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Ready for Life — An evaluation: Factors relating to truancy and promising practices

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Introduction

Truancy is generally defined as one or more unexcused absences by a student within a scheduled school day. Defining chronic truancy become problematic as definitions vary among school districts and states. Fro the purpose of this strategic recommendation, the Clark County School District policy of three or more unexcused absences shall be our working definition.

Truancy has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults. Truancy is on e of the most common factors leading to dropout and students not meeting graduation standards. Nevada has arguably the highest high school dropout rate in the nation. This evaluation was prepared for Ready for Life: A movement created by Nevada Public Education Foundation (NPEF), to connect youth to school and work by age 25, but can be of use to several audiences. Practitioners who work with struggling students, court representatives and parents, teachers and administrators, and anyone who has taken an interest in Nevada's up and coming workforce. This evaluation should provide an introduction and overview of the range and seriousness of the truancy issues in Southern Nevada and shed light on the correlates of truancy as well. It will also provide recommendations for best practices as well as some resources for parents to help prevent truancy.

Evaluation Approach

Ready for Life is a movement of the Nevada Public Education Foundation (NPEF) that works in partnership with community stakeholders to create an atmosphere in Southern Nevada that values education. Ready for Life was launched in 2005 by the NPEF in partnership with several public and private organizations, as a collaborative cross-agency effort to improve Nevada's success at engaging and graduating "ready for life" students and re-engaging those who prematurely left school.

The focus of the evaluation was on Ready for Life (RFL) and the evaluation was expected to generate a fuller understanding about truancy prevention in Southern Nevada as well as provide recommendations and best practices to help in the abatement of truancy. Understanding Ready for Life's position in the broader system as well as juxtaposing it against other truancy prevention programs was vital in order to identify effective practices. However, it is beyond the scope to look at the practices and effectiveness of other actors or the overall effectiveness of the system as a whole on addressing truancy.

The goal of Ready for Life for Southern Nevada is to connect youth to school and work by 25 years of age. Ready for Life defines itself as a collaborative initiative focused on connecting resources, people and information across systems. Ready for Life employs a plan that includes five critical components of a comprehensive local youth serving system.

1. Academic achievement
2. Career development
3. Community services and support
4. Youth leadership
5. Comprehensive youth development approach

Evaluation objectives and approach

Overarching Questions

The overarching evaluation questions were:

• What evidence exists to demonstrate that RFL practices support schools to improve the day-to-day attendance of all students, particularly those at-risk of truancy?

• Which RFL practices appear to contribute to strong or promising outputs and which appear to be linked with adequate or low outputs?

A four phased approach was adopted in order to answer the overarching and sub evaluation questions.

Phase 1. Scoping and planning phase
        What is the rationale behind the Ready for Life Movement?
        How has Ready for Life been effective since 2005?
        What are the key evaluation questions?

Phase 2. Case study development
        How, in what ways and under what circumstances has Ready for Life achieved outcomes for school and the community?

Phase 3. Evaluation of Ready for Life and its Community collaborates in relation to other truancy reduction programs
        What are the overarching best practices of effective truancy reduction programs? and

        What do schools and community programs see as their role, what actions do they undertake?

Phase 4: Final Reporting
        What would an effective truancy reduction program look like in Southern Nevada?
        What is the most effective model of this program?
        How effective has Ready for Life been in Southern Nevada?
        Recommendations for parents and stakeholders.

This report is a synthesis of data gathered from the evaluative activities carried out during the entire evaluation and the main findings have been presented in five parts:

• Understanding the Social and Financial Impact of Truancy on the State and its Resources
• Ready For Life – What is its impact in the community?
• Best Practices In and Outside of Southern Nevada.

• Dimensions of Best Practices.
• Implications and recommendations for the future of Ready for Life and other truancy prevention services, in Southern Nevada.

Findings

Part 1: Understanding the Social and Financial Impact of Truancy on the State and its Resources

• Concern for truancy in Southern Nevada is growing as more and more findings disclose the dismal high school dropout and low graduation rate and the problem has intensified over the years. Nevada ranked 50th in the nation for high school dropouts in 2009 and since 2004 has consistently been the worst or near worse in the country.

As a risk factor for delinquent behavior in youth, truancy has been found to be related to substance abuse, gang activity, and involvement in criminal activities ranging from burglary, auto theft and vandalism to name a few.

Research in the area of developmental pathways to delinquency show that truancy and its associated behavioral problems are only symptoms of greater issues that youth are dealing with. (needs subscript for citation).

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention have found that in general, four broad factors are usually present and related to truancy. These are:

◆Family factors. These include lack of guidance or parental supervision, domestic violence, poverty, drug or alcohol abuse in the home, lack of awareness of attendance laws, and differing attitudes toward education.

◆School factors. These include school climate issues—such as school size and attitudes of teachers, other students, and administrators—and inflexibility in meeting the diverse cultural and learn- ing styles of the students. Schools often have inconsistent procedures in place for dealing with chronic absenteeism and may not have meaningful consequences available for truant youth
(e.g., out-of-school suspension).

◆Economic influences. These include employed students, single-parent homes, high mobility rates, parents who hold multiple jobs, and a lack of affordable transportation and childcare.

◆Student variables. These include drug and alcohol abuse, lack of understand- ing of attendance laws, lack of social competence, mental health difficulties, and poor physical health. (link below is the reference)

[http://outcomescolorado.com/yahoo_site_admin/assets/docs/OJJDP_Bulliten.259105254.pdf]

The findings also show that although not mentioned specifically, the community greatly influences the truancy rate as well. Community factors such as economic conditions and differing culturally based attitudes are folded into the above areas.

Although truancy correlates with the above mentioned factors, it has to be looked at as one area that can be addressed through and understanding that it is a symptom that is a part of the whole faction of dysfunction that a portion of youth are coming from.

• Community systems and processes for monitoring attendance and truancy cases, is inconsistent and lacks the resources to keep up with the demand for services.

• Analysis of benchmark reports—The analysis of benchmark reports are passed from stakeholder to stakeholder and heavily debated, but few measurable goals are set and followed to determine the effectiveness of truancy prevention programs for students from entry to exit.

Part 2 Ready for Life—How do they Operate?

Ready for Life's plan to connect truant and otherwise disconnected youth to school and work by age 25 is anchored on the workforce system and the school system in Southern Nevada. Ready for Life Southern Nevada depends on its relationship with the Workforce Connections Youth Council and its partnerships with Clark County School District, local police departments and social services agencies to reach its goal of connecting youth to school and work by 25 years of age.

