

Day 3

Early Intervention: Addressing Emerging Truancy Problems

"There is not a simple answer to what works. Part of what needs to happen is persistent follow-up. Kids who drop out of school don't respond to the big system. They need one-on-one interaction. They need to be known."

- Mary Sinclair, evaluator for the Check and Connect program.

Kids can begin missing classes or full days of school for a number of reasons: They are afraid of bullies, they have uncontrolled asthma, they live in chaotic households, they don't get along with a particular teacher, or they are taking care of younger siblings. The list of possible reasons is as almost as lengthy as the list of students who begin to cut school. Schools, working with communities, can intervene early in these students' lives to turn around their attendance as well as their overall school experience. But it takes a concerted effort, typically headed by a school-based team that is in close contact with parents and community resources. In most cases, these interventions do not involve the court system.

Truancy Sweeps

In many school districts, truancy officers go out and try to track down students who are supposed to be in school. When they find kids who should be in school, the officers use a variety of techniques to encourage them to attend, including connecting them with services to address the reasons they are out on the street. Some jurisdictions, citing budget concerns, have cut their budgets for truancy officers. The City of Philadelphia has begun a program to pay parents to make calls on parents of truant children.

Click [here](#) for some information about a truancy sweep effort in Independence, Mo., submitted by a middle school coordinator.

Cell Phone Technology Nabs Truants

Some cities, like Boston, have tested technology to help truancy officers do their job. Boston truancy officers have been equipped with a cell phone that allows them to quickly find information on students they find who may be skipping school. When they encounter a student who is supposed to be in class, the officers can use the phone to verify the student's identity, check for outstanding warrants, and immediately notify the school or parent. The phone is linked to the district's central database. If a student gives a phony name, it will not come up on the system and the officer can ask him to try again.

In the past, truancy officers had to lug around a 1,000-page directory with information on 64,000 students. The print was so small they had to use a magnifying glass to read it. Even then, the information might be out of date and the students might not give their correct name.

Police officers are also often on the lookout for kids who should be in school. In some communities, it is another part of their job. In others, it is part of a comprehensive truancy intervention program. In one program in Rohnert Park, Calif., police issued courtesy citations to suspected truants and returned them to school to meet with their parents and vice principal. At the third citation, the police would refer the student to appropriate services. During the first year, daytime burglaries decreased 48 percent. In the second year there was an additional 16 percent decrease.

School Attendance Review Boards

Alarm clocks are one tool that school officials use in a Contra Costa County, Calif., program that is designed to intervene at the earliest sign of truancy for elementary students. After a child has just one unexcused visit, she and her family receive a home visit from a “positive attendance worker” who works with the family to create and implement a plan so that the child does not miss any more school. Sometimes the solution is as simple as providing an alarm clock. Since the program began, the school district is receiving an additional \$120,000 in funds for increasing its attendance, according to Ken Seeley, an evaluator of the program.



What Students Say About Skipping School

According to the National Center for School Engagement at the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, truant students said they did not attend school because of the following:

- ◆ Schools are too big.
- ◆ School starts too early.
- ◆ Classes are boring and topics are not relevant.
- ◆ Teachers or school staff are disrespectful and poor role models.
- ◆ No one seems to care.
- ◆ Negative peer influences.

School districts often set up a team, such as a School Attendance Review Board or

Team, to intervene early with students who are just beginning to have unexcused absences. School counselors, teachers, or attendance clerks will refer to the board students with a number of unexcused absences and tardies. In the best cases, students will come to the attention of a team after just a few absences. The multidisciplinary team includes parents, school officials, such as nurses, counselors, and teachers as well as community representatives, such as law enforcement and mental health. Once the team receives the referral, they will review the student's record and get in touch with the parent or guardian.

