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AUTHOR   Kim, Young Yun
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ABSTRACT

              An integrated, interactive theory of mass media
communication and the acculturation process of immigrants challenges
the traditional linear assumption that media communication is a
stimulus to which immigrants' acculturation is a response. The
acculturation process is a natural process of adaptation, occurring
in and through communication; it is the process of acquiring the
communication mode of the host society. The acculturation process is
interactive and continuous, evolving in and through the communication
of an immigrant with the new environment. The subsystems of the host
society that are of direct and significant functional relevance to an
immigrant's daily life are the most influential in the acculturation
process. The role of mass media in this process is to provide
cultural information beyond the immigrant's immediate environment.
The media role is dependent on the receptivity of the immigrant, and
is more limited than are the roles of personal and interpersonal
communication in regulating immigrant behavior. Mass media works with
interpersonal communication to reinforce acculturation and its
influence is particularly strong during the initial phase of that
process. (DF)

MASS MEDIA AND ACCULTURATION:

TOWARD DEVELOPMENT OF AN INTERACTIVE THEORY

Young Yun Kim, Ph. D.
University Professor
Communication Science
Governors State University
Park Forest South, Illinois. 60466

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Introduction

The intent of this paper is to develop a foundation for an integrated, interactive theory of mass media communication, and the acculturation process of immigrants. Five axioms and five theoretical postulates will be proposed by which the process of acculturation and the role of mass media will be described and explained.

Previously, an immigrant's media behavior was included in anthropological and sociological studies as one of the many indices of acculturation of social integration. (See Nagata, 1969, for a review of literature.) Typical aspects of media behavior are: use of publications (newspaper and magazine), radio, television, and movie-going. In a study of Canadian immigrants, Richmond (1967) reported that the newspapers and magazines explicitly and implicitly convey a knowledge of Canadian norms and social institutions. The influence of television has been noted as a possible source of acculturation. Graves (1967) included the possession of a television set as one of the items in his index of acculturation. DeFleur and Cho (1957), in their study of Japanese women, considered the amount

of daily exposure to radio (as well as television) as one of the

acculturative variables. Movie-going was included by Spindler and

Goldschmidt (1952) in their index of acculturation among Menomini

Indians.

While the previous studies generally point to the acculturation

function of mass media, the media variables have often assumed only

an incidental role. It is not clear how and why mass media communica-

tion affects an immigrant's acculturation process. A systematic

theoretical description and explanation of the underlying dynamics

of mass media communication and acculturation need to be made before

we can further explore more specific information.

Axioms

Acculturation refers to the "cultural transmission in process"

(Herskovits, 1966, p. 170). With regard to immigrants, acculturation

may be defined as the process in which the immigrants adapt to and

acquire the host culture. The acculturation process is a natural

process. Immigrants have the need and possess the capacity to adapt

to their social-cultural environment, and to acquire membership in

the various social groups upon which they depend (Axiom 1). (See Kim,

1979, for a fuller discussion of the axioms.)

Acculturation occurs in and through communication (Axiom 2).

Acculturation occurs solely through the identification and the inter-

nalization of the significant symbols of the host society. A person

living in a social-cultural system must code or decode messages in such a fashion that the messages will be recognized, accepted and responded to by the individuals with whom he interacts. Through Communication, an immigrant comes to know and be known in relationships within the new environment. Communication allows and compels the individual to organize himself and to come to know his new milieu, and, therefore, to become what he is and what he will be.

In the course of varied communication transactions with others, the immigrant succeeds or fails to evoke the kinds of situations and relations in and through which he may pursue his goals. In time, the immigrant comes to utilize the communication mode of the host culture so that he can conform with greater fidelity to the sanctioned patterns. We also see changes taking place as an immigrant deviates from accepted patterns of the old culture and replaces them with new patterns of the host culture.

From the communication standpoint, then, acculturation may be defined as the process of acquiring the communication mode of the host society. The acquired communication competency to take the role of the members of the host society, in turn, reflects the degree of that immigrant's acculturation. (Axiom 3) For example, a Korean immigrant who sees his American friend, as if he were the American friend, is taught by acculturation to communicate with the friend according to American standards. It is through "taking the role of the other" that he is able to come back on himself, and so direct his process of acculturation.

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If we view acculturation as the process of development of communication competency in relating to the host culture, it is important to emphasize the fact that such communication competency is acquired through various communication experiences. One learns to communicate by communicating. The acculturation is a cumulative result of the sum total of all communication experiences. The acculturation process, therefore, is an interactive and continuous process which evolves in and through the communication of an immigrant with his new cultural environment (Axiom 4). The immediate effect of the acquired communication competency to take the role of the other in the host society lies in the control which the individual is able to exercise over his own behavior and over his social-cultural environment.

The communication of an immigrant occurs primarily through personal observation of, and, interpersonal interaction with, people around him. An immigrant belongs to a set of subsystems within the host society. Those subsystems that are of direct and significant functional relevance to an immigrant's day-to-day life are the most influential in his communication-acculturation process (Axiom 5). Within the immediate social-cultural environment, the immigrant observes people communicating. The immigrant sees and hears how people think, feel, and react to various situations; how they make judgment, express their feelings and thoughts (verbally and nonverbally), and how they perform various social roles. Also, in the course of varied communication transactions with others, the immigrant gradually learns and internalizes the communication mode of the host culture.

Postulates

Mass media, on the other hand, enable the immigrant to extend
the scope of his communication-acculturation beyond the particular
subsets of the social-cultural environment to which he belongs.
Through mass media communication, an immigrant may be exposed to the
broader ranges of the varied elements of the host culture. (See
Figure 1.) Mass media transmit messages which reflect the aspirations,
myths, work and play, as well as specific issues and events of the
host society. They explicitly and implicitly represent societal values,
norms of behavior, and traditional perspectives for interpreting the
environment. Such a socialization function of mass media communication
is summarized by Gordon (1974) as being influential in (1) the images
and stereotypes individuals possess of their environment; (2) the long-
term value systems they posses; and (3) what they view as priority
concern by way of the media's agenda-setting function (p. 13). In
assisting the immigrant's acculturation, mass media assist the host
culture to make possible that concensus and understanding among the
individual components of the host society which eventually gives it
and them the character not merely of a society but of a cultural unit.

