

**Working with Truants: The Miami Police Department
1998 School-Based Partnership**

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Introduction

In 1998, the Miami Police Department received a School-Based Partnership grant from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office), U.S. Department of Justice. This grant provided \$138,817 to work with staff and students at the Booker T. Washington Middle/High School to address habitual truancy problems. This school



A mini-mart located near the Booker T. Washington High School in Overtown. This location was identified as a place that students were “hangin’ out” during the environmental survey.



A homeless hangout located next to the mini mart shown above. This area is an example of the poverty and crime problems existing in the Overtown area.

ranked 48th in attendance out of 48 middle schools in the county in 1996 and 1997. The school is located in Overtown, a low socio-economic community just west of downtown Miami. 21st Century Solutions, Inc. served as the local evaluator for the project. This report explains how the grant was implemented and describes the impact of the problem-solving process on the school and police.

Background

Miami Police Department. The Miami Police Department serves a community of over 365,000 people with 1,100 officers and 365 civilian employees. The Department has practiced community policing since 1992. Major efforts involved the creation of 12 Neighborhood Enhancement Team Service Areas (NETs) throughout the city. These teams worked with other city agencies to respond to specific problems of residents and businesses in these areas. To support its community policing efforts, the police department received numerous grants from the COPS Office. These grants supported hiring police officers and civilians, obtaining technology, implementing problem solving partnerships, domestic violence projects and anti-gang initiatives. Miami also served as a Community Policing Demonstration Center to assist

other police agencies. Under its “Distressed Neighborhoods” grant, the department targets Miami’s most disadvantaged areas. Officers formed problem solving teams with community members to address crime problems, stabilize neighborhoods and begin the revitalization process.

Booker T. Washington School. In 1967 the Miami-Dade School District transformed Booker T. Washington Senior High School into a middle school. This was a major change for the neighborhood, for Booker T. Washington Senior High School was the oldest high school in South Florida and one that served students from West Palm Beach to Key West. Founded in 1926 as a segregated school for “Negroes”, Booker T. Washington was the pride of the community. After its conversion to a middle school, the “Washingtonians,” an alumni group, worked to change the school back to a high school. After many years of deliberations, the alumni finally convinced the Miami Dade County Public School Board to reinstate Booker T. Washington Middle School to its senior high status.



Renovation plans from the top view

In 1999, Booker T. Washington Senior High School opened its doors and is referred to as “an all-academy, neighborhood, comprehensive senior high school.”

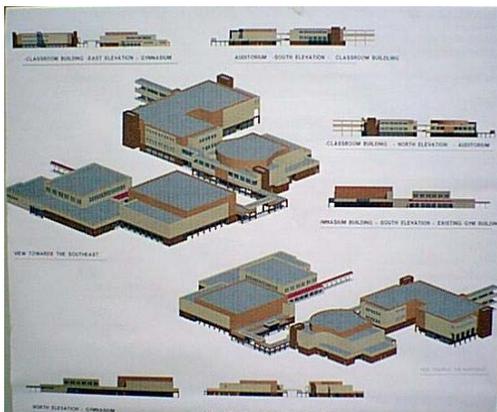
Though rebuilt in 1988 with many modern educational facilities such as a planetarium, the school had fallen into disrepair. Currently, a \$30 million construction and renovation project is underway to build a new gymnasium, auditorium, track and field facility, and classroom complex.

Additional plans include the renovation of the cafeteria, classrooms, and the media center.



Courtyard at Booker T. Washington Senior High School. The open air windows on the 2nd floor provided an easy escape route for students who decide to skip classes in the afternoons.

Like most Miami schools, it is an open facility with exposed courtyards and open-air hallways. In the fall of 1999, there were 917 7th and 8th graders in the school. The school was made up of about 52 percent Black and 48 percent Hispanic students. School boundaries are shown on the attached map. The area marked #1 is a neighborhood of Haitian Creole origin and the area marked #2 houses a mix of Haitian-origin families. Over the last few years, there has been a 52 percent increase in the cultural mix of the school. Most of the school population has limited English skills. Other



New Building Designs

nationalities present include Hondurans, Nicaraguan and Cuban immigrants.

The decision to change this school from a middle school to a high school meant a gradual increase in students over eight years. The targeted enrollment is about 2,200 to 2,400 new students. The extensive new construction will accommodate the increased enrollment.

Booker T. Washington has a total of 114 employees, including:

- 5 Administrators
- 73 Teachers
- 7 Counselors
- 5 Paraprofessionals
- 9 Clerical
- 12 Security Guards and
- 3 Community Involvement Specialist

Relationships with Social Services and the Police. At the beginning of the grant, school officials sought assistance from social service agencies and the police to help their students improve the quality of their education and to address habitual truancy problems. School officials recognized that students from Booker T. Washington came from the poorest area in the county, as it was designated a “Title I” school. This meant that 75 percent of the students received free or reduced cost lunches, the only high school in Miami-Dade County with such a high percentage. The school receives additional funding to address social and educational issues connected with this level of poverty. In particular Booker T. Washington used Title I funding to support additional paraprofessionals to assist with tracking and reporting requirements. Also, a new Community Involvement Specialist was hired to work with the Truancy project.

While multiple officers assisted with the grant, Officer Esther Farmer, a School Resource Officer with the Miami Police Department, served as the project coordinator and primary contact person between Booker T. Washington administrators and the Miami Police Department. Other officers supporting her were Neighborhood Resource Officers for the Overtown area.

