Preventing Truancy in Colorado:
A Case Study

Prepared by Spark Policy Institute on behalf of the
Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Council

Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Colorado JJDP Council

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Division of Criminal Justice
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INTRODUCTION

All 50 states have compulsory attendance laws – that is, laws that require students within a set age range to attend school. In Colorado, students are required to attend school between the ages of 6 and 17. Broadly, truancy is defined by a set number of unexcused absences from school (four per month or ten in a year in Colorado). Truancy is a serious issue, and truants are often found to be living in "multiple disadvantaged" circumstances[i], to have parents suffering from alcoholism[ii], and to have a family history of abuse[iii], maltreatment, or neglect.[iv] Moreover, studies have shown that once young people are detained, even when controlling for their prior offenses, they are more likely than non-detained youth to end up deeper in the system.[v]

The Colorado Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Council's Low Risk/High Need (LRHN) Committee was established in 2013. The Committee strives to address the needs of juveniles who may not have criminogenic tendencies, but may have undiagnosed, unmet, or underserved needs in areas such as trauma, mental health, or substance use, factors which may contribute to their eventual entrance into the juvenile justice system. Specifically, the JJDP Council has focused on truancy and the use of detention for truants in Colorado who violate a court order (204 youths in fiscal year (FY) 2014).

For these reasons, the JJDP Council through the LRHN Committee funded four truancy demonstration pilots (one focused on prevention and three problem-solving courts (PSCs) based on HB 13-1021 and the Coalition for Juvenile Justice's *Safety, Opportunity & Success: Standards of Care for Non-Delinquent Youth*[vi]. The LRHN committee serves as an advisory group and learning collaborative for all four pilot sites. The purpose of the truancy demonstration pilot sites is to learn and document:

- The causal factors of truancy;
- Effective prevention approaches to keep youth in school, on track academically and socially, while increasing school and student engagement; and
- Systems changes needed to successfully address truancy.

The Radical Possibilities Community-in-Schools-Partnership (CISP) Program, a community-based program of La Plata Youth Services (LPYS) and the La Plata County SMART (Student Multidisciplinary Assessment Review Team) collaborative, is the sole prevention pilot site and the focus of this case study. Implementation of the Radical Possibilities program began in May 2014, supported through Title II,

Colorado has long been a pioneer in the area of truancy reform, creating early intervention programs since the late 90s. In 2006, Denver Public Schools collaborated closely with the National Center for School Engagement (NCSE) to create a framework for intervention. Statewide, the Expelled and At-Risk Student Services Program (EARSS) was created in 1997, which provided support to at-risk students and, in 2009, appropriations were increased with the mandate that at least 50% of the increased appropriation be dedicated to reducing "the number of truancy cases requiring court involvement." Further, the Colorado Legislature has continually revised Colorado's current compulsory attendance law (the School Attendance Law of 1963) to move away from punitive measures to reduce truancy. The most recent revisions are House Bill (HB) 13-1021[1], which requires school districts to explore interventions to reduce court involvement, and Senate Bill (SB) 15-184, requiring the creation of a community stakeholder group to design a policy to address truancy.

Formula Grant Funds. The prevention pilot serves youth who are referred to LPYS either through truancy or diversion, students identified by the schools as experiencing significant barriers to school attendance, and students and families who self-identify and request additional support.

The following case study presents an overview of CISPs and the importance of the community in addressing truancy, documents the process and experiences of the Radical Possibilities prevention pilot, highlights lessons learned, and offers guidance to other sites interested in the use or exploration of a CISP.

DEFINING COMMUNITY-IN-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS (CISP)

Of the first 25 students served through Radical Possibilities at our first pilot school in its first year: 60% improved attendance; 40% improved their GPA; 67% reduced their number of "F" grades; and 70% improved their post-test score on the School Engagement Index.

Often referred to as a collaboration, a CISP program formally blends resources from at least one school with resources in a given neighborhood or larger community.[vii] The intent is to sustain cultivated partnerships over time. Comprehensive partnerships represent a promising direction for generating essential interventions to address barriers to learning, enhance healthy development, and strengthen families and communities.[viii] These programs bring community resources inside public schools, where they are accessible, coordinated, and accountable, surrounding students with a community of support and empowering them to stay in school.[ix] In essence, a CISP program creates the environment for healthy relationships to form between the students, community, and school, giving students a sense of belonging to a caring community.[x]

WHAT DOES A TRUANCY-FOCUSED CISP LOOK LIKE?

