

ModelsforChange

Systems Reform in Juvenile Justice

Benton/Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Personnel Survey Final Report

Excerpted from:

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY MODELS FOR CHANGE ANNUAL REPORT

Washington State University, Division of Governmental Studies and Services

Submitted by:

*Leana A. Bouffard, Principal Investigator
Department of Political Science, Criminal Justice Program
Washington State University*

*Nicholas P. Lovrich, Co-Investigator
Director, Division of Governmental Studies and Services
Department of Political Science, Criminal Justice Program
Washington State University, Pullman*

and

*Paul S. Strand, Co-Investigator
Associate Professor
Psychology Program and Educational Counseling
Washington State University, Tri-Cities*

Submitted on:

June 30, 2009

Benton Franklin Counties Juvenile Justice Personnel Survey Final Report

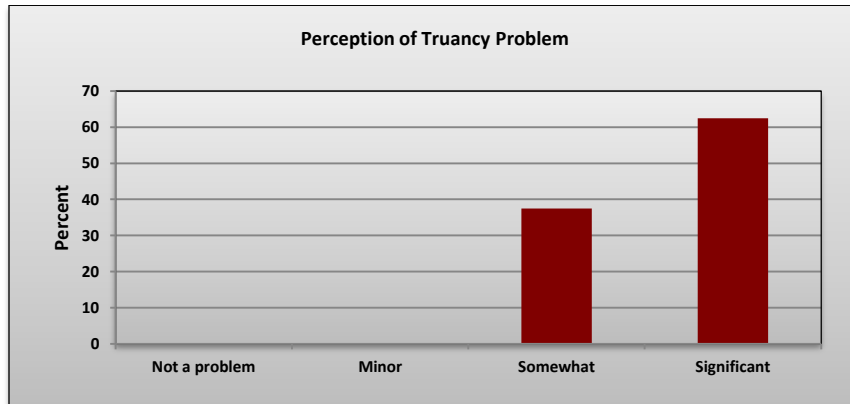
OVERVIEW

The survey of juvenile justice personnel provides an assessment of truancy and its response from the perspective of individuals working with truancy cases within the juvenile justice system. Initial contact was made with fourteen individuals to request their participation in a brief survey about truancy and the court process. The survey was administered electronically and responses were received from 8 of the 14 surveys sent (a 57.1% response rate). Individuals who completed the survey included the presiding juvenile court Judge for the Superior Court, the Judge Pro-Tem overseeing the truancy docket, the Intervention Services Manager (who oversees the truancy program), three probation counselors assigned to the truancy program, and two truancy clerks (the current as well as the previous truancy clerk). Respondents were primarily female (62.5%), white (75.0%), and non-Hispanic (75.0%). Ages ranged from 37 to 65, with an average age of 45.6. Finally, the amount of time respondents had spent in their current position varied from 2 months to more than 22 years (with an average of 8 years).

