

Evaluation of the Truancy Court Diversion Program in the District of Columbia, 2011–12



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP) is a voluntary program for students at risk of chronic truancy and their parents. It combines involvement of a Family Court judge in group and individual sessions with service provision. During the 2011–12 school year, a pilot TCDP was implemented at Kramer Middle School (M.S.) and at Johnson M.S.

The program attempts to simultaneously address participants' motivation and attitudes as well as barriers to attendance. Attitudes are addressed by the involvement of judges in the program, whose role includes meeting with individual families, and by the program's curriculum. The curriculum is intended to promote the personal responsibility of students and parents; increase parents' level of positive involvement with their children and the school; improve attitudes toward school achievement, graduation, and career aspirations; and improve parent-child communication. Barriers to attendance are addressed through family needs assessments, case management, and service referrals provided by a community collaborative and coordinated through a meeting with the judge and program team. The approach of the program is to address the "whole child."

This evaluation is focused on implementation. The report reviews the logic and design of the program, implementation successes and challenges, and makes recommendations to enhance the program and its implementation. It also briefly examines family and student needs and the services delivered through the program. However, with so few participants, these data must be interpreted with caution.

Key findings from the pilot TCDP include implementation challenges as well as some encouraging findings. Key implementation findings include the following:

- A key requirement for successful program implementation is a strong partnership between the courts and schools.
- A key challenge in the current pilot concerned recruitment and program participation.
- A limiting factor to integrated service provision in the current pilot was the lack of regular team meetings to assess family needs and services as well as academic progress, or a strong structure for regular information-sharing.

Despite such implementation issues, the program seems to have improved attitudes and school aspirations of students, as well as parent-child communication, for those students and parents who participated regularly. The program also was successful in reaching families in need with services.

Anecdotally, some student participants improved their attendance during the 10-week program. However, the pilot program involved too few students, and was implemented too late in the year, to allow a credible examination of whether participants' truancy during the program year improved.

Some modifications would strengthen the program. Based on our study of the program's implementation in this pilot, we recommend the following program modifications:

- Use prior year's attendance as eligibility criteria.
- Formalize additional program eligibility criteria (e.g., literacy levels, social functioning).
- Strengthen the use of incentives and consequences to improve program attendance.
- Provide increased training for all partners, especially judges new to the program.
- Allow sufficient time for planning, recruitment, and intake prior to beginning weekly program sessions.

- Hold regular team meetings.

Several additional modifications would also be needed in order to expand the program to more students and more schools. Because each TCDP is inherently limited to 10 to 15 participating students per school per semester, expansion to address considerably more students involves expansion to more schools. To achieve consistent implementation across multiple schools would require the following:

- More formalization of the program, including eligibility and recruitment criteria, program curriculum, procedures for the judge-family individual meetings, and incentives and consequences for attendance;
- Dedicated resources, including a formal program director; and
- Additional school and DCPS support.

In conclusion, the TCDP seems to hold promise for positively intervening in the lives of students at risk for chronic truancy and their parents, and possibly improving their school attendance and academic performance. However, the pilot suggests that program implementation could be considerably improved, and that structural changes would be necessary for the TCDP to have the potential to affect the truancy of a substantial number of students.

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	I
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Evaluation Activities	2
II. BACKGROUND.....	3
DCPS Truancy and Truancy Policy.....	3
Truancy Court Diversion Programs	3
The D.C. Truancy Court Diversion Program, 2005–2008.....	5
III. PROGRAM DESIGN	6
Philosophy and Logic of the TCDP in DC	6
Interagency Partners.....	7
Participants and Eligibility.....	7
Program Components	8
Outcomes	9
IV. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION.....	12
Interagency Partnership.....	12
Planning, Start-Up, and Participation	14
Weekly Group Sessions	16
Meetings with Individual Families.....	17
Case Management and Service Provision	17
V. STUDENT AND PARENT PERSPECTIVES	19
VI. ASSESSED NEEDS AND SERVICES PROVIDED.....	22
Intake Assessments.....	22
Baseline Family Assessments	23
Services Provided.....	24
Final Family Assessment	26
VII. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	27
Summary	27

Recommendations	27
VII. DISCUSSION	31
Conclusion	32
REFERENCES.....	34

I. INTRODUCTION

The Interagency Truancy Task Force (ITTF) of the District of Columbia launched a pilot Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP) in the 2011–12 school year to intervene with middle school students en route to chronic truancy. The pilot program was implemented at two middle schools—at Kramer Middle School from January–March 2012, and at Johnson Middle School from March–May 2012.

The TCDP is a family-based program that seeks to change the attitudes of student and parent participants concerning school attendance and achievement, personal responsibility, and accountability. In addition, the program aims to change a variety of related attitudes, including those concerning child and parent communication, career aspirations, drug use, peers, and self-esteem, as well as attitudes toward the court. The TCDP also addresses barriers to school attendance through the provision of case management and human services. The program addresses these goals through a number of program components, including weekly before-school group sessions facilitated by a judge and attended by parents and students, individual family sessions with a judge and case manager(s), and human service provision.

The District of Columbia Crime Policy Institute (DCPI) at the Urban Institute was asked to conduct a process evaluation of the TCDP. In 2011–12, the program was newly implemented on a small scale, and was expected to encounter challenges and be adapted.¹ For such a pilot program, an *impact* evaluation is inappropriate. Rather, DCPI's evaluation is focused on the program's design and implementation, including successes in implementation, challenges encountered, and measures taken to overcome those challenges.

The goal of the current evaluation is to assess the potential of the pilot project to be expanded, and if expanded, its potential to reduce truancy. Key questions for the evaluation are the following:

- What is the TCDP? What is the program's logic, and what is the relationship between key components and anticipated outcomes? What are the roles of the various program partners?
- What activities have been implemented? How successful has the partnership between program stakeholders been? What challenges have been encountered in implementing the TCDP, and how have they been overcome?
- How do youth and parent participants feel about the program and program implementation? Do they believe the program has been beneficial?

This report documents and assesses the implementation of the intervention, including challenges encountered and solutions and adjustments made through May 2012. The report also presents recommendations based on our observations of the implementation process. However, an outcome or impact evaluation is not appropriate given the pilot nature of this program, as the program was being modified during the pilot, and too few students participated for any attendance results to be reliable (or statistically significant). Moreover, because the program was implemented during the second half of the

¹ Although a TCDP program was implemented in the District in the mid-2000s, it is not clear that the current program follows the same model as the prior program.

school year at both pilot schools—and quite late at one school—it had little chance to demonstrate any effects on attendance or truancy.

Evaluation Activities

The following activities were undertaken as part of the evaluation:

- The evaluation team attended several meetings of the ITTF and its Steering Committee and other related events, and visited the truancy docket of the Family Court, to put the current effort in the larger context of truancy prevention and intervention in the District of Columbia.
- Program planning meetings were observed, in which partners from involved agencies (including the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Kramer Middle School (M.S.) or Johnson M.S., and Far Southeast Family Support Collaborative) discussed recruitment, scheduling, and the plan for implementation.
- Existing program materials were reviewed, including curricula used in the pilot program. Materials were also examined from the prior implementation of the program in DCPS (in 2004–05 and 2005–06), and from other TCDPs, notably the program of Judge Joan Byer in Louisville, KY.
- Weekly TCDP sessions at both schools were observed by evaluation staff.
- Program stakeholders and implementers were interviewed beginning in January 2012.
- Individual interviews were conducted with student participants near completion of the program, and a focus group was held with parent participants.

Together, data and information from these sources allowed us to develop a program logic model, which is presented in the Program Design section. The report then presents findings concerning implementation of the TCDP. The last section then presents recommendations for adaptations to the program.

II. BACKGROUND

Truancy is well understood as an indicator of high risk for drop-out and failure to graduate, as well as a risk factor for delinquency (e.g., Baker, Sigmon, and Nugent 2001; Hawkins et al. 1998; Herrenkohl et al. 2001). Truancy generally refers to unexcused school absences. As a policy or legal matter, truancy is variously defined by localities, generally in terms of the number of unexcused absences that lead a student to be defined as a “chronic truant.” In North Carolina, for example, 10 days of unexcused absences can trigger a referral to court. In the District of Columbia, 10 days of unexcused absences trigger referral to an attendance committee, and 25 days of unexcused absences can trigger a referral to court.

DCPS Truancy and Truancy Policy

In DCPS, 15 percent of students were truant in school year (SY) 2009–10, 12 percent in SY 2010–11, and 11 percent in SY 2011–12.² However, truancy varies considerably by grade and school level, and among schools at each level. For example, in 2008–09, high schools varied from 0 percent to over 60 percent in the percentage of students who accumulated 15 days or more of unexcused absences (DC Office of the Inspector General 2012).

