

## **Anaheim Police Department**

**Submission for the 2010 Herman Goldstein Award for  
Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing**

**Truancy...Ditching a Life of Crime**



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## Summary

Walter Elementary School opened its doors to the children of Anaheim in 1961. As the decades passed, Walter Elementary School experienced a slow and downward spiral of change regarding campus discipline and truancy. The school problems mirrored the changing demographics and downward economic trajectory affecting Walter Elementary School and the surrounding neighborhood. As the overall economic influence of the residents decreased, the influx of gangs and overall crime increased. Crime and gang activity slowly crept into the neighborhoods surrounding Walter Elementary School. Children, left with little parental support, were trapped in a situation they were unable to avoid.

During these same years, California legislators passed stricter laws against all types of crime from drug possession to murder. The stricter laws led to thousands of arrests and as a result the prison system in California grew from approximately 20,000 inmates in 1975 to over 167,000 inmates in 2010 ("California Prisoners 1974-1975: Summary Statistics of Felon Prisoners and Parolees." California Department of Corrections, 2010). While education has always been viewed as important, few correlated the link between crime and truancy. Elected officials, law enforcement, and the judicial system were focused mainly on attacking crime *after* it occurred instead of trying to prevent it. Recent studies highlight the low education level of California's prison population. On average, inmates in California have a seventh grade level of education (California Department of Corrections, 2009). So, over the past few decades while many people

were getting “tough on crime,” few were focusing on the first indicators of juvenile delinquency and overall crime—truancy.

In 2008, a plan to address truancy and campus discipline was developed and implemented at Walter Elementary School. The participants in the plan created a collaborative which included school teachers, administrators, the Anaheim Police Department, Orange County Sheriff's Department, Orange County District Attorney's Office, local faith based organizations, non-profit organizations, and local businesses. This simple plan involved getting children to attend school, thereby decreasing problems both on and off campus. Moreover, its aim was to educate children and parents, giving them the necessary skills to avoid the evil influences of crime and gangs. This paper will identify how truancy and campus discipline at Walter Elementary School was identified, the plan of action to address it, and the impressive results over the last two years.

## **Scanning**

The city of Anaheim is centrally located in Orange County and is best known for the site of the Disneyland Resort as well as the Anaheim Angels. It is also known worldwide as a center for entertainment, tourism, and convention activities. It is California's 10<sup>th</sup> largest city at fifty five square miles with a population of 348,467 (2009). There are nine school districts within Anaheim comprised of 46 elementary schools, seven junior high schools, and eight high schools. Eight percent of the city's population is of elementary and junior high school age.

One of the most under achieving elementary schools was Esther L. Walter Elementary School, located in the unincorporated area of Anaheim. Walter Elementary School currently has 650 students in kindergarten through sixth grade. Many of the students speak English as a second language. In addition, the area serviced by Walter Elementary is made up of primarily low income households.

The Anaheim Police Department has always taken pride in having a great working relationship with all the schools it services through its Safe Schools program. It was due to this working relationship that school administrators, staff, and parents requested assistance from the police department in implementing a program to help stem the tide of increased truancy, discipline problems and suspensions. Lack of parent participation in some of the schools aggravated the problem. Adding to these problems was the fact that schools are allotted money based on their Average Daily Attendance (ADA), thereby losing thousands of dollars when students are truant from school, further negatively impacting the schools.

Anaheim Police Chief John Welter requested assistance and input from his Chief's Advisory Board (CAB) in finding a solution to the schools' request. The Advisory Board is comprised of local business leaders, school officials, community leaders, and private citizens. Under the guidance of the Chief's Advisory Board, a large subcommittee was formed for the purpose creating a collaborative consisting of different community stakeholders, police personnel, and Orange County personnel.

The collaborative looked at research which indicated that students who are absent from school on a continuous basis are 65 percent more likely to commit criminal offenses (Reid, 2005). Furthermore, one of the first signs that a student is becoming involved in criminal activity is that he or she starts missing school. The collaborative was also concerned with addressing the lack of parent involvement which affected academic success. In fact, studies show that children who are rejected by their parents “are ‘prime targets’ for older youth and adults who are involved in delinquent, criminal, and/or anti-social behavior” (Boulter, 2004, p. 29). The collaborative also took into account empirical data provided by police personnel and the district attorney’s office corroborating what the research and studies indicated.

The collaborative looked at the procedures of the Orange County Courts Truancy Program, also known as School Attendance Review Board (SARB). This procedure required sending a school letter to a student having four or more unexcused absences. If the student continued to be truant, SARB procedures called for three additional letters to be sent, including two separate subsequent meetings with the parent and student before consideration was made to refer the case to the District Attorney for further action. As one might imagine, months often passed before a total of seven letters were sent and two parent meetings were scheduled. During this process, students accumulated unexcused absences well into the double digits. First-hand experience from the officers and the deputy district attorney in the collaborative indicated the SARB process was essentially ineffective in reducing truancy due to its slow response to the

problem. Also, governmental agencies such as; the police department, district attorney's office, social services agencies, and the courts were each addressing the truancy problem in a fragmented manner. In common terms, often times the left hand did not know what the right hand was doing.