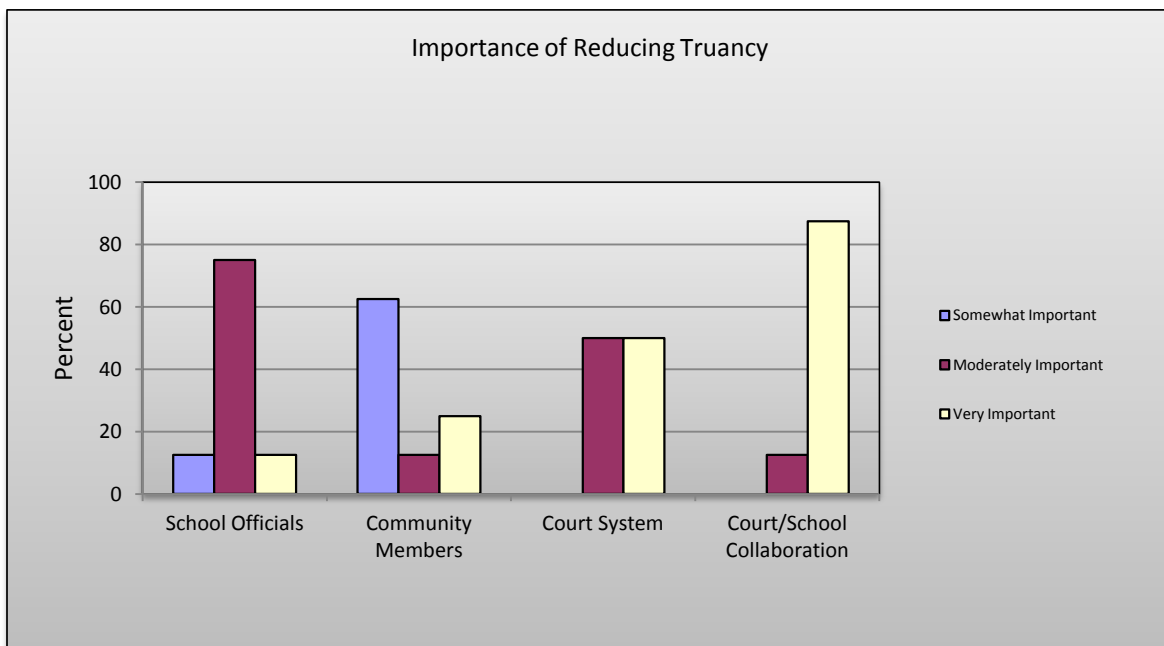
The remainder of this report is organized into the following four sections. First, a brief overview of the significance of a truancy problem as perceived by juvenile justice personnel will be assessed. Second, the perceived causes of truancy as identified by juvenile justice personnel will be analyzed. Special attention is given to the age at which problematic behavior is presented and whether the causes (and therefore the remedies) vary across ages. Third, the existing truancy responses employed by the court will be assessed. This includes the use of truancy and contempt petitions as well as the overall effectiveness of the petition process. In addition, this section will explore the perceived purpose and current effectiveness of community truancy review boards. The final section addresses programs and resources outside of the petition process.

SECTION I: OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF TRUANCY

All respondents perceived truancy to be at least somewhat of a problem, with 62.5% reporting that truancy was indeed a *significant* problem.



Respondents were also asked their perceptions of how important it is to various groups to reduce truancy. Most respondents believed it was moderately (75.0%) or very important (12.5%) to school officials to reduce truancy. Most respondents (62.5%) reported that reducing truancy was only somewhat important to community members. On the other hand, half of respondents each felt that it was moderately or very important to the court system to reduce truancy. All respondents felt that it was either moderately (12.5%) or very important (87.5%) for the court to work in collaboration with schools to reduce the problem of truancy.

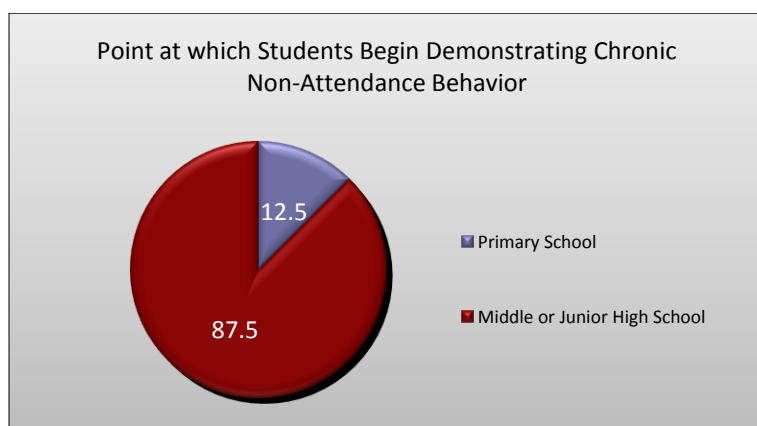


SECTION II: CAUSES OF TRUANCY

Respondents were presented with 13 factors identified in the research literature as being related to truancy. For each item, they were asked to identify whether they viewed it as a “major cause,” “plays some role,” or “not a cause.” The causes identified most frequently as a “major cause” were parenting (75.0%), youth’s lack of attachment to school (62.5%), low educational achievement by youth (50.0%), and youth drug/alcohol problems (50.0%). Other factors identified as “playing some role” include bullying/victimization (87.5%), parental low education achievement or attachment (87.5%), parental drug/alcohol problems (75.0%), parent’s mental illness (75.0%), poverty (62.5%), lack of access to social services (62.5%), child abuse/neglect (62.5%), and youth mental illness (62.5%). In addition to these factors, respondents also identified other potential causes of truancy:

