TRUANCY PREVENTION IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

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ABSTRACT

TRUANCY PREVENTION IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

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The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a truancy prevention program operated by a rural school district in southwest Virginia in reducing absenteeism and improving academic performance for students. The truancy prevention program consists of an early warning system by which school personnel and other professionals (known as the Truancy, Academic, Assistance, and Response Team or TAART) meet with students with frequent absences, poor academic performance, or behavioral problems. Referral to a truancy officer, who pursues legal action against chronically absent students and/or their parents, is a commonly used intervention, but other supportive measures are also utilized. Analysis using repeated measures t-tests indicated no observable impacts on student attendance or academics after participation in the TAART meetings at one-year follow-up or from last semester when data was available. Correlations using change scores did not yield significant relationships between absences, numerical grades, or number of TAART meetings attended.

INTRODUCTION

Truancy Prevention in the United States

As the domain of public education has typically fallen to individual state jurisdiction within the United States; states, local governments, and school districts have addressed the issues of student truancy in various ways. The terminology and classification systems attributed to students who are chronically absent or truant vary by state. In the state of Virginia, compulsory education is mandated until the age of 18. All students who fail to attend school are therefore legally classified as truants. This terminology is important because, technically speaking, the state has no student dropouts, only truants, but some of the students labeled as truants in Virginia would likely be labeled as dropouts in other states. Regardless of the terminology, the goal of truancy prevention programs is largely to prevent student dropout from school, meaning that discussion of the dropout prevention literature is warranted due to the interrelatedness of the two terms.

This situation has been the case for most of the United States' history. There was traditionally little formal accountability present and school districts could simply withdraw students who were chronically absent with little consequence. However, with the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001, schools faced increased accountability and reporting requirements. These requirements were complicated by a lack of consensus surrounding how student attendance should be measured and the differences between student "attendance" as an educational construct and student "truancy" as a legal concept.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama in 2015, added another dimension to federal reporting requirements surrounding attendance. The law

dictates that schools include measures of "chronic absenteeism" on a list of requirements that states must submit to the federal government. Chronic absenteeism differs from the way that truancy is typically defined because it does not take into account whether or not the absence was excused. The bill does not specify exactly how many days a student must miss before they are labeled as chronically absent, but most states are choosing to use 15-18 days as a general guideline ("New federal education law includes chronic absence tracking, training," 2015). The new reporting requirements appear to acknowledge the importance of regular student attendance.

Within the study of psychology, most research articles have shifted away from the use of "truancy" and instead use the term "school refusal behaviors." However, despite the change in terminology, both "truancy" and "school refusal behaviors" are concepts generally interchangeable in methodology and used to describe characteristics within an individual that cause them to actively avoid school (Ekstrand, 2015). The individual factors that are known to predict truancy or school refusal behaviors are well-documented within the research base. These are well summarized by Shannon and Bylsma (2003) as low socio-economic status, race (primarily Native American, Hispanic, and African American), poor academic achievement, repeating a grade, having a primary language other than English, living in a large city, having a close friend or family member who dropped out of high school, illness or disability, becoming pregnant, and/or low self-esteem or self-efficacy. Very rarely is just one factor implicated in a student's drop out or truancy.

Of particular relevance to the truancy and dropout prevention literature is the concept of student engagement. Finn (1993) was one of the early researchers to assert that student engagement was an essential precursor of academic success and that specific characteristics of the school climate could directly impact student engagement. Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr, and

Anderson (2003) explain that Finn's primary contribution was his Participation-Identification Model which states that student participation in academic activities is necessary in order for student's to experience academic success. This academic success subsequently leads to student engagement with the school.

However, definitions and measurement of student attachment vary and definitions may be convoluted within the literature base by similar terms, such as student bonding, student affiliation, and school membership. Jimerson, Campos, and Greif (2003) concluded in a comprehensive literature review of student attachment and related terms that student attachment is a multi-faceted construct that includes affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Measurement within this complex construct should be conducted within several contexts, including academic performance, classroom behavior, extracurricular involvement, interpersonal relationships, and the school community. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) provide a simplified definition. They define student attachment as "behavioral and psychological connections to school" (pp. 369). Key features of student attachment as it has been understood through over 20 years of research include the fact that sufficient student engagement is necessary for school completion or graduation from high school and that student dropout is not a single event, but a gradual process by which students disengage from school over time. Frequent absences are often a key indication of this gradual withdrawal process (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008).

At the school and district level, attendance is typically reported as a daily average, which tends to be high (around 95%) in general, meaning that students with highly consistent attendance can mask the impacts of students who are chronically absent. Measures of attendance are generally group based in terms of how the information is reported to the federal government.

For example, the number of students who missed a specified number of days at a school is commonly used as opposed to turning over individual student attendance records. By contrast, truancy data is typically applied to individual students who miss a specified number of days as defined by a state's law. This distinction is important, because it influences how information is reported and each type of reporting may present a different picture of how many students are consistently attending school (Kronholz, 2011).

Court Based Truancy Interventions

Truancy is a legal term used to describe students who miss school without good reason (Reid, 2008). Casoli-Reardon, Rappaport, Kulick, and Reinfe (2012) also define truancy as, "A student's refusal to attend part or all of the school day, along with a defined number of unexcused absences" (p. 51). Definitions and potential consequences for truancy vary by state with some states choosing to prosecute truant students as juvenile offenders and other states taking little or no action to address truant behaviors. There appears to be little consensus nationally surrounding definitions or guidelines for the classification of truants. All the researcher could locate were individual state guidelines which were highly discrepant. In Virginia, a student can be classified as truant after missing five days of school. The concept of truancy is important to consider because a large number of districts choose to pursue chronically absent students through the court system. In some counties, there are whole courts specifically designated to handle truancy cases outside of those typically designated for other types of juvenile offenses (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005).

Parents of children convicted of truancy offenses can also face legal consequences which may include, fines, orders for children to attend school, or in the most severe cases, parents may also face neglect charges, loss of custody, or even jail time. However, Gerrard, Burhans, and

Fair (2003) found that tying a family's public welfare benefits to the child's school attendance had no impact on the truancy of the child. There are other documented limitations to these types of programs. Hendricks, Sale, Evans, McKinley, and De Lozier Carter (2010) found that a court-based truancy intervention was most successful for students with severe truancy (i.e., missing up to 79% of instructional days) with no impact in cases of mild truancy. These findings are important because mild truancy appears to be more of a problem nationally than severe truancy (Ekstrand, 2005). Furthermore, the court-based truancy intervention had no impact on improving school attachment, grade-point average, or decreasing discipline referrals.