Convene intermediaries across sectors
   • Identify and engage leaders
   • Convene a leadership body to address issues and opportunities
   • Share quality practices among partners
   • Build and sustain a common vision among key stakeholders
   • Engage constituents across sectors and communities
   • Create a forum for building a comprehensive system

Connect intermediaries broker and provide services
   • Create demand and build awareness
   • Address partner needs and support involvement
   • Provide training and professional development
   • Map services and support cross-agency collaboration
   • Place and support youth in developmental experiences
   • Promote quality work-based and classroom learning

Sustain intermediaries influence policy to sustain effective practices
   • Build public awareness and support
   • Influence national, state and local policies
   • Connect and align local youth-serving systems
   • Generate, leverage and distribute resources

- Promote the long-term commitment to youth success
- Align workforce development, economic development and educational improvement efforts

Measure intermediaries ensure quality and impact
- Set goals and measure success
- Build partner capacity
- Use data to improve performance and promote equity
- Set quality standards based on promising practices
- Conduct regular, formal reviews and external evaluations
- Share and apply research, strategies and results

Part 3 Best Practices In and Outside of Southern Nevada: What works?

A key question posed for this evaluation was to identify dimensions of effective practice across the country with a view to developing the Ready for Life's knowledge base about what constitutes effective practice in truancy reduction programs and services.

Evaluators were tasked with gathering the data to identify strong, adequate and poor programs and services. The scoping phase revealed that it was challenging to do this and effectively find practices that were appropriate given the unique demographic of Southern Nevada. **If one was to determine effectiveness of services provided on the basis of its ability to get students off the streets and into a system demonstrating the need for services exists**, all programs providing truancy reductions services can be deemed as being successful. Investigating this more deeply further revealed that there were other characteristics of effective practice evidenced by truancy reduction programs and these can be broadly categorized into five areas:

- Organizational systems and processes – structures, systems, policies and processes in place to enable the organization to track and respond to students on a case by case basis.
- Engagement with schools – ways of working with schools and Clark County School District to promote the use of the service and achieve successful outcomes for students.
- Relationship with the wider community – ways of working with other social service agencies to meet the needs of their students, families and the school that extend beyond truancy.
- Skills and capability of the truancy officers – qualities and attributes of the officers that enable them to achieve positive outcomes.
- Engagement with families – ways of working with parents to educate them on their rights and also to give them tools to recognize behaviors that lead to truancy and for early detection.

Our assessment of effective and non-effective practices is based on the data available as it relates to truancy reduction in various states across the country as well as on feedback received from stakeholders, school principals, parents and families of truants, truants and wider community/social service agencies here in Southern Nevada.

The reflections, observations and feedback of the services rendered and received in Southern Nevada, have clearly identified particular practices that appeared to make the difference and

support the achievement of acceptable outcomes. For instance, former Clark County School District high school principals acknowledged that practices such as setting of attendance targets or proactively reviewing school attendance systems had focused their attention on the problem and helped identify the problem early.

On the other hand, non-effective practices were clearly identified as well. Parents of truants interviewed stated that the laws in place were not objective and some were left open to a wide-range of interpretation. Such feedback gathered during the interviews forms the core of our analysis presented in the main report. While there is no evidence to show any causal link between particular practices and outcomes there is sufficient evidence to show that certain practices collectively created favorable conditions for outcomes to be achieved as well as identified weaknesses that hindered truancy reduction.

Effective solutions to truancy – whether individual, programmatic, or community responses – require comprehensive, multifaceted strategies at multiple levels that address more than the absences from school, but the underlying reasons why students are missing school.

Programs who have demonstrated consistent reduction in truancy share the following characteristics:

• Communicating truancy rules clearly, monitoring youth consistently and enforcing consequences quickly and fairly make a difference while simply imposing tougher sanctions usually does not.

• Interventions with students who are chronically truant must focus on helping the youth become reengaged through the provision of educational experiences that the youth feels are safe, caring, academically supportive, interesting and relevant.

• In communities with high rates of truancy, creating comprehensive solutions that address both of the essential components – seamless systems of rules/consequences and schools that are valued by students – will be necessary to have effective long-term impacts on this issue.

Part 4 Implications and recommendations for the future of Ready for Life and other prevention services, in Southern Nevada

Given the complexity of the problem, any response to address truancy needs to be developed in collaboration with a number of partners who operate in this space. Ready for Life has established strong community alliances over the years and this allows them the ability to act as an intermediary connecting service providers with those in need of services as well as information to support students and their families.

The roles and responsibilities of these service agencies tend to overlap causing leaving critical gaps in necessary services. There is also a lack of synergy between agencies resulting in some students falling through the cracks.

Drawing on the principles underpinning effective processes for policy development, the lifecycle of any intervention or a program of interventions can generally be described by the following four phases: understanding the problem (problem definition; environmental scan), developing a response (strategy or policy initiative), implementing the response (implementation) and reflecting on and learning from the intervention (monitoring and evaluation).
 [https://www.iepdirect.com/ais/login/features/feature_3.html]

During the course of this evaluation and our interviews with various Ready for Life personnel and other stakeholders, it became apparent that each phase in an intervention's lifecycle has a number of 'elements of successes'.

Based on our findings the most important priorities for Ready for Life are:

- **Understanding the problem**

  Underpinning Ready for Life's strategies and ability to broker and provide services, there needs to be a very clear understanding of what the problems and issues are that need to be addressed and why.

  Undertaking research to delve into the root causes of truancy will provide an up-to-date understanding of:

  • what causes truancy and what are current perceptions of the problem amongst the population specific to the demographic of Southern Nevada
  • what factors contribute to truancy
  • the groups that are most at risk
  • given Southern Nevada's demographic, bilingual communication
  • definitions around truancy
  • more truancy diversion programs available at more schools

  In short, the objective will be to arrive at a clear definition of the problem. An element of good problem definition is to have a good understanding of the target populations that need to be influenced. This includes the priority populations that Ready for Life and its community partners have already identified. Several interviewees, including principals, and parents, commented that different people respond to different triggers and motivators. That is to say it is unwise to implement actions and strategies to change the behaviors of one group may not work well for other groups, even if the groups are the same race or gender. In order for the interventions to be effective they need to be targeted in nature and adaptable to the different motivators of different groups, understanding that these can vary by circumstances and so should be flexible.

