

# TACKLISCO TRUANCE

## A complicated problem that takes a collaborative approach

"I realized

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Raul Nunez Jr.,

Student

BY MICHELLE CARL

hen Raul Nunez Jr.'s parents decided to separate, he felt hopeless and alone. He didn't have anyone to talk to.

So he stopped going to school.

"My dad was at work and I found it really easy to just ditch school and stay at home," the 17-year-old Corcoran High School student says. "When I was going through this, I really didn't have much support. My dad was having the same problem. It was rough."

Raul ditched seven days of school and started falling behind on assignments. His father also received a letter informing him of his son's truancy. Raul and his dad were required to attend a School Attendance Review Board (SARB) hearing.

"At the SARB meeting, they said, 'Look, if you don't go to school your dad could get fined," Raul says. "I realized I needed to get it together. That was the wake-up call."

Raul is just one of the 1.8 million truant students in California.
Children in our state have a right to a free education, and it's a right protected by law. Truancy, defined as three or more unexcused absences during a school year, can be a criminal offense for parents who fail to get their children to school. State Attorney General Kamala Harris recently declared truancy a "crisis" for elementary school students, whose absences can impact their chances for graduating high school.

In Kings and Tulare counties, 29 percent of students are truant, according to the most recent school-year statistics. Several local agencies have come together to combat the problem by creating T.I.P.P. — Truancy

Intervention/Prevention Program for Kings County. T.I.P.P. was formed in 2012 as a collaboration between the Kings County Office of Education, SARB, the District Attorney's office and Kings County Behavioral Health.

Schools, law enforcement and county services all have a stake in solving this complicated issue, says Ahmad Bahrami, program manager for Kings County Behavioral Health.

"[Truancy] is a symptom of something else going on. It's not one particular thing," he

Bahrami says the causes of truancy can be due to behavioral issues with the child, lack of parenting skills, cultural differences or substance abuse.

"It could also be a lack of knowledge on the parent's side, not knowing it's the law," Bahrami says. "They think it's not a big deal if they know [their child] is cutting school.""

But the costs of truancy are a big deal — and they're a big deal starting at an early age. First

graders with nine or more absences are twice as likely to drop out of high school.

Students who miss school miss out on so much more than academics. Schools provide free- and reduced-price meals, diagnose learning disabilities, address hearing, vision and speech problems, and provide social interaction with peers and teachers.

"When they're not at school, they're not getting that," Bahrami says.

The costs extend to society at large.

Juvenile crimes committed by dropouts cost California \$1.1 billion per year, according to the California Dropout Research Project. High school dropouts are also 2 1/2

## What Do You Know About Truancy?

#### TAKE THIS QUIZ!



- A. When a student is sent to the principal's office.
- B. When a student is absent or tardy by 30 minutes or more without a valid excuse.
- C. When a student doesn't turn in his/her homework.

#### 2. True or false:

Attending school is legally required in California.

- 3. What is SARB?
- A. Scholastic Absence Reduction Bulletin
- B. School Attendance Review Board
- C. Students Are Really Bored
- 4. How many truant students are there in California annually?

A. 1.8 million B. 3.2 million

C. **750,000** 

#### 5. True or false:

Truancy in high school is more harmful to student achievement than truancy in elementary school.

6. What grade level has the highest truancy rate?

A. 12th grade B. 9th grade

C. kindergarten

#### ANSWER KEY

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4. P. A. S. Ealse. Elementary 5. False. Elementary school lays the achoon lays the at higher grades.

2. True. All children ages
6 to 18 are guaranteed
the right to a free
education by law.
8.8

times more likely to be on welfare than their peers who graduated, according to the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education.

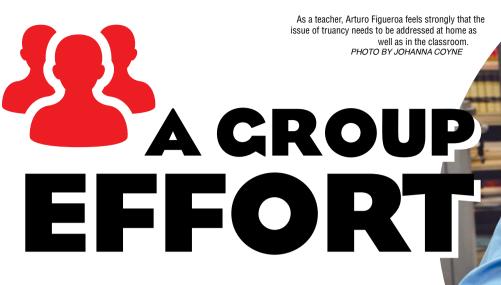
Bahrami says T.I.P.P. has connected parents and their children to resources that helped them address the root causes of truancy. In just 1 1/2 school years, 71 families have been linked to counseling, substance abuse treatment, parenting workshops and other resources through T.I.P.P.

For Raul, his intervention with the SARB hearing helped bring his family's communication issue to light.

