



**NCSE** | National Center for School Engagement

## **Lessons Learned from Four Truancy Demonstration Sites**

**National Center for School Engagement**

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children  
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## **Introduction**

In 1999 and 2000 the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began five-year funding of seven truancy demonstration programs. Each site was unique and offered different approaches to reduce truancy and promote school engagement. The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) was contracted to evaluate these seven demonstration sites. Three sites were selected for in-depth evaluation in the final two years of their funding; Houston, Seattle and Jacksonville. Their results are contained in three separate reports. The results and lessons learned from the other four sites are summarized below.

### **Contra Costa County/ Martinez , CA**

Martinez is a low income school district in northern Contra Costa County, east of San Francisco. The school district and the county Weed and Seed program teamed up to offer a truancy reduction program that focused on an elementary school and a high school. The elementary school program involved a “positive attendance worker.” This worker was a bilingual paraprofessional who conducted home visits after the unexcused absences. The position was under the supervision of a half time professional at the school. The school principal actively supported this early intervention program and helped set a standard of good attendance in the building.

The role of the positive attendance worker was to encourage good attendance, provide family support through resource and referral, and generally offer short term interventions to get the children back to regular attendance. The half-time professional at

the school was responsible for monitoring attendance and helping students solve problems at school and with their teachers.

The high school had a similar program with a half time paraprofessional who also served as the football coach. The high school was small with 500+ students. An added plus was that the coach had been a deputy sheriff in the county and was well connected with the law enforcement community. He would conduct some home visits and was constantly checking in with truant students to track their progress and advocate for them with other teachers. These efforts helped to connect these students back to school after missed days.

The superintendent of schools was highly engaged in this program and was a great supporter. He would attend focus groups with students and parents and he learned a lot about truancy. He also served on the district's Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) for the chronically truant students who were considered for court referrals. The SARB Board also had a probation officer, the Weed and Seed coordinator, the truancy program supervisor, and a school counselor.

Overall, the program improved attendance and spun off some interesting supplemental activities. The parent group at the elementary school program initiated a "walking school bus" with parent volunteers. These volunteers started the "bus" by gathering the students who lived furthest from the school and then would walk the students to school, picking up youngsters along the way. Teachers at the elementary school would have their students send letters home to those students who missed three or more school days to say that they missed them and to encourage them to return to school.

The high school reclaimed a group of truant youth who became a voice for school engagement, sponsoring dances and lunchtime music events.

California funds its schools by average daily attendance, so every day of attendance earns money for the school budget. The superintendent calculated that the truancy program's improved attendance earned the district an average increase of \$120,000 in state aid. The program cost \$50,000 per year so there was a net gain of \$70,000 in aid, plus the gains in learning for the students.

### **Hawaii/Waianae Elementary Schools**

Two elementary schools were the target of the grant to the University of Hawaii, Manoa. Each is located in a low income community on the west side of Oahu. The program used case managers to help engage young children who were entering kindergarten and first grade and their parents. A number of young children were not enrolling in school or not attending regularly, as required, and were technically truant children. The case managers were quite effective in getting the children to attend and in providing support to families with their challenges at home. A major school absence problem was due to head lice. When children were sent home more than three times for lice, they were reported as truant to the state. Hawaii has one state operated school district.

The University of Hawaii had a continuing interest in truancy reduction and collaborated with the schools, the courts and the Honolulu police, as well as business owners who would not serve students during school hours. This demonstration grant was the first time they had a special focus on young children.

The program was very successful in reducing both unexcused absences and even excused absences. At the start of the program, the children were averaging 23 unexcused absences and, after the first three months, the rate dropped to 7.9 and then to 4.1 unexcused absences at nine months. Over the same period, excused absences went from an average of seven to just under two days absent. The case managers formed strong bonds with the families served and helped them deal with a variety of health and behavioral health issues.

### **Suffolk County New York/ Bellport Middle School**

Bellport is a quiet middle class community on the ocean side of Long Island. The truancy demonstration program was operated by the Suffolk County Probation Department as part of their Weed and Seed program. Their strategy included a probation officer on staff at the middle school who focused on truant youth through direct services at school and home visits. The probation officer served on the school's Child Study Team. Truant youth were assigned to a special home room that was staffed by the probation officer, which helped in tracking who was present. The probation officer would then follow up with those who were absent and could check in with the students about their problems at school or home.