The Radical Possibilities CISP program was adopted to address truancy based on the principle that truancy is a symptom with a host of contributing factors occurring.[xi] The program was created as a community-based effort, engaging already-existing organizations to address gaps and inequalities in services. Radical Possibilities builds on the community's support for youth and brings human resources into schools, reducing barriers to services, delivering services and opportunities to students with the greatest need, pooling resources, and recognizing and reducing gaps through creative problem solving. CISP programs vary based on the need to adapt to the needs of a specific school and community; however, in general CISP truancy programs seek to mitigate barriers to school attendance by supporting positive change at three levels: student/family, school, and community.

Radical Possibilities has employed the following supports, based on the needs and conditions that exist in La Plata County:

- **Student/ Family:** Early identification of students/families in need of support by engaging students who are:
  - Identified throughout the year as experiencing significant barriers in home, community, or school that indicate the need for additional support and services ("at-risk students");
  - Referred either through truancy or diversion; and

- o Who self-identify and request additional support.
- **School**: Improve and capitalize on positive school climates by:
  - o Addressing barriers to school attendance in collaboration with community partners;
  - o Identifying and committing to further development of positive school climate;
  - o Implementing positive, strengths-based intervention models;
  - o Integrating a philosophy of providing supports for students who are facing significant adverse barriers to school attendance; and
  - o Engaging families in the process.
- **Community**: Coordinate delivery of community resources in a school setting through:
  - o Mentorships and other positive relationships with caring adults;
  - o Family outreach;
  - o Mental health services;
  - o Case management and advocacy;
  - o Restorative justice (RJ); and
  - o Other programs designed to meet the unique needs of each school community.

Truancy CISP Program Phases

The below table reflects the phases of CISP program design. Although the program is divided into phases, students in Radical Possibilities do not move through a series of specified programmatic phases, participating, instead, in a variety of programming based on their need.

Phase	Description of Work	Time Frame
Phase One	Planning: Identify needs and assets, set goals, implement planning and student staffing meetings.	First school semester
Phase Two	Implementation: Deliver identified services to students, implement school-wide programming, and engage in process of feedback and improvement.	Second school semester and subsequent months
Phase Three	Evaluation: data analysis, qualitative evaluation, and future planning.	Summer breaks

PROGRAM DESIGN

As schools and judicial districts began to develop plans in response to HB 13-1021, they resoundingly felt that a new approach to address truancy was needed. For the prevention pilot, the intention was not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to bolster an already-promising practice. Building on a strong foundation of collaborative intervention and case management, La Plata County SMART set out to design its intervention strategy to respond to the specific needs and contributing factors of chronically truant elementary and middle school-aged youth, their families, and their schools.

The Colorado Division of Criminal Justice awarded federal Title II funds to the prevention pilot site (LPYS) on a graduated basis; $48,322 the first year, $45,000 the second, and $35,000 the third year. With the support

of these funds, SMART created the Radical Possibilities CISP Program. This section of the report provides an overview of the process to create and implement Radical Possibilities, as well as steps the prevention pilot site is taking to evaluate the program.

> **HB13-1021, signed into law in August 2013, requires school districts to explore best practices and research-based interventions to reduce court involvement and, specifically, the use of detention. In furtherance of this requirement, the law focuses on four main strategies:**
> - **Creating an intervention plan, jointly completed by students, parents, and the school, with explicit encouragement to work with local service providers/community groups;**
> - **Establishing a district attendance officer who consults with parents and youth to investigate the causes of non-attendance; and**
> - **Placing other procedural requirements on the school district to demonstrate interventions before resorting to the law; and**
> - **Providing written notice to parents and the student that court proceedings will be initiated for failure to comply (which may be combined with a summons to appear in court).**

PILOT SITE OVERVIEW: RADICAL POSSIBILITIES CISP PROGRAM

Program Description – The Radical Possibilities CISP Program provides a community-based, collaborative early intervention/prevention response to students facing significant, adverse barriers to school attendance.

