

# TRUANCY PREVENTION PROGRAMS

**AGENCY:** Public Education Department

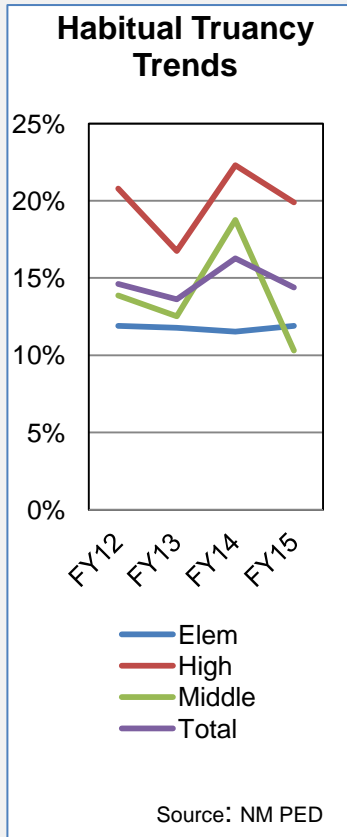
**DATE:** August 17, 2016

**PURPOSE OF HEARING:**  
Learn of truancy and dropout prevention efforts by PED and school districts.

**WITNESS:** Grace Spulak, Director, FosterEd New Mexico; Gary Perkowski, Superintendent, Carlsbad Municipal Schools (CMS); Kelli Barta, Assistant Superintendent, CMS; Angie K. Schneider, District Court Judge, 12<sup>th</sup> Judicial District

**PREPARED BY:** Kevin Force

**EXPECTED OUTCOME:**  
Better understanding of efforts in New Mexico to combat truancy and dropping out, for possible expansion of successful programs.



New Mexico is frequently ranked as one of the most impoverished states in the country; in fact, a recent study by New Mexico Voices for Children has placed the state last for child poverty. The issue of truancy, which is consistently shown to affect students from at-risk populations more than others, is one that the state must continue to work to ameliorate. According to FamilyFacts.org, habitual truants also often come from families experiencing separation or divorce. Studies indicate that students from state foster systems also display higher rates of habitual truancy; these students have higher rates of mental and physical health problems, substance abuse issues, and are more likely to be abused, or become involved with the criminal justice system. (See, e.g., *Truancy Reduction: Research, Policy and Practice*, Cumbo, Burden and Burke, The Center for Children and Youth Justice, Spring 2012.)

The Public Education Department (PED) fact sheet on truancy for the 2014-2015 school year, indicates habitual truancy rates were:

- 11.9 percent in elementary schools;
- 10.3 percent in middle schools;
- 19.9 percent in high schools; and
- 14.3 percent of the total student body.

As Cumbo, et al note, research consistently links habitual truancy to the risk of permanently dropping out of school, potentially resulting in a wide range of problems that affects students long after they have dropped out. As with truancy, students from at-risk populations are more likely to eventually drop out than their peers.

Cumbo’s research also indicates low graduation rates affect not only students who fail to graduate, but also their communities and society as a whole. Students who do not graduate have higher death rates, worse mental health, increased likelihood of teen pregnancy and parenting, and increased risk of personal injury. Over the course of their lifetime, high school dropouts earn, on average, approximately \$250 thousand less than high school graduates and \$1 million less than college graduates, and are more likely to require some form of public assistance. Consequently, higher graduation rates may save billions of dollars annually in Medicaid and TANF costs, more than \$350 million per year in food stamps, and up to \$18 million in housing assistance; a 5 percent increase in boys’ graduation rates alone could save nearly \$5 billion per year in crime related costs. Although, according to the Everyone Graduates Center (EGC), a Johns Hopkins University research project, the graduation rate in New Mexico grew from 63 percent in FY11 to 68.6 percent in FY15, it remains one of the lowest in the country.

