

STATE OF DELAWARE JUSTICE OF THE PEACE COURT

TRUANCY COURT ANNUAL REPORT School Year 2002-2003



Delaware's statewide Truancy Court successfully combats truancy by pairing community health and social service resources with intensive court oversight to strengthen families, improve school attendance, and prevent juvenile delinquency.

What is the Truancy Court?

Truancy is a powerful predictor of juvenile delinquency and often reflects serious unresolved personal or family problems including homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, child abuse, or unmet educational needs. Delaware's Truancy Court succeeds in reducing truancy by working intensively with parents and truant students to address these needs, using a wide network of resources, immediate assessment, intensive intervention, and consistent follow through with families.

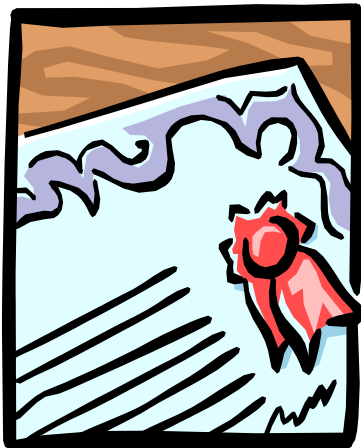
The Truancy Court takes a comprehensive approach to solving truancy problems in a family by involving visiting teachers, prosecutors, judges, court personnel, social workers, interns, and health, social service, and treatment providers. All serve an active role in assisting the family in solving its truancy and other problems and develop continuing relationships with the families during the six to nine month period that a family typically remains in Truancy Court.

The Delaware Truancy Court builds a solid foundation for improving student attendance and academic focus by requiring intensive parental involvement. Although many parents initially express hostility at being brought into court, as the process unfolds, they usually become committed participants and appreciate the assistance that the Truancy Court provides in helping them get control of their children and their lives.

The Truancy Court in 2002-2003 handled 951 new cases encompassing 5114 court events (filings, arraignments, case reviews and case dispositions) statewide. This represents a 29% caseload increase, and a 48% increase in court events, from last year.

How does the Truancy Court provide family intervention?

Truancy Court coordinates and collaborates with a variety of services, agencies and programs to provide a wraparound like service to our families. Through the Memorandum of Understanding between the Department of Education, Department of Services for Children, Youth and Families, and the Justice of the Peace Court, information is shared regarding truancy families and, as a result, most services for the families are in place in a matter of days.



For the first time the Truancy Court held a statewide graduation in May 2003 for the students and their parents who had been successful in dramatically improving their school attendance and academic performance while in Truancy Court. The event was a memorable one with 170 students and family members in attendance. The highlight of the celebration was the exceptional testimony given by students regarding the changes that Truancy Court had made in their lives.

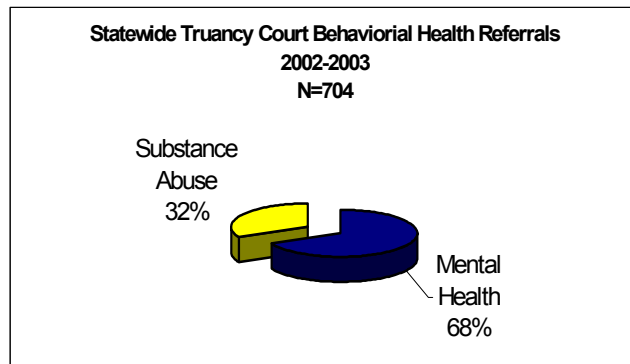
One of the common themes of the presentations was that of a renewed relationship between students and parents.

Through a grant-funded program, the teen-age student presenters who graduated obtained summer employment with a local Boy's and Girl's Club. In addition two of the students who completed this program will be presenting at an international conference for truancy based on their experiences of success with this program.

Who are the Truancy Court Partners?

