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**The Story Behind the Numbers: A Qualitative Evaluation of the
Jacksonville, FL Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program**

National Center for School Engagement

January, 2007

**An initiative of the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children
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The Story Behind the Numbers: A Qualitative Evaluation of The Jacksonville, FL Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program:

In recent years, truancy has become a focus of policy discussions across the country. School districts, juvenile courts, and police departments are trying new methods to keep children in school (Cantelon & LeBoeuf, 1997). In response to concerns about school attendance and achievement, the Office of Juvenile Justice funded several community-based truancy reduction programs to operate in various cities nationwide. One of these programs is located in Jacksonville, FL. This document reports the results of qualitative evaluation data.

Method

Interviews, focus groups and observations were conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of the Truancy Interdiction Program in Jacksonville. Participants were purposively selected in order to get a broad range of diverse perspectives. Patton (2002) describes purposive sampling as the selection of information-rich cases, meaning people who have a great deal of information central to the purpose of the research. Some snowball sampling was also used to identify additional participants who had critical information.

Eight people were interviewed and two family focus groups were conducted. Interviewees included four staff members, two hearing officers and two program partners (community service professionals who collaborate with the program). Two focus groups were conducted with family members who had participated in the program. Approximately 15 people participated in these focus groups. Only one father participated; the remaining participants were the mothers of students who had participated in the program. Program staff solicited participants the via phone calls and letters. Program staff attempted to secure a sample of people including some who had been successful and others who had not, people who had been involved with the program at different periods of time and who represented different ethno-cultural backgrounds. Finally, two observations of a mediation were

conducted to understand better this intervention. The questions used in the focus groups and the interviews are included in Appendix A. We did not strictly adhere to these questions; instead the protocols were used simply as a guide. In this way, we were able to ask unique questions of specific individuals. Additionally, this allowed us to pursue questions that emerged from previous interviews. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

To analyze these data, we used open coding (Corbin & Straus, 1990) to break down the textual data into manageable pieces. Nvivo, a qualitative software analysis package was employed to develop and check for themes. More specifically, each interview was read and reflections were noted in the margins of the hard copy transcript. We developed new questions and sometimes determined the next interviewee based on what we learned in the last interview. For final analysis, a tree structure of the codes was developed in Nvivo. All transcripts, field notes and memos were imported and subsequently coded to these “tree nodes” (codes). Additional codes were added, deleted or merged as needed. Comparisons, syntheses, patterns and themes were developed. This process helped to develop an explanatory framework for the data.

The Setting

The Community.

The Jacksonville State Attorney’s office is located in Jacksonville, Florida. The city of Jacksonville is incorporated with Duval County. The city itself 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. As of 2003, there were an estimated 817,480 residents in Duval County. Thirty-four percent are under 18 years of age, and gender is evenly split. Sixty-six percent of the population is white, 27% is African American, 4% is Latino, and 3% is Asian. Jacksonville does not have a large immigrant population; less than 6% are foreign-born. The over-25 population 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 the households are headed by females. A large portion of the households in the district are owner-occupied (63%). The average family size is three people. In 1999, 12% of households had incomes below the poverty level

The Program

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 that consists of the following elements:

1. A school-based intervention that begins with a meeting of school staff and parents to address a child's unexcused absence (K-12). This is called the Attendance Intervention Team, or AIT.
2. A non-judicial hearing held at the county courthouse for parents and students (K-8) sponsored by the State Attorney's Office, which can include case management. This is called the Truancy Arbitration Program, or TAP.
3. Four truancy centers are located across the city for grades 6-12, making up the Truancy Interdiction Program, or TIP. Police can pick up truant students during the school day and take them to one of these truancy centers, eliminating the need to determine the location of their school.
4. A community stakeholder group made up of a diverse group of local residents and agency representatives guides the overall set of truancy interventions. This group, called Jacksonville United Against Truancy (JUAT), was established in 2000.

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, and other referrals for supportive services such as counseling and tutoring can also be made at the hearing. After each hearing, the parents and the students 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 parents.

