



The Costs and Benefits of Three Intensive Interventions with Colorado Truants

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Introduction

In recent years, truancy has become a focus of policy discussions across the country. School districts, juvenile court, and police departments across the map are trying new methods to keep children in school¹. There are several good reasons for this. At a minimum, 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. One undereducated individual has a personal problem, but when urban areas are home to large numbers of residents who lack a high school diploma, the problem becomes both social and economic. On one hand, the business community has been vocal about the difficulty of finding an adequately trained workforce. On the other hand, 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, many of whom are reluctant contributors. Furthermore, 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.² Although it would be inaccurate and unfair to characterize all, or even most, truants as delinquents, it is quite accurate to recognize that a majority of criminals begin their careers of social deviance with truancy. Truancy is a red flag that may signal any of a number of problems in a child's home, ranging from poverty, to mental health, to physical abuse. And it warns of a child who is undaunted by breaking the social convention of school attendance, and who has time on his or her hands. Such a youth may be ripe for induction into criminal or self-destructive activity.

Despite the new trend toward truancy reduction, and the general belief that truancy is a precursor to other more serious problems, little research has been done regarding the effectiveness of truancy reduction approaches, or their relative costs and benefits. Most published information to date tends to be more descriptive than analytical. This paper 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, and they make communication with these service providers part

¹ See Baker, Sigmon and Nugent, 2001; San Diego Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council, 2001; Berger and Wind, 2000; Council of State Governments, 2000; Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor, 1999; Riley and McDaniel, 1999; Cantelon and LeBoeuf, 1997; Gavin, 1997; Gullatt and Lemoine, 1997; Ingersoll and LeBoeuf, 1997; Reglin, 1997; Garry, 1996; and Swope, 1995 for descriptions of efforts to reduce truancy and increase graduation rates in various cities nationwide.

² For recent studies linking school problems to delinquency see Baker et al., 2001; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001; Blum, Beuhring and Rinehart, 2000; Huizinga, et al., 2000; Loeber and Farrington, 2000; Loeber and Farrington, 1998; Fritsch, Caeti, and Taylor, 1999; Hill et al., 1999; Welsh, Jenkins, and Harris, 1999; Kelley et al., 1997. Huizinga, et al. and Huizinga, Loeber and Thornberry, 1994 report the results of the Denver Youth Survey, of particular interest to Colorado policy makers.

of their regular process. Yet they differ markedly in terms of their budget, scope, and where they fall in the larger picture of school, district, and court policy. The Adams County project is court-initiated. It is available to all the school districts in the county as an alternative to the regular court system; some of the districts choose to use the program, and some do not. The Denver 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. The Pueblo project is wide-scale, with a large budget, and is active in every Title One school in Pueblo'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 programs are available to children of all grade levels. A thorough description of each of these programs may be found in Appendices A through C at the end of this report.

This paper 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 costs of high school failure and of 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. Neither the court approach nor the case management models are shown to be demonstrably better than the other. It is most likely that the best model includes a court system that works in conjunction with social workers and school districts to provide a coherent and consistent approach to truancy in which children are not allowed to slip through the cracks.

Each of the truancy reduction projects was funded by the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, Department of Public Safety, (DCJ), for three years of operation. The DCJ also provided funding for this research, without which the work could not have been accomplished. In addition, there are many people in each of the district and state agencies who gave generously of their time and help in providing contacts, data, and program descriptions. They are too numerous to mention by name, but their help has been essential and greatly appreciated.

Methodology

Chronic truancy is defined in Colorado as having ten or more unexcused absences in an academic year, or four or more unexcused absences in one month. Schools can require valid medical excuses from qualified health professionals only, not parents. This paper analyzes the costs and benefits of three approaches to dealing with truancy: 1) doing nothing at all, 2) taking a court-centered approach, and 3) using one of the three intervention models under evaluation here. Discussions of data limitations, and of unquantifiable costs and benefits accompany each analysis. The conclusions section compares the outcomes of the three analyses.

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 who would otherwise be 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 truancy in one's adult years 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, the paper estimates 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 *current* procedures and sentencing options are considered. Thus, this analysis measures the costs and benefits of court practices after they were reorganized in favor of truancy reduction. Thus, it would be wrong to consider the court approach as traditional or outmoded. The court is very much part of the new approach to dealing with truancy in all three sites.

The section on the social service approach 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. It is too early in the life of these reforms to know whether the participating children will have a higher rate of high school graduation than they might have had without the programs, simply because most of the children served have not yet had time to graduate. Although it is not possible to know how many high school graduates any of these interventions will produce, a break-even point can be calculated. How many youths must graduate as a result of each intervention to make the program financially worthwhile? The programs are then compared on this basis, and a common sense evaluation of the probability of a positive return to the investments is made. In addition, the non-quantifiable benefits of truancy reduction are discussed.

Each of the three truancy reduction programs makes frequent use of referrals to service agencies in the community, whether they be low-cost health clinics, substance abuse recovery programs, or mental health service providers, to name a few. For the purposes of this paper, the costs of the services to which truant children and their families are referred are not considered. On one hand, they would be impossible to calculate. More importantly, however, the services to which families are referred are not intended to reduce truancy. For example, the goal of a health clinic is not to send a sick child back to school, but to make him well. Likewise, the aim of a mother's alcohol treatment plan is to reduce her drinking. The fact that reduced drinking will make her more capable of caring for her youngest child, so that her teenage daughter will not skip school to perform child care, is, from the point of view of recovery program expenditures, serendipitous. The substantial benefits of these services are not included, either, but should be acknowledged. The more intensive investigation into troubled children's and families' lives that comes about under the aegis of these programs, has, in each site, resulted in the discovery of previously undiagnosed mental illness, special education needs, drug and alcohol dependence, and abuse. To whatever extent these serious issues can be ameliorated, it will yield immeasurable benefits in quality of life for the whole family.

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. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the political origins of each program, how each program operates within the school and district context, how successful the programs are viewed by the schools which they serve, and the many challenges that truant students face in their home and school lives. The staff members of each program provided data on the numbers of students served, and their outcomes. Districts provided much helpful data in terms of student demographics and budgetary information. State and local courts, judicial departments, and departments of correction provided data on the numbers of truancy and delinquency cases, the numbers and costs of minors on probation, in detention, and in residential treatments programs, and on court costs.

Three Approaches to Truancy

When Truancy is a Low Priority

Ideally, when studying the effect of an intervention, one would like to measure outcomes before the intervention was initiated, hold all other variables constant, and measure the outcome variables again after the intervention. Rarely, in social science research, is such a clinical approach possible. It is generally not feasible to hold other variables constant. In each case, the project under evaluation was part of a broader effort to reduce truancy. However, 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, and 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, representatives in all three districts reported that 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 seriousness with which they took the charge of truancy, or the sentences they handed out for it. Efforts made at the school level also varied widely. Therefore, this paper attempts to calculate the costs of failing to correct truancy as a baseline for the “before” picture.

Program participants as eventual high school dropouts

This paper starts with the assumption that a seriously truant student of the sort that would be sent to court or to participate in an intensive truancy reduction program, would all but certainly become a high school dropout in the absence of either of these interventions. Although no longitudinal research has been done on truant students to show their educational outcomes, there are several reasons for having confidence in this assumption. First, although the state defines truancy as four unexcused absences in a month, or ten in an academic year, the social workers on all three projects reported that most students who are referred to them have many more than ten absences. Each district has its own procedures for dealing with truant students, first at the school and later at the district level. (A complete description of these procedures is provided in the appendices.)

Therefore, the projects under study here deal with youths whose truant behavior has already been addressed in several official ways, without success. These youths have very little commitment to school indeed. If children do not attend school when it is mandatory, despite the efforts of school and district personnel, why would they attend after the age of 16, when it is voluntary?

Furthermore, 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. Just over 13% of current Colorado high school students can be expected to drop out of high school and never complete an equivalency degree later on in life. (See Appendix D for data on past Colorado graduation rates and predictions of future rates.) In contrast, the Denver Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project serves 0.4% of its middle school students. Since it is oriented toward middle school, the proportions at the elementary and high school level are even smaller. A large percentage of participating students were having academic trouble: 38% in 1999-2000, 50% in 2000-2001, and 31% in the fall of 2001. District 14, the district that makes the most use of the Adams County Truancy Reduction Project (TRP), sent 1.4% of its students to the TRP case manager. Pueblo has the highest participation ratio of the three districts. Of the 11 schools for which the program is available, 7.7% participated during the 2000-20001 academic year. (Note that Project Respect family advocates check up on all cases of truancy, but officially involve only a small number of students and their families in all the program activities. See the appendices for a more complete description of the program.)

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 (NCES 1999). The obvious implications of these widely divergent life outcomes include 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, Krop and Rydell (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. Those estimates form the basis of the costs of truancy calculated here. The sophistication of the RAND model far surpasses the resources of this study to duplicate; however, the drawbacks to using those figures need be mentioned. These data come from the 1991-1992 SIPP data, which are now a decade old. Changes in both welfare and tax policy have been implemented since the data were gathered. Reductions in public spending associated with President Clinton's Welfare Reform Act of 1996 mean that the model may overestimate the cost of dropping out of high school. The Bush administration's 2001 income tax cuts likely affect the tax

contributions of both high school dropouts and high school grads.³ Offsetting the tendency of welfare reform to reduce spending on high school dropouts is the fact that some sources of public assistance are not included in the model (see Table 1).

