

**YOUTH OUT OF SCHOOL:  
LINKING ABSENCE TO  
DELINQUENCY**

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We would also like to thank the Colorado Department of Education, Prevention Initiatives which supports local programs to improve attendance and school engagement. We also recognize the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice whose grants support the evaluation of effective programs that reduce out of school youth.

This unique set of relationships of two state agencies, a private foundation, and a non-profit organization coming together has helped to generate attention to the intersection of education and juvenile justice. The energy generated by this interaction powers innovation and reform to improve the lives of our young people.

## THE COLORADO FOUNDATION FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children was founded in 1991 as a private non-profit partner to state government. The role and mission of CFFC is to improve the effectiveness of organizations and individuals who serve children, youth and their families in educational, health or human service settings. The activities to carry out this mission use three major strategies:

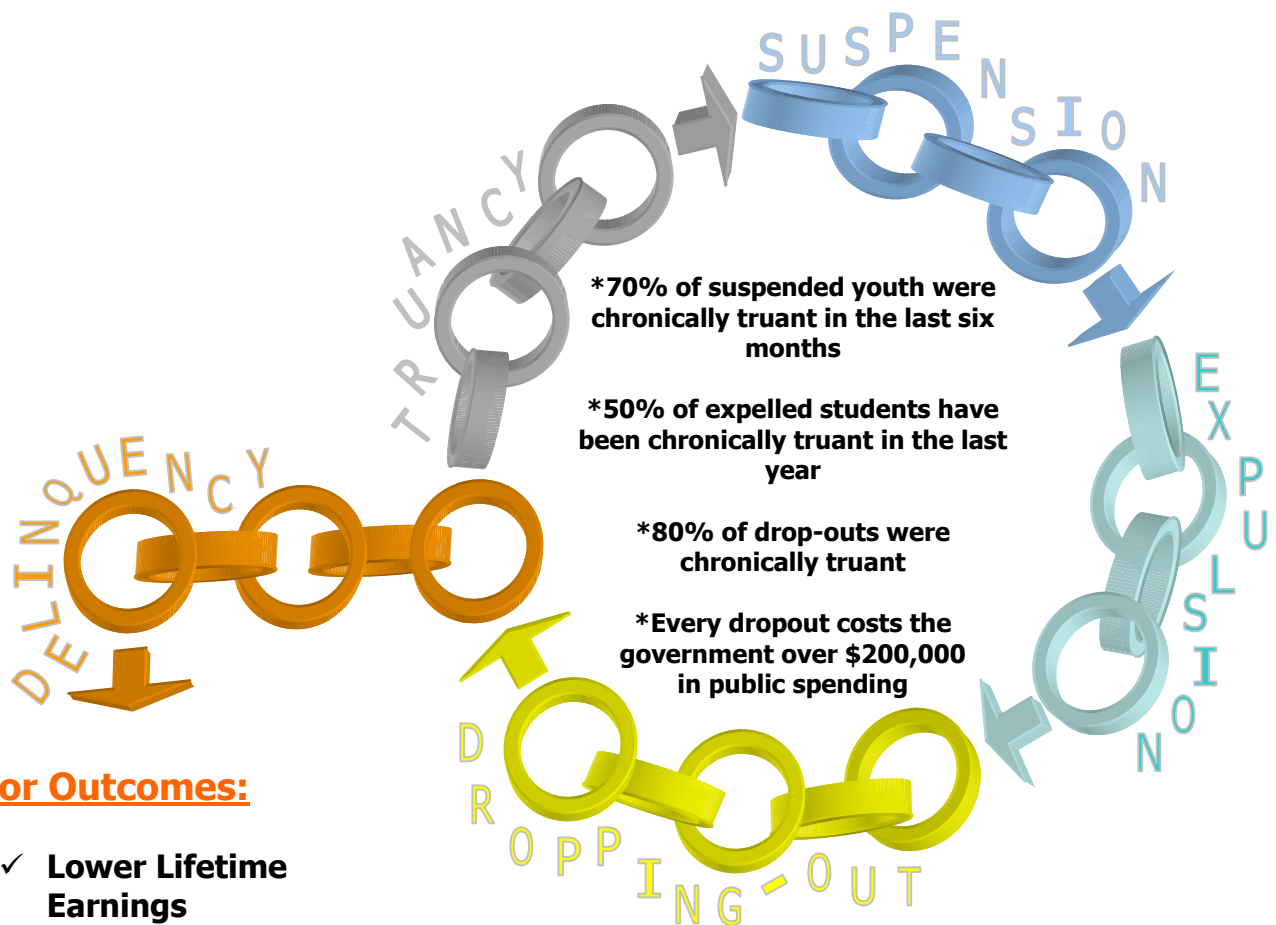
- Promote promising practices through training and technical assistance
- Improve the delivery of services by developing partnerships among funders, organizations and communities
- Inform public policy development through research, evaluation, and information dissemination

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# YOUTH OUT OF SCHOOL: Linking Absence To Delinquency



## Poor Outcomes:

- ✓ Lower Lifetime Earnings
- ✓ Adult Criminality
- ✓ Poor Outcomes for Offspring
- ✓ Family Dysfunction
- ✓ Unemployment

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM..... 2  
NATIONAL SCOPE OF THE ISSUE ..... 3  
TRUANCY AS A PREDICTOR OF DELINQUENCY AND OTHER PROBLEMS ..... 3  
COLORADO’S DEFINITION OF TRUANCY ..... 4  
II. IN SEARCH OF PROMISING PRACTICES: TRUANCY REDUCTION  
DEMONSTRATION PROGRAMS ..... 5  
THE PICTURE OF CHRONIC TRUANCY ..... 6  
PROGRAM SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM..... 8  
THE DEMONSTRATION SITES ..... 10  
NECESSARY PLAYERS FOR PRODUCING PROMISING PROGRAMS ..... 10  
PROMISING STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS ..... 12  
TRUANCY AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS ..... 13  
COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL BUSINESS ..... 14  
ADDITIONAL CREATIVE IDEAS ..... 14  
III. IN SEARCH OF PROMISING PRACTICES: INTERVENTIONS AND SOLUTIONS  
FOR IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION PROGRAMS..... 14  
THE PICTURE OF SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION..... 15  
IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION PROGRAMS..... 17  
AT-RISK PROGRAMS ..... 18  
EXPULSION PROGRAMS ..... 19  
NECESSARY PLAYERS NEEDED TO PRODUCE PROMISING PROGRAMS ..... 20  
PROMISING STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS ..... 21  
IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OUT OF SCHOOL YOUTH ..... 23  
REFERENCES ..... 25



## **I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM**

Every school day in Colorado more than 70,000 students are out of school. It should be obvious that if students are not in school they are not learning and probably will not achieve academically. While some of this absence is health-related much of it is related to truancy, suspensions, or expulsions. Too many youth are out of school for too long and fall behind in their studies. When students fall behind at school it may be difficult, perhaps impossible to make up lost ground and “catch up”. This leads to further disengagement from school, from teachers and ultimately can lead to serious anti-social behavior like juvenile delinquency.

