

## The current state of truancy reduction programs and opportunities for enhancement in Los Angeles County



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### ABSTRACT

School truancy, defined as any intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from school, influences, and is influenced by, multiple academic, health, and social factors. This project sought to describe how truancy-reduction systems are operating in Los Angeles County and identify the highest priority policy and program options to effectively address truancy. The Department of Public Health convened an expert panel and collected data through literature review, key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Results describe the interconnected players that are working to address truancy. Recommendations focus on increasing school-based efforts, identifying innovative ways to address students' and families' physical and mental health needs, enhancing coordination across partners and elevating their commitment, expanding evidence-based programs, and enhancing data collection efforts to better identify additional effective strategies. Other jurisdictions can build off our prioritization framework to describe the current state of their systems and identify promising programs to augment system functioning.

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### 1. Introduction

School truancy, any intentional unauthorized or illegal absence from school, is a significant and persistent problem in the United States. School truancy differs from chronic absenteeism, which includes missing extended amount of school for any reason (including excused and

unexcused absences). School truancy is common among older age youth. In 2009, 11% of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 reported skipping school in the past 30 days (Vaughn, Raynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). However, truancy also impacts younger students. In the 2011–2012 school-year, 691,470 California elementary school children, or 1 out of every 5 elementary school students, met California's definition for being truant (missing 3 or more days of school without a valid excuse) (California Department of Education, 2014).

School truancy is a problem that influences, and is influenced by, multiple academic, health, and social factors. Students who are absent

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from school are more likely to perform poorly on standardized tests, receive lower grades, and drop out of school (Kobrin, 2009; Maynard, Salas-Write, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). Poor attendance and dropping out of school are associated with higher rates of involvement in violence and crime, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and poor mental health (Claes, Hooghe, & Reeskens, 2009; Kearney, 2008a). Likewise, high school dropouts have poorer long-term health and social outcomes; they are more likely to be unemployed, twice as likely to live in poverty, and have higher rates of chronic disease (Stuit & Springer, 2010). Truancy and drop-out also impact communities as a whole, for example, through lower tax revenues, higher crime rates, and greater spending on public assistance and health care (Stuit & Springer, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Truancy is caused by a complex web of interrelated factors. It is influenced by environmental issues, including community and home situations (e.g., poverty, homelessness, availability of transportation) as well as school structure and climate (e.g., educational style and curriculum, safety and disciplinary procedures). Relationships and level of support from parents, teachers and other students also play a role. Finally, individual characteristics such as students' level of engagement with learning, academic performance, risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse), and physical (e.g., asthma, dental diseases) and mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety) influence truancy (Freudenberg & Reglis, 2007; Kearney, 2008a; Maynard et al., 2012).

The multi-faceted nature of school truancy has led to involvement from a variety of multidisciplinary partners, including schools, social service agencies, law enforcement, juvenile courts, and health. Over the past three decades, multiple school, community, and legal interventions have been developed and tested. A recent systematic review by Maynard and colleagues found a significant, but small effect size, for existing court-, school-, and community-based programs to reduce truancy. They found the literature on truancy to be “voluminous and disparate” and that, overall, there was limited evidence of the effectiveness of truancy interventions (Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2013). Moreover, although data suggest that truancy in elementary and middle schools has a long term impact on school attendance patterns (Schoeneberger, 2012), relatively few interventions for younger age groups have been tested (McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004).

In California, truancy issues have received increased attention, prompting increases in state-wide legislative activity and changes to school funding formulas (Harris, 2013). Despite increased attention and activity at the state level, there has been a limited focus on understanding current system operations and defining concrete priorities and actionable recommendations at the local level. Since efforts to reduce truancy are ultimately dependent on responses from local actors, this represents a critical need.

The purpose of this article is to describe how truancy-reduction systems are operating and interacting in Los Angeles County (LAC) and to identify highest priority program and policy options to effectively address truancy in this diverse, populous region of the United States. This article focuses on describing the system from an “insider”

(within-the system) perspective, in an effort to increase transparency and lay the groundwork for meaningful dialogue with external partners. This multi-faceted case study aims to provide concrete guidance for key stakeholders and agencies in the frontline of youth truancy prevention and reduction in LAC. In addition, the process used to describe system functioning and prioritize truancy-reduction strategies can serve as a model to critically evaluate these systems in other jurisdictions.

## 2. Methods

In recent years, there has been an increased effort to enhance cross-sector collaboration to address truancy in LAC; therefore, we begin with a brief overview of these efforts. We then describe data collected for this study in order to help achieve our goal of describing current system functioning and opportunities for enhancement.

### 2.1. Context in Los Angeles County and formation of an expert panel

In 2010, the LAC Education Coordinating Committee (ECC) convened the LAC School Attendance Task Force (SATF) to identify promising approaches to reduce truancy. The SATF brings together key stakeholders, including representatives from school districts, law enforcement, probation, courts, and community and youth-serving organizations. In its 2012 report, the SATF synthesized current research and recommended specific system changes at the school, juvenile justice, and community levels (Los Angeles County School Attendance Task Force, 2012). Since release of this report, several key reforms have been implemented, the majority of which have focused on changing law enforcement citation and processing protocols for youth in violation of daytime curfew laws, spurred, in part by the closure of the County's Informal Juvenile and Traffic Courts (Los Angeles Police Department, 2010, 2011). For example, instead of issuing fines to youth who are cited, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) partnered with the City of Los Angeles to enhance the capacity of 13 YouthSource centers to provide academic and career services to youth who received citations. While these changes represent major steps toward a more restorative system, only a subset of youth with truancy problems are actually cited for daytime curfew violation, highlighting the need for additional focus on broader, systems-level approaches.

