

Talk Time with the Judge

**Dona Mitchell
Lancaster ISD Truancy Coordinator
International Association for Truancy & Dropout Prevention President
Project Creator**

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Key words: dropout prevention, at-risk, school-community collaboration, systematic change, guidance, solution driven, problem solving, reduce chronic absenteeism

Funding Sources:

Community Donations

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

The cost for the project is minimal and includes the purchase of 'No Truancy Zone' draw string backpacks at a total of \$800 and the cost of transportation provided by system school buses. School and courthouse facilities were used at no cost to conduct meetings, and the school provided sack lunches, when needed.

Project Description:

The goals of "Talk Time with the Judge" are to provide a platform for at-risk students to discuss the barriers and obstacles preventing them from attending school, provide them with an opportunity to problem solve and reduce their issue with chronic absenteeism. Through this program, relationships between students and the judge are formed which builds bridges between the school and the community. Having this relationship with a judge, it is more likely that many of the negative behaviors the at-risk students exhibit will decrease. The judge is able to communicate and truly connect with the students. The students receive a certificate at the end of each session. Two certificates are printed, one for the student and one for the school.

Staffing Pattern:

School staff

Population Served:

At-risk and truant students between the ages of 12-19 years old

Project Origination:

This project came about due to concerns the LISD Truancy Coordinator and International Association for Truancy & Dropout Prevention President, Dona Mitchell, had concerning at-risk students and the negative behaviors students in the school district were exhibiting. Her vision was to be proactive and determine interventions to stop the pipeline to prison. Recognizing the need to prevent this, she discussed her concerns with school administrators and counselors and the decision was made to move forward. The project began by surveying at-risk students and discussing with them whether their problems were due to internal or external factors. This information was then used to develop the program and meet students where they are.

Issues Addressed:

The issues addressed include behavior, bullying, conflict, choices, drugs, engagement, family support, and runaway.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

- Decrease chronic absenteeism
- Promote student engagement
- Connect students with services and resources
- Learn and discuss problem solve strategies with a Judge

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

At-risk and truant students are identified by the school or campus counselors and attendance clerks. Identified students meet at both school and court once per semester based on the availability of the judge and the school. Most often they are held at the court to provide the students with the court experience hopefully leading to a systematic change.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

Statistical data has not been collected to date. However, Appendix A-C provide perception data from a judge, principal, instructor, and a school counselor who participated in the program. 100% of these individuals feel this program is life-changing due to the opportunity at-risk students have to build relationships with the adults involved.

Project Timeline:

Summer	Establish a team of willing volunteers to participate in the program (judge, school administrator(s), and Truancy Coordinator) and establish a small budget
August-September	Survey students, establish Talk Time calendar for the year using the school bell schedule and the school district calendar, create a Save the Date flyer to distribute to students and parents, determine locations for Talk Time to be held
October	Analyze student survey results and identify students who will participate in the program, schedule bus transportation to and from court, if possible, for Talk Time to occur. If not, determine a location for this to be held in the school.
November	Begin program
December	Seek initial feedback from participating students

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

Lancaster ISD has 7,400 students with 350 participating in this project. In conducting program reviews, we have learned that students are able to take what they have learned and apply it to their everyday lives and see their problems and challenges from a different perspective. Mindsets are changed from “I can’t do it” to “I can, and I will do it.” We also see that participating students are able to be re-directed back into the classroom and are participating in the school district early college programs.

Special Conditions, Expertise, and/or Skills Required to Carry Out Project:

No special skills are needed, just a willing heart and a passion to serve.

Current Status of Project:

Currently, ‘*Talk Time with the Judge*’ is a successful program and is on-going. The program began four years ago with one Justice of the Peace Judge and now we have two. For this reason, the program can now be customized to include the name of the participating Judge, i.e., “Talk Time with Judge *John Doe*”.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

As the Lancaster ISD Truancy Coordinator and International Association for Truancy & Dropout Prevention President, I create programs and projects for at risk students. I seek ways to build partnership in the community and collaborate for at-risk youth. My school district is open to new ideas and creative projects to keep students in school. My motto is 'Be The Voice: Be The Change.' My school district's vision is "All students will achieve self-sustaining success and leave a lasting legacy."