During the assessment, the collaborative was tasked with addressing truancy, discipline and suspension issues at one or more schools within the city of Anaheim. Based on the information provided by the schools along with findings from various studies, the collaborative decided to work on a problem-oriented policing project to increase attendance, while reducing discipline problems and suspensions, at Walter Elementary School. While the collaborative designed, built, and implemented their own program, partial funding was provided by the State of California through the Gang Reduction, Intervention, and Prevention Program (GRIP). Matching funds for this program came from the Anaheim Police Department and Orange County District Attorney's Office. Walter Elementary School was selected as one of the schools where GRIP would be implemented due to its high level of truancy and suspensions. In fact, 2005 data indicated Walter Elementary School had the worst attendance record of any school in the district.

## **ANALYSIS**

Studies have shown that a majority of those who are currently incarcerated in the criminal justice system had similar common behaviors while they were in school. These behaviors included a high truancy rate and an increased discipline record. In California,

78% of inmates in the state prison system violated a truancy ordinance as their first law violation (United States Department of Justice, 1996).

To determine the extent and impact of the truancy problem at Walter Elementary School the collaborative team utilized both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. An extensive review of school administrative records such as student attendance records, disciplinary records, and the Academic Performance Index (API) Report provided us with significant quantitative data. Additionally, we were able to consider qualitative data derived from interviews and input from school administrators, teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders that participated in the Chief's Advisory Board focus group. Several open discussions with the community about the high rate of truancy within Magnolia School District were facilitated through the Chief's Advisory Board.

The nature and extent of the steadily rising truancy rate and resulting negative school behavior can be best revealed by analyzing Walter Elementary School. For the purposes of our evaluation, we established a baseline utilizing Magnolia School District administrative records from 2006. As mentioned, in 2006 Walter Elementary School maintained the lowest attendance record in the District and consistently reported some of the most significant numbers of student disciplinary actions such as suspensions

During the period of time, prior to the implementation of GRIP at Walter Elementary School, truancy issues were primarily dealt with through SARB. For comparative purposes, a chart (Appendix I) is included in the appendix that depicts utilization and



recorded outcomes prior to and after implementation of GRIP. The implementation of GRIP provided an opportunity to respond to the truancy problem in a localized, expeditious and comprehensive manner. The collaborative nature of the program allowed for the appropriate targeting of resources and services to maximize the response. By utilizing relevant local agencies, we ensured sustainability of the program.

The factors that contribute to truancy are as complex and pervasive as the effects. It is commonly accepted and supported by extensive research that student, school, family and community factors are correlates of truancy (McCluskey 214-234). Each of the factors discussed below are underlying conditions that precipitate truancy and disciplinary problems. Analysis of the high rate of truancy and disciplinary problems at Walter Elementary School was consistent with this thinking. For students, the following social and environmental factors are reported to have impacted truancy rates:

- limited social competence,
- poor self esteem,
- language barriers,
- low academic performance,
- unidentified learning disabilities,
- lack of appropriate peer relationships,
- a lack of connectedness,
- intimidation, and
- poor physical health.

School factors are an equally important considerations in addressing truancy problems. If the school environment is not conducive to the engagement of at risk students, it is highly likely that there will be a truancy problem. Providing a safe school environment, having the capacity and willingness to meet the diverse needs of students and maintaining clearly defined and consistently enforced policies are all critical elements in combatting truancy and other behaviors that place students at risk. Additionally, there needs to be an ongoing commitment to developing an enriching school community. This includes a focus on positive teacher - student relationships and mentoring, as well as strategies to increase parent participation.

Family factors contribute significantly to truancy. It was evident that a disconnect between the parents and the school greatly impacted attendance, engagement and behavior at Walter Elementary School. Additionally, demographic data indicated that there was a significant over representation of single parent families (overwhelmingly female head of household) and low socio-economic levels within the school population. Many of the parents were also non-English speaking which further impacted not only the level of engagement with the school administrators and faculty, but also their understanding of the educational system as a whole. Other familial factors that contributed to the truancy problem at Walter Elementary School included a lack of parental supervision, limited exposure to positive role models and varied educational priorities.

Community factors also had an adverse effect on school attendance and behavior at Walter Elementary School. The catchment area of the school is comprised of a number

of neighborhoods that experience elevated levels of crime. Additionally, there were fewer opportunities for students to access recreational or other pro-social pursuits due to limited availability of resources. As a result, students, parents, community and the school were all determined to be factors that contributed to the truancy problem at Walter Elementary School and were eventually addressed in the response phase.

