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## School-Based Juvenile Probation and Police Partnerships for Truancy Reduction

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### Cover Page Footnote

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# School-Based Juvenile Probation and Police Partnerships for Truancy Reduction

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## Abstract

Truancy places students at risk in primary and secondary education and is linked to conduct disorder, drug use, and delinquency. To prevent truancy and reduce risk, school-based probation supervision has emerged within school districts in partnership with local law enforcement officers in an effort to enforce probation conditions for truant youths and prevent future delinquency. This research uses key information interviews of knowledgeable stakeholders to examine the delivery of school-based probation supervision. Home visits and court hearings were perceived to be effective at reducing truancy and tardiness. This study affirms that strong leadership, information sharing, and involvement of parents were 3 key factors related to truancy reduction.

Keywords: school-based programs; truancy reduction; juvenile probation

Ensuring school attendance has become a chief concern of school administrators and parents in many school districts around the United States. This is because truancy, defined as habitual unexcused absenteeism from school, has become more common over the years and has emerged as a serious problem in the educational system today (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barrett, & Willson, 2007). For example, truancy rates average between 5 and 20% on any given school day (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994), reaching as high as 30% in some large cities (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). The effects of truancy have far reaching implications for youth and for society as a whole. Chronic absenteeism not only results in educational opportunity losses and future employment marginalization for younger generations, but school districts also lose funding from the state when their student populations decrease (Presman, Chapman, & Rosen, 2002). Also, truant youth are disproportionately at risk of becoming involved in drug use, daytime theft, and gang activity (Fritsch, Caeti, & Taylor, 1999; Garry, 1996; Rohrman, 1993).

Reasons behind truancy are quite complex and informed by a number of theoretical perspectives such as self efficacy,

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family environment, school environment, or opportunity factors. For example, early research found a link between truancy and conduct disorder whereby "the most distinctive disturbance is characterized by aggressive behavior, tempers, defiance, destructiveness, uncooperativeness, disruptiveness and other evidence of poor relationships between the affected child and adults, as well as other children" (Berg, 1985, p. 327). A juvenile's lack of motivation, boredom with classroom structure, and peer pressure have all been cited as reasons for truancy. The family environment may be related to lack of parental supervision, abuse, family financial responsibilities, or other caretaking roles that may require youths to miss school, contributing to declining graduation rates (Barth, 1984; Guttmacher, Weitzman, Kapadia, & Weinberg, 2002; Hallfors, Vevea, Iritani, Cho, Khatapoush, & Saxe, 2002; Zhang et al., 2007). Excessive student absenteeism has been correlated in schools that have high rates of violent incidents on school grounds (To-by, 1983). The link between truancy and later violent behavior as adolescents and adults was especially prevalent with youth who were truant when they were 12-14 years old (Farrington, 1989). Relatedly, adolescents who feel alienated or have low levels of behavioral achievement in school are a cause of truancy, which in turn may contribute to delinquency and drug use (Maguin & Loeber, 1996; White, Fyfe, Campbell, & Goldkamp, 2001). Others argue that a positive bond to teachers is more important in delinquency prevention than school misbehavior (Smith, 2006).

Many school-based intervention strategies to decrease truancy have been tried, ranging from individual teacher-student mentoring and access to free medical services at school (DeSo-cio, VanCura, Nelson, Hewett, Kitman, & Cole, 2007) to re-

warding students for attendance alternative schooling, and establishing learning communities to community-based treatment and counseling approaches (Dembo & Gullede, 2009; Gerrard, Burhans, & Fair, 2003). Law enforcement intervention strategies have been tried as well. For example, police truancy enforcement between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to target suspected or known gang members was found to significantly reduce youth gang violence (Fritsch et al., 1999). Another response has been to monitor or sanction truant youths using in-school suspension, probation, community service, and teen courts, with some programs issuing additional sanctions for parents through citations and court-ordered parenting classes (Berg, 1985; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; McCluskey, Bynum, & Patchin, 2004; Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006). Probation is perhaps the most common disposition for chronically truant cases (Zhang et al., 2007). However, few studies have examined school-based probation supervision, whereby the probation officer managed a probation caseload and was physically located within the school district. The current study examines the early implementation efforts of a school-based probation supervision program through the partnerships created by the probation department and the school resource officer to decrease truancy of juveniles on probation supervision.

