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TITLE:

***Jacksonville, Florida Case Study:
Evidence of Effectiveness in Reducing Truancy***

REPORT

BY:

National Center for School Engagement

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303 E. 17th Avenue, Suite 400 Denver, CO 80203
303/837-8466
www.schoolengagement.org**

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By National Center for School Engagement

In recent years, truancy has become a focus of policy discussions across the country. School districts, juvenile courts, and police departments across the map are trying new methods to keep children in school (Cantelon and LeBoeuf, 1997). The business community has been vocal about the need for a workforce with a more solid foundation in the basic skills that public education is expected to provide. In response to concerns about school attendance and achievement, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention funded several model community-based truancy reduction programs to operate in various cities nationwide. One of these programs is located in Jacksonville. This chapter reports the results of a six-year evaluation of that program. Subsequent chapters will report on the progress being made in two other OJJDP-funded programs in Houston, TX and Seattle, WA.

It is “common knowledge” among those who work in the field of juvenile justice that truancy leads to a number of undesirable outcomes, yet the body of research on truancy – its causes, outcomes, and methods of prevention – is still limited. Retrospective studies of juvenile delinquents show that truancy is common among that group, and attitudes toward school are poor. However, the only prospective study – one that begins with the population of truants and investigates their propensity to be involved with delinquent behavior – is being conducted by the Study Group on Very Young Offenders, sponsored by OJJDP. This longitudinal study, conducted in Denver, CO; Rochester, NY; and Pittsburgh, PA, shows that truancy is one of the early behaviors that may eventually lead to serious delinquency (Loeber and Farrington, 2000). They identified truancy as a “disruptive behavior” and found that one quarter to one half of disruptive children are at risk of becoming juvenile delinquents. Results of the recent National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health show that frequent problems with school work is the single greatest risk factor for four of the five risky behaviors studied: cigarette smoking, under-age alcohol use, weapon-related violence and suicidal thoughts and attempts (Blum, Beuhring, and Rinehart, 2000).

With the new trend toward truancy reduction and the general belief that truancy is a precursor to other more serious problems, the National Center for School Engagement has been conducting one of the few longitudinal studies regarding the effectiveness of truancy reduction approaches, and their relative costs and benefits. The National Center for School Engagement has conducted a process evaluation of seven community-based truancy reduction programs, and an outcome evaluation of three of the sites; Jacksonville is one of these. Specifically, the comprehensive process, outcome and cost-benefit evaluation have been conducted with the Truancy Arbitration Program in Jacksonville, Florida. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

Research Questions

1. What is the relative cost effectiveness of these interventions given their propensity to produce high school graduation and deter criminal activity?

2. What specific parent, school, and community interventions are consistently effective in improving *school attendance, attachment, and academic achievement* for truant youth?

This report summarizes the results of some of the research conducted in Jacksonville, Florida.

The Community

The Jacksonville State Attorney's office is located in Jacksonville, Florida. The city of Jacksonville is incorporated with Duval County. Jacksonville is spread across 774 square miles with approximately 1,000 persons per square mile. The city/county is the largest city in the United States in terms of square miles covered. The 2003 estimate of Duval County's population is 817,480. Thirty-four percent of the population is under 18 years old. Gender is evenly split with 51% female and 49% male. Sixty-six percent of the population is white, 27% are African American, 4% are Latino, and 3% are Asian. Jacksonville does not have a large immigrant population with less than 6% foreign born persons. The population of 25+ years consists primarily of high school graduates (82%) with fewer college graduates.

The School District

Duval County School District spans the entire city of Jacksonville and includes 177 schools. In 2000, the total school population was approximately 129,000 students. Student gender is evenly split between males (49%) and females (51%). Approximately 34% of households in the district are headed by females. A large portion of the households is owner occupied (63%). The average family size is three people. In 1999, 12% of households had income below the poverty level.

The Program

Jacksonville has long had a comprehensive approach to reducing delinquency in their city and county. As part of their overall approach, they found that something had to be done about the increasing rate of absences and tardiness in Duval County. It took a creative, collaborative approach to generate a significant reduction in both. In the fall of 1994, the Jacksonville State Attorney Harry Shorstein made a commitment to prevent and reduce truancy in Duval County schools. Since that time, the Jacksonville community developed a comprehensive truancy intervention program consisting of: a school-based intervention that begins with a meeting of school staff and parents to address a child's unexcused absence (K-12), called an Attendance Intervention Teams (AIT); a non-judicial hearing held at the county court house for parents and students (K-8) sponsored by The State Attorneys Office; and can include case management. This is referred to as the Truancy Arbitration Program (TAP). Supplementing the overall truancy efforts are four truancy centers located across the city for grades 6-12, called the Truancy Interdiction Program (TIP). The overall set of truancy interventions is guided by a diverse group of community stakeholders that was formed in 2000 to increase public awareness about this critical issue – Jacksonville United Against Truancy (JUAT).

