

Truancy

a closer look

the link between
unmet educational needs
and truancy

December 2006

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Introduction

Much truancy research has failed to focus on the learning characteristics and experiences that may lead to chronic absenteeism. However, findings from the first two years of the Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP),¹ based in Hartford, CT, suggest a link between unmet academic needs and high rates of absenteeism.

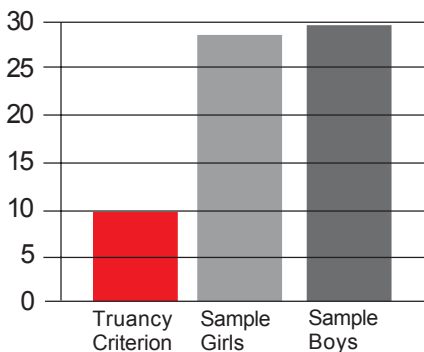
The TCPP works to reduce Hartford's high dropout rate by providing truant students with case management, legal and educational advocacy, and weekly monitoring of attendance and academic progress during informal court sessions. These court sessions are held at school and presided over by a judge.

The TCPP believes a thorough analysis of students' academic histories is a first step in understanding patterns of absenteeism and creating support systems to help re-engage students in school. As a result, a central part of the TCPP is the individual review and analysis of each participant's educational records by an educational consultant.

Findings from the TCPP's first two years of operation suggest that truancy programs must take a closer look at the academic needs of a truant youth as a first step in understanding the causes of the youth's truancy and creating solutions to it. These data offer clues to proactive strategies to prevent truancy.

Days Absent for Truant Students

Distribution of girls (28.3) and boys (29.6) average number of absences annually in relation to Connecticut state law's definition of a "truant," a youth with 10 unexcused absences in one school year.



The Population

In the period since May 2003, 91 educational records of "truant"² youth have undergone extensive review by the Center for Children's Advocacy's Educational Consultant.

Sixty-seven of the youth in the sample were participants in the TCPP. They were recruited from a list, provided by the school, of students who reached twenty or more absences each year. The sole criterion for referral to the TCPP was poor attendance, not academic difficulty, although many of the students were experiencing both.

The remaining 24 youth in the sample were involved in other projects of the Center for Children's Advocacy. Only 4 were referred solely because of education difficulties. Twenty had been referred to CCA because of abuse or neglect or juvenile justice involvement.³

Several profiles and patterns emerge regarding youth in the sample.

¹ Please see Appendix A for a complete description of the Truancy Court Prevention Project.

² These youth are "truant" according to the definition provided by Connecticut General Statutes § 10-198a, which defines a "truant" as a student with 4 unexcused absences in one month or 10 unexcused absences in one school year.

³ These other projects include the Team-Child Juvenile Justice Project, the Child Abuse Project and the Medical-Legal Partnership Project. See Appendix B for complete project descriptions.

Early Warning Signs

Time and again, school records showed early warning signs of future academic difficulty that, unfortunately, rarely led to a closer look.

Early absenteeism (kindergarten-grade one)

- 26% showed patterns of absenteeism as early as kindergarten and first grade, with one student having missed more than 2 full years of schooling by 8th grade.
- Some research suggests that patterns of absenteeism can be detected as early as third grade,⁴ but these data suggest that high rates of absenteeism begin even earlier for some youngsters.

Retention and promotion by exception

- 82% percent of the 91 students had been retained or promoted by exception at least once. One-third of these students were retained or promoted by exception more than once. Nearly one in five students were retained or promoted by exception three or more times.
- 30% of the retentions or promotions by exception occurred during the early grades (K-2).

Behavioral or Psychiatric Issues

- Behavioral or psychiatric issues were documented in 50% of the cases.

Problems with Learning

Significant Academic Delays

- 84% demonstrated significant academic delays, as measured by achievement test scores two or more years below grade level and/or Level 1 (below basic) scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT).

Attentional or Informational Processing Problems

- 73% are described as having attentional or information processing problems. These include attentional problems, memory deficits, auditory processing difficulties, visual perceptual problems, and organizational difficulties.

Indicators of Language Disorders

- 36% have indications of expressive and/or receptive language problems and articulation disorders.

These cases reflect the importance of taking a closer look at failing students as early as possible, including a careful review of their educational histories and timely, intensive analyses of academic strengths and struggles.

**Early
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⁴ Lehr, C.A., Sinclair, M.F. & Christenson, S.L. (2004) Addressing student engagement and truancy prevention during the elementary school years: A replication study of the Check & Connect Model. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, Jul2004, Vol. 9 Issue 3, p279.

Learning and behavior problems should have generated a referral for special education.

Failures to succeed may be related to increased language demands without appropriate support.

Special Education Discussed, but No Follow-Up

In 42% of cases, student learning and behavior problems should have generated a referral for special education.

