

Court-Assisted Truancy Programs: A 2013 Survey of Indiana School Superintendents

October 2013 | Prepared by Chad R. Lochmiller, Ph.D.

BACKGROUND

Previous research indicates that student attendance is a significant predictor of a student's academic success (Balfanz & Byrne, 2012). Prior research on student attendance in Indiana, suggests that students who miss ten or more days of school perform at lower levels on the ISTEP (Spradlin, Cierniak, Shi, & Chen, 2012). School districts across the state have created intervention programs to improve student attendance. Court-assisted truancy programs support students who have missed 10 or more days of school. These programs connect students with the juvenile justice system and other social services in order to encourage regular school attendance.

Research on the effectiveness of court-assisted truancy program is limited (Dembo & Gullede, 2009). The research that does exist suggests that court-assisted truancy programs typically serve a small number of students (McGillivray & Erickson, 2006) most of whom are between 16 and 17 years of age (Henry, 2007). When effectively deployed, court-assisted truancy programs may improve student attendance in the short-term (Bazemore, Stinchcomb, & Leip, 2004; Mueller, Giacomazzi, & Stoddard, 2006). However, the research also offers a cautionary note about court-assisted programs, indicating that these programs can have long-term consequences for students who are referred without receiving adequate academic and mental health supports (Bazemore, et al., 2004).

SURVEY DESIGN AND RESPONSE

The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) at Indiana University, on behalf of the Indiana Department of Education, surveyed school superintendents in Indiana's school corporations in Summer 2013 to determine whether the state's school corporations had established court-assisted truancy programs and, if they had, what support these programs provide. Superintendents received an online invitation to participate in July/August 2013 and were provided with two weeks to complete the survey, using an online survey tool. Out of 289 superintendents invited to participate in the survey, 181 responded representing 62.6% of the superintendents invited to take the survey.

SURVEY RESULTS

Based on superintendents' responses, we found that court-assisted truancy programs are operating in few school corporations across the state and are a relatively new phenomenon. As illustrated in Figure 1, out of 181 superintendents who responded to the survey, 54 superintendents (29%) indicated that their school corporation currently operated a court-assisted truancy program. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of survey superintendents indicated that their school district did not operate a court-assist truancy program. The survey responses also indicate that court-assisted truancy programs are a relatively recent addition to Indiana's school districts. A plurality of superintendents (37%) indicated that the court-assisted truancy program in their school district was launched in the past five years. Thirty-five percent of school superintendents indicated that the court-assisted truancy program in their school district began between 6 and 10 years ago. Thirteen percent indicated that their program had been operating for more than ten years.

Figure 1.
Proportion of Respondents Whose Districts Currently Operate a Court-Assisted Truancy Program

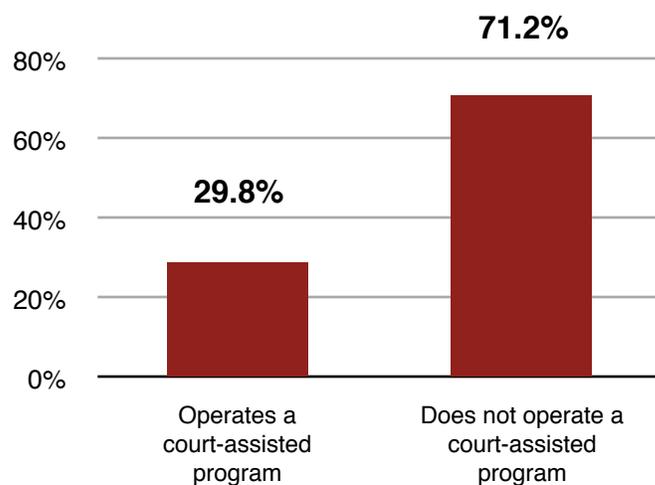
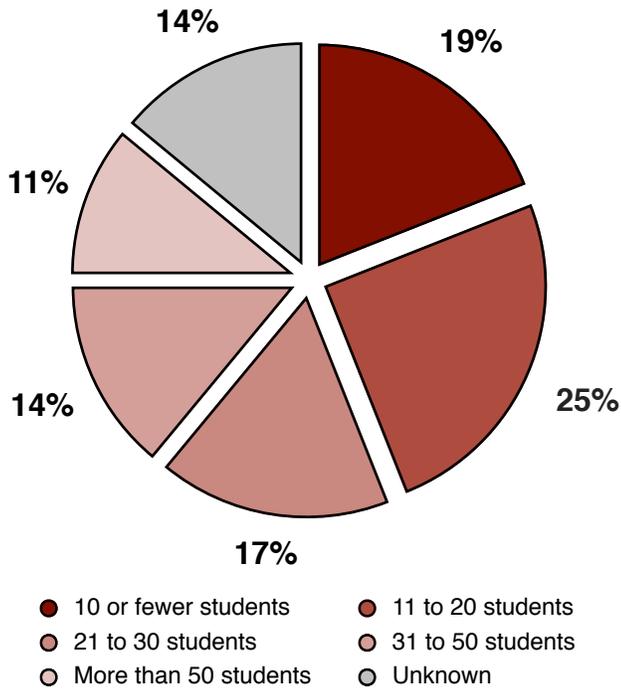