Facilitators and Challenges to Program Effectiveness

The interviews and focus groups conducted with program staff, program partners, and parents allow for an in-depth exploration of the key factors that have contributed to the success of the program, and those factors that present either a temporary or an ongoing challenge to the effectiveness of the program.

Early Intervention & Identifying Students at Risk.

Early intervention in the context of the Jacksonville program has two components. First, the program intervenes at an early age, focusing on elementary and middle school students. Second, it strives to address truancy before it has had an impact on educational performance and other areas of a student's life. Early intervention was mentioned by several program staff as being an important factor in the program's success.

“...catching the kids early before they can be arrested, before the truancy can have the huge impact, obviously we can't catch them day one, but catching them before they can get as bad as they can. So that early intervention piece.” (Program Staff Interview #2)

“I think the little ones are a little bit more responsive. The older ones, they've been doing it for two or three grades and they really don't care at that point. You can see them looking off into space, you try to get their attention, to look at you.” (Hearing Officer Interview #1)

It is the responsibility of the individual schools to track school attendance and to identify students who have exceeded the number of allowed absences (five unexcused absences within a calendar month, or ten unexcused absences within a ninety day period). Teachers submit attendance

records to a central administrative person, who enters that information into a database. If the system is working well, the school will be able to identify students who need to be referred for an in-school AIT meeting. That information can then be accessed by school and partner staff who are involved with addressing truancy issues – an important factor in the success of the truancy program.

Efforts began with elementary schools, and middle schools were added shortly thereafter.

Program staff find middle schools more challenging for several reasons. First, middle school staff have less time available to work with the truancy program staff.

“There's definitely a lot different...between the elementary and the middle school and the time they're able to commit to us. I can call and have a 15 minute conversation with my elementary schools, I'm lucky if I get 30 seconds on the phone with my middle schools.”

In addition, by the time at-risk students reach middle school, they are more likely to have delinquency charges and other more entrenched behaviors. The focus on intervening and punishing parents is less likely to work at that point, since the locus of the problem has shifted to the student.

“...we did take on three middle schools, and they are harder to work with...it's not quite as successful probably because you can't prove necessarily in every case that the parent is the problem. Because they're skipping on their own, some of the kids already have delinquency charges. You go and arrest the parent, and the parent...says 'well, look you know the county can't even control her and she has been in detention.'”

Aside from the challenges in working with middle schools, there are a number of additional challenges with tracking student attendance and the timely convening of an AIT meeting. The primary challenge seems to be related to the multiple and competing demands on school staff and resources in the context of an increased national emphasis on standardized testing. If a school is not tracking, identifying, and following up with students who should be participating in the truancy program, the referrals are not made to the truancy program and the program does not work.

“...when the AIT thing came into being, no money was given to the schools for new personnel, so the same overworked personnel were supposed to squeeze this into their routine. Some of the principals won't change excused absences to unexcused, so then we can't do anything. Some of them just don't have a process in place to identify who needs to have the meeting and then to follow through with it. So we don't get as many referrals as we should be getting.”

“...they still don't do it because that's the last thing on their agenda, they [are] thinking about

FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test], trying to get their schools that grade, that passing grade, so they're not thinking about...you need the kids to be in school in order to pass the FCAT."

Training staff on the 'little details' related to defining unexcused and excused absences is a further challenge to tracking attendance. School board policy states that an absence is initially marked as excused, and is changed for students who did not get notes for their absence – a change that may fall through the cracks.

"...sometimes AIT's are never held because schools aren't changing excused to unexcused and our statute requires that to have an AIT it has to be unexcused absences....it's school board policy that they start with excused and change to unexcused, and that's just very difficult. I mean middle school 200 and something kids absent a day...you gotta go back and figure out which kids did not bring their excuse notes in and then go change those to unexcused. So some schools just either don't do it, or they can't possibly do a good job of it because it's one paraprofessional trying to, I mean that's not their only duty, so that's a huge barrier in getting cases."

Several parents complained about poor record keeping by school personnel and a lack of consistency and clarity in helping students and their parents understand how to handle situations that arise.

