

Introduction

Recognizing that truancy is a significant predictor of juvenile delinquent behavior and long-term economic hardship, the Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program (TPTMP) intervenes with (primarily) elementary, middle school, and high school students and their families who display a pattern of absenteeism. The model focuses on students who have just begun to show a pattern of missed days; the target is intervention after three to five unexcused absences. A five year evaluation conducted by Luminesce Consulting, Columbus, Ohio confirms that the majority of TPMP students significantly improve their attendance rates as a result of intervention (OCDRCM, 1999-2004).

Although TPTMP has consistently demonstrated positive results in the effort to combat truancy, absent from these evaluations has been an examination of the impact of the program on the academic performance and behavior of the children whose families participate in the program. To fill this void, the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management and the Supreme Court of Ohio Dispute Resolution Section collaborated to commission Luminesce to conduct an independent evaluation to ascertain answers to those questions.

Evaluation Strategy

A two-phased approach to evaluating the impact of TPTMP on students' academic and social/emotional performance was proposed. The first phase employed a qualitative methodology to gather input from school personnel about the impacts of TPTMP on student's performance and behavior. The second phase was quantitative, and encompassed gathering data about students' academic performance and social/emotional behaviors based on research literature. What follows in this report is a description of the qualitative and quantitative phases of this study and its subsequent results.

Phase 1: Qualitative Methodology

Procedures

Because changes in academic and social/emotional performance may not be completely demonstrated through quantitative measures within the specified timeframe, a qualitative approach to discern these nuances was warranted. For this phase of the project, teachers, administrators, and counselors in two counties (Portage, Stark) were solicited to participate in a focus group discussion of the impact of TPTMP on student participants, specifically with regard to their academic performance and social/emotional behavior. These counties were selected based on their size, student composition, location (urban, rural), and involvement with the project (veteran, novice). Flyers were distributed by county coordinators to all school personnel participating in TPTMP during the 2004-2005 school year in Portage and Stark counties. Interested participants were instructed to phone (via toll free number) or email the evaluator for more information and screening. Screening criteria assured representatives from elementary and middle schools were involved, as well as teachers, counselors, and administrators participated.

Participants

One group in each school district was conducted by a trained facilitator, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and was audiotaped. Overall, 17 school personnel participated in the two group interviews. Eight participants were elementary school teachers, one was a middle school teacher, one was a guidance counselor, one was a principal, and six were community workers. Participants were compensated \$50 for their time and insights.

Interview Schedule

Along with personnel from the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management and the Supreme Court of Ohio, the evaluator developed an interview schedule and probes. Questions posed during the groups were:

- What changes in academic performance have you seen in students identified for the program? In what areas? Why do you think this is so?
- What changes in social/emotional behaviors have you seen in students identified for the program? How has this impacted your classroom?
- What other changes do you see in students identified for the program?
- How can the program better affect change in academic performance and/or social/emotional behaviors?
- Overall, what do you think of the TPTMP? What about it do you like/dislike?

Data Analysis

Using the transcripts of the audiotapes for analysis, an inductive analysis was undertaken. In this type of analysis, theories emerge from the “ground up” thereby letting categories or themes emerge rather than fitting them to predetermined classifications. A three-part coding system (concept, category and theme) was developed to examine responses from the school personnel focus group sessions. The term “concept” signified salient and discrete ideas, events, persons, and other instances of phenomena found in the manuscript. A “category” was a classification of concepts after the concepts had been compared against each other and relationships were found. The last coding classification was at the “theme” level. This brought together the categories. Concepts, categories, and themes were all coded.

Results

Overall, there seemed to be a great deal of similarity of experience among these participants. That is, regardless of whether they lived in an urban or rural area, were a teacher, community worker, guidance counselor, or principal, or were from a veteran or novice county; their experiences and responses were quite consistent. Results will be presented by the order in which questions were posed.

Question 1: What changes in academic performance have you seen in students identified for the program? In what areas? Why do you think this is so?

Overwhelmingly, the teachers stated the Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program had a dramatic effect on the improved academic performance of the students whose families participated in the program. Many of the teachers remarked that simply having them in the classroom made the biggest difference in that they were in class doing the work and not having to make it up later and that there was no “catching up” as they were working at the same pace as their classmates. As one teacher remarked:

The fact that they are here, they are doing all of their work here in the classroom as well as work outside the classroom for homework, and they are actually bringing it in. So the fact that they are here causes them to do better.

Another stated, “They now have more opportunity to get their work done and can get it done on time. When they are not here they obviously can’t do it and they can’t catch up.” Finally, another teacher related:

The student I had I think is more consistent. She would actually come in late. That was more her problem, the lateness rather than the truancy...But now she is not coming in later, she is not falling behind starting off the day late, catching up with us. As they come in they do morning work and so she is able to finish up things, not taking as much home and she is here. She is doing better.

As for how long the effects of mediation sustain academic performance, none of these school personnel had a really good feel for that. One person; however, stated:

I think it depends on the family. Some people have turned around and realized that the mediation was a positive meeting and we are only there to stress how important a child’s education is. My concern is the ones that we don’t have a response from.

