

**An Evaluation of the  
Provo School District  
Truancy Program's Effects on  
Commitment to School,  
Risk Factors, and  
Drug-Related Behaviors**

Romney Institute of Public Management  
Marriott School of Management  
Brigham Young University

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## Program Overview

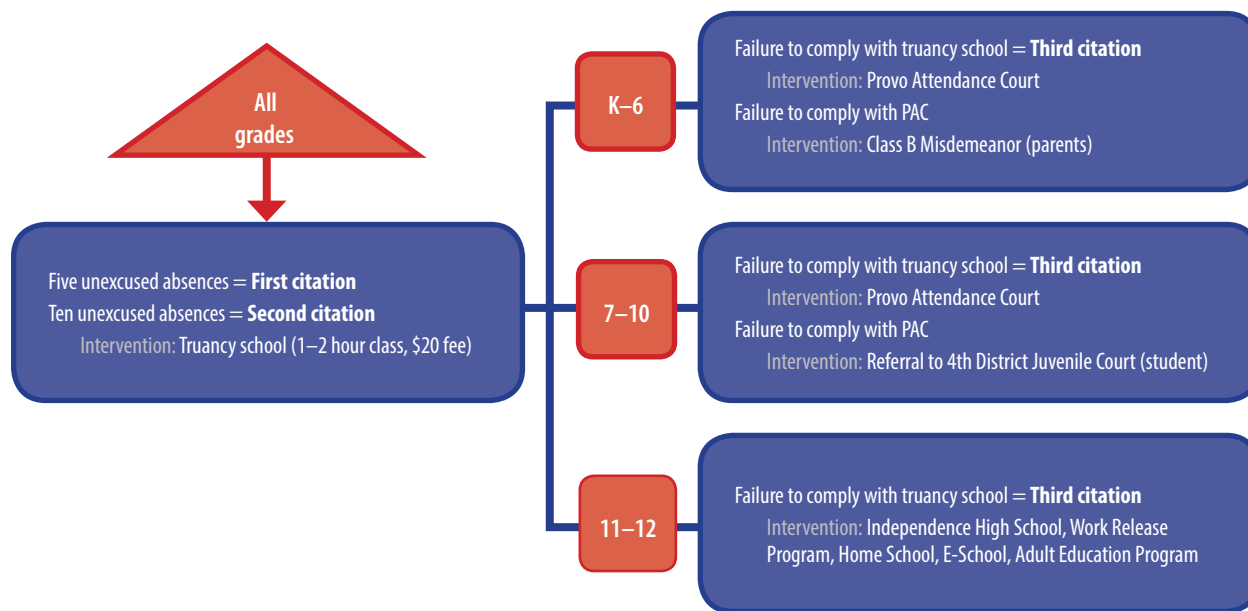
The Provo School District (PSD) operates and governs all primary and secondary schools within the boundaries of Provo, Utah. PSD oversees two high schools, one alternative high school, two middle schools, and fourteen elementary schools, and is responsible for the education and development of over 13,000 students.

For decades, school districts around the nation—PSD included— have sought to address a variety of youth problem behaviors including drug use, delinquency, violence, and other anti-social tendencies. By addressing these problems in the early years of a child’s development, school districts hope to curb or prevent these negative behaviors in later adult years.

In 2005, PSD—in conjunction with Utah’s Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health—began participating in a national, comprehensive Student Health and Risk Prevention (SHARP) survey, administered every two years to a random sample of students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12. The survey aims at determining (1) the risk factors that lead to youth problem behaviors and (2) the protective factors that inoculate against youth delinquency. With the results of each biannual SHARP survey, state researchers have consistently found that a lack of commitment to school is one of the primary risk factors leading to substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropout, and violence.<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to reduce truancy, and thereby reduce the risk factors associated with problem behaviors—especially drug and substance abuse—PSD has created a truancy program with two primary goals: (1) increase commitment to school and (2) prevent early initiation of anti-social behavior. The district’s truancy program consists of a series of escalating interventions and citations, detailed in the program utilization plan in Figure 1—after five unexcused absences, students are issued a citation; after five

Figure 1: PSD truancy program utilization plan



<sup>1</sup> “2009 Prevention Needs Assessment Survey Results: Provo School District, Profile Report” (Utah Department of Human Services Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, 2009), 23.

additional absences, students are required to attend a special session of truancy school; after five more absences, students are sent to the Provo Attendance Court (PAC), where they work with a volunteer magistrate and receive counseling to return to school.

PSD's truancy program addresses the risk factor of low commitment to school by seeking to increase that commitment, thereby inoculating students against the risk of drug abuse and other potential issues of delinquency. By ensuring that students remain actively engaged in school, and by correcting their behavior when they begin to falter, PSD hopes that students will become productive members of society with few to no drug-related issues or delinquent tendencies.

## Program Theory

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PSD's truancy program is based on a wealth of proven academic research. As mentioned previously, the results of the past three SHARP surveys have statistically proven that a lack of school commitment is one of the primary risk factors for delinquent behavior—students who regularly attend school are far less likely to exhibit anti-social tendencies or problems with drug abuse.<sup>2</sup> Three academic studies provide further evidence of this claim, concluding that truancy “has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out”<sup>3</sup> and that “lack of commitment to school has been established . . . as a risk factor for substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropout.”<sup>4</sup>

The need for high commitment to school is quite real—research has repeatedly found that truancy tends to lead to drug use and criminal behavior. In the early 1990s, state justice department officials found that excessive truancy was one of the three traits the majority of criminals in Dade County, Florida, had in common.<sup>5</sup> New York showed similar trends: “Of the 85 juveniles convicted of murder in New York State between 1978 and 1986, 57.6% had a history of truancy.”<sup>6</sup> A meta-analysis of youth risk factors found that truancy is an excellent predictor of middle school drug use: “truant 8th graders were 4.5 times more likely than regular school attenders to smoke marijuana.”<sup>7</sup>

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2 “2009 Prevention Needs Assessment Survey Results: Provo School District, Profile Report” (Utah Department of Human Services Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health, 2009), 23.

3 The National Center for School Engagement, *Truancy Toolkit: Overview of Truancy*, [http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/truancy\\_toolkt\\_2.pdf](http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/truancy_toolkt_2.pdf) (accessed October 10, 2011), 3. See also J. D. Morris, B. J. Ehren, B. J., and B. K. Lenz, “Building a Model to Predict which Fourth through Eighth Graders will Drop Out in High School,” *Journal of Experimental Education* 59, no. 3 (1991): 286–92.