To curtail truancy and prevent dropping out, EGC recommends efforts be focused on identifying warning signs and preventing truancy as early in a student’s primary and secondary education career as

Cumbo, et al note that effective dropout prevention programs, feature six main components:

- “community collaboration,” which encourages greater community involvement and allows programs to draw on diverse viewpoints and to maximize the different strengths of program partners;
- “family involvement,” which may help to address underlying family-based barriers to attendance and graduation, in turn helping students to remain engaged with school and improve academic performance;
- “comprehensive approach to prevention, intervention and retrieval,” which holistically addresses the problem at all three levels, increasing student and family engagement, addressing root causes of truancy, and retrieving youth who have already dropped out;
- “incentives and sanctions,” both tailored to students’ individual circumstances, with positive incentives serving as motivation to stay in school, and graduated sanctions directly related to truants’ behavior that avoids out-of-school penalties such as suspension;
- “supportive context” among school, family, and community partners, all invested in keeping students in school and on track to graduate; and
- “program evaluation,” via data collection, monitoring, and analysis to make schools’ prevention programs more effective over time.

possible. Early warning systems (EWS) can help to prevent dropping out by using routinely available data to identify students who exhibit these early warning signs. Once identified, students at risk of habitual truancy and dropping out can be served with a spectrum of interventions to get them back on track to graduation.

This brief will review best practices for the implementation of truancy and dropout early warning systems and interventions, and efforts in New Mexico to prevent truancy and dropping out, including the state’s own early warning system, PED’s truancy and dropout prevention coaches, FosterEd’s demonstration site in Lea County, and Carlsbad Municipal Schools’ (CMS) community outreach and truancy prevention partnerships.

**Best Practices of Truancy and Dropout Prevention.** There is a variety of truancy prevention best practices available to educators; for instance, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) “What Works Clearinghouse” contains many recommended practices to increase attendance and graduation, including the use of data-driven early warning systems to identify potential dropouts. USDE also suggests assigning adult advocates to at-risk students, implementing programs to improve students’ social skills and behavior, and the personalizing the learning process. Further, the National Center for School Engagement has identified three factors related to school engagement, which when properly addressed may increase students’ interest in school: the promotion of attendance by increasing students’ emotional involvement in school; the enhancement of attachment to school by establishing meaningful connections among peers and with their schools through supportive, well-defined expectations; and fostering greater student achievement by ensuring all students have the necessary resources to graduate.

***Truancy and Dropout Early Warning Systems and Interventions.*** As noted by EGC, most students who eventually drop out send distress signals early in their school careers. These warning signs typically fall within three categories: poor attendance, poor grades in math or English, or bad behavior in school. In a Philadelphia-based study, EGC found that sixth grade students with even one of three early warning signs (final grades of ‘F’ in either English or math, attendance below 80 percent, or a final “unsatisfactory behavior” rating in even one class) had a 75 percent chance of dropping out; unsurprisingly, the more flags raised by a particular student, the more likely that student is to drop out. Although similar results were found for eighth grade students, EGC suggests greater attention be paid to earlier warning signs, as the younger that students begin to indicate they are struggling with school attendance, the more likely they are to eventually drop out.

In addition to focused attention on early truancy and dropout prevention policies, schools should also examine their general administrative policies to identify and eliminate practices that unintentionally encourage truancy, while fostering those policies and practices that encourage school engagement. For example, suspension and expulsion would be contraindicated as interventions for students

According to PED staff, while the NM EWS was in development, it became apparent that an accurate indicator of whether a New Mexico student would eventually dropout was successful outcomes in sixth grade math. While the system is set up to flag 'Ds' and 'Fs' in that course, it is unclear if any schools in New Mexico are using sixth grade math as a determining indicator in their EWS.

According to America's Promise Alliance, the top 10 reasons students say they drop out are:

1. Student was already failing too many classes.
2. Student was bored.
3. The student became a caregiver.
4. School lacked relevance to the student's life.
5. Family needed additional support.
6. No one cared if the student attended.
7. Student was held back.
8. Drugs.
9. Pregnancy or parenthood.
10. Gang-related activity.

Coping and Support Training (CAST) is a school-based prevention program that targets young people in either middle school or high school that has shown great success in Washington. CAST is a 12-session, skills training intervention designed to enhance personal competencies and social support resources, ideal for small-group intervention to be implemented as a targeted prevention program.

struggling with truancy, as these practices actively disengage students from school, exactly what these programs should help prevent. Students suspended or expelled in middle or high school are actually more likely to drop out, and schools with higher suspension rates tend to exhibit lower academic achievement and standardized test scores. Other school policies that similarly encourage disengagement include automatic withdrawal or grade reduction after nonattendance, zero tolerance policies, and disproportionate emphasis on standardized test scores.

