

COMBATING TRUANCY IN ORANGE COUNTY

**2003-2004 Orange County Grand Jury
May 20, 2004**

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COMBATING TRUANCY IN ORANGE COUNTY

ABSTRACT

The Orange County school system is divided into 27 local school districts and one County-level Department of Education school district. Each local school district is governed by a Board of Education. A Superintendent of Schools reports to each Board of Education. The Superintendent and his/her staff are responsible for implementing the provisions of the State Education Code, carrying out the policies of the Board, and administering the day-to-day operations of the school district.

Regular and on-time attendance is vital to a student's success in school. Too many Orange County schoolchildren exhibit excessive absences and repetitive tardiness. Yet, the State Education Code is clear on the requirements for school attendance, and each district Board is responsible for ensuring that its district complies with the Code's provisions.

All school districts within the County have implemented a series of school-level or district-level interventions with truant students and their parents. Teachers and school administrators work with the students' families to: (a) identify obstacles that prevent regular and on-time attendance, and (b) develop and implement strategies to improve attendance and eliminate tardiness. If these interventions fail to produce lasting improvements, the students and their parents may be referred to a School Attendance Review Board ("SAR Board" or "SARB"). Some SAR Boards are more effective than others in dealing with these chronic behavior problems and bringing about positive change.

Among the Grand Jury's objectives in conducting this study were to:

- Determine how effective each school district is in communicating its expectations regarding attendance to students and their parents.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the various school districts in curtailing truancy.
- Assess if school districts that have a SAR Board are more effective or less effective than those that do not.
- Identify the factors and practices that may make one SAR Board more effective than another.
- Identify, if possible, the processes, procedures and other characteristics of the high-performance SAR Boards that make them most effective. Document the best practices among the various SAR Boards.
- Determine if the Truancy Response Project has been effective in reducing habitual trancies.

In performing this study, the Grand Jury interviewed representatives of nine school districts, surveyed the 18 school districts not interviewed, and attended SAR Board meetings of several school districts and of the Orange County Department of Education.

Key among the Grand Jury's 25 findings are the following:

- School districts that have chosen to embrace the Truancy Response Project have experienced significant improvements in their truancy problem and increased awareness among parents and students of the importance of regular attendance.
- School districts that have adopted attendance-incentive programs, to reward and celebrate good attendance, demonstrate improvements in Average Daily Attendance (ADA) that more than make up for the program expenses.
- The Web sites of 11 school districts provide an inadequate treatment of attendance matters and lack explicit expectations for students' attendance.
- Failure by three school districts to identify as habitual truants those students who have been truant for three or more times during a school year appears to place those districts out of compliance with the State Education Code.
- All school districts — even those without SAR Boards — would benefit by their participation on the County (Department of Education) SAR Board.

Among its 24 recommendations, the Grand Jury recommended that:

- The Probation Department and the District Attorney's Office improve the operational effectiveness of district-level SAR Boards by assigning, respectively, a Probation Officer and a Deputy District Attorney to attend SAR Board meetings in those districts that request such participation.
- The County Superintendent of Schools establish an operating SAR Board (not just an advisory or networking SAR Board) to meet the needs of those school districts that do not have their own SAR Boards.
- The County Superintendent of Schools formulate a plan whereby all school districts provide equitable financial support to the Probation Department and the District Attorney's Office to ensure that these agencies are able to continue the truancy-abatement services for which the districts are the financial beneficiaries.

BACKGROUND

In a 1995 report, the California Department of Education (CDE) noted that truancy is the most powerful predictor of juvenile-delinquent behavior. The CDE also found, in a survey of prison populations, that more than 80 percent of all inmates were school dropouts, nearly half of the inmates who had dropped out of school had been classified as truants and only 2 percent of adults entering state prisons had a high-school diploma or a graduate-equivalence degree (GED).

The *1996 Juvenile Crime Statistics* by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) supports CDE's findings. According to DOJ, 57 percent of violent crimes committed by juveniles occurred when the juveniles should have been in school, and 78 percent of "first arrests" of the prison population were for truancy.

The Orange County Board of Education and the Orange County Department of Education, headed by the Superintendent of Schools, have primary responsibility for implementing the *California Education Code* within the County.

The County school system is divided into 27 local school districts and one County-level Department of Education school district. Each local school district is governed by either a Board of Education or a Board of Trustees, which derives its powers from the Constitution and Statutes of the State of California. The Boards of the local school districts function as goal-setting, policy-making and evaluating bodies. The Boards have complete jurisdiction over their respective districts, its programs, employees, pupils, building sites and equipment. Board members are elected by the public to work for the best educational interests of the students in their districts.

Superintendents (or Superintendents of Schools) report to their respective Boards. The Superintendent and his/her staff are responsible for implementing the provisions of the *California Education Code*, carrying out the policies of the Board and administering the day-to-day operations of the school district.

With respect to student attendance, each district Board is responsible for implementing the following provisions of the *California Education Code*:

§48200: "Each person between the ages of 6 and 18 years of age is subject to compulsory full-time education. Each [such] person ... shall attend the public full-time day school or continuation school or classes for the full time designated as the length of the school day by the governing board of the school district in which the residency of either parent or legal guardian is located...."

Regular and on-time attendance is vital to a student's success in school. Too many Orange County schoolchildren exhibit excessive absences and repetitive tardiness. State law is clear on the requirement for school attendance:

§48260: "Any pupil subject to compulsory full-time education or to compulsory continuation education who is absent from school without a valid excuse three full days in one school year or tardy or absent for more than any 30-minute period during the school day without a valid excuse on three occasions in one school year, or any combination thereof, is a truant..."

Furthermore:

§48262: “Any pupil is deemed an habitual truant who has been reported as a truant three or more times per school year provided that no pupil shall be deemed an habitual truant unless an appropriate district officer or employee has made a conscientious effort to hold at least one conference with a parent or guardian of the pupil and the pupil himself....”

All school districts within the County have implemented a series of school-level or district-level interventions with truant students and their parents. Teachers and school administrators work with the students’ families to: (a) identify obstacles that prevent regular and on-time attendance, and (b) develop and implement strategies to improve attendance and eliminate tardiness. If these interventions fail to produce lasting improvements, the students and their parents may be referred to a School Attendance Review Board (SAR Board).

§48321 of the State *Education Code* authorizes – but does not require – establishment of a SAR Board in each county. Although Orange County has a SAR Board at the Department of Education, the SAR Board does not process cases but acts instead as a networking and advisory body to the local school districts.

In any county in which there is no county SAR Board, *Education Code* §48321(e) allows a school-district governing board to establish a local SAR Board, which operates in the same manner and has the same authority as a county SAR Board. Twenty of the 27 school districts in Orange County have, in fact, established local SAR Boards. The other seven school districts have adopted other measures to deal with egregious cases of absenteeism, tardiness and behavior.

If lower-level interventions fail to mitigate individual attendance problems, §48263 of the *Education Code* provides for referring habitual truants to a SAR Board:

“If any minor pupil in any district of a county is an habitual truant, or is irregular in attendance at school, ... or is habitually insubordinate or disorderly during attendance at school, the pupil may be referred to a school attendance review board....”

Some SAR Boards are more effective than others in dealing with these chronic behavior problems and bringing about positive change.

To complement the operation of the local SAR Boards, Orange County is fortunate to have in place a truancy-reduction program (the Truancy Response Project), administered by the District Attorney’s office, endorsed by the Juvenile Court, supported by the Probation Department and operated for the benefit of the school districts and citizens of the County.

PURPOSE

The purposes of this study were to:

- Determine how effective each school district is in communicating its expectations regarding attendance to students and their parents.
- Identify factors that may influence the severity of truancy experienced within a school district.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the various school districts in curtailing truancy.
- Determine if a district's effectiveness in dealing with truancy is related to the type and timing of interventions employed.
- Document one or more existing process models that offer effective means for controlling and abating truanancies.
- Assess if school districts that have a SAR Board are more effective or less effective than those that do not.
- Identify the factors and practices that may make one SAR Board more effective than another.
- Identify, if possible, the processes, procedures and other characteristics of the high-performance SAR Boards that make them most effective. Document the best practices among the various SAR Boards.
- Determine if the Truancy Response Project has been effective in reducing habitual truanancies in the participating school districts. Assess the school districts' perceptions as to the effectiveness of the Truancy Response Project.

METHOD OF STUDY

In performing this study, the Grand Jury interviewed representatives of nine school districts and several stakeholders in the truancy-abatement process; surveyed the 18 school districts not interviewed; examined school-district Web sites; analyzed data provided by the school districts; attended SAR Board meetings of several school districts and of the Orange County Department of Education; attended meetings of the Directors of Guidance, Child Welfare and Attendance (CWA); observed sessions of Juvenile Truancy Court; attended several District Attorney's Community Meetings; and participated in meetings of the Truancy Response Advisory Board.

In particular the Grand Jury:

- Held a telephone conference with a staff Education Programs administrator for the State Department of Education
- Studied pertinent sections of the *California Education Code*, the *School Attendance Review Boards Handbook* and the *School Attendance Improvement Handbook*
- Interviewed the Presiding Judge of the Orange County Juvenile Court

- Interviewed Deputy District Attorneys responsible for conducting the Truancy Response Project and for prosecuting truancy cases
- Interviewed Deputy Public Defenders responsible for defending truancy cases
- Interviewed two Division Directors of the Orange County Probation Department and one Probation Officer responsible for dealing with truancy cases
- Interviewed a Deputy Superintendent of Schools and an administrator of Student Services, both of the Orange County Department of Education
- Interviewed district administrative personnel (and, in some cases, school-board members and members of SAR Boards) of nine school districts
- Received, tabulated and evaluated responses to questionnaires submitted to the 18 school districts not interviewed
- Examined the Web sites of all 27 school districts to assess how well each district communicates its expectations regarding consistent and on-time attendance
- Attended and participated in SAR Board meetings of the Orange County Department of Education
- Observed SAR Board meetings of five school districts to assess the SAR Boards' processes and procedures
- Attended two of the Department of Education's meetings of the Directors of Guidance, Child Welfare and Attendance to better understand the issues facing these key personnel in their efforts to mitigate habitual truancy
- Attended two sessions of Juvenile Truancy Court to better understand how the "intervention of last resort" is applied when lower-level interventions have failed
- Attended two District Attorney's Community Meetings, used by the Truancy Response Project to communicate with habitual truants and their parents
- Participated in three meetings of the Truancy Response Advisory Board, which addresses ways to maintain truancy-mitigation efforts in the face of diminished budgets

DISCUSSION

Truancy is a long-standing problem in Orange County that impacts students, schools and communities.

Truancy — Its Magnitude and Causal Factors

In beginning its study of truancy in Orange County, the Grand Jury queried nine school districts to elicit their perceptions regarding the severity and causal factors of truancy within their districts. [For reference, two of those school districts (Fullerton Joint Union High School and Huntington Beach Union High School) do not have SAR Boards; the other seven do.]

At one end of the spectrum, Capistrano Unified, Buena Park and Irvine Unified see truancies as minimal or fairly well controlled. Perceptions at the other end of the spectrum raise a red flag. Huntington Beach Union High School views truancies in its district as out of control and says that poor attendance is not just a significant problem; it's an epidemic. Orange Unified also acknowledges that truancies are still a significant problem even though the numbers are much better than they were 10 years ago. Santa Ana Unified admits that they have a big problem but says that it's well controlled. (The Grand Jury notes, however, that Santa Ana Unified had more habitual truants in 2002-03 – 1,284 – than any other school district in Orange County.)

The other three school districts (Anaheim Union High School, Fullerton Joint Union High School and Los Alamitos Unified) have a more moderate view of their truancy problems, citing progressive improvements and community involvement that keeps truancies in check.

Fullerton Joint Union High School spoke glowingly of their approach — unique in Orange County — to combating truancies: “Since the district implemented ‘Dean of Attendance’ positions at each of the comprehensive schools, there have been significant improvements.” The district has, in fact, demonstrated the best improvement in F_m [the figure of merit (Average Daily Attendance divided by enrollment) for enabling comparisons to be made among school districts] over the last four school years. Two of its schools — Troy High School and Sunny Hills High School — have Average Daily Attendance (ADA) levels consistently higher than at any other schools in Orange County.

Are socio-economic factors significant in truancy rates? The nine school districts queried were asked for their opinions. Only one saw no connection, stating that truancy problems exist at all socio-economic levels. Two saw little connection. The other six school districts were convinced of a connection. Some provided a rationale for their responses:

- Among the many motel dwellers, and in less-affluent populations, children frequently stay home to take care of younger siblings, to earn money or to assist with translation.
- Lower socio-economic populations tend to rent apartments rather than buy homes, and the greater mobility of apartment renters contributes to higher absenteeism.
- The large immigrant population and its lack of English contribute to the problem.
- Families that are better off financially are better able to track their children.