4 The National Center for School Engagement, *Truancy Toolkit: Overview of Truancy*, 3. See also R. W. Blum, T. Beuhring, and P. M. Rinehart, *Protecting Teens: Beyond Race, Income and Family Structure* (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Center for Adolescent Health, 2000); D. Huizinga, et al., “Co-occurrence of Delinquency and Other Problem Behaviors,” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin, OJJDP*, November 2000; R. Loeber and D. P. Farrington, *Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders: Risk Factors and Successful Interventions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998); and D. Huizinga, et al. *Urban Delinquency and Substance Abuse: Initial Findings, OJJDP*, March 1994.

5 The Circuit of the 11th Judicial Circuit of Florida in and for the County of Dade, “Dade County’s Juvenile Offenders: A Study of the Need for Early Intervention,” *Final Report of the Dade County Grand Jury*, Spring 1993.

6 The National Center for School Engagement, *Truancy Toolkit: Overview of Truancy*, 4; Grant, et. al., “Juveniles Who Murder,” in *Child Trauma I: Issues and Research*, ed. Ann W. Burgess (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992): 459–72.

7 The National Center for School Engagement, *Truancy Toolkit: Overview of Truancy*, 4.; D. Halfors, et al., “Truancy, Grade Point Average, and Sexual Activity: A Meta-Analysis of Risk Indicators for Youth Substance Use,” *Journal of School Health* 72, no. 5 (May, 2002): 205–11.

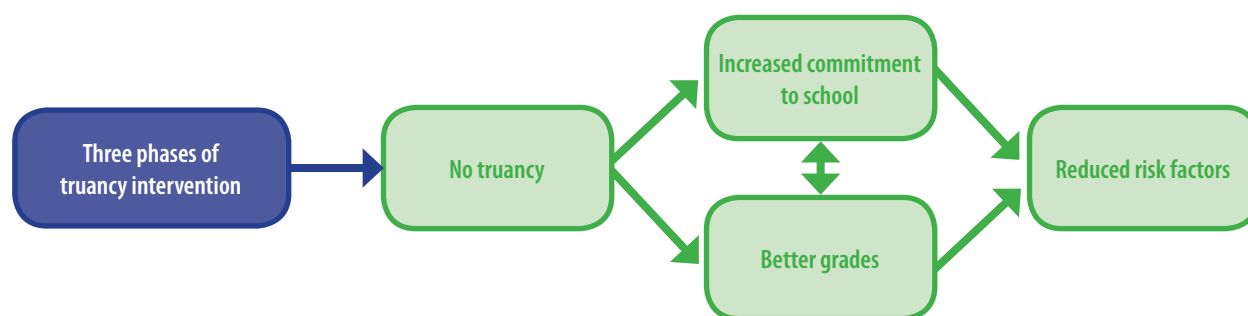
Building on this body of research, PSD sought to build a program that would successfully increase school commitment in order to inoculate against delinquency. The district found an experimental program developed as part of a research project that sought to reduce chronic truancy. Participants in this test program were given direct intervention in early stages of their truancy. Citation letters were sent to a student's parents as soon as that student missed 20% or more days of school in a six-week period. If attendance did not improve after two weeks, a truant officer visited the student's home to meet with the parents. If attendance continued to be an issue, a police officer visited the student's home with the truant officer, which then resulted in an escalation to the municipal or county court system. Researchers found that the first two interventions (a letter home and a visit from a truant officer) significantly reduced truancy among the chronically truant student population.<sup>8</sup> Simple interventions were extremely useful in keeping students engaged in school and protected from potential drug-related, anti-social, delinquent, or criminal behavior.

PSD synthesized the theoretical findings and experimental programs found in this research and developed a comprehensive model for truancy reduction and prevention, with the ultimate purpose of inoculating against the risk factors of drug abuse and delinquency. PSD's three-stage intervention program is a direct adaptation of McCluskey, et al.'s research on early truancy initiatives and aims at directly increasing commitment to school and reducing the risk of anti-social, delinquent, drug-related, or criminal behavior among youth. Ideally, students who successfully complete any stage of the program (preferably only reaching the first stage of intervention) will recognize the benefits of increased school commitment and change their behavior.

## Evaluation Methodology

The PSD truancy intervention program is focused on causing four primary outcomes: (1) reduced truancy, (2) improved grades, (3) increased commitment to school, and (4) reduced risk for delinquency. The program's impact theory, shown in Figure 2, highlights the relationship between the program's three phases of intervention and the intended final outcomes.

Figure 2: PSD truancy program impact theory



<sup>8</sup> Cynthia Pérez McCluskey, Timothy S. Bynum, and Justin Patchin, "Reducing Chronic Absenteeism: An Assessment of an Early Truancy Initiative," *Crime and Delinquency* 50, no. 2 (2004): 214–34.

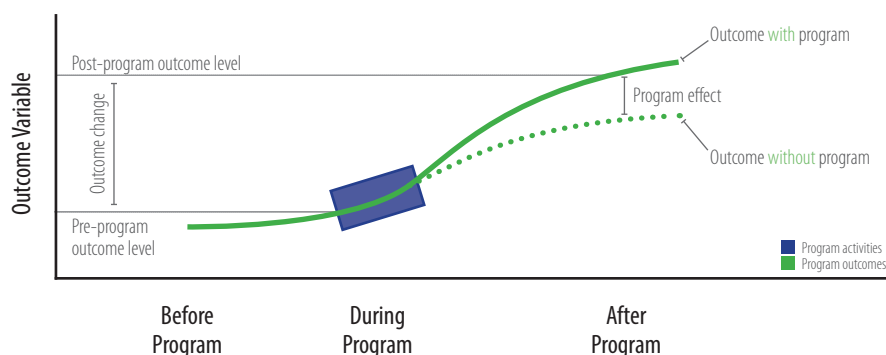
## Outcome Evaluation

Past evaluations of the PSD truancy program focused on measuring the program's outputs—how many citation letters were mailed to parents, how many students attended truancy school, and how many students went through the Provo Attendance Court (PAC) process. While these past evaluations have shown that the program functions well, they do not indicate the success of the program at achieving its desired outcomes. The number of citations mailed out to students is not directly connected to the number of students who are inoculated against the risk of anti-social behavior. In order to understand if the PSD truancy program is having the desired effects, each of the program's outcomes need to be analyzed.