  There is a strong need to describe a relationship between the theory and the evidence to support effective interventions as this will enable resources to be used more effectively and establish stronger alignment between the different initiatives that have similar objectives. There is also need for promoting consistent messages about expectations and desired behaviors so as to build a shared understanding of the problem across the different

stakeholders. [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/provision-of-school-support-services-an-evaluation/9 Author(s): Meenakshi Sankar & Fleur Chauvel - [MartinJenkins]Published: April 2011]

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our key recommendations are:

• Initiate research to delve into root causes of truancy to deepen our understanding of the problem as it relates to subpopulations as well as a broader sense.
• Initiate research to explore effective strategies for affecting change amongst particular subpopulation groups. (i.e. racial/ethnic groups)

⦿ **Developing a strategic response**

Key to any strategy or response is having a clear sense and articulation of the goal or outcome that the organization or service is working towards. In the context of truancy the evaluation indicates that there is a need for Ready for Life to shift the focus from outputs to outcomes. This will ensure that solutions designed to address truancy take a broader view of the problem and are more proactive. Solutions will need to be supported by a range of strategic alliances with community partners to ensure that truancy prevention practices are aligned to these expectations. Therefore any shift to an outcomes approach needs to be supported by clearer mandates and accountabilities.

Effective governance and leadership from Ready for Life Southern Nevada was also identified as a critical element of success and for strengthening the efficiency of the current system. The level of variability in the current environment is not desirable and needs to be addressed. It appears that Ready for Life Southern Nevada has not actively sought to influence or lead the direction and shape of its community partners, resulting in a movement that appears to lack consistency.

Effective governance and management relies on sound plans and good communication of those plans. Goals need to be clear and realistic. Ready for Life Southern Nevada needs to reflect on its role within a truancy prevention infrastructure and build its internal process/capability to manage these processes effectively.

Development of a strategic response needs to be matched with adequate resourcing. While it appears that the service is successfully recruiting community partners to provide services, and the expectations from truancy services have also widened considerably and current resourcing levels do not reflect this.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our recommendations to support the development of a strategic response are:

- Strengthen leadership from Ready for Life by providing clearer direction and expectations from a truancy prevention infrastructure.
- Shift the focus from outputs to outcomes and design truancy prevention services that are geared to deliver on outcomes.
- Review resourcing to allow truancy prevention services to balance reactive and proactive aspects of their role.
- Continue to establish formal partnerships with parents, schools and other agencies that operate in the truancy area so as to establish cohesion across the different agencies.
- Clearer mandates and accountabilities that are communicated to all partners and stakeholders.

● Implementation of the strategic response

A key issue coming through from the interviews relates to the desirability of ceding control to those who are best placed to drive the initiative. Furthermore, and consistent with one of Ready for Life's working principles which is "...combining our resources and commitment on the ground with evidence-based solutions and a connected, operational infrastructure, we will be able to make an impact on the individual youth we are serving…" it is important to allow regions to innovate and not try to force them into centrally determined frameworks and processes. The trade-off for giving more degrees of freedom to providers is the need to strengthen governance and management arrangements at the center to ensure that effective accountability is maintained, particularly relating to training, guidelines and templates, and other forms of administrative support.

While sound structures, policies and procedures can all support effective leadership and management, the role that individual partners play will directly impact how well these work in practice.

The nature of the issues surrounding truancy is such that any meaningful response requires collaboration across a wide range of agencies on a day-to-day basis. This requires Ready for Life to maintain effective community partnerships. The effectiveness of these partnerships is an element of success because it helps identify opportunities to leverage off, or assist, the work of others.

Recommendations
Based on above discussion, our recommendations for ensuring successful implementation of truancy prevention services include:

- Balancing national and regional interests – while sound structures, policies and processes all support effective partnerships, the role individual partners play will directly impact on how this will work.
- Encouraging and supporting collaborative approaches to implementation.
- Investment in training and professional development of all actors within the truancy prevention infrastructure so as to promote consistent messages and understandings.
- Becoming the knowledge network or hub to promote sharing of best practice and continuous learning.

◉ **Monitor and evaluate**

The overarching purpose of monitoring and evaluation is to inform understanding of:

• the level and rate of change in the desired outcome
• whether activities are having the impact intended, and
• what is working well, what is not and why.

Tracking progress towards outcomes is an essential way to inform the ongoing development, refinement and improvement of an intervention. Given the complex nature of truancy and the myriad of factors that contribute to achieving desired change, it is by implication often difficult to 'unpack' the impact of individual strategies and interventions. However evaluation of a small number of initiatives can contribute to the growing knowledge base about what works to reduce truancy or improve attendance.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our recommendation for improving the monitoring and evaluation environment requires Ready for Life to put in place the following:

• Clarity of desired impact – outputs and outcomes level.
• Meaningful, quantifiable and realistic performance measures which combine to tell the performance story.
• A framework within which to evaluate and analyze findings.

Background and context

Truancy is any type of unexcused absence from school. The evaluation was initiated to understand aspects of the current response that works/does not work with a view to informing decisions about future truancy prevention programs that may be considered by Ready for Life and the Nevada Public Education Foundation.

"Ready for Life was launched in 2005 by the Nevada Public Education Foundation in partnership with dozens of public and private organizations, as a collaborative cross-agency effort to improve Nevada's success at engaging and graduating "ready for life" students and re-engaging those who prematurely left school. The goal of Ready for Life Southern Nevada is to 'increase the graduation rate by 2013 and ensure that youth have the training and access to employment they need to successfully transition to life on their own." [Ready for Life Southern Nevada]

According to the mission and purpose of the movement Ready for Life Southern Nevada values:

All youth are educated and ready to learn.
All youth are experienced and ready for careers.
All youth are connected to adults, peer and educational services.
All youth are confident and ready for life.

A connected, operational infrastructure supports youth success.

 In summary RTF's purpose is to:

- •Convene intermediaries across sectors
- •Connect intermediaries broker and provide services
- •Sustain intermediaries influence policy to sustain effective practices
- •Measure intermediaries ensure quality and impact

Defining the role, critical success factors and responsibilities of those involved in addressing truancy is difficult which then makes identifying the program or "movement" for the resolution of truancy is difficult. Although parents and school officials have legal obligations in regards to attendants of school-age students, there are a number of organizations that contribute to reaching acceptable outcomes. It is for this reason that the effectiveness of truancy prevention methods, programs and movements be reviewed periodically.

Alignment with strategic policy intent of Nevada Public Education Foundation Clark County School District

An evaluation of truancy prevention programs must consider the Nevada Public Education Foundation's and more specifically Clark County School District's strategic context and ensure that educational strategies and initiatives are created to ensure students stay engaged in learned. With this understanding, more informed decisions about the future of truancy prevention in Southern Nevada can be made.

Methodology and objectives
This section outlines the evaluation objectives, scope and methodology used.

Evaluation objectives and approach

The overarching evaluation questions were:

• What evidence exists to demonstrate that RFL practices support schools to improve the day-to-day attendance of all students, particularly those at risk of truancy?

• Which RFL practices appear to contribute to strong or promising outcomes and which appear to be linked with adequate or low out?

These were broken down into the following sub-evaluation questions:

• How is RFL positioned within the current context to effect change?