On the other hand, school policies that encourage students' engagement with school and their communities should be emphasized. Rather than penalize poor attendance through grade reduction, for example, offering partial credit for course work that has been completed may encourage eventual course-completion, whereas failing a student based on attendance will only reinforce the student's negative associations with school, making it less likely, rather than more, that they will return to school and graduate.

For targeted interventions, Johns Hopkins and EGC recommend a tiered system to address truancy and keep students on track to graduate. The first tier, which should address 70 percent to 80 percent of truancy instances, should consist of school-wide preventative practices aimed at discouraging the overall incidence of truancy. Typically, these interventions closely relate to warning systems, monitoring the daily attendance patterns of the student body and providing information before students become truant. School-wide prevention efforts should be directed at educating students, parents, and the community about the consequences of uncurbed truancy and eventual dropping out while also incentivizing good attendance. Generally, at this level, even small adjustments to school culture, aimed at improving student relations teachers and their peers, can encourage regular attendance by increasing student engagement with school. For example, school-wide incentive programs might include periodic awards for good attendance.

Second-tier interventions, which should be targeted at those 10 percent to 20 percent of students who need additional assistance, might include small group training sessions to help students struggling with social and academic skills. Schools might also offer parent-training on how best to implement appropriate home-based consequences, addressing the problem both in students' school and private lives.

Third-tier intensive interventions should be reserved for those 5 percent to 10 percent of students with the most severe truancy problems, who are also most likely to permanently leave school. These students are best served by small-group and individual support. Targeted academic tutoring, modified class schedules, evaluation for special education services, and home visits are all examples of interventions that might be utilized for students most in need.

One-on-one mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, or the individual attention of a school-appointed truancy and dropout prevention coaches exemplify the final tier of targeted truancy intervention.

It should be noted that the NM EWS does not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences; both are flagged by the system.

While none have yet applied for funding under PED's truancy coach program, Regional Educational Cooperatives are also eligible. PED contemplates a situation where districts within an REC would share a coach. Under such circumstances, not only would the REC be the lead applicant, according to PED staff, it would need to describe its plan to allocate the coach's time among participating districts or schools.

**Truancy and Dropout Prevention Programs in New Mexico.**

Currently, PED administrates New Mexico's EWS, which districts utilize at their own discretion. PED has also begun to offer funding for the support of truancy and dropout prevention coaches in eligible school districts and charter schools that successfully apply. Districts and charter schools may still institute their own programs, as Carlsbad Municipal Schools has done in partnership with community stakeholders, and as Lea County is doing with FosterEd's new demonstration site there.

***New Mexico Early Warning System.*** According to PED staff, New Mexico's EWS was established in partnership with Johns Hopkins, which adjusted the system's identifying algorithms to match the unique needs of New Mexico's schools. The state administers the warning system and provides training, but EWS is used at the discretion of schools, operating as an input/output system linked to STARS, to reflect the warning signals emphasized by each individual school. Currently, EWS provides results connected to the 40<sup>th</sup>, 80<sup>th</sup>, and 120<sup>th</sup> day student counts, but PED is working on enhancements that would make it closer to a real-time feedback system, perhaps linked to the PowerSchool system, to allow for more frequent review of student information.

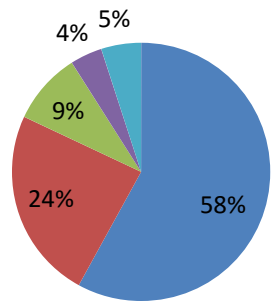
The system flags the data points most indicative of habitual truancy and dropping out, related to attendance, academic achievement, and behavior (poor final grades in English or math, attendance below 80 percent, or final "unsatisfactory behavior" ratings). New Mexico's system, tooled to the state's particular needs, flags 'Ds' and 'Fs', as well as the New Mexico Standards-Based Assessment and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career scores, which are used in conjunction with course-grades to help ensure that students with less readily apparent academic problems do not slip through any cracks in the system. Once truant students are flagged, interventions are left up to the individual school, to be tailored to the needs of their students, schools, and communities. PED will offer a training session on the Early Warning System in September 2016.