The School-Based Partnership Project

COPS Office Model. The central focus of the COPS Office grant program was to engage police agencies and their school partners in the problem-oriented policing strategy. Herman Goldstein (1979 and 1990) first called attention to problem solving as an alternative to traditional law enforcement strategies. He found that officers went from call to call to call, never delving into a situation long enough to deal with its root causes or stopping long enough to figure out a long term solution. Police were (and still are) caught up in answering calls immediately even though they knew that they would not catch the thief, burglar, or pickpocket.

Goldstein's problem solving approach is a simple four-step process; commonly known as the SARA model (Eck and Spelman, 1987). Basically this involves Scanning the problem, Analyzing the depths of the problem, Responding with appropriate solutions conducive to long term resolutions, and Assessment of the efficacy of the problem solving strategy. Tailoring solutions to specific community problems is a crucial component of the problem solving strategies, and therefore of community policing.

The COPS Office provided funding to over 270 agencies to implement this model in schools. Evaluation funds were provided as part of the grant. One of the goals of the evaluation is to determine whether agencies followed a specific model (like the SARA model). To evaluate this Problem Solving Partnership grant, we determined whether the problem-solving model was followed and its impact.

Scanning

Much of the scanning for this project was done during the grant application phase. In the application, the police department discussed how they had arrived at this problem. They responded to an appeal from school administrators, teachers and community groups and undertook a "funnel" approach to identify possible root causes of crime problems in the area.

Miami-Dade County was the highest-ranking county for juvenile arrests in the State of Florida. Further, the Miami Police Department found that the Overtown area accounted for 60 percent of juvenile arrests in the city during the 1995-96 school year.

Based upon reports by two Dade County Grand Juries (1991 and 1993), truancy was identified as one of the major causes of juvenile delinquency. A third grand jury report in 1996 revealed that early warning indicators of future criminal behavior included truancy, academic failure and behavior problems in schools. Students at Booker T. Washington appeared to fit these indicators as the school ranked 48th out of 48 middle schools for attendance. In addition, only 7 percent of the students scored above the national median in reading and 12 percent in math. On an average day, eight students were on internal suspension and 35 on out-door suspension. (Office of Student Services and Attendance, Dade County Public Schools.)

To develop the grant, the police department worked with the Miami-Dade School Board, and Booker T. Washington Middle School officials, alumni and students. They reviewed crime data and school data. They also relied on personal observations of officers and school officials. As a result of these reviews and discussions, the police department focused on addressing the problem of chronic truancy (30 or more days unexcused absences). By concentrating on this problem, they hoped to address juvenile crime issues and fear of crime in and around the school.

Initially, police officers and many school officials thought that students who were skipping school were taking the mass transit system located behind the school. They believed that students were going to local shopping areas causing nuisance crimes such as petty theft and vandalism as well as more serious burglary and drug sales problems.

Officers were certain that students were hanging out without being reported at the mini-mart across the street from the school. They also thought that some truant students were pregnant teen-age girls. Some administrators and officers suspected that truant students were caring for their younger siblings or related children during school hours. During the analysis phase, these perceptions proved to be incorrect.

Analysis

Approach. To conduct the analysis, we used the crime triangle to identify questions. Some of these questions included:

- Who are the offenders - what are their characteristics?
- What is the level of truancy in the school?
- What are the physical surroundings of the school?
- What crimes are taking place and when are they occurring?
- What impact is the truancy having on the school and other students in the school?
- What is the level of parental involvement?



To answer these questions, the team collected and reviewed data from:

- Police Records
- School Resource Officers
- Surveys of truant and non-truant students
- School information on absences, suspensions, and other disciplinary actions
- Environmental survey of the area immediately adjacent to the school
- Follow-up reports from interviews with parents of truant students

To learn about the victims the team reviewed calls for service during school hours over a seven-month period. To learn more about the offenders (and victims) a random survey was administered to 55 students. In addition, 44 students with chronic truancy rates completed the survey.

School reports on attendance and grades were reviewed. An environmental survey was conducted. Pictures were taken by officers of the areas immediately adjacent to the school to determine whether students could leave the school without being seen. Officers noted graffiti, footpaths from the school, trash, and types of structural buildings in and around the school.

During this phase of the project (November 1999 to June 2000), officers spent about 60 hours per week collecting data, students participated about one hour per week in meetings, and a teacher hired by the grant dedicated 40 hours per week to the project. The data sources included calls for service, arrest reports, incident reports, field interviews, officer perceptions, GIS mapping analysis, the environmental survey, the suspension/expulsion data, attendance records, and observational assessments by the officers. Offender and victim interviews, academic records, literature reviews, state and

jury reports, family services records, public versus private school bus rider estimates, and the student survey were viewed as somewhat helpful.

Problems encountered during the analysis phase included confidentiality issues stemming from school policies, lack of automated data, and administrative bureaucracy processing delays. Additional problems included lack of support from parents, resistance from faculty and staff, and language or cultural barriers. Many parents did not speak English, limiting the dialogue between the officers and the parents.

The school partner participated in developing and administering the student survey and the offender interview instruments, analyzed data from the school records, documented the problem behaviors and participated in the discussion meetings. Students assisted with administering the survey and participated in the response discussion meetings. The project coordinator felt that the relationship developed during the analysis phase with the school partner was good. The relationships developed with the students were viewed as excellent.

Analysis Findings. Results from each data source were linked to the crime triangle according to victim information, offender information and location information. The team cross-validated interpretations of the data. They assessed and re-directed hypotheses about who, what and why students were truant as well as the impact of their truancy on the school and neighborhood. These discussions guided them in developing the responses.

