

**An Evaluation of the Implementation and Enforcement of Washington D.C.'s Truancy Policy**

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**Abstract**

A study with 15 grade 9-12 District of Columbia public high schools was designed to explore the effectiveness of the implementation and enforcement of Washington D.C.'s truancy policy, which went into effect in January 2013. Three variables are explored as measures of effectiveness: (a) truancy rates, (b) truancy court referrals, and (c) graduation rates. Support was found for positive improvements in D.C. public high schools in regards to decreasing truancy rates and increasing graduation rates since the inauguration of the latest truancy policy. However, support improvement was also limited, as petitioned truancy court referrals have increased since the law's enactment. In terms of measuring enforcement, the intervention step of conducting a SST meeting was evaluated. The results indicated that schools are not fully enforcing the city's truancy policy.

## **An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Implementation and Enforcement of Washington D.C.'s Truancy Policy**

One of the most pressing issues that schools in Washington, D.C. face is truancy. During the 2014-2015 school year, 56 percent, more than half, of District of Columbia high school students were considered legally truant (Peerman, et al., 2015). A legal, habitual, truant is a student who is chronically absent and has accrued at least ten unexcused absences during a school year. This statistic is problematic as truant students are at greater risk of dropping out of school. A study conducted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation determined that “attendance patterns are a clear early sign that a student is at risk for dropping out” (Bridgeland, et al, 2006.). According to *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*, “Dropouts are more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison or death row, unhealthy, divorces, and single parents with children who drop out of high school themselves” (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). Dropouts also drastically impact communities across the nation as they become an economic burden on taxpayers whose dollars go to “the high costs associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services” (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). It has been estimated that “the average high school dropout costs society more than \$800,000 over the course of the individual’s lifetime” (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005).

Furthermore, truancy is a public safety issue. The free time truant students have provides them with greater opportunity to get in trouble. Studies have found that crime statistics decreased in cities which conducted truancy sweeps, suggesting that truant students play a large role in criminal activity in communities (Berger & Wind, 2000). Truancy is considered one of the most predisposing factors to other forms of delinquency, which is why this behavior has been called

the “kindergarten of crime” (Smink & Helibrun, 2005) L.E. Smith (1979, p. 13) reported in his doctoral dissertation that “95% of those considered juvenile offenders, such as burglars, shoplifters and vandals had started their deviant activities as truants” All truants should not be mistaken for delinquents, however most delinquents have histories of truancy, demonstrating the harmful consequences of schools not addressing truancy.

Similarly, chronic absenteeism is an important issue because addressing a truant can uncover barriers to attendance. An unstable living environment can be an attendance obstacle as, “Wherever conditions are unfavorable to child life, the schools suffer from non-attendance, truancy, and the violation of school rules, which come with the presence in school of children from extremely poor, undisciplined, or neglected homes” (Abbot & Breckinridge, 1917). With truancy predominant in poor inner city communities, it is suggested that a juvenile’s living situation often will impact their attendance, as a child without running water at home or clean clothes is likely to skip school (Abbot & Breckinridge, 1917). Other characteristic patterns in truants include mental health problems and learning disabilities (Smink & Helibrun, 2005). As the result of these situations, intervening in truancy cases is important because it can reveal poor conditions, such as a neglectful home or a mental health disease, that schools and the state can begin to mediate to put the student in the best possible position of achieving academic success.

In an effort to combat truancy and its consequences, the District of Columbia has a series of laws on the books. The two primary regulations that govern mandatory school attendance in the District of Columbia are Title 38, Chapter 2, of D.C. Code and Title 5, Chapter 21, of D.C. Municipal Regulations. According to these regulations, students ages 14-17 are legally responsible for their school attendance while parents of younger students are legally held responsible for their child’s truant behavior. These laws also outline specific intervention and

reporting requirements that schools must follow when a student is exhibiting truant conduct. For example, when a student accrues five unexcused absences, the school is to refer the student within two business days of the fifth absence to a school-based support team (SST), which is to hold a meeting for the student within two business days of the referral (5 DCMR §A-2103.3, 2014). The goals of SST meetings are to review the student's attendance, sort out any issues, and communicate with parents or guardians to help decrease barriers to attendance. Additionally, SST meetings are conducted to refer the student to a community-based organization, use school and community resources to terminate the student's truancy, develop an attendance intervention plan, and make referrals for academic, diagnostic, or social work services (5 DCMR §A-2103.3, 2014).

