

Truancy and Education

by Thomas C. Reeves

Wisconsin Superintendent of School Elizabeth Burmaster recently heaped praise on Racine County for employing the police and courts to decrease the area's high truancy rate. The results have been stunning: a drop in the truancy rate from 21.7% to 9% in two years. The wisdom of such a policy, however, remains debatable.

In Racine, which has a large minority population, truancy (defined as being absent without excuse five or more times per semester) has long been rampant. It remains virtually out of control in nearby Milwaukee. But Racine school officials have backed a new program that sends two full-time police officers after truants, arresting them and issuing tickets. Additional charges, such as possession of tobacco, are often discovered in the course of searching those arrested. Citations are also issued to those over 18 who "contribute" to truancy. Between February and September of this year, 945 truancy tickets were issued to first offenders, and the number was expected to at least double by the end of the school year.

Both the juvenile and municipal courts handle offenders, and judges have begun to suspend drivers' licenses of teens who fail to pay their truancy fines. Officials have noticed a drop in loitering and the rate of daytime burglaries under the new "get-tough" policy.

Three 16-year-old truants, summoned to a conference of state and local officials, said they were bored by school and often preferred to spend their days getting high or drunk. What could keep them in school? The three listed "financial incentives," more interesting teachers with "better field trips" and opportunities for "real world" learning.

When I was in school in the early 1950s, the school district permitted students to leave school after completion of the ninth grade. No one was required to attend high school, although almost everyone did. In short, those who would not or could not succeed in the classroom were free to move on. The young people were equipped with the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and were assumed to be responsible for themselves. School officials, of course, consulted with parents before final decisions were made.

This policy of freedom still seems to me to be a sensible approach. Pursuing, arresting, fining, and forcing young people 16 years of age and older back into the schoolroom, which they will continue to hate and no doubt disrupt, inevitably contributes to lower academic standards. And the expansion of police power in the pursuit of truants raises serious civil liberties questions. Theoretically, the police can be employed to enforce all sorts of "good" causes, but there must be limits on this authority. By all means arrest burglars. But should absence from school actually be a crime?

We also need to ask if the current policy actually helps those penalized for skipping school. We lack data on this crucial point. How many of those forced back into class graduate? Or actually learn anything? We should also ask a deeper question: Are all people capable of successfully achieving a meaningful high school education? If we pretend that all intellectual abilities are the same, the answer is “yes.” But why should we pretend?

Of course the 16-year-old truants, cited above, were bored. Education is excruciatingly dull to those who cannot grasp it. And if attitude, rather than intellect, is the problem, we can surely do better than sick the police on these young people, locking them into classrooms they detest.

The same principle should apply to higher education. In the late 1980s, I felt extraordinarily guilty for requiring class attendance in my college classroom. Teaching in an open admissions institution, I discovered that unless coerced, a third of the class would skip class on any given day. And they would fail. To my surprise, students liked required attendance, believing that attendance alone would get them successfully through the course. They had picked up this idea, of course, in high school. So people would show up, stare at the ceiling, draw pictures, and fall asleep in the course of my lectures. But since they were present, they expected to receive a passing grade.

I think now that serious education cannot be forced on anyone, and that only a minority of people anywhere are capable of benefiting from knowledge that gets to the heart of the greatest issues facing the globe and the human race. We should all be encouraged to travel along the educational road as far as we can. But it should be up to the individual, once armed with the basic rudiments of knowledge, to decide when to exit. Without fear of the police.