In order to build on this momentum, the LAC Department of Public Health (DPH) convened an expert panel workgroup in the spring of 2014 with the goal of “identifying opportunities to strengthen systems to reduce truancy in LAC.” The expert panel, consisted of members from all of the key LAC systems involved in addressing truancy including schools (Los Angeles County Office of Education [LACOE]), courts (LAC District Attorney, Los Angeles City Attorney), social services (LAC Department of Mental Health, LAC Department of Children and Family Services [DCFS]), and law enforcement (LAUSD School Police, LAC Department of Probation). The expert panel met four times over the course of six months to provide and review data, develop and prioritize recommendations, and draft this publication (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
School Attendance Task Force Expert Panel meeting process: scope of each meeting and inputs, Los Angeles County, 2014.

Meeting	Scope	Inputs
March, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expert panel roles and responsibilities, products, timeline</li> <li>• Discussion of opportunities and challenges and preliminary identification of recommendations</li> <li>• Discussion of current state of truancy reduction systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themes from key informant interviews of expert panel members</li> <li>• Draft of process map depicting current state of truancy reduction systems</li> </ul>
May, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of programmatic, focus group, and survey data collected</li> <li>• Development of final draft list of recommendations</li> <li>• Discussion of process for prioritizing recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesis of programmatic data of truancy-reduction efforts</li> <li>• Themes from focus groups with school attendance administrators</li> <li>• Results from survey of school-based mental health providers</li> </ul>
June, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of results of prioritization process and finalization of recommendations</li> <li>• Identification of key actions for each prioritized recommendation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results of Delphi process to prioritize recommendations</li> </ul>
August, 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and feedback on draft manuscript</li> <li>• Discussion of dissemination and next steps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Draft manuscript</li> </ul>

## 2.2. Data collection procedures

### 2.2.1. Key informant interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with each of the 10 members of the expert panel prior to the first full group meeting as well as with 2 additional experts (a school-based probation officer and school-based mental health coordinator). Participation was solicited via email and telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, which included topics in 3 domains: current efforts to reduce truancy (e.g., programs, policies, staffing), challenges with current efforts (e.g., resources, linkages with partners), and opportunities to reduce truancy in LAC. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min. We performed a content analysis of the detailed notes taken during the conversation to identify common themes related to challenges and opportunities and to develop a visual (process map) representing the current state of truancy-reduction efforts. Both products were shared and discussed during the first full group meeting.

### 2.2.2. Review of programmatic data

Each expert panel member was asked to provide existing documentation on the reach, impacts, and costs of their agency's truancy reduction efforts, including administrative data, internal reports, and peer-reviewed publications. In addition, we conducted a review of published and gray literature to identify evidence-based interventions (e.g., policies, programs) to reduce truancy. Efforts were made to identify studies from several disciplines (e.g., psychology, criminal justice, social work, education). Primary sources included Google Scholar, PubMed and ERIC databases as well relevant agency websites, including the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Institute of Education Sciences. Studies that were peer-reviewed, from the United States, published after 1993, and described an intervention that could be implemented by county department, school, or community-based organization were prioritized. The synthesis was shared with the expert panel during the second full group meeting.

### 2.2.3. Focus groups and surveys with school-based staff

During the first full group meeting, the expert panel identified the need to obtain input and perspectives from two key groups that make up the front line staff in the effort to prevent and reduce truancy: school attendance administrators and school-based mental health providers. Based on logistical considerations, the team decided to facilitate in-person focus groups with the school administrators and conduct a web-based survey of school-based mental health providers.

Participants for focus groups were solicited during a brief announcement made at a regularly scheduled county-wide meeting facilitated by LACOE. Participants were told that the purpose of the group was to share their successes and challenges in addressing truancy in order to help inform development of policy and program recommendations. Seven of approximately 50 meeting attendees provided their contact information. Two focus groups were scheduled based on availability and geographic location of those interested and additional districts (in areas neighboring the scheduled location) were recruited via email and phone. Four administrators (e.g., Child Welfare Coordinator, Student Support Services Director) from 4 districts participated in the first group; a different 4 administrators from four different districts participated in the second focus group. Focus groups were facilitated by a representative from DPH, using the following 4 scripted open-ended questions: 1) What are the major strategies that you are implementing to identify and address school truancy?, 2) Overall, how effective is your system of identifying and addressing truancy?, 3) What are some barriers and challenges to reducing truancy?, and 4) Where are there the biggest opportunities to enhance your efforts? Detailed notes were taken during the focus group and sent to participants via email for verification and input. Two team members (present during the groups) conducted a content analysis of the field notes to identify challenges and opportunities for policy and program changes. After independent

review, the two team members met to develop a consolidated list of themes. Results from the first focus group helped inform development of targeted probes for the second group. After the second group, all team members agreed that saturation of content had been reached.