Figure 2.
Proportion of Truancy Programs by Number of Students Served Per School Year



Number of students served by the court-assisted truancy program in school districts

Based on the responses superintendents provided, court-assisted truancy programs appear to serve a small number of students from one school year to the next. As illustrated in Figure 2, more than 60% of superintendents who responded to the survey indicated that their school corporation’s truancy program serves fewer than 30 students per year. Nineteen percent indicated that their program served fewer than 10 students per year, while 25% indicated that their program served between 11 and 20 students. Eleven percent of superintendents indicated that the program served more than 50 students per year. All of the responses indicating that the truancy program in their district served more than 50 students per year were from superintendents leading school corporations in urban areas.

Type of students served by the court-assisted truancy program in school districts

The survey also asked superintendents which students were served by the court-assisted truancy program in their school district. As illustrated in Table 1, twenty-one percent of superintendents indicated that the court-assisted truancy program in their district served students who were at risk of expulsion or had been suspended for poor attendance. Nineteen percent indicated that the truancy program in their school district served students who were habitually truant, which was defined as having 10 or more unexcused absences. A smaller proportion (15%) indicated that the program in their district served students who were at-risk of suspension for poor attendance. Roughly the same proportion (13%) indicated that the truancy program served students who are chronically absent, students who miss 10% of the school year for any reason. Nine percent of superintendents indicated that the truancy program in their district served students who had been expelled. Two percent indicated that their truancy program served students who did not fit into one of the previously mentioned groups. These superintendents indicated that the truancy program served a broader range of students including homeless students and students who were currently in child protective services. Additionally, superintendents indicated that these programs served students who were at-risk of dropping out of high school (e.g., high school juniors or seniors who were failing classes and missing school).

Table 1.
Students Served by the Truancy Program

Student groups served	Percent
Students who are at-risk of expulsion	21.0%
Students who have been suspended	21.0%
Students who are habitually truant	19.0%
Students who are at-risk of suspension	15.0%
Students who are chronically absent	13.0%
Students who have been expelled	9.0%
Other	2.0%

Note: Respondents were allowed to select multiple options

Primary objective for the court-assisted truancy program in your school district

A majority (42%) of superintendents who responded to the survey indicated that primary purpose of the court-assisted truancy program was to provide diversion services in lieu of suspension (see Table 2). These services include both academic and mental health services designed to help students reconnect with school and support families who are struggling to get their child to school. Thirty-seven percent of superintendents indicated that the purpose of the program was to provide supervision and educational services to habitually truant students. This included tutoring, mentoring, and other services that assist students academically as well as hold them accountable for regular school attendance. Twenty-percent indicated that the program projected alternative education experiences by licensed classroom teachers. These include providing online, home school, career academies, and other supports that improve attendance by providing students with more convenient or engaging instructional options.

Court-assisted truancy program’s primary features

Superintendents were also asked to describe the court-assisted truancy program’s primary features. A plurality of superintendents indicated that their court-assisted truancy program provided student counseling. A smaller proportion indicated that the the program provided subject-specific curriculum and instruction (16%), parent and/or family counseling (15%), credit recovery (15%), and academic advising (12%). Superintendents also indicated that their program provided students with assistance obtaining a GED (7%), food service (4%), or transportation to or from school (2%). Nine percent of superintendents indicated that their court-assisted program provided a host of other services and were invited to enter these services via an open response question. Their responses included tutoring, mentoring, before or after school activities, healthcare, as well as access to child and family services. As one superintendent wrote, “We provide services to students to help them regain focus on their academics and feel connected to their school. We work with parents and families to identify the barriers that prevent the child from making it to school. Each child needs different supports, so we try to identify what they need and provide it through the program.”