A recent study of Korean immigrants in the Chicago area provides
an empirical support for this acculturation function of mass media
(Kim, 1977). The amount of an immigrant's exposure to American mass
media, together with his interpersonal communication with Americans,
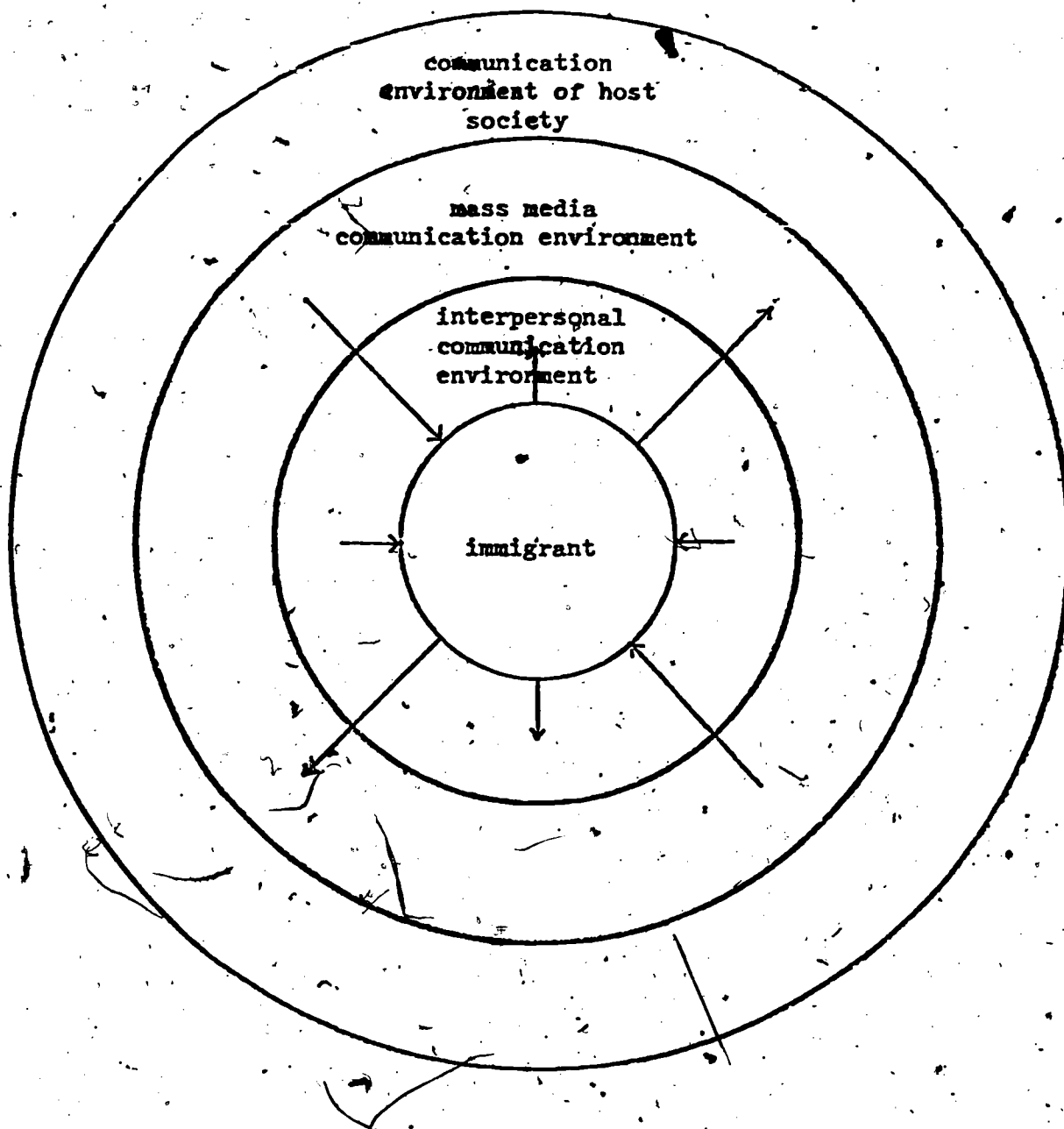was found significantly related to the "perceptual complexity" as

communication
environment of host
society

mass media
communication environment

interpersonal
communication
environment

immigrant

Figure (1): An Immigrant's Interpersonal Communication
Environment and Mass Media Communication
Environment in the Host Culture.

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manifested in the immigrant's refined understanding of the American
friendship pattern.

Postulate (1): In the acculturation process,
mass media communication provides information
about the host culture beyond the immigrant's
immediate social-cultural environment.

While the mass media transmit to immigrants broader images of
the host culture, it is ultimately the immigrant himself who defines
the effectiveness of the acculturation function of the media
communication. The transmission of the host culture via mass media
is not as simple as the transportation of a commodity like bricks.
The messages of the mass media have to be received and interpreted
by the immigrant himself in order to be functional to the
acculturation process. During the diffusion of media messages,
a process of selection necessarily takes place. Each and every
medium, and media content itself, inevitably tends to reach the
place where it will be understood and appreciated. Media messages,
therefore, can assist acculturation only as they are understood
and appreciated. At the same time, the messages are understood
and appreciated only to the extent that the immigrant is acculturated
and has acquired the communication mode of the host society.
At this point, the traditional conceptualization of the mass
media as a cause and the immigrant's acculturation as an effect

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becomes less meaningful. The whole process of acculturation,
in relation to mass media communication, can be compared to the
bed which a river cuts into the surface of the earth. The channel
is formed by the water, but the river banks also control the
direction and quantity of flow. A system of interaction is
established, in which cause and effect can no longer be isolated;
stimulus and responses are thus welded into a unit.

A few empirical studies have demonstrated such interactive
nature of the acculturation function of mass media. Nagata (1969),
for example demonstrated the differences in mass media behaviors
among first, second, and third generation Japanese-Americans,
with an increasing use of American media across generations.
Chang (1972) reported some differences, although not significant,
in mass media behaviors among three groups of Korean immigrants--
"cultural assimilation group," "bicultural group," and "nativistic
group," distinctive in the patterns of change in cultural values.

In a cross-sectional analysis of Korean immigrants and their
mass media behavior (Kim, 1978), an overall increase of mass media
consumption was observed during the initial ten years of the
acculturation process. The same developmental trend has also
been observed among other ethnic immigrants including Nigerians and
Mexicans, (Kim, 1979b). Further, the media behavior varied among
immigrants with different educational backgrounds and English
competence. Immigrants with a higher level of education demonstrated
a higher level of English competency, greater motivation to

acculturate, and more exposure to mass media (Kim, 1977). Similarly, the Korean immigrant's choice of media and media content was also closely related to the overall acculturation level. The degree of exposure to the information-oriented content of the media (newspaper and radio-television news) was far more closely related to other indicators of acculturation (including the immigrant's perceptual complexity and interpersonal relationship formation with members of the host society) than the exposure to overall radio and television content. Aames, Aames, Jung and Karanbenick (1977) reported a similar finding in their study of recent Vietnamese immigrants: Newspaper reading of the Vietnamese immigrants was a stronger indicator of their English competence than their television viewing.

These empirical findings clearly point to the interdependency of media offerings and the media behaviors of immigrants. Therefore, the acculturation function of mass media should be understood in an interactive conceptual framework.

> Postulate (2): The acculturation function of mass
> media communication is dependent upon the
> receptivity of the immigrant. The immigrant's
> media receptivity, in turn, is a function of
> his prior acculturation.

