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**The Story Behind the Numbers: A Qualitative Evaluation of the
Seattle, WA Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program**

National Center for School Engagement

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Promoting attendance, attachment and achievement

The Story Behind the Numbers: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Seattle, WA Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program

Introduction

The Seattle, Washington truancy reduction model consists of several efforts targeted at reclaiming truant youth. This report discusses the qualitative data collected on the attendance workshops and case management models. Attendance workshops are intended to serve at risk students before they become involved in court procedures as a result of truancy. The attendance workshops are geared toward giving information to the students and families in an effort to help them understand the truancy laws and potential consequences of persistent truant behavior. Lawyers are present, along with program staff, to provide this information. Workshop leaders help families develop contracts covering the issues that might be contributing to student absence; both parents and children agree to a course of action to combat school absence.

The case management model is more intensive than the workshops. Individual students and families are assigned to a case manager in an effort to identify and address needs that may impact school attendance. Case managers typically work with families who are more deeply involved in the system and for whom petitions to the court have already been filed. Based upon individual family needs, case managers make referrals to community agencies that provide relevant services to help get the student back in school on a more regular basis.

In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of these two interventions, focus groups were held with students, parents of students receiving the services, attendance workshop facilitators, and case managers. Additionally, interviews were held with program staff

regarding their perceptions about the effectiveness of the two methods used. The following is presented as a summary of the findings from those data collection processes.

Program History

Seattle's Truancy Reduction Project was funded by the Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). Prior to the present grant funding, a truancy reduction effort began in Seattle as a result of the Becca Bill, legislation requiring schools to file truancy petitions to the courts when students were truant. As a result, court petitions were filed and students were then ordered to go to school. With the implementation of the OJJDP grant, the courts worked with schools to develop a plan to provide programming for truant youth in an effort to keep them out of the court system. Using the monies from the grant, community truancy boards were started to help develop diversion options. Out of this process, the attendance workshops were developed. At roughly the same time, other state issues involving funding sources for court procedures concerning at-risk and truant kids were developing. These led to a large stakeholder meeting where all members decided that instead of building a new detention facility, they would put preventive programming in place, hoping that prevention would lead to better outcomes.

Four caseworkers were hired to provide a link between the court, the family, and the community service provider. Case managers were charged with connecting with the families and addressing the barriers and access issues inherent with the population. Additionally, the project was able to develop a functional family therapy component to serve the at-risk and truant youth. With these additions, a continuum of services was available to the families. These included a light weight diversion program, a community

truancy board for students needing extra negotiation, a formal court process, case management for students needing help connecting back to the community, and a therapeutic longer term program for families needing intensive help in their communities. The truancy reduction project is considered a resource for dealing not only with the needs of the students and families, but also the needs of the community.

Attendance Workshops

The attendance workshops provided by the truancy reduction efforts are targeted at students and families who are considered less “deep end” than those who are served through the case management model. Students in the workshops are presented with information about truancy, the court process should they become involved with court, and options available to them in the community. Program staff (hereafter referred to as facilitators) lead the workshops, along with lawyers who provide needed information to the family about the court process and the legal ramifications of truancy.

One of the main components of the attendance workshops is working with parents and children to write behavioral contracts/agreements about what they will do to ensure school attendance. Students and parents separately identify their own areas of difficulty. The facilitators then bring the parents and students together to come up with an agreement that is workable for both parties. After deciding on the specific issues, the facilitators challenge the parents and students to come up with strategies to offset the problems and identify resources they need to accomplish their goals. A good agreement is considered to be one that is detailed, thereby ensuring that all parties have a clear understanding of what needs to happen in order for the student to be successful.

