Effective Truancy Prevention Models

Nicole K. Hachfeld, LSW
Department of Social Work
Minnesota State University, Mankato
Sibley County Human Services

Purpose

In the United States, truancy has been identified as one of today's top ten educational problems (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barret & Wilson, 2007). Across the country, every day there are hundreds of thousands truant students (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Attendance can be influenced by mental health issues, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, student employment, family responsibilities, teacher attitudes, size of school, and inconsistent application of truancy policies and lack of meaningful consequences for truancy. Family factors that influence attendance include: domestic violence, poverty, lack of supervision, substance abuse, parental attitudes toward school and education (Kim & Streeter, 2006). The purpose of this study is to find programs that are evidenced-based and effective at combating the problem of truancy in rural school districts and recommending a program for the school districts in Sibley County to implement.

Research Questions

What components are necessary in effective truancy prevention programs?   What are some evidenced-based programs that can be implemented into rural school districts in Sibley County?

Literature Review

There are numerous truancy prevention programs available for implementation. Literature states that in order for the program to be effective it needs to address certain components such as: collaborative in nature, use meaningful incentives and sanctions, promote parental involvement, and have an evaluation process (National Center for School Engagement (NCSE), n.d.; Kim & Streeter, 2006). Truancy needs to be understood at multiple levels in order for the intervention to be effective (Kim & Streeter, 2006). Various truancy prevention programs were considered during this study.

Truancy affects the student, their family, school, and community . Therefore, effective responses must address all entities. Truancy is considered to be the first sign of trouble as well as an indication that the student is struggling and possibly giving up hope (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). Research has shown for decades the correlation between poor student attendance and problems later in life (McCray, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1996; Kim & Streeter, 2006). These issues include: criminal activity, family and marriage problems, struggles finding and maintaining employment, and incarceration (Kim & Streeter, 2006). Truancy interventions provide the parents and the children with education, resources and support necessary to reduce the risk factors (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001). Dropping out of school is a long process of disengagement and withdrawal from schooling and educational institutes, not a sudden occurrence (Jacobson, 2008).

Little Research has been done regarding the costs or monetary benefits of truancy reduction. In the research that does exist, it indicates that the programs used to reduce truancy are inexpensive compared to the cost of that same student dropping out of high school (NCSE, n.d.). There are numerous truancy reduction programs that cost less than $100,000 a year to operate, where as one dropout costs society over $200,000 over their lifetime (NCSE, 2007). When looking at the issue of truancy, resources need to be considered for the whole family and not just the child. Effective partnerships are based on understanding the cultural, socioeconomic, health, social, and recreational needs and interests of each family (Martinez, 2004).

Truancy programs are the responsibility of the community and not just of schools, parents, or the courts. For every race and gender group, high school dropouts use more government funded social service expenditures than non-drop-outs. Truancy can be corrected, especially among the youngest students and students whose attendance is addressed immediately. There needs to be a combination of supports, rewards, and sanctions to reduce truancy (NCSE, 2007).

Methods

A systematic review of literature regarding truancy prevention programs and their effectiveness was conducted. Key Stakeholders in Sibley County expressed interest in the program being able to address all grade levels, be cost-effective, have truancy as their primary focus, and be evidenced-based demonstrating the effectiveness of the program. These aspects were used during the first round of comparing programs and are listed in Table 1. There were six programs considered in the first stage of research. Five of the six programs were listed on the National Dropout Prevention Center Network website as being model programs in regards to truancy prevention. The Coca-Cola Valued Youth program was approved by the U.S. Department of Education's Program Effectiveness Panel. After the initial six programs were researched, two programs were focused on due to them containing all the components the Stakeholders identified.

The second round of research focused on the Check and Connect Model and the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program. These two programs were compared using the components research has shown as vital in effective truancy prevention programs as shown in Table 2. Other criteria included issues facing rural/small communities and schools such as: lack of resources, transportation restrictions, and the need for students to help out on family farms. The programs also needed to serve vulnerable and at-risk populations, for truancy this includes those with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, mobile families, and those families living in poverty (NCSE, 2007). The Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and the Check and Connect Program are both culturally sensitive and can be used across all ethnicities. However, neither the Check and Connect Program or the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program have been studied in the rural school districts, but both programs report they can be adapted to all individuals and school districts (Evelo, Sinclair, Hurley, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1996; Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA), 2004).

