

**CANTON CITY SCHOOLS
ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMMING:**

**PREVENTION OF TRUANCY THROUGH MEDIATION
FOCUS GROUP**

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES



**COLLEGE AND GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, HEALTH, AND HUMAN SERVICES
BUREAU OF RESEARCH TRAINING AND SERVICES**

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the Bureau of Research Training and Services' on-going assessment of Canton City Schools Alternative Education programming, a focus group meeting for **Prevention of Truancy through Mediation** professional staff was held in May, 2006. The purpose of the focus group experience was to explore the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of district truancy mediation professionals so to further assist the school district in addressing the needs of students utilizing mediation services.

The focus group was conducted by Bureau of Research Training and Services administrative staff. Additionally, Bureau staff trained in interview methodology provided summary evaluations of the completed qualitative data. Focus group participants included district school teachers, administrators, court personnel, and involved community members all who were attending a district program meeting. Upon conclusion of the district meeting, the focus group experience was introduced by Bureau of Research Training and Services staff. Focus group participants were read a statement of confidentiality and the focus group session was tape recorded for accuracy and later transcription.

The goal of the focus group was to understand the experiences of professionals participating in the truancy mediation process and to identify themes permeating individual experiences. In addition, Bureau researchers were interested in understanding the nature of the common program experiences for these participants. Prior to the focus group meeting, several areas of interest with regards to the truancy mediation process were identified by the research team and school district

administration and, as such, served as the basis for focus group discussion.

Specifically, these areas of interest were:

- understanding the purpose of the district’s truancy mediation programming
- identification of program strengths and weaknesses
- identification of program effects on student academic and psychosocial indicators
- suggestions for future program implementation

These areas of interest, operationalized into discussion questions, were presented to focus group participants on pre-printed discussion sheets designed to stimulate thought and dialogue concerning the truancy mediation process (Appendix A). Participants were asked upon presentation of each discussion question to spend several minutes thinking about and writing about the question at hand on the related discussion sheet. The writing segment of this process was followed by guided group discussions concerning each research question as led by participants’ written responses.

The remaining sections of this report present and summarize the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of Prevention of Truancy through Mediation professional participants as shared during the focus group experience.

UNDERSTANDING OF PROGRAM PURPOSE

Overall, focus group participants indicated that improved student school attendance was the ultimate goal of the truancy mediation program. Additionally, respondents noted that the program provided a time and format for student/family needs assessments, in addition to “plug[ging] parents into available resources” such as counseling services and community resources. One focus group respondent summarized the goals of the truancy

mediation program by saying, “It reduces truancy to increase educational success. [It is a] cooperative process increasing communication between families and school personnel. The program helps develop a plan to address underlying issues that are keeping students out of school while identifying resources families may need.”

Focus group respondents frequently noted that the truancy mediation program provided an effective means of student intervention. As such, group participants indicated that the program frequently fostered improved relations between schools and families and, as a result, families became more aware of truancy problems regarding their children. Focus group participants also noted that the truancy mediation program encouraged the development of a consensus between school officials, teachers, parents and mediators, often alleviating problems such as a lack of communication and time management concerns. Respondents noted that improving communication between parents and school personnel through participation in the truancy mediation program contributed to the development of lasting habits that would positively affect the overall aptitude of students. As one focus group respondent commented, “[The program] helps keep students in school. If habits are formed early (K-5), students are more likely to graduate and become good citizens. If students are at school, test scores are up.”

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE TRUANCY MEDIATION PROGRAM

Focus group participants noted a variety of strengths associated with the truancy mediation process including improved student school attendance, utilization of the program as a confidential forum to address problems related to, but not limited to,

truancy, and the school professional's increased knowledge of the student and/or parent's circumstances related to truancy problems. One focus group respondent commented, "Mediation is a process that helps find out things that we don't know about the family. We can get help with those problems. Sometimes this will help with the attendance problems."