For 18 students (20%), the school considered special education but did not provide it.

- Seven students received a referral for special education, but the school never took any action regarding the referral.
- Eight students were evaluated for special education but denied it on questionable grounds as demonstrated by their continued failure to achieve success in school.
- Three students were exited from special education without systematic monitoring of their progress once services were discontinued.

Anecdotal material in some records indicates that teachers are unsure about when to refer students. This is particularly true when students may have behavioral issues that can mask underlying learning issues. In some cases, this failure to seek a comprehensive evaluation of learning problems led to a lengthy delay in asking and answering key questions about eligibility for special education

Interaction between Bilingual Status and Truancy

Fifty-five students (60%) in the sample were bilingual and nearly half had been exited from bilingual education. Twelve were exited from bilingual education by Grade 7 without Language Transition Support Services (LTSS) or ESOL supports clearly identified in the records. (LTSS is provided if a student has not achieved mastery after the 30 months during which they receive instruction in their native language.)⁵ Records of 21 of the 55 (38%) suggested a need for further evaluation to determine whether students' academic difficulties were related to language-based learning disorders or to levels of English proficiency.

These students' failures to succeed may be related to increased language demands in middle and high school without appropriate supports. A lack of language support becomes particularly critical in upper elementary and middle school grades when language becomes increasingly abstract and reading and writing demands increase dramatically. This finding should prompt review of the implementation of strategies for monitoring students exited from bilingual education as they are faced with increasingly difficult language and learning expectations.

⁵ See Connecticut General Statutes § 10-17f(d).

What Came First?

There is the temptation to say that poor attendance was the predominant cause of these students' academic failure, but a closer look at their records suggests that the relationship is more complex. Records indicate that underlying learning problems may have produced a downward spiral of discouragement that prompted children to avoid school. Absenteeism, in turn, makes it less likely that the child will succeed and so makes coming to school an even more unpleasant prospect.

Anecdotal comments throughout these educational records attest to the fact that virtually every child is highly motivated and eager to learn as she enters kindergarten. Gradually, as failures mount, teacher comments begin to change and a formerly active and engaged child is described as “unmotivated” or “needs to work harder.”⁶

The challenge is clear. In order to significantly reduce truancy rates, timely, systemic as well as individualized interventions are necessary in order to nurture and sustain the hopes and aspirations of many struggling students.

Underlying learning problems may have produced a downward spiral that prompted children to avoid school.

⁶ Please see Appendix C for example of report card of Truancy Court Prevention Project participant.

Recommendations for Systemic Interventions

By the end of the 2007 school year

1. Early Intervention & Truancy Prevention Team

Create an Early Intervention & Truancy Prevention Team (EIPT) including a full complement of bilingual related service personnel (speech and language therapist, social worker, parent, advocate and special educator) with specific responsibility for monitoring the progress of children who demonstrate high rates of absenteeism or failure to make adequate progress in kindergarten, Grades 1, 3 and 5,⁷ prioritizing schools with the highest percentages of bilingual students.

- a. Provide the Team with intensive training and facilitator support in the neurodevelopmental model⁸ (Schools Attuned)⁹ established at the University of North Carolina and currently being disseminated throughout New York City public schools.¹⁰

2. Identification of Students

Identify students entering middle school with histories of absenteeism, retention and promotion by exception for review, evaluation, intervention and formative assessment by the Student Support Teams in each school.

3. Detailed Action Plan

Create a detailed action plan to achieve the following:

a. Mentoring Program

Establish mentoring programs for boys and girls who are struggling academically beginning no later than 5th grade, and focused on nurturing academic and occupational aspirations with tutoring support;

b. Comprehensive Evaluations

Conduct comprehensive evaluations with specific intervention plans and quarterly progress reviews for any child who is retained or promoted by exception more than once;

c. Intensive Enrichment Programs

Establish 6-week intensive summer language and math skills and enrichment programs for any child with more than 18 absences in early grades;

d. Specific LTSS Services

Define specific LTSS services for any child transitioning from bilingual education including formative (ongoing) evaluation of progress and strong support in content areas in middle and secondary school; and,

e. Alternative Instructional Strategies

Establish and require alternative instructional strategies in content areas to insure that students with reading deficits do not fail to learn math, social studies and science because their reading skills are below grade level. Examples include use of talking books, computer-assisted instruction, multi-media presentations (Powerpoint, videotapes, audiotapes), simplified vocabulary and vocabulary development, project-based and carefully structured cooperative learning activities, etc.

4. Professional Development

Institute annual professional development related to identification of children with special needs and the referral process for elementary and middle school teachers, with a special focus on when behavioral issues can mask underlying learning disabilities.