***PED Truancy and Dropout Prevention Coaches.*** On March 14, 2016, PED released a request for applications (RFA) for funding to support truancy and dropout prevention coaches in schools. The department seeks to establish a cohort of coaches to be placed in elementary, middle, and high schools to work with students, families, schools, and school districts to reduce the incidence of habitual truancy and to decrease the dropout rate. The RFA notes that last year's middle school social worker's program was rolled into this dropout prevention program, as the overarching goals of the two programs were closely aligned and PED saw no distinction in results between coaches and social workers, despite differing credentials and experience; PED staff noted a connection with the school and students is more indicative of success than a coach's credentials. Thus, for FY17, PED allocated \$3.8 million dollars to the program, now in its second year, for salary and support of coaches, with each position being afforded an average salary of approximately \$60 thousand. (The total FY17 allocation is

Schools applying to PED for funding for truancy prevention coaches are to exemplify the best practices noted by Cumbo, et al: utilizing EWS to identify students in danger of dropping out; applying a three-tiered system of interventions; and implementing the six components of effective dropout prevention programs, noted above (community collaboration, family involvement, a comprehensive approach to prevention, intervention and retrieval, incentives and sanctions, a supportive context, and program evaluation).

According to the Children, Youth and Families Department, as of August 1, 2016, there were 2,567 children in foster care in New Mexico.

**New Mexico Foster Children by Ethnicity**



- Hispanic or Latino
- Non-Hispanic White
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- African-American
- Mixed Race

Source: NM CYFD

the same as FY16 allocations for truancy coaches and middle school social workers.)

School districts and charter schools applied for funds to place coaches in schools with the most need. Applications were accepted from March 14 to April 8, 2016, with 34 local school districts and charter schools applying for funding for a total of 104 coaches. PED awarded 59 coaches to 31 school districts and charter schools. For the prior school year, PED received 30 applications for 67 coaches, and awarded 40 of them (see Attachment).

To be eligible, applicants must have either a district-level habitual truancy rate of 15 percent or higher, an elementary, middle, or high school truancy percentage of 15 percent or more, or a district-level dropout rate of 4 percent or greater. Applications were to include an explanation of which schools will receive coaches and why, a description of each schools' plans for implementing best practices, and a description of coaches' duties and how schools intend to implement tiered strategies to improve attendance. Finally, applicants were required to include both their plans to have positions for coaches filled by the end of August, and self-identified performance benchmarks for their selected schools.

**FosterEd Demonstration Site in Lea County.** Among at-risk children, those in foster care are often the most vulnerable to habitual truancy and dropping out. According to the Center for American Progress, for example, in 2012, there were approximately 400,000 American children in foster care, of which more than two thirds were school age. Foster children are at least twice as likely to miss school, and have a higher degree of school mobility than even their non-fostered counterparts also from low-income families: Only 68 percent of these students maintained their education at the same school for one entire academic year, compared with 90 percent of low-income students overall. In fact, close to 10 percent of students in foster care attended three or more schools during a single year; this high rate of school mobility is closely associated with negative effects on school completion. According to *Fostering Success in Education*, only 50 percent of foster children complete high school by age 18, only 20 percent attend college, and the percentage of those who complete a bachelor's degree is only between 2 percent and 9 percent. Further, without educational success, foster children are poorly prepared for the responsibilities and challenges of adult life; they "age out" of the system and more than 22 percent become homeless, while nearly 25 percent will be incarcerated within two years of leaving the system.

Mindful of these troubling facts, in 2012, the New Mexico Supreme Court created a Joint Education Task Force, charged with providing the Court with advice, recommendations and proposals to address the educational needs of high-risk children in the state, particularly those in the state's legal custody. One of the primary projects launched by the task force was to work with the National Center for Youth Law's FosterEd initiative to improve educational access and outcomes for foster youth.