Population Served – Radical Possibilities serves elementary and middle school students and their families in La Plata County, CO.

Participants - In the 2014-2015 school year, there were 61 students formally in the program and 44 additional served through auxiliary programs. The following year, 2015-2016, LPYS anticipated 102 students would formally take part in the CISP program, with 60 additional served through auxiliary programs. To date, three youth have ended participation in the program and 57 youth have graduated.

Pilot Site Description - - La Plata County is a tri-ethnic, rural community with a growing county seat (Durango), which has a concentration of people living in mid-to-high socio-economic households. The community faces many challenges common to rural communities, with a limited scope of social services resources, a wide range of socio-economic households, and noteworthy gaps in service, especially for youth. Both progressive and traditional rural values are prevalent in La Plata, with organizations often acting in silos, reflecting a value of "rugged individualism." Latino and Native American families tend to be marginalized, with people of color typically working in lower income jobs, and students of color disproportionately representing youth considered at risk of not finishing school. For example, graduation rates for Latino and Native American students in La Plata County average between 60% and 70%, while White students in the same schools average a more than 90% graduation rate.

> **The Face of Truancy in La Plata County**
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> Since September 2013, more than 85 youth have been served by LPYS', SMART program for truancy issues once school efforts have proven unsuccessful. Initial data indicates 51% are youth of color, 24% are living with families experiencing homelessness, 40% have run away from home, 67% have significant mental health needs, 60% are struggling with substance use, 31% are youth with disabilities, 73% have experienced complex trauma, 47% are in families with past child welfare involvement, 20% are living with a non-parent guardian, and 69% are living in low-income households. Furthermore, upon referral, 84% percent of these youth are not receiving direct services from any community human services agency. Within the county, approximately 250 students annually meet the criteria for habitual truancy.

CREATING TEAMS

Radical Possibilities is coordinated by the Program Director, but given the collaborative nature of the partnership, each organization involved retains decision-making authority including resource allocation for their organization. Key personnel within the schools are identified in partnership with school leadership and include, at minimum, a:

- School principal or assistant principal;
- Check and Connect mentor;
- School counselor; and
- School social worker.

Schools are asked to support the participation and contributions of those individuals throughout the school year. Participation from LPYS includes the Radical Possibilities Program Director, a school-designated case manager/youth advocate, the RJ coordinator, and the clinical supervisor. Participation of other agencies and their leadership is defined by the needs of individual schools.

> **School Check and Connect:** **Check & Connect is a comprehensive student engagement intervention developed at the University of Minnesota in partnership with the Minneapolis School District, starting back in 1990. This is an evidence-based dropout prevention program that uses trained mentors to engage marginalized students in grades K-12 and keep them on track to graduate.**
>
> Check & Connect. (2016). attendanceworks.org

Duties of team members and key personnel are multi-faceted and include many moving parts. Radical Possibilities team member duties include:

- Project Coordination: The Radical Possibilities Program Director provides leadership and project coordination throughout the school year. These duties include assuring program goals are met in partnership with the school principal and in accordance with the governing grant requirements; logistical coordination, including setting agendas and documenting meetings; supporting sustainability; fundraising and publicity efforts; facilitating collaboration between partners regarding contracts, cost-sharing, resource allocation, scheduling, etc.; facilitating compliance with district and state truancy policies; educating key stakeholders; facilitating identification and development of additional resources necessary to implement the partnership; coordinating and organizing data in order to measure outcomes; and other efforts as necessary to support the successful implementation of the partnership and delivery of services to students.

- In-school case management: LPYS provides a Youth Advocate specifically designated to the school who will work closely with the Check and Connect mentor, and other school and community service providers to: assist in early identification of youth in need of services; build rapport with students prior to referral to LPYS; provide in-school case management to students who are referred to LPYS (out-of-school case management is also available if it is more fitting); establish relationships with other service providers in order to facilitate successful collaboration; provide risk/strength assessments to identified students; support the efforts of the Program Director.

