



A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO TRUANCY FOR BALTIMORE CITY: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

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Summary Report and Recommendations

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Introduction

The University of Baltimore School of Law Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC), one of three centers of excellence within the School of Law, is a national leader in promoting family justice system reform. CFCC's mission 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. CFCC's Truancy Court Program (TCP), created in 2004, exemplifies these goals through the operation of a court-school-CFCC partnership that leverages the stature, authority and expertise of each of these three entities to tackle the truancy crisis in Baltimore City.

Beginning with five Baltimore City public elementary and middle schools, the TCP expanded to six elementary/middle schools and one high school. The model is based on an early intervention, therapeutic and non-adversarial approach to truancy. It targets students who are "soft" truants – students who have from three to 20 unexcused absences – in the belief that this group still has academic, social and emotional connections to the school.¹ The judge or master volunteers his/her time to collaborate each week with the TCP team. In addition to the judge or master, the team consists of school representatives, a CFCC staff person, a University of Baltimore law student, the TCP Mentor, the TCP School Liaison, the child and his/her parent/caregiver.²

While the TCP saw immediate and dramatic improvement in school attendance, behavior and performance among participating TCP students, CFCC quickly recognized that there were few, if any, other interventions to address truancy. Until recently, Baltimore City schools relied almost exclusively on the TCP to provide an approach to truant behavior.³ At the same time, public attention focused increasingly on the extraordinarily high number of unexcused absences in Baltimore's public schools. While chronic truancy was rampant throughout the state, it was far and away more pervasive in Baltimore City than in any of the counties. The state average as compared to the average in Baltimore for students who missed more than 20 days of school during the 2006-2007 school year is as follows⁴:

- In grades 1-5, the state average was 6.1 percent. In Baltimore, it was 14 percent.
- In grades 6-8, the state average was 12.4 percent. In Baltimore, it was 33.7 percent.

¹ Under COMAR, a student is considered an habitual truant if he or she is enrolled in a school for 91 or more days and unlawfully absent for 20 percent or more of the days enrolled.

² There are two 10-week TCP sessions each school year. Participation is strictly voluntary on the part of the student and his/her family. The judge, who presides throughout the school's TCP, reviews each child's file (attendance and school performance data compiled by the school), speaks privately with that child and his/her parent/caregiver about the student's attendance, and asks questions about any possible difficulties encountered during the week. Each child is rewarded with a small gift and, upon successful completion, is invited to a "graduation" from the program. The student is monitored for the rest of the academic year to ensure that any "relapse" is immediately remedied.

³ The Baltimore Truancy Assessment Center (BTAC) was also available to develop plans for truant students who were picked up by BTAC officers for violating the Baltimore City curfew law that prohibits children up to the age of 16 from being on the street during the hours between 9 am and 2:30 pm.

⁴ 2007 Maryland Report Card

- In grades 9-12, the state average was 19.5 percent. In Baltimore, it was 43.5 percent.

While the figures for the state indicated a substantial truancy problem, in Baltimore truancy was clearly a crisis situation, underscored by the demonstrable connection between chronic truancy and a host of social, psychological and economic problems. For example:

- Students who attend school less than 70 percent of the time in ninth grade had at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out. Students with a 6th grade attendance rate below 90 percent had an on-time graduation rate of 18 to 26 percent.⁵
- 70 percent of suspended youth were chronically truant in the last six months before suspension.⁶
- 50 percent of expelled students were chronically truant in the last year.⁷
- 80 percent of dropouts were chronically truant.⁸
- Every dropout costs the government over \$200,000 in public spending.⁹

In 2007, the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), under the leadership of Chief Executive Officer Dr. Andres Alonso, expanded and strengthened the Office of Attendance and Truancy, appointing Dr. Tina Spears as director. Dr. Spears was instrumental in supporting the TCP among school administrators.

In addition to strengthening the TCP, CFCC and Dr. Spears focused on the overall approach to truancy in Baltimore. CFCC and Dr. Spears were particularly interested in the development and implementation of a continuum of services and interventions for the full range of truant behavior, beginning with those students who had one unexcused absence and extending to students who missed the entire school year. This continuum would call for a systemic change in Baltimore's approach to truancy and would depend on the formal and informal collaboration of city and state agencies, civic organizations and private foundations. In keeping with its mission to act as a catalyst for family justice system reform, CFCC proposed hosting a roundtable discussion on truancy to bring together all those stakeholders with an interest in school attendance.

