

Recommendations of the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force

Foreword by Ald. Jim Bohl, Chair:

The goal of the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force (TATF) has been to examine the city's present role in assisting the fight against what, without exaggeration, can be called a "truancy epidemic" plaguing our city. TATF members, through careful study and examination of reports, comparable responses in other cities and statistical information, have been asked to offer recommendations to redefine and/or reprioritize the city's efforts in this fight.

The issue of truancy is a complex one, with myriad contributing factors that should not be ignored or dismissed. However, given time constraints and the risk of repeating findings of previous committees examining the truancy issue in Milwaukee, it was important for the TATF to limit the scope of its investigation and recommendations to those areas under the city's purview.

In evaluating the truancy problem in Milwaukee, it is my firm belief that all partners which have an interest in the truancy issue in Milwaukee have collectively dropped the ball, and that each bears at least a partial responsibility for Milwaukee Public Schools' 40.2%* and growing habitual truancy rate. Even more perplexing has been the lax community response to this issue. Truancy is a community problem and will require a collective community effort to remedy it.

In paraphrasing task force member Roger Quindel, "the present rate of habitual truancy in MPS is inexcusable, and would not be tolerated by residents or leaders in any other community surrounding Milwaukee. Why should we tolerate it here?"

Over the course of the past decade or two, there have been numerous bodies that have undertaken the study and proffered recommendations to alleviate the truancy problem affecting Milwaukee. Most frustrating to me as an outside observer who has reviewed many of these documents is seeing the same recommendations, never implemented, being offered up over-and-over again. Our truancy problem will never get fixed without leaders willing to take on the task and see potential solutions through to completion.

** MPS' habitual truancy rates for 2001 were 65% for students attending high schools, 52% for middle schools and 21% for elementary schools. In entirety, there were 34 MPS schools where at least 50% of the students were considered habitual truants by state law. Seventeen of the 34 were elementary or middle schools. Six MPS schools registered a rate in excess of 80% of their students classified as habitual truants. MPS' overall habitual truancy rate was at 40.2%. Only three other suburban Milwaukee County School districts exceeded a habitual truancy rate of higher than 3.6% (St. Francis, 9%; Cudahy, 6.2%; Wauwatosa, 6.1%). (Data according to a May, 2002 State Department of Public Instruction Memo to the Milw. Truancy Abatement Task Force).*

It is with this in mind that the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force offers up the following recommendations; recommendations that may elicit controversy, but ones that are surely bold and significant enough to challenge the status quo and lead to significant graduated reductions to the habitual truancy rates in MPS. We move forward remembering that positive change is needed on this issue for the welfare of our kids and in the interest of our city's future.

Members of the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force

Alderman Jim Bohl, Milwaukee Common Council, Chair.

Task Force Members

Alderman Fred Gordon, Milw. Common Council, Vice-Chair.

Srgt. Charles Coughlin, Milwaukee County Sheriff's Dept.

Sidney Hatch, M.T.E.A.

Dir. Charlene Hardin, MPS School Board of Directors.

Dr. Aquine Jackson, Milwaukee Public Schools.

Supervisor Roger Quindel, Milwaukee County Board.

Dana Nix, Milwaukee TABS/Boys & Girls Club.

Tom Phillipson, We Can Parents Network.

Inspector Raymond Sucik, Milwaukee Police Department.

Daniel Wiltrout, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Rep. G. Spencer Coggs, Wisconsin State Assembly.

We, the members of the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force hereby recommend the following:

- 1. That Milwaukee Police Department efforts at enforcing truancy laws be stepped up. This would require all active daytime Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) squads to issue citations or take other appropriate actions against youth found to be unlawfully on the streets without proper exception during normal school hours.**

According to the April 2002 MPS audit of the TABS program, "TABS officers issue municipal truancy citations if a student is between 12-17 and a repeater to the program." The same audit showed that the two two-person MPD TABS squads wrote over 1,407 of 1,479 truancy citations for the 2000-01 school year. Every other MPD day-shift squad accounted for only 72 truancy citations over a 180-day school year. (p. 17, 2002 MPS TABS Audit).

The seven-year average for TABS student intakes was 19 students per day for both TABS sites. The 2000-01 intake averaged 22 students per day. MPS has approximately 4,000 students with unexcused absences on each school day. The maximum capacity for TABS is 40 students per day or 7,200 students per year. Even if the program was operating at 100% of its capacity, it would only be addressing .005% of unexcused MPS absences per school year. With its present intake numbers, TABS addresses .0025% of these absences. (pp. 18-19, 2002 MPS TABS Audit).

On a typical school day, San Jose, California has more than 1,000 truant students. While San Jose TABS officers intake over 7,000 truants annually, Milwaukee-- with a daily average of 4,000 truant students— has half as many intakes. (City of San Jose, Sept. 1996 TABS Memorandum & LRB Jan. 21, 2001 memo).

"All police officers should be allowed to transport truant students found in public places and transport them to school or a truancy center for professional services and counseling." (Recommendation J, Final Report of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee, Feb. 2002).

Milwaukee Municipal Court Judge Vince Bobot testified before the City of Milwaukee Truancy Abatement Task Force that police should " issue tickets for all students picked up (on the street) without a valid reason" during normal school hours. (TATF minutes, May 17, 2002).

Twenty-four percent of all crimes cleared in 1999 & 2000 were committed by juveniles. (City of Milwaukee Fire & Police Commission Report).

