

**SAVING MONEY
SAVING YOUTH**

**THE FINANCIAL IMPACT OF
KEEPING KIDS IN SCHOOL**

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**COLORADO FOUNDATION
FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN**

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT
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THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

The National Center for School Engagement is an initiative of the COLORADO FOUNDATION FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN promoting truancy prevention and school success. NCSE builds the capacity of schools, law enforcement and courts to work together to improve results for youth. The website is: www.truancyprevention.org.

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INTRODUCTION

When children are not in school they fall behind in learning, but what else happens to them? Recent evidence suggests that consistent non-attendance leads to academic failure, dropping out, and in many cases, delinquency and later adult crime. Truancy and chronic absence, even in the early grades, is a strong predictor that children and youth may be at risk of a whole host of bad outcomes. While there has been much written about truancy, there has been a large gap about the financial costs and benefits of programs that improve school attendance. This report begins to fill that gap by reporting the costs and the estimated benefits of three truancy reduction programs in Colorado: The Adams County Truancy Reduction Project, the Denver Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project, and Pueblo's Project Respect.

These three programs are of interest both for the diversity and the similarity of their approaches. All three treat truancy as a family problem, and rely on intensive case management intervention with the family. All try to be advocates for the families, and build upon the families' strengths, rather than take a punitive approach. All make frequent use of referrals to outside agencies, such as health clinics or drug and alcohol rehabilitation providers. Yet each differs markedly in terms of their budget, scope, and where they fit in the larger picture of schools, courts, and youth services.

This report shows that the costs of each of the three truancy reduction projects, and each of the three court systems, pale in comparison to the enormous price society pays for high school failure and juvenile delinquency. In light of the benefits of high school graduation, all the approaches to truancy reduction reviewed here likely pay for themselves many times over. It is most likely that the best model includes a court system that works in conjunction with family advocates or case workers, connecting with schools and parents to provide a coherent and consistent approach to reducing truancy in which children are not allowed to slip through the cracks.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Truancy has caught the attention of the education and the juvenile justice systems. There have been many articles in national publications linking truancy to juvenile crime (Mulrine, 2001). This published research describes school districts, juvenile courts, and police departments who are trying new methods to keep children in school (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; Berger & Wind, 2000; Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997; Council of State Governments, 2000; Dekalb, 1999; Fritsch, Caeti, & Taylor, 1999; Garry, 1996; Gavin, 1997; Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; Reglin, 1997; Riley & McDaniel, 1999; San Diego Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, 2001; Swope, 1995).

Truancy is a red flag that may signal any number of problems in a child's home, ranging from poverty to mental health issues to physical abuse.

A truant child is likely to be ill prepared for skilled work - an increasingly serious problem given the shrinking demand for unskilled labor in the United States. Residents who are unable to earn an adequate living look to various welfare programs for help such as income assistance (TANF), Medicaid, Food Stamps, and Women, Infants and Children (WIC). These programs are funded by taxpayers, and constitute a significant cost to society that could be reduced with effective programs such as those presented in this report.

Research has consistently shown problems with school to be a risk factor for drug and alcohol use, and for involvement with the juvenile justice system (Baker et al., 2001; Blum, Beuhring, & Rinehart, 2000; Fritsch, et al., 1999; Hill, Howell, Hawkins, & Battin-Pearson, 1999; Huizinga, Loeber & Thornberry, 1994; Huizinga, Loeber, Thornberry, & Cothorn, 2000; Kelley, Loeber, Keenan, & DeLamtre, 1997; Loeber & Farrington, 2000; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Welsh, Jenkins, & Harris, 1999).

In findings from a national study, school dropouts are more likely to have higher rates of absenteeism and tardiness along with behavior and disciplinary problems while in school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). Studies of dropouts show that these students began at an early age to distance themselves from school, often through non-attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Such estranged youth are ripe for induction into criminal or self-destructive activity. Although it would be inaccurate and unfair to characterize all truants as delinquents, it is quite accurate to say that a majority of criminals begin their careers of social deviance with school truancy.

Most research still deals with truancy only as it relates to other negative behaviors, such as delinquency or substance abuse. Substantial research has been conducted on delinquent youth and substance abusing youth, but little has been done on truants themselves. In general, the research falls into one of two main categories, focusing either on the causes of truancy, or on its consequences.

