Hartford School District Intervention Proposal: Using the Positive Behavioral Support and

Intervention Model to Reduce Truancy

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INTRODUCTION

The Hartford School district is currently partnering with the Hartford Police Force to combat concerning levels of chronic truancy. Despite the good intentions of the administrations and police, previous interventions did not yield significant improvements. Through a sociological perspective, our group attempts to address concerning truancy levels. We will review past literature on class issues and the socioeconomic circumstances of low income families as well as the effects of parent, teacher and self expectations on educational attainment in order to highlight potential gaps in the school system. Through these findings, we will propose an intervention for reducing truancy at Hartford High School. At the same time, we hope that our work will provide a link between current theory and practical interventions, thereby broadening the sociological literature and providing an example for future case studies.

BACKGROUND

Truancy is a significant problem for the individually affected students' well-being and future life outcomes as well as for their communities. As one might suspect, truancy is linked to poor academic performance and high dropout rates (Henry, Knight, and Thornberry 2012; National Center for Education Statistics 2012; Vaughn et al. 2013). Moreover, truancy is also associated with higher rates of high-risk negatively affecting students' quality of life in adulthood, putting them at a higher risk for substance abuse (Best et al. 2006; Henry 2010; Vaughn et al. 2013), delinquency, teenage pregnancy, violence, divorce, job instability, criminality, and incarceration (Henry 2007; Lochner and Moretti 2004; Hirschfield and Gasper 2001; Vaughn et al. 2013; Maynard, McCrea, Pigott and Kelly 2013; Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn and Peters 2012). The negative consequences of truancy at the community level include higher rates of criminal activity,

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fewer productive citizens, and higher government spending for social services (Baker, Sigmon and Nugent 2001).

It is important for Hartford School District and the Hartford Police Force to address truancy. The current official protocol for truancy dictates that after 7 days of unexcused absence, Windsor County begins an investigation and sends a letter home to the student's household ("Windsor County Truancy Response Protocol"). Despite this intervention, truancy remains an issue. The Hartford School District outlines its most significant priorities as "[demonstrating] the ability to develop long-term life goals, to plan for their future, to cooperate with others, and to live independently" in addition to "[demonstrating] the qualities essential for succeeding within and outside of the school setting, including integrity, tolerance, self-motivation and work ethic, intellectual curiosity, and respect for themselves and others" ("News-Hartford School District"). Taking into consideration these principles, Hartford School District's investment into this project directly coincides with their mission.

Hartford School District consists of three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. This project focuses on the middle and high school. Hartford Memorial Middle School has a current enrollment of 296, while Hartford High School's current enrollment is 475. Both the middle and high schools have truancy rates below the Vermont average of 5.28%, with truancy rates of 0.68% and 2.74% respectively ("School Report - Vermont"). This speaks to the extent of the schools' current efforts to prevent truancy. Although it is lower than the Vermont average, truancy in Hartford remains a problem through both middle and high schools.

At Hartford High School, unexcused absences peak during senior year, to an average of 24 unexcused absences in a year which is four more than the legal definition of chronic truancy, defined as 20 or more unexcused absences (Psychology 81 Storytelling with Data 2017). In

addition, the statistics show socioeconomic disparities in truancy. The 26% of Hartford students eligible for free or reduced price lunch have nearly twice the average number of unexcused absences of other students (Psychology 81 Storytelling with Data 2017). Homeless students average 15 unexcused absences a year, nearly three times the number of absences found among students with stable housing (Psychology 81 Storytelling with Data 2017). These trends show connections between socioeconomic and class background and educational engagement that follow patterns found in previous literature, which we review below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parents and Socialization

Social class plays a major role in children's experiences in educational institutions, as students' class backgrounds equip them with different resources and strategies for succeeding and feeling comfortable at school. Being born into an economically privileged household not only allows access to important resources such as quality housing, health care, education, etc., but is also linked to cultural capital, which can be converted into useful social strategies in everyday life.

Parents' background, involvement, and expectations play a significant role in their child's educational attainment and motivation to learn. Parents from different socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds vary in their involvement with their children's schooling, whereas parents from dominant, higher class groups show stronger connections with their children's educational achievement (Lee and Bowen 2006). This is also evident in the social stratification and separation of children's educational attainment and trajectories where there are gaps in achievement favoring children in higher social classes over children in lower social classes (Entwisle, Alexander and Olson 2005). As a result, parents from higher social classes have the

cultural capital, time and resources to better maneuver American educational institutions giving their children an advantage (Lee and Bowen 2006).