The State Attorney's Office (SAO) works primarily with elementary-aged students and their parents. After families receive an Attendance Intervention Team meeting, the SAO summons parents and students to a TAP hearing conducted in their office. TAP hearings are facilitated by trained volunteers who act as arbitrators for the program. School social workers also participate in the hearings. Parents are referred to parenting skills classes on a voluntary basis. After each hearing, the parents and the student are required to sign a performance agreement compelling school attendance. The SAO clearly communicates with both the parent and the child that all legal avenues will be exhausted to ensure school attendance, including criminal prosecution of the parents.

When appropriate, students are referred to case management, including counseling and tutoring. According to data that case managers entered into the TRAIN database (Truancy Reduction Application Interface), the focus of the intervention is case management. Although case managers are able to refer families to free mental health, family support, mentoring, and tutoring services, typically they were not utilized. Of these additional services, mental health was used most frequently. At intake, 27 families were receiving mental health services, two had already received them, and 38 were scheduled to receive them. However, these are relatively small numbers given that there were 172 families in the database and 167 of them had received or were actively receiving case management. Tutoring services were most often categorized as needed but not available, but again this was a relatively small number of families (N=17). According to the TRAIN database, in very few instances did families ever decline services. For instance, four out of 172 declined mental health services that were offered at intake. Case managers update data in TRAIN every three months. In the updates, questions concerning referrals to outside services were either left blank or case managers reported that services other than case management were not needed.

Method

This study is guided by two areas of interest: cost-benefit and outcome effects. Together, these constructs provide evidence for the extent of effectiveness of the Jacksonville program.

Cost-Benefit. Cost-benefit analyses were conducted on case management activities during the fiscal year 2003-2004. The number of case managers and their salaries, including the cost of outside services provided, were compared with the benefit that society derives from program success. Since we know the monetary cost of high school failure (Vernez, Krop and Rydell, 1999), program success is used as a proxy for high school graduation, and program costs may be compared to their expected benefits. TRAIN data from the 2003-2004 school year and data from the program manager of Jacksonville were used to determine the effectiveness of the program.

Outcome Effects. Outcome effects include student attendance, achievement and school attachment (also known as the three A's), family functioning indicators and parental perceived arrest effectiveness. Attendance data includes excused and unexcused absences as reported by case managers in the TRAIN database since the inception of the evaluation (May 2001 through May 2005). Achievement outcomes are based on school grades in

four basic subjects (English, Math, Science, and Social Science) and GPAs. School attachment was measured using the NCSE School Engagement Survey and was tailored for the Jacksonville program and for the relatively young population¹.

Family members and students completed pre-test and post-test School Engagement Surveys. Pre-test engagement surveys were collected at intake, at the beginning of the intervention. Post-test engagement surveys were given anywhere from 2.5 months to 9 months following the pre-test. TRAIN data entry and survey collection protocols were implemented at the beginning of the evaluation. TRAIN data was provided at the moment a truant student entered the program and every three months following as long as the student was still involved in the intervention.

Results

Jacksonville Cost-Benefit Analysis

In Jacksonville, two program components were selected for cost-benefit analysis: case management and Attendance Intervention Team Meetings. Data used in this analysis were taken from FY 03/04, which roughly corresponds to the school year beginning in the fall of 2003 and continuing through the following summer of 2004. Since the benefits of education are generally not realized until after an individual completes his or her education and enters the workforce, the financial benefit assumed to result from successful intervention with a truant child is equated to that obtained by high school graduation. Assuming that the gender and racial composition of the 62 youth whose information was entered in the TRAIN database is representative of the population of children served by the Jacksonville program, the average benefit of providing the means for one child to graduate from high school is \$218,800 in current dollars².

Case management is a common component of many truancy reduction programs. In Jacksonville, a budget of \$100,847 paid the salaries and benefits for two case managers, one supervisor, and a part-time support person in FY 03/04. During that time, the case managers provided services to 226 truant youth for a per child cost of \$446.23.

The case managers make referrals to counselors and tutors; children and their families are allowed ten visits paid for by TAP funds (but not from the case management budget) when referrals are made. The benefits of counseling may reach well beyond improved school attendance, and for purposes of this study are not measurable, so the cost of providing tutoring and counseling services is not included in this analysis. (The total cost during 2003/04 was just \$1,430, so adding that expense would not appreciably alter the results of this analysis.) It is worth noting, however, that of the 226 young

¹ The School Engagement Survey which was developed using items from other similar school attachment surveys which have established construct and predictive validity. A copy of the survey and background information is available by contacting NCSE via the website. The TRAIN database is also housed on this site and new users can request temporary memberships to explore it. <http://www.schoolengagement.org>.