Reasons for Truancy

Workshop facilitators see several reasons why children are truant from school. These include many family issues such as divorce, a death in the family, incarceration of a parent, mobility, and families in crisis. One facilitator said, “I think for a lot of them, the deal is that school isn’t working for them and that’s over and over and over again.” Facilitators also note that, for some students, the classes are too big, they feel lost, the “teachers are nailing them,” teacher expectations are tough, and “kids feel marginalized.” Facilitators believed that students do not always get the support they need. For instance, they report that when students go for help they are told, “Buck up and go back to class.’ And that’s really hard when you need help. It’s a big step to ask and then nothing happens.” Although workshop facilitators make every effort to help families deal with these issues through the use of the contract that is developed during the workshops, many of these issues may be better addressed through case management.

Successes of the Attendance Workshops

In terms of the many successes the attendance workshops have, facilitators agree that the connection they make with families is critical. One facilitator stated,

“I have seen so many students and so many parents walk in that door with all kinds of attitude on their shoulders and a few still walk out with it. But, for the most part, I feel like we really are able to make a genuine respectful communication with people and for them to recognize that we really are there on their side and that we really do respect them. We want to hear what their experiences are. We want to assist them and we do believe that they can make the difference themselves.”

Another success is that students often are able to return to school with little or no further interaction from the workshop program. Facilitators feel that the program works to minimize recidivism. One facilitator believed that, for many students, the workshop

served as a wake up call that “this could get really serious” in terms of their behavior and potential court involvement.

A third success is that the program is able to work with businesses in the community to keep kids in school or use attendance as criteria for a job. Business owners have developed policies stating that they will not hire a student who is truant or allow a student to loiter during school hours.

Finally, the use of contracts between students and parents is perceived to be highly successful. Often facilitators said that the contract encourages students to talk to their parents about things that are impacting their attendance when they otherwise would not. It appears that the contract serves as a tool for helping families bond around some tough issues that they had been avoiding prior to the contract.

Challenges/Barriers of Workshops

Facilitators identified a number of challenges in their efforts to work with families through the attendance workshops. One such challenge is the cultural difference between the immigrant families and the systems in the United States. One facilitator stated,

“The parent relies on the child to help make money, to translate, to do all of these things that basically put the child in a totally different role than maybe other kids would be in. And, they don’t have a role model. And if anything, they feel responsible for their family. Their families – most of the time both parents work – and I think they feel, at that point, that school is of no use to them. And parents will take them out of school to help with family issues – take them to translate, it happens a lot. And I feel like these kids are just lost. They feel no respect between school and their families, but they feel that they’re just two completely different worlds.”

Another challenge for the workshop facilitators is the short duration of the sessions. They speak of how the restricted amount of time in the workshop limits their connection with families and, once they do connect, the workshop is over. One facilitator

stated, “I think they do leave with the best of empowerment in the sense that there are people out there who do care to help them. The unfortunate thing is we only see them once. They can’t rely on us again.”

A third barrier is that students who attend the workshops have often been referred to them during the previous school year. When they attend the workshop, many students say they don’t have a current problem and are only missing a few days. At times, facilitators find that the problem has in fact continued into the current school year and the workshop is still relevant. In other cases, however, they feel that students should have been in the workshops sooner. Essentially, the workshop referrals need to be more timely.

Some facilitators feel that students are sent to the workshops when the issues affecting attendance require individual attention that cannot be met in the workshop setting. They recommended that students be more thoroughly screened at the school level for individual therapy or other interventions. For example, one student had some major health issues and another was dealing with a rape; facilitators felt these students could not be served appropriately in workshops.

Facilitators also complained that no representative from the school is present during the workshop. The facilitators regularly tell students to “go back and talk to your school.” But, they are not sure if the school can or will actually do anything to help manage the concern raised by the students. They feel that having a school liaison could greatly help move the process along.

Finally, logistical issues sometimes impede the success of the workshops. Facilitators said things like: “Interpreters not showing up!” “...families that don’t show

up” and “Families bringing children.” Even with these challenges, the facilitators believe that the workshops are helpful overall in dealing with truant students.