- Clinical supervision: All LPYS advocates are provided with clinical supervision by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, with a concentrated focus on youth with complex needs.

- Restorative justice coordination: LPYS provides a RJ coordinator to facilitate the implementation and coordination of an in-school restorative justice and peer mediation program.

- In-school mentorship: The Check and Connect program serves as the primary hub for service delivery, and support, and implements adaptations to the Check and Connect model as necessary to support the CISP in successfully meeting its goals and delivering services to students.

> **Restorative Justice and Truancy**: **restorative justice offers students a way to become involved in their own re-integration. They have the possibility to explain what their concerns are regarding school attendance and what support they need to help them return to school. Students, along with their parents and school officials then agree on specific steps to improve future attendance.** Jung, B. (2011). Reducing truancy and improving attendance using restorative justice conferencing, 2-4.

Training and ongoing learning

From the start, the prevention pilot site understood the importance of rigorous training and continual learning for those involved in Radical Possibilities. To meet this need, the site leveraged the existing skills and knowledge of those working with low-risk/high-need youth and multi-cultural populations, and offered learning opportunities via trainings and conferences. Further, they harness the expertise of individuals who are current on best practices and evidence-based programs. Learning opportunities conducted or attended by Radical Possibilities staff and community partners include:

- Truancy research (including local qualitative study);

- Understanding of underlying factors to truancy and problem solving by addressing the three areas of individual/family, school, and community;

- Trauma-informed care;

- Cultural competence;

- School climate programming based on what each school decides to implement;

- Restorative practices/justice; and

- Community-based, collaborative skills and practices.

More than 30 administrators, counselors, and other student services staff from Radical Possibilities schools and the district recently attended a two-day restorative practices training, illustrating the commitment of these schools and the district to creating a positive school climate.

SETTING A DIRECTION

While each school and neighborhood present unique needs, the Radical Possibilities model is based on providing wrap-around interventions in response to issues facing chronically absent, habitually truant, and at-risk students and their families. Program goals and measures of success were developed in partnership with SMART, LPYS, and schools, goals center on the following:

- Increasing students' personal resilience and protective factors;
- Increasing school engagement;
- Increasing academic success; and
- Reducing behavioral incidents.

Radical Possibilities programming concentrates on improving the school climate and coordinated community service delivery in the school setting, including mentorship, family outreach, mental health, case management, RJ, tutoring, and transportation. The program, which has a dual focus on both short-and long-term objectives, has developed four specific strategies, providing a framework for programmatic goals.

Strategy #1: Identify and implement in-school, community resources designed to support students who have been identified as habitually truant or at-risk of habitual truancy.

Mentorship ▪ Case management and advocacy ▪ Comprehensive risk/strength assessments
Mental health ▪ Restorative justice ▪ Others specific to school

Benefit: Effectively address significant, adverse barriers to individual student attendance so students are more likely to engage positively in their school community and learning opportunities.

Strategy #2: Develop an effective framework for community-school partnership specific to elementary and middle schools.

Positive school climate ▪ School culture that supports delivery of services and services designed to contribute to learning ▪ Enhanced Check and Connect programming ▪ Family engagement strategies Out-of-school problem solving ▪ Additional pre- and post-surveys completed by students ▪ Use of Check and Connect data to evaluate program's effectiveness ▪ In-school case management Coordinated student services support team ▪ In-school mental health services ▪ Others specific to school

Benefit: Establish a culture, climate, and delivery of services that remove barriers to community resource access, and make school both a desirable place to be and a source of support for youth.

Strategy #3: Identify and evaluate the systems changes needed in order to provide communities-in-schools individualized case management.

Early identification and rapport-building ▪ In-school case management ▪ Coordinated delivery of service/reduction of duplication of services ▪ Family engagement strategies ▪ Use of a review process Continuity of care ▪ Others specific to school

Benefit: Ease service delivery, improve client engagement and program effectiveness for students, families, service providers, and schools.

Strategy #4: Develop an effective framework for elementary and middle schools to support their compliance with HB 13-1021.

Review of HB 13-1021 and its requirements ▪ Review of chronic absence and habitual truancy definitions ▪ Review of school's internal attendance tracking ▪Review of district's requirements ▪ Review of referral process for habitual truancy ▪ Others specific to school

Benefit: School and district compliance with HB 13-1021.