² The data on the benefit of high school graduation were taken from Vernez, Krop and Rydell, Closing the Education Gap, RAND 1999. In their analysis they include the cost of social welfare programs and criminal justice expenditures that are incurred to a disproportionate degree by high school dropouts, and lost income tax contributions due to the combined effect of lower rates of employment and lower wages. Costs are tallied over the expected lifetime of the individual, from 18 to 80 years of age, and the resulting figure is discounted to the current value of the money. The undiscounted figure is over \$800,000 per dropout.

people who received case management, fourteen were referred to counseling, but only eight actually went³. Those eight students were entitled to 80 visits, but made only 26. Therefore, the referrals made by case managers are severely underutilized.

Outcome data are obtained from the TRAIN database. Since sites use a sampling procedure for entering data in the TRAIN database, data are available for 62 of these students. Thirty-six of those 62 students have exited the case management component of the program; the remaining 26 students are still receiving case management services. Of the 36 that exited, 20 completed the program successfully, ten were exited unsuccessfully and faced court action, and six left for another educational environment – two to a hospital/homebound program, three to home schooling, and one moved out of the state.

Each student who graduates from high school as a result of the program will save \$218,800. From that figure must be subtracted the cost of the case management. The *best foreseeable* outcome of the program would occur if all the students who successfully complete the program eventually graduate from high school as a result of the program. In this scenario the success rate would be 20/36 or 55.6%. When this rate is applied to all 226 students who received case management services, total savings may be expressed as follows:

$$(\$218,800 \times 226 \times .556) - \$100,847 = \$27,392,685.80$$

Under this scenario, the return to each dollar invested in the program would equal almost \$273 – a stunning return for any type of social service program – and the total saved in one year alone would be over \$27 million.

Poor grades in elementary school have been found to be predictive of high school dropout. It is reasonable to assume case management is only likely to encourage high school graduation among students who successfully exit the case management program *and* improve their grades. It should be noted that an analysis of all the students in the database shows that grades do improve under case management, with big improvements coming early in the program, and only a slight backsliding after the initial three-month period. Unfortunately, the case managers collected very little grade information on the students served during the 2003/2004 school year. One quarter of the students for whom grade information is available made improvements in their grades.

If one quarter of successfully exited students graduate from high school, the program still produces the following pay-off:

$$(\$218,800 \times 226 \times .556 \times .25) - \$100,847 = \$6,772,536.20$$

Under this more restrictive scenario, the return to each dollar invested in the program would equal just over \$68 and the total saved in one year would be \$6.8 million. This would still be remarkable.

Both scenarios presented above may overestimate program benefits for two reasons. First, being successfully exited from case management services, even with good grades, does not equate to high school graduation. Some of the program participants are still in elementary school, and despite having developed a better habit of school attendance, many things may yet occur to impede graduation. The scanty grade information available is not encouraging. Second, even if all 20, or if just five, graduate, we will not know with certainty that they would *not* have graduated without the case management. In order to really understand the impact of case management we would

³ This data was supplied directly from the project manager for the year 2003-2004 only. Thus, it is not the same data that was entered into TRAIN.

need to track the progress of these students, along with the progress of a comparison group who did not receive case management, until all students either graduated or dropped out of high school.

However, it is almost certain that the case management program is a valuable investment of public resources. In fact, given the tremendous cost of high school failure, the case management program needs to provide the means for only one student to graduate from high school every two years in order to earn back its operating cost: $\$100,847 * 2 = \$201,697$ is still less than the cost of high school failure at $\$218,800$. Given that poor attendance and performance in elementary school is a strong predictor of high school dropout, it is highly likely that without any intervention these children would fail to graduate.

