The Truancy Court Program Road: Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Who We Are

WHY: The mission of the University of Baltimore School of Law Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC) is to create, foster and support local, state, and national movements to integrate communities, families and the justice system in order to improve the lives of families and the health of the community. Truancy can lead to problems in school, in the community, in the workplace, and in life. CFCC has developed the TCP as an early intervention approach in the belief that it is an effective means to improve the lives of truant children and their families. It is designed to identify and address the problems that underlie truant behavior, and it relies on a collaboration among schools, families, the community, and the courts to forge solutions and change circumstances that cause truancy in the first place.

WHEN AND WHERE: The Truancy Court Program has come a long way since its inception in 2005, but it has adhered very closely to its original formula for success. Starting in four Baltimore City schools and serving a total of thirty students, the TCP has expanded tremendously since then. Twelve Maryland schools currently offer the program (eight in Baltimore City, two in Anne Arundel County, and two in Montgomery County). Looking forward, CFCC plans to establish the program in four new schools beginning in September 2010.

HOW: The program is based on an early intervention model and targets students who are “soft” truants - students who have from five to twenty unexcused absences - in the belief that this group still has academic, social, and emotional connections to school. The TCP is also a preventive program, as it aims to identify and address the root causes of truancy, linking children and their families to needed social services and other supports that address these causal links.

The TCP process is straightforward: The program, which is strictly voluntary on the part of students and their families, consists of ten weekly in-school meetings per session and capitalizes on the stature and authority of the judge. Participants at each meeting include: a volunteer judge (who is an actual Circuit or District Court judge or master), a team of public school representatives, a mentor, a University of Baltimore law student, a supervisor from the School of Law, the child, and his/her parent/caregiver. This “TCP Team” listens carefully to identify the root causes of truant behavior, assesses the student’s progress and challenges in the previous week, and works with the student to craft solutions to the problems that have caused the truancy, as well as academic and behavioral challenges. The team, including the child and his/her parent or caregiver, creates an “action plan” (which could include tasks for the TCP staff, school administrators, parents, family or community members, and the students themselves) and sets out weekly goals for the student’s attendance, academic, and behavioral progress. The student receives weekly incentives (such as books, gift certificates, art supplies, and sports equipment) for meeting goals.

Can a non-punitive, incentive-based approach effectively tackle the persistent problem of truancy? CFCC has research to support this approach. The program has served over seven hundred students and has seen a 60-75 percent decrease in unexcused absences and/or tardies among the vast majority of participants. Many students experience a 75 percent or
higher increase in attendance, as well as improved classroom behavior and academic performance. In the past three years, fifty-five percent of all students who have participated in the TCP have graduated from the program, as measured by a 75 percent decrease in unexcused absences and/or tardies and improved classroom behavior and academic performance.

The TCP also enjoys significant media attention (including being voted Best of Baltimore for Youth Programs in 2006). The Charles Crane Family Foundation, the TCP’s first funder, has continued to provide support for the program. In addition, the TCP’s growing recognition and credibility have resulted in support from a number of foundations and government agencies, including the Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance. The federal funds are the most recent, enabling the TCP’s expansion into Anne Arundel and Montgomery Counties, as well as four new schools in other jurisdictions, and supporting two of the eight schools in Baltimore City this year.

The expansion model is designed to make the TCP sustainable in more geographic areas, where CFCC cannot manage it on a daily basis. Even with the evolution of the program from its pilot phase until now, however, the program’s basics are all still there - the 10 weekly sessions with a judge, TCP staff, parents, public school teachers and administrators, the mentoring component, the incentives, and the lack of punitive measures. We look forward to bringing this formula for success to two new counties next fall, and from there, who knows?

WHAT: While the TCP’s operation revolves around the meetings among the judge, the student, and the TCP team, CFCC offers a wide range of services, referrals, and programs in connection with the TCP. These include:

- A Mentoring Program for both students and parents participating in the TCP, including character-building classes and individual mentoring.
- A school-based “Kids and Cameras” program for students interested in photography.
- A Volunteer Initiative that brings volunteer mentors, tutors, and others to the TCP schools.
- A Mediation Program that offers mediation services to students and their families provided by supervised University of Baltimore School of Law clinical law students.
- Weekly incentives or rewards for participating students.
- “Family Fun Nights” for all participating students and their families.
- Graduations that reward students who demonstrate at least a seventy-five percent increase in attendance, better classroom behavior, and improved grades with gifts and graduation certificates.

The Mentoring Program, in particular, offers critical guidance on a wide range of issues that affect school attendance. Students learn important skills during the character-building classes, such as creating a daily schedule and taking a long-term, goal-minded approach. TCP “Family Fun Nights” provide an evening of fun and games for school teachers and staff, TCP parents, caregivers, and children and build strong connections among all participants. TCP graduates are treated to a final ceremony during which they receive a certificate and award. Baltimore City graduates also attend a special reception at the Governor’s mansion in Annapolis, hosted by the First Lady of Maryland, Judge Catherine Curran O’Malley, who has served as a TCP judge since the program’s inception.
WHO: The TCP program is a collaborative effort. CFCC Director Barbara Babb explains, "What makes the program so special is the caring, dedication, and enthusiasm of our participants, including volunteer judges, CFCC's TCP staff, University of Baltimore School of Law students, and public school personnel." Read more about the former professional football player, actor, city school teacher, lawyers, and others who make up the CFCC TCP team. And if you would like to contribute your time, talents, or treasure, please contact us!