REMARKS OF

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AT THE

CONFERENCE ON
PARTNERING TO PREVENT TRUANCY:
A NATIONAL PRIORITY

SPONSORED BY
THE OFFICE OF JUVENILE JUSTICE AND DELINQUENCY PREVENTION
AND
THE OFFICE OF SAFE AND DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS

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Thank you very much. I am delighted to join you today. And I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you about our collaboration to prevent truancy – a national priority, and a priority of all of you here today.

I want to thank our partner, the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools from the Department of Education. And I thank each and every one of you – from the mental health providers who understand that truancy is not just about school to the teachers who must call on wisdom and creativity every day, and from community advocates who are dedicating themselves to this issue to law enforcement personnel who are learning to rely on outreach as much as authority.

I have great respect for the work you do. Once upon a time, truancy was seen as a lark. Huck Finn went fishing; Ferris Bueller took the day off. But, if we use our data to give us a picture of what is happening right now across the country, we see that:

- Today in New York City, 150,000 of one million public school students are absent. School officials don't know how many of those are for legitimate reasons.
- Today in Los Angeles, 10 percent of public school students are not in school. Only half of them will come back with written excuses.
- Today in Wisconsin, truancy accounts for one-third of total school absences.
- And, today in America, the rate of 9-12 graders who report missing school because of safety concerns is up 50 percent since 1993.

Young people are the future of our country – But today that future is a 14 year-old boy acting as look-out for his 16 year-old neighbor who's on the street dealing drugs. And that future is a 12 year-old girl who thinks gangs are more important than classrooms.

Often, people ask: Why is the Department of Justice working with the Department of Education to spearhead a program on truancy? I tell them what the research shows.

- Truancy is one of the common factors among adult inmates. Teenagers with truancy records are more likely to go on to commit violent offenses than other young people.
- Truancy is more consistently linked to alcohol and drug abuse than other negative behaviors.
- Daytime crime rates rise when students are on the streets instead of in school.
- And, in the end, society pays – in costs to businesses to train uneducated worker and in costs to taxpayers who pay for law enforcement and welfare.

The education system can't do it alone. Our collective challenge must be to think about truancy in new ways. First, we need to think of truancy as a complex problem that requires a comprehensive solution. Second, we need to face the fact that our most powerful weapon may be prevention – and we must invest in programs that target problems before they start. And third, we need to enlist leaders in our communities and empower them to take charge.

When we were designing the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program and Evaluation, or TRDP, with the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools a little over five years ago, we started by looking at the causes behind truancy, including:

- Overburdened schools and overworked teachers.
- Ineffective strategies for dealing with chronic absenteeism.
- Lack of parental supervision.
- Family alcohol, drug, or domestic abuse.
- Inadequate attention to cultural issues and culturally-appropriate materials in schools.
- Lack of transportation.
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities.
- Poverty.
- Mental health problems.
- Other health problems.

The list went on and on. Truancy, we saw, is a multifaceted issue. And we needed to take a multidisciplinary approach – One that brings together courts and schools, family services and legal assistance, health care and local businesses, counseling and law enforcement.

In short, we wanted to design a comprehensive plan that would provide a foundation of health, security and attention to school issues in the home, coordinate educational and justice concerns in the public service system, and engage the resources of businesses in the community.

One major requirement for our TRDP sites is that they provide a continuum of services to support truant youth. This is not a time for separate entities to focus on separate issues. Our goal is to provide continuity that leads children back to the classroom, provides young people the support they need to become engaged in their lessons, and, finally, gives students pride in the path they have chosen and in their successes. We call it the three As – Attendance, Attachment, and Achievement.

We are accomplishing that goal through the innovative partnerships you see here today. And, as you [have heard, will hear?] from Robert Flores, project leaders at the TRDP sites have become put their imaginations to work in the pursuit of partners. For instance, in Hawaii, owners of a mom and pop store have stopped selling to young people during school hours, giving students one less alternative to the classroom and keeping the store from becoming a hangout.

That brings me to a second element in changing the way we think about truancy. We need to focus on prevention and reaching young people early, before they decide that they don't need to learn to read, before they turn to drugs, and before they become another absentee rate statistic in New York or Los Angeles or rural Wisconsin.

Truancy costs students an education – and it costs so much more. Ultimately, we all pay the price when young people end up on unemployment rolls or in the courts.

Last year, the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children published a cost-benefit analysis called "Saving Money, Saving Youth: The Financial Impact of Keeping Kids in School."