Schools typically discipline students’ misbehavior by excluding them. This sends a message to students, who are often already struggling, that they are in fact not wanted. This “push out” model of discipline tends to make a bad situation worse. Clearly, if students are a threat to others they need to be isolated, but students who exhibit threatening behavior make up only a small fraction of the out of school youth population. Today over 20% of school suspensions across Colorado are for truant behavior (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002). Sending a student home for not coming to school provides little or no intervention to the underlying causes of the absences and is counterproductive to the educational process.

A predictable negative cycle of behavior is becoming very clear and requires immediate attention. The cycle begins with early truant behavior that leads to later school suspensions, expulsions, and delinquency. Unexcused absence is our first, best symptom of student problems that lead to poor outcomes. If we are to re-engage students, the trajectory that begins with truancy (office referral, suspension, expulsion, dropout, and delinquency) must be broken. Schools must be more aggressive in their efforts to curb and eliminate truancy as the first step in breaking this cycle.

This report explores a variety of school attendance issues that predict poor achievement, dropping out, delinquency, and ultimately adult criminality. The good news is that these poor outcomes are preventable for most students at a fairly modest investment. While it makes sense to intervene early, there are positive results gained by turning around expelled youth.

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC) has devoted the last seven years to studying and designing programs for out of school youth. Public policy has been developed to support prevention efforts that have significantly improved outcomes for youth who have been truant, suspended, or expelled. This is a success story of research evolving into pilot programs, policy, and finally programs. There are clear strategies and recommendations for education, juvenile justice, law enforcement, and communities. Unlike many social ills we can identify the problem and a range of effective solutions to reclaim these children and youth. It does not cost a lot and can save millions of dollars. In a separate cost benefit study just completed, CFFC found that if we turn around just one truant youth and have her or him complete high school, the government savings pay for the cost of a truancy reduction program for one year. If we also are able to keep the truant youth from becoming delinquent, we can save an additional \$800,000 in government costs (CFFC, 2002). It is surprising that given the long term financial impact of allowing students to fail at school, more attention has not been paid to the issue of out of school behaviors, clearly the best indicators that students have given up on school.

### NATIONAL SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

Between the years 1985 and 1998 there was a national increase of 67% in status offense cases involving truancy. This represents a 58% increase *in the rate* of truancy cases. Truancy cases comprised 29% of all status offense cases (Butts, et. al., 1996). While there is not an abundance of national truancy data, some metropolitan areas report thousands of unexcused absences each day.

- Philadelphia averages 20,000 students truant per day (Street, 2001).
- In public schools the absentee rate was highest in urban schools.
- Absentee rates generally increased with rates of student poverty as measured by the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Heavyside, 1998; Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2001).

During the 1996-97 school year, student absenteeism, tardiness, or class cutting (i.e., truancy) was one of the three discipline issues most often cited by public school principals as serious or moderate problems in their schools. Furthermore, principals in high schools were more likely to report this as a problem in 1997 than in 1991, an increase from 39% to 52% (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

### TRUANCY AS A PREDICTOR OF DELINQUENCY AND OTHER PROBLEMS

Truancy has been clearly identified as one of the early warning signs of students headed for educational failure via suspension, expulsion, dropping out, or delinquent activity (Bell, et al, 1994; Garry, 1996). A lack of commitment to school has been established by several studies as a risk factor for substance abuse, delinquency, teen pregnancy, and school dropout. Students with the highest truancy rates have the lowest academic achievement and are most likely to drop out (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 1999).

Several studies illustrate the link between truancy and later negative outcomes. A longitudinal study conducted in St. Louis over a 30-year period showed that early truancy was clearly related to adult criminality, violence, marital problems and job problems. In a study of prison inmates conducted in 1996, 89% had a history of school truancy.

Three grand juries in Dade County, Florida analyzed the data from more than 5,000 of the county's most serious juvenile offenders and found that excessive truancy was one of the three traits most of these juveniles had in common. Additionally, several studies documented that between 75% and 85% of the serious juvenile offenders had been truant or chronically absent from school in their youth.

High rates of truancy are linked to high daytime burglary rates and high vandalism. There is also a direct relationship between truancy and reports of daytime crime. For instance, in Contra Costa County, California, 60% of violent juvenile crime occurs between 8:00 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. A recent investigation by police in Tacoma, Washington found that when they targeted neighborhoods to bring in truant youth for a sustained period they were able to reduce daytime crime by over 60% in those areas (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002).

Children who are habitually truant are often placed under the supervision of social services, a move that is traumatic for children and families and is expensive for taxpayers. The financial impact of truancy is passed on to taxpayers through the cost of court time, personnel, and fees paid to attorneys representing the school in truancy proceedings. Truancy is a direct link to expulsion from school. Many expelled students will be in youth corrections within one year at a cost of \$50,000 to \$65,000 per student per year. Multiply that by 2190 expulsions in the 1999-2000 school year, and the costs are great.

### **COLORADO'S DEFINITION OF TRUANCY:**

Colorado's definition of truancy is typical of most states. In Colorado "chronically truant" means "a child who has attained the age of seven years and is under the age of sixteen years having four unexcused absences from public school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from public school during any school year." CRS 22-33-107 (3) (a). Local schools typically further define these standards about what constitutes "unexcused" absence and how it is determined and reported to parents.

