

PS/ED COMMITTEE #1
March 29, 2012
Discussion

MEMORANDUM

March 27, 2012

TO: Public Safety Committee
Education Committee

FROM: Essie McGuire, Senior Legislative Analyst *EMcGuire*
Susan Farag, Legislative Analyst *SFF*

SUBJECT: **Discussion – Truancy Court Program**

Today the Public Safety and Education Committees will receive an update on the Truancy Court Program and other supports for students who are habitually truant. State's Attorney John McCarthy and Assistant State's Attorney George Simms are expected to participate in this discussion, as well as representatives from the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

The Committees have previously discussed truancy supports and programs in the context of the 2010 Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report "Truancy in Montgomery County". The primary purpose of today's discussion is to receive an update on the status of the Truancy Court Program and other support mechanisms that the Office of the State's Attorney and the schools have in place to address this issue.

The County received Federal funds in the spring of 2010 to support a Truancy Court Program at two middle schools, Francis Scott Key Middle School in Silver Spring and Neelsville Middle School in Germantown. Both the State's Attorney's Office and MCPS provided descriptive information about the program, attached on circles 1-6.

The program is intended to be an early intervention to improve student attendance by discovering the root causes of truancy and assisting students and their families with issues that impact attendance. It provides weekly meetings for 10 weeks that bring together the student and family with a volunteer judge and other service providers to put supportive resources in place for the student and family.

Due to reduced funding, the Truancy Court Program only operates at Key Middle School in the current school year. Funding is not expected to continue after this school year.

The information provided by the State's Attorney and MCPS details the positive outcomes in the County from the program. Specifically, in the 2010-2011 school year the two County middle schools saw an average reduction in absences of 54 percent. However, the impending lack of dedicated funding is a primary concern. **The Committees will want to hear more directly from the agency participants how they can continue to support students who are habitually truant without these dedicated resources. Specifically, the Committees may want to ask participants to address the following issues:**

- The Superintendent's response on circles 1-2 references his priority on implementing effective interventions across all schools. He states that schools start by working directly with students and parents, and may include the Pupil Personnel Workers to further engage with families who may be difficult to reach. **MCPS representatives may be able to provide more details on these school-level interventions.**
- The Superintendent also references a newly developed intermediate intervention called "Attendance Matters", which is briefly described on circle 2. **The Committees may want to hear more about this approach from MCPS representatives during the discussion.**
- The State's Attorney references the Truancy Review Board, which is another truancy intervention that can include criminal charges against parents. **It may be helpful for the State's Attorney to comment further on how the relationship between these two programs and how the role of the Truancy Review Board would be affected in the absence of the Truancy Court Program.**
- The State's Attorney's response states on circle 5 that the funding provided for two positions that were dedicated to the Truancy Court Program, a TCP coordinator and a TCP mentor. The response states that both of these positions work with the students and were integral to the program's success. **Has either agency considered whether it can dedicate funds in its budget to support these or similar positions going forward at these or other middle schools? Are other grant opportunities possible in the near future?**



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MARYLAND

March 23, 2012

Ms. Essie McGuire, Senior Legislative Analyst
 Montgomery County Council
 Stella B. Werner Council Office Building
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 Rockville, Maryland 20850



Dear Ms. McGuire:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff members with the opportunity to review and respond in advance to questions to be discussed by the County Council's Public Safety and Education committees at their Thursday, March 29, 2012, work sessions on truancy programs.

Responses to questions 1 through 5 and question 7 posed by the Council are provided directly by Ms. Gloria Danziger, senior fellow, University of Baltimore School of Law, Center for Families, Children, and the Courts. These responses are provided in an enclosure to this letter.

I am responding to Question 6.

6. **How will the school system and the SAO continue to provide these services under reduced funding? What other supports and related services to address truancy will continue at these and other schools with similar needs?**

The issue of truancy requires a well-thought-out and proactive approach on both a broad scale such as a positive school climate, a relevant and effective curriculum, and instructional strategies that support active student engagement, and the very personal side, including strong relationships that link students to their schools, teachers, and classmates. Students need to feel there is someone in the building who knows them and who they may turn to for support. To that end, we continue to work to gather and disseminate best practices through the M-Stat model and through level-alike principal meetings. Most recently, Dr. George G. Bear, a national expert on strategies to promote prosocial student behavior, presented to all MCPS principals and counselors. Each school received a copy of Dr. Bear's book, *School Discipline and Self-Discipline: A Practical Guide to Promoting Prosocial Behavior*.

One of my three priorities for moving forward is the implementation of effective interventions for every student every day across the general education environment. MCPS will continue to study, plan, and collaborate to ensure that we are accomplishing this priority in a comprehensive manner. Furthermore, I have invited leaders from the Montgomery County Public Libraries, the Montgomery County Department of Recreation, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, and the Montgomery County Department of Police to participate in a dialogue about improving interagency collaboration. Bringing together these important stakeholders reflects the reality that it will take working across agencies to truly effect change in

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this area and many others that affect our community. It is through these approaches that we can best engage our students and ensure that school is a positive and welcoming place—one where students want to be every day.

