

A STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM IN THE  
TORONTO BOARD OF EDUCATION, 1850-1997

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the  
University of Toronto

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A Study of Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education, 1850-1997  
Robert S. Brown, Doctor of Education, 1999  
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning  
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## ABSTRACT

This case study was an examination of the role, function and structure of absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education, using both historical inquiry and quantitative analysis of contemporary student data. Multi-method triangulation was used, a research process using multiple measures or methods to examine a research question where a single data set might not be appropriate. There were three directions.

Firstly, a literature review found little agreement among researchers on the role and importance of absenteeism.

Secondly, an historical overview of Toronto Board policy on absenteeism examined documents relating to absenteeism, 1850-1997. Absenteeism was at the core of Toronto Board educational policy from the 1850's to the 1940's. Policy towards "truant" students was at first retributive, but in the twentieth century policy was changed to societal and family interventions, resulting in the foundation of most of the board's current student support services. However, absenteeism disappeared as an important educational issue by the 1970's.

Thirdly, an analysis of Toronto Board administrative data looked at student absenteeism from several directions: datasets of 75,000 students registered 1996-97; Grade 9 students followed 1991-1996; and 11 year old students followed 1992-1997.

Among the findings:

- There is a consistent relationship of age to average absenteeism, which is linear for students 13 and older.
- Gender was a minor influence on absenteeism. Students who lived in two-parent households were significantly less likely to have above-average absenteeism than those in other types of households. Among Grade 9 students, post-secondary plans, hours of homework and part-time work, home language, type of high school, and academic level also influenced levels of absenteeism.
- Absenteeism was strongly linked to credit accumulation and other achievement patterns. Students with high absenteeism in Grade 9 were much more likely to drop out, and less likely to graduate. Absenteeism in any given year was moderately linked to absenteeism in the previous school year and the following school year, but the relationship faded over time.
- Contemporary secondary absenteeism is higher than that of historical records from the 1960's. This may be due to the increasing retention in the secondary school of traditionally 'at risk' students, a process similar to that which occurred in the primary school system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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“The greatest difficulty the schools have to encounter is irregularity of attendance on the part of the children”.

– Toronto Board, *Report of 1859*, p. 72

“The truancy problem has become one of the most troubling issues school administrators face while attempting to reform public education”.

David E. Gullatt and Dwayne A. Lemoine, “The School Truancy Dilemma”, Spring 1997 (ED 409652)

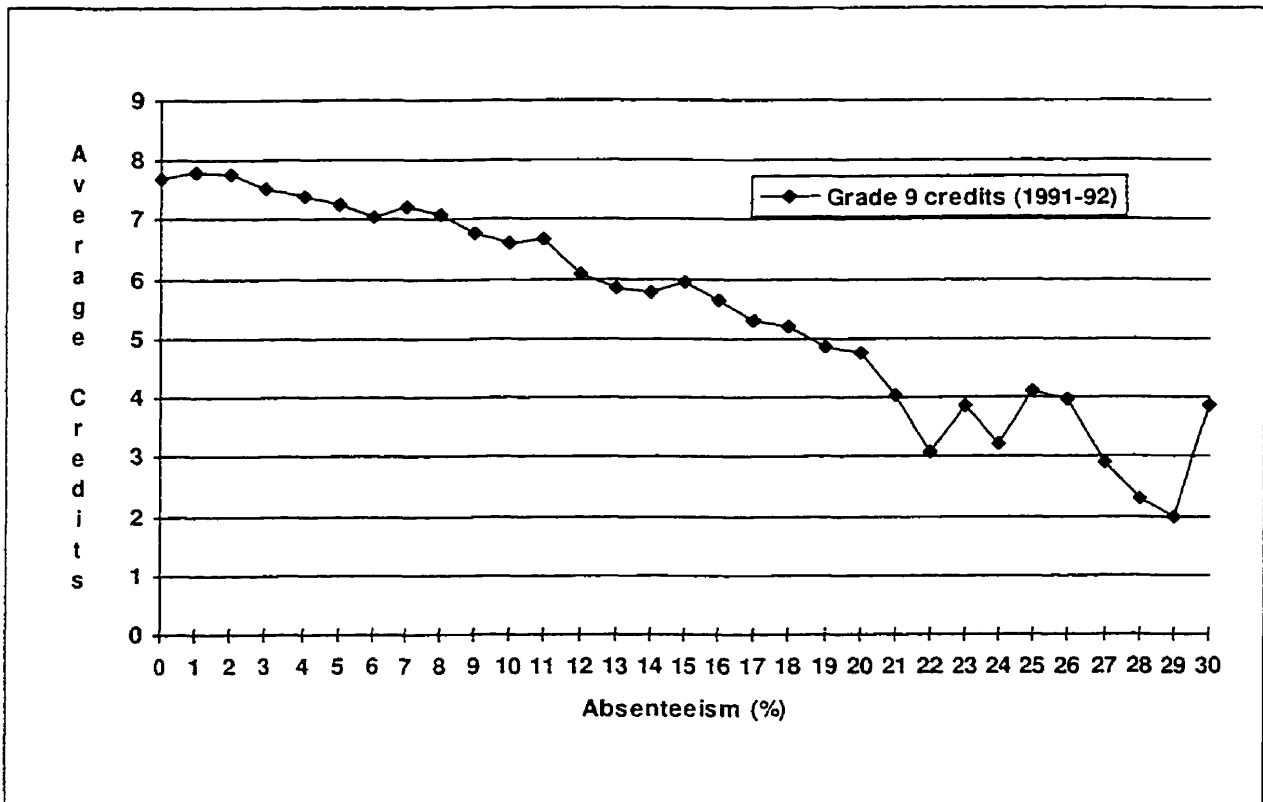
## Overview-- How This Inquiry Began

The process that eventually became this dissertation began as part of my duties as a researcher for the Toronto Board of Education, now part of the Toronto District School Board. Board researchers responded to applied research questions from trustees, board officials, and teachers. In this case, I was asked by a committee to track a cohort of Grade 9 students for two years. While discussing the project, I was asked by a senior official on the committee if there was anything connecting the absenteeism of these students with their credit achievement.

As it happened, the capability of getting absenteeism records for the students did exist. In 1990, the Toronto Board set up a computerized record-keeping system for absenteeism data; the information would stay on the system for three years, and then be deleted. Furthermore, the Computer Information Services department had worked with me in setting up a computer procedure on the Toronto Board mainframe that enabled me to extract the information. In mid-1995, when this request came, the information from the 1991-92 school year was about to be "flushed", and so I extracted it, and matched it with credit achievement of those students for Grade 9.

The relationship, as can be seen below, is quite strong. Students with low absenteeism had high credit accumulation; those with medium absenteeism had medium credit accumulation; and those with high absenteeism had low credit accumulation. This was especially important in Grade 9 because I had, in an earlier study of Grade students, found that Grade 9 credit accumulation was a very strong predictor of dropout and graduation. Therefore, it was quite probable that absenteeism was related not only to academic achievement, but also to dropout and graduation.

**Figure 1: The Grade 9 Cohort of 1991: Absenteeism in Grade 9 (1991-92) and Grade 9 Credit Accumulation**



In truth, I was surprised by the strength of the relationship. In part, my attitude was colored by my own background in the Ontario public school system. As a

somewhat indolent high school student, I had skipped large numbers of school days, and it had not noticeably harmed my credit accumulation or my overall marks (although it did not endear me to several teachers). I had assumed from this experience that absenteeism would have a minimal effect on student performance-- or, perhaps, it would effect student performance only when at an extremely high level. It seemed my assumption was incorrect.

Obviously, this close association between absenteeism and achievement had important implications for the educational system, but there were many questions. Was it a cause-effect relationship? Did it apply to all Grade 9 students? To other grades? What are the absenteeism characteristics of different types of students?

### **The Research Problem**

What I found was a troubling lack of both Canadian and American research on the structure and rhythm of absenteeism. Absenteeism has been used as an outcome variable (e.g. McParland and Nettles, 1991) or as an independent variable (e.g. Deschamps, 1992, on its influence on dropout). Reducing absenteeism was the goal of countless social work programs, or educational initiatives, as will be seen in the literature review below. But what was lacking was an examination of the morphology of absenteeism—of the characteristics, functions and structures of absenteeism within the context of the educational system; and of how absenteeism evolved into its current form. There are bits and pieces of this scattered across the literature, but it is very fragmented.

Absenteeism has rarely been studied for its own sake, as an entity. It is this gap that this inquiry wishes to address. Just as the study of a species of plant might utilize both palaeontological evidence and biological study to locate the plant within its family and genus, I propose to use both historical inquiry and quantitative analysis of recent student data to locate the role, function and structure of absenteeism in public school systems.

Absenteeism has traditionally been perceived as a “social work” issue, and much of the research that does exist has examined individual social work programs aimed at addressing absenteeism. The focus of the research is on the success of the program, which is sometimes located in a school but is usually part of a broad family and/or psychological initiative aimed at changing behavior through more fundamental change of attitudes and personal issue. Social and societal problems and solutions are paramount, and the individual student or his/her family is the focus. As a result, the connection of this research to broader educational policies and administrative concerns is often lacking.

More comprehensive and detailed recent research is lacking. The most recent Canadian work on the subject (Harte, 1993), a review for the Canadian Education Association, is 32 pages long and thus intended as an overview rather than an in-depth examination. Harte's literature review of "Correlates and causes" is only 7 pages; half of the rest of the text (pp. 17-31) examines the various legal requirements of compulsory schooling in the Canadian provinces.

The most extensive series on Ontario absenteeism, produced by the Ministry of Education in 1988, shows both the concentration on social work practice and the lack of

emphasis on detailed research on the structure of absenteeism. There are four reports, not including an overview of the project. The first (Pauker, 1988a) a review of literature from 1975 to 1986, is obviously dated in that it is missing any developments of the last twelve years. The second (Pauker, 1988b) is a survey of school legislation of the mid to late 1980's. The third (Desnoyers and Pauker, 1988) is a brief (48 pages not including appendices) survey of methods and programs to combat school absenteeism. It is primarily a description of what programs exist, and what they do. The final report is an examination of the attendance characteristics of male young offenders (Pauker, 1988c).

Nothing comparable has been done in Ontario in the last decade; the only recent Canadian studies come from Alberta (Dean, 1990, Nyberg Consultants, 1994). The last Toronto Board document that examined absenteeism in any detail was the Report of the School Social Worker, published in 1974, 25 years ago. McClare's (1989) dissertation had a good overview of past and present Toronto Board absenteeism policy, and served as the beginning point to my own research. However, the focus of McClare was on social work priorities in Great Britain, the United States and Canada, and hence issues of absenteeism could not be examined in detail. Ontario is not atypical of North American educational authorities: as will be seen in the literature review, New York and Louisiana are exceptional in their attempts to determine how absenteeism relates to other student characteristics.

Moreover, while there were a number of American studies that looked at school-level absenteeism, analysis of absenteeism at the individual student level was lacking beyond small-scale experimental studies (see below, pp. 17-18). This meant that there is little to provide detailed characteristics of who is absent and who is not. Given that

school-level data is strongly susceptible to the ecological fallacy, it would make sense that any real description of the structure and characteristics of absenteeism in a school system can only be provided through linking individual student data on absenteeism with other student characteristics, like school achievement, gender, age, and socio-economic status. The research I undertook did precisely that.

There was also a lack of the historical context of absenteeism. The Ministry of Education 1988 literature review may be typical, in that the research of only eleven years is examined. There have been several fine studies of absenteeism within a specific historic context (the most detailed was Davey's 1975 examination of mid to late nineteenth century absenteeism in Hamilton) but no Canadian study, to the best of my knowledge, has examined absenteeism policy from the nineteenth century to the present.

The lack of historical background in examining absenteeism was not unique to Canadian research. American studies examined in the literature review look only at contemporary situations, with occasional discussion of the comparatively recent past of the 1960's, '70's, and '80's. But it could be argued that historical analysis is necessary to situate current educational issues and research problems. As will be shown, absenteeism was one of the fundamental issues that policymakers addressed when the public school system was founded in the nineteenth century.

The importance is not only in filling a knowledge gap. At this time, education in the Toronto District School Board and elsewhere is being faced with "incredible change and flux", to use the words of the TDSB's Director of Education (Letter, November 2, 1998). Achievement and student retention, traditionally linked to absenteeism, have

become primary espoused goals of educators. At the same time, the function and purpose of social workers, who have been on the 'front line' of addressing absenteeism, is being reevaluated throughout North America.

What is needed is a detailed examination of the evolution and structure of absenteeism within the context of a large educational unit. Within Ontario, a school board is the largest educational unit that can be selected, because of a lack of consistent absenteeism data across the province. Also, one would need a large school board that had been established for a long enough period of time to have continuous records on absenteeism policy. Since most larger boards in Ontario were established in the 1950's and 1960's through amalgamation (e.g. North York, Etobicoke, Peel) this limits the selection to a few large boards located in well-established cities, such as London, Windsor, Ottawa and Toronto.

Therefore, I undertook to examine a case study of absenteeism in one of the few educational units that fit these criteria: the former Toronto Board of Education. The primary sources for this inquiry are historical records of Board policy, and student administrative data from Toronto Board computer records. The combination may be unusual but the historical study reinforces the quantitative exploration to provide a strong contextual explanation of how the interpretation of absenteeism evolved, and how it works today.

## **Methodology**

According to Rothe (1993), the term "case study" comes from legal, medical, and psychological research, where it refers to a detailed analysis of an individual case, and



explains the dynamics and pathology of a given disease, crime, or disorder.<sup>1</sup> The assumption underlying case studies is that proper knowledge of a phenomenon can be acquired through intense exploration of a single example. Adelman et al. (1980) claim case study analysis to be a 'family' of methods, which focus on "the study of an instance in action" (p. 49). Case study methodology is "eclectic", according to Adelman et al.: techniques and procedures in common use include observation (participant and non-participant), interview, audio and audio-visual recording, field note-taking, and document collection, but may also involve many other techniques. While usually thought of as qualitative, case study can be quantitative (Hamilton, 1980). Stake (1980) notes that a case study is seldom on an individual person or enterprise, but is on whatever system is of interest: a program, an implementation, or a population can be a case. In this study, the system is the issue of absenteeism, explored in detail through the experience of a large Canadian school board.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of the Toronto Board, while obviously influenced by personal considerations, is also important in the Ontario and the Canadian context. The Toronto region is usually considered as the most ethnically diverse in Canada and the former City of Toronto (with Scarborough, North York and York) served as an illustration of Canadian multi-culturalism. In 1995, the majority (58%) of Ontario's immigrants moved to the Greater Toronto Area. The proportion of Toronto Board students reporting a non-

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<sup>1</sup> Bisesi and Raphael (1995) attribute the origins of case study research in social science to anthropology and sociology, not psychology.

<sup>2</sup> An example of a case study of an issue is Walsh (1995), who examined the privatization of public school curriculum through the Baltimore School District's contract with a private company to manage the operation of nine schools. The analysis turned out to be a case study of "showing what can go wrong when public services are privatized", with schools being run more expensively and with lower student achievement than formerly.

English home language in 1996 was 45%, which was twice that of 1991 Census estimates for the City of Toronto (27%) and Metro Toronto (25%) and four times that of 1991 Census estimates for the rest of Ontario (11%)<sup>3</sup>. Over 76 languages other than English were spoken by Toronto Board students. About one third of the student population were born outside of Canada, in over 170 countries (Research and Assessment, 1997).

Toronto has always been one of Canada's largest school boards. In the history of Ontario education, it was easily the most prominent and populous board between the mid-nineteenth century and the formation of the Metropolitan Separate School Board (MSSB) in 1952. During its time of greatest enrollment (in the 1930's, with more than 100,000 students) the Toronto Board had greater total student enrolment than that of several Canadian provinces. Even in its more modest final years, it was the fourth largest board in Ontario, after MSSB, Peel, and Scarborough. The Board has been proud of its history of innovation. Many of the programs associated with the modern educational system-- such as kindergarten and the grade system-- were put into place into Toronto before anywhere else in Canada (Stamp, 1982).

As well, the Toronto Board has always dealt with education in the context of a dense urban setting. Overcrowding in schools, child poverty, student health, and what we now call "inner-city" issues can be seen in Board minutes, reports and memos from the mid-nineteenth century until the final days of the Board in late 1997.

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<sup>3</sup> Comparable data from other Metro Toronto boards was not available at the time.

## **Triangulation**

The methodology used in this case study is one of multi-method triangulation. This approach has advantages when one is trying to describe a complex topic or issue. Triangulation has been described as a research process that uses multiple measures or methods to examine a research question where a single data set would not be appropriate (Baker, 1990). According to Heath-Camp & Camp (1994) triangulation is a concept that comes originally from the physical sciences. It is a means by which the precise location of a specific point in space, itself unknown, can be estimated from observation of other known points.

Triangulation can consist of multiple measures within the same methodology. This is the context in which Rudman (1989) refers to triangulation in determining what pupils know about school-related content: "What is called for is a triangulation of several kinds of data drawn from various types of tests: standardized tests of achievement and aptitude, teacher-made quizzes, observations of behavior, and the like" (Rudman, 1989, p. 1).

Triangulation can also be a process using multiple methodologies to examine a research issue. For LeBlanc (1996), examining research issues in the field of family communications using multiple methodologies is analogous to building a house.

"Several competencies are necessary in order to reach the end product, a wholistic explanation of a phenomenon: a vision of the whole house. Within the discipline of communication, several distinct methods can and have been employed. This breadth of methodological competency is necessary based on the complexities of the communicative process. One approach to research does not suffice...Building a house with just a hammer as a tool is impossible. Building a theory to explain human communication in the context of the family requires many methods. The multi-method perspective purports as a fundamental strategy to approach research problems with a multitude of tools...."(LeBlanc, 1996, pp. 3-4).

LeBlanc also points out that being conversant on multiple methods may allow the researcher the advantage of serendipitous discovery of unexamined aspects of the phenomena, i.e. that entertaining differing perspectives allows a researcher to "see things" which might otherwise be missed.

Multi-method triangulation can involve both quantitative and qualitative directions. Workman and Bodner (1996) utilized both intensive focus groups, and surveys to examine gender differences in the decision to drop out of graduate school. Donaldson et al. (1993) used a triangulation of three sets of data to compare adult and 'traditional' college student perceptions of effective teaching: student nomination of excellent faculty; interviews with a small sample of adult graduate students; and a larger questionnaire survey of adult undergraduates.

Heath-Camp and Camp (1994) used a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative measures to examine professional development of beginning vocational teachers. Qualitative data collection techniques included nominal and open-discussion focus groups; in-depth interviews of beginning teachers, peer teachers, mentor teachers, principals, and other educators; participant observation; telephone interviews; field data collection visits to exemplary program sites; and tape-recorded logs. Quantitative data collection techniques included personality surveys; leadership style scales; repeated-measures administration of a stress scale, a job satisfaction scale, and a teacher/learning style scale; and a national survey of a stratified random sample of all beginning vocational teachers in the United States during the 1989-90 school year.

This investigation will have three directions: a literature review; an historical examination of Toronto Board policy towards absenteeism; and an analysis of Toronto Board administrative data.

### **I. Literature review on absenteeism.**

It is traditional practice to include a literature review as part of the methodological explanation. This is quite appropriate when investigating the accuracy of a specific problem or hypothesis, such as the effectiveness of a mentoring program or at-risk students. However, in an exploratory case study of absenteeism in a large urban school board, looking at the broader context could be thought of as part of the investigation, rather than a prelude to it.<sup>4</sup>

### **II. Historical overview of Toronto Board policy on absenteeism.**

My second point in the triangulation of absenteeism in the Toronto Board is an examination of Board policy towards absenteeism between 1850 and 1997. The focus is a very specific concentration on the perspective of the Board, as seen through the reports, minutes, memos, diaries and letters written about absenteeism by Board officials over one and a half centuries.

The Toronto Board school system actually pre-dated the establishment of the Ontario public school system, with several schools founded in the first half of the

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<sup>4</sup> An example with some similarities can be seen in Kelly's *Last Chance High* (1993), where the author starts with an "Overview" section with methodology, followed by a chronology of the American alternative school system which is a synthesis of historical and other literature on the subject. Only after the historical synthesis does Kelly begin her participant observation analysis of life in three California continuation schools.

nineteenth century (Hardy and Cochrane, 1950). The Board, as an administrative structure, lasted for nearly 150 years, from its reconstitution following the Education Act of 1850, until its amalgamation with other Metro Toronto boards to form the Toronto District School Board in 1998. Since the Board was always the largest or among the largest in Ontario, it produced and maintained policy and bureaucratic documents on a wide range of educational issues, of which absenteeism was one. Many of these records have survived, located in the Toronto Board's Sesquicentennial Museum and (to a lesser extent) in the Archives of Ontario.

### **III. Toronto Board Administrative Data on Absenteeism**

Ministry regulations require that records of school attendance be kept but do not mandate how to keep this information. Prior to 1990, information on Toronto Board absenteeism was collected manually; since 1990 the data has been computerized. In its current form, the information is kept on the Student Information System (a computerized mainframe information system) for three years and then deleted. Absenteeism information (in terms of half-days present or absent from school) is kept by school administrative staff according to procedures developed by the Board's Computer Information Services department (Toronto Board of Education, 1992). In 1991-92, Cheung Lui of Computer Information Service and the writer developed a computer program that would enable me to extract student level absenteeism. A modified version of that system is currently in operation.

Absenteeism data can be linked to other student variables through the Toronto Board's six digit student information number (SIN). Some of these variables (like

student transfer and mobility, secondary student credit accumulation) are abstracts of other data that I have collected in my duties as a researcher in the Toronto Board's Research and Assessment Department, while others (e.g. country of birth, year of arrival in Canada) are available from other Research and Assessment files.

Analysis of absenteeism data is through same method triangulation-- the examination of multiple sources of information using the same method to answer a research query. This inquiry is a case study, investigating the topic of absenteeism in a large school board; it is not determining the validity or invalidity of a null hypothesis. Therefore, much of the examination will be descriptive, and where statistics are employed, they are intended to supplement the description of Toronto Board absenteeism, rather than to answer a question or set of questions.

There are three areas of absenteeism examined. Each one of these 'points in the triangle' are intended to provide a specific angle on absenteeism.

**a) the yearly absenteeism of approximately 75,000 students enrolled in the Toronto Board between September 1996 and June 1997.** Looking at yearly absenteeism of all students at one point in time (the school year of 1996-97) provides a 'snapshot' of student absenteeism at the elementary and secondary panels.

These data have been linked with other data collected on these students during the school year in question (e.g. 1996-97), including the following:

- status at the end of the school year (for secondary students: graduation, dropout, transferring to another Board, or continuation in the Board; for

elementary students: transferring to another Board, or continuation in the Board);

- (for secondary students) total credit accumulation, and credit accumulation during the year;
- (for secondary students) average marks;
- (for secondary students) type of school first registered in (collegiate institute, technical/commercial, etc.);
- gender;
- parental status (living with both parents or one parent);
- place of birth and year of arrival in Canada;
- language first spoken at home (e.g. English, Chinese);
- (1996-97 only): average household income of student neighborhood from the Canadian census.

Absenteeism patterns for this group of students have also been selectively compared to yearly patterns for all students in four previous years: 1995-96, 1994-95, 1993-94, and 1992-93.

**b) Absenteeism of the Grade 9 cohort of 1991.** This illustrates patterns of secondary school absenteeism over time: the absenteeism of this group of around 4,000 students is followed for five consecutive years, from when they started their first year of high school in Fall 1991 to the end of their fifth year of high school in June 1996.

These data have been linked with other data collected on these students, including the following:



- status at the end of five years (graduation, dropout, transferring to another Board, or continuation in the Board in Year VI);
- total credit accumulation from Year I to Year V, and yearly credit accumulation (credit accumulation in Year I, Year II, etc.);
- average marks;
- credit accumulation by subject (English, Math, Science, etc.);
- type of school first registered in (collegiate institute, technical/commercial, etc.);
- academic stream (Advanced, Basic, General);
- gender;
- parental status (living with both parents or one parent);
- place of birth and year of arrival in Canada;
- language first spoken at home (e.g. English, Chinese);
- parents' occupation and education;
- post-secondary plans in Grade 9;
- attitudes towards school in Grade 9;
- extra-curricular activities in Grade 9;
- hours of homework and part-time work in Grade 9.

**c) Absenteeism of 11 year old students (nearly all in Grade 6) enrolled in September 1992.** This looks at absenteeism in a group of students in the transition

years from elementary to high school: from Grade 6 in Fall 1992 to the end of Grade 10 in June 1997.

These data have been linked with other data collected on these students between 1992 and 1997, including the following:

- status at the end of 1997, Grade 10 for most of these students (graduation, dropout, transferring to another Board, or continuation in the Board);
- total credit accumulation by the end of Grade 10;
- average marks at the end of Grade 10;
- gender
- parental status (living with both parents or one parent);
- place of birth and year of arrival in Canada;
- language first spoken at home (e.g. English, Chinese);
- average household income of student neighborhood from the Canadian census.

Even with the assistance of a mainframe computer, extraction and merging of this information was a time-consuming process. In total, around 400 SAS programs were written and run by the author to provide the datasets used in these analyses.

In both longitudinal breadth and in total size, the administrative data collected for the study appears to be greater than previous studies on absenteeism located in the literature, with two exceptions. The first exception is Easton and Storey, 1990. That study was intended to serve as a baseline for the Chicago Board, using data from 1985 to

1989, and the number of students over time would be larger than in this study, given the size of the Chicago Board. However, data was reported at the school level only, and there was no student-level analysis. Furthermore, study results have not been reported since 1989, possibly due to the reorganization and dissolution of the Chicago Board administration.

The second exception is the 1993 New Orleans study of absenteeism and achievement. The report on the study did not give the full student population, but it seems comparable or even larger than the Toronto Board (75-90,000 students). The New Orleans study is one of the few to link absenteeism at the individual student level to standardized test performance (in particular, the California Achievement Tests, CAT, and the Graduate Exit Exams, GEE). This is a very important study, but the *direction* is on achievement, and there is consequently a limited analysis of absenteeism: most of the report examines performance according to 'excessive' versus 'non-excessive' absenteeism. (New Orleans Public Schools, 1994.)

Of other studies, Bos et. al (1990, 1992) examined absenteeism records of 36 medium to small schools in the Netherlands. Bos et al. do not give the total sample size, but judging from other information, it would not exceed 20,000 students. Furthermore, the absenteeism information examined was for only a three-day period during one week. Ferguson (1992) looked at high absenteeism of students in an American board using administrative records, but her analysis was limited to 9<sup>th</sup> Grade students. Lambden (1996) examined absenteeism records of 97 elementary schools in the Baltimore area, over a one year period, but used only aggregate data at the school level, as did Easton and

Storey's (1990) Chicago study. The Toronto Board data goes well beyond these parameters.

The absence or presence of a student is the most simple element in education. The complexity lies within the interpretation of this absence-- about which there is precious little agreement, as will be seen. Consensus on even simple definitions is rare; there is certainly no agreement on what to do about absence from school, or why it occurs. It is hoped that this dissertation, through a multi-level case study, will provide some guidance in interpreting a topic which has provided as much frustration to educational administrators as any in the history of the public school system. Fullan (1990) has described educational change as "technically simple yet socially complex". Examination of absenteeism shows why this is true.

**A. Absenteeism in the Educational Literature**

## **A. Absenteeism in the Educational Literature**

This literature review was based on a search of the ERIC database of journal articles, research documents, theses, and books on education, starting in 1982. The search, initially conducted in Fall 1997, located approximately 500 publications based on the keywords "attendance" and "absenteeism". The abstracts of these publications were read, as were the full texts for around 120 of these publications that appeared most directly applicable to public school absenteeism. In addition, the reading of these works led to approximately 20 other publications not present in the original search.

### ***Definition of "Absenteeism"***

Absenteeism is distinctive in that it is, by basic definition, a lack, or null-- the extent of missing classes or days of school-- the inverse of "attendance". It may be thought of not as a characteristic of schools or of curriculum, but instead as the state of being physically removed (absent) from the curriculum. Absenteeism has many different definitions and names meaning much the same thing (albeit with different connotations). In their survey of school attendance and non-attendance programs, Desnoyers and Pauker (1988) found that the terms included "absence", "absenteeism", "truant", "truancy", "chronic truant", and "persistent truant". They found that the words meant somewhat different things in different areas.

I have used "absenteeism" in this study by process of elimination. The Toronto Board of Education has, in a century and a half in dealing with the issue, used "truancy" "absenteeism", and "attendance", among others. "Truancy" has association with juvenile

delinquency and is often used in a pejorative sense, or as a moral weakness, and usually (although not always) refers to a willful staying away from school. "Attendance" can often be confused with "enrollment" (i.e. the registration of the student at a school, regardless of whether the student actually shows up to classes in the school). Therefore "absenteeism" is here used as the least confusing of a number of confusing terms.

### *Absenteeism and Issues of Control*

Discussion of absenteeism is also discussion of regulation and all that that implies. Every province has laws prohibiting a defined degree of truancy; these laws have sanctions, and these sanctions are legally enforceable. For example, in 1986 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the conviction of an Alberta pastor who was educating his own children. According to the pastor, his duty to educate his children came from God and it would be sinful for him to request the state to permit him to do God's will. According to the majority opinion, "no proof is required to show the importance of education in our society or its significance to government. The legitimate, indeed compelling, interest of the state in the interest of the young is known and understood by all informed citizens" (Anderson, 1987).<sup>1</sup>

Yet enforcement of these laws is often (but not always) tempered with recognition of the social and sociological factors that may influence truancy patterns (Harte, 1994;

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<sup>1</sup> The pastor refused to acknowledge the role of the state in the education of his children. This differs from home schooling and correspondence courses, where students are not attending regular schools but are still receiving their education within educational guidelines and control of the province.

Dean, 1990; Desnoyers and Pauker, 1988). At the same time, in addition to the legal coercion on parents to keep students in school, there is also the opposing legal coercion on the part of secondary schools to force students to leave if they miss too much school (Fine, 1991; Enomoto, 1994). As was noted by Gaskell (1995) in her summary of the CEA's Exemplary Schools Project:

"Attendance policies mark schools as bureaucracies, organizations where forms must be filled out and rules obeyed. They mark students as adolescents, and schools 'in loco parentis'. Skipping classes is a mark of rebellion and independence. Although attending is an obligation, it is also an opportunity to learn, and this opportunity can be, and is, withdrawn if the student fails to attend" (Gaskell, 1995, pp. 70-71).

As well, it is thought that enforcement policies are needed in schools as a preparation of the student for participation in society.

"A school's discipline and attendance policies and practices are an extension of an educational focus that prepares students to live in a participatory, democratic society. Sound discipline and attendance policies set reasonable and clear standards and high expectations for all students, with the goal of fostering self-discipline and personal investment in a positive school climate and community. School policies can promote a positive and inclusive school climate in which all students fulfill their learning potential.

Discipline and attendance policies also provide for the safe and orderly functioning of a school. These policies set limits upon what is expected and allowable behavior within the school community, while determining consequences for breaking the rules. In addition, these policies can also help students understand their behavior, solve problems, and develop positive strategies for managing daily life and for being a productive member of the school community" (French et al., 1991, p. 1).

Attendance enforcement is a major issue in some educational authorities.

Pardini (1995) describes a growing tendency in some American cities and states to penalize the parents of truant students: among the penalties are fines, incarceration, or attending school along with their children. Wilson (1993) provides the perspective of one of these policies, in outlining the "successful" anti-truancy program of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Wilson notes that the program has paid for itself, because of increased



funding due to increased enrollment of truant students. Wilson provides an eight step guide to setting up an anti-truancy system (e.g. checking to see if there are fines for truancy; developing a uniform reporting system for truancy). Yet it is interesting that despite a claim that the system will reduce the dropout rate, he provides no actual proof of the effectiveness of the system, nor does he examine reasons for truancy. Instead, absenteeism is presented as a law and order issue, and the anti-truancy system as a consequent necessity: "it's a shame society needs laws to enforce school attendance. But the reality is that with school attendance, as with other important social obligations, some will participate willingly and others will require compulsion" (Wilson, 1993, p. 46). (For similar programs, see Eastwold, 1989, and Stine, 1990).

Other research on such attendance policies is not so optimistic: Quinn (1995) looked at a Wisconsin experiment that required adolescent students to attend school regularly in order to receive family financial aid. Investigation revealed that despite "savings" attributed to the program, family pressures were created and no improvement in attendance rates was actually realized. See also Ethridge and Percy, 1993; Rood, 1989; and Wise, 1994.

French et al.'s 1991 review of the literature found that schools that relied upon disciplinary interventions and did not provide students with individual support and attention tended to have more discipline and truancy problems than other schools. On the other hand, schools that provided students with caring and supportive peer-peer and student-teacher relationships and that promoted healthy adolescent social development,

experienced fewer discipline and attendance problems. They also used alternatives to suspension when dealing with students in crisis, like mediation programs.

Duckworth and deJung (1986) in their study of skipping in six high schools, found little to indicate that students responded to penalties for skipping.

"We were especially interested in the inhibition of skipping by school-imposed penalties for skipping. This inhibition would be consistent with the theoretical prediction that participation varies with efficacy, or the predictability of rewards in response to effort. However, although student agreement that school rules were strictly enforced varied widely in each school, there was virtually no relationship between the index of perceptions of rule enforcement and skipping among boys or girls, or at any grade level, in any of the six schools. Perceptions of rule enforcement had a weak negative effect on students' indifference about skipping, but no appreciable effect on student rejection of penalties for skipping. Students who were indifferent or who rejected school penalties were more likely to skip more often, but the relationship of perceived rule enforcement to skipping was generally similar for such students and for other students" (Duckworth and deJung, 1986, pp. 45-46).

The province of Alberta has made an interesting attempt to incorporate the current multi-causal approach to truancy into the enforcement of compulsory education legislation. The Attendance Board recognizes that absenteeism is not the consequence of any single cause but results from a multiplicity of factors; therefore, any solution will be comprehensive. Membership on the Board was therefore drawn from social workers, psychologists, teachers, pediatricians, police officers, nurses, lawyers, representatives from the aboriginal community and from the community at large. The approach is to provide a less legalistic approach than provided by the court system (Dean, 1990).

### ***Demographics and At-Risk Characteristics***

There is no consistent agreement on the role of demographic and at-risk characteristics on absenteeism. There is general agreement that absenteeism is related to aspects of socio-economic status, and that older grades have higher absenteeism than

younger grades, but a lack of consistency on findings related to race, gender, and school characteristics.

Bell et al. (1994) examined previous research for demographic characteristics of truants:

- gender differences are uncertain: some studies have found girls more likely to be truant, some studies have found boys more truant;
- with an increase in age, there is an increase in truancy; thus the upper grades in high school exhibit the highest truancy rates ;
- truancy is associated with both socio-economic status and race.

Rood (1989) came across some similar characteristics, except for his findings on gender (unlike Bell et al., he concluded that girls have higher rates of absenteeism in the first three years of high school). According to his summary of research, absenteeism increases as students progress through high school; minority students and those from one-parent families had higher rates of absenteeism; students with higher IQ's and higher grades, those in college preparatory courses, and those more involved in school cocurricular activities, had lower absenteeism.

Duckworth and deJung (1986) found that among students in six high schools, boys skipped more than girls, and students in grades 11 and 12 skipped more than students in grades 10 and 11. Students taking college prep courses skipped less than did other students. There was a wide variation in skipping among schools. There also appeared to be a difference between skipping whole school days-- the preference of doing

something else-- and skipping individual classes, which tended to be related to aversion of that class. These reasons were similar to Malcolm et al (1996) who found that Scottish secondary school truants avoided school because they were bored in school, and would rather be earning money at work. Some of the 'good attenders' in the study said that if subjects were more interesting and more choice was available they thought the truant pupils would be more likely to attend.

Nelson et al. (1996) examined elementary school mobility. When they compared mobility and absenteeism, they found that students who had moved two or more times had higher absenteeism than students who had not moved or moved only once. (By comparison, there was no relationship between mobility and tardiness.)

Some researchers have used the school as the unit of analysis in examining absenteeism. Bryk and Thum (1989) investigated a subsample of 160 schools and 4,450 students from the High School and Beyond database. The analysis revealed that absenteeism was less prevalent in schools where faculty are interested and engaged with students, where there is an emphasis on academic pursuits, where there is an orderly environment, and where there is less diversity among the student body in background characteristics and more commonality in the program taken by students; similar effects were related to dropout rates. Disadvantaged youth who attended schools with a committed faculty, an orderly environment, school emphasis on academic pursuits and smaller school size did better than expected.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1996) noted that absenteeism in secondary schools was higher than in elementary schools, and that absenteeism was

lower in rural areas or small towns but higher in central cities. Public high schools with more than 40 percent of their students eligible for free or reduced lunches had higher absenteeism than other schools (eligibility for free or reduced lunches is often used as a proxy variable for socio-economic status in American school research).

When Lamdin (1996) examined the effects of elementary school absenteeism on standardized tests at 107 Baltimore elementary schools, he found that average level of attendance at a school did have a positive influence on student performance: socioeconomic status was influential, as had been predicted from the literature search, but school input measures (school and teacher) did not have a significant effect on school performance, a difference from the above researchers.

Other researchers have attempted to define valid predictors of which elementary students would become at-risk in high school; usually, truancy is one of several factors, along with school achievement, school factors, and demographic characteristics. Rush and Vitale (1994) looked at a checklist survey of at-risk characteristics for elementary students that was completed by all elementary teachers in an Iowa school district on over 5,000 Grades 1-5 students. A factor analysis of the survey revealed eight factors accounting for 52% of the variance: academically at risk, behavior and coping skills, socially withdrawn, family income, parenting, language development, retention (i.e. grade-failing) and attendance.

Barrington and Hendricks looked at students who had entered two American high schools in 1981, and, using their status as of 1985 (if they graduated, dropped out, were still in school, etc.) examined data from their permanent records. It was found that

dropouts could be identified with 66% accuracy in the third grade, using such criteria as absenteeism and achievement.

"Compared with those who will graduate, the future dropout shows a clear indication of academic problems by the third grade. Achievement test scores are below the scores of his or her classmates and also below the level one would expect, given the student's ability. The poor attendance and underachievement increases as the student goes into middle school, and by seventh grade failing grades are present. By ninth grade a pattern of high absences, failing grades, and a low overall GPA is well established, and it continues until the student drops out of high school" (Barrington and Hendricks, 1989, p. 316).

In Barrington and Hendricks' study, achievement and absenteeism data appeared to be more powerful than socio-economic factors like parental status and father's profession. However, this does not mean there is no connection with family background. Instead, "the high accuracy with which the elementary school data identified potential dropouts probably reflects family attitudes toward education. The elementary school student who is not in school is absent with the parent's knowledge and at least tacit consent. The parents who are uninterested in their children's attendance in elementary school, and probably their achievement, likely not only convey their values to the child, but also are willing to agree when the child later decides to leave high school (Barrington and Hendricks, 1989).

### ***School Phobia***

Reasons given for student absenteeism have been parental influence (e.g. keeping a child at home, moving), boredom with school or specific subjects, or working (e.g. Malcolm et al., 1996; Stover, 1991). Another reason is school phobia, or school avoidance of the student. There are no real statistics on how widespread this issue is, although it appears to be a very small number. Intervention can be delayed because the

student will use other excuses such as physical illness to avoid school, known as the 'Masquerade Syndrome' (Tansay, 1995). Reid (1983) found fear of bullying to be a major reason for school phobia, but his small sample makes it difficult to generalize this. The best treatment for school phobia is early intervention, which is sometime difficult because of the 'Masquerade Syndrome' (Tansay, 1995).

### ***Absenteeism, Disengagement and Programs***

Chronic absenteeism or truism is recognized as partly a function of disengagement from the educational system. Jenkins (1995) examined school commitment in a Delaware middle school. She found that decreasing levels of commitment to school led to increasing levels of school crime, school misconduct, and school nonattendance. Personal and family background, and ability grouping, partially explained levels of school commitment.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of attendance programs has evolved into finding a much more direct personal fit between the school and the student. As Harte (1994) explains,

"The pre-1985 literature tends to emphasize general traits and patterns of attendance, but the more recent literature presents a more personal image of the chronic truant and attention is given to specific personality traits as well as negative home and family characteristics. The emerging profile of the truant, although recognizing the patterns associated with non-attendance, is much more personally oriented. This profile is supported in the research, which has become much more informative about the emotional and psychological problems of the truant and his or her personal maladjustments" (Harte, 1994, p. 4).

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<sup>2</sup>Jenkins cautioned, however, that data on nonattendance should be interpreted with caution because it may not be representative of students who are chronically absent from school, presumably because she used a survey methodology, and chronically absent students would be less likely to receive and complete the questionnaires.

The direction of this research can be seen in Bell et al. (1994), who examined the literature on truancy intervention programs. In addition to demographic characteristics noted above, Bell et al. found that the literature on truancy indicated that truants have a range of personal factors that contribute to their behavior, including school phobia, poor social and emotional functioning, delinquent or anti-social activities when not in school, conduct and psychological disorders, and poor achievement. Family variables included parental knowledge of truancy, family attitudes towards education, SES, child neglect, overprotectiveness, keeping the child home to care for siblings, and parenting skills and assistance. A major difference between truants and nontruants was in attitudes towards school: truants were more bored, outside of the school culture, and frustrated with their work. Bell et al. recommend that multimodal interventions-- looking at the issues in terms of individual students, combined with familial and school-based strategies-- appear to have the best chance of success. "In the past, research and interventions have treated truancy as having only one cause or being due to only one factor...It is not possible to totally solve the problem by focusing on only one aspect or target area because they are all intricately related or connected to one another. It makes sense, therefore, to utilize an approach that addresses all of these aspects" (Bell et al., 1994, p. 210). This recommendation is also given by Harte (1994) and Desnoyers and Pauker (1988).

