Truancy Prevention Efforts in School-Community Partnerships

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The emphasis that school districts place on regular school attendance is a reflection of the importance our nation places on education, as well as a recognition that being in school on a daily basis is necessary if education is to effectively prepare a child for adulthood. Truancy and chronic absenteeism, which are often steppingstones to dropping-out of school before graduation, have consequences for children, the adults these children will become, and the society in which they live. Programs that promote consistent attendance by addressing the risk factors that lead to truancy can also improve academic achievement while reducing problem behaviors, including substance abuse and delinquency. This brief will discuss:

Definitions and extent of truancy

Risk factors

Past approaches

Effective approaches

Examples of innovative approaches

Economic consequences of truancy

Examples of truancy reduction approaches from Safe Schools/Healthy Students sites

Definitions and Extent of Truancy

Every state requires that children attend school, or be provided with an authorized equivalent such as home schooling. These state mandates are accompanied by regulations on how state education and juvenile justice agencies must respond to truancy; however, the number of days absent and the criteria for categorizing unexcused absences under truancy varies by jurisdiction. The following definitions capture the different categories of behaviors.

Definitions

Truancy - While there is no nationally accepted definition of truancy, the following definition reflects many state policies: If a student is absent without an excuse by the parent/guardian or if the student leaves school or a class without permission of the teacher or administrator in charge, it will be considered an unexcused absence and the student shall be considered truant (Seeley, 2006).

Habitual Truancy - Habitual truancy is defined as a specific number of consecutive unexcused absences from school or a total number of unexcused absences over a semester or school year. The school is primarily responsible for responding to truancy (often in the form of a call to parents). If school efforts fail, habitually truant students may become involved with the juvenile justice system (Seeley, 2006).

Chronic Truancy - In recent years, many school districts have also created a third category, "chronic truant." This term mainly refers to students who have been disciplined according to procedure after meeting the criteria for habitual truancy, but continue to accumulate unlawful absences despite court or school mandate (Seeley, 2006).

Chronic Absenteeism - Younger children are usually referred to as "chronically absent" rather than truant, because it is presumed that they cannot miss school without their parents' knowledge. Young children (K–3) missing 10 percent or more of school each year are considered chronically absent (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Frequency of Truancy

Reliable national or state data on truancy are difficult to find. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act required states to report truancy rates by school beginning with the 2005–2006 school year, but due to the discrepancies in state definitions, aggregate national data are not available. However, some national data sets do give us an understanding of just how pervasive truancy and chronic absenteeism are among students of various age groups:

- Based on a study by the National Center for Children and Poverty (NCCP), data from nine school districts across the nation demonstrated that over 11 percent of kindergartners were chronically absent.

- A five-year longitudinal study by NCCP found that nearly nine percent of first graders were chronically absent. In addition, about 25 percent of kindergarteners were either at-risk (i.e., living below the federal poverty level, living with a mother who had not attended high school) or chronic absentees (NCCP, 2008).

- A study using data from a large national survey of drug use found that about 11 percent of eighth grade students and about 16 percent of 10th grade students reported having been truant at least once in the previous four weeks (Henry, 2007).

Risk Factors and Consequences Related to Truancy

Risk Factors

The broad range of risk factors related to truancy has important implications for programs and activities. A literature review commissioned by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) found correlations between truancy and four categories of risk factors:

1. *Family factors* (lack of supervision; poverty; alcohol or drug abuse; lack of awareness of attendance laws; attitude toward education)

2. ***School factors*** (school size; attitudes of students, staff, and teachers; inflexibility toward meeting different learning styles; inconsistent procedures for dealing with chronic truancy)

3. ***Economic factors*** (employed students; single parent homes; high mobility; parents with multiple jobs; lack of transportation)

4. ***Student factors*** (drug and alcohol abuse; lack of understanding of attendance laws; lack of social competence; mental and physical health problems) (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001). It should be noted that schools and communities are concerned about the effects of bullying on truancy. Although there is little evidence to suggest a strong direct linkage between bullying and truancy, an OJJDP study found that if bullying results in the victim becoming less engaged in school, that victim is more likely to cease attending and achieving (Seeley, Tombari, Bennett & Dunkle, 2011).