BUILDING BUY-IN AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

One of the early considerations when building a community-based program is how to build support and buy-in from all necessary parties. Buy-in for Radical Possibilities was built on the foundational support developed for the SMART collaborative. The founding partners of SMART spent significant time building relationships, gathering information about needs, and conducting assessments with key stakeholders to develop buy-in for the collaborative.

Once the SMART collaborative was formed, it became apparent that early intervention and prevention efforts would be the most effective at reducing and ultimately preventing truancy. While the collaborative maintained its focus on direct intervention with high school age youth, they expanded efforts to build in early intervention. As a result, the Division of Criminal Justice (DCJ) funded a proposal to pilot the Radical Possibilities program. The success of the prevention pilot is, in part, evidenced by the large number of partners involved, which include:

- **SMART collaborative** – vision, personnel, problem solving for community-wide barriers
- **La Plata Youth Services (LPYS)** – vision, planning, implementation, personnel, project coordination, fundraising, youth advocate/case management, restorative justice coordinator, clinical supervision
- **Durango School District 9R** – planning, funding
- **Participating schools** – planning, implementation, resource allocation, identification of and access to students
- **Axis Health System and private mental health providers** – in-school mental health services
- **Other agencies** – in-school services as identified through individual school's planning process
- **Other grantors** – planning, funding
- **Clients** – feedback, client voice, qualitative and quantitative measures of effectiveness

Radical Possibilities has placed a significant focus on recruitment and outreach and is able to recruit students based on a well-established relationship with schools. Students are identified through school processes – some already in place and others developed as part of Radical Possibilities planning with the school.

One middle school student in Radical Possibilities faced some big challenges at the beginning of this year, struggling with mental health and substance use issues, ultimately leading to engagement with law enforcement and escalating violence at her school and home. Partners on the Radical Possibilities team – LPYS, Axis Health System, Title VII Indian Education, Check and Connect, and the school principal – all came together to support this young woman and her family. The principal refused to expel her, understanding she would have access to these services if she remained in school. With a strong support system, this young woman has agreed to inpatient treatment and leaves to Denver tomorrow.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAM

Radical Possibilities was designed with the individual student in mind and its model illustrates this intention. The program is tailored to youth and designed to meet both their needs and those of the school's broader population. Programming is concentrated on improving school climate and providing coordinated delivery of community resources in schools, including mentoring, family outreach, mental health, case management, RJ, tutoring, and transportation.

An individualized approach was also taken in developing the initial CISP program, which implemented a qualitative data collection process. The purpose of data collection was twofold:

- To hone in on the unique needs of the particular community and its students and families; and

- To ensure the client voice was included in the planning process.

A qualitative research project ran concurrent with the planning team's process. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with individuals ranging ages 10-40 who had attended school in the Four Corners area and experienced significant barriers to school attendance. Some interviewees completed their K-12 education and some even went on to pursue college and post-graduate degrees, while others left school and did not return. The research project was designed to identify barriers and possible interventions that were mindful of the unique community context. Results were shared with the school planning committees, ensuring the community voice was present in the planning process.

> **Radical Possibilities combines the best practices of _therapeutic mentorship and peer groups_ to support youth facing significant, adverse barriers to school engagement. Students (from the University of Denver, School of Social Work; Prescott College Masters of Counseling Program; Fort Lewis College Sociology Program) serve as mentors for youth in the program for a year-long, 20 hour per week field placement, gaining credit hours towards completion of their degree. Mentors, among other things:**
> - **Provide robust one-on-one mentoring for two to four students;**
> - **Create empowering relationships with mentees;**
> - **Help youth generalize skills learned in ongoing skills groups;**
> - **Engage youth in extracurricular activities, and promote positive future orientation; and**
> - **Co-facilitate skills groups.**

Ultimately, this process served as the groundwork for the development and implementation of Radical Possibilities.