A school-based supervision strategy originated for two reasons. First, it originated because of the link between truancy and delinquency (both violent and nonviolent acts); habitual truants were on probation, particularly if they engaged in delinquent behavior while not at school (Tait, 2004). The second reason was that once those youths were on probation, and officers had difficulties monitoring school attendance in a timely manner. With truancy as a significant predictor of delinquency, and school attendance as a required condition of probation, the situation beckoned school districts to partner with the juvenile courts and local law enforcement to provide a more comprehensive way to deal with truancy in an effort to enforce probation conditions and prevent future delinquency.

### Characteristics of Effective Truancy Programs

Effective truancy programs share similar characteristics that include behavioral incentive programs for good behavior, consequences for chronic truancy, home visits, collaboration with community organizations (e.g., law enforcement, social services, etc.), commitment from parents, and support from administrators (Dembo & Gullede, 2009; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Mueller et al., 2006). Many schools around the country have opted to collaborate with a school resource officer (a police officer) who, together with probation in an "enhanced-supervision partnership" (Parent & Snyder 1999, p. 1) monitors daily attendance, provides counseling to parents and probationers, and provides training for teachers and counselors on dealing with disruptive students in the classroom (Presman et al., 2002). Other school-based programs strictly monitor youths already on probation. For these youths, both a school resource police officer and a court-based probation officer were used for a dual case management approach to supervision. This is the same model used in the districts in the current

study, whereby the school-based officer monitors school-related behavior of youth probationers, which may include attendance record, behavior while in school, academic progress, and after school home visits. The court-based officer was responsible for out of school behavior and court attendance. The school-based officer acted as a liaison between all the different agencies (Rubin, 1999; Stephens & Arnette, 2000; Presman et al.).

Schools in Arizona, California, Georgia, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Virginia have served as examples of various approaches to respond to habitually truant and disciplinary problems in school. In Pennsylvania, school resource police officers and probation officers were cross-trained on similar tasks and shared the work and the cost more evenly between the school and the court. Youths on probation had improved their own attendance at school, and with a caseload averaging 27 clients, youth were more closely supervised using the dual case management approach. Agency relationships between the probation department and the school districts also improved. When compared with regular probationers, school-based probationers utilized less residential placements and were less likely to commit serious crimes than regular probationers, saving \$6,600 per client (Metzger, 1997).

In other parts of the United States, outcomes differed. For example, in Montana, having a juvenile probation officer at school increased grades and decreased disciplinary referrals, but did not improve attendance. In fact, 60% of probationers completely dropped out of school within 1 year (Lasater, Wilis, Sherman, Schaaf, & Petak, 2008). In general, a review of the literature revealed that most school-based programs reduce absenteeism and improve graduation rates. However, these studies have focused on youth probationers, with only one study directly relevant to staff involved in rural program delivery and implementation (Henderson, Mathias-Humphrey, & McDermott, 2008). Henderson and colleagues found a great deal of practitioner, organizational, and systemic barriers that negatively affected interagency collaborations and success of a school-based probation program in a rural Midwest county. These barriers ranged from blurred job roles, lack of training, high staff turnover, interagency friction, lack of leadership participation, and perceived lack of support by the juvenile courts (Henderson et al.). While the Midwest county partnership disintegrated within 1 year, other similar programs in Pennsylvania have had more success. It remains unclear how the successful programs have been operating and why the outcomes have been different. This research seeks to analyze the perceptions of key personnel in the delivery of school-based probation supervision according to individual and organizational factors.