- Language barriers/migrant population
- Teenage pregnancy
- Gang involvement
- Inadequate educational programs/services
- WASL/IEP
- Youth’s lack of motivation
- Single parents

Juvenile justice personnel in general agreed with school administrators in their perceptions of the causes of truancy. When presented with the most common causes identified by school administrators (parenting and youth’s lack of attachment to school), most (62.5%) agreed with that assessment based on their own experience. Nearly all respondents (87.5%) believed that the causes of truancy were different for children at different ages. One even commented that “The causes of truancy are individualized for each student, and often are a combination of the above items.” Most respondents (87.5%) believed that chronic truant behavior begins at the middle or junior high school level. Primary school was identified as the beginning by one individual (12.5%).



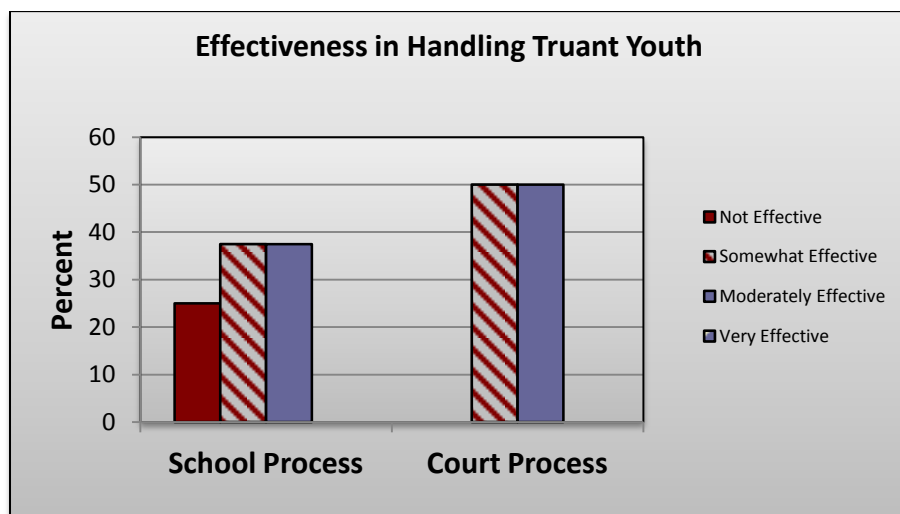
SECTION III: CURRENT RESPONSES TO TRUANCY

Petition Process

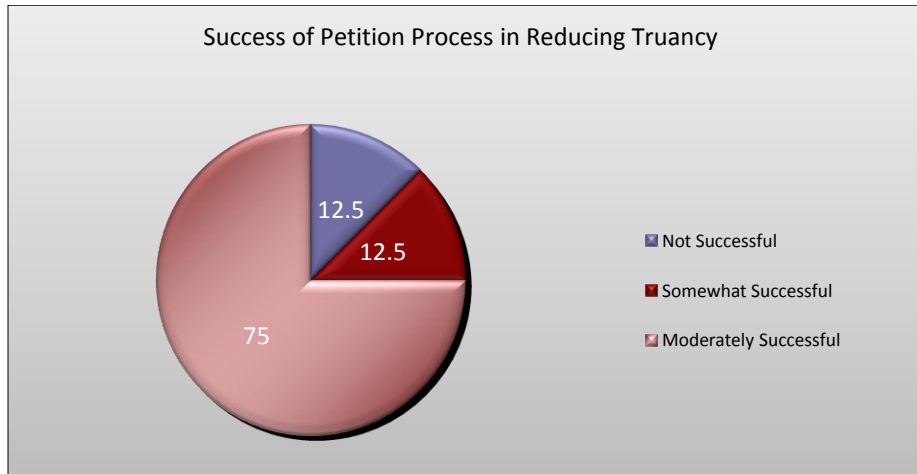
When asked for their opinions on the BECCA Bill provisions outlining when truancy petitions must be filed (after 5 unexcused absences in a month or 10 in a year), all of the respondents reported that they viewed the BECCA limits as appropriate. In general, respondents acknowledged the uniqueness of each truancy case and the implication of that for court processing. Only one individual agreed that all truancy cases should be treated the same way according to the law. More respondents (37.5%) agreed that while each truancy case is unique, the system can only work with the same procedures for all. Half of respondents believe that each truancy case is unique and should be treated individually. Comments included:

- Clearly delineated and uniform procedures are important for optimum cooperation and participation, but need to incorporate some latitude for individualization to address the unique circumstances of each truancy case.
- Each student has individual reasons for truanancies, however the same standards & procedures should be applied to all.
- Each youth has different reasons for their truancy and are at different stages in the Cycle of Change. You cannot work with all youth the same way and be effective.