The court-based truancy prevention program consisted of a referral to a Truancy Court Team. The team targeted students with less than 90% attendance who had no chronic documented health concerns or chronic suspensions. Participation in the program was voluntary and parental permission was obtained for students to participate. Students also signed a contract through which they were expected to meet program expectations (i.e., attending school each day, attending all truancy court sessions, following parental rules, and being alcohol and drug free). The actual program consisted of having students participate in truancy court (Hendricks et al., 2010).

Additionally, Lawrence, Lawther, Wendell, Jennison, and Hightower (2011) found in an evaluation of a program implemented conjointly between a district State Attorney's Office and an elementary school that the positive impacts of the program were short-lived and that truancy rates returned to pre-program rates after students exited the program. Still, court-based truancy prevention programs for chronically absent students can be cost effective. Specifically, each student who fails to complete high school may cost taxpayers up to $800,000 in loss of earning potential, healthcare costs, legal fees, and potential welfare dependence. Court-enforced truancy

prevention programs may cost as little as $100,000 per year to operate and therefore these programs can be viewed positively by the public (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005).

There is also support within the literature base for court-based truancy prevention programs. Specifically, Santelmann-Richtman (2007) describes a successful truancy intervention program implemented in Minnesota that involved a multi-step program that included "increasingly intrusive interventions to improve student's attendance." (p. 424). The program was divided into three phases. During the initial phase, students who had three unexcused absences were referred to a large-group meeting at their school that was conducted by the assistant county attorney. Parents were invited to attend this meeting as well. At the meeting, the assistant county attorney explained the compulsory attendance laws and possible consequences if the student continued to miss school. If student attendance failed to improve, the student and his or her parents attended an individual meeting with the assistant county attorney, a school counselor or social worker, and a juvenile probation officer. During this meeting, a plan was developed to help the student be more successful at school. Referral to outside community agencies was often included in the plan. The student and the parent would both sign the plan. If the student or parent failed to adhere to the plan or attendance did not improve, the school would file a truancy petition in court. Ten years into the enactment of the program, the schools in St. Paul had increased graduation rates by 50 percent. Additionally, Shoenfelt and Huddleston (2006) describe a program instituted in Bowling Green, Kentucky that was able to successfully improve student attendance and academic performance by collaborating effectively with the court system.

This program adopted a somewhat different approach from the program in Minnesota with a family court judge playing the largest role in the program. The school made an initial

referral for a student to attend the program and teachers provided weekly academic, attendance, and behavioral reports to the family court judge and the actual program was largely conducted by the judge. Specifically, families participating in the program were placed into cohorts that met either weekly or biweekly with the judge. At the meetings, the judge discussed the reports provided by the teachers and discussed any successes or problems that occurred during the week. Parent or student referral to outside community organizations was often utilized and both parents and students had access to a number of different community programs. The use of cohorts also provided the families with a source of social support to make positive changes. While both of these programs were successful, they both also incorporated additional supports besides the court system to promote student attendance, such as tutoring or a referral to community agencies.

A referral to juvenile justice is typically used as a last resort effort and is largely punitive. Ovink (2011) described why these types of approaches can be problematic. Problems occur when the focus of a court-based intervention is centered on behavioral control and "normalization" of student behavior and not education or rehabilitation of struggling students. Court-based initiatives run the risk of operating solely around "organizational survival" and an agenda of maintaining "social control" where chronically truant children are simply punished as criminals and not given the supports needed to change their behaviors. Ovink (2011) believes these programs fit into a larger social agenda where, "Having schools take on a dimension of crime control by sequestering and punishing those students already least likely to succeed does little to achieve the long-term societal benefits that would accrue from increasing educational attainment" (p. 95).

Prevention-Focused Truancy Interventions

Moving away from a crime and punishment model often requires a change in perspective from punishment to prevention, with the former receiving substantially more attention within the literature base than the latter (Ekstrand, 2015). For example, Claes, Hooghe, and Reeskens (2009) stated in a large comparative analysis of 14 year olds in 28 countries that truancy should not be viewed as an issue for the courts as chronic truancy has demonstrated negative impacts on educational performance. These negative impacts are especially true if the chronically absent child comes from a lower socio-economic status family. Claes et al. (2009) further conclude that "repressive" or highly punitive measures should not be the sole means of intervention, programs that encourage a positive school climate and actively support family or parental participation have lower truancy rates and schools with unwelcoming or "cold" school climates tend to have more problems with truancy. Actively suspending or expelling students for poor attendance can negatively contribute to school climate and further attendance problems. Shannon and Bylsma (2006) directly argue that punitive measures encourage students to drop out, saying that tactics such as suspensions or expulsions are specifically tied to student dropout.

Ekstrand (2005) concludes, in a comprehensive literature review, that rewarding students for coming to school is a more effective strategy for improving attendance than punishing them for not coming to school. The reason for those findings is consistent with the literature base. Children will avoid places where they feel unwelcome, unsafe, or unsupported and largely punitive measures contribute and support those feelings, therefore causing students to further avoid school.

However, a compromise between the perceived punitive nature of court-based interventions and the need to foster positive school climates is possible. Fantuzzo, Grim, and Hazan (2005) found in an evaluation of a community-based court intervention to reduce chronic

absenteeism that a community-based court initiative (court-referral that also included community-based services such as social or community mental health services) outperformed a traditional court referral program for both short term and long-term (one-year follow-up) reductions in truancy behaviors. The importance of community involvement in terms of reducing student truancy rates is also supported by Sheldon and Epstein (2004). A variety of professionals have been shown to contribute positively to a school's truancy prevention efforts, including school social workers (Newsome, Anderson-Butcher, Hall, & Huffer, 2008), school guidance counselors (White & Kelly, 2010), and health care professionals (Tsarouk, Thompson, Herting, Walsh, & Randall, 2007). Community involvement and collaboration with community agencies may be an important component for fostering student engagement within the school system (Ekstrand, 2015).

Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009) define what they call the ABCs of student engagement as absenteeism, behavioral problems, and course failure. These factors are most strongly associated with student truancy. The researchers also conclude that course failure in 9th grade is an especially predictive factor for student dropout. Academic difficulties in general are also highly predictive of later school dropout (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008;) primarily through the negative impacts that course failure has on student self-esteem, increased frustration levels, and low expectations for academic success in the future which then increases the likelihood of student dropout (Finn & Rock, 2007). Bradshaw et al. (2008) further elaborate on what they call the "core competencies" needed for academic success. The core competencies are individual factors that can prevent the likelihood of student dropout. In addition to self-esteem, these factors, include self-control, decision making skills, a moral system of belief, and prosocial connectedness.