Table 1	
Forms of Public Expenditure Included In and Excluded From the RAND Model	
Included Public Expenses	Excluded Public Expenses
Welfare	Public housing
Food Stamps	Rental assistance
Federal SSI	Job training
Unemployment insurance	State SSI
Medicare and Medicaid	
Social Security	
School lunch and breakfast programs	
Energy assistance	
Criminal justice resources	

Source: Vernez, Krop and Rydell, 1999 pp 11, 44.

Table 2 shows the average cumulative savings in public spending generated over the adult life, from age 18 to 80, of each individual who completes high school, rather than dropping out. Results are shown by gender and ethnicity.⁴ 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 Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and the

³ However, since it is not the absolute tax payments that matter, but the *difference* between the payments made by dropouts and graduates, it is difficult to predict whether the model overestimates or underestimates that value. Also the data are based on a national sample rather than on Colorado residents. It is unclear how much difference this fact makes, or indeed, how preferable it would really be to use a Colorado sample, if one were available. Today's workforce has considerable mobility, so that an individual educated in Colorado will not necessarily work there, and those who work there may have been educated elsewhere. It would be helpful to isolate the differences in state tax revenues and state expenditures, but unfortunately, that is not possible.

⁴ Consistent with the ethnic composition of Colorado, the three truancy programs evaluated here serve primarily non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics. All three locations educate a number of Spanish-speaking children, but immigrants from areas other than Latin America are not numerous. Although one of the original purposes of the RAND model was to take immigration status into consideration, this analysis uses only the outputs for the native born population. There are two reasons for this. First, the immigration status, as opposed to the ethnicity, of the students served by the three truancy reduction programs is not easily available. More important, however, the programs by definition serve only school-aged children. Each program beneficiary was either born in the United States, or arrived as a child. Each beneficiary has received at least part, if not all, of his or her education in the United States. These children, regardless of immigration status, are more likely in their adult lives to use social services and pay taxes in patterns similar to those of native-born Hispanics than those of immigrants who arrive as adults, having already completed their education.

programs tied to AFDC. 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. These figures should give one pause. For one thing, 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. These resources are indicative of the improved quality of life that comes with a high school degree.

	Government Costs Avoided % Due to Criminal Justice Savings		Additional Tax Revenues Earned	Total Government Savings*	After-Tax Income
	Total				
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

These estimates give a clear picture of the enormous benefit of having a high school degree as an adult. Yet even 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. One study comparing several programs aimed at reducing juvenile delinquency found that one of the most successful involved giving cash incentives to at risk youth who stay in high school. Arrest rates for children involved in this program (the Quantum Opportunity Program of the mid-1990s) were only 30% of those for a control group (Greenwood et al, 1998).

Although schools do not receive thorough information from police departments on the delinquent activities of all their students, anecdotal evidence provided by school district representatives in Adams, Denver and Pueblo Counties supports a link between truancy and delinquency. A court liaison for one of the Adams County districts reported, “One of our kids had to go to juvenile court the other day. I went to see what was going on and what charges had been pressed against him. I read the list of names on the juvenile docket for that day, and it read like a ‘who’s who’ of truant kids.” Early this year, a smaller Adams County district filed on two students who were young enough to go the truancy case manager; neither of them faced any criminal charges. But the same district had six open truancy court cases for youths who were too old for the Truancy Reduction Project. Among these older children, three had criminal charges pending as well.

Some of the component costs of juvenile delinquency are presented in Tables 3 through 7. The cost of court operations, detention, residential treatment facilities, and probation are shown in Tables 3 through 6 respectively. Table 7 aggregates these costs, and adds the amount of funds allocated to each county by Colorado Senate Bill 94 program – money intended to provide alternatives to detention. These are only some of the costs of juvenile delinquency, however. Not included are the costs to police departments of handling juvenile crime, the medical costs associated with physical injury perpetrated by juveniles, or the labor costs of the many social and mental health workers employed by the various agencies that serve delinquent youth. None of those costs are trivial, so the numbers presented below should be viewed as a partial cost only, intended to illustrate the point that juvenile delinquency is very expensive indeed.

The cost of court operations includes personnel and operating costs. Personnel costs include the salaries of judges, magistrates, and clerks. Operating costs include utilities and supplies. The total cost of running the juvenile court is shown on the third line of Table 3, but it would be incorrect to attribute the entire cost to juvenile delinquents. Juvenile courts handle many cases for which the juvenile is not alleged to be at fault; some examples are child support, and dependency and neglect cases. Therefore, the total cost is multiplied by the fraction of court cases in each district that are related to delinquency. Table 4 shows that the costs of juvenile detention range from \$1.3 million in Pueblo to \$4.4 million in Denver. Detention costs are incurred while youths await trial. Residential treatment costs are incurred by adjudicated youth. They range from \$11,000 per child in Denver to almost \$63,000 per child in Pueblo, for totals of more than \$100,000 in Adams County, to over \$5 million in Denver (See Table 5). The total amount spent placing children on probation, shown in Table 6, ranges from under one million dollars in Pueblo to \$2.4 million in Denver.

	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Total personnel costs	\$705,426	\$1,893,459	\$170,422
Total operating expenses	\$104,316	\$280,000	\$25,202
Total cost for all types of juvenile cases	\$809,742	\$2,173,459	\$195,624
Total number of juvenile cases	2,912	5,803	1,357
Number of juvenile delinquency cases	1,226	2,323	591
Percent of juvenile cases that are delinquent	42%	40%	44%
Court costs attributable to delinquency	\$340,092	\$890,207	\$85,197.85

Source: Colorado State Judicial Department, and the Denver, Adams, and Pueblo courts.

Adams Youth Services Center	
Detention admissions	760
Average length of stay in days	14.5
Cost per day	\$135.43
Total detention cost	\$1,492,439
Denver - Gilliam	
Detention admissions	1,688
Average length of stay in days	13.6
Cost per day	\$135.43
Total detention cost	\$3,109,039
Denver - Dahlia Boys Detention Center	
Detention admissions	1,304
Average length of stay in days	6.1
Cost per day	\$120.00
Total detention cost	\$954,528
Denver - Filmore Girls Detention Center	
Detention admissions	437
Average length of stay in days	5.9
Cost per day	\$120.00
Total detention cost	\$309,396
Denver Total Detention Cost	\$4,372,963
Pueblo	
Detention admissions	1,111
Average length of stay in days	9.6
Cost per day	\$124.37
Total detention cost	1,326,481

Source: The Colorado State Judicial Department

	Adams	Denver*	Pueblo
Number of placements	5	470	23
Total cost of placement	\$116,200	\$5,250,000	\$1,441,310
Per child cost	\$23,240	\$11,170	\$62,666

*Figures are estimated

	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Intensive Probation	89	68	24
Ave. days on probation	270	270	270
Ave. daily cost	\$10.10	\$10.10	\$10.10
Total annual cost of intensive probation services	\$242,703	\$185,436	\$65,448
Regular Probation	752	988	271
Ave. days on probation	455	455	455
Ave. daily cost	\$4.92	\$4.92	\$4.92
Total annual cost of regular probation services	\$1,683,427	\$2,211,737	\$606,661
Total Probation Cost	\$1,926,130	\$2,397,173	\$672,109

Source: Colorado State Judicial Department

Table 7 aggregates court, detention and probation costs, and adds the figures dedicated by Senate Bill 94 to reduce the numbers of juveniles in detention. Each district has discretion over how to use the funds, as long as the programs are intended to reduce detention stays. Total costs range from over \$4 million in Pueblo to over \$14 million in Denver, but the average costs per delinquent are quite close - \$6,124 and \$6,940 respectively. Comparable costs in Adams County are considerably lower, at \$3,853 per incident.

These figures show that juvenile delinquency is a costly problem. Yet there are costs not included in this analysis. Most importantly, police department costs in the three counties are not included. Since police officers do not investigate crimes according to the age of the criminal, it is difficult to estimate the amount of resources spent on juvenile crime. The numbers of police departments that work within Adams County further complicate the endeavor. Furthermore, in juvenile cases, there are people present in the court whose salaries are not included in the court cost estimates, such as social workers.

Lastly, the above court and detention figures show the costs per incident, rather than the cost per delinquent youth. The detention figures show the cost per admission, although the same child may be admitted several times in order to allow him or her to leave to attend a court hearing, for example. And a juvenile who offends multiple times may incur a court cost multiple times. In fact, the youths who offend seriously enough to warrant detention and probation are likely to be multiple offenders.

Table 7			
Estimated Per Incident Costs Associated with Juvenile Delinquency in 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		\$1,500,000	
	\$1,091,191	approx.	\$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

*From Table 3.

The following two sections will examine some hypothetical cases to show that school failure is so costly that neither the court nor the truancy reduction programs have to be widely successful in order to achieve a positive payback over time. It is likely that they both earn their keep many times over.

The student body count

There is one last quantifiable cost to truancy. Each October, schools count the number of students present in their classes, in order to determine how much state funding they should receive. Although it is trivial compared to the costs of dropping out of high school, the revenue lost when children are not present during the count period can be meaningful to schools. According to state law, if a school has either filed a truancy petition on a child or formally recommended a child to a truancy reduction program, the school can include him or her in its student count, and claim the per pupil state funds. Only one district has made extensive use of that option, however. Adams 14 claimed an additional \$286,000 for the 2000-2001 school year, and \$368,500 during the 2001-2002 year. Adams 28J also claimed some funds for children not in the building during the count period in October 2001, but the exact amount was not easily available, and the attendance officer recalled they only claimed funds for one or two children. Why Adams 12 and Pueblo did not collect additional funds is unclear. It could be that since the count window is two weeks long, even students with truancy problems are likely to attend at least once during that time. Schools may also be good at attracting students during the count period by holding fun activities.

