

PROJECT THRIVE
(TRUANCY HABITS REDUCED, INTERVENTIONS VIA EDUCATION)

MID-YEAR EVALUATION REPORT



SCHOOL YEAR 2003-2004

Prepared by
RaJade M. Berry, Ph.D., Evaluator
The University of Akron

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project THRIVE is a comprehensive truancy and substance abuse prevention program designed to provide school districts with sound strategies for preventing chronic and habitual truancy among at-risk youth in Summit County. THRIVE's program modalities include truancy awareness, early intervention, intervention, treatment, intervention and prevention, and mediation services for students identified as at-risk youth. The goals and objectives of Project THRIVE include the following:

1. *Prevent substance abuse among "at-risk" students by decreasing the number of absences among the "at-risk" population, increasing understanding of substance abuse and increasing participation in extra-curricula activities.*
2. *Prevent substance abuse by increasing family awareness of the correlation between truancy and substance abuse and reducing the number of families found in violation of SB 181.*
3. *Reduce substance abuse by decreasing school suspension of drug-related offenses.*
4. *Reduce substance abuse by reducing substance-related criminal activity of program participants by 40%.*
5. *Reduce truancy by adhering to State mandate of 93% school attendance by increasing attendance rates of youth in selected schools to meet 93% attendance rate and decreasing recidivism juvenile complaints to both youth and families by 50%.*

The mid-year evaluation of Project THRIVE reveals that the program has achieved all of its stated goals and objectives and has made a significant impact in preventing truancy among at-risk youth. During the 2003-2004 school year, Project THRIVE served four school districts in Summit County (i.e., Akron, Barberton, Cuyahoga Falls, and Woodridge) and offered numerous intervention and prevention activities at ten schools (i.e., McEbright Elementary, Rankin Elementary, Schumacher Academy, Oakdale Elementary, DeWitt Elementary, Price Elementary, Sill Middle, Woodridge Primary, Woodridge Intermediate, and Woodridge Middle). Project THRIVE continues to provide significant prevention and intervention activities proven to eradicate truancy and substance abuse among youth. The results of the mid-year evaluation show that program accomplishments to date are impressive. School administrators referred 191 students to Project THRIVE. Of the 191 students referred to the program, 107 were "at-risk" for truancy during SY 2004. Of the 115 mediations scheduled, 63% of the families completed their mediation sessions and signed an agreement to improve student attendance for the balance of the school year. Currently, there are 67 students on active caseload with Project THRIVE. Drug, tobacco, and alcohol use among program participants continued to remain significantly low. Family awareness of the link between truancy and academic success increased among parents and children. Additionally, slightly more than half of the parents surveyed were aware of the positive correlation between truant behavior and substance abuse.

EVALUATION OF PROJECT THRIVE
School Year 2003-2004
Mid-Year Report

RaJade M. Berry, Ph.D. at the University of Akron conducted the external evaluation of Project THRIVE, Truancy Habits Reduced, Interventions Via Education. During this grant cycle, the evaluator attended monthly meetings of the Summit County Juvenile Truancy Task Force, met with Project THRIVE staff and assisted in the management of the data collected. This evaluation report assesses the stated goals and objectives of the program and identifies program accomplishments at mid-year of the funding cycle (between July 2003 and December 2003).

Truancy Laws. Ohio Senate Bill 181 mandates that children attend school as per the minimum standards set by the State Board of Education. Under this law, school systems may identify habitually truant children as those who are absent more than 5 consecutive unexcused school days, or absent 7 days in a month or 12 days in a school year and chronically truant children as those who are absent from school 7 or more consecutive unexcused days, or absent 10 days in a month or 15 days in a year. In families where children are identified as habitual or chronic truants, both the parent and the child face serious penalties for the delinquent behavior. These penalties may include mandatory mediation and/or parenting classes, community service as well as court fines and/or jail.