"...another issue is record keeping by the school...I had a daughter that had registered for a math class but there was no record. And she was still marked absent ...So they're just very inaccurate and I don't have the energy...And they're threatening to send me to jail."

"my daughter ended up with a whole mess of tardies that are inaccurate. Because the bus would be late picking them up...she would go to the office to get a late slip but none of the other kids did and they just went to class and so she got marked tardy for doing the right thing."

School-Based Intervention – Attendance Intervention Teams.

Schools are required to track student attendance, and to intervene early with a three-person Attendance Intervention Team. Once a student has been identified as qualifying for an AIT, the school notifies the parent and meets with three school-based personnel and the assigned attendance social worker from the school board. A contractual agreement is written and signed by all parties; it details what actions the parent will take with the support of the school to address the child's unexcused absences. Violation of the signed contract, or not showing up to the AIT, triggers a referral to TAP.

Benefits of School-Based Intervention.

In general, the school-based AIT's are believed to be a positive intervention. They bring school staff together with parents and children to identify problems and to commit to intervening with the student. Ideally, they identify resources and supportive services for families (such as tutoring and counseling) that can help address underlying causes of truancy. TAP is reserved for those parents and children who are unwilling or unable to fully participate in the school-based intervention.

“The AIT's are a good thing. They work when the schools have a family in and say, 'Johnny's missing an excessive number of days of school, what's going on, he's gotta be here, if you've got things going on in your life, bring your child to school and then go handle your problem.' They are effective, and this program [TAP] should be held for the worst of the worst. The parents who just completely are uncooperative with school-based intervention.”

One program staff described a school that was successful at implementing AIT's. This led to fewer referrals to TAP, because most problems were being identified and addressed by the schools.

“the school that was very cooperative, it was wonderful. They were having the AIT that they were supposed to...they were mostly successful and so only either people who didn't show for their AIT after being told to come twice, or people who were just completely noncompliant, came on to us – as it should be. They were holding the AIT's with all the kids that they needed to hold them with.”

Referrals for supportive services such as counseling and tutoring can happen at the AIT meeting, or later at the TAP hearing. Regardless of where the referrals occur, this activity was noted as a core contributor to a successful truancy intervention. The most frequently mentioned services were counseling and behavioral health services, and tutoring. Parents at times have perceived these services as so helpful they seek to continue to pay for them out of pocket after the program ends.

“When they go through counseling, some families say that it has helped them tremendously and they would like to continue outside of the ten free sessions that they receive.”

“I also was in a position where I was able to hire someone to come in and do some extra tutoring with my daughter because she had such a bad year last year, we did a lot of mediation over the phone and she continues to have extra tutoring.”

“It's basically the counseling that they need. Because a lot of kids have issues and things that they don't feel comfortable with discussing with their parent, but once they get in the hearing you can kinda pick up on certain things and that's when we make the suggestion, do you feel

like you need counseling, and then they will say yes...and then we tell the parent it can be individual or family counseling.”

Those resources are central to the success of the student and their parent. One parent, whose child is sick and out of school frequently, mentioned internet communications with her daughter's teacher as being really helpful. However, she adds, “Sometimes teachers are real good about using it, some of them aren't.”

Challenges to School-Based Intervention/AIT.

The AIT does come with some challenges. Many of the core challenges relate to resource and staff limitations noted above. For the first five years of the program, referrals for the non-judicial Truancy Arbitration Program (TAP) hearings could come from anyone. Interviewees recalled referrals coming from neighbors and other non-family members during that time. A major rule change was implemented in 1999, requiring that schools become the sole referral source for TAP. This change added additional responsibilities to the school in early intervention in truancy among students. This change was a challenge for participating schools.

*“...in '99 the schools were just hit with it and telling them they had to have three people dedicated...they had to have someone even checking the attendance to see who qualified and then setting up the meeting and then, if the parent didn't show, rescheduling it. It was becoming very hard for the school system to set up so our referral suffered a lot for a couple of years.”
(Program Staff Interview #4)*

In addition, schools are not always aware of the full array of resources available to struggling students and their families, and/or do not always adequately communicate those resources to parents.

