



Bureau
Boekhoorn
Sociaal-wetenschappelijk
Onderzoek

Summary

Truancy: a growing problem

Truancy has become increasingly common among Dutch primary and secondary school pupils in recent years. In most cases it can be seen as a cry for attention – in other words, failure to attend school is due to pupils' psychosocial and/or family-related problems. Nationwide statistics on registered cases of truancy indicate that some 40,000 pupils a year are involved. This type of truancy associated with psychosocial and/or family problems has increased by over 50% in five years.

Judicial approach

The last few years have seen an increasingly judicial approach to the problem, owing to concerns about the link between truancy and possible juvenile delinquency. Moreover, this approach is in keeping with the Government's more stringent enforcement policy, which explicitly extends to the provisions of the Compulsory Education Act. In this connection the Ministry of Justice has developed a number of judicial schemes which have been examined in closer detail by the research institute BBSO.

Judicial schemes to tackle truancy

Although breaches of the Compulsory Education Act are still often punished by fines, community sentences have in recent years become an increasingly common way of dealing with truancy. The idea is to create a 'judicial-educational' setting that gives pupils aged 12 and older (as well as parents) an incentive to better their ways. At present the main schemes are 'Roos' (for frequent truants), 'Basta' (for persistent truants) and 'Ouders: Present' (for parents of persistent truants).

There are also lighter penalties for truancy, such as training in social skills. Another approach that has been tried in the past few years is referral to a community service centre for young offenders (the 'Halt' scheme) to receive training or carry out community service.¹

What the various schemes involve

Under the Halt scheme, occasional to frequent truants are first referred to a school attendance officer and are then required to spend several hours or periods of the day carrying out community service or receiving training, up to a maximum of 20 hours. The local prosecutor and the parents must agree to the procedure. If it is successful, the case is closed and the pupil is not registered as an offender.

The Roos scheme involves training for pupils who play truant frequently and are the subject of a training order imposed by a local prosecutor. Such orders, which are for a maximum of 40 hours, are imposed on pupils defined as 'frequent' truants. The scheme also includes counselling by a youth probation officer.

¹ 'Roos' is an acronym of the Dutch words for 'Response to truancy', 'Basta' comes from the Italian for 'That's enough!', 'Ouders: Present' means 'Parents: present!' and 'Halt' is a pun on 'Halt!' and the Dutch words for 'The alternative'.

The Basta scheme is intended for persistent truants who have been the subject of an official report by the school attendance officer. The community sentence, which is imposed by a magistrate and is for a maximum of 60 hours, is in the form of a daytime programme and must be completed within three weeks. Immediately afterwards the pupil can take part in a voluntary follow-up scheme lasting up to ten weeks.

The Ouders: Present scheme is a course for parents of secondary school pupils who are persistent truants. It is aimed at parents who are unable to exercise parental authority, ignore their children's truancy and fail to respond to overtures by the school or by school attendance officers and/or efforts by the social services to tackle the resulting problems. The 20-hour course, which is imposed on the parents by a magistrate, is an alternative to a fine. Most of the course modules are given in groups.

Effectiveness of the various schemes

The purpose of this study was to map the various judicial schemes aimed at reducing truancy and to identify programmatic and geographical areas lacking truancy programmes. The various schemes were assessed in this study with a view to determining how effective they were in tackling truancy. The following aspects were among those assessed in the study:

- frequency and nature of the truancy
- attendance and results
- range of people the current schemes fail to reach
- geographical coverage

Frequency and nature of the truancy

The existing schemes take some account of the frequency of the truancy in that they distinguish between occasional, frequent and persistent truancy. The 'Roos' and 'Basta' schemes focus on frequent and persistent truants, but there is insufficient emphasis on occasional to frequent truancy. The 'Halt' scheme takes fairly substantial account of this category, even though truancy is not specifically mentioned in the Community Service for Young Offenders (Designation of Offences) Decree.

Attendance and results

Overall, the range of the existing schemes is small, since relatively few notified truancy cases – in practice just seven per cent – lead to an official report. This means that only a relatively small group of pupils and parents are actually fined or are the subject of a training order. The impact and potential range of the schemes will therefore depend, among other things, on more stringent enforcement of the Compulsory Education Act.

An inventory of the impact of the judicial schemes on truancy reveals the relative lack of research in this area. Another major snag is the lack of systematic data gathering and progress reporting in many cases. The frequent lack of case management also means that there is no overall picture of what the various schemes have achieved. However, the following general statements can be made about the impact of the 'Halt', 'Basta' and 'Ouders: Present' schemes:

- The 'Halt' scheme leads to swifter notification of truancy by schools, and thus helps prevent more serious cases. The problem is tackled before it actually reaches the courts.
- Of pupils taking part in the 'Basta' scheme, a third to half return to regular education and a quarter are transferred to other establishments and specific vocational training courses. The scheme as a whole has no positive impact on about a quarter of those taking part.
- After two pilot courses under the 'Ouders: Present' scheme, about two thirds of the pupils involved had ceased to be persistent truants. Moreover, the judicial approach has proved more effective in cases where both parents and truants receive a community sentence.

Range of people the current schemes fail to reach

Various truancy data can be combined to build up a 'truancy risk profile' for several categories of people who are frequently involved in truancy cases but are overlooked by the present range of judicial schemes:

- occasional to frequent truants, for whom a reprimand is too mild and formal prosecution too harsh a punishment;
- young immigrants, who account for a relatively large proportion of secondary-school truancy, particularly in the four biggest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht);
- parents of truants in the upper classes of primary schools (a substantial and increasing amount of primary-school truancy is reported nationwide);
- immigrant parents of truants (the percentage of immigrant parents prosecuted under the Compulsory Education Act is disproportionately high and a cause for concern).

Geographical coverage

The geographical coverage of the schemes aimed at frequent and persistent truants turns out to be limited. The 'Roos' scheme is used in five and the 'Basta' scheme in four court districts. Disregarding the 'Halt' scheme, ten districts have no specific arrangements for frequent or persistent truants. This means that in more than half of the nineteen districts judicial schemes such as 'Roos' or 'Basta' cannot be used in cases of repeated truancy. Surprisingly, such schemes are unavailable even in several cities and towns where truancy is a substantial problem.

Recommendations

The study of the present range of judicial schemes to tackle truancy has led to a number of recommendations which can be summed up as follows:

- To increase the impact and potential range of the schemes, the Compulsory Education Act should be more stringently enforced.
- Since most truancy is a 'cry for attention', the emphasis should be on training orders that offer educational incentives, rather than financial penalties.
- The present range of judicial schemes overlooks a number of specific categories: parents of primary-school truants, immigrant parents of truants, immigrant truants and occasional to frequent truants. In particular, the possibility of introducing additional schemes aimed at immigrant parents should be considered.
- The geographical coverage of judicial schemes aimed at frequent and persistent truants should be increased so that more regions with serious truancy problems can take advantage of the schemes.
- In order to increase the range of available schemes, the 'Halt' scheme should be officially recognised as a way of tackling truancy. Once certain relevant aspects have been worked out in more detail, the 'Halt' scheme may prove an appropriate additional scheme for dealing with the problem.
- More should be done to review the content of the schemes so that people do not drop out before completing the programme and so that those taking part are reassigned more appropriately afterwards.
- There should be more emphasis on the effectiveness of the various schemes, including more research to assess their scope and their respective benefits and drawbacks.