



**NCSE** | National Center for School Engagement

**Project PACT**  
**Partnering to Assess and Counteract Truancy**  
**Program and Student Success Stories**

**National Center for School Engagement**

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children**  
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*Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement*

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In Waianae, a high-poverty area on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, elementary schools are challenged with not only educating students but also working with parents – to help their children receive the full benefits of positive educational experience. Schools in Waianae have an 85% average student population that receives free or reduced-cost lunch. Many are single-parent households with little or no extended family support. A high number of parents are substance abusers, a large number are homeless – living on the beach or wherever they can find space to put up a tarp – and, many are unaware of available parent resources.

One of the biggest concerns in Waianae schools is absenteeism. Ten years ago, elementary schools averaged an annual 86% daily attendance. Then, in 1997, the Waianae Complex implemented Project IMPACT<sup>1</sup> followed by Project PACT (in 1999) to address truancy. Although schools have not yet attained the target of 95% average daily attendance, the schools' average annual attendance rates climbed above 90%, and some as high as 92%. And, since the onset of IMPACT and PACT, school attendance rates have not dropped below 90% for the school year.

### **Program Descriptions**

Project PACT, a school-based program, works with students and families of two partnering elementary schools, Kamaile and Maili, both in the Waianae Complex of the Hawaii State Department of Education. The goal is to have a person at each school whose function revolves around school attendance. Ideally, this person should be someone who lives in the community and knows it well. It should also be someone whom the students respect and are inclined to talk with. And, preferably it should be someone who understands the education system and the concepts of resiliency and prevention. Waianae program staff members, Mary Lorenzo and Ralph Onzuka, epitomize this description. Along with Mary and Ralph, school counselors and social workers are the foundation and framework that allow the program to stand strong.

Mary and Ralph often become responsible caring adults for some students who have none at home, and they make a conscious effort to connect with the students and parents. They work with teachers and counselors at their respective schools to identify students with attendance problems. It's then up to the school to contact the parent(s). Depending on the level of absenteeism, the communication focuses from an expression of concern, to reminders of the importance of education and regular timely attendance. Or, it could also

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<sup>1</sup> Project IMPACT (Innovative Measures to Prevent And Counteract Truancy) was a truancy reduction project funded (1996-1999) by the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, U.S. Department of Education. An essential component of this project was the unification of attendance policy and procedures for the seven schools in the Waianae Complex.

include an explanation of Hawaii's school attendance law and possible consequences for violating it.

If absences continue, a school team consisting of program staff, a school counselor, and a social worker discusses the situation and assesses the needs of the family. Parents are referred to, or provided information about, appropriate community resources and services as needed. The message is "We want to help you help your child succeed in school." As a last resort, the team prepares and submits a petition to the court for educational neglect.

In 2002, Mary and Ralph identified a program developed by the Honolulu School District to improve school attendance at the elementary school level. This program, the Elementary School Attendance Program (ESAP), provides parent support sessions via its service partners and it has shown success. The partners are the Hawaii National Guard Counter Drug Office, the Honolulu Police Department, and the Hawaii Judiciary-Family Court.

After refining the program to fit the needs of its community, the five Waianae Complex elementary schools rolled out ESAP during the 2003-2004 school year. Project PACT funded the ESAP coordinator position. If positive outcomes continue, this program will serve to sustain activities initiated by Project PACT beyond federal funding.

### **Program Success: A Case of Unexpected Success for ESAP through Program Evolution**

Initially, ESAP was designed to "require" parents to attend sessions, but soon the Hawaii Department of Education instructed all ESAP sites to describe the program as voluntary. This change led to a fear that participation would drop. The elementary school social worker and counselors worked diligently in their efforts with parents. And although the number of referrals increased over time, the number of parents who attended sessions remained the same resulting in proportionately lower participation. At first, program staff questioned the worth of their efforts. Nevertheless, the school and program staff continued to track attendance data. The program ended up having a positive impact on all parents: attendance improved throughout the year for both groups of children.

The change from "required" to "voluntary" was a blessing in disguise. The school and program staff took on a much more supportive, less punitive, approach in their parent meetings for truancy, and this was well received. Consequently, ESAP staff learned that changes in programming (planned or incidental) can have positive impact not only on students and their families, but for staff as well.

### **Student Success: Project PACT (Partnering to Assess and Counteract Truancy)**

This is just one of many similar stories. It's about a family – a single mom and her two children. The oldest son had school attendance problems beginning early in kindergarten (not mandatory in Hawaii). The school followed standard procedures and sent letters home. The letters expressed concern about the child's absences, the importance of daily

attendance, and potential impacts and consequences of chronic absenteeism. The parent did not respond to the second letter requesting a conference with the school counselor. On several occasions, the attendance monitor talked with the parent to encourage regular attendance. But, by the end of the 2002-2003 school year, the child had 45 unexcused absences and 34 tardies.

The following year, the child's absences continued. Again, the school sent letters, and as before, the request for a conference was ignored. After the third letter—that included the possibility of the school filing a court petition for educational neglect—the parent responded and agreed to meet. As part of the school's attendance procedures, the school social worker assisted with a family/home assessment.

At the meeting, the parent was invited to attend a series of Parent Support Sessions. At first, the parent was apathetic, but after the school team explained that these sessions were designed to help parents and provided support including teaching parenting skills, she agreed.

The parent attended and actively participated in all three parent support sessions (over a three-week period). She was very dedicated to these sessions. For instance, she would ride her bike to a friend's home to drop off her four-year-old child before riding to the session site – by 8:00 AM. At the end of the sessions, the parent shared that she learned a lot and would try to implement the skills she had learned. The child's school attendance noticeably improved throughout the remainder of the school year.

The family moved during the summer, and the child transferred to another school within the same district. At the new school, the child's attendance continued to be good with only two absences through two quarters. The parent reflected how much the Parent Support Sessions helped, that she would continue to maintain the child's school attendance, and would carry on with the younger sibling, who at that time was entering kindergarten.

Program staff reflection: The balance of "sticks and carrots" is the key. Parents receive support through sessions, while at the same time, the potential for involvement by Child Protective Services and the court system exists. Some parents need a little push in the right direction. A team approach also makes the program work. Working together and having the good fortune to have support from several key state agencies (Department of Education, Department of Human Services, Judiciary-Family Court, Hawaii National Guard, and Honolulu Police Department) makes a difference.

## **Conclusion**

There are many success stories in Hawaii's Project PACT. This article describes how the program works and gives examples of student successes. The data this program has collected as part of the National Truancy Prevention Demonstration Project funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention indicates that student successes are common. The online database used to collect student outcomes (TRAIN) has data for

102 students (as of August 2005). Results from this database show that on average, these students improved their attendance: Unexcused absences at intake averaged 19.55, fell to 9.72 three months later, and then dropped to 5.03 at six months. Tardies and excused absences also declined. In addition, of the students whose academic progress was tracked, 37 were said to have improved, 13 stayed the same, and only one was reported to have worsened. For details see “aggregate train paper” on the National Center for School Engagement website at [www.schoolengagement.org](http://www.schoolengagement.org)

For more information about Project PACT and ESAP (including contact information for Mary and Ralph), visit their website at [www.hawaii.edu/wccc/pact](http://www.hawaii.edu/wccc/pact) or contact Patrick Nakamura at 808-956-7989 or [patrickn@hawaii.edu](mailto:patrickn@hawaii.edu).

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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