CAUSES OF TRUANCY

The literature consistently groups the causes of truancy into four categories with many contributing variables: 1) Student demographics; 2) Family characteristics; 3) Student's personal or psychological factors; 4) School climate including attachment to teachers, feelings of physical safety, as well as the effect of specific truancy policies.

Rates of truancy have been found to be higher among males, minorities, urban youth, low-income families, children living with only one parent, children from large families, and children whose parents do not have high school degrees. Not surprisingly, rates of truancy increase as children get older (Baker, et al., 2001; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998; Jenkins, 1995).

Demographic factors alone cannot adequately predict which specific children will attend school regularly and which will have poor attendance. Parental attention certainly has an effect on children's school attendance. Parent involvement with school and homework correlates with students having better attendance records (Corville-Smith, et al., 1998; Jenkins, 1995).

Students' psychological traits have an enormous influence over their daily decisions regarding whether to attend or skip school (King & Bernstein, 2001). Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, and Dalicandro (1998) found that truant students were less likely to perceive school experiences favorably and less likely to feel competent in the classroom. These students were more likely to experience family conflict and to feel academically inferior.

How students feel about their relationships at school is represented by the concept of "school attachment". A school's learning atmosphere or climate and discipline policies have an effect on school attachment among students. When a student feels an attachment to school through a web of relationships with other students, teachers or a caring adult, it can help overcome many of the causes of truancy (Jenkins, 1995).

Pellerin (2000) found that, in general, students have the best attendance records in authoritative schools – those that make high demands and provide high levels of support – and the worst records in lenient schools – those that make few demands and provide little support. The effects of school type varied across racial/ethnic groups. Black students were affected more strongly by the parenting style of their school; they were more likely to drop out of schools with lax disciplinary demands. Asian students were found to drop out at a higher rate when both academic demands and discipline problems were high. School administrators need to consider the specific characteristics of their student body when developing policies and procedures that affect school climate.

A study of over 17,000 middle and high school students in Colorado showed that risk and protective factors have an affect on truancy. Risk factors contributing to truancy included those related to safety: 1) fear of harm, 2) fear of victimization, and 3) abuse in the home. Protective factors associated with school attachment included: 1) high self-esteem, 2) positive school attitudes, 3) pro-social activities such as sports, clubs and volunteer work, and 4) positive attitudes toward police officers (Dukes & Stein, 2001).

CONSEQUENCES OF TRUANCY

Many studies describe the consequences of truancy:

- A study conducted in Florida on predicting which students would eventually drop out of high school found that the combination of increased absences and low grades was a significant predictor of early school termination (Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991).
- A small school district in Kentucky showed that graduation rates could be radically improved by addressing truancy effectively. They achieved a 100% graduation rate three years in a row, attributing the success to a truancy reduction program (Beem, 2002).
- One study among 10th graders in Michigan found that truancy was the only statistically significant predictor of all the negative behaviors studied: cigarette use, alcohol use, binge drinking and marijuana use (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2002).
- Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies cited by Epstein & Sheldon (2002) show that students who are more often absent beginning as early as first grade are those students who eventually drop out of school. The pattern of absenteeism increases throughout a students' school attendance history.
- The Study Group on Serious and Violent Juvenile Offenders found that academic failure beginning in late elementary school and lack of commitment to school, for which school attendance was used as one measure, are risk factors for health and behavior problems (Catalano, Loeber, & McKinney, 1999).

Poor attendance and chronic absenteeism cannot only predict school dropout, they also are predictors of other negative consequences.

Larger studies confirm these findings. Data from a national adolescent health survey of thousands of 7th to 12th graders attending 134 schools nationwide found that "frequent problems with school work," is a common trait among truant youth and is predictive of every health risk studied - cigarette, alcohol and drug use; weapon-related violence; suicidal thoughts or attempts; and early intercourse (Blum, et al., 2000). The authors concluded, "school failure is a public health problem."

THREE COLORADO TRUANCY REDUCTION PROGRAMS

Three Colorado communities were selected for this cost benefit study. Together, they provide a cross section of approaches operating under common state statutes. The Adams County Truancy Reduction Project is court-based. It is available to all the school districts in the county as an alternative to the regular court system. The Denver Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project is run by the Community Assessment Center, and is an add-on to a much larger district-run truancy reduction effort. Both these interventions follow several levels of school and district-sponsored efforts, and come as a last resort before initiating court proceedings. Pueblo's Project Respect is wide-scale, with a large budget, and is active in every Title I school in the city's urban school district. This project is school-based, and constitutes the universe of intervention efforts made prior to a court appearance. The Denver program focuses on middle school students, while the other two programs are available to children of all grade levels.

