



# Title V Addressing Disproportionate Minority Contact: Truancy Interventions

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Sandy Keaton M.A.  
Cynthia Burke, Ph.D.



401 B Street  
Suite 800  
San Diego, CA 92101  
(619) 699-1900

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As of September 13, 2010

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## INTRODUCTION

Although minority youth account for about one-third of the U.S. juvenile population, they comprise two-thirds of the juvenile detention/corrections population. Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) in the juvenile justice system has garnered the attention of federal, state, and local officials, who are calling for jurisdictions to take steps to reduce the DMC. For nearly a decade San Diego County has been strategically and consistently working on both identifying the extent of DMC in the juvenile justice system and creating a formal plan to reduce it. Specifically, The Children's Initiative and the San Diego County Probation formed a DMC committee in early 2000 to examine if and how DMC manifested itself in the County's juvenile justice system. With a series of private and public funds, including a California Standards Authority (CSA) three-year technical assistance program, grant San Diego County was able to conduct a thorough DMC study. The result was the creation of the *San Diego County's Juvenile Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Reduction Plan*, which outlined 11 DMC reduction recommendations.

## DMC AND TRUANCY REDUCTION

To support the reduction efforts, the San Diego Probation Department was awarded a Title V Community Planning grant from CSA to implement one of the 11 DMC reduction recommendations: "Address the Pathways to Delinquency and Enhance Prevention Services." A primary factor driving the development of this recommendation was the finding from the local research that truancy was significantly related to a youth, especially Hispanic youth, being incarcerated and detained into juvenile hall. As such, the DMC Committee tasked The Children's Initiative and the Criminal Justice Research Division of SANDAG with identifying some of the factors that contribute to truancy and outlining possible solutions. Utilizing the Title V funds and leveraging additional federal funds secured by The Children's Initiative, a three-prong research study was designed to accomplish this task.

- ▶ **Phase I:** Partner with the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) to identify factors contributing to the high rate of truancy among three middle schools: Clark, Horace Mann (Mann), and Wilson.
- ▶ **Phase II:** Conduct surveys and interviews with key school personnel at these three schools to garner their insights into the truancy issue.
- ▶ **Phase III:** Provide truancy intervention services to 100 youth with truancy issues in the central and northern regions of the county to improve school attendance and performance.

The research was conducted in phases starting with the analysis of the three middle schools and ending with the analysis of outcome data from the truancy intervention services. The report details the research process, the outcomes, and puts forth recommendations at the end of each section.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS		
Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ Combined, Clark, Mann, and Wilson schools had a 50 percent truancy rate in school year 2008-2009.</li> <li>▶▶ Mann had the largest proportion of students truant (58%), and Wilson had the lowest (37%).</li> <li>▶▶ Being an English learner, in special education and having been suspended were all positively related to truancy.</li> <li>▶▶ As youth increased in grade, so did their likelihood of being truant, with a greater proportion of eighth graders (52%) truant compared to sixth graders (44%).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ The three middle schools (i.e., Clark, Mann, and Wilson) reported being in compliance with the district’s attendance recording policy.</li> <li>▶▶ Each of the schools utilized parent conferences and home visits when absences are “unverified” or there is a pattern of “unexcused” absences.</li> <li>▶▶ Common characteristics of truants noted by respondents were nonengaged and or unmotivated youth; youth struggling academically; youth attending to family demands; and overwhelmed parents.</li> <li>▶▶ Truancy reduction efforts noted by staff included educating parents and students on the importance of attendance, increasing resources, such as mentoring, to support youth attending school, and providing resources in the community to support families.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶▶ 103 youth participated in truancy intervention services between March 2009 and July 2010.</li> <li>▶▶ The average length of program participation was approximately three months (92 days).</li> <li>▶▶ About two-thirds (65%) of youth and less than one-quarter (23%) of parent/guardians reported English as their primary language.</li> <li>▶▶ Participant’s GPA increased significantly from an average of 1.84 to 2.17 for North County Lifeline youth post program participation.</li> <li>▶▶ The average number of days truant post program participation decreased from 8.36 to 6.84.</li> <li>▶▶ Days attended increased from 89 percent to 93 percent on average.</li> </ul>

# PHASE I

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the pathways that increase a youth's likelihood of detention and institutional commitment is truancy. The research described here is part of San Diego County's efforts to implement its eleven recommendations included in its DMC reduction plan. The specific recommendation being targeted is "Address the Pathways to Delinquency and Enhance Prevention Services." As such, the DMC Committee has tasked The Children's Initiative and SANDAG with identifying some of the factors that contribute to truancy and outlining possible solutions. Truancy was selected as a focal point for two reasons: 1) truancy was found to increase the likelihood of a youth being detained in Juvenile Hall upon arrest and being committed to an institution if true found on a charge; and 2) Hispanic youth were more likely to be identified as truant and therefore at greater risk for detainment.<sup>1</sup> To support this endeavor, the San Diego County Probation Department was awarded a Title V Community Planning grant to examine and address the possible reasons contributing to high rate of truancy.

The study is divided into three phases that involved collecting archival data, conducting surveys and interviews, and implementing a truancy reduction intervention. Phase I involved partnering with the SDUSD to examine truancy among three middle schools that have a high truancy rate: Clark, Mann, and Wilson. Phase II, enhanced the data gathered in Phase I, with SANDAG conducting surveys and interviews with key personnel at the three target schools to garner their insights into the truancy<sup>2</sup> issue. Finally, Phase III centered on documenting the outcomes from two truancy intervention programs that served a 100 middle school youth in the central and northern regions of San Diego County.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Combined, Clark, Mann, and Wilson schools had a 50 percent truancy rate in school year 2008-2009.
- ▶ Mann had the largest proportion of students truant (58%), and Wilson had the lowest (37%).
- ▶ Being an English learner, in special education, and having been suspended were all positively related to truancy.
- ▶ Indochinese and Other Asians were less likely to be truant compared to their representation in the school population.
- ▶ As youth increased in grade, so did their likelihood of being truant, with a greater proportion of eighth graders (52%) truant compared to sixth graders (44%).

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<sup>1</sup> Keaton, S., Burke, C., Rohanna, K., Sievers, S., Schafer, E. (2008). San Diego County's Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC): Identification and Assessment. SANDAG.

<sup>2</sup> According to the school district, truancy is defined as having three or more unexcused full day absences.

Phase I focused on the three middle schools mentioned above, which are located in neighborhoods with a large proportion of youth on probation. SANDAG, in partnership with Probation, the SDUSD, and The Children's Initiative examined the data available on the 3,425 youth who attended these three schools in the 2008-2009 school year. This section of the report is the outcome of that exercise and was used to inform the Phase II of the project. The data analysis and interviews will lead to the development of recommendations specific to reducing truancy in these three target schools. Phase I of the report describes the schools' populations during the 2008-2009 school year, the characteristics of students at the three schools, those factors related to truancy, and possible questions for the interviews.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data on the entire population at each of the three schools were provided by the SDUSD. These data included the following information about each student:

- ▶▶ Race/ethnicity
- ▶▶ School
- ▶▶ Current grade level
- ▶▶ English learner
- ▶▶ Special education
- ▶▶ Truant
- ▶▶ Days enrolled/days absent
- ▶▶ Suspension
- ▶▶ Expulsion

The analysis plan included both bivariate and multivariate (logistic regression) analyses to determine any relationship between student characteristics and recent truancy. Truancy was defined by the school district as having three or more unexcused absences. The data were provided in a binary format (i.e., yes or no), with the number of truant episodes unknown. The analyses were conducted on the entire population of students, regardless of how long they had been enrolled in the school. Furthermore, analyses were limited to the above available variables and, therefore, the results cannot eliminate other possible contributing factors that were unknown to the researchers at the time (e.g., substance use, childhood abuse).