The Radical Possibilities pilot began in two schools – one elementary and one middle school – each with a planning committee composed of school administration, school-based student support service providers, the SMART Coordinator, and an LPYS Youth Advocate. Participating schools were initially identified by school district personnel as potential partners due to a variety of considerations, and then schools were invited to participate. Each school team moved through a planning process, identifying needs, strengths, and barriers specific to their students and families, school, and community. Additional school staff, such as teachers and nurses, were interviewed in order to provide for a diversity of perspectives. After the needs assessment, a strategic plan was developed for each school, to determine needed direct services, implement improvements to school climate, and deter community-wide barriers to SMART. School committees met twice monthly during the planning process and then moved to monthly meetings during implementation.

DESIGNING CASE MANAGEMENT

Causes of truancy are varied, but often relate to individual, family, and community factors, therefore, case management is an important part of programs designed to address truancy. Indeed, the involvement of a case manager, who provides a point of contact for youth and their families, is an important component of a CISP model. Case managers are able to work closely enough with the student and family to determine the varied issues contributing to a student's truancy and help adequately address them. The case manager also provides an additional level of accountability, ensuring a student and their family receive needed services from other agencies.

Case Management Models

There is no single "best" model for case management of truant youth. Approaches are tailored to meet the unique requirements of program participants. However, there is a trend towards counseling through strengths-based strategies, such as positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS), motivational interviewing, solution-focused therapy (SFT), and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT).

Overall, the Radical Possibilities model uses the LPYS standards of case management. Additionally:

- Mentorship is implemented according to the standards of practice of Check and Connect; and
- Mental health is implemented according to the standards of practice of each provider.

A unique goal as it relates to Radical Possibilities' case management structure is the utilization and coordination of previously existing systems of care, which allows for more effective resource management in a rural community.

> **LPYS's standards of case management include:**
>
> - **Conducting a strengths-based assessment of all potential program participants;**
> - **Developing an Advocacy Plan/Contract with youth accepted into the program using the community;**
> - **Working directly and collaboratively with a caseload of individual students and their parents/guardians, direct service units, school administrators and staff, etc. to support inclusive strategies that support student needs;**
> - **Attending teacher meetings, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and any other relevant meetings such as suspension re-entry meetings;**
> - **Referring students and families to appropriate community services as the case manager develops community-agency links; and**
> - **Assisting all staff as necessary in developing, facilitating, and supervising programming related to youth development, leadership, and community connectedness.**

Collaboration

Communication and collaboration – the need for all involved parties to be apprised of the program and participant progress, thereby ensuring everyone is moving toward the same goal – are important aspects of effective case management. Radical Possibilities staff engage with key school personnel and community

stakeholders in a process of planning, implementation, and continuous quality improvement over the course of the school year as follows:

Meeting	Frequency	Purpose	Participants
Planning Meetings	Twice monthly for two months	Meet with key school personnel, service providers, and student/family representatives to: • Educate on truancy and effective interventions • Define needs, assets, and barriers unique to the school • Establish methods for implementing elements of the partnership • Identify and plan programming goals unique to the school	• Radical Possibilities program director • LPYS case manager • Axis school-based mental health provider • School principal or assistant principal • Check and Connect mentor • School counselor • School social worker • SPED instructor • General education classroom instructor • Student(s) • Family member(s) • Others as identified
Partnership Meetings	Once planning meetings are complete, ongoing partnership meetings continue twice and then once monthly	• Carry out the goals of the program • Direct, monitor, and evaluate implementation of the program • Delegate tasks • Make improvements and changes to processes as necessary • Participants: smaller group selected from above-identified group	Smaller group selected from above group

In addition to the partners and meetings listed in the table above, case managers work with Department of Human Services, Probation, Senate Bill 94, law enforcement, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club, the Southern Ute Tribe, Manna Soup Kitchen, Housing Solutions, School to Work Alliance Project, Alternative Horizons, San Juan Basin Health, and Celebrating Healthy Communities, among others. Case managers make personal connections to these agencies and follow the referral as a collateral contact.

Alternative Horizons, an agency focused on providing alternatives and assistance to victims/survivors of domestic violence, sought and obtained a grant to offer in-school group mental health services as a Radical Possibilities partner agency. Their youth therapist is currently running one mental health group in each Radical Possibilities school through the end of the school year.