The concept of *cultural capital,* which is the mannerisms, etiquette and lifestyle habits associated with one's background*,* is useful in understanding social class differences in children's school experiences (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau 1987; Entwisle et al. 2005). Students from more privileged households are equipped with the mannerisms, etiquette and lifestyle habits and therefore cultural capital to understand standard norms in networking events and interviews, such as maintaining eye contact, engaging in small talk and firm handshakes. In school, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and parents have the cultural capital and the confidence that enable them to take full advantage of their school's resources and feel valued and accommodated in the classroom environment (Lareau 1987). The difference in cultural capital causes middle-class students to make more requests for help from teachers and do so in different ways than their working class peers (Calarco 2011). Rather than waiting for assistance, middle-class students call out or approach teachers directly, even interrupting others to make requests (Calarco 2011). Because teachers expect students to seek help, and teachers are more responsive to proactive requests, middle-class students receive more assistance, spend less time waiting and, as a result, are better able to complete assignments than their working class peers (Calarco 2011). In schools where teachers provide little explicit guidance to students about when and how to seek help, children are left to draw on their class backgrounds to guide their responses to problems at school (Calarco 2011).

These differences in educational attainment and cultural capital increase with age, and even a slight advantage in educational attainment can predict a lifelong advantage (Entwisle et al. 2005). Low income parents experience greater barriers to school involvement due to inflexible work

schedules. Therefore, low income parents have a lower chance of gaining the social, informational, and material rewards that are achievable through school involvement roles which are accessible to higher income parents (Lee and Bowen 2006). Strong negative stereotypes with regard to low-income parents have potential negative ramifications for their children (Lee and Bowen 2006), because the children must manage stigmatized identities and concerns about academic fit (Johnson, Richeson, and Finkel 2011). These factors play a role in reduced interest in academics in school and an increase risk of truancy. In contrast, parents in a higher social class may have the economic capital to spend time involved in their child's school, in ways most valued by the faculty and academic institution (Lee and Bowen 2006). These high status parents perpetuate advantages by instilling values and behaviors that are important for succeeding in school (Lee and Bowen 2006; Entwisle et al. 2005). The resulting congruence in cultural capital creates consequences in teacher expectation which affects student performance and educational attainment (Lee and Bowen 2006).

Teacher Expectation

Effects of parent socialization and cultural capital have consequences for teacher expectations and perceived student performances and competence in the classroom. Due to the strong effects of parent backgrounds, different students have different interactions with teachers based on their economic and cultural backgrounds. Lower involvement of low income parents in schools creates a disadvantage for their children. This is because lack of school engagement is perceived by the school faculty as a sign of a parent not caring for their child, causing teachers to negatively label the household as troubled or less involved and creates lower teacher expectations for the child's educational attainment and performance (Lee et al. 1989). In contrast, teachers have more positive expectations for children from more privileged backgrounds, since their parents are more involved with school and are viewed by teachers as households who value education (Lee

and Bowen 2006). This perception is associated with higher teacher ratings of the advantaged students' educational attainment (Lee and Bowen 2006), thereby bolstering self-fulfilling prophecies and perceptual biases (Lee et al. 1989).

Self-fulfilling prophecies is the process in which a teachers' expectations leads students to perform at a level that confirms the teacher's assumptions (Lee et al. 1989). Teachers may view a specific student as "driven" or "high achieving" and as a result may drive those specific students to actually perform well. Teachers may also view a student as "lazy" or "low achieving". As a result of these low expectations, the student is at a higher risk for actually performing below par.

In addition, teachers may have *perceptual biases*, in which teachers may interpret student's performance based on their expectations (Lee et al. 1989). For example, two students may have equivalent performances, but a student who is normally expected to be high achieving may receive a higher score from the teacher, while a student who is normally expected to be low achieving will receive a lower score. The process of self fulfilling prophecies and a teacher's perceptual bias can become interrelated with the student's own internal biases, which may have negative consequences at a young age when students are developing their self concept, capabilities for learning, motivation (Lee et al. 1989) and affiliation for certain academic fields or occupations (Appel and Kronberger 2012). Although self-fulfilling prophecies and perceptual biases may differ between teachers, these differential expectations may accumulate and socialize students at a young age to these expectations, having large repercussions over a long period of education and affecting educational attainment in a student's later years.

Self Expectation and Stereotype Threat

Parent socialization and teacher expectations become interrelated with a student's self expectation and their perceptions of self competence. This becomes especially prevalent with students from

lower income groups, as lack of parent involvement lowers teacher expectations, resulting in stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is a phenomenon in which members of a stigmatized social group perform poorly on a task because they are aware of a negative stereotype associated with their group (Appel and Kronberger 2012). Students from low income background experience a lack of valued cultural capital and low teacher expectations from perceptual biases, which leads to stereotype threat and self-fulfilling prophecies of lower performance. Low income students perceive themselves as less competent, and they perform poorly due to negative labeling. In addition, it is a commonly held misconception among the American population that the poor are responsible for their own misfortune, as they are perceived to lack "effort, ambition, thrift, talent and morals" (Spencer and Castano 2007). These negative stereotypes continue to hamper the performance of low income students and can negatively affect educational attainment, motivation to learn and willingness to stay in school.