Participants for the web-based survey were recruited via email by the Department of Mental Health through their regionalized network of school-based mental health coordinators. The recruitment email described the work of the expert panel and the purpose of the survey as soliciting input about the "integration of mental health services in the school with combating truancy" in order to help inform policy and program recommendations. In an effort to obtain a wide range of opinions, multiple providers from each site were allowed to complete the survey. The anonymous survey, estimated to take 10 min, included 18 closed and 4 open-ended questions focusing on services provided, level of involvement of mental health providers in school-based efforts to improve attendance, and opportunities to strengthen and enhance such efforts. One hundred and three representatives from 65 providers (agencies or organizations) responded to the survey during a three-week period, for a response rate of 37%. Most respondents identified as a program director/manager (63%) or a marriage family therapist or licensed social worker (32%). The most common delivery model was services provided at the school site (69%), as opposed to services provided through a school-based health center (14%) or school-linked (off site) provider (6%). Frequencies were calculated for each closed-ended question and themes (related to challenges and opportunities) were developed through content analysis of open-ended questions. The results of both the focus groups and the survey were shared with the expert panel during the second meeting.

## 2.3. Recommendation development and prioritization

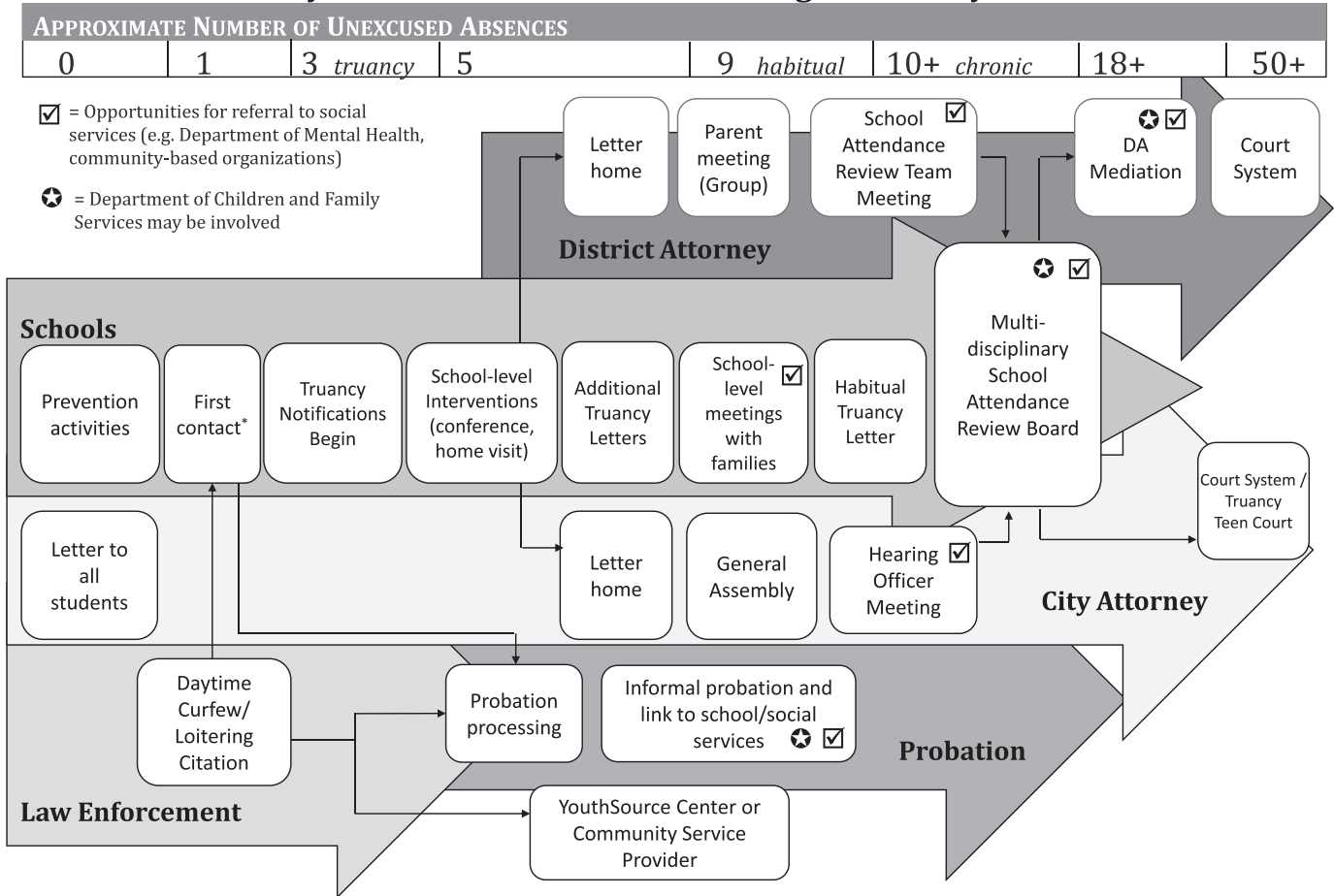
Development of the recommendations was conducted during the first three meetings of the expert panel (Table 1). Recommendations were identified during the first meeting based on discussion of the current state of truancy reduction systems in LAC and refined during the second meeting based on review of programmatic data and results from the focus groups and survey. The Delphi Technique was used to prioritize 10 identified recommendations after the second meeting (Yousuf, 2007). All experts were sent an online survey in which they were asked to rate each of the recommendations according to their level of importance and feasibility on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high). Importance was described as the extent to which the recommendation would improve school attendance for a large portion of youth in LAC, while feasibility was described as the extent to which funding/resources could be made available and decision makers would be open to implementing the recommendation. Experts were asked to provide rationale for their ratings. Aggregate results of the online survey were discussed during the third in-person meeting of the expert panel. After the meeting, experts were asked to complete a paper and pencil version of the same survey to provide their final rankings. For each round of rankings, average importance and feasibility rankings were weighted to equally represent each agency that participated in the process.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Process map describing the truancy intervention process

