Finding effective solutions to truancy

WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN – RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SERIES

Many Wisconsin school districts are struggling with high rates of truancy. Schools, teachers, and communities are seeking effective ways to deal with students who are habitually truant and to prevent truancy in the future. Because the issue is so complex, there are no "evidence-based programs" that can simply be adopted to solve the problem of truancy. What communities need are comprehensive, multifaceted solutions that work at multiple levels. To arrive at effective solutions, community groups should be sensitive to local conditions, but must also draw on the current knowledge base.

Simply knowing the extent or causes of a problem doesn't necessarily indicate what it will take to improve the situation. In order to increase communities' understanding of what needs to be done to effectively impact truancy, this brief reviews:

I)   State and local mandates that constrain and provide opportunities for effective truancy solutions

II)   Roles of the different players: students, parents, schools and communities

III) Two components identified by research as critical for addressing truancy

IV)   Individual, programmatic, and systemic approaches for truancy reduction

Why does truancy matter?

About 1 out of every 10 Wisconsin students is chronically truant [33]. The problem is of particular concern among high school students, among whom about 16% – over 45,000 – have been truant in recent years. Truancy rates are relatively similar for boys and for girls. A noticeable fact about the prevalence of truancy, however, is the significant differences in rates of habitual truancy between schools, with rates at Wisconsin high schools ranging from less than 1% to 75%.

Truancy often has immediate consequences for students in terms of reduced academic achievement because students have more limited opportunities for learning when they are absent from class. When truancy leads to school failure or to dropping out of school, youth are also likely to experience higher rates of unintended pregnancies, more criminal behavior, greater instability in career paths, higher rates of unemployment, and lower lifetime earnings. The average school dropout costs society more than $200,000 in excess criminal justice, social service, and health care costs over the course of a lifetime [3, 23, 32].

Truancy also has immediate and long-term consequences for communities in terms of public safety. Truant youth have been found to be involved in criminal acts such as burglary, auto theft and vandalism. Communities with high rates of truancy are likely to have correspondingly high rates of daytime criminal activity. In the long term, the poorer educational and occupational attainment of formerly truant students is likely to increase their risk for adult criminality and incarceration [2, 23].

Thus, there are two primary purposes for reducing truancy. The first is to have all youth attend and be engaged in school so they will have successful, productive lives. The second is to increase citizen safety, both in the short term, through having students in school rather than out in the community during school hours, and in the long term, through school engagement and achievement leading to later adult responsibility and productivity.

What causes truancy?

The reasons students fail to attend school are multifaceted and complex. Causes can occur at the individual, family, school and community levels [2]. For example, students may skip school because of school phobia, learning disabilities, or difficulty getting along with other students or teachers. Families may have chaotic living situations or parents may have poor parenting skills that affect their ability to monitor and encourage their child's school attendance. Important school factors affecting truancy rates include problems with bullying and teaching methods perceived as boring by students. Communities that don't feel safe to students traveling to and from school and those that fail to have court procedures that promptly enforce the legal consequences of truant acts are other potential contributing factors. Because the causes of truancy are numerous and occur in multiple contexts, it's important that solutions to this complex issue use a variety of strategies that target a number of different influences and work to impact several levels.

I. State and Local Mandates

Approaches to truancy must be crafted within the framework of laws. In Wisconsin, truancy is defined as an unexcused absence from all or a portion of the school day among students aged 6-18 receiving compulsory education. Wisconsin law dictates that, in all school districts, a single unexcused absence is considered *simple truancy* while having five unexcused absences in a semester is called *habitual truancy*. Habitual truancy is a *status offense*, that is, an act that would not be criminal if committed by an adult.

Individual school districts have the freedom to define what constitutes an *unexcused or illegal absence*. State law further dictates that parents must be notified of simple truancy, but leaves it to school districts as to how to do this. Parents must be notified in writing of habitual truancy and can be subject to fines or other sanctions for their children's misbehavior.

In Wisconsin, school funding is tied to *enrollment* (that is, students enrolled on the 3rd Fridays in September and January). Many other states use the count of average daily attendance as a financial incentive to ensure that all students are attending school throughout the school year.