In order to further reduce chronic absenteeism in schools, the District of Columbia introduced the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013, which amended the previous regulations, overhauling the city's truancy policy and creating new guidelines and procedures in an effort to improve school attendance. The primary changes made to the truancy policy since the implementation of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 are the creation of stricter record keeping guidelines for schools, the establishment of the 80/20 rule, and the decrease in the number of unexcused absences that warrant a court referral from 25 to 15 (Peerman, et al, 2015). As a result of this policy, ten unexcused absences define a student as chronically truant and 15 unexcused absences necessitate a court referral to the Court Social Services Division of DC Superior Court and to the Office of the Attorney General of the District of Columbia. CSS reviews the referrals and make recommendations to the Juvenile Specialty Courts Unit within the Public Safety Division of the OAG who decide which referrals will be petitioned. The 80/20 rule mandates that students must be present 80% of the day to be

considered as “legally present.” Within this rule, a student who arrives to class more than ten minutes late will be considered absent the entire period (Peerman, et al., 2015)

Since the inauguration of the Attendance Accountability Act in January 2013, little research has been conducted to evaluate whether or not D.C.’s truancy procedure is proving to be effective in positively impacting schools in their mission to encourage school attendance. Similarly, scarce research exists assessing whether D.C. schools are strictly enforcing the aspects of these regulations as the law requires them to do. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to evaluate whether the truancy laws, updated with the implementation of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013, have been effective in whether schools are properly enforcing the truancy policies and whether they are helping reduce truancy in the city.

## **BACKGROUND**

The report “The Truancy Intervention Program of the Ramsey County Attorney’s Office: A Collaborative Approach to School Success” by Kathryn Santelmann Richtman analyzes the effectiveness of Ramsey County, Minnesota’s adoption of a new truancy policy entitled Truancy Intervention Program (TIP), which began in 1996. Although TIP has different guidelines than the District’s truancy legislation, it is similar to D.C.’s policy as they include comparable early intervention efforts designed to help students combat truant behavior and improve attendance. Similar to the SST meetings in D.C. schools, School Attendance Review Team (SART) meetings are conducted for students who fail to improve their attendance in Ramsey County under TIP (Richtman, 2007). TIP also has other analogous intervention measures in place before schools have to refer a student to court for their behavior.

In measuring the effectiveness of TIP, the researchers compared the number of truancy court petitions filed between two school years, 1994-1995 and 2005-2006, before and after the

law when into the effect. According to the report, “these data show 57.8 percent fewer truancy petitions filed in 2005-2006 than in 1994-1995” (Richtman, 2007). Richtman determined that TIP was an effective program because the number of students being referred to court for truancy had shrunk tremendously since the program’s implementation.

Richtman also looked at graduation rates as an indicator of the strength of the program when evaluating the effectiveness of TIP. Improved high school graduation rates are an indicator of strength of the program as the result of the relationship between truancy and dropping out of school. Increasing habitual truancy rates tend to associate with decreasing graduation rates as chronic absenteeism is a primary predictor of thwarted academic achievement. When the program began in 1996, the graduation rate for students in St. Paul, Minnesota, was 52 percent (Richtman, 2007). By 2005, “the graduation rates had increased to 79.24 percent” (Richtman, 2007). The report concluded that although the program may not have been the only variable to contribute to the increasing graduation rate, TIP was an effective program because “there is strong evidence that the program has contributed to the improved graduation rates” (Richtman, 2007).

Richtman’s (2007) research also found that “another indication of the program’s success has been the decrease in absenteeism”. The study evaluated the percentage of students missing 15 or more days of school in the 1995-1996 school year, the year before the TIP program began, and in the 2005-2006 school year. The lower absence threshold for this data collection was fifteen absences because habitual truancy, or chronic absenteeism, in Ramsey County, Minnesota, is defined as missing fifteen or more school days (Richtman, 2007). The data indicated that nearly a 50 percent decrease occurred in the number of students missing a

significant amount of school, suggesting that TIP had been successful because of shrinking truancy rates (Richtman, 2007).