However, outcomes are more abstract than outputs. Outputs are easily measurable—it is trivial to count the number of envelopes used to send citations or count how many students actually attend truancy school or PAC. Outcomes, on the other hand, represent final changes in the target population that supposedly occur as a result of the program's activities, but may very well occur naturally without any intervention. It is possible that the parents of a truant student could intervene before the district does, thereby causing an overall improvement in commitment to school without actually using the truancy program.

The challenge for outcome measurement and evaluation, therefore, is to (1) determine the magnitude of outcome change over the duration of the program and (2) calculate how much of that change is directly attributable to the program, also known as *program effect* (see Figure 3).<sup>9</sup> Because of the complexity involved in measuring outcomes and determining their actual program effect, we have developed a set of unique quantitative and qualitative strategies to help determine the effect of the PSD truancy program and its impact on its intended outcomes.

Figure 3: General relationship between outcome changes and program effect



<sup>9</sup> Chart adapted from Peter Rossi, Mark Lipsey, and Howard Freeman, *Evaluation: A Systematic Approach*, 7th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 207.

## **Measuring a Reduction in Truancy**

Because it is based on hard data provided by PSD, reduced truancy (along with improved grades) is perhaps the most straightforward outcome in the truancy program. In order to measure the effect of the program on attendance, we created a database of every student interaction with all phases of the district truancy program during the 2011–12 school year. For each of the 477 observed records, we collected data on the number of absences, excused absences, and tardies that every elementary, middle school, and high school student incurred during each of the ten weeks preceding and five weeks following the intervention.

At times, observations in the database corresponded to the same student because of the escalating nature of truancy interventions—a student who received a first citation and who then did not improve their behavior received a second citation, and so on. In these cases, we have treated each intervention, rather than each student, as a separate observation.

To measure program effect, we first built a forecast that would predict what the average anticipated attendance would be given the patterns in the previous ten weeks, based on an exponential smoothing regression model. We then compared that forecast with what actually happened in the five weeks following the intervention. When the actual trends and the forecasted trends differed significantly, we concluded that there was real program effect directly attributable to the truancy program.

We have proven our inferences of program effect in two ways: visually and mathematically. In the graphs included in this report, it is readily apparent when the actual attendance trend falls below 80–95% of the possible forecasted outcomes—the lines do not overlap. To ensure that any divergence between actual and forecasted outcomes is not coincidental, we ran linear regression post-estimation tests to mathematically measure the statistical significance of the difference in the slopes of the trends preceding and following the truancy intervention.

## **Measuring an Improvement in Grades**

Our method for measuring the truancy program's effect on grades was almost identical to that of measuring attendance. Using a similar pool of 377 student interactions with truancy interventions, we collected student GPAs for each of the nine school terms preceding and two terms following the intervention. However, instead of collecting data for elementary, middle school, and high school students, we have only looked at grades for students in middle and high schools, due to the fact that PSD elementary schools do not collect traditional grades based on a 4.0 scale. Using the trends in average grades prior to the truancy intervention, we created a forecast for the next several terms and compared the prediction to actual grades using the same visual and mathematical methods described previously.

There are two important caveats with our grade data. Our database of attendance data was far more inclusive than our database of grades. Grades are only reported on a quarterly basis, while attendance is measured daily. As such, the nine terms prior to a truancy intervention are the equivalent of 2.25 academic years, which means that younger middle school students in the database do not have as many terms with actual GPAs as older high school students, since younger students were in elementary school and did not receive comparable grades.

The sparse granularity and low resolution of GPA data also distorted any estimates we made of post-intervention academic performance. Because our database only included students enrolled during the 2011–12 academic school year, only those students who were involved with the truancy program in late August and early September reported GPAs one or two terms after the intervention.

Despite these caveats, we feel that our post-estimation tests and visual forecasts still have a degree of explanatory power (though not as strong as the results of our attendance data). In this report, when our forecasts are based on smaller subsets of our data, we provide disclaimers about the validity and reliability of our estimates. Our predictions and measurements are based on the best district data available, and while they do not provide a complete picture of grade improvement, our tests correlate closely with our attendance data and show good leading indications of similar positive trends.

## **Measuring an Increase in Commitment to School**

While measuring attendance and grades is a relatively straightforward process, evaluating the success of the more longer-term program outcomes is far more difficult. Commitment to school is an abstract concept to measure—unlike attendance and GPA, there is no standard ranking system to determine the level of a student’s commitment. To overcome this methodological challenge, we used two strategies to quantify commitment to school: (1) opinion surveys administered to teachers, students, and parents involved in the truancy program, and (2) detailed semi-structured interviews with participants in the Provo Attendance Court (PAC).

### **Student and Parent Surveys**

Since the program began, PSD has administered a short survey (see appendix) to all students and parents participating in truancy school—the intervention that follows a student’s second citation after ten unexcused absences. The survey is aimed at measuring how much a student or parent learns from their experience in truancy school. We modified the existing PSD survey to include a question that could measure a student’s relative commitment to school. District staff administered the survey immediately prior to truancy school sessions in January and February 2012, and follow up surveys were e-mailed out to all participants two weeks later.

Unfortunately, while the response rate for pre-truancy school surveys was high (since filling out the survey is a part of the truancy school process), the number of post-truancy school surveys we received was abysmally low. We attempted to draw statistically significant conclusions from this data where possible, but we acknowledge that the survey data is not ideal.

### **Teacher Surveys**

We also created a survey for the teachers of truant students in the hopes of measuring their perception of their students’ commitment to school (see appendix). We had planned on sending the survey by e-mail to each truant student’s teacher immediately after that student received a truancy citation. The same survey was to be sent two weeks later to measure any changes in that student’s level of participation and commitment in school.



However, technical limitations and setbacks prevented us from collecting the numerical data we sought. Fortunately, though, because of the dozens of free-response answers we received from the survey, we were still able to gain significant qualitative insight on the truancy programs. We have used these responses to illustrate how teachers feel the program has impacted commitment to school and based our conclusions on common trends in the responses.

### **Semi-Structured interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were our most successful strategy for measuring the truancy program's impact on commitment to school. In March 2012 we conducted a series of 18 interviews with students attending the middle school and the high school PAC (see appendix for the interview outline). Additionally, we interviewed the two volunteer magistrates who presided over the courts—Chad McDonald and Damian Kidd—as well as several PSD social workers.

As with the free-response question in the teacher survey, we qualitatively analyzed the recorded interview data by identifying common themes that emerged in the majority of interviews. We then used these themes to draw conclusions on the program's effect on these students. Although the PAC only represents one stage of the citation process, we feel that that because it is the last of the three stages the interviews conducted during this time are representative of the truancy program as a whole and provide insight into the program's influence on commitment to school.

