



Truancy Prevention Project

A model based on holistic intervention to help students succeed

The Truancy Prevention Project is a collaborative effort between the Village, the Center for Children's Advocacy, members of and the Connecticut Judicial Department and Hartford Public Schools. The Project is funded by Travelers and The Tow Foundation.

Unique Partnership

The Truancy Prevention Project¹ (TPP) is recognized nationally as a unique model to address a highly intractable problem.

Unlike other models, the TPP's holistic approach addresses the needs of the whole child and his/her family. Because each child's reason for missing school is unique, TPP focuses intensively on the underlying problems and develops plans based on the child's individualized needs.

Currently, the TPP operates in two Hartford K-8 schools, Alfred E. Burr Elementary and Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary.² Concentrating on middle school grades, the TPP intervenes before students give up.

In the 2013-2014 school year, with the partners' observation that attendance problems often begin early in a child's education, the Project began to pilot service delivery to students in grades 1 and 2.

"I needed more for her."

Grace Pryce, parent



Kimberly Pryce* had perfect attendance last year, an amazing feat for a student who was one of the most frequently absent in the school.

Grace Pryce was always interested in helping her daughter succeed in school. But she sometimes found it difficult to get anywhere when she advocated for Kimberly, who has learning disabilities. "I needed more for her," she says.

Through the holistic approach of the Truancy Prevention Project, Kimberly got the appropriate special education services she needed to get back on track at school.

¹ Ahmad, F. and Miller, T., "The High Cost of Truancy," Center for American Progress, p. 6, 2015

² The Center for Children's Advocacy also operates a modified TPP at Bridgeport's K-8 Barnum School.

Project Partners Each Play a Critical Role

The Village for Families and Children

Case managers who help children and families overcome obstacles to attendance

Hartford Public Schools

Space and institutional/administrative support

Connecticut Judicial Department

Judges who mentor kids and hold them accountable

Center for Children's Advocacy

Legal assistance and advocacy, both individual and systemic

How TPP Works

There is no "magic bullet" to address truancy. Support can look different for each child involved. The Village for Families and Children, a social service organization, is already on site at both TPP schools.

Informal court sessions held at the school provide guidance, accountability and a unique mentoring relationship between student and judge. Meetings between students and case managers provide structure and accountability. Educational records are reviewed by the child's case manager and, as needed, by the Center for Children's Advocacy educational consultant. Legal advocacy and assistance addresses impediments to attendance.

Serving 60 students each year, the TPP has three main goals:

- 1. Improve attendance**
- 2. Increase academic performance**
- 3. Improve social engagement**

TPP accomplishes these goals through the following actions:

- **Case Management**
Case managers meet with each child 1-3 times per week. They connect families to services that address mental health or social barriers that may keep a child out of school. They track attendance and academic progress by meeting with the child's teachers, and engage families through regular home visits and calls. They match youth with appropriate pro-social activities, and meet with families of 8th graders to assist them in choosing a high school.

The most important outcome for a child is educational success. It is a predictor of future health, financial well-being and more. If you intervene at age 11 or 12, you can change the trajectory.

Hector Glynn
Vice President Outpatient and Community Services, The Village for Families and Children

- **Mentoring and Oversight by Volunteer Judges**

During informal court sessions at the schools, judges develop mentoring relationships with students, help them set goals, and discuss progress.

When Judge Stephen Frazzini holds a session with a student, he is there less as a judge and more as a coach. “I know you’re smart and capable,” he tells students on his caseload. He reviews attendance issues and works with each student on goals that he monitors in ongoing meetings. Most of the poor attendance he sees is rooted at least in part in academic struggles.

I ask, “Will you come in every morning and show your case manager that you did your homework?” Almost always, attendance issues improve immediately.

Hon. Stephen Frazzini

Helping a child overcome barriers requires sustained effort, but Judge Frazzini, who regularly sits in juvenile court, is committed to that work. He is struck by the contrast in the activities his own children enjoyed and what is available to the students he meets through the TPP.