## Method

### Participants

The state of Pennsylvania implemented school-based probation programs in 50 out of its 60 counties, with over 150 juvenile probation officers. The goals of police/probation partnerships in this study were similar to other school-based probation programs in other counties around Pennsylvania

(Metzger, 1997; Rubin, 1999; Torbet, Ricci, Brooks, & Zawacki, 2001). These goals include reducing truancy among school-aged youth, improving parental accountability, and strengthening partnerships between the police and the probation department. The school setting is the place where probation officers monitor youths at risk, whether they have already been adjudicated or are at risk for court intervention (Seyko, 2001). This study addressed perceptions from key personnel of the school truancy reduction program in two school districts within a rural county area in western Pennsylvania. This county had three cities totaling over 120,000 residents in 2000, which declined to 116,638 in the 2010 Census. In 2010, the race/ethnic demographics of this county were: 86% non-Hispanic White, 1% Hispanic, 5.8% African-American, and 2.6% Asian, American Indian, or Pacific Islander. State-wide demographics of Pennsylvania indicate more African-Americans (10.8%) and Hispanics (5.7%) with less non-Hispanic Whites (76%) according to the most recent numbers available (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Key information interviews were conducted once the program had been fully operational for about eight months. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted for two days in a row, in a semi-structured format with six key stakeholders: three probation officers, one school resource officer, the chief juvenile probation officer, and one school district administrator. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to make sense of the experiences of each key stakeholder within this program (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Prior to the interview, each participant was provided with a consent form and each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview was semi-structured regarding the program and whether overall program goals were being met. Field notes, experiences, and observations were meticulously logged and detailed in a journal format. Following the interviews, the responses were transcribed into a word processing program and were individually analyzed and organized according to major thematic areas as they emerged.

## Procedure

The role of a school-based officer involved both case supervision and education as a treatment component. The school-based officer worked with a police officer in an "enhanced supervision partnership" to conduct after school home visits of students defined as truant (Parent & Snyder, 1999, p. 1). Once a student was found to be truant, the home visits were conducted to determine the reason to talk to the youth and/or to educate parents prior to any formal action. If the truant behavior persisted following the home visits, the case would be referred to the prosecutor's office for a scheduled court hearing. Here is one school resource officer's account of a typical day:

When I arrive at 7 a.m. at school and check for tardy students, I am joined by the school resource officer. He sits with me and we interview kids as they arrive late--asking why they were late. They see me getting into the cruiser with the officer and that makes a difference to the kids. It makes my job easier. Next we go out to see parents of truant kids. When we go out to visit par-ents, I take the lead and the officer sits back. However, if the par-

ents get aggressive, the officer steps in. Parents see that the police and school district are working together. The key to success of the program is that people are getting to know each other.

The definition of truancy originated from state laws and school district rules. Ultimately, a persistent truancy case went before a juvenile court judge who imposed sanctions. It seemed from the interviews that the juvenile judges supported this program, which is a significant factor to a successful outcome (Henderson et al., 2008). A probation officer explains the process of dealing with a truant individual:

The rules are that a written excuse is required for being absent. After three days they need a doctor's excuse. Within five days, if there is no written documentation, the 5th absence starts to be counted as "illegal absences." We go before a judge and have a hearing on the matter and most of the time, the judge backs me. After four illegal absences [which means that the student has been absent for nine days] the parents and student are subject to a fine. If Mom is really trying, only the student is cited.

The primary goal was to reduce truancy in a proactive manner through home visits of truant youths. When the program first began, truant students received wake-up calls in the morning before school (between 6:30- 7:30 a.m.) and the officers conducted home visits two hours after school (3:00-5:00 p.m.). The officers felt that the morning wake -up calls were intrusive, did not promote self responsibility, and were subsequently discontinued. Focusing on the time period after school was a more effective use of resources since delinquent activities were highest during the hours after school for potentially pre-delinquent youth and youths on probation.

## Results

The major thematic areas that emerged from the interviews were the effectiveness of the home visits, holding parents accountable and collaboration and information sharing. The findings below present the results along these thematic lines.