A Deputy Superintendent of Schools and an administrator from the Department of Education concurred in the assessment of a correlation between truancy rates and socio-economic factors. Two Division Directors of the Probation Department also concurred.

The nine school districts also were asked if the educational level of parents is significant in truancy rates. The answers ran the gamut from “Absolutely!” to “Definitely not!” Two school districts gave middle-of-the-road responses, pointing out that even poorly educated parents can value education and that recent immigrants usually don’t understand the system.

Four school districts offered a rationale for their answers:

- Truancy is more related to culture than to the parents’ education, as shown, for example, by the high value that Asians place on educating their children and by the greater emphasis that Middle-eastern peoples place on educating boys than on girls.
- The strong correlation is related to a belief in the value of education, the amount and kind of TV watched and the type of reading in the home.
- If the children see that school is not important to the parents, then school will not be important to the children.
- Better-educated parents value education more highly, and better-educated parents are more likely to ensure that their kids are in school.

A Department of Education Deputy Superintendent of Schools agreed that there is an inverse relationship between parents’ educational levels and the trancies that school districts experience.

Finally, the nine school districts were asked for their views on what other factors affect truancy rates. Although there was a wide range of responses, four common themes emerged: substance abuse, peer pressure, cultural forces and the beach mentality. In particular:

- Parents’ lack of understanding of the relationship between attendance and educational success
- Parents’ lack of understanding of how attendance (ADA) affects school income
- Lack of parental support or the lack of supervision at home
- Lack of consequences at school and at home
- Conflicts with peers (e.g., bullying) or teachers
- Destructive choices made by the kids themselves: drugs, sex, hanging out with the wrong crowd; peer pressure
- The need to care for younger siblings
- The need to work to help support the family
- Pleasant weather and the availability of beaches

Good Attendance — Communicating Expectations and Encouraging Appropriate Behavior

Preventing poor attendance must start with an effective school-board policy on attendance. If a student is to stand a chance of conforming to a school district's attendance expectations, however, the student and his or her parents must be told what those expectations are. Effective policies, therefore, must convey the philosophy to all staff, parents and students that school attendance is important. It sounds like a “given,” but the effectiveness of school districts in communicating expectations varies greatly.

Most schools define their expectations at student assemblies or parent meetings held at the beginning of each school year. And many school districts include their expectations in documents, like Parent-Student Handbooks, that are distributed to students and parents.

However, oral presentations that are not reinforced tend to be forgotten, and “paper” tends to be misplaced, lost or discarded. Furthermore, some of the documentation that the Grand Jury examined placed more emphasis on defining dress codes and academic standards than on defining attendance standards. Can academic excellence really be achieved if a student doesn't attend classes?

Many statements of expectations for student attendance in the documentation that the Grand Jury examined were no more than sterile extractions from, or elaborations of, the *California Education Code*. Typical examples state, “... *you are herewith notified that the rules of the district pertaining to student discipline are available in the main office of each school and are included in this booklet....*” and “... *students are to conform to school regulations, attend all classes, pursue the required course of study, submit to the authority of the teachers....*”

If a child who asks, “why do I need to be in school?” is told “because I said so,” how is that child to understand the benefits of education? With so little attention paid to conveying the rationale for good attendance, is it any wonder that some school districts are experiencing an epidemic of poor attendance?

Since computer literacy in Orange County is now taught at an early age, and because the majority of homes in California now have one or more computers, **NOTE 1** the Grand Jury postulated that the school districts might be conveying their attendance expectations more effectively online than they are in print. The Grand Jury therefore examined all school districts' Web sites to determine if they provided clear statements of expectations for students' attendance.

As shown in Table 1 (in the Appendix), the 11 Web sites judged to be inadequate offered a very sketchy treatment of attendance matters and a lack of explicit

expectations. Moreover, the Web sites for two school districts (Centralia and Magnolia) made no mention of attendance whatsoever.

Even among the 16 Web sites judged to be adequate, there was wide variability. Although the Web sites for five school districts (Fountain Valley, Huntington Beach City, Laguna Beach Unified, Ocean View and Westminster) provided attendance expectations for individual schools, there was no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.

On the other hand, the Web sites for Capistrano Unified and Orange Unified were found to be outstanding. Capistrano Unified's Web site is very comprehensive; its home page provides parents and students with easy access to a wide range of important information, including clear and explicit statements of attendance expectations. The Grand Jury believes that Capistrano Unified's Web site is worthy of emulation by all Orange County school districts.

High attendance rates actually begin with programs at the school and district levels that emphasize the fundamental importance of regular school attendance. Such programs typically combine the components of prevention, early identification and intervention, and endow school campuses with positive cultures that engender high attendance.

A key attendance-improvement strategy is to reward and publicize good attendance. The California Department of Education reports that districts with effective programs that reward and celebrate good attendance demonstrate improvements in ADA that more than make up for the expenses of awards and public relations. **NOTE 2**

To test whether the Orange County school districts were taking advantage of proven methods to reduce truancies and increase their funding through improved ADA, the Grand Jury asked each one, "How does this school district encourage good attendance?" Twenty-one school districts responded by describing the programs that they have in place (see Appendix 1 for the complete list).

Ocean View furnished the Grand Jury with an outstanding Attendance Incentive Plan, approved by their Board of Trustees, that has separate lists of incentives in place at the district and at the school levels. Several incentives, unique to this plan, were not mentioned by any other school district:

- Lunch with the principal
- Having assemblies, tests and quizzes, or doing "fun things," on Mondays and Fridays, the high-absence days
- Creating support and buy-in by students and parents by involving them in devising the attendance incentives

Westminster also provided a long list of incentives that it uses. In fact, Westminster distributed its entire questionnaire (all 26 questions) to all 16 of its

school principals and to all of its SAR Board members, and then compiled the responses. The response from one of its schools (DeMille Elementary) is worthy of mention. DeMille employs an asset-building approach to improving attendance. The program helps students to identify their positive characteristics and to develop the feeling of belonging at school. Asset building also has helped DeMille students to develop academic assets that contribute to success in school.

One school district, Fullerton Joint Union High School, makes extensive use of the AVID (Advancement Program Via Individual Determination) academic-support program to keep its students in school. The program prepares academically average students — who are at risk for truancy or dropout — for college eligibility and success. AVID levels the playing field for minority or low-income students who don't have a college-going tradition in their families.

Some school districts might think that rewards work only at the elementary or middle-school levels and that high-school students would deride such programs. Such is not the case. Irvine Unified reports that its high-school students highly value on-campus parking permits, which are available only to those who meet attendance standards.

Corroboration that attendance incentives do work at the high-school level comes from Grossmont Union High School District in San Diego County. Grossmont attributes its excellent attendance record in part to its unique “package” of attendance incentives, among which are:

- Head-of-the-line passes for lunch periods
- Student-parent dinner certificates from local restaurants
- Special parking areas for perfect attendance
- Free yearbook for perfect attendance
- Free prom bids (tickets, pictures and flowers) for perfect attendance

Four school districts either did not understand the question or truly do not have in place a program that encourages good attendance. All four described programs that were disincentives to poor attendance rather than incentives to good attendance — punishments rather than rewards.

Centralia reported that the district does not get involved because incentives are devised and put in place by the individual schools. And Los Alamitos replied that they were not really sure how the district encourages good attendance. The students seem to know the expectation, the Grand Jury was told, but the district wasn't sure how that expectation was communicated.

Identifying Patterns of Absenteeism and Tardiness

Early identification of problem behavior begins in the classroom. If school personnel fail to identify the early indicators and patterns of absence and tardiness, students face an increased risk of becoming habitual truants.

School districts were asked how they identify patterns of absenteeism and tardiness and intervene to resolve these problems before the problems become more serious. Since *all* schools record absences and tardiness, the key word in the question was “patterns.” How, for example, would a district become aware that Student A was frequently tardy to first-period class on Mondays, or that good friends B and C were frequently both absent on Fridays?

Only nine school districts recognized the Grand Jury’s interest in *patterns* of absenteeism and tardiness. Eight of those districts use powerful attendance-tracking software that is able to generate pattern reports in response to administrative queries.

- Anaheim Union High School uses its “SMART (School Management and Resource Team) software that was developed in-house and which has been in use since 1986.
- Fullerton uses Power School, a Web-based software package.
- Buena Park, Fullerton Joint Union High School, Irvine Unified, Los Alamitos Unified, Orange Unified, and Westminster all use Eagle Aeries, “a very powerful, commercial software package that can cut the data just about any way that can be imagined.”
- Huntington Beach Union High School stated that their new software, which it did not identify, does not support pattern analysis.

Interventions to Reduce Truancies

All of the school districts were asked to identify the interventions typically used before a student is referred to a SAR Board. All but five school districts responded. The responses appear in Appendix 2 in two categories: those that students are likely to perceive as helpful, and those that students are likely to perceive as punitive.

Fullerton pointed out that the effectiveness of a given intervention varies with the age of the student. And even though some districts asserted that, for interventions to succeed, students and parents must see them as supportive rather than punitive, the districts did identify both positive and negative interventions.

One school district, Centralia, uses a clever and very creative intervention with its students who can’t seem to make it to school on time because they oversleep or fall

back to sleep after a parent wakes them: Centralia provides these students with alarm clocks.

The school districts that were interviewed were also asked which interventions they had found to be particularly effective in reducing truancies. The districts identified the following interventions as being most effective:

- Active involvement by a Probation Officer and a Deputy District Attorney in the truancy-abatement process
- District Attorney's Community Meetings
- Increased parental involvement in monitoring student's behavior
- Team approach to problem solving (e.g., Student Success Team or School Attendance Review Team)
- Direct contact by teacher or principal with parents
- Home visits and student transport by School Resource Officer
- Saturday remediation school
- Availability of outreach counselors and caseworkers
- Availability of alternative-education programs
- Availability of community day schools
- Class changes on a case-by-case basis

The School Attendance Review Board — A Truancy-Reduction Tool

SAR Boards were created in 1974 by a statute that enhanced enforcement of the compulsory-attendance laws and allowed students with school-attendance problems to be diverted from the juvenile-justice system until all other available remedies had been exhausted. Students with persistent school-attendance problems may be referred to a SAR Board if normal interventions at the school do not resolve the situation. Although the goal of a SAR Board is to identify solutions or resources for resolving the students' problems — and thus keep the students in school and provide them with a meaningful educational experience — SAR Boards do have the authority to refer students and their parents to the courts.

The County (Department of Education) SAR Board does not process cases. Rather, it is a coordinating and networking body that assists school districts in developing strategies to reduce absenteeism. The County SAR Board also:

- Helps school districts devise or improve attendance-monitoring techniques
- Works with County agencies to provide resources to the school districts
- Provides options for students who demonstrate persistent attendance and behavior problems
- Supports school districts with appropriate student interventions
- Coordinates State, County and district protocols for working with stakeholder agencies (e.g., District Attorney's Office, Probation Department, Social Services Agency)

- Encourages awareness of laws, pending legislation and trends pertaining to school attendance

While the *California Education Code* authorizes the establishment of County or local SAR Boards, it does not require that they be established. In fact, seven school districts in the County have chosen to implement other means of resolving truancy issues. The responsibility for problem resolution may rest with the attendance supervisor, who may hold the title of Director of Child Welfare and Attendance.

In years past, the focus of SAR Boards was on enforcing the compulsory-education laws, and a SAR Board's effectiveness was measured by the number of cases that were prosecuted. Today, district SAR Boards de-emphasize punishment and focus instead on diverting cases away from the juvenile-justice system. This current approach provides a safety net for students who fail to respond to the schools' normal avenues of prevention or intervention.

When a SAR Board meets with a referred student and his/her parent(s), the goal is to identify a solution or appropriate resources for resolving the problem — that is, to assist the student and the student's family in alleviating the factors that interfere with their compliance with the mandatory-education laws. The strength of a SARB derives from the combined expertise and resources of a team that collaboratively diagnoses a problem and recommends viable solutions.

The agreements reached at a SARB meeting are documented in a contract that is signed by the SARB Chairperson, the student and the parent(s). The contract formalizes the agreed-to action plan, states the responsibilities of the parties involved and identifies all referrals and follow-up dates.

School District Administrations and the O. C. Department of Education

For the nine school districts that were interviewed face-to-face, the Grand Jury inquired about the working relationship between the district administration and the Orange County Department of Education (DOE). All nine acknowledged a beneficial working relationship and welcomed the support they received. The DOE-provided resources or services that the school districts considered most valuable were: legal services; training for administrators; meetings for directors of guidance, child welfare and attendance; and meetings for superintendents. Other value-added resources mentioned were: the SAR Board; the ACCESS program for students expelled from district schools; information resources (e.g., school safety, smoking cessation); the independent-study program; crisis-response meetings; financial management; and curriculum support.