A separate report, “How DC’s Truancy Policy Fail Students and Steps to Turn it Around” published in March 2015 by DC Lawyers for Youth and DC’s Children’s Law Center, provides insight into the effectiveness of schools in the District of Columbia in enforcing the current truancy policy. This report suggests that “schools do not have the resources they need to meaningfully intervene” (Peerman, et al., 2015) According to Title 5, Chapter 21, of DC Municipal Regulations, any student who accumulates five unexcused absences is to attend a SST meeting. During an SST meeting, a school-based student support team is assigned to the student to help him develop and implement an action plan to combat barriers to attendance and improve attendance. Therefore, all chronically absent students referred to Family Court should have attended an SST meeting (Peerman, et al., 2015). However, this report cites multiple examples as it claims that these requirements do not always occur in practice, stating that only 36 percent of the 8,105 students who were legally required to have an SST meeting between August 2013 and January 2014 attended one (Peerman, et al., 2015). By this accord, not only is the SST intervention step not being properly enforced, it’s lack of execution results in the neglecting of later implementation steps such as conducting home visits, providing students with community-based resources, and referring students to court.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Participants*

In order to measure the effectiveness of the implementation and enforcement of D.C. truancy policy, data was collected from 15 grade 9-12 D.C. public high schools. These 15

schools have been selected because they are the only ones with consistent data on each of the variables which are to be assessed in this study. Grade 9-12 high schools were specifically analyzed because they are composed mostly of students ages 14-17 who are legally responsible for their own truancy. No private schools were evaluated because they have staggeringly different funding than public schools, which can be a determining factor in the improvement of truancy. D.C. public schools generally receive similar funding, which puts schools on the same playing field in terms of the amount of resources they have to allocate towards different efforts such as truancy prevention and intervention. In addition, no charter schools were included in the population as charter schools tend to be grades 6-12, and therefore the school's truancy data is reflective of a population range which includes a significant amount of students outside of the age 14-17 range.

### *Measures*

The first research question is whether the implementation of D.C.'s truancy policy has been effective in yielding positive results in D.C. schools. Based off of Richtman's report about the effectiveness of TIP in Ramsey County, Minnesota, the indicators that will be analyzed to measure the effectiveness of D.C.'s truancy policy are D.C. petitioned truancy court referrals, truancy rates, and graduation rates. Like Richtman's report, I will be evaluating data from the school year before the policy was implemented to the school year with the most recent data. In this case, I will be comparing data from the 2011-2012 school year and the 2014-2015 school year for the truancy rate and graduation rate variables.

The Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 forced D.C. schools and the Office of the Attorney General to display greater transparency by creating stricter record keeping

and reporting guidelines for truancy data, which are open to the public (Peerman, et al., 2005) As the result, all of the data in this study was provided by the District of Columbia Public Schools Office of Data and Strategy. However, The Office of Data and Strategy was unable to yield data on court referrals from 2011. Therefore, the two most recent school years, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, were compared to evaluate whether truancy court referrals petitioned by the Office of the Attorney General of D.C. are gradually decreasing while the law has been in effect.

In evaluating petitioned truancy court referrals, data from the 2013-2014 school year was compared to data from the 2014-2015 school year. A paired-sample t-test was conducted at the .05 alpha level (95% confidence interval) on the data in order to indicate whether a significant different exists between the separate school years' data. Paired-sample t-test are used to test two related groups on the same dependent variable. A paired-sample t-test procedure assesses the significance between the differences of means between two sets of data. Based off Richtman's findings, the number of truancy court referrals petitioned by the OAG are expected to be significantly less in the 2014-2015 school year than in the previous 2013-2014 school year. A significant difference between the means is expected to exist. As the result, the following were the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis tested, where  $\mu d$  represents the differences between the means:

$$H_0: \mu d = 0$$

$$H_1: \mu d \neq 0$$

In evaluating chronic absenteeism, data from the 2011-2012 school year was compared to data from the 2014-2015 school year. Unlike Richtman's study, which counted students with 15 or more unexcused absences as being chronically absent, students with ten or more unexcused absences were counted as being chronically absent as defined by D.C.'s current truancy policy.