Roundtable I

In an effort to jumpstart the development of a holistic approach to truancy, CFCC developed and hosted the first Roundtable on Truancy in Baltimore City and engaged a professional facilitator to guide the discussion. CFCC prepared the agenda and invitation list in collaboration with Dr. Spears and the facilitator.

⁵ Balfanz and Herzog, "An Early Warning System," *Educational Leadership* 65(3)

⁶ Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, "Youth Out of School: Linking Absence to Delinquency," September 2002

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Fifty-four participants attended Roundtable I on September 24, 2007, at the University of Baltimore. Attendees included representatives from 11 Baltimore City and Maryland offices, departments and agencies (Baltimore City Department of Housing, Baltimore City Department of Social Services, Baltimore City Health Department, Baltimore City Police Department, Circuit Court for Baltimore City, District Court for Baltimore City, Maryland Department of Juvenile Services, Maryland State Department of Education, Office of the State's Attorney, Maryland Administrative Office of the Courts, and the Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention); numerous community groups and foundations; and 13 representatives from the Baltimore City Public School System. (See Appendix #1 for list of attendees.)

The morning session consisted of two small-group discussions designed to bring together participants who do not typically meet each other in order to begin a conversation about ways in which Baltimore can develop a holistic, comprehensive approach to truancy. Groups were asked to follow the format of a questionnaire (Appendix #2) that each participant had completed prior to the Roundtable I. Topics included:

- Your agency's/organization's role in addressing truancy;
- The types of services that others might not realize your agency/organization provides;
- The major obstacles that prevent you/your agency/organization from being most effective in addressing truancy;
- The information that you would like about other agencies/organizations in order to make your efforts more effective.

A significant number of participants spoke about programs and initiatives to increase school attendance, including the following: translation services for immigrant families, parent support groups, social skill-building programs, after school programs, education and resources for buying houses, GED classes, senior citizen volunteer programs, gang prevention and education, mental health services and mediation services, to name just a few.

According to the Roundtable I participants, the major obstacle preventing them from being effective was the lack of coordination among these many agencies and organizations. While the lack of resources also was mentioned frequently as an obstacle, the absence of a coordinated effort overshadowed the resource question. Participants also discussed the absence of a continuum of interventions – an organized range of interventions, beginning with students who miss one or two days of schools to those who have over 100 unexcused absences. There was considerable agreement that students, parents and schools would benefit greatly from a comprehensive policy outlining various approaches appropriate for different levels of truancy.

In the afternoon session of Roundtable I, participants were divided into workgroups, each of which was charged with addressing a different component of a comprehensive policy on truancy: the establishment of a citywide task force; promoting collaboration between agencies and agency leaders; sharing best practices; monitoring; research and evaluation; defining a continuum of interventions; and the role of the community and non-governmental organizations). The breakout

groups developed many different recommendations. Highlights included the following recommendations:

- Consolidate and analyze attendance data so that it is uniform across all schools
- Improve evaluations of the different programs/initiatives that address truancy, both in terms of quantitative and qualitative analyses
- Convene regular meetings among agency heads and senior staff regarding policies and measures to address truancy
- Establish a “one-stop shop” for families struggling to increase their child’s attendance
- Base the approach to truancy on a “triage” system that assesses and refers students and families to the most appropriate and effective program for their needs
- Facilitate greater collaboration between city police and school police
- Develop and implement a public education and interagency information campaign on what constitutes truancy, including the legal definition and the consequences of missing school
- Focus on prevention as well as intervention programs
- Develop a plan for each school to increase parental involvement in improving attendance, including reaching out to and engaging parents

The final discussion focused on the group’s next steps. The following recommendations reflected the consensus reached by the end of the day:

- This was the first time a group of so many stakeholders met to discuss school attendance. The group should reconvene to continue developing a comprehensive, holistic, coordinated approach to address truancy.
- There should be ongoing updates of the group’s activities, including a listserv.
- Truancy is not an issue that belongs in a specific agency. Rather, it is a city problem that crosses many agencies and offices. Therefore, the Mayor should ultimately be responsible to implement a comprehensive plan of action.
- The group should brief Mayor Dixon regarding its discussions and recommendations.

At the end of the day, at the request of Roundtable I participants, CFCC agreed to convene a second Roundtable (“Roundtable II”) to move the conversation forward.

Roundtable II

The second Roundtable took place on November 12, 2007, at the University of Baltimore and was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. CFCC contracted with the same professional who facilitated Roundtable I to help put together the agenda and invitation list. CFCC sent invitations to

all of the participants from Roundtable I and requested recommendations for additional invitees,¹⁰ who were added to the invitation list. Fifty stakeholders came together for Roundtable II. Using Roundtable I as a springboard for discussion, the conversation focused on the development of a coordinated effort to address truant behavior in Baltimore City.