In addition to negative social outcomes of truancy, there is also a financial consequence. Average Daily Attendance (ADA) money is paid to the schools by the State. Simply stated, if there are less students present, there is less money paid. Schools rely heavily on this funding and when students are truant, the fiscal impact on schools is significant. This has a compounding effect as there is then less money to provide services that the students need to help them stay in school and achieve academically.

Along with the elevated truancy rates in 2006 and 2007, a review of the API indicated that academic performance at Walter Elementary School was being adversely affected, largely as a result of the same factors. It is widely accepted that truancy is a precursor to delinquent behavior. Unsupervised, truant youth are more likely to engage in criminal behavior and other high risk activities. The likelihood of experiencing poor self-esteem and a lack of societal assimilation is far greater for a young person that is habitually truant than a youth that is effectively engaged at school. Poor attendance will inevitably impact academic performance and as a result the likelihood of "dropping out" prior to completion of school is greatly increased. During the development stage of the project,

the collaborative team was focused on incorporating identified best practices. We were guided by principles cited by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention as being components of effective truancy reduction efforts.

## **Response**

Truancy is often the first crime committed by the criminals. Those who fail to attend school on a regular basis have a difficult time adjusting to social norms and have negative behavioral issues, which result in an increase in school discipline (McCluskey 214-234). The collaborative's response to these problems was to implement truancy sweeps;, curfew sweeps;, parent, faculty, and student education courses; strike team meetings;, and incentive programs.

Based on analysis of the truancy and behavioral problems on campus we created a collaboration to eradicate the problem. This consisted of law enforcement, the district attorney's office, the probation office, the school district, private and non-profit agencies to eradicate the problem. The collaborative analyzed attendance records and campus discipline statistics before implementing a response to the problem. Each agency in the collaborative contributed resources to analyze and solve the problem.

The goals of GRIP were to decrease truancy and decrease campus discipline problems. The resources available to the collaborative were commitment and personnel from each of the participating agencies to attack the problem of truancy and discipline with a uniform and cohesive plan. GRIP involved the implementation of a truancy program

which involved conducting truancy sweeps during the school year. Truancy sweeps are a law enforcement operation that involves the GRIP team members going to the homes of chronically truant students. The benefit from truancy sweeps is the reduction of daylight criminal activity, scholastic improvement, improvement of funding for schools, and education of the community of existing laws addressing truancy. The team members intervene with the truant students and their parents by educating them on truancy laws and the negative impact of poor attendance. Furthermore, GRIP also provides the targeted families with comprehensive resources that will assist them in improving school attendance and decreasing negative behaviors.

Community input from both parents and educators informed the collaborative that juveniles in the targeted area surrounding the school were frequently violating curfew laws and committing crimes. A number of teachers at Walter Elementary School reported their students had a difficult time staying awake during class. When the students were questioned, they often times admitted to being up late and away from their homes the previous night due to a variety of reasons. Studies show that minors who are unsupervised after curfew are more likely to commit crimes or be victims of crimes, have poor attendance and increased behavior problems at school (Bilchik 1-22). GRIP responded to this problem by implementing a comprehensive curfew operation which involved team members conducting curfew sweeps.

The curfew sweeps were designed to have directed patrols in the area surrounding Walter Elementary School. Curfew violators were detained and brought to a central

location where their parents were required to respond and meet with GRIP team members. The juvenile curfew violators and their parents were educated on curfew laws, the negative impact of curfew violations, and they were provided resources that assisted them in improving school attendance and decreasing negative behaviors.

Another method used by GRIP was to implement a comprehensive training for parents, faculty members, and students at Walter Elementary School. These educational trainings also included information on the current truancy laws, the negative consequences of poor attendance and delinquent student behavior. The educational trainings include information on how parents, faculty members, and students can work together to improve school attendance and decrease discipline problems on campus. Every faculty member and fifth/sixth grade student at Walter Elementary School attended the prevention training. In addition, over 200 parents at the school attend monthly meetings where they receive prevention training. As a result, the parents have organized a campus greeter program which involves parents volunteering on campus to welcome students to school.

Also, the collaborative created intervention meetings involving students with attendance and/or behavior problems and their parents. These meetings were identified as “Strike Team” meeting because they were focused at a few specific students who needed direct attention to change their behavior. These meetings occur on a monthly basis and members of the Strike Team explain to the parents and the students the negative impact of truancy and behavior problems on a student’s life. The parents and students

are held accountable by the Strike Team for attendance and discipline problems. The Strike Team also creates an attendance and behavior contract for both the student and the parents and provides the families with available resources to assist them in improving student attendance and decreasing negative behavior.

Realizing that children and parents often times need some type of motivation, GRIP created incentives for parents, faculty members, and students who met the goals set out for them. These incentives included attending major league sporting events, such as an Angels baseball game, all expense paid celebrations at local restaurants, law enforcement fairs, soccer camps, and end of year events. The rules were strict, but with improved attendance came rewards that many children and their parents from Walter Elementary School had never experienced.