An example of a successful program is the School Tardiness and Attendance Review Team (START) program, which began in Cambridge, Mass., and has expanded to other towns in the Boston area. The program began in 1998 with funding through the state Executive Office of Public Safety to develop a program to examine and address the issue of truancy. Since then, 10 middle schools have launched the program. Once a student is identified, the assigned school administrator contacts the parent or guardian with a phone call or e-mail message to do the following:



- ◆ Make them aware of the situation
- ◆ Remind them of the school's policy and the general laws around attendance
- ◆ Express concern
- ◆ Introduce the START program to them as a resource

Through this first screening, the team member determines the level of involvement needed from the START team, if any. A parent or guardian may have forgotten to send a note or medical records. But the team member may also discover that a parent needs resources to help get his or her child back to school regularly. Parents are invited to take part in a START team meeting, which gives them the opportunity to explain why their children have been absent. The START team uses that information to make a plan of action, including referrals to school or community-based resources. The team reviews the case in 30 days. If attendance has not improved, the team may make a referral to the Department of Social Services or file a petition in court.

In the 2002-2003 school year, data showed that students who were exposed to the intervention had about a 50 percent decrease in the number of days absent per month and about a 40 percent decrease in the number of times they were tardy each month. Records also indicate that the START program had an impact on the overall climate in the participating schools, with a decrease of approximately 40 percent in the number of children who were chronically absent and 45 percent in the number of children who were chronically tardy (defined as having been absent or late 20 or more times).



What Students Say About How to Keep Them in School

According to the National Center for School Engagement at the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, students would stay in school if the following were true:

- ◆ More alternatives were available.
- ◆ Classes were more hands-on.
- ◆ They could get more attention and help from teachers.
- ◆ Schedules were flexible.

Providing Ongoing Monitoring and Follow-up

A vulnerable time for many children is in their transition years -- from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. Some feel the loss of close contact with the same teacher all day. Others move away from their friends. An increased emphasis on testing puts some struggling students even more behind. The changes in school and environment puts some at risk for truancy and dropping out. For these students, and any at risk of dropping out, ongoing monitoring and follow-up is critical.

Does your school provide programs and services to help ease the transition for incoming students?

Yes

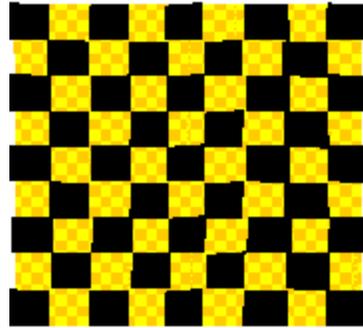
No

[Current Results](#)

[Free Web Polls](#)

A program in Minneapolis is focusing on one of those vulnerable populations -- ninth graders who have just started high school. Check and Connect is a model developed at the University of Minnesota to promote students' engagement with school, reduce dropout, and increase school completion. Students are referred when they show signs of not attending school (absences, tardies, or skipping class) in the context of

academic performance and emotional or behavioral problems.



Click [here](#) for key elements of the Check and Connect program.

The program began in 1992 focusing on students with disabilities. It has recently begun serving all students in two Minneapolis high schools with the highest dropout rates in the city, averaging around 50 percent. The program specifically focuses on students who attend 89 percent of the time or less (the school district goal is 95 percent). Funded by a private foundation, each school has five monitors to work with students and families. These monitors work to keep students and families engaged and connected with school. A hallmark of the program is that the monitors follow the students for up to two years.



The monitors become intimately involved in the lives of their students. Once they identify students, monitors meet with them and their families. They offer to work with them as a mentor and advocate. In essence, the monitors are part cheerleader, part tough coach. One of their biggest tasks is simply to be a caring adult in the student's life every school day.

"The monitors tell the students, 'I'm going to check on you every morning. If you're not in school, I'll call home.'"

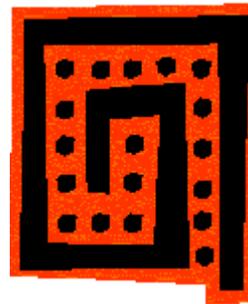
- Colleen Kaibel, dropout prevention coordinator for Minneapolis Public Schools, director of the *Check and Connect* project

Connecting Kids with Services

Students who are verging on chronic truancy often have many things going on that require outside help. Check and Connect and other programs will provide them with anger management classes, or teen parenting classes, or have them tested for undiagnosed learning disabilities. In Check and Connect, the monitors get to know the students and learn about what excites them. If they like to run or bike, the monitor will connect them with a mentoring program in which they get together with an adult for those activities. The adult also talks to them about the importance of education. The monitors find other community resources for the students as well, such as Boys and Girls Clubs and agencies that meet the needs of minority populations, like students from Cambodia and Somalia.