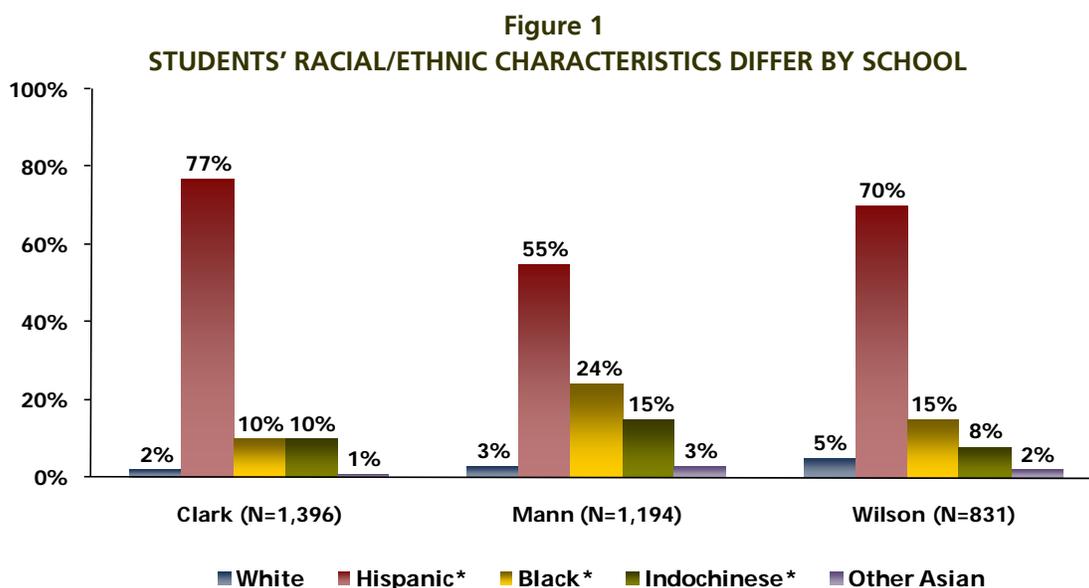
## **SCHOOL POPULATIONS**

### **Overall Population**

Clark, Mann, and Wilson are three middle schools located in the central areas of the City of San Diego within one to two miles of each other. The economically challenged areas are culturally diverse and home to many new immigrant communities. For example, Clark and Wilson middle schools are located in predominantly Hispanic areas that also include a larger proportion of Asian and Black populations in comparison to the region as a whole. The median household income of the surrounding neighborhood is \$29,078. Mann is located in an area that is shifting demographically from older Whites to younger Hispanics and has large Black and Asian populations

in comparison to the rest of the region. The median household income of \$34,540 in the local area is slightly higher than Clark and Wilson, but the majority of households still earn less than \$30,000 per year.

Examination of the overall school characteristics reveal school populations that parallel the diversity of the neighborhoods and some of the challenges. Specifically, the neighborhoods are racially diverse with a higher proportion of Hispanics, Blacks, and Asians than the county as a whole. While this is true across all three schools, analyses revealed that differences in student characteristics do exist among Clark, Mann, and Wilson. As such, student population data were analyzed by individual school. A total of 3,425 youth attended these schools in the school year 2008-2009, with Clark having the largest student body (1,399), followed by Mann (1,195), and Wilson (831). As Figure 1 shows, two-thirds of the student populations at all three schools are identified as Hispanic (67%), with a significant difference between Mann and the other two schools. Specifically, Mann had significantly fewer Hispanics, but more Black and Indochinese students than both Clark and Wilson (Figure 1).



*\*Differences at .05 level*

*NOTE: Native Americans are not included because of the small number in the school population (n=4).*

*SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009*

Given the location of these three schools, it is not surprising that most families of the student body were economically challenged. One of the proxy measures the school district has for measuring the economic status of the youth is the percentage certified eligible to receive free and/or reduced cost lunch. When a school reaches a substantial number of youth who are certified, it is considered a Provision 2 school, at which all students are deemed eligible, regardless of their household income. Clark, Mann, and Wilson are all Provision 2 schools.

Other student characteristics available and examined for this report were English learners (students not yet proficient in English), special education (had an individual learning plan), suspension, and expulsion. Overall, two out of five (40%) students were considered English learners, 16 percent

were classified as special education students, and 12 percent had been suspended at least once during the school year.<sup>3</sup> When the schools were compared, Clark differed significantly from the other two schools on these variables, with fewer English learners (35%) and special education students (14%), but more students suspended (14%) (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**CLARK HAS FEWER ENGLISH LEARNERS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS THAN MANN AND WILSON\***

	Clark	Mann	Wilson	Total
English Learners	35%	43%	43%	40%
Special Education	14%	17%	16%	16%
Suspended	14%	10%	11%	12%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,399</b>	<b>1,195</b>	<b>831</b>	<b>3,425</b>

*NOTE: Differences significant at the .05 level*

*SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009*

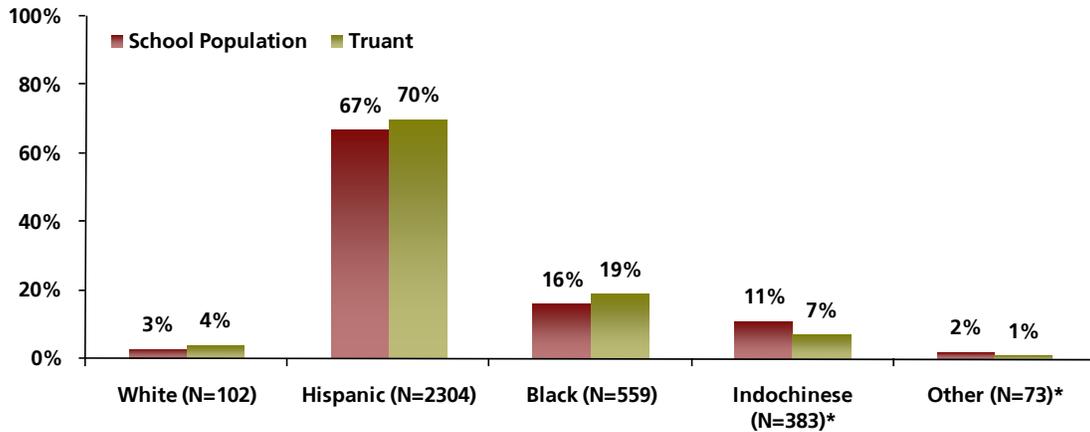
## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO TRUANCY

The primary reason for selecting these three schools was the 50 percent truancy rate of the student population. To help understand possible contributing factors leading to this high rate of truancy, bivariate analyses were run to identify any association between the aforementioned factors and truancy. Several factors were found to be associated with truancy, including race/ethnicity, English learners, special education, suspension, and school attended. The following describes these relationships in more detail.