District SARBs and their Relationships with the County and State SARBs

In addition to county and local SAR Boards authorized by *Education Code* §48321, §48325 established a State SAR Board, under the auspices of the California Department of Education (CDE). Its charter includes statewide policy coordination and personnel training to enhance the effectiveness of the SARB process in counties and local school districts. CDE's Counseling and Support Office and SAR Board are resources that support school districts in planning, implementing and monitoring comprehensive student-support systems to improve school attendance and meet other student needs. The State SAR Board encourages districts to develop strategies for guidance and community services that meet the special needs of students with school-attendance or behavior problems.

The nine school districts that were interviewed were asked how their district SAR Boards interacted with the State SAR Board. Seven of the districts said that there was no interaction. Of the seven, one based their non-interaction on their lack of a district SAR Board; one said that it is through the County SAR Board that the district deals with the State; and one said that their interaction is strictly one-way via the advisory information distributed by the State SAR Board.

Orange Unified, on the other hand, said that their SAR Board had a good working relationship with the State SAR Board and that the State Board provides their district Board with lots of good information. Huntington Beach Union High School stated that it didn't know there was a State SAR Board.

The nine school districts were also asked about their SAR Board's relationship with the County SAR Board. Fullerton Joint Union High School, which doesn't have a SAR Board, said that it is not involved with the County SAR Board. On the other hand, the Huntington Beach Union High School, which also lacks a SAR Board, stated that two district personnel attend County SARB meetings.

Buena Park School District said that it has no interaction with the County SAR Board, and Los Alamitos Unified School District stated that because the County SAR Board is primarily a policy-making body, no one from the district attends County SAR Board meetings.

The districts that felt that the County SAR Board supported their local efforts appreciated the opportunities for networking and the forum for exchange of ideas.

The Grand Jury believes that all school districts in the County — even those without SAR Boards — would benefit from participating in County SAR Board meetings. Having observed that only a small fraction of school districts are represented at the County SAR Board meetings, the Grand Jury asked an administrator at the Department of Education if there was any attempt to limit participation or to exclude those districts that did not have SAR Boards. When the

administrator gave emphatic assurance that there had been no such attempt, the Grand Jury suggested that positive steps be taken to involve greater participation by the districts.

The Grand Jury was, therefore, pleased to receive a copy of an e-mail, dated March 4, 2004, that was sent to all school districts. The e-mail reminded the districts that the County SARB actively assists districts with strategic planning for student attendance and truancy, and offered an open invitation to attend any or all County SARB meetings.

Habitual Truancies

How big is the habitual-truancy problem in Orange County? **Table 3** (in the Appendix) displays the numbers for four consecutive school years. It shows that, in 2002-03, for example, habitual truancies ranged from lows of 0 (Fountain Valley) and 2 (Buena Park) to a high of 1,284 (Santa Ana Unified), with an average of 266 for the 11 school districts that reported data.

But the real problems are in the numbers that *don't* appear in the table: Ten school districts have not been tracking habitual truancies at the district level, and three school districts (Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School and Saddleback Valley Unified) don't have habitual truants because they don't define any of their truants to *be* habitual truants.

The Grand Jury hypothesized that any student who is declared to be a habitual truant would be referred to the SAR Board in those school districts that have SAR Boards. A Deputy District Attorney agreed with this hypothesis, stating, "All [emphasis supplied] students who are declared to be habitual truants should be required to attend a D.A. Parents' Meeting. Any student who continues to be truant after being 'invited' to the Parents' Meeting should be referred to the SARB." How does reality square with expectations? The Deputy District Attorney made an "educated guess that only about 50 percent of the habitual truants are actually referred to SARB."

With this background, the Grand Jury tested both its hypothesis and the Deputy District Attorney's educated guess. Data were requested from all 27 school districts. Five districts explained that they don't have such data because they don't have SAR Boards. Eight districts chose not to respond. **Table 4** (in the Appendix) summarizes the data obtained. It shows that only three school districts (Fountain Valley, Fullerton and Ocean View) met expectations, and that another three school districts (Anaheim City, Capistrano Unified, and Orange Unified) had mid-range numbers of referrals below the 50th percentile. For four school districts, however, the percentage of habitual truants referred to a SAR Board is unacceptably low:

- La Habra City 1.5%
- Magnolia 0.2% NOTE 3
- Santa Ana Unified 4.4%
- Westminster 1.2%

Particularly bothersome is information from six school districts. Three of those school districts (Centralia, Garden Grove Unified and Laguna Beach Unified) do not collect the requested information at the district level. Cypress, Saddleback Valley Unified and Fullerton Joint Union High School, moreover, do not declare any students to be habitual truants, no matter how many times the student is found to be truant, a situation that appears to place these districts out of compliance with the *California Education Code*.

Why are so few habitual truants referred to a SAR Board? Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the responses that the Grand Jury received to another question: “For what percentage of pupils referred to a SAR Board does a Deputy District Attorney eventually file charges?” The statistical responses provide a clue:

- Anaheim City 1 %
- Anaheim Union High School 17.6%
- Capistrano Unified 67 %
- Centralia (3 cases filed; % unknown)
- Newport-Mesa Unified 2 %
- Orange Unified 11 %
- Santa Ana Unified 7 %
- Tustin Unified 0.5%

It would be comforting to think that the numbers are low because the SARB process is so effective that Deputy District Attorneys have little to do. However, the narrative offered in response to this question conveys the frustration felt by several school districts and quickly dispels that misconception. Typical are: “None [of the district’s referrals] has been accepted by the D.A.’s office yet” and “The last time that a Deputy D.A. filed charges against a student in this district was 1984!” NOTE 4

Sensing the frustration expressed by the school districts, the Grand Jury asked one of the Deputy District Attorneys responsible for juvenile matters to identify the criteria used in deciding *not* to file charges for truancy cases that had been referred by either a school district or the Probation Department. She identified three criteria:

1. The student is within three or four months of his or her 18th birthday.
2. The student doesn’t fit the definition of a “habitual truant” — e.g., the student’s excessive absences are *excused* absences.
3. Because of the student’s medical issues, it would be more appropriate to use interventions instead of prosecution.

A fourth criterion came up in other discussions, but not during *this* conversation:

4. The dual-use SARB-referral/District Attorney-referral documentation package is found to be lacking information needed for prosecution.

Addressing Habitual Truancies in School Districts Without SAR Boards

Seven of Orange County's school districts (Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School, Huntington Beach City, Huntington Beach Union High School, Laguna Beach Unified, Saddleback Valley Unified and Savanna) do not use a SAR Board to deal with egregious cases of truancy.

In studying how perceptions squared with reality with respect to the ability of school districts without SAR Boards to control truancies, the Grand Jury asked five broad questions:

- How do the school districts without SAR Boards perceive their truancy problems?
- Do the districts with SAR Boards have positive or negative perceptions regarding the reasons that some districts choose not to have SAR Boards?
- Do the early interventions used by districts without SAR Boards differ in any significant way from the interventions used by districts with SAR Boards?
- Do the districts with SAR Boards think that districts without SAR Boards are better able or less able to control truancies?
- Are school districts without SAR Boards more effective or less effective in controlling truancies than those with SAR Boards?

School districts without SAR Boards had both positive and negative perceptions regarding the problem of habitual truancies in their districts — as did districts with SAR Boards. For instance, Fullerton Joint Union High School said that there had been significant improvements in truancy control since the district implemented Dean of Attendance positions at each of its comprehensive schools. On the other hand, while Huntington Beach Union High School District used the terms “out of control” and “epidemic” in describing its truancy problem, the Grand Jury does not think that the situation in that district is related to the lack of a SAR Board, but rather to the lack of centralized attendance monitoring and control, and to fragmented responsibility at the district level. Answers to the perception question, therefore, are inconclusive.

For the most part, the early interventions used by districts with SAR Boards are quite similar to those used by districts without SAR Boards. One exception is notable: Huntington Beach Union High School has a “TTW” (tardy/truant/wandering around) program that “sweeps kids up and gets them to class.” The Orange County Sheriff's Department reports that six Orange County cities (that's *cities*, not school districts) have daytime curfews for juveniles. In theory, these curfews should be similar to Huntington Beach Union High School's TTW

program, but – except in Garden Grove and Santa Ana – the curfews are largely ineffective because they are rarely enforced. The Sheriff’s Department supplied the following information regarding daytime curfews:

- Buena Park — Curfew rarely enforced
- Garden Grove — Police officers take juveniles to Truancy Reduction Center
- La Habra — Police officers cite juveniles; court may impose community service
- Newport Beach — Curfew rarely enforced; court may impose \$25 to \$50 fine
- Santa Ana — School Resource Officers take juveniles to their schools
- Seal Beach — No information supplied

Why do some school districts choose *not* to have SAR Boards? The nine school districts that were interviewed responded to this question. Three of the districts said that they had no idea. Another said that they didn’t know but felt that it would be a mistake not to have a SAR Board.

Others responded critically that “SARBs may be effective for grades K through 6 but are a waste of time at the high-school level” and that “SAR Boards are a lot of work for no consequences at the D.A. level.”

One school district that has a SAR Board, offered: “SAR Boards are hard work, and some districts don’t want to put in the effort. Also, some districts are too small and lack the resources. And some districts just don’t understand the benefits.”

The Grand Jury did not receive sufficient data from the school districts to determine if districts without SAR Boards were more effective or less effective in controlling truancies than those with SAR Boards, so the Grand Jury asked a related question: “Are school districts without SAR Boards more effective or less effective in controlling attendance than those with SAR Boards?” The data, shown below in **Table 5**, were taken from **Table 2** in the Appendix. The data are Attendance Figures-of-Merit (F_m) (ADA divided by enrollment) and are based on reports by 15 school districts with SAR Boards and five school districts without SAR Boards.

Table 5. Comparison of Attendance Figures-of-Merit (F_m) in School Districts With and Without SAR Boards

	School Year			
	<u>1999-00</u>	<u>2000-01</u>	<u>2001-02</u>	<u>2002-03</u>
Districts With SAR Boards	0.955	0.956	0.961	0.959
Districts Without SAR Boards	0.966	0.963	0.968	0.967

The data indicate that, in each of the four school years studied, school districts without SAR Boards were slightly more successful at controlling attendance than school districts with SAR Boards. Since these results run counter to the expectations of school districts with SAR Boards, it is not clear if these surprising results are valid at face value or if there are other, unstudied factors at play.

Composition of the County SAR Board and District SAR Boards

School Attendance Review Boards are composed of representatives of various youth-serving agencies who have the skills and experience to help truant students solve school-attendance and behavior problems through the use of available school and community resources.

Although the County SAR Board does not process cases but acts instead as a networking and advisory body to the local school districts, the *California Education Code* does not distinguish between a County SAR Board that processes cases and one that does not. Without distinction, §48321(a)(2) of the *Education Code* requires that a County SAR Board include among its members the following personnel:

- A parent
- A representative of each of the following: school districts, the county probation department, the county welfare department, the county superintendent of schools, law-enforcement agencies, community-based youth service centers, school guidance personnel, child welfare and attendance personnel, school or county health-care personnel

The Grand Jury examined the lists of County SAR Board members for the years 2002-03 and 2003-04 — and also attended several meetings of the 2003-04 County SAR Board — and made the following observations:

- With one exception, the composition of the County SAR Board mandated by the *Education Code* was satisfied in 2002-03. The exception that caused the composition of the County SAR Board to be out of compliance with the State Education Code was the lack of a representative of a law-enforcement agency among its members.
- The requirement for “a parent” to be a member of the County SAR Board was satisfied in 2002-03 by the inclusion of an officer of the Fourth District PTA (Parent Teacher Association).
- With one exception, the composition of the County SAR Board mandated by the *Education Code* is being satisfied in 2003-04 — at least on paper. The exception that causes the composition of the County SAR Board to be out of compliance with the *State Education Code* is the lack of “a parent” among its members.
NOTE 6
- The 2003-04 County SAR Board membership does include a representative of a law-enforcement agency.

- Although the requirement for “a representative of the county probation department” to be a member of the County SAR Board appears to be satisfied, the Probation Department representative no longer attends County SAR Board meetings. The Grand Jury therefore suspects that Probation Department membership exists on paper only. **NOTE 6**
- The County SAR Board membership lists indicate that, in 2002-03, only 10 of the 27 school districts were represented on the Board, and in 2003-04 that number increased by only one, to 11. Yet the Department of Education encourages all school districts — even those that do not have their own SAR Boards — to appoint a member representative. All school districts could benefit by their involvement.
- For those organizations that limit or curtail their participation on the County SAR Board because of budgetary constraints, the Grand Jury notes the following provision of the *Education Code* (§48323):

The duties, obligations, or responsibilities which may be imposed on local governmental entities by this act are such that the related costs are incurred as part of their normal operating procedures. The minor costs of such services may be borne by each agency or department and each or all of the participants may apply for and utilize state or federal funds [emphasis supplied] as may be available.