The following individuals provided presentations and materials at the beginning of Roundtable II:

- **Dr. Tina Spears**, director of the BCPSS Office of Attendance and Truancy, spoke about the compulsory attendance law.¹¹ Dr. Spears provided the criteria for habitual truancy used by BCPSS: “If the student has been in membership in a school for 91 or more days in a school year and is unlawfully absent from school for a number of days in excess of 15 percent (14 school days) missed within any marking period, semester, or year.”
- **Dr. Robert Balfanz**, a researcher at the Johns Hopkins University Center for the Social Organization of Schools, spoke about the decline in attendance in middle school and the impact on graduation rates. He also presented an outline for scaling interventions in a tiered program, beginning with brief daily interactions with identified youth, moving to mid-level interventions for those students whose attendance does not improve, and ending ultimately with intensive interventions for “hardcore” truants.
- **Dr. April Lewis**, director of the BCPSS Office of Safe and Supportive Schools, provided information about the BCPSS comprehensive school safety plan, which involves the following: internal and external collaborators; multiple data sources to determine strengths, gaps, and needs; a six component prevention and intervention strategy; and implementation concurrent with development.

After the presentations, all Roundtable II attendees were assigned to work in groups focused on a topic to advance problem solving and collaboration around the broad range of truancy issues. Topics included: creating an architecture for sustained, comprehensive leadership and problem solving regarding truancy; promoting collaboration between and among agencies and neighborhoods; identifying and sharing best practices; defining a continuum of truancy interventions; establishing research and program evaluation methodologies; and sustaining community engagement and participation. The goal of each group was to build on the discussions from Roundtable I. At the end of the small group discussion, a representative from each group provided a brief synopsis of the discussion and major recommendations. The next section provides a synopsis of the discussions on each of these group session topics.

¹⁰ These included representatives from the Office of the Public Defender, the Department of Mental Health and Hygiene, the Governor’s Office for Children, the Baltimore City Department of Social Services, the Baltimore City Department of Transportation, the Baltimore City School Police Department, Baltimore City Healthy Start, and the United Way.

¹¹ Each child who resides in this State and is five years old or older and under sixteen shall attend a public school regularly during the entire school year unless the child is otherwise receiving regular, thorough instruction during the school year...” COMAR 7-301

It is noteworthy that several themes ran throughout the Roundtable I and II discussions:

- City and state agencies should pool their resources in order to develop a statewide continuum of services for truant students and their families. That continuum should include preventive, early, mid-level, and late stage interventions.
- A formal mechanism should be established to facilitate greater communication among the schools, BCPSS, and other city agencies involved in addressing the problems that underlie truancy.
- Local, even on-site, services are critical. Participants agreed that school-based direct intervention services and programs are often the most effective in addressing the problems of truant children and their families.
- There needs to be a more concerted effort to engage and re-engage parents with the schools, including the use of incentives and public information campaigns.
- There is a tremendous need for more and better data on attendance, behavior, and school performance. In addition, there is a need for more information about model programs that could be adapted in Baltimore to address school attendance.

While these themes resonated throughout the discussions, Roundtable participants generated dozens of additional ideas and suggestions that should constitute the basis for a comprehensive policy and plan to address truancy.

Summary of Roundtable II Work Group Discussions

A. Creating an architecture for sustained, comprehensive leadership and problem solving regarding truancy

Roundtable I participants reached a broad consensus agreement that Mayor Sheila Dixon and BCPSS CEO Dr. Andres Alonso should take the lead in creating a systemic approach to truancy. Roundtable II participants, building on this recommendation, felt that the two offices should create a Task Force on Truancy.

This Task Force on Truancy would be responsible for developing and implementing formal recommendations on how Baltimore should address truancy. The Roundtable II group devoted much of its time to defining the composition, roles and responsibilities of the Task Force on Truancy, including the following:

- The Task Force on Truancy should consist of representatives from the following, among others: city and state agencies; the legal and judicial communities; community-based programs; teachers and school administrators; pupil personnel service providers; school social workers; counselors and psychologists, as well as parents and students. Teachers and administrators are not enough.
- Faith-based communities; the YMCA and other youth athletic clubs; local businesses; university researchers; and the medical/health community. One of the Task Force's

major responsibilities should be to design a framework or process to facilitate agency coordination and collaboration.