Click [here](#) for some information about targeting truancy interventions to minority youth.

In addition, the monitors work with the students on cognitive skill-building. More than half of the students have shown behavior problems. Monitors help students to stop for a minute and think about their actions and how those actions are hurting them. They also encourage the students to think about more constructive ways to deal with problems that arise. According to Colleen Kaibel, one of the most important parts of the program is that the monitors simply show up, day after day.



“What works is the persistency,” said Kaibel. “The amount of failure the students have already experienced prior to high school is pretty high. A lot of them have been retained. A lot of them have been significantly disengaged from school for years but never received any services.”

This project began in 2002, and evaluators are still gathering data on its impact on attendance and other factors. Other Check and Connect programs have shown positive results. The original pilot in 1992 worked with youth who had learning and emotional or behavioral disabilities from grades 7 to 9. An evaluation found that more treatment students were in school at the end of ninth grade, than similar students randomly assigned to the control group (91 percent vs. 68 percent).

“There needs to be a significant adult in the life of that child who is

providing that academic and motivational support for them to overcome obstacles. Check and Connect monitors are that significant adult who is going to keep education a salient issue for the kids, the parents, and the teachers. They are not going to let the kids slip through the cracks.”

- Mary Sinclair,
Adjunct Research Associate/
Lecturer, University of Kansas and
Check and Connect evaluator

Provide Alternative Ways for Students to Re-Engage in School

Many of these students do not do well in traditional schools. The approach is too rigid, they are not interested in the school's subjects, or they have just had too much failure or too many problems at that particular school. They don't feel like they fit in. For some of these students, an alternative program or high school may be the answer. These alternatives can come in a variety of shapes and sizes.

Seattle Seahawks School Offers Haven for Students

The Seahawks Academy in Seattle, Wash., is a small alternative school for seventh, eighth, and ninth graders who have been unsuccessful in traditional middle and high schools. The academy is a partnership among Seattle Public Schools, Communities in Schools (a national nonprofit organization that aims to keep kids in school in part by bringing health and social services into schools), the Seattle Seahawks football team, and corporate partners. The school strives to provide a safe, nurturing, and supportive learning environment for about 110 students and offers smaller class sizes, tutors, mentors, no-cost health care, and social services. Students wear uniforms and must commit to strict behavior contracts signed by the student and parents. The academy emphasizes attendance, academic achievement, and appropriate behavior. Evidence of program effectiveness includes improved test scores, fewer discipline problems, and no suspensions or expulsions for the last two school years compared with suspensions of about seven percent and expulsions of about 0.5 percent at other schools in the district.

Some students might benefit from attending vocational-technical schools where they learn a skill. Other students might do well by earning their GED. In recent years, schools for gay and lesbian youth have formed to serve students who feel shunned or uncomfortable in their home schools.

“At the high school level, what I see is that traditional school is not for every student. I want them to get education and some training so that they are not a statistic later on. As a team with the parent, student, myself, and often a court appointed truancy case manager, we find a program that fits the individual needs of each student. That could be GED, vo-tech programs -- programs where a student can see themselves successful.

- Erin Grotting, attendance liaison for Kent School District in Washington State

Click [here](#) for some elements of successful alternative schools.

Looking Ahead

Today we explored some of the many ways that schools and communities can intervene with young people engaging in truant behavior to help get them back on a positive track toward school attendance and educational success. We will go on tomorrow to examine strategies for working with students who have fallen into an extreme pattern of truant behavior, with an emphasis on legal intervention.



Click [here](#) to print today's materials in PDF format.



Discussion Questions

Please think about the questions below and share your responses, comments, and/or any questions about today's material in the [Discussion Area](#) .

- ◆ How are truant students identified at your school(s)? What does or does not work well?

- ❖ Does your school(s) collaborate with community agencies to provide services to truant students and their families? What tips can you share with fellow event participants about how to identify and work with appropriate community agencies?
- ❖ The Check and Connect model depends on dedicated staff to follow-up with truant students. Is that a viable model for your school(s)? Are there other ways to provide consistent attention to students who are missing school?
- ❖ In your community, do students who seem not to do well in traditional schools have access to alternative options (e.g., alternative schools)? If so, what are the options and how do they work? If not, why not?