2. That MPS and Milwaukee's private and parochial schools work with the Milwaukee Police Department in establishing an official and uniform system of documentation for students legitimately excused from regular attendance during normal school days.
3. That MPS and Milwaukee's private and parochial high schools create separate coding on student identification for students who leave on ½ day schedules.
4. That MPS establish and make available a direct contact source to provide immediate and timely directory data information on student attendance to MPD or other law enforcement agencies that engage truant students on the streets.
5. That MPD, in conjunction with MPS and other local law enforcement agencies, conduct regular coordinated sweeps of the city. Students identified as truants should be cited* and/or returned to their properly enrolled school or other created detention centers. *(or other appropriate action should be taken).

According to San Jose Officials, utilization of targeted sweeps of truants has achieved "many positive results." (LRB Memo, Jan. 21, 2001).

Overall, San Jose TABS requires the participation of between 15-20 police officers annually (including sweeps). (Legislative Reference Bureau memo, Jan. 26, 2001).

6. That utilization of the City Attorney's Office and Municipal Court as a primary response for truancy offenders, complementing and supplementing TABS efforts, be increased.

In the last three school years, student attendance rates for those who participated in TABS continued to reflect a downward trend. (p.10, 2002 MPS TABS Audit).

Milwaukee Municipal Judge Vince Bobot testified before the TATF that stepping up efforts to write citations and bring truancy violators before Municipal Court would have a positive effect on reducing truancy in the city; especially in light of the fact that almost 70% of juvenile offenders who come before the court are first-time offenders. For a significant number of first-time juvenile offenders, appearing before a judge scares them straight. (May 17, 2002 TATF hearing).

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Presently, truancy violations represent 8% of the juvenile cases coming before City of Milwaukee's Municipal Court. (May 17, 2002 Report to TATF by Chief Municipal Court Administrator Kristine Hinrichs).

- 7. That a modified version of sanctions, as outlined in s. 118.63, Wis. Stats., be enacted into ordinance by the city to supplement existing remedies currently available for use by Municipal Court judges in dealing with truant offenders.**

According to the recommendations of the most recent Milwaukee County Truancy Committee, "All school districts should work with municipal officials to create municipal truancy ordinances as recommended in Ss 118.163." "These ordinances need to be established in order to provide quick response and therefore more effective and timely enforcement for truancy violations." (Final Report of the Milwaukee County Truancy Committee, Feb. 2002; The Committee was co-chaired by Dr. Aquine Jackson of MPS & Ms. Patricia Luebke of the Wauwatosa School District. Included among the committee members were four MPS representatives, two Greater Milwaukee Boys & Girls Club representatives and one representative from each the Milwaukee Police Department and Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department).

Current City of Milwaukee ordinance dealing with truancy allows only for judges to issue a court order requiring school attendance, or require a monetary forfeiture and/or order to pay court costs. (City of Milwaukee Ordinances 106-23.1).

From April 2001 to March 2002, Milwaukee Municipal Court adjudicated 750 cases for 106-23.1 (truancy violation), of which \$23,148.25 in fines and/or forfeitures were administered. (May 17, 2002 Report to TATF by Chief Municipal Court Administrator Kristine Hinrichs).

Milwaukee Municipal Court Judge Vince Bobot testified that approximately 70% of juvenile offenders are first time offenders. He indicated that while community service is the firstline of punishment proffered by the Court, that he supports additional measures, such as drivers license suspension, which would be effective in enforcing judgments on repeat violators. (Minutes from May 17, 2002 Truancy Abatement Task Force meeting).

8. That an ongoing working body, representing members from MPS, MPS parents and students, the city, the Milwaukee Police Department, the City Attorney's Office and Municipal Court, in addition to the Boys and Girls Club, the County Sheriff's Dept., Children's Court, the District Attorney's Office and the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare, among others, be created with the intent to simplify intra-agency bureaucracy, to work at implementing recommendations of this and earlier task forces on the subject of truancy, and to continue to monitor and prescribe necessary changes to combat truancy.
9. That a public relations campaign involving MPS, the city and other community and TABS partners, be created to address the importance of attending school regularly and outlining stepped up community efforts against violators.

MPS Marketing Director Don Hoffman testified that MPS spends \$1.7 million on its marketing programs, which encompasses a wide variety of programs and commercials. Mr. Hoffman stated that television, radio and billboard outlets are all effective means of reaching youth. He indicated that Strive Media Institute and Time Warner Cable have both been active players in youth marketing. (Minutes from July 19, 2002 TATF meeting).

10. That Milwaukee Municipal Court consider establishing a city-wide traveling truancy court, and hold its hearings in various MPS schools.

Nikki Yunk from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) spoke on a pilot program, the Milwaukee Teen Tribunal, a joint effort started this fall by ACLU, Milwaukee Municipal Court and MPS currently employed in two MPS schools. Truancy violations will be among the charges taken up by this body. (Minutes from the September 6, 2002 TATF meeting).

11. That the Milwaukee County Board give consideration to adopting parallel truancy and contributing to truancy ordinances to the City of Milwaukee, to allow the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department to assist in the anti-truancy efforts like sweeps and the issuance of citations for youth picked up in County parks.
12. That efforts be stepped up to enforce the "contributing to truancy" law in the city's code. Efforts should also be explored about finding ways to hold businesses, which cater to truant students during regular school hours, accountable.