Having defined the interactive nature of the acculturation function of mass media, it is important to re-emphasize that an

immigrant's communication with his host cultural environment via mass media is only a part of the total communication process that an immigrant experiences. As discussed earlier, much of an immigrant's communication-acculturation occurs in and through his direct observation of, and interpersonal communication with, people around him in his immediate social-cultural environment. The immigrant's personal and interpersonal communication experienees provide him with more intense and detailed influence over his communication-acculturation process. Communication, in the presence of other people, controls the behaviors of the immigrant through its simultaneous feedback processes by controlling and regulating communication behaviors of an immigrant; personal and interpersonal communication presents the immigrant with detailed information about the communication mode of the host culture.

In this regard, mass media communication is limited in its potential acculturation function. The study of Korean immigrants (Kim, 1977) empirically demonstrates the relative importance of the acculturation function of mass media communication and interpersonal communication. While the immigrant's interpersonal communication is associated with his perceptual refinement by $r = .56$ ($p < .001$), the corelation r between mass media exposure and perceptual refinement is .38 ($p < .001$).

Postulate (3): Relative to personal and interpersonal
communication, mass media communication is
limited in its acculturation function due to
its inability to directly regulate the immigrant's
communication behavior.

While the mass media communication lacks control and regulation of
an immigrant's communication behaviors, it broadens the scope of the
individual's understanding of the host culture. (See Postulate 1.)
Mass media transmit messages about the host culture beyond the limited
social environment in which an immigrant carries on his day-to-day
activities. Also, mass media communication provides the informational
basis upon which an immigrant can act out his own personal and inter-
personal communication. What one learns from the mass media might not
always work in his communication with people around him. Nevertheless,
the stereotypical understanding of the communication mode of the host
culture provides some basis upon which he can experiment in his own
communication interaction. Furthermore, what an immigrant learns through
his interpersonal communication experiences, in turn, prepares him to be
more receptive and appreciative of the messages on mass media.

Studies of foreign immigrants (reported earlier) have provided some
empirical support for the above theoretical inference (Kim, 1977, 1978,
1979b). In all ethnic groups surveyed, an immigrant's consumption of
the host mass media increases as his interpersonal communication with
members of the host society increases on various levels of intimacy.

In the case of the Korean sample, the immigrant's interpersonal communication and media behavior was significantly related ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). Therefore, it is postulated that mass media communication and interpersonal communication are a complementary and mutually reinforcing impetus in an immigrant's acculturation.

Postulate (4): Mass media communication and interpersonal communication are complementary, mutually reinforcing each other's acculturation function.

The complementary inter-dependence between mass media communication and interpersonal communication should be particularly significant during the intial phase of an immigrant's acculturation process. During this phase, the immigrant has not yet developed a sufficient communication competence to develop satisfactory interpersonal relationships with members of the host society. The communication experiences in direct face-to-face contact with members of the host society can often be frustrating and burdensome. The immigrant may often feel awkward and out of place in relating to other people: the direct negative feedback from the other person can be too overwhelming to experience pleasure in the interaction with members of the host society.

A natural tendency for an immigrant experiencing such interpersonal discomfort is to avoid, when possible, direct contacts with members of the host society. Instead, he can resort to mass media as an alternative, pressure-free channel through which he can relate to the host

society. The complementary function of mass media, therefore, is considered more salient among the immigrants who perceive themselves less than satisfactory in their interpersonal competence in communicating with members of the host society. This inference is shared by Ryu (1976) who has studied foreign students' reliance on mass media as sources of acculturation.

> Postulate (5): The acculturation function of mass media communication, complementing that of personal and interpersonal communication, is particularly strong during the initial phase of acculturation.

Toward a Theory

So far, I have made an initial attempt to develop a theory of mass media communication in the acculturation process. In so doing, I have challenged the traditional linear assumption which views media communication as a stimulus or cause, and an immigrant's acculturation as a response or effect. Such a linear model, in studying the dynamic, interactive processes of mass media communication and acculturation, is incomplete and less than realistic. Thus, I have reconceptualized the acculturation process from an interactive communication perspective, and defined the nature of the communication-acculturation process through five axioms. Based on the axioms, I have proposed five

theoretical postulates. Additional emphasis has been placed on the importance of viewing the acculturation function of mass media communication, not in isolation, but in the context of the total communication experiences of an immigrant.

The process of communication-acculturation and the role of mass media communication in this process is a viable object of scientific study because of its theoretical and social significance. The global, intercultural interactions increase daily with the help of modern communications technology. As a consequence, our need to understand how and why mass media assist us in adapting to a new cultural system, and how we can maximize its potential benefits for a smoother transition from one culture to another, also grows.

The five axioms and the five postulates presented in this paper are not complete in describing and explaining the complex process of mass communication and acculturation. I do hope, however, that this paper has provided a sound and realistic beginning for the future refinement of a theory and its empirical verifications.

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to this day. New societal pressures are likely to cause some significant changes. While the opportunity for public schooling well may be extended beyond twelfth grade, the obligation for students to be schooled is not apt to be extended. In fact, if the recent recommendations of the Kettering Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education are adopted, the maximum age for compulsory schooling may be dropped to 14. Compulsory education laws will likely shift their emphasis from keeping students in school to making sure that public institutions that might wish to exclude certain students are prevented from doing so. Schools will be compelled to accommodate all who want to be educated, regardless of age or circumstances.

When the Children's Defense Fund published *Children Out of School in America* in 1974, nearly every state listed a statutory exemption from compulsory attendance laws for children handicapped by physical, mental, or emotional disabilities; a handful discouraged or excluded married or pregnant students; and a dozen listed "distance from school" or "no-high school in district" as a reason for excluding children from a public education. A body of case law has grown during the 1970s giving married students solid grounds for challenging regulations that exclude them from a public education. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), passed in 1975, now requires schools to provide appropriate programs for these children. (See Phi Delta Kappa fastback 124, *Mainstreaming: Merging Regular and Special Education*). With the institution's obligation now clear, states are moving to remove exemptions that formerly allowed parents to keep handicapped children at home unschooled. In view of the change in law for the handicapped, the Children's Defense Fund's estimate that there are one million children between the ages 7 and 15 not attending school should be down when a subsequent survey is conducted. But some statistics, like the number of students prevented from attending school because of suspension or expulsion, have not improved. Such disciplinary actions affect the attendance of 5% of the student population in some states and as much as 10% of students in minority groups

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>files of School Absentees: Student and Teacher

portrait of a chronic student absentee looks something like
He is male, a member of a minority group, lives in a poor neigh-
borhood with one parent or a guardian. There are younger children
in the family, frequently an infant requiring a babysitter. The child
stays up late on school nights watching television, comes to school
without breakfast. He does not speak standard English and has a poor
self-concept. He does not participate in extracurricular activities and
is not singled out by other students for honors (class officer, best dancer,
sports team leader). He has average or better ability but makes poor
grades. In class he may be disruptive or taciturn. He has been identified
for remediation in basic skills. He attended summer school where his
attendance record was even worse.

