

Summary

In recent years public awareness concerning unauthorized absence from school has been on the increase. An effective way of combating unauthorized absence is important for several reasons. Frequent truancy often precedes early school dropout. This results in young people leaving school without qualifications and having difficulty holding their own in the job market. Additionally, truancy (and dropping out of school) often goes hand in hand with personal problems and unfavorable circumstances within the family. Above all, unauthorized absence from school is a criminal act.

The ministry of Justice (WODC) has appointed Van Montfoort Advice Bureau to look into whether judicial interventions aimed at unauthorized absence are effective. The research was carried out between the Fall of 2005 and early 2007 and encompassed the following interventions: Halt intervention for unauthorized absence from school, the ROOS¹ intervention, Basta, and Parents Present, and to a limited degree the Youth Probation intervention Help and Support, implemented in cases of unauthorized absence. Parents Present distinguishes itself from the other interventions in that it is not meant for the youth, but for the parents of the truant youth.

If a youth has a valid reason (such as illness) for his or her absence we speak of authorized absence. If there is no valid reason, we speak of unauthorized absence, irregular attendance, or truancy. Non-attendance means that a youth is not registered at any school.

In accordance with the *Compulsory Education act 1969* a school is obliged to report unauthorized absence to the Education department of the local authority if a youth has been absent from school for at least three consecutive days, or has missed more than an eighth of the school hours for a period of at least four consecutive weeks.

Out of the total number of reported cases of unauthorized absence from school relatively few are resolved judicially. In 2005 the Education department received approximately 40,000 reports of truancy. In the same year about 850 youths were referred to Halt as a result of truancy. Around 200 youths took part in the ROOS intervention, over 100 youths took part in the Basta intervention and approximately 20 parents (of truant youths) took part in the Parents Present intervention.

Consequently, the study concerns a type of intervention for unauthorized absence from school that is relatively rare. However, the numbers are increasing.

On a national level² an outline has been developed of an effective approach to combat unauthorized school absence³. The parent, the pupil, the school, the Education department, the

¹ Reaction to Unauthorized Absence from School. There are two organizations that developed and implemented an intervention with the name ROOS, the Salvation Army and B.I.G. (Bureau for aid and services aimed Individuals and Groups). Only the ROOS program run by B.I.G. was involved in the study.

² I.e.: The Judicial Youth Policy Department (DJJ) at the ministry of Justice, the ministry of OCW and the General Office of the Prosecution Service.

³ Integrale Aanpak Schoolverzuim; Eindrapportage werkconferentiecycclus; Rotterdam, Het Portaal, 2007 (page 12).

system of care in and around the school and the judicial commission for youth cases (JCO) are the most important parties within the obligatory integral approach.

The research questions

The following research questions needed to be answered.

- Do the judicial programs meet the 'What Works' criteria, especially with regard to their theoretical validation?
- Are judicial interventions aimed at reducing unauthorized absence from schools sufficiently effective for there to be enough grounds to extend them for national use?
- Can the existence of judicial interventions be justified and what is their added value over the existing non-judicial programs?
- What is known about the efficacy of non-judicial ways of dealing with unauthorized absence from school?
- Are there examples of foreign approaches for which the efficacy has been scientifically proved?

The various questions are answered consecutively.

Do the programs in the study meet the 'What Work' criteria?

The ministry of Justice has appointed an Accreditation panel to assess all judicial behavioral interventions on the basis of the so-called 'What Works' criteria (see appendix 2). These are criteria distilled from meta-analyses of effect studies aimed at the prevention of relapses and they have been found to increase the efficacy of interventions. Interventions that have had a positive evaluation from the Accreditation panel can be considered to show potential. The institutions were required to describe their programs on the basis of the 'What Works' criteria and hand the descriptions in to the national Accreditation panel before May 1 2006. The answer to the research question concerning the 'What Works' criteria is therefore linked to the initiatives the institutions were required to take themselves.

After it became apparent that the institutions were having considerable difficulty describing their programs and getting them recognized, the Accreditation panel dropped the May 1 2006 deadline. This means that none of the interventions we studied have been found to show potential yet. Only ROOS was submitted to the commission and this intervention was found to be mediocre. Following this the ROOS program description was revised and resubmitted. The second evaluation is not available yet.

There is a general description for all programs (step 1)⁴ but the programs cannot be said to show potential (step 2). In other words, it is not clear if the programs are theoretically sound (model of change) or consequently if it is plausible that a particular intervention would work for the target group.

⁴ The steps refer to the Veerman's so-called efficacy ladder. This ladder represents steps/conditions in a particular order. The higher the step, the more proof there is that a program is effective.