While these "individual" factors are strongly linked to student dropout, characteristics of the school environment can also influence the likelihood that students will drop out. Such factors include the degree to which school faculty are supportive of students (or the extent to which faculty are perceived as supportive), the presence of high academic standards, and school curriculum and instructional practices that are logical and perceived as relevant to the goals and interests of students. Students in less supportive schools are at an increased risk for dropout (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). These conclusions are also supported by the work of Pellerin (2005) who found that schools with authoritarian or low warmth and high demanding school climates are associated with the worst results for dropouts and more responsive schools tend to fare better.

School Programs Addressing Attendance and School Dropout

In terms of individual school programming, school districts have typically elected to either focus on changing school-wide practices and improving school climate or programs that are specifically designed to target at-risk student populations (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009). In a comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by Wilson, Tanner-Smith, Lipsey, Steinka-Fry, and Morrison (2011) of both school-wide programs and programs designed to target at risk populations (e.g., teen parents), the authors concluded that both types of programs were equally effective at reducing school dropout, with no significant effect observed for program type or type of participants. Rather, program implementation fidelity was the more relevant factor regardless of program type. Program implementation fidelity was measured by the reported amount of problems related to implementation reported in the articles included in the meta-analysis. In the data analysis, programs were coded as having either clear problems, possible problems, or no apparent problems based on review of the articles. However, Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009)

conclude that a tiered approach that addresses both school-wide reform and specific

programming for at-risk populations is the most evidence-based approach toward dropout

prevention.

A review of the literature on current truancy programs within schools by Huck (2011)

identifies the core components of effective truancy programs. The components include a change

in classroom instruction or instruction management and a change in the organizational structure

of grades or school. Other factors include cognitive-behavioral therapy, mentoring, work study,

and tutoring. Huck (2011) also recommends using a multi-modal and holistic approach, a step-

based approach to change, systems of rewards and consequences, and incorporating

parental/guardian/family involvement. Additionally, Haight, Chapman, Hendron, Loftis, and

Kearney (2014), in an evaluation of a truancy prevention program in nine middle schools,

concluded that academic tutoring was a key component in preventing student chronic

absenteeism. Attendance at afterschool tutoring programs provided an opportunity for positive

interactions between students and staff, aiding in student attachment to his or her school and

increasing the likelihood of regular student attendance. After-school tutoring also gave staff

members an opportunity to informally address reasons for student nonattendance. Fostering

positive relationships between students and staff members appears to be a key component in any

dropout or truancy prevention program (Mac Iver & Mac Iver, 2009).

These core components could be considered "best practices" for truancy or dropout

prevention programs and are most strongly associated with successful intervention programs.

These are components that are commonly seen within the truancy or dropout prevention

literature, with specific emphasis placed on the importance of incorporating a parental or

guardian participation component. White and Kelly (2010) also listed "best practices" for both

increasing protective factors and targeting risk factors for student dropout. In terms of increasing protective factors, White and Kelly (2010) provide evidence-based practices for preventing student dropout out. These practices include promoting social support, providing opportunities for monitoring and mentoring, providing opportunities for personal and social skill development, and promoting parental involvement. Strategies for targeting at-risk students included ideas for improving academic instruction and support. Prevatt and Kelly (2003) found evidence in a review of dropout prevention programs for programs that included bilingual education, academic skill enrichment in specific content areas, student monitoring, behavioral contracting, parent visits, individual tutoring, social skills groups, student orientations, study skills training, peer support, and teacher advising. Huck (2011) further concludes that it appears that programs that adopt a primarily punitive stance are more likely to be ineffective, but that integrating a juvenile justice system approach can be effective as along as other more supportive community or school based services are also incorporated into the school's overall approach to dropout prevention.

Dropout and Truancy Prevention in Southwest Virginia

The dropout or truancy prevention program for a rural school district in Southwest Virginia consists of an early warning system by which school personnel and other professionals (known as the Truancy, Academic, Assistance, and Response Team or TAART) meet with students with frequent absences, poor academic performance, or behavioral problems. There are no specific criteria for making a referral. Referrals are made by teachers or other school faculty who notice that a student is having a problem. Referrals are made to the person in charge of the truancy program. She then decides whether or not the team will meet with the students. Professional members of the TAART team include mental health case managers, mental health counselors, juvenile probation officers, school social workers, guidance counselors, and the

school truancy officer. TAART teams are located at the High School and Middle School, but this research will only be evaluating the team at the High School. Members of school administration and teachers also sometimes attend the meetings.

The attendance policy for the high school is provided each year to students through the school's handbook. If a student misses several days, an attendance contract may be sent home. The contract informs parents that their child may be at risk for loosing academic credit if they miss more days and parents are required to sign the contract. The attendance contract does not reference the state laws regarding truancy

As indicated above, the state of Virginia mandates compulsory attendance until the age of 18. At the meetings, various strategies are discussed and implemented to address concerns and assist with student issues. Possible interventions include recommending or requiring that the child attend after school tutoring, referral to mental health or social service agencies, or referral for 504 or special education services. Tutoring and school-based guidance services are the most used supports. Filing truancy charges is the most commonly used consequence. This consequence is a "last ditch effort" but is used frequently. The team typically waits until 8 or 9 unexcused absences before filing charges. Less frequently used interventions include home-bound academic instruction, moving the child to an alternative setting or location, making schedule changes, or offering the opportunity for credit recovery classes. Parents are always invited and often attend the meetings. If a student is over the age of 18, a parent is still usually invited to attend but the student can also decline to have a parent participate. Common interventions include recommendations for tutoring or referrals to community-based mental health or social services.

The school district also offers a credit recovery program that is often discussed during TAART meetings. The program is available to students who have passed state exams but have failed classes due to attendance issues. Through the credit recovery program, students are able to receive credit for failed courses in an abbreviated time frame. The principal at the High School also has the option to restore credit to failed courses due to attendance issues and the school can assist students who wish to pursue alternatives to a high school diploma, such a GED program that is offered in non- school setting.

Referral to a truancy officer who pursues legal action against chronically absent students and/or their parents is a commonly used intervention. However, TAART members state that the meeting itself also serves as an intervention for students and/or their parents. Team members state that parents often allow their children to stay home from school in order to avoid confrontation with their children. Parents may believe that it is not worth the time or effort to force their children to come to school. Informing parents that they could be facing criminal charges provides parents with an additional motivation to ensure that children come to school.

Follow-up after a TAART meeting is conducted one week after the meeting. In cases involving attendance, if the student has missed additional days, he or she will be turned over to a truancy officer for a court referral. For long-term follow-up, students are tracked by a color coded system within an Excel spreadsheet. First priority is given to students who have been previously referred to TAART. Low priority students are put on a monitoring system and tracked informally by teacher referral or random attendance or academic surveillance, such as random checks of absences or grades on PowerSchool. Outside of the color-coded system, no information on effectiveness is currently recorded. Daily attendance and academic information is available online for school employees through an online platform known as PowerSchool.