As noted earlier, the target schools had a large proportion of non-White students, with variance among the three schools. Further analysis showed that overall, the only racial difference related to truancy was among the smallest number of students. Specifically, Indochinese and Other Asian students were significantly less likely to be truant in comparison to their representation in the schools. As Figure 2 shows, Indochinese youth comprised 11 percent of the overall school population but only accounted for 7 percent of the total truant population, and Other Asian students also were less likely to be truant (1%) compared to their representation in the schools (2%). This difference was consistent across all three schools.

<sup>3</sup> Expulsions also were considered, but there were only 23 documented expulsions among all three schools and, therefore, this measure was not included in the analysis.

**Figure 2**  
**INDOCHINESE AND OTHER ASIAN STUDENTS LESS LIKELY TO BE TRUANT**  
**COMPARED TO THEIR OVERALL REPRESENTATION IN THE SCHOOL**

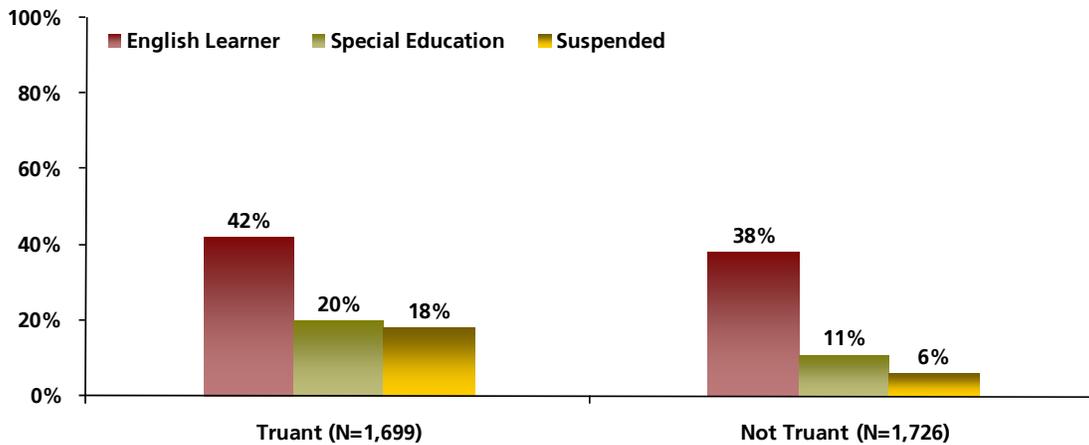


\*Differences at the .05 level.

SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009

Analyses also showed that those students who were English learners, in special education, and/or had been suspended represented a higher proportion of truant youth. As Figure 3 illustrates, two out of five truants were English learners (42%), and approximately one in five were either in special education (20%) or had a suspension in his/her record (18%).

**Figure 3**  
**OVER FORTY PERCENT OF TRUANTS ARE ENGLISH LEARNERS\***

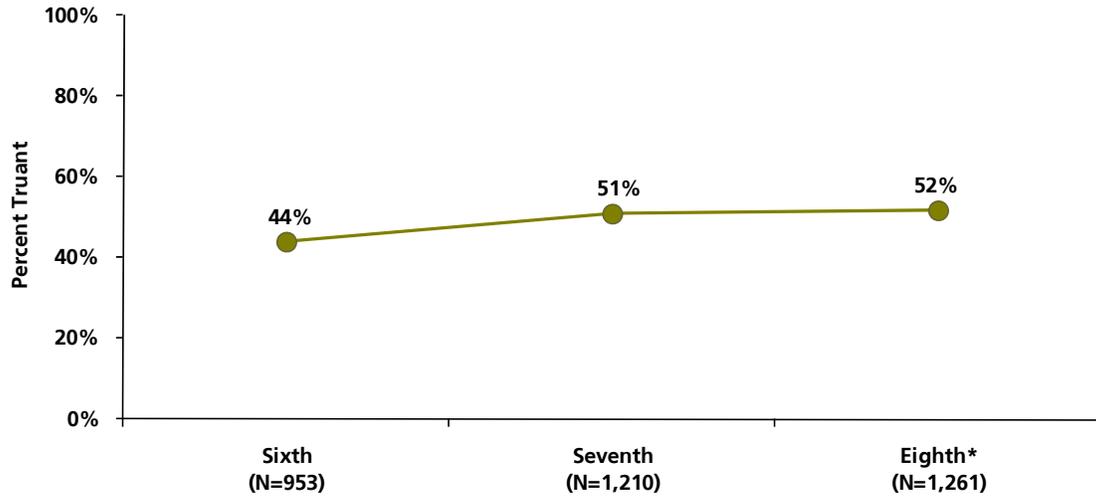


\*Differences at the .05 level.

SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009

Furthermore, youth just entering middle school were significantly less likely to be truant than those in their last year of middle school. That is, 44 percent of sixth graders were truant, but this increased to 52 percent for eighth graders (Figure 4).

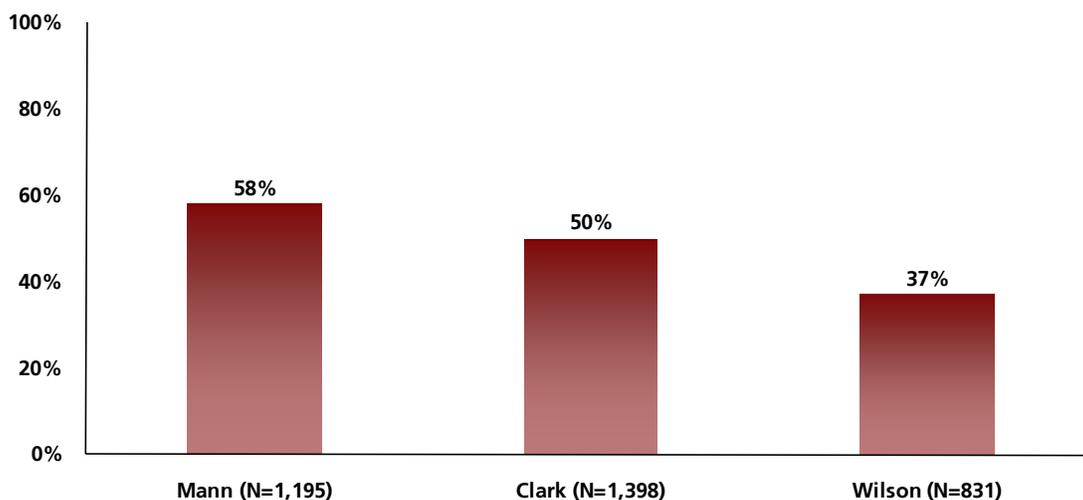
**Figure 4**  
**EIGHTH GRADERS MOST LIKELY TO HAVE BEEN TRUANT**



*\*Differences at the .05 level.*  
*SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009*