Ironically, this policy provides financial rewards for unsuccessful or half-hearted attempts to get truants back to school. To the extent that truancy reduction efforts are unsuccessful, schools can receive money for students they ultimately do not teach. On the other hand, schools are financially penalized for reducing truancy. Chronically truant students are often behind in their schoolwork and need tutoring services. They are more likely than average to require special education services, and many of them have behavioral and attitudinal problems that require counseling and make them challenges in the classroom.

The Court Approach

Costs

The cost of sending a truant student to court exceeds the court costs presented in this report. We must also take into consideration the cost incurred by the school district and other agencies. School districts must hire outside attorneys or have their own in-house attorney to represent them in court. Denver and District 14 in Adams County have their own full-time attorney who handles truancy cases, among other things. The Attendance Officer in District 1 represented that district herself until recently, though she is not an attorney. At the beginning of 2002 they began hiring an outside attorney instead. District 28J, for example, uses an outside attorney whose charges amounted to almost \$22,000 last year.⁵ Pueblo County uses an outside attorney as well. In Adams and Denver counties, there is always an attorney to represent the child, but that bill is paid by the child's family, unless they do not meet minimum income criteria. The Pueblo court does not require families to have an attorney, and they are much less likely to do so. Charges for truancy cases submitted by attorneys who are not employed by the school district are sometimes bundled with other types of cases, and are partially covered by the families of truant children, making them difficult to know with certainty. This study estimates what the cost was likely to have been during the 2000-2001 school year based on the standard attorneys' fees and the number of cases they handled. If paid on an hourly basis, lawyers receive \$55 for each hour spent in court, and \$45 for each hour out spent out of court. If they are working on contract, they receive \$105 for each case during the calendar year that begins the day they take the case, regardless of how much time they spend. If a calendar year passes and the case is still open, they begin charging on an hourly basis after that. In the case of lawyers representing the children, the total figures are multiplied by the percent of students that qualify for free and reduced lunch in the district as a proxy for the proportion of families who will not be made to pay the legal fees themselves.

Other professionals often attend truancy hearings, and their salaries must be accounted for as well. A school employee, perhaps an assistant principal, a social worker, or a special education teacher, is often present. Denver Public Schools now has a social worker who works half time sitting in the truancy court so that school-based social workers do not have to go. Other specialists may be present in court, such as a social

⁵ District 28J is split between Adams and Arapahoe Counties. These charges were incurred by Adams County children alone.

worker from the Department of Social Services or a mental health expert, though they do not bill their services to the district. Most of these costs are extremely difficult to quantify because each truancy case is a bit different, so the cast of characters in the courtroom constantly changes. Moreover, if a school official goes to court and the child against whom the school has filed is among the first to go before the magistrate, the affair is quick, and the official may go back to the school building promptly. If that child is among the last to be seen, the official may spend hours waiting. Multiply this effect by the number of people present at any given court appearance, and a picture emerges of a constantly fluctuating number of school employees and social service workers arriving and leaving the juvenile court waiting room throughout the truancy court operation. 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.

To simplify this complex process, we will assume, based on interviews with experts involved in the court process in each district, that Denver always has one magistrate, one court clerk, one interpreter, one Denver Public Schools attorney, two and a half defense attorneys (generally either two or three attorneys are present at a time), one Denver Public Schools social worker (who is permanently assigned to the courtroom), one Department of Social Services social worker, one mental health services worker, and two representatives from programs that provide alternatives to detention, present at the courthouse throughout the scheduled truancy docket. That amounts to a total of 11.5 people. Fewer people are present in the Adams County and Pueblo courtrooms. We estimate that one magistrate, one school attorney, two defense attorneys, one school social worker, a half-time special education teacher, and an occasional mental health specialist are available during the Adams County truancy court, for a total of just under six people. In Pueblo we estimate that one magistrate, one school attorney, one defense attorney, one assistant principal, a half-time special education teacher, and a half-time mental health specialist are present, for a total of five people. These lists represent conservative estimates of the average number of people present. 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 plan under study here. Those substantial costs are not included in this paper because they cannot be specifically attributed to either the court process or the truancy reduction program. The average salaries of these job categories are weighted by the length of time the truancy court is in operation in each district.

The resulting estimated personnel costs are presented in Table 8, though they are aggregated so as not to indicate any specific individual's salary. Table 8 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,⁶ and \$694 to send a child to the Pueblo court.⁷

⁶ The number of truancy court filings used in this report – 980 – came from the Denver Public Schools social worker who serves in the court during its entire operation. The 980 total comes far from matching the 627 cases recorded by the court clerk and reported to the state judicial department as the official figure. There are two possible explanations for the discrepancy. First, the social worker's number came from his end of the year report, so that the time frame does not exactly match the fiscal year used by the court clerk. Second, his number includes cases that needed to be postponed for some reason. However, neither he nor the clerk felt these differences could explain the entire discrepancy. This paper relies on the social

Table 8			
Estimated Cost of Sending a Child to Truancy Court			
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Length of truancy court	One full day per week	One full day per week	Two hours per week
	Cost		
Personnel			
Court Employees	\$19,455	\$40,830	\$4,864
Attorneys: school and children	\$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 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 clerk in Adams and Pueblo counties, and from the Denver Public Schools social worker assigned to the Denver truancy court.

** The number of truancy cases in 2000-01 was unusually low. So as not artificially to inflate the per-case cost, the more typical number from 1999-2000 was used.

Benefits

How successful is sending a child to truancy court likely to be, and how should we define success? The immediate goal of truancy court is to get the child back in the

worker's court because he routinely collects data on the types of cases heard, and the grade level of the students in question, breakdowns that were helpful in other parts of the paper. If, however, we substitute the official count of 627 truancy filings, the cost per truant equals \$456, almost exactly that of Adams County.⁷ Part of that difference is that the Pueblo court handled far fewer cases in 2000-2001 than in 1999-2000, perhaps due to the efforts of Project Respect. However, the court continued to operate two hours per week. It is logical to assume that with fewer cases, fewer people were present in court and expenses should have gone down. However, due to the nature of the estimates, they may not be sensitive enough to pick up the difference. If we calculate costs using the 130 truancy cases heard in 1999-2000, and the \$2,388 in detention costs for that year we arrive at a per case cost of \$440, which closely matches that of Adams County.

classroom. If the child's attendance after the petition hearing satisfies school officials, the court process may be deemed successful. If the child does not attend school, and is found to be in contempt of court, the initial court hearing has failed to correct truancy. In many initial petition hearings, the magistrate schedules a petition review for a later date, in order to check on the child's attendance. Denver was able to provide court data in the level of detail needed to assess the system's success according to these criteria.

According to data provided by the DPS social worker who monitors the truancy court, 980 initial petition hearings were heard during the year ending in June 2001. During the same time, 48 trials were held for families who contested the truancy charge, and 301 contempt hearings were heard for youths who failed to attend school after receiving a court order to do so. These data imply a "first round" success rate of 68%. Of all the youths who received a first-time court order to go to school, 68% began attending classes.⁸ It is also likely that the "second round" contempt hearings motivated some additional youths to attend school. We cannot measure this second round success rate, however, because all we know is the number of contempt reviews held during the year - 329. We do not know the distribution of those reviews. It could be that only a few youths generated the bulk of the contempt review hearings, and that a good number of the "original" 301 began attending school. Or it could be that contempt hearings were successful in only a few cases, and the contempt review hearings were broadly distributed among the youths who ignored the first court order to attend school.

The court may also create a deterrent effect if it is viewed by the student population as tough on truancy. How many students attend school because they know someone who was sentenced to a weekend in detention or to an ankle monitoring program, cannot be guessed. The tougher the court response to truancy, the greater the deterrent effect is likely to be. The magistrate in Pueblo reported that he intentionally creates a deterrent effect among first offenders by calling a repeat offender to the bench first, sentencing him or her to detention and having the youth taken from the courtroom in handcuffs, while the first offenders watch from the back of the court room. Such stories likely travel fast among the broader student population.

While a mandatory court appearance for truancy might be enough to discourage more serious delinquent activity, encouraging a child to attend school for a few months cannot be assumed to avert the enormous costs of high school failure. No longitudinal study of truants is available to estimate the likelihood of truancy court to encourage high school graduation down the line. However, one magistrate estimated that a high school student taken to truancy court has a "near-zero" chance of graduating with either a regular degree or a GED. The same magistrate projected that for middle school children, the chances might be as high as 50%. What is the payoff to the court system if we assume that elementary and middle school children who are sent to truancy court graduate at the rate of 50%, and high school youths do not graduate at all? The Denver social worker

⁸ Note that this rate of success is an estimate because some of the trials and contempt hearings held during the early part of the year may have been the result of petition hearings carried over from the previous year, and youths whose petition hearings were held close to June 2001 had not had a chance either to show improved attendance or to fail. However, District 14 in Adams County was able to provide data on the number of cases sent to the Adams County court, that show 36% of initial hearings result in contempt hearings - quite comparable to Denver's 32%.

was able to provide data from the first two semesters of the 2001-2002 school year, broken down by elementary, middle, and high school status.⁹ Of the 443 petition hearings held during that time, 58 were for elementary school students, 205 were for middle school students, and 180 were for high school students. If the magistrate's estimate is accurate, then 29 of these elementary school children will graduate, and 102 to 103 middle school children will graduate, for a total of, let us say, 132 more graduates than there would have been in the absence of court intervention. This guess results in a 30% success rate overall.

