and Pedlar, 1997, p. 170). The blend of the school and the community is a win situation. There is an opportunity for reciprocal relationships to be developed. Children potentially identify with the fact that people in their community care about them. It is hoped that the children also learn to care about members in their community. Further, this could potentially reduce crime but also further down the road these children may be welcome employees in these businesses. It also puts a face on poverty and it may also motivate the businesses involved in this program to encourage other businesses to get involved in the school community and/or support these families in some way. For example, sponsoring children to attend summer camps or developing scholarships. The possibilities are grand.

Parents are, by and large, recipients of the program. They receive goods on the give away days. They come to the assemblies to witness their child receiving a prize. In the spirit of building partnerships, both within the school and in the community, parent volunteers would be a key element. These individuals would have an opportunity to do something positive and give back to their community. They can also solicit other parent volunteers and then it could become not just “Beatrice’s program” but perhaps more of a “community” program. This could also assist in the longevity of the program for years to come. There is evidence that citizen participation is related to an increased feeling of

competency and confidence, decreased feelings of helplessness and alienation (Arai and Pedlar, 1997, p. 170). This is significant because parents would come to the school more often because they have their own purpose. They would also potentially have the opportunity to become more connected to the staff and with the community at large. Parents could build their own relationships with businesses and this could even lead to potential employment for them. Citizen participation has been found to increase the individual's sense of commitment and sense of community (Arai and Pedlar, 1997, 170).

Implications for Future Research and Practice:

In order to effectively evaluate the AIP program the research should be expanded to include the perceptions of children, parents and the community. It would be important particularly to assess the effectiveness from the children and their parents' perspective because this for whom the program is intended.

One method to determine how the program affects truancy rates is to track the attendance. A longitudinal study could be conducted over a five year period that would monitor attendance. Further new students who may come to the school with poor attendance could be monitored closely to see if the program has an impact. Academic progress could also be tracked with this population to support previous literature that suggests regular attendance improves academic performance. An effective study could be both qualitative, by incorporating parents, children and the larger community's perception of the program, and quantitative, by tracking attendance and academics.

If the program were to develop more of a community development approach there is a greater likelihood of sustainability over the long term. There would be people

reaping the rewards of volunteering. There would also be a number of positive outcomes. Parents would come to the school for positive reasons. Children would see their parent involved in the school. There would be an opportunity for parents to dialogue more with teachers. There would be an opportunity for families to get to know the local business operators in the area who contribute to the program.

Conclusions:

To conclude, the Attendance Incentive Program clearly demonstrates that the benefits of such a program have more to do with just improved truancy rates but can impact a child, a family, a school and a community in many positive ways. The research highlighted the fact that one special person can make a difference. One special person can put a spark in a child's life, in a school and in a community. Beatrice, the Southern Ontario Oprah, by and large, single handedly has accomplished this. The sustainability of this program may largely depend upon increasing the volunteer pool and professional institutional support. This may possibly be less of a challenge than what it has taken to develop and implement such a program. Community development literature speaks to the value of inclusion of all community members in an initiative as it provides an opportunity to build communication, promote solidarity and improve the social, economic and cultural well-being of community residents (Arai and Pedler, 1997, p. 170). This program has the potential to develop into a community development initiative where all members benefit.

The problem of truancy and early school leaving is complicated. An important step to eradicating this problem is for government officials to examine the broader issues,

particularly, the effects of poverty on families and how this impacts both education and health. Therefore, there needs to be more of a collaborative approach from both Federal and Provincial governments, school boards and the members of all communities.

However, the findings in this research support that such a program has merit in dealing with the issue of truancy. Long-term analysis may indicate that children stayed in school, received a good education and are not living their lives in poverty because of the impact this program had on them. This attendance counsellor has quite possibly created unique bonds with many children, and it is unlikely they will never forget her smiling face or how they all yearned to win their beloved school mascot “Billy Bob”.

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Private Communication:

Contact Hamilton Intake Worker, November 2004, Telephone.

Bates, M., Social Worker, Alternative Education Programs, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, Email Communication, October 6, 2005.

Tombolini, M., OACAS Regional Representative, May 2003, Telephone

Private Communication, Grade 6 Student, Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, November 17, 2004.

APPENDIX I

TRUANCY AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Truancy is an ongoing social problem. It leads to early school leaving and lost opportunities for our youth. Thirty percent of Canadian youth fail to graduate from high school (MacLeans Magazine 2004). As a school staff member, you deal with the issue of truancy on a daily basis. I am a Master's of Social Work student at McMaster University. For my thesis, I am hoping to evaluate the "**Light a Smile**" Attendance Incentive Program at your school. I am requesting your participation in this study. I am interested in examining not only how the program addresses the issue of truancy, but its impact on the school environment, the community and relationships with parents. I value your input on these questions. I will need this signed consent form in order to proceed with any interviews.