For kids who have few enrichment opportunities, mentoring relationships can be rare. This relationship with a superior court judge is extraordinary. “They are very aware that I’m a judge,” he says. “I always say that I’d rather meet you here than in my courtroom.”

- **Legal Assistance and Educational Advocacy**

Attorneys review students’ educational records and provide legal guidance and representation to secure appropriate services in areas that affect attendance, such as education, special education, access to healthcare, mental health services and public benefits.

When attendance is a problem, the onus to change is not only on the student or family.

Marisa Halm
Director TeamChild Juvenile Justice Project,
Center for Children’s Advocacy

An educational consultant from the Center for Children’s Advocacy reviews academic histories of high-risk TPP students, observes classrooms and makes recommendations for the school to meet the child’s needs. The Center’s advocacy includes legal representation for students who have learning disabilities or mental health needs for which there is no adequate plan of service.

- **Incentives and Social Activities**

The community of learners is strengthened through family activities, such as dinners and outdoor adventures for children. Children receive awards and incentives for outstanding attendance, and parents receive incentives for encouraging students’ positive behavior. These are distributed by case managers, often at the suggestion of the judges.

- **Systemic Advocacy**

Systemic issues such as unfair discipline policies, inappropriate bilingual education, and lack of access to tutoring often contribute to absenteeism and ultimately to drop out. Through TPP's presence in the school, partners can see and address these issues.

- **Partnership with the School**

Good attendance can be promoted from many quarters, all of which the TPP uses to its advantage. "I love the TPP. It's the relationships piece that I totally admire," says Crawford.

Dr. Crawford has been a strong advocate for the program because staff works closely with students, parents and educators. "This is a neighborhood where parents need a lot of support to make sure their children are in school," she says. "We are a neighborhood school in a low-income community, and many families are new to the United States."

My goal is student success and attendance is so important. Once children fall behind, it is difficult for them to catch up to their peers.

Dr. Doreen Crawford, Principal, Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School

While the relationship between school administration and the TPP is strong, it is not simple. TPP staff frequently advocate for children to get testing and additional services, and Crawford does not always agree. However, Crawford says those differences need not be deal breakers when they are handled openly and respectfully, and that has been her experience with the TPP.

"Talk to us about what is happening and we can work as a team," she says, "because we are all working toward the same goal."

Positive Outcomes Demonstrate TPP Effectiveness

The Truancy Prevention Project has a very high success rate. Children who are involved with the TPP improve attendance and school participation, academic performance and engagement in pro-social activities. This success, addressing a full spectrum of academic, health, family and social issues that can keep a child out of school, empowers families and addresses personal and systemic barriers. Indicators for success include:

- **Improved attendance**
- **Increased academic performance**
- **Improved social engagement**
- **Elimination of systemic barriers**

TPP demonstrates success in all four areas:

1. Improved Attendance

Alfred E. Burr Elementary School

2013-2014

74% of TPP students improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 95%.

The school's average attendance was 91.8% (HPS 2014)

2014-2015

61% of TPP students improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 94.5%.

The school's average attendance was 92% (HPS 2015)

Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School

2013-2014

96% of TPP students improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 94%.

The school's average attendance was 92.5% (HPS 2014)

2014-2015

79% of TPP students improved attendance.

TPP students' average attendance was 90.4%.

The school's average attendance was 91.6% (HPS 2015)

2. Increased Academic Performance

TPP participants who increased writing proficiency by one letter grade.

(All schools)

2011-2012 - 68%

2012-2013 - 73%

2013-2014 - 80%

TPP participants who received a passing score on prompts on reading for information skills aligned to the Connecticut Mastery Test and Connecticut Common Core Standards.

(All schools)

2011-2012 - 62%

2012-2013 - 75%

2013-2014 - 83%

3. Improved Social Engagement

The TPP focuses on connecting students to pro-social activities, building leadership and self-reliance. The program's family centered approach is key to these goals.

Though difficult to measure quantitatively, the TPP improves social engagement by linking every student to a new activity. Activities may include group field trips and gatherings, or extra-curricular activities in the community.

