

# COMPREHENSIVE TRUANCY PREVENTION PROJECT

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## COMMUNITY PROJECT PROPOSAL

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## **I. Introduction**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, decreased funding resources and increased community and systemic collaboration set the stage for visionary solutions to unite the energies of schools, community leaders, human service agencies, law enforcement, corrections, and the judiciary to identify and implement cost-effective and research-based solutions.

This paper proposes a community driven Comprehensive Truancy Prevention Project (CTPP) utilizing multiple agencies and departments working together to achieve enduring impacts. It begins with a review of research findings on the scope of school truancy challenges nationally, and research demonstrating the program components necessary for effective intervention. The proposed program combines key program components identified nationally, cost efficient graduated reinforcements and response costs, and research based prevention curricula developed for schools, parents, and corrections. Each of the following systems will be productively engaged in leadership, planning, coordination, communication, implementation and evaluation of this Project to serve young people.

1. Schools
2. Parents
3. Law Enforcement
4. Adult Corrections
5. Juvenile Corrections
6. The Judiciary
7. Social Services
8. Community Leaders

## **II. School Truancy is a National Challenge**

Significant national research and programmatic attention has been devoted to school truancy research and intervention over past the several decades. As the result of these coordinated Federal, State and Local efforts, truancy is widely recognized as a significant marker on the developmental pathways of numerous individual, family and community challenges including decreased school performance, expulsions and

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dropouts, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, vandalism, violent juvenile crime, status offenses, gang participation, teen pregnancy, and ultimate progression for many youth to detention, foster care, or juvenile corrections. "Further, adults who were frequently truant as teenagers are much more likely than those who were not to have poorer health and mental health, lower paying jobs, an increased chance of living in poverty, more reliance on welfare support, children who exhibit problem behaviors, and an increased likelihood of incarceration."<sup>1</sup>

Nationally, hundreds of thousands of students are truant daily.<sup>2</sup> In 50% of New York City's high schools during September 2002, 150,000 (20%) of enrolled students missed roll call during the first weeks of class.<sup>3</sup> 97% of students expelled from school had a history of truancy, and truancy cases comprised 26% of all status offense cases handled during 1998.<sup>4</sup> Petitioned truancy cases nationally are about evenly divided between boys and girls, with an average age of 15 but with significant overrepresentation of minority youth—particularly African American, Latino and Native American students.<sup>5</sup> The Colorado Foundation for Families and Children reports a national increase of 85% between 1989 and 1998 in petitioned truancy status offense cases handled by juvenile courts (from 22,200-41,000), a 61% increase.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, A.J., Rosen, L.A. and Dynlacht, D. (1994). *Truancy Intervention*. The Journal of Research and Development in Education 57 (3), 203-211. Cited in Baker, M. L, Sigmon, J.N., and Nugent. M.E. (2001). *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. Washington, D.C.: OJJDP.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, M. L, Sigmon, J.N., and Nugent. M.E. (2001). *Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School*. Washington, D.C.: OJJDP.

<sup>3</sup> Reported by NY1, September 30, 2002. Cited in Mogulescu, S., Segal, H.J. (2002) *Approaches to Truancy Prevention*. New York: Youth Justice Program, Vera Institute of Justice, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Colorado Foundation for Families and Children Website, (2003), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Puzzanchera, C. Stahl, A. Finnegan, T., Snyder, H., Poole, R., and Tierney, N. (Forthcoming). *Juvenile Court Statistics, 1998*. Report. Washington, D.C. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, OJJDP. Cited in Baker, M. et. al, (2001), op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> *Overview of Truancy* (2003). Colorado Foundation for Families and Children Website.