Through PowerSchool, daily and individual class attendance is marked and coded using a system to identify various reasons for absences, both excused and unexcused. Extensive academic information is also available, including quarterly, semester, and yearly academic performance. During the meetings, PowerSchool data is used to provide specific evidence of academic or attendance issues.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The school district has made a significant investment in conducting the TAART meetings as a means for addressing student attendance and academic issues. The conceptual underpinnings for the TAART program appear to be a mix of General Deviance Theory (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000) and the Academic Mediation Theory (Tinto, 1975). The General Deviance Theory suggests that children or teenagers who engage in "deviant" behaviors such as drug or alcohol use, high risk sexual behaviors, or truancy are more likely to drop out of school. The TAART program attempts to prevent students from engaging in these types of behaviors by intervening through the court-system. The program could also reasonably be tied to the Academic Mediation Theory which suggests that poor academic performance is highly predictive of student dropout and truancy behaviors. The TAART program uses academic tutoring as a primary intervention for children and program referral and intervention guidelines are meant to address academic and attendance issues equally (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). Because afterschool tutoring is the only strategy used for addressing academic concerns, it is unlikely that the program is comprehensive enough to meet the needs of struggling learners. At times, the TAART teams also make referrals for special education evaluations. This strategy may help identify children with disabilities that are in need of special education services.

In practice, the program is a mix of the early warning system advocated by Mac Iver and Mac Iver (2009), a court-based truancy prevention program, and the use of community and parental involvement to reduce chronic absenteeism; an approach advocated by Sheldon and Epstein (2002; 2004). The Sheldon and Epstein (2004) model is relevant because the TAART program makes an effort to communicate clearly with parents regarding attendance issues and

the TAART teams have actively cultivated community partnerships with various local agencies. Community partnerships include social services, family preservation services, and juvenile justice. Because of this explicit involvement of community agencies and not just a singular focus on court-based initiatives, the TAART program constitutes a multidimensional court-referral and community-based intervention (Fantuzzo et al., 2005).

In order to conduct an evaluation of this program, the researcher used quantitative methods. The district was concerned with improvements in academics and attendance as measures of effectiveness. Potential improvements in attendance and academics were measured through the attendance and academic records available through PowerSchool. The following are research questions that were explored during this study:

1) Do the TAART meetings lead to improvements in student attendance?

2) Do the TAART meetings lead to improvements in student academics?

METHOD

Participants

The study used archival, de-identified data related to attendance and academics information previously collected for 123 students in the ninth through twelfth grade at Carroll County High School who had participated in TAART meetings for the 2015-2016 and 2014-2015 school years. The researcher did not interact with students. Demographic information for the sample was not provided by the school district.

Materials

Materials consisted of TAART records which were comprised of the color-coded spreadsheet containing student name and date of the meeting or meetings if more than one meeting was held. The data was supplied to a member of Carroll County School's Technical Support and subsequently de-identified and combined with student academic and attendance information from the PowerSchool platform before being given to the researcher. Attendance information provided was separated by semester beginning with Fall 2012 and continuing into Fall 2015. Academic information was available from Fall 2012 through Spring 2016. Final attendance information by class for Spring 2016 was not available at the time of data analysis.

Analysis of student attendance and academic information was evaluated through several different methods. First, data for all student academic and attendance information was averaged and graphed by semester for visual analysis. The same procedure was then used on a subset of the data that just looked at data from Spring 2014 through Fall 2015 data. Next, each student's number of absences by class during the last semester when data was available was subtracted by the student's number of absences by class during the first semester in which they participated in

a meeting to obtain a change score. The same process was used for academics except using average class grade based on their numerical grades the last semester when data was available and subtracting from the class average during the first semester when the student had a meeting to obtain a change score, indicating the difference between scores in the last semester when data was available and scores from the semester when the initial meetings were held.

Student change scores for attendance and academics were then compiled and scatterplots were made and correlations conducted to explore potential relationships between number of meetings, academics, and absences. Prior to the 2014-2015 school year, TAART records were not kept but meetings were reportedly held, so it is possible that students participated in meetings prior to this year. However, due to the lack of prior information, the first recorded meetings were treated as the initial meeting semester as there was no way to verify when/if previous meetings were conducted.

Lastly, pre- and post- records for the initial meeting semester and the final semester when data was available for both attendance (by class) and academics (average numerical class grade) for all students were used to conduct a repeated measures t-test for attendance and academics individually. A repeated measures t-test was also used to compare pre-intervention data to one-year follow-up for students who had initial meetings during Fall 2014 for both academic and attendance information individually. Also, as an employee of Carroll County Schools, the researcher was familiar with the practices of the TAART teams. Team Practices were compared to the best practices suggested by the literature.

Table 1: Best Practices for Decreasing Truancy. Strategies with empirical support for decreasing truancy or school dropout in terms of protective factors and risk factors (Chapman, Buckley, Shochet, & Romaniuk, 2011; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Huck, 2011; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; White & Kelly, 2010).

Addressing Protective Factors	Specific Strategies
Positive School Climate and Social Support	Institute a peer mentoring system or buddy system. Assign socially skilled, academically successful mentors to support and coach at-risk students. Develop a helping culture and encourage peer support within the school. Foster positive relationships between students and staff.
Monitoring and Mentoring	Assign adult monitors or advocates to identified at-risk students to track progress and follow-up with parents. Partner with volunteers from the community, local colleges, and so forth to identify capable and motivated adult mentors.
Personal and Social Skill Development	Provide explicit social skills instruction. Teach relevant coping and problem solving skills (e.g., time management with part-time jobs and school, study skills, caring for family members while in school). Provide access to cognitive-behavioral therapy.
Parental Involvement and Community Involvement	Involve parents in dropout prevention programs (e.g., provide information on student's participation in school-based programs, offer parent training). Provide specific information to parents in relation to attendance issues. Identify person (e.g., family advocate) in the school with whom parents can feel comfortable. Collaborate with community agents to provide services to children.
Systematic Changes	Change in instruction or instruction management. Change in organization of the school. Multi-modal and holistic approach. Provide a program with built-in rewards and consequences.

Addressing Risk-Factors	Specific Strategies
Academic Instruction	Assist teachers in providing more academic instruction and spending less time on behavior management. Provide teacher training on effective and efficient classroom management strategies.
Academic Support	Offer after-school study skills and time management classes. Implement adult/peer tutoring programs at times convenient for students.

