

## Introduction

Until recently, when addressing youth at risk, communities have often focused primarily on what happens after a child commits a crime. An increasing volume of research, however, is helping communities learn more about preventing troubled, self-destructive or violent behavior before it happens, keeping kids in school and out of the juvenile justice system. The *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* is one such tool in this arsenal as it has consistently demonstrated positive results in the effort to combat truancy among elementary, middle, and high school age students.

There is no easy formula to predict which kids will cut school, abuse substances, become disruptive and unruly, engage in criminal activity or act violently against themselves or others. What we do know is that a number of behaviors tend to be "red flags" or factors of risk that are strongly associated with kids who find themselves in trouble in school and in court. Kids who have these "risk factors" in their lives, particularly when there are more than one operating together, are far more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system than kids who do not (Cooper, 2000; Gabb, 2000; Garry, 2000). Truancy is just one of these factors.

### The Program

The *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* is unique in that it requires families, schools, juvenile courts, and social service agencies to work collaboratively to address the issue of chronic absenteeism and truancy. At participating schools, students with five or more absences in a grading period or ten or more absences throughout the school year are targeted for the program. Once a student has been identified, the school contacts the parent/legal guardian via letter to appear at a scheduled mediation. A parent/legal guardian, trained mediator, school representative, and in some cases, the student, participate in the mediation. At this meeting, the mediator serves as a neutral third party helping to facilitate discussion of the issues surrounding the students' unexcused absences and works to develop a mutually agreeable resolution to the problems. Should the student incur subsequent absences after the mediation, the parents are referred to juvenile court and warned the child may be charged as an unruly or delinquent child, and the parents charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor and/or violation of the state revised code regarding compulsory education.

### The Evaluation Method

In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program*, a tool was developed for use during the 2005-2006 school year. This form contained items such as the school and district of the mediation, the student's grade level, number of absences and tardies, mediation date, disposition (e.g., first mediation, second mediation, no show), and agreement status. An additional brief form was also developed for mediators to complete regarding the reasons for the absences. Forms were completed for each scheduled mediation and submitted to the evaluator on a regular basis throughout the school year.

## Results

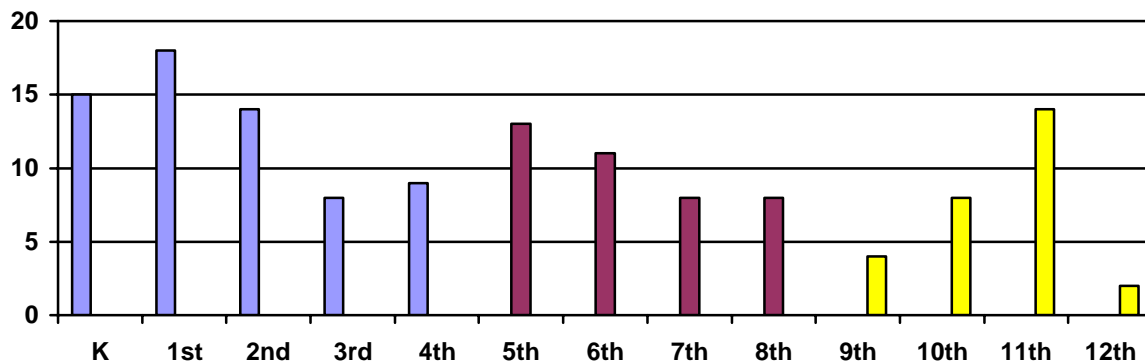
During the 2005-2006 school year, seven schools in four districts utilized the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program*. In total, 133 mediations were scheduled for this school year. **In each of the districts, statistically significant reductions in the number of absences and tardies were demonstrated for those students/families that participated in the program.**

The following table presents the number of mediations in which evaluations were conducted.

School	Number of Mediations
CCC&TC	20
Crestview EI	9
Crestview MS	15
Crestview HS	9
Daw MS	20
Garfield EI	20
Southern EI	40

Almost 76% ( $n = 101$ ) of the mediations were first mediations. Five mediations were second mediations (3.8%) and 27 of the mediations were no shows (20%). An agreement on all issues was reached in 67% ( $n = 89$ ) of mediations conducted. An agreement on some, but not all of the issues was reached four cases (3%) and no agreement was reached in twenty cases (15%). This information was missing for twenty cases (15%).