The outcomes of the analysis on the individual student population shed light on some of those characteristics that were related to a youth being truant (e.g., English learner). These findings were then used as the basis to explore if differences in truancy existed among the individual schools, regardless of student characteristics. This additional analysis was intended to assist in identifying possible differences in truancy reduction practices at the three schools. This analysis did reveal differences in the rates of truancy among the three middle schools. Specifically, Mann had the highest rate of truancy, with 58 percent of its student body having been truant, and Wilson had the lowest rate, with a 37 percent truancy rate (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**  
**MANN HAD THE HIGHEST RATE OF TRUANCY AMONG THE THREE SCHOOLS**



*\*Differences at the .05 level.*

*SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009*

Based solely on the initial analysis of student characteristics, one would expect that the school with the highest-risk students would have the greatest truancy rate. However, although Clark had a lower percentage of youth in the high-risk groups (i.e., English learners and special education), Wilson had fewer truants. Therefore, further analyses were conducted to understand how these combined factors together affected truancy. Logistic regression was used to analyze all of these variables together in order to determine the impact one variable, such as English learners, had on truancy while also taking the other variables into account. For example, by placing all the variables in the logistic regression model with a school variable, the model could determine if there was a truancy difference by school that is not due to a higher risk population (e.g., the school may have a policy that accounts for the truancy difference). The regression model also estimated how much strength each variable impacts truancy, even when the other variables were accounted for.

The outcome of these analyses supports the findings that English learners and youth in special education are at greater risk for truancy. Specifically, English learners were 1.3 times (or 30%) more likely to be truant, and youth in special education were 1.7 times (or 70%) more likely to be truant than those who were not in these groups. Interestingly, this was true for all races except Black youth who were English learners. In this case, these youth were actually less likely to be truant (.40) than other English learners. These youth are most likely Somalians (given the large proportion of Somalians living in this area) and raises the question of why this immigrant group differs from the other English learners. Not surprising, those youth who had at least one suspension during the school year also were more likely to be truant (2.8 times or 81% more likely). Another observation exposed through the analysis was the success of Wilson in reducing truancy among the groups that are at greatest risk. Even when controlling for all the factors, Clark and Mann still had higher truancy rates compared to Wilson. Specifically, students at Mann were 2.6 times (or 160%) more likely to be truant, and students at Clark were 1.8 times (or 80%) more likely to be truant compared to Wilson.

**Table 2**  
**SEVERAL FACTORS RELATED TO TRUANCY\***

	Odds of Being Truant
Suspended*	2.82
Mann*	2.60
Clark*	1.82
Special education*	1.70
English learner*	1.31
Grade*	1.19
Black English Learners*	.40

*\*Differences at the .05 level*

*SOURCE: San Diego Unified School District, 2009*

Finally, grade remained a factor, with the odds of becoming truant increasing approximately 20 percent with each grade increase. While the regression model raises the policy question of how to support English Learners and those students in special education in reducing their risk of truancy, it shines a light on the truancy reduction efforts at Wilson middle school, which seems to be having success with these higher-risk populations.

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In an effort to better understand possible factors contributing to the high truancy rate of youth attending Mann, Clark, or Wilson middle schools, bivariate and multivariate (logistic regression) analyses were conducted on the over 3,000 youth who attended one of these schools during the 2008-2009 school year. Data on several student characteristics were provided to SANDAG by the San Diego Unified School District to be used in the analyses. The ultimate goal of this exercise is to inform the development of interview questions that will be conducted with key school personnel in an effort to create policy changes directed at reducing truancy. As anticipated, several factors were found to have a positive association with truancy, and thus provided an opportunity to hone further data collection (Table 3). Overall, the intention of the research is to indirectly impact DMC through the reduction of school truants.

**Table 3**  
**KEY FACTORS RELATED TO TRUANCY**

More Likely to be Truant
▶▶ Clark and Mann
▶▶ English learners
▶▶ Special education
▶▶ Eighth graders
▶▶ Suspension

*SOURCE: SANDAG, Title V DMC Summary, 2009.*

The data results from the analyses clearly highlight several factors that increase the likelihood of a youth being truant. These factors include English learners (except for Black English learners), special education students, youth who have been suspended, and older youth (i.e., eighth graders as a proxy for age). What may be most interesting about these results is that Black English learners differ from other English learners, as does Wilson from the other two schools in respect to having lower truancy rates compared to their cohorts. Based on the outcomes of the analyses, the following suggestions are put forth as possible questions for key staff personnel:

1. What safeguards are currently in place to support English learners and students in special education attending school?
2. What barriers do staff perceive exist that might be contributing to the high rate of truancy for English learners and special education students?
3. Are there truancy reduction steps that can be put in place when a youth is at risk of or first suspended from school?
4. Are there actions that can be taken when a youth enrolls in middle school that can help prevent future truancy?
5. What steps are taken when a youth is found truant to address this issue?
6. At what point does the school intervene with a truant student?
7. What is contributing to Wilson having a significantly lower rate of truancy although it has similar types of students?
8. What are the perceptions of staff members at Clark and Mann as to the reasons their schools have such a high rate of truancy?

# PHASE II

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## INTRODUCTION

The second phase of the study was to gather qualitative information from key personnel at the targeted middle schools: Clark, Horace Mann, and Wilson. The purpose of this phase was to supplement the quantitative data gathered in Phase I, with more specific information from each school site. The information gathered from this process is presented in this report and also drove the project design for year two.

## METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this phase of the research included surveys and interviews. Given the collaborative nature of the project, an advisory committee was formed to review all instruments, provide insights on findings, and provide input on recommendations and next steps. The committee included members from the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), San Diego County Probation Department, The Children’s Initiative, and SANDAG.

### Data Collection and Analysis

To learn more about each of the three schools’ (i.e., Clark, Mann, and Wilson) truancy policies and practices, surveys and subsequent follow-up interviews were conducted with available principals and attendance support staff. The purpose of the surveys was to gather information on which personnel was responsible for tracking attendance and following up on absences and truants; how attendance was recorded, truancy reduction and intervention practices; and staff’s perception on the scope, contributing factors, and possible solutions of truancy at their school. All three principals completed the survey, two of whom were able to participate in the follow-up interview, and two support staff completed the survey and participated in the follow-up interview. This resulted in a total of five surveys and four interviews being conducted. Because of the small sample size, analyses were qualitative in nature and are meant to supplement the findings from the first phase of the research.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ▶▶ The three middle schools reported being in compliance with the district’s attendance recording policy.
- ▶▶ Parent conferences and home visits are utilized when absences remain “unverified” or there is a patterned of “unexcused” absences.
- ▶▶ Common characteristics of truants noted by respondents were non-engaged and or unmotivated youth; youth struggling academically; youth attending to family demands; and overwhelmed parents.
- ▶▶ Effective truancy reduction strategies noted by respondents included educating parents and students on the importance of attendance; increased resources, such as mentoring, to support youth attending school; and resources in the community to support families.

Truancy is defined as having three or more unexcused full day absences.