Among the many risk factors related to truancy, for young children, family and economic factors have the greatest impact on chronic absenteeism in early elementary school. A national report by the NCCP (Romero & Lee, 2007) indicated that chronic absenteeism was highest among children living in poor families. This study also reported that children living with poor families in low-income communities are more likely to experience family risk factors compared to affluent children. These risk factors may include having a mother with a low education or poor health, a mother who is unemployed, or the experience of food insecurity at home. Children experiencing multiple risk factors were more likely to miss 10 percent or more of the school year than their peers experiencing no such risks.

Consequences of Chronic Absenteeism

For young children, chronic absenteeism in early elementary school can lead to both short- and long-term consequences. Over 50 percent of those chronically absent in kindergarten were chronically absent in first grade (Romero & Lee, 2007). Early absenteeism affects school achievement in the early years, and this achievement gap has negative long-term effects, particularly for children living in urban, low-income communities. Absence in early elementary school is associated with a seven percent lower probability of high school graduation (Seeley, 2008).

Consequences of Truancy

Overall, truancy has a number of harmful consequences—not only for students, but also for schools and communities. Truancy affects academic achievement throughout school. A literature review by the National Center for School Engagement (Heilbrunn, 2007) found that, compared to non-truant students, students who are truant:

- Have lower grades

- Need to repeat grades more often

- Have higher rates of expulsion

- Have lower rates of high school graduation.

The review reported that some schools and districts still expel or otherwise "push out" students who are both truant and low-achieving. While removing these students can raise the school's overall level of academic achievement (as measured by grades, grade promotion, and graduation rates), it can also

lower enrollment, which drives school funding based on attendance. The literature review also concludes that truancy is a risk factor for other problems, including:

- Substance abuse

- Delinquency

- Gang activity

- Serious criminal behavior (such as car theft and burglary)

- Suicidal ideation and attempts

- Early sexual activity

- Dropping out of school

Truancy affects not only youth but also the adults they will become. Adults who were chronically truant from school as children or adolescents are at an elevated risk for a host of problems, including poor physical and mental health, poverty, incarceration, and raising children who exhibit problem behaviors (Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001). Although truancy has a negative influence on students' academic achievement, behavior, and health, addressing the issue early on has shown that such problems can be prevented by taking a positive approach to the issue. A number of studies demonstrate that effective truancy reduction programs can produce a marked decline in delinquency and crime committed by school-age youth (Heilbrunn, 2007).

Traditional Approaches to Truancy Reduction

School Policy

Traditionally, schools addressed truancy by calling or meeting with parents when students did not provide the proper documentation upon absence. Some schools called parents if a child did not show up at school to make sure the student was not "playing hooky." Police departments would sometimes question students who were found out of school during school hours, taking them either home or back to school (a practice made more difficult in recent years by open campuses and the amount of serious crime requiring police attention).

New research shows that zero tolerance policies, developed in the 1980s, have not been shown to be as effective as expected. These policies were designed to stop drug use and unruly violent behavior in schools by severely punishing disruptive students regardless of the infraction. Suspending or expelling truants may reward their desire to avoid school, possibly leading them to fall behind in their school work, and does little to encourage more consistent attendance. A report by the American Psychological Association in 2006 found that zero tolerance policies actually increased problem behaviors and led to higher dropout rates. Schools that have adopted such policies are not any safer or more effective in disciplining children. Instead, zero tolerance policies have actually led to an increase in referrals to the juvenile justice system for infractions once handled by schools.

Juvenile Justice

There are compelling reasons why courts now hesitate to imprison parents or place children in foster care or detention for truancy. Removing the parent or the child from the home (or the child from the school) can be counterproductive in terms of attendance. Evidence indicates that the threat of such sanctions—and the sanctions themselves—do not reduce truancy (Walls, 2003). Moreover, schools can be reluctant to file truancy petitions against children or parents because of the time school staff will need to spend in court (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). Similarly, police are also disinclined to initiate prosecution of children or their parents. Only 10 percent of the truancy cases formally handled by courts from 1985–2000 were referred by police departments (Puzzanchera et al., 2000).