- The Task Force on Truancy should act as a “policy initiating body” within the Mayor’s Office and would develop a data gathering and analytical process. Initial Task Force goals should be (1) to collect and evaluate quantitative and qualitative data on school attendance and truancy using the *Attendance-STAT* model and (2) to develop a six-month implementation plan for the long-term operation of a continuum of truancy interventions.
- There should be an evaluation of current Maryland school attendance laws, policies and procedures to determine which laws and regulations are counterproductive to school attendance. Roundtable I participants singled out expulsion and suspension policies, pointing out that truancy often leads to suspension, which is counterproductive to school success.
- The Task Force on Truancy should develop a marketing strategy for reaching out to parents to foster a sense of ownership in their children’s education and schools.

B. Promoting collaboration between and among agencies and neighborhoods

Roundtable II participants reached a general consensus that services and networks should be created at the local and, preferably, school level in order to meet the specific demographic, social, health and economic needs of the residents in every Baltimore neighborhood. In addition, the breakout group considering collaboration between and among neighborhoods and agencies agreed that there should be both formal and informal mechanisms for including families, parents and students, individually and collectively, into any collaboration.

Specific recommendations included:

- The Task Force on Truancy should encourage strong role models and mentors for truant children as an important component of any program to encourage truant and tardy students to stay in school. In addition, the Task Force should incorporate into its framework for addressing truancy peer groups and incentives for attendance. Transition programs for truant students are essential so they can successfully return to school and reconnect with the regular curriculum.
- Community organizations should identify and reach out to local merchants who, in violation of existing law, sell to truant youths during school hours. BCPSS and law enforcement should educate merchants about the impact of truancy.
- A resource guide and/or web page should be published by the Mayor’s office together with BCPSS for teachers, parents, mentors and social workers that provides information about services and resources available to families and their children.
- The Task Force should address the following barriers to collaboration including the “silo” mentality among agency staff that insulates them from interdisciplinary and cross-agency collaboration, funding issues, the lack of usable data to assess truancy, and bureaucratic barriers to collaboration.

C. Identifying and sharing best practices

An overarching theme of both Roundtable I and II was the absence of sound data and reports on best practices. The Task Force on Truancy should assume responsibility for collecting and analyzing data on model programs and best practices for addressing truancy, particularly from areas that have similar demographics and issues to those in Baltimore.

The breakout group discussed some examples of the types of information needed with respect to best practices:

- Cost-benefit analyses for intensive supervision of students who are just beginning to show signs of truant behavior.
- Studies and/or reports that provide information about how to identify specific behaviors early on that lead to truancy.
- Collect information on best practices regarding data collection and follow-up monitoring of students who have participated in truancy programs.
- Research best practices for developing and collecting appropriate measurable outcomes.
- Organize community forums and/or roundtables to include community assessments of the types of information needed regarding best practices.
- Success stories about truancy programs should be captured and regularly communicated to the Mayor and BCPSS CEO.

D. Defining a continuum of truancy interventions

There was a general consensus supporting Dr. Robert Balfanz's recommendation during his presentation earlier in the morning to adopt and implement a multi-tiered approach to truancy, particularly in light of his estimates that 65 percent of the reasons for truancy are preventable, 20 percent can be resolved through mid-level intervention (including, for example, the Truancy Court Program and the Baltimore Truancy Assessment Center), leaving 15 percent of truancy cases for a very intensive approach.

The breakout group charged with further defining a continuum of truancy interventions focused on the programs and services that would fall under each of the three tiers, as follows:

Tier 1- Prevention

- The school clearly and forcefully communicates attendance expectations to students and their families.
- Attendance is rewarded through positive reinforcements, including, for example, verbal praise, extra recess and treats.

- Teachers and administrators consistently and accurately document absences.
- The school attendance monitor follows up by contacting parents after a designated number of unexcused absences.
- BCPSS and individual schools reach out to merchants to urge them not to sell to students during daytime curfew hours.

Tier 2 – Early Intervention

- Identify those students who are beginning to demonstrate a pattern of truant behavior.
- Engage school staff, including teachers, social workers, counselors, parent liaisons, and psychologists in outreach to students and their families to determine the need for specific truancy prevention interventions that address family or individual concerns.
- Work with parents to remove barriers between the school and the student.
- The school should link truant students with necessary community services and agencies (e.g., Department of Juvenile Services, Department of Social Services, the Department of Housing, Department of Health and Mental Health, the police department) that could offer services.
- Civic groups should assist the schools in making home visits to truant students, mentoring, and addressing language and cultural sensitivities.

