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# **The Story Behind the Numbers: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Houston TX Truancy Reduction Demonstration Program**

**National Center for School Engagement**

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## **Introduction**

The Gulfton Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project in Houston, TX, uses two primary methods of reducing truancy. The first is a case management model in which students and families are assigned to a case manager in an effort to identify and address unmet needs that may be impacting school attendance. The case manager attempts to establish a network of community resources to serve families in a variety of areas. Based upon a family's particular needs, the case manager makes referrals to the appropriate community service agencies. These agencies provide to families of truant youth services such as temporary shelter, food, clothing and physical or mental health assistance.

The case management model is used in conjunction with a second method, commonly known as "Knock and Talk," in which police officers make visits to the homes of students with identified truancy patterns. Officers may issue tickets to the students and/or parents indicating that the student is in violation of state law for mandatory school attendance. Officers attempt to connect with families and engage them in conversation about the kinds of behaviors that lead to truancy and the importance of school attendance. Additionally, the officers attempt to build relationships with the student and families that extend beyond the formal home visit. Officers also make referrals to community agencies or to the case manager if they detect a particular need that may be impacting school attendance.

In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of these two methods, focus groups were held with three groups of people: high school and program staff (including police officers), the students receiving the services, and parents of those students. Topics discussed included the experiences with the programs, perceptions of program

effectiveness, and opinions about what worked well and what could be improved. People involved with both the case management and the “Knock and Talk” interventions were included in the focus groups. This paper presents a summary of the findings from those data collection processes.

### **Program History**

According to program staff, the Gulfton Truancy Reduction Project came about as a result of “Weed and Seed” monies. A grant from the U.S. Department of Justice in connection with the Mayor’s Anti-Gang Office, provided funding for program staff to be innovative in their approach to truancy. Part of the grant provided for incorporating a law enforcement aspect into the truancy program, to be operated out of “storefront” buildings in the community, so as to give closer proximity and facilitate a greater sense of community belonging among the officers hired to implement the Knock and Talk process. Additionally, the funding was awarded based on local need and where it might make the most sense given existing efforts and programs.

### **Neighborhood Demographics**

The Gulfton area targeted by the truancy project is primarily Hispanic. The population is known by the truancy project staff to be highly transient, with new families moving into the area on a daily basis. Many of the families come from Mexico as well as some Central and South American countries and most of the families are low-income. Demographic data indicate that the median family income in Gulfton is \$18,733, which is 30% below Houston’s median income. According to the 2000 Census, the Gulfton population is 45,106 of which 13,694 residents are aged 17 or under. Social service agencies and government officials working in Gulfton, however, estimate the true

population to be closer to 60,000, of which more than 20,000 are juveniles, representing the highest population density of any Houston community.

Staff members describe the neighborhood as an apartment community where extended families, or more than one nuclear family, often live in one- or two-bedroom apartments. While most are single parent families, there are many two-parent households as well. In many apartments, it is “not uncommon to find six or more people in that apartment trying to make ends meet, share the bills, share the rent, share the food so you got a lot of people crammed in one little area just trying to survive.”

Officers report there are many single-parent households in which the father is not present.

We see a lot of single family households where the dad just left. Either he’s gone back to Mexico, been deported or arrested or just left mom and went to live with somebody else. So we wind up seeing a lot of single moms out there raising families. And of course, if she’s got a fifteen or sixteen year old boy who’s a gang banger, then she’s going to have problems, you know.

### **Focus Groups and Interviews**

In addressing the effectiveness of the Houston intervention strategies, interviews and focus groups were conducted with program staff (including police officers), students who received some type of intervention, and parents of students who received interventions. During this data collection process, a myriad of themes emerged in relation to how programs run, and the opinions of those receiving services from the program. The themes discussed below are of particular significance as program staff consider next steps in service delivery.

## **Theme # 1: Attendance**

Many issues impact a student's attendance in school, and each interview and focus group discussed reasons for truancy. Different students have different reasons for missing school, and often a confluence of factors results in days missed. Comments naturally fell into several categories, broken out below. They are: economic and cultural explanations; community influences; and relationships between students and parents, students or parents and school personnel, and students and their peers.