## **Measuring a Reduction of Risk Factors for Drug Use and Delinquency**

The most important outcome of the truancy program—a reduction in the risk of anti-social, delinquent, or criminal behaviors—is the most difficult to measure. It is by far the most distant outcome of the program and therefore extremely difficult to directly attribute to program activities. It is also nearly impossible to determine if the outcome has been achieved without measuring a host of other factors, from program outcomes like improved attendance (which we have measured) to activities unrelated to the program, such as criminal records or employment histories (which are extremely difficult to measure).

In order to overcome this methodological hurdle, we have adopted a unique strategy for determining the program's effect on risk factors. Case control is a common methodology used in scientific and social science research that helps determine difficult causal relationships. For example, when epidemiologists discover a case of botulism, researchers do not spend time tracking down a specific bacteria strain in a specific bag of lettuce. Instead they interview anyone who has come in contact with the disease to determine any common trends in eating habits. They can then use these results to identify the offending food with relative certainty.

The same principle applies to truancy and delinquency. Rather than track down every formerly truant PSD student and determine if they show signs of delinquent behavior, we can instead look to academic research. As explained earlier, the PSD truancy program is based on a host of solid sociological research that proves a clear link between truancy and risk factors for anti-social behavior. By proving that the primary program outcomes of attendance, grades, and commitment to school have increased or improved, we can prove indirectly that that the PSD truancy program has a measurable effect on the risk of drug abuse and juvenile delinquency.

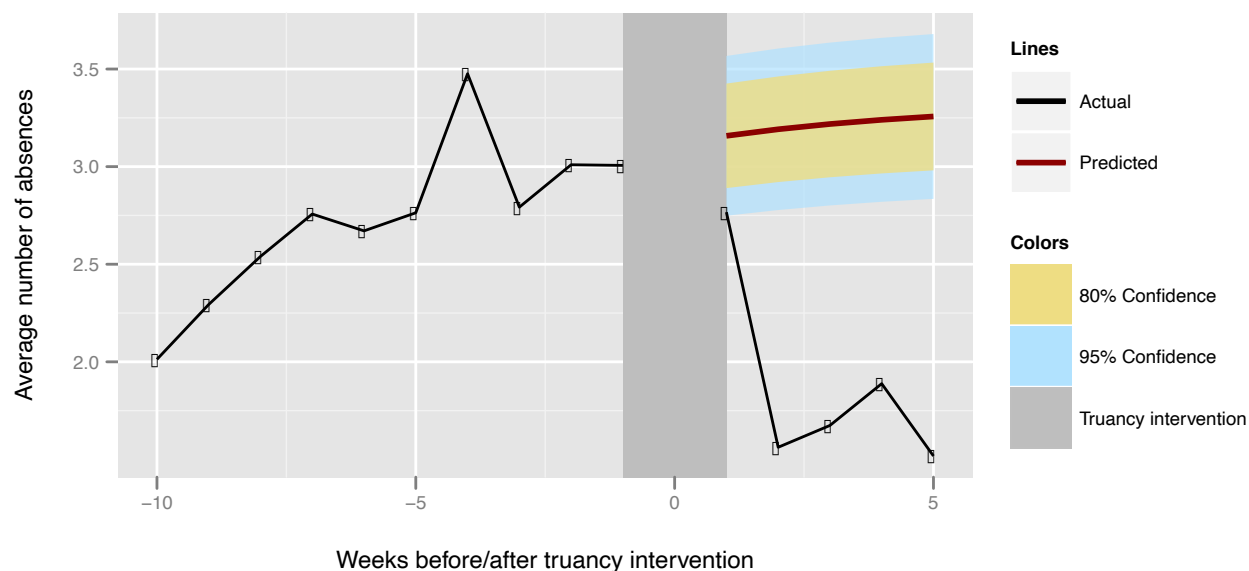
## Evaluation Findings

### Reduced Truancy

Measuring the PSD truancy program’s effect on attendance is relatively simple and can be done with basic statistical methods. As detailed previously, we have measured the aggregated 15-week trend in attendance for all students involved in the truancy program during the 2011–12 school year—with 10 weeks before and 5 weeks after any truancy intervention. We then compare the actual post-intervention trends with a forecast of predicted levels of attendance to determine the magnitude and significance of program effect.

Figure 4 shows the average number of absences for all truant students in the school district. Ten weeks before a truancy intervention the average student tends to have two unexcused absences per week. As time passes, that number gradually increases to three and above. Based on this trend, in the five following weeks with no truancy intervention a student would be expected to be absent 3.15–3.25 times, with 95% confidence that the actual number would fall between 2.75 and 3.57.

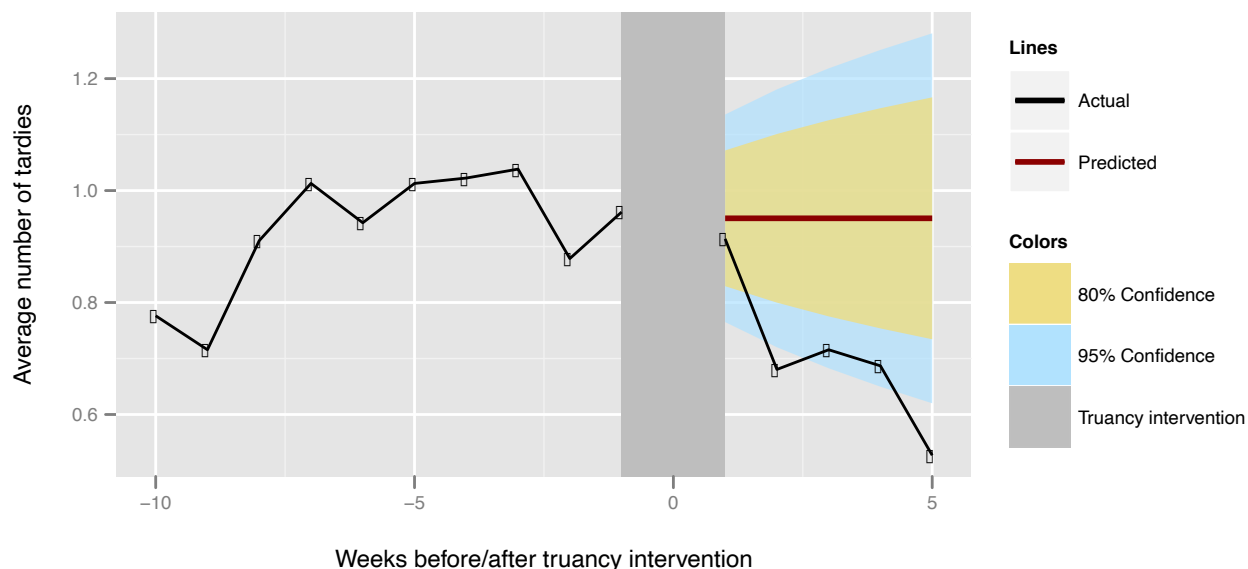
Figure 4: Average absences before and after any truancy intervention



The actual results differ sharply from this estimate, dropping dramatically from 2.77 to 1.56 two weeks after the intervention. The difference between the forecast and the actual results is statistically significant—the probability of seeing the actual results in Figure 4 by chance is less than 0.0001% ( $t = 11.33$ ).<sup>10</sup> The truancy program has a clear positive effect on overall attendance in the district.

