

PROJECT THRIVE
(TRUANCY HABITS REDUCED, INTERVENTIONS VIA EDUCATION)

SECOND MID-YEAR EVALUATION REPORT



SCHOOL YEAR 2002-2003

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

PROJECT THRIVE: SECOND MID-YEAR EVALUATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project “THRIVE,” Truancy Habits Reduced, Interventions Via Education, is a comprehensive truancy and substance abuse prevention program in Summit County that aims to prevent and reduce substance abuse among at-risk youth by: 1) keeping youth in school; 2) keeping parents informed and responsible for their child’s whereabouts; 3) encouraging parents to become involved in their child’s school, education, and life; 4) reaching at-risk children as early as possible and providing services; 5) preventing youth from entering the juvenile justice system; 6) reaching youth early in the process of substance use/abuse; and 7) providing alternative after-school activities.¹ Project THRIVE is endorsed by the Summit County Truancy Task Force which is comprised of 40 local agencies and school districts in collaboration with the Community Health Center (CHC).² Project THRIVE began as a pilot program with the goal of preventing truancy and substance abuse for at-risk youth in grades K-6 and the expected outcomes of this initiative are to increase school attendance, decrease substance use/abuse, and decrease criminal activity among Summit County youth.

Since the beginning of the 2002-2003 school year, school administrators identified and referred 114 students at-risk for truancy. More than 40% of the students came from the Akron school district, more than 20% from the Barberton district, 7% from the Cuyahoga Falls district and almost 30% from the Woodridge district. In these districts served by Project THRIVE, 50 early intervention letters were sent to parents of students with three or more unexcused absences. To date, CHC staff of Project THRIVE scheduled 70 mediation sessions and 71% of those sessions have been successfully mediated whereby parents have agreed to the terms and conditions of the School Attendance Plan of Action for the minor child and have consented to follow-up by Project THRIVE staff and the mediator. Survey data reveal that 94% of the parents involved in the mediation services offered through Project THRIVE are becoming increasingly aware of the correlation between regular school attendance and academic success.

Some of the prevention activities organized to date by Project THRIVE include campaign collaborations with “Students Working Against Tobacco,” an anti-tobacco filming campaign – STAND, supporting Ohio Drug Prevention Red Ribbon Week, hosting prevention poster contests, as well as distributing prevention and truancy information in “trick or treat” bags to 1,500 children at the mall. Survey data revealed the result of classroom prevention activities whereby students are exposed to information focused on increasing their understanding of the risks of substance use/abuse. An analysis of the pre- and post-test results indicated that student awareness regarding

¹ OJJSP, Drug-Free Communities Support Program (September 2001), <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/dfcs/programs/2001/01ohsum.html>, last accessed 2/14/03.

² For more information, see Community Health Center Prevention/Education Services, Project THRIVE, http://www.commdrugbrd.org/programs_services/prevention/THRIVE.html, last accessed 2/14/03.

substance abuse improved considerably after participation in the prevention program conducted by Project THRIVE staff and drug use among the program population continued to remain significantly low.

In just a short period of time, Project THRIVE has expanded from an effective pilot program to a larger scale initiative aimed at increasing school attendance, decreasing substance use/abuse, and decreasing criminal activity among youth in Summit County. In each of the school districts served, school principals have expressed their satisfaction with the myriad services for at-risk families: information and assistance in the areas of counseling services available as well as support for transportation issues, medical concerns and child care. To date, more than 2,000 students and parents have been involved in prevention activities since the start of the 2002-2003 school year. It remains clear that Project THRIVE continues to be effective in the areas of truancy, drug use and juvenile crime.

PROJECT THRIVE: SECOND MID-YEAR EVALUATION

Background Information

Project “THRIVE,” Truancy Habits Reduced, Interventions Via Education, is a comprehensive truancy and substance abuse prevention program focused on at-risk youth in Summit County. Its program modalities include truancy awareness, early intervention, intervention, treatment, intervention and prevention, and mediation services for students identified as at-risk youth. The main goals of Project Thrive seek to reduce school absences, juvenile complaints, drug-related suspensions, criminal activity and substance abuse in the target school districts.