A paired-sample t-test at the .05 alpha level (95% confidence interval) was conducted on the data to indicate whether the difference between the two school years' data is significant. Based off of Richtman's findings, the number of students considered chronically absent during the 2011-2012 school year was expected to be significantly greater than the number of students chronically absent during the 2014-2015 school year. In other words, there was an expected difference between the means. Therefore, the following were the null hypothesis and the alternative hypothesis tested, where  $\mu d$  represents the differences between the means:

$$H_0: \mu d = 0$$

$$H_1: \mu d \neq 0$$

The last variable in analyzing the effectiveness of the District's truancy policy was the graduation rate of students. Like Richtman, data from the year before the policy was implemented, the 2011-2012 school year, and the most recent school year, 2014-2015, was compared. The data reflects the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate at the end of each respective school year. According to D.C. guidelines, "the term four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for that graduating class" (OSSE, 2015). The adjusted aspect of this rate means, "that an incoming class of 9th graders shall be a "cohort" that is subsequently "adjusted" by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the 9th grade and the next three years and subtracting any students who transfer out, emigrate to another country, or die during that same period" (OSSE, 2015). Therefore, the final calculation for the graduation rate of the class of 2012 was based off of the following equation:

$$\frac{\text{\# of first time 9}^{\text{th}} \text{ graders in the Fall of 2008} + \text{Transfers-in} - \text{Transfer out} - \text{Students who passed away}}{\text{\# of Students in Cohort who Graduated in June of August 2012 with a standard diploma}}$$

Constructed from Richtman's findings, the adjusted cohort graduation rate for the class of 2012 was expected to be significantly lower than that of the class of 2015. A paired-sample t-test was conducted at the .05 alpha level (95% confidence interval) to determine whether the difference in graduation rates is significant. A significant difference between the means of each school year's graduation rates was expected. The null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis tested were:

$$H_0: \mu d = 0$$

$$H_1: \mu d \neq 0$$

In order to test whether schools are effectively enforcing the city's attendance laws, data from the most recent school year, 2014-2015, was analyzed. The report "How DC's Truancy Policy Fail Students and Steps to Turn it Around" suggested that public schools in the District of Columbia were not implementing every intervention step they are legally required to do. In testing this assertion, the number of students who attended at least one SST meeting were compared to the number of students who accrued at least five unexcused absences and were eligible to attend a SST meeting. A t-test at the .05 alpha level (95% confidence interval) will be conducted to test the significance of the data. The number of students who have attended at least one SST meeting was expected to be equal to the number of students with at least five unexcused absences as the result of the intervention steps mandated in Title 5, Chapter 21, of D.C. Municipal Regulation. Again, my sample size was the same 15 public high schools in the District of Columbia. Therefore, my null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis were the following:

$$H_0: \mu d = 0$$

$$H_1: \mu d \neq 0$$

## RESULTS

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the District's truancy policy, paired-sample t-test procedures were conducted for the paired variables of petitioned truancy court referrals, truancy rates, and graduation rates. A paired-sample t-test was also used to determine whether schools are enforcing the truancy policy. The statistical tests were operated under the analysis that all of the data are normally distributed. Regardless, Paired-sample t-tests are known to be robust to normality, meaning they are adaptive to overcoming the adverse condition of non-normality if be the case. Appendix A contains a chart of all of the data used in the study. The data software IBM SPSS Statistics was used to conduct the paired-sample t-test. Table 1 provides the results of the paired-sample t-test. Table 2 includes the means and standard deviations of the data.

**Table 1**

### Paired Samples Test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 cr14 - cr15	-17.40000	40.06388	10.34445	-39.58664	4.78664	-1.682	14	.115
Pair 2 truant12 - truant15	16.20000	22.53315	5.81803	3.72156	28.67844	2.784	14	.015
Pair 3 grad12 - grad15	-6.04167	9.50602	2.74415	-12.08151	-.00183	-2.202	11	.050
Pair 4 abs5 - sst	123.86667	96.18202	24.83409	70.60284	177.13049	4.988	14	.000

**Table 2****Paired Samples Statistics**

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	cr14	34.4667	15	39.24077	10.13192
	cr15	51.8667	15	62.86137	16.23074
Pair 2	truant12	61.4000	15	23.82616	6.15189
	truant15	45.2000	15	27.78797	7.17482
Pair 3	grad12	56.7500	12	27.94190	8.06613
	grad15	62.7917	12	26.32681	7.59989
Pair 4	abs5	358.2667	15	243.43860	62.85558
	sst	234.4000	15	207.31405	53.52826

In conducting the paired-sample t-test for petitioned courted referrals, all petitioned court referrals the DCPS Office of Data and Strategy reported as  $n < 10$ , as seen in Appendix A, were given the numerical value five in order to be included in the computation. The number  $n < 10$ , means that the DCPS Office of Data and Strategy did not report the specific number, but only indicated that the value was greater than zero and less than ten. The numerical value five was assigned to all of these cases because five is the midpoint between 1-10, serving best to avoid skewing the data, as a consistent number across all of these situations.