The team examined calls for service occurring during the day shift from August 28, 1999 to April 9, 2000. They reviewed where calls were originating, what they reported and what outcomes resulted. The team found that:

- 15 occurred at the school
- 24 at 7th Ave & 14th Street
- 6 at 1215 NW 7th Ave
- 3 in the 400 block of 13th Street

The calls at the school involved assaults, larcenies, and disturbances. A review of all calls in the area indicated that:

- 20 incidents occurred with no report required
- 6 incidents resulted in arrest related to traffic stops
- 5 incidents resulted in reports but no arrest
- 4 calls were disturbance calls
- 3 calls were motor vehicle larcenies
- 3 calls were assault on a person
- 3 calls were for traffic accidents

Survey results. Ninety-nine student surveys were conducted with 55 obtained from a random sample of students and 44 targeting chronically truant students. Additional demographics of the survey group are as follows:

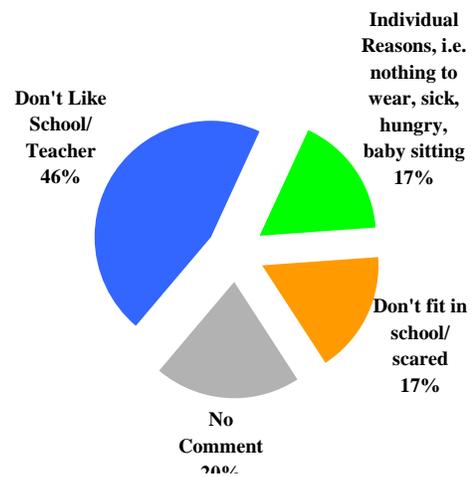
- 82 percent were 15 or 16 years old

- Half were in 9th grade and half were in 10th grade
- 40 were Female; 53 were Male; 3 Unknown
- 35 African American; 50 Hispanic
- 54 percent woke up to go to school between 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 a.m.

From this survey the team learned that the majority of students surveyed (68 percent) stated that they go to school to get an education; even the majority of truant students surveyed (54 percent) stated they go to school to get an education. However, one-fifth of truant students stated they go to school because someone makes them.

Sixteen (36 percent) of the truant students stated that they skipped school one or two days per month while 11 (25 percent) said they skipped three to five days per month.

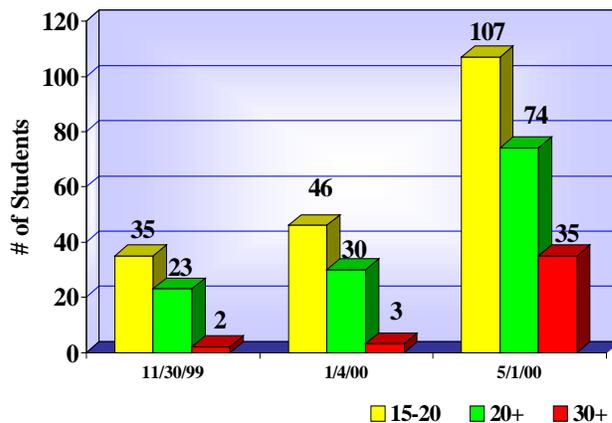
Reasons reported for skipping school by all surveyed students



When asked why they were skipping, the primary reason identified by all students was that they did not like their teachers. Seventeen percent reported individual reasons such as they lacked clothing or were baby-sitting and an additional 17 percent reported they were scared and did not fit in to school.

The third major data source was attendance records. We reviewed these records at three different time periods. In each time period the number of students that were considered chronically truant increased. It should be noted that this number may understate the problem. Those students that made up the truancy rates in the first and/or second reporting period were not necessarily the same students accounting for the truancy rate in the second and third reporting periods. Some students “disappeared” from the student roster either because they transferred to another school or turned 16 and were classified as a “drop-out.” They were administratively removed from the roster.

Attendance data during the 2000 school year.



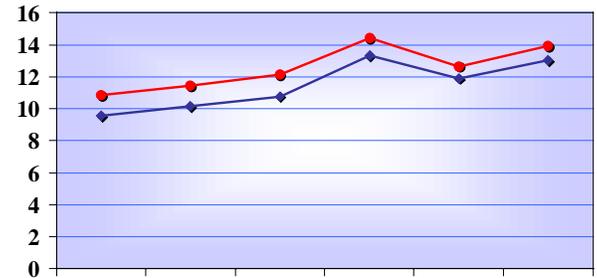
These data show that two students were considered chronically truant at the end of November. A month later, three students met this category. By May 1 the number of chronically truant students rose to 35. A more dramatic rise was seen in the number of students with significant unexcused absences ranging from 15-30. These data were useful in determining which students to target in the response

phase. Further analysis of the attendance data show that unexcused absences went up just prior to lunch. The team questioned these data because it did not seem logical that students would come back to school after skipping those periods right around the lunch hour.

A fourth data collection method that proved useful was the environmental survey. In this survey, officers walked around the school noting the physical appearance and general state of the areas as well as the type of building structures. They observed:

- 5-6 abandoned buildings
- Up to 20 people hanging out as well as vacant lots or areas suitable for loitering
- Small piles to a few pieces of trash seen on each side of the school

Unexcused absences by class period



Vacant building with trash bordering the school on the east side



They also noted that the school was bordered by residential, commercial and industrial properties. Typically the commercial structures were grocery stores and service providers.

Mass transit station to the east of the School.



In addition, the students had ready access to transportation on each side of the school. The transit stop was located next to the school as well as bus stops.