"They noticed that I wasn't a bad kid, and said, 'You can get your stuff together.' I talked to my dad, and I got my things together," he says. "My dad was there for me. We're really close. Just because of the problems I was going through, it made me forget that we could communicate."

Meredith J. Graham contributed to this report.

COVER PHOTO BY JOHANNA COYNE



Longtime teachers say academic success means being in class

BY MEREDITH J. GRAHAM

According to Diana Ward and Arturo Figueroa, there are a few key ingredients to a student's success: parental involvement, an understanding of requirements and, of course, showing up.

The local teachers say that when a student misses school, it will affect his or her attendance record, but it can also make it difficult to catch up on assignments, do well on tests and even graduate. Beyond the classroom, truancy can lead to drug or alcohol abuse, criminal activity and gang involvement.

Ward, a former teacher in the Porterville Unified School District who now oversees the

more than 2,000 migrant students there, remembers one situation vividly, of a high school student whose parents worked in the fields all day. Joe (not his real name) was left in charge of eight siblings and had poor attendance after finding "family" in a local gang.

"He had a 1.5 [GPA] in high school. He had no chance at graduating," Ward says.

Concerned, she reached out to a counselor, who intervened and helped Joe escape the gang.

"We had to work really hard to get him caught up," she recalls. "It took the work of a lot of good-hearted people, but Joe is a sophomore in college now."

Ward believes the key to ensuring students aren't truant is in educating parents. Ward took it upon herself to work with Joe's parents to instill in them the understanding that, "You may be surviving [working in the fields], but your family is dying."

Arturo Figueroa shares many of Ward's views on education. Since moving to Tulare County six years ago, he has made it his mission to not only educate local teens at University Preparatory High School, but also to teach their parents how to navigate the system. Figueroa teaches classes for Spanish-speaking parents so they know what is expected of their child, and also what is expected of them as parents.

Many of the family issues teachers see are simple cultural differences. For example, in

Mexico, the schools bear the responsibility of educating children; in the United States, parents are expected to participate, Figueroa says.

"If I can't connect
with parents, then it's
hard for me to connect
with the students,"
Ward adds. "That
means speaking their
language, understanding
their culture."

In addition, many parents lack the skills — for example, to read transcripts or understand graduation requirements — necessary

to help their kids succeed, which is the main reason Figueroa started teaching classes at the Parent Institute for Quality Education.

"By knowing that their student has guidelines that they need to meet, parents are able to see that every single school day counts," Figueroa says.





If a child is being bullied at school, it can make all the difference in whether he or she enjoys getting up each morning and heading to class. In fact, statistics show that bullying is the cause of one-third of truancies in the United States.

Enter Sprigeo, a webbased anonymous reporting system for bullying.

Four years ago, Debbie Portillo decided to pilot Sprigeo for Cherry Avenue Middle School. This school year, it's available for free to every school in Kings and Tulare counties, though not all campuses have signed up at this time.

"Almost every report I've gotten has been an incident

I did not already know about," says Portillo, who now uses Sprigeo at Garden Elementary, where she is principal.

It works like this: A student logs on to Sprigeo. com and clicks on, "Send a report." A report sheet opens and the student fills it out, hits "Submit," and it's sent to the school. From there, school officials like Portillo intervene to solve the problem.

"When you don't talk about it, that's when the bully wins,"
Portillo
says.

Be safe



## WORKSHOPS HELP PARENTS AT HOME

Life Steps class addresses underlying causes of truancy

BY MEREDITH J. GRAHAM

hen Blanca Alvarez, LMFT, first came up with the concept for Life Steps, she envisioned a program that would take a proactive approach to helping parents who might be struggling at home. Now, more than a year later, that program is an integral part of Kings County's fight to end truancy.

"The goal of the program is to service as many parents in the community as possible and be able to support them by teaching them information, providing skills and, more than anything, linking them to services that they might need outside of this class," says Alvarez, who teaches the one-day course offered through Kings County Behavioral Health.

Parents are often required by the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) to attend Life Steps as a way to tackle underlying causes of truancy. Sometimes they need help setting boundaries at home, or disciplining their children, and other times they need counseling for their own problems, Alvarez says.

She describes a recent class in which she had a couple enrolled. With eight children at home, one of their daughters, a teenager, was acting out and either not going to school at all or showing up late.

"Initially, my contact with them was a little rough," Alvarez says. "They seemed guarded, and uneasy about why they needed to come to this class."

Their uneasiness is not unusual, she says. Many parents struggle to admit that they have problems at home or that they might need help handling their children. Some, even though they are ordered to attend the class by SARB, do not show up because they are embarrassed, she says.