All MCPS schools implement a continuum of interventions to address student attendance concerns. Those interventions begin at the school level with the overall attendance policy and expectations. They include parent letters, telephone calls, student and parent conferences, and individually created student attendance plans. The next step involves direct pupil personnel worker involvement. Pupil personnel workers engage directly with students and families who may be difficult to reach and share information related to state law and compulsory attendance. They also create individual attendance contracts with meaningful reinforcements.

Finally, a new attendance program called *Attendance Matters*, described below, has been created to add an additional layer to our strategies to alleviate truancy prior to the most intensive intervention, the Interagency Truancy Review Board. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is a multiagency problem-solving and decision-making body that has the right to recommend to the State's Attorney's office that families be considered for legal action if they have not responded to the panoply of interventions previously attempted.

MCPS developed and implemented *Attendance Matters*. This program is designed to support MCPS goals of reducing student dropout rates and improving the graduation rate by supplementing existing school-level practices to improve student attendance. *Attendance Matters* is an intermediate and proactive attendance intervention strategy that occurs prior to a referral to the Interagency Truancy Review Board.

Attendance Matters is budget neutral as it is operated entirely by the Department of Student Services Pupil Personnel Services unit. All schools with attendance concerns have the opportunity to refer individual students to *Attendance Matters*.

We appreciate the collaborative nature of this process and look forward to discussing the issue of truancy.

Sincerely,



Joshua P. Starr, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

JPS:sn

Enclosure

Copy to:

Dr. Lacey

Mr. Edwards

Mrs. Richardson

Mr. Neff

Dr. Wilks

Enclosure

Responses Provided by Gloria Danziger, Senior Fellow, University of Baltimore School of Law, Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC)

1. Please provide an overview of the Truancy Court Program.

The Truancy Court Program (TCP) is an innovative, early intervention, and holistic approach to truant behavior that capitalizes on the stature and authority of a judge to address the root causes of truancy. It is a collaborative effort among the University of Baltimore School of Law, Center for Families, Children, and the Courts (CFCC); the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office; the Circuit and District Courts for Montgomery County, and Montgomery County Public Schools to encourage primarily middle school students to attend school.

The program, which is strictly voluntary on the part of students and their families, consists of 10 weekly in-school meetings per session. The TCP involves the student, his or her family, teachers, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, a CFCC coordinator and professional mentor, and a volunteer judge. The purpose of the meetings is to identify and address the reasons why each participating child is not attending school regularly and/or on time. Once the causes of truant behavior are uncovered, the TCP team puts resources into place that target truant behavior and support the student's regular school attendance, graduation from high school, and ultimately, service as a productive member of the community.

2. What was the original amount and source of funding? How much was renewed and for what time period? Has either agency provided funding to make up the reduction and continue the level of service?

The original funding was from a Federal Earmark Grant, providing \$500,000 to expand the TCP into four counties over three years. The grant cannot be renewed because it was a federal earmark and will run out at the end of the current school year.

3. What schools currently participate in the program (Key and Neelsville)? Which schools can continue to participate under the reduced funding?

The TCP currently operates only at Francis Scott Key Middle School. It had operated previously at Neelsville Middle School during the 2010-2011 school year, as well. However, Neelsville Middle School was unable to participate in TCP during the 2011-2012 school year due to funding limitations.

4. What are the current program goals and what results or outcomes have been achieved to date?

The program goals are to significantly reduce truancy among participants in the program, as well as to improve student academics and school behavior.

While we do not have fall 2011 data yet for Francis Scott Key Middle School, our initial fall 2011 data for six Baltimore City TCP schools is very promising—75.0 percent of the

84 participating students graduated from the program, meaning they demonstrated a minimum 65.0 percent decrease in unexcused absences, as well as improved behavior and academics. The average absence improvement for all participants, including those who did not graduate, was 71.0 percent.

During the 2010–2011 school year, the TCP graduation rate at Neelsville and Francis Scott Key middle schools was 86.0 percent and an average reduction in absences of 54.0 percent, with an additional 67.0 percent reduction in tardies. The entire TCP, operating in 14 schools from four Maryland counties and serving over 300 students, experienced a 72.0 percent program graduation rate. CFCC also tracked the fall 2010 participants for 10 weeks after the program ended and data showed they averaged 45.0 percent fewer absences as compared to a comparable period prior to their participation in the TCP.

5. What are the program goals moving forward?

CFCC would like to see the Montgomery County TCP participants continue to graduate from TCP at a high rate and increase their attendance and connectedness to school. Also, CFCC would like to see the program expand to Montgomery County middle schools that are “feeder” schools for high schools with low attendance or high dropout rates should funding become available.

