

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Truancy Court Diversion Program
2 Charlotte Mecklenburg School District
Charlotte, North Carolina

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Truancy Court Diversion Program

Funding Source

Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

The Truancy Court Diversion Program is funded through the Student Services Department with an approximate budget of \$90,000 per year. This local funding covers extended employment for two Lead Social workers to oversee the program, contracted services, field trips, supplies, food purchases, and incentives.

Scope and Setting

The Truancy Court Diversion Program is a community collaboration led by Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools that seeks to eliminate barriers to regular school attendance, provide comprehensive support services to students with excessive absences, and assist families in developing important connections with their child's school.

Staffing Pattern

A district specialist coordinates the program with the schools and the district court judges and superior court judges. Each school site is assigned a judge and there is a truancy court team, led by a school social worker. The team also includes additional student services personnel as needed and available (i.e., counselors, nurses, dean of students, family advocate, or Community In Schools staff).

Population Served

CMS Truancy Diversion Court program serves an average of 300 to 350 families per year. The students served are in elementary and middle schools, with ages ranging from 5 to 15. Participants are selected based on their attendance history. Those students with more than 10 unexcused absences for the prior semester or nearing 10 for their current semester are offered the program.

Project Origination

The program began in 2001 when the CMS Prevention and Intervention Department, along with the Legal Department worked with two schools to create a partnership with Mecklenburg County District Court Judges. The district court judges learned of a program following this model from a judge in Louisville, KY. They were seeking to provide an early, proactive response to attendance and truancy issues and offer an alternative approach to prosecution for violation of the NC Attendance Laws.

Issues Addressed

Through this project, we were able to take a more proactive approach to the truancy cases that were being seen in courts. This allowed us to put in an additional step prior to prosecution. This project also addressed the concern that students, schools, and families were not engaged with one another and families often did not feel comfortable in the school setting.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

The goals of school-based truancy court are to develop an intervention program to reduce excessive absences and tardiness. The program also aims to divert students and parents or caregivers from court referrals resulting in punitive consequences for students and their families.

Strategies and/or Interventions

Each school that participates in the program is assigned a judge as a “hearing officer.” The judge works with the school social worker and the school team to develop a comprehensive plan to address the needs of each family.

Project Timeline

The families participate in a 10-week session where they build relationships with school staff and community members. The school staff follows a curriculum based on Steve Covey's *7 Habits for Effective Families* for the parents, and the students are given lessons on conflict resolution, problem solving and team building. There are two separate 10-week sessions offered, one in the fall and one in the spring.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project

Having the judges involved makes the seriousness of the situation very real for the participants. Social workers are needed as the main contact and site coordinator for the program. They identify the students who are at risk, complete needs assessments, monitor student attendance, counsel, and support students and their families. They also work with teachers and school administration to make sure appropriate academic supports are in place. Social workers and counselors are also used to link participants with critical school-based supports and community agencies.

Outcomes and Achievements

The program started with just two schools and now has branched out into 18. Several of the original schools have pulled out of the program since their overall percentage of at-risk students dropped, and they have developed new supports and school expectations to promote attendance compliance. New schools have cycled in and use the opportunity to develop positive relationships with families and divert a large number from the court system.

Outcomes Related to School Completion and Graduation Rates

A full study in this area is beginning currently. We are awaiting the results from an Institute of Education Sciences grant application through the Urban Institute in Washington, DC. They are interested in doing a full program evaluation and are seeking other funding sources to complete this work.

Current Status of Project

More and more schools are asking for the program, and we have grown so much that we do not have enough judges to help support each school. As a result, the Judges have been able to assist us in reaching out to other community stakeholders to get additional support. This semester we were very happy to include four US Attorneys and one Clerk of Court on our school teams. They are very enthusiastic and committed to the program.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

I have been involved with the program as the Truancy Court specialist since January 2015. I coordinate the program and specifically work with the Judges and Principals at each school to make sure the program is meeting their needs. I train and support the teams by providing additional professional development, incentives and other supplies the project requires. I am beginning a new tracking system linking outcomes of attendance to academics for the program. I also work to increase our Community partners and identify other resources to assist in increasing support for the program.

Lessons Learned

A review of various parent surveys from the program supports the effectiveness and appreciation for the relationships that are built during the program.

Student Services support staff are an essential part of assisting at-risk families in identifying issues and utilizing community resources. Oftentimes, members of the team are pulled from Truancy Court to cover other issues happening in the school, which disrupts the flow of the presentations and meetings. It is important to gather Administrative buy-in and set expectations for the program before the school begins offering the program.

The judges are key players in communicating the urgency for parents to become more actively involved in their child's education and the importance of each child being engaged in their school and community. It is important to include the judge in any Truancy Court team meeting and/or debriefing to keep them aware of specific situations the families are facing and to have them help support the team with realistic interventions and resources. The judges may feel certain steps should be taken to help a family, not realizing it may be out of the scope of our available resources.

Adequate space and technology needs should be planned for and consistently met.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

It is key to bring all the stakeholders to the table to discuss expectations and their roles in the program. A commitment of time and staff is needed to provide a consistent circle of support for the participants.

Start small with one or two schools to help set the course for the program and then expand as needs are assessed and resources identified.

Come visit one of our sites to see our program in action!