Description of Project THRIVE. Project THRIVE is described as a comprehensive truancy and substance abuse program designed to provide school districts with sound strategies to address truancy among students identified as “at-risk” for truancy in Summit County. THRIVE is a central program designed to prevent chronic and habitual truancy and substance abuse in students identified as “at-risk.” THRIVE’s program modalities include truancy awareness, early intervention, intervention, treatment, intervention and prevention, and mediation services for students identified as at-risk youth.

Project THRIVE continues to collaborate with community partners to prevent truancy and substance abuse among at-risk youth in Summit County. Under the leadership of the Summit County court staff, the Summit County Juvenile Court and Truancy Task Force continues to meet with parents, religious organizations, members of the business community, youth treatment providers, community agency partners, police department representatives, and Summit County school administrators and educators to discuss Summit County’s progress in preventing truancy and substance abuse.

Between August and September 2003, members of the Task Force conducted two focus group discussions with students who were attending alternative education programs and had a history of truancy. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to discuss student perceptions, experiences, and feelings related to truancy and academic success. As a group, students who attended the focus group discussions indicated that their education, family and future career goals were the most important factors in their lives. For these students, a positive school atmosphere, graduation and the potential to make

more money motivated them to continue attending school. Students perceived several barriers to attending school, such as peer pressure, lack of ambition or motivation, immaturity, drug use, and family problems. However, they pointed out these barriers might be overcome if schools and families provide on-going support for issues such as student motivation, substance abuse and hands-on learning. Specifically, students suggested that schools seriously consider student input into the curriculum, expand the type of courses offered during the academic year, offer tutoring and counseling for students in trouble, offer college tuition vouchers or advanced academic credit for successful students, and improve communication between teachers and students. For students who experienced academic difficulties before, they found that completing high school is an important endeavor because academic success will greatly enhance their ability to succeed in life.

This year (SY 2004), Project THRIVE continued to serve four school districts in Summit County (i.e., Akron, Barberton, Cuyahoga Falls, and Woodridge) and has expanded intervention and prevention activities to four additional schools during this school year. In total, ten schools are participating in the THRIVE program. In the Akron Public Schools district, McBright Elementary, Rankin Elementary, and Schumacher Academy and in Barberton Schools, Oakdale Elementary is participating in Project THRIVE. In Cuyahoga Falls school district, DeWitt Elementary, Price Elementary, and Sill Middle School (6th grade only) as well as in Woodridge school district, Woodridge Primary, Woodridge Intermediate, and Woodridge Middle School (6th grade only) are participating in the program. Compared to last year, Project THRIVE's message will reach many more children in Summit County.

Evaluation of THRIVE Goals. This evaluation report is organized according to the six primary goals of Project THRIVE. Within each goal, project activities and accomplishments to date are discussed and when possible, goal achievement is assessed based on the quantitative data available.

Goal 1: *Prevent substance abuse among “at-risk” students by decreasing the number of absences among the “at-risk” population, increasing understanding of substance abuse and increasing participation in extra-curricula activities.*

Decreased Number of Absences

Since the beginning of SY 2004, school administrators have referred 191 students to Project THRIVE. Typically, administrators referred students who were “at-risk” for truancy, i.e., those who had three or more unexcused absences since the beginning of the school year. On occasion, administrators referred students to THRIVE when students had excessive excused absences and/or tardies thought to place the child “at-risk” for truancy.

Since school began, 107 early intervention letters were sent to parents of students with three or more unexcused absences. Of the 115 student mediation sessions scheduled, 72 completed sessions resulted in an agreement among all parties involved - parents, school representatives, and case managers. Currently, there are 67 students on active caseload with Project THRIVE.

Demographics. For a number of at-risk students¹ demographic data is unavailable because most participating schools only report age, race/ethnicity, and gender when students are referred for mediation and case management. However, data are available for a fair number of students who received school letters. To date, the average age of students who received school letters (i.e., were absent 3 or more unexcused days) was 8 years old. For the 54 at-risk students whose age was available, 28% were between 5 and 6 years of age, 31% were between 7 and 8, 22% were between 9 and 10 and 19% were between 11 - 13 years old². More than 2/3 of the at-risk students were under the age of ten.