The implication for our research is that we have measured the efficacy of programs for which it has not been established that they show potential. Such programs are often shaped too much by the personal experience of a trainer or organization and too little by a predetermined and common way of working based on a theoretical model. Moreover, while carrying out our research it became apparent that the general descriptions of the programs (step 1) are also flawed. Often the description of the target group is unclear and the program carried out at the location in question is not fixed or only partly ties in with the general description of the program under consideration. Consequently, the meaning and depth of our research is limited. The results of the research into the efficacy only apply to 'the approach in that particular region'. However, the results of the empirical research do offer guidance to the organizations carrying out the interventions and also to the developers of the programs on how to proceed with the interventions.

Are the investigated judicial interventions effective?

The main research question can be answered by exploring to what degree the programs succeed in reaching their goal, that is to say preventing further unauthorized absence from school. The youths need to start meeting the requirements in the Compulsory Education act again: they must either return to school or they must follow an alternative program that meets the requirements stipulated in the act. Whether the programs managed this was investigated by taking five measurements of the attendance at the school/educational institution or the alternative program. Each time the measurement of the attendance covered one week.

- Measurement 1 comprised the week six months prior to the start of the intervention.
- Measurement 2 comprised the week two months prior to the start of the intervention.
- Measurement 3 comprised the week preceding the start of the intervention.
- Measurement 4 comprised the week two months after the intervention ended.
- Measurement 5 comprised the week six months after the intervention ended.

In addition to the quantitative empirical research, qualitative interviews were held with the trainer/instructor of each program under investigation, and with the youths who took part or are taking part in the program.

The research was carried out in the following regions.

- The Halt intervention was examined at Halt West Brabant.
- The ROOS intervention was examined at ROOS Den Bosch and ROOS Haarlem.
- The Basta intervention was examined in Rotterdam. Here Basta is carried out by STEK⁵.
- Parents Present was examined in Amsterdam; in Amsterdam the Salvation Army is responsible for the program.
- The Youth Probation intervention (imposed on account of unauthorized absence from school) was examined in Rotterdam⁶.

⁵ A youth organization

⁶ At Youth Probation Rotterdam only the qualitative interviews with the official and the youths were carried out. The quantitative part of the study was not carried out.

Generally the rule of thumb is that the population should be at least 25 to give statistical statements enough power⁷. The requirements for our data collection were strict: for each youth we needed a complete set of data for five measurements, whereas the attendance records kept by schools are not always complete. Also the irregular and non-attending members of the target group are apt to change schools and are therefore difficult to follow.

For Halt, ROOS and Parents Present it was (almost) possible to get a large enough number of complete sets of attendance records. Only a few youths turned out to be untraceable in spite of extensive detective work. Some schools had switched to a different system of registration (resulting in a loss of data) or were found to delete their attendance records at the end of every school year. A complete set of attendance records were collected for 23 Halt youths, 22 ROOS youths and 26 children of parents taking part in Parents Present. The data collection for Basta was brought to a halt when it became clear that complete sets of records were retrievable for only about half of the youths. The difficulties we ran into were mainly related to schools informing us they were unable or unwilling to supply us with a complete set of attendance records. In addition the Basta youths often have problems that are more complex than the youths in the other programs, and as a consequence they were either untraceable, exempt from the Compulsory Education act or they were for instance in prison. This further impeded the data collection for the Basta youths.

Prior to giving results of the analysis, some critical remarks are necessary.

- The quality of the accumulated attendance records is not perfect. On average approximately 85% of the records originated from an automated registration system. The remaining 15% came from various sources: the class logbook, the youth's file, 'memory' or 'a reasoned estimate'. The data considered to be less reliable were also included in the analysis, so long as there was sufficient support to do so.
- The Halt results in particular were affected by the fact that some schools register being late as unauthorized absence and other schools do not. In reality the level of unauthorized absence is most probably higher for the Halt youths in all measurements.
- Schools do not always register whether they consider the absence of a pupil to be authorized or not. Moreover, it became apparent that authorized absence concealed some unauthorized absence. Hence, part of the unauthorized absence has remained hidden.
- The analysis of the ROOS and Parents Present interventions includes some youths who did not complete the program. The analysis of Parents Present included seven children whose parents did not complete the intervention (27%) and for ROOS there were three youths (14%).
- Parents Present concerns an indirect effect, because the youths are not directly influenced to reduce their truancy, but only indirectly via their parents through improvements in their parenting skills. Additionally some of the youths with parents in the Parents Present program were themselves required to take part in an intervention (typically Youth Probation).

⁷ Baarda D.B. and M.P.M. de Goede; Basisboek Methode en Technieken, 1998 (page 130).

- The effect of the ROOS intervention was measured in Den Bosch and Haarlem. It emerged that these regions differ with regard to the number of hours that ROOS is implemented. In Haarlem the program comprises 25 hours and in Den Bosch it comprises 40 hours.

