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**Law Enforcement and School Partnership as a Solution to Truancy:
Recommendations from Gulfton's Truancy Reduction Program**

By Susana Herrera, MSW

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Creating an effective partnership between law enforcement and a school system is a challenging yet essential process that requires focus on a common goal of education and safety for youth. Truancy is a gateway offense that can lead to juvenile delinquency and victimization; thus, it is imperative to understand thoroughly the risk factors that challenge immigrant youth. Socio-economic, cultural and community risk factors all contribute to truancy in the Gulfton neighborhood in Houston, Texas - a largely immigrant community. Based on the Gulfton's Truancy Reduction Program experience in working with the community, parents lack a basic understanding of laws and rules governing school attendance. Immigrant families continue to follow their own cultural norms, values and lifestyle and adapt them into their new environment. As a result, they unintentionally violate school policy and attendance laws. New immigrant families are unaware such laws exist due to not only their limited English skills but also because of the limited educational awareness conducted by the school district. Nonetheless, creating a strong partnership between law enforcement and the school system is simple when common goals are shared and joint actions are consistent.

To initiate a law enforcement/school partnership, school administrators must recognize and acknowledge issues relating to truancy that impact the student body and surrounding community. Once responsibility is accepted, law enforcement and school administrators must *meet, share their ideas, and understand each entity's purpose in order to establish mutual goals* that are measurable and culturally sensitive. It is also important that each entity's responsibilities be respected and that they understand that the partnership supplements, not replaces, the current organizational structures. A shift in priorities and action may be needed to accommodate mutual goals. Most importantly, a memorandum of agreement detailing each entity's goals and responsibilities to the partnership accompanied by new policies and procedures must be created. These strategies have been helpful in the Gulfton community.

Understanding the Problem

Misperception and miscommunication can create barrier in developing partnerships between law enforcement and schools. For example, historically, law enforcement has been skeptical of community outreach programs in contrast to suppression initiatives. School administration is dedicated to providing the best education to all students but they are typically suspicious of outside partnerships. In spite of this, creating a partnership between law enforcement and school administration is not uncommon. However, the process of establishing this sort of collaboration remains ambiguous. Nonetheless, it is necessary to continuously reinforce and sustain the relationship once a partnership among entities with distinctive ideologies is established.

When providing outreach services, it is important to understand the history and background of the population to be served. One must be mindful not only of socio-

economic, cultural and community risk factors that may affect the target population but also of the provider's personal value judgments and biases that may contribute to the partnership and services provided.

Individual and Organizational Commitment

Cooperation and rapport is key to a successful partnership. In conducting outreach activities, it is important for each entity to receive and provide accurate and updated information without impeding their current roles.

Individuals at all levels should commit to the partnership. School administrators must communicate with all school personnel about new roles or policies, and must be flexible and receptive to law enforcement needs. For example, if police officers request updated information from school personnel or seek additional assistance, the school personnel must be receptive and courteous. In the Gulfton neighborhood, one challenge was getting the school personnel and new administration to respect the police officers and project coordinator as true partners rather than assistants who simply "pick up the slack."

Policy and Procedures

Law Enforcement

It is recommended that the police department create a new set of policies and procedures that are specific to the partnership. The development of policy and procedures is crucial to ensure that everyone is on the same page and understands the administrative process thoroughly. Care in this area will eliminate unnecessary and duplicative efforts on the part of the officers and administrators, especially if there is a cost for services provided. Responsibilities and duties assigned to each individual or group must be stated specifically. In the end, attention to detail will save time and resources.

Schools

School administrators must allow outside partners access to their school data system. Although schools must comply with confidentiality regulations, outside partners often need to document and review student data or have designated school personnel to assist immediately in these activities. In addition, student data must be entered, updated or changed on a regular schedule to avoid "retroactivity". That is, when a law enforcement officer issues a citation based on the attendance record provided by school personnel, and then the school personnel adjusts or corrects the student's attendance after the citation is issued, the citation will be dismissed in court due to the conflicting attendance information. Officers must receive up-to-date student data to present in court to avoid a dismissal. When a case is dismissed, resources and time are wasted, not only for police officers and court personnel, but case managers, referral sources, and the student and parent.

In addition, school personnel must be aware of which students are involved in the project, and they must understand that improvement in attendance, achievement and attachment is likely to be gradual. In order to meet project goals, the school must commit to cooperating with partners. For example, if a student gets into trouble at school, all partners must be contacted to discuss appropriate actions; the school should avoid making decisions unilaterally and communicating outcomes afterwards.

Conclusion

Developing a strong partnership between law enforcement and schools requires being proactive and receptive to recommendations and organizational change. When new policies and procedures are thoughtfully developed and carefully implemented, the partnership will function smoothly and result in improved outcomes for youth and ultimately, the community.

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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