Referring back to the crime triangle, the team struggled to identify victims of the truancy problem. The initial thought was that truants caused some of the crime problems in this area. The data did not support this theory. The calls at the school did not necessarily involve the habitually truant students. Only two of the truant students had been on

outdoor suspension. Overall, calls in the area did not involve juveniles.

Looking at the offenders, the data provided some interesting target groups. Ninth graders accounted for approximately 70 percent of the unexcused absences. Race made no difference. Males skipped 1.7 times more often than females. Using the survey results from the truant students, we learned that the majority (27 out of 44) skipped by themselves while 22 usually skipped with two to three friends. Only three skipped with family members. When they skipped, 28 reported going home; nine reported hanging out on the streets and six went to a friend's house. Thirty-four got to their destination by walking. Thirteen rode the bus. Further, the team found from attendance data that the majority of truant students (77 percent) lived within a two-mile radius of the school.

A final data source involved information from officers who contacted the parents of chronically truant students. Although much effort was put into this collection method, it yielded few contacts. Of the 37 attempts made, 23 parents/guardians were reached. About half (18) were aware of the absences and the other half (19) was unaware. In terms of locating the student, the officers were unable to find 21 of the truant students, they transported nine back to school and learned that five were out sick.

Based on these findings, the team developed the following description of the typical truant student:

<p>Demographic Characteristics (n=77)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- 9th grader (~70 percent)- Male (1.7 times more likely to skip)- 15 or 16 years old (82 percent)- African American or Hispanic – Race makes no difference. <p>Truancy Characteristics (n=44)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Possibly goes to school to get an education but more than likely goes because someone makes him- Skips 1-2 days per month- Does not like school or the teachers- Leaves during 4th period- Skips by themselves or with 2-3 friends- Walks home, which is within ~2 miles of the school <p>Parental Involvement (Caution: very few cases to use in generalizing) (n=37)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- His parents may or may not know that he is skipping (18 did; 19 didn't)- It is not likely that he can be easily located by police officers (unable to locate 21)

Developing the Response. The project coordinator hosted an all-day session to discuss the analysis findings and to develop response options. In this session, teams of police officers, school officials, community leaders, and students were tasked with developing options. These options included:

- Creating a better link with adult role models through after-school programs with churches and other community organizations
- Investigating methods of prosecution of the parents for failure to ensure their children are in school

- Talking with teachers about their impact on the students and ways to improve their relationships with the students
- Building a better link with Miami Bridge, the alternative school, to divert the chronically truant and disruptive student more efficiently to this school
- Helping students to become more involved in school activities
- Explaining to students the expectations, requirements and benefits of graduation from high school
- Working with local grocery stores to encourage reporting of truants
- Helping students to “fit in” more easily and to bridge the cultural gaps by linking upper class students with incoming freshmen.

At the end of the session, each person was asked to write his or her thoughts about the best approach to tackle this problem. The project coordinator reviewed the input and worked with the students, school administrators and other police officers to implement the following responses. It should be noted that all attendees thought a six to ten percent drop in the number of students identified as chronically truant would be considered a success.

Response

To address the truancy problems, the team developed and implemented multiple responses focused on potential offenders. The majority of time was spent focusing on the specific “at-risk” population – incoming 9th graders with a track record of truancy. In addition to these activities, efforts were undertaken to ensure that the entire incoming 9th grade class would feel more welcome and connected to the students, faculty and staff at Booker T. Washington Senior High School.

The team did not address most findings from the environmental assessment. This was because extensive construction that was undertaken to expand the school campus. Construction safety fences and boundaries blocked access from the school to foot trails and abandoned buildings



Current construction has eliminated foot trails that truants used to leave school from the backside.

Targeted Interventions. Based upon the analysis information about the typical truant student, the team decided to work with incoming 9th graders. They targeted those with “borderline drop-out” potential for special one-on-one and small group consultations. The team felt that with their resources special attention could be given to 70 students or ten percent of the potential 714 incoming 9th graders.

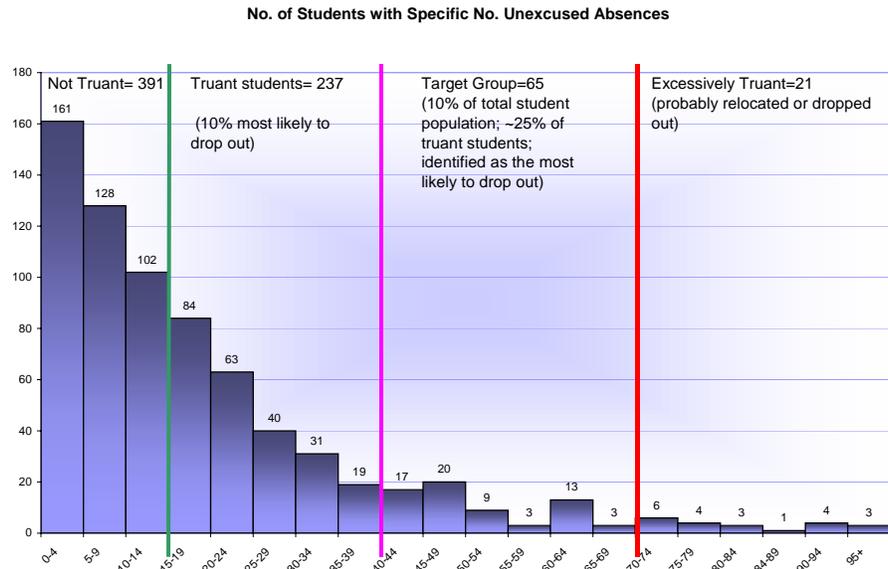
The team reviewed the 8th grade attendance records for the incoming 9th grade class. They found the average number of

unexcused absences during the 8th grade was 19 absences. They focused their limited resources to one-on-one efforts on the high-risk students. However, they decided not to spend time “hunting” for students. The students that were difficult to locate may have either left the area without transferring schools or simply lacked any motivation to attend school. Sixty-five students with more than 40 unexcused absences but less than 70 within the previous school year, were targeted for the focused intervention. Forty unexcused absences were double the average number of absences for this incoming 9th grade class.