On June 23, 2016, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and the Health and Human Services Department (HSD) released guidance to states, school districts, and child welfare agencies on new provisions in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for supporting children living in foster care. This nonbinding guidance addresses many frequently asked questions on the issue of foster children in the public schools, aiming to help state and local education partners in the implementation of the new ESSA requirements, and inform collaboration between education and child welfare agencies for the well-being of foster children.

New Mexico, after Arizona, California, and Indiana, is the fourth state to work with FosterEd:

- In Arizona, FosterEd worked with 187 foster children in Pima County, establishing nearly 700 educational goals in the intervention programs for the children in the program.
- In California, FosterEd worked with 30 foster children in Santa Cruz, ensuring that each had at least one educational champion, assessing the strengths and needs of each child and their champion, and developing and overseeing educational intervention plans.
- In Indiana, FosterEd dealt directly with more than 700 foster children identified as having the most acute educational needs. FosterEd resolved 89 percent of the educational issues facing these children, and 80 percent of them had all their educational needs met.

The FosterEd model aims to improve educational outcomes for young people in foster care and on probation by creating and maintaining better relationships between state and local education, welfare, and judicial agencies to implement a range of data-driven interventions. Noting that students with active “educational champions” consistently perform better in school, FosterEd partners with these local agencies to identify such champions and pair them with an educational coach to support fostered students’ success (biological parents are designated as champions whenever possible). Educational liaisons then develop and monitor educational teams for each foster child, which should include educational champions, social workers, school staff, court appointed advocates, and any other community member able to help the student succeed. These educational teams, in turn, help to create individualized educational plans based on each student’s strengths and needs, to help them successfully navigate and graduate school.

Ultimately, the work is designed to increase state and local capacity to the extent that FosterEd’s continued presence in the state is no longer required, and the functions initiated by it are undertaken by state and local agencies. FosterED helps to secure private and public funding to support two years of pilot program implementation, which is embedded within existing agencies and systems supporting foster youth. In order to help sustain the program after their departure, FosterEd helps to identify federal and state funding streams that can support a continuing program, and provides technical assistance on an ongoing basis when the program becomes independent.

In 2015, FosterEd launched a demonstration site in Lea County after reviewing several potential pilot locations in the state. Lea County was recommended because it reflects the composition of the state, both in terms of student populations and demographics, and population centers and school districts. Lea County was also found to have a strong history of interagency cooperation, and effective probation, welfare, education, and judicial leadership. As of June 1, 2016, there were 37 school-age children in foster care and 32 on probation in Lea County.

The demonstration project, currently serving 42 students, began referring and managing cases in March of 2016, and will last for two years, during which time FosterEd anticipates serving approximately 150 foster youth and 150 youth on probation. In partnership with state and local agencies such as the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD), the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), PED, the New Mexico Supreme Court, and both Hobbs and Lovington school districts, the program offers assistance with issues often associated with fostered youth, such as transportation for students to school, elimination of enrollment delays, and the timely transfer of student records.

**Carlsbad Municipal Schools.** While CMS did not apply to PED for funding for a truancy coach, the district is proceeding with a truancy and dropout prevention program funded by private grants from United Way. According to staff, the current Carlsbad program is actually a

During the 2016 legislative session, HB 240, *School Attendance Law Early Warning System*, was passed by the House but did not leave the Senate Education Committee. The bill directed all public schools with a truancy rate of greater than 15 percent to hire a truancy prevention coach. The bill included progressive measures to address truancy when a student accumulates three, five, and 10 unexcused absences. It also established procedures for the revocation or withholding of a student's driver's license when one accumulates 10 or more unexcused absences. HB 240 contained no appropriation. CMS staff indicated that they were involved with the development of this bill as part of an advisory board assembled in Carlsbad to examine loopholes in current law.

Interventions in CMS also include direct incentives, such as the granting of awards to students who are successfully working toward better attendance and school engagement. In some cases, for example, students might "earn back" an unexcused absence, changing it to "excused."