Schools, mental health and social services agencies, the district and city attorney, law enforcement, and probation each implement policies and programs aimed at preventing and reducing truancy. As depicted in Fig. 1, different agencies implement tiered responses to truancy based (in part) on the number of unexcused absences (e.g., universal prevention measures, increasing consequences as absences increase). The following sections synthesize programmatic data and results of key informant interviews, focus groups, and surveys to describe the role that

## Truancy Intervention Process in Los Angeles County



\*Early identification begins by the schools first contact with parents by phone calls, conferences and/or home visits, depending on district policy.

Fig. 1. Government agencies involved in preventing and reducing truancy in Los Angeles County, 2014.

each partner plays in the truancy intervention system as well as challenges and opportunities for enhancement.

### 3.1.1. Schools

Schools implement a variety of prevention and intervention strategies following a tiered intervention model promulgated by LACOE. Truancy prevention strategies include “back-to-school” campaigns, attendance recognition and incentive programs, parent engagement, attendance monitoring, and early identification of students in need of health and social services. When students begin to demonstrate irregular attendance, schools initiate contact with parents through phone calls, parent conferences or home visits (Fig. 1). After repeated unexcused absences, schools send a series of truancy notification letters to parents (California Education Code Sections 48260.5, 48261, 48262) and schedule a site-level intervention meeting if school attendance does not improve. In 2012–2013, LAC schools documented 21,103 truancy cases that required school-based interventions, such as letters/phone calls home, parent conferences, school-level team meetings, and health and social service referrals. The majority of these cases (83%) were resolved through school-based efforts (Los Angeles County Office of Education, 2014). Schools referred the remaining 17% (3606) of cases to a local School Attendance Review Board (SARB), in which a multidisciplinary panel of school officials as well as governmental and community agencies attempt to identify and address the root causes of attendance problems. According to California law, SARBs may include a parent and a representative of school districts, probation department, welfare department, superintendent of schools, law enforcement agencies,

community-based youth service agencies, school guidance personnel, child welfare and attendance personnel, and physical or mental health personnel (California Education Code Section 48321(b)(1)). SARB panels make recommendations and referrals and students sign an agreement to comply with the advised steps to improve attendance. In 2013, about half of the SARB cases (51%; 1870 cases) showed improved attendance (Los Angeles County Office of Education, 2014).

Results of focus groups with school administrators underscore the centrality of school-based interventions. Because attendance patterns often are established at young ages, many administrators described intervention efforts for kindergarten and first graders as more effective than those focusing on older students. Additionally, early response systems that track and monitor attendance on a daily basis have been successful in creating a “culture of attendance.” Schools have found that personally connecting with parents and families (e.g., through phone calls and home visits) can help identify and address the root causes of truancy. One frequently mentioned root cause was mental and physical health problems. Focus group participants reported an increase in students with unmet health needs and a lack of health and social services for students and their parents. Some schools reported independently leveraging community resources through partnerships with local universities and non-profit organizations; however, many felt that demand for services was greater than the supply. School administrators viewed the SARB process as a highly valued mechanism to address truancy when all school efforts had been exhausted and more serious consequences were needed. Focus groups recommended

ensuring that appropriate agency representatives are able to participate in a consistent manner.

Overall, both focus group participants and key informants reported many challenges with funding for school-based efforts, including SARBs as an unfunded state mandate and a decrease in child welfare and attendance workers due to school budget cuts. Effective efforts, such as positive contact with families, can be resource demanding, as they require trained personnel with flexibility to reach families outside of normal work hours. Both groups mentioned recent revisions in school funding formulas, as an opportunity to leverage additional resources. Local Control Funding Formulas (LCFF), which was approved by the California governor in July 2013 (California Assembly Bill 97), restructures the ways in which schools receive funding, beginning in the 2014–2015 school year. Under the new funding system, revenue limits and state categorical programs are eliminated; instead, local school districts will receive funding based on the demographic profile of students they serve. School districts receive additional funding to support specific populations, including low-income families, English learners and foster youth. Each school district is required to develop a Local Control Action Plan (LCAP), specifying metrics and strategies to align its planning and budgeting with eight priority areas, including reducing chronic absenteeism (California Department of Education, 2013). While LCFF does not specifically address truancy, truancy is often a large component of chronic absenteeism; thus, many districts can use LCFF to address both issues. Key informants indicated that attendance metrics in LCAPs could be used to monitor effectiveness of various truancy prevention and intervention programs, providing an opportunity to establish evidence-based best practices in the future.

