



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

**FORMING TRUANCY COALITIONS:
A CASE STUDY OF JACKSONVILLE UNITED AGAINST TRUANCY**

National Center for School Engagement

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
303 E. 17th Avenue, Suite 400 Denver, CO 80203
303/837-8466
www.schoolengagement.org**

Why Form a Truancy Coalition?

Correcting truancy requires cooperation among multiple community actors. A school can do a number of things on its own to encourage good attendance: it can create a welcoming environment in which students feel valued, it can follow up on absences promptly, and it can offer attendance awards. However, in order to ameliorate some of the fundamental difficulties that prevent some students from getting to class regularly, a school must be able to enlist the support of social service agencies. Sometimes, a school must seek the support of the court in order to get the attention of parents or older students. Courts that wish to have involvement with at-risk youth before they become involved in criminal activity need the support of schools to refer truancy cases. Police departments responsible for deterring crime have an interest in keeping youth from congregating during school hours, but need the support of business and community members. Youth service providers who understand the importance of education need to be able to work and communicate with schools. Creating a formal coalition provides a forum for inter-agency communication and cooperation, and creates momentum for accomplishing a joint goal.

Coalitions:

- encourage information sharing
- bring various skills and resources together
- prevent duplication of activities
- bring credibility and public attention to the issue of school attendance

Basic Strategies for Forming Coalitions

Many resources are available that give tips for how to form an effective coalition, a few of which are listed below. A little research will go a long way toward making your efforts pay off. The following steps are crucial.

- Identify and recruit key players. Consider the following agencies, and find the right individual(s) within each agency to participate.
 - School boards and district offices
 - Family or juvenile courts
 - Youth service agencies, especially health clinics, mental health providers, tutoring services, and emergency housing providers
 - Local government offices including recreation departments, youth services, chamber of commerce, and others
 - Police departments
 - Others unique to your community
- Name your group. A name will turn your group into a concrete entity, and allows members and non-members alike to discuss your group's goals with more clarity.

- Define objectives.
 - Set short-term and long-term goals.
 - Make sure your goals are feasible.
 - Make sure you have the support of the right people and agencies.
- Make an action plan.
 - How will work get done? Will the lead agency do most of the work or will it be divided? Will you have sub-committees?
 - Set tasks to be accomplished by the next meeting.
- Gather resources.
 - Take stock of the resources you will need to accomplish your goals.
 - Decide who will provide what resources. Unless a lead agency is willing to provide the bulk of the money and work required, make sure you divide responsibility fairly.

Tips for Maintaining Impetus

Sometimes it is easier to form a group than to keep it going. Truancy can be addressed by structural changes that do not need to be made again year after year; but there will always be a new group of children with school attendance problems. Eliminating truancy is an on-going endeavor that will need continuous attention to be successful. The work of a truancy coalition will never be completely done, so maintaining community support and participation is crucial. The following tips can help.

- Set a meeting schedule that is right for your group – frequently enough to maintain momentum, but not so often as to be burdensome. Will it be once a month? Once a quarter? Will sub-committees have separate meetings? Recognize that there will likely be seasonal fluctuations in interest and activity.
- Set short-term goals that can be met with relative ease. Review accomplishments and extend congratulations at each meeting.
- Long-term goals are important, too, but set milestones along the way.
- Begin a new initiative each year. New ideas generate enthusiasm.
- Welcome new members – they bring new enthusiasm and new ideas.
- You must create buy-in among multiple community/agency leaders. (It is not agency leaders who must be the active members of the coalition, but they must be supportive of the effort if staff members are going to take time during work hours to perform coalition tasks.)

The Jacksonville Case

A number of effective truancy coalitions operate currently, one of which is Jacksonville United Against Truancy (JUAT). Most effective coalitions have a lead agency; in Jacksonville, Florida, the State Attorney's Office (SAO) leads the effort. JUAT has

evolved over time, and truancy reduction efforts preceded the official formation of the coalition.

Critical to the success of the effort is the fact that an agency leader, State Attorney Harry Shorstein, made truancy reduction a priority for his agency. Truancy reduction efforts began for the SAO in 1995 when they initiated Truancy Arbitration Hearings for students with attendance problems. In 1997, the SAO began an effort to open truancy centers where police officers could bring truant youth. In order to accomplish that goal, they sought the cooperation of the City of Jacksonville, the Sheriff's Office, and Duval County Public Schools. In 1999, they received funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to initiate a truancy reduction program, but the grant required the formation of a community collaborative. In 2000, these agencies officially launched Jacksonville United Against Truancy (JUAT). Thus, in Jacksonville, the formation of the collaborative came as the result of pre-existing, shared concern about school attendance.

Other agencies were specifically sought out and invited to join JUAT at its initiation. Not every group that was invited has become active in JUAT, but many have, including the Youth Crisis Center, the Chamber of Commerce, the Parent-Teacher Association, an alternative school for girls called the Pace Center, police departments, and the Jacksonville Housing Authority. The group is open for anyone who wishes to attend meetings or participate.

Truancy was viewed as a serious issue in a number of agencies prior to the initiation of the coalition, so generating buy-in for coalition goals was not difficult. The SAO is the lead agency, and as such provides the bulk of the resources and does the majority of the work. As such, JUAT membership is not burdensome for other groups. The greatest advantages to maintaining the coalition are information sharing and the cooperative development of procedures for agency cooperation in handling cases of truancy. Initiating a new goal each year keeps members interested in coming to the monthly meetings. A recent endeavor has been to initiate a media campaign, called Count Me In, to increase awareness throughout the community about the importance of school attendance, and educate the public about what to do when one suspects truancy. The media campaign, in which the Chamber of Commerce played a crucial role, provided an excellent opportunity for interagency cooperation.

More information about Jacksonville United Against Truancy may be found on the State Attorney's web site. Start with the City of Jacksonville at www.coj.net/default.htm and under offices select the State Attorney's Office, then click on Jacksonville United Against Truancy, or type <http://www.coj.net/Departments/State+Attorneys+Office+/Jacksonville+United+Against+Truancy/default.htm>.

Additional Resources

Cohen, L., N. Baer and P. Satterwhite, Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight Step Guide, Prevention Institute, No date. Available at www.preventioninstitute.org by selecting the Publications tab at the top of the page, and scrolling down the alphabetical list.

Collaboration: The Power of WE the People, at the National Network for Collaboration, <http://crs.uvm.edu/ncco/>.

Building Networks and Coalitions, by Women of Steel, United Steelworkers of America, available at <http://www.uswa.org/uswa/program/content/255.php>

The Advocacy Institute, at www.advocacy.org/coalitions provides an excellent Coalition Resources section.

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.

Author: Joanna Zorn Heilbrunn

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c/o Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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