

A Comprehensive Truancy Intervention Spells Success for Jacksonville Students

Something had to be done about the increasing rate of absences and tardiness in Duval County, Florida schools. It took a creative collaborative approach to generate a significant reduction in both. In the fall of 1994, the Jacksonville State Attorney Harry Shorstein made a commitment to prevent and reduce truancy in Duval County schools. Since that time, the Jacksonville community developed a comprehensive truancy intervention program consisting of: a meeting of school staff and parents to address a child's unexcused absence (K-12) which was called an Attendance Intervention Teams (AIT); a non-judicial hearing held at the State Attorney's Office for parents and students (K-8) referred to as Truancy Arbitration Program (TAP); the creation of four truancy centers located across the city (6-12) – the Truancy Interdiction Program (TIP); and, a diverse group of community stakeholders which was formed in 2000 to increase public awareness about this critical issue – the Jacksonville United Against Truancy (JUAT).

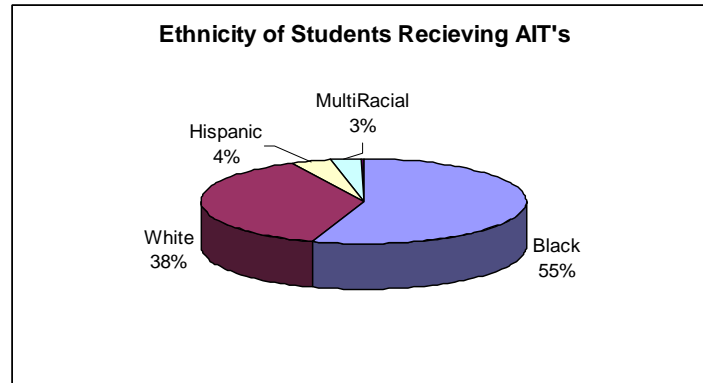
For the past several years, the State Attorney's Office worked with the National Center for School Engagement to evaluate its program. The preliminary findings indicate that the TAP program does indeed reduce unexcused absences. Even better, it also reduces "tardies" – arriving late to school. This means less missed class time and a higher likelihood of school success.

What is TAP?

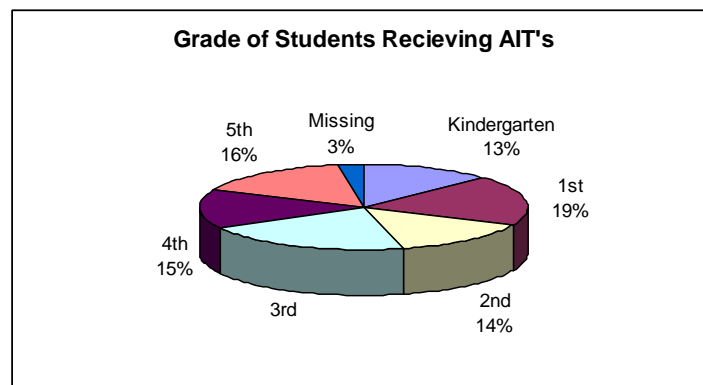
The State Attorney's Office (SAO) works primarily with elementary aged students and their parents. After families receive an Attendance Intervention Team meeting, the SAO summons parents and students to a TAP hearing conducted in their office. TAP hearings are facilitated by trained volunteers who act as arbitrators for the program. School social workers also participate in the hearings. If there is a problem, the social work and hearing office attempt to rectify it. When appropriate, students are referred for counseling or tutoring. Parents are referred to parenting skills classes. After each hearing, the parents and the student are required to sign a performance agreement compelling school attendance. The SAO clearly communicates with both the parent and the child that all legal avenues will be exhausted to ensure school attendance, including criminal prosecution of the parents.

What kinds of students receive the Attendance Intervention Team?

