

## Prevention, not prosecution:

# Help for the Habitual Truant

Jerry wasn't making it in school. Last year in the eighth grade he'd been truant 52 days out of 175. So far this year, as a high school freshman, he had 35 unexcused absences.

Sometimes he'd stay home watching TV, sometimes he'd just cut certain classes and hang out around the campus. Often when he did attend class he'd either sit apathetically staring out the window, or disrupt the class by sporadic bursts of boisterous, noisy behavior.

He'd been sent to the vice principal's office innumerable times, had sat sullenly through a couple of sessions with the school counselor, and three times had even been suspended for short periods, but it seemed that nothing was going to make him shape up.

His mother, summoned from work to talk to the vice principal, wrung her hands in despair and flatly asserted, "I just can't do a thing with him. Seems like all my kids give me nothing but trouble."

It was suggested that Jerry and his mother make an appointment with a local family services agency to see about getting some professional counseling, but the suggestion was never taken.

Twice Jerry ran away from home for brief periods. The last time, a few months ago, he'd been gone five days before returning home, cold and hungry, to face his angry mother.

The next day his mother drove him to school to make sure he got there. During his first period class he lit up a cigarette, and when the teacher reprimanded him, stood up, kicked over a desk, and declared, "I've had enough of this blank blank school," before sauntering out of the room.

Believing they'd done all they could, school officials finally decided to refer Jerry's case to SARB, the county's School Attendance Review Board.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Since all proceedings and files of cases and hearings of the county's School Attendance Review Board are in strictest confidence, this story of Jerry (not his real name) has been disguised in order to protect his privacy. However, this case history of an habitual truant is typical of most cases referred to SARB.

that had persisted since Jerry's elementary school days — chronic absenteeism, consistently low grades, and reading skills almost two years below his grade level.

At the hearing Jerry, his mother, and the vice principal who had made the referral to SARB were questioned separately and together.

Jerry maintained an impassive countenance, but a tapping foot betrayed his nervousness. His mother was by turns agitated and defiant.

Jerry's truancy was the school's fault, she maintained. "They should be doing more for him, and keeping a closer eye on him." She was not to blame. Besides she had two other children besides Jerry, and since their father had left home two years ago, she had to work all day to support the family. She could not force Jerry to go to school.

Families referred to SARB often have a prior history of local agency involvement, and this was true in Jerry's case. George Fitzgerald, SARB's probation department representative, had some knowledge of Jerry's troubled home situation, since Jerry's older brother was on probation for a minor offense.

Under questioning a significant contributor to Jerry's problem was brought out: he had a habit of staying up until 3 or 4 a.m. watching television. He had

And Jerry's mother should be responsible for getting him to bed at a reasonable hour. She agreed to try.

And while these recommendations were being carried out, Jerry should continue to attend school. Jerry, who seemed a little relieved at the outcome, reluctantly agreed to try.

But — what if he failed to comply? Herin lies a problem that only recently has come to plague SARBs throughout the state. While California's compulsory education law requiring students to attend school until they are 18 continues in effect, because of state legislation that went into effect January 1, there now seems to be no ultimate way to enforce it.

The new law, AB 3121 (Dixon), while making tougher the judicial and punitive measures that can be brought against juvenile delinquents, says, in effect, that truants are not juvenile delinquents and should not be treated as such. Incurable truants can no longer, as a last resort, be placed in any kind of detention. SARB agrees with the intent of the new legislation, but fears its actual effect may serve only to worsen the school truancy problem.

If, after everything's been tried to solve the problems of a truant such as Jerry and get him back in school, he thumbs his nose and simply refuses to go — what can be done? In the past the final

School District, agrees. "The whole reason I'm in this, willing to donate my time, is to make a difference. Not just to hear cases, but to identify some things that can be done in the future to prevent the problem."

"And if we're talking about changes, Fitzgerald suggests, "we should talk about more services being made available to elementary school kids at the time when they first begin to show signs of being truant or school behavior problems."

Just as in Jerry's case, certain patterns that emerge early in a child's school career — absenteeism, poor reading skills, poor grades, lack of adaptation to school and classmates, negative parental attitude — are significant indicators of more serious school trouble in later years.

One study by the New York State Department of Education showed that about 75 per cent of pupils exhibiting all these characteristics would eventually become school dropouts.

