

Innovation Brief

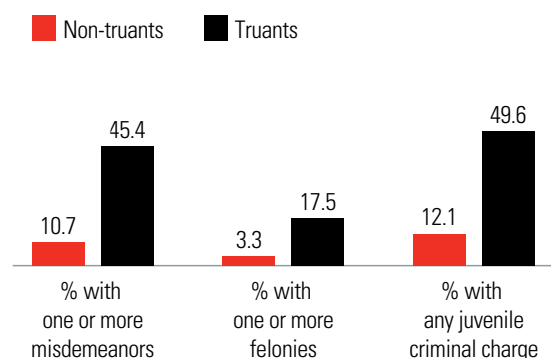
Using Community Truancy Boards to Tackle Truancy

In 2007, after a coalition of community stakeholders expressed concern with the high dropout rates and high occurrence of truancy in their Eastern Washington community, the Spokane County Juvenile Court teamed with the West Valley School District to conduct an in-depth effectiveness study of their existing community truancy board. The West Valley Community Truancy Board is a collaborative, community-based approach to working with truant youth in order to keep them in school. The community truancy board seeks to address the problem of truancy by engaging truant youth and their families in a restorative justice oriented program in which a variety of school, court and community resources are coordinated to improve school attendance, promote school attachment, and enhance academic achievement. The goal of the intervention is successful school re-engagement and renewed progress toward graduation. This model has been successfully replicated in the state of Washington and the replication toolkit has been shared with stakeholders across the country.

The Issue

Washington State law requires schools to file a truancy petition with the county's juvenile court when a student has seven unexcused absences in a month, or a total of 10 unexcused absences in a school year. Each year in Washington more than 40,000 students have 10 or more unexcused absences from school. Unexcused absences by the end of 9th grade are a significant risk factor, predictive of school dropout and juvenile delinquency, among other negative consequences. On average, court-petitioned truant youth tend to be over-age for their grade level, have lower GPAs, and be cross-system involved.

Juvenile Court Contact



Innovations

The West Valley School District Community Truancy Board was established in 1996 in response to the Washington State Becca Bill that mandates the filing of truancy petitions. In 2007, stemming from community members' concerns about the high dropout rates and chronic truant population in Spokane County, Spokane County Juvenile Court partnered with Washington State University and West Valley School District to document the historical development, operation and effectiveness of the existing community truancy board. Knowing that school-engagement interventions are most effective when used early in the truancy process and before a student is brought into court, the West Valley School District Community Truancy Board was expanded and replicated with *Models for Change* funding.

A community truancy board is a collaboration of school, court, and community resource providers who meet with truant students and families to solve problems and offer resources to address the reasons for the student's truancy. The goal of a community truancy board is successful school re-engagement and renewed progress toward school completion for students, thus increasing graduation rates.

In Spokane County, initial truancy petitions are filed with a stay, in order to provide the opportunity for Community Truancy Board interventions to take place before a court hearing is scheduled. Community truancy boards are held in a variety of locations in the community in which the school district is located. Board members include school administrators, school staff, community resource providers from social services agencies and local business, and Juvenile Court staff. As a group they seek to convey a helpful and collaborative attitude. They learn from the student and family about the obstacles that make school attendance challenging. Following a discussion of the state's truancy laws and the legal consequences of continued truant behavior, needs of the youth and family are identified and discussed over the course of a 10- to 20-minute question-and-answer period. The issues causing the truancy vary from family

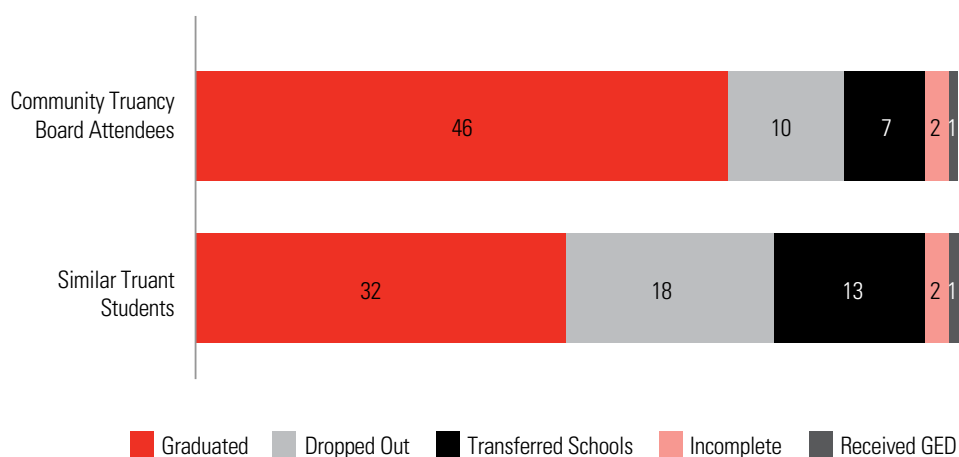
to family, but may include housing concerns, lack of transportation, violence in the home, parental or child medical and mental health issues, lack of clothing, drug and/or alcohol usage, and many others.

The board then facilitates collaboration to find solutions to the identified problems. One of the largest benefits of having community board members from service organizations is that they often have direct knowledge of, or immediate access to, the community resources that would help the youth and family address the cause of the truancy and get the student back in school.

