

Innovation Brief

A Collaborative Approach to Truancy Reform

High school dropout rates in Benton and Franklin Counties in Washington State are significantly higher than the national average. Truancy is a clear predictor of high school dropout. The establishment of a truancy workgroup, data analysis, and principal and counselor summits led to a multi-modal response in Benton and Franklin Counties focused on prevention, retention and retrieval of truant youth. This moved truancy interventions upstream with the goal of keeping youth out of the court system and in school, while also creating a strong re-engagement program for chronic truant and dropout youth.

The Issue

Truancy is strongly correlated with poor grades and eventual dropout from school. Truancy also impacts other life outcomes, including increased risk for substance abuse, poor employment skills, teen pregnancy and greater propensity for delinquency and violence. Research reveals that the majority of schools across the country do not adequately capture data about their dropout populations. In order to address an issue as complex as truancy, building a strong collaborative effort is imperative. Truancy is simply too multi-faceted for one agency alone to address.

Innovations

Before the development of Benton-Franklin's *Models for Change* interventions, truancy practices varied greatly within the eight school districts in Benton and Franklin Counties and the 28 middle and high schools within

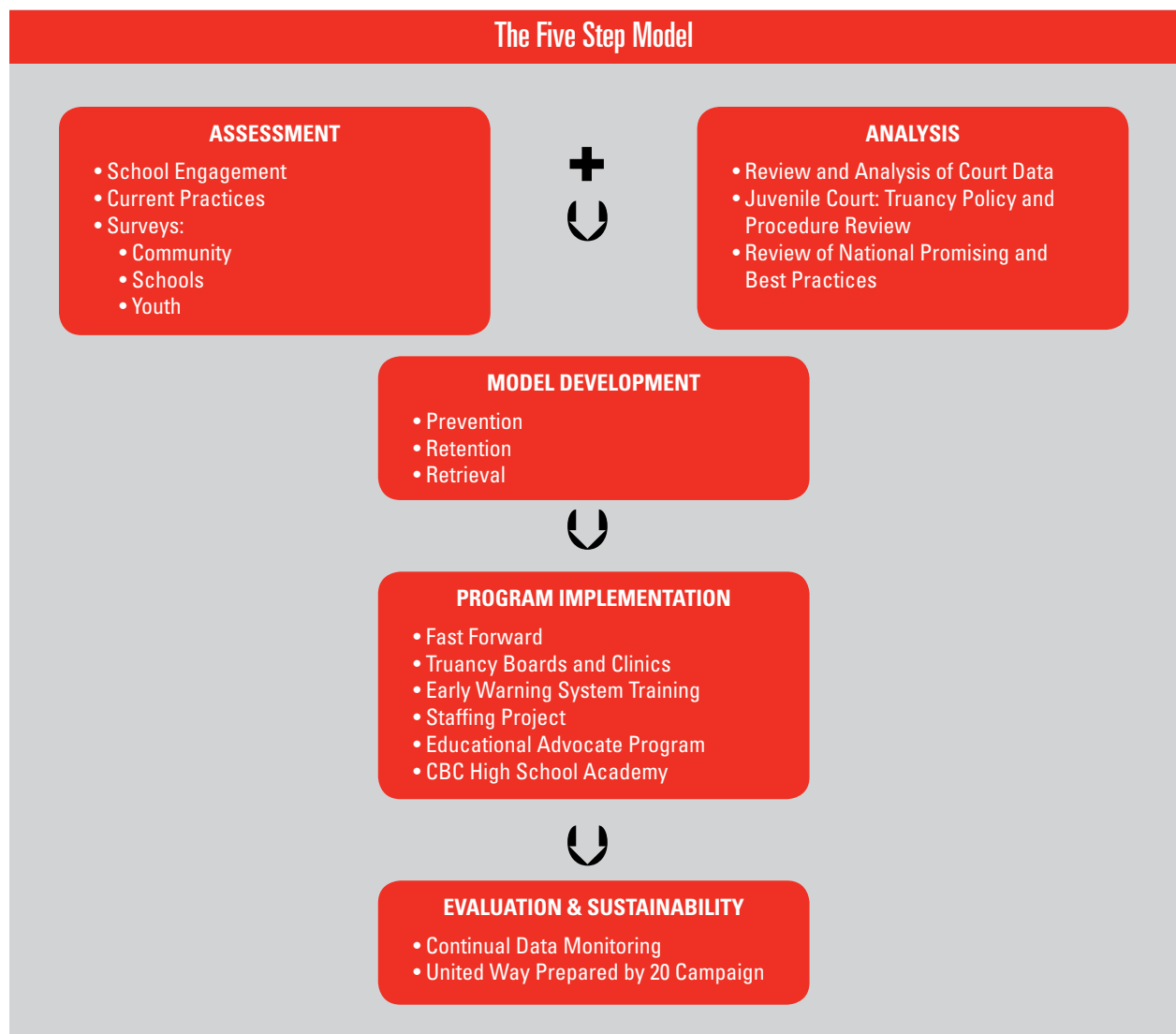
those districts. This was evident in the rate of truancy petitions filed in court, the use of community-based truancy boards within some districts but not in others and even a few schools refusing to participate in the truancy process. These variations in practice were founded in different philosophies on the causes and correlates of truancy, differences in available funding and resource support and school-level mentality on at-risk youth. In order to embark on a process of systemic change, the *Models for Change* team knew that the key to lasting reform rested in building a strong collaborative working group and a school-engaged process.

