Summary

**Ready For Life**

*An Evaluation: Factors relating to truancy and promising practices*

Truancy has been linked to serious delinquent activity in youth and to significant negative behavior and characteristics in adults. Truancy is one 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.

The financial costs of truancy are generally incurred over a long period of time, 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.

The focus of 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.

Evaluators were tasked with gathering 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.
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.

**Findings**

Understanding that truancy is a community problem 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 agencies providing community services 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.

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.

**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.