7. What challenges have you experienced with the program, and how will these be addressed going forward?

As noted above, current external funding for TCP ends in June 2012. Finding sustainable funding in the private grant-making world, especially during the current economic crisis, poses the greatest challenge.

Responses from the Office of the State's Attorney

1. The Truancy Court program (TCP) is a partnership with between Montgomery County Public Schools, the State's Attorneys Office (SAO), the University of Baltimore School of Law and County government. The program began in 2010 at Francis Scott Key Middle School and Neelsville Middle School. Currently, the program is at Francis Scott Key Middle School. The TCP has been very successful. In the Spring of 2011, 43 of the 50 (86%) of the TCP participants at Key Middle School and at Neelsville Middle School graduated from the program.

The program involves children meeting on a weekly basis with a judge who discusses their attendance, grades, school performance and tardy attendance with them. The program begins with an orientation day, at which time the parents and children attend and meet with the Truancy Court staff.

The Staff consists of representatives from the University of Baltimore School of Law, a Truancy Court coordinator, a Truancy Court mentor staff person, the presiding Judge, an Assistant State's Attorney and staff from the school. The purpose of the program is to work with habitually truant students to improve their school attendance. Truancy Court typically lasts for 10 week sessions.

2. The original source of funding was a Federal grant, which allowed the Truancy Court to operate in two Montgomery County locations, Neelesville Middle School and Francis Scott Key Middle School.. That grant expired, but was eventually renewed, but only with funding for one school, which is Key Middle School. The State's Attorney's Office provides an attorney, who attends Truancy Court on a weekly basis. The grant provides for two persons who work with children at Key Middle School. One person is a Truancy Court coordinator and the other person is a Truancy Court Mentor who both work with the children. These two grant funded positions are integral to the success of the TCP.
3. Currently, the program is at Francis Scott Key Middle School in White Oak, Maryland.
4. The current program goals remain to work with habitually truant students to improve their attendance. To date, the goals have been very successfully achieved. To wit:
 - a. In Spring 2011, 86% of participants at Key and Neelesville MS graduated from Truancy Court (43 of 50 participants);
 - b. At Key MS in the Spring of 2011, participants averaged a 44% decrease in absences and a 33% decrease in tardy reports;
 - c. At Neelsville MS in the Spring of 2011, participants averaged a 59% decrease in absences and a 75% decrease in tardy reports;
5. The SAO continues to support the Truancy Court program. Currently, the SAO provides an attorney who attends Truancy Court at Key Middle School on a weekly basis, every Wednesday, from 8am until 9:30pm while Truancy Court is operating. The SAO also attends the orientation and graduation ceremonies from Truancy Court. The SAO also works with the Truancy Review Board (TRB) which meets on a monthly basis with habitually truant

students. The TRB typically meets from 9am until about 4pm considering cases of children who are truant at or near the 20% truancy rate. The SAO files truancy cases in court against those parents who willfully fail to see to it that their children attend school. The SAO prosecutes those truancy cases in court against those parents. Additionally, the SAO attends the Kennedy Project meetings on a twice a month basis at Kennedy High School. This program is designed to address children who are at risk for delinquency in the Kennedy High School cluster area. Many of these children have truancy issues. The Kennedy Cluster meetings typically last from 9am until 3pm at John F. Kennedy High School. States Attorney John McCarthy attends the graduation ceremonies. The SAO recognizes that truancy is correlated with many delinquent behaviors by children. Mr. McCarthy views efforts at reducing truancy as critical to public safety and a key to preventing possible delinquent or criminal behavior by youth. The SAO recognizes that the TCP is unique in that it fills a role that the Truancy Review Board (TRB) does not fully meet, in that while the TRB is committed to reducing truancy, the TRB's ultimate sanction is a criminal charge against a parent or guardian for failing to see to it the child attends school. The TCP, on the other hand, works with the family and parents, but the primary focus with the TCP is with the child. The child is the person who meets weekly with the judge in Truancy Court. The child is the person who must explain to the judge why the child has missed school or was late to school. Both the TRB and TCP are important, but the Truancy Court has a slightly different, but essential focus.

6. We are hopeful that the work done by the TCP could expand to additional schools. One challenge is that the success of the Truancy Court program is limited at this point to one school.

Truancy Court has several factors which contribute to its success. First, the program works with the affected children at the school. This means that unlike other truancy reduction programs which focus on the parent's role and responsibility to send the child to school, truancy court's emphasis is primarily on the child and the child's responsibility to get him or herself to school on time. Second, Truancy Court brings the authority of the court to the child's familiar environment, the school, and communicates the message that attendance in school is mandatory for the child. Lastly, truancy court provides resources in the persons of the Truancy Court coordinator and mentor, who work directly with the child, in the school, addressing academic, social and behavior issues which may contribute to truancy. To address these challenges going forward, the TCP would need to expand the level of coordinators and mentors to allow those persons to work with additional Middle Schools.