In accordance with §48321(b)(1) of the *Education Code*, composition of a local SAR Board may include, but need not be limited to, all of the following:

- A parent
- A representative of each of the following: the school district, the county probation department, the county welfare department, the county superintendent of schools, law-enforcement agencies, community-based youth service centers, school guidance personnel, child welfare and attendance personnel, school or county health-care personnel
- Other persons or group representatives appointed by the county board of education

Furthermore, each of the departments or agencies authorized to participate in SAR Boards may assign personnel to represent the department or agency on a continuing basis (§48323).

Why should so many representatives be needed on a SAR Board? Large-scale improvements require a team approach that brings to bear the diverse expertise of the team’s various members. The California Department of Education notes that effective SARBs capitalize on the diversity of their composition and create interdependencies that stretch over different agencies and professions. The team works to augment and enhance the number of assets available to the SARB-referred student by bringing together the school, home and community in a network of support for successful intervention.

“Collaboration,” says the Chairman of the State SAR Board, “is absolutely essential ... It is also essential to select members with cultural backgrounds that will meet the language and cultural needs of referred youths and their families. The SARB should be composed of representatives that reflect the ethnic, racial, geographic, and gender components of the community.”

All 20 school districts with SAR Boards were asked to identify the agencies or organizations that provided “permanent” members of their SAR Boards. With the exception of Centralia School District, which has no permanent SARB members at the district level, the districts appeared to have a fairly broad SAR Board membership to address truancy issues and their resolution.

The nine districts that were interviewed were also asked to identify the most important skills that members of a SAR Board bring to the table. One district noted that having a diversity of skills on a SAR Board is very important in being able to address problems. The following skills and experience were mentioned as essential:

- Effective communication, particularly listening skills
- Ability to understand the dynamics of family situations
- Ability to assess needs and address problems through knowledge of available resources
- Ability to deal with people, particularly those of a different culture
- Common sense

The nine school districts were further asked if there were particular skills which, if absent from a SAR Board, would render the Board ineffective. The query was also recast by asking if there were certain skills that *must* be represented on a SAR Board for the Board to be effective. The following list summarizes the responses:

- Communication skills
- Ability to address mental-health and family-health issues
- Nursing skills
- Ability to define and solve problems
- Counseling skills
- Background in special-education matters
- Law-enforcement skills (e.g., School Resource Officer)
- Prosecutorial skills (e.g., Deputy District Attorney)
- Probation skills (e.g., Probation Officer)

The Grand Jury noted that none of the school districts identified “a parent” as an essential component of a SAR Board. And that observation provides a segue into the next four questions that were asked of the school districts:

- Are there any parents of district pupils on your SAR Board?

- How frequently do you have a Probation Officer present at your SAR Board meetings?
- How frequently do you have a Deputy District Attorney present at your SAR Board meetings?
- How frequently do you have a police officer or a School Resource Officer present at your SAR Board meetings?

Of the 20 school districts with SAR Boards, 10 said that they do have parents as members, and nine said that they do not. Anaheim City School cited confidentiality issues as the rationale for not including a parent as a member.

Twelve school districts reported having a Probation Officer present at every SARB meeting or almost every SARB meeting. Two districts said that a Probation Officer attends only when requested to do so. One replied that Probation Officers attend as often as they are available, and another said that a Probation Officer is scheduled to attend every SARB meeting but attends few. Anaheim Union High School noted that they would like to have a Probation Officer at every meeting.

Thirteen school districts said that they never have a Deputy District Attorney at their SAR Board meetings. Four other school districts said that a Deputy District Attorney attends their SARB meetings only infrequently. And only one school district reported that a Deputy District Attorney attends their SARB meetings most of the time. Two school districts stated a preference for having a Deputy District Attorney at their SAR Board meetings for the authority it would add.

Eighteen school districts acknowledged that they always or almost always have a police officer or a School Resource Officer at their SAR Board meetings, and one school district usually has one. Only Tustin Unified has *both* a police officer and a School Resource Officer attend every SAR Board meeting.

As a follow-up question, all school districts were asked, “At a SAR Board meeting, do you think that hearing about the possibility of prosecution from a Probation Officer or a Deputy District Attorney would have a greater impact on a pupil and his/her parent(s) than hearing about it from someone else, like a vice-principal or school administrator?” Six school districts were emphatically positive in their responses (“Definitely!” or “Absolutely!”). Ten other school districts answered, “Yes,” three were not sure, and one did not respond.

The consensus among those districts that answered affirmatively was that “getting the message” from an authority figure (a Probation Officer or a Deputy District Attorney) had a far greater impact on students and parents than if the same message was delivered by a school authority.

Adequacy of SARB-Referral Documentation

When a habitually truant student is referred to a district SAR Board, the administration of the referring school prepares a package of documentation for the Board members to study prior to meeting with the student and parent(s). Included in the package are a SARB-referral form, a chronology of site-level interventions, the student's attendance records (for more than one school year, if pertinent), copies of notifications and other letters sent to the parent(s), and assessments by the student's teachers and the school administrators. In fact, a comprehensive SARB-referral documentation package is so similar to the information package required by a Deputy District Attorney for filing of charges that recommendations have been made to prepare a single package that would serve both purposes.

Therefore, the Grand Jury asked the school districts if the SARB-referral documentation being prepared by their school administrators was sufficient to enable a Deputy District Attorney to prosecute habitual-truancy cases. (The question did not actually apply to the seven districts without SAR Boards. Of the 19 school districts that responded, 14 gave an unqualified affirmative answer.

Westminster School District said that their SARB-referral packages were "usually" adequate but that, in thinking about the question, they had initiated a study to improve their preparation process. And, even though they were not asked, Westminster volunteered that their documentation could be improved by periodic training of school administrators, a step that they have now undertaken.

Anaheim Union High School uses a two-step process to prepare their documentation package. The district develops a "basic" package for their SAR Board. Then, if a case is to be referred to the District Attorney's Office, the district assembles a more comprehensive documentation package.

Centralia said that they didn't know if their SARB-referral documentation packages were adequate because the paperwork is handled by social workers at the school sites.

The Grand Jury asked a follow-up question to the school districts that were interviewed: "Would periodic training of school administrators in preparing SARB-referral documentation be beneficial?" Five of the seven districts with SAR Boards said that such training *is* beneficial and *is* being done. Two added that training every other year by a Deputy District Attorney would be beneficial. Another district said that two in-service training sessions had already been scheduled.

Santa Ana Unified was unique in stating that periodic training of school administrators was not necessary because a secretary does all the work. ^{NOTE 5} It appears to the Grand Jury that Santa Ana Unified does not appreciate the important and critical role that school administrators play in the SARB process.

Impact of the Truancy Response Project

In 2001, in response to the growing rate of truancy and the increasing number of truancy-related law violations throughout the County, the District Attorney's Office banded together with the Juvenile Court, the Department of Education, the Probation Department and law-enforcement agencies to found the Truancy Response Project (TRP). The eight-step process of the TRP is depicted in **Figure 3** (in the Appendix).

The goal of the TRP is to reduce the number of truanies and the volume of truancy-related delinquent behavior among Orange County's youth. To achieve this goal, the TRP has created one more opportunity for habitual truants and their parents to "get the message" before being referred to a SAR Board, and then to the Juvenile Court for prosecution and supervision.

This "additional opportunity" takes the form of a "District Attorney's Community Meeting," attended by habitually truant students and their parent(s). In school districts that participate in the Truancy Response Project, the process unfolds this way: Once a student has been identified as a habitual truant, the school district sends a letter, on District Attorney letterhead, to the student's parent(s), requiring attendance by the student and at least one parent at a Community Meeting. The purpose of the Community Meeting is to define the differences between excused and unexcused absences, to inform the students and their parents about the laws governing truancy, to advise them that the District Attorney's Office prosecutes both parents and students for truancy violations and to identify the consequences if the unexcused absences continue. The presentations are made by a Deputy District Attorney, sometimes assisted by a Probation Officer, a law-enforcement officer or a school administrator (e.g., the Director of Child Welfare and Attendance).

Programs similar to the Truancy Response Project have been successful in many other counties in California and throughout the nation in reducing truancy and daytime crime. The District Attorney's Office reports that the impact of the Community Meetings has been overwhelmingly positive, with close to half of the students who attend the meetings being able to correct their poor attendance, thereby avoiding referral to SARB to the Probation Department or to the District Attorney's Office.

Students who do not comply with their behavioral contracts following a SARB hearing are referred to the Probation Department. The role of the Probation Department in the Truancy Response Project is as follows: A Probation Officer interviews the student and parent(s) to determine the reasons for the student's truanies and to identify prior interventions that have been unsuccessful in resolving the problem. After the issues are assessed, the student is placed on a contract for improved attendance. The contract may also require counseling or therapy for family problems and may impose punitive sanctions such as community

service or essay writing. The Probation Officer monitors the student’s compliance with the contract by telephone, letter or school visits. If the student does not abide by the contract, or if there is a new law violation, the Probation Department refers the case to the District Attorney.

To assess how well the school districts’ experience meshed with that of the District Attorney’s Office, the Grand Jury asked the school districts what impact TRP has had on their habitual truancies. Responses show that the districts that have chosen to embrace the Truancy Response Project have experienced marked improvements in their truancy problem and increased awareness among parents and students of the importance of regular attendance. Typical of the responses are the following:

- “It has been a miracle. Parents get the message. The district is no longer seeing repeat offenders. TRP is the most important thing in Orange County schools in the last 30 years.”
- “TRP has been very effective in reducing truancy levels. The D.A. letters send a strong message to parents and encourage improved attendance.”
- “The Truancy Response Project has reduced habitual truancy significantly.”
- “Parents of students with attendance problems respond well to the threat of D.A. intervention. All attendance contracts have been adhered to.”
- “Since the TRP was adopted ... attendance has improved district-wide.”
- “TRP has had a positive effect. Parents are now aware that their actions will have serious consequences if they do not comply with compulsory-education laws.”
- “It has had a positive impact once news got around that kids who don’t comply will end up in court or on probation.”
- “TRP has increased the awareness and importance of regular school attendance and its role in school achievement. TRP deters truancies district-wide.”

Next, the school districts were asked if the District Attorney’s Community Meetings with habitual truants and their parents had been effective in changing parents’ and pupils’ attitudes regarding school attendance. For the school districts that responded, the results were distinctly favorable:

	<u>NUMBER OF RESPONSES</u>
Yes	11
No	Zero
Not Sure	4
Results Inconclusive	3

Why are the District Attorney’s Community Meetings effective? Here are the reasons that some of the school districts gave:

- “The D.A. meetings reinforce district guidelines and show that the district is working with outside agencies to enforce attendance laws.”
- “The D.A. meetings make parents aware of the possibility of prosecution and of the correlation between attendance and achievement.”
- “Parents and students hear directly from someone who has the responsibility to prosecute. Legal consequences are made clear.”

When the school districts were asked who should make presentations at the District Attorney’s Community Meetings, the responses focused on four key stakeholders:

	<u>NUMBER OF RESPONSES</u>
• Deputy District Attorney:	10
• Law Enforcement Officer:	6
• Probation Officer:	6
• School Administrator:	5

Not surprisingly, the Deputy District Attorney was identified most frequently as the key player because “the Deputy D.A. sends the strongest message,” “the Deputy D.A. gets the most parental attention” and “it’s the Deputy D.A. who will prosecute.”

Improving the Effectiveness of District SAR Boards

The Chairman of the State SAR Board recommends that there be “continuing evaluation of the SARB process and the quality of SARB resources ... so the SARB members can understand what is working and what needs to be improved.” And if a SAR Board is to understand what is working and what needs to be improved, the Grand Jury reasoned, the SAR Board needs to receive feedback. Therefore, the Grand Jury asked the nine school districts that were interviewed to describe the feedback mechanism by which SAR Board members gain full knowledge of the outcomes of their interventions. Responses from the seven school districts with SAR Boards indicate that more than half of the SAR Boards are receiving adequate feedback:

- “The supervising social worker shares case progress with panel members. The SARB typically doesn’t go back and review every case, but it has access to the information.”
- “Post-SARB contract-review meetings are held with pupils. Every student who has a contract is scheduled for a review, sometimes even a second review.”
- “The feedback element has been built into the process this year. At each meeting, a recap of status of the prior month’s cases is discussed.”
- “The SARB devotes considerable energy to how well the students are abiding by their contracts. The SARB often brings students back to review their cases.”

- “A case review is held at each SAR Board meeting, before the Board considers new cases.”

All of the school districts with SAR Boards were given the opportunity to do some “blue sky” thinking about improving their SAR Boards’ effectiveness. They were asked, “Budget considerations aside, if you were able to change any aspects of this district’s SAR Board to improve its effectiveness, what changes would you make?” Many of the districts’ responses focused on desires to have increased SAR Board participation — particularly by a Deputy District Attorney and a Probation Officer. The school districts’ detailed wish lists appear in Appendix 3.