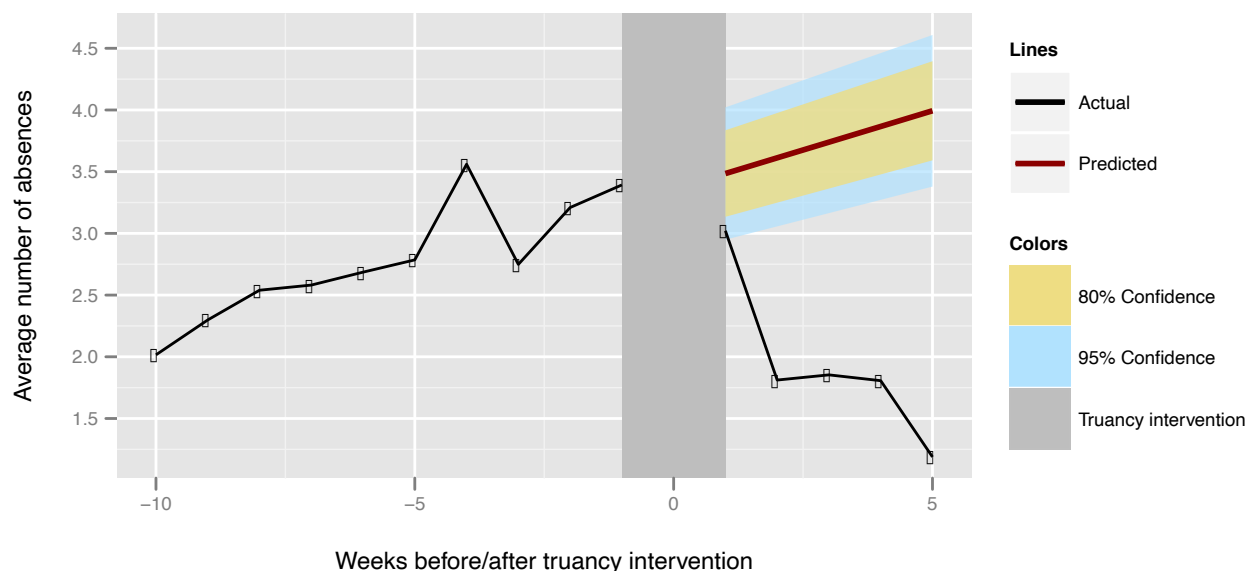
10 The t-value measures the probability that the slope of the forecasted trend is equal to the slope of the actual trend.

Figure 5: Average tardies before and after any truancy intervention



The program has a similar (albeit more muted) effect on the average number of tardies. Students involved in the truancy program tend to be tardy far less often than skipping class. As seen in Figure 5, the average number of tardies per week ranges from 0.7 to just over 1. However, five weeks after a truancy intervention the average number of tardies drops to 0.5, which is a significant change. The actual trend in tardies falls below the forecasted trend, hovering around the lower margins of the 95% confidence interval. The difference between the two forecasts is statistically significant, with only a 5% chance that the actual results could have happened randomly ( $t = -3.18, p = 0.05$ ).

Figure 6: Average high school absences before and after any truancy intervention



PSD’s truancy interventions are exceptionally effective at improving high school attendance, as evidenced by the sharp forecast in Figure 6. The difference between the actual and predicted trends is extremely strong ( $t = 18.199, p < 0.00001$ )—stronger than the overall average seen in Figure 4.

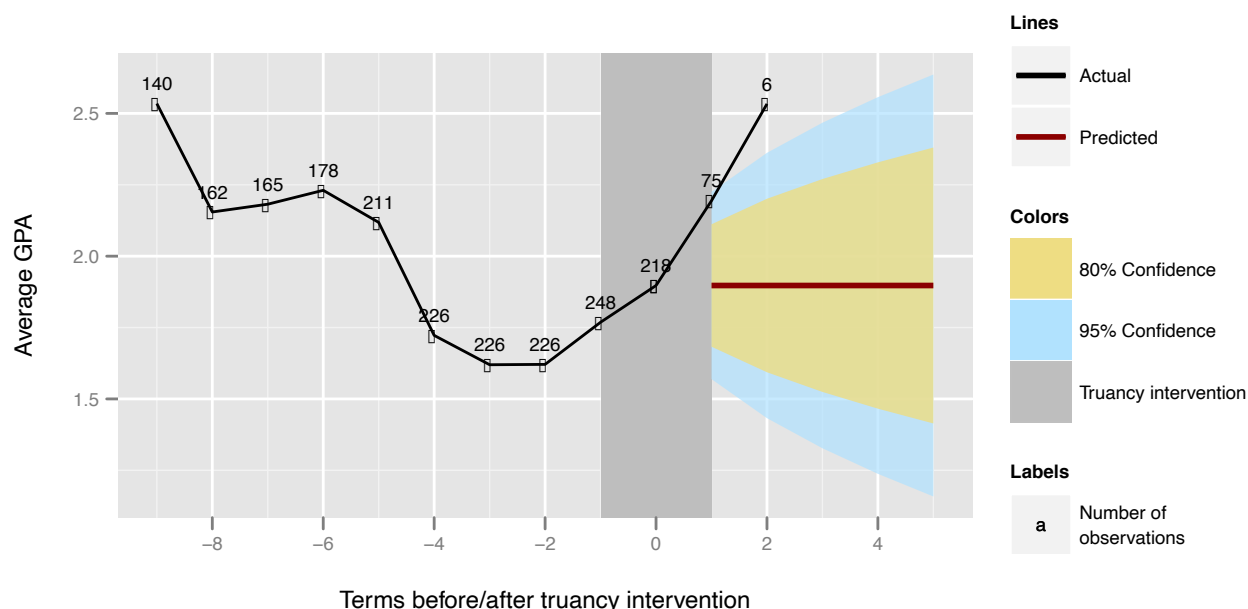
Therefore, as evidenced by our visual and statistical findings, we conclude that truancy interventions have a significant and powerful positive effect on trends in attendance in Provo School District.