Paired t-tests were carried out for the three respective interventions. These t-tests reflect the difference between the average attendance before the intervention and the attendance after the intervention at respectively measurement 4 and measurement 5. None of the interventions showed a significant effect on truancy. The sizeable spread of the attendance percentages coupled with the small population size diminished the reliability of the t-tests. Therefore, the portrayal of the developments in the attendance percentages before and after the intervention is only descriptive. The results show that the programs help to reduce truancy incidentally but not systematically. The limited attendance records for Basta point in the same direction. The descriptive analysis for ROOS produces the best results. Often the unauthorized absence drops for these youths in the long term (six months after the intervention). It is possible that this positive result is partly due to the Youth Probation supervision that continues for a while after the ROOS intervention has finished. The results of the additional interviews with the youths confirm the general picture. Only a few youths stated in concrete terms that the intervention had a positive effect on their truancy. Earlier research and data from for example the Education department paint a rosier picture of the effects of the interventions. However, it is often not stated how these results were obtained or the results consist of only one measurement directly after the intervention.

The interviews (n=19) generate a picture of the groups targeted by ROOS, Basta and Youth Probation⁸. The youths often have multiple problems in different areas, such as (light) psychiatric problems, family issues and behavioral problems. The interviewed youths lack necessary social skills, support from the people around them to tackle the problems and supervision by the school concerning their attendance. Often youths are not happy at school for several reasons. The impression is that the problems start off light and intensify over time. Eventually the youth gets 'swamped' by the problems and becomes unable to sort them out alone. By then the truancy problems have grown so large, that there is no easy way to resolve them. Parents often do not know that their children are playing truant and they are not informed until it is too late. In the eyes of the youths the school often seems to have an indifferent attitude with regard to truancy. Effective elements of all the interventions are: the individual attention for the youth, actively thinking along with the youth for a solution to the problems, the degree of trust in the relationship between the trainer and the youth during individual interventions (ROOS and Youth Probation) and the positive, safe environment during the group intervention (Basta), in short the (sometimes quite powerful) support that the youths receive. Consequently, taking part in the interventions is a positive experience for the large majority of the participants. A limitation, as stated by the youths themselves, is that the situation at the school does not change as a result of the intervention.

⁸ No interviews were carried out with the Halt youths.

While retrieving the attendance records we also gained insight into the current way truancy is dealt with. We mention a few complications. In the ROOS, Basta and Parents Present target groups, irregular attendance often develops into non-attendance. Almost half of the youths involved in the effect measurement showed 100% non-attendance in at least one of the measurements. How both problems are dealt with is not always regulated properly. Education officials repeatedly inform us that they lose track of youths who stay home and therefore no longer attend school. This mainly concerns youths exempt from the Compulsory Education act. It is not clear for the Education department whether the RMC⁹ is involved with these youths. Furthermore, the school records and the records kept by the Education department often do not tie in with each other and consequently youths can be lost track of for a while. The records at the Education department show some youths to be registered at a school (far) longer than is actually the case. The department records show other youths to be registered at a particular school, but they turn out never to have been there and the department is not informed of this. Many schools do not know where youths no longer enrolled at their school are registered, although they are legally bound to keep them registered until they are enrolled at another school. There are cases where youths have been absent from school for half a year without being officially removed from the register. This means that this is officially not a case of non attendance, but in practice it is. These and other complications found during the study require measures to increase the efficacy of the way truancy is combated.

What is the added value of judicial programs concerning unauthorized absence?

Initially the aim was to answer whether the judicial programs had added value (in comparison with non-judicial programs) by interviewing people who have benefit of experience. We let this approach go when it emerged that there are no non-judicial programs aimed specifically at truants. The research did indirectly deliver information about the perceived added value of judicial programs. In this light we mention: the normative value of judicial involvement, the option of obtaining additional help for the youth via the courts and the fact that difficult target groups are easier to reach due to the compulsory nature of the intervention. In contrast, the education officials expect more from voluntary sessions and support. The interviews with the participants do in fact show that they start with the intervention reluctantly and expect it to be of a demanding or strict nature. But soon the compulsory nature turns out not to impede a positive evaluation of the course. For this reason the Parents Present organizers advise against carrying out Parents Present on a voluntary basis, as doing so has no added value and the target group would probably be reached less successfully.

⁹ The regional office for reporting and coordinating cases of early school dropout (RMC) concerns regional cooperation between authorities, schools and institutions active in the areas of employment, education, justice, youth care and wellbeing. The goal of this cooperation is to prevent youths from leaving school early and to stimulate them to obtain the right qualifications for the job market.

What is known about the efficacy of the non-judicial approach to unauthorized absence and what examples are there of foreign judicial programs aimed at combating truancy?

