

# STUDY OF TRUANCY & SCHOOL DROPOUT PREVENTION

## YEAR 2

### STUDY PLAN

#### Study Mandate

- The Commission on Youth, at its April 2008 meeting, approved a two-year plan to study the issues of truancy and school dropout prevention in the Commonwealth.
- This study originated from legislation introduced during the 2008 General Assembly Session by Delegate Franklin P. Hall (House Bill 1263). The House Education Committee requested the Commission on Youth, in conjunction with the Virginia Department of Education, study the provisions set forth in the legislation.

#### Identified Issues from Year 1

- In 2007, the Virginia Department of Education adopted the cohort methodology for computing Virginia's graduation and dropout rates.
- The cohort graduation rate was released in October 2008 and the cohort dropout rate was released March 2009.
- These revisions in the calculation of Virginia's dropout and graduation rates are more intuitive and provide a more comprehensive measurement of these occurrences than the methodology previously employed by DOE.
- This study was designed to be conducted over two years so that Commission staff could incorporate the Department's revised cohort data.
- In 2008, Commission staff convened an Advisory Group, conducted regional site visits, held youth roundtables, interviewed agency experts, met with education and judicial officials and conducted an extensive literature review. Findings from these first-year study activities are listed as issues below.

#### *Truancy*

- Truancy is a clear warning that youth may drop out of school. In Virginia, truancy is difficult to measure because each school division adopts its own truancy policy.
- Currently, the only way truancy is measured in the Commonwealth is the number of students with whom a conference was scheduled after the student had accumulated six absences during the school year. This measure does not accurately measure the number of students who are truant.
- Virginia law does not specifically define a truant, but defines a child who is habitually and without justification absent from school as a "child in need of supervision" when certain other conditions are also met.
- The terminology used in referring youth who do not attend school regularly is also not consistent. These youth may be called:
  - Truants
  - Status Offenders
  - Children in Need of Supervision
  - Defendants
  - Member of an assistant unit
  - Student, minor, child or juvenile

- Virginia law addresses the responsibilities of the student, parent and school employees with respect to school attendance, identification procedures and the provision of services, as well as the imposition of sanctions in the event of noncompliance.
- Punitive measures may be imposed prior to referral of services in truancy cases. When proceedings are instituted against a parent pursuant to § 22.1-258 of the *Code of Virginia*, the parent may be found guilty of a Class 2 or Class 3 misdemeanor (§ 22.1-263 of the Code). While some judges may order the parent or family to receive services, (counseling, substance abuse treatment) others may not prior to imposition of jail or fines. Lack of available services in the locality or the need for additional training may be just two of the reasons for this disconnect. Service referral is frequently appropriate because truancy is usually a symptom of other serious problems.
- School divisions' application of the statute may be inconsistent and some school divisions may not be in compliance. Inconsistent application of the statute may be caused by a lack of resources or by a need for training.
- Judicial involvement among school divisions may also be inconsistent because disagreement exists as to whether truancy belongs in the courts. In some jurisdictions, there is close involvement with the courts – judges exhaust every remedy and frequently include school attendance in the court order. In other jurisdictions, school officials may not petition the court over attendance issues.
- Docket space was identified as a problem by participants interviewed on the site visits, as well as by members of the Advisory Group. Accordingly, not all truant students are actually referred to the courts for truancy.

### **Dropout**

- Virginia's disciplinary laws allow students to be "on the street" when suspended or expelled. Students who are suspended or expelled and do not receive educational services fall behind and become disengaged from school, increasing the odds that they will drop out.
- School divisions' truancy policies may create unintended consequences. Passing a class is typically tied to attendance. Attendance policies may dictate that students can pass a class only if they do not exceed a certain number of unexcused absences.
- A family's participation in their child's education is viewed as one of the most important factors that influences the success or failure of the child in the classroom. Other family factors may also impact a student's decision to drop out. An understanding of these variables is needed to develop effective dropout prevention strategies.
- Not all students are successful in the traditional school setting. Adequately connecting school and work may keep youth connected to school. An array of relevant learning experiences for students, such as alternative education and career and technical options, create meaningful education opportunities that can keep students engaged.

## **Study Activities**

### **Year Two**

- Reconvene Truancy and Dropout Prevention Advisory Group. Invite representatives from the Office of the Executive Secretary of the Supreme Court of Virginia and the Virginia State Crime Commission.
- Meet with selected school division representatives, as needed.
- Meet with judicial representatives.

- Conduct extensive background and literature reviews.
  - Other states' initiatives and policies
  - National study of dropout rates
- Review federal legislation/statutes.
  - Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Reauthorization Act of 2008
  - No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
  - Proposed rule modifying graduation rate formula
  - Other initiatives impacting schools
- Review Virginia laws.
  - Truancy and compulsory education statutes
  - Child in Need of Supervision (CHINSup) statutes
  - Juvenile confidentiality statutes
- Interview impacted stakeholders.
  - Youth, their parents and/or caregivers
  - School Superintendents
  - Attendance Officers
  - Court Service Unit Staff
  - Juvenile Court Judges
- Analyze Virginia practices.
  - Receive information from Virginia's overage academy initiatives.
  - Assess school boards' application of truancy statutes.
  - Assess judicial application of truancy statutes across the Commonwealth.
- Review cohort dropout data by school division.
- Synthesize findings of statutory review and workgroup recommendations.
- Solicit feedback to recommendations from constituents and Department of Education.
- Solicit feedback from Virginia State Crime Commission.
- Refine findings and recommendations.
- Present findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth.
- Prepare final report.