Wisconsin's 1997 Act 239 permits municipalities to enact *ordinances against simple truancy*. Local ordinances, which are enforced under the municipal court system, can increase both the speed and the extent to which truancy is addressed. That is, truancy is often adjudicated more quickly in municipal courts than in the county juvenile courts that have ultimate jurisdiction. In addition, local ordinances can include sanctions, like the loss of a driver's license, which may be particularly salient to local youth.

II. The Roles of Students, Parents, Schools and Communities

Students

The responsibility and motivations of children vary by developmental stage. It is parents who bear primary responsibility for having their elementary school age children arrive at school each day. However, by middle school and high school, students have much greater autonomy and may make their own decisions about whether or not to attend school on any given day. During middle school, some truancy is undoubtedly due to the experimentation with risky behaviors common to this age. For this reason, with young adolescents it's best to treat truancy as a mistake – albeit a serious one – and help them understand the potential effects on their lives. By high school, "students make fairly sophisticated calculations and decisions, weighing the pros and cons of attending school or class" [12] based on their current situation and school history.

Parents

The role of parents is to look out for the well-being of their own children [17]. Research clearly indicates that almost all parents in the United States, of all social classes and cultural groups, value education for their children [5, 18]. Many economically and educationally disadvantaged parents, however, have had less positive experiences with schools – either in their own or their children's education [5]. When parents do not appear to be encouraging their children's school attendance, it may be that they perceive the school to be unsafe or ineffective. These perceptions can create a conflict with parents' desire (and obligation) to protect their children's physical and psychological safety and promote their welfare [31].

By high school, most parents have little direct control over whether or not their children regularly attend class or school, yet the law holds parents fully responsible regardless of their child's age.

Schools

Schools have to balance the needs of the many with the needs of the few. Unlike parents, whose focus is on a particular child, the role of schools is to educate all children [5]. Disruptive children, however, make it more difficult to teach others, so schools may overlook or even welcome the absence of the more difficult students [12]. In many states, there are financial incentives, such as funding tied to average daily attendance [22], that may serve to discourage schools from this practice. Similarly, the *No Child Left Behind Act* attempts to limit future federal funding in schools with poor attendance records. Unfortunately, policies like these don't provide resources to address the underlying dilemma schools face in trying to meet the needs of their most needy pupils. Schools also face increasingly tighter budgets and fewer resources with which to ensure that they meet the needs of all students.

Communities

Communities and courts can provide a useful backup to families and schools by communicating expectations and enforcing sanctions on youth who fail to attend school. They are most effective in this role when they impose immediate and consistent sanctions [11, 22], particularly ones that matter to youth. Because communities and courts may be most immediately concerned with the threat to citizen safety posed by truant students, their focus may be on keeping students off the streets during school hours. However, communities are also charged with guarding public safety long-term – and one of the most effective means of accomplishing this is to ensure that a large proportion of a community's youth are prepared for responsible and productive lives through formal education.

III. The Critical Components in Truancy Reduction

Most truancy reduction efforts focus on compelling children's attendance in school. In general, rules and sanctions are effective at stopping inappropriate behavior (like skipping school), so they need to be included in any effective truancy reduction effort. Because the causes of truancy exist within multiple contexts, attendance rules must be set and enforced consistently at all relevant levels [11, 23, 28]. Thus, one critical component of an effective approach to truancy reduction is the following:

> **Families, schools, and communities need to work together to set rules for school attendance and to enforce the rules quickly and consistently.**

A seamless system, in which the adults in a child's life agree on expectations and rules and back each other up, is what is needed. Research has identified some principles of such a system. Four general principles follow. Additional principles specifically related to students/parents and to schools are listed on pages 10-11.

◆ **There will be higher compliance if all parties perceive rules as fair and fairly enforced** [12, 28]. Involving youth, parents and teachers in the development of rules and procedures is one way to achieve consensus on fair rules.

◆ **The consequences for truancy need to be quickly and consistently enforced** [11, 23, 28]. To be effective, consequences will need to be carried out for the first instance of truancy and the fortieth instance.

◆ **Sanctions for truancy that increase school absence are counterproductive** [22, 27]. Out-of-school suspensions or juvenile detention placements that remove students from educational settings are likely to decrease school

engagement and make it less likely students will achieve school success when they return. Such strategies should not be imposed as a response to truancy.