Interagency collaboration and behavioral health treatment services have been major keys to the success of Truancy Court. It is well known that truancy is just a "symptom" of family and individual challenges. The Truancy Court Model provides for swift and highly personal intervention. Provider agencies are present in the courtroom to begin the process as

soon as the court makes the agency referral. This immediate contact with agencies -- resulting in a family leaving the court with a scheduled appointment -- has been significant in engaging a family in necessary services, such as treatment, parenting education, or family services. In 2002-2003, 704 Truancy Court cases, or 74% of the total cases, resulted in a behavioral health (substance abuse or mental health) referral.



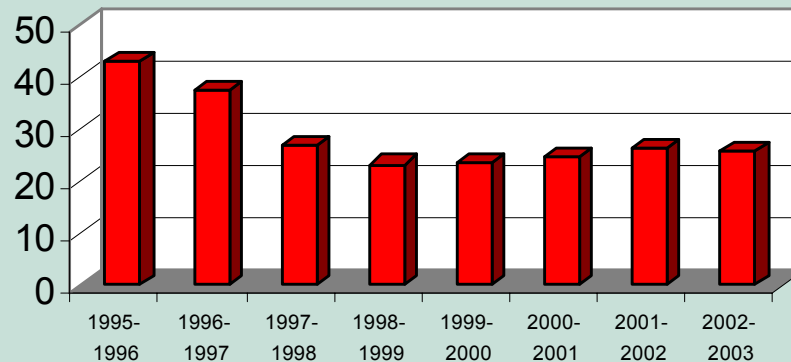
An additional intervention available in Truancy Court is on-site testing for substance abuse. This allows for immediate results and referral to an agency. For 2002-2003, 340 drug tests were administered based on high-risk indicators, with over 50% of the parents and students testing positive for some type of drug. In addition, students who self-reported substance abuse were immediately referred for assessment and treatment.

Looking at Outcomes

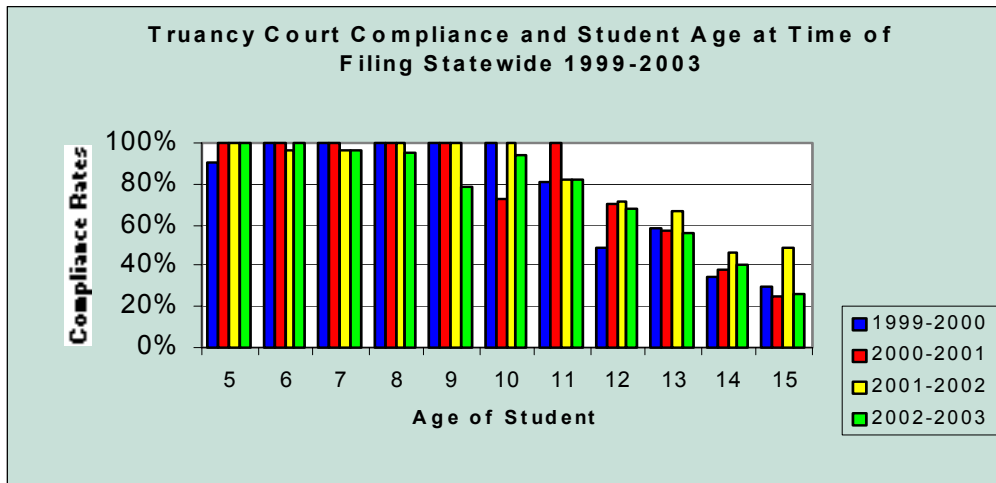
Although there have been many anecdotal indicators of success, the Truancy Court has sufficient data to comprehensively quantify its achievements during the 2002-2003 school year and beyond:

- **The average number of unexcused absences at the time of filing has decreased from 43.4 days in 1995-1996 to 25.6 days in 2002-2003, representing a 41% decrease.** This decrease evidences the hard work of school districts in charging truant students earlier, and enhances the likelihood of success in Truancy Court. This number is expected to continue to decline with the implementation of legislation mandating the reporting of truant students to visiting teachers after 10 days of unexcused absences.