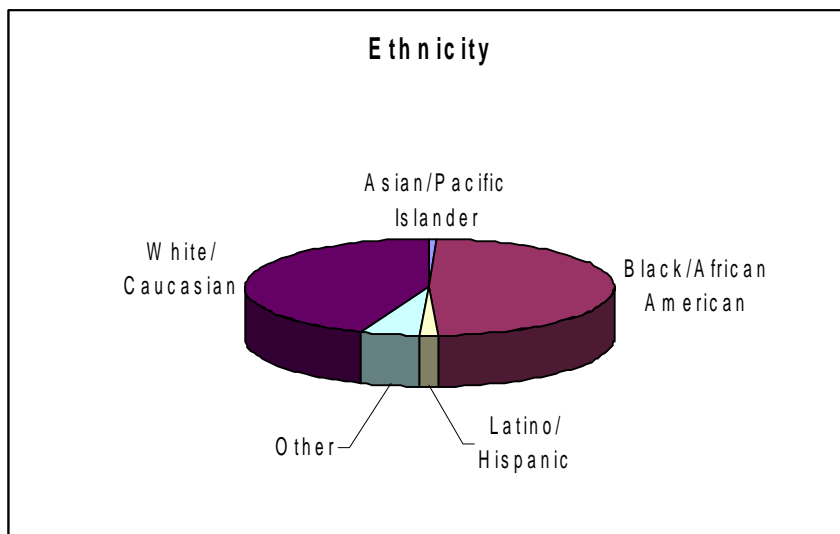
Outcome Effects

TRAIN Demographics

Data are entered into the TRAIN database for 169 participating students and their families, however missing data occurs when it is not applicable or unknown for every variable. According to TRAIN data, students typically lived with their biological mothers (115). Fathers were the primary caregiver for only 29 students, and fewer than five students lived with stepfathers (4), grandparents (3), or an aunt or uncle (1). In some cases, this information was missing, likely due to the transient living situation that some students were experiencing. Primary caregivers most frequently had less than a high school diploma (55), a high school diploma/GED (53), or some college (33). Only five had an associates degree and four had a bachelors. Eight had less than a 9th grade education and one had attended some graduate school.

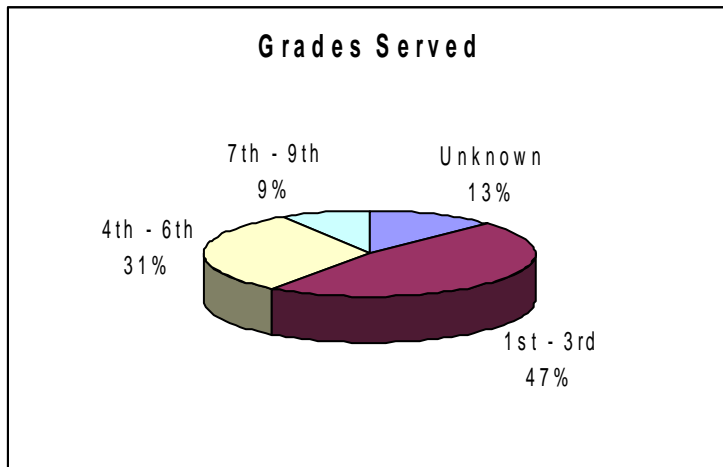
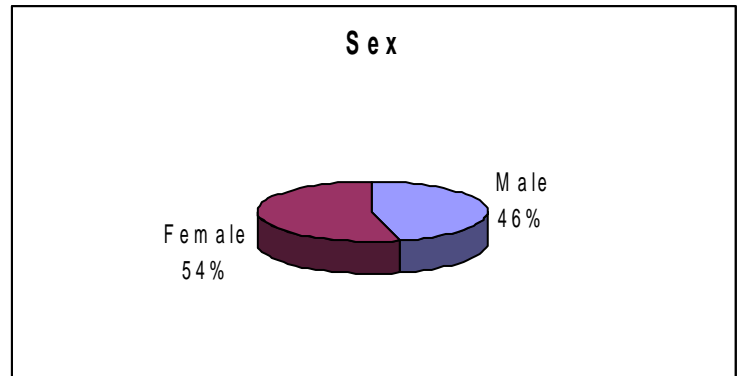
Most students had free or reduced lunch status: 81% had free lunch status, 8% had reduced lunch status, and 8% paid full price for lunch, (3% unknown). Approximately 25 percent (43) had IEP status.

The following pie charts illustrate the population served.



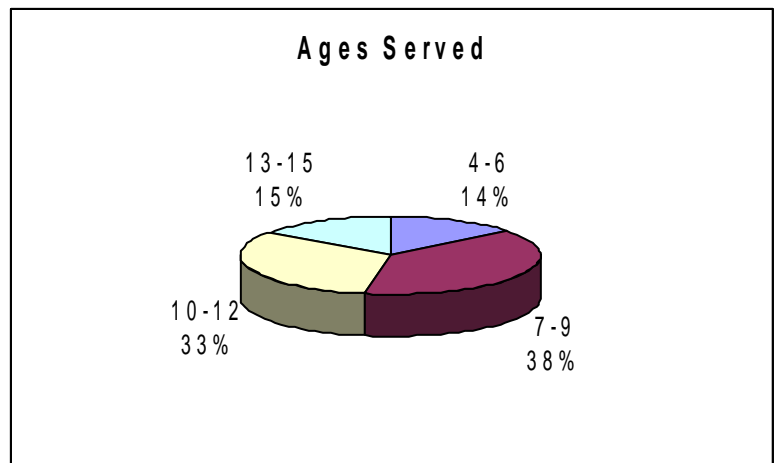
The largest ethnic group served is Black/African American, followed closely by White/Caucasian. These two groups comprise the bulk of the students served.

Females comprised slightly more than half the population served – 54%.