The mediations in which evaluation information was collected were mostly in the early primary grades and the early junior high school grades. The following chart presents the overall division of mediations by grade.



### Program Impact

#### Absences & Tardies

In Columbiana County, the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* is having a significant impact on reducing absenteeism and truancy among the target population. That is,

students whose parents/legal guardians, school representatives and in some cases, themselves attended mediation were absent and tardy significantly less after the mediation than before. More specifically, students who were mediated were absent, on average, 16.06 days before the mediation session and were absent 6.26 days after the mediation ( $t_{(1,121)} = -9.81, p \leq .001$ ). On average, students who were mediated were tardy 4.72 days before the mediation and 2.65 days after mediation ( $t_{(1,117)} = -4.87, p \leq .001$ ).

### Individual School Results

The following table represents the program impact on absences and tardies at each school participating in the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* within Columbiana County. The *Significantly different* column indicates whether the differences in the average number of pre-mediation absences/tardies and average number of post-mediation absences/tardies were statistically significantly different.

	Average Absences		Significantly Different	Average Tardies		Significantly Different
	Pre	Post		Pre	Post	
CCC&TC	17.81	8.44	yes	2.88	.88	yes
Crestview Elem	16.00	3.94	yes	10.13	3.13	yes
Crestview MS	11.67	3.50	yes	9.38	5.62	no
Crestview HS	13.33	12.94	no	7.50	7.63	no
Daw MS	17.35	5.32	yes	5.63	3.13	yes
Garfield EI	13.50	5.93	yes	3.70	2.20	no
Southern EI	18.61	5.93	yes	2.19	1.19	no

### **Reasons for Absence**

After the mediation, mediators were asked to complete an item about reasons for the child's absence from school. Student illness and transportation problems were the issues most frequently mentioned as reasons for a students' chronic absenteeism in Columbiana County (57.1% and 16.3%, respectively). Other reasons for a child not attending school regularly are presented in the table below.

Reason	Frequency	Reason	Frequency
Parent separation anxiety	5	Student illness	56
Parent divorce/separation	3	Student asthma problems	8
Parent employment interfered	6	Student had lice	8
Parent was ill	8	Student mental health issues	3
Parent does not feel child is safe	0	Student anxiety	12
Parent alcohol/drug issues	2	Medication side effects	6
Parent didn't know child missing school	2	Student does not feel safe	1
Lack of parenting skill	6	Conflict with other students	8
Unsafe conditions in home	4	Not understand assignment	3
Transportation problems	16	Homework not completed	10
Childcare problems	3	Student alcohol/drug issues	2
Homeless	0	Not feel need to attend	12

Other family member ill	9	Not getting up in time	10
ADD/ADHD mismanagement	5	Does not turn in notes	8

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* is having the desired impact on truancy for most of the participating schools in Columbiana County. As can be seen, overall, those families who participated in the program reduced the absenteeism of their children significantly.

#### Key Recommendations

Several consistent areas for improvement and refinement of the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* emerged from the data submitted by the participating schools. These recommendations are meant solely as suggestions.

- One of the consistent learnings from the *Truancy Prevention through Mediation Program* is its impact is greatest with students in the lower primary grades and the lower middle school/junior high school grades. It is thought that the transition time to a new school and to its “culture” around attendance serve as a good mechanism for these students and their parents/guardians to learn that attendance is expected and is being monitored. Seemingly, by high school, this program is less effective and may not be warranted for students after eighth grade.
- Given the most identified reason for a student’s absence was his/her illness, there may simply be a miscommunication between the school and the parents/guardians around the expectations for reporting and documenting student illnesses. Schools may want to be sure this information is communicated and reiterated throughout the school year.
- Transportation problems were the second most cited reason for student truancy. What is not clear from these data are whether the problems were with parent/guardian logistics or something else. This may need to be monitored in the future and protocols for addressing problems sought.