What would be the savings generated if these success rates are accurate? We know that the figures depend on the race and gender of the individuals graduating. 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 do not know the racial characteristics of youths sent to any of the courts, but we do know the characteristics of youths sent to the truancy reduction programs. It is likely that the racial and gender mix of these two groups of truants will match reasonably well. We can use the mix of characteristics found among the three truant populations to create a hypothetical graduate for each county. Table 9 shows these calculations. Note that while Vernez et al. distinguish between Mexicans and other Hispanics, we average the two numbers to create a single Hispanic figure because we do not know the national origin of the Hispanics served. Table 9 can be read as follows. The hypothetical graduate in Adams County is 52% male and 48% female, and is 3% Asian, and 11% black, etc. The savings generated over the life of this unusual person is the sum of 52% times 3% times the savings figure for Asian men of \$256,390, plus 48% times 3% times the savings for Asian women of \$235,402, plus 52% times 11% times the savings of black men of \$297,188, etc. 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 graduate in Pueblo will save almost \$210,000, while a graduate of Denver stands to save the government over \$215,000.

⁹ It should be noted that these fall 2001 data show a first round success rate of 82% - much higher than the 68% found in the previous year, and that adding the six semesters together yields a rate of 72%. The difference could result from any combination of four reasons. First, there could be a cyclical nature to the school year; one social worker commented that the harder cases always came up in January and February. Second, the 82% could be an artifact of a poorer match-up between initial petition hearings and contempt reviews due to the shorter time period, but by the same token, the 72% should represent a better match-up due to the longer time period. Third, the difference could be random variation. Or fourth, it could indicate a real improvement in outcomes over time. Due to concerns about the possibility of annual cycles, this author has more confidence in the 62% success rate based on one full year of data.

Table 9			
The Cost of Hypothetical Dropouts in Adams, Denver and Pueblo Counties, based on Racial and Gender Characteristics Particular of Truancy Program Participation			
The lifetime cost of dropping out, by race and gender			
Racial category	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	
	Adams	Denver	Pueblo
Data year	01-02, 1st 3 quarters	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 (uses average cost, above)	2	16	3
Cost of a hypothetical dropout	\$208,371	\$215,649	\$209,550

If one full year of the Denver court process encourages 30% of its truants to graduate, there would be an additional 294 high school graduates, for which the government would save over \$63 million in 1995 dollars, already discounted to measure the current value of the money (see Table 10). If the court process is able to discourage these 132 youths from juvenile delinquency as well, that will generate an additional savings of \$1.8 million. (Note, however, there is no reason to assume that all truants are delinquents, so this figure clearly overestimates potential savings.) At the same 30% success rate, the Adams County court would encourage 65 students to graduate, for a savings of over \$13 million. If juvenile delinquency were averted among all these students, over \$250,000 would be saved. The smaller Pueblo court would encourage 39 youths to graduate each year, saving over \$8 million, and if delinquency were averted, that would save an additional \$166,560, again an obvious overestimate.

These data show that truancy courts must be only minimally successful in order to recoup their cost. The Adams county court must result in the graduation of only 1 of every 504 truants, or one every two and a quarter years. The Denver court has only to

encourage 1 of 739 truants to graduate, or, because it serves many more students, one every $\frac{3}{4}$ year. In Pueblo, 1 of every 293 truants must graduate, or one every 2.25 years.

	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***	One graduate every 2.3 years	One graduate every .75 years	One 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 who must eventually graduate from high school in order to offset court and sentencing costs. Additional graduates represent net government savings.

The Case Management Model

The same challenge to calculating benefits presents itself when evaluating the success of the truancy reduction programs. The Adams County Truancy Reduction Project and Pueblo’s Project Respect staffs keep track of their students’ school attendance for the short run, but the programs have not been in existence long enough for their participants to graduate from high school. Since the Denver program has no explicit duration, the social worker cannot even say what percent has successfully completed the program. She guesses that about 50% of the youths she serves improve their attendance. Although the benefits are as elusive as those of the court approach, the costs of the truancy reduction programs are easily available. The Adams County Truancy Reduction Project costs \$48,943 annually. Denver’s Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project costs \$53,771. The majority of these two budgets cover the salary and benefits of just one truancy case manager (TCM). Pueblo’s Project Respect, on the other hand, costs \$767,571. It is much more indicative of the total cost of non-court truancy reduction efforts. In Adams and Denver counties, much effort is made to correct truancy problems at the school level, but that work is beyond the scope of the projects under study, so their costs have not been calculated. In Pueblo, the Community Advocates paid for by the

project take primary responsibility for attendance follow-up in the schools. Thus, the bulk of school-level truancy costs are covered by Project Respect.

Table 11 shows that the high-end estimate of savings due to these programs is quite high indeed. 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 successfully completed the program in 2000-2001. If they all eventually graduate from high school, the program will have generated a savings of \$7.9 million, even if no juvenile delinquency is averted. Interestingly, the most expensive program has the potential to generate the greatest absolute savings. Pueblo would generate \$38.8 million in savings annually if 45% of their participants graduate from high school. Denver has no definitive way to measure program success, but the social worker guesses that 50% of the participants improve their attendance. In that case, the program could generate over \$9 million in savings annually. However, it may be more reasonable to assume that since the program is similar to that of Adams County, the success rate would be similar as well. Assuming a 42% success rate equivalent to that of Adams County, the program could save \$7.5 million annually.

	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%	(estimated) 42%	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 ***	every 4.2 years	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.

It is quite a stretch to assume that successful completion of a short-term program equates to high school graduation, however. These numbers may dramatically

overestimate the probability of graduating. Since the programs have not been in place long enough to know at what rate participants will eventually graduate, it is helpful to think about how many must graduate in order to recoup the cost of the program. Table 11 also shows the “breakeven success rate” which tells us the ratio of program participants who must graduate to make the program financially worthwhile. The smaller Adams and Denver County programs need only induce graduation among one out of every 383 and 337 participants respectively, which 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. Pueblo’s Project Respect represents the sum total of school-level efforts to reduce truancy. In Denver and Adams counties, the school staffs can be credited with improving attendance among many of the more easily handled cases. Should the costs of school level efforts and the benefits of those successes be aggregated with those of the truancy reduction programs, the results might look quite different.

Each expert consulted for this study agrees that truancy can be a symptom of a number of intractable problems, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and economic hardship. Given the seriousness of the problems faced by the families of truant youths, is it reasonable to expect that these programs can make the difference between high school failure and graduation, or between a life of delinquency and crime, and one free from these troubles? Perhaps. For example, a Pueblo community advocate told of an elementary school child who had not been to school for over a year. When she visited the child’s home, she learned that the building was infested with bats. The family had adopted the habit of sleeping during the day, when the bats were asleep, so they could remain awake all night long, to keep the bats away. The advocate was able to find alternative housing for the family, and the child began attending school regularly. The Project Respect staff has also collected a number of essays from its older participants about how the program got them back on track and involved in school. From all appearances, success is hard won, but possible.

It should be clear to any school district, court, or funding agency considering sponsoring a truancy reduction program that all the truancy reduction efforts evaluated here are excellent investments. Given the 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

This paper has shown that given the tremendous cost of high school failure, all the attempts to correct truancy evaluated here are easily worth the effort. If the social workers for the Adams County Truancy Reduction Project and for Denver’s Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project work for four years, they each need help only one child to graduate from high school during that time to pay for the cumulative cost of their services. A school or district may rightly feel that all the attention, phone calls, letters, and meetings they must have with a child prior to sending him or her to a truancy reduction project or to court have not been taken into consideration in this analysis. However, the vastly larger budget for Project Respect in Pueblo does include the majority of those efforts. Even that program need only make the difference between high school

graduation and failure for four students each year in order to pay for itself. If, on top of the graduation achievements, they can avert even one serious incident of delinquency a year, that would indicate a positive return on the investment.

There are a number of important benefits that this paper has not quantified, but which should not be forgotten. First, the TCMs 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 TCMs cannot be quantified in the present study. Second, the truancy reduction programs are likely to have a spill-over 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 a family problem prevents one child from attending school, it likely prevents others from going as well. 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. Third, better educated children who grow up in more stable environments will make better parents later in life. They will earn more money and better provide for their children. They will value education more and make their children more likely to succeed in school. Fourth, minority youths are overrepresented 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 truancy reduction programs and the court process have been shown to be monetarily valuable. Rather than debate which approach is better, the most successful truancy reduction effort is likely to be one, like those studied here, in which both systems operate in close cooperation with each other. A problem solving strategy of the kind used by the TCMs could be the most helpful in many cases of family dysfunction, while the threat of the immediate consequences of a court appearance – detention, loss of driver's license, parent fines – is what is needed for other children. The Adams County magistrate reported that the biggest effect the Truancy Reduction Project has had on his job is that he has more and better information about the children who come before him. The social workers frequently remind the families they serve of the possibility of court action. Thus, the operation of one system may increase the success of the other.

Finally, this paper has pointed to a dearth of research on truancy. Truancy appears in research only because it is consistently discovered to be a characteristic of delinquent youths. Perhaps more importantly, we can only speculate about the eventual educational outcomes of truant youths. 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. Without a longitudinal study of children with academic and school attendance problems, we can only surmise the results of those problems. One reason for the lack of research on truancy is the difficulty of conducting it.