Research shows that these types of stereotype threat limit the potential of negatively stereotyped students, leading to disidentification (lack of identification) with specific academic fields and occupations (Appel and Kronberger 2012). For example, female students are less likely to go into STEM fields due to the stereotype that women are more humanities orientated. While positive stereotypes lead to preferential treatment of certain student groups, those who are negatively stereotyped may not receive the same amount of attention, creating a disparity in educational attainment (Lee et al. 1989). Since female students are socialized early to believe that they are better at humanities than math, they are more likely to pursue humanities classes and humanities related career paths due to the strong influence and power of stereotypes (Lee et al. 1989). They are also less likely to pursue STEM fields because stereotype threat creates a situation where the female students are pressured and are more likely to perform poorly due to the negatively

gendered label. Another example is where students from low income groups are less likely to be outspoken and strive for leadership positions. The negative labeling and stereotype threat creates a situation where lower income students are deterred away from these leadership roles, since societal perceptions create pressure on lower income students, where the students internalize lowered self expectation and lack of suitability for leadership positions.

Disidentification has had significant effects on disadvantaged groups in their learning potential and capabilities, since the devalued group are more at risk of internal conflict between their self-concept of talent, suitability, competencies and academic performance (Appel and Kronberger 2012). These disparities may explain why female and low-income students lack a personal connection to academics, as sustained poor performance due to stereotyping exacerbates disidentification and demotivates students.

Parent background, teacher expectations, self expectations and stereotype threat are all factors that contribute to a child's educational attainment. We can see how differences in parent backgrounds can create disparities and advantages for students from higher income backgrounds due to the economic and cultural capital associated with this upbringing. In addition, teacher's expectations based on a child's socioeconomic background and upbringing have consequences for a teacher's self-fulfilling prophecies and perceptual biases. Finally, these factors from a students' parents and teachers can be internalized and embodied by the students themselves and create stereotype threat that may inhibit their performance and limit their potential and perception of their own competences. These types of processes can negatively influence a child's motivation to learn. Interventions aimed to reduce truant behaviors must be grounded in an awareness of the correlation between low socioeconomic status and low educational attainment and the social processes that are intertwined between parents, teachers and the students themselves.

POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION

Taking into consideration socioeconomic status and its effects on educational attainment and truancy, we propose a multifaceted plan of intervention for the Hartford community. Our proposal aims to balance Hartford Public Schools and Police Force's need for immediate behavioral control over students with the need for long term student success. Our proposal centers on the school-wide implementation of a modified positive behavioral support and intervention model specifically targeting truancy (Pas and Bradshaw 2012; Mallet 2015).

The *positive behavioral intervention and support model* is a three-tiered system of behavioral modification in schools. The primary tier, which includes the entire student body, implements clear and consistent school-wide conversations about behavioral expectations. The secondary tier, which includes those students exhibiting some problematic behaviors, involves conversations with teachers and counselors about the root causes of the behavior in question and how the school can act as a support. Finally, the tertiary tier, which includes students with chronic behavioral difficulties, deals with formal disciplinary procedures.

The positive behavioral support and intervention model dictates that school policies must become a strong, consistent, and clearly defined part of the school's rhetoric (Mallet 2015). However, interventions aimed to target truancy must be wary of saddling students with excessive discipline that makes their return to class more difficult. Truancy policies that lean towards suspension and expulsion have been shown to be at best ineffective and some studies have shown such policies to actually *increase* truancy rates (Mallet 2015).

A one-size-fits-all approach to discipline is not effective when it comes to truancy because the underlying causes of truancy are so diverse, ranging between family, school, economic, and student factors (Mallet 2015, Hendricks et al 2010). One significant part of the secondary tier of

the positive behavioral intervention and support model is working with students to identify why they are truant and how the school can best support them. This conversation allows students some agency and reduces the feelings of antagonism between the student and the school (Pas and Bradshaw, 2012).

Conversations around truancy must occur between students and trusted adults who are close to the student. Hartford High school employs only four guidance counselors, requiring each counselor to be responsible for over 100 students. While guidance counselors are certainly a strong tool for students, the task of truancy prevention must rest largely with teachers. Teacher engagement is particularly important as students who consider their relationships with their teachers to be "antagonistic" report significantly lower levels of school attachment and significantly greater rates of truancy (Hendricks et al. 2010). This finding shows that eliminating negative student-teacher interactions is crucial to reducing truancy.