⁷ The importance of early intervention in kindergarten and first grade has been well-documented. However, other students begin to falter at grades 3 and 5, when expectations for increasingly verbal instruction, diminishing focus on experiential learning and more abstract conceptual demands place increasing stress on those students who have not mastered academic language skills or whose information processing difficulties become overwhelmed by increasing expectations in upper elementary classrooms.

⁸ An overview of the neurodevelopmental model may be found at www.allkindsofminds.org/about_neuroview.aspx.

⁹ Schools Attuned is a professional development and service delivery program that helps educators acquire the knowledge and skills, and offers a system of innovative tools, to meet the diverse learning needs of K-12 students. The objective is to assist educators in using neurodevelopmental content in their classrooms through new methods for recognizing, understanding, and managing students with differences in learning that will help all of the students in their class succeed. Information about Schools Attuned may be found at www.allkindsofminds.org/sa/index.aspx.

¹⁰ Wurtzel, C. (2005) Focus on What Works: Schools Attuned. Academic Intervention Newsletter: Office of Teaching and Learning, New York City Department of Education. Available at <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/3399E1F2-169E-4410-967C-CD39701A563C/2987/InterventionNewsletterWinter0406.pdf>.

Recommendations for Systemic Interventions

Long-term remedies

1. Response-to-Intervention

Institute a Response-to-Intervention¹¹ approach to identification of children with learning disabilities systemwide. The use of formative assessment ensures that quick corrections are made when instructional strategies are ineffective.

2. Information Management

Institute a system for information management that facilitates review of chronological data on individual children and would permit flagging groups of children who are failing to progress in order to anticipate programmatic needs and design additional systemic interventions.

3. Professional Development Schedule

Establish a professional development schedule in the neurodevelopmental model for all general and special education teachers, including ongoing classroom facilitation (a critical element of the approach).

4. Universal Design for Instruction

Provide professional development focusing on differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Instruction¹² as approaches that will increase teachers' skills in meeting needs of diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

5. EIPT Teams

Initiate additional EIPT Teams as necessary to meet needs across all schools.

¹¹ The Response-to-Intervention Model (RTI) is an alternative to the traditional IQ-discrepancy approach to identifying children with learning disabilities. When Congress re-authorized IDEA, they changed the law related to identification of children with specific learning disabilities, no longer requiring schools to make eligibility determinations based on a "severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability." This 3-tier model begins with screening and monitoring at 8-week intervals and diagnostic instructional trials for students who fail to progress by general education professionals; and designation as having a learning disability and eligibility for special education for non-responders. A summary of the approach can be found at: www.advocacyinstitute.org/resources/TEC_RtIblueprint.pdf.

¹² More information on Universal Design for Instruction may be found at www.cast.org.

Appendix A

Truancy Court Prevention Project

The Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP) was launched in 2004 to address Hartford's high truancy rates. Based on a successful model in Louisville, Kentucky, the TCPP is a diversionary program which aims to help youth avoid being charged as "status offenders" and formally referred to the court system. The Project's focus is to ensure that each student reduces his or her truancy, successfully completes the school year and graduates from high school. For its first two years, the Project operated on site at Hartford Public High School and, beginning with the 2006-2007 school year, expanded to Hartford's Quirk Middle School.

The TCPP is a collaboration between the Center for Children's Advocacy, Hartford Public Schools, the Connecticut Judicial Department, the Capitol Region Education Council, the Village for Families and Children, Catholic Family Services, The Hartford Financial Services Group, and Nutmeg Big Brothers Big Sisters.

The TCPP targets students in eighth and ninth grades. These grades were chosen because research shows that the transition to high school is often followed by decreases in academic performance and by increases in absenteeism.

The TCPP provides intensive and holistic support to its participants. A main focus of the TCPP is on students' rights to appropriate academic assessment and support. During its first two years in existence, the program discovered a high incidence of long-standing academic failure among its participants.

The main components of the TCPP are as follows:

- Biweekly or weekly in-school court sessions with a judge who meets with each student individually and monitors the student's academic progress and attendance.
- Case management that links students to needed services, such as mentoring, counseling, after school and youth development activities, tutoring, and job placement. Case managers from the Village for Families and Children monitor students' academic progress and attendance on a daily basis and serve as liaisons between the school, student and his family. Case managers also facilitate family engagement in school by conducting regular home visits and updating parents on their child's progress.
- Review of each student's cumulative school record by an independent educational consultant who makes recommendations for improved academic performance. The educational consultant also observes classrooms and attends Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings on select cases.
- Individual legal representation to students in areas that affect attendance, such as education, special education, access to health and mental health services, and public benefits.
- Legal advocacy on systemic issues that may contribute to high dropout rates. Past and current examples of such issues include fair discipline policy, the entitlement to appropriate bilingual education, and access to tutoring and school choice under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Information about the Truancy Court Prevention Project can also be found at www.kidscounsel.org/aboutus_programs_tcpp.htm

Appendix B

Projects of the Center for Children’s Advocacy

The Center for Children’s Advocacy is a private, non-profit, public interest organization founded in 1997 to provide unparalleled legal support to poor children in Connecticut.