Many related that the long term effects of the program were centered on behavior change. For example, one individual related,

...fortunately a lot of our students who do have attendance problems, they are able to maintain their academics...but part of being on time and being in school is starting a pattern with that child to be responsible so that when they do get to middle and high school level, they are part of that responsibility, not just the parents.

Another said, “I have a little boy this year whose sister I had two years ago, and the attendance is good, where it could have been a family problem.”

Conclusions

According to these participants, TPTMP is having a positive effect on the academic performance of those students whose families participate in the program. By being present in the classroom more work was completed, less classroom time was being spent getting those students on pace with the other students, and grade improvement seemed sustained. In addition to improved academic performance there also seemed to be a residual effect in that in the families where children were mediated, subsequent children in that family were more likely to also attend regularly.

Question 2: What changes in social/emotional behaviors have you seen in students identified for the program? How has this impacted your classroom?

Behavior problems were not an issue for the majority of these kids, so no real changes were evident in that domain. The school personnel stated that the children they had participate in the program were not typically disruptive, but rather, were unorganized. For example, one teacher stated, "Mine wasn't a behavior issue, it was just organization with papers not here, not there, not together." The school personnel did note a change in the behavior of the parents; however. For example, one guidance counselor said, "...the parents seem more comfortable with us. They will call me and let me know exactly what is going on with them if they missed that day in school."

Conclusions

The Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program does not have as great an impact on behavior as academic performance largely because social/emotional issues are not a primary concern for those students identified for the program. The school personnel did identify some behavior changes in the parents—more comfortable talking to teachers, more willing to check on the status of their child---which was positive.

Question 3: What other changes do you see in students identified for the program?

Participants noted numerous positive outcomes to participation in the TPTMP. One of these "other changes" was an increase in their self-confidence. As one teacher reported:

...he just missed so much and now that he is coming regularly, he is just blossoming. He knows what page he is on."

Teachers also related that the students seem to be happier and more organized. For example, one teacher said:

You know yourself if you are going into something, a stressful situation, and you don't feel prepared, that just makes it ten times worse. But if

they can get that organizational element in there and feel prepared, and come regularly—‘I was here yesterday so I know what I am doing today.’

Another teacher related a story about a student who was perpetually tardy prior to mediation. The teacher noted she seemed embarrassed for coming into class late day after day. After the mediation, she was on time and appeared happier to the teacher because she was not drawing attention to herself. She was just another kid in the class.

Finally, these teachers thought the students were thriving due to the increased attention, both at school and at home. Students were aware their parent(s) were meeting with school personnel about them and paying attention to their attendance, and this in itself was enough to invoke change for some.

A guidance counselor noted less frustration on the part of the teachers as a residual effect of the program. That is, one teacher knew a child's potential was for A-B level work, but he was getting D's and F's. As the counselor related, "She [the teacher] knew he should be getting good grades, but if he was never there, it meant he was getting further and further behind."

Another change as a result of TPTMP is that parents are more connected to the school personnel and involved in school activities than they were prior to mediation. As a principal stated, "What we are doing is building relationships and trust. Without mediation, it would be like a threat." A teacher related:

If I mediated with a family one year, it seems that relationship continues on more than just in the classroom. But just in general, the parent feels this connection to you that normally wouldn't have this confidence. Coming up we had one parent joining our adult education program, in part because she was comfortable in coming in and opening early on.

Conclusions

Unintentional consequences of the Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program for students were enhanced self-confidence, improved organization skills, and thriving on the attention. In most instances, the students who were mediated were fulfilling their potential and becoming model students. The TPTMP is having the unintended benefit of bridging some of the gaps between parents and school personnel. School personnel value the time spent with parents, understanding some of the auxiliary issues going on in their families and reinforcing the message that their child's education is important. Seemingly, after mediation the parents understand the school cares about their child and they are willing to work with them to foster his/her education.

Question 4: How can the program better affect change in academic performance and/or social/emotional behaviors?

One suggestion for improving the program to enhance academic performance even further may be to offer some parenting skills classes for those families that are mediated. As one person stated:

I think that their parenting skills are so poor that they don't understand. When I get a kid that parent says I just can't handle him anymore.' I am thinking, 'you get him up and drag him to school.'

Another observed parents' lack of respect for school personnel and a de-valuation of education as barriers that constantly need to be overcome. For example, she said:

I had one father tell me, 'You don't need to call me every time my daughter is absent. That is not your job. You are not her parent.' I would say, 'it is your job to get her here then.'

Another related, "We have families who have been mediated and it doesn't matter. What message do the children receive?" Finally, another teacher said:

...a lot of our parents are very young. Some are like 20 and 21. And in most cases, they did not finish school themselves. So their attitude is already one that is not respected. They don't feel comfortable in the schools. They don't see the importance. They think, 'hey, I'm living,' and they don't put the emphasis on education and so we have to change their mindset to let them understand that if they want better for their children than what they have, this is the way to do it.