Because schools are not required to collect data on truancy, they generally do not do so. Furthermore, truancy is difficult even for diligent schools to pinpoint if parents are facilitating the truancy. Most schools, for example, currently accept a parent's word that a child is ill. Seriously tracking truancy might require an end to that policy.

The present study demonstrates the serious financial impact resulting from school non-attendance and academic failure. Clearly, public policy and practice needs to shift to investing in at-risk youth prior to juvenile court involvement.

Appendix A: Adams County – The Truancy Reduction Project

The Truancy Reduction Project (TRP), available to all schools in all Adams County districts since the fall of 1999, is a voluntary alternative to the regular court system for truant students. Only three of Adams County's five districts ever participated actively, two of which continue to use the program.¹⁰ Prior to the Truancy Reduction Project, none of the districts filed many truancy cases because they felt the court, lacking information about the students' problems and without tough sentencing options, was ineffective. Changes that have occurred in districts' approaches to truancy are important because a truant child first passes through the school and district system. Only after failing at that level is a court action filed. Thus, the cases that are passed on to the Truancy Case Manager (TCM) are a function of the diligence with which districts enforce attendance laws, the success they have with their own programs, and their willingness to participate in the TRP. Although this study focuses on the two most actively participating districts - Commerce City and Mapleton - a discussion of all the district contexts is included below, followed by a description of the Truancy Reduction Project itself.

District 14 – Commerce City: At about the same time the court was revamping its truancy procedures, complimentary, but independent, actions were taken within District 14. In 1997, the district hired a new Director of Legal Council who launched a campaign to reduce the incidence of suspension, expulsion and truancy. At that point, the district had the highest truancy and expulsion rates in the state. Although the state provides the legal definition of truancy, it is, and always has been, up to school officials to determine when to invoke the law by initiating court proceedings. Prior to the TRP, District 14 rarely sent truants to court because school officials viewed it as a) costly in terms of lawyers' fees and school personnel time, and b) ineffective, because the Adams County court, which was not permitted to incarcerate youths for truancy alone, had no meaningful sanction. When they did file proceedings, they hired an outside lawyer. They spent little money this way, however, since they filed on few students. The monetary cost of truancy to the district prior to truancy reformation came primarily in the form of lost per student revenue from the state.

The district's new attorney hired part-time attendance liaisons for each school in 1997. Their sole task was to monitor student attendance and correct attendance problems.

¹⁰ Districts 14 in Commerce City and 1 in Mapleton send many truants to the program, and their staffs are enthusiastic about the program. District 28J in Aurora is split between Adams and Arapahoe Counties. They used to send students who lived in the Adams County portion of their district through the program, but have not done so since October 2001, citing the low success rate with their students. Since Arapahoe County sends youths to detention for truancy, but Adams does not, the District 28J staff has come to view the Adams County program as ineffective and lacking teeth by comparison. The director in charge of student discipline feels that pursuing truants is too costly in terms of staff time. District 12 has developed their own intervention program, which they feel is comparable. When that fails, they elect to send truant students to court under the old system. Brighton does not send truant students to court as a rule, and Westminster has sent only one student to the project.

These positions were made full-time in 1999. Each liaison currently receives a salary of \$13,000 to \$17,000 a year. Beginning in 1998, the district lawyer took over the legal work involved with sending truancy cases to court, rather than hiring an outside lawyer.

When the attendance liaison determines a child's absences are excessive, he or she first sends a letter to the parents or guardian. If problems persist, he/she draws up an attendance improvement plan, and in about 40% of the cases, makes a home visit to talk with the child and parents. If problems still persist, the paperwork is sent to the district attorney's office, and passed on to a retired LAPD officer, described as an imposing figure whom people tend to take seriously. He visits the home, and decides what type of hearing, either "in-district" or "interagency," is appropriate. Most cases receive an "in-district" hearing in the attorney's office. The parent(s) and child, the school attendance liaison, the district lawyer, and sometimes another school representative (a high school dean, a special education teacher, counselor, or mental health evaluator), attend the meeting. The parents and child are informed of the law, and another attendance plan is drawn up. They are informed that if attendance is not improved, the district will file court proceedings. If the family is determined to be in a crisis situation, for example a borderline case of dependency and neglect, an interagency meeting is held instead. The purpose of the meeting is the same, but more agencies are represented at the meeting, for example, diversion, probation, and/or social service providers. These meetings are fairly expensive in terms of personnel costs, but require no cash outlays.

If these efforts on the part of the public schools are ineffective, and the child is under 14 years of age, the district files a court proceeding for truancy. If the child is 14 years or older, efforts are abandoned because by the time the court is able to process the case and do anything about the problem, the child will be close to 16, at which point school is no longer mandatory. Furthermore, interviewees in all four districts have unanimously reported that the older the child, the more intractable the problems tend to be, and the less effective the interventions. In 2000-2001 District 14 handled 216 cases of truancy. Of these, 100, or 46%, improved their attendance. Of the others, 93 were sent to the Truancy Case Manager and 23 to the magistrate.

The district has felt several effects of the combined truancy efforts, mostly positive. The biggest effect, in the opinion of the district's attorney, is that standardized test scores have improved. Teaching practices have been modified as well during the same time, however, and the effects cannot be disentangled. Nonetheless, it stands to reason that improved attendance among enrolled children can only raise the score; if a registered child does not take the test, he or she receives a zero, which is then factored into the school's overall grade. Even a poor score is better than no score at all. In today's high-stakes testing environment, this is a politically important outcome for schools.

District 14 schools have also been able to increase the sum of their per pupil revenue from the state. Once the district has filed a court proceeding against a truant student, whether or not that student participates in the Truancy Reduction Program, the school can legally claim state revenue for that student. At \$5,500 per child, the recaptured revenue for students who were not in school during the count window totaled \$286,000 in 2000-2001 and \$386,500 in 2001-2002. A less desirable effect is the significant worsening of overcrowding. Portables are being added in many schools, but even at that, class sizes are too big.

District 1 – Mapleton: There are six elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and one alternative high school in District 1. As in Commerce City, Mapleton did not generally send truant students to court before the TRP was initiated. In 2000-2001 the district rewrote their truancy procedures in light of the new court alternative. The new system dictates that after three unexcused absences the school mails a form letter to the parents of the unexcused student, and after six absences another letter goes out. After ten absences a problem solving meeting is supposed to be held at the school, with school staff and the child's parents. In reality, practice still varies by school, and particularly if the student's grades are good, the number of absences can be closer to twenty before a meeting is held. The District Interagency Coordinator and Attendance Officer reported that when they first initiated these steps, one of the middle schools took it very seriously – so seriously that teachers began complaining that kids who had not been there previously were causing problems in the classroom.

If, after these school-level interventions, a child's attendance problems persist, an interagency meeting is held. Attending these meetings may be the Interagency Coordinator (who is also the district attendance officer), a school administrator, social service representatives, the school resource officer (a police officer based at the school who is paid half by the school district and half by the police department), a mental health worker, probation, juvenile diversion, and someone from the LINK (a juvenile assessment center for the county). These meetings last half an hour. They are held in blocks of four at a time, once a month. There is a significant bottleneck at this phase of the process. The number of meetings is dictated not by the needs of the student body, but by available resources. The Interagency Coordinator prioritizes cases, and tends to focus on the younger children first. In 2000-2001, the Interagency Committee met with 45 of the 65 youths on their list. In 1999-2000 the figures were similar; they met with 45 of 66 referred children.

The district program is fairly successful. In 2000-01, 108 of the 189 students (57%) reviewed during school and Interagency Committee meetings subsequently improved their attendance. Thirty-three percent of the 45 students sent to Interagency Committee meetings improved their attendance. However, if the interagency meeting is not successful, they file a court proceeding on children under 14 years of age, and send them to the Truancy Reduction Project. If the child is over 14, they refer him or her to the LINK (the Adams County Juvenile Assessment Center), and allow one more chance before filing in court. Thirteen cases were referred to the court.

Since 1998-99, District 1 has filed 24 cases with the Truancy Reduction Project, and seven direct filings with the court. They guessed that the program had been successful with about 25% of those students. Although not an overwhelming rate, the district staff said the greatest benefit of the Truancy Reduction Program is likely to be the deterrent effect on students who now know there are consequences of chronic truancy. The superintendent has not chosen to seek state funding for students with active truancy cases who were not counted during the student count window, though they have discussed doing so.

District 28J – Aurora: The Aurora Public School District spans two counties. About one quarter of the schools lie in Adams County, while about three quarters are in Arapahoe County. Since truancy is dealt with by the county court systems, the district must accommodate two systems for handling truant students. Furthermore, it is not the

address of the school that determines which system must be used, but the address of the student in question. Some school boundaries cross county lines, and enrollment is fairly open within the district, so each school must be prepared to work with both systems. The Arapahoe County court is among the toughest in the area. The court is permitted to send truant students to detention, and does so. Both school administrators and students are aware of the different outcomes of truancy, depending on where a student lives.

The district spends a considerable amount of money dealing with truancy. The figure has almost doubled from \$70,000 in 1995-96 to \$130,000 in 1999-2000. No breakdown is available, however, by county. When Adams County began the TRP, Aurora Public Schools made use of the program. In past years they sent a total of 62 students to the TCM; however, the district found little improvement in the attendance of those students. Because of the TCM's case load, they were displeased with the length of time it took for her to get an initial meeting with a student. Although there are no fees associated with the TRP, it requires administrator time, for which the district's Coordinator of Organizational Support, who is responsible for student discipline, sees little payoff. Accordingly, he has counseled schools not to file on truant students who live in Adams County, and no filings have been made since October of 2001. In the Coordinator's opinion, it is not a problem with the competency or procedures of the TCM, but with the numbers of students she must work with, and the fact that the magistrate cannot incarcerate students for truancy alone.

