

Evaluating the Effects of COVID-19 on a Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program

By

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## Abstract

Being present in school is essential to academic success. Students who drop out of high school are more likely to experience both negative short- and long-term consequences as compared to their graduating peers. To negate these consequences, intervention programs have been shown to successfully reduce student absenteeism. One such program is the Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program (TPDP). Although previous research supports its effectiveness when delivered in person, school personnel were forced to close physical school doors and transition to distance learning in March 2020 due to the global pandemic. This transition presented novel challenges for students to receive quality education, required the TPDP to deliver services virtually, and could have disrupted its effectiveness. The current study analyzed the effects of the TPDP in reducing student unexcused absences during Fall 2019 (in person) and Fall 2020 (virtual) and statistically compared the hours of unexcused post-program absences across the two years. The analyses showed a statistically significant difference between prior to-program and post-program percentage of unexcused absences for both Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. Further, no statistically significant difference was found between the percentage of unexcused post-program absences in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. The social validity data reveal high levels of satisfaction, regardless of the mode of service.

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## **Evaluating the Effects of COVID-19 on a Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program**

School attendance is essential for students to benefit from the material taught. Missing school in kindergarten is associated with lower academic achievement in the first grade (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). By the end of third grade, poor attendance can influence whether children read proficiently or advance to the next grade. By sixth grade, chronic absence can be a leading indicator that a student will drop out of high school (Balfanz et al., 2007). Long-term consequences of dropping out of school include negative outcomes regarding employment and physical health, and lower lifetime earnings, as high school dropouts earn approximately \$260,000 less across the lifetime than their peers who graduate (Lee-St. John et al., 2018, Graduation Alliance, 2017). Further, dropping out of high school can result in an increased risk of incarceration, with nearly 80% of all prisoners being high school dropouts (Romero, 2014), and an increased risk of being involved in crime, unplanned pregnancy, drug use, and having poor mental health (Lee-St. John et al., 2018).

Beyond absenteeism's effects on society and the student, missing school affects the community. According to the Graduation Alliance (2017), students who drop out of school cost taxpayers \$292,000 per student through the course of their life. Higher spending on public assistance and health care, higher rates of crime, and lower tax revenues correlate with truancy and drop-out rates (Gase et al., 2015). Student attendance is a driving force to our nation's achievement (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012) because the skills learned in school, both academically and socially, help prepare students to become productive members of society as adults. Unfortunately, in 2014, an estimated 5 to 7.5 million students in the United States missed nearly a month of school (Gingsburg et al., 2014), with this estimate increasing to 8 million U.S. students missing nearly a month of school in 2018 (Bauer et al., 2018). This estimate in missed



school days is rising, despite a simultaneous increase in graduation rates over the last 15 years (Lee-St. John et al., 2018).

Absenteeism refers to both excusable and inexcusable student absences from school. Chronic absenteeism is not defined consistently across states, however, but is often defined as missing (i.e., being unexcused or excused from school) 10% or more of the total available school hours (Gingsburg et al., 2014), which translates to approximately 18 school days per year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). States, counties, and school districts define truancy differently; one definition of truancy is “a student’s act of non-attendance evidenced by missing part or all of the school day without it being legitimately excused by school or per state law” (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014, p. 21).

Students miss school for a variety of reasons, and absenteeism is a complex problem since an absence is the end result of behavior that can be influenced by underlying causes and factors both within and outside the school environment (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). These factors are referred to as risk factors. These factors can be categorized by different environments and variables as they relate to student absenteeism. In the school setting, school size may affect a student negatively; for example, if the school is large, there may be less individualized attention. If the student is a victim of bullying, the result may be school avoidance. Within the home, a lack of parental guidance or acknowledgement of the importance of attending school may result in school non-attendance, and student variables such as drug use or poor physical health may result in an inability to attend school (Baker et al., 2001).

Another risk factor for absenteeism is socioeconomic status. Students who come from lower-income families often benefit the most from school because attending school is one of the most effective methods for low-income students toward a path out of poverty (Balfanz & Byrnes,

2012). Additionally, for some lower-income students, school provides access to resources they are unable to access otherwise, such as food and access to necessary technology to complete online coursework, stable Wi-Fi, and a counselor and interactions with positive adult mentors and role models.

