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Half of MPS students regularly skip school, report shows

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Nearly half of Milwaukee Public Schools students are habitually absent from school, according to a report released Thursday by the state Legislative Audit Bureau.

The report, a review of public school districts' efforts to reduce truancy, also found that more than 9% of Wisconsin's students had at least five unexcused absences in one semester - the state's definition of habitual truancy - in the 2006-'07 school year.

MPS' truancy rate was 46% for that academic year. District officials emphasized their efforts to address attendance problems, including its 15-year partnership with Milwaukee police in operating the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression, or TABS, program. The program frees up four police officers to search citywide for truants during school hours.

In 2006-'07, the officers stopped less than a fifth of the more than 38,000 students who were habitually truant, according to the report. Perhaps the most alarming case in the district is Custer High School, where the chronic truancy rate was 98% two years in a row.

MPS spokeswoman Roseann St. Aubin said she didn't know why truancy plagued the building and gave

the school's most recent attendance rate - the portion of students in the building on any given day - as 71%.

"The very best intervention is still a family's own commitment to seeing that children attend classes," Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said in a written statement.

Racine Unified School District has been held up as a success story. In the 2000-'01 academic year, more than a third of that district's students were habitually truant. By the 2006-'07 school year, Racine Unified had brought the rate down to 8.5%.

An approach similar to TABS has worked well there, said Scott Lewis, who chairs a Racine County truancy committee that includes school officials, law enforcement and community organizations.

In a district that has about one-fourth the enrollment of MPS, the City of Racine assigns two to three officers, armed with photos of students and their schedules, to patrol the city and return truants to the classroom.

"They know exactly where the students hang out," Lewis said. "They know who the ringleaders are. They know the adults who encourage them to skip school."

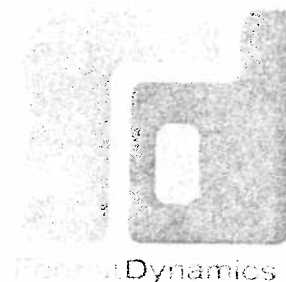
The district also does random reviews of students' attendance records to see whether they've been truant even if they haven't been caught on the streets, he said. Offending students are ticketed and have to appear in municipal court.


At MPS, about a third of the students were habitually truant 10 years ago. Half of enrolled students fell into the category in 2001-'02, and the rate has been fairly stable since then.

The state Department of Public Instruction has

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administered a total of \$1.9 million in federal funds during the past four years to districts with high rates of truancy. MPS, which received about \$1.3 million, is one of eight districts statewide that benefited from the grant. The results have been mixed, with habitual truancy rates increasing at three of six MPS schools receiving the funds despite the influx of money.

Last year the district expanded its reduced-priced breakfast program, a move St. Aubin said is getting more students to school and keeping them there. She said the Violence-Free Zones that have placed mentors in six high schools are another part of MPS' strategy.

"Those combined efforts by the district have helped, but we know there's a lot of work ahead," St. Aubin said.

The Legislative Audit Bureau report collected best practices from districts statewide and found that partnerships with community agencies are used in Appleton, where the district works with a teen runaway center, and in Oshkosh, where students from the University of Wisconsin campus have started a mentoring program.

"Just pulling in a different part of the community is a good way to go after the social, as well as the academic, needs that the children may have," said Kate Wade, an analyst with the Legislative Audit Bureau.

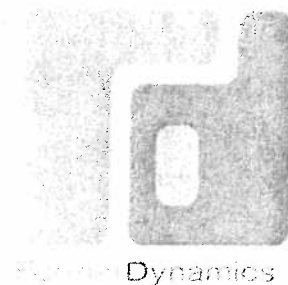
Of the state's 20 largest school districts, Oshkosh, Stevens Point, Elmbrook and Waukesha had the lowest truancy rates, with fewer than 3% of students categorized as habitually truant.


The report found that Menominee Indian School District had the highest habitual truancy rate statewide, with 58% of its students falling into that category in 2006-'07.

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