Many focus group respondents felt that the mediation process contributed to the development of a critical parent/school relationship which, in turn, bolstered student achievement. One group participant noted, "Face to face meetings with parents are so much better than any phone or written communication. Parents talk about many issues [in truancy mediation] that they would not divulge in parent teacher conferences." Focus group respondents also noted that the truancy mediation process often expedited truant students toward the court system, suggesting that mediation created an "ease of fast-tracking to court", in addition to providing an alternative for those students who wanted to avoid court. As focus group participant noted, "Truancy mediation is a cooperative, non-punitive, future oriented, problem solving process increasing communication between school and families. The process demonstrates to students that schools and families can work together in a positive manner on their behalf."

According to focus group members, several barriers often impede the effectiveness of the truancy mediation program, most notably a lack of parental accountability and a shortage of time and staff resources imperative for program success. Participants noted that parents are often "no shows" at truancy mediation hearings and that some parents were not effective in enforcing established mediation agreements. "[It is difficult] getting parents to realize the importance of getting their students to school every day and on

time. Parents are not necessarily [going to follow] the mediation agreement”, one focus group participant remarked.

Additionally, focus group respondents cited a lack of time and staff resources as a difficult aspect of the truancy mediation process, specifically with regards to processing forms and reports. One focus group respondent commented, “... there needs to be a full time truancy person for each school. We have other jobs we do at school plus doing truancy. Sometimes it’s hard to do both.” Respondents also cited inconsistencies in the mediation process, such as a lack of process standardization and a lack of time slots available for the mediation sessions, as well as the need for more trained staff to manage the significant number of truancy cases. As one focus group respondent noted, “There are no set of rules on the number of absences or tardies to start the [truancy mediation] process, no consistency of court action.”

Finally, several focus group respondents indicated that truancy mediators were sometimes weak in their recommendations and with regards to the agreements that were made with students and their families. “... Not all mediators are [good] mediators, some are very weak, not sure of their role. [The resulting] agreements are poor,” one participant commented.

**THE EFFECT OF PROGRAMMING ON
ACADEMIC AND PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDENT INDICATORS**

Overwhelmingly, focus group participants indicated that the truancy mediation program often had a dramatic positive effect on program participants, both in improving the performance of students and by assisting families who participated in the program.

Group respondents acknowledged that when mediation was successful, student academic performance usually improved. Moreover, focus group respondents also noted that when student attendance patterns improved as a result of program participation, school personnel's effectiveness also improved as student's needs could be more appropriately met utilizing truancy mediation information. As such, focus group respondents felt that, ultimately, teachers and other involved professional staff were able to perform needs assessment and maximize intervention opportunities such as tutoring, make up work and academic planning as a direct result of the truancy mediation process.

In reference to the program's effect on social abilities, focus group respondents noted that truancy mediation encouraged students, parents, teachers and mediators to collectively address underlying issues contributing to truancy. One group participant remarked, "Parents and students communicate problems with getting to school, working out solutions together at mediation." Moreover, focus group respondents acknowledged that additional school-related issues such as bullying, depression, fear of testing and other mental and/or physical health issues are often also addressed through participation in the truancy mediation program. In summary, focus group respondents noted that the truancy mediation process provided professional staff with a forum outside of teacher/parent conferences to address concerns about student performance and to uncover and resolve student needs appropriately. As such, the mediation process enhanced relationships between students, teachers and mediators which ultimately, as one focus group participant noted "empower[s] students in their own education and in their own lives." Consequently, a majority of focus group participants felt that the truancy mediation

process was critical to building relationships and creating allies on behalf of the student and families within the school and court system.

Focus group participants reported that, with regards to behavior, truancy mediation program participants often demonstrated improvement in the skills necessary to build successful relationships and engage in positive socialization. Subsequent to truancy mediation, many students displayed an improved understanding of school rules, becoming more cognizant of classroom expectations and academic target skills. Focus group respondents noted that sometimes a student's ongoing truancy might be related to feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment the student feels in not being able to perform at the same level as the rest of the class. One focus group respondent remarked, "[In reference to] social abilities, a child participating in truancy mediation often doesn't seem to feel so embarrassed anymore because they come in late or miss school and have to catch up. They know that we're all working on together to change and improve the situation." In summary, most focus group respondents felt that the truancy mediation process provided teachers and administrators with tools they deemed necessary to assist students in getting closer to their academic standard.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

While enthusiastically endorsing the effectiveness of the truancy mediation program, there were several aspects of programming which focus group respondents suggested might be changed or improved.