One such program is described by Ford and Sutphen (1996)-- an incentive program to encourage positive relationships between at-risk elementary students and the school system; a secondary purpose is to give social workers in the system a better understanding of issues related to non-attendance, and of the need to include family-based solutions in student-school problems. This direction can be seen in this



description of the role of the Attendance Supervisor in the South Carolina attendance program:

"The attendance supervisor is the coordinator of attendance programs in the local school district, and is the connecting link between the home, the school, and the community. As a trained professional, the attendance supervisor recognizes absences from school as symptoms of problems which need to be identified and corrected. Being absent from school is often not a simple matter of illness or truancy, but may be a complex problem with many dimensions, reflecting numerous facets of human behavior. To understand and to be able to cope with the causes of school absences, the attendance supervisor must be professionally trained and experienced" (South Carolina Department of Education, 1990, p. 2).

Examples are outlined in Rohrman, 1993; Solomon and Yacker, 1989; Betancourt, 1990.

Still, such programs by no means represent all truancy prevention programs. Even in South Carolina, the program described by Woodall and Bond (1993) tends to be technocratic, with the extensive use of systems monitoring, including a combination of daily attendance statistics and standardized test scores, to determine potential difficulties in schools. (The dichotomy between the more holistic description of the South Carolina attendance system, and the more technocratic description of an actual school district implementation, may also indicate a difference between theoretical ideals and actual practice.) Another, more traditional model used in North Carolina was described by Carruthers et. al (1993). There were three different types of interventions and eight different activities.

"One type of intervention was educational in which the effort was chiefly to inform the children, families and school staff on attendance issues; another type of intervention was quasi-counseling in which the effort was to assist children, families, and school staff to develop a different understanding of individual, family, and/or school system dynamics that affected attendance; and, a third type of intervention was legalistic with extreme and resistant families wherein the effort was to imply or actualize legal action. Interventions with individual cases followed a progression from the former to the latter type, and many interventions had elements of two or all three types mixed" (Carruthers et al., 1993, p. 42).

The program activities were: meeting with the child; meeting with the parent; contact with school personnel; phoning the child's home; mailing a letter to the child's home; visiting the home of the child; and making a contact with another agency on behalf of the child or family (Carruthers et al., 1993, pp. 42-43).

Many programs, especially secondary school programs, are focused predominately on keeping the student connected with the school. Attendance +Plus was initiated in the Fabens Independent School District in west Texas, an area with a majority Hispanic population and high poverty. The program was aimed at reducing absenteeism on the assumption that there is a direct correlation between increased attendance and dropout reduction. Aspects of the plan included an emphasis on individual importance, rejection of myths about minority students and dropouts, and encouragement of academic success through effective teaching. Implementation of techniques was left to school staff. There was a broad range of techniques including phone calls and notification of parents by the attendance officer, commendation letters to parents, awarding of certificates to students and teachers, child care programs for school aged mothers, community bus tours to staff to better understand and observe living conditions of the students (Casey, 1990).

### ***Program Failure***

In spite of the optimism of many programs, definitive proof of truancy program effectiveness is lacking. There are a few studies that have detailed failed programs. Kleine (1994) examined a program in "CAP", (Chronic Absenteeism Pilot Project) a mid-

sized American city that was supposed to assist agencies collaborating in truancy prevention.

"Data analyses revealed that despite elaborate interagency agreements, very little was known about potentially collaborative efforts on behalf of chronically absent youth in the city; what was known was seen as controversial and doomed to failure. This lack of mutuality surrounding chronically absent youth was rooted in basic ideological differences and agendas among the social service agencies involved, including the public schools. Substantial power differentials existed among the agencies. A legitimate convener (i.e. conduit) for CAP collaborative efforts could not be found; a few of the relevant stakeholders in CAP could not establish representation." (Kleine, 1994, p. 12.)

As a result, efforts to combat truancy in this city had been "largely ineffective."

Lindner (1990) investigated six programs in different American cities that were aimed at reducing dropout rates through improving attendance. He found that while coordinators of the programs believed that their programs improved attendance, in fact, the statistics provided showed that any change had been incremental, at best. Also, no program showed great improvement in the dropout rate from the year before the programs were implemented. Methods of judging "success" of the program were not always uniform. Lindner suggested that dropout and attendance improvement programs should start in the elementary school years, "if not earlier", since this is the time when patterns of school attendance are formed and may be the best time to work with parents.

Ligon and Jackson (1990) examined how a purportedly "tough" school policy on reducing absenteeism failed. They looked at the effect on the Austin school system of the 'five absences' rule adapted by Texas in 1984. The rule mandated that a student could miss no more than five classes per semester to receive course credit, but principals could "excuse" absences at their discretion. During the first year, the Austin absentee rate matched previous years, but after that began a "remarkable decline" in attendance, as

students were excused in record numbers, while at the same time there was an 18% increase in the number of students being denied credit due to exceeding the limit of unexcused absences. Excused absences had become so common that in some high schools, all absences were entered on attendance records as excused, and then corrected to unexcused only if proper documentation was not provided. The policy was later changed.

A large number of attendance improvement programs were initiated through New York State funding after 1984. In 1989 the New York City Board's Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment (OREA) examined four New York City programs. Findings were ambivalent: each of the programs realized "some" of their objectives. However, one program had fundamental problems in the evaluation and could not provide data; another program failed in its primary goal of increasing parental participation (and its workshops were cancelled due to poor parent attendance); another had as its primary goal the reduction of suspensions but methodological difficulties in getting accurate data made the verification of success impossible; the final program did increase reading scores and attendance, but had lower numbers of participants than planned. (Interestingly, only this last program had increased attendance as one of its stated objectives.) OREA found that all programs had the following problems in common: difficulties in stimulating parent participation, late start-up due to delays, availability of funds, and poor design of evaluation objectives (New York Board OREA, 1989).

Between 1992 and 1994, the New York State Office of the Comptroller audited the State Department of Education's administration of attendance programs (both in New

York City and the rest of the state). The audit did note that there had been "some improvement" in New York's daily attendance since the program funding began (although it did examine whether this minor improvement was due to the programs or to some other cause). However, it found that only one of the 45 programs it examined included all 12 components that were supposed to be mandated; over half the programs did not explain how the program effectiveness would be measured. Only eight of the programs had been reviewed by the Department of Education. The audit found difficulties in program goals (or lack thereof):

"We also found that the districts' Program plans generally did not contain meaningful performance goals and outcomes. Moreover, the goals established by some districts did not identify a specific amount of improvement that officials hoped to achieve. Reaching a general goal of "improving attendance" may provide a false sense of program success when there is a small increase in attendance that may be caused by non-Program factors. To help ensure that districts establish meaningful performance goals, the Department [of Education] needs to provide districts with technical guidance showing how appropriate goals and outcomes should be developed" (New York State Office of the Comptroller, 1995, p. ii.).

Evaluation of selected New York City programs found that most of the selected schools had not met the attendance goals originally set out. In tandem with the OREA (1989) study cited above, this would indicate that the track records of attendance improvement programs in New York State is indifferent at best.

### ***Absenteeism and School Culture***

Some researchers have used an ethnographic methodology to examine how the cultures within the school and school community interact with the school bureaucracy in dealing with issues of truancy. For example, Fine (1991) and Enomoto (1994) acted as participant-observers in inner-city American high schools, working in or with the school attendance office. They both found that miscommunication, incomprehension of

differing cultural values (between and within cultures and subcultures of teachers and students) often exacerbated student difficulties in attending school. Fine found that for complex reasons having to do with the relationship between attendance and school funding, the Board's policy for discharging truant students-- originally set up to keep potential dropouts in school-- had been "perverted" by the school attendance office into a mechanism for excluding students from school.

"Being discharged from this low-income, urban comprehensive high school was a tradition. Most did it. Some showed up for the event; others merely faded. The qualitative and quantitative data blend to reveal a rationalized process by which the bodies of these young men and women were neatly and almost unnoticeably removed from the rolls, largely as a consequence of policies and practices of public schooling. When they went, both educators and many youths themselves viewed these events as individual "choices" or due to personal inadequacies. Perhaps this is the most compelling consequence of institutionalized silencing. When the policies and practices of purging are rendered invisible, no one but the adolescent is held to blame" (Fine, 1991, p. 37).

### ***Adult Absenteeism***

It is intriguing that the research on student absenteeism has few references to absenteeism studies on adults. There are two developed literatures on adult absenteeism-- one on teacher absenteeism, the other on absenteeism in business and government. One consistent finding in these is that absenteeism tends to be related to issues of alienation and control. For example, Borg (1991) found that teachers who reported greater stress were also more frequently absent-- and less satisfied with teaching. Scott and Wimbush (1991) found that secondary teacher absenteeism was related to job involvement and job satisfaction. Mathieu (1990), in a study of bus drivers, found that commitment and involvement were related to drivers' personal absences. Dalton (1990), in a six year study of flexible scheduling, found that there was a significant reduction in absenteeism in a public utility company subunit once flexible scheduling of time was introduced. A

study of British supermarket staff found that senior personnel had better attendance regardless of gender. One reason given was that "people who have good working conditions and more control tend to be less often absent" (Globe and Mail, March 11, 1997).

### *Absenteeism and Student Outcomes*

Wise (1994) found a significant but very small correlation between absenteeism and secondary student grade point average in a study of Ohio students. However, most research has concluded that absenteeism is a powerful predictor of student outcomes, and a useful indicator of elementary and secondary student disengagement. According to Carruthers et al. (1993) attendance is linked to academic achievement, greater participation in school programs, and graduation from high school. A study of nearly 800 Texan superintendents (Schumacker and Brookshire, 1992) found that attendance statistics were among the top five preferred indicators of secondary schools, along with student attitude information, dropout rates, college placement, and computer literacy.

Bell et al.'s review of the literature found that "the most obvious and immediate implication of truancy is reflected in the truant's academic deficits. If students do not attend school, it is virtually impossible for them to receive the instruction necessary to keep up with the level of their classmates and earning grades". Truancy was also associated with juvenile and adult deviance including drug and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, and marital problems, along with lower-status occupations after school, less stable career patterns, lower incomes, and higher unemployment. "Probably the most serious implication of truancy is its correlation with dropout rates." There is a close

association with truancy and high school dropout, and dropouts are characterized by many of the same traits possessed by truants (Bell et al., 1994).

Deschamps (1992) in a review of research on characteristics of dropouts, concluded that "empirical research shows that absenteeism and tardiness are important factors associated with the dropping out process." Bosworth (1994), in a study of British truancy, found that students' adverse attitudes towards school are closely related to absenteeism, and unfavorable attitudes and absenteeism both adversely affect exam performance. Heberling and Shaffer (1995) examined the effects of school attendance on the grade point average (GPA's) of 70 regular education and 17 learning disabled fifth-graders in rural Ohio. There was a significant effect of attendance on grade point averages of both groups.

Crone et al. (1993) examined the relationship between school attendance and achievement in Louisiana public schools. They found that attendance was an important indicator of academic success of a school. They found a strong relationship to assessment tests (attendance was the strongest predictor of percent passing the Graduation Exit Exam); there were also strong relationships between attendance and suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates.

Like Crone et al., Easton and Storey (1990) looked at the relationship between school absenteeism and school achievement, in Chicago elementary and secondary schools. They found that Chicago elementary schools that had higher achievement on standardized tests also tended to have higher attendance rates; a regression analysis showed that attendance was significantly related to achievement even after other factors,



including mobility, low income, and grade failing were held constant. (However, schools with higher mobility, higher grade failing, and lower income had lower attendance.) In looking at the secondary panel, they also found that higher attendance goes hand in hand with higher test scores, as well as higher graduation rates. (As well, schools with higher proportions of college prep programs had higher attendance, while schools with lower income students had lower attendance).

Malcolm et al. (1996) found that there was a link between school attendance records and achievement in Scottish public schools, in both mathematics and English results, although math results were slightly more affected. Absence shows similar effects for both boys and girls.

### ***Methodological Confusion***

According to Lamdin (1996), "given the reasonable presumption that higher attendance at the individual or aggregate level should be associated with a higher level of student performance, this lack of attention is curious." An important reason for the comparative neglect of absenteeism may well be the difficulty in collecting the information in a useable way. Often, calculations of absenteeism will vary from board to board, school to school, and researcher to researcher. The New York State Office of the State Comptroller (1995) found that school districts were not recording and reporting attendance data consistently, resulting in a limited ability to accurately assess attendance program outcomes. Bos et al. (1990) found such a wide variation in academic studies of absenteeism that comparative analysis was not possible.

Enomoto (1994), in a case study of one California school, noted that there were three separate mechanisms for recording attendance within the school, and that not everyone completed all of them, therefore reliable calculations of absenteeism could not be done. Kleine (1994) examined truancy programs in a mid-sized American city and found that substantial variability existed among schools in the manner of counting and reporting absent students. Statistical analyses revealed consistent differences in perceptions between students in the programs studied and school attendees.

### ***Conclusion***

It is widely held that absenteeism is strongly related to student success. "The importance of school attendance and how it relates to student success can never be underestimated", say Carruthers et al. (1993). "Over the last three decades, school attendance has become a major issue among policy makers, educators, and business leaders" (Carruthers et al., 1993, p. xiii.).

Yet there is little agreement on the exact role of absenteeism in student progress. On the whole, researchers agree that there is a clearly established relationship of absenteeism to student achievement (achievement through marks, achievement through completed credits, and achievement in standardized tests). Researchers also agree on age and grade patterns (that absenteeism increases as students get older, and move from elementary to secondary school). Most, although not all, agree that there is a link with students' socio-economic background. As well, there is a recognized link of absenteeism with alienation and disengagement (both in students and in adults). But the roles of gender, parental influence, and school systems themselves are unclear. There is, at the

end of the day, an inability to link the exact place of absenteeism in the cause and effect continuum: do students do badly because they do not attend school? Do they not attend school because they do badly? Are other reasons responsible for both the student lack of achievement and student absenteeism? Presumably all are interconnected, but how they connect has never been adequately explained.

Absenteeism has been a major issue in Ontario education in the past, and is still a key component of educational policy in North America (Nyberg Consultants, 1994; South Carolina Department of Education, 1990; State of Maine, 1990; Thomas et al., 1990). Yet there is ambivalence around aspects of enforcement-- a lack of consensus on how to keep children in school (policies range from supporting truant students and their parents, to fining and imprisoning them) and confusion in implementation, even at the school level. And inconsistent methodology has resulted in an inability to compare research results.

The track record of absenteeism programs is also somewhat open to question. While individual programs like that in Stine (1990) are reported as having positive results, they are usually practicum descriptions (usually of the attendance policies in a school or small school board) without the more stringent examination of variables usual in research studies. Furthermore, a number of research studies looking at programs in a more stringent way, have found them to be a rather mixed bag: as a result, it is difficult to conclude what works, and what does not. (e.g. New York City Office of Research Evaluation and Assessment, 1993; New York State Office of the Comptroller, 1995; Ligon and Jackson, 1990). Thus, at this point it is difficult to conclude anything about absenteeism, except that it IS important.

**B. Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education:  
A History of Policy, 1850-1997**

## **B. Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education: A History of Policy, 1850-1997**

The key source of information on Toronto Board absenteeism policy was the Sesquicentennial Museum, location of the Toronto Board archives. Among the documents examined:

- Toronto Board minutes from 1870 to 1997;
- Toronto Board annual reports from 1859 to 1984;
- Ministry of Education Annual Reports from 1851 to 1971;
- Miscellaneous Management Committee minutes, 1899-1955;
- Miscellaneous Toronto Board department reports, e.g. *Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, *Report of the School Social Worker, 1971*;
- Toronto Board publications, e.g. Centennial Story (history of the Toronto Board to 1949);
- the Wilkinson Diaries (work diaries of the Toronto Board's first truant officer, 1872-1874).

As well, sources from the Ontario Archives include late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ministry of Education correspondence about truancy.

For more recent Toronto Board absenteeism policy, I have interviewed or discussed the topic with representatives of the Planning and Social Work departments.

## **B-1. The Foundation of the Toronto Board and the Role of Absenteeism, 1850-1891**

The monitoring of absenteeism was an important component of the Toronto school system until relatively recently. In fact, the role of absenteeism as an integral part of the board's administrative apparatus dated back to 1850. The foundation of the Toronto schools was pivotal in the establishment of the Ontario educational system; and absenteeism was closely bound up in the foundation of the Toronto Board.

There are several possible dates for the foundation of the Toronto Board of Education. The school that later became Jarvis Collegiate Institute was founded in 1807, but since Toronto's high school and elementary school systems were independent until 1904, this date tends to be ignored. The first Toronto Board Superintendent, George Anthony Barber (Esq.), was appointed in 1844 to head the common or elementary schools. But at that time there was no unified structure: Toronto had twelve individual sections, or boards in the city, each with its own board of trustees (for a total city enrollment of around 1,200 elementary students). It was a rather chaotic system, with the schools in impermanent rental facilities. In 1847, the colonial legislature amended the Education Act so that each city and town in Upper Canada was to have one public board to administer its elementary schools.

However, a disagreement with city council over taxation shut down the entire common school board in 1848. *Report of the Past History, and Present Condition, of the Common or Public Schools of the City of Toronto*, hereafter referred to as *the Report of 1859*, gives a (probably biased) description of what happened. Schools in Toronto had originally required partial tuition from students, while the 1847 legislation was supposed

to provide for free tuition. But according to the *Report of 1859*, the new 1847 legislation had an ambiguity in it that did not allow the Board to directly raise money from a rate bill to allow the schools to be free to students. The Board

"made an earnest appeal to the City Council to assist the Board in this emergency. As Free Schools, the amount of the [provincial] Government grant, with the corresponding City assessment, namely, about 1,000 pounds, would be barely enough to maintain them in operation for six months; the Council was appealed to provide the means for keeping them open the whole year; the application was refused, and the Board had, therefore, no alternative but to close the schools at the end of the first half of the year, viz.: June 30th, 1848" (*Report of 1859*, p. 14).

For over a year the stalemate continued, with neither side giving in. Finally the Board re-opened in January 1850, but as a paying system: students 9 years of age and under were to pay 3 shillings 9 pence in Summer and 5 shillings in Winter, while students over 9 were to pay 5 shillings in summer and 6 shillings 3 pence in Winter.<sup>1</sup>

It was a structure that did not last long. In part because of the uncertainty over the municipal control over Toronto educational funding, Canada West's Chief Superintendent Egerton Ryerson introduced the Education Act of 1850. The passing of this Act is why the Toronto Board's own official history, *Centennial Story*, considers 1850 the **true** foundation date of the Toronto Board system (and thus 1950 as the Centennial of the Board). The authors of *Centennial Story* thought the 1850 Act not only the foundation of the Toronto Board, but also as the "Charter of the Ontario public school system. It remedied the existing difficulties and encouraged free education by making the school fees permissive but not compulsory, and by making the City Council responsible to the board of trustees, who were to be elected by the people" (Hardy and Cochrane, 1950, p. 23).

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<sup>1</sup> At this time, one shilling was worth \$4.85 American.

Under the 1850 Act, attendance became pivotal in school funding. Ryerson had chosen average attendance because at that time, a majority of students who registered at school showed up at school less than half the time. According to Houston and Prentice (1988) using average attendance to allocate funding may have been the most important innovation of the 1850 Act. It "would reward schools achieving higher average attendance rates with a larger share of the provincial money. The keeping of school registers, which had been introduced in 1846, would now take on a new meaning as the government began to bear down on communities not only to enroll their children in school, but to make them attend, if they wanted a fair share of the provincial funds allocated to common schooling" (p. 132). Bammon (1975) says that with the Acts' introduction of free schools in Canada in 1850, "school attendance became, as it had for American educators, both the greatest obstacle to the successful implementation of the new system and the greatest justification for its future growth" (p. 217).

The protocol for funding established by Ryerson in the 1850 act remained, with modifications, in effect until 1971. Total funding for schools (the provincial school fund) was apportioned to townships, cities, and towns. Once the local Superintendent of schools had received from the County Clerk the notification of the total amount of money to be received among his school sections, he was to distribute the money "according to the rates of the average attendance of pupils attending each Common School, (the mean attendance of pupils of both Summer and Winter being taken), as compared with the whole average number of pupils attending the Common Schools of such Township." The Superintendent was also to visit each Common School within his jurisdiction, and as part of this system of inspection to investigate the system of the teacher's keeping the



School Registers and the average attendance of pupils (Hodgins, Vol. IX, p.43).

Furthermore, all school board trustees had to prepare a report to the local Superintendent on the time that the schools had been kept open, the source of monies received by the schools, and "the whole number of children residing in the School Section, over the age of five years, and under the age of sixteen; the number of children and young persons taught in the School in winter and summer, distinguishing the sexes, and those who are over and under sixteen years of age; the average attendance of pupils in both winter and summer" (Hodgins, Vol. IX, p. 35).

This information was sent to the Chief Superintendent, who in turn was instructed to prepare an annual report based on it. This meant that average attendance, in addition to being a method for distributing financial resources, would also be a comparative statistic. People would be able to see the average attendance of their school sections or school, and compare it to the average attendance of other school sections or schools. Since average absenteeism would indicate the 'success' of a school in keeping and maintaining students in their education, it was the first quantitative indicator of school success that ratepayers, parents, and others could look at how well a school was doing.

One can see this in *the Annual Report of the Normal, Model and Common Schools in Upper Canada, for the Year 1852*. Table B of this report showed both the number of students attending between the ages of 5 and 16, and the average attendance-- by gender, and according to summer and winter. This was given in two breakdowns: for the 42 counties of Upper Canada; three cities, Toronto, Hamilton, and Kingston; and 15 towns, six town municipalities, and 8 villages. In addition, the local superintendent's report for Toronto included, in the first paragraph, a description of the average attendance of

Toronto, as well as the total number of students registered for 1852. A comparison of figures for 1851 was also provided (p. 122).

### ***The Report of 1859***

Within a few years the Toronto board was offering a number of justifications for the fight against absenteeism that would remain in various guises, for over a century. These justifications can be seen most clearly in the *Report of 1859*.

Attitudes towards absenteeism had changed abruptly from 1850 to 1858. At the beginning of 1850 (but before the passing of the Act of 1850), the Toronto Board had reverted to being a system where students paid tuition. It was made clear at that time that the most important aspect was the prompt arrival of students at school. The school doors were closed between nine and 10.30, opened "for a few minutes, to admit children who may bring satisfactory reasons for not being present at nine o'clock, or at any former part of the week", and then closed until noon. Absenteeism was discouraged, without any real aspect of enforcement: "It is expected that all cases of absence, or irregular attendance, will be satisfactorily accounted for, by the parent sending some sufficient excuse in writing, which will be duly recorded by the teacher, for the inspection of the school authorities" (*Report of 1859*, p. 17). Low absenteeism was thought only as one characteristic of a good scholar, like studying:

"It is sincerely hoped that parents and guardians will see that it is for their own interest to co-operate with the Board of Trustees in strictly observing the fore-going regulations: and they are earnestly entreated to enjoin upon their children, the duty of being regular and constant in their attendance at school-- diligent in prosecuting their studies while at school-- and orderly and well-behaved while going to and returning from school" (*Report of 1859*, pp. 17-18).

Enforcement of attendance may have been toothless because there was no financial incentive for it. Tuition was paid quarterly: if not paid, the amounts due would be "levied to the Board, according to law", to be paid by the parent (p. 16). Parents would pay regardless of the quality of student attendance.

But by the late 1850's, with school funding based on average attendance of students, and with average attendance of Toronto students a matter of public record, the importance of reducing absenteeism had become one of the paramount issues of concern. "School Attendance" had a specific section in the 1859 report. It had much more detail than a section on textbooks, but less than 'The Expense of Maintaining the Schools', which in its turn had a subsection on average attendance.

"The question of school attendance has for a long time occupied the anxious attention of the Board of Trustees. It cannot be denied that the number of pupils regularly attending the city Public Schools does not bear that proportion to the number of children of school age in the city that it ought to do: while those whose names are registered as pupils are neither so regular nor so punctual in their attendance as is desirable."

The *Report of 1859* included an 1858 address to parents and guardians on the importance of punctual attendance and the unfortunate consequences of absenteeism. First, there was the responsibility to taxpayers, in ensuring that the public money is well spent. This was essentially a moral responsibility: attending school--or, more specifically, ensuring that one's children attended school-- was a civic duty, much like attending church.

"The yearly expenditure of public money, in maintaining these schools, is very large, and every rate-payer, whether he uses the schools or not, is required to contribute towards their support. The public have a right, therefore, to demand that the schools shall be managed in the best manner and for the good of the whole community, and those persons whose children share the advantages of free education, should be anxious to comply with such reasonable regulations as may be necessary to their efficient government...."

As the schools are entirely free, and every child of proper age is earnestly invited to enter them, the parents of any child who remains uneducated, are alone responsible for the loss that child suffers, and for all the future consequences of its ignorance to themselves and the community" (*Report of 1859*, p. 71).

Secondly, punctual attendance was essential for the proper progress of the child: "no business of any sort can succeed, but by dint of constant and steady application, and it is probable that six months' regular attendance at school is of more real benefit to a child than irregular attendance during twice that period."

Thirdly, absenteeism was said to have a negative impact on the schools, so that the student not only harms him or herself, the student also harms others by his or her absence. "Absence operates badly on the school as well as on the scholar, for it not only checks the progress of the absent pupil, but it prevents the advancement of those who attend with regularity" (*Report of 1859*, pp. 71-72).

Thus, for reasons of civic responsibility, the good of the student, and the good of other students, the parent was obligated to ensure that pupils would arrive, punctually, at Toronto schools.

It was also admitted that for some Toronto students and parents, moral suasion was insufficient. An 1857 Committee of the Board (the first of many such Toronto board committees that would, over the next century, suddenly emerge, discuss issues of absenteeism, and then disappear) looked at absenteeism as a moral failing of the student. In this form-- usually called truancy-- absenteeism was a sign of moral corruption. The Committee decreed that

"As there is a class of young persons, who in spite of parental authority and school discipline, are habitual absentees and truants, who are ever to be found on the public streets, corrupting others and being corrupted, fitting themselves for becoming inmates of our Jails and

Penitentiaries, the Committee, looking at the immense benefits which have attended the enactment of Truant Laws in other places, cannot but think that a similar law, judiciously framed and wisely administered, would produce similar results in Toronto. They, therefore, recommend the Board to call the attention of Municipalities, and of Parliament to this matter. They would not encourage compulsory measures while there was any hope from moral suasion; but experience has amply shown that in the case of those referred to, nothing but the arm of the Law can save them, and protect society of the evils of ignorance, and its attendant-  
- CRIME" (*Report of 1859*, p. 90).<sup>2</sup>

Upon recommendation of the Committee, the 1857 Board adopted this resolution, but it had no legal substance and nothing further was done. The *Report of 1859* opined that "the experiment [of compulsory attendance] assuredly ought to be tried, at least to some extent, for it seems to be pretty clear that a voluntary attendance falls short of accomplishing the requirements of the Free School principle" (p. 92).

### ***The Resignation of Superintendent Barber***

Absenteeism had become a "high stakes issue" in the Ontario educational system, "the greatest difficulty the schools have to encounter", according to the *Report of 1859*. In the Toronto school system, the high profile of combating absenteeism had its first prominent victim in the person of the first Local Superintendent, (and probable author of the *Report of 1859*) George Anthony Barber. According to Hardy and Cochrane,

"By 1857 it was evident that the attendance was not increasing as it should. All attempts by moral suasion had failed-- circulars to parents, visits by teachers, Honour Certificates to regular pupils, and so on. The high cost of education was jeopardizing the free system...Against these facts, deduced from his own report, Mr. Barber wages for a time a losing battle by emphasizing the improvement in the quality of the teaching, the organization, and the accommodation under the new system. Nevertheless, he admitted that the free

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<sup>2</sup> Houston (1978) says that "the association of education with the reduction of crime provided a staple ingredient of common school rhetoric. Few school supporters needed the urging of the chief superintendent [Ryerson] to link the promotion of education with 'administration of justice, organized systems for the repression or prevention of crime and other important subjects'. The existence and promised redemption of ignorant ill-mannered street children proved a stock argument of free-school advocates...The image of school as police in disguise was frankly endorsed in certain quarters" (Houston, 1978, p. 256).

system was 'inefficient, undisciplined, costly, and comparatively fruitless'-- and submitted his resignation" (Hardy and Cochrane, 1950 pp. 39-40).

Lest anyone think that Barber then had to sell pencils on the streets of Toronto, what happened after his resignation in 1858 was that the positions of Local Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer were divided, in much the same way that the positions of Chairman and President are now usually divided in modern corporations. Rev. James Porter became the new Superintendent, while Barber occupied the role of Secretary-Treasurer until his death in 1874. Still, the resignation as Superintendent of the well-regarded Barber was a sign of the public importance of absenteeism, and of the fragility of support for the public education system.

### *The Special Committee and Census of 1863*

It is well to recall the harsh line on truancy taken by the Committee of 1857 when one looks at the findings of the Special Committee of 1863, which had virtually opposite findings. This Committee had been struck to do a census of all children in the city of Toronto between 5 and 16 years. The Census, done in August 1863, found that of 9,508 children, 1,632 had not attended school in the period of six months between January and June 1863. The causes of non-attendance were "in almost all cases" due to employment (28%), that fact that students were wanted at home (16%), that their parents considered the students too young to attend or too far from school (13%), or could not come because of want of clothes (13%). Reasons for the 19% of non-attending who did not return the census were not discussed.

Although these reasons were thought cause for concern (it was hoped that "Christian charity" could address the students who could not attend school through want

of clothes) the report was nonetheless optimistic: "It must afford great relief to every benevolent mind to learn that the evil of unmitigated juvenile ignorance does not prevail so widely in Toronto as was feared, though doubtless, it exists in a sufficient degree to stimulate the zeal of every enlightened philanthropist." (*Annual School Report for Canada West*, hereafter called *Provincial Report*, 1863, p. 150.)

So much for outright truancy. The report was also quite optimistic about overall attendance or absenteeism. On average, there were 2,921 students in Toronto board schools every day over the six months; since, according to the census, 7,876 students had attended Toronto schools at some point over six months, and there were 9,508 potential students in Toronto, this meant that, crudely, absenteeism was about 63 percent of registered pupils and around 68 percent of all potential attendance. This was not the interpretation of the report, however. The report's authors pointed out that average attendance in 1863 was 112 higher than that of 1862, and 404 more students registered: as a result, "the school attendance for the year 1863 was, in fact, the largest which has yet been recorded." As a result, "the 3,000 children who, at only one time in the course of the year, were on our registers [a rather confusing description of average attendance] cannot but have been, for the most part, largely benefited by their connection with these Public Schools" (*Provincial Report*, 1863, p. 150).

A comparison of *the Report of 1859* with the findings of the Special Committee of 1863 shows differences in attitude that are so striking that it might be difficult to believe that they are from the same board, and only five years apart. The differences are more intriguing when one considers that the author of the *Report of 1859* was the same person who no doubt tallied the survey results of the Special Committee of 1863, and may even

have written the findings-- the Secretary/Treasurer, George Anthony Barber, the man who lost his original job of Toronto Board Superintendent due to the absenteeism debate. This is the first instance of what would be a familiar pendulum swing over absenteeism and truancy over the next century. The players would change, society itself would change, and the Toronto board would grow and change beyond all recognition, but for the most part, the dialogue over absenteeism would not vary much from what had occurred between 1850 and 1863.

### ***How Toronto Attendance/Absenteeism Rates Were Published***

The *Report of 1859* was published because of an educational need to keep up with the Jones, as was honestly explained in the preface:

"As beyond the ordinary Statistical Report annually sent in to the Chief Superintendent [i.e. the annual provincial report], no further information than the publication of the School Accounts has been officially given to the Ratepayers of the City; and as nearly all of the Cities in the State of New York, and, in fact, some of our own Canadian Cities-- particularly Hamilton-- have published their School Reports, in pamphlet form; it has been deemed advisable that a Report of the past history and present condition of the City Schools should be prepared and published, under the direct authority of the Board of Trustees" (*Report of 1859*, p. 1).

A Report was thereupon published by the Toronto board for every year (excluding the Depression) until 1984.

Starting with the *Report of 1859*, public disclosure of Toronto Board absenteeism would follow a consistent format-- based on provincial reporting requirements, and, as a result, very similar to the provincial Education reports. The *Report of 1859* chronicled for the year 1858:

- the number of days Toronto schools were open (226);



- the number of schools (8), teachers (36), number of 'scholars' (as students were usually called-- 4,742);
- a breakdown of attendance for the students (640 attended less than 20 days; 867 attended 20-50 days; 1,208 attended 50-100 days; 819 attended 100-150 days; 697 attended 150-200 days; and 411 attended 200-226 days).

With some modifications, this format would remain much the same for reports over the next 75 years.

### ***The Education Act of 1871***

As noted by Bamman (1975) the history of the Toronto Board in the 1850's is one of the building of the physical plant required for a growing school population: the proud drawings of these new schools in the *Report of 1859* testifies to the importance placed on having constructed a modern educational plant virtually overnight. However, the anticipated increase in attendance in the 1860's did not occur. "In spite of the modern, centralized school plant constructed in the 1850's, it became clear that working-class parents were not to any extent sending their children to these schools" (p. 220). In fact, the Toronto Superintendent of Schools in 1857 and a Board committee in 1864 had advocated a return to rate-bill schools (i.e. schools with tuition paid by the parents) "because the free school system was financially burdensome and had not improved either the proportional enrollment or the regularity of attendance of children in the city" (Davey, 1975b, p. 271). Through his geographical analysis of attendance patterns in Toronto, Bamman makes the case that the reasons for the slowly-growing school population of the 1850's and 60's can be seen in economic factors of the time. "The

transient quality of urban employment...forced parents (and their children) to move about the city rapidly, and as a result imbalances between accommodation and children in particular schools was not resolved" (p. 220). Bamman interprets the increase of attendance in the 1870's as due to the improved standard of living among the working classes, rather than the compulsory attendance legislation passed in 1871.

Ian Davey (1975a) in looking at Hamilton school attendance between 1851 and 1891, concludes that

"the most potent determinants of attendance patterns in both urban and rural areas were the same conditions which shaped the economic and social realities of nineteenth century Canadian life. Attendance was naturally influenced by such ubiquitous features as harsh climatic conditions, bad roads and sickness. However, those factors which contributed to poverty and economic insecurity-- trade depressions, crop failure, transient work patterns and seasonal employment-- largely determined the regularity of school attendance throughout the province" (pp. 270-271).

According to Houston & Prentice (1988)

"irregularity of attendance was the price mid-nineteenth century educators had to pay for their astonishing feat of enrolling most of the province's children in school. For all its improvement, over the next decade the common school continued to have to compete for a child's presence and attention. Enrolling in school was the first step; attending frequently depended on whether or not the child was needed elsewhere...Undoubtedly, economic necessities-- or as Ian Davey so aptly phrased it, the irregular rhythms of work-- dictated in large measure the rhythm of school attendance" (p. 215).

They provide the example of Essex County, the southernmost area of the province, where with the extended growing season and a lack of available hired labour, most boys twelve years of age or over worked in the field from early April to December. This allowed them a school year of three months (p. 217).

However, the viewpoint of administrators of the time was substantially different from the interpretations of later historians. "For schoolmen throughout North America"

says Katz (1975) "securing the regular and punctual attendance of all children at school was the central educational problem of the nineteenth century" (p. 272).<sup>3</sup> Houston (1978) defines the momentum and support for compulsory attendance legislation by the Toronto and Ontario elite as

"fanned by their sense of being involved in a larger Anglo-American world--- a world of large cities, manufactories, slums, and a myriad of reform activities...Regardless of prevailing economic axioms, social critics were being seduced by the prospect of large, specialized, flexible, and rationally ordered systems...A commitment to compulsory education was both a symptom and an incentive to this seduction." (p 255)

The Education Act of 1871 contained the first Ontario legislation making education compulsory to students for at least part of the year: according to the Act, "every child, from the age of seven to twelve years inclusive, shall have the right to attend some School, or be otherwise educated for four months in each year". Parents who did not provide that right were subject to a fine of \$5 for the first offence and \$10 for any subsequent offence. The magistrate examining the case had the right to imprison the parent after ascertaining if the violation was 'willful' or for some other reason, like extreme poverty, ill-health, or too great a distance from school (Hodgins Vol XXII, pp. 213-214).

In the *Annual Report for 1871* (produced in 1872, after the Act had taken effect), Ryerson argued for the need for compulsory education with much the same arguments used in the the *Toronto Report of 1859*:

"Society has had so many terrible lessons of gross evils, which Ignorance and its twin-sister, Crime, have entailed upon it, that it has at length learned the wise one, that to banish

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<sup>3</sup> Katz also notes that schoolmen "wrote about attendance with such monotonous regularity that their complaints comprise a litany within educational documents whose significance, by its very frequency, it has become easy for the historian to underestimate. Despite the fact that attendance was the principal problem and preoccupation of these Victorian schoolmen there is only one modern monograph in English on the topic." (Katz, 1975, p. 272)

ignorance, Education must be universal, and that to prevent, or lessen, crime, Education must be Christian in every part, and be an ever present and restraining influence upon it. If, however, those least capable of appreciating so great a boon as free and Christian Education, and who, at the same time, from the growth of ignorance among them, are capable of inflicting the greatest injury upon society, refuse to accept it, it becomes a legitimate question whether society has not the right, as it has the power, to protect itself, or whether with that inherent power of protection, it will suffer ignorance and crime to triumph over it. Such a question is easily answered. The instinct of self-preservation-- of common sense,-- the best interests of humanity, and of the very class which rejects the boon, all point to the one solution, the only remedy-- Compulsory enforcement of the right which every child possesses, that he shall not grow up a pest to society, but that he shall enjoy the blessings which a Christian Education can alone confer upon him" (Hodgins, Vol. XXII, 230).

In addition, Ryerson selectively outlined the compulsory education debate in the United States, England, Australia, and Prussia, and quoted from research linking truancy with crime.

### ***Truancy and the Act of 1891***

The Toronto Board Inspector's *Annual Report for 1872* reported the results of yet another survey on absenteeism, this one undertaken in October 1872. Head Teachers (principals) in schools were requested to report lists of absentee students, the age, sex and grade of the student, and reasons for absenteeism. Results showed that the largest number of absentee students were from the Junior division, and most were under 7 years of age (and thus were not covered by the new provincial regulations). The main reason for absenteeism was illness; a secondary explanation had to do with students being required at home; while "miscellaneous causes" covered a very long list. "On the whole", Inspector Porter lamented, "I cannot affirm that much additional light has been derived from this elaborate attempt to illustrate the dark spot of absenteeism from our Public Schools". (Toronto Inspector's *Report of 1872*, p. 16. These annual reports of the Toronto Board will hereafter be abbreviated to TBAR.)

The report also recorded the appointment of a truant officer for the Board, who would enforce the new 1871 attendance regulations. The Truant Officer himself, W. C. Wilkinson, included an abbreviated report of his duties. Wilkinson received 272 reports of violation of the Truant Regulations between May to December 1872, all of which he investigated and, in all but about 11 or 12 cases, "satisfactorily remedied" (p. 63). Wilkinson stated that "at the time of my appointment there appeared to be a considerable amount of truancy in some of the schools; but the appointment of such an officer had, I believe, a wholesome effect on those that were addicted to that habit, knowing that they would be found out if continued" (TBAR, 1872, p. 64).

Wilkinson also kept a dairy, probably to aid in the compilation of his reports. It has survived and has served as a source for historical study. According to McClare (1989), the dairy showed that "Mr. Wilkinson's approach to non-attendance was clearly benign" (p. 175). Transcribed from Wilkinson's Victorian longhand, the typewritten version of diaries kept in the Sesquicentennial Museum is hundreds of pages long, but it is impossible to read more than a few pages before concluding that Wilkinson's visits to truant households show overwhelming economic and social reasons for truancy, outside of the control of parents and students.

In addition accounts by the Inspector and by the Truant Officer, and a description of the duties of the Truant Officer, the presentation of absenteeism in the *1872 Report* can be found in a breakdown of the number of days attended by (p. 27), the average daily absences, average half-day absences, average late attendances (p. 29), smallest attendance on any day for all schools (broken down by gender, p. 30), the largest attendance for any day for all schools (broken down by gender, p. 31), the average monthly and daily

attendance (p. 32), and two tables showing attendance for all the schools (p. 43).

Absenteeism, needless to say, is easily the most-cited element of the *1872 Report*.

Davey (1975) like Bamman, makes the case that attendance was influenced by economic factors and that the legislation of 1871 made no difference.

"For both the farmer and the workingman, the family's welfare took precedence over the child's education. However, the impact on school attendance patterns was quite different. The seasonal pattern of farming meant that rural children attended school and stayed there well into their teens. In the cities, the years of attendance were more compressed, most children leaving school to go to work or help around the home after they were twelve. Thus, although from 1871 onwards the majority of children were in school, family circumstances, economic pressures and physical conditions dictated the length of their stay and the seasonality and the regularity of their attendance."

