

DATA BRIEF: Truancy Prevention Programs in Allegheny County

Truancy and chronic absenteeism are negatively correlated with school success, graduation and college attendance/completion. In recognition of the negative impact of truancy on future outcomes for youth, school districts and youth-serving organizations are increasing their focus on school attendance and ways to remove barriers to reducing the number of school days missed. The Department of Human Services conducted a number of activities to identify the effectiveness of truancy prevention programs in Allegheny County and to gather information about ways in which truancy prevention and intervention efforts could be improved.

Referrals to truancy prevention programs are made by the student's school (based on a number of unexcused absences) or by a child welfare caseworker (following a referral by the school, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit or a Magisterial District Judge). Referrals to truancy prevention programs are typically made at a relatively early stage of truancy (five to 10 unexcused absences); more serious cases of truancy may end up being heard by a Magisterial District Judge and can result in punishments ranging from a fine to a jail sentence for the parent or assignment to an alternative school program for the student. When child welfare is involved, the intervention can range from in-home services and truancy counseling to, in the most serious cases, filing of a dependency petition. Approximately 90 percent of the students participating in the two truancy prevention programs described below were referred by a child welfare caseworker; the other 10 percent were referred by a community organization, a school or an individual.

Data were analyzed about services provided and outcomes achieved by two Allegheny County truancy prevention program providers serving more than 400 students from July 2011 through January 2013. Interviews were then held with school counselors and social workers, Magisterial District Judges, child welfare caseworkers, and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's Truancy Prevention Program to identify causes of truancy and offer recommendations to increase the effectiveness of truancy prevention and intervention strategies.

DATA ANALYSIS

Demographic Information

A total of 419 students were served, divided almost equally between the two providers: 49 percent were female and 51 percent were male. The average age of the students was 14; 76 percent were teenagers ages 13 through 19. While there were some differences in racial breakdown by provider, the average percentages were 43 percent African American, 40 percent white and 17 percent other race.

Human Services Involvement

Approximately 58 percent of the students were receiving financial assistance (public welfare); 40 percent were involved in mental health services; 10 percent were receiving services for substance abuse issues; eight percent had prior involvement with a family support center; and eight percent were residing in public housing.

Service Delivery and Outcomes

Analysis of units/hours of service, cost per client and timing of first contact showed significant differences between the two providers on all measures. Provider A worked with students for an average of 85 hours, compared to 54 hours by Provider B. No direct contacts were documented for 25 percent of Provider B's students. However, the average time between referral and first contact (direct or indirect) was only five days for Provider B, compared to 35 days for Provider A.

On average, 27 percent of the students improved attendance pre-involvement to involvement (32 percent served by Provider A as compared to 22 percent served by Provider B). During the 2011–2012 school year, students participating in truancy intervention services on average missed fewer days post-intervention (six days) than pre-intervention (eight days). However, these improvements do not appear to be long-lasting, with these students missing an average of 21 days in the first half of the 2012–2013 school year. There were no significant differences between providers in average change in days missed.

Twelve percent of the students served (49) were re-referred to the program from July 2011 through January 2013 (16 percent of Provider A's students and eight percent of Provider B's).

INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with judges, school counselors/social workers, child welfare staff and staff from the Allegheny County Intermediate Unit's Truancy Prevention Program to gain insight into their perceptions of the issues and challenges faced in preventing truancy and excessive absenteeism. Responses were categorized into challenges facing the caregiver, the child and the family. Primary challenges faced by caregivers included mental health, medical and substance abuse issues, exacerbated by resistance to seeking or accepting help. The children faced challenges ranging from anxiety and hygiene issues to gangs and school

bullying, to responsibilities at home for younger siblings and other family members. Family challenges included transportation, lack of engagement on the part of parents, and economic challenges, such as unstable housing or lack of funds for appropriate school clothing.

In addition, an interview was conducted with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's Truancy Prevention Project (TPP). The project serves approximately 300 students each year, ages 14 and under. Students are referred to TPP when they have had at least five unexcused absences and the school, having exhausted its own internal truancy intervention resources, has filed with the Magisterial District Court. TPP is a coalition of local school districts, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Allegheny County Juvenile Court and Allegheny County's child welfare office.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When asked about ways in which they could more effectively address the issue of truancy, school counselors and social workers were unanimous in discussing the need for additional resources to allow them to: 1) employ someone in the school dedicated to attendance; 2) make more home visits; 3) provide incentives for good attendance; and 4) provide in-school services to students and their families. They also identified the need for better access to community resources and to engage child welfare at an earlier stage, as did the Magisterial District Judges and the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. In fact, the Allegheny Intermediate Unit recommended that a child welfare caseworker be assigned to TPP.

Magisterial District Judges recommended more consistency on the part of schools, so that the schools would file a complaint with the court for every student reaching a certain number of unexcused absences. They also requested that schools file earlier, so that there is time for intervention during the course of the school year. They recommended better communication regarding the outcomes of their cases and indicated that they would be more effective if they were able to link families to community resources. When asked about the effectiveness of the interventions employed by the judges, school counselors and social workers reported that more consistency and better follow-up communication could improve outcomes. Both the judges and the school representatives agreed that judges need better information about each case in order to tailor consequences to the family's particular circumstances.