◆ **Each group of adults accountable for monitoring and enforcing school attendance rules needs the tools necessary to do so.** For example, parents must actually receive notification of children's absences and they must have access to a responsive school staff member who can answer questions and provide help obtaining needed services [34]. Police who are charged with checking for truant students need information that will enable them to do so effectively. High schools in Racine, for example, now provide truant officers with a binder that includes student pictures and schedules.

We might assume that if weaker sanctions don't work, the answer would be to simply use stronger ones. But, in the case of truancy, this hasn't proven to be effective. For example, experiments in which parents were denied welfare benefits [11, 28] and programs where police were sent to the homes of truant children [20] increased, rather than decreased, the incidence of truancy. Using strong sanctions like secure detention for truant youth makes it harder for students to return to and succeed in formal schooling [13].

As a general rule, incentives (not rules and sanctions) are what are needed to encourage positive behavior [28]. While rewarding students for improved attendance has been shown to improve absenteeism among elementary students, and short-term incentives are sometimes necessary to get truant students back into educational programs, in general, short-term inducements haven't been shown to keep high school students there [11, 23]. There is, however, extensive evidence [4, 7, 23, 26, 27, 28] indicating that schools themselves are the most important incentives for children's school engagement. Some students report that they attend school regularly because they see the link between current school work and a future, well-paying job. Other students cite safety concerns, being disrespected by teachers, and being bored as major reasons for skipping school. Thus, in order to have youth attend and be engaged in school so they will achieve success in school and in life, the second critical component for truancy intervention is a focus on school environments themselves:

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Schools need to be places where students want to be.

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Characteristics of School Environments Valued by Students

> *Dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a slow process of disengagement. . . Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three hour lunches – and each absence made them less willing to go back. These students had long periods of absences and were sometimes referred to the truant officer, only to be brought back to the same environment that led them to become disengaged* [4, p. iv].

Students often rationally weigh the costs of skipping school (for example, the rules and sanctions described earlier) against the benefits of attending school. In several studies [4, 12, 30], truants and recent dropouts made it clear that they decided not to attend school simply because the costs of attending were too great. Schools were described as unsafe, uncaring, unsupportive, uninteresting or irrelevant. There is strong evidence that it is primarily these five aspects of school environments – safety, caring adults, academic support, and interesting and relevant classes – that youth weigh most heavily in deciding whether or not to attend school regularly.

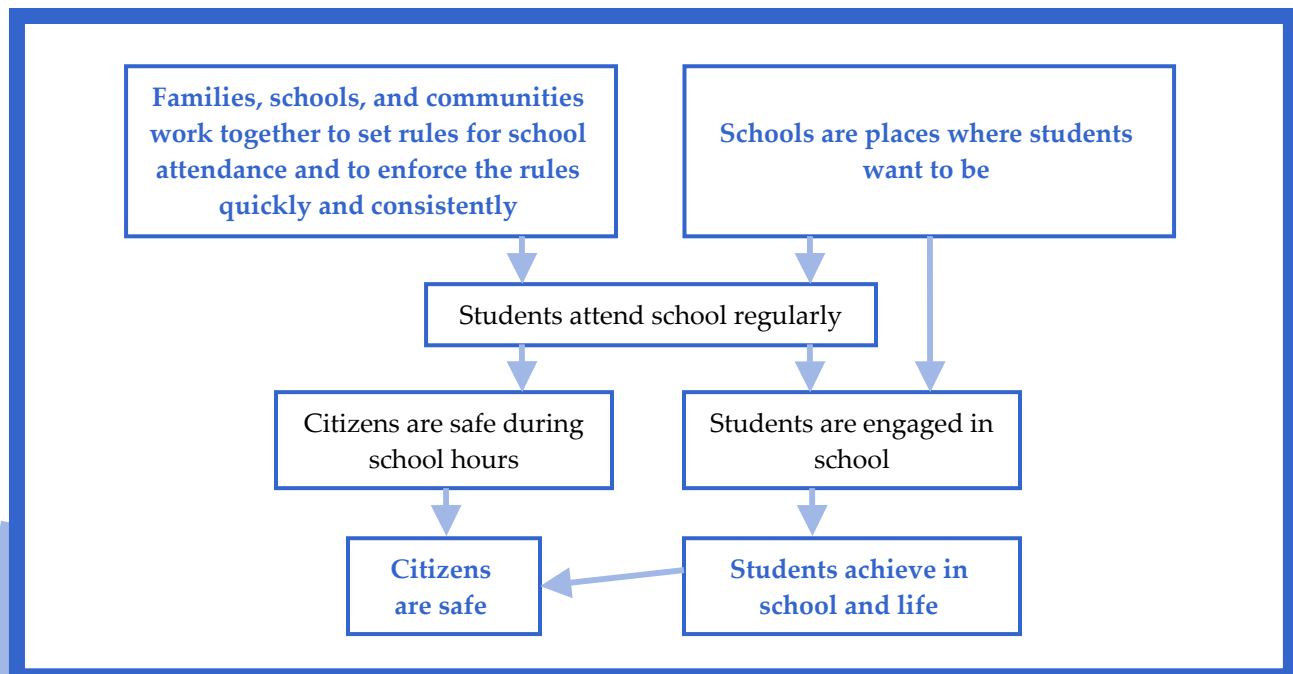**1) Safety: The environment is orderly and students feel free from physical threat and violence.** In a recent survey, 5% of Wisconsin students reported missing school because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school, 8% reported being threatened or injured with a weapon and 12% had been in a physical fight on school property [8]. Because students' perceptions of school safety are tied to their perceptions of neighborhood safety, this is a problem that communities and schools must work in partnership to address [14]. However, research suggests some things schools might do. When recent high school dropouts [4] were asked what might have helped them stay in school, a large number cited the most basic conditions in their school: 62% cited a lack of order and classroom discipline while 47% cited chaos that made them feel physically threatened. Similarly a study of middle school students [14] showed that while safety measures (such as guards and metal detectors) were not related to their feelings of safety in school, the presence of a discipline code understood by all and perceived as fair and consistently enforced did make them feel more safe.