For those students with fewer than 40 unexcused absences, the team determined that the efforts directed toward the entire 9th grade population would suffice. They felt they could help these students become more connected to the school and more aware of the requirements for graduation with limited interventions.

Although they did not “hunt” for the students per se, extensive efforts were made to contact all 65 of the targeted students. But only 30 of these students could be found and contacted on a regular basis. Efforts to contact these students included attempts to call them out of class on different school days at different time periods, home visits by officers, and a home visit by the community involvement specialist. In many cases, these students were taken off the list because of the inability to locate them and/or to determine their home address.

During successful home visits, the police officer and/or the community involvement specialist would advise parents of truancy concerns and request their assistance in addressing the problem with the student. They would also provide information about



social services if needed, and identify what issues were impacting the student's attendance at school.

In addition to the home visits, police officers and teachers conducted weekly, then bi-weekly and then monthly group and one-on-one discussions with targeted students to mentor and encourage their attendance at school. Student leaders attended group discussions to form a bond with truant students and to serve as mentors. Officers and teachers informed the students of their responsibilities, provided detailed information about graduation requirements, discussed the benefits of an education, and explained truancy laws.

For the one-on-one discussions, the officers obtained up-to-date attendance data. During each session, they pinpointed unexcused absences, questioned the cause of the absence and discussed the impacts of the unexcused absences with truant students. The students were held accountable for their answers and actions about each unexcused absence. Most importantly, officers worked with students to develop a strategy for preventing future unexcused absences.

In many cases, students were simply not waking up in time for school. They did not own alarm clocks. Once they did wake up, these students decided to stay home rather than be tardy. Also, the attendance policy required actions that many were not aware of and were not taking. If a student missed homeroom, they were marked absent for the day, *unless* they reported to the Main Office. Officer Farmer addressed this problem in a straightforward, simple way. She advised them to come to school and report to the office when they arrived. She solicited and obtained private funding to purchase alarm clocks for the students as holiday presents. She distributed alarm clocks to these students, essentially erasing this problem as a plausible excuse.

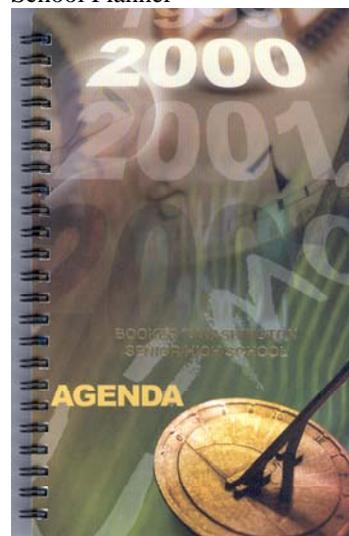
A second problem was the lack of appropriate school clothing. These students reported having no clean clothing or having clothing that no longer fit their growing bodies. Most students with this problem were female. Officer Farmer obtained funding from private donations and purchased clothing for these students. Providing these clothes seemed to aid, although not erase, this issue.

During the holiday break, Officer Farmer sent a letter in an official Miami Police Department envelope to the home of each targeted student. This letter wished them and their families a happy holiday and encouraged them to continue to prioritize regular school attendance. She noted the number of unexcused absences the student had accumulated to date.

Broad Interventions. Student leaders focused on ensuring that all incoming 9th grade students felt welcome and bonded to Booker T. Washington High School. The entire team worked to explain the policies and procedures of the school. They published information about high school graduation requirements in multiple media forums. Finally, the team briefed teachers on the analysis findings. Administrators and students identified ways for teachers to make better connections with the new students early in the school year. These efforts responded to discussions with students and findings from the

student surveys that some students, especially truant students, did not like school and did not like their teachers.

Specific interventions included an introductory/orientation course to high school to all 9th graders during the summer and developing school-planner calendars. The school planners included phone numbers for social services and emergency providers as well as school policies and graduation requirements. These attractive calendars were given to every student during the first weeks of school. Student leaders made an effort to use their calendars to encourage other students to do the same. One student leader commented that he used the graduation requirements information in the calendar to coach a 9th grader on why he must attend and pass algebra. The student did not know that three mathematics credits were required to graduate.



Student leaders worked with officers to obtain donations from businesses to host a welcome breakfast for incoming 9th graders. During this breakfast, student leaders introduced themselves and school administrators. They recognized and promoted teachers assisting with 9th grade class-specific activities such as spirit week competition. The leaders explained extracurricular activities, discussed how to request assistance with specific courses and offered their friendship to these students.

Prior to any of these student leader activities, Officer Farmer trained them in the problem solving (SARA) process. This training provided them with a systematic method to understand and assist with the truancy problems. They were better prepared to mentor and assist 9th graders with problem situations.

Assessment

To conduct the assessment the team examined the same data sources used to conduct the analysis but at different time periods. Specifically, the team collected and reviewed data from:

- Police Records – Calls for Service
- Interviews with the School Resource Officer
- School information on absences, suspensions, and other disciplinary actions
- Interviews of truant students
- Interviews of student leaders
- Interviews with school administrators and involved teachers
- Limited interviews with parents of truant students that agreed to assist the team with this process

Calls for Service. As we stated originally, it did not appear from the suspensions data that the truant students were involved in criminal activity. Since the original data did not support the assumption that truants were involved in criminal activity, we did not anticipate that any change in calls for service were related to the interventions targeting truant students. Even so, the team did review calls for service in the assessment.