In Colorado, as in most states, the paradox is that truancy information is required to be gathered under compulsory attendance laws but is usually not required to be reported by schools to their state education agencies. Attendance rates, particularly those calculated by a one-day count, give only a snapshot of school enrollment but tell us nothing about the rates of excused and unexcused absences. Truancy information is maintained at school buildings and not reported to the State. Consequently, we know almost nothing about the statewide incidence of truancy and unexcused absences. The following figures are what we have been able to discern from a variety of sources over the seven years that CFFC has been tracking out of school youth in the state:

- Truancy filings with the courts are more common in the Denver metro area than in surrounding areas (Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, 2002)
- Over 90% of youth in detention for delinquent acts have a history of truancy
- 70% of suspended youth were chronically truant in the preceding 6 months
- Nearly half of expelled students had been chronically truant in the previous year (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 1995)
- 20% of youth were suspended for truant behavior (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002)
- 80% of dropouts were chronically truant in the previous year
- 3% of expulsions were for chronically truant behavior specifically (Colorado Foundation for Families and Children, 2002)

## II. IN SEARCH OF PROMISING PRACTICES: TRUANCY REDUCTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAMS

In 1998, the U. S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) awarded a diverse group of communities funding to augment existing programs or to develop new model demonstration programs to combat truancy locally. Each community was encouraged to be innovative while maintaining common elements required including:

- A continuum of services provided to identified truants and their families;
- A community-based collaboration including members from multiple agencies;
- Community-wide public awareness campaign;
- Demonstration of system reform and accountability;
- Participation in a national process evaluation.

The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (CFFC) has been evaluating the seven programs nationally for over three years. In addition, three programs within the state have been evaluated through funds awarded by the Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, resulting in ten model programs from which data are gathered. Through multiple methods, including qualitative and quantitative strategies, common characteristics of the chronically truant youth and their families have been documented. Several promising strategies and interventions tailored to the local community have been identified. The impact on the individual youth and family, and also on the community at large will be monitored for the duration of the evaluation.

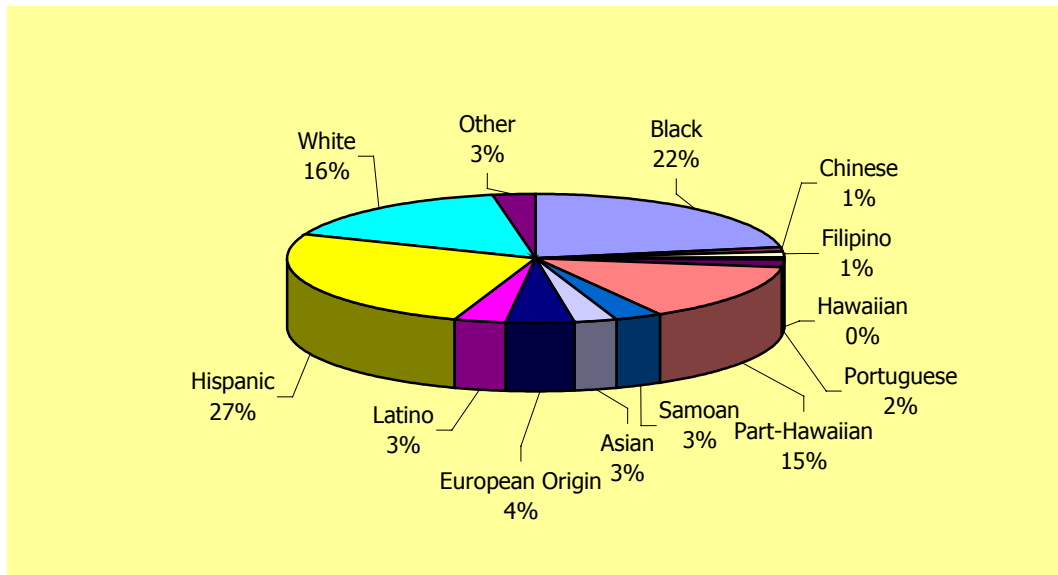


### THE PICTURE OF CHRONIC TRUANCY

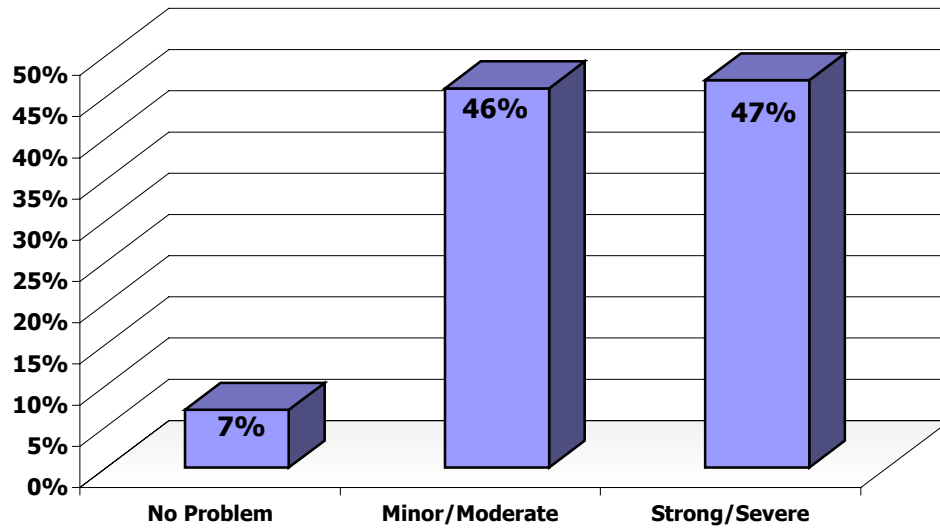
The truant youth served by the ten demonstration sites often are youth of color, however the reasons for this overrepresentation are not known. While 16% of the youth in this sample were Caucasian, 30% were Hispanic/Latino and 22% were Black (see Figure 1). There are equal numbers of males and females receiving services within the programs.

A moderate to high level of stress is reported in over 90% of the homes, which are primarily single mother headed households, illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 1. Ethnic Breakdown of Truancy Project Participants, 01-02**