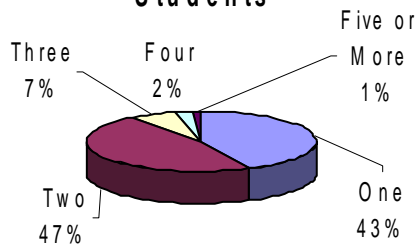


The Jacksonville program, unlike most truancy reduction programs, focuses on elementary school children. Almost half the participants are in grades 1 to 3, with another third in grades 4 to 6. The grade level of 13% of the children is unknown, perhaps due to the problem of children who are overage for grade.

The age of the children is correspondingly young. Eighty-five percent are pre-teen, and over half are under ten. The school attendance of children of this age is almost entirely the responsibility of parents; older children may be beyond the control of their parents.



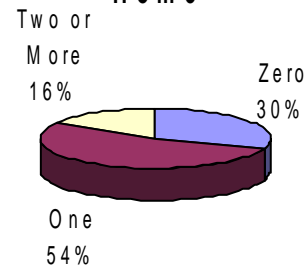
Number of Adults Living with Students



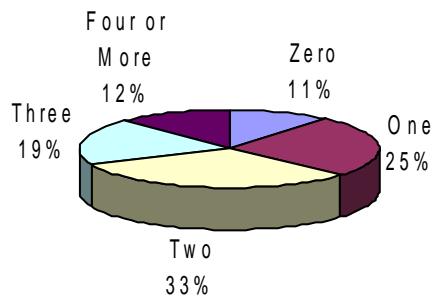
Forty-three percent of children served by Jacksonville case managers come from single parent homes. On the other hand, ten percent live with more than two adults.

A full 30% of the families served have no working adults in the home, a virtual guarantee of poverty. More than half have one working adult, while 16% have two or more. However, many of these adults hold only part-time jobs.

Number of Working Adults in the Home



Number of Other School Age Children Living with Students



One third of participating youth lives with no or one other child, 1/3 lives with two other children, and 1/3 lives in large families with three or more other children. Given the large number of adults in some households, we may be seeing cases of multiple nuclear families minimizing housing costs by sharing a residence.

Attendance

Family and student self-reports on pre-test and post-test School Engagement Surveys indicated improved attendance. Paired t-tests indicated that mothers reported that their child had fewer absences following the intervention. The average number of absences reported by mothers at pre-test was 2.11 compared to .96 following intervention, $t(28) = 3.89, p < .001$. Although this may reflect, in part, the fact that some post-tests were given in the fall semester when school had not been in session as long, students also self-reported improved attendance behavior. Students said they “tried to stay home from school” less at post-test than at pre-test $t(31) = -2.43, p < .05$. Data from TRAIN also suggest that attendance improved.

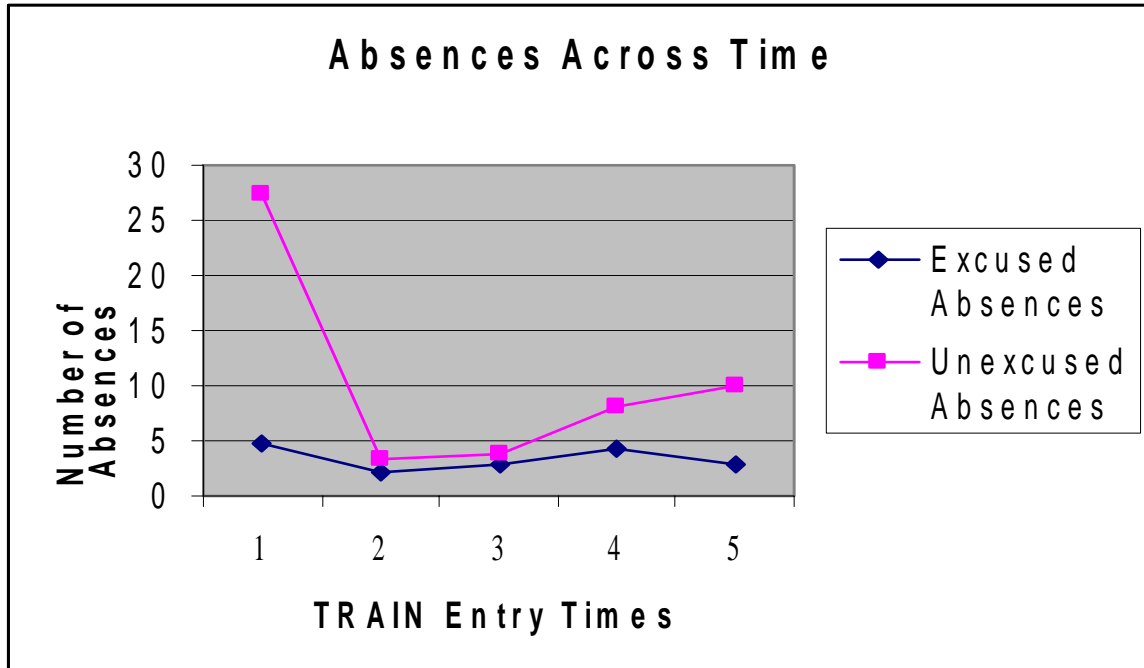
Case managers entered excused, unexcused, and tardy attendance data into the TRAIN database at Intake, Update 1, Update 2, Update 3, and Exit. Each update occurred three months following the one prior. All possible combinations of paired t-tests were run. The following tables list only the statistically significant improvements for unexcused and excused absences at each of these data entry points; comparisons were left out of the table if no significant differences between absences existed. No significant improvements occurred in excused (as opposed to *unexcused*) absences. Although tardies decreased according to TRAIN data, improvements were not statistically significant.