### Improved Grades

Measuring the PSD truancy program’s effect on grades is also relatively simple and theoretically and methodologically straightforward, albeit with a few caveats. As discussed previously, we have attempted to measure an aggregated 15-term trend in grades for all students involved in the truancy program during the 2011–12 school year—with nine terms before and five terms after any truancy intervention. As we did when measuring attendance, we compare the post-intervention trends with a predicted forecast of grades to identify program effect. A few caveats to our data, discussed above, make our analysis of grades less robust than that of attendance, but we feel that our data is still reliable and valid.

Figure 7 demonstrates the trend in average truant middle school and high school student GPA, with labels at each point indicating how many students were included in the average for each given term. The points with the largest student samples are between five and zero terms before a truancy intervention because of a lack of data for more historic or future terms. As the graph indicates, average student GPA drops rapidly from a 2.53 to a 1.62 two terms prior to a truancy intervention. The estimated forecast predicts average GPA would range from 1.57 to 2.23 to 1.16 to 2.64 in the next five terms without truancy intervention (a wide prediction range).

Figure 7: Average GPA before and after any truancy intervention



The actual trend in GPA is quite encouraging. Students had an average GPA of 2.19 one term after an intervention, which falls slightly under the upper limit of the predicted range of 1.57–2.23. Two terms after the intervention, that average increases to 2.53, which is well outside the bounds of the predicted interval. The difference between the two trends is highly statistically significant ( $t = 19.16$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), indicating an almost impossible chance that the difference between actual and predicted GPA occurred at random.

Admittedly, this conclusion is based on only six students' grades, but because there is an upward spike in attendance trends following truancy interventions, we feel that a similar trend will continue to take place with improved grades. Even if we discount those six students and compare the one-term trend with the predicted range, the difference between the two trends is still highly significant ( $t = 18.15$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), which indicates that our conclusion is fairly robust, despite the problems with our data. We therefore conclude that truancy interventions have a significant impact on truant student GPA.

## **Increased Commitment to School**

Because of the methodological challenges of objectively calculating attitudes and opinions, we have used two strategies to measure and evaluate changes in student commitment to school: (1) surveys given to students and parents, (2) surveys administered to teachers, and (3) semi-structured interviews with PAC participants.

### **Truancy School Surveys**

As mentioned previously, each parent and student who participated in the truancy school filled out a paper survey prior to the two-hour session. Two weeks after their participation in the truancy school, we sent each participant an online survey (identical to the pre-survey) that sought to assess any changes in attitudes towards commitment to school.

When parents were initially asked how important school is to them, the average response was in between "important" and "very important." After attending the truancy school, every parent's response stated that school is "very important" to them. A similar trend took place with the middle/high school students. The average response regarding the importance of school was "important" whereas in the results on the post-survey all but one student stated that school is "very important" to them.

The pre- and post-surveys that have been administered help us to understand the impact of the truancy school on the participants. The information suggests that most truancy problems do not stem from a lack of knowledge or from feeling that school is unimportant.

### **Teacher Surveys**

In February 2012, surveys were sent to all the teachers in the Provo School District who had students that received a first truancy citation after five unexcused absences (see appendix). Teachers were asked to rank (one being minimal and five being exceptional) their students' commitment to school—both in and out of class—during the month prior to receiving the citation. Teachers were also given the option to include comments on their students' behavior.

Results on the effectiveness of (or even the knowledge of) the truancy program were mixed. Of the 26 total optional comments nine teachers related improvement of either in-class participation and behavior or improved grades and homework completion as evidenced by the following positive teacher responses (names have been abbreviated to the first initial):

S.'s attitude and engagement towards class projects has improved. It has become enjoyable to have her in the classroom.  
.....

I believe that the truancy program is helping students to notice that they aren't taking their school attendance seriously. Many of my students, once they notice they are truant, begin working to make sure it doesn't stay on their transcript. It is very motivating for those students with poor attendance. I also like how this doesn't reflect on the quality of work the student is submitting. Many of my truant students are in fact great students with bad habits of being late or missing school for unexcused reasons. The truancy program is helping the students to change their behavior.  
.....

T. is now attending school on a regular basis as well as showing up on time.

On the other hand, nine teachers also indicated displeasure (with the effect of the truancy program). Below are examples of negative teacher feedback:

Truancy court appears to have little to no impact on the students and this is the norm for other students who have attended truancy court. The court/school has almost no follow through.  
.....

I have not seen B. in class for several weeks. I did not know about his enrollment in the truancy program but it does not seem to have helped get him to class. In addition I have not received any request for make-up work despite my contacting B.'s parents.  
.....

C.'s participation in truancy appears to have had no effect on his commitment to his education.

Three more teachers indicated they did not know their student was in the truancy program and they have seen no change in behavior in their students. For example:

I didn't even know A. had been to truancy. He was missing for awhile. He came back. Didn't seem like anything changed.

The remaining responses focused primarily on students behavior, did not indicate any change, and did not mention whether the teacher had a knowledge of the truancy program.

It seems as if the teachers are often not as involved with the truancy process as they should be. For example, as quoted above, one teacher believes there is no follow through with the truancy program. However, there are multiple systems in place to ensure that students succeed in class after they have completed truancy school requirements.

In the future, the truancy school staff should consider including notifying the teachers when their student participates in the truancy program. In addition, the truancy program should also seek to educate teachers about the truancy program process and the measures taken to ensure the success of each student in the program.

Teacher could be a invaluable resource to the truancy program in both providing insight into truancy school participants in-class behavior and encouraging students in their class who they know to be struggling. Although the truancy program realizes that teachers are busy, we believe it could be worthwhile to seek some way to involve teachers in the truancy process along with students and their parents.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

As previously described, we met with 18 students immediately after their participation in the Provo Attendance Court (PAC). We found the majority of the participants (83%) found the PAC to be helpful and felt motivated to improve their behavior and commitment to school. However, a small minority—including one mother—voiced their dissent.

Regardless of their opinion of the PAC, most participants stated that they do have regrets about their behavior in the past. An 8th grader at Dixon Middle School stated, “I regret not going to school because [missing school is] not really helping me out much.” Several of her peers also hinted at the realization that missing school in the past is requiring much more effort to correct now.