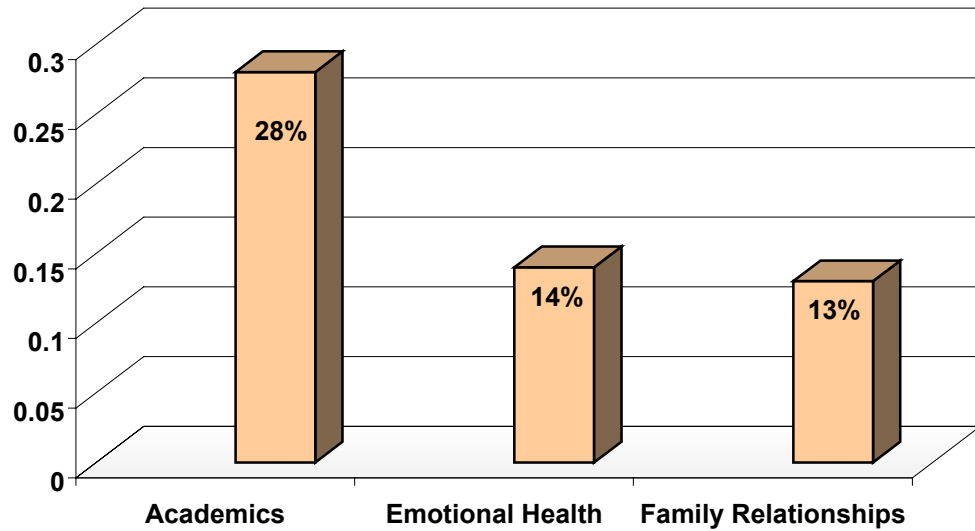


**Figure 2. Level of Family Stress for Truant Youth, 01-02**



Focus groups were held at the truancy reduction sites with program participants. Several common themes emerged as to why youth are truant. Getting behind in school work is commonly reported. For example, if a student has already missed several lessons and doesn't follow what is happening upon return to the classroom, he or she is likely to not go back. This begins a cycle that often leads to chronic absenteeism. Other reasons youth report for not going to school include being bored with irrelevant curriculum, a school environment in which they feel that no adults care about them or in which the teachers don't seem to want to be there. Disrespect from staff and feeling uncomfortable at school were additional reasons.

**Figure 3. Frequently Assessed Areas of Need Among Truant Youth, 01-02**

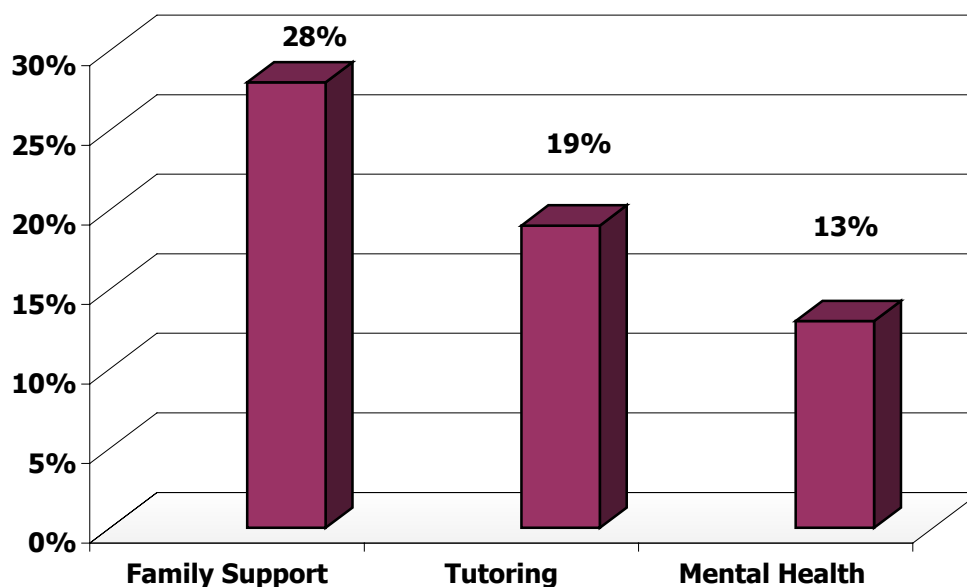


Most often the needs of the student are academic, because the youth is struggling in class or is behind in work due to nonattendance. Twenty-eight percent of the youth are assessed as having academic problems and needs. As Figure 3 illustrates, other frequently identified concerns include emotional health (such as depression or acting out behavior) at 14%, and problematic relationships among family members at 13%.

### PROGRAM SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

Tutoring and academic support are frequently put into place to get the student back on track with schoolwork. Nineteen percent of the youth across programs receive tutoring services. Mental health services are provided to 13% of the youth. Twenty-eight percent of the families are referred to affordable counseling services and other family support. (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Most Frequent Services for Truant Youth, 01-02**



Often youth and their families may not know about alternatives to the regular public school. Just as often there are few alternative education programs within the community, especially at the middle or elementary level. Parents or students will often seek modifications to schedules or class assignments within the regular school to help alleviate attendance problems. Early start times lead to tardiness and absenteeism for high school students who report that they would be more likely to go to school if classes began later in the morning and ended later in the day. In support of later start times for adolescents, brain research suggests that adolescents have different biological sleep needs, both for more sleep and for staying up later and rising later (Wahlstrom, 1999).

Because truancy is not the exclusive problem of school systems or of juvenile justice, the development of a successful program requires collaboration within the community. This is not always easy. Several of the demonstration sites reported that enlisting the cooperation of various agencies can be difficult. Collaborators often feel little ownership for the tasks at hand. Early lessons learned are that these relationships must be fostered and take time to develop. In cases where a community coalition was already in existence and where truancy became the agenda for the group, members felt more a part of a joint effort and not simply volunteering their time for the program staff.

## **THE DEMONSTRATION SITES**

Two of the three Colorado sites are funded through school districts. The other is housed in the 17th Judicial District. Denver Public School's Community Assessment Center employs a school social worker to work with youth and families referred for chronic truancy. The social worker completes an extensive intake assessment with the youth and family and links them to appropriate services in the community, including mental health, tutoring, or substance abuse services.

Thompson School District is the other of the two demonstration sites in Colorado that take place within a school system. The truancy efforts in this school district are combined with in school suspension and at risk of expulsion efforts to form a continuum of services for at risk youth. Case managers monitor attendance in schools and help youth catch up on their work.

The third program in Colorado resides in the 17th Judicial District and is a court diversion program. Youth who are at risk of receiving a truancy petition from the school are referred to a truancy case manager who draws up a contract with the youth and family. If the contract is completed successfully the petition is waived. If not, the youth goes before a magistrate and is ordered to attend school.

The additional seven include a probation department in New York, the superior court in Washington, a Weed and Seed office in California, the mayor's office in Texas, the state attorney's office in Florida, part of a Safe Streets campaign in Washington, and the school of education at the University of Hawaii.

A case management model is part of each of the demonstration programs. The truancy case manager determines the needs of the student and refers or links the youth and family to services.

## **NECESSARY PLAYERS FOR PRODUCING PROMISING PROGRAMS**

A view expressed by many of the programs is that it is sometimes difficult to get the cooperation of outside agencies. For example, often schools view truancy as a juvenile justice problem and consequently do not want to invest limited resources towards the solutions. Schools are frequently leery of sharing student information with other agencies. Successful relationships take time to gain a level of trust among the agencies.