Understanding of Substance Abuse

In just a short period of time, Project THRIVE staff conducted truancy and substance abuse educational sessions for more than 3,000 students and families. Project THRIVE staff provided information on truancy and drug prevention to approximately 1,853 children living in Summit County. Similar information warning parents of the correlation between substance abuse and truancy was provided to 2,227 families to date. In addition to the prevention and intervention activities conducted by Project THRIVE, members of the Task Force have been successful in launching a public relations campaign to increase awareness among residents living in Summit County. For example, the Task Force Subcommittee on Education Awareness and Project THRIVE staff created a truancy video to promote the goals and objectives of the program, distributed 10,000 posters which emphasize the consequences for failing to attend school and posted 30 truancy awareness billboards throughout the community near schools served by THRIVE.

Perceptions of Risk and Disapproval. Students in the schools served by Project THRIVE are becoming increasingly aware of the harmful effects of substance abuse. As indicated in Table 1, the **Survey of Perceived Risk & Disapproval of Drug Use for SY 2004**, reveals that students have an excellent understanding regarding the use of alcohol, cigarettes, and other drugs. Both pre- and post-test results reveal that more than 96% of the students indicated their parents would disapprove of their use of alcohol or cigarettes. Almost all of the students surveyed negatively perceive the use of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol among their friends and peers.

Drug Use Among Program Population. Based on the self-reported data in Table 1, substance abuse among students in the school districts participating in Project THRIVE remains significantly low. At pre-test, seven students (less than 2%) surveyed indicated

¹ In this analysis, at-risk students are only those who were received school letters because they had 3 or more unexcused absences.

² Age unknown is 49.5% (n=53).

alcohol consumption in the last 30 days; none surveyed indicated tobacco use in the last 30 days; and one student (fewer than 1%) surveyed indicated marijuana use in the last 30 days. At post-test, alcohol consumption decreased. Five students (1.3%) of the 381 students indicated alcohol consumption in the past month, none indicated tobacco use, and one student (fewer than 1%) indicated marijuana use. These findings clearly suggest that the program has been successful in educating youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and drug use.

While the post-test results reveal only modest changes in the perceptions of youth following the delivery of the prevention activities conducted by Project THRIVE, one might safely assume that these children were exposed to the prevention and intervention messages delivered by Project THRIVE in the previous school year. What is clear is that drug, tobacco, and alcohol use among youth in school districts served by THRIVE remains significantly low and youth are keenly aware of the negative association between substance abuse and academic success; students who use alcohol or drugs tend to perform poorly in school.

Table 1			
Survey of Perceived Risk & Disapproval of Drug Use (Pre- & Post-test Results)*			
Survey Questions	Pretest (n)	Post-test (n)	Change (n)
Would your parents be mad if you drank alcohol ³ ?	369	370	+1
Would your parents be mad if you smoked cigarettes?	372	371	-1
Do your friends think it is bad if you try marijuana?	369	370	+1
Do your friends think people who use drugs are smart?	13	14	+1
Do you think people hurt themselves by smoking cigarettes?	371	370	-1
Do you think people hurt themselves by drinking alcohol?	369	371	+2
Have you drunk alcohol in the last 30 days?	7	5	-2
Have you smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days?	0	0	--
Have you smoked marijuana in the last 30 days?	1	1	--
* Pre & Post-test Results reported for "yes" responses only			
Survey results for September 2003 – December 2003; N=381			
Source: CHC Project THRIVE Database, Student Survey of Perceived Risk & Disapproval of Drug Use			

Extra-Curricular Activities

Project THRIVE staff continues to increase student participation in extra-curricula activities focused on truancy and substance abuse prevention. A review of the Prevention Log for the SY 2004 reveals that project staff conducted 59 prevention activities. Some of the extra-curricular activities organized or conducted by project staff included distributing information about Project THRIVE at School Open Houses, distributing program brochures to families and children registered for after-school programs, hosting a poster contest among students in participating schools, attending county meetings with the Ohio Teen Institute, and working with children attending the

³ In this survey, alcohol is defined as beer, wine or hard liquor for survey respondents.

