



“If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered to be an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant.”

Definition of truancy, National Center for School Engagement

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Truancy Numbers Hard to Count

Truancy is a serious concern that affects most school districts in the United States, and school personnel have long recognized that truancy is a major problem. In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that 31 percent of teachers agreed that tardiness and cutting class interfered with their teaching. This rate jumps to 45 percent among schools with 1,000 or more students.¹ Unfortunately, quantifying the national prevalence of truancy has been difficult due to the lack of a uniform definition of truancy and due to inconsistent tracking and reporting procedures. Nonetheless, both national self-reported truancy data and data from individual schools, districts, cities, and states indicate that truancy is a common behavior.

A glimpse at truancy rates

In the 2003 *Monitoring the Future*, a national survey of adolescents in the U.S., 11 percent of eighth-grade students, 16 percent of 10th-grade students, and 35 percent of 12th-grade students reported illegally skipping one or more days of school during the previous 30 days.

During the 2004–05 school year approximately 11 percent of third-graders, 23 percent of eighth-graders, and 35 percent of 12th-graders in Denver Public Schools were classified as chronic truants (i.e., they accumulated 10 or more days of unexcused absences during the school year) according to a study by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) titled *Truancy in Denver: Prevalence, Effects, and Interventions*.

Defining chronic absenteeism as 21 or more days of absence during a school year, the Florida Department of Education reports that 7.4 percent of elementary school students, 11.3 percent of middle school students, and 14.8 percent of high school students meet this criterion.

In Wisconsin habitual truancy is defined as accruing five or more unexcused absences within a semester. During the 2005–06 school year, Milwaukee Public Schools reported 32 percent of elementary school students, 46 percent of middle school students, and 74 percent of high school students in the Milwaukee Public School district were classified as habitual truants.

The state of California defines a truant as a student who accumulates three or more unexcused absences or incidents of being tardy during the year. Under this definition, 24.8 percent of California students were truant during the 2005–06 school year according to the state department of education.

While the statistics in the text box above demonstrate that truancy is indeed a prevalent behavior, they also demonstrate that state definitions of truancy and reporting procedures vary greatly. Although the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* requires schools to report truancy rates, at the present time there are no requirements pertaining to the calculation of these rates. The Department of Education, through its NCES, views truancy as a function of attendance and organized an attendance working group to focus on the problem from that perspective. The group began work in late 2007 to review existing

attendance codes and calculations in order to create a comprehensive and mutually exclusive list to be used nationally. This work will help clarify the average daily attendance rates, one set of commonly employed statistics that sometimes masks high truancy rates at a school or within a district.

For example, a school can have a high average daily attendance rate and also have a big problem with truancy. Different reporting techniques can paint vastly different pictures of the same attendance rates. The average daily attendance rate does not capture the full picture of students who are chronically absent because it assesses numbers instead of individual patterns of absence. It is entirely possible that 30 percent of a given student population is considered chronically absent even though on an average day 90 percent of the students are in class.

Another complication is the variance in definitions of chronic truancy. Some districts define it as 21 or more days of absence during the school year. Some districts define it as only 10 days missed during the year.

Even with formal guidelines and appropriate reporting strategies, tracking truancy in a meaningful way can be challenging for schools. These concerns, as well as some solutions, are outlined in two reports written by the NCSE in 2005 and 2006.^{2, 3}

Consistency emerges as the most difficult challenge; attendance tracking is often inconsistent between districts, schools, and even classrooms. The NCSE recommends that these problems can be overcome if formal and appropriate definitions of truancy are established, if all districts within a state use the same tracking software, if school staff members are trained on consistent attendance-taking and reporting practices, and if school staff members recognize the importance of collecting and reporting accurate data.

The NCSE also urges school districts to carefully consider the handling of truancy coding for students who are chronically absent or drop out of school. Many schools cease tracking these students after they have accumulated a certain number of absences, a practice that inappropriately deflates the true truancy rate.

In addition to carefully collecting truancy incident data, schools should collect data on remedial actions taken for individual students. These data can help schools identify students or groups of students who have fallen through the cracks and also provide schools with a better understanding of the effectiveness of their truancy prevention efforts.

