Truancy & Chronic Absence: Promoting School Success

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Truancy & Chronic Absence: The Scope of the Problem

- **Chronic Truancy**: unexcused absence (no universal definition exists)
  - Compulsory age students

- **Chronic Absence**
  - Missing about 10% of the school year

- **Affects All Grades**

- **Common Causes**:
  - Personal Issues
  - Familial Issues
  - School Issues
Truancy & Chronic Absence: Consequences

- A Leading Predictor of School Success
- A Leading Predictor of School Drop-out
- Leads to Loss of Student Attachment to School
- Strong Predictor of Future Delinquent Behavior & Other Problem Behaviors
- Poverty in Adulthood
Truancy & Chronic Absence: Appropriate Response:

- Truancy as a Behavior: requires consistent actions

- Truancy as a Symptom: requires individualized response

- Don’ts
  - Suspend for truancy
  - Fail a student because of truancy
  - Employ all punitive actions
Truancy & Chronic Absence:

Appropriate Response:

- Truancy as a Community Problem: requires collaborative response
  - General community awareness & dialogue
  - Neighborhood business community engagement
  - Community-based supports
  - Police engagement for safety
  - Courts & child welfare engagement

- Best Practices from the Field:
  - Dedicated data-driven school staff and clear policy
  - Cross-systems early intervention
  - Intensive therapeutic models
  - Mediation
  - Youth Courts
  - Character & Youth Development
Truancy & Chronic Absence: Philadelphia’s Response

- School-level Interventions

- Referral to Truancy Court and/or Child Welfare at 10 Unexcused

- Daytime Curfew & Compulsory Education Enforcement

- In-school Suspension & Truancy

- Cross-systems Data-Sharing

- Child Welfare Monitoring & Special Supports

- Citywide Analysis & Support – with Stoneleigh Foundation Policy Fellow, City of Philadelphia Policy & Analysis Center
Youth Courts: An Effective Early Intervention

Students Helping Students Make Better Decisions

Fast Facts

- In 1994 there were 78 youth courts in the U.S. There are currently over 1,200.
- Last year over 100,000 cases were handled in youth courts and over 130,000 hours of volunteer service were provided.
- Nationally 9% of juvenile offenses are processed in youth courts.
- The average youth court case costs less than $500 to process.
- Pennsylvania only has 15 youth courts and Illinois has over 150.
- There is no cookie cutter model for youth courts, each community can adapt the concept to local needs and realities.
Youth Courts:
An Effective Early Intervention

- What are Youth Courts
- Why Use Youth Courts
- Benefits for Respondents (Offenders)
- Benefits for Youth Court Members
- Education, Juvenile Justice and Community Benefits
Youth Development: 
A Best Practice Approach to Dropout Prevention

What MRI research on the brain can tell us about growing up SUCCESSFULLY…
Youth Development

Problems we all face:

- Conquering distractions
- Dealing with information overload
- Keeping emotions in check
- Maintaining and repairing relationships
- Managing time
- Managing stress
- Managing ourselves
Youth Development

We handle our problems by using our “Executive Function”

- What?
  - A set of brain-based functions for personal process management

- Where?
  - Behind the forehead in the prefrontal cortex

- What does it do?
  - Directs processes such as setting goals, making plans, monitoring behavior and inhibiting inappropriate behavior
Youth Development

Do Adolescents have a potential Executive Function?

- **Answer**: Yes – but the timetable for its full development varies

- Some individuals mature early

- For others, Executive Function capacity may not ”be ready for use” until they are 20 – 25 years of age
The Problem of Stress:

- Worry, anxiety and stress cause a rise in brain wave frequency. (into the Beta 15-38 hz. range)

- When emotions “take over,” they overwhelm the capacity for rational thinking found in the brain’s neocortex. (into the Beta 12-15 hz. range)

- The result: we think that we are thinking, but we are being driven by an emotional autopilot.
Youth Development

How to Handle Stress

- The brain is meant to operate in a healthy, whole manner – like a jazz quartette.

- For stress overload:
  - Learn and practice relaxation strategies to restore the brain’s balance.
  - Develop a problem-solving mindset with clear strategies for intentional decision making.
Youth Development

Truancy and Absenteeism:
“The Message” being sent

- Attending school is “TOO MUCH” to handle for some students, leading to a high level of stress in their lives.

- Possible causes:
  - Personal: inadequate self-management skills resulting in problem-overload and impaired decision making.
  - Familial: conflict, lack of emotional support.
  - School: lack of commitment to “learn.” lack of attention capacity so learning can take place.
Youth Development

Learning is a Choice

- Academically successful students demonstrate specific goal-oriented behaviors:
  - Don’t procrastinate
  - Finish what they start.
  - Set long-range goals.
  - Are aware of what is going on.
  - Set short-range goals.
  - Organize what they do (make a plan).

(K. Atman, 2009)
Youth Development

Implications of Brain-based Learning for Truant Youth

Two Premises:

- All youth have the potential of an Executive Function that can work well.

- Maturing youth whose Executive Function capacity is slow to develop will benefit from carefully structured academically-oriented self-planning and self-monitoring activities.
Youth Development

The Youth Court as an Agent for Behavior Change

- For Respondents:
  - Design the disposition process to focus on the respondent’s Executive Function capacity for goal setting, planning and self-monitoring.
  - Support Executive Function capacity development as a goal of the disposition process.
Youth Development

The Youth Court as an Agent for Behavior Change

- For Jurors:
  - Encourage jurors to apply the rational thinking processes they use in the jury box in their academic classes
  - In this way, jurors can become role models for behavior change in the school.
Youth Development

Implications for Dropout Prevention

- Enhanced Executive Function capacity promotes:
  - Improved academic achievement (Washington School District, Washington County, Pennsylvania)
  - Reduced absenteeism (Beaver County (PA) Prevention Project)
  - Success for respondents engaged in the disposition process (Study underway at the Chester Youth Court)
  - Self-regulation skills for potential drop-out casualties.
Thank You!