4. Elimination of Systemic Barriers

The Center for Children's Advocacy not only provides direct, individual legal services for TPP students, but does statewide systemic policy work to benefit thousands of children each year. "There is no question that each of these informs the other," says Center for Children's Advocacy Attorney Marisa Halm.

In the 2014 academic year, CCA saw a spike in out-of-school suspensions in one of the TPP partner schools. The school had no in-school suspension program, driving educators to impose more exclusionary discipline. CCA was potentially in the position of challenging a partner, the host school.

"We frame it as a resource issue, so we maintain the partnership. We advocated with the superintendent for school resources to create an in-school suspension program," says Attorney Halm. "Our systemic advocacy helps students in the TPP, and helps every child in the school."

When TPP partners witnessed school staff repeatedly failing to observe basic disciplinary rights of special education students in compliance with special education law, CCA brought the issue to the Board of Education. This resulted in corrective action for individual students and a new commitment to ongoing professional development for staff in charge of discipline at the individual school level.

Lessons Learned

When success seems impossible, children stop attending school.

Many students enter the TPP already far behind their peers. If they are struggling academically because of unmet special education needs, school is a tough sell. Through its advocacy component, the TPP ensures that children are properly identified and getting appropriate special education services they need to be successful in school. The academic component strengthens their performance.

It is not just the child who needs to change.

Students do better and are more likely to attend school when the conditions they encounter are conducive to success. That may mean a solid plan to meet special learning needs or a step away from exclusionary discipline. Reviewing student files to find barriers has helped the team advocate for better services for individual students, has helped CCA push for school-wide changes that improve climate, and has helped formulate legislative advocacy to create schools that are more inclusive, statewide.

Family matters.

The challenges faced by an entire family may get in the way of school attendance. Parents whose own education was not a priority in their youth may not understand the importance of strong attendance. The TPP engages family members through phone calls, home visits and incentives awarded when children substantially improve attendance. As the TPP pilots work with children in first and second grades, family engagement becomes even more important. Younger children are more dependent on their caregivers to get to school.

Schools must buy in.

Removing a child from class for court sessions is significant. The TPP makes it clear that these sessions and TPP support helps students with academics because better attendance increases instructional time. TPP's success is dependent upon the support of school administrators.

Interventions must be holistic.

Every team member interviewed agreed that each player is necessary for a child to be successful. Legal advocacy, case management and mentoring are all essential components, and these components must work together. Case managers play an important role in coordinating and connecting families with services.

Attendance is a window to broader issues.

Because truancy is frequently the result of multiple challenges in a child's life, addressing truancy is an opportunity to make broad improvements in the child's well-being. A Village caseworker talking with one TPP student learned that the child had suffered abuse. Though the abuse had ended, there had been no services provided to help the child deal with the trauma, which continued to shape his life. Getting the boy help did so much more than improve his school attendance.

High school is too late.

Students who perform poorly in grade 9 are at high risk of dropping out of school. The TPP helps students get on track before they begin high school. A 2013 study found that students who exhibited poor grades, attendance or behavior in grade 8 were likely to continue to struggle in grade 9 and had only a 30 percent chance of finishing high school.

In contrast, students with the same risk factors in grade 8 who received supportive intervention had the same graduation rate as students who had exhibited no warning signs.³

The TPP has reached out to younger and younger students in its ten-year history. The Project began with high school students and now concentrates on grades 6 through 8. The TPP has begun programs with students in grades 1 and 2.

Reward success.

Success is rewarded for monthly, semester and yearlong attendance goals and other achievements. Rewards may be tangible gift cards for students and families, and/or positive reinforcement from team members who look for opportunities to praise effort and progress.

Plan for continued success.

Students do better in high schools that are geared to their particular strengths and interests. The TPP works with families to help children select the best match from the state's magnet, charter and other schools and helps families with the application process.

³ Messel, Matthew; Maclver, Martha. "The ABCs of Keeping On Track to Graduation: Research Findings from Baltimore," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. 2013. Accessed ecs.org/rs/Studies/DetailStudy.aspx?study_ID=a0r70000003qCxLAAU