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### III. Multiple Factors Can Contribute to Truancy

"Truancy is defined as an absence from school that is not excused by the parent/guardian or the school. The specific number of unexcused absences required before a student is labeled a chronic truant varies according to state law."<sup>7</sup> Truants are generally divided into students who cut or miss class, and those who miss full days. "In Chicago, 40% of extreme truancy cases occur because of class cutting. They have also found that truants are often in and around school and that tardiness may also account for truancy."<sup>8</sup>

Addressing failure to attend school by removing a child from school has been proven ineffective.<sup>9</sup> A Vera Institute of Justice study released in 2001 found that PINS (persons in need of supervision) youth placed in foster care have much worse attendance after entry than they did before they were placed.<sup>10</sup> "Moreover, as large numbers of truants are remanded to non-secure detention or placed in foster care—the most expensive components of the PINS system—the costs of the PINS system are escalating to unmanageable levels."<sup>11</sup> Court systems are often not well equipped to provide programmatic support to youth and families needed to help them comply with court orders.

*"As studies confirm that truancy is typically symptomatic of broad underlying factors, such as family problems, school environment, special education needs, economic needs, economic status, and mental health*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (2003) *New Approaches to Truancy Prevention in Urban Schools*. ERIC Digest 186, Washington, D.C.

<sup>9</sup> Stott, M.W.R. (1987). *Juvenile Court Processing of Delinquent, Ungovernable and School Truant Adolescents: The Effect on School Attendance*. (Doctoral Dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo.) Cited in Mogulescu, S., Segal, H.J. (2002) *Approaches to Truancy Prevention*. New York: Youth Justice Program, Vera Institute of Justice, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Conger, D., Rebeck, A. (2001) *How Children's Foster Care Experiences Affect Their Education*. New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 31. Cited in Mogulescu, S., Segal, H.J. (2002) *Approaches to Truancy Prevention*. New York: Youth Justice Program, Vera Institute of Justice, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Mogulescu, S. (2002). Op. cit.

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*concerns, truants referred directly to the court system rarely receive the support or services they require.*<sup>12</sup>

Colorado Foundation for Families and Children has reviewed the broad research on truancy and lists the following factors shown to contribute to truancy:

**"School Factors**

- ✓ *Poor academic performance and a lack of self-esteem tied to poor performance.*
- ✓ *Lack of personal and educational goals due to lack of stimulating school related challenges.*
- ✓ *Teacher variables, such as lack of respect for students and neglect of diverse student needs.*
- ✓ *Schools and/or district's lack of consistency and uniformity to attendance and attendance policy.*
- ✓ *Parents/guardians are not aware or notified of each absence.*

**Home and Community Factors**

- ✓ *Negative role models, such as peers who are truant or involved in trouble that is more serious.*
- ✓ *Family health or financial concerns that may put pressure on the student to be absent in order to help the family.*
- ✓ *Child is a victim of abuse, neglect and/or family management issues.*
- ✓ *Pressures from teen pregnancy or parenthood*
- ✓ *Lack of family support and valuing of education.*
- ✓ *Safety issues, such as violence in or near the home or school.*<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. Elements of Effective Truancy Intervention

When a young person begins to miss school, this communicates to all concerned that this person needs appropriate response to support and empower him/her to move forward constructively in life. Effective and coordinated truancy interventions must

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the Ramsey County Attorney. *Truancy Intervention Program Year End Report (2000-2001)*, 6 (reporting that 78 percent of students within TIP in 2000-2001 displayed significant personal or family issues that impacted school attendance.) Cited in Mogulescu, S., Segal, H.J. (2002) *Approaches to Truancy Prevention*. New York: Youth Justice Program, Vera Institute of Justice, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Overview of Truancy* (2003). Colorado Foundation for Families and Children Website.

accurately assess and target both individual and systemic factors that contribute to this behavior pattern. Federal initiatives and funding increasingly target community-wide and system-wide solutions involving multi-system collaboration and communication in implementing research-based interventions. In this way, scarce community and agency resources have the greatest impact. Without a unified vision, leadership and objectives, large expenditures of both human and financial resources can become fragmented and even counterproductive. This holds true both within systems and for intra-system collaborations.