“That's the other thing that [a social worker] is really good at, she's familiar with a lot of the school programs...And I don't think that the schools really explain these and I'm not sure whether they really want to explain these to the kids, like how they can advance a couple grades or skip a grade or get help after school. And the parents aren't aware of them.”

Parents spent some time talking about their strained relationships with the schools, which in large part arose from a sense that the school officials did not care about what was going on with their children or

their families.

“The school just don't care, parents are trying to keep their kids in school. They don't understand that many parents have problems at home.”

“If they could show more concern other than wanting the child who is in trouble, whatever it is, and I could think they're concerned when they really don't be. Just show some true concern, that would be good.”

Frequent mobility among many of the families involved in the truancy program presents a challenge for both the schools and the State Attorney's Office who runs TAP. Many at-risk families move frequently, register their children at the address of a relative where they may or may not live, or for other reasons are difficult to locate.

“They might just be putting down their grandmother's address and they might be living somewhere else. So we might go try to hand serve a notice at the grandmother's address and she might never get the letter, so it's a big issue. These people moving around and never being able to track them down.”

As one parent said,

“It was kind of hard. Basically like she was saying moving around. We were staying with other people...”

The chaos of lives lived on the brink, combined with the challenges posed to schools with ensuring parents know about their children's absences, can both contribute to a terrible surprise for parents when they are referred to the court for a hearing.

“We've had parents cry when they heard their kid had missed so many days, because to them, they live in chaos and a day here, two days there, they had no idea that it added up to that many days.”

It is unclear in some cases whether schools take advantage of every opportunity to reach parents. What is clear is that parents frequently do not know what the rules are, do not know that the program and potential arrest applies to the parents of elementary students, and that they are taken by surprise when they are referred for a hearing.

“...they didn't send me no letter, not telling me nothing. The only way I found out is I got a

letter in the mail saying I have to come to court, ok.”

“Because frankly, I didn't know about the absences...it was never mentioned to me. They didn't even mention it at conference time. They need to work to clarify and make sure that we know the rules, what's going on with our children.”

Truancy Arbitration Program (TAP).

If a parent does not attend an AIT meeting, or violates the terms of the contract that they signed at an AIT meeting, they are referred to the TAP. A volunteer Hearing Officer presides over the process, and a program staff assigned to the case is also present. Parents are required to attend along with their children. The Hearing Officer reviews the student's school records and talks with both the student and their parent. The contract from the AIT meeting is reviewed if one exists, and a new agreement is developed and signed by the end of the hearing.

Factors and challenges to the success of TAP.

A number of factors were identified as being critical to the effectiveness of TAP hearings. First and foremost was the identification of student and/or family needs that can be addressed through referrals and ongoing case management. Participation in referrals is then written into the new contract that the parent signs.

“...so then I might ask the parent, have they ever been tested for special ed., has anyone ever considered that...for some families, most families probably, it's the best look that anyone with the school board would really...take a look all the way back to kindergarten and see what's happening and if anything is needed.”

“...she does make referrals in the hearings if there's special ed needs, medical needs, she tries to deal with that one right there in the hearing.”

These referrals aren't limited to addressing student needs. Identifying relevant parental and family issues is frequently part of the hearing process as well. Parents might be referred to parenting classes, domestic violence support services, or family therapy.

“...if we recognize that there is domestic violence, then therefore that's one thing I like that we can make a connection with Hubbard House, that's for domestic violence victims, and that's one thing that we find a lot that's going on within the home, and it comes out in the hearing.”

Another factor that helps ensure the hearings are effective is the real-time access to information from the schools, including student attendance records and grades.

“The other big thing that we find when we go around from place to place that nobody else has, is the information sharing that we have. The fact that I can sit right here and punch up, punch in a student's name or a student number and I can get all their grades, all their attendance, all their disciplinary referrals, you know the fact that it's at my fingertips.”

“I'll ask the student, how many referrals did you have this year and oh, one or two and then we look and there's eight and then once they find out we can verify things, then they're a little more honest. Or I'll say how were your grades this year and they'll say, well they're pretty good and then we'll get on the computer and they're all F's. Well, your definition of pretty good it's a little different than mine!”