For example, collected as part of a needs assessment study of the truancy problem in Denver, data from Denver Public Schools during the 2004–05 school year indicate that only a small fraction of even the most serious truants (4 percent of

elementary, 16 percent of middle, and 6 percent of high school students who were classified as chronic truants) received any type of intervention beyond a phone call or letter.⁴

As outlined in the text box below, research demonstrates that the consequences of chronic truancy are far reaching, resulting in negative implications for multiple levels of society (e.g., individuals, families, schools, and communities).

One important first step to promote regular school attendance is attainment of an honest and accurate description of the current state of truancy. By taking this crucial step, schools, districts, and states will be better equipped to develop and implement effective truancy prevention strategies.



Citations

1 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2007* (Report No. NCES 2008-021). Washington, D.C.

2 National Center for School Engagement (2005). *School attendance tracking: Challenging and effective practices*. Denver, CO.

3 National Center for School Engagement (2006a). *Guidelines for a national definition of truancy and calculating rates*. Denver, CO.

4 National Center for School Engagement (2006b). *Truancy in Denver: Prevalence, effects, and interventions*. Denver, CO.



Truancy Predictors

- Disengagement from school
- Lack of success in school
- Association with delinquent peers
- Personal delinquent values
- Lack of family attachment

Truancy Outcomes

Increased risk for:

- Poor academic performance
- School dropout
- Delinquency
- Teenage pregnancy
- Substance abuse

Source: *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 40, Issue 4, Henry, K.L., Huizinga, D.H., 2007

Truancy Research Provides Insights on How to Keep Kids in Class

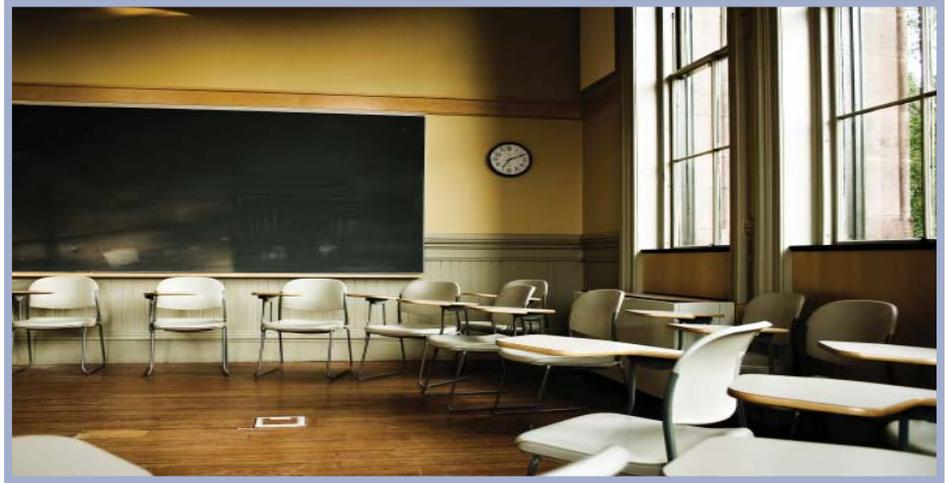
For the past decade, the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency (OJJDP), in partnership with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools of the U.S. Department of Education, has overseen and funded several programs under the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program. Sources at OJJDP answered the questions below based on findings of the program evaluation and related research.

Q1: Why do students engage in truancy?

There are many reasons and the reasons may be as unique and individualized as the children themselves. The causes of truancy are often classified according to personal, family, and school factors. Poor self-esteem, feelings of academic failure, poor relationships with other students, and gang involvement have been correlated with truancy. Mental and physical health problems and bullying also may be contributing factors. Family factors include homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, frequent moves, and other crises. Transportation difficulties are often a factor. Other family factors include elevated levels of family conflict and ineffective and inconsistent parental disciplinary practices. School factors may include poor student-teacher relations, inappropriate academic placement, and ineffective or inconsistently applied attendance policies.