During the first year of Project THRIVE, the program affected more than 300 students who were identified by school administrators as being at-risk for truancy. In just a short period of time, THRIVE conducted numerous on-site activities that focused on preventing truancy and juvenile delinquency and managed to reach out to 166 students through case management and/or mediation. In the first year, attendance rates in target school districts stabilized for nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the students who actively participated in the THRIVE program.

Coalition Building Activities

Toward the end of the program year, Project THRIVE continued to conduct prevention activities for students living in the school district served by the program. During the summer of 2002, in conjunction with members of the Summit County Juvenile and Truancy Task Force, Project THRIVE invited students to focus group sessions so that students could share their experiences, viewpoints and opinions on the

importance of school, family intervention and the Juvenile Court. Several themes emerged from the qualitative data gathered from these focus group sessions. In particular, students seemed concerned about their future, yet some were still unaware of the attendance policies at their school and were unaware of the truancy provisions of Ohio Senate Bill 181. After conducting focus groups with a representative sample of students from area school districts, it remained evident that there is a strong need for prevention and early intervention services among this population. In fact, program services that provide specific information regarding truancy and its link to educational attainment are warranted for at-risk students in Summit County. In addition, program activities that highlight the legal consequences and encourage parental involvement as well as provide educational information and support regarding substance abuse clearly support the needs of at-risk students and their families.

Program Activities & Prevention Effectiveness

Age of Student Population in Targeted Schools

Since the beginning of the 2002-03 school year, school administrators identified and referred 114 students at-risk for truancy. At-risk students are defined as those with three or more unexcused absences in the first semester of the school year. During this evaluation period (July 1, 2002 thru December 31, 2002), age-related data was available for the 114 students referred to the program by grade level only. As indicated in Table 1, **Frequency Distribution of Ages of Participating Students**, nearly one-third of all at-risk students referred to Project THRIVE are in kindergarten, between ages 5 and 6. In

fact, more than 60% of the students referred to Project THRIVE are in kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grades.

Table 1		
Frequency Distribution of Ages of Participating Students (shown by grade level)		
Grades	#	%
Kindergarten	33	28.9
1 st	20	17.5
2	19	16.7
3	8	7.0
4	13	11.4
5	4	3.5
Unknown	17	14.9
Total	114	100.0
Source: CHC Project THRIVE Database		

Outcomes

Truancy Indicators

During the summer months of the evaluation period, Project THRIVE staff conducted numerous activities prior to the start of the school year and continued to be proactive in providing truancy information regarding the Ohio Senate Bill 181. Through the THRIVE Summer Enrichment Program, activities that focus on character building and personal safety and wellness aid in the prevention of truancy and substance abuse. At the onset of the school year, staff members attended Open House programs in schools within the four districts participating in Project THRIVE. During each Open House program, parents and students were given information (via brochures or presentations) about the programs' goals and objectives. Since the start of the school year, staff participated in nearly 30 activities that offered assistance for truancy prevention activities and provided substantive information regarding tobacco and drug or alcohol use. In all,

both parents and children participated in the prevention activities developed to inform them of the legal and educational consequences of truancy and substance abuse.

In addition to the truancy awareness programs conducted by staff, five truancy awareness billboards were created and appeared in four Project Thrive school districts during the first quarter of the school year. These billboards captured the theme, “Go to School! Become a Superstar” for Project THRIVE and Summit County Truancy Task Force and were created by Clear Channel Outdoor Advertising company. One billboard was donated by Clear Channel and the others were paid for by awareness funds secured through area foundations that provide support for the project’s overall budget.

As indicated in Table 2, **Frequency Distribution of At-Risk Students by School District**, more than 40% of the students came from the Akron school district, more than 20% from the Barberton district and almost 30% from the Woodridge district. In the school districts (i.e., Akron, Barberton, Cuyahoga Falls, and Woodridge) served by Project THRIVE, 50 early intervention letters were sent to parents of students with three or more unexcused absences. In addition, staff of Project THRIVE scheduled 70 mediation sessions and 56 of those 70 sessions (80%) resulted in signed School Attendance Plan of Action agreements among parents/guardians, certified mediators, school principal/counselors, Project THRIVE case managers and students. To date, 71 student/families remain on Project THRIVE active caseloads for formal intervention and case management direct service.