While eliminating negative student-teacher interactions is an important first step in reducing truancy, eliminating negative interactions alone would be insufficient. An absence of negative student-teacher interactions is not enough to reduce truancy, instead, the presence of *positive* student-teacher interactions is crucial. One study finds that students with at least one positive adult advocate in school were up to 40% more likely to maintain behavioral changes in school long term (Hendricks et al 2010). With the priority of building positive, constructive student-teacher relationships in mind, we propose strengthening the advisory system at Hartford, and allowing students to opt-in to specific advisors.

A strong advisory system also facilitates a partnership between families and teachers, as it provides a central long-term contact at school with whom parents can build a relationship. Studies show that family engagement in school is a major predictor of attendance (Hendricks et al 2010;

Mallet 2016; Tyler and Segady 2000; Virtanen et al. 2014). As explained above, parental engagement acts as a resource disproportionately distributed across social classes (McNeal 1999). For disadvantaged students, parental engagement is often lower than that of their peers. Coupled with the fact that students who do not receive consistent validation and encouragement in the importance of schooling are more likely to skip classes (Mallett 2015), we can see the important implications for parent involvement. Increasing parental engagement in high schools has long been a goal for schools, but research on effective methods has been lacking. Recent advances in truancy policy have targeted parental responsibility in a number of state laws that fine parents of students with chronic truancy problems. Parental responsibility laws, while gaining national support, find virtually no support from the research (Tyler and Segady 2000). The literature on suspension and expulsion based truancy policies (Mallett 2015) shows that harsh punishments for students are ineffective for reducing truancy. Similarly, the literature on parental liability laws shows that harsh punishments for parents are ineffective in reducing truancy (Tyler and Segady 2000). Instead, our intervention aims to build lasting relationships between parents and advisors, allowing the school to pull parents into discussions about truancy and helping the school stay in touch with family factors that might contribute to truancy.

Another frequently-cited reason for chronic truancy is students' belief that what they are learning is not applicable to their lives and goals outside of school (Ovink 2010). Hartford High School requires students to identify their goals and priorities for school in annual check-ins with guidance counselors. Strong relationships between students and advisors maximizes the benefits of the annual check-in program. Individualized attention to students at a high risk for truancy allows for honest, productive conversations between students and advisors about the students' goals and how school can help them to achieve their goals. Students and advisors with strong,

consistent relationships are in the best position to create a plan for how the school can help the student reach his or her goals. Building school attendance to help students meet a goal of their own choosing allows students a sense of agency and encourages them to attend school.

GOALS OF FIELD RESEARCH

The goals of our field research were to determine the current state of truancy at Hartford Middle and High Schools, contributing factors to truancy and to assess the current interventions as they exist on the ground. We aimed to couple our proposed intervention with the circumstances within the schools so that we could make make realistic suggestions that capitalize on the programs that already exist. Ultimately, we wanted to use the information we learned in the interviews to create and recommend a truancy intervention plan with a proactive, rather than reactive, approach.

These goals allow us to build on our literature and proposed interventions by guiding the interviews towards insights that the guidance counselors could provide because of their practical experience in the schools every day. We built on our literature review by asking guidance counselors about what tools they have tried using to overcome the effects of low parent involvement, low teacher expectations, and low self-expectations to encourage students to return to school. We also went into interviews with an ear for how a modified positive behavioral support and intervention model could feasibly fit within existing bureaucratic structures, to create an intervention that works with the constraints of limited budgeting and manpower within the public schools.

METHODS

Our field research consisted of two semi-structured in-depth interviews, one with Brenda Greene, a guidance counselor at Hartford Middle School, and the other with Barbara Mason and Richard

Jenkison, guidance counselors at Hartford High School. We chose to interview guidance counselors because by virtue of their position, they offer the most complete picture of truant students' academics, family backgrounds, and in-school relationships.

We chose to conduct semi-structured interviews, which allowed us to ask questions about the research topics in our literature review while also giving us the flexibility to ask more questions about the experience in the schools. Semi-structured interviews are a type of qualitative methodology that uses planned questions as guidelines for a more conversational interview. Semi-structured interviews allow the respondent the freedom to focus on topics that are important to him or her, even if those topics would not be covered by the initial framework of the interview.

Flexibility in the interviews was especially important as it provided us a better idea of how our research and proposed intervention intersect with existing programs within the schools. Using semi-structured interviews allowed us to learn about how parent socialization, teacher expectations, and students' self expectations impact truancy in practice in Hartford, along with what strategies the guidance departments have used to try to overcome these obstacles.