Effective Approaches to Truancy Reduction

In the last two decades, school districts, juvenile and family courts, and police departments have begun to take more sophisticated approaches to truancy. These approaches seek to prevent rather than to punish truancy, question the logic of out-of-school suspensions, and address the four categories of truancy-related risk factors: family, school, economic, and student factors. At every school level, effective truancy reduction programs are comprehensive and respond to the four categories of risk factors shown to be relevant to truancy.

Due to the new findings on chronic absenteeism in early elementary school, poverty, and their impact on truancy and school dropout, prevention efforts have begun to target younger children in disadvantaged populations. More recent approaches have shown a marked shift toward starting truancy prevention before truancy even occurs. By addressing the early signs of chronic absenteeism in early elementary school, truancy may be prevented.

Components of Effective Programs

A literature review by the National Center for School Engagement identified critical components necessary for effective programming (Reimer and Dimock, 2005):

- **Collaboration** involves creating abroad-based multidisciplinary partnership between the agencies and organizations whose involvement impacts truancy directly (i.e. schools, juvenile courts, and law enforcement agencies).

- True **family involvement** actively engages parents "for their advice, experience, and expertise in the community, as clients of our public systems of care, and as experts in the lives of their children" (NCSE, 2005).

- A **comprehensive approach** addresses every factor that affects truancy, including transportation, mental health, family setting, and school climate.

- Effective programs combine meaningful **sanctions** for truancy and meaningful **incentives** for attendance to change the behavior of students. For example, suspending students from school for truancy is not effective and does not promote pro-school attitudes among students.

- A **supportive context** includes organizations, community cultures, and policies.

- Rigorous **evaluation** and ongoing assessment uses outcome data to develop evidence-based programs that are successful in reducing and preventing truancy.

> *"Personal approaches with students and families are key elements in truancy prevention efforts. The success we have seen has relied heavily on personal contact— involving students and families in ways that go beyond letters and phone calls—even going so far as home visits and engagement in community activities. This personal approach needs to extend to provide learning opportunities tailored to individual learning styles and needs."*
>
> *-Dr. Joseph Christy, Former Director, Washington County Juvenile Department, Hillsboro OR*

Strategies for Truancy Prevention

Programs and activities designed to improve the overall school environment have proven to be effective in truancy prevention. Children are less likely to avoid school if they feel safe, comfortable, cared for, and engaged in productive and rewarding activities. The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratories (Railsback, 2004) suggests a number of programs and practices for improving school environment:

- Personalized learning
- Learning communities within schools (e.g., learning academies focused on particular topics; house plans; or magnet schools)
- Peer mentoring
- Student advisory programs
- Interventions targeted at improving educational effectiveness in the classroom

Beyond improving the school environment, there are also practices specifically designed to prevent truancy. These practices address truancy at the universal, selective, and indicated levels of the student population, to use the [Institute of Medicine](#) framework.

[Universal Prevention](#) – *Universal prevention efforts are for all students.*

- **Attendance policies** are school and district regulations concerning student attendance requirements, excused and unexcused absences, and the consequences for truancy. A review of the research reveals that the most effective attendance policies are those that promote attendance rather than punish absence (especially through out-of-school expulsion). Students, parents, and staff must understand these policies, and especially the difference between excused absences and truancy (Railsback, 2004).
- Some programs also seek to promote a **pro-attendance culture** in the school by, for example, rewarding students for consistent attendance, and holding events and campaigns that reinforce the importance of attendance. Some of these efforts also reach out to parents and the

community through public education campaigns and events to create pro-attendance cultures in the family and community that reinforce that of the school.

Selective Prevention - Programs that include targeted supports for students who are at risk of becoming habitual truants. *Selective prevention efforts are for some students at elevated risk.*

- **Early intervention programs** identify students who have started skipping school and work with these children and their families before they become habitual truants. Early intervention programs might involve calling families after an unexplained absence, discussing the importance of consistent attendance at school, and helping them solve problems that might affect their child's presence in school (e.g., transportation issues).

- **Alternatives to adjudication for truancy** allow students who are truant to avoid formal adjudication. Such alternatives include community truancy boards that negotiate contracts between schools and truant students (and their families). These contracts may include restrictions on student behavior (such as confining the student to the campus during lunch hours), as well as participation by the student and/or the family in specialized services when appropriate.