OJJDP lists key components supported by research on national truancy reduction models resulting from the Youth Out of the Education Mainstream (YOEM) Initiative<sup>14</sup> and other researchers.<sup>15</sup>

***Key Truancy Reduction Program Components***

1. *Parental Involvement*
2. *Meaningful sanctions or consequences for truancy*
3. *Meaningful incentives for school attendance*
4. *Ongoing school-based truancy reduction programs*
5. *Involvement of community resources (e.g. law enforcement)*

***School concludes successful programs must also:***<sup>16</sup>

6. *Be comprehensive, flexible, responsive and persevering.*
7. *View children in the context of their families.*
8. *Deal with families as parts of neighborhoods and communities.*
9. *Have a long-term preventive orientation and a clear mission and continue to evolve over time.*
10. *Be well managed by competent and committed individuals with clearly identifiable skills.*

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<sup>14</sup> "YOEM was a joint initiative of OJJDP and the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, U.S. Department of Education, focused on truants, dropouts, and youth who were fearful of attending school, suspended or expelled, or in need of help to become reintegrated into mainstream schools from juvenile detention and correctional settings." Quoted from Baker, M. L. (2001), Op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> See also Catalano et. al, (1998); Dryfoos, (1990); Morley and Rossman, (1997). Cited Baker, M. L. (2001), Op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> School, L.B. (1997). Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America. New York, NY: Doubleday. Cited in Baker, M. L. (2001), Op. cit.

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11. *Have staff trained and supported to provide high-quality, responsive services.*
12. *Operate in settings that encourage practitioners to build strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect.*

## V. Description of the Comprehensive Truancy Prevention Project

The CTPP is designed as a cost-effective, comprehensive, multi-systemic approach to truancy that relies upon effective coordination and communication between multiple stakeholders, professionals, agencies and systems. The potential community benefit is significant in terms of enhanced school participation and completion for youth, effective use of scarce community resources, empowerment for schools, courts, youth and families, effective use of sanctions and incentives, and cost savings. As cited in a recent report, the potential cost savings from effective intervention is significant.

*"The multidimensional cost of a system failure for each individual and his/her family is tragic, and the economic and social cost for society in terms of lost human potential, medical, social services, law enforcement and criminal justice system costs is staggering. Mark Cohen estimated "the monetary value of saving one 'high risk youth' from a life of crime, drug abuse, or dropping out of high school to be \$ 1.3-\$ 1.5 million in 1997 dollars (discounted to present value). Comparable estimates are \$ 370,000 to \$ 970,000 for a heavy drug abuser, and \$ 243,000 to \$ 388,000 for a high school dropout."<sup>17</sup>*

## VI. Project Objectives

The intent of these system collaborations is creating character development and life skill solutions that reduce system failures, enhance school performance, empower parents, decrease criminal behavior and increase community safety, decrease

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17 Cohen, Mark A.. (1998) The monetary value of saving a high risk youth. Journal of Quantitative Criminology 14: 5-33. Cited in Cohen, Mark A. (2000) Measuring the costs and benefits of crime and justice. In Office of Justice Programs. Measurement and Analysis of Crime and Justice. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

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recidivism, and prepare young people to be contributing members of society. The Comprehensive Truancy Prevention Project has the following objectives:

1. **Positive Youth Engagement:** Enhance student and family connections to school, academic engagement, facilitate life planning, and reduce self-defeating patterns and risk taking by youth.
2. **Multi-systemic Cooperation:** Facilitate multi-system planning, coordination, implementation and communication.
3. **Comprehensive Staff Training:** Provide training to each agency and professional regarding overall project objectives and procedures and his/her role in the project to enlist staff enthusiasm and creativity in implementing the project.
4. **Participant Engagement:** Provide early identification for youth with school/class attendance challenges and connect positively with each youth and parents or guardians regarding concerns and options.
5. **Integrated Program Implementation:** Provide positive and sequenced communications, interventions, support, referrals, and response costs to youth and parents to enhance program participation, empowerment and investment in the process of change.
6. **Program Evaluation and Refinement:** Collect, analyze and report comprehensive data on project outcomes as the basis for continuing program refinement and enhancement of systemic coordination and communication.