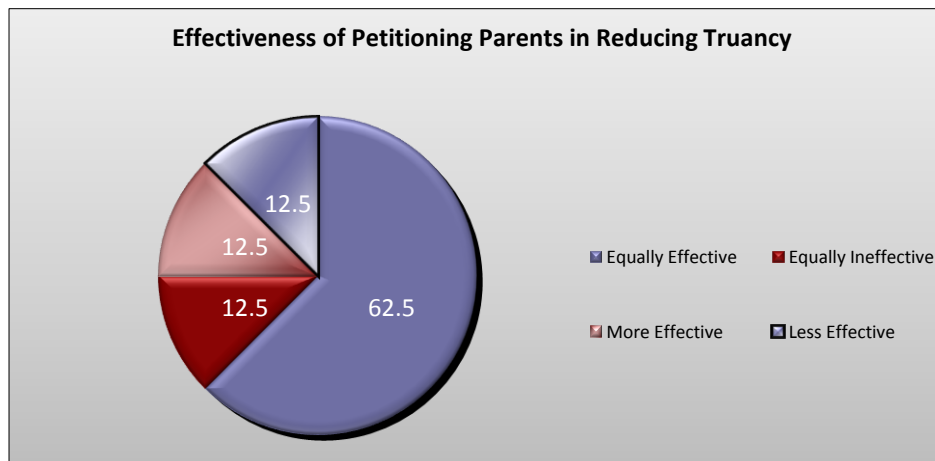
A majority of respondents viewed the school process for handling truancy as either not effective (25.0%) or only somewhat effective (37.5%). The remaining individuals (37.5%) viewed the school process as moderately effective. In contrast, half of respondents viewed the court process as somewhat effective, and half viewed it as moderately effective in handling truant youth.



Two individuals viewed the process of filing truancy petitions as either not or only somewhat successful in reducing truancy. The majority of respondents (75.0%) identified the truancy petition process as moderately successful in reducing truancy.



Respondents were also asked whether they believed petitioning parents would be effective in reducing delinquency. The majority of respondents (62.5%) believe that petitioning parents would be equally effective. One individual reported that it would be equally ineffective. The remaining two respondents were split, with one individual reporting that it would be more effective and one reporting that it would be less effective than petitioning students.

