

Project Abstract

Truancy, or any unexcused school absence, is a key indicator of chronic absenteeism and future academic success. Children cannot learn if they are not in school. About 15,000, or 10% of students in the School District of Philadelphia are absent each day, half of them with no valid excuse. Last year more than 50,000 students in the public school system were referred to Truancy Court for missing 8 or more days unexcused, many with well over 20 days.¹ Chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest predictor's of school failure, and it often starts as young as kindergarten.

Research conducted by the Philadelphia Education Fund and Johns Hopkins University with the School District of Philadelphia found that children who attend school less than 80% of the time have a 10-20% chance of graduating on time from high school.² Known as *The Early Warning Indicators Project*, this study developed the methodology to identify our eventual school dropouts, children with one or more of the early warning indicators: attending school less than 80% of the time, receiving a final poor behavior mark, failing an English or Math course. The likelihood of school dropout rises for students with more than one indicator. With a dropout rate of more than 40% facing the City of Philadelphia, where 58.7% graduated on time in 2008, truancy is a critical component to turning this major social problem around.

Currently schools are expected to make significant and sufficient efforts to curb truancy among their students, conferencing with caregivers after no more than 3 unexcused absences, and engaging all of a school's social and academic supports along the way to the 10th unexcused absence. Ten unexcused absences generate a referral to Truancy Court, a collaboration of Philadelphia Family Court's Juvenile Division, the Department of Human Services, and the School District of Philadelphia. Children and families appear before a Master, and ultimately a Judge if attendance doesn't improve, every 60-90 days to review and report on progress. Truancy case managers contracted by the Department of Human Services with community-based providers attempt to identify the causes of the truancy and develop a plan for improvement with the family, employing academic, recreational, social, and health resources to remove the barriers to good attendance. All parties in the system attempt to increase and anchor families' values around education.

While Philadelphia has one of the most sophisticated truancy response systems, the problem continues to be a significant barrier to increasing the city's graduation rate.

Project Goals

With the support of the Stoneleigh Center, Julie Cousler Emig will undertake the following project goals across 2009-2011 to improve Philadelphia's truancy rate, to improve the educational outcomes of Philadelphia's public school students:

- Strengthen all existing responses to truancy in Philadelphia among all stakeholders;
- Study, select, and implement additional truancy interventions with key City and School District stakeholders based on research and best practices across the country; and
- Create a citywide truancy data management system for ongoing evaluation and overall system management by outcomes, as well as dissemination to all stakeholders for transparency, accountability, and continued buy-in to the citywide commitment for the educational attainment and success of all of Philadelphia's children.

¹ Data from the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Attendance and Truancy. 2009.

² Herzog, Lisa and Robert Belfanz. *On-Track to Graduation: The Early Warning Indicators Project*. Philadelphia Education Fund and The Johns Hopkins University. 2005.

Project Method

Located between the Mayor's Office of Education, the Department of Human Services (DHS), the School District of Philadelphia, and Family Court, Ms. Cousler will study all elements of the citywide truancy response, from school-level interventions, to Family Court and DHS-funded case management services, to truancy sweeps conducted by the Philadelphia Police Department and other officers across the city, to current public awareness campaigns. She will study fidelity to each method and corresponding outcomes. She will better quantify the resources spent on truancy each year, relative to impact.

Working with middle and senior level management from each of these systems, protocols will be assessed, strengthened and disseminated for clear communication as to the interconnectedness of all aspects of Philadelphia's truancy response. They will be further studied for impact, and new interventions will be studied and considered by the leadership. Ms. Cousler will work to develop a sound system for ongoing program evaluation, so Philadelphia can best respond to future fluctuations in truancy rates, and economic downturns and upturns.

Use of Results

The research and policy planning and implementation conducted by Stoneleigh Policy Fellow Julie Cousler Emig over the next two years will better position the City and School District of Philadelphia to cut in half its dropout rate, as touted by Mayor Michael Nutter and School District Superintendent Arlene Ackerman. These policy decisions and implementations will justify and solidify interventions for the utmost effectiveness, and they will enhance the critical relationships among all key stakeholders based on shared vision, roadmap and success. This Fellow's work will create a solid process for the frequent review and dissemination of outcomes and effectiveness within the system and citywide for accountability and best practice management.