Q2: How many truant days should a student accumulate before the school takes action?

As few as possible. Research indicates that the earlier the intervention occurs, the better. Unexcused absence in elementary school is a warning sign that parents may need resources or information about education or the education system. Any unexcused absence (in all grades) should be cause for immediate follow-up. Some



truant youths may not be skipping full days, but only specific classes. Tracking attendance in a consistent way is the best method to identify areas where intervention may be necessary. The more absences a student accumulates, the more difficult it is to catch up, and the more incentive a student has for continued truancy.

Q3: What challenges do schools face in preventing or reducing truancy?

Schools have the greatest advantage in working with truants because they are the first to know that a student is having problems. The primary challenge that schools face is in developing partnerships with organizations that can assist in ensuring that youths return to and stay in school. It is clear that schools lack resources in many areas. Partnerships with law enforcement, courts, social services, businesses, and faith-based and community organizations can address this lack of resources while engaging greater awareness and support from the community.

At the school level, perhaps one of the most important challenges that should be addressed is developing a consistent, accurate method of tracking student attendance. It is impossible to target interventions and activities if it is not clear where the attendance problems are greatest.

Q4: What are the most important steps schools can take to combat truancy?

Dealing with truancy involves both taking early and effective action to get the students back to school, and also taking steps to engage the students at school once they are back. (See question 7 for information about the best strategies for a community-wide truancy prevention and reduction effort.) Some specific steps that can occur at the school level (and within school districts) include:

- Ending out-of-school suspensions for truancy.
- Eliminating failing grades and removing attendance as factors in grading. (Use A, B, C, and Incomplete.)
- Making start times for secondary schools later in the morning.
- Focus policies on learning and earning credits. (Provide partial credit options for students.)
- Offer specialized classes, such as Saturday or evening classes, to support students who have fallen behind and need to catch up.
- Eliminating “push-out policies” that withhold learning opportunities from truant students.

For those beginning to tackle truancy issues, OJJDP also strongly recommends

continued on page 4

the *Truancy Case Management Handbook: Advice from the Field*. This book provides specific case studies and recommendations from the truancy-reduction program evaluation conducted and published by the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE).

Q5: With what community groups, organizations, or services should schools partner to begin or enhance truancy prevention initiatives?

Schools can partner effectively with law enforcement, juvenile and family courts, local government, local businesses, public health and human services, transportation, child welfare, nonprofits, community centers, and faith-based and community organizations. Parent and student organizations are also important players in truancy prevention.

Q6: What role should parents play in preventing truancy?

Parents should have an understanding of the importance of daily attendance and the relationship between truancy and other negative outcomes. Parents need to have support from the school and feel welcome at the school. Parents are essential to communicating the importance of daily school attendance to their children, but in some cases they are not able to ensure daily attendance without other support. Most of all, the school and the parents need to join forces in a common mission to promote good attendance for the students. It is crucial to avoid the “blame game” in which parents blame the school and the school blames the parents.

Q7: What are the most effective strategies to prevent truancy?

NCSE, the organization that evaluated OJJDP’s *Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program*, established the “three A’s” of truancy prevention (attendance, attachment, and achievement) based on findings from that evaluation and related research. Elements of the three A’s are summarized as follows:

Attendance

- Clear expectations of students, families, and school staff;
- System to monitor and reward students with good attendance;
- Outreach to families and communities on the importance of attendance; and
- Policies that promote attendance.

Achievement

- High expectations and encouragement for academic achievement of all students;
- Relevant, rigorous, and culturally competent curriculum;
- Flexible instruction to address different learning styles (including data-driven instruction to meet the varying education needs of all students); and
- Multi-measures of success (including goals for students who are not college bound).

Attachment

- Positive relationships (including student-student, student-teacher, teacher-family, and school-community);
- Safe environments where students, staff, and families feel secure, and issues of bullying and harassment are effectively addressed ;
- School-based supports and resources (such as after-school programs, family support programs, mentoring, sports, and arts or music) provided in cooperation with community groups; and
- Welcoming school climates that include office staff that are friendly and familiar with students and families, adults who model respectful communication, and positive peer relationships.