ADAMS COUNTY TRUANCY REDUCTION PROJECT

The Truancy Reduction Project (TRP) is a voluntary alternative to the regular court system for truant students. The program has been open to truant students 14 years of age and under since 1999. The case manager is a family advocate whose goal is to provide families the support they need to get their children to school. S/he frequently makes referrals to low cost health clinics, mental health service providers, or substance abuse clinics, and follows up on whether the families have acted on the referrals.

To successfully complete the program, students' grades must be no less than a "C", and they must improve in at least two classes. After-school tutoring and Saturday school are available to help meet these goals, although they are not part of the TRP. At the end of three months of perfect attendance and acceptable grades, the juvenile magistrate presides over a graduation ceremony in court. About half of the students who enter the program complete it successfully.

DENVER TRUANCY REDUCTION DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

The Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project is a small program designed to handle the most severe attendance problems among Denver middle school students. Its annual budget funds one social worker operating out of the Community Assessment Center. This program is nested within a much larger effort, also focused on middle school, called the Truancy Reduction Project. Those children having the most severe truancy problems are sent directly to the social worker that has served over 200 students in three years. Statistics show that forty percent of the children in the current caseload have trouble with more than just truancy.

The process begins by conducting a needs assessment in the child’s home, gathering a full family history, including the family’s strengths and weaknesses, and finding out what sort of help the family needs in order to get the children to school. Like the Adams County case manager, the Denver social worker makes frequent referrals to an array of community agencies. There is a small budget for things like school clothes, alarm clocks, or in one case, a bicycle for transportation to school. There are no concrete goals for the students other than improved attendance. If, after a few months of intervention, the student makes no improvement in his or her attendance, the case is referred to court.

PUEBLO PROJECT RESPECT

Project Respect began in January of 2000 with 15 caseworkers known as “Community Advocates”. The Community Advocates are the core of Project Respect. Each advocate serves 10 to 12 families at a time. A significant part of their job is to follow up on attendance and behavior issues before they become chronic problems that make a child eligible for Project Respect. They make phone calls or visits to the home of every child in the school who accrues a number of absences. They try to meet any need that will prevent a pattern of truancy from developing.

Once in the program, half of the students for whom grades were available showed improvement. Students cut their absences by 50%. All the high school students improved their standardized state test scores. Seventy percent had fewer disciplinary referrals than the previous year. Forty-five percent successfully completed the program.



COST ANALYSIS

There are three approaches to dealing with truancy for which we analyze the costs and benefits: 1) doing nothing at all, 2) taking a court-centered approach, and 3) using one of the three intervention models described previously.

The do-nothing approach entails the social and economic costs of failing to correct truancy, plus zero costs of truancy reduction efforts. This analysis assumes that the youths who participate in the truancy reduction programs or are sent to court are on their way to dropping out of high school. As a starting point, it borrows the value of social program use, tax contributions, and adult prison and jail expenses of high school dropouts versus graduates as calculated by Vernez, Krop, and Rydell (1999).

The cost of dropping out of high school is assumed to be the same across all three research sites, and is based on national data. This study adds to these adult expenditures, a low-end estimate of the cost of juvenile crime based on average Colorado court costs, and local detention and probation practices. Finally, it discusses the potential for school districts to recapture per student revenues by reducing truancy.

Once the costs of truancy have been projected, we estimate the costs of the judicial approach versus the truancy intervention projects. In these sections, the three districts are treated separately. The court approach involves the cost of operating truancy court plus the time of school and other personnel who attend the court, and the cost of the sentencing options utilized in each judicial district. Only the costs of the current procedures and sentencing options implemented when the courts were reorganized in favor of truancy reduction are considered. Thus, it would be wrong to consider the court approach evaluated here as traditional or outmoded. The court is very much part of the new approach to dealing with truancy in all three sites.

The last section considers the cost of each truancy intervention program under evaluation, and the rate of success of each program. Success is defined according to the goals and record keeping of each project; it is generally considered as significantly improved attendance. For our analysis extensive interviews were conducted in the spring of 2002 with representatives of each affected school district, each court, and many of the social workers involved in the programs.