Indicated Prevention - Programs that address students who exhibit persistent challenges and who are not responsive to interventions at the universal or selective levels. *Indicated prevention efforts are for a few students.*

- **Court-based truancy reduction programs** are based in juvenile or family courts, but attempt to provide services to truants and their families as an alternative to adjudication (while acknowledging the possibility of adjudication as motivation to become involved with these services).

- **Alternative education programs** are designed specifically for students whose truancy results from a divergence between the school's educational practices and students' individual learning styles. These might include occupational or career educational programs or advanced courses at local community colleges, depending on student interest and ability.

The Application of Technology to Truancy Prevention

Some school districts have started using new technologies to complement their truancy prevention programs. One initiative, Wake Up! NYC, uses cell phones to send wake-up calls to elementary- and middle-school students in New York City (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox & Moore, 2011, http://www.attendanceworks.org/what-works/new-york-city/celebrity-wake-u...). Within the larger campaign to reduce chronic absenteeism in young children, which involves community mentorship programs and data review with school administrative staff, the use of cell phone technology has already helped to reduce chronic absenteeism by 24 percent in elementary schools and 16 percent in middle schools. In addition, Kershaw County, South Carolina, has recently used cell phone technology to keep tardy or truant students on track (Kearns, 2011). These phones are used to connect students with a mentor, and the devices are equipped with GPS technology that aids the mentor and program staff. The program has shown initial promising results.

Truancy, Dropout, and the State of the Economy

The country's employment landscape is shifting toward educational requirements that support a strong economy. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that 90 percent of new, high-wage, high-growth jobs created in the economy will require, at a minimum, post-secondary education. At an increasing rate, dropouts are unable to find gainful employment, as many positions they have occupied in the past are becoming outsourced. Furthermore, dropouts are also at higher risk for criminal involvement; according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 75 percent of state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal inmates are high school dropouts (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006).

Research indicates that a high percentage of these dropouts come from minority populations. As of 2008, minority students accounted for over one-half of the nation's dropouts. Only 57.8 percent of Hispanic, 55.3 percent of African American, and 50.6 percent of Native American students graduated on time, compared to 77.6 percent of white students. If high schools and colleges were able to raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the estimated potential increase in personal income across the nation could add up to $310 billion to the U.S. economy.

A study by the Alliance for Excellent Education in 2008 indicates that over the course of their lifetime, a single dropout costs the nation about $260,000 in lost wages, taxes, and productivity. The study also showed that each student who graduates from high school will save states an average of $13,706 in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of their lifetime. Nationwide, preventing the 1.2 million students who are estimated to drop out of school in the United States in a given year could save states more than $17 billion over the course of those students' lifetimes (Amos, 2008).

Combining the loss in wages and productivity, and the necessary allocation of public monies for criminal justice involvement and incarceration, truancy prevention programs and efforts can have a great impact on the economy at the state and federal levels.

Truancy Prevention: Examples from SS/HS sites

Several Safe Schools/Healthy Students sites are using the effective approaches outlined above to prevent and reduce truancy. A common thread throughout all these examples is the *community-based comprehensive approach*. The various community partners must collaborate on the most effective approach to satisfy the particular needs of their community. Each example illustrates how community members can become involved in the effort to create a community that supports the school attendance and learning engagement of students.

Kern County, CA - 2008
Kern County in California focused their truancy intervention around the school resource officers (SRO) and school attendance review board (SARB). The school district not only empowered SROs to target habitual truants, but it also gave SROs the responsibility to run SARB Sessions. The SARB is a problem-solving group that addresses truancy and behavior problems that interfere with educational progress of students. The SARB brings together school staff, parents, law enforcement, child-serving agency representatives, as well as agency and collaborative partners. Together, these partners can provide

services to children and families who need support. Services may include: requiring students to attend school every day; directing the student and/or family to counseling; arranging parenting classes for parents; arranging tutoring when needed; requesting assistance from other county agencies and programs when needed. As the leader of the SARB, the SRO is responsible for following up with habitual truants, contacting parents, running SARB meetings, and focusing on targeted goals for truancy reduction. As a result of this comprehensive approach, several improvements were made around truancy reduction in Kern County: between 2009 and 2011, the percentage of students in the district that were seen for attendance concerns increased from 41 percent to 58 percent; the Beardsley school district reduced its number of students with ten or more absences from 595 to 451 students; Beardsley also reduced its average number of unexcused absences from 9.4 percent to 7.7 percent.

