



NOTES FROM THE FIELD

A product of the Status Offense Reform Center (SORC), Notes from the Field is a series profiling jurisdictions that have undertaken status offense system change.

What is a status offense?

Status offenses are behaviors that are prohibited under law only because of an individual's status as a minor, including running away from home, skipping school, violating a curfew, drinking under age, and acting "incorrigibly." They are problematic, but noncriminal in nature.

What is SORC?

SORC provides policymakers and practitioners with tools and information to create effective, community-based responses for keeping young people who engage in noncriminal behavior out of the juvenile justice system. The Center is a project of the Vera Institute of Justice and is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's *Models for Change* Resource Center Partnership.

Benton & Franklin Counties, Washington

POPULATION: 268,200

YOUTH POPULATION: 77,800

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban

The Call to Action

Washington State's truancy law, known as the Becca Bill and passed in 1995, requires schools to file a petition in court when a child has accrued a certain number of absences in a month or in a year, a requirement that greatly increased the number of truancy petitions filed in juvenile courts across the state. In response, Benton-Franklin counties began to experiment with out-of-court approaches to truancy, including the implementation of Truancy Boards (TBs), comprised of juvenile court personnel and community volunteers, to hear initial truancy petitions. While efficient in diverting some cases from court, the success of TBs in addressing the root causes of truancy varied widely, as did their utilization by schools. Many school officials believed that, apart from complying with the Becca Bill, there was little more they could do to encourage attendance among their most chronically truant students; and certain schools continued to refer a high number of truant youth to court. For example, between 2005 and 2007, one high school in particular filed petitions against almost 15 percent of its students.

In 2009, with support from the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative, Benton-Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Center (BFJJC) began working on three different targeted areas of improvement for their juvenile court processes, one of which was truancy. The court launched a collaborative effort with the seven school districts in the bi-county area to enact comprehensive reforms in truancy and dropout prevention, with the goal of moving truancy reduction efforts away from the courts and into the schools.

The Change Process

From the beginning, BFJJC recognized the importance of collaborating with schools. Court officials hired a retired principal from the Kennewick school district, who was knowledgeable about school culture and constraints and had existing relationships with school personnel. With his help, BFJJC was able to convene working groups comprised of school officials from almost all the districts within the counties. From conversations within the working groups, Juvenile Court staff found that some school personnel were less willing to change truancy practices than others; a large part of these officials' unwillingness, however, stemmed from their belief that they didn't have the resources in-house to undertake substantial change. After convening principal summits with the leaders of the counties' different schools, Darryl Banks, administrator and intervention services manager at BFJJC, said, "We stood up as a court

and said, 'If you're having a problem with truancy, let's talk about it.' We sold the idea that we wanted the truancy process to be closer to the schools, and that we'd provide them with support and case management [to make that happen]."

In addition to collaborating with local school officials, BFJJC looked to organizations and jurisdictions in other parts of the nation for inspiration. From the National Center on School Engagement, they learned about best practices for truancy prevention. With a group of educators from the truancy working group, they also visited Dayton, Ohio to observe the Fast Forward Center, an innovative program for re-enrolling students that had dropped out of a regular school setting. After calling the center and meeting with a Fast Forward counselor, students are able to enroll in one of several charter schools. The idea was brought back to Benton-Franklin and became part of their truancy reduction strategy.

The Model

Benton-Franklin eventually adopted a three-pronged approach to truancy, focused on *prevention*, *retention*, and *retrieval*.

- *Prevention:* The county sought to avoid court involvement altogether by instituting a number of programs intended to stimulate school attendance and promote school-based, rather than court-based, interventions. BFJJC identified community organizations with a shared interest in truancy prevention and provided information to the local United Way that helped inspire a new community-awareness campaign called "Attendance Matters." They also employed truancy counselors in each school district, who worked with truant students and school officials in monitoring and encouraging school attendance, and conducted regular training sessions with school officials meant to foster discussion about school-based ways to combat attendance problems.
- *Retention:* Once BFJJC officials connected to local schools via the truancy counselors, they were able to collect data through the schools' student information systems, which store attendance and grade information for each student. The data they found was illuminating: for example, 89 percent of students on a truancy petition at Kennewick High School were failing one or more of their classes. To retain these truant students and prevent their attendance problems from escalating, BFJJC and the schools devised the "Passing Zone" at Kennewick High School — a smaller class specifically for struggling students on truancy petitions where they could get help with missed assignments and receive the attention necessary to keep them engaged in school. While this program demonstrated success in keeping students connected with school, the district was unable to sustain funding for the program past the grant period.

- *Retrieval:* Finally, to address those young people who had dropped out of school altogether and lacked the information and resources necessary to re-enroll, BFJJC collaborated with the local Boys and Girls Club to submit a grant to the United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties to fund a Fast Forward program. Students, parents and concerned community members can contact Fast Forward to receive information on how to re-enroll in an educational program. The Fast Forward counselor will meet with the student within 48 hours and help facilitate the student's enrollment in the most appropriate school or vocational program. The program has been highly successful and continues to be sustained with United Way funding.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

After the roll-out of the three-pronged approach, BFJJC staff knew that constant ongoing communication would be key to its ultimate success. In order to foster dialogue within and among the different school districts about their most persistently truant students and how to best serve them, BFJJC established a professional learning community comprised of alternative school principals, Fast Forward counselors, and other interested service providers. The group meets quarterly and discusses issues regarding truancy, dropout prevention, and individual student issues. This type of dialogue, Darryl Banks believes, was crucial in meeting the program's three goals. Truant students, he explained, can't be just sent back to school without officials thinking creatively about the school environment that would best motivate their attendance.

BFJJC also continued to collect data on student performance and on the number of truancy petitions filed in court, allowing them to adapt their program accordingly. After staff members saw an increase in the number of truancy petitions filed in Chiawana High School, they elected to devote a full-time truancy counselor to the school, in order to develop the relationships with students and staff members necessary to address truancy issues before resorting to court. After taking this step, the number of petitions filed by the high school dropped by 60 in a single year.

Outcomes

BFJJC has tracked outcomes for many of its truancy reform initiatives. Some notable findings include:

- From 2007 to 2011, the number of truancy contempt (petitions filed by schools after students violated an initial truancy court order) dropped by 40 percent, from 341 to 266.
- At the end of 2012, all of the 108 students who were placed in a high school or GED program through the Fast Forward program were on track to graduate. Ten of the students had already received their GED thanks to Fast Forward, and 4 had graduated from high school – one as co-salutatorian.

Reflections

People make the programs: Much of the success of BFJJC's school-based initiatives is due to the people the court recruited to lead them. The Passing Zone program, for example, was taught by a much-beloved local teacher who had established relationships with both school officials and students. This teacher was able to use this relationship capital to change student approaches to school and school approaches to truant youth. Having this staff member was critical in achieving the ultimate goal of Benton-Franklin's initiatives: to take truancy reduction and dropout prevention out of the courts and into the schools.

Relationships are key: Many BFJJC staff involved in this work, including Darryl Banks, have close ties to the community and were able to leverage their connections in pushing for reform. Even if court officials don't have those relationships organically, he believes that one must try to foster them in order to bring about change in truancy practices.

Related Resources

Check out the following resources related to Benton and Franklin Counties' status offense system reform effort at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>.

- Benton and Franklin Counties Juvenile Court Existing Truancy Data Analysis and Case Tracking
- Benton and Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Needs Assessment Results
- Benton and Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Personnel Survey Final Report
- School Survey of the Truancy Process and Resources in Benton and Franklin Counties