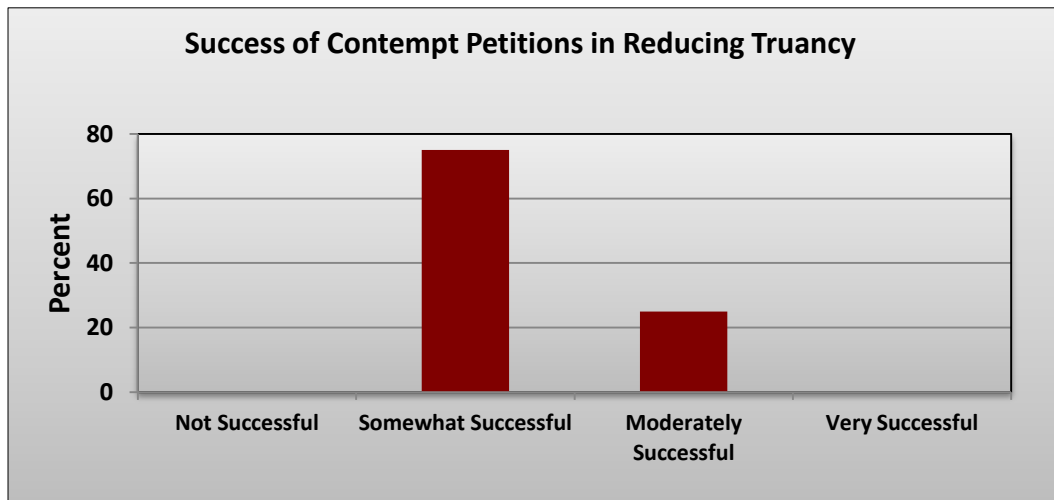


Noncompliance/Contempt

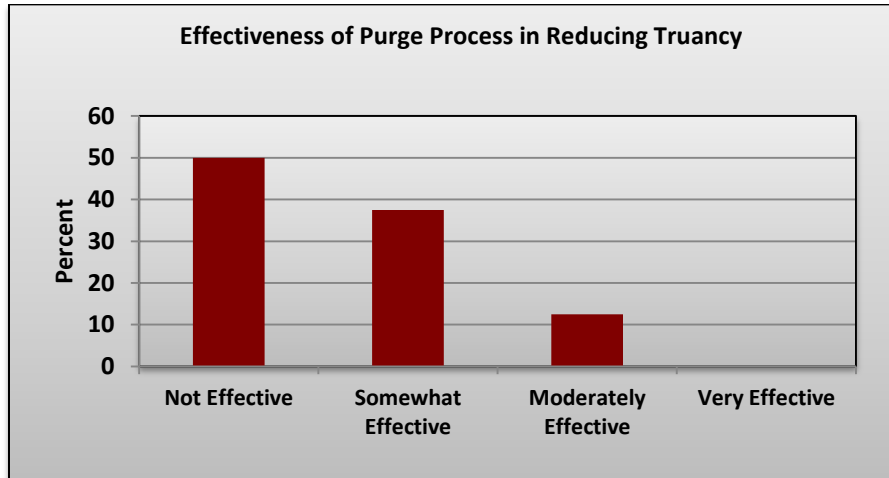
Respondents were asked what they believed to be the three most important contributors to noncompliance with the requirements of a truancy petition, and responses focused on youth issues, parenting, and school issues. The youth issues mentioned include lack of motivation/attachment (50.0%), low achievement (37.5%), drug/alcohol problems (37.5%), and mental illness (12.5%). Parenting was also mentioned frequently (75.0%). One respondent each also identified negative peers and poverty as contributors. Respondents also commonly identified school-related issues as one of the top three contributors to noncompliance. School-related comments include:

- Schools do not hold meetings with family to try and reduce problems
- Dropped for nonattendance and unable to re-enroll
- Some schools wait to file petition until the student is dropped
- Not allowing students to re-enroll until next semester
- Semester credits – not able to transcript quarter credits

The majority of respondents (75.0%) felt that filing truancy contempt petitions is only somewhat successful in reducing truancy. The remaining 25.0% reported that it is moderately successful.



Finally, respondents were asked about the Becca Bill process that allows a petition to be purged upon completion of set requirements. Half of respondents identified this process as not effective in reducing truancy. Another 37.5% reported that it was only somewhat effective in reducing truancy. Only one person indicated a more positive response, that the process was moderately effective.