The current DCPS-wide policy for responses to truancy has several tiers. After five unexcused absences, parents are requested to participate in a truancy conference. After 10 or more unexcused absences, the response varies by age. For students 13 years old and younger, 10 or more unexcused absences are grounds for a referral to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) for suspected educational neglect. For students 14 years old and older, 10 or more unexcused absences per advisory, in any class, lead to a referral to the school’s attendance committee for the development of an attendance intervention plan, and 25 or more unexcused absences are grounds for a referral to the Office of the Attorney General or Court Social Services. Given the age span of middle school, the response for most middle school students involves referral to CFSA, but the response to some older middle school students—especially students who repeated grades—can involve court referral.

Truancy Court Diversion Programs

Various jurisdictions have experimented with TCDPs as diversion programs for youth and parents who are eligible for formal referrals to the court or to the child welfare agency due to chronic truancy, or as a preventative intervention for youth whose truancy seems to be headed toward formal referrals.

Judge Byer’s TCDP. The TCDP program in the District was modeled after a program developed by Judge Joan Byer in Louisville, KY, which has received national attention, including a publication by the American Bar Association (2001). Judge Byer argues that punitive responses to chronic truancy through formal adjudication, police involvement, or suspension are ineffective, often too late, and often fail to address barriers to attendance that were rooted in the family: “Enforcing the physical presence of children in school does not in itself change their inclination to be in school” (Byer and Kuhn 2003, 60).

The major components in Judge Byer’s program are judicially led “hearings” held at the school; separate judicial meetings with each individual student and his/her parents; and the provision of coordinated services to students and families in order to remove barriers to attendance. Agency stakeholders partner to address the unique needs of each family; the involvement of judges is intended to highlight

² see <http://dc.gov/DCPS/About+DCPS/Who+We+Are/Facts+and+Statistics>.

the seriousness of truancy, motivate students and parents to address absenteeism, and facilitate a coordinated response. In broad strokes, the program is modeled after Family Court:

Superficially, the TCDP seems quite similar to the court system, but the important distinction is the intensity and speed of the intervention process.... Generally, the TCDP program lasts for 10 to 12 weeks. During this time, the court sees a family once a week and services start within days. In conventional truancy proceedings, the court may see a family only once or twice during the entire period. In the TCDP program, the case manager or social worker responsible for the family oversees the implementation of services. Appointments are made and kept or the case manager “turns up the heat.” No longer can a case be passed on to another social worker or blame placed on the recipient of services or service providers for non-compliance. It is expected that each member of the team will make all-out efforts to see that intervention and treatments are integrated and effective. (Byer and Kuhn 2003, 63)

In the TCDP, judges lack the formal authority to mandate services or service participation, to hold service providers or social workers accountable, or to formally hold youth and families accountable for failures to participate. Therefore, strong commitment by partnering agencies—include the courts, schools, and service agencies—is key to program success.

Importantly, the program is not primarily intended to motivate through deterrence and fear, but to provide positive feedback, to show the participants that judges have their best interests at heart, and to include some fun activities such as field trips.

Soon, parents see a different side of their child and themselves. School and parenting becomes a positive and affirming experience, not oppressive and over-whelming. When the child and parents see the community being supportive as opposed to judgmental, many families are lifted out of their hopelessness. (Byer and Kuhn 2003, 64)

Fostering a “positive and affirming experience” involves striking a delicate balance between accountability, responsibility, and the seriousness of school attendance with positive feedback, incentives, and fun activities. To achieve this experience, a judge’s temperament is a critical ingredient: “A disciplinarian who is inclined to focus on failure is not the right person for the job. A combination of firmness and warmth, coupled with seriousness and an emphasis on success and strength, is essential” (Byer and Kuhn 2003, 65).

Other TCDPs. Every local TCDP is different, and draws on different locally available resources. As a result, one must be careful in generalizing findings from one TCDP to another. Programs differ in terms of the age and grade levels of students and the selection criteria for the program. Some involve youth already eligible for formal court petitions, while others intervene earlier, with youth showing absenteeism that has not yet met the formal criteria for chronic truancy. Some involve a more formal court-like setup—including, perhaps, prosecutors, court officers, and other court staff—while others are less formal. Programs also involve different available services for youth and families, through different program partners. The content of the TCDP sessions or “hearings” also varies considerably, and many programs hold regular case-management meetings.

Evidence of TCDP Effectiveness. Several studies have reported improvement in attendance for TCDP program participants, using pre-post designs. For example, a local evaluation of Judge Byer’s truancy court diversion program, based on pre-post analyses of 45 elementary school student participants, found that days absent declined significantly during the program (Munoz 2001). However, when studies

have followed students after the program, sometimes gains were maintained (e.g., in Bowling Green, KY; Shoenfelt and Huddleston 2006), but at other times those gains were not maintained (e.g., in Charlotte-Mecklenberg; Tingle 2008). Program effects may also vary across participants. For example, a middle school TCDP in Springfield, MO, was found to be most effective for more serious truants (Hendricks et al. 2010).

The D.C. Truancy Court Diversion Program, 2005–2008

A TCDP was implemented in DCPS beginning in the 2005–06 school year as a partnership between the courts, with the leadership of the Family Court under then-presiding Judge Lee Satterfield, schools, human services, and the CJCC (2005, 2006, 2007). Five middle schools participated in the TCDP at least once between 2004 and 2008. Implementation success varied considerably across schools. A key factor seems to have been the level of buy-in and support for the program at each school. In schools with strong support for the program, implementation was successful and program participants believed the program was effective.

A volunteer judge held hearings weekly, before the school day started. The schools provided breakfast for youth and adult participants. In the first half of the hearings, the judge led a meeting with all participants as a group to identify challenges facing the families and affecting their child's attendance. During the second half of the weekly meetings, judges met with individual families while the group sessions were led by a CJCC representative. The curriculum involved group exercises, discussions, and conflict resolution instruction.

In addition, the judge and selected team members met with one or two individual families each week, in order to address their unique challenges related to truancy and school attendance as well as larger issues (e.g., unemployment or substance abuse). Each family participated in at least one such individual meeting over the course of the program. Families were referred to appropriate services where possible. Services were provided through the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives.

Staffing meetings were to be held at least three times during the program at which partners would discuss the progress of participants and challenges they were facing, and brainstorm ideas for addressing those challenges. Partners also communicated frequently regarding participant progress and status over email and through individual conversations.

According to program materials, the program attempted to provide regular rewards to participants even for very minor improvements or successes, in order to “foster long-term success and commitment to the process.” These included “verbal praise and encouragement by the Judge, peer support and recognition, small gifts, goal advancement, and a graduation ceremony.” Noncompliance with program requirements prompted corrective actions, including “responsibility essays, one-on-one counseling sessions, and other creative accountability measures deemed appropriate by the Judge.” Two or three missed program sessions, along with no concurrent improvement in attendance, were expected to lead schools to refer participants to court. Such responses to individual participants were also conceived of as a “teaching tool” for the entire group.

The current pilot TCDP differs in important ways from the prior implementation of the program, including a new set of program stakeholders, judges, and schools. Thus, we treat the 2011–12 program as a pilot program that is under development. The next section describes the intended program design for the current TCDP.

III. PROGRAM DESIGN

Before considering implementation of the program (in section IV), it is critical to describe what the program intends to accomplish, and how. Section III describes DCPI’s understanding of the basic design and intent of the pilot TCDP. This section summarizes the philosophy and logic underlying the program, the roles of interagency partners, and the program’s components, and concludes with a discussion of how these program components are expected to produce desired outcomes.

Philosophy and Logic of the TCDP in DC

In essence, the TCDP attempts to simultaneously address two problems that are believed to contribute to chronic truancy. First, the program attempts to change the attitudes of parents and students. To address truancy per se, the primary attitudes addressed are those concerning school attendance and achievement, personal responsibility, and accountability. In addition, the program aims to change a variety of related attitudes, including those toward the courts, child and parent communication, career aspirations, drug use, peers, and self-esteem.

At the same time, the TCDP attempts to address barriers to school attendance through the provision of human services to families. A key assumption is that chronic truancy is not merely caused by problems with the individual student, but that it is often rooted in family circumstances and human service needs (e.g., child care, mental health, substance use, unemployment, and poverty). Therefore, successfully addressing chronic truancy requires a holistic, family-based approach. Human services are provided through the Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative (FSFSC) under contract with CFSA.

These twin goals—changing student and parent attitudes and addressing barriers to school attendance—are addressed through a variety of program components, as shown in Table 1. Weekly group sessions (called “hearings” in some TCDPs), as well as associated ancillary activities (e.g., career day), are primarily aimed at changing attitudes. Human services primarily aim to address barriers to attendance. Judicial meeting with individual families attempt to address both goals.

Table 1. Key TCDP Program Goals and Components

Program components	Program Goal and Intermediate Outcome	
	Change attitudes	Address barriers to attendance
Weekly group sessions (a.k.a. hearings)	√	
Ancillary activities	√	
Judicial meeting with individual families	√	√
Human services through FSFSC		√
Regular team meetings for coordinated case management		√

Note: Grayed boxes indicate a program component common to TCDPs but not implemented in the current pilot program.