Bourbon County, KY – 2008
Bourbon County has instituted several approaches to the truancy issue in their community. One of their most successful solutions has been the provision of *alternative forms of education* to students who are having trouble attending regular school hours. The Bourbon Graduation Academy (BGA) is a non-traditional, non-punitive voluntary program using flexible scheduling and performance-based credit. BGA creates an alternative for students who may benefit from an alternative mode for credit achievement. The BGA serves 14-21 year olds; it targets those who are not on track to graduate, students who demonstrate a need for flexible scheduling, students who are at-risk of dropping out, and those who are currently withdrawn from school. The goals of the BGA are to reduce student truancy and dropout rates, increase the number of students graduating, re-engage the students with learning that occurs when students are placed in a more responsive and flexible environment, and to foster a new learning environment that has a greater capacity to engage the disengaged. Since the program's inception in 2007, Bourbon County has seen increases in district attendance rates from 93.6 percent to 94.4 percent, as well as a decrease in the number of district truancy cases filed from 56 to 37.

Pueblo City Schools, CO - 2008
Pueblo City School District 60 and the 10th Judicial District Court in Colorado have taken an aggressive stance in the fight for truancy reduction through the development of a program called Project Respect. The program places community advocates in schools to work with "at promise" students. In this project, community advocates work with students, families, community resources and the courts to assure that students regularly attend school.
The goal of the Pueblo City School Project Respect Program is to reduce the truancy rate by identifying the causes of truancy and implementing effective interventions in order to give all children the educational opportunities they deserve. The goals of the Truancy Reduction Program are to address underlying risk factors for truancy: improve school attendance for targeted students; improve the academic outcomes for students; improve students social-emotional; increase student and family access to services in the community; and decrease juvenile delinquency reoffending.

Oneida Herkimer Madison BOCES, NY - 2009
Oneida Herkimer Madison BOCES in New York instituted the Initial Response Team Model (IRT) built upon a tradition of work on truancy in Utica, NY and Rome, NY. The IRT model uses the evidence-based practice of *Family Group Conferencing* to divert potential persons in need of supervision and juvenile delinquency (PINS/JD) petitions in family court. The IRT model uses a *community approach* to truancy by developing an intervention plan outside of the courtroom and agreed upon by all parties

involved. The site employs two SS/HS specialists and two full-time Oneida County probation officers. This team meets regularly to apply principles of a wraparound service plan that is developed in concert with youth, parent, and school staff. The IRT model includes behavior contracts signed by all and regular check-ins on site at the school. This model continues to be successful in Utica and Rome, and now the OHM BOCES grant offers the program to three of their component districts and Alternative Education sites which have higher rates of truancy and incorrigibility.

Hillsboro, OR - 2005

The Hillsboro, Oregon site formed the Hillsboro Together Attendance Improvement Model based on Joe Christy's conceptual framework and Scott Perry's Model for Attendance Improvement at the Linn Benton Educational Services District. The Hillsboro School District created a *pro-attendance culture* by reframing the truancy issue as an Attendance Improvement Project, and used a social marketing initiative called *Every Day on Time* to communicate with the community about attendance improvement. They addressed the problem at the *universal, selective, and indicated levels of intervention* by developing teams, such as the Attendance Improvement and Violence Prevention Team at a system level, and the CARE team at the building level. These teams meet on a weekly basis to review attendance and assign students of concern to school staff for follow-up. The overall success of Hillsboro's model rests upon their multi-faceted approach to the attendance support systems; they utilize universal supports, parent communication systems, consequence systems, individual assessment and support, community supports and legal consequences. Early intervention is central to this *comprehensive approach*, and regular communication between the schools, community partners and school counselors allows for consistent improvements in attendance data and overall crime reduction.