### **Assessment**

As a result of implementing GRIP, Walter Elementary School experienced an increase in attendance and a decrease in discipline issues. Attendance was evaluated by looking at the attendance records provided by the Magnolia School District. Furthermore, discipline issues were evaluated by looking at the school's suspension records (Appendix II and Appendix III ). The results of GRIP were carefully evaluated by the collaborative group.

Prior to the implementation of GRIP, in the 2006/2007 school year, Walter Elementary School had a total of 378 unexcused absences between fourth through sixth grade

students while the Magnolia School District had an average of 356. In the 2007/2008 school year, only a truancy sweep and educational trainings were conducted. As a result, Walter Elementary had a total of 233 unexcused absences while the district average was 307. This was a 38% reduction for Walter compared to 14% for the district. Moreover, 2008/2009 was the first school year where all aspects of GRIP were fully implemented and the results continued to improve. In the 2008/2009 school year there were 189 unexcused absences while the district average was 267. Once again, Walter had a reduction of 19% while the district average fell by 13%. Using the same amount of resources and following the same plan, there were a total of 157 unexcused absences during the 2009/2010 school year and the average for the district was 193. Since the implementation of GRIP, unexcused absences were reduced by 58% compared to 46% reduction for the entire district (Appendix III).

As one has read, reducing unexcused absences not only benefits the students, schools and community in terms of behavior, but it also benefits the schools financially. Schools in California are partially funded by the number of students who attend a particular school every day. On average, schools receive daily attendance (ADA) money from the state. They receive approximately \$35 per pupil per day as long as he/she is present. Due to the 58% improvement in attendance, Walter Elementary School received an additional \$26,000 in ADA money in the 2008/2009 school year and this amount will increase at the conclusion of the 2009/2010 school year.



Schools currently deal with truancy issues by referring truant students and their parents to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB). SARB is composed of representatives from various youth-serving agencies, helping students and their parents solve school attendance and behavior problems through the use of school and community resources. In the State of California, when a student has three or more unexcused absences, he/she becomes a truant under the law on their fourth absence. In 2006/2007, Walter Elementary School had 91 truancy cases. The following year, 2007/2008, the school had 64 cases. When GRIP was implemented, in 2008/2009, Walter Elementary had 63 cases and in 2009/2010, it had 33. The implementation of ADP yielded an overall 64% improvement from the 2006/2007 school year to the 2009/2010 school year.

The implementation of GRIP has also improved discipline issues at Walter Elementary School. The discipline issues were measured by looking at the school suspension numbers. In the 2006/2007 school year, Walter Elementary School had a total of 28 suspensions and the Magnolia School District had an average of 20 suspensions. In 2007/2008, Walter reduced their suspensions to 23, an 18% reduction. Meanwhile, the district went from an average of 20 to 16 suspensions per school, a 20% reduction. After the GRIP was put into practice, in the 2008/2009 school year, Walter's suspension numbers decreased from 23 to 9, a 61% reduction. During this time, the district suspension average fell from 16 to 12, a 25% reduction. In the 2009/2010 school year, Walter's suspensions fell from 9 to 8 while the district average fell from 12 to 5, an 8% reduction compared to a 41% reduction for the district. While the district average fell

greater in the past year the overall data shows Walter Elementary School had an impressive 71% reduction in disciplinary action (Appendix III).

Another significant sign of improvement was noticed in Walter Elementary School's Academic Performance Index (API). This was not one of the identified goals of the program, but proved to be a beneficial bi-product of the decreases in discipline and truancy. In 2006, Walter Elementary School had an API of 669, which was 58 points below the district average. When the GRIP was implemented in 2008, Walter Elementary School's API improved to 716, which was only 55 points below district average. By 2010, Walter Elementary School had an API score of 801, which left them just nine points below the district average. Between 2006 and 2010, Walter Elementary School's API scores had an overall increase of 19.7% (Appendix VI).

When the collaborative initially implemented a response plan to the problem, the committee observed that parents lacked trust in law enforcement and that school officials were hesitant to have law enforcement on campus. This hindered our ability to follow up with students that were identified as being habitually truant and/or having discipline issues. In the years to come, we hope to improve our response plan by improving our follow up protocol with the schools and the parents. Previously the collaborative approached the individual school about implementing the GRIP. This approach caused problems in some areas of implementation due to the lack of support from top level district administration. In the future, instead of approaching individual

schools first, we will approach school districts and their top level administrators to ensure full support of the program.

As the analysis shows, success outcomes have been much greater than expected. The key has been the collaborative approach between school teachers, administrators, the law enforcement, district attorney's office, local faith based organizations private and non-profit organizations, and businesses. Most notably, GRIP has restored hope throughout the Walter Elementary School and the families associated with it. This success has reignited hope at similar schools, not only in Anaheim but throughout Orange County.