Particularly relevant to low-income students, Santibañez and Guarino (2021) examined risk factors and their effect on academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) outcomes in approximately 600,000 individual students using 4 years of data from academic years 2014–2015 through 2017–2018. The authors found that absenteeism negatively affected student achievement, and although all students experienced the negative effects of absenteeism on academic outcomes, low-income students, students with disabilities, and homeless and foster youth experienced a higher risk of learning loss than other students. Further, being absent from school harms SEL skills—particularly those related to social awareness, self-efficacy, and self-management. Attending school provides students with opportunities to engage with their peers and the ability to foster the skills necessary for their social development and interactions with others. Social awareness allows students to develop empathy and understanding of others; self-efficacy describes the extent to which students have confidence in their own abilities; and self-management is when a student navigates and expresses their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors effectively (Niemi, 2020). Thus, in addition to affecting academic outcomes, chronic school absences can harm the social-emotional development of students. This finding has relevance given school disruptions caused by the 2020 global pandemic. In fact, Santibañez and Guarino concluded that school interruptions caused by the pandemic will negatively affect both the social–emotional development and academic performance of students. Fortunately, improving

attendance can help reduce these gaps, especially for students from low-income families (Gingsurg et al., 2014).

Various protective factors can help mitigate the variables that increase the likelihood that students will miss school. For example, having a mentor and opportunities for engagement within the school (e.g., clubs or sports) and community are protective factors against absenteeism. Another protective factor includes having a family that provides structure, limits, rules, monitoring, predictability, and clear expectations for behavior and values. Personal academic success, and engagement and connections to positive contexts such as school, positive peers, athletics, employment, religion, and culture helps protect against absenteeism (O'Connell et al., 2009).

A large number of interventions have been conducted to address non-attendance (e.g., Bazemore et al., 2004; Fantuzzo et al., 2005; ; Lehr et al., 2004; McCluskey et al., 2004; Mueller & Stoddard, 2006). In a large-scale program in Ramsey County, Minnesota, a Truancy Intervention Program (TIP) operated as a pre-court diversion program and worked in collaboration with five school districts, the juvenile court, and community corrections. The TIP team's goal was to reduce student absences by informing students and parents of the consequences of truancy by holding group meetings. If attendance issues continued, the student and parent were referred for a more individualized conference. If issues continued further, a petition was filed in the juvenile court. Although not published in a peer-reviewed journal, the authors report that since its inception, more than 25,000 students from 150 schools were referred to TIP. Results showed that during the 2003-2004 school year, 70.5% of students in the program improved their attendance, 79% of families in the program were connected with community resources, and filings for truancy petitions reduced by 50% (Gowen, n.d.).

Another truancy program started with university researchers who worked collaboratively with teachers, administrators, and social workers in the Durham Public School District in North Carolina to create the Early Truancy Prevention Program (ETPP) (Cook et al., 2017). The purpose of the program was to prevent the onset of truancy among first and second grade students. ETPP includes (a) a home visit made by the teacher to initiate a joint home-school effort to promote success and to obtain information about student barriers to attendance; (b) a smart phone provided to each teacher to encourage frequent communication with parents; (c) weekly attendance information; and (d) an online Attendance Information System for monitoring student progress. During the 2013-2014 school year, ETPP was implemented in 20 classrooms in the public elementary schools, with 21 other classrooms as controls. A preliminary analysis showed a statistically significant reduction in the number of student absences in the intervention group compared to the control group; within a sample month post-intervention, the number of students with 4 to 5 absences decreased by 9% and those students with 6 or more absences decreased by 10%. Teachers involved in ETPP classrooms also reported a high level of satisfaction with the program.

These varied intervention programs are designed to negate costs and resulting consequences of absenteeism. The intensity of intervention (e.g., large group meetings, one-on-one support) implemented by programs can range depending on funding, resources available, and the needs of the surrounding community. As described by the Colorado Foundation for Families and Children (2007), effective strategies for improving attendance using intervention programs include (a) parent or guardian involvement; (b) a range of services, including reinforcing incentives, consequences, and support; (c) collaboration with community resources, such as law enforcement, mental health services, and mentoring; (d) school support and dedication to student success; and (e) continuing evaluation. Further, programs that incorporate multicomponent interventions that address truancy at its onset by fostering

protective factors and addressing risk factors have been shown to be successful (Lee-St. John et al., 2018). Addressing absenteeism prior to an escalation in delinquent behaviors (e.g., drug use) is crucial in assisting youth in avoiding involvement in the juvenile justice system (Dembo & Gullledge, 2008).