2) Caring Adults: Teachers work to help all students succeed. In talking about their teachers, truants and students who have dropped out read-

ily identified the best teachers as those who cared about them in and out of classes [4, 12]. Caring meant that teachers wanted and expected students to do well and that they were willing to help them do so. Interestingly, it was expectations by teachers that were too low – not work that was too hard – that was perceived to be the bigger turn-off to these students. Students wanted to be challenged and valued teachers who they felt believed in their potential [4, 12, 27].

3) Academic Support: All students are helped to achieve school success. In one recent study, over half of students who had dropped out felt that more needed to be done to help students who had problems learning [4]. Seventy percent of survey participants believed that more after-school tutoring, Saturday school, summer school and extra help from teachers would have enhanced their chances of staying in school. Students also felt that large schools and large classes worked against teachers being able to manage classroom discipline and provide individual help.

4) Interesting Classes: Curricula and teaching methods are of personal interest to students. Nearly half (47 percent) of former students surveyed said that boring classes were a major factor in their decision to drop out [4]. Research on tru-

ancy has discovered that students are selective about cutting classes because of classroom practices. In classes with high cutting, students were often assigned large quantities of written "seat work" and independent silent reading. Classes characterized as more interactive were better attended [12]. Marc Prensky has noted that most students today are "digital natives" while their teachers and parents are "digital immigrants" [25]. Teaching practices developed in the 20th century are less appealing to children who live in the 21st century.

5) Relevant Classes: Connections are made between what happens in school and students' future lives. A large majority (81%) of former students said that if schools provided opportunities for real-world learning, such as internships and service learning projects, it would have improved their chances of graduating from high

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Are structural changes the answer?

Do smaller schools and smaller classes make a difference? Research on elementary schools with economically disadvantaged children has shown *smaller class sizes* to be effective, but only when teachers also receive training on how to alter their teaching methods to take advantage of the new environment. A number of studies demonstrate that, in poorer communities, creating *smaller high schools* does lead to more regular student attendance, engagement, and academic achievement. However, recent work has demonstrated that, for the most part, these benefits accrue only among teachers with less skill. Research on *smaller learning communities* created within larger schools has shown few effects, but evaluations of smaller learning communities formed for a specific educational purpose (see, for example, *Career Academies* in Appendix B) have shown positive effects on both attendance and school achievement. Thus, structural changes like smaller classes or smaller schools "may provide the opportunity for important educational conditions, such as stronger relationships, greater student involvement, and greater academic press, but they do not, by themselves, guarantee that those conditions will exist" [9, p. 164].