Funded solely through grants and individual contributions, the Center is dedicated to protecting and promoting the legal rights and interests of poor children who fall through the cracks of the state’s judicial, child welfare, health, mental health, education, and juvenile justice systems. The Center’s mission is to provide holistic legal services to poor children in their communities, and to improve the quality of legal representation of children throughout the state.

Projects include:

Tuancy Court Prevention Project

Please see Appendix A for description.

Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic

The Center’s Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic is on site at Hartford Public High School, and serves various community organizations throughout the city. The Clinic addresses the legal aspects of problems that result in poor school attendance, both on an individual and systemic level. The Teen Legal Advocacy Clinic also provides legal representation for teens who are living in shelters.

Child Abuse Project

The Center’s Child Abuse Project provides individual legal representation to abused and neglected children. Attorneys also advocate for changes in policy and legislation to ensure that the best interests of children are foremost in the decision-making process of Connecticut’s child welfare, mental health, and education systems. The Project works closely with the interdisciplinary teams at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center and the UCONN Health Center.

TeamChild–Juvenile Justice Project

TeamChild pairs an attorney from the Center with an attorney from the Juvenile Public Defender’s Office to handle civil legal issues (such as special education, abuse and neglect, or access to mental health treatment) to help improve outcomes for children in the juvenile justice system. CCA is a founding partner in the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance, and established the Girls Juvenile Justice Project, to address systemic issues in the juvenile justice system.

Medical Legal Partnership Project

The Medical Legal Partnership employs a preventive, multidisciplinary approach to improving child health, addressing legal issues such as safe housing, adequate income and benefits, disability advocacy, access to health care, freedom from abuse, and appropriate education services. The Project operates legal offices on site at its collaborating partners, Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, Charter Oak Health Clinic, and Community Health Services.

Information about the Center for Children’s Advocacy can also be found at www.kidscounsel.org

Appendix C

Example of Report Card of Truancy Court Prevention Project Participant

HARTFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
T. J. QUIRK MIDDLE SCHOOL • 85 EDWARDS STREET • HARTFORD, CT 06120 • TEL 695-2140

2004-2005 School Year REPORT CARD • GRADES 7-8 ID# _____

Name: H J Grade 8 Cluster 3 DOB _____

Homeroom Teacher: MR. Lu Room 222 Special Needs Program _____

MARKING PERIODS

	1	2	3	4	FINAL	
ENGLISH						Teacher's Name: <u>A</u> Comment 4: GOOD LUCK!
Skill Level	F	F	F	F	F	
Conduct						
Homework						
Conference Requested						
Comment 1	NO WORK		TOO MANY absences, not enough work		Comment 3	too many days out no work
GENERAL MATH						Teacher's Name: <u>H</u> Comment 4: Have a good summer.
PRE-ALGEBRA						
Skill Level	70C	44E	42E	537E	49F	
Conduct	3	3	3	3	3	
Homework	3	3	3	3	3	
Conference Requested						
Comment 1	needs to do homework		missed 3 classes this marking period.		Comment 3	missed 16 classes.
READING/ FOREIGN LANG						Teacher's Name: <u>H</u> Comment 4: Good Luck - Have a great summer
Skill Level	F50	F50	F	F	F	
Conduct	3	3	2	3	3	
Homework	3	3	2	3	3	
Conference Requested						
Comment 1	Has no energy or motivation to complete any assignments		missing 15 assignments unprepared		Comment 3	NO work NO EFFORT - missed many assignments
PHYSICAL LIFE SCIENCE						Teacher's Name: <u>H</u> Comment 4: Need to complete work on time.
Skill Level	D ₂	D ₂	D ₂	F ₂	D ₂	
Conduct						
Homework						
Conference Requested						
Comment 1	Completes all work on time		Complete all work on time		Comment 3	focus on completion of assignments
GEOGRAPHY/HISTORY						Teacher's Name: <u>A</u> Comment 4: MISSING WORK/ ASSIGNMENT
Skill Level	B/2	C/2	D/3	F/3	C/3	
Conduct						
Homework						
Conference Requested						
Comment 1	NEEDS TO TRY SELF BETTER		COULD DO MUCH BETTER		Comment 3	NEEDS TO WORK HARDER

	1	2	3	4	FINAL	
ART/MUSIC						
Music History			C2			
Music Theory			F2			
Physical Development			F1		R1	
TECH/PCS						
TECH ED - MANU/POWER						
TECH ED - EXP TEST I						
TECH ED - EXP TEST II						
PHYSICAL ED/HEALTH						
Physical Education I						
Physical Education II						
Physical Education III						

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