Procedures

Working in collaboration with the school district, a member of technical support services employed by the school district was granted access to the TAART records which were comprised of the color-coded spreadsheets that contained the student name, date of the meeting or meetings if more than one meeting was held. The employee used this information to compile student attendance and academic information through the PowerSchool platform for students who participated in the TAART program. This information was then supplied to the researcher in a spreadsheet as de-identified data with a student identification number replacing the student name . Consistency of interventions provided by the team was not be measured as provided data was de-identified and the school district was concerned about providing the forms that they use to track interventions. These form are considered "court documents" and the researcher would need to obtained permission from parents in order to view them.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a truancy prevention program in terms of its impact on the attendance and academics of program participants. The analysis provided no objective evidence that the TAART program was improving student academics or attendance. For the purpose of clarity when reporting results, academic information (the average of students' numerical grades by semester) will be referred to as "scores" and attendance information (averages of the sum of students' classes missed by semester) will be referred to as "absences."
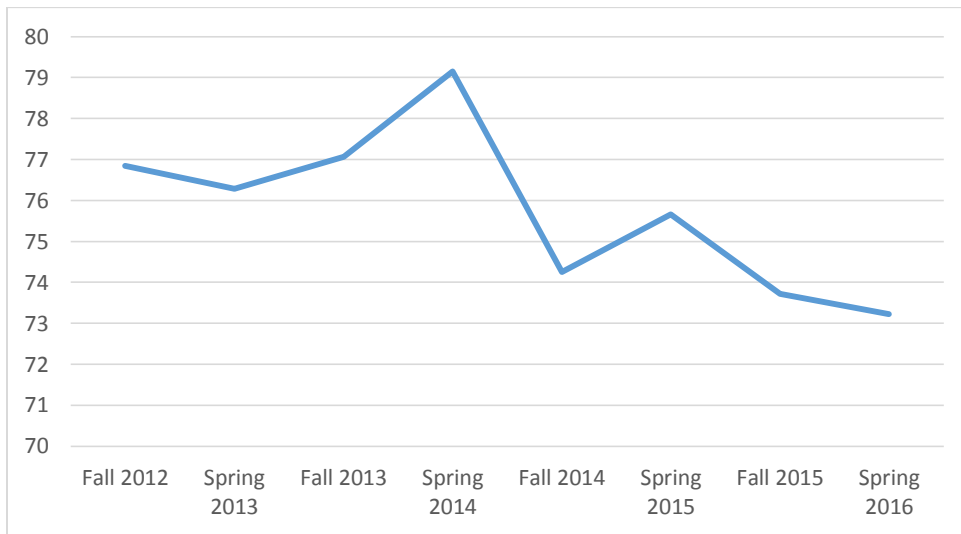

Figure 1. Trends for Academic Scores by Semester. The following graph illustrates that average scores for program participants have remained largely similar over time. Based on the provided information, students began having TAART meetings during Fall 2014. Due to the possibility that students participated in meetings prior to these times, scores for prior semesters were also included in the graph.
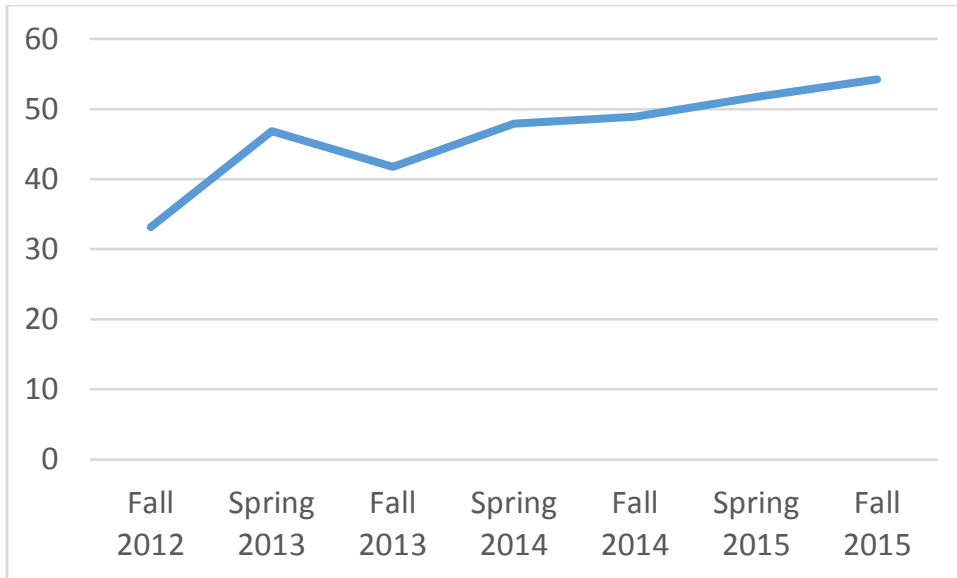
Figure 2. Trends for Absences by Semester. In the next graph (Figure 2) the average number of absences for program participants by semester was also graphed. Absences appear to have increased somewhat over time.
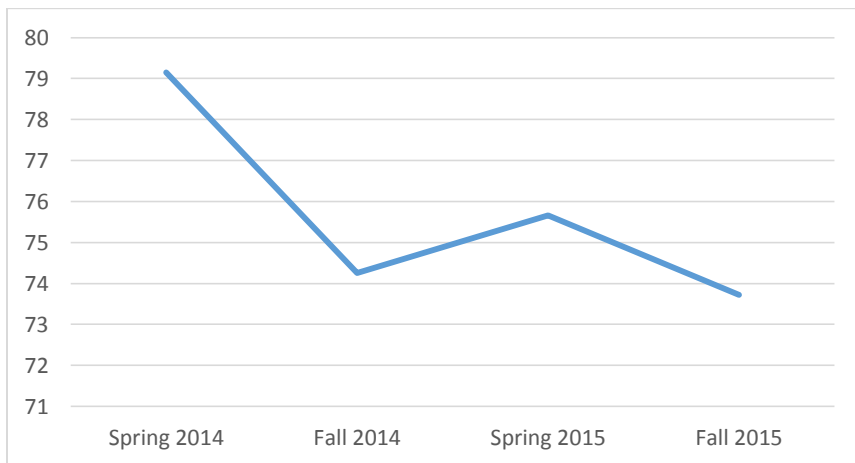