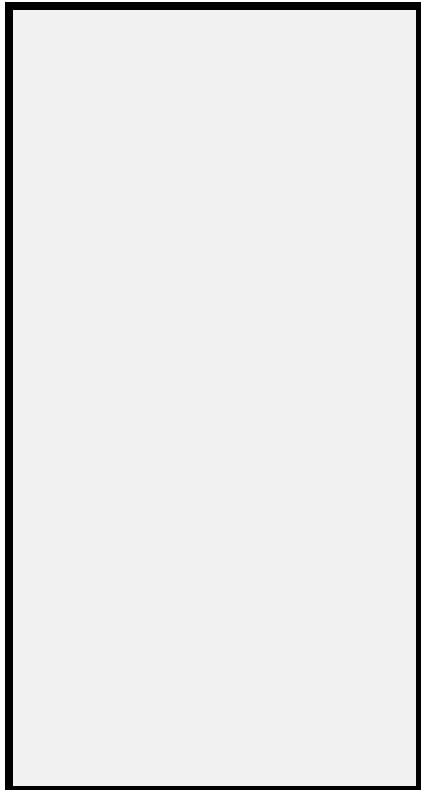
second iteration of a very successful effort from several years ago that already exemplified many of the best practices recommended by recent studies. Carlsbad staff have indicated dropouts increased during the oil boom, as well-paying jobs were readily available even for high school dropouts; in response, the district crafted their dropout prevention program.

The CMS program called for students to attend a "truancy intervention court," presided over by a judge, upon their fifth unexcused absence. According to CMS staff, however, the AOC notified the participating judge that it was concerned with the potential for conflicts of interest and the appearance of impropriety arising from the judges' participation in the truancy "court." As a result, the program ended despite its success. Since that time, CMS staff report that their incidence of truancy increased by 25 percent, leading to the return of the previous program, although with retired judges or other interested personnel presiding over truancy courts, rather than active sitting judges.

Carlsbad's Community Truancy Action Committee (CTAC), composed of volunteer organizations such as CYFD, the Juvenile Probation and Parole Office, local police, anti-drug and alcohol groups, United Way, and local charities, engages in a tiered series of responses to student truancy that attempt to address the underlying causes of students' disengagement. A student's third unexcused absence results in a meeting between a social worker and the student and their guardian to discuss consequences, and to sign an attendance "contract." Any identified underlying circumstances causing the student's truancy can be identified, here. A fifth absence requires the student to attend truancy intervention court. Response in court is a community wraparound affair, where partners from the community, other state and local agencies, mental health providers, juvenile probation officers, local homeless shelters, and the United Way work in concert to help both students and their families stay on track to graduate. The CMS program attempts to combat truancy with buy-in from the entire community, painting these efforts as investment in bettering the community, both now and in the long-term.

Often, CMS staff found that family issues, including language barriers, and lack of resources or access to support systems, were at the root of many students' truancy issues. To combat this, community partners were engaged to connect families in need with appropriate assistance; by addressing issues at home that cause or exacerbate truancy, CMS has had success in keeping students in school. Students whose parents are barred from driving because of DWI judgments, for example, could have someone come to their home to transport them to school. Community investment might also mean clothes, groceries, or shoes are made available to families in need, and personnel are on hand during to assist connecting families with services such as Medicaid or food stamps.

Another potential intervention explored by CMS is Saturday school as a sanction, which would include participation by parents to receive



community support. After arrival at school, parents and students are separated, with students attending academic tutoring and other assistance, while parents are assisted with applying for and receiving access to various community support structures. Together, parents and children learn about attendance law, community services, academic support, and important life skills, such as nutritious meal preparation.

**Conclusion.** The far-reaching and potentially devastating consequences of truancy and dropping out that affect not only students, but also families and communities, more than justify the time and resources dedicated to keeping them in school until graduation, when they can enter society as productive, healthy adults. Early identification of struggling students, with interventions targeted to address both the immediate effects and root causes of truancy, is vital to supporting youth as they complete their primary and secondary education. Wide agreement among studies, as well as practical evidence of program results, all indicate that the earlier that potential truants are identified for appropriately targeted interventions, the more likely they are to return to school. New Mexico's status as a high-poverty state means truancy is an issue that the state must continue to focus on ensure student success and enhance the state's communities and financial well-being.