**School Systems:** Each state has compulsory attendance laws that guide when a student is considered chronically truant and what steps should be taken to rectify the problem. The logical and most obvious way to flag youth at risk of developing chronically truant behavior is at school. However, often it is long past the legally identified number of absences before the truancy reduction programs have contact with the student. It is frequently the case that there is no staff position at a school that deals solely with attendance. Attendance is often viewed as a clerical and reporting task and not an important indicator of school problems. It is likely that a secretary with other responsibilities handles attendance for the entire school. This can be a daunting task in a school with a large membership. Many times the opportunity for early intervention, for example an attendance meeting with the student and family or a letter to parents, falls by the wayside due to inadequate staffing. Other barriers to addressing non-attendance include:

- antiquated attendance databases that are slow and inaccurate,
- over-worked office staff burdened with clerical duties and reporting functions,
- 'push-out' policies such as out of school suspension for truancy, or failing students based on absences;
- automated phone calling systems to report absences which are ignored or erased by students at home;
- unclear school building attendance policies to parents and teachers.

Ideally, the school should contribute to the solution by making policies clear and ensuring that students and their parents/guardians understand them. Strong leadership is needed to encourage teachers to report youth who are chronically absent. A strong relationship with the agency that is funding the truancy reduction program is critical to successfully keeping youth at school.

**Juvenile Justice and Law Enforcement:** The juvenile justice system and law enforcement are the other obvious partners. Once the student has been identified as truant and the school has done everything possible to correct the problem, stronger sanctions are imposed. The link between law enforcement, the juvenile justice system, schools, and other agencies may include contact with community police officers, school resource officers, probation officers, juvenile judges and magistrates, attorneys, and guardians ad litem.

The importance of these players in policy decision-making is underscored by the fact that they are the ones that design and implement sanctions. The sanctions must be enforceable and provide assurance that they are carried out. Because the local police must deal with daytime crime, they have a vested interest in the issue of truancy and can be involved early in identifying out of school youth in the community.

In the demonstration sites, when youth are identified as chronically truant, the program case manager determines the course of action. Community resources to address the problem might include linking them to mental health agencies, drug or alcohol treatment, after school tutors, Boys and Girls Club, or mentoring programs. Support from the local business community is one avenue for promoting the importance of school attendance. Local merchants can further the cause by refusing to serve youth during school hours, or informing daytime police officers when they see youth out of school.

Finally, a parent/guardian representative and a youth representative involved in the truancy reduction programs sends the message that parents and youth can make an impact, and that their voices are critical in addressing the truancy problem.

### **PROMISING STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS**

Although the demonstration sites and other truancy reduction efforts across the states were developed locally, CFFC has found that there are several interventions commonly used because there has been some indication of success documented. Multi-level interventions range from "carrots," which are the incentives to improve attendance, to "sticks," which are the deep end sanctions to enforce compliance.

Students report that having a person at school who is checking up on them gives the sense that someone cares and motivates them to come to school. Thus, the case management model is a common component of truancy reduction programs. Frequently, contracts between the case manager and the family are signed to avoid going further into the court system. If the youth is compliant with the contract and attendance improves, court is diverted and no further sanctions are imposed. If they do not comply, the next step is a date in court.

Another promising strategy is Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) comprised of a multi-disciplinary team that reviews the records of chronic truants at risk of failing. The team meets with the youth and family, and determines what needs to be done to rectify the truancy problem. Much like the case management model, the SARB requires the family to sign an agreement that the child will attend school. SARBs are also used to divert they youth from court.

Another intervention is the use of teen court. Youth are judged by a jury of peers on first time minor offenses, such as chronic truancy, and consequences such as community service, jury duty, or apologies are given. Research on teen courts appears favorable at a low implementation cost (American Bar Association website, <http://www.abanet.org>).

Truancy centers provide a location for law enforcement officers to take youth found out of class during school hours. The benefit of having the center versus delivering youth back to school is that the police officers can spend time intervening with the youth, potentially making a connection or an impact on the youth.

When these diversions fail, a truancy petition (citation, ticket) is filed with the court and harsher sanctions may be ordered by the presiding judge or magistrate. The loss of driving privileges, probation, community service, daily fines, detention, and incarceration of parents are all examples of deeper-end sanctions when prevention and early intervention fails.

While there is not yet much outcome data on these promising strategies on a statewide or national level, some communities that implement these interventions claim to have reductions in day time crime and report improved attendance at the district and building level. Because of the use of a continuum of 'carrots to sticks' , it is difficult to determine with precision which interventions are more effective than others.

While the previous section highlighted common practices for reducing truancy, each truancy reduction program is locally developed based on the needs of the community, limitations of resources, the success of the collaborative group, and creative leadership. The following are additional innovations used at the local level.

### TRUANCY AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

- King County Superior Courts in Seattle, Washington displayed ads on metro buses telling youth "want respect? stay in school."
- In Jacksonville, Florida, the program holds a truancy awareness month at the beginning of the school year, during which each student in the district receives a brochure explaining the compulsory attendance law in Florida. The brochure also promotes a local truancy website where parents and youth can go for information.
- In Suffolk County, NY a truancy poster contest was held at an elementary, middle and high school. The winning poster was displayed in stores and other businesses making customers aware that the businesses supported truancy reduction efforts.
- The probation officer in Suffolk County was trained at bicycle policing, and combs the area on a bicycle educating parents and encouraging youth to stay in school.
- The program manager in Contra Costa, California linked up with the mobile nurse during vaccination time and educated the parents of incoming students about compulsory education laws.



### COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL BUSINESS

- In the NY program, a local bank donated the funds to print the winning poster and also contributed several hundred dollars for award scholarships for the winners at each school.
- Florida's program enlisted the help of their phone company and a fast food chain and purchased cell phones for UPS drivers to use when they spot truants. They also created a toll free number that any citizen can use to report truants.

### ADDITIONAL CREATIVE IDEAS INCLUDE:

- An extensive incentive program that recognizes both students and their parents for improved attendance,
- Holding truancy court on school grounds so that there is a strong presence and message sent to students,
- Incarcerating parents and having the local media present when the parents are arrested and broadcasting this on the evening news,
- Case managers accompanying police officers on 'knock and talk' visits to homes of chronic truants.

With strong community collaboration, and a program design based on local data and the needs of the community, it is possible to have widespread impact on attendance and daytime crime rates and garner local support.

### III. IN SEARCH OF PROMISING PRACTICES: INTERVENTIONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION PROGRAMS

In 1995, CFFC completed a study that looked at the cost of academic failure. Data were gathered from students held in various detention settings in Colorado. This report was then presented to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and the Colorado Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ). As a result a partnership was forged among these two state agencies and CFFC. Through this partnership, DCJ funded the initial In School Suspension and At Risk of Expulsion study and the ongoing program evaluation. CFFC advocated to the Colorado legislature to invest state monies toward prevention programs aimed at keeping children and youth in school. CDE manages the \$ 6 million program, funding grants to local schools.