To get the most effect, interventions need to focus on the underlying factors that cause unauthorized absence. Theory shows there to be various contributory factors related to the youth, the family, the school and the community. Contributory factors related to the youth are limited social and cognitive skills, health problems, learning difficulties and emotional difficulties. In relation to the family, structural factors such as socioeconomic status, parenting skills, social support from the family, neglect and child abuse are considered to be causally related to truancy. Influential school characteristics are said to be: the relationship with the teacher (supportive teachers encourage school attendance) and the broader school context (safe schools, that pay more attention to attendance problems and have high expectations of the pupils, generally have a higher rate of attendance). Societal factors mentioned are: the presence of delinquent peers and problematic relationships with peers.

On the basis of the Dutch literature, the effective preventative *measures* against unauthorized absence have been cataloged. In the first place, measures can be taken that are easy to apply, such as implementing efficient timetables and speaking to the youth about the truant behavior. The Education Council emphasizes the importance of a good relationship between the school and the pupil, the appeal of education and the quality of the supervision that the pupils receive. Additionally the Council has supplied an overview of concrete measures that research has shown to be effective in combating truancy. These measures can be considered as important ingredients for effective interventions. The measures comprise:

- Analysis of the factors underlying the truancy and an approach based this analysis.
- Immediate involvement of the parents in countering the truancy.
- Clear sanctions that are followed up consistently and make use of punishments and rewards.
- Continuous monitoring of persistent truants, preferably by the same person (from the school) and not by different people.
- Timely involvement of the education official in order that joint action can be taken if necessary.

When we look at successful foreign *programs* focusing on truancy, the theory in part mentions the same successful ingredients, such as: involving parents early and holding them responsible for the unauthorized absence, systematic monitoring and a continuum of support and sanctions that are clearly linked to the youth's truant behavior. Additional successful characteristics are: multidisciplinary cooperation between the involved parties, a comprehensive and flexible tailor-made approach, concrete goals for the execution of the program and the performance of the pupils, accurate registration and continuous evaluation, and a good relationship between the mentor and the pupil. The implementation of mentor programs in particular has grown in popularity over recent decades. While some programs are aimed at only the relationship between the mentor and the youth, in other programs this relationship is a component in a wide-ranging program. A few examples of effective non-judicial programs (among others mentor programs) are highlighted. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America is a successful and long-standing mentor program. In the Mentoring

and Tutoring Help program mentoring is coupled with another intervention. The Chronic Truancy Initiative and the Truancy Arbitration Program are primarily system-oriented and attach a high value to involving the family of the youth in the intervention. The TL and SSTG schemes were developed to combat truancy predominantly via monitoring and via improving the management.

The call for effective foreign judicial programs for combating truancy resulted in the description of three examples. Firstly the Truant Recovery Program is discussed, which focuses on firm cooperation between the school and the local police, who immediately confront youths found roaming around outside during school hours and return them to school if they are playing truant. An example of an effective system-orientated intervention in the family, as part of a wide-ranging intervention, is the Truancy Diversion Program. Lastly a description is given of Project START, with the advantage of a well coordinated cooperation between the school, the community and the department of justice. Seeing the differences between the various groups targeted by the interventions, it is difficult to establish which intervention is most effective. The choice for an intervention should preferably be attuned to the specific circumstances of the subgroup targeted. It is apparent that certain elements crop up in many of the studies, also in the studies that sorted the effects but did not describe them any further. Most of the factors were mentioned to be successful earlier, such as: monitoring closely and acting quickly by making good use of registration systems and measures; intensive, well coordinated and compulsory cooperation between the family, the school, the community and the police/department of justice, and supervision of the youth by way of personal mentoring.

The most important conclusions of the study are as follows.

1. The judicial interventions that were researched are not effective enough to combat truancy in pupils. That does not mean that the interventions are not beneficial and do not have an effect. The goals of ROOS, Basta and Parents Present and Youth Probation are broader than just preventing unauthorized absence. They are also aimed at offering youths and parents support with respectively growing up and developing parenting skills. The dropout rate for these programs is low and in interviews the participants are positive about taking part in the program.
2. When the descriptions of the programs and the theory are put side by side an explanation can be found for why the interventions in this study did not work. The elements that are effective in an intervention against unauthorized absence are present to only a small extent in the analyzed interventions. For the most part the interventions are aimed at one 'factor', specifically the youth involved, and there is no intensive cooperation between the family, school, community and police/department of justice. Additionally, often years have already gone by without (effective) preventative interventions being implemented.
3. For a large part the efficacy of the judicial interventions depends on whether the right approach has been taken previously. Only meeting this requirement can ensure that the judicial programs do not have to tackle youth truancy when it is in fact too late. Therefore the improvement of the existing judicial interventions and the development of new judicial interventions should be coordinated centrally. Central coordination should also ensure that the judicial interventions are

compatible with each other with regard to the target group and how demanding they are. The improvement and development of new interventions should implement the elements the theory shows to be effective.