Improving the Effectiveness of District SAR Boards — Some Best Practices

The Grand Jury had intended to attend SAR Board meetings of eight to 10 school districts, not as participants but as observers of the SAR Boards’ processes and procedures. It was hoped that the Grand Jury would be able to identify the processes, procedures and other characteristics of high-performance SAR Boards that make them most effective — and, thereby, to document best practices among the various SAR Boards.

As it turned out, several school districts were reluctant to allow Grand Jurors to attend their SARB meetings, citing privacy and confidentiality concerns, despite being informed that Grand Jurors were sworn to secrecy and were sensitive to privacy issues. As a result, the Grand Jury was able to attend meetings of only five SAR Boards (Anaheim Union High School, Fullerton, Orange Unified, Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified and Santa Ana Unified) and even then — because of parental objections — was not able to observe Board reviews of certain cases. Nevertheless, from interviews and observations, the Grand Jury identified the following best practices among SAR Boards:

- A case review is held at each meeting before the SAR Board considers new cases. Case reviews permit Board members to ascertain how well the students and parents are abiding by their contracts and to understand the efficacy of their interventions.
- A law-enforcement officer and a Probation Officer attend each meeting. A Deputy District Attorney attends particular meetings, by invitation, where such attention is warranted.
- SARB-referral documentation is dual-use in that it not only meets the needs of the SAR Board but also satisfies a Deputy District Attorney’s requirements for filing charges.
- A script is used to guide the proceedings of each hearing.
- An audio recording is made of each SARB hearing. Recordings are kept on file and are transcribed only if required by a Deputy District Attorney for filing of charges.

- Provisions are made for two-way interpretation of the proceedings for parents who do not speak or understand English.
- Documentation to be signed by a non-English-speaking parent is available in that parent’s native language (or is translated orally into the parent’s native language before the parent is required to sign).

Process Models for Controlling and Abating Truancies

Two process models for controlling and abating truancies are shown in the Appendix. **Figure 1** depicts the process used by Ocean View prior to the district’s adoption of the Truancy Response Project and reflects a more traditional flow. **Figure 2** illustrates the process currently used by Santa Ana Unified and shows the involvement of the Probation Department and the District Attorney’s Office under the Truancy Response Project.

Improving District-Level Processes and Procedures

Wanting the school districts to engage in some “blue sky” thinking, unconstrained by limitations that real-world monetary considerations might impose, the Grand Jury asked all 27 school districts the following question: “Budget considerations aside, if you were able to make any changes to the processes and procedures intended to ameliorate the problem of habitual truancy in this school district, what changes would you make, and how would those changes address the problem?”

Only Centralia did not respond. Quoted in Appendix 4 are the responses of the other 26 school districts.

Other Ideas for Solving the Problem of Habitual Truancy

As pointed out by the Probation Department, while truancy may be incorrigible behavior, in the eyes of the law it is a trivial situation — a status offense less serious than an infraction and not even worthy of being called a crime. That is why so few cases are prosecuted.

The Presiding Judge of the Juvenile Court says that truancy used to be a crime and suggests that if habitual truancy is to be brought under control, legislation will have to be enacted to put more teeth in the law and make truancy a crime once again. Then Juvenile Court judges will be able to deal with the problems on a case-by-case basis.

Nevertheless, to the school districts affected by habitual truancies, the problems are very real, very serious, and very non-trivial. Therefore, in case there were some aspects of the truancy problem that the Grand Jury had neglected to address, the Grand Jury asked, “Do you have any other ideas that you would like to share with

us about solving the problem of habitual truancy, either in your school district or in Orange County, as a whole?”

Some, but not all, of the responses revolve around budget issues:

- “Agreement by the various police departments on the imposition of curfews. The ability to hold the parents more accountable for the actions of their children. More community involvement (donations of incentives for good attendance, job opportunities).”
- “Have greater enforcement of the curfew. Hire a School Resource Officer.”
- “Increase the budget to be able to hire more Assistant Principals. Have one attendance technician whose sole responsibility is to nip attendance problems in the bud. Implement early interventions to prevent habitual trancies. Show the ‘offenders’ that the district is serious about the consequences for inappropriate behavior: ‘Violate the SARB contract; go to Probation.’”
- “Combating truancy needs to be a community effort. Add municipal codes that support truancy abatement. Involve agencies that provide resources. The County should provide a SAR Board for districts that do not have one [emphasis supplied]. The Department of Education, the Probation Department and the District Attorney’s Office should jointly issue advice on procedures that are effective.”
- “There are visionary people in the school district who really care about kids. There is also a great collaborative effort in the community; for example, surrounding businesses notify the ... Police Department if kids are ‘hanging out’ instead of being in school.”
- “Truancy support by the Probation Department needs to be fully funded. All habitual truants need to have their ‘day in court.’ All school districts need to be diligent in referring their habitual truants to Probation or the D.A.”
- “Pro-active involvement by Probation is welcome and effective.”
- “Hire more staff. We need more personnel dedicated to solving the truancy problem.”

FINDINGS

Under *California Penal Code* §933 and §933.05, responses are required to all findings. The 2003-2004 Orange County Grand Jury has arrived at the following 25 findings:

1. The Web sites of the following school districts provide an inadequate treatment of attendance matters and lack explicit expectations for students' attendance:
 - Anaheim City
 - Buena Park
 - Centralia
 - Cypress
 - Fullerton Joint Union High School
 - Fullerton School
 - La Habra City School
 - Magnolia School
 - Newport-Mesa Unified
 - Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified
 - Santa Ana Unified School

Moreover, the Web sites for Centralia and Magnolia do not address attendance at all.

2. While the Web sites for the following school districts provide attendance expectations for individual schools:
 - Fountain Valley
 - Huntington Beach City
 - Laguna Beach Unified
 - Ocean View
 - Westminster

there are no statements of expectations for the districts as a whole.

3. The Web sites of the Capistrano Unified School District and the Orange Unified School District are outstanding in providing clear and explicit statements of attendance expectations.
4. The Ocean View School District has recognized that school districts that reward and celebrate good attendance demonstrate improvements in Average Daily Attendance (ADA) that more than make up for the expenses of awards and public relations. Ocean View has adopted an outstanding Attendance Incentive Plan, approved by its Board of Trustees, that has separate lists of incentives in place at the district and at the school levels.
5. Attendance-incentive programs work not only at the elementary and middle-school levels, but – given the right incentives or rewards – at the high-school level, also. Irvine Unified School District successfully uses attendance incentives at all levels. The rewards are valued by the students and help to keep attendance levels high.

6. Because attendance incentives in the Centralia School District are devised and put in place by the individual schools, the district does not get involved.
7. Los Alamitos Unified School District does not explicitly encourage good attendance, and the district's expectation of good attendance is not directly communicated to the district's students.
8. In 2002-03, only 10 of the 27 school districts were represented on the County (Department of Education) SAR Board. In 2003-04, that number has increased by one to 11. Membership on the County SAR Board is open to all County school districts, and all school districts – even those without SAR Boards – would benefit by their participation.
9. The Orange County Superintendent of Schools / Department of Education has not done enough to encourage all of the school districts to participate on the County SAR Board. However, on March 4, 2004, the Department of Education did send all school districts an open invitation to attend any or all County SAR Board meetings.
10. The percentage of habitual truants referred to a SAR Board in the following school districts is unacceptably low:

La Habra City	1.5%
Magnolia	0.2% NOTE 3
Santa Ana Unified	4.4%
Westminster	1.2%
11. The Centralia, Garden Grove Unified and Laguna Beach Unified school districts do not collect information on habitual truancies and SAR Board referrals at the district levels.
12. Cypress School District, Fullerton Joint Union High School District and Saddleback Valley Unified School District do not declare any of their truants to be habitual truants. Failure to identify as habitual truants those students who have been truant for three or more times during a school year appears to place those districts out of compliance with the State Education Code.
13. Huntington Beach Union High School District's self-described "out of control" and "epidemic" truancy situation is due only in small part to the lack of a SAR Board, but primarily to the lack of centralized attendance monitoring and control and to fragmented responsibility at the district level.
14. Some school districts believe: that SAR Boards are ineffective, particularly at the high-school level; that SAR Boards are "a lot of work for no consequences at the D.A. level;" and that threats of SARB intervention and consequences that

are not reinforced by the District Attorney's office make the efforts of a SARB hollow and ineffective.

15. School districts that limit or curtail their participation on the County SAR Board because of budgetary constraints may not be aware of the opportunity for reimbursement, through State or federal funding, afforded by *Education Code* §48323.
16. Centralia School District has no permanent SAR Board members at the district level.
17. School districts repeatedly identified three particular skills as being essential if SAR Boards are to be effective: law-enforcement skills (e.g., a School Resource Officer), prosecutorial skills (e.g., a Deputy District Attorney), and probation skills (e.g., a Probation Officer). Yet, more often than not, these skills are *not* present at district SAR Board meetings.
18. Centralia School District stated that it does not know if its SARB-referral documentation packages are adequate because the paperwork is handled by social workers at the school sites.
19. Periodic training of school administrators in preparing SARB-referral documentation packages would be beneficial.
20. Santa Ana Unified School District's statement that periodic training of school administrators in preparing SARB-referral documentation packages is not necessary because clerical personnel do the work appears to underestimate the important and critical role that school administrators play in the SARB process. **NOTE 5**
21. School districts that have chosen to embrace the Truancy Response Project have experienced significant improvements in their truancy problem and increased awareness among parents and students of the importance of regular attendance.
22. School districts repeatedly identified a Deputy District Attorney, a law-enforcement officer and a Probation Officer as three key people who should make presentations to habitually truant students and their parent(s) at the District Attorney's Community Meetings. Yet, more often than not, neither a law-enforcement officer nor a Probation Officer is present at such meetings.
23. In each of the four school years studied, five of the school districts without SAR Boards were slightly more successful at controlling attendance, on average, than 15 of the school districts with SAR Boards.

24. A need exists among the school districts that do not have their own SAR Boards for an operating SAR Board (not just an advisory or networking SAR Board) at the County level.
25. Truancy support by the Probation Department and the District Attorney's Office needs to be fully funded if these organizations are to be as effective as the school districts would like them to be.

Responses to Finding 1 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the following school districts:

- Anaheim City
- Buena Park
- Centralia
- Cypress
- Fullerton Joint Union High School
- Fullerton
- La Habra City
- Magnolia
- Newport-Mesa
- Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified
- Santa Ana Unified

Responses to Finding 2 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Fountain Valley, Huntington Beach City, Laguna Beach Unified, Ocean View and Westminster school districts.

Responses to Finding 3 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Capistrano Unified and Orange Unified school districts.

A response to Finding 4 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Ocean View School District.

A response to Finding 5 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Irvine Unified School District.

A response to Finding 6 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Centralia School District.

A response to Finding 7 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Los Alamitos Unified School District.

Responses to Findings 8, 15 and 19 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of all 27 local school districts.

A response to Findings 8, 9, 14 and 23 are required from the Orange County Superintendent of Schools / Department of Education.

Responses to Finding 10 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the La Habra City, Magnolia, Santa Ana Unified and Westminster school districts.

Responses to Finding 11 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Centralia, Garden Grove Unified and Laguna Beach Unified school districts.

Responses to Finding 12 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School and Saddleback Valley Unified school districts.

A response to Finding 13 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Huntington Beach Union High School District.

Responses to Finding 14 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Cypress School District, the Fullerton Joint Union High School District and the Huntington Beach Union High School District.

Responses to Findings 14, 17, 21 and 25 are required from the District Attorney.

A response to Finding 16 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Centralia School District.

Responses to Findings 17, 21, 22 and 25 are requested from the Probation Department.

A response to Finding 18 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Centralia School District.

A response to Finding 20 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Santa Ana Unified School District.