Interagency Partners

The TCDP model requires strong interagency partnership among the courts, schools, and human services. While the judicial presence brings implied authority to the process, the judges operate without formal authority. Therefore, a strong partnership with shared understandings and commitments by the participating judges, the schools, and human service agencies is critical to success of the program.

The TCDP places judges in a nonadversarial role, working with families to uncover and overcome the major barriers to success. The judges' authority is intended to encourage youth and parents to participate in the program, attend regularly, and work to improve student attendance. The judges' participation is also intended to help youth and parents see judges in a nonthreatening way, to understand that judges do "get it," and to advocate for necessary services on their behalf. In addition, although judges in the TCDP do not have legal authority to set requirements for participants, they aim to draw on the courts' authority and impartiality to address the barriers that have been identified and to help coordinate services to be delivered to participating families. "The model... [applies]... the authority of the Presiding Judge of the Family Division to support and reinforce compliance with a service plan developed by a multi-agency treatment team" (CJCC 2006, p. 43).

The schools' role in the program is to identify candidates for the program, to host the program, to monitor attendance and school performance and provide regular updates to the team, and to participate in addressing student needs as appropriate. Participation of school personnel at program sessions also provides support and encouragement for participants, ties a youth's participation in the program and his or her behavior in the school, and keeps the TCDP informed about individual student academic progress.

With support from the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Human Services, and under its existing contract with CFSA, case management and referrals to appropriate services are provided for the program by FSFSC. Case managers work with each family throughout the 10-week program period; are typically involved in planning and facilitating ancillary activities; and attend all weekly group sessions with the judges, providing participant support (e.g., via shout-outs for a family's improvements). Case managers also participate in the individual family meetings with the judge to discuss family barriers, needs, and services.

Participants and Eligibility

Program eligibility is based on two considerations: attendance and expected participant benefit. After identifying potential participants based on attendance criteria, program partners discuss which of the eligible students would be most appropriate for the program in light of other factors (e.g., parental presence, willingness to participate, need, literacy levels, how he/she handles a group setting, how he/she interacts with peers, etc.). Students and families with open cases with the Child and Family Services Agency, Court Social Services, or other agencies are deemed ineligible for the program.

The program targets about 10 to 15 students for the program, and every youth must have an adult—ideally a parent or guardian—participate with him or her during the weekly program sessions. The program's capacity is limited by the judicial meetings with individual families. Because there is only time for one, or possibly two, meetings each week, each 10-week program can only accommodate 10 to 20 participants.

Program Components

WEEKLY GROUP SESSIONS

The program involves about 10 weekly TCDP sessions, held before school and typically facilitated by a volunteer judge. Each session involves discussions run by volunteer judges and another staff member. Every session also contains homework assignments and projects on the next week's theme, such as creating a poster about one's family, creating a public service announcement about the dangers of drug abuse, or writing an essay about one's career aspirations. Completed homework assignments are discussed during the next week's session.

The goals of the group sessions and the program curriculum are various and diffuse. The goals of the sessions are to change the attitudes of parents and students, including attitudes toward school attendance and achievement, personal responsibility and accountability, the courts, career aspirations, drug use, negative peers, and self-esteem. The sessions also aim to improve child and parent communication.

Such a holistic approach can encompass a wide variety of discussion topics and exercises, and each session typically features a theme relevant to youth (e.g., defining self, avoiding peer influence, avoiding drug and alcohol use). The program also includes regular positive reinforcement for all participating youth, including "shout-outs" from others in the room about each student. These shout-outs—provided from anyone in attendance, even other participants—give public, positive feedback to youths in order to recognize and encourage their efforts and their progress.

MEETINGS WITH INDIVIDUAL FAMILIES

Judges and other relevant support staff meet once with each family over the course of the program, in private. These meetings are intended to help with both attitude change and with the identification of service needs and service coordination.

These sessions allow the judges and other staff to delve deeply into the challenges facing each family, in a private and supportive setting. Different support services put into place or still needed can be discussed, along with other ideas for moving forward and improving a youth's school attendance. A case manager, school personnel, the judge, the youth, and a parent or other adult typically attend these individual family meetings.

CASE MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE PROVISION

The TCDP model also involves service provision via intensive case management conducted at the family level, in order to address barriers to student attendance. Case management is primarily provided by FSFSC family support workers. The intake process is the standard intake process used by all Collaboratives under the Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaborative Council (HFTCCC) in the District of Columbia. The intake process involves collection of demographic information, completion of an intake form, a Family Assessment Form to identify service needs, and a Family Development Plan that outlines the family's goals and the requirements of the truancy initiative. Within 30 days, family support workers complete assessments for each participating family, and the Family Assessment Form and Family Development Plan are revisited at least once every 90 days for updating and evaluating progress toward family goals. The plans and assistance for each family are unique in order to address each family's individual needs.

Ideally, all families complete the intake process prior to the start of the group sessions. Completing intake before beginning the program sessions allows all program staff to understand the needs and abilities of participating youth and families, and to tailor their approach and the curriculum as needed.

Following intake, FSFSC family support workers conduct home visits and make frequent contact with clients in order to build and maintain rapport, identify client needs, and assess progress toward family and student goals. FSFSC provides referrals and linkage to appropriate services and organizations, as well as case management. Support workers construct plans and provide assistance to each family in order to uniquely address each family's individual needs. In practice, family support workers are jacks of all trades, doing what is needed to help their clients succeed.

TEAM MEETINGS

The 2011–12 pilot program did not involve regular team meetings to discuss participant needs and progress. Such meetings are part of other TCDPs, including the prior TCDP in DC. Such team meetings are typically used to facilitate a discussion across all program stakeholders regarding each participant's needs, monitor his or her progress, and brainstorm approaches for each family that might help address barriers.

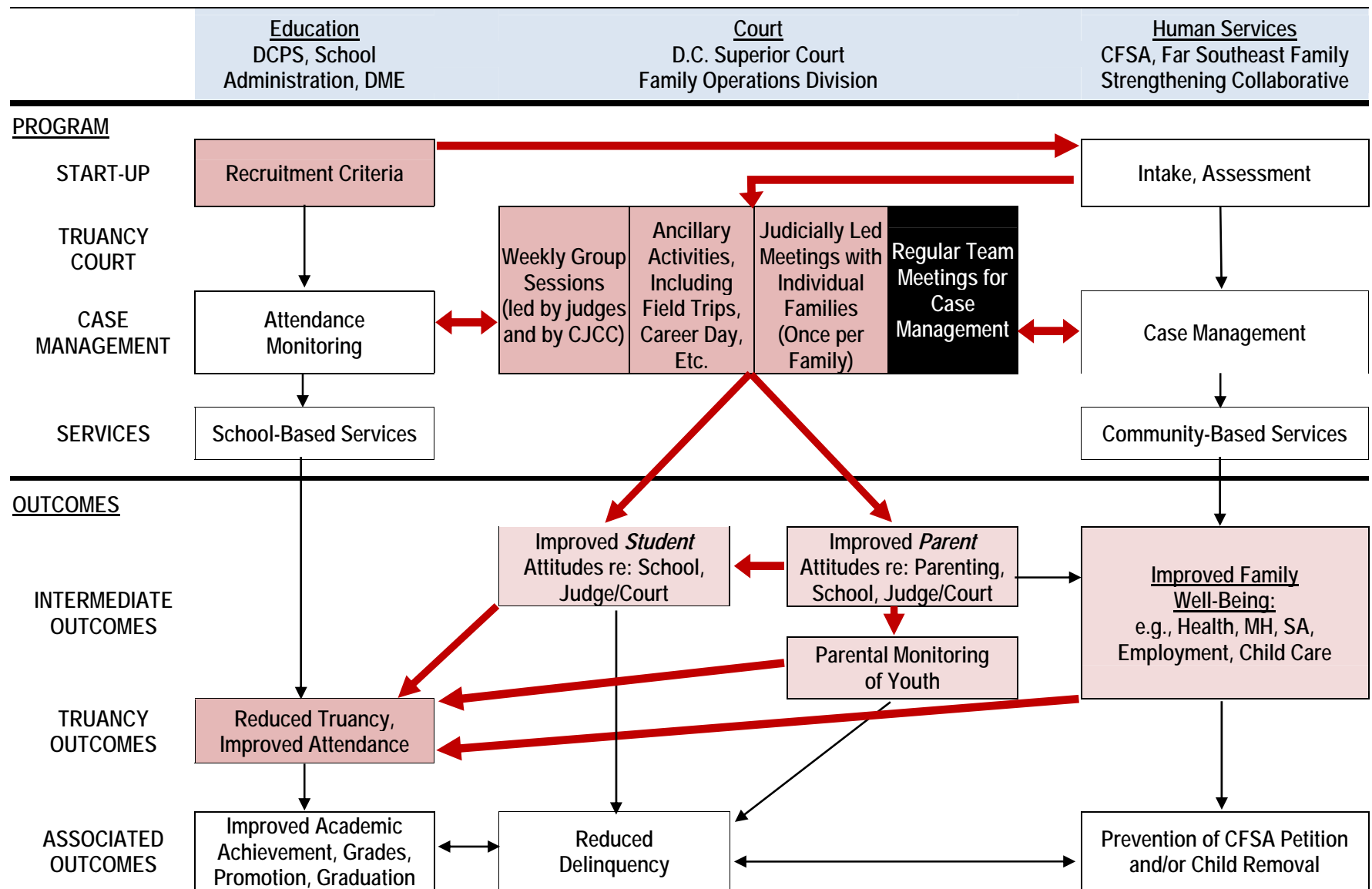
ANCILLARY ACTIVITIES

Several additional program activities may also be used to supplement the standard program components (i.e., the group sessions, FSFSC case management, and individual family meetings with the judges). These ancillary activities, which do not involve parents, reinforce the general attitudinal change goals of the program. Such activities may involve after-school group sessions with youth conducted by FSFSC case managers, field trips, or a career day.

