



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

**Jacksonville, Florida: Evidence of Effectiveness in the
Early Years of the Truancy Arbitration Program**

National Center for School Engagement

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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Jacksonville, FL: Evidence of Effectiveness in the Early Years of the Truancy Arbitration Program

The purpose of this study is to examine the longitudinal effects of the Jacksonville Truancy Arbitration Program (TAP) during 1995 to 2000. TAP is a diversion program that holds parents accountable for their child's school attendance. Several modifications have been made to the TAP program over the years. Prior to 1999, referrals to TAP could be made by anyone (i.e., family members, schools, etc.) After 1999, Attendance Intervention Team Meetings were the required means of referral. Prior to 1998, case management was not offered, and there were very few home visits. Consequently, this is a study of the TAP program when it was less intensive than it is now. Evaluation reports of the current TAP are available on the National Center for School Engagement at www.schoolengagement.org.

Methodology

TAP representatives provided us with student data from truants referred to TAP between 1995 and 2000 and also provided student data up through school year 2004-2005 when available. The data we obtained included annual counts of unexcused absences, excused absences, GPA or reading and math grades, and retention/promotion status as of the last year the court had records on the student.

In order to assure that the TAP intervention had time to affect behavior, data were analyzed by restructuring the file such that regardless of the year of the TAP referral, school year data following that referral was considered "Post-Intervention Year 1, "Post-Intervention Year 2", "Post-Intervention Year 3", etc. The specific requirement was that in order for the first full year of data to be considered a reflection of the TAP process the referral must have occurred no later than October 1 of that school year. If the referral to TAP occurred after October 1, the subsequent school year was used as the first year of post-intervention data. Depending on the

type of services the child received, a referral date might be followed with months of intervention which may or may not begin immediately after referral. Consequently, the advantage of using the conservative October 1 cutoff date is that by the next year, most of the intervention was likely completed.

Data Analyses and Results

Typically, it is unreasonable to believe that even very effective interventions have long lasting effects years after the intervention ends. Consequently, the most reasonable analyses to perform are those using data from the year before/during the intervention and those from the following year. In addition, because some students' data were not available for more than one year following the intervention, these analyses include as many students as possible (i.e., 59 students).

Pre-post analyses showed that being referred to TAP had a significant impact on daily attendance and achievement. Excused absences declined from an average of 20.39 days during the year of intervention to 13.02 the following year. $F(1, 58) = 3.41, p < .10$. Unexcused absences declined more dramatically from 25.20 days during the year of intervention to 15.87 the following year, $F(1, 58) = 10.42, p < .005$.

GPA and grades also improved although not significantly: Pre-intervention GPAs averaged 1.05, whereas the year following the intervention, they had risen to an average of 1.55 (not statistically significant). In addition, eight students had failing GPAs (less than a 1.0) during the pre-intervention school year. Six of these eight had risen above a 1.0 GPA during the post-intervention school year.

Those students for whom we did not have GPA information, we typically had reading and math grades. Twelve students were failing reading during the pre-intervention year;

however, only two of these were failing during the first post-intervention year. Twelve students – not all the same ones - were failing math prior to the intervention. Post intervention, only two were still failing math. Overall grades also improved the first year, although these too, were not significant improvements. However, grades continued to improve two and three years following the intervention, eventually reaching a statistically significant change¹. The following table illustrates the long term improvements.

Average Absences and Achievement: Pre-Intervention Compared to Post-Intervention*

| | Pre-Intervention | Year 1 | Year 2 | Year 3 | Year 4 |
|-------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Days of Excused Absences (N = 28) | 15.38 | 12.38 | 7.48 | 8.72 | 6.48 |
| Days of Unexcused Absences (N = 30) | 24.80 | 11.98 | 14.50 | 17.94 | 15.63 |
| GPA (N = 8) | 1.07 | 1.86 | 1.98 | Insufficient Data | Insufficient Data |
| Reading Grades (N = 21) | 1.57 (≈ D +) | 1.62 (≈ D +) | 2.14 (≈ C) | 2.14 (≈ C) | Insufficient Data |
| Math Grades (N = 20) | 1.62 (≈ D +) | 2.05 (≈ C) | 2.14 (≈ C) | 1.86 (≈ C -) | Insufficient Data |

* Note: The pre-intervention means differ on longitudinal analyses compared to simple pre and post test analyses because the longitudinal analyses depend on all students having all data in all years. Consequently, those students who only had pre-post data are not included in this analysis.

The data included promotion or retention at the end of the year for each student. For these students, 36% were retained, 28% were promoted with another 8% administratively promoted, and 18% were not enrolled at the end of the school year. (Data for the other students were missing.)

¹ When two numbers are statistically significantly different from one another it means that the difference is extremely unlikely to be due to chance. This does not mean that differences are not real, just that they *may* not be. However, the overall trends in these data suggest that the non-significant data do reflect “real difference”.

Conclusion

In this study we found that being referred to TAP (and presumably being served by TAP in some way) was followed by significant long-term improvement in attendance and grades. It is important to point out that for some students merely drawing attention to the act of truancy may have been enough to improve attendance. Assuming some services were provided, the overall impact was great and supports the efficiency of the TAP program's success.

The skeptic might look at these data and argue that the average attendance and grades were not all that positive in the years following TAP. For instance, the average unexcused absences in Post-Intervention Year 4 was 15.63. This is still higher than the Jacksonville definition of "chronic truancy" which requires no more than ten unexcused absences within one school year. Because these are averages we can assume some students had much better attendance and some worsened. Nevertheless, those knowledgeable about truants and their typical outcomes will argue that truants do not improve without help. Instead, the ignored truant will most likely decline rapidly and drop out, moving from Ds to Fs and attending some school to none at all. These data show that grades were improving and failure was all but eliminated, two indicators that these students were on the path to successful school completion.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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