Does this mean that all students filling this description will have
poor attendance records? Of course not. Children are individuals, not
statistics. Many deserve our admiration for attending school regularly
and succeeding there in spite of great odds against them. For others, all
they need is only slight provocation to avoid school.

If the student's motivation to attend school is borderline, any of the
following absence-prone conditions may be enough to keep him out
on any one occasion: "It's Monday, I need an extra day. It's Friday, I'm
tired of school. It's raining, too much effort to get to school. The bus is
late, not my fault. It's the day before or after a holiday, not much go-
ing on, anyway. It's the first nice spring day, everyone gets spring
fever, let's go cruising."

Another problem with student absenteeism is caused by students who cut certain classes but remain on school grounds and are counted as present. Some in-school absentees may be physically present in class while being tuned out to class activity. Others are "hall people" who arrive for roll call and then slip out. All rely on social promotion and a good attendance record to get through school.

Some teachers share absentee habits with students, especially those of high Monday and Friday absence rates. Nancy Karweit of Johns Hopkins Univ rsity says high Monday absences are peculiar to teachers and high school students, possibly because a desire to extend the weekend is mostly an adult behavior. She also accuses schools of reinforcing the pattern of Monday-Friday absences by not scheduling special events on these days in anticipation of a large number of absences. This is the time schools ought to schedule assemblies, cultural events, pep rallies, special recognition days, and the best lunch of the week as attendance incentives.

We have far fewer data about the patterns of teacher absenteeism relating to such factors as age, sex, race, time of year, level of instruction, and subject area than we do for students. In 1970, 56 districts in Philadelphia participated in studies of employee absences. Increased absenteeism among all school employees (including teachers) was associated with these factors: urban transportation, women who take jobs for "luxury" money, alcohol and drug use, young hedonistic tendencies, marital and family trouble, child care problems, extended holidays, and lack of interest in job.

Specific factors possibly affecting teacher attendance identified in the same study included: staff morale, education program, salary scale, student attitudes, professional expectations and attitudes of teachers, administrative leadership, working conditions, emotional stress and strain, climate and weather, physical weakness and chronic illness, and policies for supplemental remuneration.

It was also found that female teachers had poorer records than male in both absence-resistant and absence-prone settings. (Among students, girls in most grades have poorer attendance records than boys, although the stereotype of the truant is male.) This is corroborated by a study of teachers in Newark, New Jersey. The same study showed white

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teachers had the highest absence rates (7.1%), followed by black (6.3%) and Hispanic teachers (5.3%). Teachers with tenure had higher absence rates (7.2%) than nontenured (6.1%).

Increased distance from school also appeared to affect adversely a teacher's attendance; this is not the case, however, in those studies that examined the effect of the child's distance from school on attendance. Attendance by bused students is as good or better than that of those walking or riding to school in cars, except when other factors come into play. (Resistance to desegregation busing and fear of robbery or assault while waiting for buses have been cited by students and parents.)

It would be inappropriate to draw too many conclusions from this scattered data on teachers. In some cases even the indicators of absence-prone students should be reexamined under better controls and using broader geographic samples. These findings of individual school systems about their own students and teacher populations may be a starting point for others concerned about the problem. Certainly the information ought not be used to stereotype groups of students or teachers because of their sex, race, or family life.

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Questions Raised by the Attendance Problem

Do teachers abuse their sick leave privileges? Most probably abuse them a little, and a few abuse them a lot. But the way in which administrative policies contribute to abuse is unclear. A study of 12 school districts in Nassau County, New York, showed trat teacher absences were 20% higher in the six districts limiting sick leave to a specified number of days. Staff may have the attitude that they should use all days coming to them. When the number of sick leave days is not specified, those on their honor to use only the days they need may be discouraged from taking extra days because they are unsure of the acceptable limit. Other schools have arrived at different conclusions from studying teacher absence patterns.

A 1970 study in the Philadelphia area involved 56 districts with 12,000 teachers on the payroll. The district reported 71,000 absences per year. About 2,000 absences were covered by school staff, leaving 69,000 substitute days to pay. With substitute pay at a modest $29.87 a day, this added approximately $2 million to the school budgets in all the districts combined. The study found that the 11 districts whose sick leave benefits matched the minimum allowed by the state (10 days) had the lowest rate of teacher absence. Teachers whose unions had bargained for additional days or who were granted more days at the discretion of local school boards had higher rates. The study also found that rates vere higher in schools requiring proof of all illness and in which an answering service had been set up to report absences for the day. Absences were lower in districts where teachers were ac-

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countable personally only to the principal when absent. While it would be premature to draw conclusions from isolated studies, it appears that stringent rules and formalized reporting procedures are not necessarily inducements to teachers to improve attendance. Taking the time one needs for illness or other necessary leave without rigid limits seems to work for students and teachers alike when they know they are directly accountable for their time.

Newark, New Jersey, is another school system concerned about a rising number of reported illnesses among teachers. In the late 1960s and early 1970s teachers called in sick from 9% to 12% of the time, in contrast to the 2% to 4% reported in the private business sector. Each teacher was allowed up to 15 days sick leave a year. In a subsequent plan to reduce absences, it was found that short-term absences were the easiest to curb and were therefore implicated as the most frequent kind of abuse.

New York City schools report double the number of student and teacher absentees experienced in the average school. The city launched a three-year campaign beginning in the 1973-74 school year to reduce teacher absences and their costs. The system was spending $200,000 a day for substitutes, who, although they were not unionized, had their own sick leave and benefits package. Per diem for substitutes was $60 and was raised to $62 in 1974-75. The city's total expense for substitute teachers that year was down slightly, however, due to greater utilization of teachers on staff to cover classrooms.

Then in 1975-76 the first effects of the city's financial crisis hit the schools. Fewer substitutes were used, their pay was cut by a third, and their benefits eliminated. Teacher absences fell from 5.7% to 4.9% over the two-year period, and the schools were able to save half the money formerly paid out to substitutes. The money saved spared the job of one regular teacher at each school. Part of the plan to reduce teacher absences was the reminder that sick leave abuse was unprofessional and could lead to dismissal. If that threat was ever carried out in New York City, it has not come to light. Union officials there said they could not recall a single tenured teacher ever having been dismissed for excessive absence.

Many teachers agree that sick leave use is higher than it ought to be,

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but they blame stress-producing working conditions rather than personal abuse of leave policies. In Chicago, 5,000 members of the local teachers union responded to a survey of job-related stress conducted by the RMC Research Corporation (November, 1977). Over half reported experiencing physical illness as a result of stress in their jobs, and about one-fourth said their jobs had caused some form of mental anxiety.

Soon after the results of the survey were released, *Chicago Union Teacher* reported, "This survey probably constitutes the largest study of job stress for a single group ever conducted in this country. The fact that there was such an overwhelming response to the survey indicates that the magnitude of the problem is much greater than even those that had initiated the survey had supposed."