One young man, a freshman at Provo High, said, “I wish I could go back and just be in class.” Most students admitted that they really had no plans when they missed school, but rather they spent time wandering around with friends or simply sleeping all day at home. This aimless wandering of teens during the day is quite concerning to school officials.

Chris Miller, a social worker with the Provo School District, explained:

I see the truancy process as very effective in helping to engage students in school. This engagement helps to reduce problem behaviors such as juvenile delinquency, theft, and especially drug use. I know that in our Provo Attendance Court and juvenile court programs an individual’s drug problems are addressed and resources are given to the individual and family to help them find support in overcoming these drug related issues.

As mentioned previously, the PAC is based on sound theory that commitment to school reduces the risk factors that lead to drug and alcohol abuse among school-aged children. This program has strong support from the staff and administration who are involved.

Both of the judges who preside over the PAC were asked about the impact this program makes in a student’s life. Judge Chad McDonald, the magistrate for the middle school PAC, claimed that this program “provides a reality check” for the students and is generally successful in helping them to see that they need to make a change in the direction their life is headed. Judge Damian Kidd, the judge for the high school PAC elaborated by stating, “success [in the PAC] depends on the participants. The ones who respond, respond well. The failures are because some kids just don’t try.” He later went on to explain that this court does a good job of teaching the youth that they do need help. Once a participant decides they will accept the help, they thrive.

One mother we interviewed pointed out that the PAC has some potential downfalls. In her experience, not all truant students have been targeted equally, which has led to feeling picked on or singled out. That isolated feeling can lead to stress or hopelessness. In an extreme example she shared, “One parent I spoke with even said her child talked about suicide because she felt so bad.” While the PAC does aim to be firm and clear with the youth, a balance of positive reinforcement is needed.

Judge Kidd explained, “I wish we had better reward for graduating [the PAC]. This is a big deal. It’s a big accomplishment.” In speaking to the judges and social workers, the desire to help is clearly the motive behind this program. Helping the youth understand that—while still being firm—is one challenge the PAC faces.

Ultimately the purpose of the PAC is to make a lasting impression on the participants. Each of the students were asked if they thought the program would influence their behavior at all. “It’s helping me. I used to fail six classes,” said a Provo High sophomore who aspires to be on the track team after he gets his grades up, “Now I am only failing three. I’m thinking it’s really helping me. I think it will affect me for the rest of my life.” A fellow Provo High sophomore explained how the PAC has helped her know that she doesn’t want to get into trouble: “Maybe it will help. Let’s just say I don’t want to get in trouble. I will do what I have to do. I’m not that kind of kid.”

The impact of this program was evident while speaking with with several of the PAC participants. Most of the students were somewhat passive and slow to respond to our questions. However, without fail, every single student had a ready answer when we asked what their goals or dreams are. Answers ranged from wanting to be an auto mechanic to aspiring to be a veterinarian. The court aims to help the students recommit to school and thereby help them to avoid negative behaviors that would keep them from achieving those dreams. A fourteen year old 8th grader at Dixon Middle School perfectly exemplified the change the PAC is striving to facilitate by stating, “school wasn’t important until now.”

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

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Using various quantitative and qualitative evaluative methods, we have been able to prove that the PSD truancy program has a measurable effect on the risk of drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. Specifically, our research has found that the four outcomes of PSD’s truancy program—(1) improved grades, (2) increased attendance, (3) increased commitment to school, and (4) reduced risk factors for drug use and delinquency—have seen significant improvements that can be directly attributable to the program itself. Our statistical and anecdotal evidence proves that the truancy program achieves the desired effects for increasing commitment to school and, in turn, reducing risk factors for drug related behavior.

This evaluation of the PSD truancy program provides statistically significant findings, along with stories from participants, that support the effectiveness of this program in increasing commitment to school (measured primarily through grades and attendance) and reducing drug-related risk factors. We feel confident that there is evidence that suggests that the PSD truancy program has a significant impact on all four program outcomes by helping to inoculate students against the risk factors of drug abuse and juvenile delinquency.

We recommend that the PSD truancy program continue to be funded in order to operate as designed. District administrators and staff should continue to closely monitor and evaluate this program—which is based on sound theory and proven practices—to ensure that it functions as intended. We are convinced that as this program is fully funded and administered as designed, the four outcomes of PSD’s truancy program will continue to be achieved.



# Appendix

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# PSD Truancy Program Evaluation Survey Instructions

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## Pre-Truancy School Paper Surveys:

	<i>Administrator</i>	<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Timeline</i>
<b>Elementary school</b>	Truancy school instructor or PSD staff member	Elementary school students attending truancy school	Distribute survey as participants arrive for truancy school. Collect before truancy school begins.
<b>Middle/High school</b>	Truancy school instructor or PSD staff member	Middle and high school students attending truancy school	Distribute survey as participants arrive for truancy school. Collect before truancy school begins.
<b>Parents</b>	Truancy school instructor or PSD staff member	Parents attending truancy school	Distribute survey as participants arrive for truancy school. Collect before truancy school begins.

## Post-Truancy School E-Surveys:

	<i>Administrator</i>	<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Timeline</i>	<i>Other Details</i>
<b>Elementary school</b>	Our research team	Elementary school students who attended truancy school	Email to participants (to address listed on their pre-survey) 2 week(s) after truancy school	A read-only field will be prepopulated with their e-mail address
<b>Middle/High school</b>	Our research team	Middle and high school students who attended truancy school	Email to participants 2 week(s) after truancy school	A read-only field will be prepopulated with their e-mail address
<b>Parents</b>	Our research team	Parents who attended truancy school	Email to participants 2 week(s) after truancy school	A read-only field will be prepopulated with their e-mail address

## Commitment to School E-Surveys for Teachers:

	<i><b>Administrator</b></i>	<i><b>Respondent</b></i>	<i><b>Timeline</b></i>	<i><b>Other Details</b></i>
<b>Pre-survey</b>	Our research team	Teachers of students who receive citation letters	Send to instructors of a student who received a 1st citation letter.	A read-only field will be prepopulated with the student's name
<b>Post-survey</b>	Our research team	Teachers of students who receive citation letters	Send to the same instructors 3 weeks after the first survey.	A read-only field will be prepopulated with the student's name

## Elementary School Student Survey

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

I want to come to school more (circle)

Yes No Don't Know

I know that I am supposed to come to school

Yes No

I know the rules about coming to school

Yes No

I know how to use the computer to find school information

Yes No

I know my parents could get in trouble if  
I do not come to school

Yes No

How important is school to you?