The results of the paired-sample t-test for petitioned court referrals indicate the difference between the means of the petitioned court referrals during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years was 17.4,  $t = -.1682$ , and significance at the .115 level. For this t-test, the alpha level was set at .05. Since  $.115 > .005$ , the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. In other words, the statistical differences between the means of both school year's petitioned court referrals was not significant. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that the truancy policy has significantly affected the differences in the number of court referrals petitions by the court in the past two school years.

However, an evaluation of the means of this data indicate that the number of truancy court referrals petitioned by the OAG was actually greater during the 2014-2015 school year than the 2013-2014 school year. According to Richtman's findings, the opposite was expected to occur. As seen in Table 2, the average number of petitioned court referrals during the 2013-2014 school year was 34.37 referrals and the average number of petitioned court referrals in the 2014-2015 school year was a much greater 51.87 referrals. This information gives reason to suspect the 2013 policy has not been effective in positively impacting D.C. public high schools when analyzing petitioned court referrals as a measurement of success or failure.

The results of the paired-sample t-test for truancy rates indicate the difference between the means of truancy rates during the 2011-2012 school year and 2014-2015 school year was 16.20,  $t=2.78$ , and significance at the .015 level. The alpha level of this test was .05. Since  $.015 < .05$ , the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis that a significant difference exists between the means of the truancy rates during the 2011-2012 and 2014-2015 school year. The mean truancy rate of the 2011-2012 school year was 61.4 and the mean truancy rate of the 2014-2015 school year was 45.2. As the result, it can be concluded that since the enactment of the law, a significant difference in the truancy rate has occurred, resulting in lowered truancy rates. It can be concluded that the implementation of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 has been effective in positively impacting schools when truancy rate is analyzed as the sole the measure of effectiveness.

When graduation rate was analyzed as an indicator of effectiveness of the 2013 truancy policy, only 12 of the 15 schools in the sample could be utilized as three of the schools were either not in existence or not in operation long enough for there to be an adjusted cohort graduation rates for the class of 2012. These three schools were left out of the statistical analysis.

The results of the paired-sample t-test for graduation rates indicate the difference between the means of graduation rates of the 2011-2012 and the 2014-2015 school year was 6.04,  $t=-2.20$ , and significance at the .05 level. The alpha level of this test was .05. Since  $.05=.05$ , the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative that a significant difference exists between the means of the graduation rates of the two school years. The mean graduation rate of the 2011-2012 school year was 56.75. The average graduation rate of the 2014-2015 school year was 62.79. Since the enactment of the 2013 truancy policy, graduation rates in District of Columbia grade 9-12 public high schools have increased significantly. As the result, it can be concluded that Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 has been effective in positively impacting D.C. public high schools when graduation rates are analyzed as the sole measure of effectiveness.

In measuring D.C. grade 9-12 public high school's enforcement of the 2013 changes to the truancy policy, the number of students who had five or more unexcused absences during the 2014-2015 school year was compared to the number of students who attend a SST meeting during the 2014-2015 school year. The results of the paired-sample t-test indicate the difference between the means of the number of students with at least five unexcused absences and the number of students who attended a SST meeting was 123.87,  $t=4.99$ , and significance at a value between .000 and .001. The alpha level of this test was .05. Since  $.000<.005$ , the null hypothesis was rejected in in favor of the alternative hypothesis that a significant difference exists between the two means. The average number of students with at least five absences during the 2014-2015 school year was 358.27. The average number of students who attended SST meetings during the same school year was 234.4. With Title 5, Chapter 21, of DC Municipal Regulations as the basis of our hypothesis, the number of students with at least five unexcused absences should have been

equal to the number of students who attended a SST meeting. There should not have been a significant difference between the means. Therefore, after analyzing the SST meeting intervention step required by D.C. Code when a student accrues five unexcused absences, it can be concluded that D.C. public schools have not been strictly enforcing the truancy law.

