

Thursday 26 February, 2009

## 130 years of bunking off: low marks for Government efforts to tackle truancy

Truancy rates have struggled to improve since the 1920s because governments have failed to tackle deep-rooted problems, according to education historian Nicola Sheldon. Today's statistics released by the Department for Children, Schools and Families show an incremental improvement in rates of school attendance, some of which has been achieved using controversial 'Victorian' methods. But despite £1 billion being spent over the last ten years, a stubborn minority of children remain persistent absentees.

In [\*Tackling truancy: why have the millions invested not paid off?\*](#), Dr Sheldon, a historian and former head teacher, shows that methods of tackling truancy have barely changed in 130 years. Her History & Policy paper suggests that the persistence of the truancy problem can only be solved by changing deep-seated cultural attitudes and systemic problems.

The punitive approaches introduced in 1876, which allowed attendance officers to visit homes, issue attendance orders and fine parents, have been reintroduced, but are still failing because they don't address two crucial and deep-rooted problems:

- Schools are held accountable for truancy but do not have responsibility for enforcing attendance, which is left to education welfare officers working independently;
- Local attitudes to truancy may create a culture of acceptance, which can have a negative impact on family behaviour.

Dr Sheldon said:

"Prosecuting parents for failing to make their kids go to school is not a new idea. But if we look at what went on in the nineteenth century, we see that even when the courts imposed fines and attendance orders, children might return to school for a short while and then stop

again. We need to address the wider issues that perpetuate truancy: family poverty, parents undervaluing education, local cultures of acceptance, and the disconnect between schools and Education Welfare Officers."

Policymakers' reasons for wanting to curb truancy have not changed a great deal. In the 1880s local authorities were under pressure to curb the anti-social behaviour of children hanging around the streets and much the same reasoning occurs today when truancy sweeps are commonly used to spot youngsters out of school in shopping centres. At the turn of the twentieth century, school funding was tied to attendance due to Treasury concern about waste of public funds by truanting children. Similarly, in the 1980s the Thatcher government wanted to limit the waste of public resources caused by absence, and made tackling truancy a priority once more.

In the late 1990s, the Labour government launched a series of initiatives aimed at improving attendance, which by 2009 have cost over £1 billion. As pressure has increased to meet targets, schools and education welfare services have been put under pressure to work together more effectively. The systems for liaison and communication have not always made this easy. Evidence of this problem stretches back to the 1900s, suggesting there was a structural problem in the way the enforcement system was set up in the first place. Dr Sheldon recommends a new model of child welfare services, organised 'from the bottom up', integrating education and family support services within school management.

## Notes to editors

1. Nicola Sheldon's paper [\*Tackling truancy: why have the millions invested not paid off?\*](#) is published today on the [History & Policy website](#).
2. Nicola Sheldon is a researcher on the History in Education project at the [Institute of Historical Research](#). The project, which is funded by The Linbury Trust, will review the teaching of history in Britain over the last 100 years. Dr Sheldon is examining the period from the 1960s to the present day, from the onset of comprehensive education via the still-continuing debates on the national curriculum. She was previously a Post-doctoral Research Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford, where she specialised in historical research into policies on school attendance. She has been chair of governors for an Oxford secondary school and formerly worked in senior management in further education for 16 years. [nicola.sheldon@sas.ac.uk](mailto:nicola.sheldon@sas.ac.uk).
3. [History & Policy](#) is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the [Centre for Contemporary](#)

[British History](#), at the [Institute of Historical Research](#), University of London. History & Policy is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.

4. For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:  
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