

WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE

**TESTIMONY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
SCHOOL OF LAW
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FOR FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND THE COURTS
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**House Bill 363
Truant Students - System of Active Intervention – Requirements
February 18, 2014**

The University of Baltimore School of Law Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) is a center of excellence within the law school and is a national leader in promoting family justice system reform. CFCC strongly supports House Bill 363, which requires schools and community agencies to create individualized attendance plans to re-engage truant students.

House Bill 363 calls for an interdisciplinary team of professionals to develop and implement an individualized reengagement plan for each truant student, which stipulates measurable goals, strategies, and service provisions. This approach mirrors that of CFCC's Truancy Court Program (TCP), an evidence-based approach that has successfully reengaged truant students using the practices laid out in House Bill 363 since 2005. The TCP capitalizes on the stature and authority of District and Circuit Court Judges, who meet with the students weekly. The TCP provides intensive mentoring, support, and attendance strategies; connects families with needed resources and services; tracks attendance and academic performance; provides accountability; and re-evaluates goals and strategies, as needed.

Truancy Is Often Caused by Individual and Community Factors That Must Be Identified and Addressed in Order to Prevent Negative Outcomes.

Children are more likely to be chronically absent when they live in poverty, face multiple family risks (e.g., single parent who has limited education, is in poor health, depends on welfare, and/or has three or more children) and experience domestic and/or community violence.¹ It is a vicious cycle: When students miss school, they often fall behind academically, sometimes permanently, which leads to further attendance issues. Students who attend school less than 70 percent of the time in ninth grade have at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out. Students with a sixth grade attendance rate below 90 percent have an on-time graduation rate of 18-26 percent.²

¹ Mariajose Romero and Young-Sun Lee, "A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades," National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University

² Robert Balfanz, "An Early Warning System," Educational Leadership, October 2007

Individualized, holistic interventions, like the TCP and that espoused in House Bill 363, are critical to ensure that students and their families have the tools and support they need to break the cycle of truancy, dropout, and poverty.

Effective Truancy Interventions Must Address the Root Causes of Truancy.

Eighteen percent of Maryland’s high school students (46,314) were chronically truant in the 2012-2013 school year, a rate that has remained relatively unchanged since 2008, despite an increased focus on truancy in many districts³. Most schools and districts, without the support of holistic programs like the TCP, do not yet have a mechanism to identify, track, and address truant students and the individualized causes that underlie truant behavior. Without an individualized, data-driven, multidisciplinary truancy intervention system, it is unlikely that truancy will decrease.

The TCP, which currently operates in seven elementary, middle, and high schools in Baltimore City and six middle schools in Montgomery County, is an early to mid-level intervention in the cycle of truancy. It works to prevent the often inevitable progression from missing a few days of school to chronic truancy by identifying the root causes of each child’s truancy, delivering the services that are critical to stabilize a child’s school attendance, and emphasizing at every opportunity the importance and power of education.

The TCP served nearly 2000 students and their families since 2005. According to the most recent data, participants overall had 60 percent fewer unexcused absences during and immediately following the student’s participation in the program. In addition, there was substantial survey data indicating that there were improvements in both classroom behavior and academic achievement among TCP participants.

The TCP capitalizes on the stature and authority of the District or Circuit Court Judge, who volunteers his/her time. The program consists of weekly in-school sessions with the volunteer judge, a CFCC Coordinator, a CFCC Mentor, a CFCC Social Worker, a University of Baltimore law student, school social workers, guidance counselors, teachers, administrators, the child, and his/her family. There are two ten-week TCP sessions per school each school year--one in the fall and one in the spring. Every week, the judge, who presides throughout the school’s TCP, reviews each child’s file (including attendance and school performance data compiled by the school), speaks privately with that child and his/her parent/caregiver about the student’s attendance, sets measurable attendance goals for the student, and discusses any possible difficulties encountered during the week. Each child is rewarded weekly with a small incentive and is invited to a “graduation” from the program upon successful completion of the TCP. After graduation, the student is monitored for the rest of the school year to ensure that any “relapse” is remedied immediately.

In order to change truant behavior from a holistic perspective, CFCC provides:

- A TCP Mentor at each school who works with the students during the TCP session, conducts phone calls each week to participating students and parents, and provides mentoring on both an individual and group basis during the school day;

³ “2013 Maryland Report Card”, Maryland State Department of Education, 1/9/2014.



- A TCP Social Worker, who works closely with families and students in need of resources and support, including intake, meetings, home visits, and regular phone conversations with families and resource providers to ensure that students and families receive the help they need;
- A TCP Volunteer Initiative which provides weekly tutoring by University of Baltimore students, faculty, and staff to truant students in Baltimore City, including 25 volunteers currently tutoring at 7 schools;
- A TCP Attorney who provides limited legal assistance to families on issues such as guardianship, special education, and access to public benefits and refers families to legal services organizations;
- Programs and services to participating students, including field trips, Family Fun Nights, attending sports events, and essay contests. CFCC also has established ancillary arts education programs, including Kids and Cameras and Kids and Theater, and is developing a sports-related program to encourage student engagement in school
- Partnerships with government, nonprofit, and private services providers in order to address the complex barriers to school attendance faced by many TCP families.

The holistic and therapeutic approach advocated by the proposed legislation and implemented by the TCP should form the foundation for effective truancy interventions.

In summary, truancy remains at epidemic levels in Maryland. Our state must create a coordinated, individualized program in order to tackle the complex factors that cause truancy. Current efforts are not leading to statewide improvement, and the model espoused in House Bill 363, like the Truancy Court Program model, has proven effective to improve school attendance.

Respectfully submitted,

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