### Effectiveness of Home Visits at Reducing Truancy

Three out of four of the officers interviewed perceived that the home visits and court hearings were effective at reducing both truancy and tardiness:

We have a police officer as a truant officer in the school. It helps us tremendously. We no longer get calls about kids in the street when they should be in school. We also have the power to cite parents.

Yes. It [coming before a juvenile judge] has had a big impact on the truancy. Out of the 49 I had in truancy court, I had only 1 repeat.

Yes. Both [tardiness and truancy] have gone down. The repeat rate is either stable or reduced. Home visits and court hearings causes them to be accountable.

Absolutely. Wasn't a "bad" year compared to years before the program started. Truancy was down. Tardiness was down. [School resource officer]

The school resource officer believed that the school-based program was effective with younger kids, but that court hearings and the law had its limits with youths who were 17 years old:

The program is better for 12-16 year-olds, but has no clout with those 17 and over because by law they don't have to go to school. Restrictions placed on juvenile probation to detain a child are not always enforced. Picking up kids might serve as a deterrent.

There was general satisfaction with the frequency of evening home visits, but two probation officers expressed the need for more assertive supervision, such as home visits to be conducted during the school day:

We do home visits for kids who have missed three or more days of school or [those] who are habitually late. We go home to find out why [they are late]. Parents who don't care to begin with won't make a difference, which is about 30% of parents. Some parents have requested advice on how to get their child to school (e.g., cyber-school, home tutors, pregnant teens). After six unexcused absences, we do a formal court intervention and a fine is imposed. We really should be doing more visits during the school day.

I am on home visits 2-3 days a week - I go out during the week and in other offices on the other days... If I did not have contact [with the juvenile] in the morning, I go back in the evening as well.

One respondent stated that visits should even be expanded beyond the home to where youth congregate, such as parks, convenience stores and shopping malls. Truancy sweeps of public areas, whereby truant youths without an excused absence were returned to school, were used successfully for chronic truants regardless of their probation status (White et al., 2001).

### **Holding Parents Accountable**

One of the root causes of student truancy and tardiness was due to a variety of family problems or lack of parental accountability. Some children were in a situation where school attendance was not enforced or parents are failing to monitor daily activities. Officers were asked about whether they felt the program held parents accountable for the behavior of their children. The reactions were mixed. Three out of four officers seemed to think that home visits were related to parents becoming more responsible:

It is an added support to schools. Police officers monitoring truant issues have been a big help. Going to the parents and explaining to them alerts them to the problem. They understand they have to force the child to school.

Yes - and in both cases, parents get on board more with a face-to-face home visit as opposed to us sending them a letter.

If a parent is having a problem, they are reporting this to the teams. They get involved to actually assist the teams in monitoring and tracking. Also we can refer them to the ministerium [religious leaders who volunteer as mentors].

One officer believed that while home visits were effective, solving the problem was much more than this. He stressed the importance of role modeling, mentoring, and community leadership and noted how the officers are always being watched even off the clock:

There is a very positive effect of the police and probation and us knowing each other. We know each other personally and that makes a big difference. The kids see us together at the school and they see us together when we go into the neighborhoods going door-to-door [after school] checking up on kids. The parents also know that we are proactive. I coach little league and I may see a kid in the afternoon about missing school and then see them with their parents later at the little league game. The fact that we all live in the same community makes a big difference. We have a good relationship [between the police and probation].

A 5th respondent did not believe the parental impact to be long-lasting:

Yes, [accountability is present] on a short-term basis, like for a few weeks, but not on any long term basis, like more than a couple of months.