### ***Economic/Cultural Influences on School Attendance***

Several comments illustrate how the economic challenges faced by low-income families and a cultural background in which a high school diploma is not essential combine to pressure teens to work rather than attend school -- eventually resulting in habitual truancy. As the case manager put it, "...what if they want to come to school and the parents are saying you know what, I need you to help me. And I don't know what to do. You know, I'm trying to work and I can't afford daycare and if it's between daycare and eating and buying clothes, what do I do?" A police officer commented that "... we find that it's a big cultural difference because a boy at the age of 15 that lives at home with dad, he wants to put that boy to work." A principal talked about the stresses that students face and how hard it is for schools to help.

You know social intervention factors that technically the school is limited in how we can deal with those factors. You know, we deal with student academics and success in the classroom, student success in the building, that kind of thing. However, those students who have truancy issues have baggage that many people aren't familiar with. And I say baggage, stuff that's happening in their communities, environment, and home a lot of issues there. Until we resolve that issue, the child can't come to the school or to any school with their minds free of that burden. And what happens is if the child does? He's struggling with that in the classroom. It just spirals down, success rates, to the point the child sees no alternative. Again, he's looking at his situation. "Okay, 17 years old, I'm 18

years old, I'm probably better off getting a job right now, why is this important? I'm failing half my classes.

A Hispanic program staff member feels that a culturally ingrained reticence to seek help sometimes impedes the resolution of problems. "You know this culture is about, you know, what happens in the house, stays in the house. You don't put it out there in front of folks, and the mentality of going to try to get help is one that it's not very sought after in this culture, this community. It's, you know, handle it, you're a man handle it, you're a woman you handle it, there's no don't be going ask for help and don't be telling your business and that kind of stuff." Immigrant status sometimes interferes with school attendance as well. Parents in the Spanish focus group reported that they sometimes needed to take their families home to Mexico to take care of family matters there, and their trips do not always coincide with school vacations.

Language barriers, when they exist, complicate all these issues and put children who speak better English than their parents in a position of power. A Knock and Talk officer explained that "we're finding that the older parents are only Spanish speakers. The children are more bilingual. And unless the children convey to the parents, well, we got to go to school, we go to school this amount of days, we're off this amount of days, that's all the parents know, exactly what the student tells them."

The officers also report that different expectations surrounding dating and teen pregnancy can result in situations in which parents have less influence on their daughters, particularly regarding school attendance.

Another difference as far as cultures is that, people who come from South America is that, it's common for their daughters to become involved with older guys, older men...and we've had mothers come in to this office and file a missing persons report on their daughter when it was the report was completely false. The problem was that she's getting heat from the school truancy officer from us, saying hey, your child needs to be in school or we're going to write you a ticket.

So what happened was she already condoned her daughter, who's 12, 13, 14, 15 years old to go live with a guy that's 22 or 23, as husband and wife.

A lot of times what I've run into is that the daughter became pregnant and it was kind of dishonorable to the father so the father and mother actually take the daughter to the boy's house, or man's house and she would live with that family. A lot of times regarding truancy, she's actually living with her boyfriend's family...

One parent viewed such a relationship from a different light, however, and said she had never condoned her daughter's move or truancy. "She was gone for eight days to live with her boyfriend and after eight days, her boyfriend brought her home. He didn't want her anymore."

### *Community Influences on School Attendance*

In addition to poverty and extreme population density, the Gulfton neighborhood is beset by gang activity. Gangs actively recruit high school and middle school students most of whose parents work long hours and are unaware of their children's activities. According to the officers, it is not uncommon for a single parent to work "two and even three jobs," leaving teenaged males to become targets of gang recruitment.

You know the parents, I would like to say that almost 90% if not higher were single, single parent families. She'll work a minimum of one job, most of the time it's two jobs or up to three jobs. She'll be at the house maybe five to six hours. She might get in at 11:00 or 12:00 at night and she's up and gone by 6:00 AM. Like, I just see, mostly siblings from the house, if we've got, if they've got a fifteen-year-old kids that's giving her problems, ... she's going to go 'I can't worry about him, I've got five other kids to worry about.' And he is basically going to be out on his own.

A program staff member from the Mayor's anti-gang office explained that truancy is an early warning sign of possible gang involvement.

They're missing school, behavioral issues, their grades start to drop.... Are they representing the colors, are they getting small tattoos on their hands and are their friends doing them, are they now getting caught with graffiti on their books, on their homework, are they turning in their homework with all graffiti writing? Are they

getting caught on campus doing graffiti or any other gang related activity? So at an early age, you can really, really tell but the truancy is probably a big indication from the get go.