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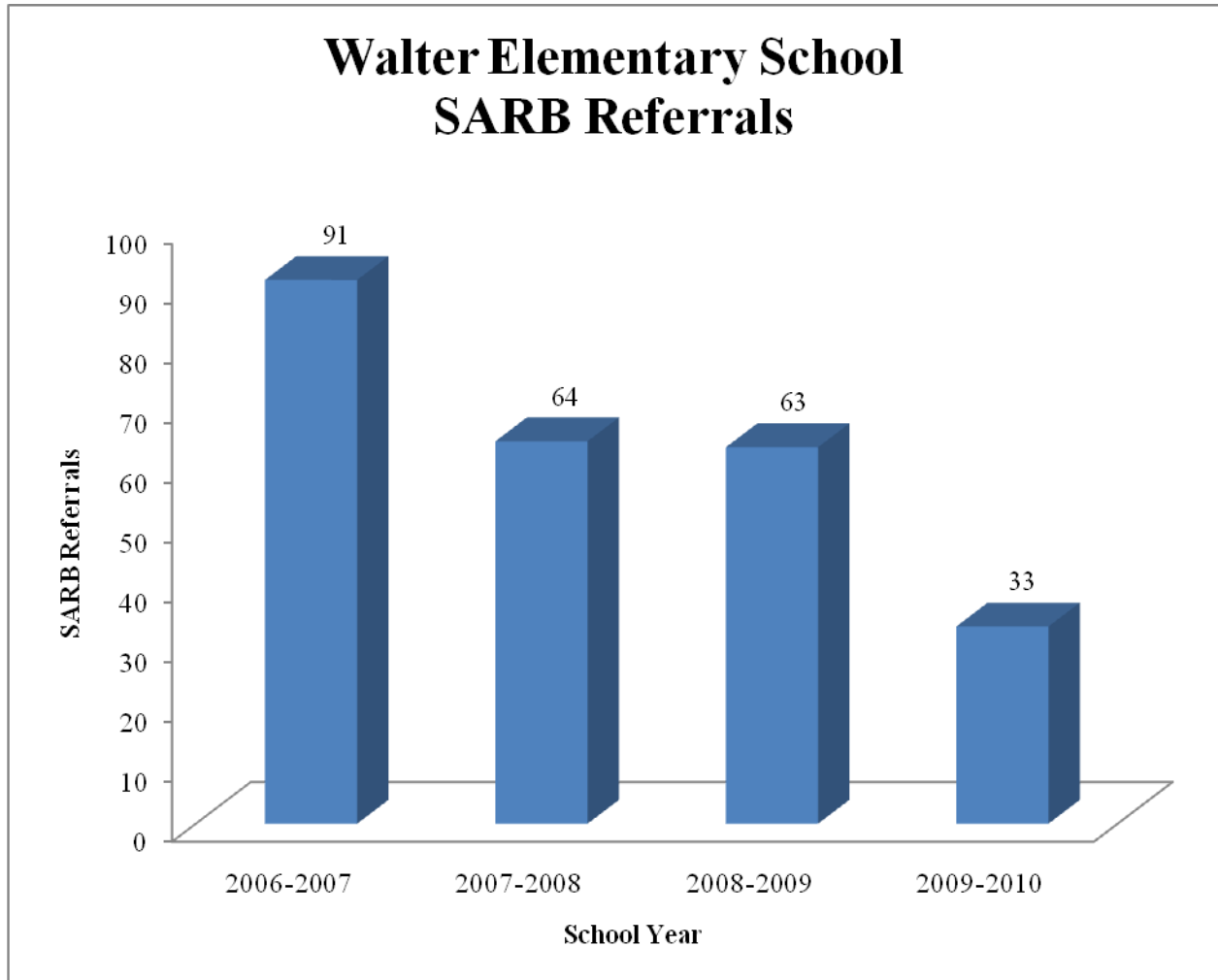
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