## VII. Prevention Curricula Utilized in the CTPP

A challenge we face as human beings is that individual and system change is uncomfortable and involves effort and struggle. The encouraging fact is that once we make the effort to change, the benefits are significant and gratifying. Successful systems and programs must facilitate the following for all stakeholders in developing new behavior and system choices and patterns:

- ✓ We must decide that a behavior or system change is the right thing to do, and
  - ✓ We must have the resources and support necessary to develop the required habits and skills.
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The Comprehensive Truancy Prevention Project utilizes Social Responsibility Training (SRT™) and Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT®) to provide a project foundation. These research based programs provide an integrated philosophy and language, and target character development and essential skills development for youth and parents or parenting figures. Originally developed in corrections and now utilized with over 400,000 offenders in 43 states, MRT® embodies three critical messages: 1) You are important; 2) You are responsible for your life; 3) You have unique gifts to share with the world. With over 2,000,000 persons in jail and prison in this country, we are well aware as a society that we cannot afford either financially or from a humanitarian perspective to lock people up and throw away the key. As mentioned above, the choices that ultimately lead to incarceration frequently begin with the decision to stop attending school. No Child Left Behind mandates now put pressure on each school and district to see each youth as a resource to be developed. The CTPP proposal is intended to provide additional resources for schools and the many other systems working to assist youth in becoming productive and responsible citizens.

**SRT™ and MRT® focus systematically on seven basic life issues:**

1. **Confrontation and Assessment of Self:** Participants assess beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and defense mechanisms;
2. **Assessment of Relationships:** Includes planning to heal relationships that have been harmed;
3. **Reinforcement of Positive Behavior and Habits:** Helping others raises awareness of moral responsibility;
4. **Positive Identity Formation:** Exploration of Real Self and goal setting;
5. **Enhancement of Self-Concept:** Actions that enhance self-respect and development of pro-social habits change how participants see themselves.
6. **Decreasing Hedonism:** Participants learn to delay gratification and control of pleasure-seeking behavior.
7. **Developing Moral Reasoning:** With greater concern for others and social systems.

Changing character risk factors and developing in youth the Foundation Skills, Personal Qualities, and Interpersonal Competencies essential for adult responsibilities

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requires significant practice and experience to achieve mastery. SRT™ and MRT™ are designed to reduce specific youth risk factors that are problematic aspects of character identified through scientific research and enhance prosocial supports, skills and motivation. These systematic, step-by-step curricula are designed to alter how students think, how they make judgments and decisions about right and wrong, and promote actions and behaviors focused on changing negative relationships. SRT™ and MRT® teach participants thinking, judgment and life skills in systematic class processes designed to enhance social, moral, and behavioral growth in a progressive fashion.

Several characteristics of these educational programs make them uniquely suited to this project:

1. **SRT™ and MRT® are open-ended curricula.** This means that a participant can enter the programs at any time and work at his/her own pace. This quality of the programs allows a student (or parent) to begin the program in one setting (for instance in a regular high school) and pick up program participation in another setting (for instance an alternative high school) at the point he/she left off.
  2. **SRT™ and MRT® are participant driven rather than content driven.** Each participant brings the specifics of his/her life to the class and applies the skills and information of the class to their own situation. In this way, the class is always “live” because the content discussed is happening right now in their daily affairs. Each participant (whether student, parent or guardian) thus benefits from the growth process of other class members.
  3. **SRT™ and MRT® are based upon true internalization of skills, moral reasoning and positive decision-making.** For instance, students make a commitment to honesty in all their school affairs. If, as happens, a student breaks his/her commitment, they are asked to repeat that part of the class to enhance the internalization process. The SRT™ and MRT® foundation curricula were created as one semester classes but students progress at their own pace to master the material.
  4. **SRT™ provides students and family members with skills to solve day the life challenges they face.** MRT®, developed in corrections, is appropriate for students who are resistive. By his/her behavior choices
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and class progress, students thus choose the programmatic content and level of intervention (as outlined below) that they need.

SRT™ and MRT® utilize class dynamics to create a positive peer culture that mirrors to an individual his/her personality characteristics that contradict the above qualities. This facilitates a process of self-examination and reflection that is not achieved by more directive or purely skill-based approaches. In addition, SRT™ and MRT® involve the individual becoming a member of a team whose goal is to assist one another in successful behavior change. Participants are involved in teaching others new skills, communicating, and working with others from diverse backgrounds. The program thus serves to advance the individual's work readiness and assists him/her to increase interpersonal competencies in these areas.