Workshop Changes/Recommendations

Workshop facilitators identified several areas they believed would improve the workshops, including more diversity among program staff. One facilitator stated, “I think we need a lot more diversity! But, I don’t think that we’re going to get it. They’re all middle aged white females, predominantly middle aged white females.” Facilitators agreed that a more diverse staff would help some conversations and garner better connections for students and parents.

Another needed change is to have the schools become more involved. One facilitator stated, “For me, the thing that would make the most immediate and effective change would be to have the school involved – there’s us, there’s the court, there’s you and your family and then, there’s also the school. And to not have the school there, almost seems absurd.”

Third, the location of where workshops are held must be considered. Facilitators agreed that having them on a bus line would make a significant difference in whether some families attend or not. They reported that this is especially true for people in the city, as people in the suburbs “are a little more used to having to get around without public transportation.”

Bullying is one common cause of truancy. Facilitators would like to have more resources to give families who are dealing with bullying. They noted that it is difficult for many students to talk about bullying and that having some specific resources for dealing with the issue would be beneficial.

Finally, while the facilitators agreed that there is a lot of community connection and involvement, they would like to have a resource available for students to contact when the issues impacting truancy are not student driven. Some students are victims of abuse and have parents who are drug involved or neglectful. Having a resource the student can reach out to and trust not to “exacerbate the situation” would be ideal in meeting some of the emotional needs of these students.

Parent Focus Group

Limited information came from the parent focus group, as parents did not share much. In addition, only a few parents were in attendance. A synopsis of the information they shared is presented below.

Reasons for Truancy

Parents see many issues that impact whether or not their child attends school. Among them is that being with friends and “hanging out” is more appealing than school. Another reason has to do with the connection a child feels to school. One parent stated, “In high school, he basically didn’t like the classes; he didn’t like the teachers. It was very easy to walk the six blocks from school to our home for lunch and just stay there.”

Additional reasons included:

- problems with attention and hyperactivity,
- school personnel insulting students for missing class, which discourages students from going back,
- students skip frequently and the school fails to report it to parents,
- easy access to public transportation makes skipping school easier, and,

- peer harassment and students' belief that "the teachers cannot do anything to stop it."

Many of the parents' comments showed some anger toward the school and placed blame on the school.

Effectiveness of Attendance Workshop

One of the biggest effects the workshops had on students is that it provided a "wake up call" to students and parents. One parent stated, "I think the workshop sort of scared him straight. He doesn't want to see anything more of the legal system ... and he is attending school..." Another parent reported that while the workshop was "intimidating" to her, she felt it was an opportunity to "see that I'm not the only one with a kid having problems." Another parent was able to impress upon her daughter the importance of going to school by using the workshop to justify that truancy was "... a serious matter. If she don't want to go to juvenile and I'll get in trouble because you are under age. They'll think that I'm the kind of parent that I don't do my job to my kid."

The use of contracts in the workshop got mixed reviews from parents. On one hand, parents felt that it was good that they and their child made some agreements to deal with truancy issues. On the other hand, they felt it was not helpful as their child still had some problems, i.e., everything was not fixed, although it was "better than before." They felt that the use of the contracts at least brought some issues to light.

Changes in Attendance Workshops

Most of the changes parents discussed had to do with the school and the school's lack of effort to help them deal with their children. Parents felt that the schools had not notified them soon enough about the truancy, had not responded to their concerns about

their children's problems in a way that could have prevented some of the truancy, were not providing a "productive learning environment," and ignored their requests to transfer their children to another school in order to get them away from problematic friends. Parents were clearly frustrated with the schools.

Parents did have a few comments about what they felt would help the workshops be more effective. One such change would be to increase the length of the workshop. One parent noted that during the two-hour session she felt rushed, and there was so much information to cover that some of her questions were not answered. An additional concern was that there were too many families there at the same time, again impeding the ability to get thorough answers to questions. Parents also recommended allowing more time for group discussions about the contract and how to structure it. Parents felt that when it was time to write the contract, their child struggled with what to include and how to write it.

