

Expelled and At-Risk Student Services (EARSS) Program

Dropout Prevention and Student Engagement Unit, Colorado Department of Education

The Colorado State Legislature designated a portion of the FY10 EARSS program funding for special emphasis on reducing truancy. The funding was to be utilized only during the 2009-10 school year. Seven current EARSS grantees, identified by having the highest number of referrals to truancy court, were given the additional funds. These districts employed the following strategies:

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a practice characterized by bringing together administrators, educators, advocates, school resource officers, parents and students with a history of truancy for a series of goal-oriented meetings in order to counsel towards problem solving in the area of daily and class based attendance, or other behavioral or academic issues at hand. Typically, a restorative justice model will maintain conducting three to five meetings of the necessary personnel to bring the student at fault to understand how his/her absence is affecting his/her potential. The meetings will often be centered on discussion of offenses and consequences, which will lead to the creation of a contract between students, parents and educators, promising change in a student's attendance rates. The restorative justice model is emerging as one of the most dynamic and effective ways to address truancy without the use of suspension or court order. It was used by three of the EARSS grantees, including Boulder, Littleton and Denver Public Schools. All reported gains, results and satisfaction from the use of this model.

Attendance Mediation Workshops (AMW)

Attendance mediation workshops are aimed at training students, teachers and administrators in attendance building practices and raising awareness about current issues students are facing with attendance, as well as school procedure for addressing them. AMWs are similar to the restorative justice model in that they bring together parents, students and educators, and involve a contract. AMWs, however, will gather multiple students and families (instead of a case by case model used in restorative justice), and conduct a whole group workshop. There, students and parents will have a guided opportunity to discuss how and why a student struggles with attendance, and problem-solve in order to create a plan for that student. Together, they will draft a contract to sign, and commit to the plan they have created. AMWs allow educators to meet with multiple struggling students and families at one time, and shows significant results (see below), especially as an early intervention method in truancy cases.

<http://www.denvergov.com/Portals/713/documents/AttendanceMediationWorkshops.pdf>

Attendance Advocates/Case Managers/Engagement Specialists/Early Intervention Advocates

The hiring or creation of campus-based personnel was the most popular use of EARSS grants. Five out of seven schools used a significant amount of their funding towards this goal. Without a full-time staff member to keep programs moving, handle and follow cases with students and families, and conduct workshops, meetings and communication, the rest of the alternatives to suspension in addressing truancy seem to be impossible. Arguably all of the education system is based on human capital, and this subject is hardly any different, hence why it was the most widely used. The key is ensuring that the staff members are using the most valuable methods, in order to maximize their time and resources. When attendance advocates used structured programs such as restorative justice or attendance mediation, as well as communicated new models and expectations to the community, results were strong.

Uniform policy/Protocol

Spreading awareness about school policy and protocol for absenteeism is also foundational in utilizing the other best practices discussed. If students, parents, teachers and administrators all have a strong understanding of what counts as truancy, and what happens when it occurs, they will be much less likely to be repeat offenders. There also needs to be a strong system in place for effectively notifying students, and especially their parents, when a student is nearing the absentee limit. Only one school, Cherry Creek, used funds to strengthen protocol, create uniform policy amongst schools, and communicate expectations to the community. In order for all districts to strengthen results, this resource too, must be used.

Student Attendance Review Boards (SARBs)

Students Attendance Review Boards are composed of representatives from various youth-serving agencies, and help truant students and their parents or guardians solve school attendance problems through the use of school and community resources. SARBs are often convened by the county superintendent at the beginning of each school year. The meetings aim to bring together resources to solve ongoing and district wide problems. Some practices with SARBs require students and parents to be present, and others engage educators and student advocates to plan new policies and methods. Both restorative justice and attendance mediation workshops are new forms of SARBs that have more direct contact and involvement on the part of students and guardians.