Responses to Finding 24 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the following school districts:

- Cypress
- Fullerton Joint Union High School
- Huntington Beach City
- Huntington Beach Joint Union High School
- Laguna Beach Unified
- Saddleback Valley Unified
- Savanna

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with *California Penal Code* §933 and §933.05, each recommendation must be responded to by the government entity to which it is addressed. These responses are to be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court. Based on the findings, the 2003-2004 Orange County Grand Jury recommends that:

1. Each of the following school districts improve their respective Web sites with an enhanced treatment of attendance matters that includes explicit expectations for students' attendance:
 - Anaheim City
 - Buena Park
 - Centralia
 - Cypress
 - Fullerton Joint Union High School
 - Fullerton
 - La Habra City
 - Magnolia
 - Newport-Mesa Unified
 - Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified
 - Santa Ana Unified(Finding 1)

2. Each of the following school districts:
 - Fountain Valley
 - Huntington Beach City
 - Laguna Beach Unified
 - Ocean View
 - Westminsteradd to their respective Web sites, statements of attendance expectations for the district as a whole. (Finding 2)

3. Capistrano Unified and Orange Unified school districts continue to provide clear and explicit statements of attendance expectations on their respective Web sites, and Capistrano Unified mentor any other school districts that would like to emulate Capistrano Unified's outstanding Web site. (Finding 3)

4. Ocean View School District continue to use its outstanding Attendance Incentive Plan, approved by its Board of Trustees, that has separate incentives in place at the district and school levels to reward and celebrate good attendance, and Ocean View mentor any other school districts that would like to emulate Ocean View's outstanding Attendance Incentive Plan. (Finding 4)

5. Irvine Unified School District continue to use its successful attendance-incentive program, and any school districts that do not currently have an

attendance-incentive program – particularly at the high-school level – adopt one. (Finding 5)

6. Centralia School District become fully aware of the attendance incentives currently in place at its schools, and provide leadership to its schools in setting standards for, and supervising, attendance-incentive programs throughout the district. (Finding 6)
7. Los Alamitos Unified School District fill the void in its truancy-abatement program by formulating and putting in place an explicit program to encourage good attendance. (Finding 7)
8. The Orange County Superintendent of Schools / Department of Education strongly encourage each of the school districts in Orange County — even those without School Attendance Review Boards — to appoint a representative to the County SAR Board and to participate more fully in County SAR Board activities. (Findings 8 and 9)
9. La Habra City, Magnolia, Santa Ana Unified and Westminster school districts each formulate a corrective-action plan to improve its percentage of habitual truants referred to a SAR Board, beginning with the 2004-2005 school year and continuing thereafter. (Finding 10)
10. Centralia, Garden Grove Unified and Laguna Beach Unified school districts each devise a method to collect data on habitual truancies and information on referrals of habitual truants to a SAR Board, beginning with the 2004-2005 school year and continuing thereafter. (Finding 11)
11. Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School and Saddleback Valley Unified school districts each bring itself into compliance with the provisions of the *California Education Code* by identifying habitual truants, beginning with the 2004-2005 school year and continuing thereafter. (Finding 12)
12. Huntington Beach Union High School District centralize attendance monitoring and control at the district level, and assign ultimate responsibility for attendance monitoring and control to a single individual. (Finding 13)
13. The Orange County Superintendent of Schools / Department of Education respond to a school district’s perception that “SAR Boards are a waste of time at the high-school level.” The District Attorney respond to school districts’ views that “SAR Boards are a lot of work for no consequences at the DA level” and that “when SARB interventions and consequences are not reinforced by the District Attorney’s Office, efforts of the SARBs become hollow and ineffective.” (Finding 14)

14. All Orange County school districts become aware of the opportunity for reimbursement through State or federal funding, afforded by *California Education Code* §48323, for participating on the County SAR Board. (Finding 15)
15. Centralia School District consider adopting a district-level SAR Board and appointing permanent SAR Board members at the district level. (Finding 16)
16. The Probation Department and the District Attorney improve the operational effectiveness of district-level SAR Boards by assigning, respectively, a Probation Officer and a Deputy District Attorney to attend SAR Board meetings in those school districts that request such participation. (Finding 17)
17. Centralia School District assign responsibility for the content and quality of SARB-referral documentation packages to an individual at the district level. (Finding 18)
18. The District Attorney provide for the periodic training of school administrators in preparing SARB-referral documentation packages. (Finding 19)
19. Santa Ana Unified School District ensure that school administrators are properly trained to prepare SARB-referral documentation. (Finding 20)
20. School districts that are not involved in the Truancy Response Project become involved as a means to significantly improve their truancy problems and to increase awareness among parents and students of the importance of regular attendance. (Finding 21)
21. The Probation Department provide for having Probation Officers participate in the Truancy Response Project by making presentations to habitually truant students and their parents at the District Attorney's Community Meetings. (Finding 22)
22. The Department of Education identify factors that might account for five school districts without SAR Boards being slightly more successful at controlling attendance, on average, than 15 school districts with SAR Boards. (Finding 23)
23. The Department of Education establish an operating SAR Board (not just an advisory or networking SAR Board) to meet the needs of those school districts that do not have their own SAR Boards. (Finding 24)
24. The Department of Education formulate a plan whereby all school districts provide equitable financial support to the Probation Department and the District Attorney's Office to ensure that these agencies are able to continue the

truancy-abatement services for which the districts are the financial beneficiaries. (Finding 25)

Responses to Recommendation 1 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the following school districts:

- Anaheim City
- Buena Park
- Centralia
- Cypress
- Fullerton Joint Union High School
- Fullerton
- La Habra City
- Magnolia
- Newport-Mesa Unified
- Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified
- Santa Ana Unified

Responses to Recommendation 2 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Fountain Valley, Huntington Beach City, Laguna Beach Unified, Ocean View, and Westminster school districts.

Responses to Recommendation 3 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Capistrano Unified and Orange Unified school districts.

A response to Recommendation 4 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Ocean View School District.

A response to Recommendation 5 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Irvine Unified School District.

A response to Recommendation 6 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Centralia School District.

A response to Recommendation 7 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Los Alamitos Unified School District.

Responses to Recommendations 8, 13, 22, 23 and 24 are required from the Orange County Department of Education.

Responses to Recommendation 9 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the La Habra City, Magnolia, Santa Ana Unified and Westminster school districts.

Responses to Recommendation 10 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Centralia, Garden Grove Unified and Laguna Beach Unified school districts.

Responses to Recommendation 11 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the Cypress, Fullerton Joint Union High School and Saddleback Valley Unified school districts.

A response to Recommendation 12 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Huntington Beach Union High School District.

Responses to Recommendations 13, 16 and 18 are required from the District Attorney.

Responses to Recommendation 14 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of all 27 local school districts.

Responses to Recommendations 15 and 17 are required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Centralia School District.

Responses to Recommendations 16 and 21 are requested from the Probation Department.

A response to Recommendation 19 is required from the Superintendent of Schools of the Santa Ana Unified School District.

Responses to Recommendation 20 are required from the Superintendents of Schools of the following school districts:

- Centralia
- Cypress
- Fountain Valley
- Fullerton Joint Union High School
- Huntington Beach City
- Laguna Beach Unified
- Magnolia
- Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified
- Savanna

COMMENDATIONS

1. The **Capistrano Unified School District** and the **Orange Unified School District** are commended for their outstanding Web sites. Orange Unified's Web site explicitly communicates attendance expectations both for the district and for the individual schools; it conveys the importance that the district attaches to good attendance. Capistrano Unified's Web site is very comprehensive; its home page provides parents and students with easy access to a wide range of important information, including clear and explicit statements of attendance expectations. The Grand Jury believes that Capistrano Unified's Web site is worthy of emulation by all of Orange County's school districts.

2. The **Ocean View School District** is commended for formulating and putting in place an outstanding Attendance Incentive Plan, approved by their Board of Trustees, with separate incentives for both the district and the school sites. The Plan shows how creative thinking can be applied to help solve an all-too-common truancy problem.

3. The **Westminster School District** is commended for its proactive approach to improving its processes and procedures. Not content to have a single person respond to the Grand Jury's questionnaire, the district distributed the entire questionnaire (all 26 questions) to all 16 of its school principals and to all of its SAR Board members, and compiled the responses. Then, well in advance of the publication of this report, the district appointed task teams to study how to improve those of its processes that the questionnaire responses indicated might be coming up short. Kudos to the Westminster School District for recognizing that "continual process improvement" pays dividends in efficiency and effectiveness.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Incentives That Encourage Good Attendance

- Attendance expectations and the rationale for good attendance emphasized at back-to-school night
- A beginning-of-the-year assembly in every school to convey expectations
- Orientation of parents and students twice a year
- Presentations at PTA/PTSA/PTO meetings
- Assemblies that recognize student performance; good-attendance awards at positive-achievement assemblies
- Positive recognition at school-wide assemblies for exemplary attendance
- Honoring students with year-end awards
- Rewards to classrooms with the highest attendance percentages
- School-site rewards for perfect attendance
- Incentive programs at each school site (e.g., fast-food coupons, T-shirts, discounts on yearbooks; school dances and raffles of donated bicycles only for qualifying high-attendance students)
- District-wide poster and essay contests
- Banners that succinctly reinforce the good-attendance message (e.g., “Every Day Counts”)
- Communications (letters, personal messages, Web sites) that emphasize attendance as an indicator of student success
- Summertime mailing to parents
- Policies posted in high-traffic areas of all schools
- An effective message in the Student Handbook
- Parent and student newsletters
- Programs, such as *Character Counts*, that encourage responsible behavior
- Building positive relationships between staff and students
- Student awards and incentives
- Distribution of *Every Day Counts* to all parents
- Assigning every ninth-grader to an upper-class mentor to convey standards for attendance and academic achievement
- Daytime curfews for minors
- Good attendance required if student is to participate in extracurricular activities
- One-on-one counseling
- Parent contact by teachers to encourage children’s attendance
- Academic credit given for good attendance
- Class grading on level of participation (students must attend and participate to earn extra points)

Appendix 2. Interventions To Reduce Truancies

Interventions Likely to be Perceived as Helpful by Students

- Class schedule changes
- Language tutoring
- Pairing of at-risk student with a peer mentor
- Pairing of student with an adult mentor
- Referral of student to school counseling
- Referral of student to outside counseling agency
- Referral of student to outside health-care agency
- Referral of student to Student Study Team, Student Intervention Team or Student Success Team
- Referral of student and parents to School Attendance Review Team
- Referral of parents to parenting classes
- Parent contact by teachers
- Home visits by social workers
- Referral of family to Family Resource Center (or equivalent)
- Referral of student to immunization clinic
- Referral of student to Pediatric Nurse Practitioner
- Attendance-alert letter sent to parents by school

Interventions Likely to be Perceived as Punitive by Students

- Increased parental involvement in monitoring student's behavior
- Transport of truant student to school by School Resource Officer
- Home visits by School Resource Officer
- After-school classes
- Extended school day for student to make-up missed time, hour for hour
- Saturday-school classes (Saturday remediation school)
- Referral of student to summer attendance workshop
- Referral of student to Truancy Reduction Center (or equivalent)
- Referral of student to alternative-education classes, continuation school or community day school
- Referral of student and parents to District Attorney's Community Meetings
- Detention of student during recess, lunchtime or after school
- Detention of student after last class on Friday
- In-house student suspension
- Student/parent conference with teacher
- Student/parent conference with assistant principal or principal
- Letter to parents from the district office
- Student's loss of privileges
- Requiring student/parents to sign attendance contract; consequences for non-compliance

Appendix 3. School Districts' Wish Lists For Improving SAR Board Effectiveness

- Anaheim City: “Have a Deputy District Attorney or a Probation Officer as regular Board members.”
- Anaheim Union High School: “Improve the SAR Board’s ability to access resources (e.g., housing, transportation, child care) in the community. Have a Probation Officer and a social worker at every SARB meeting. Provide for more immediate action after a SARB meeting.”
- Brea Olinda: “Fund a full-time Director of Student Services, who could assist each site with attendance-related issues.”
- Buena Park: “Hold SARB meetings every week. Have a Deputy D.A. present for the harder cases. Be able to refer cases to community resources.”
- Capistrano Unified: “The district needs to test and evaluate the changes that were recently made.”
- Fountain Valley: “Our SARB is very effective. No changes are recommended.”
- Fullerton: “Have a Probation Officer, a County social worker, and a law-enforcement officer attend every meeting.”
- Garden Grove Unified: “No changes or improvements are needed.”
- Irvine Unified: “Perhaps have a representative from the Department of Education at *some* SARB meetings.”
- Magnolia: “Include a district school nurse as a permanent member of the Board. Allow students’ teachers to be released to attend the meeting.”
- La Habra City: “We would like to have a Deputy D.A. at every SARB meeting.”
- Los Alamitos: “Include a Deputy D.A. at each meeting.”
- Newport-Mesa Unified: “Provide for the arrest of parents and/or students at the meeting.”
- Ocean View: “Pay representatives from community health/counseling agencies to attend *each* SARB meeting. Assign a person to monitor all outstanding SARB contracts.”
- Orange Unified: “We could use a computer program to prepare statistical summaries.”
- Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified: “Add police department recovery teams.”
- Tustin Unified: “Provide for increased participation by school nurse, participation by a school psychologist, and participation by a full-time truant officer.”
- Santa Ana Unified: “Have the D.A., Probation, and police at every meeting. Also have a counselor (psychologist) attend.”
- Westminster: “Have a Deputy D.A. at each SARB meeting; also a member of the Board of Trustees and an Assistant Superintendent. Meet more often.” [Westminster School District provided an excellent, detailed list.]