A Knock and Talk officer explained the ease of recruitment when parents are so often at work. “So, these kids, if they don’t have education to come in the back way and push them, then they have the Cholos and it’s sad because they say that’s where I get my love from and that’s their family.”

Violence, whether gang related or not, affects families’ ability to keep school at the forefront of their daily lives. The same staff member explained that “you have people who don’t use banks, they don’t trust here, so they walk around with their money, so they become, a lot of them become victims of crime...” There are “...home invasions, drive by’s, you have an area where families are having to deal with a lot of violence sometimes in those areas, lot of drug selling, crack, cocaine, marijuana, inhalants...”

### ***Relationships***

#### **Parent/Child**

Parents report that relationships within the family and the children’s willingness to listen to their parents about the importance of attending school are paramount. Many of the parents in the focus groups describe their own surprise and disappointment at the fact that their children are not in school. They claim to have emphasized to their children, without effect, the importance of school and its positive outcomes. Sadness and frustration was evident from the parent who said “I’ve done everything for them; I just don’t know what else to do for them. You know, I take them and I pick them up. You know, they can get there and they can skip class, they may not go to class and I don’t know what else to do,” and another who said “I have brought my children and left them off at the back entrance and then left and I don’t know where they went. They go into the



school but I don't know if they left by another door.” Knock and Talk officers reported their view that parents are often not to blame for their children's truancy. They described the typical mother of a truant as working hard to “do the best that she can do” given her circumstances.

“She's gone early in the morning and she comes home later in the afternoon or late at night so she's never notified that there's a problem with that student's attendance. I mean like I said earlier, there's been countless times I've gone over there where it's the mom taking care of [a large family], and a lot of times we see that she's doing a real good job. She's got, I mean she's working her butt off. She's got a clean apartment; she's got the kids dressed well. She means well, she has good intentions, we can tell that she really cares about the kids but she has no knowledge whatsoever that that child is skipping classes. For 35, 45, 50 days. It's unbelievable.”

Parents also expressed a desire for help in reinforcing their messages about the importance of school. “I think that if another person talks to them like a counselor will tell them because they need that. Because I'm tired of talking to them. I talk to them and tell them what is going to happen to them and all that but...”

A principal, however, said that sometimes parents are complicit, particularly in order to avoid getting in trouble with the law.

There is a group of kids who just tell their parents they aren't going to school, [and the parents write] excuses. My child was sick, he wasn't feeling well and the kid is like ‘Thank you Mom. You're great, I'm covered.’ So the siblings in that family are aware of this, they are modeling the behavior – it's going to be perpetuated for several years. The kid will end up dropping out. High truancy is a major cause of dropouts.

### *Student-Teacher Relationships*

Research shows that a student's relationships with adults in the school are among the most critical factors affecting school attendance. Most often those relationships are

formed with classroom teachers, but can also be with other adults. The students in the focus groups do not report having the kind of positive relationships that enhance school attendance. Primarily they complained about teachers, saying things like “School is boring!,” “Change the teachers!,” “I don’t like my teachers,” and “Teachers talk too much.” One said that “once a teacher pulled my ear – my parents forced the school to change my class.”

A parent echoed this sentiment when she said “nowadays, the children don’t want to go to school because of the teachers. They have to see the kid’s side too.” Another parent noted:

The teachers have to win over the children. Try to be their friend. So do we. Get their attention so they will want to go to school. Because if they treat them badly, they will be in the streets, and I think they shouldn’t expel them because they’ll push them out in the streets more ....

Another parent agreed. “Well, the only thing I think is that if they want to study they will study because they want to and are interested. But if they are treated badly...no matter how good a person is the child is going to rebel. So treat them better.” Parents also complained about the level of supervision in the classrooms themselves. “I think we have to do more to supervise the school and classrooms because my daughter has left the classes and no one knew she had left.”

One of the principals also acknowledged that problems with teachers are sometimes at the root of truancy:

There is a huge dynamic at work. There is no one single cause of why kids miss school, why they come to class. I know there are situations where a kid and a teacher don’t get along. The teacher may suggest to the child that they don’t have a prayer in that class, so the rationale for the child now is ‘Why should I go to that class. The teacher has already told me I am not going to make it in this class.’ There are those things you have to deal with. And maybe it is not a good match, so we’ll try to change the kids out of there.

