



Graduation outcomes for truant students: An evaluation of a school-based, court-engaged community truancy board with case management



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ABSTRACT

The present study evaluated school completion outcomes (i.e., graduation versus dropout) as they related to the implementation of a truancy reduction intervention. The intervention was characterized by the coupling of a school-based, court-engaged community truancy board and an approach to case management known as *Check and Connect*. The methodology involved comparing school outcomes of students with a history of truancy exposed to the intervention and a matched comparison group not exposed to the intervention. Preliminary analyses revealed the groups to be comparable with respect to characteristics of schools attended and individual demographic background and social risk factors. Results revealed higher graduation and GED attainment for children exposed to the intervention. Discussion focuses on the promise of programs that utilize school-court-community partnerships within a restorative justice/social support framework to respond to truancy.

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1. Introduction

School truancy has been identified as a risk factor for a host of problematic outcomes. These outcomes include low educational attainment, poor economic prospects, drug use, and increased likelihood of criminal activity and incarceration (Colorado Foundation for Families, Children, 2007; Hallfors et al., 2002; Henry & Huizinga, 2007; Henry, Thornberry, & Huizinga, 2009; Huizinga & Jacob-Chein, 1998). The financial costs of truancy for society are also significant, as it has been estimated that each year's class of dropouts costs the United States more than \$240 billion in lost earnings and associated tax contributions over the lifetimes of school dropouts (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997; see also Belfield & Levin, 2007). As a direct consequence of these substantial social costs, identifying effective strategies for reducing truancy is indeed a national priority.

Efforts to develop efficacious methods for reducing truancy are likely to be advanced by interventions that recognize and respond to its principal causes, which are known to be multiple and typically include family, school, economic, and student factors (Baker, Sigmon, & Nugent, 2001; cf., Kearney, 2008). Family contributors include lack of parental supervision and guidance, parental substance abuse, lack of awareness and understanding of attendance laws, and negative attitudes about schooling. School factors include large school size, poor morale on the part of teachers, students, and administrators, failure to engage minority and disadvantaged students in school-based activities, and inconsistent and ineffective attendance policies. Economic factors include a necessity for student employment and family needs for child care and economic assistance. Student factors often include substance abuse, physical and emotional health difficulties, lack of positive social and academic engagement at school (including bully victimization), and low English language proficiency. Given these multiple and complex influences on truant behavior, it is not surprising that promising practices for truancy reduction often involve a comprehensive and individualized set of efforts that address student problems that typically occur across multiple contexts.

One such approach, founded on the principles of *restorative justice* and *social support*, and making use of intervention elements found in other successful truancy reduction programs, is known as the *West Valley Community Truancy Board*

(WVCTB) (Johnson, Wright, & Strand, 2012; Marshall, 2013). The program is driven by a philosophical commitment to precede a punitive, court-focused and formalized status offense process with one that conceptualizes excessive school absences as a *community problem to be addressed with the active assistance of school, juvenile court, family, and community resource persons in the school setting*. Subsequent school attendance is conceived of as a restorative commitment to self and others. The WVCTB integrates a case management follow-up framework focused on providing social support to truant youth known as *Check and Connect* (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998) into an ongoing community-school-juvenile court-family partnership taking place in the school setting. The purposeful integration of these intervention components is consistent with the notion that improving school and legal outcomes for at-risk youth requires influencing their lives across multiple settings (e.g., home, neighborhood, school) and by addressing risk factors that are oftentimes multiple and idiosyncratic (e.g., alienation from school and credit deficiency, peer and gang pressure, family dysfunction, substance abuse, and challenges due to poverty). The goal of the intervention and the primary indicator of its success are improved school attendance and renewed progress toward graduation.

Both of the key intervention components that serve as the foundation of the WVCTB have at once a strong theoretical and institutional basis, and enjoy growing empirical support. For instance, the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) has promulgated a broad set of guidelines for truancy prevention and intervention that is community focused and comprehensive with respect to connecting school, court, family and community resources in ongoing, collaborative justice partnerships (Baker et al., 2001). The five primary elements of this framework include: (a) active parental involvement in truancy prevention efforts; (b) firm sanctions for schools not monitoring truancy closely; (c) incentives for families to ensure adequate school attendance of their children; (d) individualized school-based efforts to combat the root causes of truancy; and (e) the active involvement of local law enforcement. Although each of these elements has not been evaluated independently of the others, mounting evidence suggests that interventions that derive from or are consistent with them can lead to improved school attendance (for recent reviews see, Maynard, McCrea, Pigott, & Kelly, 2013; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010), and substantial economic benefits for communities in which they are implemented (National Center for School Engagement, 2013). Despite their promise, it has been noted that mean rates of

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absenteeism among samples of students who receive such treatments remain above acceptable levels and that particularly little is known about effectiveness with respect outcomes beyond school attendance, such as graduation (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009).

Some noteworthy truancy reduction programs exist that are heavily focused on improving attendance and educational success by initiating and fostering supportive relationships within school settings. Such school-based programs strive to improve what have been referred to as the “Three A’s”: attendance, academic achievement, and attachment to school peers, teachers, and/or programs (NCSE, 2006). This approach is driven by the knowledge that simply having truant or otherwise at-risk students show up at school is not generally enough of an intervention to generate positive educational outcomes and that students must also develop a connection to people in the school and experience genuine progress toward the goal of successful completion (i.e., graduation; NCSE, 2006).