Appendix 4. Changes to Processes and Procedures Recommended By School Districts to Ameliorate the Problem of Habitual Truancy

- Anaheim City: “Hire a full-time office assistant to receive and process SARB referrals and D.A. meeting referrals, and to evaluate post-SARB results. Fund a police officer for making home visits, driving truants to school, attending SARB and D.A. meetings, and acting as the liaison between the district and Probation.”
- Anaheim Union High School: “Improve the parent-school partnership, and get more parents involved in school issues/activities. Require parents to attend school a couple of times a year. Improve parents’ parenting skills.”
- Brea Olinda: “We are currently establishing procedures for the district’s SAR Board.”
- Buena Park: “Implement a system similar to that in Orange Unified, to centralize attendance operations.”
- Capistrano Unified: “Streamline the attendance-tracking and problem-identification processes. Maintain the funding. Maintain participation by all of the players; don’t lose one of the essential elements.”
- Cypress: “No changes are needed. As an elementary district, the Cypress school community does not have significant issues related to habitual truancy. [Historically, however,] successful truancy interventions have involved a strong relationship between schools, local law enforcement and the willingness of the district attorney’s office to consistently prosecute child and parent offenders.

“Intervention is best when promptly addressed by school site principals and local law enforcement. Threats of SARB intervention and consequences, which are not able to be reinforced with the district attorney’s office because of inadequate personnel or the desire to address more pressing issues, make the efforts of the SARB hollow and, therefore, ineffective.”

- Fountain Valley: “Attendance problems are few. Current practices are effective. No changes are contemplated.”
- Fullerton: “Have a full-time probation officer and/or County social worker assigned to each school district or attendance area, with the sole responsibility of student attendance. Their authority to invoke and enforce penal codes, welfare regulations, etc. would go a long way in getting cooperation from parents and students.”
- Fullerton Joint Union High School: “Clone the Deans of Attendance, and have more of them. (The district already has five counselors at the schools.)”
- Garden Grove Unified: “Gain better support from social-services organizations, to allow schools to focus on the education of the children.”

Appendix 4. Changes to Processes and Procedures (continued)

- Huntington Beach City: “The district would not make any changes.”
- Huntington Beach Union High School: “Hire a CWA officer and staff. Invoke immediate interventions when truancies are identified. Have a facility, on the order of Orange Unified’s Truancy Learning Center, where services are available. Seek grants for other needed programs.”
- Irvine Unified: “The district needs the schools to be more consistent in applying the approved procedures. Also, a lot of school-attendance people see their roles as bookkeepers or statisticians; we need to educate the administrators one principal at a time.”
- Laguna Beach Unified: “Create a SARB at the district level, or multiple SARBs at the site levels. A SARB would provide a more formal process for parents to realize the seriousness of their children’s truancy problems.”
- La Habra City: “The district’s processes are OK as is. However the district would like to have more involvement by the existing players (Deputy District Attorney, Probation Officer, social worker). Modify State law to be more stringent in the area of child neglect.”
- Los Alamitos: “Have a more consistent attendance-reporting system among the schools.” [Nonetheless, the district noted that attendance taken during first period shows up in the district’s Aeries database by third period.]
- Magnolia: “Develop a local community-service awareness campaign, focusing on the importance of good attendance. Employ a health professional to directly assist parents to manage head lice and asthma; interventions would include in-home training and educational materials.”
- Newport-Mesa Unified: “Create an alternative-education school that meets the needs of students in grades 5 through 8; a community day school, plus intensive counseling.”
- Ocean View: “Hire a School Resource Officer to work with truants identified at each school site.”
- Orange Unified: “Because effective communication is important, have translators available at all times, including SAR Board meetings and District Attorney Parent Meetings.”
- Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified: “Expand the CWA and the elementary guidance and counseling program to address attendance issues and their causes early. Expand the collaborative efforts of educating police departments and Deputy District Attorneys with appropriate follow-up interventions.”
- Saddleback Valley Unified: “Arrange for direct intervention by local law enforcement. Enable the district to make pre-SARB referrals directly to Probation.”

Appendix 4. Changes to Processes and Procedures (continued)

- Savanna: “Continually convincing the parents of the need to have their children in school.”
- Santa Ana Unified: “Hire more attendance clerks and more School Resource Officers. Publicize the benefits of good attendance and the consequences of poor attendance so people know.”
- Tustin Unified: “Hire a full-time truant officer. Enact citywide daytime curfews for students. Hire a full-time administrator of attendance at the district level.”
- Westminster: “Hire additional personnel:
 - A Truancy Officer/Specialist to make regular home visits
 - Personnel to assist schools in implementing SARTs
 - Personnel to implement district-wide procedures (e.g., monthly tracking, letters to parents)Schedule quarterly Parent Meetings with the Deputy District Attorney, Police Department, Probation, district and site administration — with the means to provide transportation and child care.”

Ocean View School District
SCHOOL ATTENDANCE REVIEW BOARD
 Referral Process

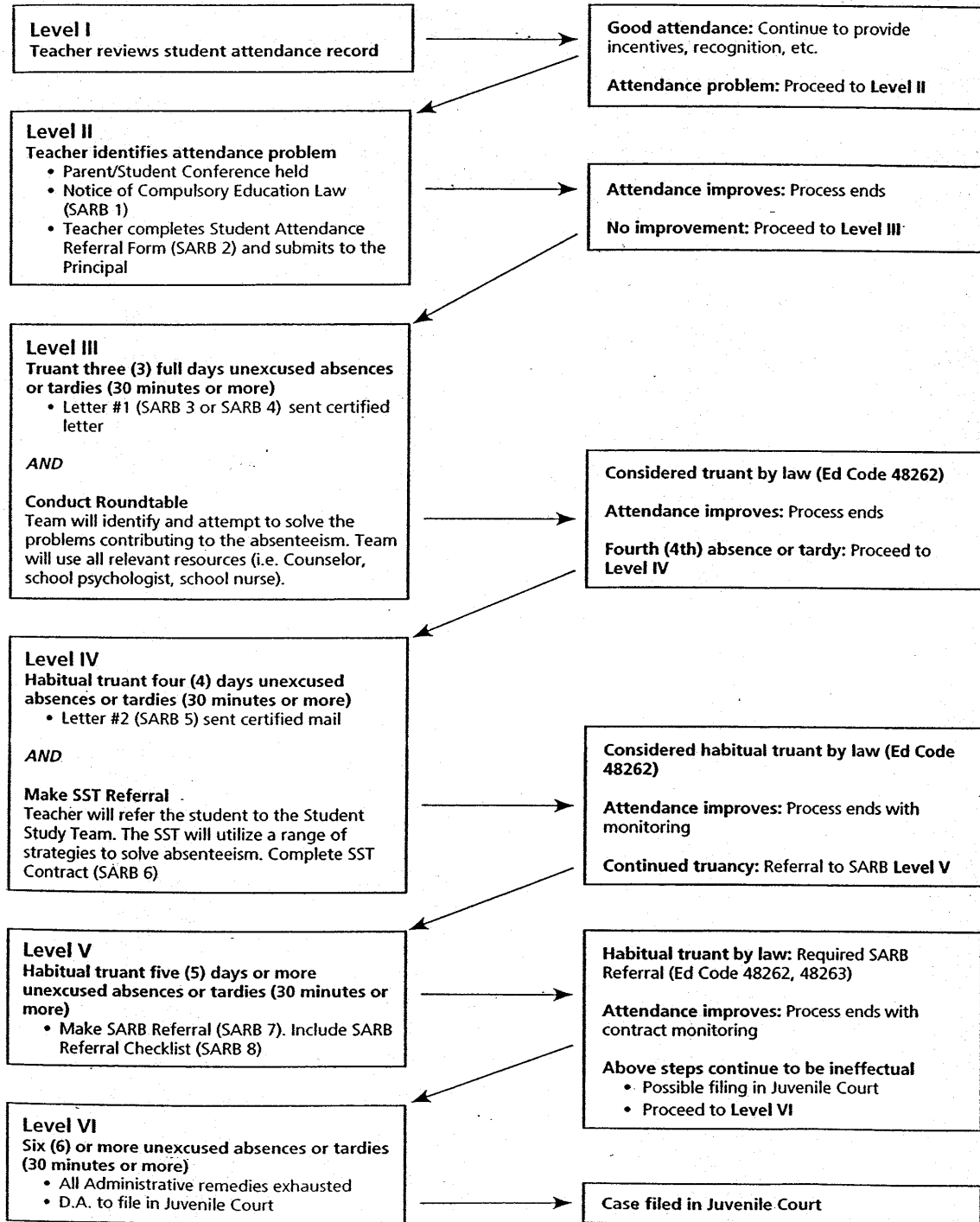
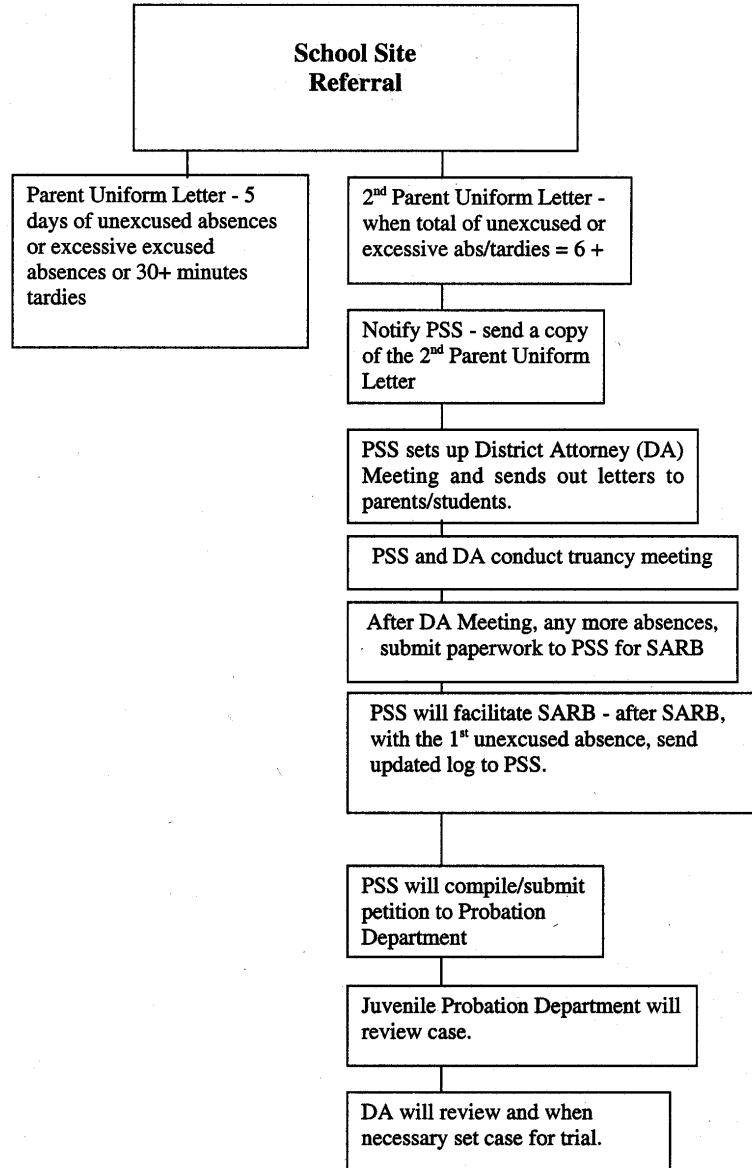


Figure 1. School Attendance Review Process – Ocean View School District

Flow Chart for SARB Process



12/15/03 rg/cv

Figure 2. School Attendance Review Process – Santa Ana Unified School District

- Step 1:** TRUANT – 3 Unexcused Absences or 3 Tardies (30 minutes or more)
 (a) School sends written notice to Parent(s)
 (Reimbursement by State - \$12.50 per letter)
- Step 2:** REPEAT TRUANT – Fourth Unexcused Absence or Tardy
 (a) Report to Superintendent or Attendance Supervisor
 (b) 2nd Letter Sent to Parents
 (c) Attempt Parent/School Conference
- Step 3:** HABITUAL TRUANT- Fifth Unexcused Absence or Tardy
 (a) District sends letter to parent(s) on D.A. Letterhead requiring their attendance at a District Attorney Meeting
 (b) District Attorney Parent Meeting
- Step 4:** ANY ADDITIONAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCE (WHETHER ATTENDED DA MEETING OR NOT)
 (a) Send letter to Parent and Child to appear at SARB Hearing
- Step 5:** SARB HEARING
 (a) Student and Parent(s) sign SARB contract agreeing to attend school Daily.
 (b) Informed that consequences of additional unexcused absence will be Referral to the Probation Department and District Attorney’s Office
- Step 6:** ANY ADDITIONAL UNEXCUSED ABSENCE / 30-MINUTE TARDY AND ALL ADMINISTRATIVE REMEDIES EXHAUSTED
 (a) District forwards file with checklist and documentation to Probation Department.
 (b) Probation monitors minor / places on contract / punitive measures
- Step 7:** FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH PROBATION OR TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE
 (a) Probation Department refers matter to District Attorney’s Office and requests Petition to be filed with the Court against Student and/or Parent
- Step 8:** CHARGES FILED AGAINST MINOR AND/OR PARENTS IN JUVENILE COURT
 (a) Minor and Parents appear before Judge Hutson in Juvenile Court

Figure 3. Truancy-Response Process — For Children Between the Ages of 6 and 17 (Grades 1-12) Required by Law to Attend School

(Adapted from figure provided by District Attorney’s Office)

Table 1. Does the School-District's Website Provide a Clear Statement of Expectations for Students' Attendance?