Themes across the three A’s include:

- Family involvement that includes opportunities for families to be active in their children’s education, parent training, and effective two-way communication between families and schools to share successes and problems;
- Professional development for educators and school administrators on such topics as school engagement, welcoming school climate, and individualized instruction; and
- Leadership that includes an advisory council of students, families, and

teachers to track school engagement, inclusion of community partners, and inclusive decision-making.

Q8: What are the most effective strategies to reduce truancy once a student begins skipping school?

Spur collaboration among schools, courts, law enforcement, partner agencies, and families to provide the most comprehensive truancy-reduction efforts—offer a continuum of rewards and punishments for families and students. Most truancy goes without consequences until it reaches a very high level (large number of missed days), so immediate action and the consequences and rewards that follow help ensure better engagement. Schools should review their policies to ensure they are not inadvertently using what we term “push-out policies” that actually discourage school attendance, such as automatic failure as a result of missed classes or suspension as a punishment for truancy.

Q9: What are the future directions for truancy prevention and intervention?

OJJDP sees the direction as continuing to research and disseminate best practices (including training and technical assistance) among truancy prevention efforts, identifying the “real” and common definitions of truancy rates in the U.S., and increasing awareness of the extreme importance of keeping children in schools. OJJDP believes that the future direction needs to be built on the three A’s of attendance, attachment, and achievement. These work together to promote school success such that students attend regularly, feel engaged in their own learning and in the life of the school, and achieve their academic goals. 

For more information about the OJJDP *Tool Kit*, see the Resources section on page 7.

For resources and information about evaluation results of OJJDP’s truancy reduction program, visit NCSE online at <http://www.schoolengagement.org>.

Ten Things a School Can Do to Improve Attendance

1. Make students and parents or guardians feel welcome at school and school events.
2. Create an environment that enables students to succeed in academics or activities by acknowledging accomplishments, even small ones.
3. When a student is absent, immediately talk to the student's parent or guardian.
4. When students are absent, talk to them upon their return about why they were gone.
5. Forge relationships with local businesses where youths may congregate when truant so those business owners encourage students to go back to class.
6. Forge relationships with local law enforcement, juvenile courts, and faith-based or community organizations to share information and suggestions for keeping students in school.
7. Don't provide the temptation for youths to become truant by keeping campus closed during lunch and breaks.
8. Empower and expect teachers to take action when they think a student may be truant.
9. Reward and recognize good attendance.
10. Make school a place where students feel safe from harm and harassment.

Adapted from *10 Things a School Can Do to Improve Attendance*, National Center for School Engagement



How To Attract Meaningful Parent Involvement

Parent support and cooperation are vital to quality education practices, particularly truancy prevention. Decades of research show that when parents are actively involved in their children's education, the children will achieve greater success in school. The *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* requires schools to promote meaningful parent involvement, but it is up to individual districts to determine how best to do that. Numerous publications are available to help schools and parents work together to promote the best education possible for students. Among them:

The National PTA created the *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs: An Implementation Guide for School Communities* and recommends that parent programs meet standards in these six areas:

1. **Communicating:** Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. **Parenting:** Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
3. **Student learning:** Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. **Volunteering:** Parents are welcome in the school and their support and assistance are sought.
5. **School decision-making and advocacy:** Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. **Collaborating with the community:** Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning.

A second resource is *Strengthening Parent Involvement: A Toolkit* which was published by the Colorado Department of Education to help schools understand the *NCLB* requirements on parent involvement and develop sound policies and strategies to promote that involvement.

The *National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs* is available from Solution Tree online at <http://www.solution-tree.com>. Item number: BKF175. Price: \$4.

The *Strengthening Parent Involvement: A Tool Kit* is available online at http://www.cde.state.co.us/FedPrograms/nclb/downloads/pi_toolkit.pdf.

News From OSDFS

Several school districts from around the country are using OSDFS grant funds to operate truancy reduction activities. These school-based programs are similar in that they recognize a need to address truancy early and consistently. Also, each program is tailored to meet the needs as determined by its local community and school priorities and resources.