Tier 3 – Intensive Intervention

- The school should provide intensive school-based intervention.
- Intervention includes a school social worker who would be a case manager in charge of developing and implementing a plan to address the issues underlying a student’s truant behavior.
- The school should make referrals, if necessary, to outside sources, such as a truancy court.

The breakout group also discussed whether there should be a fourth “tier” consisting of prosecution and other punitive approaches. There was a lack of consensus on whether this type of intervention would be effective and, if so, what it would entail, given the agreement of those in the breakout group that incarceration is very likely counterproductive and does not address the reasons why a student is truant.

E. Establishing research and program evaluation methodologies

Participants at both roundtable discussions agreed that the Task Force on Truancy should investigate and develop a plan for improving research and program evaluation methodologies regarding truancy intervention programs. The Truancy Task Force should put in place a process that

facilitates the collection of descriptive data (e.g., who is truant, why they are truant, demographic information); longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of various truancy interventions; program evaluations that look at the outcomes of initiatives; and data on the difference made by incorporating services, especially mental health, child health, and juvenile services.

This breakout group also developed a list of some sample research questions:

- What are the major areas of school climate that can be linked to increased attendance?
- What are the most effective intervention tools for increasing attendance?
- What do students indicate as reasons for attending (or not attending) school?
- What family and neighborhood factors can be most readily addressed to increase attendance? (There are often issues of bus routes, gang-threatened pathways, family fears and concerns, and ambivalence about school attendance that can be overcome.)
- Is there research to show how best to support teachers and schools in their efforts to engage students?
- Are schools implementing attendance policies correctly? If so, does that work? If not, what are the challenges/barriers to implementing policies?
- How can we help schools pilot and evaluate innovative techniques for addressing truancy?
- What, if any, is the impact of foster care on school attendance? Homelessness? Substance abuse? Other health and safety issues?

F. Sustaining community engagement and participation

There was considerable discussion at Roundtable I and II around the question of how to engage, nurture, and maintain community engagement and participation. If truancy is a community problem – and there appeared to be unanimous agreement that it is – then all sectors of the community should be involved in developing, implementing and supporting truancy interventions.

This breakout group came up with several creative recommendations for generating and sustaining community engagement:

- Tap into the resources of local universities and colleges to do research and evaluations on truancy programs, develop and implement innovative programs, and provide volunteers to participate in the schools.
- Concentrate on strengthening communication between schools and parents in order to determine why a student is truant and how a parent should be involved in curbing that behavior.
- Create relationships between students and community leaders, especially if parents seem “unreachable.”

- Offer incentives for parent involvement.
- Reach out to faith-based organizations, the Maryland Food Bank, non-profits, the business community, health care organizations, and others to provide education and services for families with truant children.
- Include students who have been truant to advise the Task Force on Truancy.
- The Task Force on Truancy should create a “community map” that shows where services are available and how they are utilized.
- A foundation or institute should host Webcasts that offer information about innovative truancy programs.
- The Task Force on Truancy should exert pressure on local, state, and national media to contribute to citizens’ education about truancy and the issues that underlie truant behavior.

Conclusion

Participants at both the September 24 and November 12, 2007, meetings of “A Comprehensive Approach to Truancy for Baltimore City: A Roundtable Discussion” strongly support a formal collaboration between the Office of the Mayor and the Baltimore City Public School System Chief Executive Officer to address truancy and school attendance. The ultimate goal of this effort is the creation of a citywide continuum for truancy intervention and prevention. The city should send an unequivocal message to educators, administrators, parents, students and the community at large, stressing the importance of attending school and academic success.

This report is not intended to represent the final scope of issues related to truancy and needed interventions, but it does offer a wide range of thoughts and considerations related to addressing the issues underlying the truancy epidemic in Baltimore. The Mayor’s Office, in partnership with BCPSS, should appoint a Task Force on Truancy comprised of high level representatives from city agencies (Department of Juvenile Services, Department of Social Services, the Transportation Department, the Office of the State’s Attorney, the Office of the Public Defender, the Police Department, the Circuit and District Courts, the Department of Human Resources, the Social Security Administration, the Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development, the Housing Authority, the Baltimore City Health Department, and other stakeholders). The Task Force on Truancy would design, develop and start implementation of a citywide continuum of services and interventions for truant students and their families. The establishment and operation of the Task Force on Truancy would be the first step in creating once and for all an effective and comprehensive solution to the truancy crisis in Baltimore.