"I really just explain to the parents that this class doesn't reflect negatively on them as parents — it's more to teach and support their parenting style," says Alvarez, who offers the course in both English and Spanish.

After sitting down with the couple and getting to know their situation a little better, Alvarez says she felt they were able to let their guard down and open up.

"It was a behavioral issue for these parents, who were struggling with a defiant child," she says. "One of the interventions we worked on was practicing tough love, changing how they set out limits and consequences. The parents didn't have any rules at home. There weren't a lot of consequences."

One of the goals of Life
Steps is to teach parents
how to manage their kids'
behavior using different
parenting techniques. But
every situation is different,
Alvarez says. She's quick to point
out, too, that it's a team effort and
Life Steps is most effective when
combined with other services offered by the

Truancy Intervention and Prevention Program.

"We want to support the parents in this community and provide them with quality service that is as effective as possible," she says.

"I really just explain to the parents that this class doesn't reflect negatively on them as parents; it's more to teach and support their parenting style."

Blanca Alvarez, Life Steps instructor

#### their child they need problems

Blanca Alvarez, LMFT, teaches Life Steps to both English- and

PHOTO BY JACQUES GROSS

Spanish-speaking parents of truant

### SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

There are a variety of reasons why kids don't show up for school. Sometimes they're truly sick, but other times truancy is an indication of an underlying problem such as:

- » Bullying
- » Unhappiness or violence at home
- » An undiagnosed learning disability
- » Drug or gang involvement
- $^{\mathsf{w}}$  Depression

SAYE A LIFE. KEEP A KID IN SCHOOL.

Kings County understands that these underlying issues need to be addressed in order to decrease truancy rates. That's why in 2012 it established the Truancy Intervention/Prevention Program (T.I.P.P.), which is a collaborative effort among several agencies to provide support for parents and youth to address these issues and help solve them.

#### Here are a few ways T.I.P.P. can help:

Families can get involved in the Life Steps course, which focuses on parenting styles, discipline, behavior management and other issues.

- » Parents and students can get referrals for therapy.
- » Services are offered in English and Spanish.



#### Process addresses the root of the truancy problem

#### BY MIKE BLOUNT

"If we don't

keep kids in school, they will get behind and

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**Greg Strickland**,

**Kings County District Attorney** 

n California, every child between the ages of 6 and 18 is required to attend public school full time. When a student becomes truant, there are several steps school officials can take to address the problem. But for parents who don't comply with the law, Kings County District Attorney Greg Strickland serves as a last resort.

Strickland has prosecuted the parents of truant students who don't respond to repeated interventions because he has an obligation to give kids the best chance in life. Keeping a kid in school could mean the difference between a successful future and a much more difficult one. Statistically, high school dropouts are three times more likely to go to jail or prison. According to a report by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, keeping kids in school results in 500 fewer homicides and 20,000 fewer assaults a year.

"Dropout statistics show that dropouts are more likely to commit crime and go on welfare, and the California taxpayer picks up the bill," Strickland says. "The math is pretty simple. If we don't keep kids in school, they will get behind and not be able to compete in life. We're not just helping the individual, we're helping society as well."

Strickland says that getting to the root of the truancy problem starts with getting the parents in the picture. Kings County Truancy Officer Brian Gonzales will

attempt to visit the student's home to make contact with the parents if reaching them via telephone or mail is unsuccessful. Once the parent is contacted, they will have to sign an agreement stating they will make sure their kid gets to school every day. If the truancy continues, the parents will then be referred to a School Attendance Review Board (SARB).

Because habitual truancy often is a symptom of another problem inside the home — drug or alcohol addiction or parents who just are not involved — a local or county SARB can connect parents and students to community resources. Strickland says SARB hearings are a great intervention tool because parents and students have an opportunity to address issues that may be causing the truancy, resulting in a positive impact on the whole family. Resolving truancy at a local

level is ideal, and generally, it is a gradual process. But for more egregious cases of truancy, there are much stiffer penalties, including fines up to \$2,500 and jail time up to a year. These extreme cases get sent directly to Strickland to review and take action.

"The most important aspect to kids getting to school is the parents," Strickland says. "What we have is an incentive program to get the parents to get the kids to school, and that's the main goal. We don't want to send the parents to jail. We don't want to punish anyone, but we will if that's what it takes."

#### Did You Know?

In California, every child between the ages of 6 and 18 is required to attend public school full time, unless subject to exemption. It's the law. Here are some other facts about California's truancy law that you might not know:



» Truancy is defined as being absent without a valid legal excuse



» Being tardy 30 minutes or more to school counts as a truancy.