Other suggestions for improving the program focused on logistical issues. For example, having more mediators and/or mediation days, evening or alternative hours for mediation so parents don't have to take off work, and offering rewards for students who maintain or improve their attendance were mentioned by these school personnel. Another suggestion was to involve the older elementary school students in part of the sessions. Teachers felt these students were old enough to understand what was going on, needed to begin taking responsibility for some of their attendance, and could see the concern of the teachers, principal, and their parents.

Finally, as a way for addressing the number of mediations occurring and the few mediators assigned to the program, exploring the possibility of group mediation vs. individual mediation was suggested. While this was met with some negativity by many in the group; comments such as, 'we would lose our connection with the parent' and 'we can't because of privacy,' it is a novel approach and may be a way to manage time and limited resources more efficiently.

Conclusions

Perhaps revising TPTMP to include a parenting skills component would be beneficial. By giving parents tools and skills for dealing with their children's issues, schools can continue to bridge gaps and forge new bonds with parents. Furthermore, examining mechanisms for offering rewards, making mediation even more accessible by holding

some mediations during alternate hours, and by exploring different methods for conducting mediation, the program may improve outcomes even more.

Question 5: Overall, what do you think of the TPTMP? What about it do you like/dislike?

There was overwhelming support from school personnel for the program. As one teacher exclaimed, "I wish we could mediate all of our parents!" These school personnel felt as though the program was improving attendance and academic performance, but a greater benefit was the connection with parents that they often do not get a chance to experience at school events or parent-teacher conferences. No dislikes were reported.

Conclusions

These school personnel would like to know whether there are some longer term benefits to TPTMP; however, they are quick to recognize that for the majority of families participating in this program, truancy is just one of a myriad of issues. For example, one of the community workers said:

We have about 85% poverty rate. We have people out of work. They have no unemployment. They have no transportation to get to school, even though it is a neighborhood school they may live a distance. If the child misses the bus, there is no way to get there unless they walk them through the cold and snow.

Another teacher related:

I think the economy in this area right now has really caused a lot of problems that are now, it all trickles down to the family unit, but the children are bearing the brunt of it. The mediation like this helps bring those parents in and then they tell you, 'you know we don't have a car, we don't know if we are going to have a place to live.

While another teacher stated:

...a lot of times they are taking care of younger siblings. They are asked to stay home. The mother says you need to stay here today and help me so I can go somewhere else—the grocery, work, pay bills.

Similarly, there were other social issues facing these families that also contribute to their child's attendance. For example, substance use, sexual abuse, and teen pregnancy were all mentioned as other factors in a students' poor attendance. As one community worker stated:

We are also dealing with pregnancies. We need day care for their babies. When you make a home visit on a 7th grader that has a baby....now we are dealing with family services to keep her in school. We deal with a lot.

Still, school personnel were also realistic in the impact they felt they could have. For example, one teacher empathized with a parent and could understand the lack of communication with the school in some instances, as she related:

If we have a mom that has little babies that has to walk through a couple of blocks to get to a pay phone, then that is a problem. It is not like they always have a phone. It is one thing to criticize them for not calling, but if I have a sick kid, I am not going to bundle up that child and drag my other little ones two blocks over.

One of the issues that was not the same between the two counties was, to date, there was not the problem of no shows for Portage County (rural). It may be the volume of cases was not as great in this county, which meant they were able to ensure participation in the mediation with pre-session letters and phone calls, whereas the workers in Stark County had more cases and were unable to attend to pre-mediation communication as well.

Overall, these school personnel were quite supportive and positive about the Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program. They appreciated the opportunities it afforded in bridging some communication gaps with parents and feeling more connected with parents about the students they serve.

Phase 2: Quantitative Methodology

Procedures

In order to examine the question of whether academic performance improves after mediation for truancy, the Child Behavior Checklist –Teacher Report Form (CBCL-TRF; Achenbach, 1992) was used. This instrument asks teachers to rate, on a four point scale from Failing (1) to Above average (4), students' current performance in reading or English, Writing, Arithmetic or Math, and Spelling. When appropriate (i.e, middle or high school student), performance in other academic subjects such as history, science, social science was also requested.

Results

Forms were completed for 19 students in Portage ($n = 10$) and Stark ($n = 9$) Counties. Over 80% of the students were male ($n = 15$) and white, non-Latino. For those students who were another race, they were most often African American ($n = 3$), with one student's ethnicity marked as "Other". Students ranged in age from 5 to 15, with an average age of 9 years. Grade levels of these students ranged from Kindergarten to 8th grade.

Conclusions

There were too few cases here to draw conclusions about academic performance as related to truancy and mediation; however, when coupled with the group interviews of school personnel, a compelling case can be drawn. For example, students apparently do not have behaviors that are all that different from their non-truant compatriots, with the exception of attending school or being on time. School personnel reported mediation making a difference in attendance and behavior and were quite positive about the Truancy Prevention Through Mediation Program, thus if given a larger sample size quantitative results may mirror the anecdotal evidence posed by personnel.