### 3.1.2. School-based mental health services

During the 2013–2014 school year, the Department of Mental Health oversaw the operation of more than 60 legal entities that provide school based mental health services to approximately 1500 school sites in LAC. The most common types of delivery sites include an individual provider traveling to deliver services at the school site, a designated center at the school site, and an offsite site center with linkages to the school. In addition, as part of a LAC Board of Supervisors directive, 16 Integrated School Health Centers have been established on school campuses to facilitate the integration of behavioral health services and County-funded primary care services; the Centers can provide services to children, youth, adults and older adults. The most common points at which students are referred to services include during school-level team meetings, SARBs, and meetings with the District or City Attorney (Fig. 1). Additionally, the Department of Probation refers students to mental health services as part of its truancy citation diversion program.

Results of the survey of school-based mental health providers suggest that there are additional opportunities for better integrating mental health services into efforts to reduce truancy and chronic absenteeism. Only 57% of service providers strongly or somewhat agreed that mental health was integrated with school functions in general and only 33% agreed that mental health was integrated with efforts to improve school attendance. The three most frequently identified ways to enhance integration of mental health services, included a) training for school administrators on the importance of mental health and ways to identify students who could benefit from referrals, b) school-based campaigns to increase awareness of mental health needs and reduce stigma, and c) improved access to physical space on campus to deliver mental health services to students. In order to meet the needs of truant students, mental health providers suggested focusing on prevention and early intervention efforts and involving parents and families as a key early step to manage truancy. However, this can be challenging due to reluctance by students and parents to accept treatment referrals.

### 3.1.3. Department of child and family services

DCFS interfaces with the truancy process when families with an open DCFS case are referred to SARB, at which point DCFS representatives

participate in SARB – many DCFS representatives serve on local SARBs on a regular basis – not just for open cases (Fig. 1). Data from 2012–2013 for one large school district show that 4% of families in SARB had open DCFS cases, 25% had a history of an open case, and 70% had a history of a referral to DCFS. DCFS receives many requests from schools and districts for information concerning DCFS-connected students. Currently, youth cannot be referred to DCFS for truancy. There was disagreement among key informants about the value of changing these protocols. While some wanted to hold parents legally responsible for sending children to school, others felt that drawing families into the DCFS system had the possibility to create hindrances for many families, especially when community-based services to help address root causes of truancy are lacking (i.e., setting families up to fail to meet mandated requirements).

### 3.1.4. District Attorney

The District Attorney leads the Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) program which works with elementary schools to address truancy through an early intervention strategy. The District Attorney becomes involved when schools identify students with excessive absences, who are at risk of becoming habitually truant (defined as three or more unexcused absences) or chronically truant (defined as 10 or more unexcused absences) (Fig. 1). Parents and guardians are invited to a general assembly meeting to learn about their legal responsibilities and the importance of school attendance. In 2012–2013, the District Attorney contacted 3434 students; 39% attended one-on-one meetings with the parents and a District Attorney representative. When the parent and personal meetings are not effective, ACT personnel attend SARB to address the truancy. If necessary, ACT personnel ultimately refer the case for misdemeanor prosecution of the parent (Fig. 1); only four misdemeanor cases were filed in 2013. The ACT program consistently shows a high level of effectiveness. In 2012–2013, ACT participants improved school attendance by 9.2 days within one year of referral (Fain, Turner, & Greathouse, 2013).

Additionally, the District Attorney participates in the SARB meetings for students of all ages (although the majority are elementary), and holds truancy mediations for students who cannot resolve their attendance problems through SARB (Fig. 1). In 2012–2013, mediators heard 384 cases referred from SARB, and filed 86 cases with juvenile courts.

### 3.1.5. Los Angeles City attorney

The City Attorney's Truancy Prevention Program (TPP) follows a similar early intervention process as the District Attorney's program, but for approximately 20 middle schools in the City of Los Angeles. One major difference is the inclusions of an additional preventative component: a letter to all students before the school year to notify families of the legal responsibility for children to attend school (Fig. 1). In 2012–2013, a total of 20,075 students and their parents received this letter. Parents of 3919 students attended group general assembly meetings due to habitually truant behavior. Subsequently, 8% (309 students) and their parents required one-on-one hearings, and 4% (156 students) were sent to SARB, where TPP participated in the hearing. Less than 1% of those who attended the general assembly were filed as a misdemeanor case.

Interviews with key informants and focus group results support the value of the ACT and TPP programs. These programs are seen as positive because they concentrate intervention efforts on younger students, actively work to engage parents, and lay out clear expectations and consequences for truancy. The ACT and TPP programs face several challenges including limited funding for expansion (e.g., the ACT program is located in only 380 out of 1790 elementary schools in LAC), lack of available school administrator time and support to identify and refer eligible students, and barriers to data sharing.

### 3.1.6. Law enforcement

When a student is seen outside of school grounds during school hours he/she can be cited for daytime curfew violation. When a law enforcement official identifies these students, they are either brought back

to school or issued a citation (Fig. 1). When students are brought to school, officers notify the school administrators, who review the student's attendance record, academic performance and history of other infractions, and may contact parents. At LAUSD schools, habitually truant students are referred to a city-run youth resource center (YouthSource center). Due to recent changes in officer protocols advanced by the SATF, the number of day-time curfew citations issued by the Los Angeles School Police Department has been greatly reduced from 2625 citations (2011) to 79 (2013). Key informants and focus group participants spoke of the usefulness of the YouthSource centers. However, many respondents noted that because only a small proportion of youth who are truant get picked up by the police, other intervention efforts are needed to help address truancy in a proactive and more comprehensive manner.