Teachers reported experiences of physical assault, confrontations with colleagues and administrators, horrendous working conditions, and various stress-related physical illnesses such as colitis, hypertension, sleeplessness, and ulcers. The perception of on-the-job stress was similar regardless of the teacher's race, sex, or subject taught.

Of 36 factors that could potentially cause stress, teachers listed these as most stressful: involuntary transfer (frequently associated with desegregation programs), managing disruptive children, notification of unsatisfactory performance, threats of personal injury, and overcrowded classrooms. Least stressful of all the events named were: taking additional course work for promotion, talking to parents about their children's problems, dealing with students whose primary language is not English, teacher-parent conferences, and voluntary transfer.

Many wish these stress factors could be reversed. If teachers must live with a certain amount of stress, better that it be directed toward student achievement and parent participation than physical safety and job security. Stress as a positive indicator is associated with concern; therefore, it is seen as a productive kind of stress. Unfortunately, when a teacher is literally or figuratively "under the knife," survival comes first.

If inservice training could help stress-vulnerable teachers cope with the conditions that precipitate their stress, attendance rates might im-

prove. A different method of attack would be for schools to reduce the stress-producing conditions identified by teachers in the Chicago study. As is frequently the case with student attendance problems, the solution that first comes to mind is a plan to modify people rather than environment. This approach seems more immediate, less far-reaching, less expensive, in a word, easier. As we shall see with attempts to change student behavior, this is often easier said than done.

Should Compulsory Attendance Laws Be Repealed?

In gathering government data for this fastback, a staff person at the U.S. Department of Labor supplied me with this useful distinction: "Schooling is an industry, education a process." The government's statistics on student and teacher attendance deal with schooling as an industry. So do a state's compulsory school attendance laws. They require a student's presence; they do not require or guarantee that he learn or be taught anything. Attendance laws make public schools the custodians of our children; not necessarily places to teach the right thing at the right time to fulfill each child's needs. Compulsory attendance laws keep the industry of schooling going. Competency and educational accountability are process issues quite distinct from daily attendance. These two aspects of school are linked by the assumption that students cannot benefit from what public schools have to offer unless they are there most of the time.

Many people think it's time this situation changed. If there is anything compulsory about school, say critics of current laws, it ought to be that public institutions be required to provide free learning opportunities for citizens of all ages, when and where those citizens can best utilize them. As for the students, they should be free to come and go. Perhaps not in the very early years, but certainly by adolescence people ought to be able to choose whether or not they want to attend school. If a 14-year-old does not take advantage of his right to a free public education, he should not be put in jail (the statutory penalty in every state but New York). Counseling and alternative work-study programs

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ought to be available to students who wish to leave school—not prison. Punishing a student for not wanting to take advantage of his or her right to a free public education is roughly analogous to nabbing a citizen for not voting or not applying for social security.

The excessive penalty for nonattendance is only one aspect of current laws being questioned by many. The laws, while they are on the books in every state, are difficult and expensive to enforce. Many school officials ignore them, failing to report chronic truancies. Others uphold the laws selectively. (A disproportionate number of minority children are suspended or incarcerated for truancy.) A third criticism of the status quo is that conditions giving rise to compulsory attendance laws may no longer exist. The student population today is different from that of a century ago. Children mature at a younger age and, thanks to TV, are more worldly. They are also more questioning of authority (both their parents' and the school's) and more cognizant that "they do not shed their rights at the schoolhouse door."

Special problems are created by local attendance policies that apply to students past the maximum age for compulsory schooling and those who at 18 have reached their legal age of majority. Courts cannot force a 17-year-old to attend school, but school administrative policies can ...ire the student to be present a certain number of days in order to re-...ive course credit or graduate. Others who are less reflective argue simply that if students and their parents ignore the law, then, like Prohibition, it ought to be repealed—good, bad, or indifferent.

As it now stands, parents bear the primary responsibility for truancy. They are subject to criminal prosecution if they keep a child home or are found to be "in control" of the truant. Parents may be fined (rare) or imprisoned (even more rare) if it is found they caused the child to break the law. But many parents have no more influence in getting a child to school than the school has in keeping him or her there. If parents do not know about the truant behavior, or if they try and fail to correct it, they tell the court the truant child is "incorrigible" or "in need of supervision." The child can then be tried as a juvenile delinquent. The distinction as to whether the parents or the child is in violation of the law is usually made on the basis of the child's age. If he is young, chronic truancy is presumed to arise from

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parents' actions. When children are older, the choice is presumed their own.

What schools and courts do to satisfy compulsory attendance laws depends on where a person lives and, to some extent, the financial resources of the school. A recent report, "Truancy in the Wisconsin Public Schools," observes that, "Statutory procedures for dealing with truancy are not being observed by many Wisconsin school districts." Attendance officers there are supposed to visit the homes of reported truants, but it is less expensive to send postcards. While parents are liable for these truants, district attorneys are unwilling to prosecute the parents. Instead, the child is usually placed under supervision in his own home. Other procedural options include counseling or placement in a foster home. Seldom are cases even referred to juvenile court in Wisconsin because the courts have no effective way of dealing with truancy.

In Stork County, Ohio, mass hearings of truancy cases with as many as 150 children and their parents are brought before the juvenile court at once. Those who admit to charges are fined. Those denying are granted separate hearings. This process saves court costs but moves even further away from examining individual problems and remedies.

In New York City the schools are required to notify parents of suspected truancy by mail, followed up with a telephone call. Continual truancy problems are supposed to be referred to the Bureau of Attendance, but the Public Education Agency, a consumer and student advocacy organization in the city, claims 60% of habitual truants are never referred. Of those who are, it is questionable how many are found. In New York City and other systems where money is in short supply, so are attendance officers.

John Splaine, a researcher in Maryland, has a different worry about compulsory attendance laws. Over the five-year period from 1970 to 1974, 300 juveniles were committed to penal institutions for the "crime" of truancy in this state. During the same time, nearly 3,000 others were committed to institutions as truants "in need of supervision." Even one child treated this way would be one too many, in Splaine's view. He considers it inhumane and imprudent to incarcerate people for

not taking advantage of what is rightfully theirs." Splaine is one who would exchange *compulsory schooling* for *compulsory educa- tion*. Splaine says, "The state should be compelled to provide free pub- lic education for all our citizens, regardless of age, by using the consid- erable savings as a result of the deletion of compulsory attendance laws. Consequently, we could provide free education for those who, for one reason or another, do not avail themselves of educational oppor- tunities at a young age. These persons would be able to resume their education with dignity, which is not presently the case."

Splaine is in good company. The National Commission on the Re- form of Secondary Education, funded by the Kettering Foundation in 1973, recommended, "The formal school-leaving age should be dropped to 14. Other programs should accommodate those who wish to leave school, and employment laws should be rewritten to assure on- the-job training in full-time service and work." In a separate recom- mendation, the commission said, "The Congress of the United States, in conjunction with state legislatures, should enact legislation that will entitle each citizen to 14 years of tuition-free education beyond kindergarten, only eight of which would be compulsory. The remain- ing six years should be available for use by anyone at any stage of his life. Congressional involvement is essential to assure equal access in an age of interstate mobility."