Five years later, the Colorado Department of Education continues to award and support the implementation of programs, which offer best practice in re-claiming out of school youth. Toward that end, grants are annually awarded to over 50 expulsion and at-risk of expulsion programs, and over 25 in-school suspension programs. The following data come from CFFC's ongoing evaluation of these programs.

## THE PICTURE OF SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION

In the state of Colorado and nationwide students are suspended and expelled for a number of reasons. Zero tolerance legislation has opened the door for school systems to often implement stricter requirements of students and families in school settings and in the community as it relates to safety.

Zero tolerance refers to "policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor" - which grew out of state and federal drug enforcement policies in the 1980s (Skiba, & Peterson, 1999). Ideas such as the "one strike and you're out" approach have prompted much concern and controversy in dealing with the behavior of students nationwide (Essex, N. 2000).

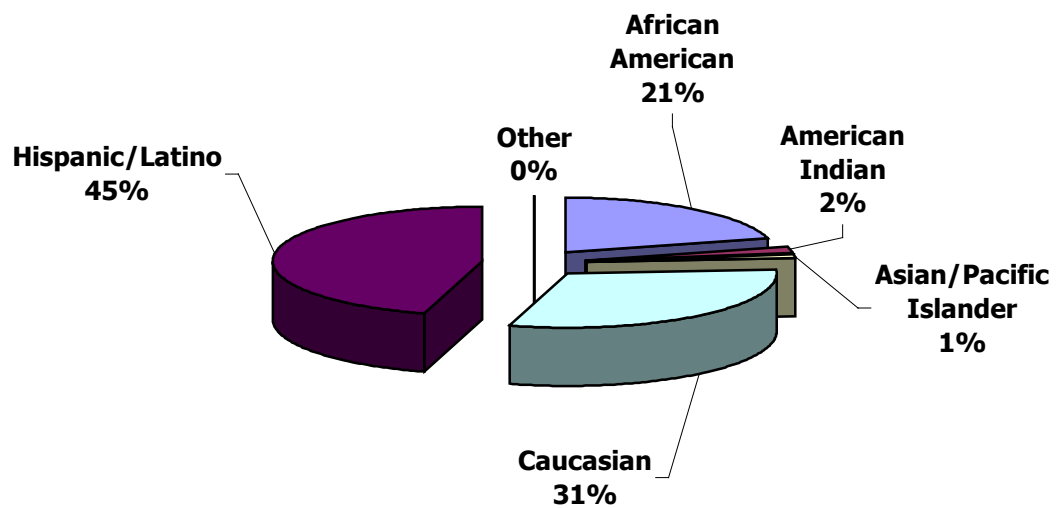
Currently in Colorado, the Department of Education provides funds for 59 expulsion programs, and 27 in-school suspension programs. These programs cover both elementary and secondary levels and include students considered to be "at-risk" of suspension and expulsion. Students identified as "at-risk" are students who have difficulties in one or more areas of concern. These include:

- students with several office referrals for behavioral problems (leading to the Habitually Disruptive label),
- students who are chronically truant,
- students who are struggling in academic tasks and primarily failing all or almost all subjects,
- students who are displaying emotional difficulties that tend to stem from family stressors,
- students on the fringe of the social network,
- students who have had some interface with law enforcement.

During the first half of the 2001-2002 school year 85% of the students served in these programs were considered to be "at-risk". This signifies an attempt on the part of schools to identify students in need of intervention (prevention) before an expulsion process occurs.

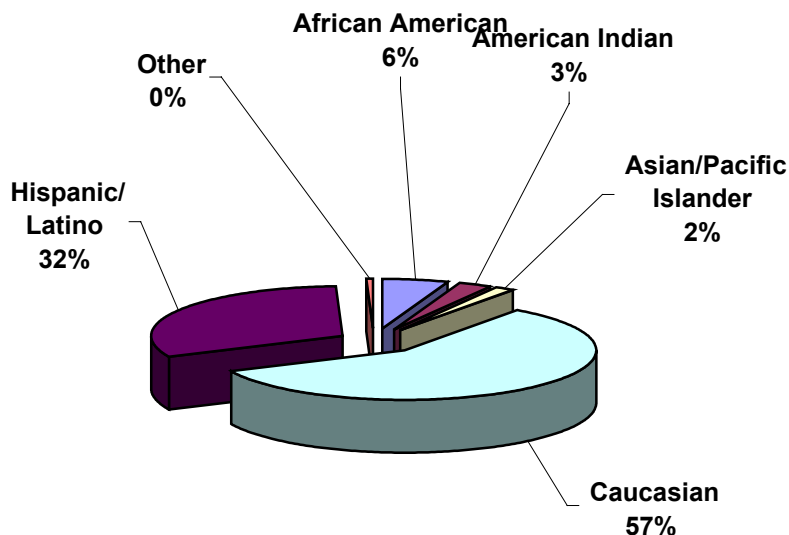
Consistent with the truancy reduction demonstration programs, the majority of children and youth served by in-school suspension programs tend to be youth of color. During the first half of the 2001-2002 school year, 45% of the youth served were Hispanic/Latino, and 21% were African American, while 31% were Caucasian (See Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Ethnicity of Colorado Students Served by Suspension Programs, 01-02**



In contrast to the suspension data however, expulsion programs served 32% Hispanic/Latino students, 6% African American and 57% Caucasian students during this same period (See Figure 6). The cause of the reversal in the data is not known but warrants further study.

**Figure 6: Ethnicity of Colorado Students Served by Expulsion Programs, 01-02**



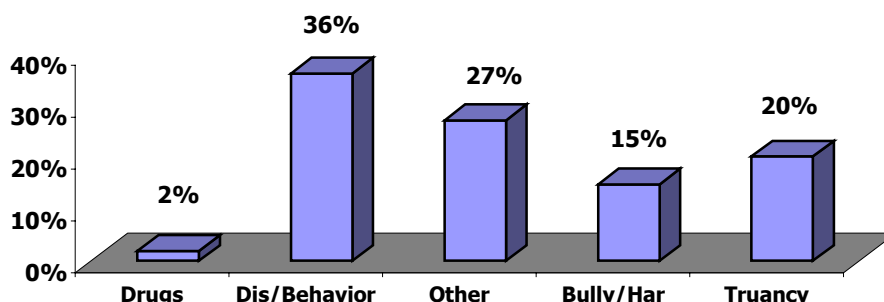
Unlike the data collected from the truancy reduction program that shows equal numbers of males and females accessing services, in both the suspension and expulsion programs males are represented at a ratio of 2:1 to females.

### IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSION PROGRAMS

The primary focus for in-school suspension programs is not only to provide discipline, but also to keep students in school vs. sending them home for offenses. The intent is to keep some connection with the student and attempt to keep them engaged in an academic setting. In-school suspension programs are typically comprised of two main components in addressing the needs of the students being served. The first is an academic component, which programs around the state have identified as crucial in keeping suspended students up to date with class work and helps to ease the transition back into the classroom once the suspension is completed. Additionally, an academic focus provides a chance for students to receive much needed assistance with tasks that may have been too difficult initially in the classroom and perhaps prompted some behavioral "acting out". While teachers and paraprofessionals are used to meeting this end, many of the sites report using computer-assisted programs, particularly for the middle and high school level students. Computerized programs are self-paced and allow for students to work at their own speed vs. that of the classroom teacher.

The second component of these programs focuses on social/emotional/behavioral needs. In the Colorado sites receiving funding from CDE, the most frequent reason for suspension was behavioral concerns at 36%. Clearly this indicates the need to focus interventions on programs that will target behaviors and provide alternative solutions for students. Many of the sites reported using specific/prescribed programs that have at their core built-in behavior management components. Other sites use counselors and/or school psychologists in an effort to deal with the specific issues and needs of the students being served. Behavior contracts have been identified as a necessary part of this process, with counselors and school psychologists taking the lead in developing them. Sites indicate that some focus on the mental health needs of many of these students helps to curb further behavior problems. The following graph highlights the reasons given for suspension during the first half of the 2001-2002 school year, for participating programs. These reasons include drugs, disruptive behavior, bullying/harassment, truancy and other.

**Figure 7: Reasons for Suspensions in Colorado, 01-02**



### **AT-RISK PROGRAMS**

In conjunction with programs targeted to reach expelled youth, an effort is being made statewide to identify students who are considered to be “at-risk” of expulsion. These programs have targeted interventions around monitoring attendance, discipline referrals, and grades, given that these areas tend to predict later school failure and disengagement.

Services are also directed at the social/emotional needs of students who might otherwise not seek help for these kinds of concerns. Students might be involved in tutoring sessions, social skills groups, or outside activities in an effort to engage them in the school process and redirect their energies toward positive alternatives.

Additionally, some districts use a community liaison as the primary connection between the home and school. This is done as a means to keep families engaged in the school process, and in order to identify the needs and concerns of these families that might be impacting the attendance, performance, and behavior of the students.

## EXPULSION PROGRAMS

In the state of Colorado and nationally, students can be expelled for infractions such as possession of a weapon, the use or sale of illegal substances (drugs), habitually disruptive classroom behavior, and for behavior considered to be threatening or dangerous to others. In Colorado an additional category of "other" is present, which allows school districts to interpret whether or not other behaviors warrant expulsion. Examples of infractions that are in this "other" category include harassment, theft, vandalism and truancy. Districts around the state have interpreted this somewhat ambiguous category differently; therefore the reasons falling into this category vary throughout the state.

Several primary areas are targeted in expulsion prevention programs. These include academics, family involvement, and mental health needs. In line with the in-school suspension programs, academics are a primary concern. Many of the programs offer more structured learning environments than the typical classroom. Additionally, these classrooms have smaller numbers of students, garnering a better teacher to student ratio. Expulsion programs must focus on a variety of issues in addition to academics; therefore, core academic skills (reading, writing, and math) are the primary focus. This then gives students more overall success as they transition back to their home schools. Computer programs are also used to engage students and help further and/or maintain academic skills.

Another major area of focus is on mental health needs. These services include:

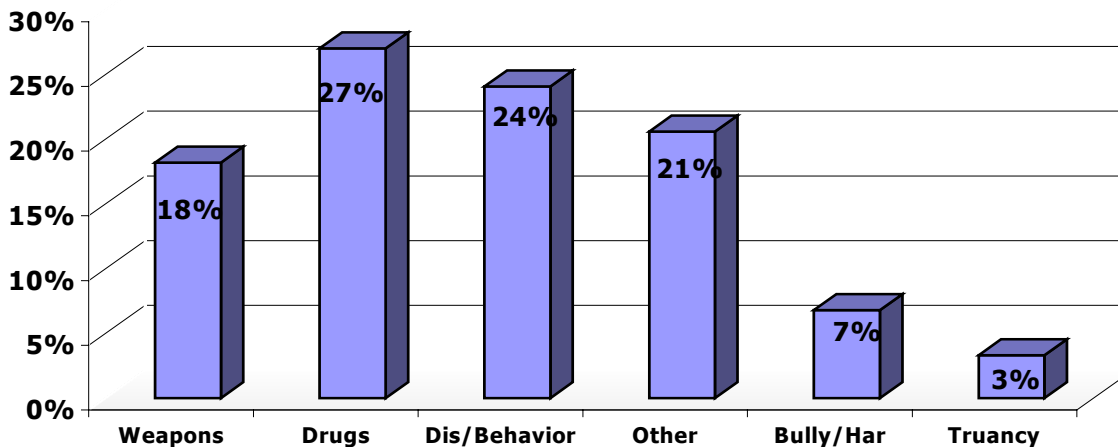
- drug/alcohol treatment,
- family/individual therapy,
- anger management groups,
- character education components,
- and community service.

Program staff have indicated that guiding students to address their own behavioral and social/emotional needs helps prepare the student for future situations as they return to their home school.

Of primary importance in these programs is the connection between the home and school. Providing a model that encourages parents and links them to the school setting enhances the program and the quality of outcomes. Some programs provide in-home contact with students and parents while others have mandatory parent/family night on a weekly basis. Still others provide both. Sites report that often these are families that have felt disaffected by the school system and now have been able to re-engage in the schooling of their child.

Multiple outreach strategies to these families have shown great promise toward the reclaiming of these youth. The following graph highlights the reasons given for expulsions during the first half of the 2001-2002 school year for participating programs.