### **Collaboration and Information Sharing**

As an enhanced-supervision partnership between probation officers and police, information sharing and training was paramount to program success and to reduce future delinquency (Parent & Snyder, 1999). Collaboration was thus essential for agency partnerships in order that probation be able to notify the school as to which students were on probation and what special treatment needs the court had ordered related to the school environment (Metzger, 1997; Stephens & Arnette, 2000). The steps taken to bridge relationships among the police, probation, the schools, and the parents were viewed as exceptional in this jurisdiction, particularly due to the commitment of both the chief juvenile probation officer and the school district superintendent. The following four comments illustrate:

We've always had a good relationship with the school. School-based resource officers are in plain clothes if anything comes up and we do educational programs. There have been two officers in the schools... Parents were a little uneasy at first, but once we explained why we were talking to their child, they understand it.

...Was in the schools sharing info before the grant started, so no change because of grant. Change in info sharing... school shares more with their own personnel within the school. Info sharing between agencies is OK.

Our program has direct contact with the school and the info sharing has been really helpful. The police officers do much of the mediation in the schools and are able to share the problems...with probation.

Long-time resident people have a history of working together. \_\_\_ [the school superintendent] has a reputation for moving programs forward - doing what he said he would do. Police have kids in these schools because it is a small enough area and all parties know each other. Judges have been somewhat of a problem related to probation officers sharing information with police. Judges don't like "doing" things in the school because they feel it "stigmatizes" kids, so we sold the program as an after-school and before-school program. Schools seem to be willing to take the risks, even with liability issues like partnering with police. It is not purely a school issue any longer.

This last comment raises the concern that juvenile judges have about the potential stigma that the school-based program might have for juveniles, by drawing unnecessary attention to

their probationary status. Given the importance of peers as a primary reference group, this is an important concern. None of the respondents noted that any youths were adversely affected by the program. This partnership between the police and probation, however, does attempt to increase the function and responsibilities that schools accept.

Both school districts hired new school superintendents, one within the last 2 years and the other within the last 3 months. Two of three officers interviewed perceived a difference between the two school districts that seemed due to the degree of school leadership support:

Before the current superintendent, both districts were problematic and violent and now it is much improved. One superintendent is more supportive of our truancy program than the other. In the school district that is less supportive, the superintendent has less training and is losing students to charter schools, so they are losing funding. The current school officer is just waiting to retire, and Officer \_\_\_ [someone new] needs to be broken in after his retirement.

\_\_\_ [the chief juvenile probation officer] has done a good job of public relations with the school superintendent. The \_\_\_ [other] district that has had turnover in last three months with a new school superintendent has less perseverance to program than the first school district.

Well, so far we had a change in the administration [school superintendents] and they've done well so far.

Leadership support and some disconnect was present between at least one of the school superintendents and the school probation officer. Organizational barriers with new leadership presented a challenge; high turnover of school resource officers seemed to be a problem in other areas as well (Henderson et al., 2008). However, with regard to information sharing, the school districts have been open to providing probation officers and police officers with information or record access that they need in order to monitor and track youth. Below are some of the responses:

Yes - anything I need... I get a print out of daily attendance and tardy rolls. Also the school gives background history from students' files; the school is very supportive.

Yes - can get anything I need. I developed a good enough relationship to get anything off the record if necessary.

Yes. We have an officer in the school who works in a family center who has access to records. He is aware of all of the factors involved because of the student support system.

At the present time, one of the school districts was strongly committed and the other neighboring district did not seem to be fully committed, in large part due to the school leadership.

### Discussion

Schools are institutions with a great deal of responsibility. Schools are not only expected to educate youth, but teachers seem to have taken on additional accountability in delinquency and violence prevention, and raising youth to become responsible citizens (Stephens & Arnette, 2000). Given the established link between truancy and increased student risk for drug use

and delinquency, a sound truancy reduction program is important for every school to have in place. This study examined a school-based probation supervision strategy, wherein the probation officer managed a probation caseload and was physically located within the school district and partnerships were created between the probation department/juvenile courts and the school resource officer in an effort to decrease truancy of juveniles at risk.