THREE APPROACHES TO TRUANCY

I. WHEN TRUANCY IS A LOW PRIORITY

Professionals interviewed in both the school districts and the courts in all three sites agreed that prior to the initiation of the truancy reduction efforts of the last several years, little attention was paid to truancy. Few children were taken to court for the reason of truancy alone. The old court processes were characterized as expensive in terms of school personnel time, and so lengthy as to be ineffective as either a deterrent or a correctional device. Furthermore, as of the early 1990s there were several juvenile magistrates hearing truancy cases in each location, and magistrates within the same court showed little consistency in the sentences they handed out. Efforts made at the school level also varied widely. Therefore, this report attempts to calculate the costs of failing to correct truancy as a surrogate for the “before” picture.

If children do not attend school when it is mandatory, despite the efforts of school personnel, they will not be likely to attend after the age of 16 when it is voluntary. These youths have very little commitment to school indeed. The proportion of high school dropouts far exceeds the proportion of youth sent to any of the truancy reduction programs examined here, or to the court, making it reasonable to assume that most of these children are not on a path to a degree.

THE COSTS OF DROPPING OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL

It is almost self-evident that earning a high school degree is a good investment. Regardless of fluctuations in the overall level of employment over the last decades, unemployment rates have hovered around 20% higher for high school dropouts than for graduates. Among those who are employed, men who have dropped out of high school earn less than 75% of what their counterparts with high school degrees earn, while female high school dropouts earn just over 60% of those with high school degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Two implications of these widely divergent life outcomes are differences in income taxes paid by graduates versus dropouts, and in social program use such as welfare, unemployment insurance, Medicaid, etc. A less obvious difference is in criminal justice expenditures, which are much higher for male dropouts than male graduates.

To quantify these differences, this analysis employs the results of work done by Vernez, et al. (1999) at the RAND Corporation. They have calculated the social program use and tax contributions of U.S. residents based on immigration status, ethnicity, gender, and educational attainment. Since the sophistication of the RAND model far surpasses the resources of this study to duplicate, the estimates form the basis of the costs of truancy calculated here.

The average cumulative savings in public spending generated over an adult life (age 18 to 80) of each individual who completes high school is shown in the Lifetime Savings Table. The difference between the figures for men and women has mostly to do with the larger criminal justice expenditures – prison and jail costs – incurred by men, and secondarily with the fact that women are more likely to qualify for some type of aid through programs such as income assistance.

One high school dropout can be expected to cost the public in excess of \$200,000 over the course of his or her life.

For most gender and ethnic categories, one high school dropout can be expected to cost the public in excess of \$200,000 more over the course of his or her life than if he or she had earned a high school degree. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of these figures is the proportion of government savings on social programs for men attributable to criminal justice savings. Criminal justice costs are about ten times as great for men as for women, and, depending on ethnicity, account for between 48% and 70% of the social program savings associated with increased education for men.

The monetary benefits of education are enormous. But, the effect of reduced criminal behavior on the quality of life both of the high school graduates, who would spend less time in jail, and on the general population, who would be less often victimized by crime, cannot be quantified. The after-tax income shows the increased resources available to high school graduates, indicative of the improved quality of life that comes with a high school degree.

Lifetime Savings Table

Lifetime Savings in Public Social Programs, Increases in Tax Revenues & Increases in Disposable Income Associated with High School Graduation Versus Dropping Out
By Gender and Ethnicity in 1997 Dollars, Discounted for Current Value

	Government Costs Avoided		Additional Tax Revenues Earned	Total Government Savings*	After-Tax Income
	Total	% Due to Criminal Justice Savings			
Men					
White	72,274	48%	115,812	188,086	223,647
Black	203,329	70%	93,859	297,188	176,130
Asian	145,541	56%	110,848	256,390	208,906
Mexican	112,333	60%	89,856	202,189	170,406
Other Hispanic	129,966	60%	94,427	224,393	176,517
Women					
White	60,663	4%	129,695	190,359	254,007
Black	126,283	9%	98,169	224,452	187,149
Asian	100,961	10%	134,441	235,402	255,631
Mexican	90,876	7%	102,484	193,360	194,738
Other Hispanic	123,942	4%	104,921	228,863	199,749

* Total government savings equals government expenditures saved plus additional tax revenues earned.
Source: Data provided by Dr. Richard Krop, as calculated for Vernez, Krop and Rydell, 1999.