• What systems, processes, policies and resources are in place to effect change?

• What factors influence the effectiveness of RFL practices?

• What could be done to maximize the effectiveness of RFL practices?

From an evaluation perspective, it was critical to solidify the outcomes of Ready for Life and its community partners in a conceptual framework as it provided the context and a focus for the evaluation study.

In the theory of action model Ready for Life is considered to be the intermediary for change and acts as the broker for community partners and acts as one of the mechanism through which the NPEF expects to reduce truancy in Southern Nevada. The model helped identify the key areas of focus for the outcomes evaluation about how Ready for Life plays a role in the improvements of truancy in Southern Nevada. Applying this model provided the basis for our approach and rationale for the evaluation.

Scope

The focus of the evaluation was on Ready For Life (RFL) and the evaluation was expected to generate a fuller understanding about truancy prevention programs in Southern Nevada and the role and contribution of RFL within the broader education system and the intermediary way it functions. Understanding the positioning of RFL in this broader system was vital in order to identify best practices. However, it is beyond the scope to look at the practices and effectiveness of other actors or the overall effectiveness of the system as a whole on addressing RFL's impact on truancy reduction.

During the scoping phase, consideration of policy priorities as it related to Northern Nevada was originally identified as a secondary topic for the evaluation. Early interviews with Ready for Life personnel and a sample of partners highlighted significant challenges in this regard, particularly challenges associated with:

• Unpacking the contribution of RFL to reducing truancy from the contribution made by other players in the broader truancy system. This was difficult as there was considerable variability in the extent and nature of involvement of players in the broader system at a regional level. There was also little definitive information on which to draw conclusions about changes/causes in truancy levels.

• Lack of information to help determine the effectiveness of Ready for Life Southern Nevada in relation to other potential solutions. Again this was complex and required a systems level focus on best practices of regional truancy prevention programs rather than just a RFL specific focus.

Methodology
A five phased approach was adopted in order to answer the overarching and sub-evaluation questions.

Phase 1: Planning and scoping
The focus for this phase was to develop a shared understanding and agreed approach to the

evaluation. This was achieved through:

• Interviews with key RFL staff and partners, preliminary discussions with parents and students in Clark County School District and professors at UNLV to build an understanding of the structures in place, or lack thereof, to implement the service and expectations from the service.

• Review of public RFL documents including the RFL website and brochures. No internal documents were provided, however a review of the available documents was used to gain an understanding of the extent and quality of the services already available and being provided.

As part of this phase a detailed evaluation plan was developed in order to guide the future phases of the research.

Phase 2: Case studies

This qualitative phase of the research was designed in response to an urgent need to develop a rich picture of what good practice looks like and how Ready for Life may function within the broader context. The overarching question for this phase of the work was:

'How, in what ways and under what circumstances is Ready for Life and its community partners able to achieve outcomes for schools?'

This question was investigated by focusing attention on the community partners identified as being effective or crucial to Ready for Life and the wider stakeholder community.

By diving a bit deeper into these organizations and talking to schools and the wider community serviced by them, the evaluators were able to build a picture of the ways in which RFL and its partners were working to reduce truancy.

The purpose of this phase was two-fold:

• To gain breadth and depth of understanding in relation to how Ready for Life functions within their contexts to reduce truancy, and
• To provide a range of measures and an understanding of the current tracking and measurement system used by RFL to inform its stakeholders of its successes and failures as they relate as to their role as intermediary.

Phase 3: Evaluation of Ready for Life and its Community Partners through Stakeholder, Partner and Parent Interviews

This phase of the research was designed in response to the need to understand what RFL and its community partners are doing and how they are positioned vis-à-vis the characteristics of effective practice identified in the case studies.

The purpose of the evaluation was to quantify the findings from the case studies in order to

understand where RFL sits in relation to the spectrum of performance and how well they are placed to move towards good performance. The overarching evaluation question can be summarized as

"how well aligned is Ready for Life and its community partners with best practice and what are the overarching best practices of effective truancy reduction programs? "

From an evaluation perspective, it was important to anchor the outcomes evaluation of RFL in a conceptual framework as this provided the context and a focus for the evaluation inquiry.

The model helped identify the key areas of focus for the outcomes evaluation and surfaced assumptions about how RFL could be expected to bring about improvements in students' attendance at school.

Phase 4: Final Reporting Phase

The evaluation intentionally combined a range of methods to generate fuller and broader insights about the effectiveness of Ready for Life. On completion of the evaluation and research activities, the evaluation team undertook in-depth analysis of the findings in order to provide a fair but in-depth evaluation and recommendations. The insights from these meetings were used to formulate specific, feasible and well-founded recommendations for truancy management services as they pertain to Ready for Life Southern Nevada and its community partners in the future. This final report is a synthesis of the findings from all data gathering activities and provides a rich commentary on what effective truancy prevention programs would need to offer to be of value to schools, students and their families and the wider community.

Part 1: Understanding the Social and Financial Impact of Truancy on the State and its Resources

In this section we discuss the economic nature of the problem and the associated costs to society that truancy poses. This section provides a critical backdrop for the analysis of state funded truancy prevention programs as well as other social services that are needed for the correlates of truancy.

The financial costs of truancy are generally incurred over the long run, and can be measured in terms of forfeited education. These costs are carried by students, business, and society. The short-term exception is the cost of crime committed by young people who should be in the classroom, instead, are shoplifting, vandalizing or burglarizing property. Although no studies to date measure the cost of truancy per se, many studies measure the cost of dropping out of high school, or conversely, the value of education.

Researchers from the RAND Corporation found that for most groups [gender, racial/ethnic group and immigration status], each high school dropout costs the government more than $800,000 over the course of the individual's lifetime, from age 18 to 80.

A list of the costs associated with the educational failure that chronic truancy generally implies includes the following:

• High school dropouts earn less, on average, and have higher unemployment rates.
• They pay less in income taxes to federal and state governments.
• They cost government more in social service program funds.
• They incur higher criminal justice costs, both as juveniles and adults.
• The victims of crime bear a cost, both monetary and non-monetary.
• A second-generation cost is incurred by the children of high school dropouts.