Developmental research shows that the ability to perform logical, social and moral reasoning is directly related to structural changes in the way the mind operates.<sup>4</sup> Laurence Kohlberg built on the work of Piaget and postulated six sequential stages of moral development related to a person's degree of internalization of moral reasoning:<sup>5</sup>

**Preconventional Level of Moral Reasoning**

1. Punishment and Obedience Orientation (Pleasure/Pain)
2. Instrumental Relativist Orientation (Deal making)

**Conventional Level of Moral Reasoning**

3. Interpersonal Concordance (Social Approval)
4. Law and Order Orientation

**Post-Conventional or Autonomous Level of Moral Reasoning**

5. Social Contract (Legalistic Orientation)
6. Universal Ethical-Principle Orientation

SRT™ and MRT® require behavior and reasoning at progressively higher levels of moral reasoning. Original research with MRT® demonstrated that for each step completed, participants made small gains in moral reasoning as measured by reasoning on a series of moral dilemmas. SRT™ and MRT® curricula are open-ended classes. Students can enter at any time during a semester. Participants then work at their own pace to process exercises and tasks sequentially. More advanced students are asked to teach those who are newer in the program. This procedure gives a

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flexible tool to administrators for referral, facilitates the learning process, and allows for the continuation of ongoing classes.

SRT™ and MRT® utilize structured exercises and tasks to foster development of higher levels of reasoning as well as addressing other important character development and life skill areas. These programs incorporate what is typically described as “cognitive skills” educational programming, but surpass common classroom methods as a comprehensive cognitive-behavioral approach. Negative behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes are the initial target of these curricula. Behavioral rehearsal and practice is gained in the class process, as students make a direct commitment to honesty, trust and following school rules.

### **VIII. CTPP Program Overview**

The chart on the following page illustrates proposed program components, and levels of intervention based upon needs and compliance. This is intended to be illustrative only, and the stakeholders of each specific community would decide as part of the community planning process the exact elements and pattern of implementation appropriate for their community. Once the exact preliminary design has been identified, it is possible to develop precise program cost projections, as well as develop complete policies and procedures for the CTPP. In this way, it can be implemented as envisioned by community stakeholders.

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<b>Level of Intervention</b> <b>Program Component</b>	1	2	3	4
1. School sends letter to parents of all students informing them of the program and of state educational attendance requirements. Letter is co-signed by the Principal, SRO and by a representative of the court.	X			
2. Community education campaign and volunteer recruitment is launched.	X			
3. Identify students who have 3 absences. Meet with student and call parent.		X		
4. If absences continue, school requests parent mediation meeting at school on Court stationery to set up contract. Refer student to SRT™.		X		
5. Student academic status is reviewed and youth is referred for academic assistance or assessed for IEP if required.		X		
6. Student and family needs are assessed, family concerns are addressed, and family is referred to community resources if needed.		X		
7. Parents or guardians are invited to participate in a SRT™ Parent Support Class conducted by school or court volunteer parents.		X		
8. Students progress at their own pace in SRT™ class. Depending upon educational requirements, students receive class credit.		X		
9. Dean, Principal, Counselor or School Social Worker meets with student monthly to recognize progress made, address any concerns, or bring to bear additional resources if required.		X		
10. Students who successfully participate and/or complete the program are recognized through community activities led by volunteers, supported by community organizations and businesses.		X		
11. If non-compliance continues, citation is issued. Law enforcement or SRO apprehends student at school or in the community and brings him/her to truancy center for ½-1 day.			X	
12. Court referral is made. Community service is assigned by the court.			X	
13. For students who are not making adequate progress or who are non-compliant with the program, an additional parent/guardian meeting is scheduled to problem solve and student is referred to MRT®.			X	
14. For students still resistant, court considers option of community Voice Monitoring, electronic monitoring, as well as community service and other appropriate sanctions.				X
15. Intensive Family Compliance initiative is implemented as ordered by the court including MRT® for parents, multiple family group meetings.				X
16. Detention or foster placement is evaluated.				X