

**Executive Summary**  
**Final Evaluation Report**  
**Burlington Truancy Prevention Project**  
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April 2007

**Introduction to Evaluation Findings:** The Burlington school district has seen increasing student attendance and graduation rates, with reciprocal decreases in the dropout rate. The statistics are remarkable considering the rate of poverty in the district. Its approach includes a consistent attendance policy supplemented by supportive case management for students and families. This brief summary highlights some of the findings detailed in the full report.

**Methodology:** This evaluation study has examined what interventions worked in Burlington, what were their effects, and which are replicable. For the qualitative portion of the study, interviews were conducted with 13 program personnel, school staff, and community partners. Planned focus group interviews with parents and youth did not come to fruition due to unforeseen events on the part of program staff. However, a youth's perspective was included through researcher observation of a community truancy meeting where a youth spoke about his experiences in the program. The quantitative portion of the study relied upon data supplied by the school district and records maintained by the program. These were supplemented by additional data from the Vermont State Department of Education's website. All data were analyzed and reported at the level of the school as individual student records were not available.

**Qualitative Findings:** The qualitative findings resulting from the interviews and observation include the following themes:

- 1) Collaboration and Cooperation by Key Community Partners
- 2) Truancy Prevention and Intervention: Policy and Case Management
- 3) Outcomes Attributed to the Project
- 4) Unmet Needs
- 5) Stakeholder Recommendations

The first two themes address the primary items that should be considered by another district interested in replicating the approach.

***1) Collaboration and Cooperation by Key Community Partners:*** The team of community partners has shown exemplary collaboration in defining and addressing the problem of truancy. They view it as a "community problem" and have historically worked together to study the problem and share responsibility for it. Each community partner takes a role in working to solve the problem collaboratively. Highlighting the effectiveness of the community-wide effort, many respondents felt a core factor to its success was "the partnership" and that a "broad spectrum of people have bought in," including social workers, law enforcement, family centers, and the courts.

Various partners form the truancy prevention team. The United Way provides team leadership as well as information on best practices. In addition to providing services to families, the Baird Center for Children and Families oversees the “attendance social workers” who provide case management for families with serious truancy issues. The guidance staff in each school monitor absences, send weekly reports to the program administrator, and organize and participate in meetings for families when youth have been absent for 15 days. The court, with its truancy docket, judges, and state’s attorneys, stands ready to enforce the attendance policy at the community level. The truancy docket is part of the juvenile section of family court. The Truancy Prevention Project has a coordinator who handles data collection, recordkeeping and statistical reporting in addition to general coordination and follow up. The project director’s focus is on district-wide consistency. She coordinates internal truancy team meetings as well as co-facilitation with the United Way of the countywide Truancy Task Force. All partners appear to work in tandem to implement a consistent policy for all students.

**2) *Truancy Prevention and Intervention: Policy and Case Management:*** The Burlington School System’s approach to truancy prevention involves a consistent attendance policy, with case management support as needed. The policy involves a gradation of steps, starting with letters to parents at five and ten days of absence. At 15 days of absence, parents and youth are invited to a meeting designed to identify barriers to attendance and find solutions. When students are absent between 20 and 30 days, court affidavits are filed with the state’s attorney’s office and cases go to the truancy docket. The role of the court is to provide compassionate yet firm consequences. Attendance Social Workers provide case management and supportive counseling to youth and families, facilitating good communication between home and school, and helping families access needed resources. In addition to linking students with teachers and a school team, their services extend beyond school bounds to home and community visits. Every person interviewed described the attendance policy as fair, straightforward, and consistent.

Those interviewed emphasized the importance of case management in addition to the truancy prevention policy. In the words of one social worker, “*If there was the court and not the support, it wouldn’t work.*” The attendance social workers provide case management and supportive counseling, helping to meet special needs. They facilitate good communication between home and school, and often meet with families and youth on the phone, in the family homes, or at community locations.