This study consists of single face-to-face interviews. All data will be treated confidentially. Neither your identity, nor the name of the school will be revealed. Any information or detail that would allow identification will be removed or altered in any written reports. No one apart from the researcher and her supervisor will know who participated and who did not. Interviews can take place at your school or a location of your choice. The interview will be audio- taped with your permission to ensure accuracy of information. If at any time you wish not to be recorded your wishes will be respected and the recorder turned off. The written transcripts and tape will be kept under lock and key in my home. Material will be destroyed, through shredding of information and erasing of tape, upon completion of study. The interview will last approximately 30 – 45 minutes. I am asking that you dictate the best time for you and I will do my best to accommodate all requests.

You have the right to **decline** to answer any question you would prefer not to address, and to withdraw from the study at any time, even after the interview has been completed, without consequences.

If you are interested in this study, please attach your name to the next page and place in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. Only those letters returned who agree to participate in the study will be approached.

The research project is supervised by Sheila Sammon, M.S.W., Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at McMaster University. Results of this study will be submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Social Work.

Should you need any more information regarding this study, please contact:

Sheila Sammon @ 905-525-9140 ext. 23780 or email sammon@mcmaster.ca

Kelly Duffy-Kariam @ 905-521-1348 or email Kariam@sympatico.ca

If you have any further inquiries regarding your participation in this study, please feel free to contact McMaster University Research Ethics Board Secretariat at 905-525-9140 ext. 23142 or email rsebsec@mcmaster.ca.

I _____ am interested in participating in this research project.
Name

For your interest a sample of questions to be discussed are as follows:

1. Can you tell me some of the advantages of the Attendance Incentive Program?
2. Can you tell me some of the disadvantages of the Attendance Incentive Program?
3. Do you believe the Attendance Incentive Program positively impacts truancy?

APPENDIX II

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM:

Truancy is an ongoing social problem. It leads to early school leaving and lost opportunities for our youth. Thirty percent of Canadian youth fail to graduate from high school (MacLeans Magazine 2004).

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kelly Duffy-Kariam, a Master of Social Work Student at McMaster University, Hamilton. Results of this study will be submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the graduate degree.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact my research supervisor:

Sheila Sammon
905-525-9140, Ext. 23780
sammon@mcmaster.ca

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The study will examine staff perceptions of the “Light a Smile” Attendance Incentive and Mentorship Program in your school board. The researcher is not only examining how the program addresses the issues of truancy, but looks at other impacts, such as, the school environment, the community environment and relationships with parents.

PROCEDURES:

If you volunteer to be part of the study, I will ask you to participate in a single interview that will last approximately one-half hour. The interview can take place at your school or a location of your choice. The researcher will ask you a number of questions related to the Attendance Incentive and Mentorship Program. Permission is asked of you to tape the interview for clarity and accuracy. You may decline to answer any question without any consequences. You may decline a taped interview. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions. The interview will last approximately 30 – 45 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can identify you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

All data will be treated confidentially. Neither your identity, nor the name of the school will be revealed. Any information or detail that would allow identification will be removed or altered in any written reports. No one apart from the researcher and her supervisor will know who participated and who did not. The audio tapes will be kept in the researcher's home under lock and key and they will be destroyed upon completion of the research project. Data will be assessed by the researcher, Kelly Duffy-Kariam and the Faculty Supervisor, Sheila Sammon.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORT:

There are not foreseen potential risks or discomforts.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR SOCIETY:

The participants will have the opportunity to discuss their perceptions about the program. Reflecting on whether or not the program has positive effects beyond addressing truancy will hopefully be insightful for the participants. This research is somewhat groundbreaking in that this program has not been evaluated, and it is hoped that if positive outcomes are found than this type of program may be duplicated in other schools in the province of Ontario. This would be achieved by getting the research published.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS:

Participants in this research study will not receive any form of compensation.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL:

You may choose whether or not to participate in the study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences. You may remove your data from the study. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and remain in the study.

RIGHTS OF PARTICIPANTS:

You may withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any time without any consequences. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. The study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact:

MREB Secretariat	Telephone: 905-525-9140, Ext. 23142
McMaster University	E-mail: srebsec@mcmaster.ca
1280 Main St. W., GH-306	Fax: 905-540-8019

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT:

I understand that the information is provided solely for the study of “Light a Smile” Attendance Incentive and Mentorship Program – as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR:

In my judgement, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX III

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

- 1) Can you tell me some of the advantages of the Program?
- 2) Can you tell me some of the disadvantages of the Program?
- 3) Do you believe the Attendance Incentive Program positively impacts truancy?
- 4) Are you in favour of an Incentive Program to address truancy? Can you explain why?
- 5) What, if anything, do the children, parents and other educators say about the program?
- 6) Besides addressing truancy are there other impacts of the program? For example, what impact, if any, does the program have on the school environment, on the community or with parents?
- 7) In relation to the children, do you think it is about the prize or the pride?
- 8) If the program was under threat of being discontinued what do you think fellow staff members would say?