The teacher-student relationships are a huge factor as well. ... It's about governance, classroom management...it's about how students are motivated in the context of what's being taught. There are a lot of factors. 'This class is important, this teacher is important. Maybe not, maybe not for me. Maybe the teacher is important for them, but not for me, Adios.'

### Parents-Law Enforcement Relationships

While parents were able to acknowledge their own difficulty in managing their children, they were also disappointed with the efforts of law enforcement. A Knock and Talk officer recognized that frustration when he described an interaction with a parent. "You know, ma'am, that your son isn't going to school.' [The parent replies], 'I said I was tired of telling them, and the judges, to do something for him. If you can't do anything, what can I do? I can't beat him or not feed him!'"

Many parents wanted law enforcement to be tougher with their children. Wishing for more serious police reaction, one complained that "They said they have to do something wrong so they can arrest them. I guess they have to wait until they kill someone or rob someone before they can arrest them." Several expressed wishes that the community or legal system would levy harsher penalties with more expediency, saying things like "I think we need more boot camps" and "maybe they need to be taken away."

### Students and Peers

Both parents and the case manager cited peer relationships as instrumental in a student's decision to attend or avoid school. Truant friends may *pull* a child away from school, as evidenced by a parent who said "It's because of the friends he's been associating with more or less." On the other hand, the case manager reported that bullies may *push* a child out. "... [I]f the student doesn't feel accepted at the school by their

peers, they're not going to come to school. If they're being bullied and being picked on, they're not going to want to come to school." She continued,

In this particular area, it can also make or break the student. Being accepted is one of the primary issues at school. Being seen as an individual and somebody you want to be around. Having friends really determines your worth to respect you at school because there are so many students. And with the gang issue, they want to be part of something.

## **Theme #2: School Engagement**

Research shows that for some students, failure to identify with school, feeling that they do not belong in school, or thinking that school is unimportant leads to disengagement from school (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Voelkl, 1997). When students have positive experiences at school, they feel more connected and valued. The principal recognized the importance of school engagement as a truancy prevention strategy when he said "We...try and create better connections between students and adults, and students and families. So that we catch kids earlier and that way we can establish relationships that we can then draw on to hold onto kids so that we don't have this mess in the first place."

Once truancy has become a pattern, it is more difficult to create a feeling of engagement. A program staff member talked about truant students' perceptions of how school staff members dislike them, and how those feelings reinforce truant behavior.

...the kids that are truant, there isn't very much either respect or confidence or trust in the school personnel that you already have there, because obviously if they're in trouble, then everybody's on them and you know the kids get this in their head, you know you hate me, you don't like me, you don't respect me, so why am I even gonna come back and talk to you?

Another staff member talked about the importance of listening to students as a means of recreating a sense of trust.

They just want to know that somebody is paying attention. Whether it's positive or negative attention, you know, they just want to know that somebody is there and somebody gives a damn... And also listening. Are you going to listen to them or are you going just sit there and sort of say what you think they need to hear?

The case manager works to improve school engagement by trying “to encourage the students to be a part of at least one program. Whether it's a youth program or an extra curricular activity, Spanish Club, whether it's a mentoring program or whether they do sports, art...and get involved in the arts...something as an outlet.”

### **Theme #3: Community Resources**

Both program staff and families made it clear that efforts to connect families with community resources are very much needed. Community agencies have been used in a variety of ways with an emphasis on making families more knowledgeable about available resources and how to navigate the systems. “I mean you got kids that you know are having unprotected sex out there, and getting them to a health clinic can be, you know, it can be helpful for them because they've never heard that information, HIV, STD's, counseling components.” Even the police officers have gotten involved in the referral process, saying:

We're also offering referrals so we can get these kids to get help with their grades, tutoring, or if they need mental health counseling you know. This referral sheet that we give them, we let them know that hey, it's you know, it's free, it's there. But you've got to call and you've got to get the help.

One of the community program options is called the Family Initiative, which offers in-home health services concerning parenting and pregnancy issues.

[The] Family Initiative, they provide at-home services, for ... pregnant students, from prenatal all the way to three months old. And the services last from three to five years. So they go into the home on a weekly basis to prevent the underlying effect of child abuse or neglect. So, if the parents need counseling, like if they need to know how to feed their child, how to react in a specific way to their child – their child is crying, crying, crying, rather than hitting them, they need to

understand. They basically teach them the basics on how to be a parent and it may involve the parent and the father as well, and not just the student but for the family.