District 50 – Westminster: Westminster is in the process of changing the way it handles truants, again because the Adams County Court has become more effective in dealing with cases. Prior to the initiation of the Truancy Reduction Project, Westminster expelled habitually truant students who had accrued two to three times the ten absences that constitute the legal definition of truancy. In 1999-2000 they expelled approximately six students for truancy. (In the transition period of 2000-2001 they simply monitored students' attendance, but neither expelled nor initiated legal proceedings against them.) This academic year they began sending truants to court. By February 2001 they had sent one student directly to a court hearing and a handful to the Truancy Reduction Project. Although the district incurred no court costs in the pre-project period, expelling a student is not free. The district is still legally required to educate expelled children; parents who want a tutor can request one for up to ten hours a week, 36 weeks a year, at a cost of \$13 per hour. The maximum expenditure per student would then be \$4,680. Because of the few cases sent to the TRP so far, and the transitional character of current district practices, Westminster is not included in the cost/benefit analysis of this report.

District 12 – Northglenn: The Northglenn district staff was displeased with the functioning of the Truancy Reduction Project in its initial period, due to the length of time it took to get a truant child a meeting with either the counselor or the magistrate. The Director of Alternative and Intervention Services (AIS), who is new to the district this year, reported being told that only one of the 30 students sent to the TRP in its first year showed improvement. Nonetheless, the process required court costs and principals' time. As a result, they hired their own hearing officers and developed their own program. Although they are happy with their success rate, the AIS Director plans to reevaluate the costs and benefits of the two programs at the end of the year. Northglenn is another school district that spans two counties, Adams County and the newly-formed Broomfield

County. Using their own program avoids the complexity of dealing with two administrative centers.

Truancy Reduction Project (TRP): The TRP was initiated by the Adams County court in the fall of 1999, and had been in operation for almost three years at the time of this writing. The program is open to truant students 14 years of age and under in all Adams County schools, but it is not the only avenue for dealing with truancy. Schools, generally under the advice of their district offices, choose whether or not to offer the TRP to their students as an alternative to court. (The program is not available to truant children 14 and over because they are so close to the 16-year cutoff for mandatory schooling.) The annual program budget is just under \$50,000. The money is used to pay the salary and benefits of a full-time, bilingual Truancy Case Manager (TCM) who works with the truant students and their families. The court pays for operating expenses, like mileage and office space, out of its regular budget. For the first three years of operation, the State Department of Justice funded the program. As spring of 2002 approached, most key players were convinced that continuation funding would not be found, and that the program would not resume in the fall of 2002. Asking districts to pay for the program was discussed, but those districts that do not make use of the program were understandably not interested in paying for it. By a hair's breadth, the Colorado Department of Justice renewed the funding for the 2002-2003 school year.

The TRP is a court-run project, so when a school refers a student to the TRP, it is a court action. The first step in the process is called the Initial Hearing, during which the Truancy Case Manager informs the student and his/her family of the law and describes the program requirements. The student and family are given the option either to enter the Truancy Reduction Project or go through the regular court process. In almost all cases, the family opts for the TRP. Judging by their choices, students and their families are unambiguously glad to have the TRP option.

School staff, parents, and the child must complete extensive questionnaires about the student's school participation, behavior, family history, and extracurricular activities. The student questionnaire is particularly extensive, and includes questions on friendships, hobbies, family relations, relations with school staff, job information, drug and alcohol use, and contacts with the police department. Equipped with the completed questionnaires and notes taken during the Initial Hearing, the TCM develops a personalized Family Treatment Plan for improving the child's school attendance. The plan, to which the family must agree and sign, is reviewed at the second meeting. The TCM monitors the attendance reports that the school is required to submit on all participating students.

Program requirements are not insignificant for a student who is accustomed to frequent truancy and or tardiness, and who likely has difficulty with schoolwork. The student must have no unexcused absences for twelve weeks. If a child is sick, the parent must provide a doctor's note or have the child visit the school nurse. Merely a phone call from a parent is not sufficient to excuse an absence. The student's 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.

If, however, the student has an unexcused absence during the three-month program, the child is said to “disrupt” – in other words, fail. An advisement hearing before the magistrate is then scheduled, and the regular court process is initiated. At the advisement hearing, the court issues an order to compel attendance, and may request a review hearing for a later date. If the student denies the unexcused absence that provoked the advisement hearing, a “hearing on the merits” is scheduled. If the student continues to miss school, the district initiates contempt proceedings. For these students, the court process can be lengthy and costly, entailing many court appearances.

The role of the Truancy Case Manager is to give families whatever support they need in order to get their children to school. The TCM keeps a file of all service organizations available in the county, and frequently makes referrals to low cost health clinics, mental health service providers, or substance abuse clinics, for example. She also follows up on whether the families have acted on her referrals. She works as an advocate for the family with the school, to make sure the student receives all the services to which he or she is entitled. Her job is to be supportive, rather than punitive, and to always keep the child’s best interests at heart. However, the information uncovered during her interactions with families has led her to file several dependency and neglect cases.

Appendix B: Denver – The Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project

The Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project (TRDP) is a small program designed to handle the most intractable attendance problems among Denver Public School middle school students. Its annual budget of just under \$54,000 funds one social worker who operates out of the Community Assessment Center in Denver. In addition to her middle school focus, the TRDP social worker has handled a small number of elementary school cases and has followed some of her middle school students into high school. This “Truancy Reduction *Demonstration* Project” is nested within a much larger effort, also focused on middle school, called the “Truancy Reduction Project (TRP).” The two programs are complimentary, but should not be confused with each other. Although this paper evaluates the costs and benefits of only the TRDP, it will describe the TRP in order to place the program in context.¹¹

The truancy reduction efforts in Denver during the 2001-2002 school year had their seeds in the mid-1990s when a committee was formed to study recipients of multiple social services, and to describe a prototype recipient. The name given to this fictitious person was Geraldine Thompson. Among other characteristics, Geraldine had a history of difficulty in school and of attendance problems that compounded those difficulties. Thus, school attendance came to be viewed as a cornerstone of effective social service management. Current truancy reduction efforts are cobbled together from a number of funding sources, and take different forms according to elementary, middle, or high school setting. The TRP money goes to middle and high schools, but not the elementary schools. The backbone of the TRP consists of ten truant officers who serve two middle schools each, 19 catch-up teachers (18 of which work in middle schools and one in a high school), eight social workers (in addition to those already funded by the district), and a Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) that reviews truancy cases that the truant officers and social workers are unable to resolve. In addition, the district pays for attendance clerks in the elementary schools, and the Safe Schools Healthy Students Initiative pays for one elementary school SARB. Social workers, whether paid for by the district or the TRP, spend up to half their time on attendance issues. Funding for these truancy reduction efforts has been cut for the next school year, however; the final shape of the program for the 2002-2003 school year has not yet been determined.

Attendance efforts begin within the school buildings. Responsibility for those efforts varies according to school staffing. Teachers, principals, social workers, attendance clerks and truant officers share the responsibility. Some schools might have a social worker but not an attendance clerk, or have an attendance clerk but not a truant officer, and there are about 40 schools that do not have social workers. If the combined efforts of school staff members are unsuccessful, they select students to send either to a SARB or to court. There are 16 SARBS that serve 19 schools, and one that was formed

¹¹ A thorough description and evaluation of the TRP has been done elsewhere. See Anthony I, Castro, V., and Goodteacher, D., Evaluation: Truancy Reduction Project 2000-2001, Department of Social Work Services, Denver Public Schools, July 2001.

by special request to serve five elementary schools. SARB members come from a number of government and community agencies including Human Services, Juvenile Diversion, the Police Department, mental health service providers, parents, and non-profit community organizations. They review cases, meet with families, and draw up individualized contracts specifying the student's, parents', and school's responsibilities regarding a child's attendance problem. A student's participation in the SARB process is voluntary. SARB resources are inadequate to handle the huge number of truancy cases in Denver. Schools select students they feel will benefit most from SARB intervention – those that have family support and are just beginning to develop patterns of truancy, but who they deem will accept correction and help. The more intractable cases are sent directly to court.

The original idea behind the TRDP was to provide additional support to families who had gone through the SARB process without success. However, the case load has grown so great that some cases are referred to the TRDP social worker without having gone through the SARB. Recently, she has also begun to receive cases that involve more than truancy. The Denver Department of Human Services used to serve all children who were deemed by the court to be “beyond control of parent” – BCOP cases. When Human Services became overwhelmed with cases, they began to reallocate their resources away from these BCOP children. In response, the Community Assessment Centers were formed to provide services to a broader segment of the population than DHS could serve. Since many BCOP children have severe truancy problems, some of them have been added to the TRDP social worker's case load. She reported that forty percent of the children in her current case load have trouble with more than just truancy.