THE COST OF JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

During the school years, there is likely an additional financial cost to truancy in terms of juvenile crime. School problems, including poor academic achievement, absenteeism, and low attachment to school, are frequently identified as risk factors for juvenile delinquency. The Juvenile Delinquency Cost Table shows the costs of juvenile delinquency in each of the three counties under study, including the cost of court operations, detention, residential treatment facilities, probation, and the money earmarked to provide alternatives to detention. Total costs range from over \$4 million in Pueblo to over \$14 million in Denver, but the average costs per delinquent incident are quite close - \$6,124 and \$6,940 respectively. Comparable costs in Adams County are considerably lower, at \$3,853 per incident. Note that these figures show the costs per incident (or in the case of the detention figures, the cost per admission), rather than the cost per delinquent youth. A juvenile who offends multiple times may incur multiple court costs. These numbers should be viewed as a partial cost only, illustrative of the point that juvenile delinquency is very expensive indeed.

Juvenile Delinquency Cost Table			
Estimated Per Incident Costs Associated with Juvenile Delinquency For the Three Study Sites in 2000-01			
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Court operations	\$ 340,092	\$ 890,207	\$ 85,198
Detention	\$1,492,439	\$4,372,963	\$1,326,481
Residential placement	\$ 116,200	\$5,250,000	\$1,441,310
Probation	\$1,683,427	\$2,211,737	\$ 606,661
Senate Bill 94	\$1,091,191	\$1,500,000	\$ 642,000
Total costs	\$4,723,349	\$14,224,907	\$4,101,650
Total juvenile delinquent cases	1,226	2,323	591
Average per incident cost of juvenile delinquency	\$3,853	\$6,124	\$6,940



II. THE COURT APPROACH

COSTS

The total cost of sending a truant student to court includes court time, attorney’s fees, and the salaries of school personnel and other professionals who attend the court proceedings. Other professionals often attend truancy hearings, and their salaries must be accounted for as well. Most of these costs are extremely difficult to quantify because each truancy case is different, so the cast of characters in the courtroom constantly changes. All three courts have tried to minimize waiting time by consolidating the truancy cases into a single truancy docket that meets at the same time each week. Note that the people employed by the school districts may spend a considerable amount of time trying to resolve truancy cases before they resort to either the court or the truancy reduction plans under study here. Those substantial costs are not included in this analysis.

The resulting estimated personnel costs are presented in the Court Costs Table. This table shows that it costs on average \$413 to send a truant child to the Adams County court, \$292 to send one to the Denver juvenile court, and \$716 to send a child to the Pueblo court.

Court Costs Table			
Estimated Cost of Sending a Child to Truancy Court			
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
	One full day per week	One full day per week	Two hours per week
PERSONNEL	COST FOR EACH COUNTY		
Court Employees	\$19,455	\$ 40,830	\$ 4,864
Attorneys	\$38,183	\$ 96,022	\$38,642
School employees, other than attorneys	\$16,500	\$ 11,000	\$ 7,094
Other social and mental health workers	\$ 7,750	\$ 38,000	\$ 2,750
Total personnel cost	\$81,888	\$185,852	\$53,350
Share of court operating expenses based on number of cases heard	\$ 7,774	\$ 47,286	\$ 1,467
Cost of detention for truancy	Not used	\$ 52,897	\$38,206
Total truancy court cost	\$89,662	\$286,035	\$93,023
Number of truancy cases, 2000-2001*	217	980	130**
Total cost per truancy case	\$413	\$292	\$716

*The number of truancy cases came from the court clerks in Adams and Pueblo counties, and from the Denver Public Schools social worker assigned to the Denver truancy court.

** So as not to artificially inflate the per truant cost, the 1999-2000 figure was used as 00-01 rates were unusually low



BENEFITS

The immediate goal of truancy court is to get children back in the classroom. The Denver court data imply an impressive “first round” success rate of 68%. Of all the youths who received a first-time court order to go to school, 68% were not sent back to court because of continued truancy. Although some may have moved out of the school district to avoid further court action, we assume they subsequently began attending classes. Nonetheless, successfully encouraging a child to attend school for a few months does not necessarily equate to high school graduation. No longitudinal study of truants is available to estimate the likelihood of truancy court to encourage high school graduation down the line. However, one juvenile magistrate estimated that a high school student taken to truancy court has a “near-zero” chance of graduating. The same magistrate projected that for elementary and middle school children, the chances might be as high as 50%.