This completes today's work.

Please visit the [Discussion Area](#) to share your responses to the discussion questions!

Truancy programs mentioned in Day 3 materials:

Check & Connect

<http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect/>

The START (School Tardiness and Attendance Review Team) Program

Christine Shaw, Truancy Prevention Program Coordinator, (617) 679-6555

<http://www.projectalliance.org/>

References for Day 3 materials:

Check and Connect Web site: <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect>.

Kaibel, C. (April 2004). Personal communication.

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Web site: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>.

Rumberger, R. W. (January 13, 2001). *Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done*. Paper prepared for the Conference, "Drop Outs in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know about Intervention and Prevention?" at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Office. (2000). *School attendance improvement handbook*. Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.

School dropouts: Education could play a stronger role in identifying and disseminating promising

prevention strategies. (2002). Washington, DC: United States General Accounting Office.

Sinclair, M. (April 2004). Personal communication.

The START (School Tardiness and Attendance Review Team) Program information sheet. For more information about START, please contact Christine Shaw, Truancy Prevention Program Coordinator at 617-679-6555.



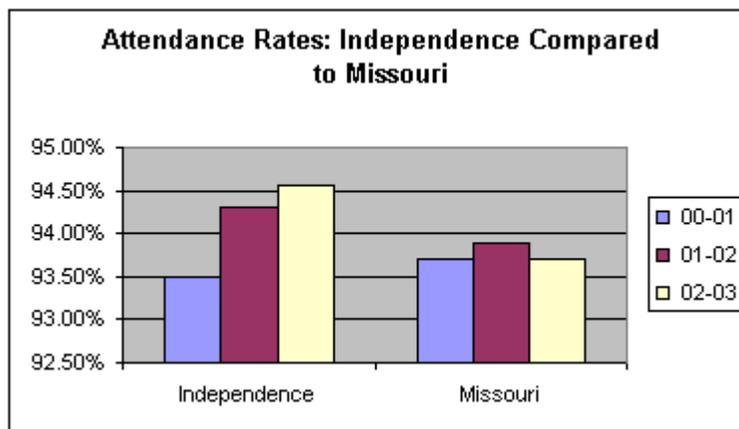
Independence Public Schools Truancy Sweep Initiative

Submitted By: Charles Vreeland, Middle School Coordinator
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Description: The Independence Truancy Initiative began four years ago as a joint effort between the school district and community-based services to respond to the risk factors that are associated with truancy.

Four times a school year (two each semester), a centralized site is set up in the community in which representatives of area community-based services are located and available for consultation with families who have truant children who are “picked up” on that particular day through a truancy sweep conducted by school social workers along with SRO officers. High-absentee students are identified before the truancy sweep day, and those absent from school on the sweep day are brought to the centralized site and their parents are contacted. The student and parent both go through an intake process conducted by a trained social worker, and appropriate referrals are made to available community-based agencies on site. The services regularly available to families include but are not limited to health services, mental health counseling services, Department of Family Services, Drug treatment services, family mediation services, truancy court judge, and homeless services. The initial contact on this day paves the way for setting up ongoing services as needed, and follow-up can then be communicated to truancy court and other needs.

Outcomes: The bottom-line is that the district attendance rate has shown an increase from an attendance rate that was lower than the State of Missouri's, to a current district-wide rate of 95 percent (a significant increase over Missouri's, which has maintained a flat rate). Other benefits are an increase in the use of community-based services by the families who need them most and increased collaborative working relationships among the community agencies and school district.



Challenges: Not all at-risk students are absent on the day of the sweep. While

they still receive services either through the school social worker or SRO and through truancy court, they do not get the added motivation provided by the truancy sweep to come to terms with their attendance problems.

However, the experience of the district has been that as time progresses, many families have made the positive turn-around in attendance patterns. This has resulted in at-risk lists becoming shorter, but those families that remain at risk have a whole host of problems taking place in the home environment. Most of the students who are now identified as at risk of truancy are from home environments in which there is drug abuse by one or more family member, mental health issues, or other child abuse and neglect issues. At the beginning of the project the families involved were from a wide spectrum of truancy-related issues; many were easily changed through increased parenting skills, or just awareness of the seriousness of the problem. Now the families have multiple serious problems that require more intense involvement from all resources in the community. The Truancy Initiative has increased our accessibility to these families in their home environments and provided a motivation for change.