The gravity of these costs as it relates to Southern Nevada can only be understood in terms of the current high school dropout rate. A number of studies have been conducted over the last few years that attempt to present a more realistic picture of high school completion rates, with disturbing results (Barton, 2004, 2005; Greene, 2002; Greene & Winters, 2005). They show that about one-third of our students are failing to graduate from high school on time (in four years) with a regular diploma, as opposed to a general equivalency degree (GED). The data published by Education Week states the number of non-graduates in 2010 at 1.3 million and U.S. public high schools are losing more than 7,200 students per day. Other studies indicate that some students attend school with less than a 30% chance of completing a high school diploma. Highlights from a number of studies include the following:

• Completion rates by state range from 48% to 88% according to Barton (2004), and from 53% to 89% according to Greene and Winters (2005).
• High school completion rates fell in all but seven states between 1990 and 2000 (Barton, 2004).
• In 2009, Clark County School District high school graduation rate for Asians was 77% while for Blacks it was 57% and for Hispanics it was 54%. (CCSD, 2010)

Clark County School District (CCSD) faces several conflicting incentives in regarding truant students. Not only do they have disciplinary issues, but they tend to be low achieving in the classroom as well. One obvious incentive for the schools in the district to get students back in the classroom is per pupil funding. All schools in CCSD receive funding based on the number of students attending the school. For CCSD, the all-important attendance number is calculated in September, early in the school year, and is known as count day.

Some schools go to great lengths to promote the fun side of school. The school will host fun and well-publicized events leading up to count day. Such activities promote valuable school attachment on the part of students, some of which hopefully carries over to the rest of the school year. The downside of this method is that schools neither gain nor lose funding regardless of how their student attendance changes subsequent to count day.

The magnitude of the high school dropout problem in Southern Nevada is staggering when coupled with an understanding of the expense entailed. The depth of the expense goes much deeper than the "cost" per pupil; it extends beyond the families into the community as well.

The Impact of Truancy on Students and Families

Economic hardship can both contribute to and be exacerbated by a student's truancy and nowhere is that truer than right now in Southern Nevada. Parents and working age children work long hours, leaving home before school hours and returning late after children should be home, it is not east to monitor school attendance, especially if the child is working as well. Many times, parents do not know their child has been skipping classes until the considerable amount of school has been missed.

Clark County School District will place warning phone calls and mail letters to the address on file, but these may be received by the student and discarded. Another reason these warning notifications may be missed is because of the high transient rate, as well as economic hardship, families may have trouble paying housing bills and have to move frequently, and children may switch schools often. Research shows that multiple changes of school diminish school attachment and are a risk factor for high school dropout.

The impact of truancy on business

Business owners have a stake in school attendance for a number of reasons that differ depending on the business. All businesses benefit from a well-educated workforce and in the current economic climate, Southern Nevada is at a loss because businesses find it risky to operate here because of the lack of well-educated workforce in relation to other cities. Where low high school graduation rates exist, employers have difficulty finding adequate numbers of employees with even the basic skills needed to do the job.

The owners of small businesses that surround schools have may feel they benefit from sales made to truant students, and may not want to turn down sales during school hours or to alienate the students in general. However, shoplifting and even robbery by truant students is part of the cost of doing business with students who are skipping school, are bored, and can find nothing better to do. Truancy sweeps have resulted in measurable reductions in petty crime.

The impact of truancy on court and law enforcement

Truancy courts incur two types of costs: the operational cost of hearing the cases, and the cost of sentences handed out.

The most expensive sentencing option is that of juvenile detention. The average daily cost of a juvenile detention bed nationwide in 2001 was $135.40. 8 The total cost of providing those beds, given an estimated 286,160 juvenile detention days dedicated to truants, comes to more than $38.7 million nationwide. That sum could fund 387 small- to medium-sized truancy reduction programs at $100,000 per year. To put these figures in terms of state budgets, the cost of detention amounts to $760,000 for the average state plus the District of Columbia. The money could fund seven $100,000 TRPs per state.

All of the options open to judges and magistrates, including the ability of the court to hear truancy cases, are constrained by resources. Most states have faced severe budget cuts in recent years, and every branch of government has felt the pinch. When courts are pressured to reduce

their caseloads, truancy court is likely to be the first to go despite its long-term economic benefits.

Part 2 Ready for Life—How do they Operate?
A collaborative cross-agency effort to improve Nevada's success at engaging and graduating ready for life students.

This section outlines the structure of Ready for Life and the method by which its plan of action is implemented.

Ready for Life's plan to connect truant and otherwise disconnected youth to school and work by age 25 is anchored on the workforce system and the school system in Southern Nevada. Ready for Life Southern Nevada depends on its relationship with the Workforce Connections Youth Council and its partnerships with Clark County School District, local police departments and social services agencies to reach its goal of connecting youth to school and work by 25 years of age.

Convene intermediaries convene across sectors
- Identify and engage leaders
- Convene a leadership body to address issues and opportunities
- Share quality practices among partners
- Build and sustain a common vision among key stakeholders
- Engage constituents across sectors and communities
- Create a forum for building a comprehensive system

Connect intermediaries broker and provide services
- Create demand and build awareness
- Address partner needs and support involvement
- Provide training and professional development
- Map services and support cross-agency collaboration
- Place and support youth in developmental experiences
- Promote quality work-based and classroom learning

Sustain intermediaries influence policy to sustain effective practice
- Build public awareness and support
- Influence national, state and local policies
- Connect and align local youth-serving systems
- Generate, leverage and distribute resources
- Promote the long-term commitment to youth success
- Align workforce development, economic development and educational improvement efforts

Measure intermediaries ensure quality an impact
- Set goals and measure success
- Build partner capacity
- Use data to improve performance and promote equity

- Set quality standards based on promising practices
- Conduct regular, formal reviews and external evaluations
- Share and apply research, strategies and results

Ready for Life Southern Nevada is not a program but rather a movement that works to build a community ethic that values education.

Key Stakeholders help in the promotion of Ready for Life Southern Nevada and since launching in November 2008 with 97 participating organizations, the Ready for Life Resource Map has grown to 725 service providers statewide, with ongoing need for further expansion.

Several processes are in place to forward the Ready for Life movement:

- Develop a communications plan and media campaign to build a community ethic that values education and promotes the importance of a HS diploma. (NPEF, Summit Planning Team)
- Increase awareness of community resources available to families and youth. (NPEF)
- Create/support local collaborative infrastructures (such as Ready for Life committees) as needed, via ongoing convening/facilitating of statewide and community efforts. (NPEF)
- Develop accountability plan that includes tracking progress on graduation rates from NDE and reporting annually to stakeholders. (NPEF/Summit Planning Team)
- Partners have engaged in unprecedented collaboration to provide summer employment and academic experiences for more than 1,500 youth in Clark County through workforceConnections, increasing opportunities for both academic credit and job training

Part 3 Promising Practices In and Outside of Southern Nevada: What works?

A key question posed for this evaluation was to identify dimensions of effective practice across the country with a view to developing the Ready for Life's knowledge base about what constitutes effective practice in truancy reduction programs and services.