SIGNIFICANT TRAIN UNEXCUSED ABSENCE FINDINGS – PAIRED T-TESTS

Comparison	Means	N	t-score	Sig (2-tailed)	Improved/Worsened
Intake vs. Update 1	16.34 vs.3.50	108	6.16	.001	Improved
Intake vs. Update 2	18.59 vs.5.02*	85	4.81	.001	Improved
Intake vs. Update 3	23.05 vs. 6.08*	61	5.03	.001	Improved
Intake vs. Exit	24.30 vs. 9.62*	47	4.19	.001	Improved

* NOTE: The means and number of students included in each comparison vary depending on the paired data available

There were 35 students who had excused absence records entered into TRAIN at all five data collection points. There were 32 who had complete unexcused absence records. For these students, attendance was tracked and recorded every three months for one year beginning at intake (time 1). The following table shows their absence patterns over time. Clearly, there is a decrease in absences following Intake (time 1) and neither excused nor unexcused absences increase back to their original levels.



Attachment

The School Engagement Survey was intended primarily to measure school attachment. Thirty-one students and family members filled out these surveys.

Survey Demographics:

The same number of mothers and students (31) took both the pre-test and post-test survey. Mothers’ average age was 35, 17 were white, 11 were African-American/Black, and two were Hispanic/Latina. Student ethnicity was similar to the mothers’. Thirty-nine percent of mothers reported having some high school, 19% graduated from high school, ten percent received a GED, nine percent went to technical school or a two-year college, and 23 percent attended some college. Half of the mothers were currently working at the time of the pre-test, but only eight were employed full time. Forty-five percent lived with another adult in the house; seven of these individuals had full-time jobs. Seventy-four percent had a total family income of less than \$30,000. Five mothers owned their own home. Fifty-two percent said they had taken their children out of school during the past year. Of those 52%, the majority said it was for less than one week.

Analysis and Results:

Paired t-tests indicated that mothers attended more Parent Teacher Association meetings and volunteered more at the school after the intervention than before, $t(29) = -1.89, p < .10$ and $t(28) = -2.08, p < .05$, respectively). Mothers also indicated that their children enjoyed school more following the intervention, $t(28) = -2.12, p < .05$. In addition, they were more likely to believe the school was a good place for their child and that the staff were doing good things $t(30) = -1.73, p < .10$ and $t(30) = -2.18, p < .05$.

Mothers' confidence in the staff at the school also improved, $t(30) = -2.79, p < .01$ as did their belief that the school was preparing them for the future, $t(30) = -1.75, p < .10$.

Students' attachment worsened overall from pre-test to post-test:

- Students felt their school was not as beautiful or light, $t(28) = 3.27$ and $t(28) = 4.58, p < .01$, in both cases.
- Students were less likely to endorse the idea that they would graduate from high school, $t(30) = 1.99, p < .10$.
- Students felt less excited by their classwork, were less likely to say they enjoyed the work, and thought school was less fun, $t(29) = -2.09, t(29) = -2.57$ and $t(29) = -2.29, p < .05$, in all cases.
- Students were less likely to talk with people outside of class about school, less likely to look up words they didn't know, and less likely to read extra books about school related topics, $t(29) = -1.96, p < .05, t(29) = -4.01, p < .001$, and $t(228) = -2.96, p < .01$.
- Students felt that teachers did not praise them as much when they worked hard, $t(28) = -2.70, p < .05$.
- Students reported missing school more because they felt unsafe, $t(30) = -2.30, p < .05$.

These data may be a result of the specific focus of the program on parents, rather than on student. Interpretations of these findings are discussed in the conclusions section of this paper. However, at post-test students did say that they got along with their teachers better, $t(30) = 1.999, p < .10$, and that they get in trouble at school less, $t(29) = -2.09, p < .05$.