This officer also worked with Bellport community police and the county sheriff's department who rounded up truant youth on school days and returned them to school as part of the overall community strategy. Truant youth experiencing academic or family challenges would be staffed through the Child Study Team and then provided

supplemental services. Mental health services were available and paid out of county probation office funds.

This intervention had short term effects on improving attendance from an average of 10 days truant to two days over the first three months. However, the unexcused absence rate climbed to where it had originally been after six or nine months. Tardies were reduced significantly and remained low which may be attributed to having a special home room. These truant youth were the highest risk youth in the school and truancy was only one manifestation of a large number of factors that interfered with regular attendance. It seemed that, over time, there was less focus on the students' attendance and more on their other challenging behaviors. Many students in the program also improved their short term academic performance. Forty-one percent of the students improved during the first three months of the program but grades declined in subsequent quarters. The program was challenged by staff turnover and leadership change at the probation department and truancy became less of a priority. This may account for the declining performance of the program.

### **Tacoma, WA/ Safe Streets Program & Mc Ilvaigh Middle School**

This middle school was targeted for the truancy demonstration program because of its high level of attendance problems and a strong commitment from the school staff and neighborhood partner organizations. The school is located in a low income area with a large number of public housing units. The grantee was the Safe Cities program which worked to reduce crime and violence in the city through a large collaborating group involving the school's city government, law enforcement, and county prosecutor. The

program coordinator helped middle school staff and neighborhood organizations in supporting a truancy reduction program. An outreach worker conducted home visits and offered case management using existing community resources to engage students, and support their return to regular school attendance. The community based organizations would also provide family support services. The group of students identified for this program started with fairly low unexcused absences and maintained them, with slight variation, from quarter to quarter. Significant improvement in academic performance was seen as a result of the truancy reduction program.

It was not clear why so few students had school attendance problems and were served by this program. The school identified very high risk students, assuming they would have attendance issues, but that did not bear out. This program was the most culturally diverse of the seven demonstration sites and had the most culturally competent set of services because of the neighborhood organizations, including churches that were involved in serving the youth.

Elsewhere in Tacoma, there was a truancy center program that had a very compelling impact on daytime crime rates. This was not a part of the demonstration evaluation but is worthy of mention. The center used two community police officers to round-up truant students during the school day and bring them a center for assessment, counseling and return to school. Truancy centers were a strategy used here and in Jacksonville. Unfortunately, they were not a part of the federal Demonstration Program Evaluation. Strategies that use truancy centers should get a formal evaluation because they seem to hold promise based on anecdotal evidence.

## **Conclusions and Lessons Learned**

These four communities demonstrate a broad variety of approaches that generate effectiveness in improving attendance. The lesson from this overview of approaches is that intervening with locally designed strategies can improve attendance by calling attention to truancy and making attendance a priority. Hawaii and Contra Costa demonstrate the lessons of intervening early with young children.

Bellport and Tacoma were middle school models and demonstrated effectiveness by integrating the interventions into the ongoing student services at the schools. This integration in Bellport added a probation officer to the regular special education and child study team staff which helped make the truancy program a regular part of the school's helping culture. The truancy case manager in Tacoma, joined the counseling staff of the middle school and worked closely with community based organizations in the neighborhood. The lessons learned are when outside agencies provide services in schools, they need to become a part of the existing student support services to have greater acceptance and impact.

A lesson learned in Hawaii is that early intervention pays off when we can begin with kindergarten and first grade excessive absences. Attendance improves and develops good habits so that these young children and their parents value regular attendance to promote learning. Parents of elementary age students are also the focus in Martinez, CA. Using positive attendance workers to do home visits and outreach to parents of children with a few unexcused absences also reinforced the lessons of intervening early. It is important to act early and not wait for children to accrue large numbers of unexcused

absence before doing something. We believe this early attention saved many children and their parents from later more punitive measures after many missed days.

Finally, the major lesson learned is the power of community organizations joining forces with schools to improve school attendance. These are relatively inexpensive services that re-engage both students and their families in school. If children are not in school they are not learning and their positive life course outcomes diminish enormously. School achievement and high school graduation begins with attendance, and requires attachment to schools through purposive activities by schools and community agencies. Truancy reduction is a small investment with a big payoff.

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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