*SDUSD*

## SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The first phase of this research analyzed data on each of the three target schools to document the actual scope of the problem. The three target schools had a combined 50 percent truancy rate for school year 2008-2009; however, none of the principals rated it as a large problem. That is, when asked how severe of a truancy problem existed at the school, only one principal marked that it was a “problem” on a four-point scale from a “large problem” to “not a problem at all.” In addition, when asked what proportion of first-time truants continues to be truant, estimates were 3, 5, and 50 percent, indicating a possible lack of awareness of the actual scope of the problem or access to timely data.

### Truant characteristics at the three middle schools:

- 42% of truants were English learners
- 20% of truants were in special education
- 18% had a suspension in the past

*Phase I Findings*

To learn more about factors that could be contributing to truancy, staff were asked if there were certain student and family characteristics associated with students who were more likely to be truant. Respondents from all three schools were in agreement that there were. The respondents also agreed on what some of these factors were, with both internal and external factors contributing to attendance problems. The respondents reported the following common characteristics associated with truant students:

“Often, the family has many of its own issues and is not able to provide the consistency and support the student needs to go to school regularly.”

*School Principal Survey Response*

- ▶ Lack of motivation on the part of the student or academic failure;
- ▶ Families working long hours, therefore only able to provide minimal supervision;
- ▶ Parent(s) unable to monitor or control child’s attendance effectively;
- ▶ Lack of knowledge or skill on parents’ part to hold student accountable for attendance;
- ▶ Family obligations on the part of the student (e.g., taking care of siblings, staying at home to assist parent);
- ▶ Poor peer relations, including boyfriends/girlfriends; and
- ▶ Lack of attachment to the school on the part of the student.

When compared to the quantitative data analyzed during the first phase of the this study, English learners, youth involved in special education, and youth who had a suspension were more likely to be truant. Although not as specific, these characteristics are consistent with the staffs’ concern about struggling, nonengaged youth.

## SCHOOL REPORTING SYSTEMS

### SDUSD Attendance Reporting Policies

California laws require that parents be notified the day of the youth's absence.

*SDUSD*

The SDUSD has a written "Pupil Accounting Attendance Procedures" document detailing the district's expectations and attendance practices. It is not the intention of this report to recite these procedures; however it is worth noting some of the standard policies to place the findings of this study in context. While SDUSD has standardized attendance reporting requirements, the principal at each school site has flexibility to decide which staff will be responsible for recording attendance, what resources will be allocated towards attendance, how parent notification occurs, and what and how interventions are carried out. The schools are expected to verify all absences and upload attendance information into the district's central automated system, Zangle. The district has specific codes that categorize each absence as either "excused" or "unexcused." Until a parent is contacted and/or notifies the school an absence is coded as "unverified." An "unverified" absence is re-coded as "unexcused" in Zangle if an absence cannot be verified. Three unexcused absences equate to one truancy episode.

The district in monitoring its attendance policy, conducted its own internal review of school practices in relation to the written policies and found variance in how attendance was being recorded and monitored throughout the district.<sup>4</sup> Of particular concern was the tracking of truant and habitually absent students, including confusion on who is responsible for taking attendance and site accountability. As such, several questions on the survey pertained to these issues.

### School Site Reporting Practices

Survey results inquiring about who is responsible for collecting attendance data and how showed little to no variance in reporting practices among the three schools. Each school has a full-time attendance clerk who is responsible for ensuring that the teachers have reported their daily attendance and uploading the information into Zangle. Then an absence is unverified, each of the schools utilizes Connect-Ed (the district's auto-dialer phone system), which calls the parent that same day reminding them to verify the absence. If no contact is made, the attendance clerk also phones the parents in order to verify the absences. However, one reporting practice that varied among the three schools was the length of time an unverified absence remains in the system. The range was five days to weeks (or until verified). This difference is significant because it impacts the accuracy of the truancy records at each site. That is, if an unverified absence is not switched to either "unexcused" or "excused," it is limbo and does not pose a red flag for a youth who may have a truancy issue.

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Attendance-Truancy Policy and Procedures Review Project Team (March 23, 2009).

## Addressing Unexcused Absences/Truancies

SDUSD policy dictates that absences other than illness, bereavement, justifiable personal reason, juvenile hall, school initiated (e.g. suspension), and students pending exemption or placement are considered “unverified.” In general, not being able to reach a parent, either by phone or written notification, or a series of unexcused absences triggers a more intensive outreach effort on the part of the schools. Common practices at each of the schools are:

“Left unchecked, truancy is a risk factor for serious juvenile delinquency. Truancy’s impact also extends into the adult years where it has been linked to numerous negative outcomes.”

*OJJDP (September 2001)*

- ▶ Monthly review of truancy data by the principal and involved attendance staff;
- ▶ Involvement of additional support staff (i.e., nurse, vice principal, or counselor);
- ▶ A home visit or office visit for a conference; and
- ▶ Initiation of the Student Attendance Review Board (SARB) process.

Depending on the school and individual case, school staff intervenes when a youth has an “unexcused” or “unverified” absence ranging from the first day of the “unexcused” absence to the tenth day. Whether it is a meeting between the vice principal and parents at school or a home visit from the school counselor and nurse, each school site reported that the purpose of the face-to-face meeting was to learn what factors were contributing to the absenteeism, create a plan to help the youth attend school, and identify other possible supports for the families. This latter action is dependent on the resources available in the neighborhood surrounding the school and the communication between the school and the community. Although this is the general process carried out by the three schools, there are some additional steps taken by each site. These included:

- ▶ Monthly assemblies (principal conducts the first few at the beginning of the year and then staff take over the rest of the year) addressing the students about the importance of attendance and the schools’ expectations of them;
- ▶ The principal’s going on a home visit when truancy persists;
- ▶ Daily attendance tracking system being signed by each teacher to reward youth for good attendance; and
- ▶ Saturday school to help youth make up lost academic time.

In the cases where the truancy continues, the SARB process is initiated. This is a more formal structure which starts with the school sending a series of four attendance warning letters to the parents alerting them to the severity of the issue. Interestingly, the feedback on the effectiveness of SARB was mixed, with one respondent noting that the time needed to complete the SARB process was too long to be effective, and the truancy intervention has to start sooner. However, two of the three principals felt that the SARB process was one of the more effective truancy reduction tools at their disposal.

## Which Truancy Reduction Strategies Work

Responses from the surveys and interviews indicate that, in general, the schools would like to be doing more to address truancy if they had additional resources. All three principals rated the effectiveness of their current school practices as only “somewhat” effective on a four-point scale from “effective” to “not effective at all.” However, one of the attendance clerks had a different view, reporting that the school had a “large problem” with truancy and also rated their truancy reduction efforts higher, reporting that they were “effective.” Of the various truancy school reduction practices, the ones involving face-to-face communication were noted as being the most successful. Specifically, when asked which of their current truancy reduction practices they thought were most effective, principals and support staff cited the home visits, the individual counseling received by the counselors, contacting parent immediately to set up the conferences, working with the students to set goals, and SARB. Having the youth make up the lost academic time also was noted by one principal.

### Effective Truancy Reduction Strategies: The Three “A’s”

- Attendance: clear expectations, outreach, policies to promote attendance;
- Attachment: positive relationships, welcoming and safe school environment, school-based support, and resources in collaboration with the community; and
- Achievement: high expectations, relevant curriculum, flexible instruction, and multiple measures of success.