Data/Results

	Check and Connect	Coca-Cola Valued Youth	CASAStart	Process Communica-tions	FAST	Project Reconnect
Addresses all grades	X	X		X		X
Cost per student	About $1,200	$150-$250	$2,000	Less than $500	$500-$1,000	$500
Annual Cost	Under $25,000	Unknown	$100,000-$200,000	$25,000-$100,000	Under $25,000	Under $25,000
Truancy is primary focus	X	X				X
Strong Evidence of Effectiveness	X	X	X	X	X	

Table 1. Comparison of various truancy prevention programs currently being used

	Check and Connect	Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program
Collaborates with school, family, and community	X	Limited community involvement
Evidenced-based	X	X
Addresses Parental Involvement	X	X
Can be used for all grades	X	X
Adaptable to issues in rural/small communities and schools	X	X
Serves at-risk students (those most vulnerable for dropping out)	X	X
Flexible and able to adjust to individual students needs	X	X
Views children in the context of the family	X	
Use meaningful sanctions and rewards	X	
Evaluation of program and performance built in	X	X

Table 2. Comparison of the Check and Connect Model and the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program

Findings

Both the Coca-Cola Valued Youth Program and the Check and Connect Program contain numerous components that research indicates are essential for effectiveness (Evelo et al., 1996; IDRA, 2004). However, the Check and Connect Program contains all of the necessary components . Check and Connect Program has been studied and tested in various schools and has proven to be effective (Evelo et al., 1996) The recommendation resulting from this research is for the school districts and human services in Sibley County to implement the Check and Connect Program. Implementing the program and finding mentors should be a collaborative effort between the entities. It will be vital to implement the program just as it is laid out in the manual. If the program is implemented correctly , as the research states, it will reduce the truancy rates in those school districts using the program. This program will also provide students and their families with one person in the school or community to go to when they need resources or assistance. Reducing truancy rates will be beneficial to the school, students, families, and the communities in Sibley County. Sibley County Human Services will not have to spend as much staff time and energy working with those students who are truant and could have benefited from the Check and Connect Program. By decreasing the truancy rates and rates of high school drop out now, it will provide students with some of the necessary skills for later in life.

Implications for social work practice

High school dropouts are two and a half times more likely to be on welfare, be unemployed, earn lower wages, experience unstable marriages, live in poverty, and spend time in prison when compared to high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Baker et al 2001; McCray, 2006). Children who become truant or miss a lot of school are often referred to social service agencies or probation (Garry, 1996). Since truancy indicates a bigger problem in the child's life, a multidisciplinary team is often consulted. This team usually includes the school, law enforcement, social services, judicial agencies, and community and youth service organizations (Garry, 1996).

1. Collaboration between the school and the family is necessary to improve attendance. Family problems will often spill over into the classroom and affect the student's attendance and academic performance.
2. Schools and school social workers can help by assisting the families and students find resources and appropriate social services to help alleviate some of the family problems and in turn helping with attendance (Kim & Streeter, 2006).
3. With the Check and Connect Program, it is important for the mentors to be aware of the resources in the area in order to refer the family. Research has shown that when students have at least one supportive adult in their lives, they typically do better in school and with their attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).
4. The Check and Connect Program and the Coca-Valued Youth Program both provide a supportive relationship to at-risk students. Both of these programs are in line with the NASW Code of Ethics principle of recognizing the importance of human relationships. Social workers realize that relationships between people such as the mentors and the students are important vehicles for change (NASW, 2008).
5. If truancy is not resolved, and the student does not receive the tools necessary for success in their adult life, problems among this generation will most likely arise again in the next (NCSE, 2007).

Limitations/Barriers

✓ Neither Check and Connect nor Coca-Cola Valued Youth have been tested in rural school districts.
✓ With Check and Connect, mentors and students should be paired for a minimum of two years. This time commitment may deter some people from becoming mentors.
✓ Stakeholders in Sibley County have expressed concern about being able to find mentors. In the Check and Connect Program there are certain qualities and characteristics mentors should posses, limiting the number of mentors available.
✓ There are typically fewer resources available in the rural area (Evelo et al., 1996).
✓ If mentors are not school employees there are additional barriers the mentors face such as a reduction in communication between themselves and school staff.
✓ There has not been a true cost/benefit analysis of a broad range of truancy reduction programs.
✓ School districts are not required to attend a training in order to implement the program, but it is highly recommended. However, if they do not attend a training on implementation of the program, it may result in certain aspects being implemented correctly, thus affecting the impact the program may have on truancy.
✓ Policies regarding truancy and tracking of attendance need to be improved.
✓ Definition and policies of truancy vary from school district to school district.
✓ More research needs to be done regarding truancy in rural school districts.

References

References are available from the author upon request.