"The earlier we can catch them, the better," says Williams. "Once a student like that gets to be 17 years old, there's really not much a school can do."

San Lorenzo Valley's parent representative, Gwen Graham, believes there should be an expansion of psychological testing and counseling services offered students. Traditionally, however, the overworked school counselor, even though well trained in psychology, spends most of the time on the job helping students plan class schedules, rather than counseling about personal problems.

Bennett comments, "In the Santa Cruz High School District it was determined that if all the counselors spread their time equally among the students, each

a lot of individualized attention. His attendance record is still not very good but much better than it was.

The more thorough testing recommended revealed a slight perceptual problem that had hitherto gone undetected, but which probably had contributed to some of Jerry's learning difficulties.

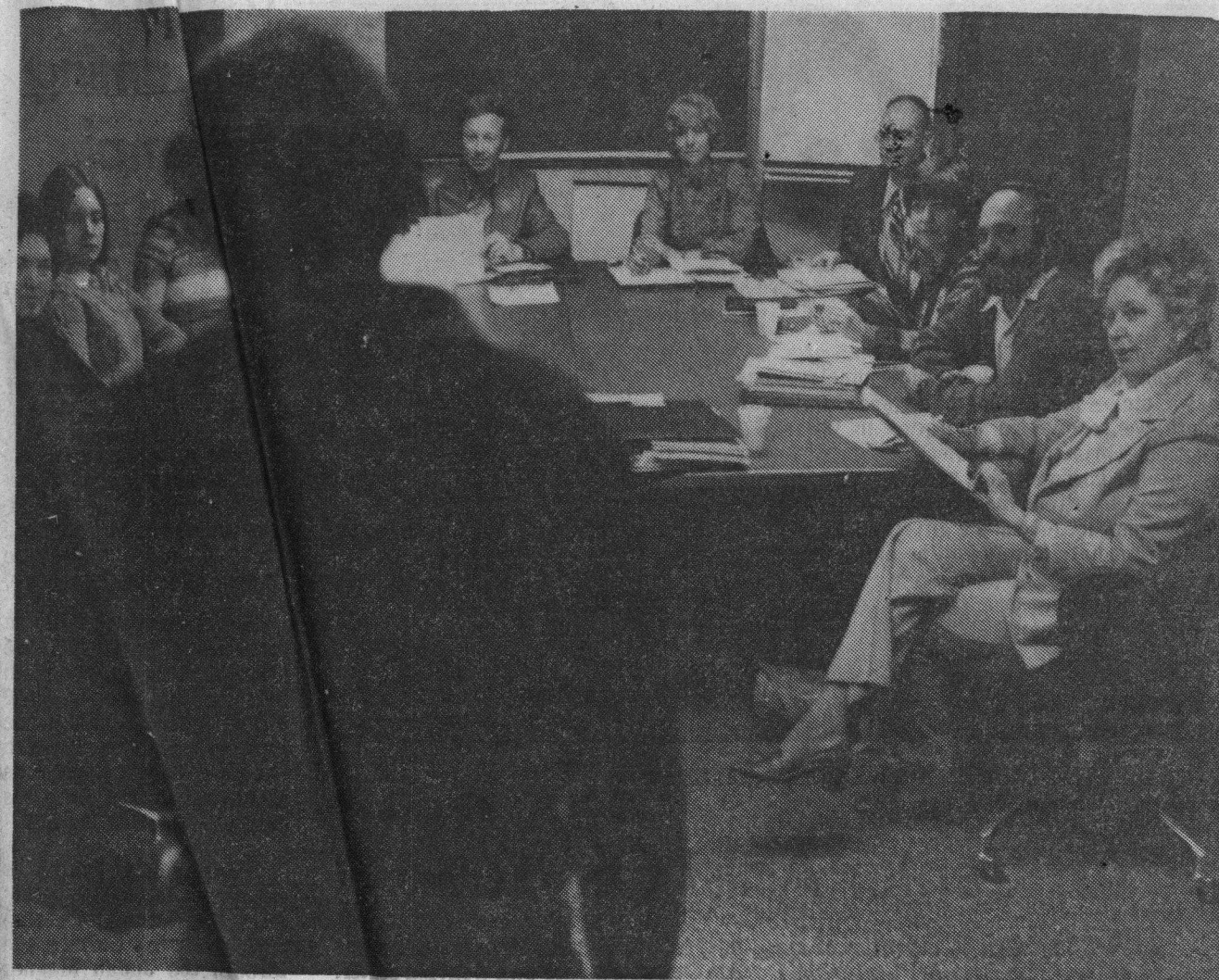
Most important, this time Jerry kept his appointment with Youth Services. He was assigned a counselor and a trained volunteer worker who serves as a kind of "big brother" to him — both of whom Jerry has come to consider as good friends and with whom he is in contact three to five hours a week. He is receiving intensive