We prepared for the interviews by creating a guideline of questions and topics based on our literature review and background research on Hartford Memorial Middle School and Hartford High School. Our guiding questions aimed to discover the extent to which truancy in Hartford mirrored the literature on truancy, what obstacles to truancy prevention impact the schools, and what tools already exist for truancy prevention.

We interviewed Brenda Greene on February 9th for just over thirty minutes in a private conference room at Hartford Middle School. Brenda gave us her perspective as a guidance counselor on the causes and effects of truancy at Hartford High School, along with the active

truancy prevention programs and current challenges at the school. We spoke with Brenda for just over thirty minutes in a private conference room.

We also interviewed Barbara Mason and Richard Jenkison in Barbara's office in the guidance suite at Hartford High School on March 5. Though we were scheduled to interview Barbara for about thirty minutes, Richard requested to join in and we spoke for over an hour. We discussed their perspective as guidance counselors on the current state of truancy at Hartford High School, the existing truancy prevention and intervention programs, and their wishes for future interventions.

RESULTS AND INSIGHTS

School Atmosphere

Guidance Counselors at both Hartford Memorial Middle School and Hartford High School said a major priority for the schools was building a strong community through strong relationships. At both schools, the value for community was palpable as soon as we entered the building.

Arriving at the Hartford Memorial Middle School, students are greeted by a tree with paper leaves that say words such as "kindness", "respect", "loyalty", "family & friends", "enthusiasm", "compassion", "love", "empathy", "courage" and "honesty". One poster in the hallway promotes healthy values, safety, and high aspirations. Another poster urges students ask adults for help in dangerous and difficult situations. Inspirational quotes cover bulletin boards and classroom doors. These decorations communicate a value for community. The decorations also create a welcoming environment that remind students every day of the school's values and behavioral expectations, ingraining these values and expectations into the school's rhetoric.

Entering Hartford High School, the focus on community is clear in the building itself. The walls are covered in student artwork and announcements of student achievements. In addition, the

guidance office has a large open space where students can gather and work along with offices for private conversations between counselors and students. The honor roll is posted on a bulletin board near the front office. Each spring, a map outside the guidance office is updated to mark and celebrate students' college choices. Posters on the walls encourage students to use technology with caution and kindness. Each classroom has a poster outside with names, photos, and information about the teachers who use the classroom.

Parent Engagement

The schools work hard to build strong school communities, and these communities aim to include parents as well as students. At both the middle school and the high school, guidance counselors explained that parent involvement was the most significant predictor of a student's success and attendance at school. Their input mirrors the research, which shows that students whose parents have the lowest involvement in their education exhibit the highest rates of truancy (Lee and Bowen 2006).

When talking with parents of truant children, Brenda explains "often times you find that parents themselves have had a really hard time in school, so school was hard for them". These are overwhelmingly parents who did not choose to continue with school, and ended up in low-paying jobs. Alternatively, they may be parents who struggled through school and felt that their education was not worth the investment. These parents exhibit the connection between low cultural and economic capital and low value towards education (Lee and Bowen 2006; Entwisle et al. 2005**).** Additionally, children of parents who do not value education are at a higher risk for truancy as the parents do not encourage students to prioritize school (Lee and Bowen 2006).

Many of the existing interventions for addressing truancy in Hartford involve trying to increase parent engagement. The official truancy protocol in Hartford requires the school to send

a letter home after ten unexcused absences. In addition to the official notification, administrators try to contact parents of truant students to identify a plan of action that can work for the student and the family. At the high school, Barbara and Richard explain that when students are chronically truant, contacting the parents is a delicate procedure. "When we call home, we just have to pray that the family hasn't had a negative experience with schools, whether with the parents or with a sibling. If they have, there is very little hope of getting them back", Richard explains. Some parents admit that the family is counting down the days until the student's sixteenth birthday, when withdrawing from school becomes a legal option. For students whose parents do not prioritize education, it is especially important to find academic encouragement and positive role models in school. Hartford School District's advisory groups provide support and create strong bonds between teachers and students.

Advisory Groups

Barbara Mason explains a philosophy on attendance that mirrors the research. "Attendance is really all about relationships" she explains. At the end of every year, Barbara meets with each freshman to check in about the student's progress and happiness at school. "The last question I ask them is always 'who is an adult here that you feel like you can talk to?'". More often than not, the students who are chronically truant are the same students who could not name an adult or teacher they could talk to by the end of their freshman year.