Allamakee Community School District - Waukon, Iowa

In 2004, ACS used funds from its *Safe Schools/Healthy Students* grant to hire a truancy officer to create and oversee the implementation of a series of attendance guidelines. While the district, with approximately 700 junior and senior high school students, has always maintained a high attendance rate, district employees recognize good attendance translates to good grades.

The district uses a series of benchmarks that trigger certain responses from the school, such as phone calls to parents, home visits, or referrals to juvenile court. The program consists of four components:

- **Community Involvement:** The district uses public service announcements that encourage school attendance. The district also works with the area chamber of commerce to promote the message at community events.
- **Parental Involvement:** The district recommends that parents notify the school if their child will be absent from school and not to allow a three-day absence without contacting the school. The school notifies parents if students miss a class and then conducts meetings with both the parents and the student to encourage parents to take responsibility for their child's attendance at school.
- **Consequences:** The truancy officer maintains a close working relationship with the county attorney to streamline the process for addressing disregard for the local school attendance laws.
- **Incentives:** The district uses various student incentives from year to year, such as awarding students that have three or fewer absences with a half grade increase (i.e., improving a grade of B- to B) for each class in which they met the attendance benchmark.

Worcester Public Schools - Worcester, Mass.

The Worcester Public School system diligently monitors student attendance with its well-established truancy prevention program funded in part by a *Safe Schools/Healthy Students* grant. The school notifies parents and guardians on a daily basis of any unexcused or unexplained absence. If, after five consecutive days, there is no reasonable response or explanation by the parent or guardian, a Notice of Truancy will be completed and sent home with copies also faxed to the School Safety office.

School staff members work with parents and students to solve individual barriers to regular school attendance. These efforts can include daily phone calls, notices sent to the home, home visits, school conferences, and mediation when necessary. If appropriate, a Student Support Process meeting is convened to develop more in-depth interventions to assist the student. This can involve referrals to community-based providers of various essential services that could help alleviate the problems contributing to the student's truancy.

If truancy continues despite early efforts by the school, an appropriate action is filed with the juvenile court. Depending on the action filed, either the clerk magistrate or a probation officer conducts a preliminary inquiry with the student and guardian to determine how to proceed with the case—continue the case at the clerk magistrate level, elevate it to the formal court, or dismiss it.

Lansing School District - Lansing, Mich.

The Attendance Intervention program is designed to use a graduated sequence of interventions to encourage and assist students, ages 12 through 15, and their families to develop and maintain regular school attendance. Safe and Drug-Free Schools state formula funds are used, in part, to target those students who, due to chronic truancy, are referred to truancy court and screened for drug use. Those students who test positive for drug use are referred to a drug treatment program, periodically screened for continued drug use, provided with counseling services, and monitored for subsequent truancy. Students are released from court jurisdiction only after they have maintained regular school attendance and stopped using drugs. Since truancy is a gateway behavior to drug abuse, the program is focused on decreasing the use of drugs by participating students. Occasionally, parents also are identified as drug users and are placed under court jurisdiction as well. The court monitors parents until they test free of drug use.

During the 2005–06 school year, 64 students (37 high school students and 27 middle school students) and three parents were identified as drug users and participated in the program. By the end of the school year, 48 (75 percent) of the students and one parent tested free of drug use and were dismissed by the court. Sixteen students remained under court jurisdiction, and the two parents who did not test free of drugs lost custody of their children and remained under court supervision. 

Research Findings

Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), September 2001 (NCJ 188947)

Findings indicate that chronic truancy is a key predictor for negative outcomes in education, employment, and social success. Truancy has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youths and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults, including substance abuse, gang activity, burglary, auto theft, and vandalism. This Bulletin discusses two programs—*Abolish Chronic Truancy (ACT) Now* and the *Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program*—that have worked to intervene with chronic truants, address the root causes of truancy, and stop youths' progression from truancy into more serious and violent behaviors. See <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/188947.pdf>.