» Students are deemed a habitual truant after they have five or more unexcused absences and/or tardies over 30 minutes and the school has made an effort to reach out to the parents or legal guardians and the truancy is not resolved.



» After the third truancy, the student and parents can be referred to the **School Attendance Review Board** (**SARB**), a multi-agency board that reviews each truancy case and connects families with services in exchange for a plan for improved attendance.



» A student is deemed a **chronic truant** when they have been absent from school without a valid excuse 10 percent or more of school days within a school year.



» Once a student is deemed a habitual truant and all other intervention strategies have failed, the SARB board can refer a case to the district attorney for prosecution of an infraction that can lead to fines and/or jail time.



» If found guilty of an infraction or misdemeanor, parents or legal guardians can be fined up to \$400 for the first infraction, up to \$1,000 for the second and up to \$2,500 for the third.



» Parents or legal guardians referred to the DA by SARB for a fourth time or for their child's chronic truancy can be charged with a misdemeanor and be sentenced up to one year in jail and/or a \$2,500 fine.

## MEET TRUANT OFFICER BRIAN CONZALES

Help Save a Child's Life

Truancy is a multifaceted issue that can be addressed through a collaborative approach between families, schools, law enforcement and community agencies. Be part of the solution by helping to keep children in school.

#### Find resources

**211** — In Kings or Tulare counties, call the information line to connect with resources that could alleviate truancy, such as substance abuse treatment, and behavioral and mental health services.

LIFE STEPS (KINGS COUNTY) — For enrollment in the Life Steps family skills program, call 559-852-2415.

**SPRIGEO** — Many local schools in Kings and Tulare counties promote this website as an anonymous way to report bullying and other safety concerns that may lead to truancy. Visit www.sprigeo.com to make a report.

#### **Educate yourself**

"IN SCHOOL + ON TRACK" — Read California Attorney General Kamala D. Harris' report on the state's elementary school truancy crisis, at www.oag.ca.gov/truancy.

#### **BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS**

 Learn about the California Department of Education's strategies to keep students in school while holding them accountable for their behavior at www.cde.ca.gov/LS/ss/se/behaviorialintervention.asp.

This publication is a collaboration with:













BY MIKE BLOUNT

#### : How did you become a Truant

A: After I graduated with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, I became a reserve police officer in Lemoore. Through that position I was approached by the Kings County Probation Department to be a Truant Officer for the Kings County Office of Education. I decided to give it a shot, but I didn't realize the importance of the job until I actually got into the position. When I started in August 2000, there were major truancy issues in Kings County. I began making constant home visits, making a lot of phone calls and anything else I could do to make parents aware of the issue.

#### • What are some of the issues surrounding truancy?

A: I came into this position from a good family background, so I wasn't familiar with some of the family issues that these kids face — divorces, domestic violence, drug abuse in the home, adultery, mental illness, suicide, cultural barriers,

"Once I began digging into why they were missing school, I would be exposed to these issues and it opened my eyes."

Brian Gonzales, Kings County Truant Officer language barriers. Once I began digging into why they were missing school, I would be exposed to these issues and it opened my eyes. I was helping them address issues that no one else was addressing. I was doing a service to the public. I became a hub of information for these families to get help for the issues they were dealing with and get the students back in school.

Truant Officer for the Kings County Office of Education for 14 years

#### **Q:** What are some of the tactics you use to reduce truancy?

A: I work directly with the students and their parents to resolve the issue. Truancy is a symptom of something else happening in the home. A lot of times when I confront the student, they tell me exactly what is going on. They just may not know how to get help or their parents have no idea because they are not involved in their lives. Sometimes, I have to dig. Some kids are just not used to expressing themselves to their parents, so just showing even a little bit of concern really makes them comfortable enough to talk. Parents and students have to attend [School Attendance Review Board] hearings by law when they are referred, and there are several community resources there that can get them help so the healing can begin.

#### • What is an average day like for you?

A: When I first started, it was pretty common for me to drive around and see kids skipping school. Sometimes, they would run from me and I'd have to chase them down, or in some instances I would just take them to school. But over time my position has become more proactive. I spend less time patrolling the streets and more time on the phone calling and pounding on doors to get in touch with the parents. Some migrant families in the community are not always aware that education is compulsory here in California, and the student may be three weeks absent because the family took a trip to Mexico. When they get back, they have a SARB hearing pending and they don't know why. I have to make them aware of the laws.