The ability to move the truancy intervention outside of the school and into the legal system – beginning with the TAP hearing up to and including parental arrest – was seen as a unique and important component of Jacksonville's program. Program staff perceive that some parents do not take the school interventions seriously.

“With the schools just doing it by themselves, [parents] tend to ignore that. And say for instance when they receive a letter from the school, they never go in for conferences, like they should. But once it comes from us, and it says State Attorney on the letterhead, that really gets their attention. They'll call to find out what is it in reference to and then they will make the effort to come in. If they do not come in, they know that there could be consequences.”

While a referral to TAP and the subsequent hearing does not end the effort to refer students and their parents to a variety of services, parents clearly recognize that the stakes have been raised and the threat of punishment shapes how they perceive and experience the TAP hearing. Parents who had participated in a TAP hearing communicated an overall impression of the process as being negatively judgmental.

“Like a jerk.” Yah, they try to make seem as if you...” “Like you were being bad.” “Being like you don't care and they don't, well they didn't listen to me. They didn't try to understand, they try to pin you or make you feel bad.” “Like it's your fault. It's really not, you know what I'm saying. You don't have some changes and when stuff is going on in your life, they don't understand you.”

“He told me I was a terrible parent. He told me it's a wonder my kids made that good of grades and I told him, because my kids were taught just fine in school and my job was for them to learn at home too...he was particularly nasty to me. He was just condescending, I mean I told you, I was in tears, I was in tears.”

Interviews with Hearing Officers reflected their awareness that parents frequently resent being called into court, and they discuss needing to manage 'parental attitudes' at the beginning of the hearing.

“I try to introduce myself in the beginning and I tell them what the purpose is and try to settle them down and introduce [the participants] and just try to get them to relax a little so diffuse anything. Most of them don't come in with an attitude but a certain number of them do...you don't want to put them on the defensive and if you do they're going to clam up and you're not going to get very much information so you have to show them that you're very understanding of what's happening.”

As noted earlier, the goal of the school-based intervention is to address problems outside of the legal system where possible. The parents who make it to this step may, therefore, be less cooperative than those who are able to address their children's truancy at the AIT stage, or they may be dealing with more complex behavioral and other issues.

Parental Arrest/Detention for Truancy.

The Jacksonville program is unusual in that it has the power to arrest parents for their young child's truancy. Arrest is widely seen as a powerful motivator for parents to address the issues contributing to their children's truancy and to ensure that they attend school.

“We put parents in jail. That is very unique, and some people just completely disagree with it, but I try to make sure that if I'm talking about it that I make it very clear it is a last resort.... We saw [about] 1600 families and we've put 110 people in jail. It's not the goal of our program, and it's not the largest part of our program, even though that's what gets publicity is the fact that we put parents in jail...”

The threat and actual arrest of parents is perceived to work best when the parent is contributing in a significant way to their children's truancy and when that punishment is wielded when the child is still young.

“Holding the parent accountable, since the child, frankly, half the time the child doesn't care if we say we're going to arrest their parent. Is the parent, has the parent contributed to the attendance problem, most definitely, but can you prove it in a court of law and is arresting the parent going to make any difference in the attendance? Probably not once they're getting older.”

Clearly, at times arresting a parent can make a profound difference in their commitment to reducing their children's truancy, as illustrated in this account by a repeat offender.

“[W]e had a mom earlier this year, she had been arrested for a different child, and now she was here for another one. And not only had she been arrested, but she was one of the few that actually had jail time because she had violated her probation somehow...she said she had done thirty days at the P Farm (they call it the Prison Farm) and that she was not going back, so this one was not going to miss any more days...she wasn't angry with us. It was like she knew what she needed to do.”

The ability to arrest parents is not universally perceived as a significant intervention in addressing truancy among students. Its potential as a deterrent is dependent on knowing that the possibility of arrest exists, but a number of parents only learned that they could be arrested when they arrived at their TAP hearing. One parent said that she did not realize that the law in question applied to parents of elementary students; she thought it only applied to parents of high school students.

