

How Truants Can Save the Schools¹

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Like many fables, this one is based on that which I have seen and felt. Like other fables, I contend that this is not untrue. Once upon a time, there was a superintendent of schools who figured out how to save his school system if only the state education department would designate the truants of his district as handicapped.

"After all," he demanded to know, "isn't truancy the most significant factor in lack of student achievement in our district? Of course! Then it's clear! Truants must be identified as children having handicapping conditions."

And to his confidants, this advocate on behalf of truants and the other downtrodden in his district, confided more. "If we could only get the State Department of Education to permit us to designate truants as handicapped, then we can claim reimbursements for their nonattendance in our schools. It's a wonderful way to help ease our desperate budget problems. As you know, today when the truant doesn't come to school, we lose dollars. If that same child was labeled "truant handicapped," we would get dollars. For those who are truant on occasion—possibly when the weather is warm and the kids want to get an early start at the fishing hole—they would be categorized as "mildly truant," and for each unauthorized absence we would receive a reimbursement from the state for their non-education. But if the child was a more frequent truant, then he would be labeled "moderately truant," and we would receive double reimbursement for his tru-

ancy. And if the child was an habitual truant, we would receive triple reimbursement for his not coming to school. The less he came to school, the more we would be reimbursed for avoiding his educational problems."

"Chief, that's a splendid idea," the gang chorused.

"But I'm not finished. If we can convince the State Department that truants should be labeled "handicapped," then we solve the single most embarrassing problem we have."

"What's that, Chief?"

"Our district-wide reading and arithmetic achievement scores! Each year, the state requires us to publish our achievement scores, and each year they go down, down, and down. And some day, they'll fall off the newspaper. And we will fall."

"But, chief, what do our handicapped truants have to do with the district-wide achievement tests?"

"Everything! Don't you remember? We do not have to include children who have gone through committees for the handicapped in our compilations of these data. And who are our poorest students, our most intractible learners, our most under-achieving pupils? The truants. Those are the ones who are driving our achievement scores down. If we label them as handicapped, then we can remove their scores from the achievement averages and—Eureka!!—our scores will go up dramatically.

"Chief, you're a genius," the guys gushed.

"I'm not finished, fellows. If we get

away with this, there is yet another bonus, a big one, maybe the biggest one politically speaking. If truants could be designated as handicapped, we can with one broad brilliant stroke solve the racial imbalance that has been plaguing our schools."

"How?," the guys whined.

"It's so simple, so beautiful. Why none of us ever thought of this before, why I have to do all the thinking for all of us, constantly amazes me. Once the program is in place, we then assign our handicapped truants to home schools on the basis of their race. White truants would be placed in black schools, and black truants in white schools. Because none of them attend school frequently, and because some of them never attend school, I don't expect we will have serious objections from parents or, for that matter, the children themselves in placing them in that manner. And the schools will be delighted. Since they won't be seeing much of the children anyway, those placements will balance the racial composition in our schools while there will be no disruptions of programs or feelings."

With bold insight, one school district was able to reap large reimbursements for the nonattendance of children to its classrooms. And at the same time, it enhanced its academic standing in the state without adding one remedial teacher to its roles or spending on extra minute teaching its children to read or write or its teachers to teach. And possibly best of all, without bussing children, without inflicting children on the schools that did not want them, or—conversely—inflicting schools on children who did not want them, the district's schools for the first time were approved as racially balanced. For the first time the bleeding hearts, the Civil Liberties Union, the Black Caucus, the Hispanics, the women, and the other troublemakers were given racially balanced schools.

Picture this headline in the local paper:

SCHOOLS BALANCED,
SCORES UP,
DEFICITS DOWN,
ALL IS WELL WITH THE WORLD.

¹On November 11, 1981, the superintendent of an eastern school district proposed that truancy be identified as a "handicapping condition," that it be taken out of the criminal area and defined as a learning barrier. He also proposed that his district be given the opportunities to develop new remedies for truancy, such efforts to be funded under the present formula for handicapped education.