Many focus group participants indicated that there were inconsistencies within truancy program standards which need to be addressed. As a result, many respondents suggested

that a consistent launch of the truancy process be developed and implemented, with check points utilized throughout the truancy mediation process to ensure consistency.

Several focus group participants noted time management concerns, especially with regards to processing forms and reports. Accordingly, many group respondents suggested a review of the program's current paperwork procedures with the goal of consolidating forms and reports where possible. One group respondent suggested the need for less paperwork, commenting "Send just one letter to parents saying these are the amount of days your child has been absent and you are required to attend this meeting or be referred to the courts immediately!" Another group respondent commented, "I need more time. More public and school staff awareness of guidelines and proper chain of events". Noting the imperative role of multi-tasking in the truancy mediation process, several focus group respondents noted that they did not currently have the time they needed to effectively multi-task. "Sometimes I have to decide what I'm going to have to leave undone and that's not something I'm OK with," one group respondent commented. To alleviate this problem, some group participants suggested that additional mediators or even permanent mediators might be assigned to each school.

Focus group participants proposed several prevention strategies which might serve to deter students and parents from truancy problems early in a student's academic career. One group respondent noted, "More mediation should be done in elementary [school] to stop truancy before it becomes a life style. By the time students reach middle school, [we] have to really get tough on students and parents." Focus group participants also suggested that needs assessment strategies, peer intervention and home visits might be utilized to deter truancy as early as elementary school. In addition, some focus group

respondents suggested changes to district policy, such as the implementation of stricter penalties for truancy or changes to court procedures. One group respondent commented, “We would love to be able to have an officer of the court make a home visit and bring [students] to school on days that they defy the truancy contract.” In addition, focus group respondents indicated that a quicker response time from the court system was essential when parents and/or students failed to show up for mediation or when the mediation was not successful. Focus group respondents noted that some parents do not take the truancy mediation process seriously and that, consequently, the process should, as one group participant noted, “issue harsher sanctions if [initial mediation agreements] are not adhered by.”

Focus group participants recommended that follow-up procedures be used by the truancy mediation program to provide feedback to school personnel and mediators, including information such as students’ post-mediation academic performance, attendance, and conferences with parents. Specifically, focus group respondents recommended a systematic evaluation of how each student fared in the truancy mediation program, as well as tracking student success or lack of success. In addition, group participants suggested that case notes and documentation from prior mediations be made available throughout subsequent mediation sessions in order to appropriately gauge students’ needs and to assess student progress. Many focus group participants also suggested that the truancy mediation program might be used as a proactive tool to assist students in developing necessary life skills through the use of court appointed parenting classes and intervention. One respondent, summarizing the comments of others, suggested that some helpful activities might include, “Court ordered parenting classes,

court ordered interventions for student and parent. Otherwise take their assistance away and driver's license." Other focus group respondents, however, were concerned about the truancy mediation program being perceived as punishment. "Parents should not see [truancy mediation] as punishment, but as a way for us to help," noted one group participant.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the outlook of the truancy mediation program is optimistic, according to district professionals participating in the focus group experience. Respondents noted that the truancy mediation program had a very positive impact on many students and families who participated in the program. In addition, group participants felt that addressing shortcomings of the truancy mediation process would increase program effectiveness and allow the program to meet the needs of an increasing number of students and families. As one participant summarized, "I have had a permanent change in some parents and students after one mediation...I think [the truancy mediation program] is a very positive program and I strongly advocate for its continued development."

APPENDIX A

**Canton City Schools Alternative Education
Truancy Mediation**

Focus Group Discussion Questions

Spring, 2006



Focus Group Questions
Spring 2006

Teachers/Staff:

What is your understanding of the purpose of the Truancy Mediation program?

List 2-3 strengths about the Truancy Mediation process.

List 2-3 difficulties that you have encountered with regards to the Truancy Mediation process.

How do you feel the Truancy Mediation program affects students in terms of:

Academics?

Social Abilities?

Behavior?

Relationships with teachers?

What would you change about the Truancy Mediation program?