Dachman and colleagues (2019) described another intervention, known as the Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program (TPDP), that address the strategies outlined above for effective intervention for truancy. The program has its origins in 1977 when created by a juvenile court judge, Judge Mike Elwell. In 1979, the program was expanded and formalized by university professor Jan Sheldon and aims to reduce truancy among students in a midwestern state. As a collaborative community program, the TPDP works with surrounding school districts, a local public university, the local office of the district attorney (DA), the local criminal justice services agency, and the Department for Children and Families (DCF). Students eligible for referral to TPDP must meet the requirements outlined in the Kansas compulsory school attendance law (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-3120). Undergraduate students, who take courses in a specialty area focusing on working with adolescents, enroll in a year-long practicum where they serve as mentors for truant children and youth. The TPDP uses behavioral contracting to monitor and motivate youth to attend school. Major features of behavior contracts include (a) clearly stating the behavioral expectations regarding behavior change, (b) incorporating rewards for adhering to the contract, and (c) consequences for not meeting agreed upon expectations (Kidd & Saudargas, 1988). Dachman et al. (2019) conducted an analysis of the TDPD, which included 450 participants from August 2008—May 2018. Results showed that 75.3% of students who participated in the TPDP reduced their percentage of hours of unexcused absences and exited the program successfully. These results describe in-person services; the effectiveness of the program delivered virtually during the pandemic is unknown.

From March 2020 to February 2021, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools for more than 168 million children globally to close due to lockdowns for almost an entire year (UNICEF, 2021). These closures resulted in schools requiring teachers to quickly transition to distance learning. In doing so, educators were responsible for meeting students' educational needs through a new virtual platform; however, due to the urgent shift from school to home classrooms, some students were unequipped for success. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2021), students who represent underserved communities (e.g., students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, students in foster care, students experiencing homelessness) face unique barriers to school attendance by lacking access to resources, such as reliable Wi-Fi and broadband, that are required to participate in high-quality remote education. This equated to approximately 16 million public school students in the U.S. who lived in households without sufficient internet access or computing devices to facilitate distance learning (Chandra et al., 2020).

Although local school districts often offered hotspots for in-home use, transportation barriers or conflicts with work schedules often prevented parents or guardians from being able to pick up the hotspot from their student's school. Further, many younger students were held accountable for their virtual attendance by being required to navigate school-issued technology (e.g., iPads) and novel apps designated for virtual schooling. Additionally, many working parents or guardians were unable to supervise their child(ren) to ensure they were attending school virtually throughout the day. Parents who were able to monitor their child(ren) during the school day were often unfamiliar with accessing Zoom links, deciphering class schedules, or understanding school attendance requirements. Some families had to reevaluate their priorities during the pandemic due to unexpected challenges, such as a partner being laid off, a family

member falling ill with COVID-19, or losing access to childcare, which effected the families of an estimated 21 million children (Donohue & Miller, 2020).

Components of truancy intervention programs, such as Dachman et al. (2019), have largely been based on the ability to provide in-person services. The effectiveness of the TPDP delivered virtually with no in-person component is unknown. Thus, the present retrospective study attempts to address this gap by analyzing the effects of the TPDP in reducing student unexcused absences during Fall 2019 (in person) and Fall 2020 (virtual) and statistically comparing the hours of unexcused post-program absences across the two years.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Setting**

Forty-seven students who participated in the TPDP and had a truancy review hearing during the Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters participated in the study. Students were referred from three school districts totaling 16 public schools (elementary [ $n = 9$ ], middle [ $n = 5$ ], and high school [ $n = 2$ ]) in a midwestern state. Participants were between 6 to 17 years ( $M = 12$ ) of age and included both boys and young men [ $n = 19$ ] and girls and young women [ $n = 28$ ]. Tables 1 and 2 summarize additional demographic data. Prior to voluntary participation in the TPDP, both student participants and a parent/guardian provide written consent (Appendix A). Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to data compilation.

### **Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program (TPDP)**

According to Kansas compulsory school attendance law (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-3120), any child who is 7 years of age and up to age 18 years is subject to compulsory education laws, which means they must be enrolled in and attending school. In Kansas, a student is truant if the student is absent without excuse for a significant portion of the school day for three consecutive

days, five days in a semester, or seven days in a school year (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-3121). The local school board policy defines a significant portion to be one or more hours at the elementary level and one or more class periods at the secondary level (USD 497 Truancy Defined and Scenarios, 2021).