In partnership with the University of Washington and Washington State University, a truancy workgroup convened for the initiative, and the Benton-Franklin Juvenile Justice Center staff explored pathways into truancy, service delivery points, the overlap between truancy and child welfare system involvement and current

and needed truancy resources. Emphasis was placed on understanding linguistic limitations and studying practices and services available for Latino youth and families. Special emphasis was placed on building a reform effort that could be sustained over time within current budget structures. The reform effort took three essential steps in order to ensure that potential programs would serve their audiences appropriately:

1. Truancy Workgroup – The first step was to identify the exact need in the community. A truancy workgroup (“workgroup”) was convened with membership that included strategically selected representatives from the education, social service, juvenile justice, and public

health systems, as well as several community members. The workgroup was charged with understanding the existing state of the problem of truancy within the local community and nationwide, and particularly focusing on what the desired state should look like. The workgroup also understood that the reform and restructuring would not occur quickly and that they would need sufficient time (two to three years) to develop and achieve goals and to nurture the collaborative. Armed with this information, the workgroup focused on developing the model and the programs needed to reach the desired state. The workgroup began a calculated process of assessment, analysis, model/program development, program implementation and evaluation.



2. Information Collection and Analysis – The first set of deliverables identified by the workgroup was the need for better information about the causes and correlates of truancy and a deeper understanding of community concerns about truancy. The University of Washington was engaged to collect information about community needs and opinions. Surveys revealed a range of information, including the services and programs needed in the community.

After understanding the concerns of the community, the next step was to officially survey school administrations' truancy beliefs and practices. The findings were quite startling, revealing that interventions and application of truancy laws vary drastically by school building.

The workgroup also conducted a survey of youth confined in detention on probation violations, pending court charges or status offenses. The purpose of the survey was to better understand the reasons why youth engage in school-refusal behaviors and what services are needed.

Additionally, an analysis of administrative data and a process evaluation of the current juvenile court policies and practices related to truancy was conducted, as well as a review of causes and national-level promising and best practices. A review of historical data on truancy petition filings (sorted by demographics, filings by school, use of truancy boards, dispositions/outcomes and contempt filings) was also completed.

3. Summits – It was important to find ways to engage, educate and seek buy-in from school district principals and vice-principals about the reform efforts being considered by the workgroup. The purpose of the original Principals Summit was to engage key educators on the topic of truancy, clarify the truancy laws and process, share the survey results and present research findings about the causes and correlates of truancy. A follow-up summit was convened 18 months later to explore solutions, innovations and identified areas of concern. A final summit was conducted six months after, at which a three-tiered response model aimed at prevention, retention and retrieval of truant and

at-risk youth was presented. This model utilized existing programming and created and implemented additional programming in order to form a cohesive model reaching youth at all stages of the truancy process.

Three-Tiered Response Model

ORIGINAL PROCESS

- Varied truancy petition filing procedures among schools
- Minimal school-based truancy diversion options/supports for youth
- Heavy use of formal court proceedings and contempt process
- Two truancy staff assigned to caseload of over 750 petitions
- Use of volunteer truancy boards to handle majority (70%) of petition filings

THREE-TIERED PROCESS (Prevention, Retention, and Retrieval)

- Training on Early Warning System (prevention)
- Embedded truancy counselors in select schools (prevention)
- Launch of United Way "Attendance Matters" Campaign (prevention)
- Creation of school-based tutoring, mentoring and other supports (prevention/retention)
- Creation of "Passing Zone" credit retrieval program (retention)
- Restructuring of truancy boards and clinics (retention)
- Intensive case management for high risk youth (retention/ retrieval)
- Creation of a professional learning community (retention/ retrieval)
- Implementation of FAST FORWARD program (retrieval)
- Development of High School Academy—Columbia Basin College (retrieval)

Given the success of the Principals Summit, a Counselors Summit was held for school counselors, school-based intervention specialists and juvenile court staff. This summit allowed court officials to bridge the gap between schools and the juvenile court, creating a critical dialogue about the importance of understanding the complexities of truancy and the potential to create stronger, evidence-based interventions.

