

WHAT WORKS? TARGETED TRUANCY AND DROPOUT PROGRAMS IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

Executive Summary

Background

In 2008, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) was directed to investigate evidence-based intervention and prevention programs for truancy. Because truancy and school dropout are closely linked, we also examined dropout prevention programs. The purpose of this assignment was to identify programs that work to increase attendance, improve school performance, and reduce high school dropout rates.

To assess whether programs work or not, we conducted a national literature search for evaluations of *targeted* truancy or dropout programs for middle and high school students. We excluded programs that serve “at-risk youth” more generally or that take place outside of school, courts, or law enforcement.¹

In order to know with some confidence that programs are effective, we require that the evaluations be of sufficient scientific rigor. At a minimum, to be included in our analysis, evaluations must have a comparison group of similar youth who did not receive the intervention. Without a comparison group we cannot know if changes in attendance, for example, were caused by the intervention or are due to other factors (such as youth maturation). Although many evaluations of truancy and dropout programs exist, the vast majority do not meet this minimum standard.

Results

The 22 studies included in this analysis reviewed 34 distinct programs (some studies tested more than one program). Four outcomes were examined: dropping out, high school graduation, academic achievement (grades and test scores), and “presence at school” (attendance and enrollment). On the whole, we found modest but positive impact on dropping out, achievement, and presence at school.²

Because these results combine the effects of programs that differ greatly in their approach, setting, and intensity, we further investigated programs based on their general focus or modality. Six program types were identified, as described in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the average effect expected for each program type. The plus and minus signs indicate a statistically significant effect on the relevant outcome. Plus signs (+) designate a positive effect, such as greater achievement or more school presence. Negative effects, such as increased dropout rates, are shown with a minus sign (–). Zeroes indicate that the program effect is not statistically significant (i.e., the evidence reveals no reliable effect). “N/A” indicates that the outcome was not measured.

¹ For the complete list of programs that were included and excluded, see full report: T. Klima, M. Miller, & C. Nunlist (2009). *What works? Targeted truancy and dropout programs in middle and high school*. Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 09-06-2201.

² The effects on graduation were moderate; however, only three types of programs are represented by these figures. Thus, at this time, it is not clear that all (or even most) truancy and dropout programs have similar effects on graduation.

Table 1
Effects of Truancy and Dropout Programs for Middle and High School Students on School Outcomes

Program Class	Dropout	Presence at School (Enrollment & Attendance)	Achievement (Test Scores & Grades)	Graduation
Alternative educational programs: Programs involving a group of students <i>in a traditional school</i> (e.g., school-within-a-school) that usually offer small class size, more individualized instruction, and/or different instructional methods and material (e.g., vocational curriculum).	+	+	+	+
Mentoring: Providing students with positive role models, who help with specific academic issues (e.g., homework), advocate for the student in the school system, and connect them to other services (e.g., social services).	+	+	0	0
Behavioral programs: Targeting students' school behaviors by helping them analyze and problem-solve negative behaviors, and/or by establishing a system of contingencies (rewards, punishments) for desirable and undesirable behaviors.	N/A	+	0	N/A
Youth development: Preventing negative school outcomes by promoting bonding with positive figures and school environment, fostering competence and skill building, and supporting resilience. Rather than focusing on remediation of youth's weaknesses, programs target healthy development and build on youth's strengths.	N/A	0	0	N/A
Academic remediation: Providing students with additional or intensive instruction to improve academic skills, usually in core subject areas (e.g., reading, math).	0	0	0	N/A
Alternative schools: Schools with <i>separate facilities and services</i> for students who struggle in traditional school settings. Schools usually incorporate an alternative curriculum (often academic remediation) and psychosocial services (e.g., counseling, case management).	-	0	0	0

Evidence-based programs:

Three types of programs show improvement in school outcomes: alternative programs (e.g., schools-within-schools), mentoring, and behavioral programs. Educational interventions—and programs for at-risk populations more generally—usually produce modest effects. Thus, the small but statistically significant results of the programs in this analysis are within the typical range of effects.

For instance, one of the larger observed effects was that of student dropout rates in mentoring programs. Whereas, on average, 35 percent of the comparison group dropped out, one would expect 28 percent of the mentoring group to drop out based on the calculated program effect. This is an overall reduction of 7 percentage points. Because this effect is statistically significant and based on rigorous research, however, we can be confident that it is an accurate and reliable finding for school-based mentoring programs of the type reviewed here.

No positive outcomes were found for alternative schools, academic remediation, or youth development programs.

Alternative educational programs versus alternative schools:

Alternative programs provide specialized instruction to a group of students *within* a traditional school, often separating them for at least some of their academic courses and integrating them with other students for elective classes. In this sense, alternative programs differ from alternative schools, in which the entire

school day is spent in separate facilities that often include different rules and norms from traditional schools.

Alternative programs had a positive effect on all four outcomes. The positive effects are due to a particular intervention model known as Career Academies. Career Academies are small learning communities within a larger high school. They combine an academic and technical curriculum around a career theme (which differs based on local interest). Additionally, they offer work-based learning through partnerships with community employers. A unique feature of Career Academies is that they serve not only struggling students, but also seek to include achieving students. According to the Career Academy Support Network (CASN), there are 6,000 to 8,000 Academies in the US, including 14 currently operating in Washington.

In contrast to the positive findings of alternative *programs*, studies of alternative *schools* reveal no positive impact on school presence, achievement, or graduation rates. Moreover, alternative schools show a small *negative* effect on dropping out. The evidence indicates that 35 percent of students in alternative schools dropped out compared with 31 percent of similarly at-risk students in other settings (such as traditional schools)—a difference of 4 percentage points.

It is unclear why alternative *programs* result in positive outcomes while alternative *schools* do not. Some have speculated that by isolating the most at-risk students, alternative *schools* may increase negative peer influences. On the other hand, students in alternative *programs* remain part of the larger high school setting that includes a more diverse set of peers.

Another possibility is that assignment to alternative *schools* is not based on student choice; therefore, students may view transfer to an alternative school as punishment. This perception may, in turn, impact academic motivation and the decision to remain in school. By contrast, many alternative *programs* are voluntary, which may affect students' sense of control and motivation to succeed.

Mentoring programs:

These programs pair struggling students with an adult who serves as a role model, supports school achievement, and helps the youth navigate an often complex school system. In this analysis, we found that such programs make a small positive impact on school presence and dropping out, but not on achievement. Importantly, the school-based mentoring programs reviewed here may differ from other mentoring programs in important ways that influence their effectiveness. For example, most of the interventions evaluated here employed paid mentors. Such payment may have encouraged the mentors to perform better than volunteer mentors, who are more typical in the community.

Conclusions

In the field of dropout and truancy prevention, there have been very few rigorous evaluations. Many studies that have been conducted use weak research designs, but these do not allow us to draw conclusions about program effectiveness. A number of creative interventions—including some programs in Washington—have recently been implemented with plans for evaluation. In order to contribute to our understanding of effective interventions, these evaluations will have to use robust research designs.

The rigorous studies included in this analysis showed that some targeted programs have positive effects on dropping out, school attendance, and student achievement in middle and high school. Specifically, the evidence points to alternative programs, mentoring approaches, and to a lesser extent, behavioral interventions as those that hold promise for at-risk populations.

It is informative that alternative programs, housed within traditional schools, improved student outcomes, but alternative schools, in separate facilities, did not. This finding may reflect a need to maintain some level of integration among at-risk and high-achieving students.

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