Other services that staff mentioned include English classes, GED classes, mental health services, and help filling out applications for jobs, food assistance programs and transportation assistance programs.

#### **Theme # 4: Effectiveness of Case Management**

Comments from the parents and students reflect an overall sense of satisfaction with the services they received from the case manager. Parents of Lee High School students view the case manager as supportive, respectful and caring about the students she serves. One said "...she was friendly and supportive and she showed concern and affection toward the students". Another said "I have come to talk with her many times. I wanted to. Every time I have looked for her is so that she can help with my daughter". Parents in the Spanish focus group said they appreciated the referrals she made and that she mentored students and encouraged them to come to school. When parents were asked whether working with the case manager affected their child's school attendance, one replied, "Yes, attendance and attitude improved".

Students also reported having a positive relationship with the case manager. One said "She seems like a big sister to me because you can tell her anything that happens at home."

#### **Theme # 4: Effectiveness of Police Knock and Talks**

Parents' busy work schedules made it difficult for officers to have face-to-face interactions with them, and for financial reasons many families lack a telephone. To offset these problems, the Knock and Talk officers generally made house calls at 6:00 AM in order to maximize their chances of contacting parents before they leave for work.

Police officers selected for “Knock and Talks” worked out of a “store front,” designed to make residents think of them as community members. They felt they have deeper relationships with people in the neighborhood than are typical of most police officers.

We probably had more expertise in going and talking to people, what have you. And we take this personally. We’ve become real close to a lot of the business owners, the apartment managers. Everybody that lives in this community, we’ve become closer. Normally when we have a police call, say for instance if you want to make a report, you call the police out, he comes out, he takes your information, he gives it to you. You never see him again.... People call us and we have to take care of the problems. Then we usually wind up coming back and making contact over and over and over and making sure that that problem is taken care of.

Police officers who participate in the Knock and Talks described the ability to develop relationships with truant students and their families as well. They noted that the personal nature of the program allows them to have conversations they might otherwise not have with these families. They reported being glad to be able to say things like “We’re not here to make money for the city of Houston, we’re here to get you in school.” “We can help you regardless of if you belong here or you don’t. All the laws also still provide for you guys...now we’re seeing more transition with people who actually come and get help.” Sometimes the conversations police had with the students revealed the root of the problem. “Some, they’re pregnant in school and we’re not aware. We have to tell them hey, you know, we ask, we get personal and ask are you pregnant and they’re like ‘Yes’.”

The officers have compassion for the parents and are conscious of the need to maintain a balance between a punitive and a supportive approach. They try to remain somewhat distant and firm in their need to carry out their duties and deliver tickets or

penalties. However, they also report seeking personal contacts that allow them to establish better working relationships with families.

The difference between the officers' perception of their role and manner during the Knock and Talk visits, and the students' perceptions of the interactions was notably large, however. Students in the Spanish focus group reported that the police asked a lot of questions and did not seem interested in hearing what they and their parents had to say. Another said his mother cried because she wants what is best for him, and the police are an indicator that he is not doing well. Several reported that the first reaction among undocumented parents at seeing a police officer at the door is fear of deportation. Not surprisingly, most parents were not happy about the fines they had to pay.

Despite reports of less than enthusiastic parental assessments of the police visits, parents generally agreed that their children's attendance improved after the visit. One said her daughter "... has gotten better since they gave her a ticket and court."

The officers also felt that the information available to them due to the program is an asset.

These records that we get, they're great tools to work with. Like this one right here, he's passing everything...but he's not passing world geography, so I would automatically talk to him about this world geography class and see why this grade is so low...do you need tutoring...Tell me because I'm here to help you.

It gives us a real, local, personal contact with these kids, once we know their whole discipline record. You know you might be joking like why were you fighting in school? "What do you mean I was fighting in school?" It's right here, it's right here, you were fighting in school. And the kid is like, "Oh man!"

## **Theme # 6: Program Challenges and Barriers**

Interviews with program staff and school staff revealed that the most significant program barriers are related to the ability to attract and keep staff. Not surprisingly, lack of funding was viewed as a major barrier to adequate staffing. A principal said "... we



need more money, because we need more people. I don't need money, I need people. If you could get them to work for free, that would work too."

Turnover has been a problem, particularly in the case manager position. A program staff member said,

... it's really been difficult because we've had turn over in the project coordinator. Had we had the same person, you know what I mean, we'd be way ahead, we're ahead of the game now but we'd be so much more ahead. And the turnover issue, you know, I don't know if you guys know about that, you know the first person left because she wanted to have a family. And the second person left because she had, she got a better job opportunity and who are we to sort of stand in her way.