Thus, Davey concludes, it is not surprising that attendance remained irregular after 1871. "The legislation for compulsory attendance, after all, had absolutely no effect upon the material conditions in which the people lived" (Davey, 1975, p. 295). It was not that parents did not want to send their children to school, but rather "the rigor and the rhythm of work made it difficult to keep them there for sustained periods of time" (Davey, 1975, p. 296).

Davey gives the musing of the Inspector of Renfrew County in 1872 as an example of the recognition by certain officials who recognized this reality. "When we take into careful consideration the claims of industry, of domestic service, and the necessary interference by sickness, we feel that considerable time must elapse before the attendance of pupils will come up to the required estimate..." (Davey, 1975, p. 296).

However, many officials and teachers continued to blame the students or parents for the problem. For A.M. Machar, a female teacher from Kingston writing on the issue of compulsory education for *Canadian Educational Monthly* in 1881, compulsory

education was the natural complement of free education. "If the State provides, at the public expense, a free education for all her children, it would seem to be her right also to insist on having all her children brought within reach of the advantages which she provided for them." If children do not come, the State has a right to insist that they come, for the good of the children and of the State:

"For, as we all know, there are, mainly, of course in the very lowest class, multitudes of parents who, in the first place, are utterly incapable of estimating the value of education for their children, and, in the next, are utterly destitute of the firmness or the self-denial of insisting on their regular attendance at school, when that would in the least interfere with their own ease or convenience. In our cities, as is well known to every one who observes the condition of the poor, many children are systematically kept from attending school, that they may be sent out, half-clad in miserable rags, to be what they can from those whose charity lacks discretion, in order to maintain their wretched parents in drunken idleness. What becomes of such children it is only too easy to see. Their early habits of vagrancy and idleness become so fixed, that the best after-influences can hardly eradicate them; they can hardly be expected to expect the contamination of vice to which they are exposed, and they grow up ignorant and undisciplined, either to become in time frequent inmates of our prisons, or-- if they escape this step to ruin-- to live a miserable hand-to-mouth existence and become, in their turn, the parents of a similarly unhappy progeny" (Machar, 1881, p. 329).

In Toronto, the issue of parental responsibility again surfaced with the appointment of James Hughes as Inspector in 1874. Hughes (appointed at the age of 28 after the death of James Porter) is portrayed by Hardy and Cochrane's *Centennial Story* (1950) as a whirlwind of activity and change, and he certainly took the issue of absenteeism head-on:

"The new Inspector was not one to skip over discreditable facts or shrink from unpleasant charges. He was a born fighter, and there was still plenty to fight about in Toronto's public school system. Instead of hiding his head, ostrich-like, in the sands of rising attendance figures, he glared at the terrible total of absences, and compared them to our shame with Rochester's record-- better by far, yet independent of any Truant Officer. For the first time the average actual attendance was shown, glaringly, as a percentage of the total registered number; also for the first time the "lates" were exposed to a remorseless tabulation" (p. 68).

A primary reason was parental indifference. To quote from the Toronto Inspector's *Report of 1874*:

"I do not wish to express any complaint against *necessary* absence caused by sickness, either of the pupils or member of their respective families; but I do take the liberty of expressing my views upon the question of absence as it presents itself to me in Toronto. I find that in regard to this matter, the greatest indifference exists on the part of many of the parents. There seems also to be quite a general misunderstanding with reference to the Regulation of the Council of Public Instruction regarding regularity of attendance; and a wide spread misconception of the meaning of the work *free* as applied to Public Schools. Instead of taking it to mean *free of charge*, as it really does, many parents regard it as giving them freedom of action in everything connected with the schools. They believe that they are free to send their children when they choose; free to take them away, when they please; free to have them leave regularly at stated times, for any purpose, or to gratify any whim; and indeed they, in many cases, believe that they are free to make any use of the Public Schools which may suit their convenience, when they have nothing else for their children to do. Freedom of speech does not allow a man to say whatever he pleases without responsibility; freedom of action does not permit a man to do what he chooses, beyond certain limits; nor does the fact that our Schools are free, give a man a right to all kinds of freedom in connection with them. It is our pride that they are free to all children so long as their parents submit to the laws and regulations laid down for their control, but they are free no longer. This seems to be the only reasonable method of conducting free schools" (TBAR, 1874, p. 15).

This also served as the basis for an extensive structural reorganization of the Toronto Board.

Hughes is held by historians to have been a 'new broom' for the Toronto Board and in Canadian education in general. A man of the phenomenal energy often seen in the Victorians, he would write over 20 books on a wide range of subjects (including several on verse, and one on women's suffrage, of which he was a prominent advocate), was a well-known amateur athlete, would champion both British Imperial connections and the Orange order (but without alienating other constituencies). He would introduce many new innovations into Canadian education, including kindergarten, whereupon he married the kindergarten teacher who piloted the first classes (Stamp, 1982). The *Report of 1874* is the beginning of this extraordinary process, and it might not be surprising that such a man would think nothing of taking on the topic that had daunted Toronto administrators for decades.



What is interesting about this episode is, again, the multiple roles held by administrative players in the dialogue on absenteeism. Hughes was new. Later, as will be seen below, he would initiate a further study on absenteeism that would contradict his approach but not force him to change it. His second-in-command, the Secretary of the Board, was W.C. Wilkinson. William Carr Wilkinson, Truant Officer of the Board quoted above, whose diaries from 1872 to 1874 provide great detail about the difficult social nature of truancy, had temporarily taken over George Barber's post as Secretary when Barber fell ill in Fall 1874, and was appointed to the position when Barber died shortly thereafter. As part of his duties, Wilkinson would have published the 1874 *Report*, and would have at least partly assisted in the preparation of Hughes's address. What he would have thought of the reference to the lower absenteeism rate of Rochester, which did without a Truant Officer, is not recorded. Still, the pairing of Hughes and Wilkinson, as the joint heads of the Toronto Board, would last for thirty years, until the retirement of Hughes in 1914.

It was the view of Hughes and other administrators that would lead to the educational changes in the 1891 Act. The legislation of 1871, while considered a step in the right direction, was obviously incomplete. "By the mid-1880's", says Stamp (1982) "it was obvious that the attendance legislation of 1871 was not securing the desired results. The percentage attendance of school-age children had inched up from 42 percent in 1872 to just 50 percent in 1887" (p. 37). Stamp sees three primary causes of the changes in attendance legislation: an awareness of urban truancy (truancy was not thought an issue in rural schools); the concern over the use of child labour, raised through such forums as the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital in 1889;

and a recognition that compulsory attendance laws were not being enforced (Stamp, 1982, p. 38).

The 1891 Act-- officially *entitled An Act Respecting Truancy and Compulsory School Attendance*-- is important to the history of absenteeism and attendance policy for four reasons.<sup>4</sup>

1. First, it increased the upper limit of compulsory attendance from 13 to 14 years of age<sup>5</sup>.
2. Secondly, the length of time students were required to attend increased from four months to the "full term" in which the schools are open.
3. Third, students had to attend school, regardless of whether they were employed. There were limited exceptions: students under home instruction; those too ill to attend, or too far from schools; children with an authorized exemption from a Justice of the Peace or the principal (exemptions that still exist today); or, children who had passed high school entrance examinations.
4. Finally, truancy enforcement was taken from the school boards, and transferred to the police commissioners or, where they did not exist, municipal councils. For Toronto,

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<sup>4</sup> *An Act Respecting Truancy and Compulsory School Attendance* (54 Victoria Chapter 56, 1891) is also important in that it is the first Ontario act specifically dedicated to enforcement of truancy and attendance. *The Public Schools Act of 1891* (54 Victoria Chapter 55, 1891) was a different act passed at the same time. This second 1891 Act continued the attendance requirements passed in the Act of 1850, including the use of average attendance for distribution of legislative and county grants.

<sup>5</sup> The upper limit had been increased from 12 to 13 in 1881.

this meant the Chief Constable of the City of Toronto. Truant Officers would thereupon be members of the police force: they would "be vested with police powers, and shall have the authority to enter factories, workshops, stores and all other places where children may be employed". Schools had the duty to report to Truant Officers the name, age and residence of students who were not attending school. Truant officers had the duty to examine all cases of truancy brought to their notice, to warn parents and guardians, and, if necessary, to bring them to the Police Magistrate in the City. They also had to report this information to the Education Department. (*Act of 1891, 54 Victoria Chapter 56, 1891*).

This change in enforcement had important consequences for how absenteeism was dealt with in Toronto schools. Truancy-- the willful missing of school-- was differentiated from absenteeism in general, which, along with tardiness, continued to be monitored by the Toronto Board and the provincial Department of Education. However, the Toronto Board's only active involvement in addressing truancy would be the initial notification of the truant officers of missing students: the City of Toronto police would take over all other functions, including enforcement and monitoring. This situation would continue for nearly thirty years, from 1891 to 1920.

### ***Conclusion***

The passing of the 1891 truancy legislation was controversial-- there were demonstrations against it in Toronto (McClare, 1989)-- but it was permanent, the outcome of over forty years of public debate. The key points of this debate were made in the early years of the Toronto Board. On the one side, there was a great deal of

momentum in enlisting legal and other forces in the drive to reduce absenteeism. Higher absenteeism led to lower school funding; and the publication of attendance rates (at the school, board, regional and provincial level) provided a degree of public scrutiny replicated in recent years only by the publication of standardized testing results. Lowering absenteeism was fundamental to the success of the newly established Toronto Board. It was thought necessary to have the majority of students attending most of the time to demonstrate system success, and this often refused to take place when administrators wanted it to take place. Student truancy was also thought to be a moral failing, and hence the failure to reduce absenteeism was a failure for the students, the school, and society in general. As well, given the believed link of absenteeism with crime, failure to eradicate absenteeism was thought to have a direct effect on future crime rates, leading to the association of truancy with police enforcement.

On the other side, there is no evidence that this momentum towards attendance was shared by the majority of the population. The writings of such typical educators as A. Macher demonstrate the close relationship between class bias and reform: enforcement of truancy was something to be done to the lowest classes. The demonstrations against the 1891 legislation, (not mentioned in *Centennial Story*, the Toronto Board's official history) show a concern with parents rights; *student* rights never appear to have entered the debate. Furthermore, there were three pieces of what we would now call educational research on the attendance situation in the Toronto Board: the parent survey (or 'census') of 1863, the teacher survey of 1872, and the reports of W. C. Wilkinson between 1872 and 1874. Results of each were published, either by the Toronto Board or the Ontario Department of Education. Each study found no evidence of a 'truancy crisis' but

powerful evidence of the social and economic factors at work on absenteeism. The power of a perceived need to combat truancy by legal channels appears to triumph with the passing of the 1891 Act. But debate over what to do about the issue would continue, along familiar lines.

## **B-2. The Re-Establishment and Organization of the Attendance Department, 1891-1931**

After the passing of the 1891 legislation, official Ontario attitudes towards compulsory attendance appear to have been quite united. Reflecting North American and European trends, it was thought that direct state enforcement against students and parents was necessary: the main area of discussion was the *extent* of that enforcement.

Reaction of school inspectors and others (at least as contained in the annual Ontario Department of Education reports) was in favour of the approach taken by the 1891 legislation. The Annual Meeting of the Ontario Teachers' Association in August 1890 reported the findings of its Committee on Compulsory Education, with two key recommendations:

1. That we regard Compulsory Education as the logical complement of our Free School System.
2. Realizing that the present compulsory clauses are inoperative in rural sections, we request the Minister of Education to make such amendments as will remove much of the responsibility of enforcement from the local authorities in each section (*Provincial Report*, 1890, p. 137).

The abridged Inspectors' Reports for the Department of Education *Provincial Report* for 1891, the year the legislation was introduced, show how powerful was the conviction that enforcement was necessary for the health of the school system. The Minister's summary at the beginning of the report noted that "the number of cases of

truancy is comparatively small for 1891" (p. xxiv). For the inspectors, if there was a decline in absenteeism in their jurisdiction, it was attributed to the effectiveness of compulsory enforcement. On the other hand, if there was no decline or an increase, this would show the necessity for more compulsory enforcement. Thus, the inspector for the County of York (North) noted that "the clause of the Act compelling each municipal council to appoint a truant officer to enforce the Act has had a most salutary and beneficial effect wherever it has been applied with wisdom and energy. Statistics from rural municipalities shew that there too compulsion is greatly needed; and without doubt in a few years the same beneficial legislation will be greatly enjoyed by rural municipalities as is now enjoyed by cities, towns and villages." (p. 136) The inspector for Lanark county found an "unsatisfactory" state of affairs for attendance. The solution?

"The Truancy Bill of last session is compulsory in the towns, but still optional in rural municipalities. It is, I believe, affecting the object for which it was framed in the towns, and I presume its wider extension is only a matter of time. Statistics from rural municipalities go to show that there too, compulsion is greatly needed" (p. 128).

Within a few years, the dialogue (at least portrayed in the Annual Reports) had changed somewhat. In the 1896 *Provincial Report* truancy was still portrayed in moral terms: in fact, truancy was a component of each inspector's submission for 1896 on the 'moral standing' of students and teachers. However, truancy *per se* was no longer thought to be a rural issue, but an issue of the towns and villages. According to the report from Bruce County (West),

"So far as I can ascertain, there is very little truancy and it is confined principally to villages and towns. It is true that rural schools suffering from irregular attendance, are calling loudly for a stringent law on compulsory attendance; but irregular attendance is not caused by truancy. It is caused more by indifference on the part of parents and by weakness in yielding to the whims of children who are not very anxious to go regularly to school" (p. 128).

The rural inspectors now differentiated between 'willful truancy', which was thought a moral failing of individual students, and working on the farm. For example, the inspector of Huron County (South) stated categorically that

"Truancy is not on the increase in West Huron. There are a few cases of truancy every term in our town and village schools, but in the rural schools truancy does not exist. The majority of children enjoy attending school, and remain away only when circumstances compel them to do so. The average attendance during September and October this year was very low on account of many children being detained at home to exist in picking the vast crop of apples" (p. 159).

As the inspector of Haldimand county noted, although 'truancy' was attributed to the student and 'irregular attendance' to other factors, both were thought unacceptable.

"I have no hesitation in saying that truancy is on the decrease. In fact, very seldom do I hear of a case of persistent truancy. A very much greater evil is irregular attendance. It is difficult to see why an unnecessary absence from school at the pleasure of the pupil is worse than an unnecessary absence of the pupil at the pleasure of the parent. It is pleasing to note, however, that while truancy is steadily on the decrease, the regular attendance of pupils is steadily on the increase. This is no doubt owing, in a great measure, to the increasing attractiveness of the school rooms and to the increasing interest of the pupils in their school work" (p. 151).

But the desire to blame the individual student not attending school for a moral failing, a weakness of character akin to, and leading to, criminality, continued to be very strong in Ontario educational circles. In 1903, J.K. Knight, an inspector from Lindsay, published "Compulsory Education and the Truancy Act" in *Canada Educational Monthly*, which had earlier been a paper read at the meeting of the Ontario Educational Association. The paper starts out with the usual argument that "A Free School Act implies not only that every child has a right to be educated, but also that every ratepayer has a right to know that every child in the municipality in which he pays taxes is educated." He notes that the 1891 act has done much "to improve the attendance of children in cities and towns, and possibly in incorporated villages. It provides for the



appointment of truant officers in all urban municipalities, and wherever teachers, truant officers and magistrates do their duty the attendance ought to be all that can be reasonably expected."

However, there is one case in which the Act is weak and could easily be improved-- where the absence from school is the fault of the child and not of the parent or guardian; in fact, "where the child actually plays truant. To fine or imprison the parent, when he has done all he can do, is not likely to accomplish the end in view." His solution was that "if the child were imprisoned two days for the first offence, two weeks for the second, and received a flogging for the third, very few scholars would stay away of their own accord. It might be better still if the flogging were administered for the first offence."

This course of action was never seriously considered or put forward by other educational authorities (and in fact was somewhat peripheral to the main point of the article). Its importance lies in the fact that such a statement was read at one important professional conference and later published in an important professional journal by a senior Ontario educational official at the turn of the century. It may have been extreme, but was within the continuum (if on the margins) of official thought of the time.<sup>6</sup>

The Toronto Board's approach towards truancy (that is, James Hughes' approach

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<sup>6</sup> The rest of the paper details a way to fine parents of rural students for absenteeism without involving educational staff or truant officers, contradicting Knight's earlier premise of not blaming the parents.

towards truancy) was consistent. In late 1899, James Hughes had submitted a report to the Toronto Board's Management Committee. The report looked at the number of students reported to the truant officer (i.e. the police truant officer) who had been present at school for less than 80 days between April 1, 1898 and April 1, 1899. There were 117 of these non-attending students. The reasons given for absence in "nearly all the above cases are satisfactory, chiefly sickness in the family, or personal sickness, or removal from the city, or similar reasons" . Yet Hughes then stated that "in the cases of truancy the truant officers are handicapped, as the Magistrate will not send children to the Industrial School without the consent of their parents" (Management Committee Minutes, June 22, 1899, p. 97).

To modern eyes the two statements may be contradictory-- on the one hand, Hughes is saying that (as in the previous Toronto Board investigations of reasons for truancy) most cases are due to "satisfactory" reasons, yet he also points out that the Police Magistrate is not sending truants to the Industrial School without parental consent: by inference, this would imply that truancy is a problem that has to be addressed by sterner measures. This may, perhaps, be an indication of the power that the issue of "truancy" had on school administrators like James Hughes.

A few months later (February 1900), Hughes was writing to the Ontario government requesting a tightening of the truancy laws. He noted that the current Act stated that parents and guardians should send children to school regularly, but this was too ambiguous. In particular, in Toronto, the Police Magistrate had taken this to mean that the parent fulfills his duty if he tells his child to go to school. Hughes thought the Act "was clearly intended to mean that responsibility should rest on the parent not merely

to tell his children to go to school, but to see that they do attend school. I think the clause should be amended to make it perfectly clear that the parent is responsible for the attendance of his children at school” (Archives of Ontario, Series RG-42, Reel 5609).

Hughes was in good company with his concerns. In the same Ministry file containing his letter is the correspondence of a lengthy dispute between the Chief Inspector of the Ottawa Board, and the Chief of Police of Ottawa: the Chief Inspector thought the Chief of Police too lax in his enforcement of the truancy laws. Also included were petitions from Windsor, Sarnia, and Berlin (now Kitchener). These could be summarized by the head of the Sarnia Committee on Truancy:

“Those concerned in the administration of the law know perfectly well that a very large portion of the juvenile crime committed in our town is directly traceable to those who have started on the down grade by playing truant. In the hours of idleness and mischief so spent, evil associations have been formed, and idle and lawless habits acquired, which in too many cases, have developed habitual criminals: hence the necessity for a vigorous enforcement of the law, and for such amendments as will make it thoroughly effective” (Archives of Ontario, Series RG-42, Reel 5609).

In May 1905, the Management Committee of the Toronto Board fielded a query by one of the trustees, James Simpson, about truancy, which appeared to show that the board was quite satisfied with the current state of affairs and legislation.

**Question:** Are the present truancy officers doing their work to the satisfaction of the Management Committee?

**Answer:** Yes.

**Question:** Are there sufficient truancy officers to adequately cope with the work necessary to insure a proper attendance at the schools of the city?

**Answer: Yes**

**Question:** Is it advisable to recommend to the Board of Police Commissioners that additional truancy officers be appointed?

**Answer: No.**

The Committee added that "It is only through courtesy that the truancy officers confer with the Chief Inspector, as they are wholly under the jurisdiction of the Police Commissioners" (*Minutes of the Board of Education*, 1905, Appendix, p. 204, hereafter called TBEM; Committee report was adapted by the Board, May 4th, 1905).

### ***The Attendance Acts of 1919 and the Foundation of the Attendance Department***

Fifteen years after the Management Committee pronounced its satisfaction with the philosophy of enforcing truancy through police enforcement, the Board's Annual Report of 1920 gave a very different interpretation of affairs. A section of the report on "School Attendance" briefly described the setting up of the Toronto Board's own Attendance Department.

"Formerly three members of the Police Force were appointed by the Police Commissioners to work under the direction of the Chief Inspector of Schools.<sup>7</sup> Their duties... consisted in looking after cases of truancy and irregular attendance. It was generally felt that while the officers were conscientious in the discharge of their duty the system was permeated too much by the unbending authority of law as typified in the police and lacked the more gentle but not less powerful element of moral suasion" (TBAR, 1920, p. 103).

The structural reason for this change can be found in legislation passed by the Ontario legislature in 1919. The School Attendance Act took enforcement of truancy

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<sup>7</sup> Given that the Management Committee had said in 1905 that the police truant officers were entirely under control of the police department, lines of authority appear to have been a little blurred.

legislation out of the hands of the police, where it had resided since 1891, and squarely back into the area of responsibility of the local boards of education.

But in examining Toronto Board and Ministry of Education annual reports in the years between 1905 and 1920, one can also see an increased activism in what is perceived as the role of education. The first 'wave' of progressivism in education, as typified by James Hughes, J.J. Kelso, and Education Minister George Ross, was what Stamp describes as a "loosely based 'child saving' movement which focussed its attention on a variety of interconnected school and school-related reforms" (Stamp, 1982, p. 53). Besides the introduction of kindergartens to Canada by James and Ada Hughes, most of these reforms tended to be legislative.

However, many of the Toronto Board innovations in the early twentieth century were aimed at supplementing perceived social and family weaknesses. Forest schools were founded in 1911 at Victoria Park and High Park, with the intent of providing poor urban students with the positive moral and health benefits of direct contact with nature (as High Park and Victoria Park were perceived to be). Also in 1911, the Board established its School Medical Inspection Department, which provided health services for Toronto Board students. The connection of student health with student achievement was clear in the Annual Report of the first Chief Medical Inspector, Dr. W. E. Struthers:

"Education must comprehend the whole man, and the whole man is built fundamentally on what he is physically. Hence, if the State makes mandatory laws for education, it should pass compulsory legislation to secure physical soundness and capacity. If the community permits or orders its children to assemble in public places at the age of greatest susceptibility of infection, where certainly the opportunity for the spread of illness is greatly increased, and washes its hands of all responsibility for their physical condition and protection from disease, it is committing a social crime" (Willebrands, 1988, p. 1).

Willebrands, in her history of health care in the Toronto Board from 1910 to 1980, says that prior to 1911, “health services to school-age children were largely non-existent” in the Toronto Board, so this was a very important step. The School Medical Inspection Department lasted only six years. In 1917, after internal power struggles within the Toronto Board, external disputes with the local Toronto Department of Public Health, and a city referendum, the department was transferred to the city’s Department of Public Health. At that point, a School Medical Services division was created within the Public Health Department. The responsibilities of the division included development of comprehensive medical, dental and nursing services in the schools (Willebrands, 1988, pp. 1-55).

The Toronto Annual Reports of 1920 and 1921 show the range of interventionist program activities. The 1920 Report gives a summary of research by Dr. Eric Kent Clarke, Psychiatrist of the Department of Public Health, on the mental health and intelligence of elementary students in 38 public schools (1.66% of the population were found to be defective, either through mental defection or through being psychopathic). There was then a description by the Director of Education (as the Chief Inspector was now called) of the description for 'special classes' for these students (TBAR, 1920, pp. 55-61). There was also a report from the Chief Medical Officer on a survey of physical defects and malnutrition of elementary students, from which it was calculated that 7 to 8 % of the school population had defects that could benefit from corrective exercise, and 26% had some sort of malnutrition (pp. 62-64).

The 1921 Report contains a report on the three open-air classes at Orde Street School, and the Forest Schools at Victoria and High Park (pp. 60-74), further results of

'mental surveys' by Dr. Clarke (pp. 74-75) and a summary of School Medical Inspection, including 19,203 complete physical examinations of students, 656,498 classroom inspections of children, 55,586 dental inspections, and 2,276 psychiatric examinations (p. 78). The justification for this was long-term efficiency, for example with open-air classes: "As the children suitable for open-air classes are otherwise normal, they have the possibility of growing up to be healthy, useful citizens and an asset to the state, or of being allowed to run on as the present with a considerable proportion later becoming a direct charge on the state."

Attendance and truancy would now be reframed from being a moral weakness best enforced by the police, to being an issue of health and social services. The 1922 Minutes included a discussion of whether to give preference to hiring Attendance Officers "who have had some experience in Social Service work" (TBEM, 1922, p. 12, p. 32). Flogging was no longer raised as an option.

### ***Secondary School Absenteeism***

The initial debate around compulsory attendance of students was entirely focused on the common, or elementary schools. At that time, secondary schools (especially collegiate institutes) were thought of as much more elite institutions. Attended by only a small proportion of the population (5 % in 1871, a lower proportion than those attending university today) they were considered as preparatory institutions for universities (hence the American term of 'prep schools') or as training grounds for the professions and businesses. Given that situation, no one appears to have thought enforcement of attendance would be necessary-- and as noted above, the 1891 legislation specifically

exempted public school students who had completed their high school entrance examination from compulsory attendance.

But by the early twentieth century, things were changing. In 1904, the various public schools boards in the city of Toronto-- the Public board or Common School Board, the Technical Board, and the Collegiate Institute Board-- were combined into the Toronto Board of Education.<sup>8</sup> In the 1904 Inaugural Address of George Gooderham, the first chair of the amalgamated Toronto Board claimed that the chief work of the amalgamation would be "so that there will no unnecessary overlapping, and at the same time to secure for all classes of the community the special education they desire for the community."

Higher education (by which Gooderham meant high school) had in the past been reserved almost exclusively for those who would enter the learned professions. But "the great development of modern industrial and commercial institutions, and the introduction of scientific principles into the work of everyday life, make it absolutely necessary that the young men and women who are to develop the manufacturing and business enterprises of our city should have the advantages of a higher education provided for them, of a character suited to the work they are expected to do" (TBEM, 1904, Appendix, p. 4).

Secondary enrollment started an enormous growth spurt that would take it from

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<sup>8</sup> The amalgamation was controversial at the time.. There was only one technical school (which later became Central Technical School) and three collegiate institute (Jarvis, Harbord, and Parkdale) compared to 57 elementary schools. The Toronto amalgamation presaged the amalgamation of high school and public schools in most cities and towns, which may been a reason for the stern resistance of John Seath, the respected and powerful Inspector of High Schools , to what might be considered a minor administrative change. See Heath, 1903, pp. 33-35; Hardy and Cochrane, 1950, pp. 106-108.



21,723 Ontario students in 1900 (5% of public school enrolment) to 127,250 students in 1950 (25% of public school enrolment). (Phillips, 1978, pp. 164-165). While at the time of the Toronto amalgamation there was only three collegiate institute and one technical school, by the end of World War I there were seven collegiate institutes, the technical school had moved from a medium sized commercial building to the single most expensive educational building ever constructed in Ontario, and the foundation had been laid for the construction of a comprehensive city-wide vocational and business secondary system.

With increased expansion came the monitoring of students, through enrollment and attendance figures. In 1906, the Board approved a motion to make monthly returns of attendance at collegiates, "with the registered an average attendance of pupils under the headings of subjects taught." (TBEM, 1906, p. 155; average attendance for night schools was already being reported. See TBAR, 1905.)

The extension of compulsory attendance of students from 14 to 16 years of age in the 1919 legislation was attributed by some to a desire to keep these students from competing for jobs with returning World War I veterans (Stamp, 1982, p. 107). The *Provincial Annual Report* for 1918 gave a different interpretation.

"Rightly or wrongly, the schools are being look to, on the one hand, of the character of the youth and, on the other hand, for training in efficiency. If the schools are to accept the responsibility... the conditions of attendance and organization should be such as to make it possible to realize these ends...if the child's schooling closes at the end of the elementary school period, the chief opportunity for character direction is lost to the school, because the significant aims and purposes of life do not begin to take shape until the youth enters upon the period of adolescence. If the school is to be held responsible in a large measure for the development of the national character, it follows that it most take an important part in guiding and controlling the youth during this critical and formative period." (*Provincial Report*, 1918, p. 25).

In an echo of Ryerson's technique justifying the compulsory attendance legislation of 1871, the *Report* pointed to similar compulsory adolescent education being enacted in Britain and various American states.

This extension of compulsory education to a maximum of 16 years of age meant the enforcement of attendance into the Fifth Form (now Grades 9 and 10). Minutes of the Toronto Board make it clear that there was great concern about the effects of the legislation on Toronto schools.<sup>9</sup> Between 1918 and 1921, there were numerous requests to officials for statistics on adolescent enrollment, on the capacity of secondary schools, on a possible 'duplex' structure of the school, where two shifts of students could use the school on one day, on the statistics for adolescent students attending night school and part time classes. (See TBEM, 1918, p. 958; TBEM, 1919, p. 214; TBEM, 1921, p. 19, 51, 63, 105-106, 243, 263, 275, 318, 330, Appendix p. 122, 301-302, 330; TBEM, 1922, p. 14, 127, 189; re. overcrowding of schools and the duplex system, see TBEM, 1922, Appendix p. 845, 1308-1309). The new Attendance Department was set up in the midst of this minor tidal wave.

### ***Organization and Philosophy of the Attendance Department***

The 1920 account of the setup of the Attendance Department notes that there were four staff, a Chief Attendance Officer and three Attendance Officers. During 1929 they

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<sup>9</sup> In 1922 the Toronto Board passed a motion requesting that the Act be modified so that students 16 years of age should not have to attend school. The motion was intended to be added to those already passed by Peterborough and Chatham, claiming that "the municipalities are not in a position at this time to bear the great cost of carrying [the terms of adolescent compulsory attendance] out". The motion started with "whereas the Adolescent Act is a burden upon the shoulders of the workingmen who are the lead able to bear it, and whereas the cost to the taxpayer is too large a burden" (TBEM, 1922, Appendix p. 309). In 1923 the Board investigated a passing a bill to suspend the Act (TBEM, 1923, pp. 23, 48). These resolutions do not appear to have influenced Ministry policy.

investigated 3,831 cases of 'irregular attendance', of which 624 were examples of 'truancy' , i.e. willful non-attendance of the student.

As well, the department was responsible for investigating and granting exemptions to the legislation-- that is, students who were granted exemptions to not attend school (usually to work), allowed under the 1891 legislation but now pivotal for those 14-16 year olds who were leaving school. There were 244 exemptions granted by the Toronto Board in 1929 and 111 requests for exemptions that were refused. This was "exclusive of visits to movie theatres and factories, which are an essential part of an officer's work".<sup>10</sup>

Inspector Elliott, writer of the 1920 description of the department,<sup>11</sup> noted that there were many challenges faced by the Attendance Officers. "In a city the size of Toronto there are always present environmental conditions that make for the undoing of boys and girls, especially where the home is not possessed of sufficient moral force to counteract them". Part of the problem was the rapid increase in the foreign (i.e. non-British) population. "While many of these people, while in humble circumstances, are going their utmost to secure for their children all the advantages of the public schools, a very large number are anxious to put their children to work before the age of fourteen years. This results in a great increase of visits by the officers to the homes".

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<sup>10</sup> The Wilkinson diaries make it very clear that Truant Officer W. C. Wilkinson visited homes, not factories, when he had the position in the early 1870's; the visits to theatres and factories may have been legacies of the police enforcement of truancy between 1891 and 1919.

<sup>11</sup> Inspector Elliott had been appointed Chief Attendance Officer in 1919 for a one-year period, for 1920. Between 1921 and 1923 there does not appear to have been a Chief Attendance Officer (TBEM, 1919, Appendix p. 1368).

As well, there were problems with disabled servicemen unable to find employment in an already-glutted market. "Many of these men have large families and in the presence of abnormally high rents and high cost of food, clothing and fuel, they are driven to request exemption for children, either that the home may be looked after while the already overburdened mother goes to work, or that they may supplement the family earnings" (TBAR, 1920, p. 104). It was in these 'deserving' cases that "the time, tact, and resourcefulness of the officers are taxed to the utmost. Everything is done that is possible to provide for the family so that the children may continue at school" (p. 104). Elliott openly criticized an impossible emphasis on self-reliance that would have been taken for granted two decades earlier: "it is true that the doctrine of self-helpfulness should always be emphasized and that the doling of charity should be strictly limited to the actually needy, but official suggestions and advice are of practically no value to a man whose family lack the bare necessities of life" (p. 105).

An examination of the Toronto Board's 1920 Report also shows a format change: school by school absenteeism was no longer reported. As with many changes, this one went unremarked and unnoticed, but it shows a major cultural shift within the Board. From now on, discussion of the issue would ignore school-level differences, or even the role of the individual school. Instead, the dialogue would concentrate, as in Elliott's report, on a direct dialogue of intervention between the Attendance Department and the 'truant' student or his/her parents.

In the provincial Department of Education reports, the new "Provincial School Attendance Officer" started making reports starting in 1920. The 1921 Provincial Report had a section on the duties of Attendance Officers that clearly shows the origins of

modern professional student support services. Like Elliott's report, this emphasizes that addressing truancy is much more than penalizing missing students. Instead, the Attendance Officer "may often be an intermediary between the school and the home and can do much to smooth away causes of friction which prevent a child's steady progress in his class." The Officer would, when appropriate, bring cases to the attention of the Children's Aid Society, the Mother's Allowance Commission, and similar institutions. When considering adolescent truants, the Officer played a vocational guidance role anticipating the function of guidance counselors.

"In the case of adolescents who must leave school he acts in the capacity of a vocational guide himself, or in harmony with any local juvenile placement agency which endeavors intelligently to put young people in employment and to guide their after steps so that they may make satisfactory progress in their chosen work. In addition to this he must be able to lay before the local education authorities reports and information from which they may be able to organize and maintain for the handicapped and for the part-time pupils special classes..." (*Provincial Report, 1921, p. 81*).

However, the former justification of attendance enforcement as a form of educational efficiency was simultaneously held. The 1927 Report of the Provincial School Attendance Officer states a philosophy not substantially different from the Toronto Board *Report of 1859*, or the justifications for compulsory attendance uttered by Egerton Ryerson, but restated in the colouring of Taylorian scientific efficiency:

"The enforcement of school attendance is founded upon the basic principle of the moral right of every child to an adequate education consistent with his powers and needs and the corresponding moral obligation on the part of all persons charged with his care to see that this rights are protected and, as far as possible, realized... The capital investment of the Province of Ontario in elementary schools plant and equipment approximates one hundred millions of dollars. To maintain this plant in working order and to furnish the necessary staff and teaching equipment, about forty million dollars per annum are expended. It is essential that a plant of such dimensions involving so large a public investment and in itself so indispensable to national stability and progress, should operate on the same principles of economy and efficiency that apply in the industrial and commercial world-- that is to say, the plant should run to capacity, there should be no idling units, it should care for its full quota of raw material, and there should be a minimum of leakage and a maximum of the finest finished products of the varied types which it is designed to produce. It is the special function of the

Attendance Department to care for these fundamental factors in efficiency on the quantitative side" (*Provincial Report*, 1927, p. 45).

The Provincial School Attendance Officer's submission soon became among the longest in the annual provincial reports, presumably some measure of the continued prominence of the issue of attendance. The presentation of this information was quite sophisticated for the time. The 1927 report, for example, has bar charts and line graphs that would not be out of place in a modern social science paper (*Provincial Report*, 1927, pp. 46-49).

### ***Reports of the Toronto Board Chief Attendance Officer , 1926-1932***

Margaret Pettigrew became Acting Chief Attendance Officer of the Toronto Board in 1924; the position was made permanent by 1926 (TBEM, 1924, pp. 231-232; TBEM, 1926, Appendix, p. 685). She wrote a series of department reports that were included in the Board's Annual Report from 1926 until 1932, when the Annual Reports were halted due to financial constraints of the Depression. These reports do not have the graphical sophistication of the provincial reports but clearly document the concerns and direction of Toronto's Attendance Department.

The 1927 report noted that the three field officers had investigated 9,464 cases of absenteeism or irregular attendance reported to them by principals, teachers, and social organizations, out of a total of 79,000 students (TBAR, 1927, p. 222; in TBAR, 1928, p. 304, it was noted that two additional field officers had been hired). The 1928 report gave the Department's interpretation of three main causes of this absenteeism, according to experience of the Attendance Officers: ill-health, the indifference or selfishness of parents/guardians, and poverty "with its attendant difficulties."

Ill-health was the most frequent cause of absenteeism (as was found in previous Toronto studies), in spite of the "efficient services" in health support offered by the Board and the City of Toronto. Absences of half a day, a whole day, or a couple of days at a time "inevitably result in retardation, with costly re-education and loss of interest which leads to truancy." There did not appear to be much the Attendance Department could do about it, however.

Ill-health had a second subgrouping, 'mental infirmity'. A number of students were excluded from regular classes due to mental infirmity, "as they were found to be quite incapable of assimilating education as provided by our school system". Unfortunately, the provincial institutions designed for them were over crowded and these students had to wait until vacancies became available. "This class of pupil is frequently reported to the Attendance Officer by interested citizens, who unaware of the facts of the case regard it as one in which the department has failed to secure regularity of school attendance".

The second cause, the negligence of parents, was admittedly small, but it took much time and effort to address. If all other efforts failed, the Attendance Department would have to take the parents to Juvenile Court, as they did in 321 cases during 1928.

The third cause, poverty, took substantial resources in co-ordination with other social organizations, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters. The type of intervention--subsidies for books and supplies, and scholarships for poor but promising students—may be rather limited by today's standard but it was a substantial change at the time, since it

was a series of systemic interventions aimed at a root cause outside of the classroom (TBAR, 1928, pp. 300-304).

Another intervention of sorts was directed at non-English families arriving from Europe.

"The Immigration Officials report once a month to the Attendance Department the number of families having children of school age who have located in Toronto during the month. An officer calls at the home and arranges, if the family has not already done so, for the school attendance of the children concerned. The officers report that many of these new comers are glad to discuss their educational problems with the officer, and learn details of school attendance laws in the new country" (TBAR, 1929, p. 322).

Much of the activity in the department continued to be directed at the 14-16 year old students affected by the 1920 legislation. Issuing employment and home certificates was still a large role, although the 1929 report notes that only 1,605 certificates were issued in 1929, compared to 3,667 in 1922 and 4,812 in 1923. The change was attributed to both more stringent requirements following the rather free policies of the initial years, and alternate programs to keep students being educated (TBAR, 1929, pp. 320-321).

In these policies, one can see the origin of secondary retention programs currently in place in Toronto and other boards. They had been established partly because of the inadequacy of evening classes for those students leaving at 14 years of age. "These children do not go on to evening school immediately on completing their public school education, and often make no effort to enter these classes until two or three classes have elapsed, during which time they have run to seed educationally" (TBAR, 1927, p. 223). Moreover, it was the experience of the Attendance Department that even when arrangements were made with 14-16 year old students to start attending Evening Classes,



"the adolescent has absented himself from these classes often before the term has well began" (TBAR, 1927, pp. 223-224).

One retention program consisted of a number of both Academic and Commercial Fifth Form Classes established in elementary schools. At this time, elementary school ended at Fourth Form (the equivalent of Grades 7-8) while secondary schools started at Fifth Form (Grades 9-10), but there were exit and entrance requirements that tended to make the transition to high school difficult for the more at-risk students. The establishment of Fifth Form programs at elementary schools enabled these students to graduate from Fifth Form in two years, "during which time the student has gained some skill which assists him in gaining admission to the business world" (TBAR, 1932, p. 145).

A second program consisted of part-time classes established at five centres in elementary schools "to meet the needs of the student who is forced to leave school before he has attained the educational standard set for admission to technical school" (TBAR, 1929, pp. 320-321). In 1930, students in these classes were allowed to write the entrance examinations to secondary school. Only one student successfully completed all sections of the exam, but at least it created the possibility of these students continuing in education (TBAR, 1930, p. 186).

For students 14 years of age or older who were determined to leave, the Attendance Department continued to work at facilitating what would later be called the "transition" to work. In 1931 it was reported that "in spite of the extreme business depression the Officer who has been attempting to place adolescents in suitable positions

has managed to secure employment for a considerable number of needy children, and has established satisfactory contacts with employers of juvenile labour" (TBAR, 1931, p. 192).

As the Chief Attendance Officer of the Toronto Board, Margaret Pettigrew clearly identified her policy as efficiency driven, but child and student-centred. "No school system should be so inelastic that a boy must be sentenced to a penal institution to realize his ambition through vocational training" (a direct if inadvertent contradiction of James Hughes' comments from 1905, although it was Hughes who had hired her as a new teacher). "The New Education Programme is said to be based on the interest in the child, and let us hope that it will be interest, not only in the gifted, and exceptional child, but that which will secure for every child an opportunity equal to his capacity" (TBAR, 1929, p. 325).

### ***TBE Attendance Survey of 1930-1931***

In her report for 1930, Margaret Pettigrew declared that a survey was being undertaken to study the extent of truancy in the schools (TBAR, 1930, p. 187). For anyone reading her reports, this might sound a bit odd, given that the 1928 report cited above had already given three main causes of student absenteeism-- ill health and mental infirmity, the negligence of parents, and poverty. In fact, the word 'truancy' (referring to willful and persistent absenteeism by students) is not mentioned at all in the 1928 report. Why, then, a survey involving the full-time employment of a social worker to investigate the issue?

It is often not easy to deduce reasons behind the somewhat bland policy statements of administrative officials. In this case, however, there is some evidence that while the Toronto Board administration had abandoned a preoccupation with truancy that was characteristic of the late nineteenth century, certain trustees had not done so. For example, in 1926 a resolution was passed by the Board instructing Chief Inspector Cowley to request the co-operation of the Toronto Chief of Police and his men "in an effort to curtail school truancy", by reporting the names of unaccompanied children of school age discovered on the street during school hours (TBEM, 1926, p. 112).