*OJJDP Truancy Reduction Demonstration Project*

Understanding that schools are challenged with limited resources and shrinking budgets, the three sites also were asked what the best way would be to address truancy, with cost not being a factor. The primary recommendation was more individuals to help the youth make it to school in the morning. Whether in the form of mentors or school staff, the message was that some of these youth need someone to knock on their door and get them to school.

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Need for Support Staff

**Fact:** One of the target schools has 910 students, is located in a high-crime and low socioeconomic neighborhood, has 58 percent of its student body with at least one recorded truancy episode, and has only two counselors employed to support the entire student body.

*School Principal Interview  
Response and Phase I Findings*

The surveys and interviews of school personnel confirmed that overall, the three target schools were in compliance with the district’s attendance reporting system. However, the schools differed slightly regarding which staff were tasked with following up on “unverified” absentees and/or truants. As a whole, the schools had similar intervention policies; however, the intensity and consistency of the implementation of these policies was beyond the scope of this study.

Feedback gathered from the interviews and surveys echoed what is cited in the truancy research about the reasons contributing to truancy and what interventions work. Although the principals seemed to underestimate the level of truancy in their schools, they all noted the value of educating the parents and students about the importance of attendance and meeting one on one with those students and families struggling with attendance. Based on the information gathered from the surveys and research on “what works” in truancy reduction, the following recommendations are put forth:

- ▶▶ Explore means to support mentoring programs focused on truant youth;
- ▶▶ Institutionalize truancy reduction programs to ensure consistency and fidelity;
- ▶▶ Ensure all “unverified” absences are recoded in Zangle within the five-day required time period;
- ▶▶ Ensure all involved staff (e.g., principal, counselor) have timely truancy data;
- ▶▶ Identify resources in the community that can assist with providing appropriate resources for the families (e.g., parenting classes geared toward teens, childcare support, classes on the value of education);
- ▶▶ Create an easy-to-use resource book to provide to struggling families;
- ▶▶ Ensure staff are available to build relationships with struggling students through home visits and/or conferences with students and parents;
- ▶▶ Provide consistent marketing to students on the value of attendance (e.g., the monthly assemblies);
- ▶▶ Research the effectiveness of the SARB process and provide recommendations for improvement;
- ▶▶ Conduct additional research with the parents and students to solicit information on ways to support good attendance; and
- ▶▶ Coordinate truancy reduction efforts with attendance improvement projects.

# PHASE III

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## INTRODUCTION

Phase III of this three-part study examining truancy as it relates to DMC in the San Diego County juvenile justice system focused on the outcomes of the truancy intervention programs implemented as a part of the Title V Community Planning grant. Diversion prevention services in the form of truancy reduction interventions were funded to serve 100 youth at four middle schools in the central and northern regions of the county. The target schools were all located in high-crime and low socioeconomic neighborhoods. Two non-profit agencies in San Diego County implemented the diversion programs, with San Diego Youth Services (SDYS) serving central San Diego and targeting Logan and Wilson middle schools, and North County Lifeline (NCL) operating in Oceanside and Vista and serving youth attending Washington and Jefferson middle schools. Each of these agencies has a working relationship with the schools in their service areas, and agreements were established between the schools and programs for the schools to refer those youth who had behavior problems and/or were truant to the program for services. Data were collected on attendance, truant days, and grade point average (GPA) before and after participation.

Delinquent behavior and treatment provision were also tracked while a youth was participating in the program. The outcome data from this diversion component are detailed below.

### KEY FINDINGS

- ▶▶ 103 youth participated in the Truancy Intervention Program between March 2009 and July 2010.
- ▶▶ The average length of program participation was approximately three months (92 days).
- ▶▶ The majority of participants (84%) identified as Hispanic.
- ▶▶ About two-thirds (65%) of youth and less than one-quarter (23%) of parent/guardians reported English as their primary language.
- ▶▶ Participant's GPA increased significantly from an average of 1.84 to 2.17 for NCL youth post program participation.
- ▶▶ The average number of days truant post program participation decreased from 8.36 to 6.84
- ▶▶ Days attended increased from 89 percent to 93 percent on average.

## METHODOLOGY

SANDAG conducted an outcome evaluation. With the exception of criminal history information, program staff was responsible for collecting and entering their own data. SANDAG created a tracking form which each program populated and sent on a monthly basis to SANDAG staff who then cleaned and analyzed the data. Data collected included GPA, days attended and truant days for the semester/quarter prior to and post enrollment, demographics, gang association, English learners (SDYS only), San Diego Risk and Resiliency Checkup (NCL only), and treatment dosage. SANDAG collected data on any contact youth had with law enforcement during the period of program participation. Data were collected on all youth who entered the program as of

March 1, 2009 through July 31, 2010. A total of 103 youth received services during this time (i.e., 52 at SDYS and 51 at NCL). Due to the amount of resources available for the evaluation a process, evaluation was not able to be conducted. Therefore, the actual implementation of the interventions could vary within and between programs.

## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION**

The truancy Interventions targeted elementary and middle school youth who had attendance and/or school performance issues and attended one of four schools in the central and northern regions of San Diego County. The youth and families could receive up to 24 hours of services aimed to increase the youth's involvement in his/her education and enhance his/her ability to benefit from schooling. While the program goals were the same among the two sites (SDYS in the central area and NCL in the northern region), the program sites did vary in intensity and implementation. Overall, the following interventions were offered by the programs:

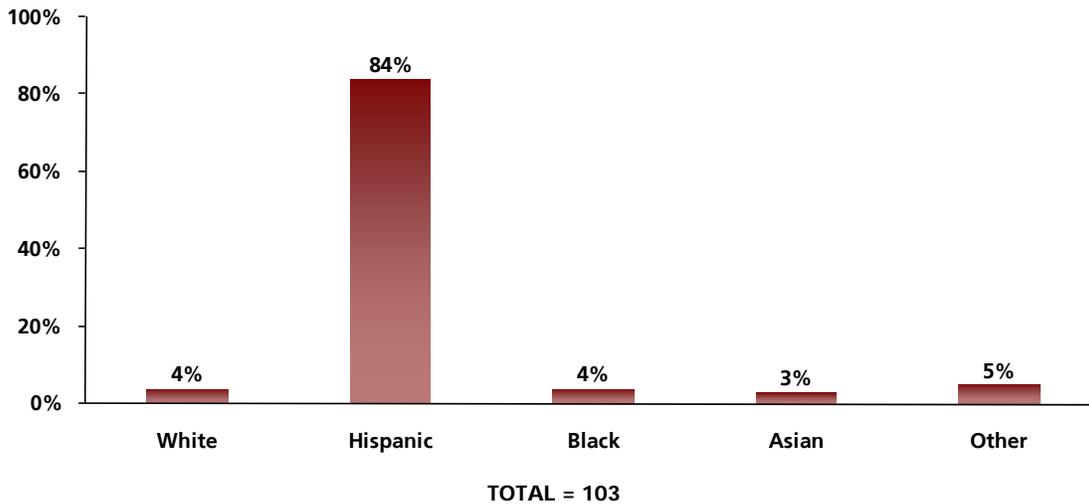
- ▶▶ Home visits;
- ▶▶ School visits;
- ▶▶ Meetings with and resources for parents;
- ▶▶ Mentoring;
- ▶▶ Tutoring; and
- ▶▶ Recreational activities.