***Additional school supports:*** The school offers other programs and services that supplement the attendance project. These were not identified as the primary focus of the attendance project nor were they a focus of the evaluation. However, they came up in the interviews as supplemental to the success of the truancy prevention project. These additional supports include programs and services such as free after school care, school-based health centers and dental services, alternative programs, mental health placements, and a flexible \$2000 give to the high school from United Way for whatever is needed to keep a child in school.

**3) Outcomes Attributed to the Project:** The results reported in the interviews reflect change on a variety of levels. Many spoke of cultural change within the school and larger community. They also said parents and students more aware of expectations. Teachers and guidance staff are able to be more vigilant about attendance with an enforced policy in place. According to the staff, statistics confirm what they have noticed: the number of 15 day letters and court affidavits has decreased. They see students attending school regularly, feeling more involved and invested, and earning better grades. The school has also noticed the improvement and has begun financially supporting a few social worker positions and a coordinator position for the program.

**4) Unmet Needs:** Despite the gains from the current truancy prevention project, some youth still do not attend school. These involve situations where families have complex issues that make school a low priority, and where families refuse services or are unresponsive to court sanctions. Barriers to school attendance that were discussed include homelessness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, chronic illnesses including mental illness, and lack of a positive connection with educational institutions. In addition, staff explained that sometimes communication with families can be difficult if the family has no phone or if letters are insufficient due to “literacy issues, culture, language, or kids removing mail.”

**5) Stakeholder Recommendations:** The stakeholders we interviewed had several recommendations for further addressing truancy prevention. Some of these are already in process, such as a policy about tardiness. Other recommendations include a commitment by city, state, and federal policy-makers to address issues that impact on truancy, such as housing, homelessness, and mental health. One of the most frequent suggestions from respondents was to stabilize funding for current positions such as the project coordinator and the existing attendance social workers and to secure funding for additional positions including social workers and school resources officers. Others suggested extending the policy beyond Burlington for greater consistency across school districts. For example, the Superintendent was enthusiastic about the truancy prevention policy and is interested in collaborating with other school districts in Chittenden County in order to track students who leave Burlington and enroll in other schools in the region. Currently there are several schools outside of Burlington who have adopted Burlington’s school policy on truancy.

**Quantitative Findings:** In general the school and district wide results suggest a pattern of decreasing absences and times tardy, an increase in graduation rates and a decrease in the dropout rate, coincident with the implementation of the program. The increase in graduation and decrease in dropouts are particularly heartening because of the districts relatively high poverty rate. An interesting finding from the quantitative data is “that the threshold of 21+ days, which often signals the probability of dropping out between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, disappears at both Edmunds Middle and Hunt Middle School between 2005 and 2006.” In addition, “Middle school reductions in the number of times tardy in both Edmunds and Hunt are impressive gains in all categories.” Could these findings be linked to the fact that these are the schools with attendance social workers? Are they an outcome of the project’s preventive effects after several years of policy implementation that started

at the elementary school level? It is difficult to do more than speculate on the answers to these questions, since the data do not track individual youth and their improvement.

***Recommendations for Further Study:*** The outcomes show reduced absences, tardies, and dropouts, as well as increased graduation rates, in a district with significant need and poverty that have remained unchanged since the inception of the project. However, the data submitted for the evaluation are insufficient to prove that the Truancy Prevention Project as implemented is solely responsible for these remarkable results. The following recommendations for further study would help with this analysis:

- Gain access to program data since the program began until 2005.
- Include test scores, grades, and enrollment in leveled courses in data collected, making it possible to analyze ‘opportunity to learn’ variables that may affect outcomes.
- Since absences of youth eligible for free or reduced lunch actually increased from 2005 to 2006 while overall rates decreased, explore how to reduce **these** absences.

**Conclusion:** Although the policy adopted by the Burlington schools is identified as their primary prevention approach, it is apparent that it works in tandem with relationships that give students both support and boundaries. For example, an important component of the policy includes the 15 day meeting for students and their families. It is also evident that court can at times include an important relational component that worked for at least one youth. As several staff members emphasized, the policy without support would not be effective and risks being seen as punitive by students and families. This is an important consideration for those interested in replicating Burlington’s Truancy Prevention Project.