Even dissenters to the commission's prevailing view did not deny the efficacy of lowering the compulsory age if alternative educational activities are assured. One dissenter, John A. Stanavage, wrote: "That the compulsory aspects of school attendance and other school regula- tions are incompatible with a meaningful adolescence for many of our young people is not to be denied. Attempting to keep these young people within the confines of the school and apart from adult society has proved to be counterproductive. Thus, reducing the school leaving age to 14 might be therapeutic.

"However, unless concern is taken to provide those early school leavers with alternative forms of education and appropriate counsel- ing once having left school, all we shall be doing is to doom them to economic and educational inferiority. Low-order work in our culture is not stimulating, not educative in itself. Untrained youth fares ill on

the job market today. Simply adding to that pool will exacerbate rather than ameliorate the situation."

Author/educator Pamela Neal of Arizona blames schools when attendance falls off. She says, "Wouldn't it be nice to think that we as educators could make education so attractive to the younger child that compulsory education laws would be unnecessary? I feel because secondary education is not compulsory in Arizona, we as educators are even more accountable for the quality of our education. If we see we are losing students, we know we must take a closer look at our programs and see where we are failing to provide for their needs."

Are Schools Partly To Blame for Truancy?

The National Association of Secondary School Principals has iden-
tified these factors as contributing to student truancy: family attitudes,
social forces, peer pressure, economic circumstances (need to work),
home-school relationship, school size, student age, and nealth. Added
to this stock list are some new causes of unexcused absence: winter
vacations, erosion of parental co.trol, economic affluence, novel life-
styles, and breakdown in enforcement of attendance laws. Of this long
list, schools can readily change and control only three factors: the
home-school relationship, school size, and the breakdown in the en-
forcement of attendance laws. We have already discussed the need to
either enforce existing attendance laws or change them. Let's now con-
sider the role of school size and the home-school relationship in un-
authorized absences.

There is a small body of research relating to absences and the size
of schools and school systems. It is interesting but not conclusive.
Oliver R. Gibson, in a research paper titled "Absence, Legitimacy and
System Size," shows evidence that the relationship of school size to at-
tendance is curvilinear. His study of schools in the Chicago area found
both the very small and very large school systems to have better at-
tendance rates than medium to large ones, each for different reasons.
When schools are very small, absences are highly visible, he rea-
sons. When a student is absent, it is noticed. Also, a high level of
friendship and loyalty can keep school-caused absences low. These ef-
fects decrease as the size of the system increases, until a high degree of

formality and management efficiency takes over in very large systems, again depressing absences. What Gibson is observing in his formal research sounds like growing pains. Schools that have grown or consolidated may be making a mistake to rely on old informal means of keeping track of attendance. Instead they need to change to highly structured systems for the sake of efficiency. But where is the magic turning point when informal and friendly becomes slipshod and ineffective?

A study by John S. Wright of all schools in Virginia has somewhat different conclusions. He found absences to be linear; the bigger the school and the more urban the setting, the worse the attendance rates. Now maybe there aren't any schools in Virginia large enough to fit Gibson's formula for better attendance figures associated with the formal management system of a large school. If there are, maybe they haven't instituted efficient management systems. Wright also found that lowered teacher-pupil ratios had a slight positive effect on attendance, and that attendance was negatively related to the number of elective subjects offered in secondary schools.

Large and formalized schools may be efficient from a management viewpoint, but they are also impersonal and frequently inaccessible to parents and students. As schools and school systems grow, they tend to become less responsive to their clients—the students and their families. This contributes to the third absence factor that schools can control—home-school relations. When school units are kept small and manageable and maintain an atmosphere of openness to parents and citizens, friction is reduced, cooperation enhanced. At the National Committee for Citizens in Education (where the author is employed), we receive many letters from parents questioning local attendance policies. Some point out the illogic of suspending a child for truancy. Others have "excused" their own children to attend a 4-H meeting or go on a family outing only to find when the child returned to school his grades were lowered, he was sent to detention, or threatened with suspension.

There is such a wide variance in the enforcement of school attendance policies that parents are often surprised or angry when they discover the broad discretion school boards and building principals have to set rules and punish violators. Like the earlier example of the opera singer's son, some schools will go along with most decisions a family

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makes to take a child out of school for a particular purpose. Others are in constant conflict with parents over the parameters of legal and illegal absences. Parents argue with some sense that a family trip to a museum or early dismissal for a meeting is as legitimate as school football practice or the art class's day-long field trip.

When schools fail to notify parents at the beginning of the year of guidelines for absences and the consequences of abusing them, families are rightfully incensed when children are penalized. An even better approach to improving home-school relations over the issue of attendance is to involve parents and mature students in setting policies the school and community can live with. If and when a consensus is reached, citizens and students will take more seriously their responsibilities to uphold attendance rules.

Student attendance is often reflective of school programs and the classroom learning environment. Does the way in which the teacher teaches affect student attendance? Without any research data, most adults would answer, "Yes, this is true regardless of the age of the child." It is probably fair to say that students who are well satisfied with a teacher's style and personality don't mind going to school. Repeated claims of stomachaches and vague illnesses by even young children who have previously made a good adjustment to school can signal a problem with an individual teacher. The teacher may be too strict, unfair, unprepared for class, bored with the class material, or distracted by personal problems. If teachers themselves are absent frequently, students may follow their lead. This has been substantiated by a study of five pilot schools conducted by the national parent-teacher association.

Research into the area of teaching styles that are best accepted by children, with high attendance as an indicator of satisfaction, is enlightening. Margaret Needels, in a paper presented at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, summarized the research done in 108 first-grade and 58 third-grade classrooms in several states by the Stanford Research Institute as part of a federally funded Follow Through program. The study tested the hypothesis that even very young children have the power to decide whether or not they will attend school. The prevailing view has been

that older children have more autonomy in making decisions about school attendance. Here are some of her observations about classroom teaching styles and their correlation with attendance.

Providing children with individual attention appears to be an important factor in student attendance, particularly one child with a teacher or aide in personalized reading instruction. In classrooms where the teacher or the aide was occupied by activities that did not include children, such as grading papers, preparing assignments, or cleaning up, there was a higher rate of absences.

Attendance was higher in classrooms where children were allowed more independence. Third-grade classrooms where children asked questions and where adults were responsive to the children showed lower absences. In third-grade classrooms where adults asked children open-ended questions, attendance was even higher.

Absences were higher in classrooms where children were not interacting but were listening to or observing adults. Adult punishment of children had the highest correlation with absences.

The classes at the Far West Laboratory and the University of Arizona that used a wide variety of educational activities and materials and where children exhibited independent behavior had the lowest absence rates.