### 3.1.7. Department of Probation

The Department of Probation is responsible for processing daytime curfew citations (Fig. 1). In 2013, Probation handled a total of 5105 cases for loitering, habitual truancy or truancy. When Probation receives these cases, habitually truant students enter into an informal probation agreement (i.e., a voluntary agreement of students and parent which does not get included on the student's record). Instead of fines, students are referred to a range of health and social services. Students may also be referred to informal probation through school administrators, self-referral, or SARBs, particularly when the student has a probation history (Fig. 1).

Key informants expressed the value of school-based probation officers participating in SARBs; however time and resource challenges often prevent officers from attending. Informants also pointed to the potential value of informal probation (an underutilized strategy) to help students access the social service resources they may need.

### 3.2. Priority policy recommendations

Expert panel members ranked each of the 10 recommendations on their level of importance and feasibility. Eight out of 10 workgroup members participated in the final ranking process, representing seven different agencies that interface with the truancy process. The panel decided to prioritize recommendations based only on the "importance" criteria, in an effort to identify the most important directions for future work, even if feasibility might be lacking. The five recommendations that received the highest importance scores are described below and summarized in Table 2.

#### 3.2.1. Priority no. 1

The highest priority recommendation (average rating = 9.7, standard deviation [SD] = 0.44) was for school districts to use LCFF to reduce chronic absenteeism, including truancy prevention and early intervention efforts. As discussed, LCFF gives schools flexibility in deciding how best to spend funds and provides more funding to support disadvantaged students. The expert panel ranked this recommendation of high importance because of the fundamental roles that schools play in

**Table 2**  
Highest priority policies and programs for preventing and reducing truancy in Los Angeles County, as recommended by the Expert Panel<sup>a</sup>, 2014.

Recommendation	Ranking <sup>b</sup> Mean (SD)		Key components identified
	Importance	Feasibility	
School districts should use Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) <sup>c</sup> to support truancy prevention and reduction efforts.	9.8 (0.44)	9.4 (0.88)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School districts should make school attendance an explicit priority in their Local Control Funding Action Plans.</li> <li>• School districts should implement evidence-based and sustained strategies to improve attendance, such as hiring child welfare and attendance staff, improving attendance tracking systems, and enhancing interagency collaborations.</li> <li>• Partners working with districts should provide technical assistance and training on best practices for reducing truancy and methods to evaluate their efforts.</li> </ul>
Explore models to integrate physical and mental health into schools.	9.6 (0.51)	8.3 (1.5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Health, Health Services and Mental Health should establish a coordinated school wellness working group that               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Provides technical assistance and support to schools (e.g., linkages to services); and</li> <li>○ Identifies and evaluates models for school-based/school-linked health services.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Expand the District Attorney and City Attorney Truancy Prevention Programs.	9.4 (0.78)	8.9 (1.4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District Attorney should expand its Abolish Chronic Truancy program to all LAC elementary schools.</li> <li>• City Attorney should expand its truancy prevention program to all middle schools in the City of Los Angeles.</li> <li>• County and City governments should support additional staff for truancy prevention program expansion.</li> <li>• Schools should identify administrator and staff support for truancy prevention program implementation.</li> </ul>
Enhance the commitment of County and City departments to reprioritize/allocate additional staff and other resources to reduce truancy.	9.1 (0.94)	8.4 (1.9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A central governmental coordinating body (e.g. Office of Child Protection) should prioritize school attendance as a social welfare issue, leverage existing truancy reduction resources and programs, and coordinate efforts by governmental agencies and community resources.</li> </ul>
Modernize data collection and reporting systems to track truancy frequency.	7.6 (1.8)	6.7 (2.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• LACOE and school districts should align with state initiatives to improve data collection and reporting systems.</li> <li>• Public Health, LACOE and school districts should use data to conduct program evaluation and identify best practices.</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup> The expert panel included 10 representatives from the Los Angeles County (LAC) Office of Education, Los Angeles City Attorney, LAC District Attorney, LAC Department of Mental Health, LAC Department of Children and Family Services, Los Angeles Unified School District School Police, LAC Department of Probation and the LAC Chief Executive Office.

<sup>b</sup> Each recommendation was ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 by the expert panel using the Delphi method on two criteria: importance ("the extent to which the recommendation would improve school attendance for a large portion of youth in Los Angeles County") and feasibility ("the extent to which funding/resources could be made available and decision makers would be open to implementing the recommendation").

<sup>c</sup> Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), established in California Assembly Bill 97, restructures school funding formulas to give more autonomy in planning and budgeting to local school districts and requires districts to develop a Local Control Action Plan with metrics and strategies, including measures to monitor school attendance.

being the “front line of defense” against school truancy. Experts also consistently rated this recommendation as being highly feasible, as there is an established mechanism in place for school to receive additional funding. Since LCFF gives schools autonomy in selecting funding priorities and metrics, the panel mentioned the importance of a) putting pressure on districts to prioritize meaningful and sustained strategies to reduce truancy, b) providing technical assistance and training to districts on best practices (e.g., hire and retain additional child welfare and attendance workers), and c) helping districts and schools evaluate their efforts. Panel members emphasized the importance of a comprehensive approach to reducing truancy that includes a focus on improving school climate, engaging students and parents, and increasing access to mental health and social services.