The advisory program places students with an advisor and an advisory group in an attempt to build relationships in the schools. Ideally, students can name their advisor as an adult at school whom they feel they can trust. This way, students also build relationships with their advisory groups, who serve as a type of family at school. The advisory system is one of the most significant existing tools for preventing truancy in Hartford. Advisories' primary purpose is community-

based, a departure from the academic school day. In the middle school, Brenda explains, "We have an advisory system in place and try to make sure every single student starts their day here at the middle school in an advisory. [...] It's a check-in, 'how're you doing?', playing games. And the students are in that advisory group for the whole year. So it really does build a community and a family. If someone's not there or attendance is an issue, the students know that 'it's just us', you know, 'we really missed you yesterday, why were you away?'".

While all three guidance counselors said they were pleased with how the advisory system had helped to build school communities, the advisory system is full of inconsistencies. The role of advisors varies by advisory. All advisories meet in the mornings, but some have a structured daily meeting while others are allowed to do work. Some students use their advisors as a personal and academic resource, while others only interact with their advisors during advisory. Advisor quality also varies, which poses an obstacle with student/advisor matching.

At their best, advisory groups become a source of community at school, encouraging students to come to school every day. However, for students who do not connect with their advisors or advisory groups, advisory can be a source of additional source of alienation and discomfort at school. Because advisory is largely an unstructured time, personal differences between students and advisors have a more negative impact than differences with typical teachers. "We try to really be thoughtful about where students are placed and they're starting their day in a warm welcoming situation, and somebody's gonna really notice if the student's absent and ask them why they weren't here at school" explains Brenda.

A high quality match between student and advisor can transform the student's experience at school, so students are carefully matched with advisors for the coming school year. In the matching process, a student's current advisor makes recommendations for his or her future advisor.

The differences in advisor quality, however, pose a challenge for matching. "It's hard, though, when there are a few rock star advisors. How do we best distribute those?" asks Barbara Mason.

Although imperfect, the advisory groups can serve as an educational and emotional resource for who struggle to stay active and excel in school. The schools have not collected data on the effectiveness of the advisory group over the years. All of the counselors we interviewed, however, found advisory groups to be very successful in building community.

Personalized Curricula

Both the middle and high schools currently make use of personal learning plans. Every year, each student puts together a presentation about their academic strengths, interests, and goals and how the school can best support them. At the middle school, Brenda explains "Students really see that they can pick some of the topics they wanna study, and if they have more control over their learning, they're gonna be more engaged". Over at the high school, the EYE program gives students the freedom to create their own class. Student-designed classes offer students a sense of agency over their education. So far, the EYE program has been a tremendous success. Barbara notes one example: a previously struggling student who admitted an interest in psychology. After the student created a psychology class of her own, Barbara described a near-miraculous transformation. The student began consistently attending class, her grades rose from nearly failing to all As, and the student expressed a newfound commitment to academics, even planning to apply for college. The literature supports the EYE program, as Ovnick (2010) finds that students whose academic classes directly relate to their interests and goals report higher school attachment and higher academic achievement

Another way that students shape school to meet their personal interests and goals is through extracurricular activities. Brenda explains that after school clubs and activities are crucial for

building school engagement and reducing truancy. In fact, Brenda explains, for some students, after school activities are the only reason they decide to come to school at all. Brenda noted that some students come to school everyday during basketball season, because attendance is required to participate in clubs and school teams. Engagement in these activities motivates children to participate in school, reducing the risk of truancy. While the extracurricular programs are strong, Brenda notes that for the students at the highest risk for truancy, the programs are not accessible. Because the students most vulnerable to truancy are those of a lower socioeconomic status, their parents are at work when extracurriculars release. Working parents cannot come retrieve their children from school in the afternoon, and the busses only drive students immediately after the end of classes.

Barriers to Returning to School

The priority for the guidance offices is not punishing students for skipping school, it is bringing students back. Richard explains that in especially severe cases of truancy, he has visited the student's home with the police and pleaded with the student to return to school. When returning to school, the students do not face punishment. "We really want students to know that we're here to help them, not to punish them" Barbara explains.

While fear of punishment is not a barrier for students' return to school, the pressure associated with making up work can make the return to school more difficult. Hartford High School currently uses the block scheduling system, with longer than traditional class periods and fewer classes each day. The block schedule makes attendance especially important, as missing even one day of school can put a student far behind in the class. Students can have a very hard time making up the days missed, and often feel alienated or embarrassed by being behind upon their return to school.