Outcomes

Figure 1 outlines the logic of the program, with the three main program partners highlighted at the top: educational partners, the courts, and human services partners. The main distinctive elements of the TCDP program—group sessions led by judges and CJCC staff, and meetings between judges and individual families—are shown in the center. The schools and community service provider (FSFSC, in this case) play crucial independent roles in the program, which are essentially their standard roles. The primary intended change to standard practice is greater interagency collaboration among partners through the program.

The logic model illustrates the key anticipated relationship between program activities and intermediate outcomes, and in turn, to long-term outcomes. The two primary goals of changed attitudes and reduced barriers to student attendance are *intermediate* outcomes, which are in turn expected to lead to the *primary program outcomes* of improved student attendance and lower truancy. Note that in human services terms, improvements in family well-being, especially for families with extensive needs, may be more important than reducing truancy per se. Yet, for the TCDP as a truancy reduction program, improved family well-being is an intermediate outcome, which is expected to lead to improvements in the primary outcomes of truancy and attendance.

FIGURE 1. TRUANCY COURT DIVERSION PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL

Note: Thick red arrows indicate key routes to reduced truancy for TCDP; black components are commonly part of TCDPs but are not being implemented in the pilot program. In the table, MH stands for mental health and SA for substance abuse.

It is also hoped that improved attendance will be tied to improvement in *associated outcomes*. Academically, increased attendance should be associated with improved achievement, grades, and high school graduation rates, and lowered dropout rates. Indeed, much of the curriculum of the group sessions, as well as a career day in which students meet someone who works in a field of interest to them, is directed at motivating academic achievement and graduation. TCDP's approach also assumes that intervening with at-risk youth will prevent the need for more formal involvement with CFSA and the court in the future.

The logic model is meant to illustrate the program's intended effects. But the present evaluation is not an impact evaluation, and does not measure these outcomes. Nor are there measures in place for the key intermediate outcomes of student or parent attitudes. The logic model is intended to illustrate that the program is predicated on the understanding that in order to affect truancy outcomes, the program would first affect these intermediate outcomes.

Anticipated outcomes are relative to what would have happened in the absence of the program. Thus, "improved" student attitudes or "reduced" truancy indicates that participants have improved attitudes or reduced truancy more than they would have otherwise. This is not necessarily the same as students' improvement in their own prior truancy, because truancy is not stable. If left unaddressed, truancy problems often worsen with age. For this reason, a strong impact evaluation would involve a strong comparison group of students with equivalent truancy risk but who did not participate in the program, preferably from a random assignment design.

IV. PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

We now turn to examine the actual implementation of the program design described in section III, based on DCPI's observations and interviews with program personnel.

Interagency Partnership

The interagency partnership of the TCDP functioned on two different levels. One level involved key stakeholders, the ITTF, and its Steering Committee, who decided to implement the TCDP and provided oversight and key decisionmaking. The other level of the partnership was operational, and involved interagency coordination to implement the program. The partnership was generally strong at each level. However, the two aspects of the program were quite disconnected, involving different participants, and coordination between these two levels was not strong. Most participants in the stakeholder decisionmaking meetings were not directly involved in implementing the program, while those who did implement the program were not present at stakeholder decisionmaking meetings. As a result, there was insufficient feedback from the program as implemented to the stakeholder decisionmaking group, and decisions made by that group and their rationale were often not clear to those actually implementing the program.

PARTNER INVOLVEMENT

Judges. The presiding judge of the Family Court was involved in planning and oversight, and attended several key events. Two volunteer Family Court judges were involved in the pilot program at each school. The first TCDP, at Kramer M.S., was led by a judge with prior experience with the program, a background in education and human services, and a strong presence. She was accompanied by a judge new to the program, who began primarily as an observer and eventually took a more active role. This was somewhat akin to an apprenticeship approach. For most weeks, the judge who conducted the sessions wore a robe.

At the second TCDP, at Johnson M.S., both judges were new to the program. Both had participated in the training by Judge Byer in September 2011, one had attended some of the weekly sessions held at Kramer M.S., and both had good working relationships with and were able to seek out guidance and advice from the other judges.

CJCC. CJCC served as a coordinating body for the ITTF and its Steering Committee, and also provided a program manager to coordinate the TCDP. The program manager also led the second half of the weekly program meetings, while judges met with individual families. The CJCC program manager also led development of the curriculum, starting from the curriculum used in the District's earlier TCDP.

The contrast in roles between the judges and the CJCC staff member helped to keep participants engaged throughout the hour-long sessions, and the CJCC staff member was able to relate to and connect with the students in a very different way than the judges and developed a strong rapport with participants.

DCPS and Schools. Central DCPS staff attended some planning meetings and other significant events at both schools, such as the last day's graduation ceremony, as well as some weekly TCDP sessions.

The assistant principal attended nearly every session at one school, but representatives from the administration attended only infrequently at the other. At one school, the attendance counselor participated at most sessions; at the other, the attendance counselor was considered a strong program

partner, but was often trying to locate students who had not yet arrived, which often precluded direct participation in the sessions. One teacher came to weekly sessions regularly to cite progress her students were making during “shout-outs” or to sit with a student whose parent was not there if needed; another teacher attended occasionally. At each school, school social workers were involved in only one or two of the meetings with individual families. In general, partners felt that successful program implementation required strong support from school administration, and would be strengthened by increased participation of school personnel, including teachers and social workers.

Human Services. Administrative staff from CFSA and the Deputy Mayor for Human Services were involved in program planning and oversight meetings, but rarely attended the weekly sessions.

FSFSC supervisory staff attended several early weekly sessions at each school. FSFSC family support workers were regular and important participants at the weekly sessions, conducted intense work with participating families, and also organized additional group meetings during the week with the students involved in the program.

A SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROGRAM

In an interagency partnership, it is important for partners to have a shared understanding of the program, its goals, and its strategies. This was a weak point at the start of this program. The program was chosen based on some partners’ earlier experiences, but a common understanding of the underlying program logic and appropriateness does not seem to have been developed.

Some partners conceived of the program as a diversion program and “last chance” for those who would otherwise receive formal intervention. Other partners, however, conceived of the program as a supportive prevention program that is intended to forestall the eventual consideration of a formal referral. This difference in perspectives was associated with different ideas about whether to use a “harder” or “softer” approach during program recruitment, and no clear decision was reached. In addition, no consensus was reached on how to respond to nonattendance and noncompliance with the program, as discussed below.

Not all program materials were shared with all partners, including materials from the previous District TCDP, from the training session in September 2011, and directly from Judge Byer. Inconsistent communication among partners—including key agency stakeholders and those actually implementing the program—led to some confusion and a lack of clarity regarding who or what was driving different programmatic plans and decisionmaking, the timing of the program, and the expectations for those implementing the program.

INFORMATION SHARING

As a first step, memorandums of understanding for sharing data across agencies were established early on in the program through the leadership of the ITTF Steering Committee and Presiding Family Court Judge Zoe Bush. However, judges were not provided with full information on all participants prior to the start of the program in either school. Nor did the pilot program include a regular forum for this kind of information sharing, such as regular program partner meetings. As a result, information was not shared routinely. Data on attendance, grades, or disciplinary actions were not provided to program partners regularly, and program partners had limited information regarding how well the youth were doing in school and whether the efforts were having any immediate effects. In addition, no information on student and family challenges or barriers, progress, or outstanding needs was provided to partners in

advance of the individual family meetings, although brief verbal summaries were often provided immediately prior to the meeting.

Partners did communicate with each other as necessary on an informal basis, but many program partners interviewed believed that partner meetings should be held regularly, which would facilitate more comprehensive information sharing.