Additionally, finding police officers who were willing to work with families and be patient with them was difficult. The program calls for officers to play a non-traditional role, of which they were initially skeptical. One officer said, "You had to show me that this is going to work. But, as it has progressed, we have seen the benefits of the kids staying in school."

One of the major day-to-day challenges faced by the case manager has been getting correct contact information about a student. When asked about barriers, she replied,

... the student profile, their addresses, where do they live, what are their phone numbers and how do you get a hold of them? Actually going out there and getting a hold of the student, if there homeless. Probably one of the most complicated barriers is that by the time you get the correct address, you get the run around and by the time you get to the students, they have maybe, ...six absences.

Another, related, challenge has been making contact with the parents, and the need to make repeated calls in order to talk with a parent.

The case manager was also asked where, if anywhere, gaps in program services exist. She replied that after referring a family to an outside agency for assistance,

knowing how much help to give the family in contacting that agency is difficult, and can sometimes lead to a gap in services.

The gaps in services is actually, I think the gaps in services is doing the follow up. ... [Y]ou can give the student and parent referrals because you don't want to make them codependent. You really want to say, 'here is your list of services, call this one, call this one, which you may need.' And sometimes you may have to hold their hand. And sometimes I may call the providers for them. But it's just, just encouraging the parent or the student to take initiative and call the services. And then maybe the gaps are in following up with that.

### **Theme # 7: Successes**

Many of the successes of the Gulfton project have been intangible. Attendance data showed that police involvement had some immediate impact, particularly during the days just following the visits. However, without follow-up contact from the case manager, the police visits alone were insufficient to create lasting changes in school attendance. Barriers to attendance must be removed, and the students' attitudes about school need to change in order to achieve a long-lasting improvement.

Several aspects of the program helped improve the experiences of students in school. The personal interactions that the police officers and case manager had with the students often help identify inappropriate class placements. A program staff member offered this assessment.

Being able to identify if a person can read or not can determine whether you can find out whether the kid is in the wrong track. He may be in regular classes, when he really needs to be in ESL or maybe he's in regular classes and really needs to be in special ed. and nobody caught it, because I've seen that happen.

Students, parents and staff alike reported that students viewed the case manager as accessible and non-threatening. They felt comfortable confiding in her and trusted that she cared about them. A staff member described the effect of the case manager's presence as follows.

...and having a person that they can go to, I think that's one of the biggest things that I've noticed about that particular program...the kids knew that they could go to somebody else that they could talk to that was on campus, it was not school, you know it's a different person, it's an outside agency.

Of her relationship with Susana, one student said, "She used to get on my case a lot about not dropping out of school. It didn't feel good, but it kept me in school." Another said, "She seems like a big sister to me..." These relationships sometimes extend to parents as well. One student commented that "Susana contacts my family, the program has become a family thing."

A program staff officer with the Gang Violence Reduction Team said that the case management component of the program is the most effective.

Because even if you don't have the cops there, she could still go and hustle her own kids. And she could bring them into the program doing outreach. She [could] just find out who they are, and try to locate them, obviously it would be lot for her. And she'd have to go on her skills quite a bit, but obviously I think the case management piece is the most important. Because without that you can't educate, you can't give them services, you can't even find out what the heck's going on.

### **Theme # 8: Recommendations for Program Improvements**

The parents, students, and staff of the truancy reduction program had several ideas about how to make the program more effective for the students. Some have to do with tighter discipline, some with ways to make school more appealing to students, and still others with system operation, such as communication.

Many of the suggestions made by parents were harsh and reflective of the sense of helplessness many of them feel. They wanted relief from the host of problems they perceived their children caused for themselves and their families. One parent said "I think [the case manager] could find a place to lock them up for awhile so they'll know that there is some punishment for them." Another said "Put them in one of those schools

until they have good qualifications and good behavior, then they can let them go. And their parents wouldn't go see them. That's what they have to do."

An intense conversation took place about a "hospital" where parents can take their children to be treated for their behavior, with several parents instructing another parent to take her daughter to this "hospital" which they identified as a place for "...people who behave badly; alcoholics, druggies and all that". Again, the sense of anguish and desperation about how to help their children is apparent in this conversation.