Achievement

The family survey questions did not focus on student achievement. However, paired t-tests performed on family survey data indicated that following intervention mothers helped their children prepare for tests more than before the intervention ($t(31) = -2.01, p < .10$). Students reported that they repeated a grade more at post-test than at pre-test, $t(31) = -2.74, p < .05$. Nonetheless, they also reported at post-test that they daydream less in class, $t(29) = -2.81, p < .01$, and that parents checked their homework more $t(28) = -1.77, p < .10$ than at pre-test.

A subset of students in TRAIN had at least two sets of grade information. Average grades in all subjects fell between D+s and C+s. Across all four subjects (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) grades were worst at intake, better at update one (which occurred anywhere from 2.5 to 9 months later) and then fell lower at update two. However, grades at update two did not decline to the original grades reported at intake. Although this pattern was true for all courses examined, only grades in English and Social Studies showed statistically significant improvements (Wilcoxon $T(42) = -2.23, p < .05$ and $(38) = -2.44, p < .05$, respectively). Analysis of variance showed that the improvements in English were primarily due to the inclusion of the females in the sample; $F(1, 40) = 3.91, p < .10$ (update one) and $F = 7.86, p < .05$ (update two).

Too few students had specific exit grade data to perform meaningful analyses, but 36 students had TRAIN data indicating case manager reports of whether or not their overall academic performance had improved. In part, this is due to the fact that an A, B, C, etc, grading scale is not used in some elementary grades. However, case managers were able to input whether overall academic performance improved and did so when they had access to that information. Three months following the intervention, case managers reported that 52 students improved, 41 stayed the same and 18 students were performing worse. At exit, there was much less information; case managers reported that 10 students improved, 16 remained the same, and 12 worsened.

Family Functioning

Family School Engagement Surveys show the extent of serious challenges that confront families who have difficulties getting their children to school (see table below). Fifty-five percent of mothers had moved at least once in the past year, 16% had been homeless, 26% were separated or divorced, 26% changed employment or started working, 29% lost jobs, 13% had a death in the family, 16% had a major illness and 10% lost housing.

Life Stressors within the last year	% (N)
Moved residences	55% (17)
Separated or divorced	26% (8)
Changed employment or began working	26% (8)
Lost job	29% (9)
Homeless	16% (5)
Suffered a major illness in the family	16% (5)
Death in the family	13% (4)
Lost housing	10% (3)

Note: These do not add up to 100% because some individuals experienced more than one life stressor.

The TRAIN database provides additional information on family functioning. Of the 169 total students for whom intake data are available, 54% (91) said they had family stress issues. Family stress most often meant that there were illnesses or deaths in the family, that there was marital discord, and the father was absent or frequently absent. The demographics in TRAIN show this as well: Only 27 (15.4%) families confirmed that both parents were living in the household.

Three months following intervention, update information indicated that family functioning had improved for some families. However, family functioning indicators were largely missing from update information. For instance, family stress improved for 21% (36) of families at update 1, but remained a concern for 28% (48)⁴.

⁴ Due to missing data and sometimes inconsistent coding, percentages and numbers in updates do not match those at Intake. For instance, it was possible to enter that a student had improved in areas where the concern didn't exist at intake, thereby increasing total numbers at update compared to original numbers at intake.

Twenty-eight percent (46) of the 169 said they had difficulties with mobility, defined as moving households either within or outside of the school district. At update 1 however, 15% (25) improved and only 16% (27) said it was still a concern (see footnote one concerning the total numbers provided).

Eleven percent (18) at intake had problems getting along with parents and/or siblings. At update 1, 20% (33) were said to have improved in this area. Although it seems illogical that more families could improve in this indicator than had problems at intake, the reality is that more than 11% had difficulties and this was simply not known at the time of intake.

It is unlikely that family problems are stemming from child delinquency. Less than 10% of students had any in-school or out-of-school discipline incidences or were involved with Juvenile Justice. Truant youth most often said they sat at home and watched TV when being truant. Since these are elementary students it is unlikely they engage in activities typical of older students (i.e., hanging out with friends, committing acts of vandalism, aggression, property crime, abusing drugs, etc.).

Parental Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Arrest

The SAO very rarely arrests parents due to their child's truancy. When parents are arrested, it is early in the morning and unless other warrants are pending, the parent is home by the end of the school day. Fortunately, no out-of-home placement is necessary for the child. Because the threat of arrest could have a particularly strong impact on parents, it was important to find out if this motivated parents to improve their children's school attendance. Twenty-two parents responded to the questions concerning parental arrest as a consequence of child truancy using an adapted version of the NCSE Family School Engagement Survey.

Results of Family Questionnaires

	YES	NO	
Were you aware that parents can be arrested for their child's chronic truancy?	21	1	
Did this awareness motivate you to attend today's hearing?	18	3	
	Not at all	A little	A lot
Does the possibility of arrest affect your motivation to improve your child's attendance?	1	4	17

For these parents, many were aware of the possibility of arrest and that possibility motivated them to come to the non-judicial hearing and to try to improve their child's attendance.