Evaluators were tasked with gathering the data to identify strong, adequate and poor programs and services. The scoping phase revealed that it was challenging to do this and effectively find practices that were appropriate given the unique demographic of Southern Nevada.
If one was to determine effectiveness of services provided on the basis of its ability to get students off the streets and into a system demonstrating the need for services exists, all programs providing truancy reductions services can be deemed as being successful. Investigating this more deeply further revealed that there were other characteristics of effective practice evidenced by truancy reduction programs and these can be broadly categorized into five areas:

- Organizational systems and processes – structures, systems, policies and processes in place to enable the organization to track and respond to students on a case by case basis.
- Engagement with schools – ways of working with schools and Clark County School District to promote the use of the service and achieve successful outcomes for students.
- Relationship with the wider community – ways of working with other social service agencies to meet the needs of their students, families and the school that extend beyond truancy.

- Skills and capability of the truancy officers – qualities and attributes of the officers that enable them to achieve positive outcomes.
- Engagement with families – ways of working with parents to educate them on their rights and also to give them tools to recognize behaviors that lead to truancy and for early detection.

Our assessment of effective and non-effective practices is based on the data available as it relates to truancy reduction in various states across the country as well as on feedback received from stakeholders, school principals, parents and families of truants, truants and wider community/social service agencies here in Southern Nevada.

The reflections, observations and feedback of the services rendered and received in Southern Nevada, have clearly identified particular practices that appeared to make the difference and support the achievement of acceptable outcomes. For instance, former Clark County School District high school principals acknowledged that practices such as setting of attendance targets or proactively reviewing school attendance systems had focused their attention on the problem and helped identify the problem early.

On the other hand, non-effective practices were clearly identified as well. Parents of truants interviewed stated that the laws in place were not objective and some were left open to a wide-range of interpretation. Such feedback gathered during the interviews forms the core of our analysis presented in the main report. While there is no evidence to show any causal link between particular practices and outcomes there is sufficient evidence to show that certain practices collectively created favorable conditions for outcomes to be achieved as well as identified weaknesses that hindered truancy reduction.

In Southern Nevada, the Truancy Diversion Project was created 11 years ago by Judge Gerald Hardcastle to model after the Louisville, KY program started by Judge Joan Byer. It's funded by the Clark County Family Court and the Clark County School District. It has grown from being in four schools to 12. It services about 225 habitual truant kids per year. While Truancy Court deals with truant kids after they've been given an official citation for habitual truancy, the Diversion Program is pre-citation. It's a voluntary program that tries to disseminate the reasons why kids are missing school. In doing so, the program's view is that collaboration between school, community, students, and family need to occur to effectively deal with the issue of truancy. According to Debbie Rose, "administration needs to buy into this program first and then relay this message to rest of the school's staff in order for it to work." The program's primary target is middle schools, where they've recently expanded to add two high schools.

Truancy Diversion Program set up:

- Very Similar to Truancy Court as the Truancy Court program is modeled after the Truancy Diversion program.
- In order to complete the program, truants follow a 100 point system (10-12 week program)
- Typical truant in this program averages 25-30 absences from school
- Differs from Truancy Court because the judges or volunteer attorneys go to school to hold court weekly. Each weekly session lasts about 3 hrs.

- After truant completes the program, they are still under a "maintenance program", where attendance is tracked for a specified amount of time.
- Fifty percent success rate (from start to finish)
- Majority of selected candidates-- about 75% -- agree to join program
- Those who fail Truancy Diversion Program get kicked out immediately

Parties Involved:

Volunteer judge or attorney, Debbie Rose (Truancy Diversion Coordinator), Educational Liaison or Attendance Officer (not every school has one), Family Advocate from each school who is bilingual, Social worker, Practicum Student i.e., soc work intern, truant child, and their guardian.

Truancy Court and Diversion Program Demographic Info:

2010 Stats:
Hispanic: 72%
White: 16%
Black: 11%
Asian: 1%
-she estimates that about 50% come from single parent families
-Avg Age: 13-14(6-8th graders)
-Pretty even b/w males and females

Like Truancy Court, all parties involved are invested in the program and strongly want the truants to succeed. The judge's goal is to connect with the truant child through non-punitive reinforcement and consistency. According to Debbie, "applauding someone in front of everyone, make all the difference in the world for these kids." Besides positive reinforcement, other incentives used to motivate the students include, giving out school supplies, i.e., mechanical pencils, personal hygiene products, etc. The Diversion Program's focus is primarily on middle school students because the belief is, if you catch them young, then there is much more opportunity for change to occur.

Why are kids in Southern Nevada truant?
Parents need to be more involved and check on what their children are doing and hold them accountable for their actions.
Importance and value of education not promoted enough- In considering our demographic here, even though the jobs this low income demographic may have may be considered "low income" in nature here, it may be better than what they were making in Mexico. As a result, the cycle repeats itself.
In few cases, some kids are needed to watch siblings or work
Poor use of school resources b/c not enough CCSD schools are emphasizing the importance of truancy reduction so funding in this area is limited-some schools don't even have attendance officers.
No consistency in truancy laws/policy & procedures
The unique nature of Las Vegas:
- Transient town, so difficult to track kids

- Twenty-four hour/seven day-a-week town: if parents work night or graveyard shift, it is difficult to manage what kids are doing.
- The job industry is still primarily service based, and not a lot of education is needed to for the majority of the jobs.
- Because we have the lowest graduation rate here, our employee potential is diminished which discourages any outside businesses from coming here and create new jobs.

Truancy prevention and reduction programs (TRPs) take a variety of forms. Most are organized either by schools, a court or a community coalition. Regardless of the type of program, monitoring progress and outcomes is essential to the effectiveness and success of the program.

Truancy reduction programs are being launched across the country due to increased awareness of the cost benefit factor. Within the policies and practices set by each state, school districts create the policies that govern school responses to truancy problems and TRPs work with the school districts by creating programs that address the different areas related to truancy. Community service providers agree that it's much more effective to address truancy earlier than later, but it's also necessary to address the concurrent truancy issues, yet there is substantial variation in how community services respond to truancy.

Evaluations of many programs show short-lived success, but few studies have trailed participants long enough to know whether the programs are reaching their long-term goal of high school graduation.

Assessing programs across the country to formulate a list of best practices as it relates to improving graduation rates, several programs published data that was evaluated in respect to similarities drawn from the truancy rates and correlates. The average graduation rate for the states whose programs were assessed is

Wisconsin, which has a graduation rate of 81 percent based on a report from Education Week, a Washington-based journal which compared graduation rates nationwide, is home to the Truancy Abatement and Burglary Suppression (TABS) initiated in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. TABS is a program where parents, police, and the school system focus on the causes of truancy. As a program requirement, attendance is taken for each class in high schools. Those students who are truant are picked up by the local police and taken to the Boys and Girls Club for counseling. If parents choose not support the school attendance policy the district attorney is contacted.