Moreover, a Special Meeting of the Board was held in May 1926 to meet with Judge Mott of the Juvenile Court, to discuss closer co-operation of the Board and Juvenile Court in "special cases" of students, which, in the discussion as recorded in the minutes, was interpreted as truant students. Judge Mott then spoke to the board "at length on the various stages leading up to the more serious forms of delinquency, starting invariably with truancy", as well as the value of the parent and school in alleviating the situation, the responsibilities of the parent, home, and state. The Board gave thanks to Judge Mott for his "splendid inspirational address" and moved that the address be printed and sent to each member of the Board, along with other copies for further distribution (TBEM, 1926, p. 122). Thus, the equation of truancy with morality was by no means dead.

The 1930 survey was a result of this worry, specifically as an outgrowth of a "Special Committee of the Board re. Attendance Problems", that was formed in January 1930 and met at the end of February 1930. The Committee consisted of six trustees but also included (as non-voting attendees) Judge Mott, the chair of the local Big Brother

movement, the Chief Attendance Officer and the Chief Inspector. In the meeting, Chief Attendance Officer Pettigrew appeared to be most concerned with the issue of the 'dull-normal' child-- specifically, changes in school curriculum, and perhaps an Industrial School where some children could attend away from home. Judge Mott's focus was different. It was his suggestion that there should be an intensive study made of all cases of truancy, and a report prepared giving the number of cases, ages and grades at which truancy was most frequent, and what was considered a temporary absence and what was considered truancy (perhaps an indication that the understanding of the term was not universal). He also restated that "invariably the serious problem of delinquency starts with truancy" (Minutes of the Special Committee of the Board re. Attendance Problems, February 28, 1930).

Over the next few months, the Committee held several meetings with Judge Mott, the Big Brother Movement and the Attendance Department. In addition, the Attendance Department conducted a survey of 100 cases of "irregular attendance or truancy" since September 1929, and submitted a report at the last meeting of the Committee in April 1930. The report found that truant students varied from ages 5 to 15 and from kindergarten to first year of high school; the length of truancy varied for a few days to several weeks. It is unclear whether this survey was intended by the Attendance Department to be the response to Judge Mott's request for an "intensive" survey. If so, the Committee did not think it intense enough, because it authorized that the Department now make an additional "intensive" study of the problems of persistent and intermittent truancy in the schools, from the beginning of September to the end of the year. The Committee authorized the Department to employ such additional help as needed up to the

cost of \$1,500 (Minutes of the Special Committee of the Board re. Attendance Problems, April 25, 1930).

The survey as implemented in Fall 1930 did this, but was intended to be more than another fact-gathering mission. The person hired was a social worker, who was authorized not only to "study the extent of the problem of truancy, its causes, methods of prevention", but also to "undertake follow-up work in families where younger children are likely to be affected by existing adverse conditions causing truancy of older members" (TBAR, 1930, p. 187). The intervention was considered to be quite successful. First, the number of cases referred to Juvenile Court declined from 155 to 98; secondly, Pettigrew noted a change in the attitudes of students and their parents. "In nearly every case the Visitor [i.e., the Social Worker, sometimes referred to at the time as a Friendly Visitor] has been able to change attitudes of defiance and bitterness to understanding and co-operation, and children whose problems had their origin in home, school or community have been given sympathy, guidance and practical assistance" (TBAR, 1930, p. 187).

The survey found that, of the number of days lost, the vast majority were lost through illness (78%), home help (5%) and "parental neglect" (4%). Truancy was a miniscule contributor towards absenteeism-- less than a third of a percent (TBAR, 1930, p. 187-188). Possibly to drive the point home, the survey was replicated in 1931, and the reasons for days lost remained the same. Truancy was, once again, demonstrated as a minor (and virtually non-existent) contributor to student absenteeism, the latest demonstration of this fact in a succession of Toronto Board surveys over a period of 70 years. Pettigrew was able to point out (again) that fighting absenteeism in the Toronto

system meant providing support for childrens' health, and multiplying services for the child who is "unadjusted in the school system" (TBAR, 1931, pp. 193-194).

### **B-3. Maturity of the Attendance Department, 1932-1949**

By 1931, the Toronto Board's attitude toward absenteeism had changed from a pursuit of truant students, to what would today be called a "holistic" approach, with absenteeism seen as linked with many other factors, including health, family issues, economic factors, and academic self-esteem. Thus, addressing absenteeism meant addressing these social issues. This might have led to a more activist approach by the Board, but the economic realities of the Depression intervened. In 1932, Margaret Pettigrew was one of the members of a Committee formed by the Board to investigate student nutrition. The report concluded that malnutrition was closely related to the inability to follow school lessons, to family income, and to health issues (Minutes of the Special Committee of the Board Re. Undernourished School Children, October 31, 1932). Beyond this, the economic realities of the 1930's appear to have restricted the Attendance Department to the mandate secured in the 1920's.

#### ***Truancy Redux***

However, the issue of absenteeism (and in particular, "truancy") again became prominent in the beginning of 1943, with the formation of the "Sub-Committee of Management Committee re. Segregation of Truants Only From Boys and Girls Guilty of Other Misdemeanors", later shortened, presumably for the sake of clarity, to the "Special Committee Re. Truancy and Delinquency", and, finally, the "Truancy Committee". At the Board meeting of January 21 1943, the Board passed two resolutions. First, there was a request that the Police Commissioner of Toronto consider "the advisability of instructing their officers to stop and question children of "apparent school age" seen on

the streets during school hours (TBEM, 1943, p. 23). This, of course, was nearly identical to a Board resolution of 1926 described above.<sup>12</sup> The second resolution was for a committee to "consider the treatment of truant boys and girls of our schools" (TBEM, 1943, p. 14). The Committee met between March 1943 and Summer 1945. The Committee was formed with three trustees (none of whom had been on the earlier 1930 Committee), several school principals, and the two central players from the 1930 committee, Chief Attendance Officer Pettigrew and (later) Judge Mott of the Juvenile Court.

The Committee had been convened for a very specific purpose—to decide whether those children who had been incarcerated for truancy should be segregated from those "guilty of misdemeanors". However, once the Committee met, the chair stated that "the approach to the question should touch other matters not inconsistent with the purpose of the Committee". The Committee, in this first meeting, came to a set of conclusions that would not have been out of place at the turn of the century:

- a. That a large percentage of delinquency is due to irregular or sporadic school attendance.
- b. That many cases of juvenile delinquency are traced to irregular school attendance almost from the time that the pupils concerned started school, and that, in these cases, the main contributing factor has been a lack of foresight or interest on the part of parents to see that school attendance is regular.

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<sup>12</sup> The Police Commissioner's office reported back that "the matter has been discussed with the Divisional Inspectors who advise that this procedure is now being followed" (TBEM, 1943, p. 43).



c. That 95% of all juvenile delinquency is born of irregular school attendance. There is very little difference from the school point of view between a truant and a delinquent.

d. That, from a legal standpoint, truancy is not considered delinquency but that from the school standpoint, delinquency and truancy are synonymous.

e. Habitual truants from school, when brought to juvenile court, are very rarely confined to detention home.

f. That schools for boys, similar to those formerly conducted at Bowmanville and Galt, Ontario, should be opened as soon as possible.

g. That consideration should be given to the opening of a separate court to deal with cases of truants from school (Minutes of sub-Committee of Management Committee re. Segregation of Truants only from Boys and Girls Guilty of Other Misdemeanors, March 31, 1943).

After about a month of meetings, the Special Committee passed on three recommendations to the Management Committee of the Board.<sup>13</sup> First, it recommended as an experiment that qualified 'visiting teachers' be appointed by the Board and be assigned to a selected area in the city, "with a view to studying and meeting as far as possible conditions attending truancy." Secondly, it suggested opening a number of schools as "community centres", as a further means to check tendencies to truancy. Thirdly, it suggested that government authorities be urged to discourage the employment

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<sup>13</sup> The Management Committee considered issues of administration and would forward their recommendations to the full Board meeting.

of mothers having children, "especially where the father is absent from home and where, as a result, the children are left without the proper parental care" (Minutes of sub-Committee of Management Committee re. Segregation of Truants only from Boys and Girls Guilty of Other Misdemeanors, May 11, 1943, p. 75). How such single parents would survive without working was not explained.

The Management Committee agreed that two visiting teachers should be appointed, one in the east and one in the west side of the city. These visiting teachers "should thoroughly know school work and school procedures but should approach the problem from the standpoint of ascertaining the causes and remedying them, rather than from the standpoint of law enforcement, to bring about satisfactory conditions between the child, the parents and the school." This was very similar in function to the intervention of the social worker in the above surveys of 1930-31 (which may have been more than coincidence, given the presence on the Committee of the Chief Attendance Officer).

The Management Committee deferred action on the recommendation of community centres-- instead it recommended that the Special Committee give "further study" to the issue, and present a report at a later time. The third suggestion, to advise governments to discourage single mothers from working, was summarily deleted without comment (Minutes, Management Committee, May 11 1943). The two surviving recommendations were accepted by the full Board (Minutes, Management Committee,

June 15, 1943).<sup>14</sup> Two Visiting Teachers were duly appointed from existing Board staff and put under the direct supervision of the Director of Education (interestingly, the Director resisted the suggestions that the Visiting Teachers should be put under the control of the Attendance Department. See Minutes, Special Committee, March 5, 1945).

In all of this discussion there was, oddly, no reference to the earlier 1930 studies that had shown truancy to be a virtually inconsequential issue in the total context of student absenteeism, or of the conclusions in the 1930 report showing absenteeism related to other social factors. Likewise, there was no source given for such claims as "95% of all juvenile delinquency is born of irregular school attendance".

It is difficult to determine where this renewed concern over truancy originated. The Board resolution requesting the Police Commissioners to instruct police officers to stop suspicious students of school age starts with "in view of the fact that truancy has increased recently", but there is absolutely no evidence to support that statement (TBEM, 1943, Appendix, pp. 5-6). There was certainly no discussion of a potential truancy problem by the provincial Department of Education. In fact, the provincial report on school attendance for 1943 was quite positive:

"Every child in the Province of Ontario has the moral right to the best education he can receive consistent with his ability and it is the moral obligation of those charged with his care to see that this is provided. For his own good, and the good of the state as a whole, compulsory school attendance is necessary. This has been in force in this province for nearly

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<sup>14</sup> However, the suggestion to advise governments to discourage single mothers from working was revived at the Board and passed, presumably as a result of a bureaucratic power struggle. The federal Minister of Labour "acknowledged the receipt of a copy of the Board's resolution...urging the Dominion Government to give further consideration to the advisability of discouraging the employment of mothers having two or more young children, especially when the father is absent from the home, as a remedial measure in connection with truancy and juvenile delinquency" (TBEM, 1943, p. 105). The Board also recommended to the Ontario Attorney-General that the provincial government "give serious advisability of making available separate accommodations for truants, as opposed to the more serious offenders of the law", thus fulfilling the original mandate of the Special Committee (TBEM, 1943, pp. 144-145).

sixty years and the result is that the parents, teachers and pupils are now most co-operative in this respect. The percentage attendance for all schools for a number of years past has been over 90" (*Provincial Report*, 1943, p. 61).

The provincial report then provided a table of reasons for absence in elementary schools, from 1939-40 to 1942-43. As in the Toronto Board 1930 report, "illness" was the highest reason for absenteeism, accounting for 66% of all reasons (1939-40) to 61% (1942-43). Truancy was, as in the earlier Toronto Board study, a very minor cause of absenteeism, accounting for a third of 1% to half of 1% of all reasons. It also appears to have been stable, and in fact marginally declined between 1941-2 and 1942-3 (*Provincial Report*, 1943, pp. 61-62).

How then to explain the 1943 Toronto Board resolutions, when there appears to have been nothing to justify this concern with truancy? The 1943 resolutions *appear* to be a return to past attitudes. However, as usual, "truancy " was not defined. It may be that the committee had, in practice, redefined the definition of "truancy" from 1) a willful skipping of some school to 2) a willful skipping of school of such a nature that the usual visits and interventions of the Attendance Department had not worked, and where the Juvenile Court had become involved. In that case, the committee would be talking about a small number of extreme cases, numbering in the hundreds, compared to the nearly hundred thousand students then in the Toronto Board system. It would be very possible to believe, from the point of view of school administrators, that there was very little difference between juvenile delinquents and truants, when both would appear in court as 'problems'.

As noted, one has to be cautious in interpreting the mundane reportings of administrative meetings (and Toronto Board minutes during this period appear to have

taken 'bland' to its logical extreme). Still, it would appear, from the direction of the rest of the meetings of the Committee, that this 'court' truancy was the focus of committee discussions. Margaret Pettigrew noted that during 1943, there were 10,835 cases of irregular attendance investigated, which resulted in 388 appearances in Juvenile Court. These habitual truants were brought before the Court only after "all other efforts on the parts of teachers, principals and attendance officers have failed" (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, Feb. 21, 1944, p. 45).

There was a concern with juvenile delinquency at this time, perhaps influenced by concern over the large number of fathers serving in the army away from their families. According to the Toronto Board's official history, during the war "many homes had become disorganized, and a growing restlessness among the young people" led "to an increase in juvenile delinquency" (Hardy and Cochrane, 1950, p. 251). For example, the Toronto Teachers' Council sponsored a series of lectures throughout 1944 on the "general topic" of juvenile delinquency, including one in October 1944 presented by the Superintendent of Schools (TBEM, 1944, p. 139, 144). The renewed concern over truancy may therefore have been due to the ill-defined but widespread association of truancy with juvenile crime: concern over one led to concern over the other.

Though in 1944, the Committee then looked at additional ways to "correct truancy at the source and thereby obviate the need for children to appear in Juvenile Court" (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, February 21, 1944, p. 45). It had already started the practice of 'visiting teachers', and had investigated the role of community centres in schools; the principals of Hester How and Boulton schools suggested the establishment of such centres at their schools. The Committee noted that

"the advantage of having [such centres] conducted by representatives of the community was... considered essential for the success of such projects" (Minutes, Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, April 4, 1944). The principal of Charles G. Fraser School came to the Committee on February 29, 1944 and reviewed specific cases from his school. He referred to the difficulty experienced in obtaining the assistance of the various agencies in dealing with these cases, and the high number of such cases. He noted that while his school did not have the services of a visiting teacher to check on truancy cases, "the services of the teacher in the adjoining school district have been utilized on some occasions, with good results" (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, February 21, 1944).

The Committee also looked at the legal issues. It was pointed out that Judge Mott had a tendency of not imposing fines on parents who might not be able to pay them, but the Committee believed that fining parents of habitual truants resulted in reduced absenteeism (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, February 21, 1944). It was later noted that Judge Mott had been brought round, "co-operating with the Attendance Department in dealing with truancy cases which come before the Court" (Special Committee Minutes, May 19, 1944). In May 1944 the Committee met with General Draper, Chief Constable (i.e. Chief of Police) of Toronto. The Chief Constable had earlier examined issues of truancy and had concluded that The Board of Education

"is the one agency which should undertake the direction of an organized body to correlate the efforts of interested organizations to combat juvenile delinquency in the City.... [The Board] should direct the efforts of the various social services agencies that are doing effective work in this field and by a programme of coverage over the whole city, should assign to the

respective agencies certain definite work in specific areas of the city" (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, May 6, 1944, p. 55).

This idea was discussed in detail but never really went anywhere, possibly because it was thought by others that the authority of the Board was too limited to take the full leadership of co-ordination (this point was made by Alderman D. Fleming, later Minister of Finance in the Diefenbaker Administration, who appeared before the committee) (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, May 8, 1944, May 19, 1944). Instead, the City of Toronto's Board of Trade came up with a recommendation to the establishment of a Youth Service Department within the City bureaucracy, to serve as a "central medium for co-ordinating juvenile delinquency activities". The Chief Attendance Officer was appointed as one of the Board's representatives on this council, the other being a trustee (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, March 5, 1945; TBEM, 1945, Appendix, pp. 75-76).

Among the suggestions were an intervention that included interviewing truants, their parents and principals; and psychiatric examinations for those truants committed to the Detention Home. These suggestions were taken up. 'School Attendance Clinics' were founded; a psychiatrist was appointed to the Board; and vocational and educational guidance facilities in schools were increased (Minutes of the Special Committee on Truancy and Delinquency, April 4, 1944, May 13, 1944).

### ***Establishment of the Child Guidance Clinic***

Throughout 1945 there was an official recognition of a change in direction of the committee, from looking at truancy in the context of juvenile delinquency, to issues of

social work and social intervention. First, the name of the committee was changed to "The Committee for the Unadjusted Child". The Chief Attendance Officer was requested to communicate with Toronto's Chief Medical Officer to look at the issue of pre-school medical examinations to reduce the absenteeism caused by ear and eye defects of students entering the Toronto Board.

Significantly, a pilot program was suggested to take place at two downtown schools (Edith L. Groves and Boulton Avenue) that would involve social workers who, it was thought, could best deal with social problems. It was hoped that this would greatly assist principals in these schools, given the large number of social organizations operating in the school with which the principal was expected to liaison (Minutes of the Committee for the Unadjusted Child, March 5, 1945; TBEM, 1945, Appendix, p. 217). In later minutes, the Committee started to discuss the formation of a "Child Guidance Clinic" that would have a broader mandate. After Summer 1945, the Committee ceased holding meetings. There was no reason given for this mysterious disappearance but it may have been because the Board administration had undertaken to investigate and organize such a Clinic. In 1946 C.C. Goldring, the Director of Education, visited New York City as part of a report on these clinics (New York City having more Child Guidance Clinics than any other American city).

In May 1948 Director Goldring submitted an update to the Board's Management Committee, "since it is proposed to establish a Child Guidance Clinic at Board of Education headquarters in the near future." He gave a history of Child Guidance Clinics. They had been originally founded in the U.S. in the 1920's with the idea of reducing delinquency, but had changed: they now saw the child as a product of his



environment and potentialities. The next stage after testing the child was to bring in the parent, using a cooperative and collaborative mode. "In most clinics the psychiatrist is the key person. He may see the parent and study the child. His assistant is a case worker. Some clinics have a psychiatrist, one or two psychologists, and two or more social workers. They work together as a team" (Minutes, Management Committee, May 13, 1948).

In June Director Goldring recommended that the Clinic be opened in September. It was to function under the "general direction" of the Director of Education but under the specific control of the new Chief Attendance Officer, Bertha Reynolds, who would keep her position as Chief Attendance Officer but also be appointed Co-ordinator of the new Clinic. Thus, the Attendance Department and the Clinic would be two separate departments, a minor issue that later would have important ramifications.

At this time, it was thought that the two departments would work closely. "The Attendance Department must, of necessity, take a leading part in the successful operation of the clinic. To this Department come problems of non-attendance, family difficulties, and the sort of behavior conditions which require clinic treatment. Many of the cases in the clinic will come from the Attendance Department, and the requests will be cleared through it" (Minutes, Management Committee, June 14, 1948). The word "truancy" had again disappeared from the lexicon.

Establishment of the Child Guidance Clinic appeared to have immediate results. By the end of the first full year (1949), there had been 5,195 parent and children clients: 3,944 in the attendance division, 664 in the reading clinic, and 587 in psychiatric

services. Of 11,257 cases of non-attendance reported in 1949, over 9,500 were investigated at homes by the six Attendance Officers, "and more than half of these were solved through follow-up assistance by a psychologist or nurse, or by a social, philanthropic, or church agency. " Others were resolved through conferences with the child. Thirty-one cases actually went to court (of which 30 of 31 were aimed at the parents), compared to 200 cases before the Child Guidance Clinic opened (Hardy and Cochrane, 1950, pp. 245-246. These figures were reported by the Chief Attendance Officer). Thus, through addressing issues associated with absenteeism, the Toronto Board had by 1950 developed the comprehensive set of student interventions advocated by the Chief Attendance Officer in the early 1930's, which became the foundation for the Board's current Student Support Services.

## **B-4. Redundancy and Disappearance 1951-1972**

The 1950's was a period of extraordinary stability for the Attendance Department of the Toronto Board. The only reference to the Department in the Toronto Board Minutes during the whole decade was in February 1958, when the Department hosted a buffet luncheon for visiting members of the Rochester, New York Attendance Department (TBEM, 1958, pp. 24-25).

However, the stability masked two serious issues. First, the provincial Department of Education appears to have decided that after a century, attendance was no longer a priority. The detailed 5-6 page summaries of the Provincial Director of School Attendance, which had been an essential component of the Ministry of Education reports since the passing of the Attendance Acts in 1919, disappeared in 1948-- as had any reference to the said Director of School Attendance. Instead, a short paragraph summarized both enrolment and attendance, until that too disappeared in the 1960's. The history of these changes has yet to be written; no explanation was provided by the Department of Education. Nor, for that matter, had any figures on absenteeism been included in various Toronto Board annual reports once they started to be re-issued in the late 1940's. The explanation may simply be that absenteeism was now both low and stable. It had been around 50% by the late nineteenth century but was around 6-7% by the time of World War II, and changed little thereafter. It was apparent, through numerous surveys and studies, that most of the remaining absenteeism was outside the control of school authorities and could not really be addressed, save through broader

health and social interventions. Attendance/absenteeism had finally declined as a social and educational priority, although it would continue as an important mechanism for the distribution of school funding until the early 1970's.

Secondly, a bureaucratic dispute was building up within the Toronto Board over student support services. As noted above, the Child Guidance Clinic had been placed under the leadership of the Chief Attendance Officer in 1948. However, in 1951 the Child Guidance Clinic was renamed Child Adjustment Services, with a Director of Mental Health Services who reported to the Director of Education. This department had a psychological and psychiatric section; in 1958, this was expanded to include social workers (*Report of the Advisory Committee of the School Social Worker, 1974, pp. 24-26*).

The Chief Attendance Officer and the Attendance Department worked in parallel with Child Adjustment Services. But in December 1962, the Toronto Board passed the following motion: "That, as there is a need for persons trained in Social Work skills in dealing with absenteeism, social workers be engaged in the Attendance Department to fill existing vacancies and that the qualifications, salary range and vacation period be the same as those for psychiatric social workers" (i.e, the name then used for school social workers). Thus, Attendance Officers were now with the same qualifications, similar role, and similar philosophy, as parallel personnel in a parallel department (*Report of the Advisory Committee of the School Social Worker, 1974, p. 24*). Not surprisingly, there was confusion over the role of each department, and in 1964 a Special Committee of the Board was appointed to study the issue (TBEM, 1964, Appendix, p. 501).

### *Attendance Report of 1964*

In response to the Special Committee, the Chief Attendance Officer put together what was the last Report of the Attendance Department. The direction of the Attendance Department was now very much that of social work-- specifically, as the type of social work agency best able to interact with schools, other agencies, and homes:

"The Attendance Department, in approaching its responsibility to carry out the provisions of the Schools Administration Act [i.e. the Education Act of 1954], recognizes the importance of attacking the problem of absenteeism at its roots. It is aware that the mere physical return of the absentee child does not in any real sense further the purposes for which the Department was established. It must be prepared at the sociological level to diagnose and remedy underlying causes of truancy as they are met in day-to-day work with absentee children. The wholesome adjustment of the absentee is the ultimate goal of attendance service....

As a casework agency in an authoritative setting, we feel that with adequate staff this Department would be able to operate as an arm of the school, 'reaching out' to such families, working with them aggressively in an effort to stimulate them to move to a solution of their difficulties. The Attendance Department is one of the few agencies in the city which is geared to working with clients in their homes. This can be of vital importance in reaching non-cooperative or hostile families who can be supported and assisted by no other agency in the city" (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, pp. 23-24).

The reasons given for "non-attendance" are very similar to those given by Margaret Pettigrew decades earlier:

- a) Ignorance on the part of parents in knowledge of law, child rearing, sound parent-child relationships, moral and spiritual concepts, habits, etc.
- b) Imitation by children of poor adult example in home and community.
- c) Limitations in capacity (intellectual, physical, educational, emotional and social) of parents and children.
- d) Lack of opportunities to obtain a sense of achievement in the home, school or community.

e) Deep-seated social, mental and emotional pathology in parents and children, e.g. parental neglect, rejection, marital conflict, neuroses, psychoses, alcoholism, long-term economic dependency, etc.

f) Confusion caused by world unrest, wars, unemployment, etc. (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, pp. 23-24).

Given that ill-health of the student is not listed, it is likely that the 'truancy' referred to here is the very specific, repeated absenteeism that the first stages of the Attendance Department process could not address. As usual, however, the term is not defined, so it is impossible to tell for sure. Also missing is an explanation of how these reasons for truancy were derived-- presumably, as a summary of the result of practice of the Attendance Officers.

The staff of the Attendance Department by now consisted of 12 attendance clerks, 6 officers, and 2 counselors. (This did not include Visiting Attendance Teachers, which had been associated with the Attendance Department in the 1940's but were now independent of it). They liaised with 3600 teachers, and the principals and vice-principals of the 117 schools in the Toronto Board. In 1963, the Attendance Department received 27,445 referrals from Toronto Schools. In addition, there were 958 referrals from other agencies to the Attendance Department, and 2,547 referrals from the Attendance Department to other agencies. These agencies included Child Adjustment Services, Clifton House, Visiting Teachers and Visiting Attendance Teachers, Children's Aid, Family Allowance, Juvenile Court, Wardship Court, Family Court, Public Health, and Public Welfare (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, pp. 9-11).

The report described four types of interventions. First, short-term referrals from schools called for counseling and/or investigation of school absenteeism, suspensions, parental neglect or abuse, juvenile employment, and delinquent activities, among other things. Conferences would be held with school staff, guidance officers, Child Adjustment Services, Juvenile Court, the Youth Bureau of the Police and Settlement House. "An interesting finding was that the proportion of problem teen-agers was five boys to one girl in all schools except in one section of West Toronto, where the reverse was the case" (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964, p.8*).

Secondly, "Case Processes" were those cases recognized as in need of more intensive and continuous help. According to the report, "the last few years have brought an enlightened and positive approach to attendance problems." (It is interesting that this is a very similar statement to that made in the 1920 Toronto Board *Annual Report* some 44 years earlier.) "Children who are frequently absent need help rather than punishment. On visiting a family, the attendance counselor tries to bring the interest of the school to the home in an encouraging and helpful way. Chronic absence is always a symptom, and the basic trouble may be financial, psychological, physical, or environmental" (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964, p.8*).

Thirdly, the "Case Work" program was staffed by attendance counselors with Master of Social Work degrees. It proved an intensive service for chronic absentees with what were described as "severe problems", and their families. The case load consisted largely of what were described as "multi-problem families" which had not been accepted into assistance by community agencies.

Finally, the Attendance Department served as the liaison with the Juvenile and other courts, for "pupils who are in need of protective help.", i.e. those 100 or so cases that would go to court (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, pp. 8, 24).

There was also a description of work permits for 14-16 year old students to be released from school attendance (as required by law, but under the control of the Attendance Department in the Toronto Board); of Attendance Scholarships established by the Attendance Department to financially aid those students who might otherwise be forced to leave school due to poverty; and of a Clothing Depot and other financial supports such as free books and equipment (*Report of the Attendance Department, 1964*, pp. 53-68).

Much of the rest of the report consisted of case studies which purported to provide a description of examples of absenteeism and how they were remedied: "The Potential Dropout", "The Boy Who Carries a Weapon", "The Lonely New Canadian Pupils", "The Neglected Child", "the Overly Protective Mother", "Parental Alcoholism", "Runaways", "The Problem of Transitions to New School", "The Rejected Child".

### ***Amalgamation, 1964-1971***

At the end of 1964, the Special Committee appointed to study the overlap of Child Adjustment Services and the Attendance Department suggested fairly minor, or housekeeping, changes. The title "Attendance Officer" was changed to "Attendance Counselor", and any vacancies were to be filled by social workers with MSW qualifications. In addition, the parallel position of Senior Social Worker (in Child Adjustment Services) and Senior Attendance Counselor (in the Attendance Department)



were created (TBEM, 1964, Appendix, p. 501). As a result, it became harder to tell the difference between the two services. According to the *Report of the Advisory Committee on the School Social Worker, 1974*, "most principals and teachers-- and indeed, the social workers themselves--- felt that it was confusing to have two social workers functioning in the same school" (*Report of the Advisory Committee on the School Social Worker, 1974*, p. 28).

Thus, by June 1966 *another* Special Committee was appointed to study the Board's Child Adjustment Services and Attendance Departments, the Board resolution pointedly noting that "it is clear that further changes are necessary in these Departments" (TBEM, 1966, p. 398). As a result, the two services started a number of experiments in "dual function", where one social worker would perform the functions of both departments (*Report of the Advisory Committee on the School Social Worker, 1974*, p. 28).

The direction was clear by September 1970, when a further motion was passed by the Board to "report to the Special Committee re. Administrative Re-Organization on the feasibility and advisability of merging the Child Adjustment Services and the Attendance Department" (TBEM, 1970, p. 605). By June 1971 a report had been prepared to Board recommending the merger of Child Adjustment Services and the Attendance Department as of September 1971, into a new department (subsequently named Student Support Services) that would have three sections: Psychiatric Services, Psychological Services, and Social Work services. The integration of the two social work departments was thought to be a resolution of the confusion of duplicate function:

"The proposed amalgamation of the social work services of the Attendance Department and the Child Adjustment Services is an attempt to meld the social service work of these two departments so that social workers will handle both attendance problems (which frequently have a familial or societal base) and family social problems which may not produce attendance problems but may result in behavioral or activities which call for help of a social work type. It is hoped thus to avoid some of the confusion which existed in the past as to which social worker should handle a particular problem and, by avoiding overlapping, of providing a more efficient service" (TBEM, p. 538- 539).

Shortly thereafter, the Chief Attendance Officer resigned and was not replaced.

At the same time, a seemingly minor administrative change in Ministry of Education procedure signaled the end of absenteeism as an important administrative instrument-- i.e., as the means for allocating funds according to students. Modifications to the various school acts (The Department of Education Act, the Public Schools Act, the Schools Administration Act, the Separate Schools Act, and the Secondary Schools and Boards of Education Act, 1971), substituted "average daily enrolment" instead of "average daily attendance". "Average daily enrolment", despite its name, was actually a count of students on the books attending a school as of certain times in the year: originally three times in the year, now changed to two times in the year (October and March)<sup>15</sup> (*Provincial Report*, 1971).

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<sup>15</sup> The change from "average daily attendance" to "average daily enrolment" can be said to have started in 1967, as a recommendation of the deputy minister of education to a Ministry committee on education grants. In his 1972 book *Schools for Ontario*, David Cameron (one of the people responsible for the modification), justified the change as something done to assist schools. "The change was made for two purposes: to relieve teachers of some of the clerical responsibilities involved in keeping daily registers, and to cease penalizing school boards for abnormal numbers of absences produced by such disruptions as epidemics of influenza" (Cameron, 1972, p. 136).

This explanation was rather disingenuous: the clerical responsibilities of boards in keeping attendance registers did not go away, and, as noted, continues to this day; nor were there any complaints of school boards for losing large funds due to influenza outbreaks. A more likely explanation is that this relieved the Ministry of Education of *its* clerical responsibility, in keeping the daily registration for all students in the province. For whatever the reason, this change in policy led directly to the final official supplementation of daily attendance figures by enrollment figures by 1972.

Boards of Education were still obligated to keep attendance and absences of students in the event of student problems. But schools would no longer suffer or benefit because of the absenteeism rates of their students: as long as the student was registered at the school at certain key times of the year, the school would receive funding for the student. Thus, 121 years after the passing of the 1850 Act and the birth of Ontario's public school system, the Ministry of Education quietly closed the book on Egerton Ryerson's experiment with absenteeism.

## **B-5. Current Absenteeism Policy, 1972-1997**

In the years following the amalgamation of the Attendance Department, discussion of absenteeism issues did not altogether disappear. *The Report of the Advisory Committee of the School Social Worker, 1974* looked at enforcement of attendance (finding great variation from school to school) and truancy (it was noted that truancy had remained stable since 1900, was negatively related to punishment, and was based on complex societal, familial and psychological factors). The report asserted the importance of school social workers in addressing issues of absenteeism. However, it also noted that social work staff reductions, taking place at the same time, meant "a reduced ability to be involved deeply with the life of schools, at a time when there is still an increasing demand for services" (*Report of the Advisory Committee of the Social Worker, 1974*, p. 28).

The Board trustees also approached issues of compulsory attendance, without much result. In 1972 the Ministry of Education abolished work permits which had allowed students between 14 to 16 to leave full-time study, under limited conditions (this had been, incidentally, the last of the mandatory functions of the former Attendance Department). Board trustees debated for some time about whether 'compulsory education' should be revisited. Finally, on May 2, 1974 they adapted a rather ineffectual resolution: "The Board is in favor of the proposed amendment to provide that a pupil must attend school until he attains 16 years, but recommends that the whole policy of compulsory versus non-compulsory education should be examined" (TBEM, 1973, pp.

607-608; TBEM, 1974, p. 328, 364). This does not appear to have resulted in any changes.

In 1981, the issue was raised by an Advisory Committee on Attendance and Employment. After a consultation process throughout the year, the Committee released a report in September. Much of the report was concerned with providing alternatives to students between 14 and 16 who are not attending school, known as the Leaving School Early (LSE) program. The next year, the Board responded to potential changes in changes to the Education Act that would affect attendance regulations. In both cases, the Board reflected what had become a consistent position on attendance: that absenteeism was a social issue that was best dealt with through social interventions; that "prevention and flexibility" were preferable to sanctions (TBEM, 1981, pp. 835-836, TBEM, 1982, pp. 996, 1053).

### *Attendance and Absenteeism Policy to 1997<sup>16</sup>*

Recent Toronto Board policy towards student absenteeism was governed by the Education Act of 1974, which had consolidated five earlier education acts. Attendance was compulsory for all students between the ages of 6 and 16 (the earlier threshold had been changed from 8 to 6 in the 1950's). Students must attend school during the full school year during which they turn 6, and up to the end of the school year in which they turn 16. There were certain exceptions-- religious holy days, civic holidays,

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<sup>16</sup> - Unless otherwise specified, information here is courtesy of Student Support Services, Toronto District School Board. Policy described goes to September 1997.

closure during a temporary emergency. Students could be suspended for persistent truancy, as well as opposition to authority, vandalism of school property, use of improper language, and behavior injurious to the school or those in the school (Gilbert, Martin, and Sheehan, 1990).

Principals might suspend students, but only boards could expel students.

Students expelled from the Toronto Board and other Metro boards attended a program for expelled students, administered by the Toronto Board of Education.

Enforcement of attendance legislation in the Toronto Board was vested in the Senior Co-ordinator, Social Work Services (formerly the Chief Social Worker).

According to a fact sheet on Social Work Services in May 1997, "school absenteeism" was one of nine kinds of cases referred to Social Work Services from Local School Teams and school staff (this included non-attendance, school phobia, absenteeism due to victimization through bullying, and parental neglect). In fact, absenteeism was one of the top reasons for referral, and was related to up to half of Social Work referrals at the secondary level. Since absenteeism is connected to many other social issues, it was often the means of noticing these other issues, such as family-based and school behavior problems. According to the Senior Co-ordinator of Social Work Services, absenteeism was thought to be around 5% at the elementary level, and 18-20% at the secondary level.

Within the Toronto Board, truant students were rarely prosecuted in the courts; there were no such referrals in 1996-97, the last full year of the Board's existence. One reason was that it was felt that the courts were not receptive to prosecutions of truancy. As well, the Board continued the philosophy espoused in the *Report on the School Social*

*Worker, 1974*, where it was recognized that prosecutions for truancy do not result in decreased truancy. Instead, the Board addressed absenteeism through a number of intervention programs:

*The Supervised Alternative Learning for Excused Pupils Progress (or SALEP)* program was designed for 14 and 15 year old students "for whom the regular school program is no longer suitable" (TBE *Fact Sheet* on SALEP, 1995). This program replaced the granting of work permits, known by the early 1980's as the Leaving School Early Program (see the previous section), and which had been part of Ontario legislation in one form or another since 1871. Students were referred through the school principal to the school social worker after discussion with the student and his/her parents. The application went to the SALEP committee, consisting of at least one trustee, a superintendent, a community representative, and the Senior Co-ordinator of Social Work Services. Around 50 students per year were accepted into the program, nearly all of whom applied. The program consisted of a work component and a school component.

According to the 1996-97 Annual Report on SALEP, half the students were male and half female; three quarters were in Grade 9, a quarter were in Grade 10; 43% came from Special Education programs. A third were on probation or were awaiting court hearings; a third were receiving various forms of counseling and treatment from community agencies. Three quarters were from single-parent families; 38% were from families receiving social assistance. Ninety percent of these students had serious non-attendance histories (Annual SALEP Report, 1996-97; TBE *Fact Sheet* on SALEP, 1995).

*The Community Attendance Program (CAP)* was designed to provide support for up to 8 students in Grade 7-9 who were chronic non-attenders, or who are on a long-term suspension. The program was intended to provide short-term academic support and counseling, to enable students to return to a full academic program at their home school or to become involved in a more intensive program through a community agency. The program was administered through the Special Education Department of the Board, and took referrals from Local School Teams. There were three program locations across the city (TBE Special Education Department, Application Forms for System Behavioral Programs, September 8, 1994).

Another program administered through Special Education, the *Kindergarten Early Intervention Program (KIP)*, was not technically an attendance program, but it was designed for Junior and Senior Kindergarten programs who had experienced great difficulty in adjusting to school, and this would include issues of school avoidance. The program was intended "to provide a safe and secure setting where where these young children can learn the basic routines of going to school." The focus of the program was on the basic skills of compliance of requests by adults in the school setting; of attending school; and of staying on task. The goal was to place these students back in their home classrooms, either in kindergarten or grade 1 (TBE Special Education Department, Application Forms for System Behavioral Programs, September 8, 1994).

A large administrative office staff throughout the Board monitored and kept records of attendance and absenteeism throughout the 148 Toronto Board schools (and these records form the basis of data analysis in the next section). There were also two programs intended to monitor students. At the elementary level, an *Early Arrival*



*Program* existed in most schools. This would confirm that elementary students had arrived at school; those who did not arrive were called by a combination of volunteer/parents, and paid staff. At the secondary level, the *Night Attendance Program* at 16 secondary and 4 elementary schools monitored the attendance patterns of younger students, intervening when attendance problems first surfaced in order to prevent the development of chronic attendance problems. The key personnel were night secretaries to make early contact with parents, as well as social workers (TBEM, 1977, pp. 654-655; Social Work Services, Night Attendance Program (NAP) School Hours, January to June 1998).

## **B-6. History of Toronto Board Absenteeism Policy: Summary/Discussion**

In some ways, the Attendance Department of the Toronto Board was a victim of its own success. In Toronto, most of the student support programs were either introduced by the Attendance Department, or had their establishment greatly assisted by the Attendance Department. Thus, vocational guidance in elementary and high schools, special education schools, reading clinics, and psychiatric, psychological and social work services were introduced through the Attendance Department, or as a result of its lobbying. More specifically, their establishment-- as well as those of school-connected community centres in Toronto-- might be seen as a consequence of social and psychological issues that were highlighted through concern with absenteeism.<sup>17</sup> By the 1960's, therefore, it was difficult to define the role of the Attendance Department, given that most of its functions were also done by other departments, and it disappeared.

Absenteeism as an outcome can also be said to have become a victim of its success. Although changing methodologies make year-to-year measurement difficult, a few generalizations can be made. The initial organization of the Ontario public school was considered an extraordinary success at the time because, within a few decades, the majority of children between 8 and 11 were registered in school. However, the majority of these students attended only a limited number of classes. Therefore, the demonstration of the Toronto Board's "success" as an institution was demonstrated by the

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<sup>17</sup> Other less prominent programs established by the Attendance Department and still in operation today are the student financial assistance provided by Social Work Services to eligible elementary and secondary students on the basis of income criteria, formerly known as Attendance Scholarships when they were established in 1948; and the Clothing Exchange going on in many schools such as Ursula Franklin Academy.

gradual lowering of absenteeism rates, which would demonstrate that students were both enrolled in school and attending classes. Unfortunately such success was not immediate; the resignation of the first head of the Toronto Board, Superintendent Barber, demonstrates the degree to which this had become a "high stakes" issue. Absenteeism rates started to improve in the later part of the nineteenth century (according to Katz and others, this may have been related to the increase in economic prosperity and the related decrease in mobility). By the early twentieth century, the majority of registered students were attending their classes. By the 1930's the absenteeism rate was down to 7% or so, and changed little until the Ministry ceased to publish the rate in the 1960's. After several decades of success and stability, therefore, there was really not much to report-- absenteeism was as unremarkable as the proportion of male versus female students. Thus, it quietly faded from view.

Of course, this interpretation has intriguing possibilities. Absenteeism was most important when it was a problem; the dialogue about truancy came at a time when absenteeism was in transition, from a controversial issue to a low, stable measurement; and it disappeared as an issue when it remained low and stable. Does this mean that educational issues are considered important only when they are interpreted as problems? Certainly, current educational issues, like student achievement and school violence, appear to have achieved their current prominence through being interpreted as "problems", and they provide an opportunity for measuring school progress through their increase or reduction, just as absenteeism was interpreted in the nineteenth century. What would happen if these issues were considered to be stabilized? Would they

disappear from the public agenda, as did Ontario absenteeism during the later part of the twentieth century?