Figure 3. Scores by Semester Prior to Initial Meetings and at 1 Year Follow-Up. This figure illustrates that average scores prior to the TAART meetings and at one-year follow-up appear largely similar. In comparison to the previous chart which displays information for all participations across different time periods, this graph isolates specific time periods.
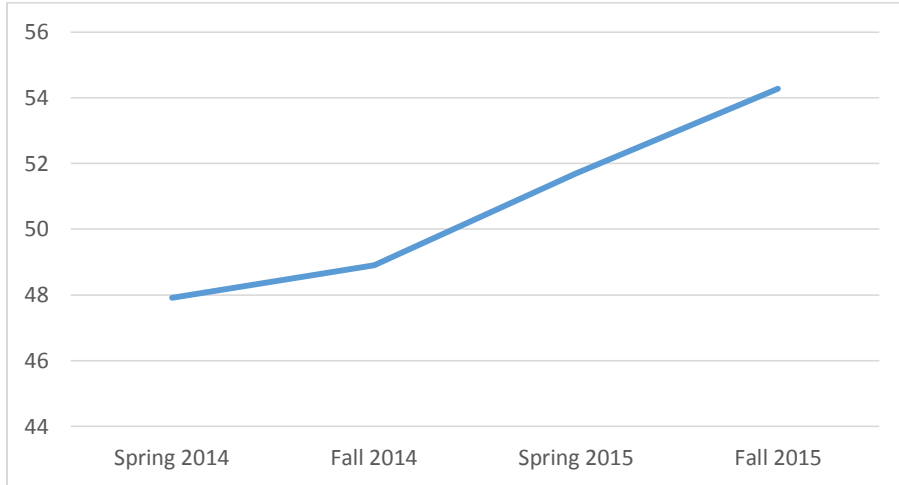
Figure 4. Absences by Semester Prior to Initial Meeting and at 1 Year Follow-Up. Figure 4 shows the average number of absences prior to the TAART meetings and at one-year follow-up appear similar. In comparison to the initial charts which displays information for all participations

Change Score Graphs and Interpretations for Fall 2014-Fall 2015

No information for spring 2016 was used in these measurements as attendance information by class for spring 2016 was not available at the time of the analysis. The relationship between the change in absences (last available absences- absences during semester of first meeting) and change in scores (last available score-score during semester of first meeting) was investigated using Pearson product-movement correlation coefficient. There was a weak, negative correlation between the two variables, r (42) = -0.19, p = .22.
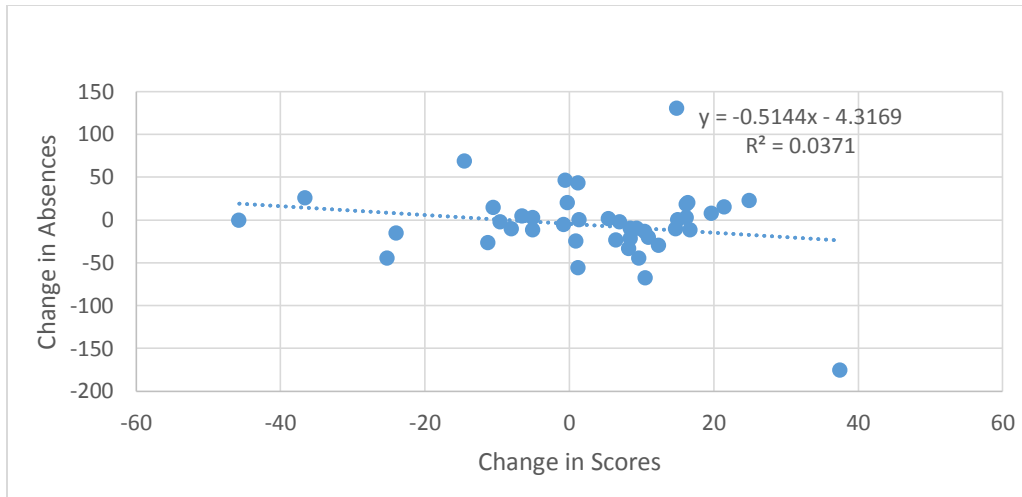
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Figure 5. Scatterplot of Change in Absences vs. Change in Scores. This figure provides a visual display of the relationship between change in absences and change in scores.

The relationship between the change in absences (last available absences- absences during semester of first meeting) and number of meetings (the total number of meetings each child received) was also investigated using Pearson product-movement correlation coefficient. There was a weak, negative correlation between the two variables, $r(42) = -0.27$, $p = .086$.

Figure 6. Scatterplot for Number of Meetings by Change in Absences. This figure provides a visual display of the relationship between change in absences and number of meetings.

The relationship between the number of meetings (the total number of meetings each child received) and change in scores (last available scores- scores during semester of first meeting) was investigated using Pearson product-movement correlation coefficient. No correlation between the two variables was found, $r(42) = .05$, $p = .75$.
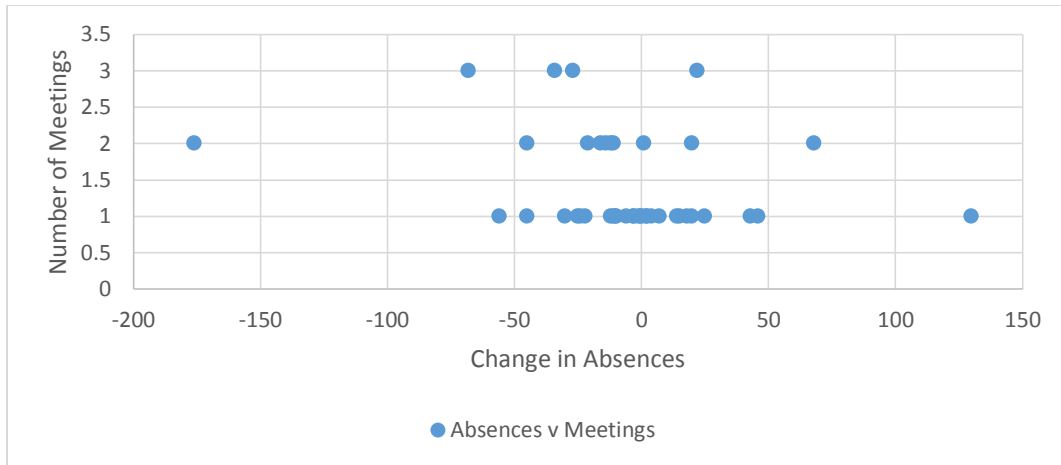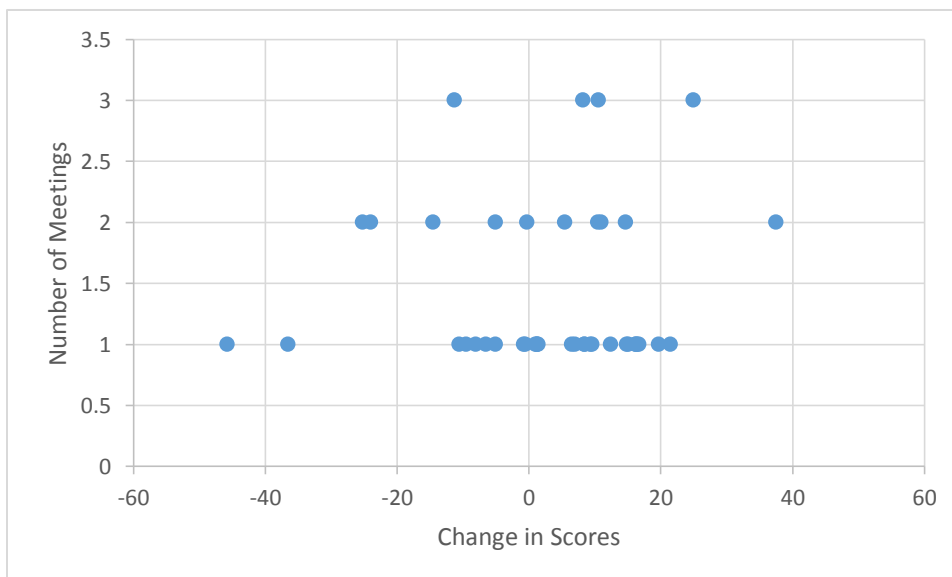
Figure 7. Scatterplot for Number of Meetings by Change in Scores. This figure provides a visual display of the relationship between number of meetings and change in scores.