We were not able to obtain data for the corresponding time period of August to April and therefore, we cannot determine the exact level of changes in the calls for service. However, we examined calls for service during the day shift from January 1, 2001 to May 15, 2001. We looked at where calls were originating, what they reported and what outcomes resulted. Looking at the same addresses as in the Analysis phase, we found that:

- 19 incidents occurred at the school during the four-month period (20 occurred in the original analysis during the eight-month period)
- 12 at 7th Ave & 14th Street, the address for the mini-mart (24 occurred during the original analysis period)
- 0 at 1216 NW 7th Ct (next to 1215 NW 7th Ave) as opposed to 6 for the original analysis
- 0 in the 400 block of 13th Street as opposed to 3 for the original analysis

Eleven of the calls at the school involved “supplements only” as opposed to person offenses of assaults, larceny and disturbances. Of the remaining calls, one involved a traffic incident, two involved false alarms, two involved assault on a person, one involved a disturbance call and 1 involved a missing person. The nature of two calls is unknown. The following table shows the differences between the original analysis and the assessment period. Only two arrest were made in the area surrounding the school.

Original Analysis	Assessment Analysis
20 incidents occurred with no report required	11 incidents occurred with no report required
6 incidents resulted in arrest related to traffic stops	
5 incidents resulted in reports but no arrest	10 incidents resulted in reports but no arrest
4 calls were disturbance calls	1 call was a disturbance call
3 calls were motor vehicle larcenies	
3 calls were assault on a person	3 calls were assault on a person
3 calls were for traffic accidents	1 call for traffic accident
	2 involved false alarms
	1 involved missing persons

Because the time periods for this comparison were not the same we cannot make any assertions about their meaning.

Interviews with the School Resource Officer. Officer Esther Farmer served as the project coordinator. She provided her assessment and views of the impact of the program.

During the interventions, Officer Farmer stressed that students must understand the requirements for graduation and for attending school. She felt the students must take responsibility for their actions related to these requirements. She successfully resisted suggestions to provide “incentives” to the truant students. She believed that the team should not encourage student to attend school for reasons other than to obtain an education and to graduate from high school.

Through the one-on-one contacts, Officer Farmer ensured that students were aware that their attendance was being watched. If they failed to meet the requirements of the school, the fault rested with the student and the student only.

During our observations of a one-on-one meeting, we noted that students understood this philosophy. Some students made statements such as “I wanted to stay home today but I knew not to because we would be having our meeting with you.” Those students who did not take responsibility for their actions learned that excuses were not accepted.

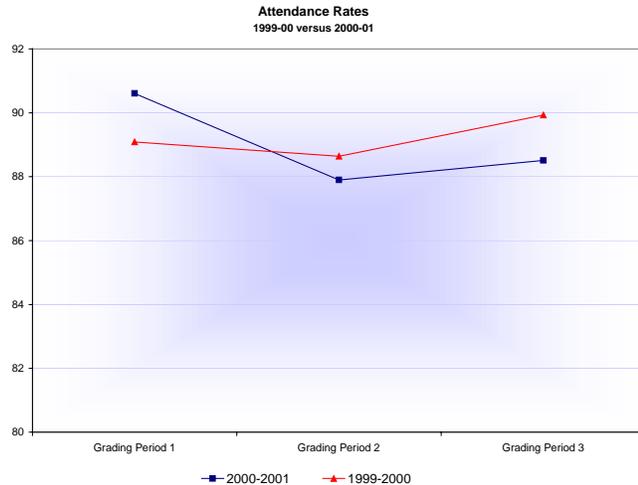
When they made excuses about missing school or that they were unaware of the attendance requirements, rebuttals were quick and focused. Officer Farmer promptly pointed out the policies and procedures that were documented in their school planners. Students were also questioned about their commitment to obtaining an education and graduating.

Officer Farmer made clear that those students not wanting an education should drop out and not waste their time or the teacher’s or other students’ time. During the same discussion, teachers and officers would talk about the importance of having a high school education to succeed in life. This type of realistic but fair approach seemed to seize the attention of the students. It motivated them to try harder and take responsibility for their actions.

In terms of the grant process, Officer Farmer hoped to have the project operational much sooner than it was. She faced bureaucratic hurdles within the County School Board processes. She did not fully understanding these processes and missed important deadlines. She felt substantial time and some resources were misused as a result. However, by overcoming these obstacles and building this partnership, future problem solving efforts operate more smoothly.

School information on absences. When the project was conceived, Booker T. Washington Middle School ranked 48th out of 48 middle schools in Miami-Dade County in terms of attendance rates. During the period of the project, Booker T. Washington School began its transition to a senior high school. Because of this unusual set of circumstances, data were not available to compare the school to other schools. It resembled both a middle school and a high school, making it unlike any other school in the county. However, attendance rate data were available.

We were able to compare some data and attendance rates among high schools in Miami-Dade during the response period. Beginning in the first grading period (fall of 2000), Booker T.