Planning, Start-Up, and Participation

The planning process began with a training session given by Judge Byer on her truancy court model in September 2011. Stakeholders from the ITTF, including judges and service providers, attended the training along with members of the CJCC and representatives from both schools. Judge Byer also met with the judges alone to discuss logistics of the program that were relevant to the judge's role. Because DCPI had not begun its evaluation at that time, DCPI was unable to observe these sessions.

Kramer M.S. and Johnson M.S. were selected as the first TCDP sites during the 2011–12 school year, based both on the schools' perceived needs (i.e., high levels of truant and at-risk youth) and the openness of the schools' administrations to hosting such a program. Implementation at these two schools was staggered, with the TCDP at Kramer starting first. While both were expected to begin in the fall term, the start-up for the first school was pushed back several times due to recruitment issues. In late December, one judge introduced the program to Kramer M.S. school staff, including teachers, at a regularly scheduled staff professional development session. Teachers were invited to attend the weekly sessions. The start date was ultimately set for January 5, 2012. Start-up at the second school was even later, with a start date of February 29, 2012. Many partners, including the judges who had been trained in September, had waited months for the program to start, only to rush into it when the start date was set.

Ultimately, the TCDP was held from January to March 2012 at Kramer M.S., and from March to May 2012 at Johnson M.S.

While several individuals took the initiative to accomplish different parts of the program, the program did not have a clear director or leader who was empowered to easily lead the interagency work and coordinate communication among both stakeholders and participating personnel. Moreover, some partners felt that they were progressing without a real plan or "making it up as [they] went along," and that progress was accomplished "in bits and pieces."

RECRUITMENT AND START-UP

The current year's attendance was used to identify students at risk for chronic truancy. This approach meant that program eligibility could not be determined until midway through the fall academic term. Eligible students were first identified based on current year attendance, with the school's attendance counselor playing a central role in the process. Then consultation with program partners identified students and families who were ineligible because of open cases with the CFSA, Court Social Services, or other agencies.

School and FSFSC personnel then reached out (sometimes together) to candidate students and their families through home visits, telephone calls, and letters sent home with the students. The letters were signed by the judge, explaining that their child had been identified as at risk for truancy and was being given an opportunity to participate in an antitrtruancy program.

To welcome participating families, an event was hosted for both committed and potential participating families—a spaghetti dinner—shortly prior to the start of the program. Parents were able to share with each other why they decided to attend the program, providing support for each other. Program partners presented the structure of the program in more detail, talked about the program as an opportunity to improve their situation or get help for their children, and provided positive reinforcement for agreeing to participate.

Families who agreed to participate were asked to sign a contract committing to the program, including completing the intake process with FSFSC, regularly attending the weekly sessions, and participating in at least one individual family meeting with the judge over the program period.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Kramer M.S. The Kramer M.S. administration initially identified 46 eligible youth who had five to nine absences through approximately the end of October 2011. After excluding those with open cases with the CFSA, Court Social Services, or other agencies, 15 to 18 students were identified for recruitment. By December 2011, only six families had committed to the program. A planning meeting held at that time focused on recruitment strategies, with partners brainstorming ideas for getting families to commit to participation, and debating whether to use a “softer” recruitment strategy focused on offers of help, or a “harder” strategy focused on the possible consequences of a referral to court for chronic truancy. Ultimately, eight students from seven families agreed to participate. Participation contracts were signed prior to the start of the program sessions. Program attendance was then fairly consistent for most participants, with a core group missing only one or two sessions each.

Johnson M.S. The Johnson M.S. administration began identifying students for the TCDP in February 2012. Approximately 20 youth were identified for the program, with five later excluded because of open CFSA cases. Twelve families were visited by the school attendance counselor and/or FSFSC case managers, and five youths (five families) ultimately agreed to participate. Participants signed participation contracts during the first session.

It proved difficult for FSFSC workers to complete the intake process, which is required in order for families to begin receiving FSFSC services, before the program began. At the first two sessions, FSFSC staff encouraged families to complete the intake forms, even providing a phone for calling the office and offering to sit with families while they went through the process over the phone. Nonetheless, it was a struggle to get families to complete intake in a timely fashion so that services from FSFSC could begin. Some families that originally committed to participate never completed the intake process and ultimately dropped out of the program.

At the first scheduled session, only three students and their parents attended, and those attendees arrived late. The first session’s curriculum was delayed a week so that more families could participate in the full set of program sessions. Commitment forms for the program were signed during the second session, when more participants were present. Despite overall improvement in program attendance over time, participants continued to arrive late (sometimes as much as 45 minutes late), and for some, program attendance remained spotty throughout the program period. This was especially true for the parents; only a few attended regularly.

Ultimately, 15 students from 13 families participated; two participating families each involved two students. Demographics of the participating families are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Student (n = 14)	
African American	100%
Female	57%
Average age	14
No involvement of father	85%
6th grade	2
7th grade	5
8th grade	7
Parent (n = 12)	
Female	100%
Average age	42
Single parent	75%
Average number of children in household	2
English language speakers	100%

Sources: Intake assessment, FSFSC participant data.

RESPONSES TO PROGRAM NONATTENDANCE AND NONCOMPLIANCE

No consensus was reached among partners concerning how to respond to program nonattendance and/or noncompliance. This reflects a tension inherent in the program. On the one hand, the program is intended to promote positive attitudes and reinforce positive development. On the other, the program uses judges to reinforce the seriousness of participants' truancy problem and to emphasize accountability. As a voluntary program, attendance is not obligatory, and punitive responses are at odds with the program's philosophy. Nonetheless, for a program stressing both the importance of attendance and the theme of responsibility, failure to establish key expectations with participants concerning program requirements, and failure to respond to program noncompliance, may perversely reinforce the idea that school attendance is optional. And indeed, as discussed below, program attendance was a problem.

An additional unresolved issue for the program was how to respond when a student attended, but without a parent. On the one hand, parent involvement is key to the program's holistic and family-based approach to truancy. Absence of the parent means that the program cannot be implemented as intended. On the other hand, program staff did want to reward the presence of students even in the face of an absent parent or guardian. In practice, when parents or guardians were not present, another adult (e.g., an FSFSC case manager, school attendance counselor, or the second judge) acted as the youth's partner in the group meetings, discussions, and exercises, spoke up for the youth, and provided support and encouragement.

Weekly Group Sessions

The judges typically ran the first half of the session, going over the previous week's homework or introducing a new theme. A CJCC staff member ran the second half of the session, usually with a hands-on activity related to the weekly theme. Throughout program implementation, a CJCC staff member updated and adjusted the materials that had been used for the previous implementation.

As implemented, the curriculum aimed to uncover participants' talents, what they want to do later in life, and what they need to do in order to get there. The program was strong in working to ensure that every student participant received some praise during every program session. In addition, the session activities were well received and appeared to address the goals of attitude change among students and parents.

A career day session was held late in the program at each school. Adults in different careers, such as police officers, lawyers, a fashion designer, a former National Football League player, a current football coach, and a chef, were brought in to match the interests of the participants. Career day generated significant excitement and energy among both program partners and participants, and the conversation the following week focused on the career day lessons and revelations.

The Johnson M.S. program period included spring break. In lieu of a weekly meeting during the school vacation, the FSFSC case managers, with encouragement from CJCC and the judges, tried to organize a field trip to the National Portrait Gallery to see a special exhibit on acclaimed black artists and professionals, but student interest in the field trip was low, and the trip was canceled.

Meetings with Individual Families

The first meeting with an individual family was conducted during the third week of the program at both schools. DCPI staff did not observe any of these meetings but did discuss what the meetings entailed with program partners and participants.

As a component of a larger program, these meetings did seem to help with the development of positive attitudes, although we are unable to parse out their particular contribution to those attitude changes. However, these meetings were not very successful in promoting service coordination, as discussed below. If anything, they served to help identify gaps and problems with services (e.g., an individualized education program that had not been acted upon by the school). While families appreciated someone attending to these issues, the attention occurred too late in the academic term to have much effect. Even when such service gaps were identified early, including only one such meeting with each family did not allow for coordinated follow-up efforts to see that issues had been successfully addressed.

The school social workers at both schools were involved in only one or two of the meetings with individual families at their respective schools. In addition, representatives from the school administration were often missing from the individual meetings at Johnson. Some partners believe that the individual family meetings should have routine participation from additional personnel, including the school attendance counselors and school social workers.

Case Management and Service Provision

The program was successful in linking participating students and their families to services through FSFSC, through FSFSC's existing contract with CFSA. However, without regular team meetings in which information was shared repeatedly about individual youth and families, the program was only weakly able to produce integrated service provision.

Significant mental health needs were found among participants and their families, and partners expressed a desire for more involvement from the Department of Mental Health, including on-site mental health counselors.

