



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.

Clark County, Washington

POPULATION: 438,300

YOUTH POPULATION: 113,100

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban

The Call to Action

Clark County, Washington first initiated reforms to its truancy process in the mid-1990s. After Washington's truancy law (known as the Becca Bill) was passed in 1995, requiring schools to take court action against habitually truant students, Clark County Juvenile Court (CCJC) began to change its post-court referral process to avoid confining truant students in an already-overcrowded local detention center. In 1997, the county, in conjunction with ESD 112 (a regional education agency), launched the Truancy Project, whereby truant students who continue to miss school after an initial court appearance receive an individualized education plan and intensive supervision rather than detention. In the years following the project's launch, however, the court realized that it also needed to implement changes at the front-end of the truancy court process. The number of initial truancy petitions filed in court had grown so great that students were often brought into the courtroom 30 at a time, with each spending only a minute or two in front of the judge. Moreover, a Washington Court of Appeals ruling in 2009—later overturned by the state's Supreme Court in mid-2011—mandated that each student appearing at an initial truancy hearing be appointed counsel, a shift that would significantly strain the county's resources. In an effort to reduce the high number of truancy court hearings triggered by the Becca Bill, CCJC spearheaded a front-end reform effort that culminated in additional intervention options, outside of court, for truant students in early 2011.

The Change Process

Before enacting additional changes to their truancy system, CCJC convened a working group comprised of school administrators, court personnel, and ESD 112/Truancy Project staff to study the existing process in the courts and brainstorm ideas for reform. The working group spent more than a month conducting surveys of youth and families who appeared before the court on truancy petitions to identify the main reasons behind school non-attendance. The surveys also enabled the working group to obtain demographic information that would allow them to best serve student needs. For example, the surveys indicated that a significant number of students and families spoke primarily Spanish or Russian at home, a finding that prompted the group to engage the services of interpreters and translators for planned truancy-related programs and materials.

The county also identified resources outside of the court that could be used to address many of the youth and family issues at the heart of

school non-attendance. A subcommittee formed by several members of the working group created a resource directory of all youth service providers in the county; it also created an information-sharing guide for school and court officials wishing to work collaboratively on student issues while also respecting student privacy under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). In addition, court officials visited nearby King and Pierce counties to learn about their intervention systems for truant youth, which included escalating levels of pre-court intervention depending on student needs.

The Model

Today, when a truancy petition is filed in Clark County, the student is asked to appear not before a judge but instead at a Truancy Project-run workshop. At the workshop—staffed by school officials, Truancy Project staff, and interpreters, as needed—students receive information about the Becca Bill as well as the long-term career and financial consequences of not attending school. At the end of the session, students are asked to sign a stay of proceedings, which places the truancy petition on hold for up to one year, along with a disclosure agreement that allows for communication about the student’s case between court and school officials. If a student’s attendance problems improve after the workshop, the petition and resulting stay will be dismissed in one year; if not, he or she may be referred to the Truancy Project. A student may also be “fast-tracked” to the Truancy Project if court officials determine after the workshop that, based on the student’s attendance record, the student may be in need of more extensive intervention.

The Truancy Project provides students who are chronically missing school with a mix of individual supervision and group activities meant to identify student-specific barriers to school attendance and to help the student better engage in the community. Although the Truancy Project has been in place since 1997, its approach was refined during the truancy workshop creation process to better classify and meet student needs: students referred to the Truancy Project now receive a Massachusetts Youth Screening Instrument-2 (MAYSI-2) screening, which helps identify mental health issues and other root causes of student nonattendance.

Students are then assigned a case manager who conducts a series of home and school visits; they also are asked to participate in a variety of skill building activities and service projects. Students who continue to skip school may be referred to a community truancy board, which can recommend more extensive services; the student may also be referred back to juvenile court, where the court will sign an intervention order and seek the assistance of the court’s probation counselor in monitoring the student. Formal contempt petitions are seen as a last resort, only after all other interventions have failed.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

Since the truancy workshops were put into place, the county has actively monitored outcomes. In addition to collecting data on student attendance

after the workshop, CCJC solicits feedback from every parent and student who attends the workshops. The county also continues to collect data on Truancy Project outcomes: each Truancy Project specialist issues a year-end report on the progress of each child he/she has served that year.

This continued data collection has been complemented by frequent collaboration on truancy issues among all system stakeholders. Every fall, the juvenile court sponsors a district-wide truancy meeting for school officials, where they discuss progress made during the prior school year and disseminate an updated manual on truancy procedures and best practices. Many officials who helped change the county's truancy process have also attended truancy workshops themselves.

Outcomes

Thanks to the court's continued monitoring, there is considerable data available on how the Truancy Project and the truancy workshops have affected students with truancy petitions in juvenile court. Some notable outcomes:

- In the 2011/2012 school year, only 58 (or 10 percent) of the 576 truancy petitions filed in court resulted in a formal intervention order, in contrast to the 252 intervention orders (or 39 percent) out of 644 truancy petitions in 2008/2009.
- Youth involved in the Truancy Project were significantly less likely to have further involvement with the juvenile justice system: in 2011, 37 percent of all truant youth in the county received a delinquency charge after receiving a truancy petition, compared to 19 percent of those enrolled in the Truancy Project.
- Court administrators received largely positive feedback from parents and youth surveyed after truancy workshops. In the first two years of the workshop, 95 percent of parents and 93 percent of youth found the workshop helpful, and many parents reported that the workshop reflected the community's wider positive approach to truancy. One parent wrote that the workshop showed that "there is help and that people other than me care about [my daughter's] education."

Reflections

Standardized tools add legitimacy: Clark County has found that using a screening tool at intake not only helps the county tailor approaches to youth's individual needs, but also serves to corroborate the work of Truancy Project specialists. Specifically, Clark County Juvenile Court Program Coordinator Jodi Martin noted that the specialists' use of the MAYSI-2 "has added validity to referrals, because there's a tool behind the referral rather than just a hunch." This use of validated screening tools has increased buy-in from students who might otherwise be resistant to service referrals.

Ground specific changes in a broader philosophy: Clark County's approach to truancy reflects its approach to juvenile justice in general. The county believes that juvenile court interventions should be grounded in "balanced and restorative justice," meaning that interventions should be proportional to the level of offense, and that every youth should have the opportunity to develop into a healthy, productive citizen. By grounding its truancy response in this broader approach, court officials believe that there is much greater participation and buy-in.

Related Resources

Check out the following resources related to Clark County's status offense system reform effort at <http://www.statusoffensereform.org/library>:

- Clark County Information Sharing Guide
- Clark County Truancy Manual
- Evaluation of Responses to Truancy in Clark County, Washington: Background Factors and Outcomes
- Sample Status Offense System Flow Chart : Clark County, WA
- Service Referral Directory: Clark County, WA