Because the focus of the evaluation was to track school-related outcomes, data which documented variation in program implementation were not a focus of the evaluation. Therefore, fidelity to the model and correlations between individual treatment factors and outcomes were not measured. However, information on treatment dosage, length of time in the program, and completion status provide an account of the level of involvement in the program.

### **Youth Characteristics**

The decision to select the four target schools was based on the large proportion of juvenile probationers living in the feeder neighborhoods, as well as the attendance and truancy rates at the schools. The schools are located in urban settings in neighborhoods with low socioeconomics and high crime rates and a student population that is largely Hispanic (63% to 96%) (not shown). As illustrated in Figure 6, over 80 percent of the youth in the program identified as Hispanic. While overall there was a similar proportion of males (51%) and females (49%) in the program, SDYS served a significantly larger number of females (60%) than NCL (37%) (not shown).

**Figure 6**  
**MAJORITY OF PARTICIPANTS WERE HISPANIC**



SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010

Although the schools were similar in regard to the ethnicity of the student body, they differed significantly in the proportion that spoke English as their primary language. Almost all (96%) of NCL youth reported that English was their primary language, but only around one-third (35%) of SDYS did so. This was coupled with the finding that only one in ten (10%) SDYS parents/guardians reported speaking primarily English at home. Thirty-seven percent of NCL parents/guardians reported English as their primary language (Table 2). Given this information, it is not surprising that 92 percent of SDYS youth were considered English learners.<sup>5</sup> Knowing a youth’s English language proficiency is not only important because of the predictive relationship between English learners and truancy found in the first phase of this research, but also because of the achievement gap between English learners and their peers, with English learners lagging behind.

**Table 4**  
**ENGLISH NOT THE PRIMARY LANGUAGE FOR MANY PARTICPANTS AND MOST PARENTS**

	SDYS	NCL	TOTAL
English primary language for youth*	35%	96%	65%
English primary language for adult*	10%	37%	23%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>103</b>

\*Significant difference at  $p < .05$ .

SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010

<sup>5</sup> This was an extra data element that only SDYS chose to collect. This is different than the self-report of what language was spoken in the home as an English learner is a youth who has been assessed and documented as eligible to receive support services.

Because the target population was middle school students, most of the youth were in seventh or eighth grade (76%), followed by sixth grade (18%), and the remaining youth were in elementary grades third through fifth (6%). There were no significant differences in participant grade level between the two sites. As expected, the age of the participants reflected these grade levels, with youth 12.67 (SD = 1.12) years old on average (range 10 to 15) (not shown).

Examination of overall school performance of participants revealed a struggling population at the target schools, with NCL participants having lower GPAs and missing more school on average during the semester/quarter prior to intake than SDYS participants. Overall, youth had a low C average, were truant on average 9 days, and were absent 14 percent of the time in the semester/quarter prior to intake. NCL youth had an average GPA of 1.84 (SD = .74) compared to 2.27 (SD = .86) for SDYS youth, all (100%) had at least one truant day with an average of 9.18 truancies versus 85 percent of SDYS youth having had a truant day, averaging 6.03 days. Additionally, SDYS participants attended 93 percent of school days versus 86 percent for NCL youth (Table 3).

**Table 5**  
**DIVERSION PARTICIPANTS HAD POOR ATTENDANCE AND LOW GRADES AT INTAKE**

	SDYS	NCL	TOTAL
Average intake GPA*	2.27 ( <u>SD</u> = .86)	1.84 ( <u>SD</u> = .74)	2.03 ( <u>SD</u> = .82)
Percent days truant	100%	85%	
Average days truant*	6.03 ( <u>SD</u> = 3.98)	9.18 ( <u>SD</u> = 7.67)	7.908 ( <u>SD</u> = 6.58)
Percent days attended*	93% ( <u>SD</u> = 5%)	86% ( <u>SD</u> = 10%)	89% ( <u>SD</u> = 8%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>40 - 52</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>91 - 94</b>

\*Significant difference at  $P < .05$ .

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010

Another way to look at absenteeism is the percentage of youth at a school who attend 95 percent of their enrolled days. As noted in research and highlighted in the local *Data To Action Project* toolkit produced by The Children’s Initiative,<sup>6</sup> elementary level youth who miss over 5 percent of days enrolled are at risk of truancy, delinquency, and dropping out of school. When examined as total percent days missed, over three-quarters (78%) of all diversion participants fell within this risk category of attending less than 95 percent of school days, with significant differences between the two sites (60% of SDYS youth and 92% of NCL youth) (not shown). These data indicate that the appropriate youth were being referred for services.

With regard to prior criminal activity, the majority of the population had not yet become involved in the juvenile justice system. Only 8 percent of youth had a prior arrest and referral to probation, and just 6 percent of youth reported some form of gang association (not shown). These data are consistent with the prevention focus of the program, which was designed to “divert” youth from a path that could lead to involvement in the juvenile justice system.

<sup>6</sup> Author and Martin J. (2010). *Attendance Improvement Toolkit: Data to Action Project*. Children’s Initiative, San Diego CA.

## Services Received

Program staff outreach to the feeder schools generated the referrals to the program. Upon entering the program, a truancy intervention worker met with the youth and his/her parent/guardian to discuss the reasons for referral and create a service plan. The truancy intervention worker served the youth and his/her parent/guardian during the program, with the primary goal of increasing the youth's school attendance. As Table 6 shows, the average (median) length of participation for all youth in the program was about three months (92 days), with youth at NCL involved approximately one month longer on average (109 days) compared to SDYS youth (90.5 days). There also was a significant difference between the two sites in regard to completion status. Although over three-quarters (77%) of youth completed the program successfully, nearly all (96%) of NCL youth successfully completed compared to slightly more than half (58%) of SDYS participants. "Successful completion" was defined when a youth meeting most of their goals, "unsuccessful completion" described a youth who stopped participating and did not meet his/her goals, and "unsuccessful completion no fault" included youth who had end their participation for reasons beyond their control (e.g., a family relocation, medical reasons, SDYS staff unable to contact parent or meet with youth). It is important to note that variation in coding could have existed between the two programs, so data were no analyzed according to completion status. Rather, focus on success was placed on the individual outcome data (e.g., GPA, attendance).