Finally, one mother stated that during her workshop, there were two women sitting in the corner having a private conversation, whispering and laughing at what appeared to be inappropriate times. The women appeared to be legal aids and were observing the process. This mother found it very distressing and felt that the women were perhaps laughing at the group members. This parent would clearly prefer not to have observers in the room.

Student Focus Group

A small group of students who attended the workshops gave feedback about the sessions. All were high school students; both males and females participated. Following is a synopsis of the issues that they addressed.

Reasons for Truancy

Students gave several reasons why they did not attend school. Most comments indicated boredom with classes. Students said things like “I was bored of it. I get the same thing every day in every class.” Another student said that teachers are dull, and they “never do anything exciting and it’s just blah!” Some complained that school starts too early. Not all students blamed the school, however. One reported “I have ADD [attention deficit disorder] and no medications” which makes it difficult to stay focused throughout the day. Another told of the cumulative, discouraging effect of getting behind in schoolwork. As a result of missing school, “I was really far behind, so I just stopped going to school.”

Effectiveness of Attendance Workshop

Students initially gave mixed reviews about the workshops. Although they felt that notice of the workshops prompted them to attend school before they received more serious sanctions, they appeared to be angry about having to attend. One student reported, “I received information that if I do skip, I’ll be in court very shortly after that.” This prompted her to attend more often and she actually found that some of her classes were “fun.”

In terms of the workshops themselves, students felt the workshops were “okay” and allowed them to “just talk things over.” However, one student added that they themselves only participated a little in the workshop, which impacted their assessment of its helpfulness. Although most students felt that the facilitators were “okay,” one reported that “... mostly they seemed rude about me writing up this contract thing and

signing it.” Some reported the facilitators did not understand their feelings or positions, saying they did not get “heard.”

In contrast to this, the students all stated that they would much rather have had to go to the truancy workshop than to court and that the workshop “kept me out of court!” Other students said, “Yes, and it convinced me to go to school!” and “I’m glad I came!” Furthermore, the students reported some significant changes in parental behavior as a result of the workshop. One said “My mom stopped lecturing me for awhile,” while another reported that “my mom kept a closer eye on me, making sure I didn’t skip.” In addition, the workshop helped one student get her schedule changed, eliminating some of the more troubling classes. Another reported that friends “stopped skipping, too.”

Overall, the students felt that the workshops served to get them re-engaged in school, and they expressed renewed hope as a result. Several students felt they would continue in school and advance to the next grade.

Changes in the Workshops

The students did not have many comments about things they would change in the delivery of the workshops. However, they did not appreciate having to pay for the workshop. They felt that the choice of attending the workshop or going to court was unfair. Finally, they felt that the workshop material was repetitious.

Case Management

As stated previously, the case management component of the truancy project is targeted at students who require more intensive intervention. The following is a summary of the information gathered from the focus group and interviews held with case managers. A description of the case managers’ role is provided, along with their thoughts

concerning their work with the courts, schools, and other community agencies.

Additionally, successes and barriers to services are discussed, along with hopes for what would make the process more effective.

Reasons for Truancy

Like attendance workshop facilitators, case managers identified several reasons why students are truant from school. These include:

- students feeling disenfranchised because they may have a learning style that the school does not accommodate which leads to poor academic achievement,
- low self-esteem as it relates to academic tasks,
- lack of encouragement on the part of the school,
- failure in class work,
- mental health issues of the student or parent,
- parental neglect,
- conflict with a teacher or school administrator, and
- feeling that no one cares if they are at school or not.

Many of these issues can be addressed in the case management model, and the case managers use all of the tools at their disposal to try to address these challenges to improve school attendance.