At the conclusion of the community truancy board meeting an agreement is signed between the board members and the student and family. This agreement contains a summary of the identified solutions and a commitment that the family and student will, to their best ability, work to change what is needed so the child will attend school regularly. The school lifts the stay if there is a failure to meet the agreed upon standards and attain the goals set in the agreement, resulting in the child and the family having to appear in Spokane County Juvenile Court. If the student fulfills the goals and standards of the agreement the truancy petition is dropped.

During school years 2008-2011, a probation counselor from the Spokane County Juvenile Court was contracted to serve as the truancy specialist and enhance the effectiveness of the court and community truancy board collaboration by providing case management using the Check & Connect model. The truancy specialist provided services related to mentoring, systematic academic monitoring, timely individualized intervention, and enhanced home-school support. The truancy specialist also conducted a risks and needs assessment with each student. To facilitate this work, the truancy specialist had an office in each of the schools in the district and traveled between schools to establish and maintain productive relationships with students who have had a history of truancy. This truancy specialist usually sits as a member of the community truancy board.

Outcomes of Community Truancy Board Attendees Compared to Similar Students



Results and Lessons

Outcomes: Students who attended the community truancy board had a higher rate of graduating or obtaining a GED and correspondingly lower dropout and transfer rates than truant students in comparison districts. To test the effectiveness of the community truancy board model, sixty-six students who attended the main traditional high school in West Valley School District were identified for participation. These students received a truancy petition and attended the West Valley Community Truancy Board during the 2008-2009 school year. The students were matched with 66 students from three local high schools in different school districts who were also attending their district's main traditional high school. Comparison high schools were chosen that were located either within Spokane County or an adjoining county, and judged to be similar to the West Valley School District based on cultural, economic, and demographic factors. Results revealed that graduation and GED completion rates, relative to school dropout and transfer-out-of district, were higher for students who attended the West Valley Community Truancy Board, such that graduation and/or GED attainment was 40% greater for those exposed to the intervention. Similarly, graduation rates, relative to school dropout, were also higher for the West Valley Community Truancy Board group, such that graduation as an outcome was 28% more likely for those students exposed to the intervention. These results add to a growing body of empirical literature suggesting the effectiveness of multi-systemic interventions for reducing truancy. The study is noteworthy for the fact that it included a control group and

investigated a decisive educational outcome in the form of school completion.

Relationships: Successful relationships and partnerships between the court, schools, and board member volunteers have made the community truancy boards a success. The strong relationships with service providers means that the Spokane County truancy boards have never run out of volunteers to staff the program, even as they have expanded their frequency and locations.

Cost Savings: By harnessing partnerships with community services and schools, replication and sustainability costs of a community truancy board can be kept minimal through reallocation of existing resources. By reducing the number of truancy hearings through this early intervention, the cost savings can be passed to the community truancy boards to use for sustainability.

By putting money towards low-cost community truancy boards now, the long term cost savings are sizeable. Since truancy is a strong predictor of future drop out, successful truancy interventions should raise graduation rates.

Community truancy boards have been shown to raise graduation rates, saving society money. West Valley Community Truancy Board participants had a high school graduation rate of nearly 70%, over 20% higher than the graduation rate of similar truant students who did not attend a community truancy board. In the 2010-2011 school

year, Spokane County community truancy boards, serving approximately 20% of students with truancy petitions, helped an estimated 234 students achieve their high school diploma.

Every high school dropout costs society an estimated \$292,575 over his or her lifetime. By increasing graduation rates, the West Valley Community Truancy Board averted costs of nearly \$68.5 million. With an annual operating cost of less than \$198,795, community truancy boards are estimated to return nearly \$344 for every dollar spent.

Replication: Every state and every school district across the country deals with truant students and many are looking for a low-cost, community-based approach to working with students and families in order to keep them out of court and in school. Community Truancy Boards are being replicated across Washington and interest has spread throughout the country, with schools and courts in 18 states, including Hawaii, Kansas, West Virginia, Colorado, and California, requesting copies of the Spokane County Toolkit for Community Truancy Board Replication.

The Spokane County Community Truancy Boards averted up to \$68.4 million in lifetime costs due to high school dropout. The return to each dollar spent was estimated to be up to \$344.

Looking Forward

Community truancy boards are an integral part of the truancy work in Spokane County and will be sustained well beyond *Models for Change*. Due to the low cost and high success rate of the model, the boards are expanding throughout the county, state, and even the rest of the country.

The next step in the process is analyzing the use of community truancy boards for middle school students. The community truancy boards are being expanded to younger students with the goal of working with truant youth at the first sign of a problem and before their absences require the filing of a truancy petition. Currently all but one school district in Spokane County that utilizes the community truancy board model offers the intervention to truant students and families in kindergarten through high school. However, while the use with younger students looks promising, it has yet to be formally evaluated. Washington State University, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is currently working on this evaluation and findings will be published in 2015.

Resources

Spokane County Toolkit for Community Truancy Board Replication

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/475>

West Valley School District (Spokane, WA) Community Truancy Board Evaluation (2011)

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/467>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from *Models for Change*, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. *Models for Change* is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.