Lessons Learned:

This project is a life changing experience for the at-risk and truant students. It gives them a great opportunity to receive undivided attention from judges volunteering their time to make a difference, prevent dropouts and detour from the pipeline to prison.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

This project comes with a vision for change. Every school district must have a change in the dropout and absenteeism rates. Educators and support staff work countless hours trying to connect with at-risk students. It can be difficult at times but we cannot give up on their education. "Talk Time with the Judge" is an excellent source to bridge that gap. At-risk students are encouraged to make better choices and are empowered to be great.

Appendix A



J.D. Hall Learning Center

**Antionette Mathews, EdD
Principal**

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To Whom It May Concern,

This letter is a testimonial to the benefits of the "Talk Time with the Judge" program coordinated by Mrs. Dona Mitchell. I am the principal of the District's Discipline Alternative Education Program (DAEP), and I have seen firsthand how this program has influenced many of my student's lives. The students are eager to ask questions and generally cannot believe that they are able to speak candidly to a real judge. The Judge provides "Real Talk" and tells it like it is. The students are encouraged to ask authentic questions. Their questions range from such topics as: How long does it take to become a judge?; How much money do judges make?; Can you become a judge if you have been in juvenile trouble?; and How should you respond to police or law enforcement? After the students spend time talking with the judge, they complete a reflection activity. It is during the reflection activity that students have revealed their new perspectives. It is great to hear students articulate their new thinking, but amazing to see them put it into action.

This program affords students the opportunity to consider the perspective of law enforcement in various situations. Many of the students have never pondered how judges make decisions. As they listen to the judge and ask clarifying questions, they are better able to understand their own situations. I can definitely say that the "Talk Time with the Judge" program is a highlight for my students and staff. I am very appreciative to Mrs. Mitchell for coordinating all aspects of the program in the fall and the spring.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dr. Antionette Mathews".

Dr. Antionette Mathews

Appendix B



JUDGE VALENCIA NASH
JUSTICE OF THE PEACE - PRECINCT 1 PLACE 2

September 3, 2020

To: National Dropout Prevention Network

Several years ago, Dona Mitchell proposed a program that would engage students with the Judicial System in an effort to produce positive outcomes.

Talk Time with Judge Nash has been such a successful program where students have been allowed to be open and honest expressing some of their concerns about school, community and the judicial system and discussing solutions to these issues.

Dona and I have seen firsthand the effectiveness of the program and how hundreds of lives were changed in the process. I am hopeful that we can continue to collaborate and impact young lives.

Thank you Ms. Mitchell for your innovative and effective programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Valencia Nash", is written over the word "Sincerely,".

Judge Valencia Nash

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G. W. Carver 6th Grade STEM Learning Center



September 14, 2020

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Arabrian Lewis and I serve as a school counselor in Lancaster ISD. I am writing this letter of recommendation on behalf of Mrs. Dona Mitchell. I have known and worked with Mrs. Mitchell for 9 years. During this time, she has spearheaded multiple distractive initiatives including but not limited to “Talk Time With the Judge”, Truancy Awareness Month, Attendance Rocks, and Perfect Attendance Principal of the Year. Each of these programs are aimed at highlighting the importance of being present in school daily as well as rewarding those scholars, teachers, and administrators that assist in making this possible.

While serving as the campus counselor, Mrs. Mitchell has assisted me by securing attendance donations and incentives, and speakers for our students. Her tireless effort to ensure that students are at school, but also motivated to be in school is a testament to her belief about the importance of education. The programs instituted on our campus allowed our campus to be recognized 3 years in a row as the secondary campus with the greatest attendance—98%!!!

I can attest to her good moral character and her dedication to the role she plays in lives of the students she touch and consider her to be a great asset to our district.

Sincerely,

Arabrian Lewis, M.Ed.
School Counselor
972-218-1582



J.D. Hall Learning Center

Terry Tucker
Student Advisor

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Talk Time with the Judge

Students need to learn not to be afraid to the judicial system. Many of them have already experienced or witnessed chronic trauma like domestic violence, abuse and neglect. The positive “Talk Time” with the judge allows them to see and hear firsthand the message of staying in school, staying out of trouble, saying no to drugs and not to skip school.

Terry Tucker