Researchers compared the costs of three different truancy reduction models to the costs to society from high school failure and juvenile delinquency. They found that if even only 30 percent of truants successfully completed any of the three truancy reduction programs and graduated, depending on the community the savings would be from $8 million to $63 million dollars. In fact, just having one or two program participants graduate from high school every year meant the program broke even.

But prevention isn't just a good thing to do – It's the only thing that works. Remember the causes we listed – from unrecognized family problems such as abuse to undiagnosed health problems such as mental illness. We need to learn about issues in our young peoples' lives, identify those who are at-risk for truancy and reach them before their school problems escalate.

Parental neglect is a common cause of truancy. Parents of many truant students do not value education. Some children are kept home to babysit preschool children. Others are prevented from attending school because of problems at home, at school, or in the neighborhood. In one program, a truant officer reported parents who kept their son from going to school so that he would not have to walk past the neighborhood crack house. In a program in Minnesota, immigrant students said that they stayed home because they feared students at their schools.
In a truancy reduction program run by the District Attorney's Office in the16th Judicial District in Louisiana, case managers from the Family Service Division work with closely with every elementary school. They are available and ready to step in when their assigned school identifies a child at-risk for truancy.

In the Hawaii project that I mentioned earlier, a part-time staff member at two participating elementary schools provides personal attention to students and families.

And, third, as we transform the way we think about truancy, we must embrace one more consideration: That the most enduring solution to truancy must come from our communities. Truancy is, in the first place, a community problem. After all, when young people aren't in school, they're usually somewhere in the community … on the streets or in the stores. People in the community are the first ones to pay for truancy -- in higher crime rates and law enforcement costs or in business losses from shoplifting or vandalism.

In the past, you could count on a neighbor looking out the window or a shopkeeper who knew the family, ready to call parents or the school. Times may have changed – single parents, two working parents, not enough contact among neighbors for everyone in town to know each other. But, still, we must not lose sight of the unshakable reservoir of strength and creativity in our communities. Here are a couple examples from our programs: In Jacksonville, Florida, UPS drivers carry cell phones to report wandering students. In Roswell, New Mexico, the mayor issued a curfew during school hours in 1994. Since the curfew began, daytime burglaries and other crimes in the two high school neighborhoods have decreased.

When communities take charge, the possibilities are endless. Shopkeepers no longer may know every teen who comes in their store. But store owners in malls are forming alliances to report truancy. And community education and awareness programs are getting out the message by running free events, and even hotlines for the public and truancy officer training for parents.

I'd like to share with you something that John Gardner, the great civic leader, said a quarter of a century ago about our sense of community responsibility. We live in a different world now, but his words are as true today as they were then. He said (and I quote):

"Our tradition of voluntary association …is rooted in good soil -- civic pride, compassion, spiritual commitments, a sense of individual responsibility and, whatever cynics may say, a commitment to the great shared effort to improve our life together and to ensure a good future for our children and our children's children."

That brings me to my final and most important point: personal responsibility. I want to leave you today with a challenge and a call to action. Each of us must take part in solving our common problems – especially those who are most directly involved in raising our children – parents and educators.

Parents must be involved in their children's lives. You need to assign yourselves responsibility for your children's attendance. And, above all, you must make education a non-negotiable value.

Teachers and Educators must create an environment that gives students every opportunity to feel good about themselves. Be innovative. You can reward minor as well as major achievements, talk with children about absences and their importance to the class, recognize improved attendance. You must forge relationships with parents, businesses and law enforcement – and

bring them into the classroom. And, you must make your school a place where students feel safe and respected.

But, each of us must answer the call.

Police Officers must visit schools and talk to teachers and students about attendance laws and consequences. Enlist the involvement of the public in reporting truancy and become involved in community programs that improve school attendance.

Judges must get tough on truancy. Consider sanctions for truant young people, such as community service, denied driving privileges, as well as require parents to answer for absenteeism.

State Officials must make sure that school attendance is a priority throughout the public system – Inform schools, courts, probation, social services, mental health, business and law enforcement about school attendance laws.

Community Leaders must give young people alternatives to truancy, from after school programs to activities that engage students in school. Be role models.

Business Owners must consider themselves part of the truancy monitoring system. And, you can create opportunities for students and foster relationships with schools.

Faith leaders must hold forth on truancy and guide parents and families. Create a place of healing and a place where young people who feel alienated from society can feel at home.

And young people also must take part. Encourage each other in school successes. And talk about the choices: You can skip school, drop out and hang out at the mall. Or today you can make school work for you, and in the future be the ones who make a difference.

Each of us must reach out. And each of us must speak out – So that none of us has to face the consequences of truancy.

Thank you for being leaders in this mission and for being here today.