Table 2		
Frequency Distribution of At-Risk Students by School District		
	#	%
Akron	47	41.2
Barberton	24	21.1
Cuyahoga Falls	8	7.0
Woodridge	34	29.8
District Unknown	1	0.9
Total	114	100.0
Source: CHC Project THRIVE Database		

Prevention Indicators

While it may be too soon to ascertain the effect of project’s prevention activities to date, project staff continues to provide age-appropriate information to children attending prevention activities. Some of the prevention activities organized to date include campaign collaborations with “Students Working Against Tobacco” and an anti-tobacco filming campaign - STAND, supporting Ohio Drug Prevention Red Ribbon Weeks, distributing prevention and truancy information in “trick or treat” bags to 1,500 children at the local mall, as well as hosting prevention poster contests.

In addition, staff continues to ensure that at-risk students participate in extra-curricular activities supported by Project THRIVE initiatives in the summer months as well as in the academic school year.

Perceptions of Risk and Disapproval

Pre- and posttest results for classroom presentations clearly demonstrate the effect of prevention activities for students exposed to information geared to increasing their understanding of substance abuse. As indicated in Table 3, **Survey of Perceived Risk &**

Disapproval of Drug Use, pretest results reveal that an overwhelming majority of third, fourth, and fifth grade students report that their parents would disapprove of any substance abuse (i.e., alcohol, cigarette, or drugs) use. Similarly, student perceptions indicated that most of their peers believe that drug use is bad yet fewer believe that those who use drugs are stupid or lack good judgment. At least ninety percent of students believe that those who drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes hurt themselves and only a few students (one or two) have indicated the use of alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana within the last 30 days of the test administration. Overall, posttest results revealed increases in knowledge of substance abuse and positive attitudes in all areas. As such, student awareness regarding substance abuse improved after student participation in the prevention program conducted by Project THRIVE staff. Drug use among the program population remains significantly low, with only one student indicating usage during the posttest.

Table 3			
Survey of Perceived Risk & Disapproval of Drug Use (Pre- & Posttest Results)*			
Survey Questions	Pretest Results	Posttest Results	Percent Change
Would your parents be made if you drank alcohol?	92.9	100.0	7.1
Would your parents be made if you smoked cigarettes?	94.3	98.6	4.3
Do your friends think it is bad if you try marijuana?	95.7	98.6	2.9
Do your friends think people who use drugs are stupid?	84.3	88.6	4.3
Do you think people hurt themselves by smoking cigarettes?	90.0	95.7	5.7
Do you think people hurt themselves by drinking alcohol?	92.9	92.9	**
Have you drunk alcohol in the last 30 days?	2.6	1.4	-1.2
Have you smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days?	1.4	1.4	**
Have you smoked marijuana in the last 30 days?	1.4	1.4	**
* Pre & Posttest Results reported for “yes” responses only			
** Indicates no percent change between the pretest and posttest results			
Source: CHC Project THRIVE Database, Student Survey of Perceived Risk & Disapproval of Drug Use			

Focus on Families

Since the start of the school year, 70 cases have been mediated in conjunction with Project THRIVE. The mediation process occurs after cases have been referred to Juvenile Court. The process ensures that a court assigned mediator work with the parent/guardian of the truant child. In his/her role, the mediator attempts to ascertain the reasons for excessive absenteeism and/or tardiness and further explains to the parent how the provision of Senate Bill 181 can affect him/her. Parents voluntarily sign a contract indicating agreement with the School Attendance Plan of Action that promotes daily attendance with the understanding that failure to comply may result in formal court action and/or prosecution pursuant to Senate Bill 181. Of the 70 cases referred for mediation since the start of the school year, 50 (71.4%) have been successfully mediated whereby parents have agreed to the terms and conditions of the Plan of Action for the minor child and consent to follow-up by Project THRIVE staff and the mediator.