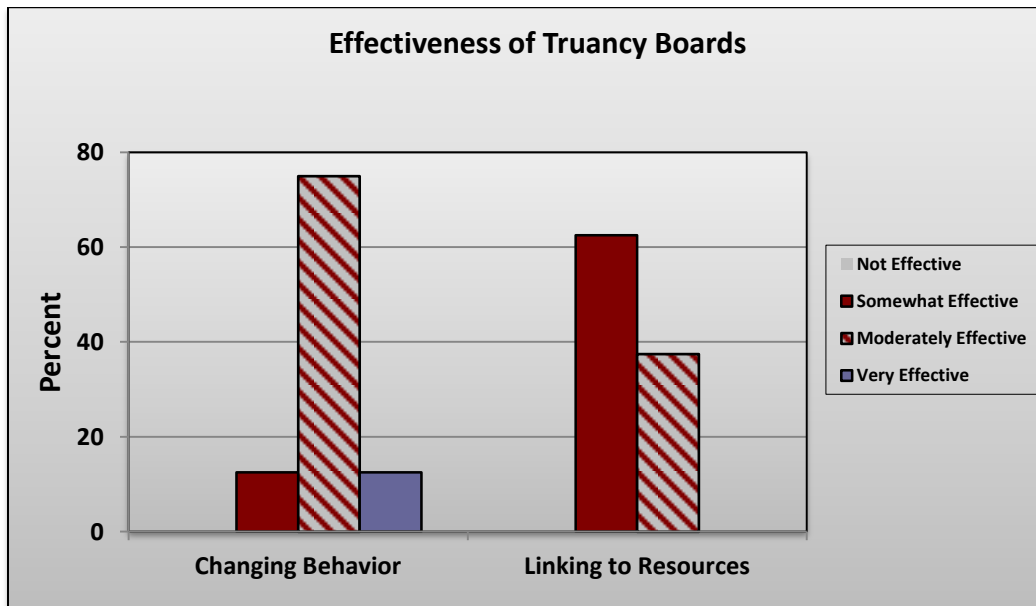
Community Truancy Boards

Several questions were asked to respondents concerning the purpose and effectiveness of community truancy boards. In terms of the perceived purpose of community truancy boards, a number of themes emerged in the responses, and most individuals identified multiple themes within their response. The most common response was that the truancy board serves as an alternative to court. Respondents also indicated that they perceived the truancy board as a way to connect truant youth to resources, to promote parent interaction/participation, and to inform the youth/parents of the law and court process. Each respondent’s comment is listed below:

- Get youth’s attention to defer from the court system, encourage parent involvement, explain law and court process, encourage communication with the schools, refer to available community resources
- TB’s are a diversion from the curt process, that involves education, problem solving and accountability.
- To keep youth out of court
- To provide an alternative to full engagement in the court system; to encourage, facilitate student and parent participation in resolving truancy issues.
- To recommend resources that will help the family and defer them from the court. Promote parent interaction
- To help juvenile/parents come up with solutions to avoid truancy.
- First contact with Youth and his/her family outside of the school to identify and correct deficiencies.

- I believe they are used to inform families & students of state laws regarding truancy, consequences of truancy and the judicial process of those cases.

Respondents were asked how effective they perceive truancy boards to be in changing truant behavior and in linking truant youth to resources. Overall, the responses were fairly positive. A large majority of individuals indicated that truancy boards are either moderately effective (75.0%) or very effective (12.5%) in changing truant behavior. One person indicated that truancy boards are only somewhat effective in this role. In terms of linking youth to resources, the majority of respondents felt that truancy boards were somewhat effective (62.5%). The remaining individuals (37.5%) felt that truancy boards were moderately effective in connecting youth to resources.



When asked how to make truancy boards more effective, a number of strategies were offered, including expanding board membership and training/education, access to more resources, incorporating a follow-up component, and reserving truancy boards for first-time truants. Individual responses include:

- By broadening the diversity of board membership, enhancing board training and support services.
- By incorporating school personnel
- More volunteers, maybe a coordination of services program for parents who are interesting in resources for their children.
- More volunteers, more resources for parents
- I think more education for the volunteers and time for truancy boards. Less attendees so they can have more one on one and provide more information on services
- Have juveniles and parents return to board and report on status, and what is working or not.

- I think truancy boards should be reserved for first time students who have never been involved in the process. This will educate families on their rights and obligations under the state law. For these groups of students such a board can serve as a wake-up call that they can be held accountable for skipping school. I don't believe that returning students, meaning those that have petitions filed year after year, should have the privilege of starting at Truancy Board. Those cases should be fast tracked through court in order to set a high level of accountability.