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school [4]. Other studies have noted that clarifying the links between attending school and getting a job may convince more students to stay in school [19].

IV. Individual, programmatic, and systemic responses

Individual, programmatic and systemic approaches can all be useful responses to truancy. However, regardless of the approach chosen, to be effective, both components – a seamless system of rules and consequences and educational programs that are perceived by youth as safe, caring, supportive, interesting and relevant – need to be addressed.

Individual Approaches for Truant Youth

The programmatic responses that have been tried with students who are chronically truant typically focus on monitoring youth more carefully and threatening or instituting increasingly tough sanctions. However, this approach hasn't been shown to be very successful at keeping youth in school or in engaging them in school work.

On the other hand, tightening up the system of expectations and sanctions at different levels does tend to increase attendance in the short run and does seem to be one important component in the long-term reduction of truancy. This can be accomplished by communicating rules more clearly, monitoring youths' attendance more carefully and responding to infractions more quickly and consistently. Communities can use the principles on pages 4, 10, and 11 as a guide.

In addition, if the primary purpose of truancy reduction efforts is to help students attend and be engaged in school so they will have successful, productive lives, interventions with students who are persistently truant must also have a primary focus on helping the youth become reengaged in educational experiences. For that purpose, individualized approaches [18, 20] in which a single adult both identifies educational programming

that meets a child's needs and monitors their attendance appear to work best. Individualized approaches that include the following aspects are likely to be most effective:

◆ A single adult guide – counselor, teacher, or case manager – who communicates that they care about and believe in the student

◆ Discussion between the adult and student focused on the question: "What would it take to help you succeed?"

◆ Use of information from this discussion to identify educational programs that this particular student will experience as safe, caring, academically supportive, interesting and relevant. This could include alternative school programs, supports, changes, or programs within the regular school program, community support programs, or some combination of these.

◆ Use of information from this discussion to help the youth identify services for personal or family problems as needed

◆ Short-term incentives to get the student to try out new educational programming

◆ Monitoring of the youth's participation in designated programs by the adult guide

Programmatic Responses for Youth at Risk of Truancy

The programs that have been effective both at increasing school attendance and achievement have typically had youth at risk of truancy as their primary audience [20]. In Appendix B, we identify three programs (*Career Academies, School Transitional Environment Program,* and *Big Brothers, Big Sisters*) that have been identified as particularly effective for students who are truant or at risk of becoming truant. Additional examples of exemplary programs can be found in program registries such as the Ohio State Center for Learning

Excellence Evidence-Based Program Database (www.alted-mh.org/ebpd/) or the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's Model Programs Guide (www.dsgonline.com/mpg2.5/).

Because effective solutions to truancy will need to be comprehensive and responsive to local conditions, these programs shouldn't be thought of as "magic bullets." Instead, they can serve as examples of programs that have successfully targeted some of the five critical school characteristics described above. Because these programs address only one of the two necessary components of an effective approach to truancy, implementation of such programs does not preclude the need for attention to the other component.

Systemic Responses

In many communities, particularly those with high rates of truancy, case management or single intervention programs alone are not likely to have a large impact on the student truancy problem. Furthermore, the cost of responding primarily through individualistic interventions is likely to be prohibitively expensive over time. Communities may want to think about systemic responses in which they consider all the ways in which their school or community would need to change to have both consistent systems of truancy rules/ consequences and safe, caring, academically supportive, interesting and relevant schools for all children. Appendix B includes an example of one systemic approach (the *Comer School Development Program*). Again, this program serves as an illustrative example of how a school can become a place where students want to be.

In Summary. . .

◆ Chronic absence from school has serious negative consequences both for truant youth themselves and for communities, which suffer both short and long-term threats to public safety.

◆ Different communities will need their own unique solutions.

◆ Research identifies two critical components that must be addressed:

   • Youth, families, schools, communities and courts need to work together to set rules and enforce consequences quickly and consistently.

   • Schools need to become places where students want to be.

◆ Effective solutions to truancy – whether individual, programmatic, or community responses – require comprehensive, multifaceted strategies at multiple levels that address both components.

◆ Communicating truancy rules clearly, monitoring youth consistently and enforcing consequences quickly and fairly make a difference while simply imposing tougher sanctions usually does not.