counseling and some tutoring in school subjects.

Jerry's mother, however, refused to have anything to do with family counseling. Williams notes that absentee pupils often seem to have what he terms "absentee parents" — but this is only part of the problem.

"No matter how many absentee parents there are who are not taking responsibility," he says, "I think maybe the answer is to make schools more interesting places, places where kids want to go. Because you can't chain them in, you can't lock them up on the campus."

— MARYLYN PAINTER



SARB, (Santa Cruz County's School Attendance Review Board) has the task of making sure that everything has been done that can be done for this habitual truant.

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Review Board, the "last chance" of the habitual truant.

A couple of years ago Jerry would not have had that last chance, and his school might have given up on him earlier.

Early in 1975 state legislation directed that community-centered review boards be set up in every county to help students who, because of their seemingly insoluble truancy or school behavior problems, might otherwise be sent to juvenile court.

One of SARB's jobs is to make sure a school is aware of and has explored all avenues of help for troubled youngsters such as Jerry -- parent conferences, talks with school counselor and psychologist, appropriate testing, and referrals to community service agencies who might be able to help.

Cases are referred to SARB by a school after all other efforts to resolve the youngster's problems have failed.

Serving on the Santa Cruz County SARB are representatives of three local high school districts, agents of the county departments of Social Services, Probation and Health Services, parents, students, and a County Office of Education representative.

Before Jerry's hearing all members of the review board went over the material from Jerry's school files.

It was apparent from the records that Jerry was a loner. He had joined in few school activities and seemed to have few friends. The files also showed a pattern

trouble getting up in the morning. His mother would wake him, tell him to go to school, and then leave for work -- leaving Jerry to fend for himself.

The vice principal told the board there was an alternative education program at his high school for students such as Jerry but Jerry couldn't get in because there was a long waiting list and he was below the age of admission.

Finally the board make its recommendations:

Although previous attempts by the school to get Jerry and his family into professional counseling had failed, he and his mother were directed to contact the county's Youth Services agency and make an immediate appointment.

The school should attempt to override the waiting list in Jerry's case, and get him into the special alternative program that might be of benefit to him.

Previous psychological testing, records showed, had been done two years ago. More thorough and current testing was suggested.

resort was juvenile court which had the authorities place him in detention at Juvenile Hall. Faced with this "shape up or ship out" ultimatum, all but the most recalcitrant youngster would usually decide to shape up.

Now there no longer is that threat of detention, the compulsory attendance law has no teeth and educators (who incidentally lose thousands of dollars in stat ADA funds each year because of unexcused absences) are being forced to take a new and harder look at the problem. How DO you make a student attend school if he refuses to attend?

"It seems obvious we're going to have to do more in the area of prevention," says SARB Chairman Carl Williams, the county's child welfare and attendance officer (otherwise known as the truant officer). "We'll have to work harder at preventing truancy from the start."

Lenne Bennett, the board's parent representative from Santa Cruz City

counselor about one and a half hours during his entire high school career."

Board members agree on the importance of early emphasis on reading skills. "What is high school going to offer a kid who's 15 and who's reading at a third grade level in terms of classes he can handle?" questions FitzGerald. "The elementary school graduates him and throws him into the larger pot and expects him to survive. Well, the chances of a kid like that surviving or continuing to come to school are just about nil."

And what about Jerry? Will he survive in the "larger pot" of high school? A progress report submitted to the board 60 days after the hearing gave SARB members cause for guarded optimism.

He's cut out the late night TV viewing, gets to bed earlier, and finds it easier to get to school in the morning. Most of this is probably less due to his mother's influence than the fact that he likes his new program at high school in which he gets

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