All county students who are in violation of the Kansas compulsory school attendance law (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-3120) are eligible for the program. The typical referral process to the TPDP begins when a student meets the definition of truancy. The school in which a student is enrolled is required to notify the parents with a letter explaining the definition of truancy and noting the student's absences. The goal of the parent notification is to ensure parents are aware of their child's attendance issues. If student absences remain unchanged, the school sends a referral (known as a DCF 1006 form) to the DCF for students under the age of 13. The DCF personnel assess the needs of the family and if the family is willing to participate in the program. If the family agrees to participate, the referral is sent to the county truancy supervisor, who is housed in the local criminal justice services agency. For students who are 13 years or older, schools also send the referral to the DA's office. The DA's office then sends the referral to the truancy supervisor.

Next, the truancy supervisor contacts the family and describes the details of the program. If the family is interested in the program, the truancy supervisor assigns the case to an undergraduate college student (referred to as an intern) completing a two-semester practicum course with the Department of Applied Behavioral Science in the Youth Development and Juvenile Justice specialty area. The practicum course is taught by a professor with the support of two graduate teaching assistants. The truancy supervisor also seeks student and parent written consent (see Appendix A) to participate in the program, which is obtained before contact



between the intern and the student. Parents and students who decline to participate in the program are referred directly to the DA's office under the Revised Kansas Code for Care of Children (CINC) statute (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 38-2201 et seq.) which defines a Child in Need of Care to include a child not attending school (Kan. Stat. Ann. § 38-2202(d)(6)). The length of the referral process varies; it may take several weeks before an intern is able to begin working with a family. Once the contract is signed, a student begins the TPDP on the next school day.

The TPDP contains several components including monitoring, mentoring, and motivating. Monitoring involves tracking school attendance through a student's official attendance record (Appendix B). Interns foster a mentoring relationship with students. Interns meet with the youth assigned to their caseload for at least 1.5 hr each week. To emphasize the importance of a mentoring relationship, TPDP supervisors train the interns to build rapport and develop positive, professional relationships with students by taking an interest in their life, goals, and values. Interns conduct an informal assessment (Appendix C) to identify the needs of the student and family. Based on the assessment results, interns work to address the barriers to school attendance and build positive relationships with teachers to support the student's needs. Further, interns help communicate concerns from the school to the parent, or vice versa, and advocate on behalf of students.

Finally, the TPDP uses behavior contracts to motivate students to attend school. Behavior contracts are implemented within 2 weeks of the initial meeting with the student. The behavior contract communicates the student's responsibility to attend school every hour of every day school is in session. It also includes an individualized reward for meeting the responsibility, a bonus clause to reward long-term compliance, and a sanction for failing to meet the responsibility. During weekly meetings, the intern and student view the student's official

attendance record to determine what activities will occur during the meeting. If a student attends school every day with no unexcused absences, the intern and student will initially work on homework together and discuss any issues in the student's life. During the second half of the meeting, the student is allowed to choose an activity for them to do together (e.g., walking on the university campus, going to a museum or a park). If a student earns the bonus, the student is permitted to choose the activity for the entire meeting (e.g., watching a movie together, playing video games, going to a local toy store) and a \$5 gift card. If a student fails to attend school, a sanction is imposed in which the student must provide written rationales for attending school in addition to removing access to the privilege. The remaining time is spent working on homework and continuing to develop a relationship. Appendix D shows an example behavior contract.

A truancy review hearing to evaluate progress on attendance is typically held after students have participated in the program for 45 school days. The assistant DA responsible for CINC cases, county truancy supervisor, university program supervisors, intern, student, student's parent or guardian, and relevant school personnel (e.g., teacher, counselor, principal) are present at the hearing. Interns write and present a report to all parties. The report provides a comprehensive update on a student's attendance, a description of the intervention conducted with the student, and a recommendation moving forward. Recommendations may include graduating from the program contingent on accumulating 0 hr of unexcused absences, participating in an additional 45-school day program, filing a CINC petition with the juvenile court if absences worsen, or removal of services contingent on noncompliance with TPDP contractual terms.