◆ Interventions with students who are chronically truant must focus on helping the youth become reengaged through the provision of educational experiences that the youth feels are safe, caring, academically supportive, interesting and relevant.

◆ In communities with high rates of truancy, creating comprehensive solutions that address both of the essential components – seamless systems of rules/consequences *and* schools that are valued by students – will be necessary to have effective long-term impacts on this issue.

Appendix A
Toward more effective systems of truancy rules and sanctions:
Context-specific principles

Principles related to Students and Families

◆ **School policies on attendance should be clearly communicated to students and to parents.** It is easier for students and parents to understand rules about attendance if all teachers and administrators within a particular school building (or school district) can agree on and communicate a consistent policy. Students and parents are more likely to pay attention to this information when it's provided in forums and languages typically utilized by families in a particular community [10].

◆ **Public service announcements or campaigns simply telling students or parents that attending school is important are ineffective.** Personal stories of how school improved the lives of people like the ones you want to reach are more likely to be effective, but multiple messages over long periods of time would be needed [1].

◆ **Students and parents are most likely to pay attention to attendance policies during transitions to new school situations** [6]. Thus, kindergarten, first, and sixth grades may be the most important times to communicate the value of school attendance and attendance policies to *parents*. Unexcused absences typically increase dramatically and peak during ninth grade [31], so both middle school (a transition period) and ninth grade itself are particularly important times for the communication and enforcement of attendance rules with *students*. When students and families are new to a school district, another important opportunity exists for communicating attendance expectations.

◆ **Definitions of excused and unexcused attendance that fit the life realities of families in a particular school can decrease the incidence of truancy.** Contemporary families vary widely in their resources and risks. In Wisconsin, school districts have the flexibility to provide local definitions of excused and unexcused absence. This means that some school districts may legally allow students to make college visits while others may allow students time off to care for an ill family member. If a primary purpose of truancy reduction efforts is to ensure that all children successfully achieve in school, academic support provided for time missed to students who have these locally legitimate needs for absence is preferable to sanctions (or to more uniform definitions that may be seen as useful by researchers and politicians) [2].

◆ **Since families have the most responsibility and influence during elementary and middle school, truancy efforts involving younger children should work directly with parents.** Personal contact is most effective. Focusing discussions on the needs of the child (for example, pointing out how regular attendance will help the child learn to read) and helping parents identify what needs to be done so the child can attend school regularly is more likely to bring about compliance than blaming parents or asking them why the child isn't attending school [10, 18].

◆ **To be effective, student sanctions for truancy should be ones that matter to students** [28]. Restrictions on school sports team participation or on work permits are examples of consequences salient to many youth.

◆ **Student sanctions for truancy should be closely tied to the truant behavior, particularly ones that focus on making up missed work.** Several studies report that Saturday sessions and same-day after-school sessions are effective in reducing truancy [19, 28].

Principles related to Schools

◆ **Consistent setting and enforcement of rules within schools is critical.** There is evidence that most truant behavior actually occurs within school buildings and that such class cutting is highly related to later absence from school [12].

◆ **Teacher response is critical to handling class cutting before too many days are lost.** Involving teachers in the development of methods to reliably monitor and record students' absences without significantly reducing instructional time is likely to facilitate teachers' enforcement of truancy rules.

◆ **Significant thought must be given to finding effective solutions for keeping disorderly students from disrupting the learning of others** *at the same time* **as helping the disruptive students stay engaged in and successful in schooling themselves.** Multiple solutions are likely to be necessary. Strategies might include new discipline strategies, alternative educational program interventions, and supplementary community services for students themselves, classroom management education for teachers, or changes in school environments to make them safer, more caring, more academically supportive, more interesting, and more relevant.

Appendix B
Examples of Effective Programs and Approaches

Chart 1

Chart 1 shows how the program examples given below target different critical characteristics valued by students.

Note that every one of these successful programs included *Caring Relationships with Adults* as one target characteristic and that every program focused on multiple characteristics.