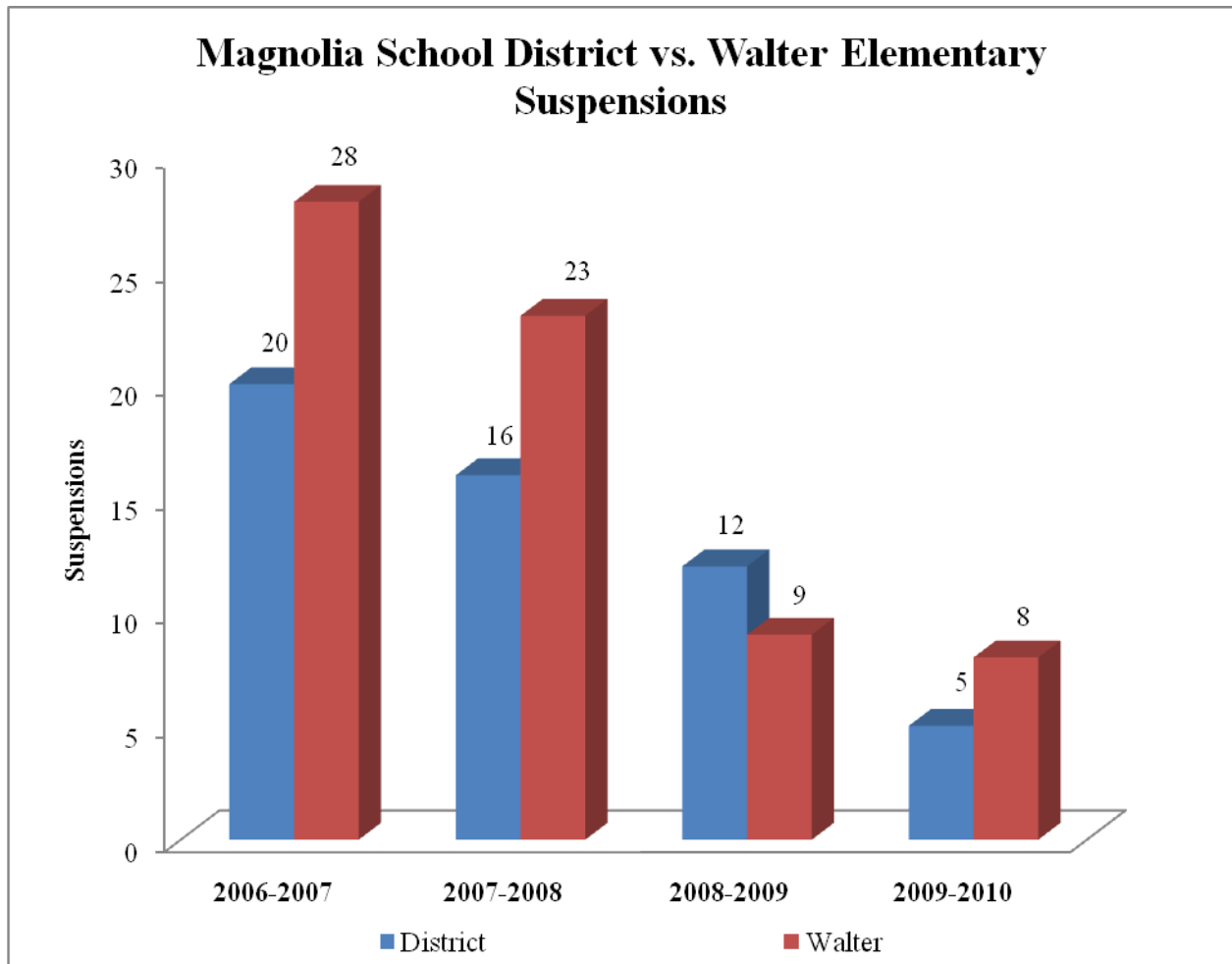
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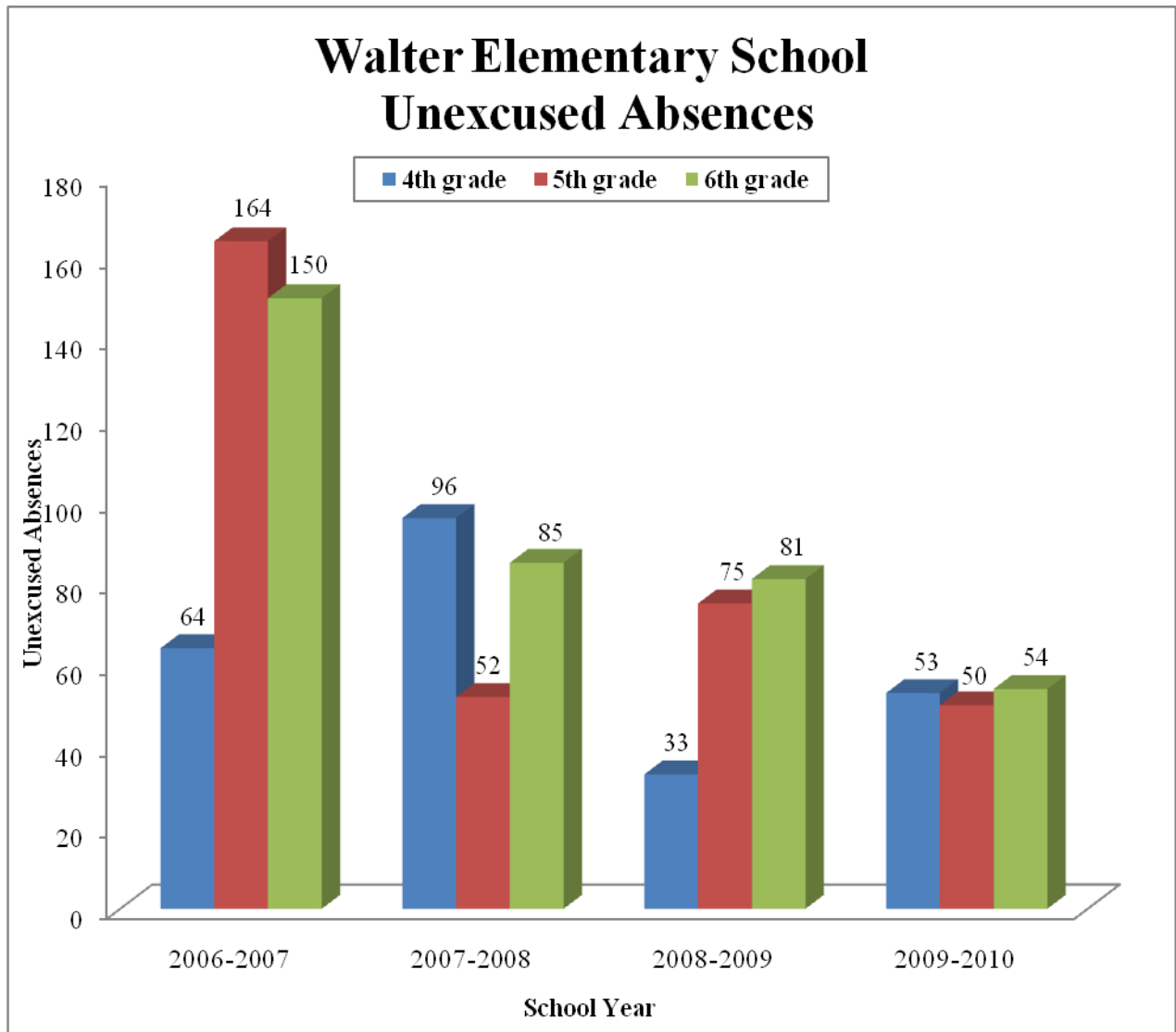
Appendix I