Who's Skipping School: Characteristics of Truants in 8th and 10th Grade

Kimberly L. Henry, PhD
American School Health Association,
Journal of School Health, January 2007

Findings in this research article indicate some of the most reliable predictors of truancy include:

- parental education;
- having large amounts of unsupervised time after school;
- school disengagement; and
- drug use.

Exploring the associations between truant behavior, demographic and family characteristics, school-related risk factors, and drug use gives insight to the potential target audiences for truancy prevention efforts. This research, conducted at Colorado State University and supported in part by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, examines the University of Michigan's 2003 *Monitoring the Future* survey results which includes self-reported data on how often the eighth- and 10th-grade students were truant.

Resources

Truancy: A Serious Problem for Students, Schools, and Society

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2004

This five-part online workshop was originally designed to be completed over five days but is archived so that users can access the information at their own pace. The workshop takes a tiered approach to learning, presenting multiple levels of information, actual examples of the application of this information, and extensive additional resources. It has segments on causes and consequences of truancy, prevention, early intervention, legal intervention, and elements of a comprehensive approach.

Visit the workshop materials at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/training/truancy/index.html>.

Truancy Prevention: Empowering Communities and Schools to Help Students Succeed

*U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)*

This Web site was created jointly by OJJDP and OSDFS to collect and disseminate truancy-related information and resources designed to help children reach their fullest potential. This partnership reflects a shared objective of keeping youths engaged in school and on the path to responsible adulthood. The site includes information for educators, law enforcement officers, court personnel, communities, and families.

Visit the site at <http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/truancy>.

Tool Kit for Creating Your Own Truancy Reduction Program

*U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2007*

This tool kit provides background information on truancy, including its causes and possible solutions. It outlines critical components of effective truancy prevention programs, such as family involvement, use of incentives and sanctions, use of a support network, and program evaluation. The tool kit also examines the legal and economic implications of truancy and provides recommendations to courts, schools, state lawmakers, and researchers.

Free online at http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov/publications/truancy_toolkit.html.

National Center for School Engagement (NCSE)

Colorado Foundation for Families and Children

Established by the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children with ongoing support from OJJDP, the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) provides resources on the three As of school success: attendance, attachment, and achievement. NCSE resources include publications, truancy and school attendance programs, trainings, technical assistance, research, and evaluation. These resources are available to school districts, law enforcement agencies, courts, as well as state and federal agencies.

Visit the center online at <http://www.schoolengagement.org>.



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Questions and Comments

Hello, I was wondering if the newsletter is available in Spanish? I'm the Health Coordinator for our school district. When I sent the newsletter to the principals and asked them to consider using some of the information to send to parents, they replied that their policy states that they won't send information unless it's available in English and Spanish. It's such good "stuff," that I hate to keep it from getting out there. Either way, thanks for such great information.

—Katy F., Colorado

We only print an English language version of the newsletter, but we have a translation feature on the Web site. Readers can select from eight languages (Spanish, German, French, Japanese, Korean, Italian, Portuguese, and Chinese) using the Babel Fish translation option. Just go to the Web site and look for the icon near the bottom of the page. Choose the flag represent-

ing the language you want and the entire site, including current articles and links, is translated to that language. Please note that you'll need to have certain characters installed on your computer for some of the languages to display properly.

•••

I never realized how much the flu pandemic [sic] might affect my classroom. Thank you very much for the very helpful information.

—Athena H., Colorado

•••

The newsletter about pandemic flu had a lot of valuable advice, but you didn't mention the recommendations about stocking food and water at home. If people are unable to work and being advised to stay home, it may be really difficult to find enough supplies at the grocery store—if it's even open. I remind

everyone that they need to be prepared at home as well as at school or other places of employment. Some people suggest having enough food and water for two or three weeks for your family. I thought this might be valuable to your readers.

—Bill W., Georgia

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Send questions, comments, or suggestions to *The Challenge* via e-mail at informationcnl@thechallenge.org.

To ensure the articles in the newsletter meet your needs, the writing staff needs your feedback. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey found on *The Challenge* Web site—it's confidential and takes only a couple of minutes to complete.