The program boasts success rates of 64 percent of students who went through TABS are still in school 30 days later. The program is successful not only because of the collaboration with the Milwaukee Police department, the Milwaukee Public School system, and the Milwaukee Boys and Girls Clubs, but because of the participation of the parents or guardians.

California, which according to the Education Week's report has a 62.7 percent graduation rate, has several programs that have been found to effectively bring students back to school. The Stop, Cite and Return Program in Rohnert Park, California was designed to reduce truancy and juvenile crime in the community and to increase average daily attendance for the schools. Patrol

officers issue citations to suspected truants contacted during school hours, and students are returned to school to meet with their parents and a vice principal. Two citations are issued without penalty; the third citation results in referral to appropriate support services.

The Stop, Cite and Return Program initiative is given partial credit to reducing the daytime burglary rate to 75 percent below the 1975 rate. Its success is attributed to being highly visible and in contact with students.

The Truancy Reduction Program was formed in Bakersfield, California to reach out to youth with a history of truancy through parent contact, peer tutoring, and mentoring services. Persistently truant youth are referred to the County Probation Office. Probation officers visit parents at home one-on-one, check on the youth at school weekly, and in the majority of cases refer youth and their families to one or more needed social service agencies. The County Probation Office and local school continue to track the youth for a full year before making referral to the local District Attorney's Office.

Oklahoma, which according to Education Week has a graduation rate of 71.8 percent, is home to THRIVE (Truancy Habits Reduced Increasing Valuable Education) initiative is a comprehensive anti-truancy program spurred by an ongoing community partnership of law enforcement, education, and social service officials. Police bring suspected truants to a community-run detention and assess the youth's school status. The student is then released to a parent or relative and the family is referred to any needed social services agency. The district attorney notifies parents of repeat behavior consequences. Parents who don't comply with the program are subject to misdemeanor charges.

The daytime burglary rate dropped 33% based on a report by the Oklahoma City Police Department and the drop is attributed to the inception of THRIVE.

Ohio, with a graduation rate as reported by Education Week of 73.7 percent, has the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management--Truancy Mediation Program. Truancy Mediation is a process that helps parents, caregivers, and schools find a fair and workable solution to children's truancy problems. The truancy mediation program allows you to settle truancy problems without going to court. The meetings are held at the child's school with parents or caregivers, teachers and the mediator for one hour. Research shows that the combination of mediation, counseling, and connecting to helpful people in the schools and the community has greatly reduced truancy.

Pennsylvania, with a graduation rate of 77.6 percent according to Education Week, and the Philadelphia Department of Human Services has truancy prevention programs that utilize strengths-base case management, which supports active client involvement. Home visits occur twice a month for one hour to help families achieve goals on their family development plan. The PATCH process is a community-based model of family support service delivery involving a locally-based multi-disciplinary team of human service workers. The team works to review and advice on every family seen in the regional or family court truancy system. PATCH conferences occur weekly for each court. http://stoneleighfoundation.org/node/406

Maryland, 74.6 percent University of Baltimore—Truancy Court Program (TCP)
The TCP addresses the root causes of truant behavior and links families to needed social services or other community-based supports. The program is voluntary and consists of 1- weekly in-school meetings among the student, the child's parent or caregiver, a judge or master who volunteers, a mentor. Interventions include parenting classes, tutoring, training in basic skills, counseling and anger management. Initial data indicate an overall 75 per cent decrease in absences for students during and immediately following their TCP participation.
http://law.ubalt.edu/template.cfm?page=1274

New York, graduation rate as reported by Education Week of 70.6 percent is home to the Harlem Children's Zone—Truancy Prevention. This program serves 90 families with at-risk children. The program conducts groups on domestic violence, parenting (the Parenting Journey) and a group for teen-agers. Truancy Prevention is contracted by ACS to provide support and services to these families to help transform their lives and communities with support from a caseworker who makes regular visits to their homes. The program provides casework counseling, advocacy, and referrals as needed.

Kentucky, graduation rate of 71.8 percent, initiated in 1997, by Judge Joan Byer, this program serves as a national model for other truancy diversion projects throughout the United States, including here in Clark County. It is a judicially driven school and community initiative where the goal is to improve school attendance and to enhance family function and behavior. It operates by bringing court to school once a week for 10 weeks. The success of this program relies on effective collaboration among all parties involved in the process, i.e., judge & court reps, school reps, social service reps, and the truant child and guardian. The program differs from "traditional truancy court" in that it uses positive reinforcement to accomplish its goal in reducing absenteeism in middle schools, rather than punitive measures. "Suspending and punishing a child, embarrassing, isolating or humiliating does not help the children. We need to stop doing things that don't work. Praise the parents, too, when the kids are doing well. Everyone has value," http://www.aoc.state.nc.us/www/public/aoc/pr/truancy.htm).   This rationale is based on the premise that the Diversion Program looks at truancy as a symptom of other underlying issues that need to also be considered before the issue of truancy can be dealt with effectively. "Besides academic failure, truancy can be symptomatic of family dysfunction, substance abuse, domestic violence, or child abuse and neglect that may be occurring within the child's home. The key then is to treat the whole child and to develop the awareness that truancy is symptomatic of a larger problem,"(A Model Response to Truancy Prevention…, Byer, J.).

Part 4 Implications and recommendations for the future of Ready for Life and other prevention services, in Southern Nevada

Given the complexity of the problem, any response to address truancy needs to be developed in collaboration with a number of partners who operate in this space. Ready for Life has established strong community alliances over the years and this allows them the ability to act as an intermediary connecting service providers with those in need of services as well as information to support students and their families.

What can be done to help reduce truancy in Southern Nevada?

Understanding that it is a community problem that requires everyone to be educated on the financial costs that are a direct result of truancy. Because the continual truant population here in Southern Nevada is predominantly Hispanic, a possible solution could be to have a bilingual representative from the Hispanic community who shares similarities with some of the students, speak on the importance of education and getting a secure job. Some avenues of communication could be through Hispanic media channels, town hall meeting and school assemblies.

The intranet service provided by Clark County School District, Parentlink, should be used more by parents to check on the academic status of their children. Truancy diversion programs also need to be in more schools throughout Southern Nevada. A five million dollar grant awarded to Clark County School District in fall of 2010 which work to expand more aspects of the truancy prevention, but much more needs to be done on a larger scale in terms of truancy reduction programs here in Southern Nevada.

The roles and responsibilities of these service agencies tend to overlap causing leaving critical gaps in necessary services. There is also a lack of synergy between agencies resulting in some students falling through the cracks.