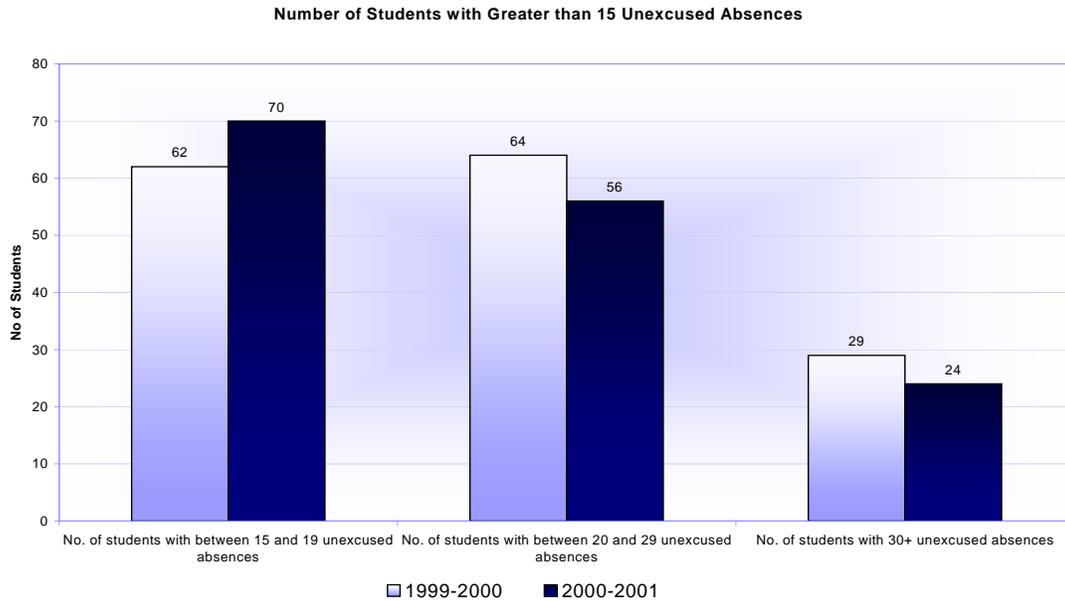


Washington Senior High School ranked 29th for attendance rates out of 29 senior high schools in the county. Even so, the actual attendance rate (or percentage of attendance) improved slightly from 89.09 to 90.61. Attendance rates improved between the same periods in 1999-2000 to 2000-2001.

During the second grading period, Booker T. Washington Senior High School ranked 27th out of 29 senior high schools for attendance rates; but when compared to the same period in the 1999-2000 school year, the attendance rate dropped slightly from 88.64 to 87.90. During the third grading period, Booker T. Washington Senior High School moved up to 26th out of 29 high schools. Once again, when compared to the previous year, the actual attendance rate decreased slightly from 89.93 to 88.51. These small changes can be accounted for based upon an increase in the school population in general. The improvements in ranking as compared to other high schools are encouraging as they reflect a slow but steady improvement relative to attendance problems within the county as a whole.

What was the impact of the efforts to target the 9th grade students and to target those 9th graders thought to have “borderline” dropout potential? We compared the 2000 attendance data to the 2001 attendance data for 9th graders only. In the 1999-2000 school year, there were 545 9th graders at Booker T. Washington. In the 2000-2001 school year, the number of 9th graders dropped to 265, a 51 percent drop in the number of students. It is unclear why this drop occurred. We suspect that the school building could not accommodate the same number of students per grade because an additional grade level (11 grade) was added. This increased the overall enrollment in the building before the construction of the new facilities was completed.

To complete this analysis, we compared attendance data for “truant” students collected on May 1, 2000 and on April 25, 2001. These were the comparable weeks during the school year. For this analysis, a “truant” is considered a student with 15 or more unexcused absences.



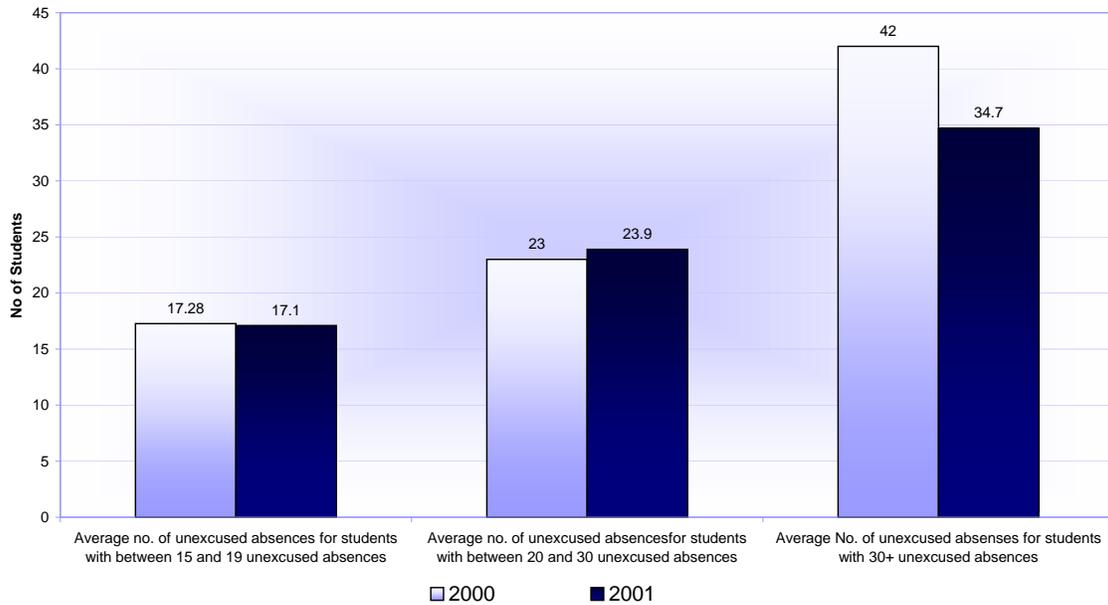
In the 1999-2000 school year, 155 students accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences. In the 2000-2001 school year, 150 students accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences, a drop of only 5 students from the prior year. Initially, these findings are discouraging, especially given the enrollment decreases. However, examining the data further shows that although the number of students having 15 to 20 unexcused absences increased, the number of students having 20 or more unexcused absences decreased by 13 students.