### 3.2.2. Priority no. 2

The second highest priority recommendation (average rating = 9.6, SD = 0.51) was to explore models that would improve the integration of physical and mental health promotion into schools. The expert panel ranked this recommendation of high importance based on information and experience that suggested that physical and mental health issues are often underlying reasons for truancy, and improved access to health and mental health services would likely improve student's academic performance and overall family well-being. While the average level of feasibility was high (8.3), ratings ranged from 5 to 10, with experts somewhat split on the ability to identify models that would not require a lot of additional resources. Experts mentioned the importance of a two-pronged approach that included connecting students to services early, for example through expansion of school-based informal probation, as well as once issues are identified (e.g., in SARB meetings). Due to the importance and complexity of this issue, experts recommended forming a separate working group to examine best practices to address the health needs of students (especially asthma, diabetes, and mental health), as well as those of parents.

### 3.2.3. Priority no. 3

The third highest priority recommendation (average rating = 9.4, SD = 0.78) was to expand the District Attorney and City Attorney truancy prevention programs. The expert panel ranked this recommendation of high importance because the programs have been shown to be effective in improving school attendance and provide students and families with multiple opportunities to resolve truancy before legal recourse. While there were some concerns about the negative impact of the threat of legal consequences for truancy, experts agreed that schools appreciated the program's concrete consequences, which resulted in prosecution in only a small number of very severe cases. Experts mentioned the need to think of these programs as a piece of the solution, as oppose to the whole solution. With regard to feasibility, the primary concern was the additional funding that would be required to expand these programs.

### 3.2.4. Priority no. 4

The fourth highest priority recommendation (average rating = 9.1, SD = 0.94) was to enhance the commitment of County and City departments to reprioritize or allocate additional staff and other resources to reduce truancy. Experts noted the role that many agencies play in helping to reduce truancy and the need for an elevated commitment, for example, to ensure that all appropriate agencies participate in SARBs and for agencies to “look beyond” traditional scopes of duty to integrate efforts to improve school attendance into their work. In June 2014, the County Board of Supervisors (governing body of LAC) voted to establish an Office of Child Protection. Experts recommended that this position serve as the coordinating body to help elevate the issue of truancy and help improve integration of efforts across county agencies.

### 3.2.5. Priority no. 5

The fifth highest priority recommendation (average rating = 7.6, SD = 1.8) was to improve data collection and reporting systems in order to track truancy frequency. Currently, the California Department of Education reports rates of truancy: the percentage of students who miss more than 3 days without an excuse; it does not provide any information about the average number of days missed (California Department of Education, 2014). A current California Assembly Bill, endorsed by Attorney General Kamila Harris, would require the California Department of Education to enhance the student record system to include the number and rates of absence, chronic absenteeism, truanancies, habitual truanancies and chronic truanancies, along with established definitions for each measure (AB 1866). Ratings for the level of importance for this recommendation ranged from 5 to 10, with high ratings given based on opinions that stronger, more integrated data systems are needed to better understand the magnitude of the problem and the impact of prevention strategies as well as to enhance coordination of services across agencies (e.g., through data sharing). Lower ratings were related to concerns about the ability of this measure to independently have a large impact. With regard to feasibility, there was an even larger range (3 to 9), with experts raising concerns about the ability to standardized metrics across LAC's 80 school districts as well as challenges related to privacy and confidentiality.

## 4. Discussion

The truancy prevention and reduction process in LAC includes multiple, interconnected players and many opportunities for enhancement. Highest priority recommendations from our expert panel focus on increasing school-based efforts, identifying innovative ways to address students' and families' physical and mental health needs, enhancing coordination across diverse partners and elevating their commitment, expanding evidence-based programs that have proven track records, and enhancing data collection efforts to better identify additional effective strategies. Across the recommendations there was an emphasis on the need to a) identify and address truancy patterns among younger students, b) implement restorative approaches that address root causes of truancy, but have clear consequences for continued offenses, and c) continue to evaluate programs and policies to identify best practices.

Results of this study align with previous research and current national dialogue regarding how to effectively reduce truancy. The need for greater school-based efforts has been recognized, specifically strategies that involve families and the community, have a restorative focus, and use long-term goal setting (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Numerous school-wide programs and interventions have shown promise, including incentive-based programs (Ford & Sutphen, 1996; Sturgeon & Beer, 1990), enhanced multi-agency partnerships (Elizondo, Feske, Edgull, & Walsh, 2003; McCluskey et al., 2004), and school reorganization of students; however these studies are limited by small sample sizes and non-experimental study designs. In addition to scant evidence, sufficient funding is also a limitation to school-based efforts. Schools are under significant pressure as a result of state and federal mandates to demonstrate improvements in academic outcomes. California's LCFF helps shift focus away from solely test scores to also consider performance on metrics related to school climate and attendance. Likewise, efforts led by the California Office to Reform Education are underway under a federal No Child Left Behind waiver to help broaden the way in which schools are held accountable. The waiver plan, called the School Quality Improvement System, calls for a reorientation of districts' work toward academic, social/emotional, and culture/climate domains (California Office to Reform Education, 2014). The flexibility offered by LCFF is both an asset and a challenge. For districts that choose to focus significant efforts on increasing school attendance, LCFF will provide a set of school-based laboratories by which districts can test innovative efforts and help build the evidence-based of promising practices, if evaluation efforts are prioritized.