## **DISCUSSION**

The data indicates that since the implementation of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013, D.C. grade 9-12 public high schools have seen major improvements as *graduation rates have significantly increased and truancy rates have significantly decreased*. The average adjusted cohort graduation rates of this sample of fifteen schools from the 2011-2012 school year was 56.75%. The 2014-2015 average adjusted cohort graduation rate was 62.79%. A paired-sample t-test revealed that the difference between these two was significant, providing reason to suspect the 2013 truancy law has been effective in positively impacting D.C. schools in their effort to combat chronic absenteeism and encourage school attendance.

Similarly, truancy rates decreased tremendously since the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 went into effect. The average truancy rate of this sample of schools during the 2011-2012 school year was 61.4%. The 2014-2015 school year yielded a much lower truancy rate of 45.2%. A paired-sample t-test indicated that the difference between the truancy rates of these school years was significant, providing support that the 2013 law has been effective in positively influencing D.C. grade 9-12 public high schools.

However, analysis of the number of court referrals petitioned by the Office of the Attorney General of the District of Columbia revealed a different finding, regarding court involvement in the truancy process. This sample of schools revealed that the average number of

truancy cases petitioned per school during the 2013-2014 school year was 34.47 cases. During the 2014-2015 school year, the OAG petitioned a much higher 51.87 cases per school. A paired-sample t-test showed that *the difference between petitioned court referrals during these two school years was not significantly different*, providing support that the truancy law has not affected the number of petitioned court referrals when comparing the last two most recent school years. Based off of Richtman's study in Minnesota, it was originally expected that the number of petitioned court referrals would have been fewer in the 2014-2015 school year than the 2013-2014 school year. However, a comparison of the means revealed the opposite, as more truancy court referrals were petitioned in the 2014-2015 school year than 2013-2014 school year.

If petitioned court referrals were the only variable analyzed to measure the effectiveness of D.C.'s truancy policy, the data would indicate that the laws in place are not effective in positively impacting D.C. public schools in their mission to combat chronic absenteeism and encourage attendance since more juveniles were petitioned by the court for truancy in the most recent school year than the previous year. However, it is important to acknowledge the previous finding that truancy rates are decreasing in the District of Columbia. Reduced truancy rates and increase involvement of the courts in truancy case are two different dimensions of the process. Therefore, it is possible to have an overall decline in the truancy rate and increase in court involvement as increased juvenile intervention could be a factor driving truancy rates down. Future research could evaluate whether and to what extent increased court involvement impacts truancy numbers.

An explanation for this increase in petitioned court referrals could be that schools enforced the law more strictly during the 2014-2015 school year than the previous year. Being that the current D.C. truancy policy is still relatively new, schools may still be adjusting to the

changes made with the implementation of the 2013 law. Decreasing the number of unexcused absences that correspond to a court referral from 25 to 15 may have resulted in an increased number of students eligible to be referred to court. While adjusting to truancy policy changes, schools may have gradually implemented the staff and resources necessary to enforce the law. This gradual adjustment could explain why the number of court referrals were higher during the 2014-2015 school year than the previous year as the schools could have had the resources in place to more strictly enforce the law than they did during the 2013-2014 school year.

Another possible explanation may be that the Office of the Attorney General of the District of Columbia was more equipped to handle a greater workload of truancy cases during the 2014-2015 school year than the 2013-2014 school year. At the end of 2015, the OAG created a new section within the Public Safety Division, separate from the Juvenile Section, named the Juvenile Special Courts Unit. The Juvenile Special Courts Unit was designed to specifically to deal with Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) cases. PINS offenders are truants and runaways. The creation of the Juvenile Special Courts Unit displays how more staff was needed to strictly work on these cases as an influx of truancy referrals flooded the office as the result of the decrease in the truancy law regarding the number of unexcused absences mandatory to refer a truant to court. During the 2013-2014 school year, the OAG might not have had the resources and staff in place to pursue every truancy referral they should have. After a year of experience, the OAG may have been better equipped to petition more referrals than the previous year, explaining why the number of petitioned referrals increased.

