



NCSE | National Center for School Engagement

**Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Evaluation of the
Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program:
King County, Washington Successfully Reduces Unexcused Absences**

National Center for School Engagement

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**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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Reduction Demonstration Program:**

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This report is an outcome evaluation of the King County truancy reduction effort in Washington State. The evaluation and program were funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The goal of the program was primarily to prevent truancy and minimize the burden of truancy courts by reducing unexcused absences that lead to students being labeled “truant.” Under Washington State Law, RCW 28A.225.030, students are considered truant if they have seven unexcused absences in one month, or 10 cumulative during the school year. The program was aimed at students who had met or exceeded these criteria in the Kent and Seattle School Districts.

During the 1999-2000 school year, King County Superior Court developed a program to provide alternatives to the formal court process for court-involved, truant youth in King County, Washington. These pre-court attendance workshops are led by skilled facilitators who provide information about the impact of dropping out of school and help truant youth develop behavior contracts with their parents in a supportive, non-judgmental environment.

The 2.5 hour-long attendance workshops are aimed at parents as well as youth. The curriculum includes:

- 1) A video of youth talking about their decisions to be truant, and what it meant to them
- 2) A prosecuting attorney telling families about the truancy law
- 3) Parents and kids break into two groups, respectively; each group is run by a trained facilitator and they discuss problems and possible solutions

4) Parents and kids are reunited, and develop a written contract, which is not legally binding, that outlines what they each promise to do to assure students' ability to attend to school

Workshop contracts are monitored by the school districts for 30 days to assess compliance and level of behavior change. Students who attend workshops typically have missed 15 or fewer days of school. Those with more than 15 unexcused absences go to court. In the event of non-compliance after monitoring for 30 days, school districts may request preliminary hearings for these students, so that the court takes jurisdiction over them with an Order to Compel School Attendance.

Depending on the level of risk and the situation of the family, the court may assign a case manager to work with the family and school district. Case managers provide further support and resources to the student and family, as well as make recommendations to the Court for further action.

During the School Year 2004 – 2005, the King County truancy reduction program held 56 workshops, and 248 truant students and their family members attended them. The data used in these analyses are from students who may have received any part of the intervention (workshop, court, and/or case management) and represent a small sample of all the students who were served in King County.

Seattle School District

The Seattle School District provided NCSE with data on unexcused absences for 32 students served in the 2004-2005 school year. The data reflected three months pre-intervention and three months post-intervention for the 04/05 school year.

There was a significant decline in unexcused absences from pre-intervention compared to three months post-intervention. Specifically, the average number of unexcused absences at pre-intervention was 12.66 compared to 8.44 post-intervention, $t(32) = 2.56, p < .05$.

Kent School District

The Kent School District also provided us with pre and post-intervention data for school year 2004-2005. In this case, pre-intervention data reflected attendance three months prior to the intervention and three months following the intervention. The data they provided included unexcused and excused absences, and disciplinary actions.

There was a significant decline in unexcused absences following the intervention. The average number of unexcused absences three months prior to the intervention was 18.4; following the intervention the number declined to 6.56, $t(25) = 4.95, p < .001$. Due to missing data on excused absences, and the requirements of the statistical technique used to perform these analyses, it was impossible to analyze excused absences independently. However, it was possible to analyze absences in total (i.e., combining excused and unexcused absences). Overall, combined absences also significantly declined from three months prior to the intervention (average = 18.8) compared to three months after (average = 8.7), $t(31) = 3.79, p < .005$. Similar to the decline in absences, disciplinary actions declined, but not significantly (average pre = .59, average post = .41, $n = 22, ns$).

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the King County truancy reduction accomplishes its goal of improving student attendance at least within three months of receiving services. Truant students in Seattle School District served by the program reduced their absences from an average of almost 13 unexcused absences to fewer than nine. Kent School District truants' absences

declined from approximately 18 unexcused absences to fewer than seven. If we assume that the unexcused absences over the three month period following the intervention are distributed evenly, then on average, students were no longer considered “truant” according to Washington State Law. If absences were distributed evenly across each month, students were missing between two and three days of school each month after the intervention compared to four and six before the intervention. This represents a 50% reduction, and a difference between court involvement or no court involvement, at least for those three months.

According to King County data, truancy court referrals have been reduced by 75% as a result of this program. These data support the effectiveness of the King County truancy reduction program. Their combination of the one-time workshop for most truants and case management for a few who have more significant needs seems to be an effective program design that deserves replication in other communities.

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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