The dual responsibilities performed by the probation officers in partnership with the school resource officer seemed to run smoothly overall. The general consensus by the staff interviewed was that the program was meeting its established goals. This study affirmed that strong leadership and collaboration within each of the three key agencies (juvenile probation, police, and school districts) was paramount to sustained implementation, which is consistent with other research (Fantuzzo et al., 2005; Henderson et al., 2008). Second, knowledge and information sharing was key to success, in particular uncovering the reasons behind the truancy or tardiness (such as problems at home, child abuse, learning disabilities, drug use, etc.). Information sharing was formally worked out through memorandums of understanding and written agreements such that both agencies received the information as needed to perform their functions (Stephens & Arnette, 2000). We found that program staff was adequately trained to carry out programmatic goals and there did not appear to be any role confusion, in part, because one of the officers had primarily a law enforcement function, and was the only officer of the two authorized to make an arrest. There did not appear to be resistance at the line levels, but there was a perception of resistance at the school district leadership level. That organizational barrier was perhaps overcome by the strong leadership support that existed with the chief juvenile probation officer and the police chief.

The truancy reduction program of study did not actively pursue the root causes or broader school environment issues related to truancy. There were judicial concerns about the potential stigma that too much intervention during the school day might have for juveniles, by drawing unnecessary attention to their probationary status. Probation officers in this study also had a more narrowly defined role that was limited to interacting solely with youth on probation. This is quite different than other programs where the school-based probation officer had significantly more authority to file formal charges on any youth, who committed an offense on school grounds, admit youths to detention, and mandate community service and drug testing that may result in adjusted charges (Seyko, 2001). The trend nationwide has been to expand the juvenile probation officer's role to allow each local jurisdiction to choose whether to allow the probation officer to have peacekeeping responsibilities and to be involved in charging decisions. This expanded role has the potential for juvenile probation officers to lose their historic caseworker function and be viewed by youth as just another police officer, so we recommend a more limited role for school-based probation officers.

The current study underscores the importance of home visits and parental involvement in any truancy reduction program, which was also consistent with extant research (Dembo & Gullede, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mueller et al., 2006; White et al., 2001). While the truancy reduction program under

study did not have cognitive-behavioral components integrated into school discipline, establishing behavioral norms and policies on regular school attendance would likely be effective in reducing truancy, alcohol and drug use, delinquency and violent behavior (Gerrard et al., 2003; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001). While cognitive components address faulty thinking patterns, behavioral modeling provides components such as feedback of old behaviors, rehearsal and repeated exposure to new behaviors, and positive reinforcement when the desired behavior is exhibited, as well as negative reinforcement when old habits such as truancy are exhibited. Model truancy reduction programs have been provided in the literature (see Bry, 1982; Gerrard et al., 2003; Lochman, 1992).

Our findings were limited to the implementation process and perceptions of key personnel who were directly involved in the program. Results are thus exploratory as they were not able to be triangulated with behavioral outcome measures such as school attendance rates, tardiness, school performance, home visitation rates, or rate of re-arrest. Other limitations of these findings must be mentioned. Juvenile judges and teachers were not available to be interviewed as key personnel. Judicial support was found to be important for a smoothly operating program through court-imposed conditions and support of officer discretion for revocation proceedings if necessary. Also, youth probationers, their parents, and members of the larger community were not included in the data collection effort. Outcome variables that may be valuable to future school-based supervision programs should include type of contact the probation officer made (e.g., home visit, phone call, parent visit), quality of contact with youth, attendance record (e.g., truancy, tardiness), academic progress (e.g., grades, grade point average), behavior while at school (e.g., suspensions, expulsions), graduation rates, and adjudication rates for both violent and nonviolent acts committed while at school and off school grounds.

School-based probation supervision and truancy enforcement are just two of many techniques to respond to truant youths at risk. For truancy reduction to be effective with youth, including those who are not already on probation with the juvenile courts, we advocate using a variety of other approaches, such as responding better to how children learn, establishing learning communities, rewarding students for attendance, and sanctions via in-school suspension, and if need be, court-ordered parenting classes for uninvolved parents (Berg, 1985; Gerrard et al., 2003; Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; McCluskey et al., 2004).

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