Table 2.
Primary Objectives of the Truancy Program

Purpose of program	Percent
Provide diversion services in lieu of expulsion or suspension	42.0%
Provide supervision and educational services to habitually truant students	37.0%
Provide alternative education experiences by licensed classroom teacher	20.0%
Other	1.0%

Note: Percentages based on 76 responses, respondents allowed to select multiple options

Table 3.
Primary Features of the Truancy Program

Program feature	Percent
Student counseling	21.0%
Subject-specific curriculum and instruction	16.0%
Parent and/or family counseling	15.0%
Credit recovery	15.0%
Academic advising	12.0%
GED or continuing education	7.0%
Food service	4.0%
Transportation (to school or home)	2.0%
Other services	9.0%

Note: Percentages based on 117 responses, respondents allowed to select multiple options

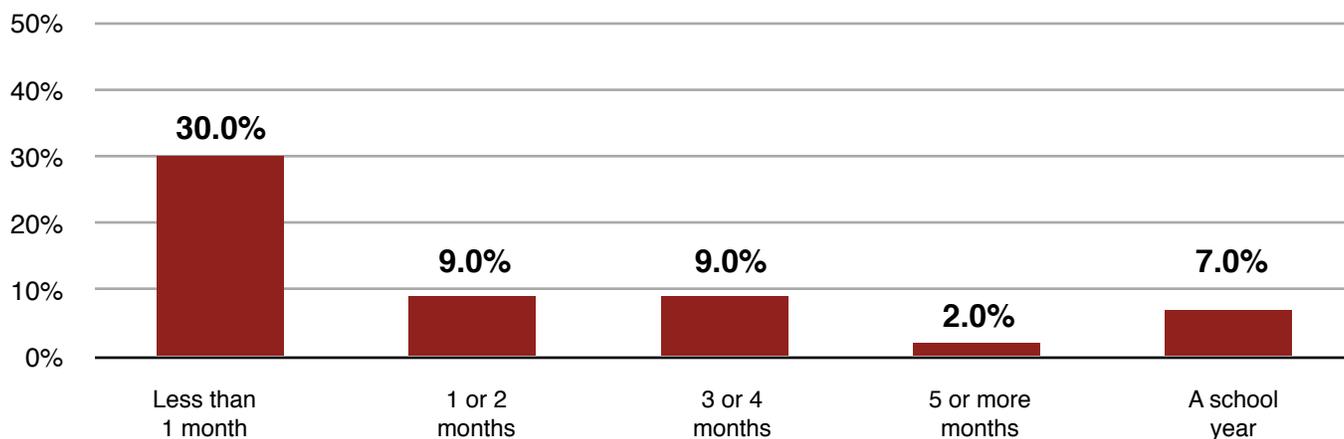
Length of time students are typically served by the court-assisted truancy program

The survey also gathered information about the typical length of time a student participated in the court-assisted truancy program. As illustrated in Figure 3, a third (30%) of superintendents indicated that students typically participated in the court-assisted program for less than one month. The vast majority of these superintendents (93%) indicated that students participated in the program less than 10 days. A smaller proportion of superintendents who responded to the survey indicated that students participated in the court-assisted program for longer periods. For example, 9% of superintendents indicated that students participated in the program between 1 and 2 months. The same percent indicated that students participated in the program between 3 and 4 months. Two percent indicated that students participated between 5 and 8 months. Seven percent indicated that students participated in the program for one school year (at least 9 months). More than 40% of superintendents provided no response to the question or indicated that they did not know the average length of participation.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the superintendent’s responses to the CEEP survey, court-assisted truancy programs appear to be a recent addition to school corporations in Indiana. The programs serve a small number of chronically absent, suspended, expelled, or truant students. Most programs provide some type of academic intervention. Students who typically participate in the programs do so for less than one month. Many participate fewer than 10 days. While more research is needed to determine whether these programs improve student attendance, this survey provides stakeholders and policy-makers with important information about the prevalence and current configuration of these programs in school districts across the state. This information may be especially helpful in informing schools and districts as they contemplate establishing a court-assisted program or discuss developing partnerships with community agencies that can provide services to chronically absent and truant students.

Figure 3.
Typical Length of Participation in a Court-Assisted Truancy Program



References

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