A random sample of 471 school records was collected for students who received AIT's in the 2003-2004 school year. Students received an AIT if the child had 5 unexcused absences in a calendar month or 10 unexcused absences in a 90-day period. The following data describe these students:



- 48% of these students were female, 53% were male.
- 25% received some sort of free and reduced lunch.
- 24% had special education status.
- Of the students who took an FCAT in reading, 84% rated as poor, limited success or partial success. Of the students who took an FCAT in math, 94% rated as poor, limited success or partial success.
- During the school year, 4.5% of students had between 1 and 10 in-school suspensions. 11.9% of students had between 1 and 9 out-of-school suspensions. 17.3% of students had between 1 and 10 office referrals.
- 19.7% of the students who received an AIT either did not matriculate or were administratively promoted.



One program staff member described the role of the AIT's saying:

"The school should try to intervene before they [parents] have to come to the courthouse...we should be the last resort."

Another staff person said:

"Our whole program is based on the cooperation with the school system and it would not be good to ruin that cooperation."

Show me the Data...

about the Non-Judicial Hearings and Case Management!!!

Preliminary attendance outcomes for students who participate in the non-judicial hearing and case management indicate that both unexcused attendance and tardiness decreased significantly in the three months immediately after their hearing. Excused absences did not change significantly.

Outcome	Mean	# of Cases
Unexcused Absences at Intake	10.11*	44
Unexcused Absences at First Update	2.3*	
Excused Absences at Intake	2.36	44
Excused Absences at First Update	2.48	
Tardies at Intake	6.98**	44
Tardies at First Update	3.95**	

* $(t(1,43)=5.272, p<.005)$ ** $(t(1,43)=3.199, p<.005)$

One of the hearing officers described his approach saying:

“You don’t want to put them (the family) on the defensive and if you do they’re going to clam up and you’re not going to get very much information. So you have to show them that you’re very understanding of what is happening.”

Another staff member described parent reactions saying:

“We have had parents cry when they heard their kids missed so many days, because to them they live in chaos and a day here, and two days there, they had no idea that it added up to that many days.”

The case management that parents receive also plays a critical role in reducing student tardies and unexcused absences. One parent described the case manager in the following way:

“Well she didn’t hang it over your head because she’s understanding and she [didn’t] have that “I’m above you” condescending attitude. She helped me find a solution.”

What about criminal prosecution of the parents?

The SAO very rarely arrests parents due to their child’s truancy. When parents are arrested, it is early in the morning and unless other warrants are pending, the parent is home by the end of the school day. Fortunately, no out-of-home placement is necessary for the child. In NCSE’s research, we wanted to know if the possibility of arrest motivated parents to improve attendance. Twenty-two parents responded to the questions concerning parental arrest as a consequence of child truancy using an adapted version of the NCSE Family School Engagement Survey.

Results of Family Questionnaires

	YES	NO
Were you aware that parents can be arrested for their child's chronic truancy?	21	1
Did this awareness motivate you to attend today's hearing?	18	3

	Not at all	A little	A lot
Does the possibility of arrest affect your motivation to improve your child's attendance?	1	4	17

For these parents, many were aware of the possibility of arrest and that possibility motivated them to come to the non-judicial hearing and to try to improve their child's attendance.

Many of the staff we talked with concurred with these results saying:

"It's a shame to say but you're more successful with the threat of arrest because parents say, "I'll send him to school cause you're going to put me in jail if I don't."

"We had a mom earlier this year who been arrested for a different child, and now she was here for another one, and not only had she been arrested, but she was one of the few that actually had jail time because she had violated her probation somehow – whether it was because the child kept missing or [she wrote] a bad check or something. She said she had done 30 days at the "P farm." They call it the prison farm, and she was not going back. So this [child] was not going to miss any more days, she said."

Some staff wanted a deeper sanction that might further motivate the parents who are arrested.

"I think when they are arrested, I feel like they probably should have more than just a few hours (in lock-up). They need a wake-up call because it is like a slap on the wrist sometimes. We have some that come right back through...For some it's not fear (of arrest) because they have gone through it before."

How do I get more information?

For more information about this successful program, please contact:

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