### ***TPDP and COVID-19***

When many schools transitioned to remote learning due to precautions put in place by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) due to COVID-19 in March 2020, the TPDP made a variety

of adaptations in which the way services were provided to the youth and families served. Recommendations made by the CDC (e.g., maintaining 6 feet of social distance) resulted in an inability to interact face-to-face, since interns would previously use their vehicle to transport students from school. Instead of meeting in person, interns held individualized meetings with students as well as meetings with parents and school personnel using virtual meeting platforms (e.g., Zoom, WebEx). Meeting length and frequency with students was individualized based on student needs. Interns accessed school attendance records via their student's school platform of choice (e.g., PowerSchool) and truancy review hearings were held through Zoom.

In addition to the typical services provided by the TPDP, interns worked to address various novel challenges experienced by students. If a student needed access to Wi-Fi, the intern helped with accessing hotspots from their student's school. If a student needed help interpreting their new virtual schedule, interns facilitated communication between the student and the student's teachers. If a student had feelings of anxiety, interns helped with coping skills such as breathing strategies. If a student felt isolated, the intern was available to provide stable support by checking in with them daily and meeting with them weekly or on a more frequent basis depending on their needs. Lastly, interns held students accountable for engaging in virtual learning using the behavior contract. Interns implemented privileges (e.g., watching YouTube videos, drawing together, playing a game online), sanctions, and bonus privileges (e.g., watching Netflix together, doing an art activity) virtually.

### **Dependent Variable and Data Analysis**

The dependent variable was the percentage of hours of unexcused absences from school, as noted on a student's official attendance record. An unexcused absence was defined as being physically absent from school without notice by a parent or legal guardian and/or without proper

documentation of the reason for the absence. Hours of unexcused absences included hours of out-of-school suspensions, when applicable. The percentage of hours of unexcused absences was calculated for each student by dividing the number of hours marked as unexcused by the total available school hours and multiplying by 100.

Data analysis involved comparing the percentage of hours of unexcused absences prior to (prior to-program) and after (post-program) participating in the TPDP in both Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters. The purpose of this analysis was to evaluate the effects of the TPDP on unexcused absences when the program was delivered both in person and virtually. The measurement of prior to-program hours of unexcused absences began with the first unexcused absence that occurred during the school year in which the student met the legal definition of truancy as defined by Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-3121. Data were analyzed for skewness using IBM SPSS Statistics Software version 27. During Fall 2019 semester, prior to-program percentage of hours of unexcused absences showed a moderately skewed distribution (value = 0.848) and post-program percentage of hours of unexcused absences showed a skewed distribution (value = 2.025). During Fall 2020 semester, prior to-program percentage of hours of unexcused absences showed a skewed distribution (value = 1.802) and post-program percentage of hours of unexcused absences showed a moderately skewed distribution (value = 0.848). Due to skewness of the data, nonparametric tests were used. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare each student's prior to-program to post-program percentage of unexcused absences for both Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters. Graph Pad Prism version 9.1.0 was used for statistical analysis.

Data analysis also involved comparing the post-program percentage of hours of unexcused absence across the Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters. A Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare post-program outcomes when services were delivered in-person and virtually.

### **Interobserver Agreement (IOA)**

A second observer collected data on hours of unexcused absences and total available school hours to assess interobserver agreement (IOA). The observer recorded the number of hours of unexcused absences using students' official attendance records, which were compared with the primary experimenter's record. Total count IOA was calculated by dividing the smaller count by the larger count and multiplying by 100.

For Fall 2019 semester, IOA was calculated on hours of unexcused absences for all students. For 79.2% of those students, attendance was checked for 100% of weeks. The average percentage agreement was 94.5% (range, 88.6%-100%). For the remaining students, attendance was checked for 20% of their attendance record. The average percentage agreement was 91.2% (range, 81.1%-100%). For Fall 2020 semester, IOA was calculated on hours of unexcused absences for all students. For 47.8% of students, attendance was checked for 100% of weeks. The average percentage agreement was 94.9% (range, 59.1%-100%). For the remaining students, attendance was checked for 20% of their attendance record. The average percentage agreement was 88.1% (range, 86.7%-100%). For Fall 2019 semester, IOA was calculated on total available school hours for 94.3% of students. The average percentage agreement was 99.5% (range, 95%-100%). For Fall 2020, IOA was calculated on total available school hours for 47.8% of students. The average percentage agreement was 93.4% (range, 53%-100%).