Although referrals were slow to come in the first year of the TRDP, that has changed, and the social worker now carries a large load. She served 73 students in 1999-2000, 84 in 2000-2001, and 45 in just the fall semester of 2001. The social worker begins with each new student by conducting a needs assessment, always in the child's home. She uses the opportunity to gather a full family history, including the family's strengths and weaknesses, and find out what sort of help the family needs in order to get their children to school. Like the Adams County case manager, she makes frequent referrals to an array of community agencies. She has a small budget which she can use to purchase things for the children she serves like school clothes, an alarm clock, or in one case a bicycle for transportation to school. She follows each child extensively for a few months, but there is no official graduation from her program. Once she has a file on a student she continues to monitor them to whatever extent she feels necessary. Likewise, there are no concrete goals for her students other than improved attendance. Having no specific end to her program and no quantifiable goals makes it difficult to count successes or failures. The social worker feels that she is able to help about half the students she serves improve their attendance to an acceptable level. If, after a few months of her intervention, the student makes no improvement in his or her attendance, she refers the case to court.

Concurrent with the initiation of the TRP and the TRDP, court procedures for handling truancy changed substantially. Before the Geraldine Thompson Committee made truancy a focus, schools rarely filed truancy cases in court. When they did, it took six months to a year to get a case into court. Before a concrete plan for improvement could be drawn up, or any social services provided, a student would have to go to court,

be ordered back to school, and then be found in contempt of court for not improving attendance. Cases were heard by one of three magistrates who did not always agree in terms of how seriously they viewed the truancy problem. The process took so long that it was viewed as useless by school officials. Detention was an available option for truant children then, and now, but was rarely used. Detention remains a last resort, and a number of programs are in place to minimize the number of children given that sentence.

Now, one magistrate hears almost all the truancy cases. Truancy court is held every Friday to minimize the time that school officials and social service representatives spend waiting in court, and therefore the associated cost. Since there are too many cases to fit into the allotted time, however, spillover cases are heard on other afternoons. This year, two days during Spring Break were devoted to catching up. Hearings can last five minutes for the initial petition, or up to an hour for a trial. About 50 cases are heard every Friday. The court held about 2,000 truancy-related hearings during the 2000-2001 school year. (Since some children return to court multiple times, far fewer than 2,000 students were involved.) A number of people are present at the court hearings: the magistrate, the child and his or her family, the DPS attorney representing the school, an attorney or guardian ad litem (GAL) representing the child, a Department of Human Services social worker, and a Denver Public Schools social worker assigned to the court. (Until recently, the social worker assigned to the child's school was required to attend the hearings. That led to considerable duplication of effort, as a number of social workers spent hours waiting for their students' cases to be heard. Now, DPS has one social worker assigned to court; he reviews reports completed by the school social worker, so they do not have to appear.) In special cases other service providers may be present as well. A Spanish language interpreter is available all day, and interpreters for other languages are scheduled as needed. A representative from Project X, a juvenile diversion program, is also in court all day. At the time of a child's first truancy petition hearing, the Human Services representative does a brief needs assessment. If she deems a full assessment is required, she schedules one for a later date. Her goal is to prevent contempt hearings by connecting the student with whatever services he or she needs to resolve the attendance issue. This is much the same as the goal of the SARBs and the TRDP social worker, but not all children who are sent to court have gone through those programs. She reported that her investigations discover many mental health cases, and the services to which she refers children can prevent charges of dependency and neglect.

A number of official sentencing options are available. They include Project X, which places a child on an ankle monitor and provides tutors, usually for 45 days, and Youth Passages, which is similar to Project X but provides transportation to their own school, generally for a 90-day sentence. Two detention centers, one for boys and one for girls, are available as a last resort, but few children are sent there solely for reasons of truancy. Most children also have other offenses, but data on the offenses is not available.

Appendix C: Pueblo – Project Respect

Pueblo has the most extensive of the three truancy reduction programs reviewed here. There are two districts in the city of Pueblo, one urban (Pueblo 60) and one rural. So far, Project Respect is operating in the eleven Title 1 schools located in the urban district. They consist of eight elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and one alternative school. Before Project Respect began, Pueblo 60 had three overworked truant officers who tried to contact students, make home visits, and send chronically truant children to court. A four-month waiting list to get to court culminated in a hearing before one of the six different judges who decided truancy cases. There was little consistency among schools in terms of which students they sent to court, or among judges in terms of how they handled cases. For example, some judges were willing to send truant children to detention, but some did not believe in doing so. In general, few cases were filed due to the expense and time it took to get a hearing.

Pueblo 60 began planning an alternative system in January of 1999, received a grant in the fall, and began operation in January of 2000. The Project Respect budget is enormous compared to those of the other programs in this analysis – almost \$770,000 in 2001-2002. The bulk of this money pays the salaries of 15 social workers called Community Advocates (CAs), who work intensively with Project Respect students and their families. It also covers the cost of the High School Proficiency Program in which a teacher works with 30 students in an intensive reading and language arts block each day. A third piece of the program focuses on mental health. There is one therapist who goes to the schools and works with the students and families in a fairly traditional manner. But if needed, the student can also participate in the Equine Assisted Suspension/Expulsion Uproot Program, otherwise known as EASE-UP. EASE-UP participants attend either group or individual therapy sessions which revolve around working with a horse. Forty percent of Project Respect students have done the six-week EASE-UP session. Project Respect also contracts with the Pueblo Recreation Department to sponsor special activities like sports camps and skating parties.

Community Advocates, however, are the meat and potatoes of Project Respect. Unlike the Adams County Truancy Case Manager, the CAs are school-based. There are nine CAs housed in eight elementary schools, one in the middle school, three in the high school, and one in an alternative school. The CAs work with many more children than the relative few who are enrolled in the Project Respect Program. A significant part of the CAs' job is to follow up on attendance and behavior issues before they become the chronic problems that make a child eligible for Project Respect.

Unlike the other programs, Project Respect targets children for reasons other than truancy alone. Students must have exhibited difficulties in at least two of five areas to be considered for program participation: attendance (absences, whether excused or not), tardiness, behavior, suspensions, and truancy (unexcused absences). In 2001-2002 just under 20% of the program participants were referred for reasons of truancy, but almost

80% were referred for attendance problems, and almost 50% for tardiness.¹² Whatever the label, a poor record of getting to school is the main reason for admittance into the program; the 163 students served by Project Respect this year averaged six absences per quarter last year, well above the legal limit for truancy. Thirty-five percent were referred for behavioral issues, and although fewer than 20% were referred due to suspensions, the majority of Project Respect students had been suspended at least once last year. Twenty-five, or 15%, have a history of involvement with law enforcement, 9 are on probation, and 5 are in a juvenile diversion program. Seventy percent of the students have serious difficulties in their living situation, according to Project Respect evaluators. Thus, Project Respect staff members, like those in Adams County and Denver, deal with children who face multiple challenges.

The role of the CA is to support the families of children with attendance or behavioral problems, and provide a link between the families and the school. CAs make phone calls or visits to the home of every child in the school who accrues a number of absences, hoping to help him or her get back to school. If the student is ill, they try to get medical services; if they find the power has been turned off for failure to pay, they find resources to help the family get utilities on again; if they find a child does not want to go to school because he or she cannot afford acceptable clothing, the CA takes the student shopping. In short, they try to meet any need that will prevent a pattern of truancy from developing. This level of effort is not always enough, however, and the CAs cannot intensively serve all the children who have attendance problems. Each school has a Teacher Support Team that decides which families would be best suited to the program. The teams focus on the students that appear to have the most serious difficulties, but also select based on which families they believe would be most receptive to help. Children with special education needs, or who get other special services from the school, are not eligible for Project Respect. The program goal is to provide a resource for families who otherwise would get no special attention from the school staff.

Each CA serves 10 to 12 families at any one time. If one child is admitted into the program, all the children in the family are admitted by extension. Thus, it is a family-based rather than student-based project. For these children, the CA organizes special after-school activities. For example, the middle school CA lives on a farm, so she runs an adopt-a-pet program in which the students visit her farm on a regular basis and learn to care for a farm animal. Project Respect students in an elementary school built a float for the Parade of Lights in November. There are also free sports teams at the YMCA for Project Respect pupils. Or students might be taken skating one day if they have attended tutoring sessions for the two previous days. Project Respect provides an incentive to attend school; in order to participate in the fun activities, the student must attend school. By keeping the children busy, it also keeps them out of trouble.

Successes are difficult to measure in aggregate, partially because the program is new, and in part because multi-year grade and attendance information are not available for all the students given the high mobility rate. However, Project Respect students averaged six absences per quarter in 1999-2000, and only three per quarter in the fall of 2001. Half of the 125 students for whom grades were available this year and last year showed grade improvement. Although grade improvement was more evident in

¹² Since two reasons are required for referral, the total adds to 200%.

elementary and middle school students than high school students, all the high school students in the program improved their CSAP scores. Fifty-eight of eighty-three students, or 70%, had fewer disciplinary referrals than last year. Of the 423 students served by the program in 2001-2002, 189 successfully completed the program, and 49 were removed from the program, most of whom transferred to other schools. Eight students failed the program and were sent to court. The remainder of the students is still participating.