Truancy Court Statewide Number of Unexcused Absences at Time of Filing 2002-2003



- **55% of the 739 cases closed in 2002-2003 achieved overall compliance with the Truancy Court.**
- This overall compliance rate is similar to last year's compliance rate of 56%. It represents a meaningful achievement, given the substantial numbers of Truancy Court students who are difficult to reach because of long-term truancy problems well entrenched before they appear in Court, their advanced age (they are close to 16 years of age and age out before the Truancy Court process can work), their large number of the unexcused absences (exceeding 60 days), or their extended involvement in the criminal/delinquency system.
- **Early intervention by decreasing the unexcused absences at the time of filing also effects outcome.** 2002-2003 students who achieved full compliance with the Truancy Court had an average number of unexcused absences at the time of filing of 20.87 days, down from 23 days in 2001-2002. The average number of unexcused days for all students at the time of filing was 26.14 days. This difference demonstrates *the importance of charging truants sooner (when they have fewer absences) to enhance the likelihood that the student will reengage in the educational process.*
- **Early intervention continues to support success – as in the past the compliance rate for younger students continues to be maintained at high rates and in most cases is between 90% and 100% when the truant student is less than 11 years old.**



- For the school year 2002-2003, there were 90 students, age 12 or older, charged with the civil truancy charge of "Failure to Attend School." 53% of those students achieved full compliance with the court, demonstrating that, with help, youth are capable of taking direct responsibility for their own actions.
- **Long-term school attendance** for truancy cases closed in Truancy Court show that a substantial majority of those students are still attending school regularly:

*For students statewide in **2002-2003:***

94% of the students who achieved full compliance with the Truancy Court in **2002-2003** completed the school year.

70% of the 739 students involved with Truancy Court in **2002-2003** completed the school year.

*For students statewide in **2001-2002:***

66% of students involved with Truancy Court in **2001- 2002** continues to attend school regularly.

For New Castle County students only:*

1999-2000, 73% continues to attend

1998-1999, 66% continues to attend

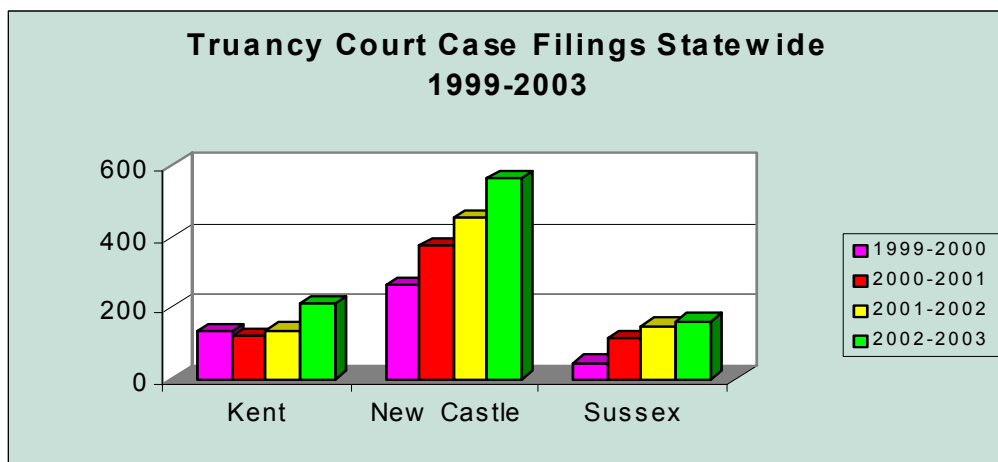
**Data not available for lower 2 counties*

Substantial gains continue to be made for students who have had the experience of participating in Truancy Court.