While schools play a fundamental role in reducing truancy, results also highlight the need for continued engagement and participation from a range of partners, especially from legal partners. There are a number of promising legal avenues through the court system that have been identified as model programs by the American Bar Association, such as the Kern County Truancy Reduction Program (Kern County Superintendent of Schools Office, 2006), the Seattle Becca Bill (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2000), and the San Francisco Truancy Assessment and Resource Center (City and County of San Francisco District Attorney, 2013). Commonalities in these programs include a focus on family involvement and use of punitive measures only after intervention attempts or incentives are unsuccessful. Moreover interagency collaborations that support access to various social service agencies are critical (Dembo & Gullede, 2009). Results of our study underscore the importance of these principles, including the value of identifying and addressing the underlying reasons for truancy and having clear expectations for students and parents, especially when school-based efforts have been exhausted. In LAC, the District and City Attorney truancy reduction programs represent potential models for expansion. Continued evaluation to assess their long-term effectiveness, impact on other outcomes, and cost-effectiveness can provide further confirmation of these programs' utility. In addition, the opportunities and challenges associated with using school-based probation officers to monitor attendance and connect students to resources warrants further exploration, as there is evidence of its success elsewhere (Status Offense Reform Center, 2014).

Results also show the need for increased participation and guidance from the health, public health, and mental health sectors. The connection between physical and mental health and school truancy and chronic absenteeism has been widely documented (Kearney, 2008a). There are a number of models to help address health barriers to learning and attendance such as school-based health centers (i.e., on-site comprehensive wellness centers), school-linked services (i.e., mechanisms for referral to community resources), and community health workers. For instance, since 2009, the Gainesville City School District has implemented a comprehensive system of learning supports to address student barriers to academic achievement. Through designating staff and district resources, identifying school-based service gaps, and building relationships with community providers, they have been able to streamline service delivery and better address challenges to attendance and learning, including physical and mental health needs (Education Development Center, 2012). Many health and school professionals have recognized the need for multidisciplinary efforts to improve school wellness (Cura, 2010; Kearney, 2008b; Walker, Kerns, Lyon, Bruns, & Cosgrove, 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends eight components of coordinated school health, including health education, physical education, health services, nutrition services, counseling, psychological and social services, healthy and safe school environments, and family/community involvement (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). There are many state and federal mandates which require schools to develop wellness plans and committees (United States Department of Agriculture, 2014). Increasing active involvement with schools to implement these mandates and improve physical and mental health is a clear future direction for local public health departments.

Overall, there is a greater need for increased participation and coordination from a variety of cross-sector partners to help address truancy. Previous studies have acknowledged the complex nature of truancy and the potential value of a more comprehensive approach (Kearney, 2008b); however, little work is available to describe best practices for implementing cross-sector strategies and optimal system functioning. Our research lays the foundation by describing how systems are operating and identifying leverage points that can be used to augment system functioning. Key priorities identified in this research, which align with practice- and research-based efforts in the field, are already under consideration by the study's participating agencies. For example, priority #2

has prompted the departments of public health, mental health, and health services to develop a coordinated school health learning community that will provide school districts and community partners with technical assistance and support from experts and peers on models to improve the integration of physical and mental health promotion on school campuses and in the surrounding community.

#### 4.1. Limitations

While our study synthesized data from a wide variety of sources and partners involved in the truancy-reduction system, it has a number of limitations. First, LAC is a large system; however, we were only able to gather input and perspectives from a limited number of system participants. Although saturation of content was seen in qualitative analyses and near consensus was reached by the panel members, additional input – especially from front-line school staff – would have been useful. Second, there was likely selection bias among the agency work group participants, school administrators who participated in focus groups, and the school-based mental health providers who responded to the survey. These groups may have extremely positive or negative views of the system and thus may not be representative of the opinions of all individuals working in these roles. Third, perspectives of system functioning and recommendations for improvement are based on a “within the system” perspective which does not capture students' or parents' experiences (i.e., “user of the system” perspective). While we attempted to capture diverse opinions, expert panel representatives (many of whom represented law enforcement agencies) may have distinct perspectives. Additional work is needed to capture feedback and input from primary recipients of services. Finally, systems for addressing truancy (e.g., use of SARBs, role of law enforcement) are likely to differ across states and jurisdictions. As other entities attempt to build on this work, they will likely need to conduct their own assessments to illuminate the nature of the system functioning in their jurisdiction.

## 5. Conclusion

Truancy is a persistent problem in the United States, which is affected by and impacts the goals of multiple sectors, including schools, health, public health, social services, courts, and law enforcement. Results of this study highlight the important roles that many of these sectors can play by working individually and synergistically to help identify and address the needs of youth and their families. Other jurisdictions interested in implementing policies and programs to help prevent and reduce truancy can build off this work to address their unique, local conditions. Describing the current state of the local system and implementing a process to identify and prioritize opportunities for refinement can help to define concrete policies and promising programs to augment system functioning.

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