When Project Respect is not sufficient to improve attendance, or if a student attends a non-participating school, court is still an option. Truancy court is held on Wednesday afternoons. All current truancy cases come in at the same time for an advisement regarding the law and their responsibilities. Then the magistrate calls each child, along with his or her family, to the bench separately for a few minutes of consultation. If a child is under 11 years of age, Human Services is informed of the case. Several people attend the truancy court sessions. A Department of Social Services caseworker is always there. If the family already has a particular caseworker, he or she attends as well. The school's assistant principal and attorney are present, and other possible attendants include a special education teacher or a mental health professional. At the advisement, the magistrate issues a court order for the child to attend school. Toward that end, he can include any requirements he sees fit, including curfews, suspension of driver's licenses, fines to the family, or orders for a parent to attend school with the child. A review is set for three weeks later, and in ninety percent of the cases, a third review takes place about three months later. According to the magistrate, the most difficult cases may make up to ten court appearances. If, after receiving a court order to attend school, the child is absent without excuse again, he or she is in contempt of court. Another hearing is held, at which the child may be sentenced to 45 days in detention. An alternative, however, is a sentence of 90 days in the Senate Bill 94 program. Designed to keep kids out of detention, this program puts truants on 24-hour-a-day electronic monitoring using an ankle monitor. Youths who violate the requirements of SB94 may still be sent to detention.

Although Project Respect was designed to reduce truancy, the new focus on attendance by both the school and court means that more cases are being sent to court now than before. More court time and more school personnel time is being put into the effort, so the costs of dealing with truancy in court have risen at the same time that more money is being allocated to prevention.

An important goal for Project Respect, particularly given its cost, is to make each element self-funding within five years. The mental health component is already self-funding. The therapist who runs the equine mental health program has an independent practice. Although many of her referrals come from Project Respect, she serves other clients as well. She bills Medicaid just as she bills any insurance company. Other elements of the project have been designed to qualify for Medicaid coverage as well. The CAs' salaries can be billed because they are based in schools and serve the general population of students. In future years, they expect the entire cost of Project Respect to be covered by outside sources, mostly Medicaid, so that it will be entirely free to the district.

Appendix D: High School Graduation Rates in Colorado

The following calculations show that the portion of current high school students likely to drop out far exceeds the proportion served by the programs under study. Table D1 shows dropout rates in Colorado by grade and gender from 1996-97 to 2000-01, and the change in rates across that time span. Dropout rates in each year of high school decreased over the last five years, although 7th and 8th grade rates rose a bit. The improvement was most dramatic for 12th graders. In 2001, there were 729 more graduates than would have been predicted in the spring of 1997. If we apply each of the four 2001 9th to 12th grade rates to last year's 9th graders, 85% of them would be expected to graduate from high school in the spring of 2004, but 15% would be expected to drop out along the way. (This calculation assumes that last year's 9th graders, as they age, will act just like last year's 10th, 11th, and 12th grade cohorts. However, if dropout rates continue to fall, then last year's 9th grade cohort will do even better than that.)

Table D1
Colorado Dropout Rates by Grade, Gender and Year

Grade		96-97			97-98			98-99			99-00			00-01			Change
		Pupil Count	Dropout Count	Rate													
7	Male	29,892	73	0.2	30,592	59	0.2	31,101	66	0.2	31,255	79	0.3	31,883	137	0.4	0.2
	Female	27,987	66	0.2	28,366	52	0.2	29,347	68	0.2	29,154	78	0.3	30,171	137	0.5	0.3
	Total	57,879	139	0.2	58,958	111	0.2	60,448	134	0.2	60,409	157	0.3	62,054	274	0.4	0.2
8	Male	30,885	102	0.3	30,762	144	0.5	31,466	122	0.4	32,067	100	0.3	32,311	121	0.4	0.1
	Female	28,770	102	0.4	28,951	156	0.5	29,593	131	0.4	30,223	103	0.3	30,484	141	0.5	0.1
	Total	59,655	204	0.3	59,713	300	0.5	61,059	253	0.4	62,290	203	0.3	62,795	262	0.4	0.1
9	Male	33,897	1,314	3.9	34,744	1,325	3.8	35,146	1,511	4.3	35,871	1,408	3.9	36,717	1,309	3.6	-0.3
	Female	31,621	1,092	3.5	32,067	1,121	3.5	32,575	1,148	3.5	33,196	1,205	3.6	34,559	986	2.9	-0.6
	Total	65,518	2,406	3.7	66,811	2,446	3.7	67,721	2,659	3.9	69,067	2,613	3.8	71,276	2,295	3.2	-0.5
10	Male	29,574	1,854	6.3	30,542	1,838	6.0	30,913	1,709	5.5	31,899	1,584	5.0	32,540	1,584	4.9	-1.4
	Female	27,588	1,343	4.9	28,739	1,332	4.6	28,886	1,193	4.1	30,169	1,104	3.7	30,515	1,087	3.6	-1.3
	Total	57,162	3,197	5.6	59,281	3,170	5.3	59,799	2,902	4.9	62,068	2,688	4.3	63,055	2,671	4.2	-1.4
11	Male	26,977	1,782	6.6	27,783	1,919	6.9	28,461	1,791	6.3	28,497	1,501	5.3	30,156	1,597	5.3	-1.3
	Female	25,532	1,478	5.8	26,092	1,394	5.3	27,078	1,345	5.0	26,709	1,101	4.1	28,535	1,238	4.3	-1.5
	Total	52,509	3,260	6.2	53,875	3,313	6.1	55,539	3,136	5.6	55,206	2,602	4.7	58,691	2,835	4.8	-1.4
12	Male	21,141	1,357	6.4	22,029	1,286	5.8	22,664	1,167	5.1	24,413	1,101	4.5	24,453	1,057	4.3	-2.1
	Female	20,831	870	4.2	22,104	867	3.9	22,410	791	3.5	24,245	776	3.2	24,122	772	3.2	-1.0
	Total	41,964	2,227	5.3	44,133	2,153	4.9	45,074	1,958	4.3	48,658	1,877	3.9	48,575	1,829	3.8	-1.5
None	Male	871	288	33.1	1,005	316	31.4	1,061	302	28.5	1,116	367	32.9	1,065	310	29.1	-4.0
	Female	831	246	29.6	938	254	27.1	950	240	25.3	1,014	282	27.8	970	242	24.9	-4.7
	Total	1,702	534	31.4	1,943	570	29.3	2,011	542	27.0	2,130	649	30.5	2,035	552	27.1	-4.3
TOTAL	Male	173,237	6,770	3.9	177,457	6,887	3.9	180,812	6,668	3.7	185,118	6,140	3.3	189,125	6,115	3.2	-0.7
	Female	163,160	5,197	3.2	167,257	5,176	3.1	170,839	4,916	2.9	174,710	4,649	2.7	179,356	4,603	2.6	-0.6
TOTAL		336,397	11,967	3.6	344,714	12,063	3.5	351,651	11,584	3.3	359,828	10,789	3.0	368,481	10,718	2.9	-0.7

Prepared by the Research and Evaluation Unit of the Colorado Department of Education, February 2002.

This is not the end of the high school story, however, since an increasing proportion of high school graduates are reporting they earned a GED as opposed to a traditional high school degree (Murnane and Tyler, 2000). Of the 15% that we expect will drop out of high school, how many will later earn a GED? Nationally, the proportion of high school students earning a degree in the traditional way, at the end of 12th grade, has fallen slightly, (see Table D2, and note that most of the decrease may be a result of changes in survey methods), while the proportion of degrees earned by alternative means has risen to make up the difference. The total rose only slightly between 1988 and 1999. The correlation between the two types of degrees, based on the most recent six years of data, for which there were no changes in survey methods, is $-.91$. That is, for every 100 additional dropouts, 91 more would be expected to get a GED.

Year	Total	Completion method (percent)	
		Diploma	Alternative ¹
1988	84.5%	80.3%	4.2%
1989	84.7	80.5	4.2
1990	85.6	80.6	4.9
1991	84.9	80.7	4.2
1992 ²	86.4	81.2	5.2
1993 ²	86.2	81.2	4.9
1994 ^{2,3}	85.8	78.8	7.0
1995 ^{2,3}	85.3	77.5	7.7
1996 ^{2,3}	86.2	76.5	9.8
1997 ^{2,3}	85.9	76.7	9.1
1998 ^{2,3}	84.8	74.7	10.1
1999 ^{2,3}	85.9	76.8	9.2

NOTE: Because of rounding, detail may not add to totals.

Table reproduced from Kaufman et al, Dropout Rates in the United States, 1999, NCES, November 2000.

1. Completed high school by means of an equivalency test, such as a GED exam.
2. Numbers for years 1992 through 1999 reflect new wording of the educational attainment item in the Current Population Survey beginning in 1992.
3. Numbers for years 1994 through 1999 reflect changes in the Current Population Survey due to newly instituted computer-assisted interviewing and the change in population controls used in the 1990 Census-based estimates, with adjustment for undercounting in the 1990 Census.

Table D3 shows graduation rates in Colorado from 1996 to 2000, but how likely are current students to earn a GED at some point in the future? Using national figures we can make a prediction. In 1996, 77.7% of the senior class graduated with a traditional high school degree, 1.2% more than the national average. Using the correlation coefficient of $-.91$, we would expect 1.1% fewer (or 8.7%, since $9.8 - 1.1 = 8.7$), alternative degrees. From there, we continue applying the correlation to the change in the Colorado graduation rate. Based on these calculations, just over 13% of Colorado's recent high school cohorts will terminate their education without receiving either a high school degree or its equivalent.

Table D3				
Graduation Rates in Colorado				
1996 to 2000				
Year	Graduation Rate	Predicted GED Rate	Predicted HS Equivalency Rate	Predicted Dropout Rate
1996	77.7	8.7	86.4	13.6
1997	78.5	8.0	86.5	13.5
1998	80.1	6.5	86.6	13.4
1999	79.9	6.7	86.6	13.4
2000	80.9	5.8	86.7	13.3

Source for Colorado graduation rates: Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Education Facts, 1996-2000.

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