Nonetheless, parents also talked about the need to make school more appealing to students. One said, "I think there should be more programs, more reports so that they will encourage them to come. Things that will catch their attention". Another pointed out the need for earlier and more consistent communication between the school and parents.

Some students had some quite different suggestions for improving their school experience including "do not hold back students a year for failing a class," and "have less classes. Now we have eight and we could have four so that classes last longer. Attendance and learning would improve. If you fall behind you could still catch up." Some comments conflicted with one another, however. For example, one student said "change the time so that school starts later," but another said "have earlier dismissals." Students also wished the community would provide more jobs for young people.

A program officer pointed out the need to work more effectively with the juvenile justice system to create more effective follow-up interventions for recidivists. She said that "what we have in place is good, it's better than nothing, and I think if we continue to

build or tweak it through the criminal justice [system] a little more – I think a little more, better relapse services ...”

## **Conclusion**

The Gulfton Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project provides two significant interventions in an effort to reclaim students who may be on the fringe of school, and are demonstrating this by skipping school. The case management model allows a social worker to develop relationships with the students that combine traditional counseling roles with the role of a liaison between home, community and school. The case manager is able to engage in dialogue with families in a non-threatening manner, and can advocate for the needs of the student and family. Parents, students and staff view the case manager in the Gulfton program as highly effective in gaining the trust and respect of the parents and students. The case manager builds trust among the students so that they become willing to share information with her in a way that do not with others in the school system. This trust is critical to an ability to view the families’ needs and values through their own eyes.

The Knock and Talk model employs police officers to go to homes and discuss the students’ truancy with both students and parents. The comments heard in focus groups indicate that this model is more controversial. While effective in focusing a family’s attention on school attendance, the stigma of having a police officer come to one’s home is difficult for families to grapple with. Clearly, seeing an officer implies to these parents that they have done something wrong and a penalty is about to be levied. Getting beyond this stigma is difficult for the officers; there is a notable mismatch between the way in which the officers portray their attitudes and roles and the way in

which parents interpret them. This mismatch is aggravated by the fact that the officers' duties do include law enforcement, particularly as it pertains to truancy. They are responsible for levying consequences, while at the same time attempting to develop relationships with the families that say 'we're here to help'. While some families viewed the officers as helpful, others were not able to see beyond the traditional punitive roles of the police.

Most significant in the delivery of Gulfton truancy program is the cultural divide that exists between the families in this community and the legalities of the American system. Misconceptions about school attendance law, the sanctions that may be imposed, and the supports available in the community, all play a role in the disconnection that is apparent from the comments made by officers and by parents. Officers frequently needed to answer generic questions about the legal system, for example, the kind of discipline parents may legally use. Undocumented families may forever be unwilling to trust the officers for fear of deportation. Additionally, staff members find that if children speak more fluent English than their parents, they interpret law to their parents incorrectly. For example, parents report being afraid that if they spank their child, he or she will call the police, who will arrest the parent.

It may appear that the cultural learning curve is steep for the families in the Gulfton area; they have little knowledge of how to access community resources and little confidence in systems that greatly impact their lives. On the other hand, the learning curve is also steep for those who operate the educational, legal and social systems in Gulfton, in terms of what is important for local families, and why. Clearly, the issue of economic status adds yet another dimension to the needs of Gulfton families. Meeting

daily minimum needs for shelter, food and clothing is of necessity the top priority for these low-income families, making it difficult to impress upon them the need for school attendance.

In spite of these difficulties, it is clear that the Gulfton truancy program is able to re-engage some students and regenerate the hope that school is an accessible means for the current generation of students to overcome the challenges faced by their parents.

The National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) is an initiative of The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC). NCSE strives to build a network of key stakeholders who share the belief that improving school attendance and school attachment promotes achievement and school success.



National Center for School Engagement

NCSE was established as a result of more than a decade of educational research about youth out of the educational mainstream conducted by CFFC. The impact of this work has been the development of significant investments of state funds to reduce suspensions expulsions and truancy. Over five years ago, CFFC began working with the OJJDP, US Department of Justice to assist in the planning and implementation of pilot demonstration projects across the country. As projects developed, CFFC became the national evaluator of this five-year truancy demonstration project.

The culmination of ten years of program experience and research has identified truancy and school engagement as the centerpiece of NCSE's work to improve outcomes for youth who are at the greatest risk of school failure and delinquency. We are national leaders in applying research to help communities prevent and reduce truancy.

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