Next we looked at the actual number of unexcused absences and the average number of unexcused absences within each of these categories, i.e. students with between 15 and 19 unexcused absences, students with 20 to 29 unexcused absences and students with more than 30 unexcused absences. The total number of unexcused absences dropped 435 days from 3,801 unexcused absences in the 1999-2000 school year to 3,366 unexcused absences in the 2000-2001 school year. This is an 11 percent drop in unexcused absences, but may be offset by the large enrollment reduction.

Even so, the average number of unexcused absences per “truant” student fell slightly from 24.2 days to 22.4 days. The average number of unexcused absences for students missing 30 or more days fell the most from 42 days to 35 days. This finding suggests that, although the targeted group did not include the worst violators¹, the efforts did impact the borderline students.

¹ The worst violators were those students with more than 70 unexcused absences in the 8th grade.

Average Number of Unexcused Absences Per "Truant" Student



Anecdotal evidence supports this finding. Of the 31 targeted students that were reached on a regular basis, only six continued to have over 15 unexcused absences in the 2000-2001 school year. Also, two of the incoming 9th grade students that attended the welcome breakfast were truant students as 8th graders, one with 34 unexcused absences and one with 47 unexcused absences. These two students had 16 unexcused absences and 19 unexcused absences respectively in the 2000-2001 school year.

Interviews with Truant Students. In discussions with some of the targeted students, they said they appreciated having the graduation requirements explained. They were confused about the requirements. Misinformation existed about what classes and what attendance levels were required to receive credit for these classes. For example, one student was completely unaware that she had to complete one physical education credit to graduate.

Two students were pleased because someone was helping them with social issues. They were assisted with issues such as how to obtain school clothing and how to manage care for younger siblings while balancing school and a part time job.

Interviews with Student Leaders. Student leaders expressed their excitement about tackling the issue of attendance. As leaders they did not like being labeled as the school with the highest truancy levels. They stated how much they enjoyed becoming mentors and building school spirit through the breakfast and class competitions in spirit week.

Student leaders enjoyed learning the problem-solving process. They found it helpful in a range of situations. They also expressed excitement about the opportunity to participate in this type of leadership program.

Interviews with School Administrators and Involved Teachers. Mr. Vidall, the assistant principal responsible for attendance issues, expressed his gratitude for the

project to Chief Raul Martinez of the Miami Police Department. He stated that gaining a better understanding of the truancy issue and working in partnership with the School Resource Officer would have lasting benefits to the school.

The teacher responsible for the group consultations stated how important this project was to students who struggled to understand high school. She felt that the presence of the officers as role models helped the students understand the importance of education.

Interviews with Parents. Parents/guardians of truants who agreed to assist with this project expressed positive feedback regularly. They interacted with Officer Farmer and contacted her when they needed help encouraging their children to go to school. They expressed their appreciation that officials were interested in helping them with their children. However, the number of parents/guardians participating was quite limited.

Conclusions

The Miami School-Based Partnership 1998 grant program was successful on a number of levels. First, it was a key part of a comprehensive effort to improve the educational focus of a school in a poverty stricken, diverse immigrant community. Due to the large number of projects occurring simultaneously – the transition from a middle school to a high school, the designation and resources provided to a Title I High School, the extensive construction, the increasing alumni involvement, and many other factors, it is difficult to distinguish the precise impact of the grant. Even so, these accomplishments are noteworthy:

- Booker T. Washington school officials sought and received assistance from the Miami Police Department.
- The partnership between the school and the police department was strong and continues.
- Team members involved in the project have a better understanding of the truancy problem – who is truant, where they are being truant, and what they are doing when they are truant. It seems clear that truant students are not contributing to the crime problems in the Overtown area.
- The team involved in this effort determined in the analysis phase that they would be successful if they saw a 6 to 10 percent drop in truancy. While the truancy rate did not drop by that percentage, average truancy rates appeared to be dropping. Of the 31 students targeted and contacted, 25 students (80%) improved their attendance significantly.
- Those students who participated in the interventions have a clear understanding of the school policies and graduation requirements. These students feel they are more likely to graduate as a result.

Recommendations

The experiences of this project suggested that interventions addressing truancy must be targeted, individualized and consistently applied. In future projects, we recommend that:

- Police and school officials targeting truancy as a problem should conduct detailed analysis of the problem to cross validate their data and check their premises and beliefs about who the truant students are, why they are truant and what activities truants engage in.
- Partnerships between school resource officers and school personnel and students should be formed at least three months prior to the beginning of the school year.
 - Preparation for welcoming and school requirement educations requires preparation prior to the beginning of the school year.
 - To be effective with one-on-one interventions, officers and teachers must identify and reach the students before they have accumulated excessive unexcused absences.
- Private funding for intervention supplies, such as alarm clocks and clothing be secured prior to the start of the school year.
- Attention should be directed at embracing and involving new students in school activities and matching them with student mentors, especially in schools with diverse populations and language barriers.
- The messages promoted by programs involving incentives as deterrence to truancy should be considered. When students think about the benefits of school, they understand the implicit incentives of obtaining an education without the expenses of providing quick response incentives.