Perhaps the most widely utilized and empirically scrutinized of these Three A’s-focused programs is the commercially available program known as *Check and Connect* (CC) (Christenson et al., 2008). CC seeks to meet the needs of youth at-risk for truancy by connecting them with a mentor/advocate who sets out to establish an emotional connection with the youth and helps with identifying and overcoming obstacles to regular school attendance. CC has been widely researched and has been singled out by the non-profit *Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy* (2013) as a promising intervention in their “social programs that work” listing. This highly regarded designation derives from the fact that the CC intervention has illustrated positive outcomes in the context of multiple well-designed and implemented randomized controlled trials (Sinclair et al., 1998; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurow, 2005; see also, Anderson et al., 2004; Christenson et al., 1997; Gandy & Shultz, 2007; Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). In those trials, youth at-risk for school failure due to either emotional or behavioral disabilities were randomly assigned to a treatment and a control condition. Control group students obtained treatment as usual services. Results revealed that students assigned to the CC condition were less likely to drop out of school compared to control group students. These results suggest the effectiveness of interventions that utilize community and school supports and that identify and train individuals who are dedicated to connecting with and mentoring at-risk students for a substantial period of time (two-year minimum commitment).

2. The present study

The present study evaluates the effectiveness of the WVCTB, a program that is a hybrid intervention integrating the school-based CC case management approach with a framework for integrating community, school, family, and judicial court resources. A distinguishing aspect of the present intervention concerns the method for integrating school and court resources. Specifically, the implementation of the CC component of the intervention was carried out not by school personnel but, rather, by a court-employed probation counselor housed at the school at which the truancy intervention was implemented. This arrangement resulted in a CC mentor who not only had knowledge of and access to school resources but also possessed knowledge of and access to court resources. As such, this CC mentor was qualified and empowered to carry out the “boundary spanning” functions that some theorists have identified as a critical component in successful efforts to help at-risk youth identify and overcome the multiple challenges they often face (Miller, 2008; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010; Williams, 2011).

The current analysis seeks to provide an answer to the broad question: *Is a program that utilizes a school-based, court-engaged community truancy board with case management conducted by a school-based probation counselor effective at improving school outcomes for youth with a history of truancy?* Toward that end, school completion outcomes for students for whom truancy petitions were filed with the juvenile court, and who attended the WVCTB restorative justice-oriented diversion as an alternative to court processing, are compared to a matched control group that attended comparison schools with no such process for intervention. The study seeks to add to existing literature by evaluating an intervention that combines promising practices in the field (i.e., case management and a community truancy board), and utilizes a matched control procedure to document outcomes related to a decisive educational outcome — namely, successful school completion.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 132 students from four high schools in eastern Washington State participated in the present study. Of these, 66

attended West Valley High School (Spokane, WA), the main traditional high school in the district, and had been the recipient of a truancy petition filed by the school district with the Spokane County Juvenile Court. As a result, all of these students qualified for and attended the WVCTB during the 2008–2009 school year. The remaining 66 students were matched controls who attended one of three other local area high schools. These comparison high schools were chosen because they were located either within Spokane County or an adjoining county, and judged to be similar to the West Valley School District (WVSD) based on cultural, economic, and demographic factors accessible on the Washington school district database maintained by the Washington State Office of Superintendent for Public Instruction. Demographic characteristics for the three comparison high schools and for West Valley High School are presented in Table 1. These data reveal the similarity of West Valley High School and the comparison schools with respect to the following pertinent variables: enrollment size, racial/ethnic composition, gender, percentage of families living in poverty as indexed by free and reduced price lunch qualifications, dropout rate, and on-time graduation rate.

Having identified a set of comparison schools, the next step in the case matching process was to select students on a case-by-case basis to serve as a match for each individual WVSD student. With the agreement of school districts involved, individual student-level data were provided to the Washington State Center for Court Research (WSCCR) by the agency responsible for managing the student information system used by the majority of school districts in the state. Data submitted by the school districts included information on academic performance and progress in credit accumulation, school behavior, ultimate graduation outcomes, demographic variables, and other related information. These data were used by WSCCR to construct the *Educational Research Database*, a longitudinal K–12 database containing approximately 1.5 million student records for the period 2004–2012. All the WVCTB and comparison students were enrolled as 9th graders at their respective schools between 2007 and 2009, and all completed the 2008–2009 school year. Students were first matched on grade level and gender. Each WVCTB student was then matched to a comparison student that most closely resembled him or her on several additional variables at the conclusion of the 2008–2009 school year, including total number of absences, number of unexcused absences, number of times he or she received detention or an in-school suspension, number of out-of-school suspensions, number of expulsions, total number of disciplinary events, number of credits attempted, and number of credits earned. Results of the matching process are presented in Table 2. None of the differences between the groups was statistically significant (p values $> .10$), and only one variable had an effect size greater than .01 (detentions/in-school suspensions: $\eta^2 = .018$).

3.2. Outcome assessment

The outcome variable was students’ educational status at the conclusion of the 2011–2012 school year, allowing each student four or more years to graduate. Each student was classified as having graduated, having received a GED, continuing in school, having dropped out, or having transferred out of the district. These data were obtained from the *Educational Research Database* maintained by WSCCR.

3.3. Intervention

By state law (BECCA Bill, 1995, E2SSB 5439), schools in Washington State are required to engage in a series of progressively more involved interventions beginning at the first signs of truant behavior. If those efforts fail to the point where a student has accrued five unexcused absences in a given month, school districts are required to enter into an attendance agreement with the student and parent, refer a student to a community truancy board, or file a truancy petition in juvenile court. If the actions taken by a school district do not substantially reduce

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