CHARACTERISTICS	PROGRAMS/APPROACHES			
	Career Academies	School Transitional Environment Program	Big Brothers, Big Sisters	Comer School Development
SAFETY				X
CARING ADULTS	X	X	X	X
ACADEMIC SUPPORT		X	X	X
INTERESTING CLASSES	X			
RELEVANT CLASSES	X			

School-Based Program: Career Academies

Targeted Characteristics: Caring Relationships; Interest; Future Relevance

Program Effectiveness Rating: Listed as an Effective program in OJJDP's Model Programs Guide (www.dsgonline.com/mpg2.5/)

Target Audience: High school students

Program Description: "Career Academies are school based programs that seek to reduce drop-out rates, as well as improve school performance and career readiness among high school youth. A Career Academy (CA) is organized as a school-within-a-school, where students work in 'Small learning communities.' Each small learning community involves a small number of students working with the same group of teachers for three or four years of high school with the aim of creating a more personalized and supportive learning environment for students. CAs use a career theme to integrate academic and vocational curricula. In an effort to build connections between school and work and to provide students with a range of career development and work based learning opportunities, CAs establish partnerships with local employers" [20].

Relevant Outcomes: Increased attendance; Decreased dropping out; Increased academic course taking; Increased likelihood of taking enough credits to graduate on time; Increased vocational course taking without reducing completion of basic academic curriculum

School-Based Program: STEP - School Transitional Environment Program

Targeted Characteristics: Academic Support; Caring Relationships

Program Effectiveness Rating: Listed as a Promising program by Blueprints for Violence Prevention (www.colorado.edu/cspv/blueprints/) and as an Effective program in OJJDP's Model Programs Guide

Target Audience: Students transitioning into high school

Program Description: "STEP seeks to mediate the negative effects for adolescents that are associated with making the transition from junior high to high school. Specifically, the program focuses on increasing social support and decreasing the task-oriented difficulties for adolescents who are experiencing this transition. The program uses

two components in order to accomplish these goals. First, the program restructures the role of homeroom teachers, who take on additional roles as counselors and school administrators to the program participants. Second, the program seeks to reorganize the social system the student is entering. STEP students are assigned to class-rooms in four of their classes only with other program participants in order to keep a constant peer group in a relatively fixed location of the school" [20].

Relevant Outcomes: Increased attendance; Decreased dropping out; Maintained achievement levels from middle school to high school; Reduced levels of emotional, behavioral and academic dys-function, Less academic failure; Higher GPAs

Community- or School-Based Program: **Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America (BBBSA)**

Targeted Characteristics: Caring Relationships (with non-teacher adults); Academic Support

Program Effectiveness Rating: Listed as a Model program by Blueprints, Effective program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (http://modelprograms.samhsa.gov/), and an Exemplary program in OJJDP's Model Programs Guide

Target Audience: Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America typically targets youth (aged 6 to 18) from single parent homes.

Program Description: "The BBBSA program matches volunteer adult mentors with at-risk children and youth, anticipating that caring and supportive relationships will develop. Mentors are selected, screened, and matched with children based on shared goals and interests of the child and adult volunteer. Mentors are expected to meet with the child at least 3-5 hours per week for a period of 12 months or longer. BBBSA staff mon-itor the relationship and maintain contact with the mentor, child, and parent/guardian throughout the matched relationship. BBBSA staff can provide advice and guidance to the mentor, as well as support and encouragement" [20].

Relevant Outcomes: Increased school atten-dance; Students felt more competent; Modest increase in standardized achievement test scores

School-Based Systemic Approach: **Comer School Development Program**

Targeted Characteristics: Safety, Caring Rela-tionships, Academic Support

Program Effectiveness Rating: Because this is more a systemic approach to school reform, rather than a program, it has not been rated by the organizations that provide registries of effective programs. However, evaluations of this approach have demonstrated strong program effects.

Target Audience: Elementary through high school

Program Description: "The Comer School Development Program (SDP) addresses various aspects of school climate related to the prevention and reduction of violence in the school setting. There are three main program components: (a) a school planning team that involves parents and school staff in making the critical decisions that shape school policy, influence school climate, and direct school programs; (b) a student and staff support team composed of mental health professionals and child development experts, whose task is to identify and/or develop ways to address developmentally and socially appropriate responses to issues affecting students and staff, including violence; and (c) a parent involvement program that engages parents in meaningful ways in the life of the school. Because the program adheres to the philosophy that each school should determine its own academic and social goals, the SDP specifies only the processes and structures needed to establish, monitor, and modify these goals" [20].

Relevant Outcomes: Increased school atten-dance; Increased academic achievement.

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