At both schools, case managers from FSFSC directed weekly afternoon sessions with youth participants only; no parents were involved. During these weekly sessions, youth participated in additional activities related to the week's theme. These sessions are not standard for most TCDP programs; FSFSC took the initiative to conduct the additional sessions in order to support the efforts made at the TCDP morning sessions. The sessions were required for the youth, and case managers used the time as an opportunity to provide additional support to youth, assist them with completing assignments required for the program, and continue to develop the relationship between youths and case managers.

Finally, we note that the pilot program did not involve regular team meetings to discuss the students' progress and situations. This function of case management and service provision was essentially left to FSFSC. The single judicial meeting with individual families during the course of the program was the only time a particular student's case was really discussed by the entire team. Partners indicated that they frequently shared information about students informally, such as over email or after weekly program sessions. While valuable, those conversations did not involve all relevant parties, and they often did not involve consistent data sharing on attendance, behavior, or academic performance.

V. STUDENT AND PARENT PERSPECTIVES

At the end of the 10-week session at both schools, the evaluation team conducted a focus group with parents who participated in the TCDP sessions regularly, and at Kramer M.S., the evaluation team interviewed youth participants individually. This section summarizes the perspective of participants on program implementation, including what they believed was successful and what could be improved for future cohorts.

We note the important caveat that program dropouts and nonparticipants are not represented. As a result, it is likely that participants with the most negative perspectives are omitted, so that the reports here may be biased toward being positive.

Below are some of the attitudes expressed by various participants:

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE PROGRAM

- Youth participants were overwhelmingly positive about the program. All respondents reported initially being resistant to participating in the program, being worried that it would be boring, too much like school, or would require too much additional work. All participants also reported that after having finished the program, they found it to be much more engaging than they expected.
- Youth reported that participating in the program had changed their attitudes.
- Parents, too, were overwhelmingly positive about the program, despite some initial concerns that the program would be preachy or would criticize their parenting skills or style.
- The program also seemed to create a support system, both for youth with other program participants, as well as for parents in meeting other parents facing similar challenges.

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE JUDGE

- Youth identified the judges as strict but caring.
- Participation in TCDP offered both parents and youths a “dose of reality” by introducing them to a real judge and teaching them the value of being on time, being in class, and focusing on doing better in school.
- The families preferred to be at the TCDP program rather than go to truancy court and believed that the judges did not want to see the students in the system.
- Parents believed that judges carried through with their responsibilities, which spoke volumes about their commitment to the youth.
- Parents felt that the judges encouraged a sense of responsibility and planned, with the family, what the student would change on his or her own.

- Parents also looked positively on the way the judges related with the students, addressing them directly.
- The parents agreed that it was important for the students to see the judges, learn about what they do, and realize they are concerned for the students.
- From the parents' perspective, the students also learned trust, self-respect, and that they can talk to other role models.

ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL

- Youth reported identifying with the themes that were presented in the weekly sessions, and having learned more about themselves.
- Youth were also able to identify some of the poor school attendance behaviors that made them eligible for the program.
- They reported a greater understanding of the importance of school and how to achieve their career goals, and felt confident that their school attendance had improved and would remain that way.
- Some parents believed that the program had beneficial effects by encouraging parents to face the truth about their child's truancy.
- Some parents learned that their child's attendance was the parents' responsibility.
- Parents reported confusion and anger about how their students had become truant—the students were going to school but were tardy, and if they were absent from the school, the staff didn't notify the parents until late in the day.
- The parents stressed the importance of being involved with the schools and the sacrifices the parents may need to make in order to do so.

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATION AND ATTITUDES

- Participants reported improved relationships and communication between parents and children, an increased ability of children to talk to their parents about issues they were facing, and children reported that their parents better understood their positions.
- Parents reported that the program helped them to get more involved in their children's day-to-day lives.
- Parents indicated that they had also learned how to handle behavior in a more constructive way, and were more prepared to parent the other children in their home as well (who were not in the TCDP program).

- Parents believed that when they attended and participated in the TCDP sessions, it demonstrated to their children that they are interested in the children's lives and will support them, and sacrifice their time to attend the sessions.

PEER AND OTHER INFLUENCES

- Youth reported being more aware of the influence of their peers and were making better decisions regarding with whom they would spend time. This report is consistent with observation of many program partners that the participants had formed friendships with other youth in the program and were acting as positive supports for each other.

FSFSC

- Parents greatly appreciated the services provided by FSFSC; some found this the most important part of the program.
- Most parents had heard of FSFSC before, but none had received any services prior to participating in the TCDP.
- Parents reported that the home visits were helpful in addressing a range of issues and assisting with other children living in the home.
- FSFSC provided a support system and helped the families plan or find employment opportunities.

VI. ASSESSED NEEDS AND SERVICES PROVIDED

The Collaboratives in the HFTCC use common assessment instruments and management information systems to collect and store case information. Data concerning assessed family functioning and services provided by FSFSC were obtained from HFTCC for this evaluation. This chapter begins by describing baseline family functioning for TCDP participants, examines services provided, and then describes family functioning at the end of the program.

Intake Assessments

FSFSC conducted intake assessments of all participants. Completing the intake process is a prerequisite to receiving services through FSFSC. These intakes were conducted on average two days before the beginning of the formal TCDP. However, in one of the pilot schools, it proved difficult to get families to complete the intake, and some intake assessments were conducted only after several TCDP sessions.

Intake assessment involves answering a series of questions about all members of the family, monthly expenses and income, and services the family would like to receive. This intake assessment can be done over the phone or in the FSFSC office and typically takes about 20 minutes to complete. Intake is not necessarily conducted by the family support worker who will ultimately work with a family.

Table 3 displays intake information on participating families. The predominant needs of these families were financial: 9 of 12 families received food stamps, 11 were on Medicaid, and 7 received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); half (6 of 12) of heads of household were unemployed.

Table 3. Intake Assessment Data (N = 12 families)*

Health and Mental Health	
Has physical disability	4
Ever had mental health issues	2
Ever had alcohol or drug problem	1
Education and Employment	
Less than HS degree	3
Not in labor force	3
Unemployed	6
At job longer than 6 months	2
Financial Situation	
Avg. monthly income	\$599
On Medicaid	11
On disability	2
Receiving Food Stamps	9
Receiving Social Security Income	2
Receiving TANF	7
Receiving unemployment insurance	2
Housing	
Average monthly rent	\$470
Section 8 Voucher holder	2
Average times moved in last 3 years	1

Sources: Intake Assessment, FSFSC participant data.

Baseline Family Assessments

The case manager (or family support worker) assigned to a family initially conducts a home visit and completes the Family Assessment Form (FAF) within 30 days of intake. The FAF is then repeated every 90 days until a case is closed. The FAF was developed by the Children's Bureau of Southern California in the mid-1980s and has been used by hundreds of child welfare organizations.³ This report uses data from four Family Functioning Factors in the FAF: (1) living conditions, (2) financial conditions, (3) interactions between caregivers and children, and (4) support available to the family. Data are also summarized from additional sections that assess personal characteristics of the caregiver (e.g., substance use, depression), and whether the child needs supportive services to address a physical, emotional, or behavioral concern.

Table 4 displays the service needs identified at the initial assessment.⁴ Six of 13 families were assessed as having financial needs; these were compounded by problematic living conditions for four families. Five families had problems in caregiver-child interactions, and two families had children who were assessed as having a physical, emotional, or behavioral concern.

³ See <http://dccollaboratives.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Family-Assessment-Form.pdf>.

⁴ Most domains consist of several items. Item responses range from 1 (representing normal functioning with no cause for concern) to 5 (representing dysfunction that requires immediate intervention). Scores of 3 or above on individual items typically indicate that a family has service needs, and are used in these tables.

As part of the assessment, FSFSC case managers also listed particular needs of TCDP student participants, which are displayed at the bottom of the table.⁵ More than half of student participants (6 of 13) were assessed as showing lack of cooperation and/or withdrawal from family. Three students each were assessed as have inadequate educational services, problematic peer interactions or influences, and needs in emotional, behavior, or mental health. In summary, the TCDP participant students and their families displayed considerable service needs.

Table 4. Baseline needs

Family assessment domain	Number of families with a service need (N = 11)*
Living conditions	4
Financial conditions	6
Supports to caregivers	2
Caregiver-child interactions	5
Caregiver personal characteristics	2
Child needs supportive services to address a physical, emotional, or behavioral concern	2
Student needs	Number of students with identified needs (N = 13)**
Lack of cooperation/withdrawal from family	6
Inadequate educational services	3
Peer interactions, influence	3
Emotional, behavioral, mental health	3
Developmental delays/intellectual capacity	1
Substance abuse/drug involvement	1
Physical health problems/physical disability	1

* FAF data were missing for one participant/family.