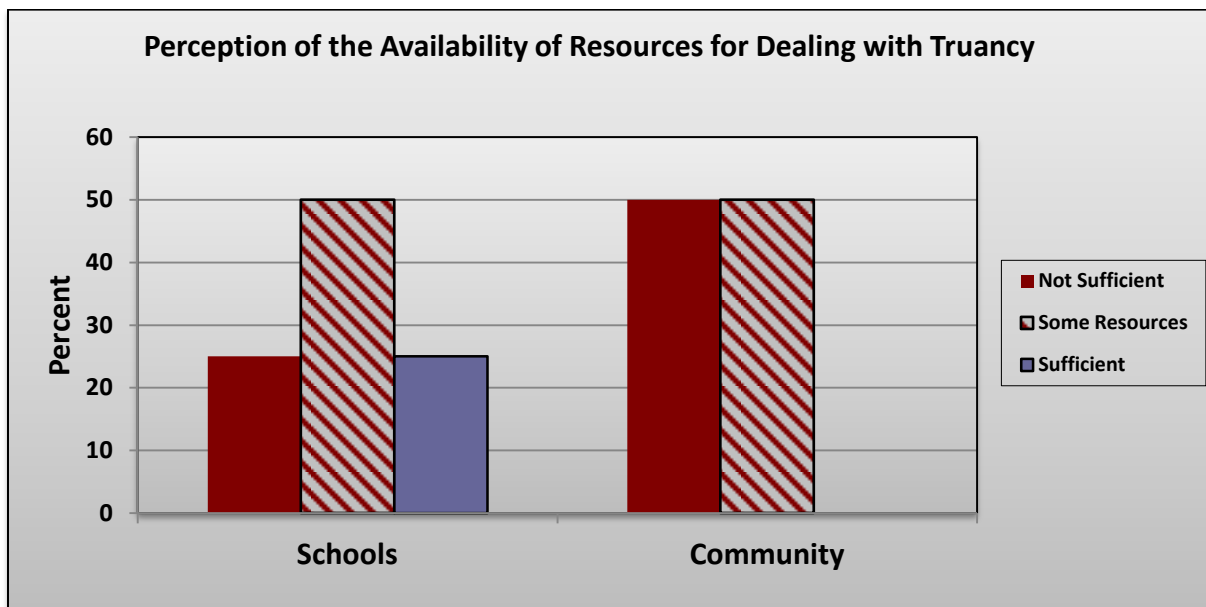
Finally, individuals were asked about their perception of the role of truancy officers in reducing student absences/truancy. Responses generally focused on monitoring and problem-solving with the youth, facilitating communication between the youth and the school, and assisting the youth with accessing services. Individual responses include:

- In addition to facilitating truancy boards, counselors monitor attendance and problem solve with schools and parents. Often this level of communication solves the problem.
- Monitor attendance, goal setting, foster communication between student/counselor/parent/school personnel, refer to community resources
- Monitor attendance, try to connect with school, offer resources in and out of school, encouragement, help with parent, youth and school connection to work together
- The role should be proactive, identifying emerging patterns of truancy, making appropriate referrals and providing sustained monitoring.
- Help juvenile with simple solutions as to increase school attendance. Connect or meet with school officials when necessary to find what works for each juvenile.
- Keeping in contact with the youth and making sure services are being provided
- Contact with Youth and the juvenile court system. Truancy officer follows up with student and school officials.
- The same as a probation officer. Truancy officers need to be seen at the schools so that better communications and relationship can be built with families and students. Ore funding will be needed to provide these services to schools. On-site truancy officers can lessen the burden for school officials if a truancy officer can take over supervising and tracking truant students.

SECTION IV: PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES

Current Resources

Respondents were asked about their perceptions of the availability of resources and programs for dealing with truancy. One-fourth of respondents believed that the resources available in schools are not sufficient, and half noted that there are some resources available. Only 25.0% reported that the resources available in schools are sufficient. None of the respondents believed that the resources available in the community are sufficient. Half noted that there are some resources, while the other half reported that community resources are not sufficient.