The Gender imbalance

The statistics from the previous Dartmouth Class showed female students as exhibiting higher rates of truancy than male students. However, when we discussed the gender imbalance in truancy during our interview at Hartford High School, the guidance counselors were surprised about the previous class's finding that female students were more often truant. Reviewing the numbers, we found a flaw in the prior class's research. The prior class operationalized truancy in missed classes, rather than in missed days. When measured in missed classes, truancy appears to be more common for female than male students. However, when measured in missed full days, the chronically truant students are overwhelmingly male. Richard explains that girls come more often to school, but skip classes to deal with "drama". Boys, he explains, are more likely to skip entire days of school. "The boys are more obstinate," he says, "they are the ones who will look you in the face and say 'no, you cannot make me come to school'".

The research shows that students with more social ties at school are less likely to be truant (Lee and Bowen 2006)**.** The gender imbalance at Hartford suggests that girls' social ties draw female students to attend school, but not necessarily to attend class. On the other hand, the students who have the least social ties at school are typically male, which explains why boys more often skip school entirely. This insight suggests that while social connections with peers are important to predicting school attendance, social connections with teachers are important to predicting class attendance.

Partnership with Hartford Police Force

Both guidance departments explain that they use the police force to do wellbeing checks on students who are absent without explanation. The existing partnership between the Police Force

and the schools has been a useful tool for making sure that students are safe even if they are not in school. Because the partnership has proved so valuable, the guidance counselors at both the middle school and the high school say the most helpful thing to them in reducing truancy would be more proactive police involvement. Barbara and Richard explain that in an ideal world they would be able to schedule a wellbeing check for every unexcused absence. Due to the constraints of the police force, guidance counselors currently request significantly fewer wellbeing checks than they would like. Because guidance counselors have to limit how many visits they can request, the students who do benefit from wellbeing visits are typically those who are already chronically truant. For these students, the visits are often too late, so they have a lower chance of drawing the students back to school.

Truancy Intervention Protocols

Windsor County follows a common protocol for managing truant students. Brenda, Barbara, and Richard share very little faith in the official intervention protocols. Brenda expressed her concern with the current protocol by stating, "I would love to see DCF and states attorney to get involved sooner. Right now, we honestly do not have a plan once we get to twenty days". Because the official protocols are so weak, guidance counselors consistently have to go above and beyond the protocol. In severe instances, Richard explains, he has even gone to students' homes himself with a police officer and pleaded with the students and families to return to school.

Because the schools have so little guidance from the existing protocols, when the schools make progress in preventing truancy, the progress is dependent on the individuals who work at the school. "Sometimes I worry that it is the person, not the program, that works. That puts us in a tough spot when the person leaves." Barbara explains. For example, Barbara notes that the BARGE program, which had been developing in partnership with the Department for Children and

Families, was stopped in its tracks when the contact in DCF went on maternity leave. Since the maternity leave started, DCF has made no contact with Hartford High School on the status of the program, nor any update on when or if they could expect any progress. Developing a strong protocol for truancy in connection with teachers and guidance counselors is crucial for maintaining the gains that individual counselors and teachers make in encouraging attendance.

SOLUTIONS

While the intervention program we have designed, including instituting a modified behavioral support and intervention model, may seem to be a massive overhaul, our field research shows that Hartford already has a lot of the tools that we have identified as crucial for truancy prevention. We have identified a number of small changes to the existing systems that will maximize their effectiveness.

Background

The Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) model exists officially at elementary schools that feed into Hartford Middle School, but the middle and high schools do not use the model. However, our field research showed that many elements of PBIS already exist unofficially at the middle and high school levels. For example, the high school exhibits elements of the primary level, which includes introducing behavioral expectations into the rhetoric of the school, with their signage about acceptable use of technology. We recommend introducing attendance expectations into the school's rhetoric in similar ways, including via signage and by addressing truancy specifically in Friday school-wide assembly.

Advisory

Hartford Middle and High Schools both currently benefit from advisory programs. PBIS emphasizes building strong student-teacher relationships and allowing students more agency in the school environment. The existing advisory program is a powerful tool for building a special relationship between each student and his or her advisor. We recommend allowing students to have input in the process of matching with a future advisor. Allowing students to give input on teachers they feel especially close to or teachers they would prefer not to work as closely with, makes stronger matches between students and advisors. As students feel they have some agency over matching with an advisor, they are more likely to view the advisor as a tool for and partner in their success.

Additionally, we recommend that advisors consistently become the point person for all school-related matters affecting their advisees. By making the advisor the person with the clearest view of the student's life in school, the student has a clear contact person for each of his or her classes. For truant students, the advisor would become the person who knows what assignments the student has missed for each class. Upon returning to school, the student would not face awkward and embarrassing conversations with all of his or her teachers, but instead one conversation with his or her trusted advisor to strategize how to make up work. Students would still meet with individual subject teachers for further questions about missed course content or assignment instructions.

