

Community Intervention: Keeping Kids in School -

The Northside Truancy Program

(Summary)

The Minneapolis Police Department's Fourth Precinct Patrol Division was in its third year of Chief Robert K. Olson's Computer Optimized Employment Program (CODEFOR). The precinct had already achieved two straight years of large Part I Crime declines using the traditional methods of directed and saturation patrols. To achieve a third straight year of declines, they needed to find smarter and more creative methods. The Northside Truancy Program was the answer.

SCAN

Inspector Tim Dolan, Commander of the Fourth Precinct, attended the 1999 International Problem-Oriented Policing (POP) Conference. While there he learned about police truancy efforts in Baltimore and San Diego. Coincidentally, the Fourth Precinct had just suffered through a fall of increased daytime crime by juvenile burglars. The suspects were taking advantage of residents being gone to work.

ANALYSIS

Truancy had reached a crisis in Minneapolis. Minnesota had legislated graduation standards, and Minneapolis public schools were under severe scrutiny. The city had already opened a Truancy Center - officers were bringing kids in by the hundreds.

Truancy rates in city high schools exceeded fifty percent. Less than forty percent were passing preliminary state exams.

Inspector Dolan believed that his officers were just "chasing the tail of the dog" by pursuing truants on the street. There was no real follow-through with the kids. Officers often found that the truants were actually suspended from going to school.

Even preliminary research shows that fighting school truancy is much more complicated than it sounds. Putting officers in schools takes them off the street. Arresting truants does no good without cooperation of the schools and the county attorney. Parents have to want their kids to stay in school. Alternative to Suspension must be staffed and funded.

RESPONSE

Fortunately, Principal Paul McMahan of Henry High School, a Northside school, was currently trying to take on an effort to keep suspended kids at school. McMahan had also closed the campus and began taking attendance in every class.

Inspector Dolan offered Principal Paul McMahan two officers to assist with the Alternative to Suspension Program as long as they could work on truancy abatement. He proposed sending officers to the homes of students identified as chronic truants.

While discussing the program at a Hawthorne Huddle meeting, two very influential officials approached Inspector Dolan - Newly elected County Attorney Amy Klobuchar and a Minneapolis School Site Coordinator Dr. Farzaneh Kia. Klobuchar was implementing reform for the truancy petition process, and Dr. Kia had a Northside elementary school with truancy problems.

The Northside Truancy Effort now had a team. Parents supported the program because they wanted their kids in school. General Mills, neighborhood organizations, and ministries helped fund and house the supervised suspension effort that had no official funding.

ANALYSIS

No one involved expected the results of this effort to be immediate. We all hoped that in a few years we would see better attendance and academic achievement. However, school officials quickly found out that parents do not like officers coming to their homes when their kids were missing. Their truancy rates dropped very quickly. Henry High School received National recognition for graduation and attendance rates and is the program that other city high schools are trying to match. Four other grade schools and North High School have joined the Northside program this year. Oh yes, and crime dropped a record amount in the Fourth Precinct for the third straight year.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Northside Truancy Effort originated from many sources. However, the ultimate direction, procedures, and success of the effort is due to the hard work and diligence of Lt. Marie Przynski and "truancy officers:" Officers Paul Gillies and Cheryl Kasa of the Fourth Precinct.

For further information contact:

Lt. Marie Przynski
Minneapolis Police Department
Fourth Precinct
1925 Plymouth Avenue North
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55411
(612) 673-5704

Community Intervention: Keeping Kids in School -
The Northside Truancy Program

The Minneapolis Police Department and its Fourth Precinct Patrol Division are proud to nominate the Fourth Precinct (Northside) Truancy Program for the 2001 Herman Goldstein Award. At first look, the program seems to just be a throwback to the past when truancy officers were in all schools. In reality, creating a program today that takes busy officers off the street and coordinates their efforts with schools and the County Attorney's Office took courage, vision, passion and cooperation from all the community partners.

Truancy was low in the 1960's and 70's. School attendance and truancy were viewed as issues for the educational community and families. For law enforcement, the issues were manifest in the person of the Truancy Officer assigned to the schools. The low impact of truancy on community crime incidents caused police administrators to reconsider these assignments and return these officers to the streets in response to the increasing demands of 911 calls and growing crime. At the same time, schools were also getting larger. Educational professionals found that these large schools ran much smoother by removing problematic students. In fact, these students were often suspended and told to remain at home.

However, by the mid -1990's chronic truancy rates in Minneapolis public schools were exceeding fifty percent and crime rates were at all-time highs.