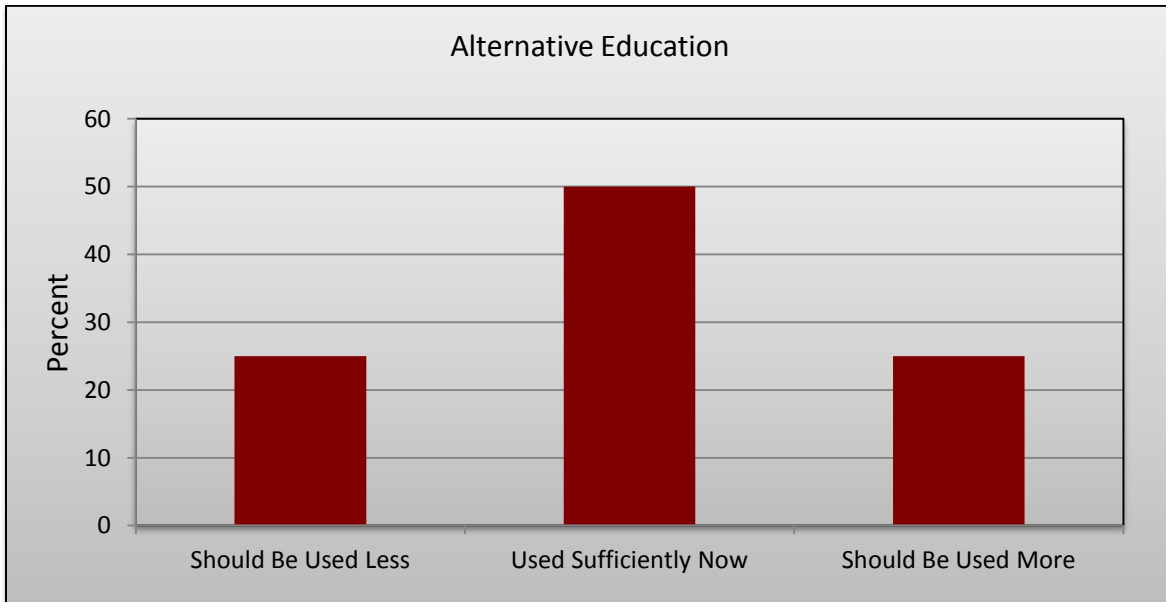
Half of respondents indicated that there are identified programs to assist truant youth. The programs noted include EPIC (center for runaway youth), alternative schools, community truancy boards, Truancy Contempt Prevention Project, Latino Juvenile Justice Network (LJJN), and Three Rivers Wraparound school project. A smaller percentage of respondents (37.5%) reported that there are identified programs to assist the families of truant youth. Programs listed here include the same ones listed above plus home-visitor, intervention and truancy programs.

Respondents also commented on the availability of culturally appropriate resources to address the issue of truancy among youth from minority populations. A majority of respondents (62.5%) felt that there are not sufficient culturally appropriate resources available. Individual comments include:

- At this point all we are doing is translating the process for monolingual parents and very little assistance is given to those parents to help them problem solve truant issues.
- Does not cater to barriers such as language, culture, correspondence.
- My impression is that resources vary from school to school; I believe that generally culturally appropriate resources in both the schools and the court are not sufficient to adequately address students and families of color, particularly Latinos.
- School correspondence is primarily in English only, attendance secretaries, counselors, etc. only speak English
- We do not have enough resources period. We need more Spanish language staff.

Alternative Education

Overall, respondents were mainly positive about the usefulness of alternative education—with only 25.0% suggesting that it should be used less. Another 25.0% believed that alternative education is being used sufficiently, and half suggesting that it should be used more.



Direction for the Courts in the Future

Respondents were also asked what direction they believe the courts should take in the future. A number of themes emerged, including providing the courts with more punitive options, providing leadership in collaboration with schools, services, and the community, individualizing the process, and reducing the processing time for truancy petitions. The specific comments are below:

- I believe there should be more sanctions imposed for the youth. I believe the youth know the court process and know they can purge and then purge out of detention. They need to be held accountable once they have been found in contempt.
- I would like to see the court have more punitive options available. Based on recent case law, we no longer have the option to order time in detention – which I think had a positive effect on some Youth, that needed to see the direction that they were heading.
- The courts should provide leadership in enhancing collaboration and cooperation with schools, social service providers and the community in the early identification of truancy and the early and effective intervention in dealing with truancy.
- Treat each case individually as far as sanctions, immediate sanctions not the purged language
- Quicker process in handling petitions. Do away with allowing juveniles to purge, and have them attend school while in detention instead. Also hold (elementary) parent accountable more as the Becca law states.
- Require schools to meet with students and parents prior to filing a truancy petition (which would require funding for schools to have personnel dedicated to this). Immediate consequences, not always the ability to purge – individualize the process!
- Intervention strategies for middle and early high school, alternative programs and recovery programs for credit deficient high school students.
- Repeated truant offenders should be required to enroll in GED program. Most of the student in this group have such poor attendance in school that it is virtually impossible for them to ever graduate. Court should mandate these students to be enrolled in a GED program and report in weekly to truancy counselor to supervise progress. And if these students waver in their efforts in completing a GED program, then immediate court sanctions should be exercised.