North Wasco, OR - 2008

North Wasco, Oregon developed a collaborative system that focuses on identification and *early intervention* for truant students before they become habitual truants. The site engaged various representatives from partners and stakeholders to develop a new Truancy Protocol that is collaborative in nature. The group addressed one of the overarching challenges in the field by developing a common definition for truancy across all of their local school districts and a process by which to address the issue locally. Utilizing the common definition, the school identifies truant students and sends an initial letter to the family. If the child continues to be truant, a second letter is generated by the school requesting a family meeting. If the behavior continues, a third letter is generated by the Youth Services Department and signed by Youth Services, the Superintendent of Schools, and the 7th Judicial Circuit Court. The letter is then delivered by law enforcement to the family. The letter requests that the family bring the child to Youth Services for an assessment with oversight by a Truancy Accountability Board. Should the family continue to be unresponsive and/or refuse to take action, then the Court may step in with sanctions for the family. In 2008, this group of partners piloted the new Truancy Protocol with great success, particularly with the Hispanic population. In the 2008-2009 school year, Hispanic students comprised 30 percent of the total student population at the Dalles Middle School and were responsible for 40 percent of all middle school offenses. Following the 2010-2011 school year, the same percentage of Hispanic students were responsible for only 27 percent of all middle school offenses. The Truancy Protocol has now been in place for several years, and this group has begun collaborating to develop solutions to address the specific challenges of truancy at the elementary school level.

Tigard Tualatin, OR – 2008

The Tigard Tualatin School District in Oregon has seen success in truancy prevention using several different interventions. The Check-In Check-Out (CICO) program is the first-line *intervention for the improvement of school attendance/school engagement*. This program has several key features: frequent feedback to students about their behavior to prevent future problem behavior; positive reinforcement to students for meeting daily goals; data tracking of positive behavior in addition to disciplinary issues; and the acknowledgement of expected behavior through a reward system. The *pro-attendance culture* created by this program requires strong administrative support and consistent communication between teachers and staff. There is strong evidence of this program's effectiveness for both truancy data measurements and truancy-related disciplinary issues. For students participating in Check in-Check Out in 2010-2011, from the first semester of initial enrollment to the second semester after enrollment, the average number of days absent decreased by 11 percent (n=102), and the percentage of students with 10+ absences per semester decreased by 18 percent (n=102). CICO also had a pronounced effect on reducing office disciplinary referrals (34 percent decrease) and suspensions (54 percent decrease).

The Tigard-Tualatin district also utilizes a *collaborative approach* to the EBIS process. They formed a "Red Zone Team" at each school in the district, consisting of the principal or associate principal, school counselors, learning specialists, SSHS mental health care coordinators, school resource officers (SRO), and the SSHS juvenile counselor. This team works to implement interventions based on data collection on absences, office disciplinary referrals, and suspensions, as well as students reaching identified thresholds in these areas. For truancy, this may be a family contact by the principal, a referral to the mental health care coordinator, a referral to the truancy officer in repeat cases, or a home visit by school staff, the SRO, and/or the SS/HS Juvenile Counselor. This team may also implement school engagement interventions for the student, such as Check In-Check Out.

Lastly, the school district employs an SS/HS juvenile counselor to address the high absence rates of students under the supervision of the juvenile system. For students on her formal caseload for whom information is available, the number of days absent decreased by 43 percent (n=10) and the percent of students with over 10 absences decreased by 84 percent (n=10). The juvenile counselor directly serves or provides consultation for an additional 40-60 students at high risk of law enforcement contact. The majority of these students have truancy issues. The juvenile counselor provides home visits, service coordination, and informal student counseling. She also works very closely with the mental health care coordinators to identify at-risk youth in need of mental health services.

Montgomery Public Schools, AL – 2007

In an effort to address the growing number of unexcused absences, Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) and its SS/HS partner agencies began researching best practices in truancy during the 2009-2010 school year. The research verified that a comprehensive, collaborative approach which included identifying truant students early, linking students and their families to needed services to address the underlying causes of truancy, providing positive reinforcement for attendance and timely consequences for non-attendance and tracking of students were all key to a successful truancy program. Montgomery Public Schools has for several years successfully partnered with the Helping Montgomery Families Initiative (HMFI), a program operated by the Montgomery County District Attorney's office, to intervene with students who have been suspended for serious behavior infractions. Most of the best practice techniques cited above were already successfully being used by

HMFI in their work with suspended students. As a result MPS partnered with HMFI to pilot a Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) in three MPS schools during the 2010-2011 school year utilizing many of its suspension program techniques. TIP utilizes several universal prevention measures to improve community awareness of the importance of school attendance such as PSAs, school assemblies, PTA meetings, attendance banners, meetings with churches and community/civic groups, bilingual inserts/handouts for various settings, and media coverage in newspapers, websites, and on the radio.