Truancy Court case filings comparison

School districts filing cases in Truancy Court include:

NEW CASTLE COUNTY	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
Appoquinimink	9	15	9
Brandywine	51	48	59
Christina	202	234	322
Colonial	54	59	60
Red Clay	61	96	128
TOTAL	377	452	578
KENT COUNTY	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
*Because We Care	14	23	NA
Capital	27	32	67
Caesar Rodney	21	42	28
Lake Forest	21	17	51
Smyrna	14	22	61
Poly Tech			3
TOTAL	121	136	210
SUSSEX COUNTY	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003
Cape Henlopen	7	24	31
Delmar	20	26	28
Indian River	32	24	37
Laurel	4	36	27
Milford	12	25	8
Seaford	11	9	25
Woodbridge	7	5	8
TOTAL	112	149	163
GRAND TOTAL	610	737	951
*Alternative School (multi-district)			



What does a Truancy Court family look like?



“Johnny” is a real-life example of the Truancy Court’s success in ensuring that students and parents address the root causes of a student’s failure to attend school. “Johnny” is a 13 year old who started skipping school and experimenting with marijuana. At his first appearance in Court, the judge ordered a family assessment. The family scheduled the assessment with a mental health provider present in the courtroom and the date for the first court progress hearing was set.

The assessment revealed that “Johnny’s” mother was severely depressed and that “Johnny” had been abused years before by an acquaintance. At the next hearing, the judge ordered his mother to obtain psychiatric treatment and to complete parenting classes for Truancy Court parents to help her function better and improve her parenting skills.

In addition, the judge referred “Johnny” to counseling to help him with emotional issues resulting from his abuse and to a special Boys and Girls Club program. The program, designed for difficult-to-motivate Truancy Court teenagers, requires that participants complete community service, life and job skills training, tutoring, and participate in Club activities each weekday after school. Throughout this process, the Court’s case manager maintained frequent contact with all service providers to ensure progress and to alert the Court to any problems.

“Johnny” thrived during his year in Truancy Court. He now has excellent school attendance, improved his grades, stopped smoking marijuana, and is enthusiastically involved with the Boys and Girls Club. He “graduated” last June from Truancy Court and continues as Boys and Girls Club part-time staff. Both “Johnny” and his mother credit the Truancy Court with turning their lives around.

“Johnny” is only one of many Delaware students who have benefited from the Truancy Court. As their stories show, the Delaware Truancy Court model is highly effective in building stronger families and reducing truancy.

Initiatives 2002-2003

- Implementation of 2002 Truancy Legislation providing for mandated reporting to visiting teachers of all students with 10 unexcused absences and allowing the charging of students 12 years of age and older without an affirmative defense for parent(s).
- Second year continuation of a grant-funded program in Kent County in partnership with the Boy’s and Girl’s Club to work with older, chronically truant students.
- Continuing enhancement of consistency in policies and procedures for filing and management of truancy cases statewide.

- A third day of Truancy Court per month was added in Sussex County, a ninth day added in New Castle County, and evening Truancy Court hours in Kent County due to caseload increases.
- Promoting relationships with school districts statewide to enhance access to school-related follow up information on truancy cases.
- Services provided by Delaware State University social work and Wesley College psychology student interns benefiting school districts and Truancy Court through half year and year long internships with Truancy Court.
- Presentation to the Mid-Atlantic Consortium of Schools of Social Work in May 2003 on "Intergenerational Issues" related to school attendance and truancy.

What's next for Truancy Court in 2003-2004?

- Delaware's Truancy Court will receive the "**Program of the Year Award**" from the International Association for Truancy and Dropout Prevention at its Annual Conference in the fall of 2003. As the only statewide program in the country and because of its achievements, other truancy prevention professionals recognize Delaware's Truancy Court as a model program.
- Seeking additional resources to assist the Justice of the Peace Court in managing the Truancy Court process.
- Continuing efforts to expand the Boy's and Girl's Club program for chronically truant teenagers in Kent County to Sussex County.
- Expanding the Truancy Court relationship with Delaware State University, other institutions of higher learning, and additional community-based agencies.
- Implementing "Electronic Monitoring" and "In Home Detention" through the Division of Youth Rehabilitation Services for youth who meet certain criteria.

*State of Delaware
Justice of the Peace Court
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