



## 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.

## Clayton County, Georgia

POPULATION: 265,888  
YOUTH POPULATION: 76,000  
MAIN COMMUNITY MAKEUP: Urban

### The Call to Action

Early on in his experiences on the juvenile bench, Judge Steven Teske of Clayton County, Georgia was struck by some disturbing trends regarding youth who were ending up in court. Between 1995 and 2003, the number of school referrals to court for both status offenses and delinquent acts increased dramatically, from 46 to more than 1,200. This sharp rise in school referrals was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of youth detained for these behaviors and coincided with increased numbers of sworn police school resource officers in the county's middle and high schools. Judge Teske found these filings to be excessive and unnecessary: "Why file in court when I'm just going to tell you to engage in services that you could've sought out before coming to court?"

### The Change Process

As a respected voice in the juvenile justice community, Judge Teske decided to convene stakeholders to rethink the county's approach to status offenses. This working group included representatives from the police department, schools, court, social services, mental health, and the prosecutor's office. Before beginning their work, an orientation was held to define the roles and expectations for the group. Family members and youth were also included in the working group, which helped police and school officials better understand the impact of their policies on school culture. A neutral moderator was brought in to facilitate discussions and ensure that each stakeholder had an equal voice. "I got one vote. I didn't get everything I wanted. That was good. I think the others respected me for that," reflected Judge Teske.

In order to gain a common understanding of the county's status offense system and school disciplinary policies, the working group reviewed data dating back to the early 1990s. The group grappled with the 2,000 percent increase in school referrals to court since the introduction of police on school campuses, 91 percent of which were for misdemeanor offenses including school fights, disrupting school and disorderly conduct. The impact of out-of-school suspensions and arrests on graduation rates was also discussed. Based on their analysis of this information, the working group made reducing school arrests its first priority, developing over the course of nine months a written School Referral Reduction Protocol. The protocol outlined different interventions to use in schools, including written warnings and workshops, to address misdemeanor

offenses, such as simple battery, criminal trespassing, and disorderly conduct, before a referral was made to court.

After the development of the School Referral Reduction Protocol, the working group reconvened to address truancy because their analysis had uncovered a significant overlap between students who were committing misdemeanors and those who frequently missed school. The system for addressing truancy at that time consisted of a written warning, followed by a home visit from a social worker. If the situation did not improve, the parent and child were brought in for a meeting with the superintendent. Nevertheless, truancy cases were still being filed in court. The working group wanted to find a way to link truant youth and their families to service providers in the community before involving the court. Inspired by the court's effective use of a collaborative panel to review the cases of pre-trial youth on delinquency charges, the working group piloted a similar panel for status offenses cases. This panel, the Clayton County Collaborative Child Study Team (Quad-C ST), which is now firmly embedded within the local status offense system, connects youth alleged of status offenses to appropriate services within the community.

### **The Model**

There are three main sources of referral to the Quad-C ST: parents, schools and the court. When a parent makes a status offense allegation, youth go through an intake and assessment process at the court and based on information gathered staff make referrals to community-based services that are deemed appropriate by the families. If this initial attempt at diversion is unsuccessful, then the Quad-C ST will take the case. Schools are also a major source of referral for offenses such as truancy, since schools are able to identify which youth frequently miss school, but are often unable to dig deeper into each young person's case. Referrals may also come from court for cases like family battery.

The Quad-C ST consists of representatives from agencies across the county, including the Clayton County Public School System (CCPS), Clayton County Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), Clayton Center for Behavioral Health Services, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), Rainbow House (a local non-profit that provides temporary shelter for youth), the District Attorney's Office, private youth services agencies, trained citizen volunteers, and others. The Quad-C ST meets every Thursday. The panel spends one hour on each case working with the youth's family to develop a service plan. To develop this plan, the panel considers the needs and history of the youth and family and addresses other important questions such as whether the family's Medicaid or health insurance is active, and if not, what steps might be taken to activate it. The process is a collaborative and supportive one. According to Shannon Howard, the current chair of the Quad-C ST: "Members on the panel contribute in different ways. The school representative may say we need an Individualized Education Program. Mental health may say we need a psychosocial evaluation in order to better address the young person's needs. A service provider who works

down the street from the family and was previously unknown to them may be able to offer needed services.”

At the end of this meeting, a primary service provider is assigned to the case and clear roles and responsibilities are defined for this provider and the family. Treatment plans may include life skills training, mental health treatment, mentoring, counseling, educational coaching, etc.

### Monitoring Progress and Ensuring Success

The chair of the Quad-C ST panel conducts a 30-day follow-up with the service provider to ensure that the treatment plan is being followed. A follow-up is also conducted with the family to ensure that the service provider is a good fit. If any concerns arise at this point, the case can be re-staffed to better suit the needs of the young person and his or her family. The duration of a treatment plan is determined on a case-by-case basis, but generally lasts from one-to-two months. In the vast majority of cases, the treatment plan is sufficient to address the problems of the young person, and cases are filed in court on very rare occasions.

### Outcomes

As a result of the reform efforts in Clayton County, including the Quad-C ST young people who engage in status offenses and low-level misdemeanors are increasingly receiving the support and services they need in the community, without court involvement. For example, between 2003 and 2011:

- school referrals to juvenile court decreased by more than 73 percent;
- youth of color referred to court decreased by 60 percent; and
- the high school graduation rate in Clayton County rose by more than 24 percent.

### Reflections

*You can't call it a problem if you can't prove it's a problem:* The initial meetings and discussions in Clayton County were more meaningful and productive because stakeholders were able to grapple with data together. Judge Teske strongly advocates this data-driven approach to system change because it helps identify clearly and irrefutably where problems lie within the system.

*Know your system and its players:* Shannon Howard highlights the importance of fostering strong relationships with stakeholders who are part of the status offense system. The service providers he relies on are all vetted by the court in advance, and he spends time building a rapport with them, which helps minimize concerns about the quality of work and communication.

*People need time to “talk it out”:* According to Judge Teske, it is important to recognize the challenges inherent to undertaking change in any bureaucracy. Budget cuts and regulations, in particular, can be difficult to

navigate, and stakeholders need to be willing to invest the time and energy necessary to develop strategies that will make their reform efforts both effective and sustainable.

### Related Resources

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

- Positive Power: Exercising Judicial Leadership to Prevent Court Involvement and Incarceration of Non-Delinquent Youth