Juveniles who encounter the courts are at greater risk to have future run-ins with the law. As the result, it could be in the best interest for the D.C. government, schools, and community to act to decrease the number of students being referred to court for truancy. One possible solution

is to organize and execute a city-wide campaign to encourage school attendance and make students aware of the court referral consequence. A community-wide awareness of the consequences of missing school might deter students from skipping school in the future.

Another solution is to alter the truancy policy by eliminating the 80/20 rule and increasing the number of unexcused absences required for a mandatory court referral. The 80/20 rule requires that students must be present for 80 percent of the school day, otherwise they will be considered absent. In addition, a student who arrives to class more than ten minutes late is considered absent for the entire period. As the result, the 80/20 rule often confuses chronic tardiness with chronic absenteeism. By altering the 80/20 rule, there will be fewer students considered absent for being tardy, which would decrease the amount of truant students and most likely decrease the number of court referrals. Currently, the D.C. Council is reviewing the School Attendance Clarification Amendment Act of 2015, introduced by D.C. Councilmember David Grosso (I-At-Large, chairperson of the Committee on Education, which would only consider students who miss the “full school day” absent, eliminating the 80/20 rule. Separately, the number of unexcused absences associated with a court referral can be raised from 15 to 20. This would allow schools more time to intervene and encourage students to be present in school, which would hopefully decrease the number of court referrals the school will have to make.

The data also suggests the conclusion that D.C. public high schools have not been enforcing the truancy laws as they are required to do so. Title 5, Chapter 21, of D.C. Municipal Regulations requires that every student who accrues five unexcused absences attend a SST meeting. In this sample, the average number of students with at least five unexcused absences during the 2014-2015 school year was 234.4 students. The average number of students who attended an SST meeting during the 2014-2015 school year was 358.27. A paired-sample t-test

reveals that *the difference between the two variables is significant*, indicating that schools are not accurately enforcing the law.

A reason for this discrepancy may be that the students with five unexcused absences who did not attend SST meetings were 18-years-old or older. Truancy is an offense specific to only juveniles. 18-year-olds are no longer considered juveniles, and therefore are no longer legally required to attend school nor would be eligible to be petitioned by the court. As the result, schools may not be holding SST meetings for these students because they are not legally required to and can allocate their resources elsewhere.

Another possible explanation is that students who were supposed to attend an SST meeting were actively choosing to not attend these meetings. If this is the case, schools need to make students more aware of the consequences of truant behavior and have penalties in place for students who forgo these meetings. However, this explanation is likely to explain only a few of the neglected SST meetings. It is more likely that schools are ill equipped to conduct the number of meetings that they are supposed to. With a school like Anacostia High School where 447 SST meetings should have been conducted during the 2014-2015 school year, the school may not have the staff, time, and resources to host all of the require meetings, which is why only 166 meetings occurred.

A possible solution to this issue is that the D.C. government allocates more funds to D.C. public schools to direct towards attendance efforts. The hiring of an additional attendance counselor at each school could potentially increase the firmness in school's enforcement of the law. Another solution could be to hold schools accountable for not strictly enforcing the truancy policy and implement a series of punishments if schools are not conducting each mandatory intervention step for each student who requires one. Although truancy rates have decreased since

the passage of the law, these numbers could be significantly less if schools were truly abiding by the law. Graduation rates could also improve further if schools conducted every intervention step the law requires them to as the result of the relationship between truancy and dropout rates.

Leniency in enforcement of the law is counterintuitive to the mission of the District of Columbia to improve school attendance.

## **CONCLUSION**

Analysis of the data allows us to make a number of conclusions on the effectiveness of Washington DC's truancy policy. The data indicates that, since the implementation of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013, the average graduation and truancy rates in D.C. grade 9-12 public high schools improved. This is indicative that Washington D.C.'s truancy policy has been effective in improving attendance across D.C. public high schools. Future research can explore the strength of this relationship, evaluating the extent to which the Attendance Accountability Act of 2013 impacted graduation rates in comparison to other variables such as academic performance, teachers, or state mandated education requirements. In addition, future research can focus on a regression analysis to measure the extent of which the 2013 truancy policy impacted truancy rates in comparison to other variables such as academic achievements or the demographic of students.

Conversely, the data shows that the number of court referrals petitioned by the Office of the Attorney General have significantly increased between the 2013-2014 school year and the 2014-2015 school year, revealing that more juveniles have been referred to court in the past school year than previously. If the truancy policy was only to be evaluated for effectiveness in terms of the number of court referrals, the law would be concluded to be ineffective.