Given the distribution of elementary, middle, and high school youth sent to truancy courts in all three counties, these assumptions result in an overall estimate that about 30% of truancy court participants might graduate from high school. If one year of the Denver court process encourages 30% of its truants to graduate, there would be an additional 294 high school graduates. The Adams County court would encourage 65 students to graduate, and the smaller Pueblo court would produce 39 graduates.

Cost of a Dropout Table			
The Cost of a “Typical” Dropout in Adams, Denver and Pueblo Counties, Based on Racial and Gender Characteristics Particular of Truancy Program Participants			
The lifetime cost of dropping out, by race and gender			
	Men	Women	
Asian	\$256,390	\$235,402	
Black	\$297,188	\$224,452	
Hispanic	\$213,291	\$211,111	
White	\$188,086	\$190,359	
Average	\$238,739	\$215,331	
Data Year	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
	01-02,	99-00 and 00-01	00-01
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Male	52	51	66
Female	48	49	34
Asian	3	0	0
Black	11	10	2
Hispanic	54	57	67
White	28	17	29
Other	2	16	3
Cost of a “typical” dropout	\$208,371	\$215,649	\$209,550



In order to use data from Vernez et al. to assign a dollar value to the savings generated by a group of graduates, we must know whether they are likely to be male or female, and whether they are Asian, white, black, or Hispanic. We can use the mix of characteristics found among the three truant populations to create a hypothetical "typical" truant for each county.

The Cost of a Dropout Table (see page 13) shows these calculations. A typical individual who graduates from high school in Adams County as a result of either truancy court or Truancy Reduction Project intervention will likely save the government more than \$208,000 over the course of his or her life. A typical truant-turned-graduate in Pueblo will save almost \$210,000, while a graduate of Denver stands to save the government over \$215,000.

The Truancy Court Savings Table shows that if all the court successes graduate from high school, the Pueblo court would save over \$8 million; The Adams County court could save about \$13.5 million; and the Denver court could save over \$63 million in current dollars. Truancy courts must be only minimally successful in order to recoup the cost. The Adams county court must result in the graduation of only 1 student every two years, or 1 of every 504 truants. The Denver court has only to encourage 1 truant to graduate every year, or 1 out of 739 truants. In Pueblo, 1 of every 293 truants must graduate, or close to one every 2 years. If the courts encourage these few students to graduate, they operate essentially free to the public. Court involvement may also create an immeasurable deterrent effect by encouraging youth to attend more routinely.

Truancy Court Savings Table			
Potential Government Savings Generated by the Truancy Courts in Adams, Denver, and Pueblo Counties in 2000-2001			
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Total Court Cost	\$89,662	\$286,035	\$93,023
Total youths served annually	217	980	130
Per capita cost	\$413	\$292	\$716
Estimated success rate	30%	30%	30%
Per Capita Adult Lifetime Savings of High School Graduation	\$208,371	\$215,649	\$209,550
Savings generated if court successes all graduate from high school*	\$13,454,453	\$63,114,771	\$8,079,427
Breakeven success rate**	1 of 504 truants	1 of 739 truants	1 of 293 truants
Breakeven point for return on investment***	1 graduate every 2.3 years	1 graduate every .75 years	1 graduate every 2.25 years

*Equals "number of youths who successfully completed project" multiplied by "per capita savings associated with high school graduation" minus "total program cost".

**The rate at which truants sent to court must eventually graduate from high school in order for government savings to offset court and sentencing costs.

***The number of truants sent to court that must eventually graduate from high school in order to offset court and sentencing costs. Additional graduates represent net government savings.



III. THE CASE MANAGEMENT MODEL

The same challenge to calculating benefits presents itself when evaluating the success of the truancy reduction programs: there are no long-term data from which to calculate graduation rates among participants. The Adams County Truancy Reduction Project costs under \$50,000 a year while Denver’s program budget is just over that figure. The majority of the money pays for one case manager in each program. Pueblo’s Project Respect, on the other hand, costs \$768,000 annually, but pays for 15 Community Advocates.

The Truancy Reduction Program Savings Table shows that if all the youths who successfully completed the three truancy reduction programs graduate from high school, the annual savings will be in the millions. In Adams County, 38 students completed the program in 2000-2001. If they all eventually graduate from high school, the program will have generated a savings of almost \$8 million, even if no juvenile delinquency is averted. For Denver, a 42% success rate equivalent to that of Adams County could save \$7.5 million annually.