There were some other points that come out of this history of Toronto Board absenteeism:

**The persistence of the idea of truancy.** For nearly a century (from the 1850's until the late 1940's) truancy-- the willful staying away of students from school-- was periodically raised as an important educational issue. Partly as a result of this, there is a fairly lengthy history of inquiries into non-attendance: the Census of 1863, the teacher survey of 1872, the notes and reports of William Carr Wilkinson from 1872 to 1874, the 1899 report of the Police Truant Officer, the survey of 1930, the survey of 1931, the Ministry of Education surveys of the 1930's and 1940's. Each one of these demonstrated that student truancy was an inconsequential cause of total absenteeism from school. Yet, the results of each survey would be dutifully reported; and either the results would make no difference, or there would be a short-term cessation of concern about absenteeism, followed by its re-emergence a few years later. To modern eyes, the reasons for this concern are hard to fathom. Furthermore, James Hughes' reporting of the 1899 survey appears to demonstrate a virtual blindness to the dichotomy between fact and belief. Hughes reported that truancy is not the major reason for absenteeism; at the same time, he expressed regret that parental consent is needed to confine truant students to reformatory schools. And Hughes is widely (and justifiably) considered among the top educators in Canadian history.

Much research on absenteeism as a social issue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century needs to be done, but one can speculate on a few possible reasons for this seeming disregard of facts. Torontonians were not living in an isolated environment, but were affected by national and international trends, much the way we are today. A preoccupation with truancy, and, later, in the early to mid twentieth century, juvenile delinquency, were common among the educational elite of North America. It should hardly be surprising that issues would appear and re-appear in Toronto; they originated from outside Toronto and therefore would enter and re-enter the city like any other idea. Also, we may be guilty of foisting the modern use and familiarity with social science research on people who had very different ways of thinking. We are used to looking for research to "guide" us; Victorians like James Hughes may have thought research much less influential for decision-making. What is thought to be "logical" will vary from culture to culture and historical period to historical period<sup>18</sup>: it is likely that some of our assumptions about education will provide great amusement to historians of the future.

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<sup>18</sup> An example of this might be the equation of "truancy" with crime reported by both the Sarnia Committee on Truancy in 1900, and the Toronto Board Committee on Truancy in 1943. To modern social scientists, this is a confusion between correlation and causation; no such doubts hindered the committee members, or many other educators of these times. It is not that those educators were any less intelligent than those of today, but that our thinking around social issues has changed. On a similar theme, Steven Weinberg comments that "scientists who come of age in a period of normal science find it extraordinarily difficult to understand the work of the scientists in previous scientific *revolutions*, so that in this respect we are often almost incapable of reliving the "gestalt flip" produced by the revolution" (Weinberg, 1998, p. 49).

**Names of concepts will change, but the definitions may vary even more.** The history of absenteeism is a history of fluid conceptualization. Much like the hammer with a replaced handle and replaced head, the concern over students missing classes might appear to be a constant of Ontario educational history, but the consistency disappears upon examination. The lack of any written definition makes things worse: there was never any written definition of 'truancy' in all the policy documents and discussion in the Toronto Board, or indeed in most Ontario documents. From references made, this term could apply to any sort of repeated absenteeism (including illness), or it could apply to willful staying away from school, or it could apply to incorrigible absenteeism linked to juvenile delinquency. The assumed definition would change regularly. For example, the rural inspectors in the 1891 Provincial Report complained about truancy, and hoped that the new legislation would affect it. But in the 1896 Report, truancy was no longer considered to be a rural issue. Given that overall statistics for absenteeism had not changed for rural boards over the five year period, and given that rural absenteeism was still higher than urban absenteeism, it would seem that rural inspectors had re-defined what they thought "truancy" was (without, of course, actually defining it or noting the change).

Sometimes (as in the Reports of Toronto's Chief Attendance Officer for 1926-1932) the same person will use the term in two or more ways. Thus, the reports by Margaret Pettigrew used 'truancy' to mean repeated absenteeism, and also to mean repeated and incorrigible absenteeism so strong that the student was prosecuted by the law. The term 'absenteeism' itself made an infrequent appearance in Ontario documents;

often the word 'attendance' as used, but attendance was also identified with 'enrolment', i.e., the number of students actually registered at a school.

Therefore, when the Ministry of Education replaced 'average daily attendance' with 'average daily enrolment' in 1971 it would have appeared without looking at the definitions that the two were virtually the same, that the change was a minor technical adjustment (and given that the Ministry of Education did not supply definitions when announcing the change, this may have been deliberate). In fact, 'average daily attendance' referred to the number of days the students would actually show up at school (i.e. the inverse of absenteeism) while 'average daily enrolment' was an average of three snapshots of school registration. The two were not the same at all; it was the end of the official use of absenteeism in any widespread systematic form. Perhaps it was an appropriate ending, given the history of foggy, changing or (most frequently) non-existent definitions.

**Treating the whole child-- Act IV.** As noted in the literature review, Harte's 1994 review of absenteeism from a Canadian context posits that the general attitude of educators and social work practitioners changed in the mid 1980's-- that a more holistic, multi-level strategy examined issues of absenteeism from a societal, personal and familial viewpoint. This is also the conclusion of Desnoyers and Pauker (1988), and other recent practitioners. However, review of the policies of the Toronto Board of Education have made it clear that this is the espoused philosophy of the Attendance Department in the 1920's; also, in the 1940's; also, in the 1960's. It would appear, therefore, that this 'new' orientation is in fact at least the fourth recycling of a multi-dimensional strategy towards absenteeism. This may be a result of each generation of practitioners thinking they have

discovered the idea; or, it may be that each generation's idea of 'holistic intervention' differs. For example, the Attendance Department report of 1964 portrayed the Attendance Department as a compassionate caregiver, yet that caregiver was also responsible for taking hundreds of parents to court. This is an area where a more detailed examination might provide interesting answers.

**The issue of absenteeism is at root a debate about free will.** Initially, discussion of absenteeism centred around making sure students were in school, even though it was recognized that the students might not see the reason for being in school, and even their parents might not see the reasons for being in school. It was thought that the needs of society in this case overrode the needs of the individuals. At the same time, there was an equation of persistent absenteeism-- usually called truancy-- with moral failing, and delinquency. Forcing (usually lower-class) students to attend school against their will was thought to be necessary to counteract a propensity for moral degeneracy or crime.

On the other side were those who thought that coming to school should be a matter of choice. In the twentieth century, this focused on the right of 14-16 year olds to attend school (in the 1920's, the motivation was the increased expense for the school system of educating these new students; in the 1970's, it was centered on the futility of forcing the attendance of alienated students). A group of practitioners have also observed that if students or their parents perceive no benefit from attending school, no amount of force will be successful in anything but the short term. Most people would agree that some coercion is necessary at some stage: few would agree that a five year old who doesn't want to return to school should get his wish. It is the degree to which coercion is



used, and when it is used, that provides the spectrum of different policies towards absenteeism.

### *Assumptions*

There are a number of assumptions to be examined that can be made from the above study of Toronto Board policy and documents:

**1. Absenteeism is stable.** According to Ministry of Education reports, absenteeism rates were quite stable over a period of at least several decades (from the 1930's to the 1950's), and that, historically, absenteeism tended to change slowly. Therefore, one would assume that absenteeism in the Toronto Board from 1992 to 1997 would also be stable, assuming that things have not changed.

**2. Elementary and secondary absenteeism will be approximately the same.** For the last decades, absenteeism at elementary schools was 6-7%; so was absenteeism at the secondary level (in fact, secondary absenteeism was sometimes marginally lower than elementary absenteeism). Therefore, one would assume that recent Toronto Board secondary absenteeism will be the same or lower than that of the elementary panel.

**3. That absenteeism has a variety of causes.** The majority cause of absenteeism in every Toronto Board study was health related, but there were also other social, familial, and attitudinal factors. One would assume, therefore, that current Toronto Board absenteeism is also related to multiple causes, with health related issues being the primary, although historians of nineteenth century absenteeism such as Katz

(1975) and Bamman (1975) have shown a close link of absenteeism to economic conditions.

4. **Elementary and secondary absenteeism have different causes.** This was recognized by the Attendance Department in the 1920's, when they had to deal with mandatory attendance of 14-16 year old secondary students for the first time after the implementation of the Adolescence Attendance legislation. Thus, Attendance Department policy at the early elementary ages was focused on health and psychological support, while policy at the middle and elementary school level looked at vocational guidance, and providing a psychological and financial connection to school.

C. Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education, 1991-97

## **C-1. Absenteeism in the Toronto Board of Education, 1991-97**

Until this study, aggregate information on Toronto Board absenteeism was last made public during the Great Depression over six decades ago, so this is the Board's first quantitative examination of the topic in modern times.<sup>1</sup> There are three groups of students examined, each intended to provide a different type of information on student absenteeism:

- The combined elementary and secondary panels of 1996-97 (N = 75,078). Examining these students would provide a full snapshot of absenteeism for one school year, across age groups and grades in the elementary and secondary panel.
- The Grade 9 cohort of 1991-92, followed for five years to the Fall of 1996 (N= 4,077). This would portray the characteristics of secondary school absenteeism, through examining a group of students from the beginning to the conclusion of their high school careers.
- The 12-year-old (mostly Grade 6) students of 1992-93, followed for five years to the end of the 1996-97 school year (N = 3,677). This would look at absenteeism in group of students as they made the transition from the elementary to the secondary panel.

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<sup>1</sup> Some information of this analysis has been presented in two recent Toronto Board reports: Brown, 1997a, and Brown, 1997b.

## Descriptive Analysis

The primary function of the analysis is to provide a canvas, and at least some of the broad strokes, in the picture of absenteeism in a large school board. Therefore, much of the information is presented in a descriptive format: through presentation and discussion of frequency tables, cross-tabulations, and means.

## Logistic Regression

A second function of the analysis examines the influence of different demographic, social, and school characteristics on absenteeism. This is important given that, as noted in the literature review, there is little consensus on what influences student attendance in school. The availability of student-level information on absenteeism, rarely seen in the published research, provides an opportunity for multivariate analysis.

Unfortunately, there is a limitation: absenteeism data is not normally distributed. While the range of absenteeism can be 0% to 100%, the majority of students have low absenteeism: for example, most 9 year olds have 0% to 2% absenteeism. As a result, it may not be proper to utilize the standard types of multivariate analysis, such as n-way analysis of variance, MANOVA, and multiple regression.

An exception is logistic regression, a technique increasingly used in epidemiology and other health science research. According to Sharma (1996, p. 317), logistic regression does not make any distributional assumption for the independent variables, and is normally recommended when the independent variables do not satisfy the multivariate normality assumption. As well, it can be used when the independent

variables are a mixture of categorical and continuous variables.<sup>2</sup>

In standard logistic regression, the dependent or 'response' variable is a dichotomous (yes/no) condition—for example , being diagnosed with diabetes (or not); dropping out (or graduating/staying in school).

For each of the groups of absenteeism data, logistic regressions were run, with the following response variables:

- Above average/below average absenteeism in 1996-97 for elementary and secondary students registered in Fall 1996 (that is, each student registered in Fall 1996 was catalogued as having above average or below average absenteeism for the 1996-97 school year);
- Above average/below average absenteeism in 1991-92 (for the Grade 9 cohort of 1991-92);
- Above average/below average absenteeism in 1992-93 (for the Grade 6 cohort of 1992-93);
- Above average/below average absenteeism in 1996-97 (for the Grade 6 cohort of 1992-93).

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<sup>2</sup> Logistic regression appears to have become a dominant statistic in health science research when dealing with administrative datasets, primarily because of its flexibility in dealing with abnormally distributed data, and because of its ability to use categorical and continuous independent variables. For example, both of the external research review projects conducted by the University of Toronto's Health Sciences departments in the Toronto Board used logistic regression in their analysis (see Yang, 1998). The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of Prof. John Frank of the Department of Health Science, University of Toronto, and Dr. Jennifer Payne of the Institute for Work and Health, for their suggestions and advice on this statistic.

### Spearman's R ( $r_s$ )

A third function of the analysis looks at the relationship of absenteeism and achievement over time. As noted earlier, much of the administrative data collected for this analysis (in particular the absenteeism data) does not have a normal distribution, which means that most parametric statistics cannot be used. However, Spearman's ranking correlation procedure, like logistic regression, does not depend upon a normal distribution: according to Norcliffe (1982, p. 121), "when the form of the population is clearly non-normal and cannot be normalized by data transformation, or when the form is not known and the sample is too small to give a clear picture of the population distribution, than the use of a rank correlation coefficient is appropriate."

Spearman's  $r_s$  is a measure of linear correlation between two variables, ranging from the limit of +1.00 when there is a perfect positive relationship, to -1.00 when there is a perfect negative relationship (it has a value of 0 when the two variables are totally unrelated). For this case, Spearman's  $r_s$  provides a statistical interpretation for the correlation of absenteeism with achievement across time.

Correlations were run with the following:

- Students who were Grade 12 students in 1996-97, who had also attended Grade 8 and Grade 9 in the Toronto Board (correlations between Grades 8-12 absenteeism and with secondary school marks and credit accumulation);
- The Grade 9 cohort of 1991-92 (correlations between Grades 9-13 absenteeism and with Grades 9-13 credits/marks);

- The Grade 6 cohort (12-year-olds) of 1992-93 (correlations between Grades 6-10 absenteeism and with Grade 10 credits/marks).



## **C- 1. Absenteeism in the Toronto Board Over One Year, 1996-97**

### *a. Description of the Data*

Schools boards have an obligation to keep information on the attendance and absenteeism of their students during the current year, to ensure that those students under the age of 16 attend school regularly, and to document when students above the age of 16 leave school. In 1990, the Toronto Board of Education started keeping computerized records of absenteeism. For every month, a record is entered containing the individual Toronto student identification number; the number of days absent (in half days); the number of days present (in half days); and the number of days registered at the school. I have combined this information for each student, linking the records through the student identification number. I have kept total yearly absenteeism information on all students in the Toronto Board since September 1992, the most recent for the 1996-97 school year.

There are several other datasets on student information of 1996-97 Toronto Board students. All have the student identification number in common, and I have combined them with data on absenteeism. These variables are:

- student age;
- when the student entered the Toronto Board (September 1996, or between October 1996 and June 1997);
- student gender;
- student's country of birth;
- year of arrival in Canada (if foreign-born);
- language that the student first learned at home;

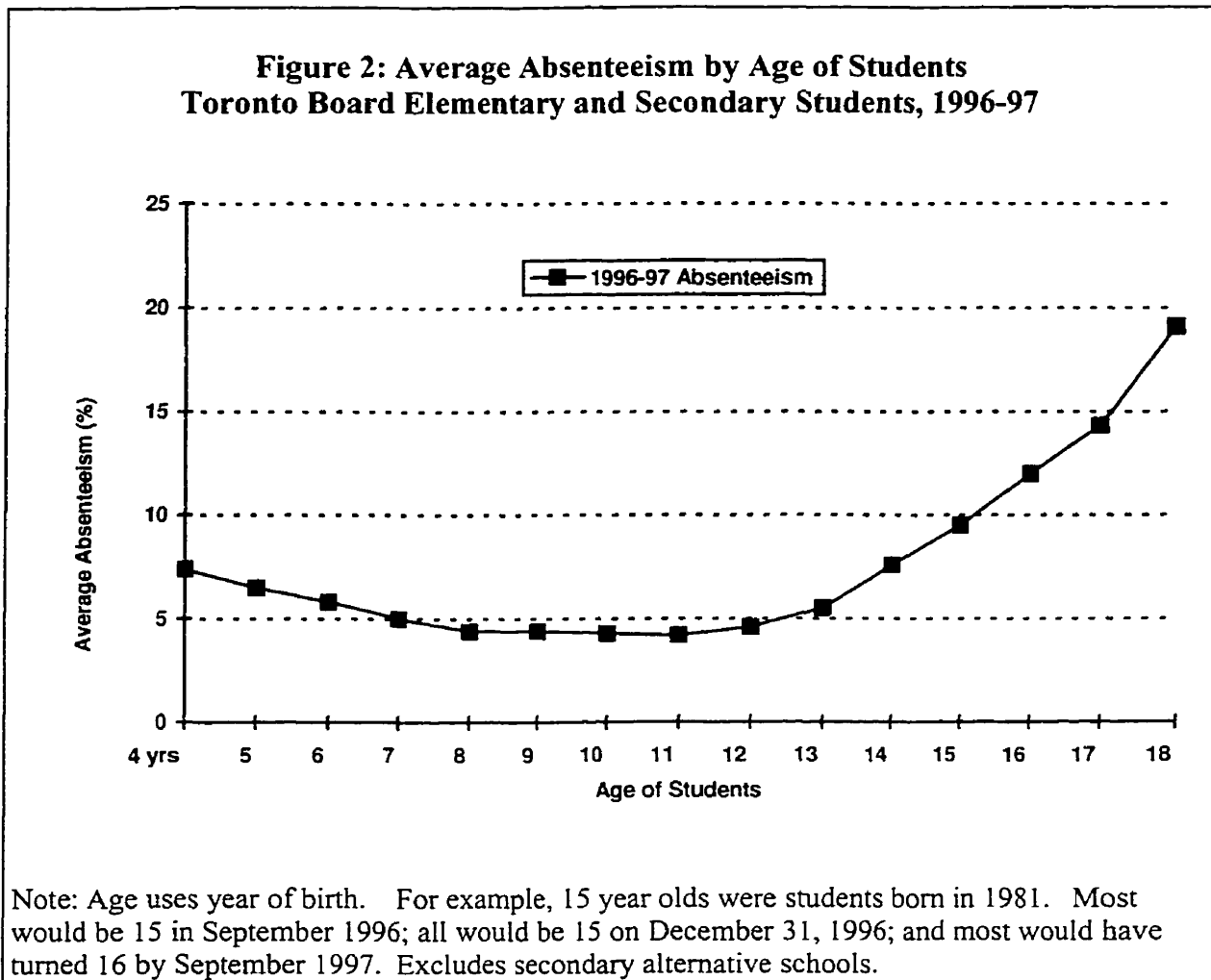
- parental status (whether the student lived with both parents, mother only, father only, guardian, group home, or if the student lived by him/herself);
- status at the end of the school year (whether student was still in the Toronto Board in the Fall of 1997, had transferred out, or, for secondary students, had dropped out or graduated).

In addition, socio-economic status has been determined by a proxy variable-- estimated 1997 income for the micro-neighborhood of student residence. This was done through a two stage process. 1.) The student residence postal code was linked with the Statistics Canada enumeration area. There are approximately 3,300 enumeration areas in Metro Toronto (now the expanded City of Toronto), and approximately 52,000 postal codes. 2.) This was then linked with estimated average income of the enumeration area of the postal code calculated by Compusearch, a geographical and market research company. (The 1997 estimated average income is calculated by Compusearch through census and other data.) This is a fairly standard process for ascertaining socio-economic status of samples, where the residence is known. For example, the Toronto Board of Education used this methodology to calculate the Inner-City index, for resource allocation of Inner-City funds, using the 1987 and 1991 censuses. (See Toronto Board of Education, 1993.)

At the secondary level, information on the marks and credits of completed credits is also available. The following have been extracted:

- credits successfully achieved between September 1996 and September 1997;
- total of all credits completed up to September 1997.

b. Overall Absenteeism

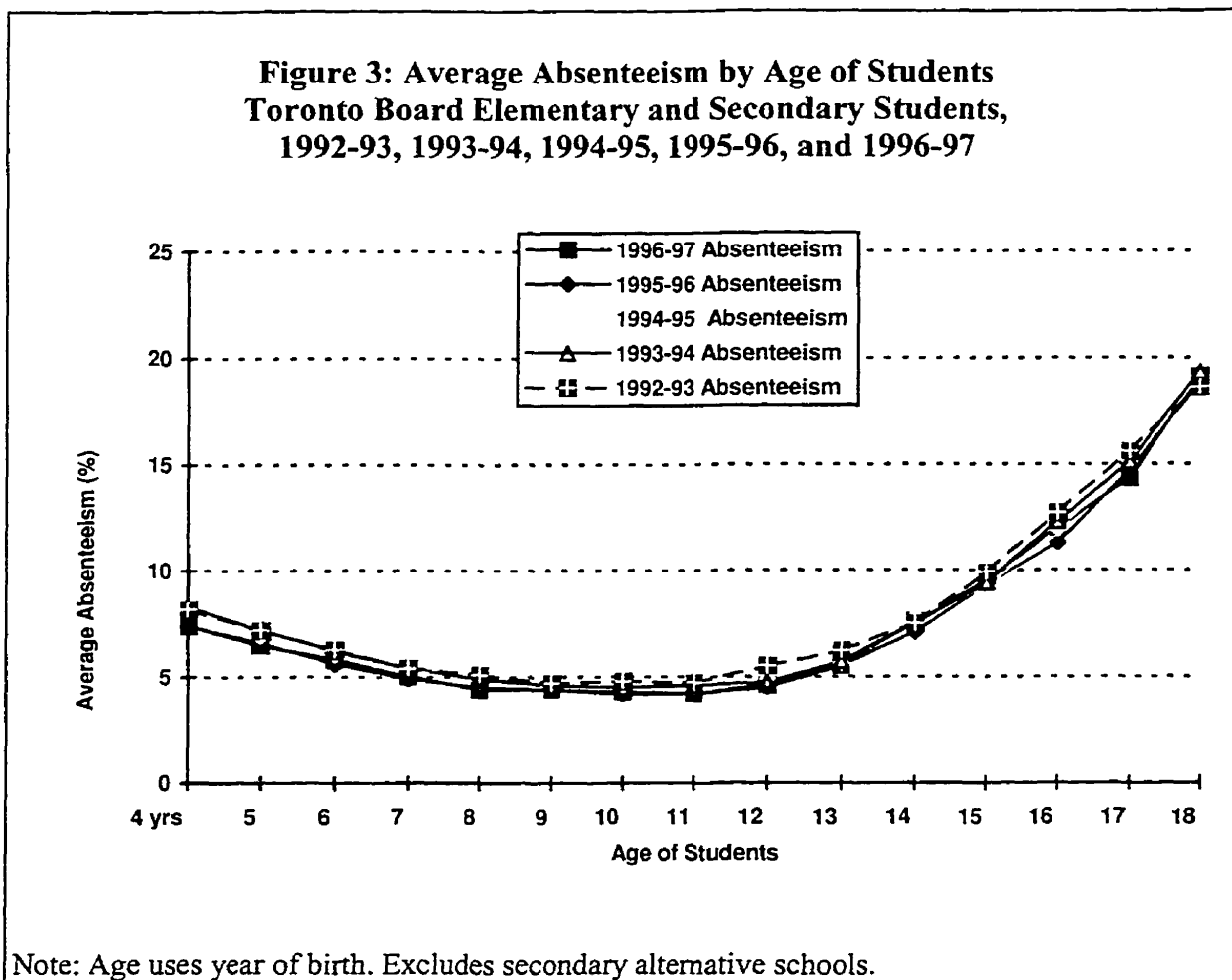


Of students who registered in September 1996, the average absenteeism of elementary students was 5% and the average absenteeism of secondary students was 15%. This is close to the rates estimated by the Board's Senior Co-ordinator of Social Work, who gave his opinion from practical experience.

Given the difference between the elementary and secondary panels, an obvious question would be whether there is a difference between age groups. As can be seen in Figure 2, there is a clear pattern of absenteeism from 4 year olds (Junior Kindergarten) to

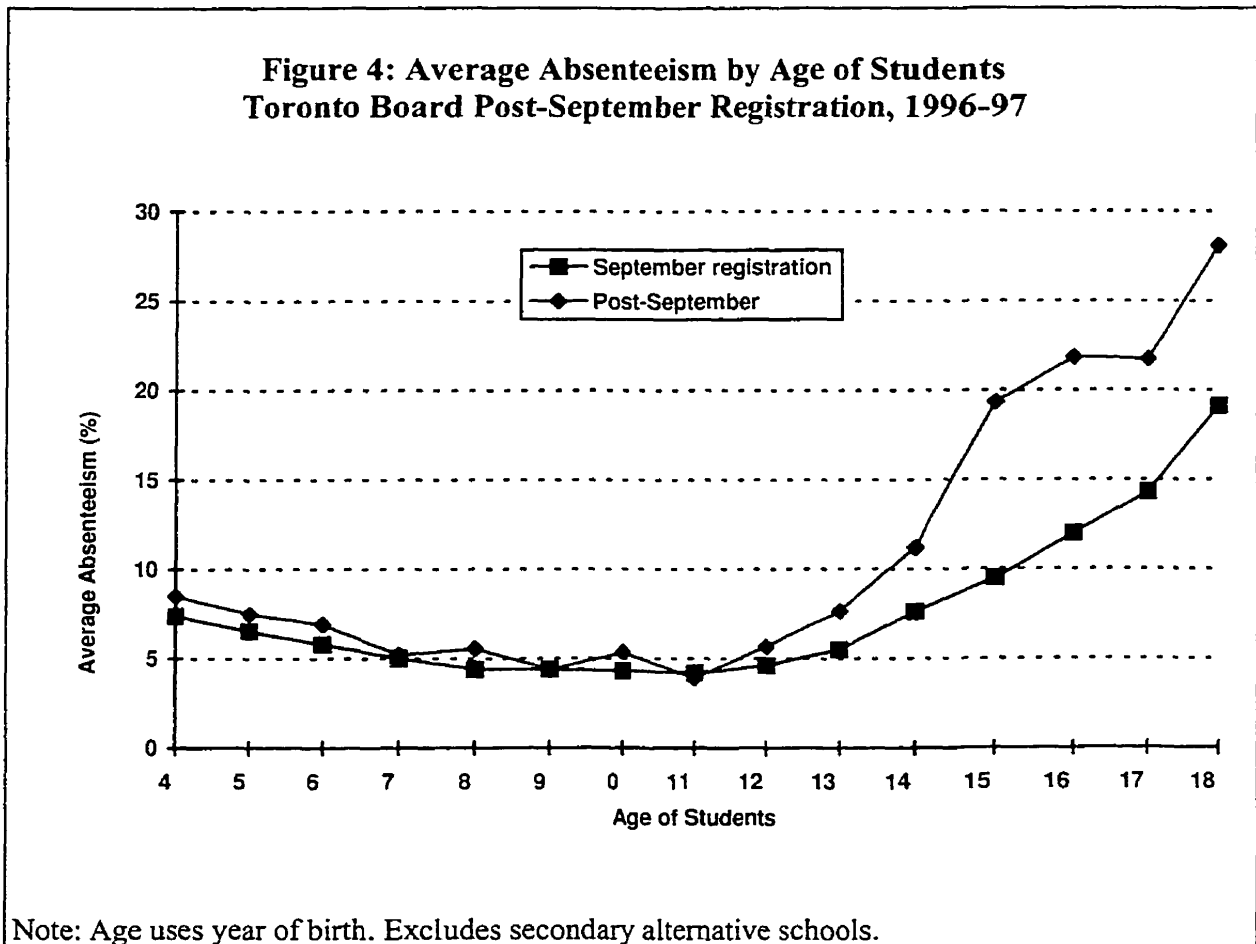
18 year olds (OAC), with high absenteeism among 4-5 year olds, a gradual decline to an average of about 4% among 8-12 year olds, and a direct increase starting among 13 year olds, up to 18 year olds.

Figure 3 shows the pattern of absenteeism and age for 1996-97, along with the pattern of previous years from 1992-93. The age-absenteeism pattern is so consistent that it is difficult to see the difference between 1996-97 and the other years. Thus, one can conclude that the relationship of age to overall absenteeism is both powerful and consistent.



c. *Post-September Registration*

Although September is the traditional beginning of school, a number of students enter at a later point in the school calendar: 3,145 elementary students and 3,543 secondary students entered the Toronto Board between October 1996 and June 1997. At the elementary level, the majority of these students entered the Toronto Board from another country. At the secondary level, in addition to students coming from other countries, there were students transferring from other Boards (usually entering at the beginning of the second semester), and dropouts re-entering school.



As can be seen in Figure 4, post-September students have higher absenteeism than students who register in September, especially those in the secondary panel. Assuming that higher absenteeism is related to at-risk status (which will be explored in a latter part of this chapter), it would seem that post-September students-- especially those in high school-- are more likely to be at-risk.

It should be noted that most school reportings do not include post-September registration. For example, the Ministry of Education and Training's *Directory of Education*, which lists all boards, schools, enrollment and teaching staff, uses September enrollment. The rest of this analysis will examine September registrations, to be consistent with Ontario reporting practices. As well, given that much of this analysis will be comparing groups of students, and given that there is monthly variation in average attendance, there is greater consistency if the analysis looks only at students who all started at the same time (September). However, it is important to note the existence of this important group of post-September students. They appear to have greater needs than the majority of students who enter in September, but may be ignored because they do not handily fit into the accounting procedures set up in Ontario.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As seen in the previous section, for most of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, records were kept using averages based on the full school year. In the 1960's and 1970's this practice was discontinued by the Ministry of Education, presumably because of the complexity and expense of such record keeping during the height of the baby boom. The reporting of a September benchmark dates from this time. It might be useful to revisit this decision, given the changes that have taken place in Ontario over the last three decades

**d. Demographic Differences**

Given that the literature on absenteeism has not been conclusive on what demographic differences between groups exist, it would be useful to see what the patterns are among Toronto Board students registered in 1996-97. Note that secondary students 19 years of age or above are excluded. These older students are demographically very different from the rest of the Toronto Board secondary students, and deserve a separate study in their own right.

**Gender**

There was no difference between gender at the elementary level, and a very slight difference at the secondary level.

**Table 1: Gender (N's in brackets)**

Gender	Average Absenteeism-Elementary	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
Male (34,699)	5%	13%
Female (31,736)	5%	12%

**Country of Birth**

There was a slight range of difference between countries of birth at the secondary level, with those born in China, Hong Kong and Vietnam with the lowest levels (3%) and those born in Canada and Portugal with the highest absenteeism. Differences had increased at the secondary level: those born in China had the lowest absenteeism with 7%, those born in Jamaica had 16%, and others had absenteeism rates in between.

**Table 2: Country of Birth (N's in brackets)**

Country of Birth	Average Absenteeism-Elementary	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
Canada (49,082)	5%	13%
China (2,034)	3%	7%
Hong Kong (638)	3%	10%
Jamaica (591)	4%	16%
Philippines (636)	4%	12%
Portugal (518)	5%	15%
Sri Lanka (1,059)	4%	9%
Vietnam (1,687)	3%	13%

**Home Language**

There were also some differences according to home language of student: the range of elementary absenteeism was 3-6%, while the range of secondary absenteeism was 8-15%. Chinese, Tamil and Korean-speaking students had the lowest absenteeism; English only, Portuguese, Spanish-speaking students had the highest absenteeism.

**Table 3: Home Language (N's in brackets)**

Home Language	Average Absenteeism-Elementary	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
Chinese (5,512)	3%	8%
English only (37,040)	6%	14%
Greek (717)	5%	14%
Korean (603)	3%	9%
Persian (374)	5%	12%
Polish (424)	5%	13%
Portuguese (1,893)	6%	15%
Somali (346)	6%	13%
Spanish (1,377)	8%	14%
Tagalog (621)	4%	11%
Tamil (1,257)	4%	8%
Vietnamese (2,668)	4%	13%



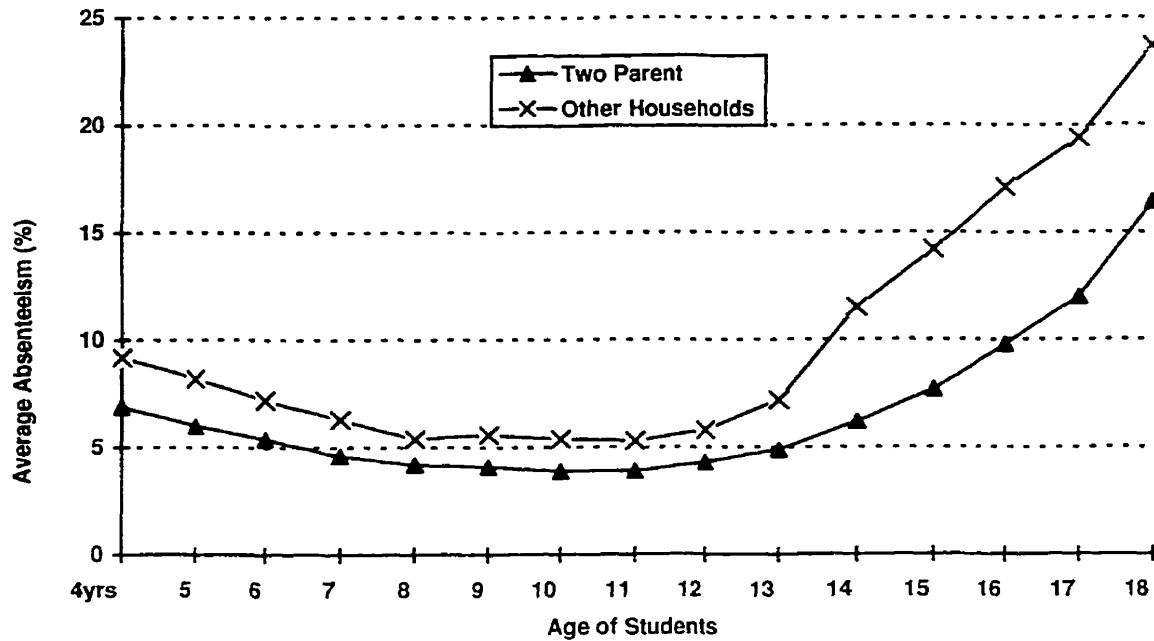
## Parental status

There were minor differences among elementary students who lived with both parents (5%) and those who lived with mother only (7%), father only, guardian, relatives, and group home (6%). Differences at the secondary level were dramatic. Those living with both parents had 10% absenteeism; those living with a single parent or guardian had nearly double this absenteeism rate (17% for those living with mother only, 16% for those living with father only or with a guardian), those living with relatives had a 21% absenteeism rate, while those living in a group home (27%) or by themselves (28%) had rates nearly thrice that of those living with both parents. Figure 5 shows how the difference in average absenteeism between living with both parents and those living with one parent increased as students entered high school

**Table 4: Parental Status (N's in brackets)**

Parental Status	Average Absenteeism-Elementary	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
Both parents (48,210)	5%	10%
Father only (1,776)	6%	16%
Mother only (13,992)	7%	17%
Guardian (629)	6%	16%
Group home (168)	6%	27%
Relatives (546)	6%	21%
Alone (226)	n/a	28%

**Figure 5: Average Absenteeism by Age of Students  
Toronto Board Elementary and Secondary Students, 1996-97  
Living With Two Parent and Other Households**



Note: Age uses year of birth.

### Income

There was no noticeable difference between income and absenteeism at the elementary level. There was a fairly pronounced difference between average secondary absenteeism of those in the lowest income brackets (14%) and those in the highest income brackets (10%).

**Table 5: Income (N's in brackets)**

Income	Average Absenteeism-Elementary	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
<\$30,000 (6,721)	5%	14%
\$30-39,000 (12,116)	6%	14%
\$40-49,000 (16,407)	5%	13%
\$50-59,000 (11,718)	5%	13%
\$60-69,000 (6,294)	5%	11%
\$70-79,000 (3,493)	5%	11%
\$80,000 + (8,381)	5%	10%

*e. School Characteristics*

**Type of School** (Secondary schools only)

Historically, there were three types of secondary schools in the Toronto Board: collegiate institutes, technical-commercial schools, and basic level schools. In the last decade, basic level schools have been phased out, while destreamed schools and short-term ESL schools for recent arrivals to Canada have been established.

There was a pronounced difference in the average attendance of these schools. ESL schools had the lowest absenteeism (6%), followed by collegiate institutes (10%), destreamed schools (17%) and technical-commercial schools (18%)

**Table 6: Type of Secondary School (N's in brackets)**

Type of School	Average Absenteeism-Secondary
Collegiate (16,059)	10%
Technical-commercial (4,745)	18%
ESL (175)	6%
Destreamed (521)	17%

### **Student Outcomes (Secondary schools only)**

Secondary students who graduated by September 1997 and students who continued their secondary studies in the Toronto Board had the lowest absenteeism with 11%; those who dropped out had absenteeism over three times as high, with 36%.

**Table 7: Secondary School Outcomes (N's in brackets)**

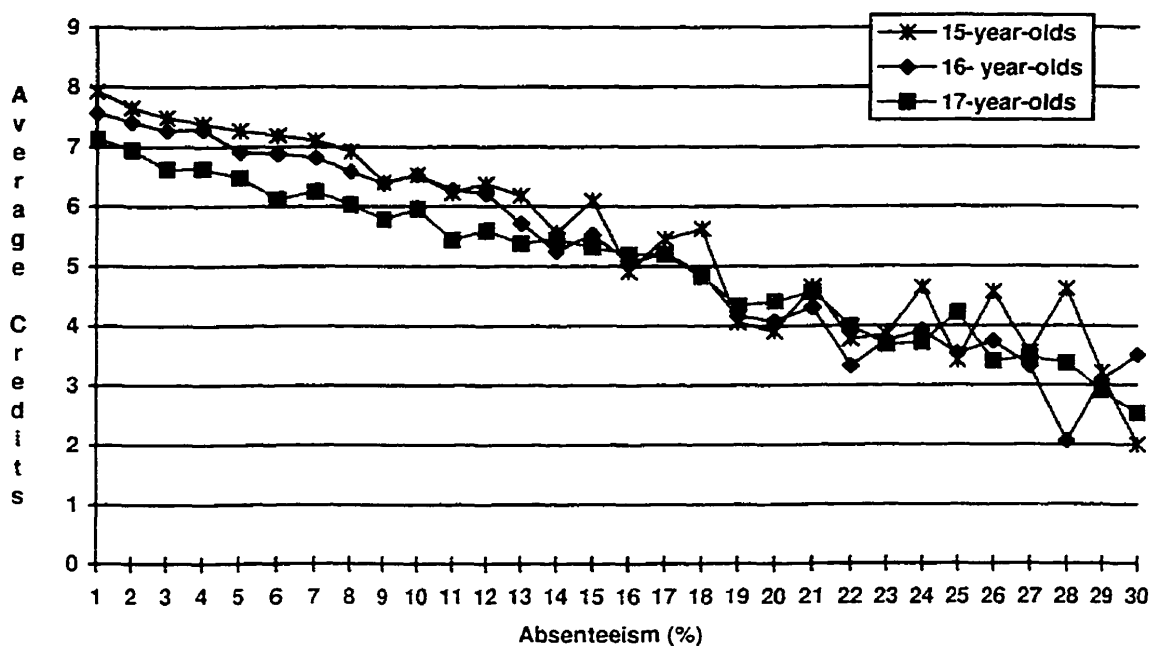
<b>Outcomes by September 1997</b>	<b>Average Absenteeism-Secondary</b>
Graduate (4,088)	11%
Continue in TBE in Fall 1997 (15,233)	11%
Transfer out of the Board (1,001)	17%
Dropout (1,334)	36%

#### *f. Absenteeism and Secondary School Credit Accumulation*

If one were to speculate on important questions about absenteeism, an essential one would be in its relationship to academic achievement. Toronto Board research has found very powerful relationships between credit accumulation in Grade 9, and ability to graduate within five years. In two separate cohorts of Grade 9 students, it was found that 80 percent of those who had achieved 8 credits in Grade 9 had graduated five years later; less than a fifth of students who had completed 4 credits in Grade 9 had graduated five years later (Brown, 1993a, 1997b; see also Morris et al., 1992). Likewise, achievement patterns in high school tend to be strong predictors of post-secondary student achievement (see Powell and Steelman, 1996).

There appears to be a relationship between credit accumulation of students, and absenteeism. Figure 6 shows that for 15-17 year old students (mostly in Grade 10), the higher the absenteeism, the lower the average number of completed credits for that year.

**Figure 6:  
Absenteeism and Credit Accumulation of 15 to 17-year-olds  
Toronto Board of Education, 1996-97**

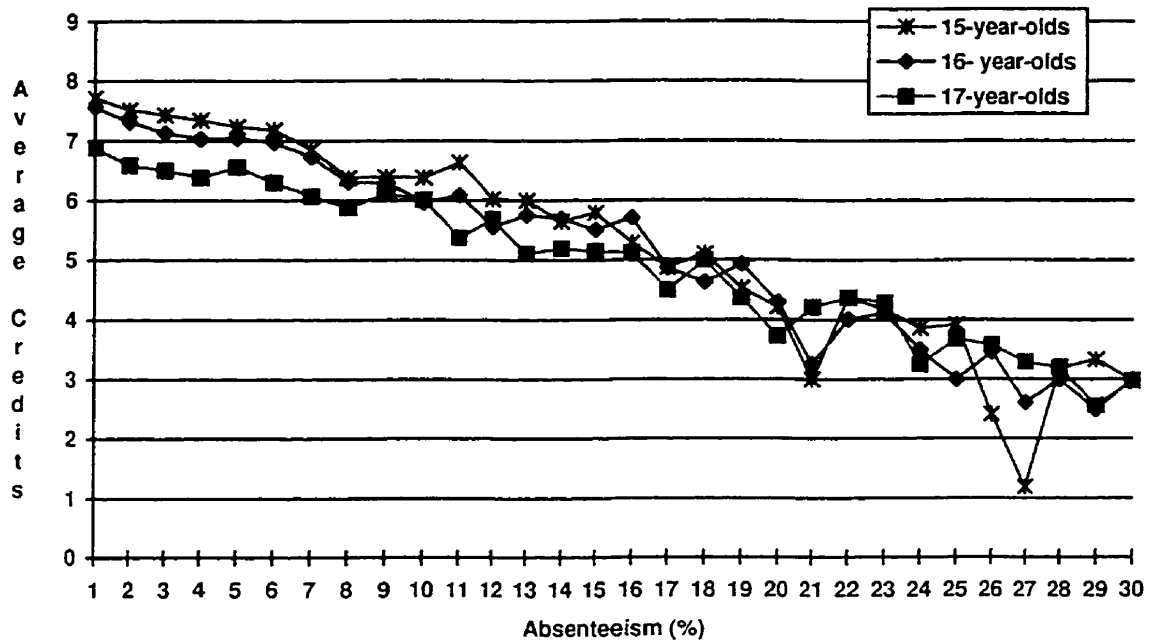


Note: Students who enrolled in the Board in September 1996, excluding alternative schools.  
 Note: Age uses year of birth. For example, 15 year olds were students born in 1981. Most would be 15 in September 1996; all would be 15 on December 31, 1996; and most would have turned 16 by September 1997.