In 1998, Minnesota passed a state law setting high-school graduation standards. Students who wanted a diploma would have to pass this standards test. Minneapolis public schools performed poorly in pre-implementation examinations. School and elected officials were soon under extreme pressure to make changes.

As a result, demands were made on police departments to address truancy. Initially, the Minneapolis Police Department had its officers focus on traditional methods of dealing with truant students - find them on the street, arrest them, and bring them to a truancy center. Analysis of this method indicated an increase in the number of truants picked up but little decrease in truancy, a result of dealing with the symptoms rather than causes of chronic truant behavior. Officers were literally chasing the tail of the dog. Dealing with truancy effectively requires involvement from parents, schools, the courts and the community.

NORTHSIDE TRUANCY PROGRAM

The Northside of Minneapolis is an inner-city neighborhood with a predominance of minority students. It has several neighborhoods that consistently rate high in the city for crimes per person. As part of the Minneapolis Police Department's Computer Optimized Deployment Philosophy (CODEFOR) the Fourth Precinct was looking for creative ways to reduce Part I crimes for a third straight year.

Inspector Tim Dolan, Commander of the Fourth Precinct, attended the 1999 Problem Oriented Policing Conference in San Diego to give a presentation on their award winning efforts with the Hawthorne Huddle. While there, he listened to presentations from

Baltimore and San Diego Police Departments on dealing with truancy. San Diego was sending officers to the homes of truant students to advise the parents and transport the student to school if possible.

Inspector Dolan came back to Minneapolis believing that reducing truancy could remove juvenile offenders from the streets and provide the opportunity for a positive intervention in these kids' lives. He found that Hennepin County Attorney Amy Klobuchar and Principal Paul McMahan of Henry High School were also working on intervention strategies. Inspector Dolan joined those efforts and offered precinct resources to assist with truancy and supervised suspension efforts.

At a monthly community meeting, the Hawthorne Huddle, facilitated by the General Mills Foundation, Inspector Dolan talked about the planned efforts. Dr. Farzaneh Kia, Site Coordinator for North Star School asked if that elementary school could also participate.

General Mills Foundation provided funds to pilot the intervention from June 1999 to January 2000. A site was provided by On Fire Ministries and later by Pillsbury United Communities. Staffing for the center was provided by the Minneapolis Public Schools.

HOW IT WORKS

Under Minnesota State Law children must attend school until the age of 18. Students with seven full or partial days of unexcused absences from school are considered truant and subject to possible legal actions. For children under 12, it is the parents' legal

responsibility to make sure students attend school and, if they do not, the parents can be charged with educational neglect. From ages twelve to eighteen years the presumption is that the student did not wish to be in school.

In the fall of 1999, the Hennepin County Attorney's Office partnered with the Minneapolis Public Schools and produced the School Attendance Review Board (SARB). SARB is a community-based effort to harness multiple resources to assist families and students with truancy problems. The SARB board includes Hennepin County Juvenile Probation, Hennepin County Children & Family Services, the Minneapolis Police Department and the Hennepin County Attorney's Office.

This is the five-step process:

- 1) school letter and follow-up call after 3 days of unexcused absences;
- 2) County Attorney meeting with student and parents after five days of unexcused absences;
- 3) Principal's meeting for every student and parents after seven days of unexcused absences;
- 4) Review board hearing for every student after 10 days unexcused absences and
- 5) Referrals to County Attorney Office for appropriate legal action if the truancy continues.

North Star Community School has 814 students in grades K-5. The North Star programming followed SARB guidelines and partnered with police officers and a school community resource worker. On the first day of non-excused absence the community

resource worker and/or the police officers contact the family. The Community Resource worker and/or the police officers go to the home and make inquiries of parents or guardians as to non-attendance at school. Explanatory information regarding educational laws is left with the families. Additionally, both the Community Worker and the officers may refer the family (or individuals) for additional social service intervention. The officers may also transport truant children to the school if requested to do so by the parents. After the 7th non-excused absence, the community worker will make a referral to Hennepin County Children and Family Services for intervention and the possible charge of "educational neglect."

Before this effort began, 46% of truancy referrals (from Minneapolis Schools) were referred for prosecution after March 1. Most cases were dropped by summer as being moot. There was little ability to impact students. It was also learned that although the state law provided for referral after seven unexcused absences, the Minneapolis School system was allowing up to thirty-six unexcused absences before referral.

Patrick Henry High School is one of seven high schools in Minneapolis, and one of two in the 4th Precinct. It has a student base of 1382 students. While working with the school, partners learned that suspensions counted as non-excused absences - even "in-house" suspensions. After seven (7) unexcused absences, the student automatically fails the term. This created the very real risk of exceeding the maximum unexcused absences and having to repeat the term. Additionally, suspension was the only method available to teachers to remove disruptive students for the classroom. It was also learned that

suspension did little, if anything, to direct the offending student towards more positive behaviors.