Art Camp at Joy Park. During the summer months and throughout the school year, project staff ensures that all extra-curricular activities offered at participating schools and in the community include truancy and substance abuse awareness.

Goal 2: *Prevent substance abuse by increasing the family awareness of the correlation between truancy and substance abuse and reducing the number of families found in violation of SB 181.*

Family Awareness of Truancy and Substance Abuse

Project staff continues to conduct workshops at participating schools to ensure families are made aware of the correlation between truancy and substance abuse. To date, THRIVE staff have spent almost 1,500 hours providing support to families through community referrals, face-to-face services and prevention services. To reduce the number of families found in violation of S.B. 181, project staff have encouraged participating schools to spotlight truancy laws and Project THRIVE activities in school newsletters.

Family Awareness of Ohio State Bill (S.B.) 181

Project THRIVE has been very successful in encouraging parents to take an active role in the academic experiences of their children. As indicated in Table 2, 41 parents have completed the **Truancy Knowledge Survey**. The survey results reveal that families are aware of the state law regarding truancy and are increasingly aware of the consequences should they fail to comply with truant laws in the state. Additionally, the survey data reveal that slightly more than half of the parents surveyed are aware of the positive correlation between truant behavior and substance abuse. Slightly more than half of the parents believe chronic or habitual truancy can affect a child's self-esteem.

Compared to last year, more parents are unaware of the prominent link between youth substance abuse and truancy. However, more than 80% of parents clearly understand regular school attendance leads to academic success. Nearly all of the parents surveyed understand the statutory provisions of S.B. 181. Ninety-eight percent understand that serious penalties will result if parents fail to send their children to school. Ninety-three percent know that failure to comply with S.B. 181 could lead to imprisonment. Ninety-five percent are aware that they can be referred to juvenile court if their child is deemed a habitual or chronic truant.

Table 2			
Frequency Distribution of Truancy Knowledge Survey Results for Parents (N=41)			
	% False	% True	% Unknown
If kids are not in school, they are more likely to use illegal drugs	46.3	51.2	2.4
Being absent from school doesn't affect a child's grades	82.9	17.1	0.0
A new state law can send parents to jail if their children don't go to school	0.0	97.6	2.4
Students who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed	12.2	87.7	0.0
Missing school makes children feel bad about themselves	41.5	56.1	2.4
There is no penalty for parents if their children miss school	92.7	4.8	2.4
If a child misses too much school, the parents may have to go to court	0.0	95.1	4.9
Most people in prison have a high school diploma	85.4	9.8	4.9
Source: CHC THRIVE Database Parent Survey			

Goal 3: *Reduce substance abuse by decreasing school suspensions for drug related offenses.*

Decreased School Suspensions

An assessment of school suspensions for drug related offenses is premature at this time. However, these data will be made available at the end of the school year. In previous years, the number of school suspensions for drug-related offenses was minimal. Last year, for example, there were no student suspensions for drug-related offenses reported by participating schools.

Goal 4: *Reduce substance abuse by reducing substance related criminal activity during school hours by 40%.*

Reduced Criminal Activity

Participating school districts will report data on substance-related criminal activity at the end of the school year. Last year, none of the participating schools reported criminal activity among students participating in Project THRIVE.

Goal 5: *Reduce truancy by adhering to State mandate of 93% school attendance by increasing attendance rates of youth in selected schools to meet 93% attendance rate and by decreasing recidivism of juvenile complaints of both youth and families by 50%.*

School Attendance Rates

Overall school attendance rates for the SY 2004 will be reported at the end of the school year. During the past three years, the average school attendance rate for schools participating in Project THRIVE was above the State mandate of 93%.