As selective prevention measures, TIP consistently monitors/tracks student attendance through the MPS student information data base; communicates with parents through regular attendance letters and school based attendance intervention sessions with truant students and their parents. One-on-one sessions with the students and their parents are conducted at the attendance intervention sessions to identify barriers to attendance and link the families to needed services. Early warning sessions are conducted monthly in conjunction with juvenile court staff and students and their families are also linked to services at those sessions. Indicated prevention efforts are utilized with students/families who continue to be absent following Early Warning sessions. HMFI staff conducts family assessments utilizing the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale – G Version and the assessment findings are presented to a multi-disciplinary team. The HMFI multi-disciplinary team (MDT) approach to intervention represents a collaborative effort between multiple local agencies. The agencies meet on a weekly basis to share information and to develop individualized intervention plans for students and their families. The team is comprised of representatives from law enforcement, mental health, public health, the school district, juvenile court, child welfare, and other local agencies which address domestic violence, substance abuse, child and adolescent assessment, and so on. The team approach affords an opportunity to have professionals with expertise in each service delivery area offer informed recommendations for treatment or intervention for students and their families. Once the individualized intervention plan is developed the family is linked to services and HMFI staff monitors the family's compliance with the plan and the student's attendance. If the student continues to be truant affidavits are filed with the court. When affidavits are filed HMFI and MPS can easily demonstrate its repeated efforts to educate the student and family on the importance of school attendance, consequences for failure to attend and to assist students and families to overcome   barriers to attendance.

During the first year of the pilot the district experienced a significant decrease in the rate of unexcused absences in the two elementary schools, a slight increase in the rate of unexcused absences in the middle school (which may be a result of improved compliance with recording absences) and more affidavits filed from the three pilot schools than from all of the other 55 schools in the district.

Nevada County, CA – 2009
Nevada County in California has seen significant improvements in attendance through the use of Truancy Deputy Probation Officers to provide *community outreach services* to families and children in elementary school (grades K-5) and middle school (grades 6-8). These officers work to interact with youth to build resiliency skills early in their lives. They provide support services, such as regular home visits, welfare checks per a school's request, interaction at the school level, and provide transportation as needed. They also make any necessary referrals to other community based organizations for emergent needs, such as assistance with counseling, emergency food, temporary housing, including referrals to the three SS/HS Family Resource Centers at local elementary schools.

This level of involvement has allowed staff the opportunity to build trust with students, schools, and parents/guardians, and to gain insight into other students in need of assistance. The staff then communicates this information to local law enforcement to help prevent high-risk youth from becoming involved in criminal behavior.

Department staff members that service the Truancy Program also participate in monthly School Attendance Review Board (SARB) hearings and make referrals to the community based services which are included in the SARB contracts.

San Francisco Unified School District, CA – 2007

San Francisco Unified School District was awarded an SS/HS-OJJDP truancy mentoring grant in 2010. This new program targets thirteen elementary schools that feed into SS/HS middle schools, partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Bay Area for community-based mentoring and Project Arrive, a group mentoring program model at four high schools. The high school component uses the Student Assistance Program, Transition Program and Early Warning Indicators census to help identify chronically truant eighth grade students who will attend one of the four project high schools in the following school year. In fall 2011, seventy students and sixteen mentors have begun participating in the program. Data for the intervention's effectiveness is not yet available; however, there is evidence to suggest that the group mentoring model may be effective in reducing risk factors for negative behavior and enhancing protective factors for positive behavior by addressing the need for positive adult contact.

New California State Legislation

On July 8, 2011, Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill which will require adding a mental health representative to the School Attendance Review Boards (SARBs) to work with students who are truant from school. Currently, the SARB is composed of many experts (law enforcement, teachers, social workers, etc.) but no mental health representative to identify appropriate services to help students stay in school.

Beginning January 2012, the new law requires that SARBs are staffed with essential experts to assist truant students and their parents or guardians to solve school attendance or behavior problems through available school and community resources.

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