Role Description

The case management model is set up to work with families who are typically more court involved than those who attend the truancy workshops. Case managers in the truancy program describe their job as taking on multiple roles. They provide guidance to families about navigating the judicial system and help interpret legal information for

them; they examine family needs and connect them with resources in the community that might be helpful in addressing them; they provide mediation between families and schools or other agencies, as well as between students and parents; and they act as a “sounding board” for the family and child. One case manager said,

“... case managers don’t really fix the problems, they just hook the families up with people who can. I think a big part of what we do is just systemic guidance. The court is a big, unfriendly environment and you put families who are not exactly the highest functioning in an environment like that and they’re not likely to be very successful.”

Additionally, case managers attend court hearings. They also provide suggestions to the school or other agencies involved in the students’ lives and work to resolve issues without going through any kind of legal process.

While case managers typically work with students whose main problem is truancy, they may also serve students identified as “at-risk” for other reasons. Case managers sometimes become involved at the request of a parent or school, before a petition is filed, in cases where a child has been out of the home, is using drugs and/or alcohol, is gang involved, is considered to be a danger to themselves or others or is out of the control of the parent. In many of these situations, the case manager works in conjunction with the Human Services Department to refer youth or to provide interventions targeted at making the family more functional so that the student can return to school.

With the case management model, families beginning the process typically have considerable needs. Once they get engaged in the system, the case manager is able to “back off” and let the process work. At this point, case managers tend to check on

families less frequently to make sure that the services are still working to keep the student and family engaged and in school.

One issue for case managers is that services need to be provided early on. They noted that once a child starts to skip school and falls behind, it is hard for them to catch up, leading to more truant behavior. The program tends to work best for students who are primarily having difficulty with truancy, but are not drug or alcohol involved or runaways. One facilitator said, “I think it works for families who respect systems, for families where all parties share a desire to go to school and receive an education and for families who probably need just a little push in order to do better.”

Case Management Successes

Case managers reported several program successes. One such success is that, as a result of their work, students are less likely to return to the court system. Case managers reported that connecting families to needed services has diminished the need for further involvement, especially when the system has worked to mitigate the students’ and families’ problems. “So, we have an opportunity to try to find some common ground between the parent and the child and to see if we can work on some things outside of court so that they don’t have to come back.”

Another success has been the connections case managers have made with community agencies, especially in terms of being able to access the resources that families need in order to promote positive changes. One caseworker stated,

“Probably the big picture level is just the relationship building within the community and the awareness of resources. We sit on the South King County Youth Violence Prevention Committee which is school districts, police, community resources, youth, leadership groups and just really have an awareness and a presence ... and knowing what’s going on ... with the focus on intervention and keeping kids in school and their needs met.”

Case managers report that schools have begun to seek them out as a resource for both the school and the family, which was not occurring in the past. For instance, one case manager reported, “We have school districts calling us and saying, ‘I got this kid who is 12 years old; he’s got a serious drug problem and I’m not sure what to do.’ And we’ll give them some ideas ...”

A highly regarded intervention that has worked for many families is called Functional Family Therapy (FFT). FFT is a therapy model geared at helping family members examine their roles and agree to make some changes. One case manager stated, “I’m supposed to keep up on FFT therapists and my relationship with them is how well they serve the family. I always give the family a call afterwards to talk to them first and get their input and their input is overwhelmingly good.” Using this model, a mother and daughter were able to improve their communication and told the case manager that “they wish they could stay on longer” in the treatment program.

Despite many successes, case managers reported that students who are difficult to manage within the typical purview of the model require different approaches. In more difficult situations, case managers reported using the threat of juvenile detention as a deterrent, in order to get students to respond. “And we tried everything else before that, but a couple of days in detention and he really didn’t really want to go back and that’s enough to keep him going to school.” Case managers said detention is typically used with more “deep end” youth in the program and those who have a higher level of recidivism.

Challenges and Barriers for Case Management

One of the major challenges seen by staff is that probation officers sometimes minimize the issue of truancy. Probation counselors may be more concerned with other behaviors, so truancy is deemed a minor issue. As stated by one case manager, “Oftentimes the probation counselors will look at truancy as a minor issue. If they are stealing or breaking into houses and stuff, they’re like well so he didn’t go to school, so what?” Truancy is then relegated to the back burner of the legal process.