DEVELOPING INCENTIVES AND SANCTIONS

Strengths-based Program: a specific method of working with and resolving problems experienced by the presenting person. It does not attempt to ignore the problems and difficulties. Rather, it attempts to identify the positive basis of the person's resources (or what may need to be added) and strengths that will lay the basis to address the challenges resulting from the problems.
Hammond, W, PhD. (2010). Principles of a strengths based practice, 3-5. Resiliency Initiatives.

Incentives vary according to the individual and school. Individual incentives may be as broad as providing food with tutoring or as specific as paying for an individual's participation in a martial arts class. It is important to note that incentives are an important part of the program, but that schools are limited in the incentives they can offer. Private nonprofit agencies, however, have more flexible use of funding and can provide a broader range of incentives. Sanctions are not associated with strengths-based programs like Radical Possibilities.

EVALUATING AND SUSTAINING

Although a full evaluation of Colorado's four truancy demonstration pilot sites (one focused on prevention and three on problem-solving courts) would be premature at this time, integrating evaluation as part of design and implementation rather than treating it as an afterthought can lead to more actionable evaluation results. One comprehensive literature review speaks to the "need for more and better evaluation studies to provide a more definitive knowledge base to guide effective truancy interventions for practitioners."[xii] With this in mind, the pilot sites collect and track information on the programs and their participants. While they have had to adapt along the way and still face barriers to data collection, particularly with long-term data, the sites have taken the first steps toward developing an evaluation of program effectiveness that will hopefully allow them to sustain these programs.

Baseline and On-going Data Collection

The initial CISP program model was designed and implemented, in part, based on data from interviews and focus groups. After implementation, a survey was administered to Radical Possibilities pilot sites. The initial quantitative data from the pilot middle school has allowed Radical Possibilities to track improvement in attendance, grades, and number of behavioral incidences. Radical Possibilities also collects qualitative data,

including feedback and individual stories from clients and schools, which also significantly helps with program evaluation. Individual and school participants continue to give positive feedback and encourage and praise the program regularly. Through strong relationships with collaborative partners Radical Possibilities has created an exciting opportunity for the establishment of a thorough evaluation process. New data collection and tracking mechanisms include:

- Administering pre/post-surveys, developed in partnership with the State of Colorado Division of Criminal Justice through its Truancy Formula Grant project, to all participating youth.
- Collecting data on number of students served and cost per student.
- Asking schools to provide attendance data and behavioral records for all participating youth throughout their school career.
- Obtaining qualitative data from students and teachers from schools.
- Collecting pre/post data according to the current program model and sharing this information with partners for comprehensive evaluation (School Check and Connect).
- Monitoring juvenile justice involvement by LPYS, who will track referrals to diversion and recidivism rates for all participating youth.
- Defining and tracking engagement in short-term support services, acknowledging that addressing underlying factors of truancy will precede consistent school engagement.

Confidentiality

In addition to the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the program, Radical Possibilities is currently working with the schools to come up with a way to more efficiently gather school data. Currently, data on students in Radical Possibilities is tracked in Excel spreadsheets, as well as through Social Solutions and Efforts to Outcomes software, and school databases. The largest challenge in tracking student data is Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requirements. Presently, students and parents sign an information release and waiver to meet state and federal requirements regarding confidentiality and information exchange with partners.

Sustaining the Program

Program sustainability is a long-term goal for the pilot sites. Conducting qualitative research at a local level enabled Radical Possibilities to implement client-informed programming and apply research to address resistance to the program. Creating a sustainable program requires connecting students with adults who care and are skilled at helping students successfully navigate multiple systems to address individual needs. As such, human resources are the key to the success of this project. Other key ingredients to program sustainability identified by the prevention site include:

- Designating a program coordinator outside of school personnel;
- Identifying a principal who is fully invested and supportive of the program;
- Working with schools that can – and will – allow community services to be delivered in the school environment;
- Ensuring there is adequate funding for an appropriate number of highly-skilled personnel to work with students as intervention begins and ends with people.