No one likes to keep a parent away from their young children, in particular where a single parent is involved. In practice, when a parent is arrested they are typically released on their own recognizance, and they spend a couple of hours in jail and are sentenced to twelve months probation, amounting to little more than a slap on the wrist.

“I think when they are arrested, I feel like they probably should have to do more than a few hours, they need a wake up call, because it's like a slap on the wrist sometimes. We have some that come right back though, eventually later down the line because they know that they can come in and they're going to get out, unless they have a pending warrant...it's not a fear, because they've gone through it before.”

One program staff recounted a case where this was an ineffective intervention:

“[W]e had a father...he was given twelve months probation, he got early term, he served two months probation, he was given \$150 court cost, I guess he demonstrated he couldn't pay it and it was waived, he served two months probation, never paid his court cost, that was it, he was gone. His child, after he served his probation, still continued to have unexcused absences. This year so far he's had like fifteen unexcused absences. We're only in November, there's six months left to go to school.”

One condition of parole can be required participation in parenting classes, attending school with their child for several days, and community service. One criticism of the program is that the system doesn't always help families until it reaches the stage where parents are being punished.

“[W]e used to refer to parenting skills classes that now, we're not doing that, they're doing that once they have gone to the last phase, the judge actually makes that recommendation...and some parents really need that additional guidance, that help.”

Another complaint a staff member reported hearing is that no one steps in to help parents address their children's truancy. When a parent asks for help, he or she is held accountable for the truancy anyway.

“I don't know if it's a valid complaint or not, but I hear all the time that it's just...you keep passing the buck, nobody really wants to help, and we do all that we can, but you know when parents call to complain to us, we hold the parents accountable.”

Case Management and Follow-Up.

Parents who have gone through the truancy program are assigned a case manager who provides ongoing support, guidance, and referrals. This program component was positively viewed by parents and program staff alike, and widely cited as a critical factor contributing to the success of parents. Case managers keep parents informed about what is going on with their children and with the truancy process, serve as their child's advocate and a point person for answering questions and making sense of the process, and make referrals to supportive services.

“And then they take her through their process and I say, you can even stay there for like maybe five days in order to get your act together at home, and the parents thanked me and she says I hate to worry you but, I tend to call you for the least little thing, and I told her you know that was my job, I didn't mind because my goal is to try to make sure that the kids are in school, to eliminate them coming down here for other reasons.”

Parents greatly appreciate the positive approach, support, and guidance they receive from the case managers, and were far more positive about that relationship than about either the school staff or the hearing officers. The case managers, most importantly, were viewed by parents as having the best interests of the children and parents at heart and genuinely caring about what was happening in their lives.

“The people who really are nasty to me, that's why I was seeing Yolanda...she did her job, she was professional and she wasn't managing, she didn't have an attitude and she was understanding and she told me why she needs to know and what I need to do.”

“They actually work with you at your house and do ask you, how can they help and try to figure out what’s going on.”

“Of all the people that I dealt with at the State Attorney's Office, not once did anybody ever say anything like how's your daughter, is she ok? Nobody asked about my daughter. She [the case manager] even called me after she fell and hurt her head. She called me Monday morning asking if everything was ok and was she doing ok.”

Case managers also advocate and support the parents, giving positive feedback for parents making an effort with their children and pushing them to make positive changes in their own lives.

“Right and once they come in, you know, they’re told to try to go and get their GED, they’re told about different programs to try to motivate them and give them self esteem, that you can do the same thing that your child is doing now, it’s not too late for you to go back and get your high school diploma or take up a trade where you can provide for your child.”

“I tell the parents; I’m not calling all the time for, placing a bad phone call, I calling to say guys, I’m glad to see your child is going to school and I just want to call and say keep up the good work, and they [said] thank you Ms. Champion because the only time they feel like they gonna hear from me is when it’s something bad getting ready to take place...I went to the home to actually see them face to face and I left a note saying to give me a call, and it was just a call to praise them.”