Principal McMahan undertook a school-based program called "School Success". The purpose of this program was to stabilize attendance for specific student populations, combat truancy and increase student's awareness of their role in and possible impact on the community. Implementation of the "School Success" program required the hiring of a school based, outreach worker to interact with the students and the community. As collaborations within this initiative matured, the "Alternative to Suspension" program was created as a more productive disciplinary intervention strategy in lieu of out-of-school suspension.

Program components were devised to keep students involved in the school community, continue their education without unexcused absences, and provides a resource for teachers that would remove "offending" students from the classroom without removing them from school. Additionally, the initiative provided additional programming (i.e. community awareness, anger management, conflict resolution, "circle of justice" principles, esteem building, etc). The Alternative to Suspension program also supports that the offending student performs community service (restorative behavior/reparations) to earn their way back into school community.

While participating in the "alternative" program the student is still responsible for his/her regular school program, and is not considered absent from school. This strategy was designed to foster an internalization or "understanding within the student" of the

consequences of their choices, hopefully to have students be able to make better choices for themselves in the future.

In addition to the staff working in the supervised suspension program, other school staff volunteered to provide support for students with persistent behavior problems. The basic idea is to try and make a fairly large school more personal by helping create those personal relationships that help minimize behavior issues that arise from anonymity and lack of ownership.

Police officers from the 4th Precinct were involved in the Alternative to Suspension Program by doing home site visits for truancy reports, transporting students, and providing security of the off school site. Additionally, the officers became involved in "circles of justice" becoming an information resource for impacted students.

SCANNING

Regular school attendance is one of the most reliable predictors of academic achievement. In addition to promoting education success, truancy intervention is a strategy for preventing crime.

Keeping young people in school is an important step towards keeping them out of trouble. Truancy is widely regarded, as a gateway to crime, missing school is a key risk factor for future delinquency and criminal behavior.

The communities of the 4th Precinct defined truancy abatement, "keeping kids in school," as the primary goal. Both factual and anecdotal information demonstrated a disproportionate rate of juvenile crime being committed while students were truant from school. High proportions of truants were found to be suspended students ignoring suspension criteria of state law dictating in-home location during suspension period.

Changes in the State law also impacted a higher number of individuals and school participation. Students are now required to stay in school until 18 years of age.

ANALYSIS

Using research, local city and school attendance and suspension data, combined with Police database information it was found that the Minneapolis School district has over 49,991 students and that over 20,000 students yearly are suspended (all types/lengths) from Minneapolis schools. 78% of the suspensions were students that had been suspended on a prior occasion. Additionally 37% were related to assaultive behavior (profanity, direct attack with a weapon, etc.). Disrespect (lack of cooperation, lying, cheating, etc.) and defiance (truancy, skipping classes, chronic tardiness, etc.) accounted for 32%. These two categories accounted for 69% of the total suspensions.

The issue of truancy has traditionally not been viewed as a priority with the criminal justice system. The Truancy Center was having increased use, but it was reported that a significant number of students were repeat referrals. The entire community indicated that

they were affected by school absenteeism and decided that it should share the role of promoting positive school attendance and the value of education.

School districts across the nation have long recognized that the lack of student involvement in school, directly impacts the student's ability to integrate more fully and successfully in life after leaving the school environment.

RESPONSE

Since 1996, Minneapolis has been the only urban district in the nation with formally adopted "family involvement standards." The Office of Family Involvement supports schools and families in building strong partnerships that promote student learning. Through training and access to resources, it help schools, families and the community "Team Up for Learning" and work together to help students achieve.

Beginning with the 2001-2002 school year, the district will require 95 percent attendance (missing no more than eight days per year) for all students. While the district will assume responsibility for communicating the new policy and making the system changes necessary to accurately monitor daily attendance, this initiative will not be successful without the support of students, families and outside community. Currently, only half of Minneapolis students have 95 percent attendance, and truancy officers have made notifications of truancy to thirty percent of the student's homes.

Each student, parent, community member, organization and/or business is encouraged to take responsibility to support regular school attendance. The police or schools cannot

support this goal alone. The entire community is strongly encourage to mobilize on behalf of students - Parents must see to it that children come to school every day; communities must provide safe, structured after school activities. Parents, teachers and the community provide, promote and model respectful behavior and communicate the value of education to students. The City of Minneapolis, Hennepin County and the state legislature are committed to continue working together in full partnership.