Conclusions

This study focused on answering two main questions: Is the program cost-effective and how does it affect outcomes? In general, the findings are quite favorable for both inquiries. However, as with most studies, additional questions remain and potential improvements in the program can be identified.

1. What is the relative cost effectiveness of these interventions given their propensity to produce high school graduation and deter criminal activity?

According to the cost-effectiveness portion of this study, the program is likely to be a very good investment of public funds given the enormous cost of high school failure. This is especially true if it improves graduation rates, which remains to be seen. It would be highly beneficial to be able to collect data on these children until they are old enough to graduate from high school. In addition, the counseling portion of the program costs very little due to the small number of services actually used. Nevertheless, the counseling portion may be beneficial in a variety of ways. Evaluating the immediate and long-term benefits of these services would provide additional information concerning the cost-benefits of the program.

The truants being served by the Jacksonville program face difficult life circumstances. The large proportion of students on free and reduced lunch status, who have female headed households with no working adult in the home, and whose mother reported a recent job loss make evident the financially precarious situation in which the majority of these students live. Given the savings of this program and the population it serves, it is likely that additional services that address the needs of this population would also be cost-effective (e.g., parent links to career training, job placement services, childcare options, etc.)

2. What specific parent, school, and community interventions are consistently effective in improving *school attendance*, *attachment* and *academic achievement* for truant youth?

Improved school attendance is the primary focus of this program. The fact that unexcused absences remained lower at every three-month increment compared to intake, and that this was true even as much as a year later, indicates that this program is highly effective in terms of immediate improvements in attendance. However, the attendance graph and statistical analyses show that no significant differences occurred in excused absences between intake and 3 and 6 months later. Excused absences generally increased following the intervention. Parents' increase in informing schools of an excused absence could be due to increased awareness of the arrest law and school policies (of which they claim the former is a motivating factor to improve their child's attendance). However, excused absences did not occur as frequently as the initial unexcused absences and therefore do not reflect ineffectiveness of the intervention.

These children are very young, and for almost all of them, school attendance is the parents' responsibility. Most of these children cannot yet be held responsible for their own school attendance. Consequently, in order for the program to improve

attendance, it is only logical to focus on the parents' behaviors. Given this, it is understandable why school attachment improved for parents as did attitudes toward the schools, whereas this was not the case for students on many attachment items. Since the program may be relatively less focused on the students' experiences at the school compared to how the parent can improve, it may not be reasonable to expect that the students would feel more attached or report better experiences. Nevertheless, student self-reports on the engagement survey do indicate that they notice that parents are more involved in their schoolwork and that their own discipline and attendance have improved.

Although girls showed some improvement in grades, boys did not; and in general, grades were not very good. It is likely that most students would benefit from a tutor. Unfortunately, tutoring is not often recommended, and it may not be currently available. In order to reach the academic goals of the program, tutoring services should be provided on a more regular basis. In addition, students who begin to see improvements in their own performance are also likely to feel more attached to school, which will contribute to their overall success.

In general, these families face considerable challenges. According to case managers, behavior among these young students does not appear to be as problematic as that of older truants (i.e., they watch TV rather than engage in more risky behavior, and they have relatively few discipline problems). Consequently, a program aimed at elementary school children should probably focus attention on parents, as this one does. In addition, this may be the best time to intervene, especially since the parents can more easily improve their children's attendance and potentially their attitudes towards education when they are younger. However, given that school attachment is not particularly improved for the students, improving experiences at school may be a beneficial next step in future program activities.

Finally, evaluation activities continue. While this research is informative about the effectiveness of the program (mostly case management), Jacksonville staff intends to continue to work with NCSE to explore other issues. Planned evaluation activities include:

- Collecting comparison data. Although some comparison data is available now, additional attendance and achievement data are being collected from students who meet the intervention criteria but do not receive services.
- Conducting a follow-up study of students served from 1995-1999 to assess the long-term effectiveness of the program using 5 - 8 cases, if the records and the families can be located.
- Examining the difference in achievement between students with high excused versus unexcused absences to determine whether children with similar attendance patterns have different achievement outcomes.
- Exploring the activities of other surrounding schools regarding truancy activities by interviewing attendance clerks.

- Assessing the effectiveness of Jacksonville’s Truancy Centers to compare the effectiveness of delivering a truant student to a truancy center versus the home school on attendance.

This initial research shows that the Jacksonville program is accomplishing its goal of reducing absences among the children it serves. Future research will add to this knowledge and provide further recommendations about what works, what does not, and what can be improved. Ultimately, Jacksonville will be able to develop a comprehensive set of program and policy recommendations for the school district, state Attorney’s office and law enforcement.

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