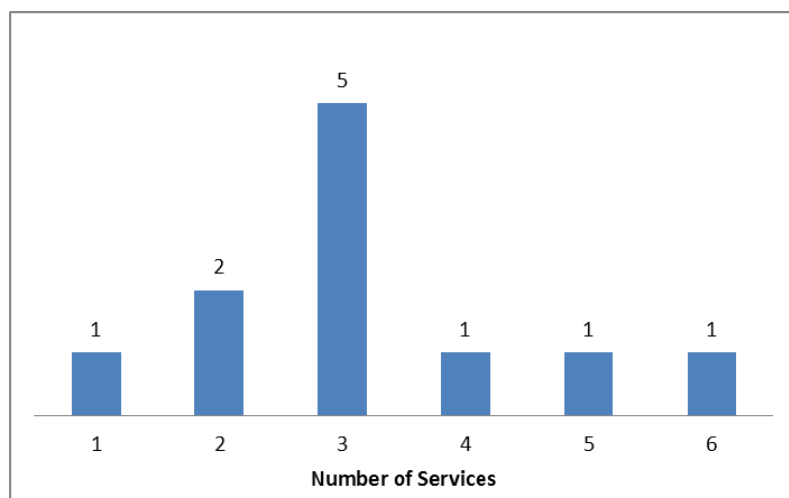
** Two students participated from each of two families.

Sources: Family Assessment Form data, FSFSC participant data.

Services Provided

Based on their assessments of family needs, FSFSC case managers work to provide services to TCDP families. Figure 2 displays the number of types of services provided to each family; most clients were referred to services of three separate types. Table 5 then displays the particular types of services provided to TCDP participating families. The most common service provided to children were educational (10 of 11 families), and the most common service provided to parents concerned employment (4 of 11 families).

⁵ The need to address truancy was also sometimes noted, but we take this as given for clients referred through the TCDP.

Figure 2. Number of Services Provided to Participating Families

Sources: Family Assessment Form data, FSFSC participant data.

Table 5. Services Provided to TCDP Families (N = 11 families)*

SERVICES TO CHILD	
Child education	10
Medical health–child	0
Mental health–child	2
Youth recreation	3
FINANCIAL	
Clothing	1
Food	0
Furniture	1
Utility assistance	2
PARENT CHILD INTERACTION	
Parent-child interaction support	1
OTHER	
Caregiver education	1
Child care	0
Employment	4
Family education	0
Homemaker services	0
Transportation	0

* FAF data were missing for one participant/family.

Sources: Family Development Plan data, FSFSC participant data.

Final Family Assessment

Table 6 displays the assessed needs of families at the end of the program, based on the last FAF completed. In most cases, service provision was for the length of the TCDP program (about 10 weeks), and cases were closed shortly thereafter. For two families still receiving services at the time the data were compiled for DCPI, the evaluation team used data from the most recently completed FAF.

Before comparing baseline and final family assessments, we should note that these assessments are not independent of case management; they are made by the same case managers providing service referrals. The number of participants is too small to support any statistical comparisons, and we are unable to distinguish changes in family need attributable to the program from chance fluctuation in family needs over time.

Descriptively, a comparison to the baseline assessed needs shown earlier seems to show improvement in family service needs. Financial needs are listed for four families (vs. six at baseline); living conditions for one family (vs. four at baseline); supportive services for children needed for two families (vs. five at baseline). Student needs also seem to show some improvement, with three students now showing lack of cooperation and/or family withdrawal compared to six at baseline, based on the same eleven students.

Table 6. Assessed Needs at End of Program

Family assessment domain	Number of families with a service need (N = 11)*
Living conditions	1
Financial conditions	4
Supports to caregivers	0
Caregiver-child interactions	4
Caregiver personal characteristics	2
Child needs supportive services to address a physical, emotional, or behavioral concern	2
Student needs	Number of students with identified need (N = 13)*
Lack of cooperation/withdrawal from family	3
Inadequate educational services	3
Peer interactions, influence	3
Emotional, behavioral, mental health	4
Developmental delays/intellectual capacity	1
Substance abuse/drug involvement	1
Physical health problems/physical disability	1

* Data were missing for one participant/family.

Sources: Family Assessment Form data, FSFSC participant data.

In sum, the families participating in the TCDP displayed considerable needs, especially in financial and employment domains. Through case management from FSFSC, each family received three types of services, on average, during the TCDP. Final assessments by caseworkers are consistent with anecdotal reports of participants that the services provided by FSFSC improved their family well-being.

VII. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implementation and testing of the TCDP can be thought of as involving phases. In the initial phases of program implementation, there is a period of experimentation and adaptation, which may involve one or several cycles of experimentation. The program is first tried in a pilot program, which yields lessons about implementation challenges and about warranted program modifications. Once stable, the program is tested more rigorously. Finally, the stable and well-defined program is implemented more broadly.

We organize our discussion along similar lines by first summarizing the findings from this pilot evaluation, then turning to possible program adaptations for future implementation, and finally to considerations that would be involved in expanding the program.

Summary

The TCDP aims to reduce truancy in two ways: by changing the attitudes of parents and students, and by using case management and human service delivery to address barriers to student attendance. The pilot program had areas of success and also had challenges that suggest the potential for program improvement and modification.

Despite strong beliefs that the scope of the truancy problem is far larger than the capacity of this program, the pilot TCDP had difficulty recruiting students and families and did not fill all program slots. For a program *target* of only 10 to 15 students, at Kramer M.S. only eight students regularly participated and graduated, and at Johnson M.S., only six students participated and graduated.

The primary success of the program was that among those who did participate, by the end of the program, it seems—based on qualitative responses—to have been effective in improving attitudes of student participants as well as parents. As the intermediate outcome that is the target of the program’s formal activities, this is promising.

The program also seems to have been successful in getting needed services to families through the program, and the services seem to have had some positive impact on family well-being. However, the interagency coordination and integrated service delivery model was only weakly implemented. This means that the service delivery aspect likely did not achieve its full potential. A missing component that seems important for such a program is a regular team meeting to discuss student progress and challenges, and to monitor service access and delivery across school and human services.

We are unable to assess the program’s possible effects on student attendance. Too few students participated for any attendance results to be reliable (or statistically significant). Moreover, because the program was implemented during the second half of the school year at both pilot schools—and quite late at one school—it had little chance to demonstrate any effects on attendance or truancy.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested in order to address some of the main challenges experienced during the TCDP pilot program.

PLANNING AND START-UP

Recommendation: Provide increased training for all partners, especially judges new to the program.

As DCPI was not able to attend the training that was provided to program partners, we cannot comment on it directly. However, based on our observation that partners did not have a strong enough shared understanding of the program, we infer that increased training is needed for the participating staff, including judges, and school personnel, including local school administration, CJCC staff, and case managers. Training should cover not just the goals and general program aims, but also concrete particulars of implementing the program, including requirements for attendance, responses to nonattendance, the kind of information that partners are expected to share at the weekly meetings, and the curriculum to be used.

Recommendation: Allow sufficient time for planning, recruitment, and intake prior to beginning weekly program sessions.

The weekly program sessions at both schools seemed to begin before all program partners—including the schools and participants themselves—were ready. Recruitment took longer and presented more challenges than was expected, and not all participants had completed the intake process prior to the start of program sessions. Understanding that planning, recruitment, and intake will take a significant amount of time, and incorporating a realistic planning period into the program design, will ensure that all partners have shared expectations for a program start date, that participating families are committed, and that the intake process for the human services component is completed.

PROGRAM ELIGIBILITY, RECRUITMENT, AND PROGRAM ATTENDANCE

The key challenge to the pilot program was recruitment. The program was mounted at the middle schools deemed to have some of the most serious truancy problems in the city, and yet program partners were unable to fill the program slots. We also note that some participants began the program but attended only sporadically.

Recommendation: Use prior year's attendance as eligibility criteria.

As implemented during the pilot, the program targeted at-risk students based on current year attendance. This required the program to wait until sometime into the school year to identify the target population. Basing eligibility criteria on attendance during the prior term (or prior year) was raised in planning discussions late in the year for the 2012–13 school year. This would allow participants for the fall term to be identified during the summer, and would allow program recruitment to begin at the beginning of the academic year, or even beforehand. It would allow recruitment of students and families to dovetail more easily with the start of a new school term. Conceivably, this might help with program recruitment. It would also allow one cohort of participants to be involved in each academic term.

Recommendation: Formalize additional eligibility criteria and include partners outside of school in the process.

Prior attendance is not the only criterion for selection into the program. Another set of criteria are less well defined, and relate to the potential for the program to improve attendance. Such criteria might relate either to the attitude change or the service dimension of the program, or both. That is, selection might take into account prior knowledge of the students' and parents' attitudes. Or they might take into account what is known about the families' level of need. Which of these types of criteria are used for selection should be aligned with the program's emphases. DCPI was not present at the meetings at which the youth were selected for invitation into the TCDP. In the pilot program, these considerations were not formalized. Going forward, it may prove constructive to formalize these considerations.

Recommendation: Use incentives and consequences to improve attendance at program sessions.