Juvenile Recidivism Rates

In Summit County, the number of families found in violation of S.B. 181 (court hearings for truancy/failure to send cases) has decreased significantly since the implementation of Project THRIVE. At the Truancy Task Force meeting, the Juvenile Court reported that truancy referrals, i.e., juvenile court cases for “truancy/failure to send,” were down considerably when compared to referrals at this time last year. As of October 2003, only four families were referred to the court.

Goal 6: *Strengthen the coalition by encouraging participation of new members, seeking additional funding, and increasing collaboration among coalition members.*

Participation of New Members

During this evaluation period, on average, 38 members of the Summit County community attended the monthly meetings of the Juvenile Court Truancy (S.B. 181) Task Force between July 2003 and November 2003. Task force members have met monthly to discuss the implementation of the program and have invited guest speakers from the community to share information about resources available to families participating in the program. Guests continue to be invited to join the Task Force.

In December 2003, the Task Force coordinator, a member of the court staff, resigned from the Summit County Juvenile Court to pursue an employment opportunity. Although the Task Force did not meet in December, the new Summit County Juvenile Court Judge remains committed to developing strategies to address truancy and substance use among youth in Summit County. In December 2003, THRIVE’s project director met with the Summit County Juvenile Court Administrative Staff to discuss the reformation of the task force.

Additional Funding

Between July and December 2003, Project THRIVE secured funding from various community resources to promote prevention and intervention programming. When feasible, grants continue to be submitted to numerous agencies and foundations to expand program services. To date, Project THRIVE has received more than \$160,000 to provide intervention and prevention services to district schools. Below are some of the grants received to date:

-
- Akron Public Schools - \$17,500
 - AOH Foundation for Children - \$2,000
 - Barberton Community Foundation - \$12,500
 - Laura R. & Lucian Q. Moffitt Foundation - \$500
 - Ohio Department of Youth Services - \$29,000
 - CHC Foundation - \$1,000
 - OJJDP - \$100,000
 - Holland Oil - \$300
 - Dollar General Corporation - \$1,000
-

Increasing collaboration among coalition members

Between July 2003 and December 2003, project staff dedicated a total of 1,459 service hours to students and their families, to school personnel and community referrals, and to prevention services. Specifically, among school staff and community members, more than 800 hours were dedicated to providing consultation and case coordination. Project staff continue to actively collaborate with school districts and community coalition members.

Suggestions for Improving the Program

During this evaluation period, Project THRIVE implemented the evaluator's recommendations for improvement identified in the SY 2003 end-of-the-year evaluation report. In this school year, project staff increased communication among families and schools by ensuring that program details were highlighted in school newsletters. In addition, the widespread nature of the media campaign within Summit County ensured that families were reminded of truancy laws as soon as school began. In an effort to increase awareness regarding truancy and substance abuse, staff attended multiple Open House programs for participating schools. Program staff might consider ways to ensure that all students who are referred to mediation also receive school letters as soon as the student is absent 3 unexcused days. In addition, it may be helpful to develop a reporting mechanism for age-related demographic data – since these data are only reported in completion toward the end of the grant year. The truancy knowledge survey completed by parents revealed that some parents are reluctant to believe that truant behavior can lead to substance abuse and can affect a child's self-esteem. As such, program staff might consider planning adult program at participating schools to increase awareness among parents.

Summary of Findings

In summarizing the goals assessed in this mid-year evaluation, program accomplishments to date are quite impressive. Project THRIVE continues to provide significant prevention and intervention activities proven to eradicate truancy and substance abuse among youth. Schools have referred 191 students to Project THRIVE. Of those referred to the program, 107 were “at-risk” for truancy during SY 2004. Of the mediations scheduled, 63% of the families completed their mediation sessions and signed an agreement to improve student attendance for the balance of the school year. Currently, there are 67 students on active caseload with Project THRIVE. Drug, tobacco, and alcohol use among program participants continued to remain significantly low. Family awareness of the correlation between truancy and academic success increased among parents and children. Additionally, slightly more than half of the parents surveyed were aware of the positive correlation between truant behavior and substance abuse.