Paired *t*-tests for Initial Meeting and Final Data Point

Scores.

A paired-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the impact of the TAART meetings on students' academic scores. Results from semester of the initial meeting ($M = 71.65$, $SD = 10.64$) and the final semester when data was available ($M = 71.62$, $SD = 15.49$) showed no statistically significant difference between student scores, $t(88) = .017$, $p > .05$ (two-tailed).

Absences.

A paired-samples *t*-test was also conducted to evaluate the impact of the TAART meetings on students' absences. Results from the semester of the initial meeting ($M = 54.78$, $SD = 52.48$) and the final semester when data was available ($M = 48.95$, $SD = 48.63$) showed no statistically significant difference between the student absences, t(42) = .88, $p > .05$ (two-tailed). There were fewer observations in this analysis as absences information was not available for spring 2016.

Paired *t*-tests for Semester Prior to Meeting and at One-Year Follow-Up

Scores.

In order to provide an analysis of the participant's scores at the same time periods, a paired-samples *t*-test was conducted for participants' scores one semester prior to their initial meeting (Spring 2014) and at one-year follow-up (Spring 2015). Results from Spring 2014 ($M =$

76.77, *SD* = 9.64) and Spring 2015 (*M* = 73.3, *SD* = 13.5) showed no statistically significant difference in student scores, t(33) = 1.83, *p* > .05.

Absences.

In order to provide an analysis of the participant's absences at the same time periods, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted for participants one semester prior to their initial meeting (Spring 2014) and at one-year follow-up (Spring 2015). Results from Spring 2014 (*M* = 50.09, *SD* = 42.4) and Spring 2015 (*M* = 52.72, *SD* = 45.75) showed no statistically significant difference in student absences, *t*(33) = .43, *p* > .05.

Comparison of Team Practices to Best Practices

As an employee of the school system, the researcher was familiar with the practices of the TAART teams. Table 2 was comprised of strategies with empirical support for decreasing truancy or school dropout in terms of protective and risk factors (Chapman et al, 2011; Fantuzzo, Grim, & Hazan, 2005; Huck, 2011; Prevatt & Kelly, 2003; White & Kelly, 2010). These "best practices" suggested by the literature were then compared to team practices and added under the "Team Practices" in the table.

Table 2: Comparison of Team Practices to Best Practices

Addressing Protective Factors	Specific Strategies	Team Practices
Positive School Climate and Social Support	Institute a peer mentoring system or buddy system. Assign socially skilled, academically successful mentors to support and coach at-risk students. Develop a helping culture and encourage peer	Team members appeared to view the meetings as a way to begin to foster a positive rapport for students. The meetings are designed to promote solutions and help families gain access to services when needed. Peer support is not utilized. The primarily

	support within the school. Foster positive relationships between students and staff.	intervention is punitive (court-referral).
Monitoring and Mentoring	Assign adult monitors or advocates to identified at-risk students to track progress and follow-up with parents. Partner with volunteers from the community, local colleges, and so forth to identify capable and motivated adult mentors.	A specific mentoring program is not utilized. Tracking and follow-up is conducted informally.
Personal and Social Skill Development	Provide explicit social skills instruction. Teach relevant coping and problem solving skills (e.g., time management with part-time jobs and school, study skills, caring for family members while in school). Provide access to cognitive-behavioral therapy.	Students may at times receive access to cognitive-behavioral therapy through coordination with outside agencies, however this is not a primary intervention. Students may attend tutoring for academic skills, but no other skill building services are offered.
Parental Involvement and Community Involvement	Involve parents in dropout prevention programs (e.g., provide information on student's participation in school-based programs, offer parent training). Provide specific information to parents in relation to attendance issues. Identify person (e.g., family advocate) in the school with whom parents can feel comfortable. Collaborate with community agents to provide services to children.	The TAART team appears to make deliberate and frequent efforts to include parents in the TAART process. They attempt to inform parents directly of academic or attendance issues. They also collaborate with agencies to provide services to children and families. However, team members appear to have largely negative perceptions of parents.
Systematic Changes	Change in instruction or instruction management. Change in organization of the school. Multi-modal and holistic approach. Provide a program with built-in rewards and consequences.	The TAART team was successful in addressing a systematic problem with referrals based on tobacco use through the development of the tobacco succession program. They also work with teachers to make clear when a referral to TAART is appropriate. The team uses collaborate with outside agencies to obtain a "more complete" or holistic picture of the problems

		facing students. However, the program is largely punitive and the only incentive is to avoid a court referral.

Addressing Risk-Factors	Specific Strategies	Team Practices
Academic Instruction	Assist teachers in providing more academic instruction and spending less time on behavior management. Provide teacher training on effective and efficient classroom management strategies.	The team has not contributed to any changes in academic instruction or provided opportunities for teacher training.
Academic Support	Offer after-school study skills and time management classes. Implement adult/peer tutoring programs at times convenient for students.	The TAART team encourages teachers to provide after school tutoring.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a truancy prevention program in terms of its impact on the attendance and academics of program participants. The analysis provided no objective evidence that the TAART program was improving student academics or attendance. However, as an employee of the district and by observing team practices, several strengths of the program were discovered that constitute strengths that could to be built upon. Changes to other aspects of the program could also lead to more positive student outcomes.