A final challenge has been sustainability. Funding for taking care of the needs of the Truancy Initiative has been a testament to the collaborative efforts of many resources. There has not been just one funding mechanism to consistently meet this need. Rather, the experience has been one community partner stepping up to the plate one time and another agency helping out the next. While this has caused much last-minute stress and networking, it has also met the needs of the initiative up to this point. A second sustainability issue is changing priorities of district and/or other agencies (i.e., Police Department). A decline in resources has caused priority changes with the Police Department resulting in fewer personnel assigned to the initiative. The district, seeing attendance problems decrease, has focused on other pressing issues (state testing, safety, etc.), and this has the potential of reducing support for the program over the long term.

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Key Features of the Check and Connect Model

The Check and Connect model uses a comprehensive approach toward promoting students' engagement with schools. Key features of the model are interrelated and include the following:

-  **Relationship Building:** mutual trust and open communication, nurtured through long-term commitment that is focused on students' educational success.
-  **Routine Monitoring of Alterable Indications:** systematically checking warning signs of withdrawal (attendance, academic performance, behavior) that are readily available to school personnel and that can be altered through intervention.
-  **Individualized and Timely Intervention:** support that is tailored to individual student needs, based on level of engagement with school, associated influences of home and school, and the leveraging of local resources.
-  **Long-Term Commitment:** committing to students and families for at least two years, including the ability to follow highly mobile youth from school to school and program to program.
-  **Persistent Plus:** refers to a persistent source of academic motivation, a continuity of familiarity with the youth and family, and a consistency in the message that “education is important for your future.”
-  **Problem-Solving:** designed to promote the acquisition of skills to resolve conflict constructively and to look for solutions rather than a source of blame.
-  **Affiliation with School and Learning:** facilitating students' access to and active participation in school-related events and activities.

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From:

Check and Connect Web site: <http://ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect>.

Targeting Truancy Interventions to Minority Youth

Minorities such as African Americans and Latinos are at particular risk for truancy and dropping out. Several programs in recent years have targeted them in an attempt to reduce truancy and dropout. According to Russell Rumberger, a professor of education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, one program showed promise but also points to the pitfalls of a program that is dependent solely on outside funding.

The Achievement for Latinos Through Academic Success (ALAS) program was developed as a pilot drop-out prevention program to serve the most at-risk students in a poor, predominantly Latino middle school in the Los Angeles area from 1990 to 1995. Selected students participated in the program for all three of their middle-school years. Among the interventions were: (1) remediation of the student's problem-solving skills; (2) personal recognition and bonding activities; (3) intensive attendance monitoring; (4) frequent teacher feedback to students; (5) direct instruction and modeling for parents; and (6) integration of school and home needs with community services.

The evaluation found promising results. By the end of ninth grade, the students in the comparison group who did not receive the intervention had twice the number of failed classes, were four times more likely to have excessive absences, and were twice as likely to be seriously behind in high school graduation credits as the students who participated in ALAS. However, the dramatic effects were not sustained. By the end of twelfth grade, just 32 percent of the ALAS participants and 27 percent of the comparison students had completed high school. According to Rumberger, these findings suggest that drop-out prevention at the secondary level needs to be ongoing and continue through a student's school years.

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Reference:

Rumberger, R. W. (January 13, 2001). *Why Students Drop Out of School and What Can Be Done*. Paper prepared for the Conference, "Drop Outs in America: How Severe is the Problem? What Do We Know about Intervention and Prevention?" at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Elements of Successful Alternative Schools

According to the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, the following are some of the key elements of successful alternative schools:

- ◆ A maximum teacher to student ratio of 1:10
- ◆ A small student base not exceeding 250 students
- ◆ A clearly stated mission and discipline code
- ◆ Caring faculty with continual staff development
- ◆ A learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style
- ◆ A total commitment to have each student be a success

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National Dropout Prevention Center/Network Web site: <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>.