1 2 3 4 5

It is not important It is kind of important It is very important

## Encuesta para estudiantes de escuela elemental

---

Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_ Escuela: \_\_\_\_\_

Quiero venir más a la escuela (encierre en un círculo)

Sí No No sé

Sé que debo asistir a la escuela

Sí No

Sé las reglas sobre asistir a la escuela

Sí No

Sé cómo usar el computador para encontrar información sobre  
mi escuela

Sí No

Sé que mis padres pueden meterse en problemas si yo no asisto  
a la escuela

Sí No

Qué tan importante es la escuela para mi?

1 2 3 4 5

No es importante Es más o menos importante Es muy importante

## Middle and High School Student Survey

---

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

I want to improve my attendance at school (circle)

Yes    No    Don't Know

It is a law for me to attend school

Yes    No    Don't Know

I know what my school's attendance policy says

Yes    No

I know how to use PowerSchool

Yes    No

I am likely to make more money during my life if  
I graduate from high school

Yes    No    Don't Know

How important is school to you?

1    2    3    4    5  
(Not important at all)                      (Very important)

**\*\*\* To receive a follow-up survey in two weeks, can you please provide  
your e-mail address or phone number?**

---

## Encuesta para estudiantes de secundaria

---

Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_ Escuela: \_\_\_\_\_

Deseo mejorar mi asistencia a la escuela (encierre en un círculo)

Sí    No    No sé

Es una norma para mí el asistir a la escuela

Sí    No    No sé

Se cuáles son las políticas de asistencia en la escuela

Sí    No

Sé cómo usar el programa PowerSchool

Sí    No

Es muy probable que gane más dinero en mi vida si me gradúo de la  
secundaria

Sí    No    No sé

Qué tan importante es la escuela para mí?

1    2    3    4    5  
(Para nada importante)                      (Muy importante)

**\*\*\* Para recibir una encuesta relacionada a esta en las próximas dos  
semanas, por favor proporciona tu dirección de correo electrónico o  
número de teléfono abajo:**

---

## Parent Survey

---

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

I want to improve my child's attendance at school (circle)

Yes    No    Don't Know

It is a law for my child to attend school

Yes    No    Don't Know

I know what my child's school's attendance policy says

Yes    No

I know how to use PowerSchool

Yes    No

I can change my child's truancy problems

Yes    No    Don't Know

How important is school to you?

1    2    3    4    5  
(Not important at all)                      (Very important)

**\*\*\* To receive a follow-up survey in two weeks, can you please provide your e-mail address or phone number?**

---

## Encuesta para Padres de Familia

---

Fecha: \_\_\_\_\_ Escuela: \_\_\_\_\_

Deseo mejorar la asistencia de mi hijo(a) a la escuela (encierre en un círculo)

Sí    No    No sé

Es una norma que mi hijo(a) asista a la escuela

Sí    No    No sé

Sé qué dice la política de asistencia de los estudiantes en la escuela de mi hijo(a)

Sí    No

Sé cómo usar el programa PowerSchool

Sí    No

Puedo cambiar los problemas de inasistencia injustificada de mi hijo(a)

Sí    No    No sé

Qué tan importante es la escuela para usted?

1    2    3    4    5  
(Para nada importante)                      (Muy importante)

**\*\*\* Para recibir una encuesta relacionada a esta en las próximas dos semanas, por favor proporcione su dirección de correo electrónico o número de teléfono:**

---

# Commitment to School Survey

## Statement of Implied Consent

You are being invited to participate in the evaluation of Provo School District's Truancy Program. We are a team of Marriott School graduate students at Brigham Young University and are conducting this survey as part of our coursework. We are interested in finding out about commitment to school shown by truant students.

Your participation in this study will require the completion of the attached survey. This should take approximately one (1) minute of your time. This survey involves minimal risk to you (sacrificing time). The benefits, however, may impact society by helping increase the effectiveness of the truancy program and ultimately reducing juvenile delinquency.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer for any reason. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem you may contact our advisor Dr. Eva Witesman at [eva\\_witesman@byu.edu](mailto:eva_witesman@byu.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the IRB Administrator at A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; [irb@byu.edu](mailto:irb@byu.edu); (801) 422-1461. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The completion of this survey implies your consent to participate.

Thank you!

\* Required

**Your e-mail address \***

**Student name \***

**Date of truancy citation \***

Do not change this date. Use this to determine student commitment before this date.

**Please indicate the level of the student's commitment to school (in-class) over the past month**

1 2 3 4 5

Minimal      Exceptional

**Please indicate the level of the student's commitment to school (out-of-class, including homework) over the past month**

1 2 3 4 5

Minimal      Exceptional

---

**Optionally include any comments/insights regarding the impact of the truancy program on the student**

Submit

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# PSD Truancy Program Semi-Structured Interview

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## Interview Procedures

Broad topics on the interview guide should be covered during the interview but the order is not particularly important. If the interview will naturally flow better with the questions in a different order than how they are listed, that is fine.

Generally, begin with broad questions and only ask the more specific questions as follow-ups, allowing the interviewees to provide their own details and subtopics as the need arises.

While it is ideal to finish all of the questions, do not force it if the interviewee is providing other useful information. For example, if they are providing detailed information on one topic or subtopic, allow them to provide the information in case it helps to identify new information we did not anticipate.

If the interviewee does not speak English, the interviewer is encouraged to follow the structure of this form but is not obligated to use direct translations.

## Interview Guide

### Informed consent

- Can you please read through and sign this consent form?
- May I record this interview?
- Do you mind if we take notes on paper?
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

### History & Context

Tell me a little bit about yourself...

- How long have you been in Provo?
- What are some of your hobbies?
- What are some of your dreams?
- What would you like to be when you grow up?

### School

Now I'd like to talk to you about school in general...

- What do you enjoy about school?
  - Why do you think you enjoy those things?
- What do you dislike about school?
  - Why do you think you dislike those things?
- Tell me about your participation at school
- How do you remember the things taught in class?
- What are some of the reasons you don't attend class?
  - What do you do when you aren't in class (during school hours)?
- What do you do after school on a typical day?
- How much time does homework take up?
- Have you ever enjoyed doing homework? When? Why?
- What types of things stress you out?
  - How do you deal with that stress?

### Looking Back

Now I'd like you to look back at the past few months...

- Looking back, do you regret missing class?
  - Why or why not?
- Do you feel that something other than school would be a better use of your time?
  - What?

Thanks for your time.