We recommend that the annual learning check-ins occur between students and their advisors, rather than between students and administrators. We also recommend reframing the presentations as conversations, so that students and advisors can be in strong dialogue about how school can best help them to reach their goals.

Advisors would also become the point person for contact with the student's families, so that parents connect with a friendly face at the school rather than a school administrator who they do not know. Because advisors would be responsible for a small group of students, advisors would become a feasible option for consistent communication with the parents. By opening year long conversation between parents and the school, parents would receive positive feedback from advisors, rather than being contacted only when there were concerns about their children.

Finally, the middle and high school advisory systems have built close knit groups of students. As advisors become more involved in their advisees, we also hope to see them prioritize building relationships between their advisees. These relationships could become strong social ties at school, which the research shows encourage school attendance (Lee and Bowen 2006; Entwisle et al. 2005)**.** For truant students, fellow advisees become a community that might help send home assignments, become a study buddy, or just act as a support. One small way advisees could help encourage students to return to school is just sending a quick text to a peer checking in and letting them know their fellow advisees notice they aren't here, care, and hope to see them return soon.

Personalized Curricula

We recommend expanding the high school EYE program, allowing more students to create their own classes. We understand that supporting a student through an independent study is labor intensive, and teachers may wish to prioritize higher achieving students in considering potential EYE classes. However, personalized classes are particularly important to students who do not feel confident or engaged in the classroom, to give them a chance to be successful in a class they feel excited and passionate about. This opportunity would be especially impactful for students at the highest risk for truancy, as it allows students to clearly connect their interests and goals to their academic work. As Barbara explained, the EYE program can be absolutely transformational. We

expect that expanding the EYE program and making it accessible to lower-achieving students will increase student engagement and attendance.

In addition to personalization of regular classes, being able to personalize one's after school extracurriculars is essential to maintaining engagement in school and reducing truancy. Since after school activities were so important to bringing students to school, we recommend increasing the amount of later after school buses so that students are able to attend their extracurriculars and get back home safely afterwards. This is because there is currently a lack of after school buses and some students have no way of getting home after the first wave of school buses leave at the end of school. We understand that cost may be a concern, so a potential alternative could be student carpooling with parents that are already involved with the community. This not only serves as a way for students to get home in a more convenient manner, but also allows bolstering connections to the community and intertwining parent involvement with student engagement. The carpooling parent would also be another role model that could act as a socializing agent that imparts positive cultural values to help students better navigate educational institutions.

Hartford Police

For both the middle and high schools, the police are a strong tool for truancy prevention. The existing police partnership is especially strong at the High School, where the police officer is a strong match with the school. We recommend that the police continue to prioritize finding a strong match for the middle school.

For the police partnership to be as strong as possible, officers have to prioritize building relationships with students. The police have to consciously include themselves in the adults with whom it is important for students to build strong relationships based on trust. Both the middle and

high schools have requested more police to check in on truant students. We recommend as many wellbeing checks for absent students as possible.

It is clear that the schools do not want to punish students for truancy, which encourages students to return to school. While the school and the police do not mean to punish truant students, they must be cognizant of the fact that students will feel that they are in trouble when the police arrive at their door. To minimize this effect, the police have to reframe themselves as friends and resources to the students. The tone of conversation between students and police must develop such that students can view the police as adults who worry and care about the students. Additionally, as the research shows, behavioral modification, in this case, returning to school, is more likely when the student has a relationship with the adult (Lee and Bowen 2006). To maximize the effectiveness of police wellbeing checks, the police who arrive at the door should, whenever possible, be officers who have a relationship with the students.

Future Steps

We recommend that Hartford School district continues to monitor truancy going forward. We recommend that the district operationalizes truancy as unexcused full day absences, rather than missed classes. Monitoring missed classes is also important to improving class attendance, but interventions for increasing class attendance should be seen as separate from truancy interventions.

We also would recommend regularly scheduled check ins with guidance counselors about truancy. Regular meetings with counselors about truancy should aim to create guidelines for truancy policy that are grounded in tools that counselors have had success with. The current truancy protocol should be updated to bridge the gap between truancy intervention protocol and practice in the schools.

CONCLUSION

Through research on existing sociological literature and field work in Hartford Memorial Middle School and Hartford High School, we have provided insights and interventions that couple the Hartford School District's existing structures and interventions with the modified positive behavioral support model. We attempt to maximize parent, student and teacher engagement by focusing on improving advisory groups, personalized curricula and partnership with the Hartford Police Force. These solutions are targeted towards increasing student engagement and reducing truancy. Although these interventions will take time to make significant changes, we hope these recommendations will ultimately help reduce truancy in Hartford.

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