A study by Rudolph H. Moos and Bernice S. Moos in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* 70 (1978) compared the achievement levels and absences among 19 classrooms at a single high school. Most students were enrolled in a college preparatory course. Subjects covered math, foreign languages, biology, English, and bookkeeping. This study did not rely on classroom observation as the Stanford study had, but it asked students and teachers to complete a "Classroom Environment Scale" measuring their perception of involvement, affiliation, teacher support, task orientation, competition, organization, teacher control, innovations, and clarity of rules. These are some of the findings. (While the correlations are clear, the researchers caution against assuming cause and effect.)

Average class grades and student absences are related to classroom climate. In classrooms where teachers gave higher average grades, teachers and students saw the environment as high in involvement and

low in teacher control. Classes with higher absenteeism were seen as high in competition and teacher control and low in teacher support. No differences were found in either grades or absenteeism among classes of different subject matter.

In a third study, conducted at the Career Study Center (CSC), an alternative public high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, students, parents, and teachers were interviewed. The study concluded, "Students feel CSC is significantly different and better than previously attended schoo'; there is more freedom and closer relationships with teachers; their basic skills, attendance, and understanding are improving."

These findings are nothing new. As early as 1928, Carl Ziegler in his classic study of school attendance as a factor in school progress observed, "Attendance of students in homerooms where the teachers were interested and concerned with their students was . . . significantly better than homerooms where the teachers were not." Nearly 50 years later, Lewis Kohler, speaking to the American Association of School Administrators, reframed Ziegler's findings: "Absenteeism has been recognized in many instances to be a symptom of poor supervision, management, and administration, leading to low morale, tardiness, inferior teaching, poor student achievement, and excessive school termination."

If the teaching style of a single teacher can adversely affect student attendance, think of the effect when morale is low among the entire faculty for such reasons as violence or the breakdown of teacher contract negotiations.

The threat of violence from truants and other youth can paralyze teachers and children and actually keep them away from school. In an award-winning article for the *Detroit News*, reporter Shelly Eichenhorn, a former teacher, posed as a high school student at Cody High School in order to witness firsthand the fractured and fearful lives of teachers in Detroit's secondary schools. Teachers were portrayed as locking their door against intruders, carrying weapons for protection, even lecturing on their fear of truant students and their planned defenses against assault. In Dayton, Ohio, teachers recently have won extra sick leave days to recover from an injury inflicted by students. Improving attendance when an atmosphere of violence prevails in a

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school is contingent upon eliminating the root cause. This is a task that calls for total community action and is not likely to be corrected by simply improving administrative procedures for recording and detecting truancy.

When teacher morale is low because of a breakdown in contract negotiations or when a strike seems imminent: teachers' attendance plummets. So does the students'. A school board member in Willingboro, Pennsylvania, claims a four-week strike in November in her district affected student and teacher attendance for the rest of the year. In Boston, student attendance ranged between 5% and 10% during the week of a teachers' strike even though schools were officially open. This is a knotty problem for which I can't offer any solutions here, except to make the point that a student's motivation and attendance can suffer when a teacher's does.

When absences are caused by a student's personal problems in school or at home, individual attention is especially important. A student of normal or above-average intelligence whose school performance and attendance rates suddenly fall may be having a problem at home. It may be related to poverty, illness, or the parents' divorce. If the child does not have warm clothing to wear to school, is kept at home to babysit, is put to work, or is caring for a sick parent or sibling while adult family members work, these situations are relatively easy to identify and the school can take some action. Referral to social service and welfare agencies may help children in eligible families. In many rural and inner-city schools, the main work of the school PTA is providing warm clothing for students so they can attend school.

When truancy stems from the indifferent attitude of students or parents toward school, the problem is more difficult to pin down or solve. How do you get students to attend school if they and their parents don't think it is important? Some youth, especially minority students in urban schools, are discouraged by returning graduates who tell them their high school diploma will only help them land a job as a dishwasher. If schools are not preparing students for independence in adult life, they should undertake a serious assessment of their programs and standards. A renewed focus on career education is one way schools are responding that could have positive effects on attendance.

Programs To Reduce Absenteeism

There are roughly as many programs to reduce high absences as there are schools that are plagued with the problem. But some school campaigns are more successful than others. When schools embark on an absentee reduction program, they either try to change the institution or the students. Really comprehensive programs attack both ends of the problem at once. Dealing with sweeping institutional reform is beyond the scope of this brief treatment of the issue. Programs directed at changing the students' behavior usually involve three approaches: reward, punishment, or counseling students and their parents. Rewards may be material—candy, money, prizes; or social—class or individual praise and recognition, exemption from exams, social promotion, or improved grades. Punishments include automatic grade reduction, detention, nonpromotion, suspension, or legal action against student or parents. Counseling may take place individually or in groups, stressing the importance of good attendance for achievement and for landing and keeping a job.

Following are descriptions of programs and policies adopted by schools to improve attendance.

Savannah, Georgia, High School. Developed by school principal, incorporating some new districtwide policies.

Improvement Quotient: 22% first year, additional 10% to 20% second year, from 86% to 92% attendance.

1. To deter tardiness, following a 10-minute grace period during

homeroom, students are not permitted to enter school without parental accompaniment.

2. Students who accumulate more than 10 unexcused absences in any given quarter receive no academic credit.

3. The homeroom with the highest ADA is privileged with a special field trip.

4. Special activities are planned on Mondays and Fridays since these days were identified as having a high rate of absence.

5. The quarter system has been adopted. Nonrestricted electives are open to enrollment from all grades. Twelve-week courses replace year-long courses.

6. Certificates of recognition are presented by the board of education to the high school, middle school, and elementary school with the highest attendance rate and most improved rate during each attendance period.

7. All truancy cases are referred to visiting teachers for court action where necessary.

8. Students 16 years of age who are consistently absent are notified by registered mail that they will be withdrawn after five calendar days if regular attendance is not established.

9. Alternative programs are offered to students with low self-concepts and attendance problems; for example, coordinated vocational and academic educational programs. Opportunities are provided for students to enroll in vocational and technical programs.

10. Homeroom teachers are continually requested to encourage student attendance.

11. Motivational posters, a graph of attendance, and certificates of recognition for attendance are displayed throughout the school.

12. Periodically, motivational announcements are made on the intercom during homeroom and in student publications.

13. Homeroom teachers are requested to telephone the parents of daily absentees and record the stated reasons for absences on attendance cards that are reviewed by assistant principals.

14. The pupil/teacher ratio has been reduced.

15. Teacher advisory groups have been formed to establish better communication among administrators, teachers, and students.
16. An administrative organization that embraces the school within a school concept has been developed.

Napa High School, Napa, California. To improve attendance, recommendations were made to the school administration by an attendance policy study committee and a faculty curriculum review committee. Approved by school PTSA.

Improvement Quotient: 50% first year. Non-illness absences reduced 40% (less than 4.5% on the average as compared with 8% to 12% the year before).