**Table 6**  
**THE MAJORITY OF YOUTH SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE PROGRAM**

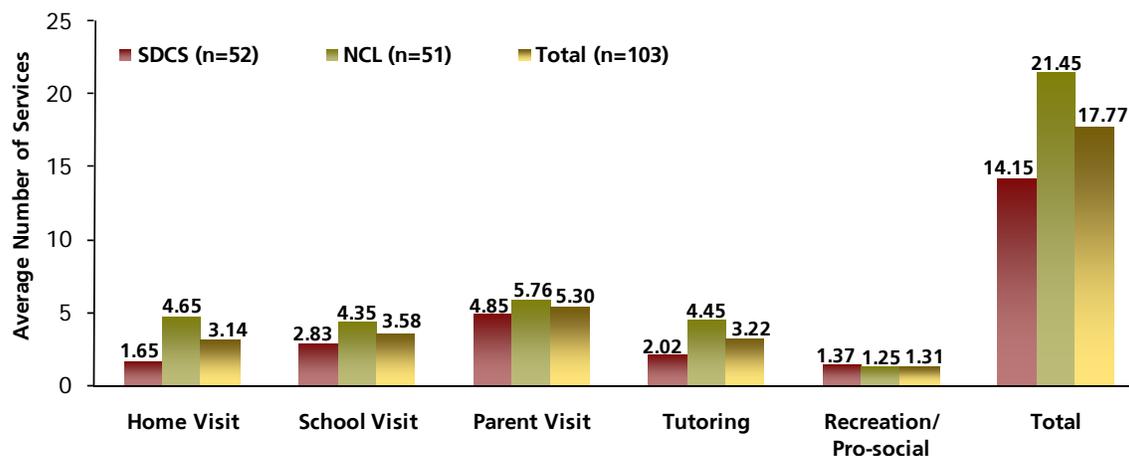
	SDYS	NCL	TOTAL
Average number of days in program* (range)	90.5 (10 to 159)	109 (17 to 201)	92 (10 to 201)
Successful completion*	58%	96%	77%
Unsuccessful completion (no fault of own)	23%	2%	13%
Unsuccessful completion	19%	2%	11%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>103</b>

\*Significant difference at  $P < .05$ .

SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010.

As noted previously, during program participation, youth and families were offered an array of services, including face-to-face visits with the youth, resources, and meetings with the parent about the youth's progress, tutorial services, and a range of recreational and pro-social activities. Figure 7 shows the amount of services that a youth received on average while in the program. Similar to the differences in time in program, the two sites differed significantly in treatment dosage. That is, NCL youth received significantly more services in each of the service categories, with an average of 21.45 interventions during their time in the program. This compared to 14.15 service contacts on average for the SDYS youth and families. Additionally, the programs clearly kept the parent apprised of the youth's progress as parent contact/visit was the most frequent type of service received at both sites, followed by schools visits, tutoring, home visits, and recreational activities being the fewest service type contacts.

**Figure 7**  
**PARENT/GUARDIAN CONTACTS LEAD THE LIST OF TYPE OF SERVICES RECEIVED**



\*Significant difference at  $p < .05$ .

SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010.

## OUTCOME DATA

Several school performance indicators were used to measure change in school engagement after involvement in the truancy intervention program. These data included GPA, attendance, and truant days during the semester/quarter post exit from program. Because of the nexus between truancy and delinquent behavior, contact with law enforcement during program participation also was collected. Only cases that had both pre- and post-data were included in the outcome analysis.

### School Performance

Overall, youth who participated in the program improved their grades, attendance, and truancy after program completion. Similar to the participant characteristics and service provision, there were some differences in outcomes between the two sites. Specifically, GPA increased significantly from an average of 1.84 to 2.17 for NCL youth, with little change among SDYS youth (2.26 pre to 2.25 post). In addition, while the average percentage of days attended improved for both groups, the increase was higher for NCL participants (86% pre to 92% post compared to SDYS 93% pre to 95% post) (Table 7). Increases in attendance is valuable not only for a youth's school performance, but it also equates to additional dollars for the school as the state reimburses each school for totals days attended.

In regard to truancy, overall the proportion of youth truant decreased significantly from 94 percent of youth, with at least one truant day prior to intake to 87 percent after exit. Although not a statistically significant difference, it is still worth noting that SDYS had 13 percent fewer youth having one truant day (87% pre to 74% post), and NCL had a 4 percent decrease (100% to 96%). Additionally, the average number of truancy days decreased for participants of both agencies, with truants in SDYS having 6.27 truancy days on average prior to enrollment compared to 4.85 at post, and NCL youth decreasing from 9.47 to 7.90 truancy days on average (Table 5).

**Table 7**  
**GRADES AND ATTENDANCE IMPROVED POST PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

	SDYS		NCL		Total	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Average GPA	2.26 (SD = .89)	2.25 (SD = .82)	1.84 (SD = .74)	2.17 (SD = .78)*	2.02 (SD = .83)	2.20 (SD = .79)
Percent days attended	93%	95%*	86%	92%*	89%	93%*
Percent truant one day	87%	74%	100%	96%	94%	87%*
Average days truant	6.27 (SD = 4.06)	4.85 (SD = 4.92)	9.47 (SD = 7.68)	7.90 (SD = 7.02)	8.36 (SD = 6.80)	6.84* (SD = 6.50)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26 - 38</b>		<b>49 - 51</b>		<b>75 - 89</b>	

\*Significant difference at  $p < .05$ .

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SDYS and NCL Tracking Records, 2010.

These results reveal how at risk these youth are. While positive gains were made, the majority of youth still had at least one day truant and was still absent more than 5 percent of the days enrolled.

## Criminal History

As noted earlier, this project is part of San Diego County's larger vision to reduce DMC in the juvenile justice system. Although the youth receiving the diversion services were not singled out because of their involvement in delinquent behaviors, juvenile justice data were collected to measure their level of involvement in the system. Specifically, any referrals to Probation prior to and during program participation were gathered. As noted earlier, only 8 of youth had a prior referral to Probation, and only one youth received a referral to Probation during program participation. This referral was "true found" on a felony property charge (not shown). Given the young age of the youth, it would be valuable to track attendance and delinquent behavior longitudinally to measure any change as they enter high school (when youth are more likely to drop out and/or become involved with probation).

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Phase III of the three prong study of truancy in San Diego Region focused on outcomes from two truancy intervention programs. The truancy intervention services were provided in two communities with a high proportion of juvenile probationers living in the surrounding neighborhood, low socioeconomics, and high truancy rates. A total of 103 youth received truancy intervention services from either SDYS (Central region) or NCL (North region) with over three-quarters successfully completing all or most of their goals. Each program site offered case management services in combination with tutoring, parent contacts, school visits, and recreational activities.

Overall, the majority of youth entering the program had below average grades, missed more than 5 percent of days enrolled during the prior semester/quarter, and been truant at least once in the prior semester/quarter before entering the program. The two programs varied in the characteristics of the youth served, the intensity of services provided, and the outcomes. Youth entering NCL had lower grades and attendance on average, but were more likely to speak English as their primary language than youth enrolled in SDYS's program.

Outcome data revealed that youth did make positive strides in improving their grades and attendance. They also remained out of the juvenile justice system while in the program.

Based on these findings the following recommendations are put forth:

- ▶▶ Examine NCL implementation of the truancy intervention services to identify key elements that contributed to the successful outcomes;
- ▶▶ Standardize implementation of the truancy intervention services to ensure fidelity to the model and improve likelihood of positive outcomes;
- ▶▶ Explore increasing program length to six months in an effort to strengthen durability of outcomes;
- ▶▶ Implement additional truancy intervention programs at middle schools with high truancy rates and attendance rates below 95 percent;
- ▶▶ Include a process evaluation to measure factors contributing to success; and
- ▶▶ Seek input from youth and parents on the effectiveness of the program.