

Successful Children and Youth Policy Team

December 17, 2014 Meeting Summary

Key decisions and actions are in **bold**.

SCYPT Members in Attendance:

Gloria Addo-Ayensu, George Becerra, Bob Birmingham, Tisha Deeghan, Judith Dittman, Jack Dobbyn, Kim Dockery, Cristy Gallagher, Bryan Holland (for Ed Roessler), Cathy Hudgins, Rick Leichtweis, Chris Leonard, Jane Lipp, Leslie MacDonald (for Eileen Ellsworth), Megan McLaughlin, Mary Ann Panarelli, Fahemeh Pirzadeh, Jeff Platenberg, Erin Schaible, Jane Strauss, Douglas Tyson

Action Item – Endorsement of Recommendations for Addressing Truancy in Fairfax County:

Bob Birmingham and Mary Ann Panarelli presented an overview of truancy in Fairfax County. While over 90 percent of students are in attendance daily in FCPS, over 2,000 students had more than 20 unexcused absences last school year. Truancy is impacted by factors in the child, family, school, and community domains; its negative consequences can also be seen in each of those domains. Therefore, it is necessary that a comprehensive approach to addressing truancy include strategies in each domain. Furthermore, as Mr. Birmingham noted, truancy is generally the sign that something is wrong; it often results from mental health problems, substance abuse, bullying, family issues, and other concerns. Truancy cannot be addressed simply by making students go to school; these underlying concerns must be addressed. Even adding more truancy officers will not solve the problem, as the Juvenile Court wouldn't be able to handle the increased caseload; the emphasis must be on prevention and services, including how students are supported once they return to school. The SCYPT was asked to endorse a multi-stakeholder truancy summit to build awareness and support for a comprehensive approach and a truancy task force to develop and oversee implementation of a strategy which is more family-focused than the current student-centric approach.

Kim Dockery noted that the causes and impacts truancy can vary according to age/grade level. When working with parents, for example, the focus in the early grades should be on understanding what missing school means and why attendance is important. In middle school, the emphasis can be more on the content being missed. With older students, parents often need help handling deeper issues (e.g., "How can I get my kid out of bed to go to school?").

Judith Dittman stated that students who are parents themselves face additional barriers; it can be hard to get to school when your kid is sick and cannot go to day care. Transportation, either for the student or to get kids to day care, can provide additional burdens. Dr. Panarelli noted that this population, as well as students who work, are important topics to discuss at the summit. Cathy Hudgins emphasized the importance of including pre-kindergarten strategies as well.

Rick Leichtweis stated that truants seem to fit into three groups: those whose truancy is impacted primarily by cultural/environmental factors, those with oppositional defiant disorder

or other behavioral problems, and those who are school avoidant. He stressed the importance of involving the behavioral health care provider community in efforts.

Janie Strauss asked if improved legislation is being proposed. Mr. Bermingham and Dr. Dockery replied that it is not at this time, but that recommendations for changes will hopefully come out of the summit. It is time to start talking to legislators now in order to get the issue on their radar.

The SCYPT voted unanimously to support the truancy summit and the development of a task force. The team will be updated on these efforts at future meetings.

Information Item – Opportunity Neighborhood:

Karla Bruce, Mary Ann Panarelli, and Karen Shaban presented on Opportunity Neighborhood, a place-based approach to support children and youth from cradle to college to career. ON is not a program, or even a set of program, but a “way of thinking,” or a framework for collectively addressing needs within a defined community. ON is data-driven, so programs and activities are selected based on identified needs, and evaluation is a critical component; activities are discontinued, fixed, or replaced if they are not working. In response to a question of whether the community feels “abandoned” when ineffective programs are removed, Ms. Bruce noted that the effort is still so new, and such programs are often still so new, that the community hasn’t yet become used to them. Furthermore, changes are made with community input and other available resources are identified. Measures and outcomes are child focused, but strategies may target families, communities, schools, and other broader contexts that impact children and youth.

Dr. Panarelli emphasized that the community has bought in to ON; they want it there for the long term. In particular, staff often hears from community members, “Don’t set this up and then disappear!” Resident involvement, and not just from the “regular players,” has been maintained, and community members hold at least one-third of the seats on the Governance Team. To support community engagement and outreach, United Community Ministries has partnered with the effort and dedicated staff to community organizing and outreach.

There are no FCPS- or county-allocated resources for ON. The initiative has received some grants, including ones that are expiring soon. However, ON has proven helpful when agencies are looking to place resources such as Neighborhood School Readiness Teams, Safe Routes to School, and Nurse Family Partnership. It provides an infrastructure for implementation of efforts such as the Imagination Library, which to date has provided free books to nearly 100 children ages birth to five.

ON has been able to provide lessons learned for other place-based approaches in Fairfax County. But it is also important to recognize the resources necessary to scale up ON. Ms. McLaughlin noted that it shares much in common with the Community Schools model. And Ms. Hudgins emphasized that it’s important to look at ON as a way of doing business, so that existing connections in the community are more efficiently utilized and so that communities are networked in a way that they are the pillars of change.

Information Item – Restorative Justice:

Jamie McCarron, Erin Schaible, and Megan Johnston presented on the restorative justice initiative that is being implemented collaboratively by FCPS, Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court, the Police Department, Neighborhood and Community Services, and Northern Virginia Mediation Service. Upon recognizing that both FCPS and JDRDC were implementing restorative justice, the agencies agreed to partner on the effort. According to Ms. Johnston, the level of collaboration is unique among jurisdictions using restorative justice throughout the country. Youth can be referred into the program through schools or JDRDC; a pilot initiative with the police includes patrol officers in the Mount Vernon District and School Resource Officers countywide.

The program is for first-time offenders and is considered a type of “pre-diversion” that is completely outside the juvenile court system. Youth who successfully complete the program have nothing attached to their records.

Restorative justice is tailored to both the victim and the offender; a “restorative justice conference” results in an agreement that may include tangible consequences such as financial restitution, intangibles such as apologies, and longer-term behavioral change agreements. Megan McLaughlin noted that it is important to note that restorative justice is not just victim-centered, but also includes a major emphasis on the offender as an educational and behavior-changing opportunity.

An outcome evaluation of the program is in process.

It was noted that restorative justice is one strategy among a larger emphasis on diversion policies within the juvenile justice system, as there is more focus on how the system works with youth and their families (as opposed to strictly punitive efforts). This type of approach ties in to the holistic approach needed to address truancy.

Information Item – Racial Equity Update:

The School Board was briefed on the racial equity initiative and has committed to a joint work session on the issue with the Board of Supervisors. The respective Board chairmen are working to schedule the joint meeting.