ASSESSMENT

Findings from the Wilder Research Center evaluation of "Targeted Early Intervention" indicates that children have fewer and less severe subsequent offenses and significantly better school attendance when compared to a similar group (children who received no intervention).

The Hennepin County Attorney's Office monitors attendance at the school level through school attendance plans, producing a semi-annual report card on truancy cases for every secondary school in the county as part of a continuing effort with the schools to reduce student absenteeism.

Each school's report card provides detailed information on the individual students who were referred and the outcomes of their cases. Additionally, the Hennepin County Attorney's Office works to improve school attendance by expanding the Attorney's Office truancy lectures in the Minneapolis schools to students and parents. They are also committed to reducing, by 33 percent, the time for filing truancy petitions in Juvenile Court.

Chronic truancy at North Star Community School has dropped dramatically. Evaluation at end of 1999-2000 school year indicates that at the onset of the program, 52 students were chronically truant. At the end of the intervention program, 23 had perfect attendance, 23 had much improved attendance, 3 had withdrawn from the district, and 3 were still chronically truant. North Star Community School has achieved at this point in the 2000-2001 school year a 91% attendance rate.

Henry High School had a relatively high rate of attendance (86%). When the School Success program started attendance rose to 90%, the Alternative to Suspension program was implemented and attendance is presently 95%. Suspension was reduced 24% in Year 1999 - 2000, with an additional 10% for the current school year.

Unexpected, but easily the most dramatic result of the collaborative effort, is the anticipated graduation rate. In 1997 it was anticipated that only 25% of the entering freshmen would graduate. In June of 2001, 75% of that class will accomplish graduation.

This initiative was expanded to North High School (also within the 4th Precinct). Henry High reports that the majority of students who experienced the "alternative to suspension" program were only referred for the initial offense and have not been subject to additional referral or suspension.

CONCLUSION

Chief Robert K. Olson began a Computer Optimized Deployment Philosophy (CODEFOR) in 1997. The goal of the program is to make precincts more accountable for dealing with crime patterns in their geographic areas. CODEFOR'S success has been notable - with three straight years of decreases in Part I crimes.

The Fourth Precinct shared in the substantial decreases in Part I crimes since the inception of CODEFOR with a notable 36% in years 1997 to 2000 inclusive. These decreases are the result of dealing with the proverbial "lower hanging fruit" (of crimes) through saturation and directed patrol methods. The precinct was aware that further decreases could only occur as a result of more creative and smarter policing methods that proactively fight crime.

The staff at the Fourth Precinct recognized that truancy efforts would have multiple benefits - keeping kids off the street and returning them to the school community thus encouraging them to graduate and become more productive citizens. The precinct took up the challenge and assigned two officers from patrol to full time truancy efforts.

The gamble paid off In 2000, the Fourth Precinct led all other city precincts, for the first time, with a 14% decrease in Part I crimes. The decrease put crime rates at the lowest point since records were kept for the precincts - over thirty years. Crime was down in all but one of the Fourth Precinct neighborhoods and was led by a twenty-four percent decrease in burglaries.

The Fourth Precinct's decrease in burglaries, 24% in Year 2000, is one demonstration of the benefits of the truancy effort. In 1999, the precinct found that many burglaries were occurring during the day when residents were away. Many of the suspects were truant teenagers taking advantage of the unoccupied homes, Larceny, also a crime of opportunity for many youth, also had a 17% decrease in 2000.

The Minneapolis Police Department recognized "successful urban movements require the resolution of diverse interests and the sharing of a new value system." (Castells, 1983). The communities include government, education, public and private components. This partnership met and developed the focus of "keeping our kids in school."

The 4th Precinct anticipated and did experiences resistance from other schools and precincts not showing such positive results. Other precincts felt pressure to defend their efforts and the traditional methods they continued to employ in an attempt to suppress truancy within their boundaries. The partnership and the community collaboration sustained the program and were able to withstand the resistance. In the end, the common goal of keeping kids in school won out.

The "communities" involved in the Northside Truancy Effort continue to meet to analyze new ideas and concerns to increase student attendance, reduce truancy and expand the effort to more schools. Truancy abatement has become a "passion" for Northside Minneapolis.

"Communication between agencies can lead to recognition of common goals, development of mutual respect, and establishment of a working relationship that benefits the agencies, the community, and, most important, the individuals who are subject to some form of control." (Goldstein, 1990).

The short and long-term benefits of truancy intervention are well recognized and need to be sustained over a period of time. We look forward to continuing this partnership and measuring the outcomes of this effort.

Special Note: This nomination was written quickly in order to make this deadline. We can provide further crime, demographic, and truancy graphs and tables upon request.

The Hennepin County Attorney's Office has also created a short film on the effort.