Based on the findings of these reform steps and under the prevention, retention and retrieval model, the following programs, among many, were implemented in Benton-Franklin counties:

Professional Learning Community: A Professional Learning Community was established whereby youth who are struggling in one school setting can be reviewed by educators for placement in a more appropriate setting, changing school districts if necessary.

Fast Forward: Part truancy call center and part school re-engagement service, Fast Forward fields calls from the community, youth and families regarding school re-engagement and placement opportunities. Within 48 hours of making a call, a student is generally seen face-to-face by the program coordinator. The program coordinator conducts an education and social skills assessment and initiates placement in a local traditional school, alternative school or GED program.

The goals of Fast Forward are to establish a single contact point for youth wishing to re-engage in their education; partner with community organizations, agencies and public schools to identify and pursue youth, ages 16-21, who left school without graduating; and provide initial assessment, case management and innovative solutions that meet the needs of out-of-school youth.

High School Academy: Of equal importance for this project has been the creation of more “seats” for dropout youth that have elected to return to school. The High School Academy program provides 16 to 21-year-olds a chance to get an accelerated high school degree outside of their former school districts. The academy offers high school classes on a local community college campus with the belief that giving slightly-older students a chance to finish high school on a college campus makes it easier for them to return to the classroom and to quickly transition to college post-diploma.

Passing Zone: Passing Zone targeted 9th and 10th grade students with truancy petitions who were at-risk for failing one or more classes. A part-time certified

teacher and a juvenile court truancy counselor worked together to assist students with educational coordination and tutoring. This program was designed to identify barriers to successful school navigation and completion; increase communication between the student, their parents and school; provide social skills training to address attitudinal and motivational issues; and provide opportunities for academic success.

Truancy Boards: The majority of truancy petitions filed by area schools are now handled through a truancy board process. A truancy board is an informal, non-court-based option that allows the student and parents an opportunity to receive information about state laws governing school attendance and to develop a plan to reduce non-attendance with a board of community volunteers.

Results and Lessons

The work of the *Models for Change* Truancy Workgroup greatly increased the level of buy-in among most of the school administrators regarding the needs of this at-risk population. Some lessons from these successes include maintaining and increasing partnerships, retaining a focus on the issue of truancy, building successful programs with measurable outcomes and continual assessment of the “health” of collaborative efforts.

The Professional Learning Community continues to meet quarterly. The focus has evolved to incorporate the sustainment of the High School Academy. The High School Academy continues to thrive and has served 185 students since March 2012. The program served 50 students during the 2013-14 school year and is looking to raise that number to at least 80 students.

Fast Forward has received contacts from over 250 youth, parents and agency representatives seeking information or educational placement. 127 students completed intake paperwork and 108 of the 127 youth (85%) that completed intake paperwork were placed in a high school or GED program. Fast Forward has had over 20 high school graduates (one as co-salutatorian) and at least 18 GED completions. There is currently an 85%

engagement rate of those students in the program. A total of 103 youth were served during the first two years of the Passing Zone project. Youth who participated in Passing Zone displayed a 30% reduction in “F” grades over time and significantly increased their overall GPA. Unfortunately, because of a lack of communication between the court and the schools, both in regards to establishment of Passing Zone and in sharing the successes of the program, Passing Zone was not sustained when school budget issues and leadership changes arose.

Community truancy boards continue to be a crucial truancy intervention. Recently, a Parent Truancy Board has been added in order to address parent petitions on elementary school students. Community truancy boards are being utilized more uniformly across school districts.

Looking Forward

All sustained programming continues to adapt to meet the needs of the community. With the ongoing work of the Professional Learning Community, programs launched with *Models for Change* support will continue to thrive in Benton-Franklin counties. Other organizations have become involved in the cause as well. In 2013, the United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties offices rolled out its Community Solutions media campaign entitled *Attendance Matters*. This new campaign was informed by the positive outcomes of the Washington *Models for Change* truancy work.

Resources

Juvenile Justice Needs Assessment

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/414>

Existing Truancy Data Analysis and Case Tracking

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/375>

Juvenile Justice Personnel Truancy Survey Report

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/379>

School Truancy Survey Instrument

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/378>

Truancy Case Study Coding Instrument

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/420>

A Framework for Juvenile Justice Reform (Toolkit)

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/535>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from *Models for Change*, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. *Models for Change* is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youths. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.