The most expensive program has the potential to generate the greatest absolute savings. Pueblo would generate almost \$40 million in savings annually if just 45% of their participants graduate from high school.

Truancy Reduction Program Savings Table			
Potential Government Savings Generated by the Truancy Reduction Projects in Adams, Denver, and Pueblo Counties in 2000-2001			
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Total Program Cost	\$48,943	\$53,771	\$767,571
Number of youths served	90	84	423
Per capita cost	\$544	\$640	\$1,815
Number of youths who successfully completed the project	38	35 (estimated)	189
Percent who successfully completed the project	42%	42% (estimated)	45%
Per capita savings associated with high school graduation	\$208,371	\$215,649	\$209,550
Total potential savings if all youths who complete the project graduate from high school*	\$7,869,155	\$7,493,944	\$38,837,379
Breakeven success rate**	1 of 383 truants	1 of 337 truants	1 of 115 truants
Breakeven point for return on investment ***	1 graduate every 4.2 years	1 graduate every 4 years	4 graduates per year

* Equals "number of youths who successfully completed project" multiplied by "per capita savings associated with high school graduation" minus "total program cost".

**The rate at which program participants must eventually graduate from high school in order for government savings to offset the program cost.

***The number of project participants who must eventually graduate from high school in order to offset the cost of each truancy reduction program. Additional graduates represent net government savings.



The “breakeven success rate” tells us the ratio of truancy program participants who must graduate to make the program financially worthwhile. The smaller Adams and Denver County truancy reduction programs need only graduate one out of every 383 and 337 participants respectively. That amounts to one approximately every four years. Pueblo needs to produce one graduate for every 115 participants, or about four per year. One cannot conclude that the Pueblo program is less efficient based on this difference. Unlike the other projects, Pueblo’s Project Respect represents the sum total of school-level efforts to reduce truancy, including the easiest interventions.

Despite the intractable problems at the root of chronic truancy, for some children the case management intervention can make the difference between high school failure and graduation, and possibly between a life of delinquency and crime, and one of social success. Given the high cost of high school failure and juvenile delinquency, it is almost impossible to believe that these programs will not pay for themselves over time.

CONCLUSIONS

School failure is so costly that there need only be minor success with truancy reduction programs in order to achieve a positive payback.

If, on top of encouraging the minimal number of graduates indicated by the breakeven points, the truancy reduction programs reviewed here avert even one serious incident of delinquency a year, they would generate a positive return on their investment.

This study shows a deficiency of research on truancy; it generally is studied only as a characteristic of delinquent youth. Because schools are not required to report truancy data to the state, they do not do so. We do know with certainty that high school failure on its current broad scale is enormously costly to federal and state governments. It is somewhat surprising that given the long run financial impact of allowing children to fail at school, more attention has not been paid to the issue of truancy, one of the most blatant indicators of the probability of giving up on school. Clearly, public policy and practice need to shift to investing in youth prior to juvenile court involvement. As shown here, a small investment has the potential to reap the incredible return of saving money and saving youth.

There are a number of important benefits that this report has not quantified, but which should not be forgotten.

- The case managers for the truancy reduction programs encounter many serious family problems: poverty, physical and mental health problems, substance abuse, and at the worst, cases of abuse and neglect. They make many referrals to a wide range of social service agencies, and follow up on those referrals. The benefits that accrue to the individuals and families who receive help from these agencies as a result of the persistent investigations of the case managers cannot be quantified in this study.
- The truancy reduction programs are likely to have a spillover effect that impacts other family members. Each expert interviewed agreed that in some cases truancy shows up among all the children in a family. If the eldest child gets away with truancy, the younger ones feel they can, too. If intervention on the part of a social worker can correct the problem as soon as it affects one child, it may never spread to the others in the family. This invisible preventive effect can be equated to the deterrent effect of a tough court policy.
- Better-educated children who grow up in more stable environments will probably value education more as adults. They will be more likely to encourage their own children to succeed in school.
- Minority youths are over-represented among the population of children served by these programs. To the extent that success is randomly distributed among program participants, the programs will make some small contribution toward closing the education gap.

Both the court approach and the case management approach to truancy reduction are monetarily valuable. The most successful truancy reduction effort is likely to be one in which both teams cooperate with each other.

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