<u>School District and Website</u>	<u>Yes / No</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Anaheim City School District http://www.acsd.k12.ca.us	No	A sterile treatment of attendance, primarily by reference to the Education Code, is buried in Pupil Support Services, under Education Administration. There is no statement of expectations.
Anaheim Union High School District http://www.auhsd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations for the district are in the Parent-Student Handbook and the District Discipline Code. Individual schools reinforce the expectations in terms of specific procedures.
Brea Olinda Unified School District http://www.bousd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations are in the Accountability Report Cards for individual schools. However, there is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.
Buena Park School District http://www.ocde.k12.ca.us/bpsd	No	Attendance in the Accountability Report Cards for individual schools is primarily historical. There are no statements of expectations either for the schools or for the district as a whole.
Capistrano Unified School District http://www.capousd.org/	Yes	Clear and explicit expectations are readily accessible from the home page. Expectations are repeated and amplified in the linked Parent Information Booklet. This Website is worthy of emulation.
Centralia School District http://www.cesd.k12.ca.us	No	There is no mention of attendance on the Website.
Cypress School District http://www.cypsd.k12.ca.us	No	There is a single mention of attendance expectations for kindergarten pupils.
Fountain Valley School District http://www.fvsd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations are in the Accountability Report Cards for individual schools. However, there is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.

<u>School District and Website</u>	<u>Yes / No</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Fullerton Joint Union High School District http://www.fjuhsd.k12.ca.us	No	Attendance expectations in the Accountability Report Cards for individual schools merely say, "Students who are not present for classes cannot receive instruction. This obvious fact accounts for the high priority placed upon regular attendance." The only statement for the district as a whole says, "Students will meet District standards in attendance" but does not identify those standards.
Fullerton School District http://www.fsd.k12.ca.us	No	Attendance expectations are provided for only three of the 21 schools in the district. There is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.
Garden Grove Unified School District http://www.ggusd.k12.ca.us	Yes	The district's attendance expectations appear in the Parent-Student Handbook, included on the Website. Two of the 66 schools also provide explicit expectations.
Huntington Beach City School District http://www.hbcasd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations are in the Accountability Report Cards and Reports to the Community for individual schools, and in the Parent/Student Handbook for one school. There is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.
Huntington Beach Union High School District http://www.hbuhsd.org	Yes	Attendance expectations appear in the Planning Guide for Students and Parents and in the Guidance Team Handbook. Some of the schools also provide expectations.
Irvine Unified School District http://www.iusd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations are given for individual schools but are not always easy to find. At the district level, attendance matters are covered by a sterile list of references to the Education Code.
Laguna Beach Unified School District http://www.lagunabeachschools.org	Yes	Attendance expectations are in the Accountability Report Cards for individual schools. A detailed elaboration appears in one Student Handbook. However, there is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.
La Habra City School District http://www.lhcsd.k12.ca.us	No	The importance of "regular and prompt attendance" is mentioned for only one school. There are no statements of expectations either for individual schools or for the district as a whole.

<u>School District and Website</u>	<u>Yes / No</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Los Alamitos Unified School District http://www.losalusd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations for the district appear in the Superintendent's Message. Additional expectations for individual schools are in Student Handbooks or Minder Binders.
Magnolia School District http://www.msd.k12.ca.us/	No	There is no mention of attendance on the Website.
Newport-Mesa Unified School District http://www.nmusd.k12.ca.us	No	Only one school addresses attendance, but does so with but a single sentence: "The strong message delivered by staff is that daily attendance and active participation are key to student success." There is no statement of expectations for the district.
Ocean View School District http://www.ovsd.org	Yes	Attendance expectations are in Principals' Newsletters for individual schools. However, there is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.
Orange Unified School District http://www.orangeusd.k12.ca.us	Yes	Attendance expectations for the district and for individual schools are explicitly communicated. This is an outstanding Website.
Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District http://www.pylusd.k12.ca.us	No	Only one school addresses attendance, but does so with only a single sentence: "Valencia has a long-standing commitment to enforcing school policies such as regular student attendance...." There is no statement of expectations for the district.
Saddleback Valley Unified School District http://www.svusd.k12.ca.us	Yes	The Superintendent's Message clearly lays out district expectations. Attendance expectations for individual schools are stated in School Policies/Procedures, School Rules, and Attendance Policies.
Santa Ana Unified School District http://www.sausd.k12.ca.us	No	Only a handful of the 58 schools in the district provide attendance expectations. There is no statement of expectations for the district. Many broken links make it difficult to negotiate the Website.

School District and Website

Savanna School District
<http://www.savsd.k12.ca.us>

Tustin Unified School District
<http://www.tustin.k12.ca.us>

Westminster School District
<http://www.wsd.k12.ca.us/>

Yes / No

Yes

Yes

Yes

Comments

In addition to the district's statement of attendance expectations, two schools provide a brief statement of expectations in their Annual Update.

District expectations are stated in the Parent/Student Rights and Responsibilities. Expectations of individual schools are sparse. Reference is made to "binder reminders," but no content is included.

Attendance expectations for each school are stated in both Principals' Messages and School Accountability Report Cards. There is no statement of expectations for the district as a whole.

Table 2. Attendance^③ Trends in Orange County School Districts

School District	School Year			
	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Anaheim City	0.954	0.951	0.955	0.956
Anaheim Union High School	④	④	④	④
Brea Olinda Unified	0.964	0.963	0.973	0.960
Buena Park	0.959	0.956	0.965	0.967
Capistrano Unified	②	②	0.957	0.956
Centralia	①	①	①	①
Cypress	0.970	0.969	0.972	0.970
Fountain Valley	0.964	0.964	0.965	0.966
Fullerton	0.963	0.964	0.970	0.966
Fullerton Joint Union High School	0.960	0.962	0.967	0.972
Garden Grove Unified	0.955	0.953	0.959	0.958
Huntington Beach City	0.953	0.958	0.958	0.955
Huntington Beach Union High School	①	①	①	①
Irvine Unified	①	①	①	①
Laguna Beach Unified	0.995	0.973	0.983	0.975
La Habra City	0.946	0.945	0.949	0.949
Los Alamitos Unified	①	①	①	①
Magnolia	0.952	0.950	0.955	0.944
Newport-Mesa Unified	0.932	0.945	0.952	0.953
Ocean View	0.958	0.957	0.960	0.958
Orange Unified	0.954	0.952	0.961	0.958
Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	②	0.956	0.963	0.963
Saddleback Valley Unified	0.962	0.967	0.964	0.966
Santa Ana Unified	②	0.959	0.963	0.964
Savanna	0.954	0.954	0.964	0.967
Tustin Unified	①	①	①	①
Westminster	②	0.969	0.974	0.971

NOTES:

- ① School district did not provide the requested information.
- ② Data were not available for these school years.
- ③ Attendance Figures-of-Merit are Average Daily Attendance (ADA) divided by Enrollment.
- ④ Data could not be deciphered.

Table 3. Habitual Truants in Orange County School Districts

School District	School Year			
	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
Anaheim City	82	53	27	42
Anaheim Union High School	②	②	669	547
Brea Olinda Unified	③	③	③	③
Buena Park	0	0	0	2
Capistrano Unified	④	④	④	61④
Centralia	0	0	0	50
Cypress	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
Fountain Valley	0	0	2	0
Fullerton	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑥
Fullerton Joint Union High School	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
Garden Grove Unified	84	87	56	56
Huntington Beach City	①	①	①	①
Huntington Beach Union High School	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑥
Irvine Unified	①	①	①	①
Laguna Beach Unified	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑥
La Habra City	①	①	①	①
Los Alamitos Unified	①	①	①	①
Magnolia	②	②	②	548
Newport-Mesa Unified	①	①	①	①
Ocean View	20	46	37	54
Orange Unified	323	160	366	279
Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	①	①	①	①
Saddleback Valley Unified	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤
Santa Ana Unified	②	②	②	1284
Savanna	⑥	⑥	⑥	⑥
Tustin Unified	①	①	①	①
Westminster	⑦	⑦	⑦	⑦

NOTES:

- ① School district did not provide the requested information.
- ② Data were not available for these school years.
- ③ School district just started tracking habitual truants this school year.
- ④ School district says it does not track truancies “because the numbers are too low” but admits to 61 habitual truants for 2002-03.
- ⑤ School district does not declare students to be habitual truants.
- ⑥ Truancy data are not tracked at the district level.
- ⑦ Truancy data have not been tracked at district level, but recommendations have been made to do so.

Table 4. Percentage of Habitual Truants Referred to SAR Board

School District	Percentage Referred To SARB
Anaheim City	~18
Anaheim Union High School	①
Brea Olinda Unified	②
Buena Park	③
Capistrano Unified	15
Centralia	④
Cypress	⑤
Fountain Valley	100
Fullerton	100
Fullerton Joint Union High School	⑥
Garden Grove Unified	④
Huntington Beach City	⑥
Huntington Beach Union High School	⑥
Irvine Unified	③
Laguna Beach Unified	④
La Habra City	1.5
Los Alamitos Unified	③
Magnolia	0.2
Newport-Mesa Unified	③
Ocean View	~96
Orange Unified	~30
Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified	③
Saddleback Valley Unified	⑥
Santa Ana Unified	4.4
Savanna	⑥
Tustin Unified	③
Westminster	1.2

- ① Data not provided, but district says, “In theory they should all be.”
- ② Data not provided because district just started tracking habitual truancies.
- ③ District did not provide the requested data.
- ④ Data are not collected at the district level.
- ⑤ The district has not declared any students to be habitual truants.
- ⑥ No students have been referred to SARB because the district does not have a SARB.

ENDNOTES

NOTE 1. In a statewide survey conducted by the Field Research Corporation and reported in *Tenth Planet Elementary School Teachers and Technology*, August-September 1995, it was found that:

- Fifty-one percent of households in California own a personal computer, compared to 40 percent nationwide
- Among California households with children, the same percentage of households (51 percent) own a personal computer
- 37 percent of California households with children have children using computers at home

A nationwide telephone survey of 2,000 households, conducted by Nielsen Media Research, and reported in *Home Technology Report*, July 1996, seems to corroborate Field Research's survey results for Los Angeles and Orange Counties.

According to an article in the September 6, 2001, edition of *The (Cincinnati) Enquirer*, "almost two-thirds of all children between ages 3 and 17 lived in homes with computers, and almost one-third in that age group have gone online ... More than half of the country's 105 million households had computers ... [although] gaps still existed among different socioeconomic groups ... Among children, however, that gap was erased by the availability of computers in most schools. Almost 90 percent of all school-age kids — age 6 to 17 — had access to computers either at home or at school."

A Nation Online: How Americans are Expanding their Use of the Internet, published by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce, February 2002, reported that:

- The rate of growth of Internet use in the United States is currently two million new Internet users per month.
- More than half of the nation is now online. In September 2001, 143 million Americans (about 54 percent of the population) were using the Internet — an increase of 26 million in 13 months. In September 2001, 174 million people (or 66 percent of the population) in the United States used computers.
- Children and teenagers use computers and the Internet more than any other age group.
- Ninety percent of children between the ages of 5 and 17 (or 48 million) now use computers.
- In the year 2000, 56.6 percent of California households had computers.
- Seventy-five percent of 14-17 year olds and 65 percent of 10-13 year olds use the Internet.
- Computers at schools substantially narrow the gap in computer usage rates for children from high- and low-income families.
- Internet use is increasing for people regardless of income, education, age, race, ethnicity, or gender.

NOTE 2. Interview with the Education Programs Consultant of the California Department of Education, published in the October 2003 edition of INTERCOM, the official publication of the California Association Supervisors of Child Welfare and Attendance

NOTE 3. Magnolia School district attributes the low percentage of habitual truants referred the SAR Board to the effectiveness of the district's School Attendance Review Teams. The district stated that "the SART process ... continues to be the main vehicle for resolving attendance problems at [Magnolia]."

NOTE 4. Deputy District Attorneys who reviewed these statistics and the school districts' assertions stated that (a) the reason that a Deputy District Attorney files charges for only a small percentage of cases referred to a SAR Board is that the Probation Department resolves most of the cases before prosecution becomes necessary, (b) the school districts' perceptions are largely historical (i.e., not reflective of current realities) and (c) some school districts may view the Probation Department and the District Attorney's Office as a single entity in truancy-resolution matters.

NOTE 5. Officials of the Santa Ana Unified School District who subsequently reviewed the district's statement regarding training of school administrators stated that the district's current practice is to train administrators to prepare SARB-referral documentation.

NOTE 6. An administrator of the Department of Education stated that steps have now been taken or are being taken to bring the composition of the County SAR Board into compliance with the *State Education Code*.