Furthermore, when the relationship between the absenteeism of 15-17 year old students in 1995-96, and the average number of completed credits for those students in 1995-96, is compared to the previous figure, the two patterns are very similar, indicating

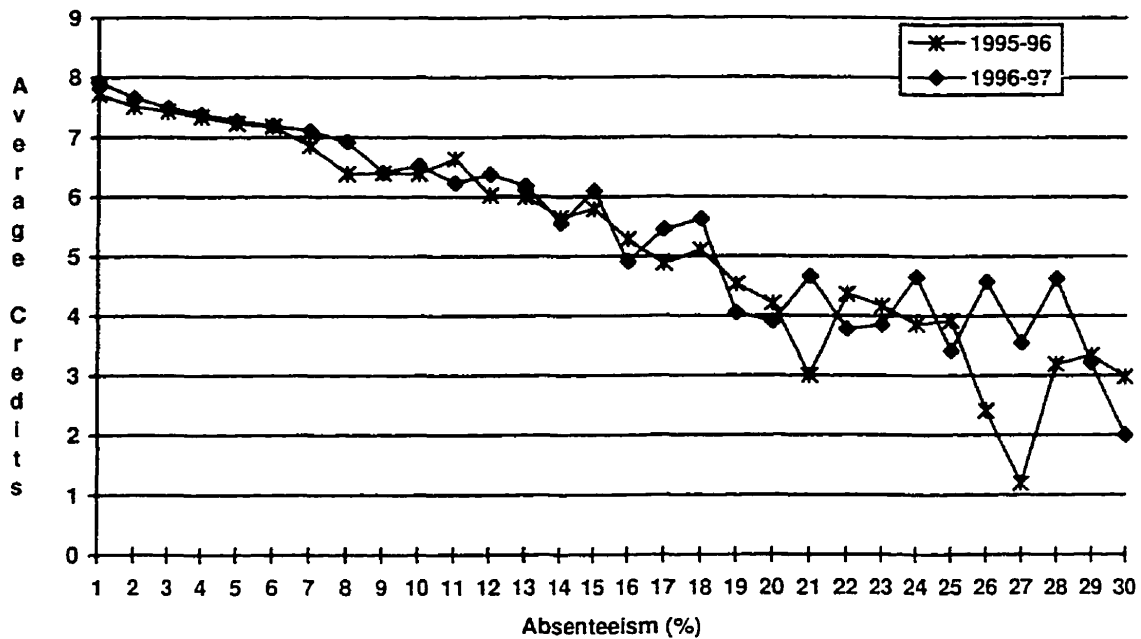
a consistent relationship. Figure 7 shows absenteeism and average credit completion for 15-17 year old students in 1995-96; Figure 8 shows absenteeism and credit accumulation for 15 year old students in 1996-97 and 1995-96.

**Figure 7:  
Absenteeism and Credit Accumulation of 15 to 17-year-olds  
Toronto Board of Education, 1995-96**



Note: Students who enrolled in the Board in September 1995, excluding alternative schools.  
 Note: Age uses year of birth. For example, 15 year olds were students born in 1980. Most would be 15 in September 1995; all would be 15 on December 31, 1995; and most would have turned 16 by September 1996.

**Figure 8:  
Absenteeism and Credit Accumulation of 15 Year Olds  
Toronto Board of Education, 1995-96 and 1996-97**



Note: Age uses year of birth. Students who enrolled in the Board in September 1995, and September 1996 excluding alternative schools. Students would be 15 years of age as of December 31 of the school year.

***g. Logistic Regression on 1996-97 Absenteeism***

Logistic regression is the multivariate technique used here to examine the influence of demographic and school level effects on absenteeism. For 1996-97 data, the response or dependent variable was above-average absenteeism for 1996-97: i.e., the 'event' was defined as missing above 7.6% of school days, the non-event was defined as missing 7.6% or less of school days. Independent variables were defined as follows:

- Average income in three categories: \$39,000 and below; \$40,000- \$59,000; and \$60,000 and above;
- Age (from 4 years old to 18 years old);
- Place of birth (born in Canada, born outside of Canada);
- Gender (male, female);
- Home language (English, non-English);
- Parental status (living with two parents, or living with one parent, relative, by self, in group home).

The Backward Elimination procedure of Proc Logistic was used. This looked at Wald chi-square values and p-values, and eliminated variables with a p-value of less than .01. It was found that gender had the smallest Wald chi-square value and the largest p-value (.90), indicating that it did not contribute to the model, and was eliminated. Proc Logistic was then run without gender.

The results of the revised run showed that the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Schwartz Criterion (SC) of intercepts and co-ordinates were lower than the intercept only, indicating that the model (of the relationship between absenteeism and the independent variables of income, age, home language, place of birth, and parental



status) provides at least some explanation for absenteeism. As well, the -2LogL and Score statistics were both significant at .0001, providing evidence that the independent variables contribute to above average absenteeism.

The analysis of maximum likelihood estimates looked in more detail at the four independent variables. All had very low p-values (.0001). A key explanatory part of Proc Logistic is the Odds Ratio, which show the odds of the independent variable increasing the 'event' (i.e., above-average absenteeism). Odds of 1.000 (i.e., 1 to 1) would mean that the independent variable does not contribute likelihood of increasing absenteeism; odds of 2.000 (i.e. 2 to 1) would mean that the odds of above-average absenteeism increase by a factor of two for each increase in the value of the independent variable.

Odds ratios of the four independent variables, along with lower and upper 95% confidence limits, are as follows:

**TABLE 8:  
Conditional Odds Ratio and 95% Confidence Limits  
Significant Logistic Regression Variables**

Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Limits	
		Upper	Lower
PARENTAL STATUS	1.793	1.722	1.868
BORN IN CANADA	1.302	1.238	1.369
SPEAKING ENGLISH	1.273	1.216	1.332
INCOME	1.159	1.130	1.190
AGE	1.121	1.116	1.126

Thus, age and income (with odds of 1.121 and 1.159) had significant effects on average absenteeism, but their influence was lower than the other three variables, while parental status had the highest influence on absenteeism. Overall, being older, being from a household with lower income, being born in Canada, speaking English, and, especially, living in a non-traditional family (i.e. not living with both parents), were more likely to contribute to having higher absenteeism.

However, there is a serious limitation to this interpretation. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-fit test on the model found a significant difference between the actual data and predicted outcomes based on the data, indicating that there may not be a good fit between the model and the data. It has been noted (SAS, 1995, pp. 67-68) that the test is conservative and has low power to detect specific types of fit (such as nonlinearity in an independent variable), and age, in particular, has a non-linear fit with absenteeism, as seen in the earlier description of the 1996-97 data. The AIC and SC criterion, and -2LogL and Score statistics, do show that the variables have some effect on average absenteeism.

But it is also possible that there is not a fit between the model of five variables and absenteeism because the variables provide only a *partial and incomplete explanation* for absenteeism. Looking back at the review of the literature and of the historical analysis of the Toronto Board, there are three main types of explanations: issues of health (students not attending because they are sick); social issues (e.g. students needed at home); and issues of disengagement from school (e.g. students not attending because they are alienated from school). None of these issues could be examined in a model that

included only background characteristics of students. Thus, what is needed is a dataset containing additional variables, to try and provide a closer fit between data and model. Although it lacks information on student health, data from the 1991 Grade 9 cohort of 1991 has a broader range of explanatory variables; it will be examined in the next chapter.

A further analysis divided the 1996-97 dataset into the elementary panel and secondary panel. The same Proc Logistic analysis was run at the elementary level, with above average elementary absenteeism as the response variable, and at the secondary level, with above average secondary absenteeism as the response variable. The Hosmer and Lemeshow goodness of fit model was found to be significant at the elementary level but insignificant at the secondary level, showing that the model of these demographic variables did not fit the data at the elementary level but did fit the data at the secondary level. An explanation for this puzzling difference may well lie in the historical analysis of Toronto Board policy. Nearly all of the many studies of student absenteeism done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries clearly indicated that health issues were the root cause of most absenteeism.

However, these earlier studies examined only elementary or junior high school students-- during this time the secondary school system was an elite institution catering to a minority of students. It may be that elementary absenteeism is influenced by one set of characteristics (including health and related issues) while secondary absenteeism is influenced by other characteristics (related to issues of disengagement from school, which in turn are closely connected to demographic characteristics of students). This may partly explain the extraordinary pattern of absenteeism and age demonstrated at the

beginning of this chapter, where senior elementary and high school absenteeism showed a fairly linear pattern, while primary and junior absenteeism show a non linear pattern. This issue will be examined later.

***h. Spearman's Correlation Procedure-- Absenteeism and Grade 12 Students***

**i. Grade 12 Students of 1996-97 Followed Back to Grade 9**

In this analysis, Spearman's ranked correlation—a measure of linear correlation between two variables—is used to provide interpretation of the correlation of absenteeism with achievement, across time. Therefore, I took the students who were Grade 12 students in 1996-97 but who had started the Toronto Board secondary system as Grade 9 students in 1993-94. I was able to examine correlations between Grade 9, Grade 10 Grade 11 and Grade 12 absenteeism with: Grade 10 credit accumulation, Grade 10 math and English marks, Grade 11 credit accumulation, Grade 12 credit accumulation, total credit accumulation by the end of 1997, and income. Grade 9 marks and credits could not be examined, due to Toronto board administrative systems limitations on the new Grade 9 destreamed/decredited courses.

Of these various correlations, (seen on Table 9) income was significant with some but the correlation tended to be small (the range of  $r_s$  was from .06 to .19).

Absenteeism had the strongest correlations, indicating that absenteeism during one year tends to be a close predictor of absenteeism in the next year and the year previous (Grade 10 absenteeism had a correlation of .69 to Grade 9 absenteeism, .70 to Grade 11 absenteeism and .63 to Grade 12 absenteeism).

Absenteeism was also negatively associated with credit accumulation, as seen earlier in this chapter (Figures 6-8). The best fit was with Grade 10 absenteeism: it had a correlation of  $-.50$  to Grade 10 credit accumulation,  $-.47$  to Grade 11 credit accumulation,  $-.42$  to Grade 12 credit accumulation, and  $-.57$  to total Grade 9-12 credit accumulation. Grade 12 absenteeism was more closely correlated with total Grade 9-12 credit accumulation than Grade 9-11 absenteeism, with an  $r_s$  of  $-.64$  (although not surprisingly, Grade 12, Grade 11 and Grade 10 credit accumulation were more closely associated with total credit accumulation than was absenteeism). Grade 12 absenteeism was also associated with Grade 12 credit accumulation ( $-.62$ ), and to a lesser degree with Grade 11 credit accumulation ( $-.51$ ) and Grade 10 credit accumulation ( $-.44$ ). (All of these were significant at  $.0001$ ).

Grade 10 English and Grade 10 Math marks were strongly correlated with each other ( $.65$ ). Grade 10 English was correlated with Grade 10 credit accumulation ( $.64$ ), Grade 11 credit accumulation ( $.57$ ), Grade 12 credit accumulation ( $.46$ ) and total Grade 9-12 credit accumulation ( $.66$ ). Grade 10 English also had a moderate negative correlation with absenteeism:  $-.34$  for Grade 9,  $-.45$  for Grade 10,  $-.43$  for Grade 11,  $-.45$  for Grade 12.

So, what does this tell us?

- absenteeism in any given year is a strong predictor of how many credits students will successfully complete in that year, although it does not tell the whole story;
- absenteeism in Grade 10 is an extremely strong predictor of how students will do in high school;
- English and Math marks in Grade 10 are also strong predictors of achievement from Grade 10 to Grade 12; in fact, Grade 10 absenteeism, coupled with English and Math

marks, may provide a useful predictor of most students would do by the end of Grade 12.

- SES (in the form of proxy income) appears a significant but not especially important factor, compared to absenteeism and achievement data. This may be because its effects are much more subtle, contributing to the other factors in indirect ways.

**ii. The Grade 12 Students of 1996-97 followed back to Grade 8**

Approximately three quarters of students in the above analysis (i.e. students in the who were in Grade 12 in 1996-97, and had started secondary school in the Toronto Board in 1993) were also in Grade 8 in the Toronto Board in 1992-93; and we have Grade 8-12 absenteeism records for those students. A second Spearman's Rank Correlation procedure was then done with the addition of Grade 8 absenteeism (see Table 10).

When this variable is added, the above patterns remain the same. The addition of Grade 8 absenteeism highlights an interesting trend: absenteeism is closely correlated to achievement in any given year, and is closely correlated to absenteeism in previous and future years, but the relationship is diluted by time. This can be clearly seen when we look at the correlation of Grade 8 absenteeism and absenteeism of the students over the next four years:

Grade 8 absenteeism with:

	$r_s$
Grade 9 absenteeism	.54
Grade 10 absenteeism	.49
Grade 11 absenteeism	.42
Grade 12 absenteeism.	.36

Interestingly, Grade 8 absenteeism has a stronger negative correlation with total secondary school credit accumulation (-.33) than with credit accumulation of individual years (-.24 to -.27).

Grade 8 absenteeism with:

	$r_s$
Grade 10 credit accumulation	-.25
Grade 11 credit accumulation	-.26
Grade 12 credit accumulation	-.24
Total Grade 9-12 credit accumulation	-.33

(For more detail, see Table 10.)

It should be noted that the two analyses include only students who remained in the Toronto Board from Grade 9 (Grade 8 for the second analysis) to Grade 12.<sup>4</sup> It therefore excluded the most highly at-risk students-- those who had left the Toronto Board, through transferring or dropping out, in Grade 10 and Grade 11. Given that (as seen earlier), 1996-97 Toronto Board secondary students who dropped out and transferred had the highest absenteeism, it is possible that the two analyses may be underestimating the relationship of absenteeism to achievement. To see if this is true, it would be best to examine an entire cohort-- that is, take a group of students and follow all of them for a period of time. This will be done in Chapter 2, in looking at the Grade 9 cohort of 1991, which was followed for five years to Fall 1996.

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<sup>4</sup> N = 3,275 for students followed from Grade 9, and 2,476 for students followed from Grade 8.

**Table 9: Spearman Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables,  
Grade 9 Students of 1993-94, Grade 9 to Grade 12**

	Grade 9 Absenteeism	Grade 10 Absenteeism	Grade 11 Absenteeism	Grade 12 Absenteeism	Grade 10 English marks	Grade 10 Math marks	Grade 10 Credits	Grade 11 Credits	Grade 12 Credits	Total Grade 9-12 Credits	Average Income
Grade 9 Absenteeism	1.00	0.69	0.58	0.53	-0.34	-0.37	-0.38	-0.36	-0.35	-0.46	--
Grade 10 Absenteeism	0.69	1.00	0.70	0.63	-0.46	-0.46	-0.50	-0.47	-0.42	-0.57	--
Grade 11 Absenteeism	0.58	0.70	1.00	0.73	-0.43	-0.43	-0.43	-0.54	-0.47	-0.59	--
Grade 12 Absenteeism	0.53	0.63	0.73	1.00	-0.45	-0.44	-0.45	-0.51	-0.62	-0.64	-0.07
Grade 10 English marks	-0.34	-0.46	-0.43	-0.45	1.00	0.65	0.64	0.57	0.46	0.66	0.17
Grade 10 Math marks	-0.37	-0.46	-0.43	-0.44	0.65	1.00	0.65	0.55	0.42	0.65	0.16
Grade 10 Credits	-0.38	-0.50	-0.43	-0.45	0.64	0.65	1.00	0.62	0.46	0.73	0.19
Grade 11 Credits	-0.36	-0.47	-0.54	-0.51	0.57	0.55	0.62	1.00	0.53	0.82	0.18
Grade 12 Credits	-0.35	-0.42	-0.47	-0.62	0.46	0.42	0.46	0.53	1.00	0.80	.06 *
Total Grade 9-12 Credits	-0.46	-0.57	-0.59	-0.64	0.66	0.65	0.73	0.82	0.80	1.00	0.14
Average Income	---	---	---	-0.07	0.17	0.16	0.19	0.18	.06 *	0.14	1.00

All correlations significant at .0001 unless otherwise stated

\* Significant at .0003



**Table 10: Spearman Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables,  
Grade 9 Students of 1993-94, Grade 8 to Grade 12**

	Grade 8 Absenteeism	Grade 9 Absenteeism	Grade 10 Absenteeism	Grade 11 Absenteeism	Grade 12 Absenteeism	Grade 10 English marks	Grade 10 Math marks	Grade 10 Credits	Grade 11 Credits	Grade 12 Credits	Total Grade 9-12 Credits	Average Income
Grade 8 Absenteeism	<b>1.00</b>	0.54	0.49	0.42	0.36	-0.24	-0.27	-0.25	-0.26	-0.24	-0.33	0.12
Grade 9 Absenteeism	0.54	<b>1.00</b>	0.70	0.58	0.53	-0.37	-0.40	-0.42	-0.38	-0.37	-0.48	--
Grade 10 Absenteeism	0.49	0.70	<b>1.00</b>	0.71	0.64	-0.48	-0.49	-0.53	-0.49	-0.44	-0.60	--
Grade 11 Absenteeism	0.42	0.58	0.71	<b>1.00</b>	0.74	-0.44	-0.44	-0.45	-0.56	-0.49	-0.61	--
Grade 12 Absenteeism	0.36	0.53	0.64	0.74	<b>1.00</b>	-0.46	-0.45	-0.48	-0.54	-0.64	-0.67	--
Grade 10 English marks	-0.24	-0.37	-0.48	-0.44	-0.46	<b>1.00</b>	0.65	0.65	0.57	0.46	0.66	0.14
Grade 10 Math marks	-0.27	-0.40	-0.49	-0.44	-0.45	0.65	<b>1.00</b>	0.67	0.57	0.42	0.66	0.13
Grade 10 Credits	-0.25	-0.42	-0.53	-0.45	-0.48	0.65	0.67	<b>1.00</b>	0.64	0.48	0.75	0.17
Grade 11 Credits	-0.26	-0.38	-0.49	-0.56	-0.54	0.57	0.55	0.64	<b>1.00</b>	0.54	0.83	0.17
Grade 12 Credits	-0.24	-0.37	-0.44	-0.49	-0.64	0.46	0.42	0.48	0.54	<b>1.00</b>	0.81	.06 *
Total Grade 9-12 Credits	-0.33	-0.48	-0.60	-0.61	-0.67	0.66	0.66	0.75	0.83	0.81	<b>1.00</b>	0.13
Average Income	0.12	--	--	--	--	0.14	0.13	0.17	0.17	.06 *	0.13	<b>1.00</b>

All correlations significant at .0001 unless otherwise stated

\* Significant at .0059

## **C-2. The Grade 9 Cohort of 1991**

As part of a periodic process, every few years the Toronto Board's Research and Assessment Department undertakes a cohort study of Grade 9 students. These studies track groups of Grade 9 students over a period of time—usually for five years, the time thought normal for Ontario students to complete their secondary studies. In 1991, a cohort of Grade 9 students was followed for slightly over five years, from September of 1991 until October 1996. These were students who were between the ages of 13 and 15, and who, according to Toronto Board records, had not attended secondary school until the start of the study in Fall 1991.

The students were tracked using their Toronto Board student number. By Fall 1996, 59% of the students had graduated, 22% had dropped out, and 19% were still pursuing their secondary studies in the Toronto Board of Education (this excludes the 14% of the cohort who had transferred to other Boards, and could no longer be followed in the tracking study). Compared to an earlier cohort of Fall 1987 Grade 9 students followed in the same way, the 1991 cohort had a lower dropout rate (from 33% to 22%), a higher graduation rate (from 56% to 59%), and a higher proportion of students who were still in secondary school in their sixth year (from 11% to 19%). For more details of changes in the dropout and graduation characteristics of these students, see the Toronto Board report (Brown, 1997b).

The study had a broad range of demographic information available. First, there was the information available from Toronto Board administrative systems, as seen in the previous section on 1996-97 students: i.e., age, gender, parental status, country of birth,

language spoken at home, as well as information available on completed marks and credits, and on the mobility characteristics of the students (i.e. where they went within the Toronto Board).

In addition, the majority of these students had participated in the Toronto Board's Every Secondary Student Survey in Fall 1991. This asked a number of questions on student attitude towards school; students' post-secondary plans; parental education and socio-economic status; race of student; and hours of homework and hours of work per week.

Finally, for this analysis, student absenteeism for all five years was captured.

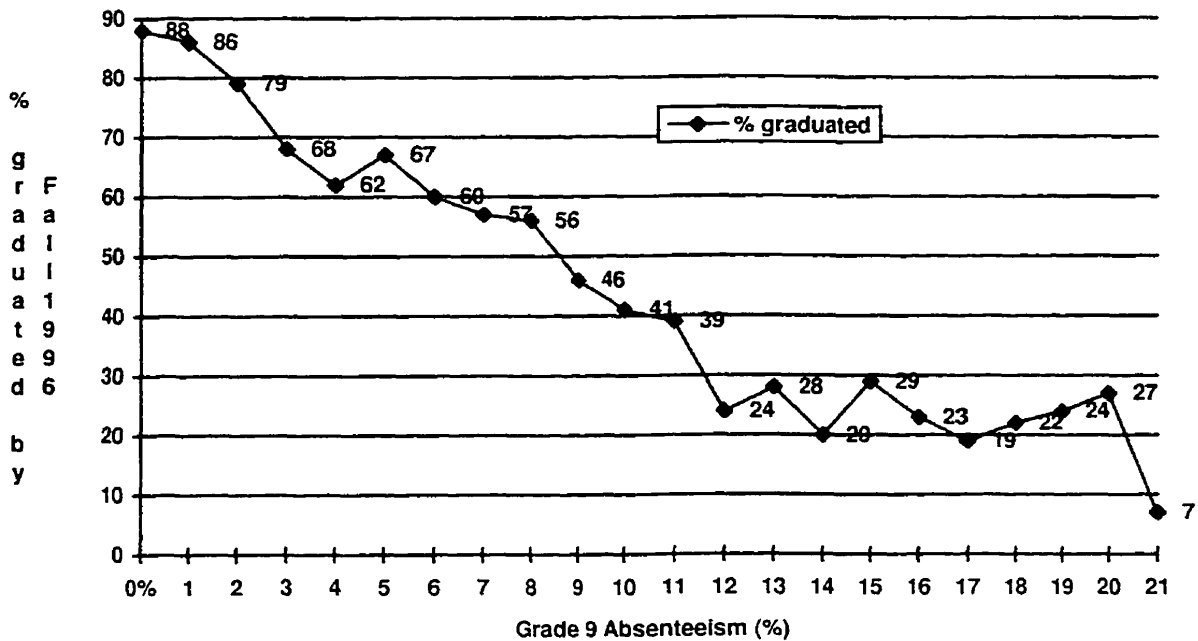
**a. Year 1 Absenteeism and Year 5 Graduation**

When Grade 9 (Year 1) absenteeism is linked with academic outcomes five years later, it would appear that students who missed more than 8% of their school year in Grade 9 were in serious trouble: less than half of them had graduated five years later, while a quarter had dropped out of school. (See Table 11 and Figure 9.)

**Table 11: Tracking Outcomes, 1991 to 1996  
According to Grade 9/Year 1 Absenteeism**

	<b>Graduated (%)</b>	<b>Still in TBE system (%)</b>	<b>Dropout (%)</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	59	19	22
0% absenteeism	88	5	7
1% absenteeism	86	8	6
2% absenteeism	79	11	10
3% absenteeism	68	20	13
4% absenteeism	62	21	16
5% absenteeism	67	16	17
6% absenteeism	60	20	20
7% absenteeism	57	23	20
8% absenteeism	56	20	24
9% absenteeism	46	28	26
10% absenteeism	41	31	28
11% absenteeism	39	26	34
12% absenteeism	24	29	48
13% absenteeism	28	26	46
14% absenteeism	20	44	36
15% absenteeism	29	18	53
16% absenteeism	23	38	38
17% absenteeism	19	38	44
18% absenteeism	22	22	57
19% absenteeism	24	36	40
20% absenteeism	27	20	53
21% absenteeism	7	33	59

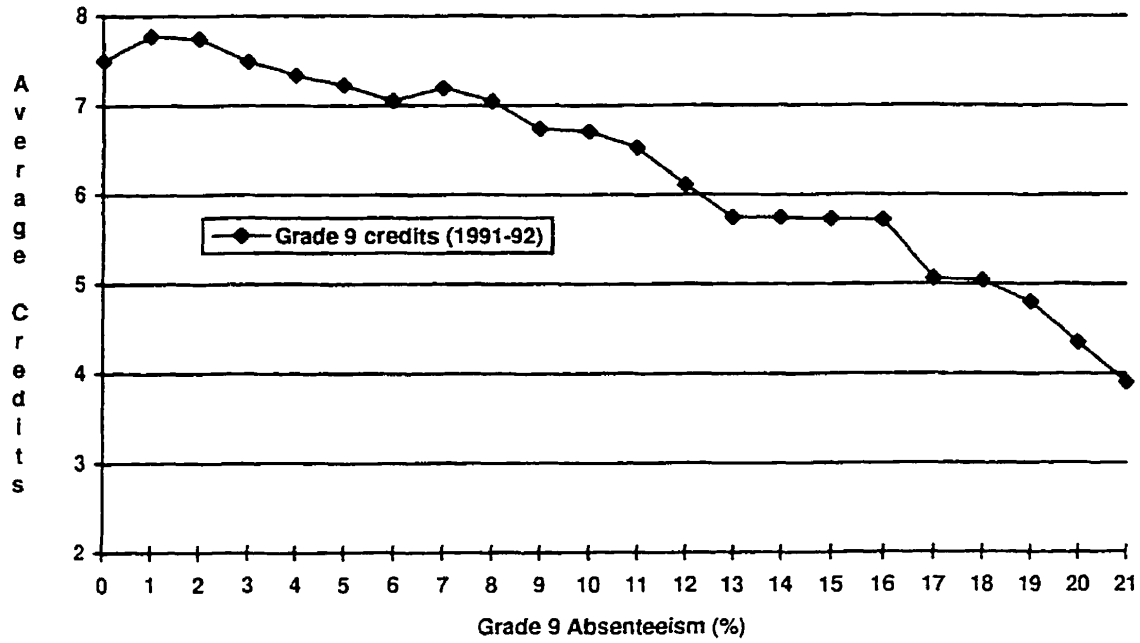
**Figure 9:  
Absenteeism in Grade 9/Year 1 (1991-92) and  
Graduation Five Years Later (Fall 1996)**



Earlier preliminary research on attendance of this cohort had already established a strong relationship between Grade 9 absenteeism and credit accumulation in Grade 9. (See Brown, 1995a; see also Figure 10 below. This is the figure, as seen in the Introduction, that started my investigation of absenteeism.)

Previous research had already demonstrated a close link between credit accumulation in Grade 9, and long-term student success, as noted in Chapter C-1. Therefore, the link between absenteeism and long-term success naturally follows.

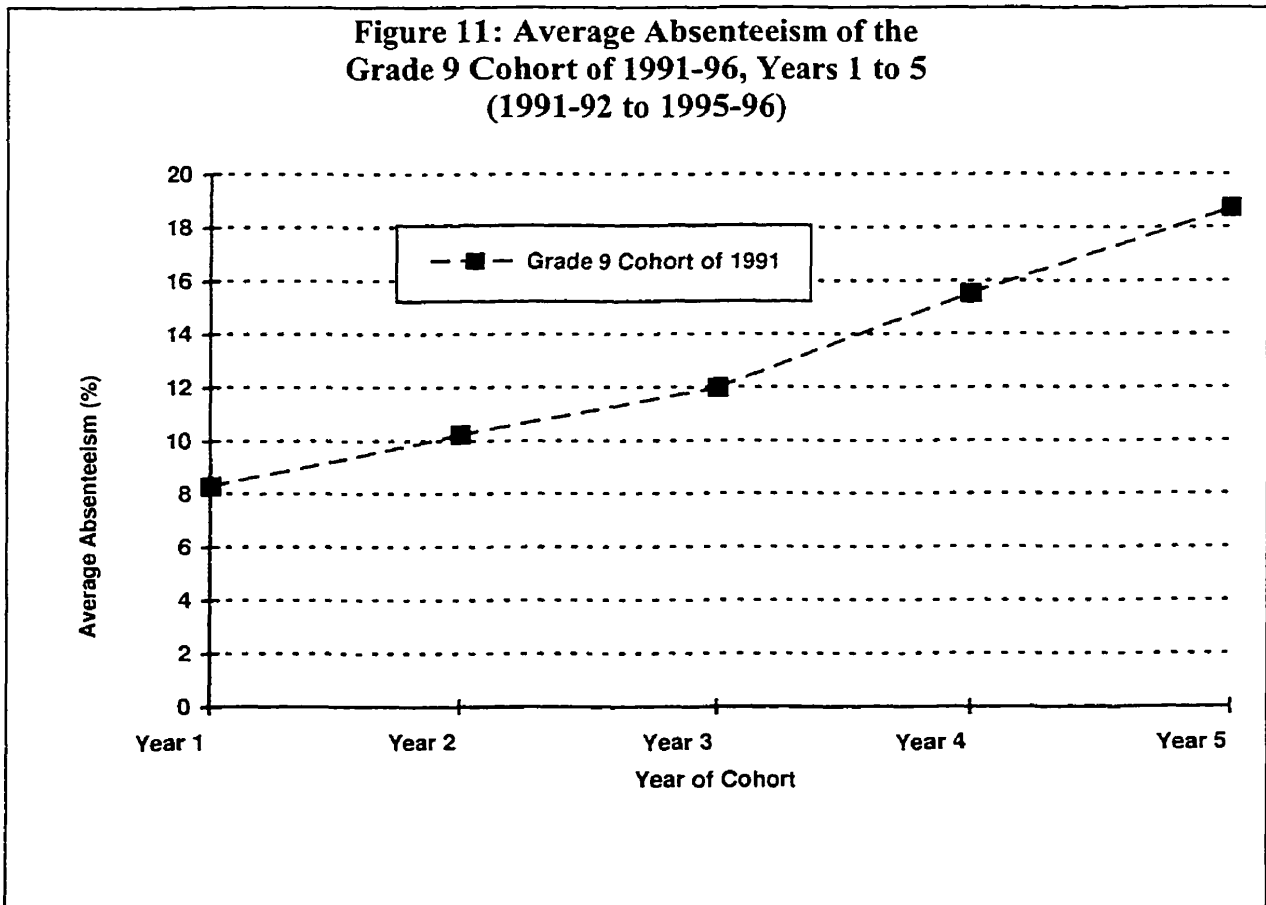
**Figure 10:  
Absenteeism in Grade 9/Year 1 (1991-92) and  
Grade 9 Credit Accumulation**



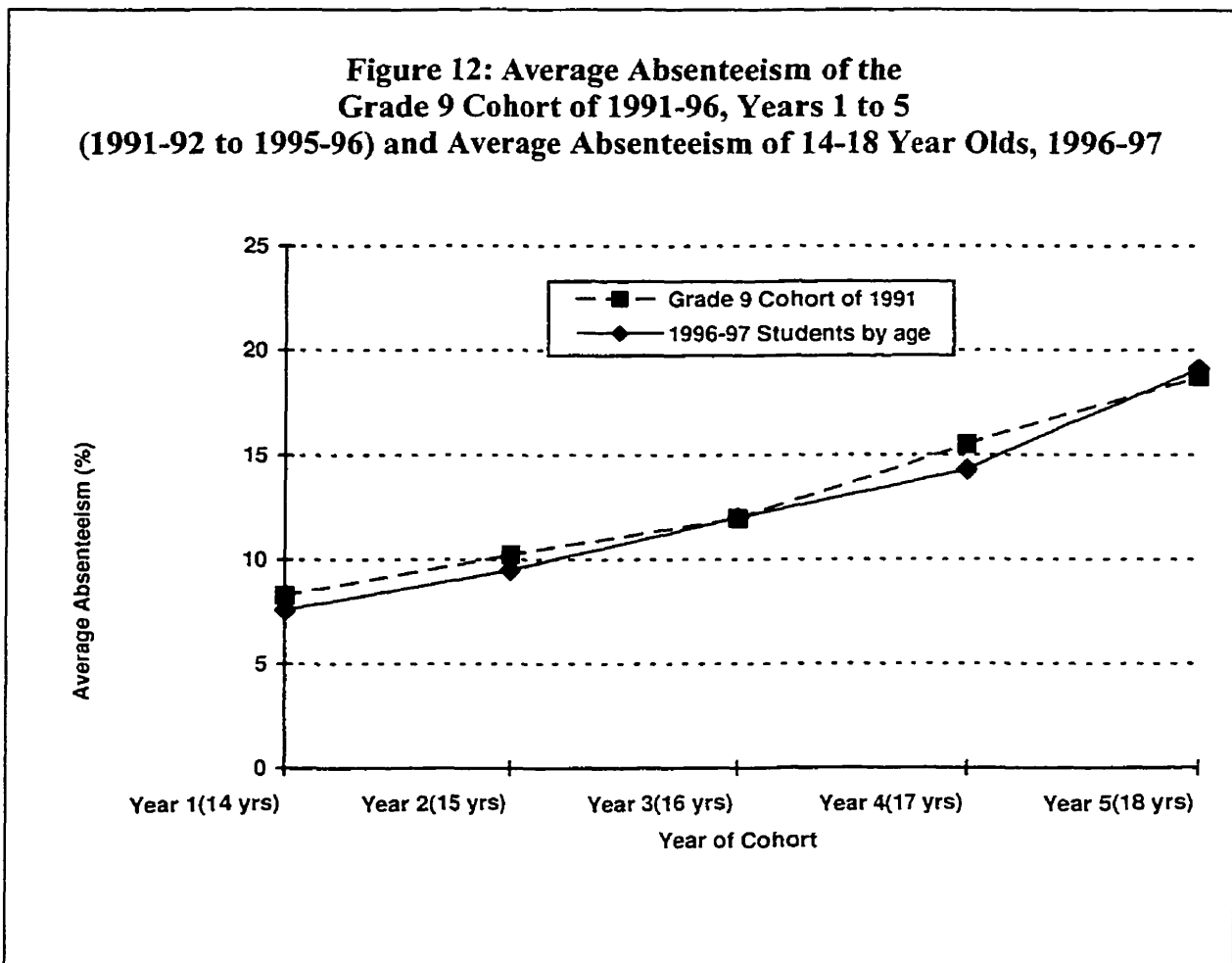
**b. Absenteeism for the 1991 Cohort 1991-1996**

The absenteeism of the cohort was calculated for the school years 1991-92, 1992-93, 1993-94, 1994-95, and 1995-96. Because students dropped out or transferred one year and then re-entered the Board another year, there is the danger of exaggerating total absenteeism by falsely including students who were not there at all; therefore, the calculation was performed only for students who were present for at least some time during each school year in question.

Absenteeism increased during each year-- as seen in Figure 11, from 8% in Year 1 (1991-92), to 10% in Year 2, 12% in Year 3, 16% in Year 4, and 19% in Year 5 (1995-6).



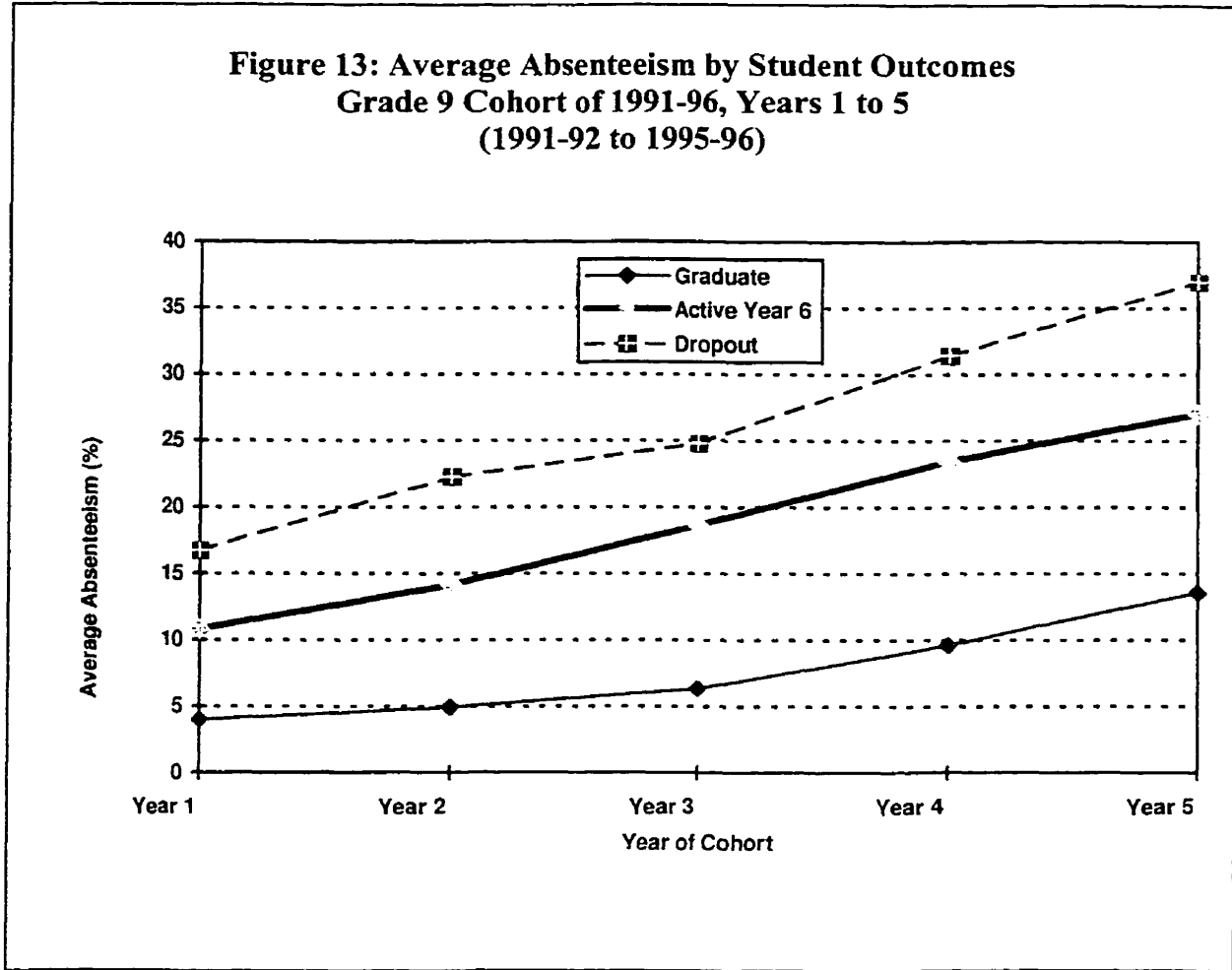
The pattern is very similar to the increase of absenteeism according to age group in 1996-97, as seen in the previous chapter (C-1). In fact, when the 1996-97 absenteeism rates of 14-18 year olds are overlaid with the rates of the Grade 9 cohort over five years, the two lines are virtually identical, indicating that, at the secondary level, the average absenteeism of a large group is greatly influenced by age, or at least factors closely associated with age.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The two patterns have only a few students in common--- the 100 or so 13-year-old students who started the Toronto Board in Fall 1991, who were about 3% of the 18-year-old group of 1996-97 students.



**Figure 13: Average Absenteeism by Student Outcomes  
Grade 9 Cohort of 1991-96, Years 1 to 5  
(1991-92 to 1995-96)**



However, the increase in absenteeism is not equal among all students. Figure 13 illustrates the absenteeism rates of three groups: those who had graduated by the end of 1996; those who were still in the Toronto Board in their sixth year of secondary studies by Fall 1996; and those who had dropped out by Fall 1996. The average absenteeism of graduates was 4% in Year 1 (1991-92) and had increased to 14% in Year 5 (1995-96). Yet the average absenteeism of dropouts was 17% in Year 1 and 37% in Year 5. This does show that absenteeism as an ‘at risk’ variable is not an absolute: the absenteeism rate of “successful” students in their fifth year was only slightly lower than the rate of

dropouts in their first year. The pattern is similar to the pattern of credit accumulation of these students as found in Brown (1997a): while average credit accumulation among all students decreased according to years in school, the credit accumulation of most “unsuccessful” students, and the gap between graduates and non-graduates widened over time.