Halfway through the second year, Radical possibilities was in the middle school pilot, two students indicated they wanted to share their stories and the positive impact the program had on their lives. They joined a team from the middle school who made a series of presentations about the program to community organizations and potential grantors. At one presentation, one of the student's entire family joined him in telling their story and the impact of the program. Ultimately, through the efforts and courage of these two young people, the program was able to raise an additional $40,000 to support their expansion into a total of five schools in the 2015-16 school year.

LESSONS LEARNED

As Radical Possibilities has progressed through program design, implementation, and adaptation, those involved with the program have learned a lot about what it takes to implement a successful CISP. Overall, Radical Possibilities has been the most successful with schools that combine a commitment to their students with a positive school climate. The middle school that met these criteria saw their Radical Possibilities program up and running quickly. In contrast, Radical Possibilities staff struggled to find a good elementary partner, with a few false starts. One elementary partner was unwilling to consider improving school climate as part of the problem solving. Another elementary partner was open to the programmatic structure, but had very few students who fit the target population. However, this year, Radical Possibilities is working with two elementary schools that better fit the criteria.

WHAT HAS BEEN CHALLENGING?

As is often the case, securing funding proved challenging for the program. Specifically, more funding was needed for data collection, marketing, and program documentation at the inception of the program. The funding challenge remains as there is a lack of funds for personnel specifically assigned to these tasks. Looking ahead, the biggest funding challenge Radical Possibilities foresees is compensation. Currently, the Check and Connect positions in schools are funded through AmeriCorps. Given the structure of AmeriCorps program, these positions are difficult to fill, skills and professional competency are sometimes limited, and experience high turnover. In order for the Radical Possibilities program to be truly sustainable and reach maximum effectiveness, these in-school mentorship positions will need to be compensated through a similar pay and benefits scale as teachers.

In addition to funding challenges, data collection efforts have been positive for Radical Possibilities, but have also proven challenging, with schools providing only a small amount of baseline data in pilot years. Data collection efforts are being formalized in this school year and should prove fruitful, although it would have been ideal to have all collection mechanisms in place for the first set of students served.

WHAT IS WORKING?

In simple terms, what works is highly-skilled, caring people, and it is these people that are the key to the success of Radical Possibilities. As such, ensuring sustainability of human capital is of utmost importance.

Radical Possibilities has helped realize a number of wins across the spectrum, although for different reasons:

- **Schools** win because community resources are making their way into the schools and allowing for effective service of students who have needs beyond the traditional capacity of schools.

- **Human services agencies** win because schools allow them access to, and early identification of, students who need support and otherwise may never receive it due to the barriers of accessing services in their family, school, and community?.

- **Students** win because their needs are identified early and the appropriate resources are brought to them through caring, connected adults with whom they already have established trusting relationships. Additionally, support is integrated into their day, rather than being extraneous to their daily life.

- **Program staff** win because conducting qualitative research at a local level has enabled Radical Possibilities to implement client-informed programming and use research to address resistance.

In the second year of Radical Possibilities, one of our partner schools lost a beloved counselor to suicide. Community partners spent the following week providing emergency counseling support to youth and adults throughout the school. One student, who had a very close relationship with the counselor, found a strong support system in two Radical Possibilities team members and frequently credits them with getting him through the loss and his own life challenges.

CONCLUSION

If considering a CISP truancy program, it is important for a site to modify each of their programs to fit the community, neighborhood, school, and students they serve, allow for flexibility of program changes and modifications, and be open to sharing information and methods. A three-year funding cycle has provided the prevention pilot site (LPYS) with the time to plan and implement a program that meets the specific needs of each participating school. Overall, all four truancy demonstration pilot sites noted that the first year was mostly spent on planning and initial implementation, while the second year was spent implementing changes and improvements to their program through first year learnings. Both the learning culture created amongst the four truancy demonstration sites and measureable outcomes are integral to programmatic sustainability. Throughout the grant cycle, the Radical Possibilities program has collected more revealing data and connected it across sectors to tell a holistic story of the student. Currently, Radical Possibilities is taking inventory of additional data needs and working with schools to collect necessary data. While more time is needed to have clearly defined outcomes, all four sites have shared numerous success stories to illustrate the difference truancy demonstration pilot funds and support are making in the lives of students and families.

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