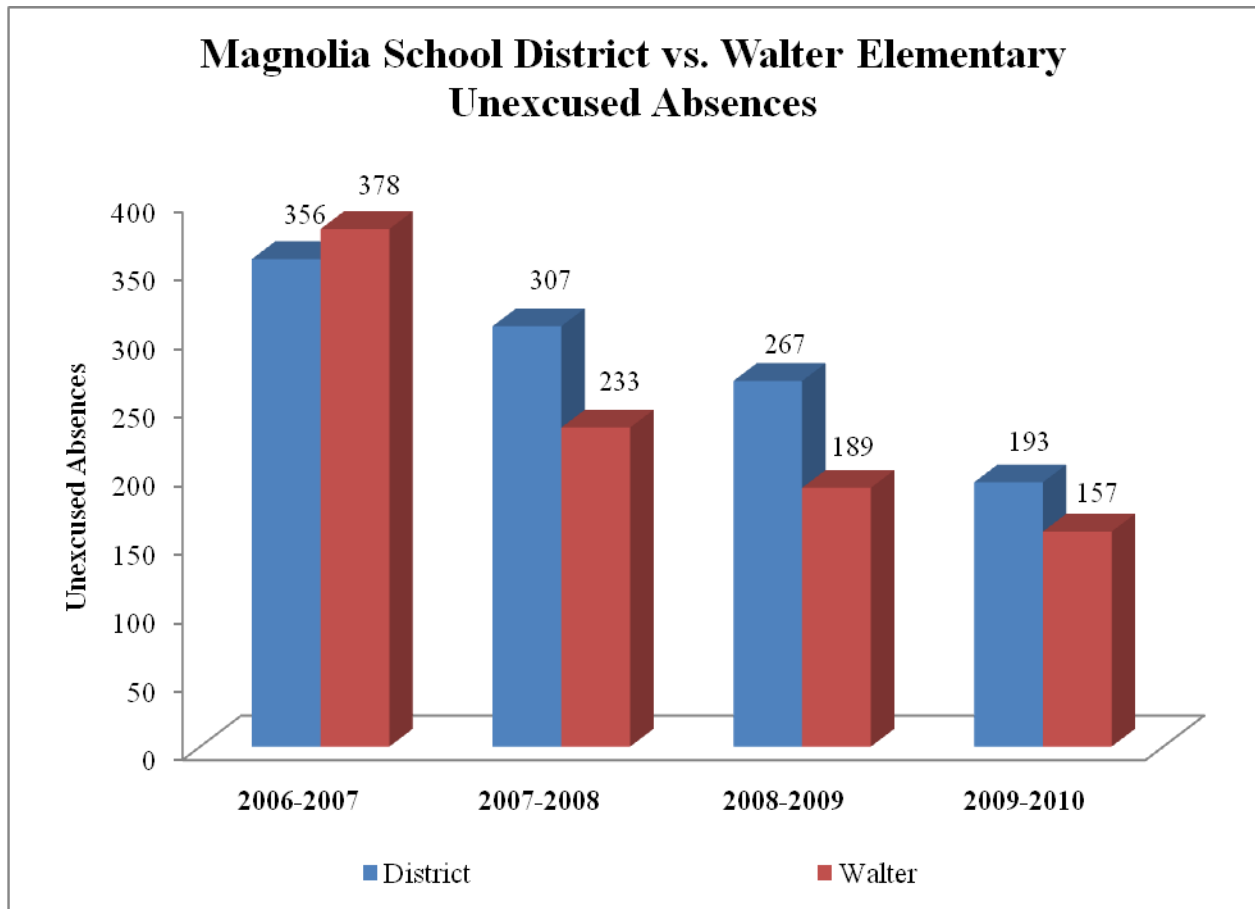
Appendix II



Appendix III

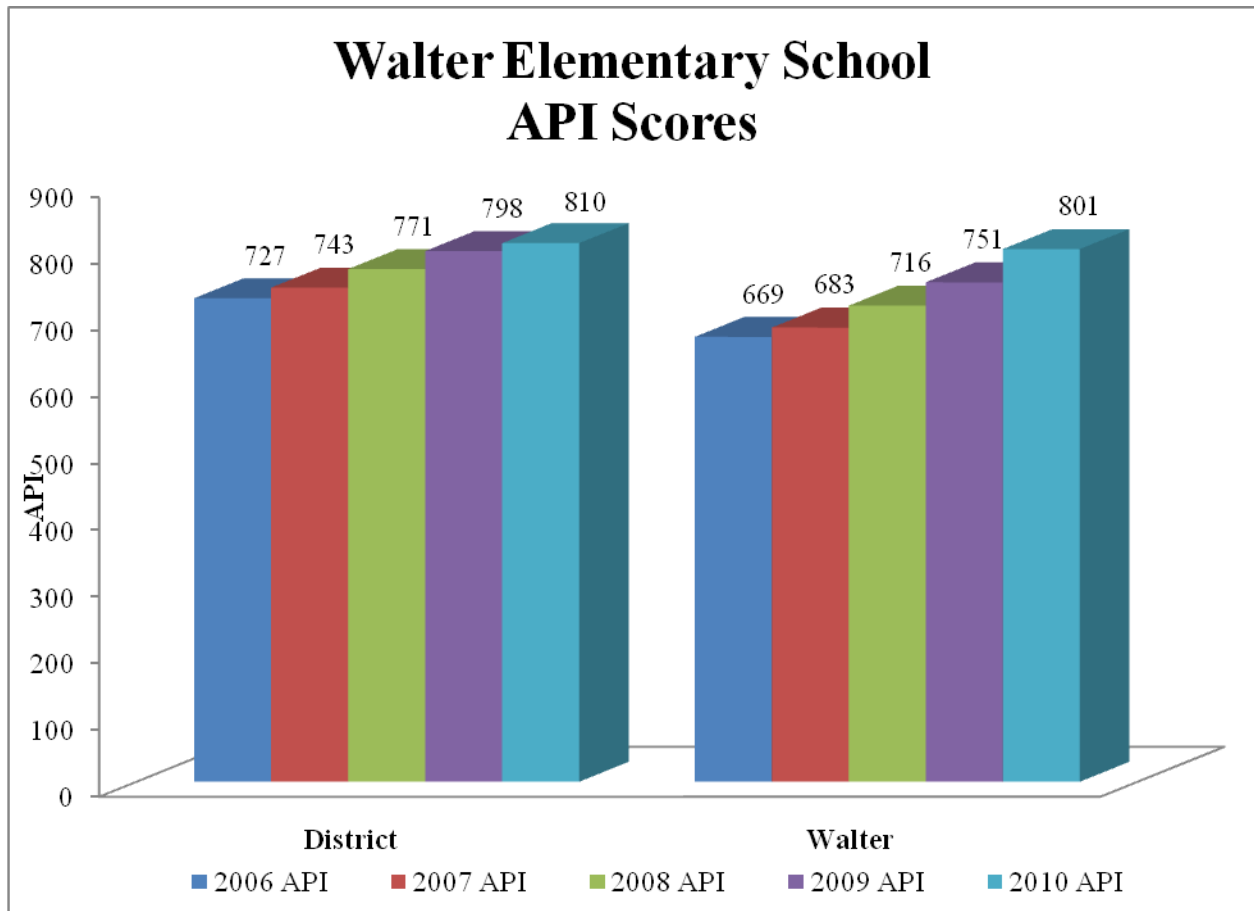


Appendix IV





Appendix V



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