Likewise, with absenteeism, students who dropped out or took longer to complete their diploma started out with substantially higher absenteeism than graduates; the pattern continued and increased as the students progressed through their secondary careers.

c. Year 1 Absenteeism and Average Credit Accumulation, 1991-1996

**Table 12: Average Credits Per Year, 1991 to 1996  
According to Grade 9/Year 1**

Year 1 Absenteeism	N	Year 1 Credits	Year 2 Credits	Year 3 Credits	Year 4 Credits	Year 5 Credits	Total Credits*
0% absenteeism	168	8	8	7	6	5	34
1% absenteeism	521	8	8	7	6	5	33
2% absenteeism	443	8	8	7	6	5	32
3% absenteeism	387	8	7	7	6	4	30
4% absenteeism	252	7	7	7	6	5	29
5% absenteeism	262	7	7	7	6	5	29
6% absenteeism	193	7	7	7	5	5	28
7% absenteeism	145	7	7	6	5	4	27
8% absenteeism	106	7	7	6	5	5	27
9% absenteeism	141	7	6	6	5	5	25
10% absenteeism	85	7	6	6	5	4	24
11% absenteeism	60	7	6	5	5	4	24
12% absenteeism	59	6	6	6	5	4	20
13% absenteeism	56	6	6	5	5	4	20
14% absenteeism	44	6	6	5	5	4	20
15% absenteeism	34	6	6	5	6	4	19
16% absenteeism	59	6	5	5	5	5	19
17% absenteeism	32	6	5	5	5	5	19
18% absenteeism	22	5	6	5	6	5	18
19% absenteeism	24	6	5	5	6	5	18
20% absenteeism	13	5	5	4	4	5	18
21% absenteeism	27	4	5	5	5	5	14

Excludes those who transferred out of the Toronto Board to other Boards by September 1996.  
N refers to students in Year 1.

The relationship between Year 1 absenteeism and Year 1 credit accumulation had already been noted above. Table 12 shows the close relationship between Year 1 absenteeism and credit accumulation over the five years. Column 1 shows Year 1 absenteeism; Columns 3-7 show average credit accumulation between Year 1 and Year 5; while Column 8 shows the total credits students still active in Year 5 had achieved by the end of that year, excluding students who transferred out of the Board.

Students with 0% to 2% absenteeism had the credit accumulation characteristics of graduates as seen in previous research (Brown, 1997). These students had an average of 32-34 credits by the end of Year 5, well above the graduation requirement of 30 credits; and as can be seen in Table 4 at the beginning of this chapter, most of these students had graduated and comparatively few had dropped out. With Year 1 absenteeism of 3% or more, the 'at risk' factor directly increased; students with 12% Year 1 absenteeism were highly at risk, with well under a third graduating 'on time' by Year 5.

**d. Year 1 Absenteeism and Demographic and other Independent Variables**

Given the close relationship between Year 1 (Grade 9) absenteeism, credit accumulation from Years 1-5, and dropping out, that has been shown above, it would seem likely that demographic and other subgroups that previous Toronto Board research has shown to be highly 'at risk' would also have higher than normal absenteeism. An attempt to examine this is seen in Table 13. For each subgroup (e.g. Asian students) the proportion of the population that had higher than average Year 1 absenteeism is given, along with dropout at the end of Year 5. Of the cohort, 24% had above average Year 1 absenteeism and 22% had dropped out by the end of Year 5.<sup>2</sup>

On the whole, as might be expected, groups that had low absenteeism in Year 1 also had a low dropout rate by the end of Year 5. Specifically:

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<sup>2</sup> 'Above average' absenteeism was defined as those having an absenteeism rate of above 8.3%. 'Dropout' is calculated after excluding students who had transferred out of the Toronto Board during the five-year period.

- Students in the Advanced academic stream had the lowest Year 1 absenteeism and the lowest dropout rate by Year 5, while students in the Basic stream had the highest absenteeism and the highest dropout rate; a similar pattern is seen with students in collegiate institutes and the lowest absenteeism and lowest dropout rate, while students in Basic level schools (now phased out) had the highest absenteeism and highest dropout rate.
- Asian students had much lower Year 1 absenteeism and dropout rate by Year 5 than White and Black students, who had similar levels of absenteeism and dropping out. This may be a partial explanation for the increased success of Black students, who showed a dramatic decline in dropping out compared to the previous Toronto Board cohort study (1987-1992).
- There was little difference between male and female students: male students had 1% higher proportion of high absenteeism and a 4% higher rate of dropping out. This is similar to the pattern found for all 1996-97 students.
- Language group differences showed that the relationship between Year 1 absenteeism and final dropout rates was not absolute. Chinese-speaking students had the lowest absenteeism and the lowest dropout rate. However, Spanish-speaking students had higher absenteeism but a lower dropout rate than Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Vietnamese students.
- Likewise, students born out of Canada had lower absenteeism but a marginally higher dropout rate than students born in Canada. As was seen in the examination of

1996-97 absenteeism in the previous section, there are obviously many other factors at work than purely cultural ones.

- However, the traditional power of socio-economic variables appears to have maintained itself in this cohort. Students living in households where the parents were professionals had half the proportion of high absenteeism, and less than half the dropout rate, than students living in households where the parents did not work. Likewise, students whose parents had a university education had lower proportion of high absenteeism, and a lower dropout rate, than other students.
- Similarly, students living with one parent had twice the proportion of high absenteeism, and almost twice the dropout rate, than students living with both parents. This is similar to the findings of the 1996-97 students. Figure 14 shows that the differences in parental status were consistent regardless of parental occupation.
- Disengagement has been associated in the literature with absenteeism; therefore, it would seem likely that the series of student climate questions asked in the 1991 Every Student Survey would provide a clear indicator of both absenteeism and future achievement. In fact, this was not the case. For the most part, students with the most extreme negative attitudes had higher than normal Year 1 absenteeism and a higher dropout rate by Year 5. But these students provide only a small fraction of both the truant students and later dropouts, simply because most Grade 9 students appeared to like school. For example, of students who responded to the statement “I feel I belong to this school”, 75% agreed with the statement, 21% were not sure, and only

3% disagreed. It may be that these questions were not a truly valid indicator of disengagement from high school. Perhaps other questions may provide more valid indicators of future performance. On the other hand, it may be that students at the beginning of their Grade 9 year are fairly optimistic and that the 'disengagement' from school may be more appropriately measured through early absenteeism, numbers of dropped courses, and other items traditionally noted by guidance and social workers (for an example, see Topa, 1988).

- Likewise, involvement in extra-curricular activities is closely associated with scholastic disengagement in the literature (see, for example, McNeil, 1995). However, the evidence of the 1991 Toronto Board Grade 9 cohort is not clear. The most uninvolved students (those who never participated in extra-curricular activities) had higher absenteeism and dropout than did other students, but they were a small proportion of the total. It would seem from these questions that psychological disengagement, as least as imperfectly measured by Likert-type scales, captures a certain proportion of the potentially at-risk population, but by no means the majority.
- Students who worked 16 or more hours per week in Year 1(Grade 9) had higher absenteeism and dropout than students who worked 15 or fewer hours a week, or who did not work. This is consistent with the literature on student work habits which has found that long work hours (15-20 hours per week of employment) are associated with lower marks, higher absenteeism rates, lower involvement in homework and extra-curricular activities, and higher dropout rates (Cheng, 1995.)

- Hours of homework per week in Year 1 appeared to be very closely related to both Year 1 absenteeism and eventual dropout and graduation. Students who completed between 0 and 5 hours of homework per week had more than twice the ratio of high absenteeism, and more than twice the eventual dropout rate, than those students who completed 16 or more hours of homework per week. It would appear that here, as in most things, students who put in the hours inside of school also put in the hours outside of school, and tend to get the results.
- At the same time, post-secondary plans were also closely related to absenteeism and dropout rate. Students who planned to go onto university (and who thought their parents wanted them to go to university) were much less likely to be absent, and much less likely to drop out, than those who planned to go to community college or directly to the world of work.

**Table 13: Proportion of Year I (Grade 9) Students with Above Average Absenteeism and Dropout by the end of Year V According to Demographic Variables**

Variable	Subgroup	Above Average Absenteeism (%)	Dropout (%)
OVERALL		24	22
Academic level	Advanced	18	11
	General	40	32
	Basic	54	35
Race	Asian	12	14
	Black	29	22
	White	27	21
Gender	Male	29	24
	Female	28	20



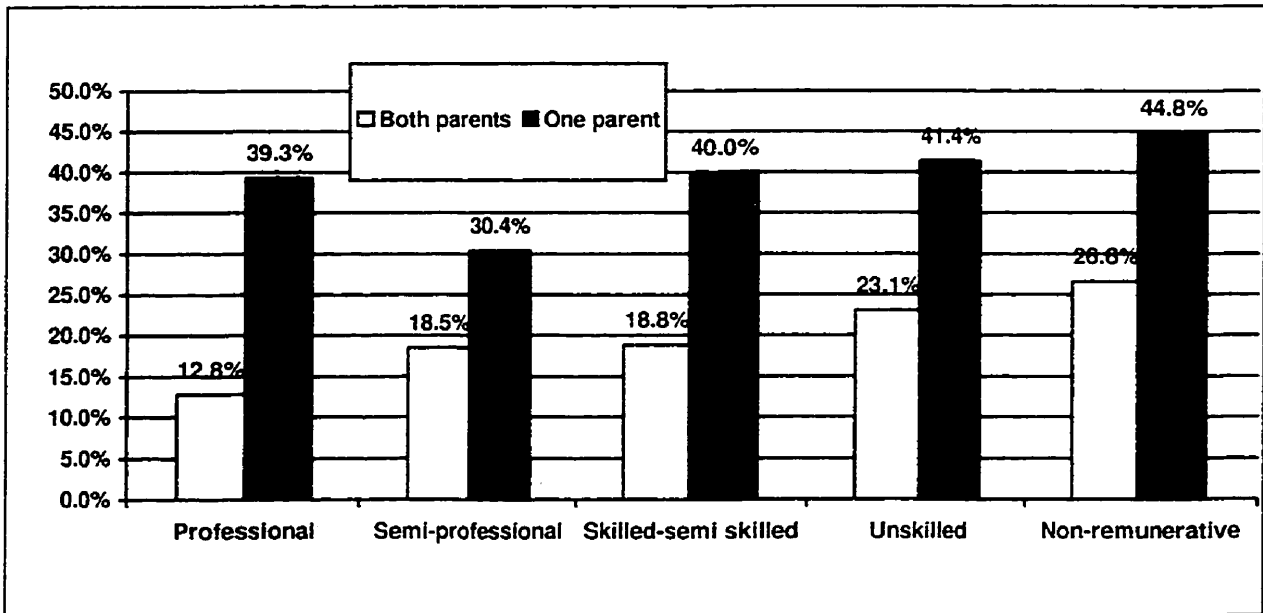
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Subgroup</b>	<b>Above Average Absenteeism (%)</b>	<b>Dropout (%)</b>
OVERALL		24	22
Socio-economic status (of parents)	Professional	18	12
	Semi-professional	22	16
	Skilled/semi-skilled	23	20
	Unskilled	31	25
	Non-remunerative	36	32
Highest Education (of parents)	Elementary	24	25
	Secondary	29	24
	Community College	28	22
	University	18	13
Home language	Chinese	9	10
	English only	28	19
	Greek	17	24
	Italian *	28	23
	Portuguese	27	29
	Spanish *	36	20
	Vietnamese	15	21
Birthplace	Born in Canada	30	21
	Born outside Canada	24	23
Parental presence	Lives with both parents	21	17
	Lives with one parent	44	31
Type of School First Attended	Collegiate	21	15
	Technical-Commercial	42	34
	Basic	66	53
Hours worked in Grade 9 (per week)	None	24	19
	1-15	26	22
	16 hours or more	34	30
Hours of Homework in Grade 9 (per week)	0-5 hour	33	27
	6-9 hours	25	18
	10-15 hours	16	15
	16 +	14	11

\* N < 100

Variable	Subgroup	Above Average Absenteeism (%)	Dropout (%)
OVERALL		24	22
Post-secondary plans in Grade 9	Not sure yet	35	27
	Community College	34	33
	Work full-time	57	61
	University	16	12
Parents' Post-secondary plans in Grade 9	Not sure yet	35	28
	Community College	38	32
	Work full-time *	59	53
	University	18	15
Extracurricular activities in Grade 9	Often	23	16
	Sometimes	24	20
	Rarely	21	19
	Never	32	24
"I feel I belong in this school"	Strongly agree/agree	23	18
	Not sure	27	21
	Disagree/strongly disagree *	42	27
"This school encourages students to learn"	Strongly agree/agree	24	18
	Not sure	22	19
	Disagree/strongly disagree*	40	28
"This school treats students of all backgrounds fairly"	Strongly agree/agree	25	19
	Not sure	24	20
	Disagree/strongly disagree *	24	20
"Extra help is available when I need it"	Strongly agree/agree	23	19
	Not sure	29	18
	Disagree/strongly disagree *	40	32
"Students have enough say over things that are important to them"	Strongly agree/agree	24	18
	Not sure	24	20
	Disagree/strongly disagree*	31	19
"Most teachers at this school make an effort to know their students"	Strongly agree/agree	24	19
	Not sure	21	16
	Disagree/strongly disagree	31	25
"My school gives students the help they need for planning their future education and careers"	Strongly agree/agree	25	20
	Not sure	22	15
	Disagree/strongly disagree *	33	27

\* N < 100

**Figure 14:  
Absenteeism: % of Students with Above Average Absenteeism  
1991-92 Grade 9 Every Secondary Student Survey Participants  
Socio-economic Status of Student**



**e. Logistic Regression on 1991-92 Absenteeism**

As with the 1996-97 data in the previous chapter (C-1), logistic regression was used with absenteeism of the Grade 9 cohort of 1991. For this analysis, the response or dependent variable looked at likelihood of above average absenteeism for the students' Grade 9 year: i.e., the 'event' was defined as missing above 8.3% of school days during the 1991-92 school year; the non-event is defined as missing 8.3% or less of school days. Independent variables were taken from responses to the 1991 Every Secondary Student Survey and from administrative data. (The Every Student Survey used matrix sampling with some questions, such as the school attitude questions shown earlier; this meant that they were asked of only half the sample. Because logistic regression uses only cases where complete data is available, these variables were excluded from the analysis.)

Just under a quarter of the students (23%) had above average absenteeism; the distribution was skewed, with most students having low absenteeism rates, and a small proportion having very high rates. It is already shown (see Table 4) that most students with above 8% absenteeism did not graduate at the end of five years in high school. Therefore, students with above-average absenteeism should be thought of as highly at-risk of not completing high school.

Independent variables were as follows:

- Socio-economic status from parents' occupation in two categories: professional/semi-professional, and non-professional (technical and semi-technical, unskilled, and non-remunerative);<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Another analysis was run with parents' occupation divided into four categories: professional, semi-professional, technical/semi-technical, and unskilled/non-remunerative. Results were nearly identical as the above analysis using two categories.

- Place of birth (born in Canada, born outside of Canada);
- Gender (male, female);
- Home language (English, non-English);
- Parental status (living with two parents, or living with one parent, relative, by self, in group home);
- Post-secondary plans (planning to attend university, other plans);
- Hours of homework per week (ten hours of homework or more, nine hours of homework or less);
- Hours of part-time work per week (15 hours or less, 16 hours or more);
- Academic level of student (Academic level, all other levels);
- Type of high school attended (Collegiate institute, other type of high school).

There were 2,373 cases with complete data on all of the independent and response variables.

The Backward Elimination procedure of Proc Logistic was used. The procedure looked at the largest Wald chi-square values and consequent lower p-value, and eliminated variables with a greater p-value than .05, starting with the largest p-value over .05, to lowest p-value over .05, in a step-wise procedure. This eliminated, in sequence, place of birth ( $p = .69$ ), gender ( $p = .41$ ), and socio-economic status ( $p = .20$ ).

The results of the revised run showed that the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Schwartz Criterion (SC) were lower than the intercept only, indicating that the model provides some explanation for absenteeism. As well, the -2LogL and Score statistics were both significant at .0001, showing that the independent variables contribute to above average absenteeism. Moreover, the Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-fit test on the

model found no significant difference between the actual data and predicted values on the data. This indicates that, unlike Hosmer and Lemeshow results for 1996-97 data, there appears to be a good fit between the new model and the data. Thus, a combination of:

- parental status,
- post-secondary plans,
- type of secondary school;
- hours of part-time work per week,
- home language,
- hours of homework per week, and
- academic level

provides a valid predictor of whether Grade 9 students have above average absenteeism, and therefore become highly at-risk of dropping out of school.

Another logistic procedure was run with just those seven variables (i.e. excluding place of birth, gender, socio-economic status, and hours of part-time work per week). This resulted in an increase in sample size, from 2,373 to 2,834, because of a reduction in exclusion due to missing data. Results from logistic procedures from both runs-- that of the original 2,373 students, and the later one of 2,834 students-- are so similar that either could be reported without changing the conclusions. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit test for the second run of 4.9024 showed a lower F value and higher p-value ( $p = .77$ , compared to  $p = .69$ ), indicating a stronger argument that there is a match between model and data.

Odds ratios of the significant variables, in this revised run, along with lower and upper 95% confidence limits, are as follows:

**TABLE 14:  
Conditional Odds Ratio and 95% Confidence Limits  
Significant Logistic Regression Variables**

Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Limits	
		Upper	Lower
PARENTAL STATUS	2.416	1.945	3.001
PLANS FOR UNIVERSITY	2.063	1.636	2.602
TYPE OF SCHOOL	1.922	1.474	2.505
HOURS OF PART-TIME WORK PER WEEK	1.843	1.121	3.031
SPEAKING ENGLISH	1.795	1.425	2.261
HOURS OF HOMEWORK PER WEEK	1.649	1.303	2.088
ACADEMIC LEVEL	1.485	1.124	1.963

Of the significant variables, parental status was the most powerful determinant, with odds of between 2:1 and 3:1. Thus, Grade 9 students not living in two parent households are more likely to have above average absenteeism, with consequent lower credit accumulation and more problems with subsequent secondary school achievement. Students not planning to attend university were twice as likely to have high absenteeism, as were students who attended high schools that were not collegiate institutes. These outcomes had been earlier seen in Table 6 dropout rates: students from single parent families had twice the dropout rate of students from two parent families; students not

planning on going to university in Grade 9 had much higher dropout rates than those planning to go to university; and students enrolled in technical/commercial schools and basic level schools had more than twice the dropout rate of students attending collegiate institutes. Such patterns have been seen repeatedly in previous Toronto Board research: see Brown, 1993, Yau, Cheng and Ziegler, 1994, and Brown, 1997b.

The disappearance of socio-economic status as a variable is somewhat puzzling, given its traditional importance in studies on achievement. In the previous chapter (C-1), in looking at the relationship of SES to absenteeism, it was found that SES was a significant but weak influence. In the case of 1991-92 Grade 9 students the relationship is not even significant. One possibility is that the predictor variables are correlated with SES. This is obviously an area that deserves more study.



**f. Spearman's  $r_s$  Procedure-- Absenteeism and the Grade 9 Cohort of 1991**

The previous chapter (C-1 section g) had seen Spearman's  $r_s$  used as a statistical interpretation for the correlation of absenteeism across time, in looking at absenteeism of 1996-97 Grade 12 students followed back to Grade 8. A similar process will be used here, following Grade 9 students from 1991-92 (Year 1, their first year of secondary school) to 1995-96 (Year 5, their fifth year of secondary school)<sup>4</sup>.

The following variables were examined:

- absenteeism of Year 1 (1991-92);
- absenteeism of Year 2 (1992-93);
- absenteeism of Year 3 (1993-94);
- absenteeism of Year 4 (1994-95);
- absenteeism of Year 5 (1995-96);
- credit accumulation of Year 1 (this was prior to the Decrediting initiative of 1993-94);
- credit accumulation of Year 2;
- credit accumulation of Year 3;
- credit accumulation of Year 4;
- credit accumulation of Year 5;
- total credit accumulation, Year 1 to Year 5;
- Year 2 English marks;
- Year 2 Math marks;

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<sup>4</sup> The use of 'years' rather than 'grades' was used in the study of the 1991 cohort (Brown, 1997b) because 'Grade' is often misleading when applied to students in secondary studies. One student in his/her third year of secondary school may be taking partly Grade 10 and partly Grade 11 courses, while another will be taking a range of Grade 9, 10, 11 and 12 courses.

- total marks of completed credits, Year 1 to Year 5;
- graduation (where 1 = dropout, 2 = still in the Toronto Board in Year 6, and 3 = graduation by Year 5).

The correlations are seen in Table 8. All correlations were statistically significant at .0001, clearly demonstrating the interconnection between absenteeism, credits, and marks. Absenteeism was negatively correlated with credit accumulation and marks, as has been seen in the descriptive section of this chapter and with the Spearman's analysis in Chapter C-1 section g (Tables 9 and 10).

Absenteeism in any given year was most closely related to the year previous and the year following: for example, Year 3 absenteeism had a correlation of .69 with Year 2 absenteeism and a correlation of .71 with Year 4 absenteeism. The relationship appears to fade over time. Year 1 absenteeism had a correlation of .70 with Year 2, .58 with Year 3, .50 with Year 4 and .32 with Year 5 absenteeism, changing from a strong to a moderately weak (albeit significant) positive relationship. It would seem, then, that absenteeism patterns are time related—were most closely connected to immediate past and immediate future patterns, but more weakly related to patterns beyond a few years in the past or future.

The correlation of absenteeism with credit accumulation similarly varied over time, although the patterns were not quite as strong. Thus, Year 3 absenteeism had a correlation of -.59 with Year 3 credits, -.48 with Year 2 credits, and -.43 with Year 4 credits. It had a -.61 correlation with total credits, indicating that absenteeism is more closely related to the final overall picture-- the total accumulation of five years-- than with any specific year, something found in the previous chapter. This could also be

because the 'total credits' variable is less skewed than credit accumulation of specific years. Correlation with marks were moderate, although still powerful-- between -.47 and -.49 for Years 1-4 absenteeism.

As a result, absenteeism was closely connected with graduation: -.49 for Year 1, -.52 for Year 2, -.54 for Year 3, -.54 for Year 4. The correlation with Year 5 is weak to moderate-, at -.36. This makes sense given that by Year 5, most patterns of success are already set: both graduates and dropouts had lower average credit accumulation in Year 5 than in previous years. As well, many at-risk students had already dropped out by Year 5, and many successful students only needed a few remaining credits to graduate.

Correlation of credits and marks with graduation was even higher than the correlation of absenteeism and graduation: .86 for correlation of total credit accumulation and graduation and .63 for total marks and graduation. It is possible, therefore, that the correlation of absenteeism with graduation may actually due to the connection of absenteeism to achievement, as seen through credit accumulation and (to a lesser degree) marks.

**Table 15: Spearman Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables,  
Grade 9 Students of 1991, Years 1 to Year 5**

	Year 1 Absenteeism	Year 2 Absenteeism	Year 3 Absenteeism	Year 4 Absenteeism	Year 5 Absenteeism	Year 1 Credits	Year 2 Credits	Year 3 Credits	Year 4 Credits	Year 5 Credits	Total Credits	Year 2 English Marks	Year 2 Math Marks	Total Marks	Graduation
Year 1 Absenteeism	1.00	0.70	0.58	0.50	0.32	-0.50	-0.49	-0.44	-0.31	-0.22	-0.52	-0.41	-0.43	-0.47	-0.49
Year 2 Absenteeism	0.70	1.00	0.69	0.58	0.37	-0.43	-0.56	-0.56	0.35	-0.23	-0.57	-0.48	-0.49	-0.48	-0.52
Year 3 Absenteeism	0.58	0.69	1.00	0.71	0.48	-0.37	-0.48	1.00	-0.43	-0.27	-0.61	-0.43	-0.42	-0.47	-0.54
Year 4 Absenteeism	0.50	0.58	0.71	1.00	0.64	-0.33	-0.41	-0.49	-0.57	-0.36	-0.62	-0.38	-0.39	-0.49	-0.54
Year 5 Absenteeism	0.32	0.37	0.48	0.64	1.00	-0.17	-0.23	-0.30	-0.37	-0.40	-0.43	-0.28	-0.27	-0.38	-0.36
Year 1 Credits	-0.50	-0.43	-0.37	-0.33	0.63	1.00	0.63	0.47	0.28	0.17	0.65	0.51	0.49	0.62	0.58
Year 2 Credits	-0.49	1.00	-0.48	-0.41	-0.23	0.63	1.00	0.61	0.38	0.25	0.73	0.66	0.68	0.63	0.66
Year 3 Credits	-0.44	0.69	1.00	-0.49	-0.30	0.47	0.61	1.00	0.50	0.28	0.78	0.55	0.54	0.62	0.69
Year 4 Credits	-0.31	-0.35	-0.43	-0.56	-0.37	0.28	0.38	0.50	1.00	0.35	0.69	0.38	0.35	0.49	0.64
Year 5 Credits	-0.22	-0.23	-0.27	-0.36	-0.40	0.17	0.25	0.28	0.35	1.00	0.60	0.25	0.27	0.36	0.49
Total Credits	-0.52	-0.57	-0.61	-0.62	-0.64	0.65	0.73	0.78	0.78	0.60	1.00	0.64	0.64	0.69	0.86
Year 2 English Marks	-0.41	-0.48	-0.43	-0.38	-0.28	0.51	0.66	0.55	0.38	0.25	0.64	1.00	0.64	0.74	0.57
Year 2 Math Marks	-0.43	-0.49	-0.42	-0.39	-0.27	0.49	0.68	0.54	0.35	0.27	0.64	0.64	1.00	0.70	0.55
Total Marks	-0.47	-0.48	-0.47	-0.49	-0.38	0.62	0.63	0.62	0.49	0.36	0.69	0.74	0.70	1.00	0.63
Graduation	-0.49	-0.52	-0.54	-0.54	-0.36	0.58	0.66	0.69	0.64	0.49	0.86	0.57	0.55	0.63	1.00

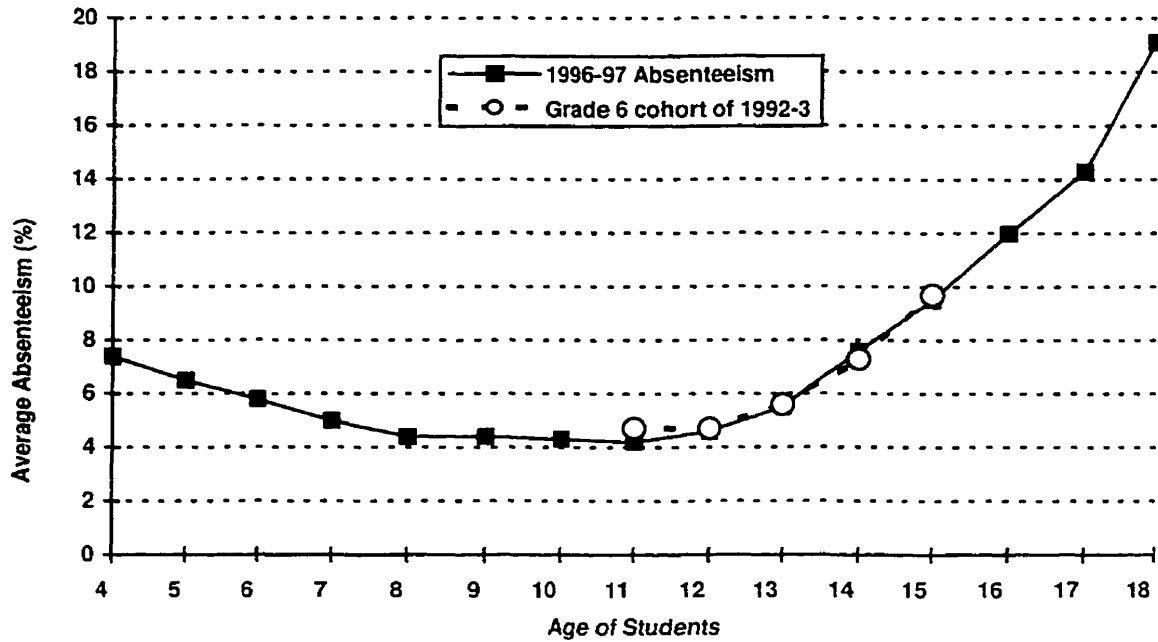
All correlations significant at .0001

### **C-3. The Grade 6 Cohort of 1992-93**

In Chapter C-1, I examined absenteeism across all age groups over a one year period, the 1996-97 school year. In Chapter C-2, I looked at a group of Grade 9 students over a five year period, from 1991-92 to 1995-96. As a third angle on this topic, a group of 11 year olds (the vast majority of whom were in Grade 6) were followed for five years, from 1992-93 until 1996-97, when they were in their second year of secondary school. This particular groups shows the pivotal "transition years" from the last year of the junior elementary system, through the senior elementary grades (7-8), and into the first two years of secondary school.

There were 3,640 11-year-old (Grade 6) students in Toronto Board elementary schools registered in Fall 1992; by Fall 1996, 2,543 of these students had registered in Toronto Board secondary schools. Absenteeism of these students was 4.7% in 1992-93 (Grade 6); 4.7% in 1993-94 (Grade 7); 5.6% in 1994-95 (Grade 8); 7.3% in 1995-96 (Grade 9); and 9.7% in 1996-97 (Grade 10). Figure 15 shows the line graph of this change in absenteeism over time, overlaying the line graph of the absenteeism of all age groups over a one-year period, 1996-97. As can be seen, the patterns are so similar for the 12-17 year old age group as to be indistinguishable-- yet another illustration that at the aggregate level, average absenteeism by age is extraordinarily consistent.

**Figure 15: Average Absenteeism by Age of Students  
Toronto Board Elementary and Secondary Students, 1996-97  
And the Grade 6 Cohort of 1992-93 followed to 1996-97**



The increase in absenteeism across time tends to go across all major groups on which there is information, as seen in Table 16. However, in the case of parental status, the relatively small Grade 6 gap between students from single parent households and those from two parent households had widened appreciably by Grade 10.

**Table 16: The Grade 6 Cohort of 1992-93  
Absenteeism Rates 1992-93 to 1996-97, and Selected Subgroups  
(N's for 1992-93 are in brackets)**

	1992-93 Absenteeism (%)	1993-94 Absenteeism (%)	1994-95 Absenteeism (%)	1995-96 Absenteeism (%)	1996-97 Absenteeism (%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	4.7	4.7	5.6	7.3	9.7
<b>Females (1,778)</b>	4.7	4.7	5.8	7.5	9.4
<b>Males (1,862)</b>	4.7	4.6	5.5	7.0	10.0
<b>Both parents (2,567)</b>	4.3	4.1	4.8	6.0	8.1
<b>One parent (958)</b>	5.7	6.2	7.8	11.1	14.1
<b>Born in Canada (2,713)</b>	4.9	5.0	6.0	7.5	10.2
<b>Born in China/Hong Kong (118)</b>	2.8	1.7	2.7	3.8	3.8
<b>Born in Vietnam (146)</b>	2.8	2.4	3.4	7.8	9.1
<b>Speaks English only (2,226)</b>	5.2	5.4	6.5	8.4	10.9
<b>Speaks Chinese (391)</b>	2.2	2.0	2.4	3.9	5.6
<b>Speaks Vietnamese (155)</b>	3.2	3.1	3.7	7.0	10.0
<b>Speaks Portuguese (151)</b>	4.8	3.7	6.1	5.8	9.4
<b>Above average income (1,151)</b>	4.5	4.5	5.4	6.0	7.6
<b>Below average income (2,344)</b>	4.8	4.7	5.7	7.7	10.6

**a. Logistic Regression— Grade 6 Absenteeism**

As in Chapters C-1 and C-2, logistic regression was used to determine factors that are predictive of higher than average Grade 6 absenteeism. The following factors were examined:

- Parental status (living with both parents, living in one parent, group home or other situation);
- Speaking English at home;
- Speaking Chinese at home;
- Speaking Vietnamese at home;

- Speaking Portuguese at home;
- Born in Canada;
- Born in Vietnam;
- Born in China or Hong Kong;
- Income (above or below average household income).

The regression revealed several factors to be significantly and independently predictive of higher Grade 6 absenteeism (see Table 17a).<sup>1</sup> As in all other analyses, students from outside two parent households were significantly more likely to have above average absenteeism than students from two parent households (OR = 1.239). Students speaking English at home were more likely to have above average absenteeism (OR = 1.409) while students speaking Chinese (OR = 0.254) or Vietnamese (OR = 0.336) were much less likely to have above average absenteeism. On the other hand, students from households with below average income were more likely to have above average absenteeism (OR = 1.198). Being born in Canada, Vietnam or China, and speaking Portuguese, were not found to be significant predictors of Grade 6 absenteeism.

***b. Logistic Regression-- Grade 10 Absenteeism***

The same variables were used in another logistic regression, this time to determine factors that are predictive of higher than average Grade 10 absenteeism. Not surprisingly, most of the factors that were significantly and independently predictive of Grade 6 absenteeism patterns were also significantly and independently predictive of Grade 10 absenteeism: parental status, speaking English at home, speaking Chinese at

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<sup>1</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit Test was not significant (at 3.3,  $p = .86$ ), showing a good fit between the model and data.



home, and income.<sup>2</sup> There were two changes: speaking Vietnamese at home was no longer significant, while students born in China were less likely to have above average absenteeism (OR = 0.408). (See Table 17b.)

The risk of students from other than two-parent households to have higher absenteeism had increased (OR = 1.916, from 1.239), as had the risk of students from lower than average income (OR = 2.068, from 1.198). Figure 16 demonstrates the change in the risk of students from other than two parent households in a different way: it shows the increasing gap between average absenteeism of students from two parent households and students from other households, as these students age from 12 years to 17 years.

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<sup>2</sup> The Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness-of-Fit Test was not significant (at 9.57,  $p = .14$ ), showing a good fit between the model and data.

**TABLE 17:**  
**Conditional Odds Ratio and 95% Confidence Limits**  
**Significant Logistic Regression Variables**

**a. Response Variable = Above Average 1992-93 Absenteeism**

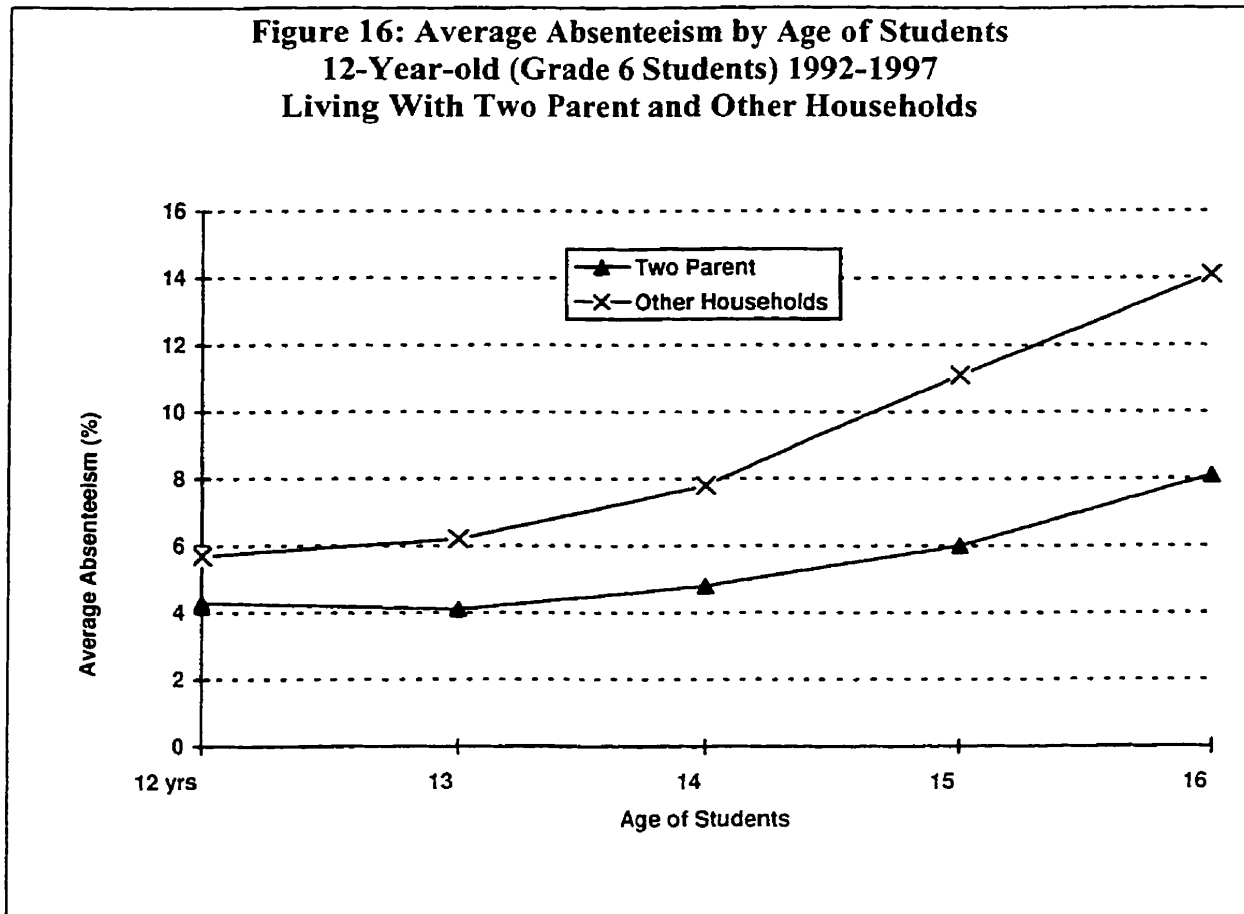
Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Limits	
		Upper	Lower
SPEAKING ENGLISH	1.409	1.168	1.700**
PARENTAL STATUS	1.239	1.051	1.459*
INCOME	1.198	1.017	1.412*
SPEAKING VIETNAMESE	0.336	0.208	0.543***
SPEAKING CHINESE	0.254	0.177	0.363***

**b. Response Variable = Above Average 1996-97 Absenteeism**

Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Limits	
		Upper	Lower
INCOME	2.068	1.663	2.571***
PARENTAL STATUS	1.916	1.570	2.339***
SPEAKING ENGLISH	1.423	1.133	1.787***
SPEAKING CHINESE	0.529	0.353	0.796**
BORN IN CHINA	0.408	0.175	0.952*

\* =  $p < .05$   
 \*\* =  $p < .01$   
 \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Figure 16: Average Absenteeism by Age of Students  
12-Year-old (Grade 6 Students) 1992-1997  
Living With Two Parent and Other Households**



*c. Spearman's  $r_s$  Procedure-- Absenteeism and the Grade 6 Cohort of 1992-93*

An analysis of data from the Grade 6 Cohort of 1992-93 was conducted using Spearman's  $r_s$  (this parallels similar analyses done in Chapters C-1 and C-2). In this case, absenteeism rates for five years-- from Grade 6 in 1992-93 to Grade 10 in 1996-97-- were compared, along with total secondary credits, total secondary marks, English marks and Math marks, and average income.<sup>3</sup> (The English and Math marks would be only for

<sup>3</sup> In this analysis, postal code of student was linked with average income of Enumeration Areas from the 1996 census.

Grade 10, since marks are not kept for separate Grade 9 subjects under the destreamed/decredited initiative.)

Patterns of absenteeism over time are nearly identical to that found in the previous analyses: like the waves produced by a stone dropped into a pool of calm water, the relationships of absenteeism tend to be immediately strong, but fade over time. Thus, the correlation of Grade 6 absenteeism with the next four years was:

<b>Year</b>	<b><math>r_s</math></b>
Grade 7	.47
Grade 8	.47
Grade 9	.37
Grade 10	.33

On the other hand, the correlation of Grade 10 absenteeism with the *previous* four years was:

<b>Year</b>	<b><math>r_s</math></b>
Grade 9	.72
Grade 8	.54
Grade 7	.44
Grade 6	.33

For more detail, see Table 18.

The relationship of absenteeism with marks and credits is also closely connected to time. Grade 10 absenteeism had a moderate negative correlation to total secondary marks achieved by Grade 10 (-.49) and credits (-.31). However, the relationship of Grade 6 absenteeism with total secondary marks achieved by Grade 10 was significant but quite weak (-.10) as was the relationship with credits (-.09). This would suggest that

as a predictor of yearly achievement, absenteeism is best for one or two years but limited after that time.

The correlation of absenteeism to income, as in the previous Spearman correlation analyses, is rather limited. There was a significant but very weak positive relationship of Grade 6 and 8 absenteeism to average income (.06) (indicating that higher income students are very slightly more likely to have higher absenteeism) and a significant but very weak negative relationship of Grade 10 absenteeism to average income (-.06) (indicating that lower income students are very slightly more likely to have higher absenteeism). Given the limited power of the relationship, and the contradictory findings of the logistic regression, this should be interpreted rather cautiously.