Mediation involvement remains critical to the targeted population served given parents' knowledge and attitudes related to substance abuse and truancy as well as its affect on student educational outcomes. As indicated in Table 4, **Frequency Distribution of Truancy Knowledge Survey Results for Parents**, most parents (70.6%) believe that children who are not in school are at-risk to substance use while more than one-third (38.2%) believe that being absent from school doesn't affect a child's academic performance. This latter result may be due to the fact that almost one-third of the children identified as at-risk were in kindergarten and parents still perceive that the skills learned in kindergarten emphasize social skills rather than essential academic preparation. While the majority of parents (97.1%) understand that Senate Bill 181 can

send them to jail for the habitual truancy of their child, alarmingly more than one-quarter (26.5%) of those surveyed indicated that there is no penalty for parents if their children miss school. By the time parents have been referred to mediation services and completed each session, many understand that there are concrete consequences (i.e., jail time, court referrals, and penalties) for the truant behavior of their children.

Table 4		
Frequency Distribution of Truancy Knowledge Survey Results for Parents*		
	% False	% True
If kids are not in school, they are more likely to use illegal drugs**	26.5	70.6
Being absent from school doesn't affect a child's grades	61.8	38.2
A new state law can send parents to jail if their children don't go to school	2.9	97.1
Students who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed	11.8	88.2
Missing school makes children feel bad about themselves**	26.5	70.6
There is no penalty for parents if their children miss school**	70.6	26.5
If a child misses too much school, the parents may have to go to court	2.9	97.1
Most people in prison have a high school diploma	76.5	20.6
* Total number of parents responding equal to 34		
** Unknown percent equal to 2.9%		
Source: CHC Project THRIVE Database, Parent Survey of Truancy Knowledge		

Most of the parents (94.1%) whose cases were referred for mediation believe that children who attend school regularly are likely to graduate from high school while only a small minority (2.9%) believe that children who regularly attend will likely drop out of school. Clearly, parents are becoming increasingly aware of the correlation between regular school attendance and academic success.

Lessons Learned

In its first year, suggestions for improving Project THRIVE focused primarily on implementation concerns:

- To improve program startup, it was suggested that project staff be available to work within the school systems immediately at the onset of the school year. As such, THRIVE prevention and intervention activities have occurred accordingly with numerous activities occurring during the summer and continuing throughout the first semester of the school year giving case managers, teachers and project staff an opportunity to introduce the program early on in the school year.
- To increase collaboration between school and program staff, several THRIVE activities have been conducted in conjunction with school awareness programs.
- In addition, staff has increased contact with parents and children in order to promote truancy awareness of the provisions of Senate Bill 181.
- To date, uniform policies (such as three unexcused absences leads to a referral to THRIVE) have been developed to ensure that accurate information is being provided to parents in participating school systems.
- The director of Project THRIVE has worked diligently with members of the Summit County Truancy Taskforce to seek and secure additional funding and support the expansion of program initiatives since several school administrators have expressed an interest in expanding the program in their districts.

Suggested Program Improvements

While the status of families who complete mediation are always followed by the mediator and/or case manager, some families (i.e., those who fail to complete mediation) continue truant behaviors that often lead to harsher outcomes. Although these service improvements were suggested in last years evaluation, it would be in the best interest of program participants if all school systems in the districts served participated in the THRIVE Project. Often, families who unsuccessfully participate in THRIVE transfer out of the school district to avoid the truant restrictions. Additionally, the start of the school year was met with an unforeseen challenge for Project THRIVE due to the election outcome. Judith L. Hunter, the sitting Summit Court Juvenile Court judge and a staunch supporter of the THRIVE project, lost the election in Summit County. As such, the transition period to occur may reflect a break in the administrative coordination between

the Juvenile Court and Project THRIVE. To date, the incoming judge has indicated support for the THRIVE project. During this transition period, increased communication and commitment for program initiatives through the Juvenile Court, in particular, and Summit County Truancy Taskforce is greatly needed to enhance program outcomes.

Program Impact

In just a short period of time, Project THRIVE has had significant outcomes. Since the start of the school year, 70 cases of truancy have been referred for mediation and a significant number of students remain active on Project THRIVE caseloads. The School Attendance Plan of Action has become an integral agreement for the more than 70% of families who have completed mediation and who are receptive to the support that the program offers. School principals in each of the systems served have expressed their satisfaction with the myriad benefits for at-risk families: information and assistance in the areas of counseling services available as well as support for transportation issues, medical concerns and child care. To date, more than 2,000 students and parents have been involved in prevention activities since the start of the school year. Project THRIVE continues to demonstrate its effectiveness in the areas of truancy, drug use in schools and juvenile crime.