The TAART program should be commended for the use of the tobacco cessation program that was founded as an alternative to suspensions and court-referrals for students who used tobacco on school grounds. The team members responded to a student need in a flexible and positive way. TAART team members appear to genuinely care about the well-being of the students they serve and want them to be successful in school.

The team also really tries to help parents to participate in the TAART process by making frequent phone call, sending emails, and sending notes home. Parents may also be more informed of the school's attendance policy through changes in the way the policy was presented in the school handbook. Team members tend to view the TAART meeting as an opportunity to foster positive rapport with students and their parents and provide access to outside resources for families by collaborating with various community agencies. In the same vein, the TAART members are able to gain a full picture of the challenges that are facing students and their families through work with the community agencies. These propensities all align with "best practices" and are strong positives for the team that can continue to be built upon.

Improvements in other areas could be associated with more positive student outcomes. Specifically, the program is largely punitive in nature and few incentives are offered to promote student attendance other than potentially avoiding a court referral. The literature surrounding student engagement and truancy prevention has consistently shown that student's need a positive school climate and active school affiliation in order to be successful. Chronically truant students are likely disengaged from the school environment, punishing them further will likely cause them to simply withdrawn further from school.

Additionally, the students who participated in the TAART program often appear to be having serious academic difficulties. Academic success is a key way to foster student engagement. Currently tutoring is used as a primary academic intervention, but it is unlikely that tutoring is sufficiently individualized or intensive enough to meet the academic needs of struggling learners. Furthermore, after speaking with the TAART members, it appears that they tend to have somewhat negative perceptions of the parents of students who participate in the TAART meetings. Negative perceptions could hinder essential school-family partnerships which will be essential for promoting school attendance and improving academic performance.

Practices such as using primarily punitive intervention methods, providing minimal academic support, and failing to facilitate positive school-family interactions are all practices that are contrary to "best practices" within the literature base. Aligned program practices moe closely with evidenced-based practices could likely lead to more positive outcomes for students. Review of the quantitative finding provides additional information.

Initial quantitative analysis suggested that the average number of classes missed and average numeric grades were relatively similar across semesters. If the program was impacting student performance, the expectation would be for academic averages to increase and for

absences to decrease over time. However, neither of these trends were observed in the data. Isolating core semesters for pre-intervention and one-year follow-up on both variables also did not reveal clear changes in the data.

Next, change scores were calculated by subtracting final data points from initial data points (semester when the first meeting occurred) and correlations were conducted between change in absences, change in scores, and number of meetings. Correlations were weak for all scenarios. The weak correlation between change in scores and change in absences was an interesting finding. One would expect for the two variables to be related, assuming that a child would perform more poorly academically as they missed more days. This finding could be attributed to the sample of children studied.

The TAART team was designed for student's with "severe" and multi-faceted needs through multiple social service oriented agencies. Therefore, it is possible that a third variable (mental health, homelessness, experience of abuse, etc.) was impacting the student's performance at school more than attendance. Also, the average academic scores across semesters were in the 70s, meaning that even if student attendance improved, it may be difficult for the students to demonstrate academic gains.

The lack of relationship between the number of meetings and change in absences or change in scores was also somewhat counterintuitive. Initially, the researcher had expected that more meetings would be associated with students with more absences and worse scores thinking that more severe cases would need the most attention from the TAART teams, however this was not the case and student absences and scores were similar regardless of how many meetings they attended.

Change scores have well-documented limitations and their reliability has faced criticism at times (Edwards, 2001). However, one way to help mitigate the potential impact of lower reliability is to try to ensure that the variables that compose the change scores are reliably measured. In this situation, the variables were drawn from school records for academic and attendance records which were calculated electronically and updated on a frequent basis. The researcher had little reason to suspect that the official school records were not collected or calculated accurately, especially for the absences variable. Still, the use of change scores could impact the validity of our results.

Luckily, our other measures were not controversial and produced similar findings. Using paired-t tests for the whole sample (semester of first meeting compared to final available data point) and selected semesters (pre-intervention semester compared to one-year follow-up) yielded non-significant differences for both scores and absences. These findings could not support a change in either scores or absences for students who participated in the TAART program.

However, there were also several limitations to this study that warrant discussion. This was a "real life" study that involved messy data. Specifically, there was a lot of missing student data potentially due to student transfer to other school districts or programs (ex. GED programs), graduation or dropout (some students may have had initial meetings during the last semester they were enrolled in school), or unknown variables. Locating the reason for each case of missing data was unfeasible for the researcher, therefore it is possible that this missing data somehow biased the sample. Additionally, as we used archival data for this study, participants were not randomly selected to participate in the program and TAART members indicated that the team was supposed to handle severe cases where the child was facing a number of different types of

problems that were contributing to the truancy. Therefore, the lack of impact seen in the data could be more attributable to the sample than the program design or implementation.

The researcher also did not have access to intervention data in order to separate students by court referral vs. no referral or other types of separations, therefore it is possible that various intervention may have been more effective than others, but the impact was masked by viewing the sample as a whole. Similarly, without access to the intervention data, measures of program implementation fidelity or effectiveness/amount of follow-up could not be analyzed. Potential impacts of these variables could also influence the effectiveness of the program and were not accounted for in this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary difficulty in conducting this study was that the information regarding the TAART meetings was stored in a different platform from the academic and attendance information, meaning that combining this data was a cumbersome process. While the TAART members have access to both mediums, having this information in one place and available for group and individual analysis would be helpful for future monitoring. In general, I would recommend more frequent monitoring of both student attendance and academic information in order to know if the chosen interventions are being effective and whether or not changes to the intervention plan are warranted.

I would also recommend shifting away from primarily punitive interventions and focusing on student engagement and positive school climate. Offering peer or faculty mentoring programs is an evidence-based method for fostering student engagement. Offering students a wide range of incentives for coming to school may also be helpful in this regard.

      a. Check and Connect is an evidenced program to promote student engagement that could be implemented with students who go through the TAART process. The program involves having students participate in daily "check-ins" with selected faculty members. The check-ins are usually brief but are conducted by the same faculty member in order to help develop a relationship between the faculty member and the student. The program also involves frequent monitoring of academic and attendance information in order to provide or modify an intervention. Specific program details can be found at http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/.

The students who participated in the TAART program appear to need more academic support than what is offered through tutoring. Targeted, individualized, and intensive academic interventions are often needed for students to make academic gains.

Negative perceptions of parents by TAART members may have negative impacts on the team's ability to form effective working relationships with parents. Often, the duty to form positive relationships falls to the schools. Conducting frequent, positive outreach to parents may be warranted. Conducting the meeting in a less intimidating format with parents may also be helpful. Whatever the chosen remedy, finding ways to overcome negative perceptions is vital.

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