The opposing conclusions of effectiveness could be an interesting topic for further research. With a knowingly firm threat of a court referral on the line, more D.C. students might be incentivized to regularly attending school to avoid such consequence, therefore increasing graduation rates and decreasing truancy rates. Attendance is known to be positively and negatively correlated with graduation rates and truancy rates respectively. A future researcher could explore this theory by evaluating the relationship between truancy court referrals and graduation rates and truancy rates. In addition, future research can assess whether students feel more incentivized to attend school as the result of the court referral consequence of truancy.

The other major conclusion that the analysis of the data found is that schools have not been strictly enforcing the Title 5, Chapter 21, of D.C. Municipal Regulations. Despite the law's requirement for schools to conduct a SST meeting for every student with five unexcused absences, the data indicates that the number of students who attended an SST meeting during the 2014-2015 school year was significantly less than the number of students who accrued at least five unexcused absences. For example, at Anacostia High School, 447 students had five or more absences, but only 166 of these students attended an SST meeting. In other words, Anacostia High School only held 37% of the SST meetings they were required to do so. Similarly, Ballou High School only conducted 386 SST meetings, 60%, for 647 eligible students. This finding reveals that D.C. public high schools are not fully abiding by and enforcing the law.

This conclusion can inspire future research into this matter. One research topic could be an evaluation of the relationship between schools' resources directed towards attendance efforts and the percentage of the mandated SST meetings that are actually being held. A possible hypothesis is that schools who direct more resources towards attendance efforts are more likely to have conducted a greater percentage of required SST meetings than other schools.

From briefly looking at the data from individual schools, it seems as though schools where truancy, court referrals, and lower graduation rates are the most prevalent are in lower income high-crime neighborhoods. Future research can further analyze the relationship between neighborhoods and truancy, graduation rates, and petitioned court referrals. This is an important topic to be explored because if it is the case that neighborhood is associated with a student's likeliness to be truant, not graduate on time, or be petitioned by the court for truancy, an intervention would need to happen so this situation would not be accepted as status quo. Instead, more attention and funding should be directed to schools in these communities to help break the cycle as education is a mitigating factor in breaking the cycle of poverty and reducing the risk of criminal activity.

Overall, the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013 has made progress in District of Columbia grade 9-12 public high schools as demonstrated by growing graduation rates and decreasing truancy rates. However, an increase in court referrals sets the achievements of the 2013 act back a step. The District of Columbia should continue to stick with the general structure of their current truancy policy as the result of the positive changes in graduation and truancy rates, but also should be open to making some adjustments that could be helpful in decreasing the number of juveniles referred to court for truancy. In addition, schools need to enforce the truancy law more strictly in order to intervene and help students overcome barriers to attendance. Lenient enforcement of the community's truancy policy is an area that needs to be addressed if the District of Columbia is seriously dedicated to their students' attendance and the well-being of the community.

## Appendix A:

	Referrals 13-14	Referrals 14-15	Grad. Rate 11-12	Grad. Rate 14-15	Truancy Rate 11-12	Truancy Rate 14-15	SST Meetings	5+ absences
Anacostia	n<10	23	42	46.4	78	74	166	447
Ballou	90	196	28	51.5	88	81	386	647
Banneker	0	n<10	11	2.8	6	8	98	104
Coolidge	37	54	60	57.7	80	41	203	221
Dunbar	20	34	60	65.6	87	85	342	529
Eastern	109	43		<b>70.8</b>	48	63	501	662
Ellington	0	0	92	87.1	39	32	155	265
H.D. Woodson	28	48	57	71	88	72	195	455
Luke C. Moore	13	n<10	24	39.9	34	5	n<10	n<10
McKinley	0	0	94	96.5	76	8	182	254
Phelps	0	n<10		<b>88.4</b>	44	53	92	248
Roosevelt	43	50	46	62.1	71	28	86	194
SWW	0	22	93	95.3	52	27	163	323
Washington Met.	84	111		<b>37.6</b>	69	70	118	127
Wilson	88	182	74	77.6	61	31	824	893
* In order to include schools with "n<10" data, n<10 will be equal to 5.								
** The bolded numbers were not included in the calculations								

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