



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.

Spokane County, Washington

POPULATION: 476,500

YOUTH POPULATION: 100,000

MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban/Suburban

The Call to Action

Spokane County—which includes the city of Spokane, the second largest city in Washington State, and encompasses 14 school districts—first initiated changes to its truancy procedures in 1996. In response to the passage of the state's Becca Bill in 1995, which required schools to file petitions in court when students had accrued a certain number of absences in a month or year, Spokane County Juvenile Court (SCJC) began to issue stays (or holds) on these petitions to give schools the opportunity to work with these students and find solutions to the truancy prior to an initial court appearance. As part of these efforts, West Valley school district implemented Community Truancy Boards (CTBs) during the 1996-97 school year. These boards, staffed by school officials and community volunteers, sought to prevent further formal court involvement by working with students and their families to identify barriers to school attendance and generate solutions. Many officials who participated in West Valley CTBs believed that the model was effective in combating truancy, but additional programs like it were needed in order to help students in the remaining 13 school districts. When Spokane County was invited in 2008 to submit a proposal for a MacArthur Foundation Models for Change grant focused on reforming truancy processes, SCJC seized the opportunity to make this reform effort more uniform and lasting.

The Change Process

Upon receiving the Models for Change grant, SCJC decided to evaluate West Valley's CTBs. As Jennie Marshall, SCJC's Models for Change coordinator, explained, "We had this really promising model in place, [one that] we believed was great for youth. But no one had yet proven that it worked." Spokane court officials recruited University of Washington researchers to conduct a quantitative and qualitative study of the boards and their outcomes. The researchers found that the CTB model showed immense promise in re-connecting truant youth and their families with schools outside of the formal court process: 82 percent of participating youth and their families, for example, found the model helpful in addressing their individual barriers to school attendance. Quantitative analysis of the West Valley CTBs also showed that they were effective and replicable truancy interventions, leading Spokane to move forward in expanding the CTB model to other districts.

SCJC next interviewed CTB members and coordinators and consulted with researchers to identify the key attributes of the boards that other

school districts would need to implement in order to replicate West Valley's successes. SCJC also examined its truancy process as a whole, mapping out the different levels of intervention for truant youth and brainstorming ways in which both school and court officials could fine-tune their approaches to students at each point in the process. Informed by this extensive exploration process, Spokane produced a toolkit to help interested school districts create their own CTBs without the need for additional funding (as the boards rely on community volunteers and existing school resources). The toolkit includes numerous resources to help jurisdictions with the CTB implementation process, including training documents for CTB members and sample CTB letters and agreements.

The Model

In the CTB model, school officials, community service providers, and juvenile court staff assemble every two or three weeks (more if necessary) to meet with referred youth and their families. During the meeting, board members ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions about why the student is not attending school, and seek to identify community resources such as counseling or substance abuse treatment that could help target any identified behaviors. They also explain what may happen in court should the youth continue to exhibit truant behavior. The parent and youth then sign a document agreeing to the CTB's recommendations, and a designated CTB member monitors the student's attendance after the meeting.

SCJC has also implemented other methods for re-engaging truant youth in schools rather than in the courts. Using funding obtained through the governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, SCJC employs a truancy specialist in the West Valley School District to work with habitually truant students. Through the "Check and Connect" model, the specialist targets school nonattendance through problem-solving conversations with students and by monitoring youth at risk of truancy. In conjunction with the University of Minnesota, SCJC also conducted training with school officials throughout Washington on the "Check and Connect" model.

Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

Court officials leading Spokane's truancy reform work actively sought—and continue to seek—feedback from local stakeholders. While developing the CTB toolkit, SCJC requested school officials' feedback on draft versions to ensure the resource was as helpful and comprehensive as possible. SCJC also solicits feedback from school officials by convening annual "All Schools" truancy meetings.

SCJC is also committed to collecting data on Spokane's CTBs and encourages other jurisdictions using the CTB toolkit to do the same. The toolkit encourages schools implementing a CTB to continuously collect and analyze data around attendance, academics, graduation, and service interventions. To assist jurisdictions in this effort, the toolkit includes examples of data collected by existing CTBs.

Outcomes

Spokane's reform efforts have led to numerous results both within and beyond the county. Some notable outcomes:

- The CTB model has now been successfully implemented in five Spokane County districts, with these districts running a total of nine boards.
- Jurisdictions outside Spokane have also benefitted from Spokane's CTB toolkit. SCJC continues to field requests for the toolkit via its website, and has disseminated it to interested school and court officials across the country, from New Hampshire to Puerto Rico.
- From 2010-11 (the year in which four Spokane districts implemented CTBs) to 2011-12, SCJC saw a 41 percent drop in the number of truancy petitions that reached contempt status (i.e. resulted in a court order that a student then violated).
- Thanks to the combination of CTBs and the "Check and Connect" model employed by its designated truancy specialist, West Valley School District has been able to resolve ninety-four percent of its truancy cases without further court involvement.

Reflections

Pound the pavement: At the beginning of the change process, Spokane County officials struggled to generate community interest in truancy reform. In order to be successful, the CTB model needed community support: it required schools to be interested in undertaking the effort to implement the model, and community service providers to be willing to give up their time to staff the boards. After calls and emails to community members proved unproductive, some SCJC officials took a different approach: they drove around to local schools and service providers to talk about the CTB model in person. This face-to-face approach proved much more successful in convincing the community that truancy reform was worthwhile.

Start small: While jurisdictions often make the mistake of initiating too many reforms at once to see what may work, Spokane County was able to take its reform efforts to scale by studying and replicating one promising program: West Valley's CTBs. By focusing their time and resources on a single promising practice, officials were able to hone this approach and, ultimately, increase the number of truant students receiving this valuable intervention.

Children & families know best: Through the reform process, Spokane court officials came to realize that collaborative models—that is, those which seek to work with children and families rather than impose services or sanctions upon them—are oftentimes the most effective. As Jennie Marshall explains, "the family is the expert. They really do know what they

need [to help their children].” Indeed, the overwhelming success of the CTB model perhaps lies in this collaboration: by bringing community members, school officials, and families together to discuss a child’s truancy, the boards are better able to identify youth needs and provide services accordingly.

Related Resources

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

- Spokane County Community Truancy Board Success
- Spokane County Toolkit for Community Truancy Board Replication
- Survey of Schools on Truancy Issues – Final Results