Drawing on the principles underpinning effective processes for policy development, the lifecycle of any intervention or a program of interventions can generally be described by the following four phases: understanding the problem (problem definition; environmental scan), developing a response (strategy or policy initiative), implementing the response (implementation) and reflecting on and learning from the intervention (monitoring and evaluation).
 [https://www.iepdirect.com/ais/login/features/feature_3.html]

During the course of this evaluation and our interviews with various Ready for Life personnel and other stakeholders, it became apparent that each phase in an intervention's lifecycle has a number of 'elements of success'. The following diagram illustrates the high-level elements of success that have to be in place in order for interventions to have a good chance of achieving their intended outcomes.

Based on our findings the most important priorities for Ready for Life are:

- **Understanding the problem**

    Underpinning Ready for Life's strategies and ability to broker and provide services, there needs to be a very clear understanding of what the problems and issues are that need to be addressed and why.

    Undertaking research to delve into the root causes of truancy will provide an up-to-date understanding of:

    • what causes truancy and what are current perceptions of the problem amongst the
       population specific to the demographic of Southern Nevada
    • what factors contribute to truancy

• the groups that are most at risk
• given Southern Nevada's demographic, bilingual communication
• definitions around truancy
• more truancy diversion programs available at more schools

In short, the objective will be to arrive at a clear definition of the problem. An element of good problem definition is to have a good understanding of the target populations that need to be influenced. This includes the priority populations that Ready for Life and its community partners have already identified. Several interviewees, including principals, and parents, commented that different people respond to different triggers and motivators. That is to say it is unwise to implement actions and strategies to change the behaviors of one group may not work well for other groups, even if the groups are the same race or gender. In order for the interventions to be effective they need to be targeted in nature and adaptable to the different motivators of different groups, understanding that these can vary by circumstances and so should be flexible.

There is a strong need to describe a relationship between the theory and the evidence to support effective interventions as this will enable resources to be used more effectively and establish stronger alignment between the different initiatives that have similar objectives. There is also need for promoting consistent messages about expectations and desired behaviors so as to build a shared understanding of the problem across the different stakeholders. [http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/provision-of-school-support-services-an-evaluation/9 Author(s): Meenakshi Sankar & Fleur Chauvel - [MartinJenkins]Published: April 2011]

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our key recommendations are:

• Initiate research to delve into root causes of truancy to deepen our understanding of the problem as it relates to subpopulations as well as a broader sense.
• Initiate research to explore effective strategies for affecting change amongst particular subpopulation groups. (i.e. racial/ethnic groups)

Developing a strategic response

Key to any strategy or response is having a clear sense and articulation of the goal or outcome that the organization or service is working towards. In the context of truancy the evaluation indicates that there is a need for Ready for Life to shift the focus from outputs to outcomes. This will ensure that solutions designed to address truancy take a broader view of the problem and are more proactive. Solutions will need to be supported by a range of strategic alliances with community partners to ensure that truancy prevention practices are aligned to these expectations. Therefore any shift to an outcomes approach needs to be supported by clearer mandates and accountabilities.

Effective governance and leadership from Ready for Life Southern Nevada was also identified as a critical element of success and for strengthening the efficiency of the current system. The level of variability in the current environment is not desirable and needs to be addressed. It appears that Ready for Life Southern Nevada has not actively sought to influence or lead the direction and shape of its community partners, resulting in a movement that appears to lack consistency.

Effective governance and management relies on sound plans and good communication of those plans. Goals need to be clear and realistic. Ready for Life Southern Nevada needs to reflect on its role within a truancy prevention infrastructure and build its internal process/capability to manage these processes effectively.

Development of a strategic response needs to be matched with adequate resourcing. While it appears that the service is successfully recruiting community partners to provide services, and the expectations from truancy services have also widened considerably and current resourcing levels do not reflect this.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our recommendations to support the development of a strategic response are:
- Strengthen leadership from Ready for Life by providing clearer direction and expectations from a truancy prevention infrastructure.
- Shift the focus from outputs to outcomes and design truancy prevention services that are geared to deliver on outcomes.
- Review resourcing to allow truancy prevention services to balance reactive and proactive aspects of their role.
- Continue to establish formal partnerships with parents, schools and other agencies that operate in the truancy area so as to establish cohesion across the different agencies.
- Clearer mandates and accountabilities that are communicated to all partners and stakeholders.

Implementation of the strategic response

A key issue coming through from the interviews relates to the desirability of ceding control to those who are best placed to drive the initiative. Furthermore, and consistent with one of Ready for Life's working principles which is "...combining our resources and commitment on the ground with evidence-based solutions and a connected, operational infrastructure, we will be able to make an impact on the individual youth we are serving…" it is important to allow regions to innovate and not try to force them into centrally determined frameworks and processes. The trade-off for giving more degrees of freedom to providers is the need to strengthen governance and management arrangements at the center to ensure that effective accountability is maintained, particularly relating to training, guidelines and templates, and other forms of administrative support.

While sound structures, policies and procedures can all support effective leadership and management, the role that individual partners play will directly impact how well these work in practice.

The nature of the issues surrounding truancy is such that any meaningful response requires collaboration across a wide range of agencies on a day-to-day basis. This requires Ready for Life to maintain effective community partnerships. The effectiveness of these partnerships is an element of success because it helps identify opportunities to leverage off, or assist, the work of others.

Recommendations

Based on above discussion, our recommendations for ensuring successful implementation of truancy prevention services include:

• Balancing national and regional interests – while sound structures, policies and processes all support effective partnerships, the role individual partners play will directly impact on how this will work.
• Encouraging and supporting collaborative approaches to implementation.
• Investment in training and professional development of all actors within the truancy prevention infrastructure so as to promote consistent messages and understandings.
• Becoming the knowledge network or hub to promote sharing of best practice and continuous learning.

◉ **Monitor and evaluate**

The overarching purpose of monitoring and evaluation is to inform understanding of:

• the level and rate of change in the desired outcome
• whether activities are having the impact intended, and
• what is working well, what is not and why.

Tracking progress towards outcomes is an essential way to inform the ongoing development, refinement and improvement of an intervention. Given the complex nature of truancy and the myriad of factors that contribute to achieving desired change, it is by implication often difficult to 'unpack' the impact of individual strategies and interventions. However evaluation of a small number of initiatives can contribute to the growing knowledge base about what works to reduce truancy or improve attendance.

Recommendations

Based on the above discussion, our recommendation for improving the monitoring and evaluation environment requires Ready for Life to put in place the following:

• Clarity of desired impact – outputs and outcomes level.
• Meaningful, quantifiable and realistic performance measures which combine to tell the performance story.

• A framework within which to evaluate and analyze findings.

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