The major challenge for the case managers appears to be the heavy caseload they carry. One case manager said that she usually has about 200 clients, but it recently spiked to 220. Another case manager mentioned having 250 referrals, a caseload exacerbated by their belief that the policy which requires closing a case after 30 days is too limiting. Another program staff argued that having funds for an additional case manager would make a difference in their ability to help families.

“We do a pretty good job, although Yolanda is managing a hundred and something cases, you know everything boils down to money...we could do more if we could have another case manager, if they each had 60 cases.”

Suggestions for Improvement to the Truancy Program

Several of the interviewees made concrete suggestions for improvements to various aspects of the truancy reduction program in Jacksonville.

1. Increase Use of Positive Incentives for Youth doing Well in Program.

“I wish we could be doing more in the area of positive incentives. I do feel like we kinda get the label that we’re negative, we arrest people and I would like to possibly look at doing some more positive incentives for the kids that are doing good in our program... not that we don’t do some things, we do have specific programs here for rewarding perfect attendance and during our truancy awareness months we do have give-aways for kids with good attendance, it’s not that we don’t think that it’s important, that we don’t make any effort in it...I would say that would probably be an area where we could improve.”

2. Improve School Follow Through with Parents and Children

“I’ve been in it long enough where we get the same parents back again with maybe with a different child and sometimes even with the same child so I don’t really think the school follows through as much as they should. And the parents kind of tell me that the school never tells them that they’ve missed that many days. I’m not really sure if that’s true or not but they tell me enough times that I think it’s partially true...so I’m just guessing again but I think sometimes the teachers see this kid and he’s not going to cooperate and I’ve got too many other kids to worry about so if he’s not here it’s not disruptive and they don’t really care and kind of give up on him. I kind of get that impression and again this would depend on the teachers and school and guidance counselors and with some obviously you can tell right away they’re good.

3. More Time at TAP Hearings

“I think if you took more time for the hearings but that’s probably not very feasible. I mean you have limited time and it’s hard. Like I said, you have 45 minutes to an hour to get a lot done. You’re trying to evaluate what’s happening with the family and why the kid is missing school and some of them you can reach a conclusion pretty quick and others it’s drawn out. Maybe the parents aren’t responsive enough and you know there’s a problem but you don’t know what it is.”

4. More Attendance Social Workers

“I wish there were more attendance social workers, ‘cause of course right now there’s five of us and four truant officers I think, ‘cause we’re down one and there’s a freeze on hiring. But 10 for 127,000 students is not enough...For the whole county, and then we can’t attend to our schools very well. Some of them, some of the attendance social workers might have 20 schools, 20, so how can they go in and massage the school to do what they need to do.”

5. Increase Ability to Follow How Families do Over Time

“I would like to know how did those people that we’ve had hearings with, what’s happened to them. And I don’t really know if there’s any way that, I’m sure that maybe they can address that question in there. But I’ve often wondered, just like anything else you do, you want to know how effective it is.”

Conclusions

Program staff interviewed for this study believe that the focus on identification and intervention

at an early age is critical to the long term reduction in truancy in Jacksonville. They also believe that their ability to enforce consequences for parents who do not cooperate with school or program staff is critical. The ability of the program to imprison parents for their child's truant behavior is the key factor that makes the program in Jacksonville unique. Whether jail is actually a deterrent for most parents who reach that stage is a matter of some debate in the interviews and focus groups.

Program staff and parents seemed to be universally appreciative of the school-based intervention, and the link to supportive services for students, parents, and their families. Parents greatly appreciated the relationships they developed with the case manager, who frequently acted as a parental coach and advocate. The three services most frequently mentioned in interviews and focus groups included counseling (for students and their families), tutoring, and parenting classes (for parents).

There were a number of ongoing challenges noted throughout. The most critical challenge appears to be constraints on time and resources schools are able to dedicate to tracking students, and implementing various parts of the program. An additional challenge that cut across the interviews had to do with communication. This includes communication between schools and program staff, as well as communication between parents, schools, and the program staff. Finally, caseloads carried by the program's case managers are enormous, averaging well over a hundred cases per staff person.

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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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Prepared for the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by the National Center for School Engagement

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