A second barrier has to do with staffing, both in terms of the numbers of and turnover among case managers. Case managers expressed the belief that if there were more of them, they could address some of the students’ issues more promptly, before problems escalated to the point of a truancy petition. Improved staff retention would make it easier to access resources and develop relationships with others in the court system and community.

Another barrier identified by the case managers is the lack of alternative schooling available to students who are not suited to traditional educational options. For example, case managers would like a vocational program that offers different educational opportunities. Despite numerous community resources, one of the counties is clearly at a disadvantage when students need different types of learning environments, because alternative settings are scarce.

Finally, funding is a continuous concern. One staff member said,

“the fact that most of our programming is grant funded, with one time funds, sort of points to this issue that we’re still not, as a bigger system of care, identifying this as an important enough issue to have every part of our regular general funding. We’re still cobbling together funds from other sources or seeing it as project or seeing it as a separate discreet thing.”

Case Managers' Wish List

Case managers identified several supports they believed would improve their services. For instance, they would like the ability to get insurance coverage for low-income families and urine analyses when the court requires them. For many families, scarce monetary resources impact the family's ability to carry through with this court requirement. Case managers suggested having scholarships, grant money, or at least an affordable system, to supply urine analyses. In addition, they would like grants or funding to provide conveniently located drug and alcohol evaluations for youth in detention.

Case managers also reported that students what they variously referred to as psychological, psychiatric, or mental health evaluations. One case manager stated, "Those are really difficult to get without the promise of ongoing services. A lot of times a commissioner will order a psychiatric evaluation to see if the kid would benefit from medication or have a mental health evaluation just to rule out the need for counseling or whatever. Those are almost impossible for them to get on their own."

Mentoring programs are also needed. Although there are some, there is typically a waiting list, which prohibits some students from ever being able to access the service. Additionally, finding people who are willing to mentor a "really troubled kid" is seen as problematic in having the resources for this kind of service.

Finally, case managers would like to be able to refer families to drug/alcohol education and parenting classes. Parents need to be able to identify warning signs that their child is using drugs or alcohol and know what to do about it.

Summary

The Seattle, Washington truancy reduction project's purpose is to reclaim truant students in the school system. Through the attendance workshops and the case management models, the project has demonstrated many successes. In attendance workshops, students and parents work together to minimize problems that interfere with school attendance. Although not all problems can be resolved in a workshop, students have been able to use the experience to reevaluate their own behavior as it relates to school attendance. Students who participated in the focus group report that they are attending class, doing well and will be promoted to the next grade. While it cannot be said for certain, their success may not have occurred without the workshop intervention.

Although the parents who participated in the focus group expressed mixed emotions about the workshop, closer examination reveals that most of their concerns lie with the school system and feeling that they are not getting the services they need early on in the process. Like the students, the parents believe that the workshops helped to improve school attendance. They felt that the information given in the session was enough to prompt their children to look at the serious nature of their truant behavior and to begin to attend school more regularly. The considerable agreement between comments made by students and parents in the focus groups provides some evidence of the effectiveness of the workshops in Seattle.

Like the attendance workshops, the case management component of the project appears to be effective in reclaiming students. While students and parents did not directly discuss their experiences with case management, case managers reported many successes, especially in helping families connect with relevant community services.

Several recommendations for improving the program were identified through this evaluation. In all interviews and focus groups, there was a clear need for more school support. Students and parents expressed frustration with school personnel. Facilitators and case managers also identified the need for schools to be more involved with their truancy efforts. In addition, workshops may not allow enough time to accomplish all their goals; everyone feels rushed in this process. Case managers also identified additional resources they need to meet effectively the needs of their clients – additional funding, alternative education resources and drug/alcohol services. Nevertheless, according to this feedback, the program is successful at reducing truancy among the students it serves.

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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