A clear understanding by program participants of what is expected in terms of program participation, along with an expectation of what will follow from failing to attend the program—potentially including being dropped from the program—seems important if the program is not to undermine the message of personal responsibility and the importance of school attendance.

CASE MANAGEMENT

Recommendation: Hold regular team meetings.

The service provision aspect of the program would be considerably strengthened by regular team meetings to review individual cases before the group sessions. This was mentioned by many program partners in our interviews. Regular team meetings would give judges information to build upon in the group sessions, especially in discussing past week's attendance and schoolwork, and allow a process more like traditional family court. They would also make the meetings with individual families much more constructive. Finally, they would allow the program to serve as the vehicle for integrated service delivery that is envisioned.

It may be useful to compare the TCDP to the Case Management Partnership Initiative (CMPI) that was also mounted during this academic year and was the topic of a prior DCPI Interim Report. The CMPI was based solely on integrated service provision to the families of truants. The services and case management were delivered by FSFSC, as in the current program. In addition, the CMPI involved regular weekly case management meetings, which the program partners believed were quite effective in facilitating integrated services delivery to the participating families. As well, those regular case management meetings served a strong role in developing working interagency relationships at the staff level, which participating staff believe have served them well beyond the immediate cases involved.

However, the time commitment to the program would double with regular weekly team meetings, which would be held either earlier in the morning (7 AM) or perhaps on the day before the TCDP session. The plan used in the earlier TCDP in the District, of at least three team meetings during the 10-week program, may be a useful intermediate step.

PROGRAM SIZE AND RESOURCES

At present, the program has served only a handful of youth with attendance issues. The program at a given school is by definition limited to 10 to 15 cases at a time, given both the need for individual families to meet with judges and to avoid overwhelming the group process that goes on during the group sessions.

Recommendation: Dedicated resources, including a formal program director, will be needed in order to expand the program considerably.

The pilot TCDP was implemented without any dedications of budgetary resources. The primary resource needed is staff time. All participating staff, including judges, CJCC staff, school personnel, and FSFSC case managers, either volunteered their time or found time within existing resources.

Implementing the TCDP at a school requires at least one judge and one other staff person, as well as the participation of a team including representatives from the schools and service providers. The number of volunteer judges willing to participate would seem the most obvious constraint on resources, but may be the easiest resource to secure. Expansion also requires another staff person on hand—currently from CJCC—to run the group sessions. It is unclear how many school sites can be supported simultaneously in this manner.

As well, the human services and case management function of the program is staff intensive. For the pilot program, FSFSC provided this function through their standing contract with CFSA. For one or two school sites, FSFSC may be able to absorb this into its ongoing capacity.

Recommendation: Additional school and DCPS support will be needed for a successful expansion of the program.

In essence, the program aims to use judicial authority to reinforce the school's message about the importance of school attendance. Only when the schools are considerably involved and supportive is that message delivered in a consistent manner.

The significance of the school's active role as host should not be underestimated. Not only can active school interest facilitate the program, lack of involvement can easily lead to scheduling problems and impediments to student participation. For example, suspension from school can prevent students from entering the school, thus preventing them from participating in the program. In addition, active school personnel participation conveys to the students and their families that the program is coordinated, and that both the school and the program are monitoring attendance and interested in addressing barriers to attendance.

Materials on the prior implementation of TCDP in the District, as well as reports from other jurisdictions, often note that the key difference between successful and unsuccessful program implementation is the level of support for the program from the school administration.

To expand on a considerable scale, the TCDP program would require strong support from the central school administration. In some outside jurisdictions, such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the TCDP partnership between the courts and the schools has been structured so that the school system is the lead organizing partner, and school social workers are key staff for the program.

VII. DISCUSSION

As a pilot program, the TCDP during the 2011–12 year was launched relatively quickly, without a long period of consideration about different alternatives on the program details. The pilot program has provided some opportunity to identify some early strengths and weaknesses and areas for potential improvement.

VARIABILITY IN IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the program in two schools demonstrates clearly the variability in implementation that is likely to occur across different schools. Comparison between the two pilot sites is not useful in itself, beyond bringing our attention to the expected variation in program implementation. The key lesson here is that the TCDP is likely to show considerable *variation* in implementation across replications that involve different schools, with varying levels of resources and support for the program, with students of varying levels of needs, and involving different judges and other key staff at different sites. We also note that participants from the District's earlier implementation of the TCDP reported similarly varied success in implementing the TCDP at various schools.

PROGRAM FIDELITY AND ADAPTATION

The current TCDP program is based on the prior DC program, but with some changes; that program in turn was based on Judge Byer's program. Because Judge Byer's program was intended to be adapted to local conditions, many of its operational details are not manualized, and its evidence of effectiveness is tentative, we do not take changes to the program as necessarily indicative of failures to implement with "fidelity." We note, therefore, that the program has changed somewhat, both in its adaptation from Judge Byer's program to the original District program, and then changed further in its reimplementations in 2011–12. It is not clear whether these changes are the result of careful and considered strategic changes, differences in immediate circumstances, or indications of program drift.

Two changes to the program are illustrative. One example concerns the coordination and monitoring of student progress and services. Judge Byer's program involved weekly team meetings before the "court" sessions to review the attendance, services, and progress for all participants. The original District of Columbia program mandated at least three such team meetings throughout the course of the program. The current pilot program formally involves just one such team meeting, at the outset of the program.

Another example concerns the nature of the group meetings, the role of the judge in those meetings, and the level of formality. In Judge Byer's program, these meetings had a formal Truancy Court session, with judges in robes and a uniformed bailiff (Byer and Kuhn 2003, 65). In the original District program, these sessions were called "hearings," again keeping some sense of a mock court, and judges often wore robes. In the current pilot program, judges have sometimes worn robes, but the meetings are neither referred to as court sessions nor as hearings.

In addition, we note that the curriculum of the program is not fixed. The breadth of the overall attitude-change goals of the program could accommodate a wide variety of curricula. While this could allow the program content to be continually improved, and potentially tailored to the particular needs of participating students, it may also leave the program somewhat murky.

More formalization of the program will be necessary in order to expand the program substantially and to achieve reasonably consistent implementation. The very adaptability of the program can be a

potential strength, by allowing it to better fit the immediate circumstances of its implementation. During an experimental phase, adapting the program to fit local circumstances can be appropriate.

The pilot TCDP program in 2011–12 seems to have been less formalized than in the earlier implementation in the District. For example, a more formal manual was developed than was used in the current program. In view of reports of variable success in implementing that program at different schools, modification of the prior program may not be unreasonable. However, the program will require more formalization before it will be ready for considerable expansion.

FUTURE TCDP EVALUATION

If formalized and expanded, the program will warrant another evaluation. Implementation will be important to reexamine. In addition to examining whether the program has been able to make progress on key implementation challenges identified in this report, a key question for an expanded program will concern whether the program is achieving *consistent* implementation across schools. Development of measures of student and parent attitudes would also allow assessment of key intermediate outcomes for a key aspect of program.

If the program involves a sufficient number of students, and is implemented early enough in the academic year to plausibly affect attendance and truancy, then attendance outcomes should also be examined. For such an outcome evaluation to achieve its potential, it will require a strong comparison group. Such comparison groups can best be identified *before* program start-up and before recruitment of students.

Conclusion

The TCDP model attempts to simultaneously address motivation and attitudes as well as barriers to attendance. Attitudes are addressed by the involvement of judges in the program, including meeting with individual families, and by curriculum intended to promote the personal responsibility of students and parents and positive involvement of parents; improve attitudes toward school achievement, graduation, and career aspirations; and improve parent-child communication. Barriers to attendance are addressed through assessment, case management, and service referrals provided by the community collaboratives and coordinated through a meeting with the judge and program team. The approach of the program is to address the “whole child.”

The pilot TCDP had encouraging aspects and also some challenges. A key challenge concerned recruitment and program participation. In addition, the lack of regular team meetings to assess family needs and services as well as academic progress hampered the integrated service provision that the TCDP supposes.

Despite such implementation issues, for those students and parents who participated regularly, the program seems to have improved attitudes and school aspirations of students, as well as parent-child communication. The program also was successful in reaching families with needed services. Anecdotally, several participating students were reported to have improved their attendance. However, too few students participated, and the program was implemented too late in the school year, to allow us to credibly examine the program’s effectiveness in improving attendance.

Some modification of the program will be needed to address its current implementation challenges, and to allow it to expand considerably. Because the program is inherently limited to 10 to 15 participating students per school per semester, addressing considerably more students involves expansion to more

schools, or to multiple parallel TCDP sessions within schools. To achieve consistent implementation of a considerably expanded program will require more formalization of the program, a dedicated program director who can coordinate the multiple partners, considerable support from the schools, and dedicated program resources. At that point, an evaluation including both intermediate and attendance outcomes will be warranted. A strong design with a strong comparison group will be necessary to determine if the TDCP is affecting student attendance.

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