1. Students are allowed 12 days of absence per semester for illness, professional appointments, or serious personal or family problems (it is made clear to students that these are not authorized days of absence but are only to be used for illness and emergencies).
2. Thirteen or more absences during a semester can jeopardize a student's enrollment status: being tardy three times equals one absence. Parents are notified.
3. After the fourth, eighth, and twelfth absences from any class period, a form indicating absences is sent home to parents. Teacher counsels student after fourth absence, teacher and guidance counselor/administrator counsel after eighth and twelfth absences. Personal school contact with parents after eighth absence. Parent conference encouraged at this point.

Alexandria, Virginia. Cooperative effort of local police department and city school administration.

Improvement Quotient: 33% improvement first year in secondary schools, raising attendance from 85% to 90%.

1. Police pick up school-age juveniles frequenting shopping centers, parking lots, and residential streets and return them directly to their schools. During the first month of the pro-

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gram, officers returned an average of three truants a day, mostly first-time offenders.

2. After the third violation by a student, case is examined and charges filed against student and parent. (Not only did truancy decrease, but number of local juveniles arrested for burglary decreased during the period. There were similar findings in Los Angeles, where "Operation Stay in School" resulted in improved attendance and lowered incidence of daylight burglaries, shoplifting, and school violence.)

Philadelphia Public Schools. Individual programs at schools designed by special attendance teams.

Improvement Quotient: As much as 33% in one year at any one school.

1. Teams composed of principal, school nurse, school-community coordinator, teacher, home-school visitor, and resource person in community have devised group and individual programs to boost classroom attendance. Some are described below.

2. Interclass competition. Joseph C. Ferguson Elementary School. Banners are awarded to display in classrooms with the best attendance.

3. Attendance lottery. Thomas Jr. High School. A day of attendance count is selected at random. All classes with 100% attendance on that day receive a prize.

4. Crossing guard monitors. W. C. Bryant School. Guards volunteer time on rotating basis to check on tardy students. After being tardy three times, a conference is requested with parents. Certificates are awarded to children with no tardiness.

Cora Howe Elementary School, Nashville, Tennessee. This inner-city school's attendance program was developed jointly by PTA and school administration.

Improvement Quotient: Significant drop in number of tardy students.

1. Students call classmates who have been absent to remind them to come to school the next day. Classes compete for best attendance record.

2. Parent volunteers call homes when children are absent and homes where parents are known to leave early for work in order to waken children.

3. A pupil personnel team consisting of a psychologist, social worker, nurse, attendance teacher, special teachers, and the coordinator of pupil services help students and parents acquire medical, psychological, and dental care needed to resume regular school attendance.

4. A report on absenteeism is given at each PTA meeting.

5. The school system prepares incentive posters and brochures on school attendance for parents.

South Range Elementary School, Derry, New Hampshire. Program developed by PTA under supervision of school administration.

Improvement Quotient: Individual successes.

1. A mini-conference was held to orient everyone involved with the project.

2. A system of record keeping was initiated to record and monitor each pupil's absences. Recording is done by school volunteers.

3. Teachers routinely submit an absenteeism form using a code to facilitate recording procedures.

4. Forms requesting reasons for absences are sent to parents when no note is received by the teacher.

5. Teachers are given the responsibility of telephoning parents to seek the cause of absences.

6. An alternative means of handling court-related problems resulted in a student at South Range making restitution for vandalism at the junior high school through a work program rather than face the possibility of incarceration.

7. A teacher on the staff became a volunteer probation officer, thus enabling her to work closely with one pupil who, as a result, remained in school.

8. As a result of the project, the number of school volunteers more than doubled, offering extra hands in the classrooms.

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9. PTA emergency funds were used to purchase footwear, making it possible for one student to attend school regularly.
10. An award program was begun to reward pupils in both academic and nonacademic areas.

Lake Oswego High School, Lake Oswego, Oregon. New administrative policy.

Improvement Quotient: 70% over three years.
1. Policy provides that absences are excused only if they have been prearranged or if there is student illness, family illness, or an emergency. Otherwise, a student is expected to attend every class period every day. Attendance is taken each period.
2. Truant absences result in a grade of zero for all classes missed. Truancies are handled as follows:
   First truancy: Notification of parents
   Second truancy: One-day suspension and parent conference
   Third truancy: Three-day suspension and notification of county attendance officer
   Fourth truancy: Informal hearing to discuss possibility of student expulsion.

Hannibal High School, Hannibal, Missouri.

Improvement Quotient: 60% of dropouts returned to school and 50% of the students with attendance problems showed marked improvement.
Principal refers reported cases of truancy to the school-community court coordinator who serves as a liaison between school, home, community, and juvenile department. The coordinator maintains close personal contact with the students and their parents.

North High School, Omaha, Nebraska. Program initiated by school principal with aid of an attendance committee.

Improvement Quotient: Tardiness reduced 50% over two years, absences by 25%, reversing a steady decline for the five previous years. Corresponding improvement in grades as attendance improved.

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1. Counselors relieved of attendance responsibility for 85% of students who do not have attendance problems. Instead, they concentrate on 15% with poor records. Parental conferences are part of an individual approach to solving school absence problems.
2. Students with no more than two and one-half days absence a semester, or fewer than six times tardy are excused from exams (unless they are in danger of failing a course).
3. Campaign to impress on students importance of regular attendance. The value of dependability to prospective employers stressed.

The attendance improvement programs described above are varied, yet all have been successful in a particular setting. All have elements in common: 1) The policy is broadcast before it is implemented. Students and parents know what to expect; 2) the programs are well organized and school officials follow through; 3) the policies are applied evenly and fairly to all without exception; and 4) the policies combine student responsibility with school responsiveness.

In some of the programs, volunteer and parent responsibility for student attendance played an important role in the success of the programs. In fact, some studies found that parents calling homes to check on absentees had a better rate of success than professional staff, perhaps because the call was seen as less threatening.

Conclusion

The problem of student and teacher absenteeism discussed in this fastback is not an easy one to resolve. Many of the factors contributing to student absenteeism are beyond the direct control of the school. They are problems of the broader society. Our schools, however, are a vital part of that society and they have the talent and resources to remedy at least some of the problems. That some school systems have adopted successful programs to curb a rising absentee rate is proof of this. Such programs should be expanded to other schools facing rising absenteeism.

Teacher absenteeism is a more subtle problem with which to deal. Both administrators and teachers acknowledge abuse of sick leave, but it is frequently difficult to prove. However, the disparity in teacher absentee rates among different school districts is quite convincing evidence that abuse does occur. It seems likely that as teachers unions bargain for more control of working conditions and other benefits, school boards and parents will, in turn, demand greater accountability from teachers, including stricter attendance policies.

In the final analysis, the problem of attendance will diminish when our schools become places where children enjoy going to learn and where teachers find satisfaction and fulfillment in their work. This is a tall order but one to strive for.

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