

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

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?