**Table 18: Spearman Correlation Coefficients of Selected Variables,  
Grade 6 Students of 1992-93**

	Grade 6 Absenteeism	Grade 7 Absenteeism	Grade 8 Absenteeism	Grade 9 Absenteeism	Grade 10 Absenteeism	Grade 10 Math marks	Grade 10 English marks	Grade 10 Total marks	Total Credits by Grade 10	Average Income
Grade 6 Absenteeism	<b>1.00</b>	0.47	0.47	0.37	0.33	-.07*	--	-0.10	-0.09	.06**
Grade 7 Absenteeism	0.47	<b>1.00</b>	0.57	0.52	0.44	-0.15	-0.13	-0.21	-0.13	--
Grade 8 Absenteeism	0.47	0.57	<b>1.00</b>	0.61	0.54	-0.16	-0.15	-0.23	-0.19	.06***
Grade 9 Absenteeism	0.37	0.52	0.61	<b>1.00</b>	0.71	-0.23	-0.24	-0.36	-0.22	--
Grade 10 Absenteeism	0.33	0.44	0.54	0.71	<b>1.00</b>	-0.30	-0.32	-0.49	-0.31	0.00
Grade 10 Math marks	-.07*	-0.15	-0.16	-0.26	-0.30	<b>1.00</b>	0.54	0.78	0.31	--
Grade 10 English marks	--	-0.13	-0.15	-0.24	-0.32	0.54	<b>1.00</b>	0.79	0.38	0.12
Grade 10 Total marks	-0.10	-0.21	-0.23	-0.36	-0.49	0.78	0.79	<b>1.00</b>	0.45	0.13
Total Credits by Grade 10	-0.09	-0.13	-0.19	-0.22	-0.31	0.31	0.38	0.45	<b>1.00</b>	--
Average Income	.06**	--	.06***	--	0.00	--	0.12	0.13	--	<b>1.00</b>

All correlations significant at .0001 unless otherwise stated

\* Significant at .004

\*\* Significant at .0004

\*\*\* Significant at .003

% Significant at .0015

#### **C-4. Summary: Toronto Board Data, 1991-1997**

This investigation examined data from three sources: the elementary and secondary students in the Toronto Board during 1996-97, to get the 'full picture' of absenteeism across all age groups and grades; students in Grade 9 in Fall 1991, to examine the secondary school experience; and 11-year-old (Grade 6) students enrolled in Fall 1992, to look at the transition between elementary and secondary panels. Much of the investigation was descriptive. As well, two quantitative techniques that do not depend on a 'normal' distribution were used with all three datasets: Spearman's ranked correlation for changes over time, and logistic regression to examine the influence of different variables on above average absenteeism. They should be considered as a series of related but separate analyses, a triangulation of the structure of absenteeism.

##### *Age*

Figures 2 and 3 in Chapter C-1 show a 'v' shaped or 'j' shaped pattern of age and average absenteeism: high absenteeism among 4-5 year olds, a gradual decline to an average of about 4% among 8-12 year olds, and a direct increase starting among 13 year olds, up to 18 year olds. This finding was rather surprising, given that there was nothing to suggest it in either the literature review or the historical analysis. On the other hand, this is one of the first large sample studies using students as the unit of analysis, so it would have been difficult for earlier researchers to find such a pattern. Yet its consistency over 5 years (Figure 3) plus the way that the 1991 Grade 9 and the 1992 Grade 6 cohorts fit into the pattern when tracked for different five-year periods (Figures 12 and 15) show this relationship of age to absenteeism to be extraordinarily powerful.

But given that this study looked at only one school board, it is unclear if this exact pattern would be present among Ontario students in general. There is an obvious need for more large-sample studies of absenteeism, with different age groups of students as the unit of analysis.

There is another key question-- why did the average absenteeism in these datasets remain fairly stable (around 5-6%) between Grade 2 and Grade 7, but change to a linear slope following Grade 7? There is no definitive reason for this, but in the Summary/Discussion I will speculate on a possible explanation (see "Absenteeism and Legal Requirements for School Attending").

### ***Gender***

There appears to be virtually no difference between male and female students in their patterns of absenteeism, at both the elementary and secondary level. Over four logistic regressions, gender was the first independent variable eliminated due to a lack of significance. Of the many possible influences on absenteeism, it would appear that being male or female is the least influential. This is particularly intriguing given that both Toronto Board and Statistics Canada studies have found that achievement and graduation rates of male students are lower than that of female students (e.g. Gilbert, 1993, Brown, 1997b). Gender characteristics may be an instance where the dynamics of student achievement differ from the dynamics of student attendance.



### ***Parental Status***

The importance of parental status was evident in every logistic regression: in separate regressions examining absenteeism of Grade 6, Grade 8, Grade 10, and of all 1996-97 JK-OAC students, living outside the two-parent household was found to significantly increase the risk of above average absenteeism. The difference between students from two-parent and those from other families appears to increase as students enter secondary school, as can be seen in Figure 5 in section C-1 showing average absenteeism of 1996-97 students. (See also Figure 14 in Chapter C-2 and Figure 16 in Chapter C-3.)

This pattern is not unique to absenteeism: previous Toronto Board studies have found a very clear link between parental status and achievement, including marks and credits in Math and English. The difference remained even when SES and other variables were held constant (Yau et al, 1993). The most daunting statistic relates to dropouts: two successive Toronto Board cohort studies have found that students from one parent families were twice as likely to drop out as students from two parent families (Brown, 1993a; Brown, 1997b).

Research on the impact of parental status has been accumulating. For example, according to a study presented to the American Sociological Association in August 1998, young men who grow up in homes without fathers are twice as likely to end up in jail as those who come from traditional two-parent families. Harper and McLanahan tracked a sample of 6,000 males aged 14-22 from 1979-93. They found that those boys whose fathers were absent from the household had double the odds of being incarcerated -- even when other factors such as race, income, parent education and urban residence were held

constant. Surprisingly, those boys who grow up with a step-father in the home were at even higher risk for incarceration, roughly three times that of children who remain with both of their natural parents. Child support payments did not appear to make a significant difference in the odds of incarceration, but the presence of live-in grandparents in households without fathers "appears to help improve youths' chances of avoiding incarceration," the study found (Reuters, August 20, 1998). A recent Canadian study using the 1994 General Social Survey to examine graduation rates found that students from lone-parent or blended/step-parent families are less likely to graduate than students living with both biological parents (Frederick and Boyd, 1998).

What is lacking in the statistics presented in this thesis is an explanation of how parental status affects absenteeism. One plausible explanation has to do with the support networks. Flaxman et al. (1988) has noted that the difference between at-risk and other students can be linked to the systems of support available to the student. Students who are not at-risk have 'redundant' systems of support, while at-risk students have fragile systems of support. Many students from single-parent families are more likely to have fragile systems of support, simply because they have fewer familial and social resources to draw upon.

As well, students from single-parent households are more likely to have to overcome a number of challenges. The Ontario Child Health Study found that single parent status was associated with certain kinds of emotional risk, especially in younger children (Offord et al., 1990). According to the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (1996), children in single-parent families, regardless of income, were more likely to exhibit behavioral and relationship problems. Children in these families

were almost twice as likely to exhibit a behavioral problem as those in two parent families in similar income situations (Statistics Canada, 1998).

In addition, research is “virtually unanimous” that parent involvement makes a fundamental difference to student success.

“...trying to educate children without the involvement of their family is like trying to play a hockey game with one of the teams barred from the arena. The research literature on parental involvement in schools indicates that such inclusion results in many benefits for children: better long-term academic achievement, higher grades, higher test scores, higher motivation and more positive attitudes, increased commitment to schooling, fewer retentions in grade, decreased placement in special education classes, fewer behavioral problems, improved average daily attendance, fewer school dropouts, lower suspension rates, more successful programs, and ultimately more effective schools!” (Ross, 1994, p. 5; see also Ziegler, 1987).

But the time commitments of many single parents—of work, of family responsibilities—are often so difficult to juggle that they provide obstacles to parental involvement, and, thus indirectly, student success.

Of course, the term 'single parent' is an abstraction disguising a variety of situations. For example, what are the differences between divorced parents and those who did not marry? Does the number of siblings make a difference? Can familial cultural patterns influence outcomes? What is the role of parenting style?<sup>1</sup> Given its potential importance to the school system, this is another area deserving greater study.

### ***Socio-economic Status***

Researchers use the term 'socioeconomic status' (SES) to refer to the relative position of a family or individual in an hierarchical social structure, based on their access

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<sup>1</sup> The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth found that a hostile parenting style has a more negative effect on behavioral problems than other factors, including income and family structure (Statistics Canada, 1998.)

to, or control over, wealth, prestige, and power. Operationally, the term is ascribed to a wide range of measures which describe the occupational prestige, educational levels, and economic positions of pupils' parents (Willms, 1992, p. 50).

The relationship between SES and schooling outcomes is well established, but researchers disagree about the magnitude of the relationship, and therefore the role that family background plays in schooling (Willms, 1992, pp. 50-51). While White et al. (1993) claim only a modest tie between SES and student achievement, others (e.g. Deschamp, 1992, or Duttweiler, 1995) attach much greater importance to family background.

Findings of this study on the role of SES as it relates to absenteeism reflect the general lack of consensus on the role of SES in schooling: family background does appear to influence absenteeism, but it is unclear whether this influence is moderate or weak. SES was a moderately important factor in the logistic regression of all elementary and secondary students, and of the Grade 6 cohort, but it was not a significant factor in the logistic regression of the Grade 9 cohort. There were also a number of significant, but weak, Spearman's correlations between absenteeism and SES. Future studies might wish to investigate how other types of SES variables effect absenteeism. In this analysis, two types of SES were used-- proxy income derived from census data, and parents' occupation as reported by student. It may be that the 'right' SES variable is missing, the one (or ones) that could validly explain social circumstances within the context of absenteeism.

### ***Achievement***

Figures 6, 7, and 8 in Section C-1 show the very clear association with credit accumulation. It is clear that in their first four years of high school, secondary students who missed few days of school also tended to complete the credits they would need to graduate; students with above average absenteeism were much less likely to complete their necessary credits-- and, therefore, to graduate within the desired five year timespan. In the fifth year, absenteeism appeared to make little difference.<sup>2</sup> Does this mean that absenteeism causes at-risk status? Unfortunately, Spearman's  $r_s$ , the key statistic that examined the correlation of absenteeism and credit information, shows association, not cause. But at the same time, the fact that absenteeism is often as strongly related to *previous* credit achievement as to *future* credit achievement-- as seen in the Spearman's  $r_s$  analysis of the Grade 9 Cohort of 1991-- should give one pause. It may well be that whatever issues or problems cause lower performance will also influence absenteeism: that both are parallel effects. Such an issue or problem was not captured among the independent variables used in this set of analyses, and should be the object of future investigations.

### ***Attitudes Towards School***

The Grade 9 Cohort of 1991, which participated in the Every Secondary Student Survey, was potentially a gold mine of information about student attitudes as they related to absenteeism. Students had answered a number of Likert scales on what they thought

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<sup>2</sup> Three things may be concurrently at work in the fifth year: 1) the average number of completed credits for all students has declined; 2) the average absenteeism for all students has increased; 3) many of the most 'at risk' students would have dropped out or transferred out of the Board by their fifth year.

of their school, and of school in general. However, students with the most negative attitudes accounted for only a small fraction of those with high absenteeism.

Thus, the most available measures of disengagement did not appear to have the relationship with absenteeism that one would have expected from the literature. Yet, it may be that 'disengagement' could also be measured in other ways. The logistic regression of the Grade 9 cohort of 1991 found that students who completed 9 hours or less of homework every week, and those who worked 16 or more hours each week, were significantly more likely to have higher absenteeism than students who completed 10 or more hours of homework, or worked less than 16 hours. Furthermore, students who did not plan to go to university after completing high school were more likely to have higher absenteeism than students planning to go to university. It may be that work/homework patterns and post-secondary plans are a more valid way of measuring student connection to school, than more generic statements about school atmosphere.

### *Type of Secondary School*

The logistic regression of the Grade 9 cohort found that students not in collegiate institutes (for the most part, in technical schools, commercial schools, or basic-level schools) were more likely to have higher absenteeism than students attending collegiate institutes. The link between type of secondary school and dropout in the Toronto Board has already been clearly established: students attending technical, commercial, and basic-level schools have lower credit accumulation, lower graduation rates, and higher dropout rates, than students attending collegiates (Brown, 1995c, 1997b). The link with Grade 9

absenteeism shows that the at-risk process is clearly at work in these students' first year of secondary study.

### *Absenteeism and Culture*

Willms (1992) has noted that researchers often find it difficult to interpret the role of socio-economic status in schooling outcomes. Interpreting the role of family culture is even more challenging. This research found a connection of family culture to absenteeism-- although it is unclear why, and how, this interaction occurs. The logistic regression looking at JK-OAC students attending school in 1996-97, and the logistic regression of the Grade 9 cohort of 1991, found that students speaking English at home were more likely to have higher average absenteeism, than students speaking another language at home. Specifically, logistic regression of the Grade 6 cohort of 1992 found that Chinese-speaking students were much less likely have higher absenteeism than other students. Yet the dynamics are complex. Chinese-speaking students appeared to have consistently lower absenteeism from Grade 6 through Grade 10. In contrast, Vietnamese-speaking students had lower absenteeism in Grade 6, but the difference was no longer significant by Grade 10. And there were no significant differences between Portuguese-speaking students and other students, in both Grade 6 and Grade 10 absenteeism. There is nothing in the current data to provide any indication of why this is so. Perhaps qualitative research would be a valuable supplement, in that participant observation or focus groups may provide insight into why students from some cultural groups appear to show up at school more than other students.

### *Differences Over Time*

In a series of analyses using Spearman's  $r_s$ , the pattern of absenteeism over time was very clear. Student absenteeism in any given year was usually most closely linked to the year previous, and the year following. The more years removed from the current student absenteeism, the weaker the correlation with current student absenteeism.

As noted earlier, absenteeism had an important negative link with achievement, at least at the secondary level (no achievement data at the elementary level was available). But likewise, the correlation faded over time. Thus, Grade 6 absenteeism had a very weak correlation with Grade 10 achievement.

This shows the limits of absenteeism as a predictor variable (to use primary absenteeism to predict secondary performance would appear to be highly questionable) and also puts into question the idea of absenteeism as a cause of student non-achievement. Still, the findings show that absenteeism in any given year (at least up to Grade 12) is one of the most important ways to detect at-risk status for at least a year or two afterwards. Given the importance of the first years of high school, this has real possibilities. For example, the correlation of  $-.33$  of total Grade 9-12 credits with Grade 8 absenteeism (see Chapter C-1) shows that, if used with other predictors, absenteeism could help focus on at-risk students well before they enter high school. Student absence from school has not been shown to be a definitive cause of anything, nor can it be considered a 'magic bullet' to predict student outcomes, but it would appear to be extremely valuable as part of a group of diagnostic tools for student connectiveness to the school system.



## **Concluding Reflections**

## Concluding Reflections

Many of the writings on absenteeism can be categorized into two schools of thought. At one end, some educators (usually practitioners working in American elementary or secondary schools) believe that students have a moral and legal obligation to attend school, and that if they do not, it is necessary for society to enforce the students' obligation. At the other end, absenteeism is seen as a societal issue, and strategies to address absenteeism have to address the issues underlying that absenteeism. The history of absenteeism in the Toronto Board is a chronology of dynamic interaction between these two points of view. In this chapter I would like to comment on this dialogue, through the role of absenteeism in past and present Toronto schools.

### *The Rise of Absenteeism as an Outcome Variable*

Modern educators would be very surprised at the importance attached to absenteeism in late nineteenth century Toronto. Reasons for this importance show the political and social factors at work in determining educational priorities.

Reporting of absenteeism dates from the foundation of the modern Ontario public school bureaucracy in 1850, when Egerton Ryerson used the proportion of students actually showing up for class as the key method of allocating funding. The public reporting of absenteeism that accompanied this resulted in the first public comparison of schools, and led to 'reducing absenteeism' being equated with 'school success'. Since the Toronto school system was perceived as untried and fragile in its first few decades, its ability to get the city's children into its classrooms became a 'high stakes' issue. This

was most noticeably demonstrated by the resignation of the Board's first superintendent when he failed to decrease absenteeism.

The heightened importance of standardized reporting of absenteeism and other administrative data in the mid to late nineteenth century may be connected to what Thompson (1968) describes as the general social interest in time management shown by the nineteenth century elite. According to this view, absenteeism, like holidays, the working day, and indeed the regulation of time itself, was considered important because increased regulation would lead to increased industrial productivity. Victorian concerns about what Thompson calls the "irregular work rhythms" of pre-Industrial society (most openly expressed in the campaign against "Saint Monday") are thus in parallel with concerns over student truancy. In consequence, even a cursory reading of late nineteenth century Ontario documents affirms Katz's (1975) assertion that attendance and absenteeism were the central educational issues of the time.

The idea of enforcing the requirement of school attendance with social and legal penalties was first raised by the Toronto Board in 1857, and was associated with the concern about children running around unsupervised, leading to crime. This concern over truancy can be seen as a major reason for the compulsory legislation of 1871 and 1891. Meanwhile, the rhetoric and general tone of educational administrators became more and more heated on the subject. The increased temperature of the discussion can be seen as parallel to changes in social attitudes towards crime. With court cases, fines and the occasional imprisonment of recalcitrant students, administration of attendance requirements fit together nicely with the Victorian worry of law and order, as

demonstrated by Houston's definitive articles on the subject (e.g. Houston, 1975, 1994).

The high point was reached in the early part of this century, with one Ontario inspector calling for the flogging of truant students and other educational leaders (including the heads of the Toronto and Ottawa boards) arguing with the police and judges for more stringent penalties. By this time, attendance enforcement had been taken from the hands of the local boards into the hands of the police.

Absenteeism thus became a prominent Toronto education issue in the nineteenth century through a combination of political reasons (most noticeably, the need to demonstrate success in a new, untried school system) with administrative reasons (the use of absenteeism reporting for the Ontario funding formula). Its importance was fueled by two concerns of the late nineteenth century middle class: time and efficiency; and the concern over crime, both youth crime and its development into adult crime.

What is lacking in this list of reasons is any reference to student learning. The nineteenth century concern with absenteeism demonstrates that educational priorities are not intuitive and preordained, but are a result of a complex confluence of social, political and administrative reasons that may only have a marginal relationship to modern concepts of effective learning.

### ***Absenteeism and the Limits of Research***

The history of Toronto Board policy on absenteeism also provides a cautionary tale on the use of research. Policymakers in the Toronto Board had no lack of what we would call "research" on patterns and reasons of absenteeism: the "census" of 1863, the

teacher survey of 1872, the notes of truant officer James Carr Wilkinson between 1872 and 1874, the census of 1898-99, the various surveys of 1929-31, not to mention numerous Ministry of Education surveys in the 1930's and 1940's. All of these clearly showed that student "truancy" was a very minor contributor to absenteeism, compared to health and social issues. And yet the impact of this collective research was extremely limited. It was sometimes openly disregarded: James S. Hughes, for example, does not appear to have taken the least regard of findings that he reported to the Board, probably because they were not in agreement with his own ideas on the subject.

Furthermore, each research project was undertaken within an extremely isolated context. There is no evidence that any of the various administrators who undertook the surveys were aware that others on the same subject had been done previously; this dissertation is the first time they are reported together. There are a number of modern examples of research that is disregarded when it conflicts with preconceptions of policymakers and politicians-- grade school retention (Roderick, 1995), or elementary school acceleration (Quinn, 1991; Southern et al., 1989). The lack of influence of successive Toronto Board studies on absenteeism shows that the trend is not a new one.

### *The Effects of Public Debate*

The Toronto Board debate over absenteeism in the first part of the twentieth century shows how one educational issue can have ramifications far beyond that issue. The debate centered over the role of truancy (or the purposive avoidance of school) in youth crime. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Toronto Board administrators agreed with most educators of the time, in viewing truancy as a crime-- or more

particularly, as the first step into a life of crime, much the way substance abuse is viewed by many people today. Truancy thus had to be punished quickly and forcefully. Blame for truancy was attached to both the student and the student's family.

However, by the second decade of the century, school administrators had shifted from retributive legal solutions to trying to address social issues thought to be underlying student absenteeism. In 1919, enforcement of attendance regulations was handed back from the police to school boards, and the Toronto Board Attendance Department was established.

But concerns over truancy and its association with crime did not completely disappear. Conservative trustees, concerned citizens, judges, and police officials, would periodically raise the same worries about truancy that had been expressed by James S. Hughes in the late nineteenth century; they would demand stringent and retributive actions against truants by police and Board officials. These demands and concerns were raised in the mid 1920's, the late 1920's and early 1930's, and the early to mid 1940's, leading to the formation of successive "truancy committees" to tackle the issue.

The results of these committee deliberations are surprising. There were a few (usually toothless) 'law and order' resolutions, such those passed in 1926 and 1943 asking the police to note the names of school-aged children observed on the streets during school hours, or the resolution requesting the federal government to prohibit mothers of school-aged children from working. But the committee deliberations also resulted in the creation of most of the student support services currently provided by the Toronto Board:

guidance services, school community centres, reading clinics, and the psychiatric, psychological and social work departments.

It could be argued that such services would eventually have been set up at some point in time: that the debate over absenteeism merely provided the agenda through which services were introduced. Perhaps an examination of the establishment of student support services in other school boards could see if this is the case.

But it is important to note that the influence of the "Whig" view of continuous progress in education is still strong. This philosophy of educational policy, a successor to the nineteenth century view of historical progress, underlies Hodgkin's source volumes of early Ontario history, and was reinforced by the publication of Phillip's *Development of Canadian Education* in 1957 (Tomkins, 1979). The history of absenteeism in the Toronto Board shows a more complex picture: of competing interests and points of view struggling for dominance, their mechanizations disguised through the imperturbable reporting format of bureaucratic meetings. The consequent compromises were often surprising and sometimes unwieldy. The current Toronto Board school structure is a result of such compromises; presumably, one can say the same of most educational systems.

The Toronto debate over absenteeism in the first half of the twentieth century also shows the importance of local governance in education. Stamp (1982) has amply demonstrated how many of the great administrative changes in Ontario education were mandated by the colonial or provincial educational authorities, but many of the innovations in curriculum and policy were introduced by school boards, most noticeably

Toronto. It is questionable whether the vibrant absenteeism debate that I have chronicled could take place at the provincial or national level. With the current provincial attack on local educational governance, we should note that such responsive and fruitful dialogues over local educational issues may soon become a thing of the past.

### ***Secondary School Absenteeism and the Changing Educational System***

Absenteeism faded as an Ontario educational priority in the 1940's and 1950's, finally disappearing entirely as a central administrative concern. It is not entirely clear why the Ministry of Education eliminated the central collection and publishing of absenteeism information. Perhaps this was because the Ministry did not wish to continue being saddled with the costs of verifying and maintaining the data. One can hardly blame the bureaucrats making the decision: there appeared to be little change of absenteeism over time. It was neither a new success story, nor a problem. There was, by then, no perceived need to keep system level records.

As a result, no systematic records were kept when a major shift in secondary school absenteeism patterns may have occurred. In the 1960's (the time of last published absenteeism information), secondary absenteeism appeared to be about the same, or somewhat lower, than absenteeism in the elementary panel. The recent absenteeism data shows secondary absenteeism to be *two to three times* that of the elementary panel.

What accounts for the difference between "then" and "now"? An explanation can be found in the 1945 Ministry annual report. An account of 'pupil progress' from the beginning of school life found that 97% completed Grade VI, 84% completed Grade



VIII, 67% passed their high school entrance exams, and only 58% entered secondary school. When in secondary school, the attrition continued: 56% completed Grade IX, 46% completed Grade X, 31% completed Grade XI, 21% completed Grade 12, and 13% completed Grade 13. Only 4% of those who started elementary school went onto post-secondary studies. (*Provincial Report*, 1945, p. 106.) As Gidney and Miller (1992, p. 310) have pointed out, the high school system of the 1940's and 1950's was one that had not changed in many fundamental ways since the late 1880's. Despite many important improvements, it was still the system of the privileged minority.

I attended an Ontario high school in the mid 1970's, not long after the Ministry had abandoned absenteeism data, and can testify that my experience had many of the fundamental equations of the 1940's or even the 1920's. It was still in many respects an elimination system, one stacked in favour of the privileged few like myself who would complete Grade 13 and go onto university. In my first year there was still a "termination" program to give certificates to those students not going beyond Grade 10, the last remnant of a time when few high school students were expected to go beyond Fifth Form. By the mid 1970's students were expected to go beyond Grade 10, but not by much. You can see the assumptions of the system in my 1976 high school yearbook. Each grade had the same number of pages, but the photographs of the Grade 9 and 10 students were tiny, those of Grade 11 and 12 increasingly large, and the photographs of the Grade 13 students were the largest of all, a sort of unconscious illustration of educational Darwinism.

But the 1980's and 1990's have seen a fundamental restructuring of this paradigm. The dropout rate of secondary students has changed dramatically in Ontario and Toronto.

Whereas staying in school beyond Grade 10 was a minority experience to Ontarians in the first part of the twentieth century, and staying in school to Grade 12 was a minority experience to Ontarians in the 1950's, graduation had become the majority experience of Ontario students in the 1990's. (See Human Resources Development Canada, and Statistics Canada, 1998; Gilbert, 1993.) The transition is still occurring. The five-year dropout rate of Toronto Grade 9 students has fallen from 33% (1987-1992) to 22% (1991-1996). The majority of the decline is accounted for by student groups thought to be more at risk, such as students from lower SES households, those from single parent families, and Black students (Brown, 1997b).<sup>1</sup>

Houston and Prentice (1988) have noted that high absenteeism was the price the Ontario school system paid for the enormous undertaking of quickly establishing universal schooling. The high absenteeism seen in the Toronto Board's secondary school system may likewise be the 'price' that the system has paid for the extraordinary achievement of making the total secondary school experience-- from Grade 9 to graduation-- the majority experience.

### ***Absenteeism as a Parallel Secondary School Indicator to Dropout Statistics***

Administrators have looked to the 'dropout rate' to capture the success of the educational system at keeping students in school. However, the dropout rate has limitations in giving the complete picture of the secondary school system, in many of the

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<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to compare this change with changes from other countries, due to different definitions and school administrative structures. However, the Americans have struggled with major changes to their secondary school system in recent years. It is usually agreed that the American dropout rate has declined in recent years. However, a New York City study of graduation rates has warned that the long-term graduation rate of students has not improved—students are staying in school longer, but they are not achieving performance standards (New York City Office of the Comptroller, 1993).

same ways that general figures of enrollment were thought to reflect only part of the picture of nineteenth century school systems. This is partly a result of severe methodological weaknesses: there are no standards for measuring dropout rates, and so direct comparisons between one study and another are often unwise. For years researchers and administrators have decried the problem, but little has been done about it. The Radwanski Report noted in 1987 that “because there is at present no central statistical data base tracking the progress of individual students through the secondary system, the quality of available statistics regarding the dropout rate leaves much to be desired” (Radwanski, 1987, p. 68). In 1990 American researcher Glynn Ligon noted that there were so many mutually incompatible dropout rates that it would be unwise to assume validity to most comparisons (Ligon, 1990). In 1994 the Alberta Department of Education warned that “considerable confusion and misinformation exist in the educational community regarding dropout statistics. A major factor contributing to this situation is the common failure to distinguish between definitions of a dropout and methods for calculating dropout rates” (Policy and Planning Branch, Alberta Education, 1994, p. A-1). By 1996, American researcher Richard Fossey was claiming that there were so many flaws in dropout data that contrary to popular belief, the U.S. dropout rate may be going up rather than going down (Fossey, 1996). It is unlikely that this situation will change in the near future.

In addition, the changes to the secondary school system discussed above have limited the utility of a dropout rate. Toronto students who would formerly have dropped out are staying in school beyond five years; transferring from one school to another; and re-entering school through a multiplicity of transition programs. For example, the

proportion of Toronto Board students staying in secondary school beyond five years increased from 11% to 19% between 1992 and 1996. Of students who dropped out of the Toronto Board in 1991-92, over a quarter re-entered the Ontario school system the next year, mostly into other Greater Toronto Area boards (Brown, 1997b; Brown and Chan, 1994).

At one point I found a Toronto Board student who had entered and dropped out of the Toronto Board three times, entered another Metro Toronto Board and dropped out, and then re-entered the Toronto Board for the fifth time. The concept of secondary school 'dropout' comes from the time when students who withdrew from the secondary system would not return, or only return years later as adult students. But it is not as appropriate when 'dropping out' is a multiple measure. The use of drop out rates (assuming one could standardize them) is important, but dropout rates by themselves cannot give a complete picture of the breadth of the modern secondary educational system. Absenteeism could be an important supplement as a system indicator.

### ***Absenteeism and Legal Requirements for School Attending***

The rise in absenteeism following Grade 6 appears to have little to do with legal requirements for attending school. In Ontario, students are legally required to attend school until the end of the school year in which they turn 16. But the increase in average absenteeism by age starts well before 16 and continues well after 16. If legal requirements do have an effect, it is not obvious here.

A more likely explanation (in lieu of more detailed information on the subject) has to do with student control. As students' psychological and social independence

increase, the ability to stay away from school is exercised. There are other examples of this pattern. Meal skipping by students increases from 5% of JK students to 30% of Grade 8 students, becoming a majority in high school. The most obvious explanation for meal skipping (which predates the onset of puberty but appears to dramatically increase afterwards) is related to parental control: as students become older, parental and adult supervision of students decrease, and meal skipping increases. (Brown, 1993a, Brown, 1995b.)

### ***Current Absenteeism at the Elementary Level***

Elementary absenteeism appears to have remained fairly stable over much of the twentieth century<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is quite possible that the key reasons for missing elementary school in the 1970's may also be the key reasons today-- for the most part, health issues, with a minority of behavior-related cases. Although many of these health issues could have serious long term consequences, the majority would have short term implications. Thus, long-term consistency of absenteeism would apply only in exceptional cases; the connection of primary to middle and secondary school absenteeism would be extremely limited.

### ***Questions***

There is much we do not know about absenteeism, interesting things suggested by the data but not explained:

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<sup>22</sup> An exception is the higher than average absenteeism of junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten, which used to be optional, and thus not included in absenteeism reporting.

*What are the cultural influences on absenteeism and why do they change over time?* The Grade 6 cohort of 1992-93 shows an example. Chinese-speaking students were significantly less likely to have high absenteeism in Grade 6, and also in Grade 10. Vietnamese-speaking students were also significantly less likely to have high absenteeism in Grade 6, but not by Grade 10. But as noted in Chapter C-4, statistical associations do not provide reasons for cultural issues. Understanding how issues of race and culture influence student connectiveness to school has been at the heart of a spectrum of equity and anti-racist policies (e.g. Cheng and Soudack, 1994). Examining the role of culture in student absenteeism may provide a valuable contribution to this area.

*Why is absenteeism among general and basic level students higher than that of advanced level students? And what is the effect of school type-- collegiates versus technical, commercial and other schools? Both level of study and school type have an influence on absenteeism that is independent of such factors as socio-economic status.*

*What is the link between absenteeism among elementary students and their achievement?* All information on achievement in this study was at the secondary level, leaving a very obvious gap. The link between elementary level absenteeism and achievement will have to wait for achievement on elementary students to be available so that it can be linked to absenteeism information (which can only be done through common linking fields like student identification number). The New Orleans study of absenteeism found that reading and mathematics test scores decreased as the number of days absent increased, for elementary as well as secondary students. (New Orleans Public Schools, 1994). However, if elementary absenteeism is caused by health issues

rather than disengagement, the link with achievement may be complex. This will be another obvious case for further study.

At the beginning of this research journey, I had noticed a close association between Grade 9 absenteeism and Grade 9 credits, and wanted to examine the reality behind the association. I have found no clear, unequivocal cause and effect relationship; and there is no evidence that forcing students to come to school will help their performance. Still, the importance of association should not be underestimated. It is something to note, or example, that Grade 9 students with above average absenteeism are much less likely to graduate than those with below average absenteeism, or that absenteeism and achievement are closely associated.

Perhaps a monitoring of absenteeism should not require a justification, but should be seen as an end in itself. The absenteeism policy of the Toronto Board in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century may have been excessive or even misguided, but it was also a recognition that the measurement of time spent by students in school was an important indicator of school system quality. Over the past few decades, Ontario policymakers have neglected this outcome. It may be time for a reappraisal.

### ***Future Directions and Recommendations***

It may be that the period during which the administrative data was collected will be thought of as a "high water" mark of Toronto and perhaps Ontario education. Certainly, within the former Toronto Board of Education, a battery of programs existed which showed a commitment to the Board's espoused priority of equity in the school system. In 1997, Research and Assessment enumerated about 80 programs and services over and above the regular curriculum supports offered in the Board. These additional programs and services were provided "specifically for meeting the diverse and multifaceted challenges facing our students and our school community" in terms of basic needs (e.g. clothing, financial assistance), inner-city needs, socio-economic needs (to help disadvantaged children adjust in school), school readiness, language/cultural support, immigrant and refugee needs, parent/community needs, and equity needs. The programs varied in size and scope, from child care attended by 4,200 children, to parenting centres attended by 11,000 children and 7,000 parents, through the Toronto Music Camp for hundreds of inner-city students in Grades 5-8, to the "Change Your Future" intervention for 60 at-risk visible minority secondary students (Research and Assessment, 1997).

The next few years promise to be very unsettling ones for Ontario education. A now-retired superintendent of the former Toronto Board summarized the changes in a conversation we had last fall: throughout its history, he said, the school system in Ontario has experienced major changes in organizational structure, major changes in funding arrangements, and major changes in governance, but never at the same time. Thus, the



current situation can be said to be one of unparalleled change (not least of the changes was the disappearance of the focus of this study, the Toronto Board of Education, through its amalgamation with the other Metro Toronto boards to form the Toronto District School Board).

The ultimate impact of this upheaval is unclear at present. This case study of Toronto Board absenteeism has shown how historically, measurement of absenteeism has been an important tool for school system evaluation. For the last few decades, systemic analysis of this indicator has all but disappeared in Ontario. I would argue that given the potential impact of current changes, it is necessary to reintroduce absenteeism as one of the ways to monitor the educational health of Ontario schools and students. Below are a number of suggested courses of action for implementation and for future research.

1. The New Orleans study of absenteeism and achievement concluded that “it behooves not only the District but parents and community to make student attendance a number one priority at the secondary level in any strategic planning effort” (New Orleans Public Schools, 1994, p. 19). Ontario is at an earlier stage: provincial-level data on student absenteeism has yet to be collected. Such Ontario information should be gathered using a set of consistent definitions, and in a way that can be centrally examined and analyzed. Given that the Ministry of Education did this throughout most of the history of the Ontario public school system, and only stopped in the recent past, it would make sense that the Ministry should re-institute the function it abandoned in 1971.

Most central administrative authorities that had collected absenteeism data in the past continue to do so (e.g. New York State); it may be that Ontario is the only authority

that abandoned the taking of this student information. In fact, the information is being collected by Ontario boards of education, but inconsistently; consequently, little use has been made of it. Therefore, standardizing and centrally using this information in a way that would make it useful should easily justify any additional expense.

2. The information should be collected and analyzed at the student level.

Willms (1992, pp. 150-151) in his design for a district or EA monitoring system, recommends collection of individual-level data, which enables the use of multilevel modeling techniques, and allows researchers to more accurately take account of student background, with adjustment for measurement and sampling error. The Ontario Ministry of Education and Training has announced plans to introduce an Ontario Education Number (OEN) that will facilitate the keeping of individual-level data. This will remove the most important technical hurdle to keeping absenteeism data for all students in Ontario.

3. Certainly, individual level data linked by a student identification number should be available for analysis at the district board level. The sort of analysis done in this thesis or by the New Orleans 1993 study could then easily be replicated; this could provide additional information on the relationship of absenteeism to achievement.

4. A weakness in the quantitative analysis was in examining the relationship between elementary absenteeism and achievement. This could be rectified in two ways: through linking Grade 3 elementary absenteeism with EQAO results in mathematics, reading, and writing; and through linking elementary absenteeism with information on the new Provincial Report cards, which are to be computerized in a

consistent format. (In the next school year, all Grade 6 students are supposed to take part in a new EQAO assessment, providing another potential source of data.)

5. Another limitation in the data examined here was the lack of reasons for absenteeism. I have hypothesized that the majority of elementary absenteeism is related to health issues, while the majority of secondary level absenteeism is motivated by issues connected to student control and disengagement. To provide any substance to this hypothesis, it will be necessary to do a survey or 'census' of absenteeism, as had been done repeatedly in the Toronto Board between 1860 and 1931, and by the Ministry of Education in the 1930's and 1940's.

6. At one time, secondary school absenteeism was reported in the Ministry of Education reports by subject. At some point, consistent subject reporting and record keeping requirements were removed by the Ministry. Today, secondary subject absenteeism is kept for a time by the school but in an inconsistent and often impermanent way. For example, the Toronto Board of Education kept this data at the local school but not system level, whereas the North York Board had the capability to access and keep these records on its central computer system. The link between individual subject absenteeism and student performance in that subject would presumably be strong; it is certainly worth further exploration. Analysis of the North York data could serve as a pilot for Toronto District School Board-wide or province-wide collection of this data.

7. The historical investigation of absenteeism policy done in this thesis should be done with other areas of educational administration. This investigation found that throughout its long history, the Toronto Board's policies toward absenteeism was

based entirely on present-day concerns, to the exclusion of the past. Likewise, what 'background' exists in current policy discussion makes reference only to the comparatively recent past. For example, most discussions of inner-city education policy go back to the 1960's, when discussions of this sort can be found in Toronto Board documents a century earlier. When this happens, policies can be presented without informed context.

There is some reason for this-- educational administration is often the first large bureaucracy to deal with new social issues, and has to form and implement policy quickly, often in a crisis situation. The studied analytical approach may not be most appropriate in this context.

Still, examination and implementation of policy without historical background runs the risk of missing important information. This thesis found a multitude of investigations of absenteeism issues, each independent of (and presumably ignorant of) previous investigations. This is an extreme example but there are no doubt many others. It is quite likely that a topic may be new to a current educational administration, but not to education.

## **APPENDICES**

## Appendix 1: Logistic Regression of Odds of Dropping Out

A logistic regression analysis looked at the effects of a number of demographic and school-related variables on the effects of dropping out. The sample was the Grade 9 cohort of 1991, students who had started their secondary careers in the Toronto Board during Fall 1991. These students were followed for five years, until Fall 1996. The dependent or outcome variable is dropout: the 'event' is whether the student had dropped out, versus the non-event, graduation or continuation in the Toronto Board in the sixth year.

The following independent variables were included:

- Socio-economic status through parental background (skilled, unskilled or non-remunerative occupations/ business, semi-professional or professional backgrounds);
- place of birth (born in/out of Canada),
- gender,
- parental status (lives with two parents/other household),
- hours of homework (9 hours a week or less/10 or more)
- level of study (advanced/other)
- type of school (collegiate institute/other)
- language (speaking English at home/speaking another language),
- post-secondary plans (university/other),
- hours of part-time work (15 hours a week or less, 16 or more),
- average Grade 9 absenteeism (below/above average),
- and Grade 9 credits (achieving 7-8 credits in Grade 9, achieving 6 or less).

Using a backwards elimination procedure using a .05 cutoff, the following variables resulted in a model that significantly effected the odds of dropping out: Grade 9 credits, Grade 9 absenteeism, parental status, post-secondary plans, type of school attended, and being born outside of Canada. The Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness of Fit had a probability of .4597, indicating a good fit between model and data.

As can be seen, students who completed six credits or less during Grade 9 had odds of dropping out of school nearly five times that of other students (the normal number of credits successfully completed by most Grade 9's is eight credits). Students with above average absenteeism were nearly three times as likely to drop out as those with average or below average absenteeism; and students living outside the two-parent family structure were almost twice as likely to drop out as those living with both parents.

Conditional Odds Ratio and 95% Confidence Limits  
Significant Logistic Regression Variables

Variable	Odds Ratio	Confidence Limits	
		Upper	Lower
Completed 6 or fewer Grade 9 credits	4.781	3.592	6.362
Above Average Grade 9 absenteeism	2.692	2.014	3.598
Lives 1 parent/other family	1.908	1.455	2.504
Attends non-collegiate school	1.635	1.221	2.187
Does not plan to go to university	1.465	1.102	1.948
Born out of Canada	1.385	1.049	1.83

**Appendix 2: Average Absenteeism Per Year, 1992 to 1996  
According to Grade 9/Year I**

Year 1 Absenteeism	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
0% absenteeism	2	4	7	8
1% absenteeism	3	5	8	12
2% absenteeism	4	7	12	16
3% absenteeism	5	8	13	18
4% absenteeism	7	11	16	19
5% absenteeism	7	11	15	19
6% absenteeism	8	13	18	20
7% absenteeism	10	14	19	23
8% absenteeism	11	16	21	21
9% absenteeism	12	15	22	26
10% absenteeism	15	18	23	23
11% absenteeism	14	18	21	26
12% absenteeism	18	19	25	31
13% absenteeism	19	21	26	21
14% absenteeism	22	22	24	28
15% absenteeism	24	23	25	25
16% absenteeism	20	25	29	30
17% absenteeism	23	21	22	26
18% absenteeism	29	26	30	35
19% absenteeism	27	21	22	25
20% absenteeism	21	20	28	36
21% absenteeism	24	30	27	35



**Appendix 3:  
Ontario Compulsory Attendance Legislation Changes  
1850 to the present**

Year of passage	Year provisions took effect	# of days required	Age
1850	1850	None	---
1871	1871	4 months	7 to 12
1881	1881	11 weeks each term	7 to 13
1885	1885	100 days each school year	7 to 13
1891	1891	all year	8 to 14
1912	1912	all year	8 to 14*
1919	1921	all year	8 to 16
1954	1954	all year	6 to 16**

\* optional clause for boards to set upper limit to 16; 2 Geo. V Ch. 77

\*\*from year in which student turned 6 to year in which student turned 16

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