



Truancy – nip it in the bud

Truancy is among the government's priorities. Because truancy is often a signal of early school drop-out. And truancy adds to public nuisance such as young people hanging around on the street. Prevention and quick action often help to keep pupils in school. The single contact point for school absenteeism and drop out (*Verzuimloket*), with three NUP building blocks and nationwide coverage, is proving effective in tackling the issue. Erik Ordelman, school attendance officer in Groningen and Anneke van der Heide –truancy coordinator at Gomarus College, Groningen – work with this single contact point.

How does Gomarus College tackle truancy?

Anneke van der Heide: 'My school only covers 3 and 4 *vmbo* (vocational education) programmes for students aged 14 to 16. Pupils like to see how far they can go, and skip college now and then. But truancy can signal early school dropout. That's something we want to prevent, so we take immediate action. Every instance of absenteeism is entered in our absence registration system. I phone their homes straight away when students report in sick or skip a class. Students arriving late have to make up the time they missed. I do an absence round every day, too. And it works! Frequent late attendance means coming back to school later, or seeing the school attendance officer during his consulting hour. If a student continues to truant, I report him or her officially to the single contact point for school absenteeism and drop out. Then the school attendance officer takes over.'

How does Groningen municipal authority structure its truancy policy?

Erik Ordelman: 'It is increasingly effective. Until about seven years ago, priority was mainly given to tackling truancy. This was followed by a budget to help set up serious anti-truancy measures, since then Groningen has invested heavily in prevention. More school attendance officers were appointed to hold truancy consulting hours at schools and to participate in a range of collaborations and pupil projects. Groningen also set up a central website to which schools could report non-attendance. Because before that, reporting had been relatively ad hoc. Schools tend to report truancy more regularly only when municipalities can demonstrate results.

Why is an effective truancy report so important?

Ordelman: 'Implementing the Compulsory Education Act and speedy anti-truancy measures depend entirely on official truancy reports. But for many schools reporting was complicated because they first had to find out where and how to make the reports. The single contact point for school absenteeism and drop out is an important tool in the truancy policy: reports are submitted to a single point of contact, following a single procedure. The reports help us gain as fast and early a grasp of truancy as possible, so we can take action. Because if a child stays at home, nothing's been solved. In the past, a truanting child might have been lost to the education system; now you can get him back on board.'

Are you satisfied with the single contact point for school absenteeism and drop out?

Van der Heide: 'Yes. Particularly because we have branches in three provinces. Now I don't have to work out where pupils live and track



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down the local school attendance officer. I enter a student's name and the report is automatically sent to the right person. The screens could do with a little improvement, though. It would be useful if you could enter a contact person – a mentor perhaps.'

Ordelman: 'Every report appears automatically on my screen. And goes directly to our systems. Schools receive a message that I am dealing with the report. But contact with schools is still important. Because every non-attendance is different. You've got to nip it in the bud.'

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