**Figure 8: Reasons for Expulsions in Colorado, 01-02**



**NECESSARY PLAYERS NEEDED TO PRODUCE PROMISING PROGRAMS**

When looking at the needs of students in suspension programs and at-risk/expulsion programs, the severity of the needs stands apart from the general student population. In order to address the depth of the needs, programs identify the need for many key players. Programs across the state indicate that it is crucial for program staff to be committed to their students. The students served in expulsion programs are the students who have had many "run-ins" with adults in school settings and the focus and outcome of those encounters have been negative. In programs designed to specifically meet the needs of these students, it is critical that they have an opportunity to develop relationships that enhance the skills and strengths that they already possess versus reinforcing the mistakes they have made in the past. Students indicate that staff members need to be open, direct, fair, and need to provide the structure these students often lack both internally and in their external world.

Parent/family involvement in the lives of their children can never be underestimated. The many environmental, financial, and personal pressures experienced by all families are clearly documented in education literature. The ability of these families in particular, to cope with the myriad struggles they face has been challenging for the most part. While clearly not all families fit this generalization, the majority of them do, and the impact on the student is obvious.

Not only do expulsion/suspension programs need to help alleviate the pressures felt by the students, they must also provide services to help address the needs of the families in order for the student to function at his/her best. The involvement of parents in the program is tantamount to the success of the program, and likewise the students. Parent input, suggestions, and feedback must not only be sought out, it must be incorporated into the missions and goals. Parents are not only key stakeholders, but also partners in the process.

In order to address the total ecology of the students served in expulsion and suspension programs, the inclusion of community agencies is a must. Students in these programs have often been disaffected in many ways, including being "pushed out" of community services that are available to other students. In a sense they have been excluded from the very structures that we know keep kids engaged in life, let alone school. The participation of these agencies in the recapturing and re-engaging of the students in expulsion and suspension programs sends out the message that in fact it does "take a village" to promote success and safety in communities. Community agencies can not only provide financial support to programs, they can provide volunteers, role models, mentors, and opportunities for students who need guidance, connections, and hope. Community agencies provide a critical link between the student and their families, to community members and the community support services.

## PROMISING STRATEGIES AND INTERVENTIONS

Throughout the state of Colorado, suspension and expulsion programs have implemented a variety of approaches in an attempt to curb disengagement and to reclaim students. Several interventions that are commonly used have been described above, because there has been some indication of success documented with these approaches. In addition to these strategies, a few programs (with other programs beginning to implement them or considering the use of these programs) have used specific programs touted nationally as having successful outcomes.

One such program and philosophy is Restorative Justice, used by the Thompson R2-J school district. Restorative Justice is recognized worldwide as one of the largest growing approaches dealing with crimes and students who are suspended, at-risk of expulsion, or expelled. This approach offers a comprehensive approach for dealing with the "victim" and "offender" in order to subvert suspensions and expulsions.



Restorative Justice attempts to re-define “crime as injury to the victim and the community rather than an affront to the power of authorities” (Ierley, & Claassen-Wilson, 2002). The focus is on repairing the harm, as much as possible, and having the offender take responsibility for his/her behavior while bringing resolution, versus only restitution, to offenses and crimes committed. Schools can use a variety of restorative practices in an effort to repair harm including community conferencing, peacemaking circles, victim offender mediation, letters of apology, and victim impact statements.

Another program that is gaining national attention in schools and is showing much promise is Aggression Replacement Training (ART), currently being used by the Denver Public Schools PREP program. ART, first developed by Dr. Arnold P. Goldstein, is a character education based program for students kindergarten through high school. It focuses on helping students learn their own cues for aggression and ways to deal with anger and aggression in a more constructive manner (Salmon, 1997). ART has a heavily based empathy component whereby students learn skills that promote empathy in order to resolve problems with others. Character traits such as caring, patience, humanity, integrity, support, service, and self-determination are part of the curriculum. Written lessons are geared toward the traits. Student participation in some discussion about the traits reinforces the messages throughout the day. Character traits are posted in the classrooms and hallways and assemblies are held to appreciate those who display a high level of that trait. In the ART curriculum, recognition and rewards for one's own behavior is are crucial components in changing behavior.

A nascent model being used by several sites and expanded upon by the Pueblo 60 School District is that of the community advocate. The community advocate takes the role of advocating for the child and family in regards to any concern that might be impacting school attendance or school behavior. Community advocates provide mentoring, family support, case management, and coordination among community resources in which students participate. Additionally, connections with community agencies are fostered and maintained in an effort to complete the circle of support for schools and families. Community advocates:

- make daily contact with students at school,
- provide at least weekly contact with families,
- follow up on absenteeism,
- provide academic support through tutoring & social/ emotional support for students.

The extensive nature of the involvement and interventions made by the community advocates has shown much promise in keeping kids and families connected to the school and community.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OUT OF SCHOOL YOUTH

The importance of school attendance to achievement, engagement, and educational success has been neglected in most education reform and prevention initiatives. School discipline, zero tolerance, and school safety concerns have combined to produce strategies that are counterproductive by pushing the problem out of the school and into the community.

For instance, suspending a student for being truant makes no sense to any reasonable person, but most of all to the student being disciplined. A zero tolerance policy that expels a six year old for bringing a paring knife to cut his/her apple at lunch seems illogical and removes the ability of competent professionals to make reasonable decisions about safety.

Attendance is the basis of school finance and school achievement. Making school attendance a priority is sound fiscal and educational policy. And assuring that each student in our schools that there will be at least one caring adult for them each day is sound policy based on data gathered from youth in the truancy reduction and suspension/expulsion prevention programs.

By researching these prevention programs, CFFC has identified solutions to prevent many predictable negative outcomes for youth that result from being out of school. CFFC recommends that:

- Courts, law enforcement and schools knit together a plan to improve school attendance and reduce truancy;
- Parents and schools intervene early at the first signs of unexcused absences in children;
- Schools adopt promising in-school suspension programs;
- Communities work to prevent expulsions and plan to re-engage expelled youth;
- Parents and students should be involved in any prevention program planning and implementation;
- Schools should change policies that push out students at risk;
- Compulsory attendance age should be 18 years old;
- Schools should be funded on average daily attendance, not a one-day count.

This document presents compelling evidence that educators, human services professionals and policy makers need to take immediate steps to improve school attendance. Policies and practices that push students out of school to discipline them when they do not pose a safety concern is counterproductive, leads to dropping out, and in many cases, delinquency and poor lifetime outcomes. We have presented programs that not only improve attendance but avoid government costs and save public dollars. The economic impact of high school completion is enormous for individuals and for government. While these prevention programs are cost effective and should be adopted statewide, we also need to ask citizens to set community standards of school engagement and school completion. "Stay in School" should be more than a cliché. It should be the expectation of every citizen for our young people and for our schools that serve them.



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