### **Social Validity**

Prior to a student's truancy review hearing, a TPDP supervisor would ask the student and parent to fill out a consumer satisfaction questionnaire. This questionnaire included four items: three items for the student and one item for the parent. Question 1 asked the student to rate their level of satisfaction with how often they saw or talked to their intern. Question 2 asked the

student to rate their level of satisfaction with their intern's ability to talk about and help with any school-related problems. Question 3 asked the student to rate their level of satisfaction with their intern's pleasantness and willingness to be their friend. Question 4 asked the parent/guardian to rate their level of satisfaction of the intern's overall performance as their child's truancy intern. Participants were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with their intern on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely dissatisfied; 5 = completely satisfied) and had the option to leave comments.

### Results

Figure 1 depicts the Fall 2019 semester prior to- and post-program hours of unexcused absences. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that prior to- and post-program percentage of hours of unexcused absences yielded ( $p = <0.0001$ ), a statistically significant difference during Fall 2019 semester [ $n = 24$ ]. The median percentage of hours of unexcused absences was 9.40% prior to- and 5.88% post-program. These data suggest the percentage of hours of unexcused absences decreased while participating in the TPDP.

Figure 2 depicts the Fall 2020 semester prior to- and post-program hours of unexcused absences. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that prior to- and post-program percent of hours of unexcused absences yielded ( $p = <0.0001$ ) a statistically significant difference during Fall 2020 semester [ $n = 23$ ]. The median percentage of hours of unexcused absences was 11.75% prior to- and 4.58% post- program. These data suggest the percentage of hours of unexcused absences decreased while participating in the TPDP.

Figure 3 depicts the Fall 2019 semester and Fall 2020 semester post-program hours of unexcused absences. A Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.872$ ) between the percentage of hours of unexcused absences while participating in the TPDP

for students in Fall 2019 semester compared to students in Fall 2020 semester. These data suggest the key components of the program were delivered with similar effects virtually as compared to in-person.

### **Social Validity**

Table 3 displays the consumer satisfaction survey results. The survey is scored on a scale of 1 (complete satisfaction) to 5 (complete satisfaction). Overall, the results reveal high levels of satisfaction across both semesters. Student responses for question 1 averaged 4.6 of 5 in both semesters, which is between satisfied and completely satisfied with how often they saw or talked to their intern. Similarly high scores were found for question 2 ( $M = 4.4$  in Fall 2019 semester;  $M = 4.3$  in Fall 2020 semester). Thus, students across both semesters reported high satisfaction with their intern's ability to talk about and help with any school-related problems they may be having. Student responses for question 3 ( $M = 4.9$  in Fall 2019 semester;  $M = 4.7$  in Fall 2020 semester) suggested high satisfaction with their intern's pleasantness and willingness to be their friend. Parent/guardian responses for question 4 averaged scores ( $M = 4.9$  in Fall 2019 semester;  $M = 4.8$  in Fall 2020 semester) indicating high satisfaction with the overall performance of their child's truancy intern.

### **Fifty Percent Reduction and Graduation Outcomes**

Table 4 depicts those students with 50% or greater reductions in hours of unexcused absences accumulated post-program compared to their prior to-program hours of unexcused absences and students who graduated from the TPDP. In Fall 2019 semester, 16 out of 24 (67%) students reduced their hours of unexcused absences by 50% or greater, and of those 16, five (21%) reduced their hours to the extent that they were allowed to graduate from the TPDP. In Fall 2020 semester, 15 out of 23 (65%) students reduced their hours of unexcused absences by

50% or greater, and of those 15, eight (35%) reduced their hours to the extent that they were allowed to graduate from the TPDP.

### **Discussion**

The present retrospective study analyzed the effects of the TPDP in reducing student unexcused absences during Fall 2019 semester (in person) and Fall 2020 semester (virtual) and statistically comparing the hours of unexcused post-program absences across the two years. The analyses showed a statistically significant difference between prior to-program and post-program percentage of unexcused absences for both Fall 2019 and Fall 2020 semesters. Further, no statistically significant difference was found between the percentage of unexcused post-program absences in Fall 2019 semester and Fall 2020 semester. The social validity data reveal high levels of satisfaction, regardless of the mode of service. These data suggest the TPDP delivered virtually was similarly effective and socially valid as the in-person TPDP.

These findings contribute to the literature in three ways. First, these data provide additional support for the effectiveness of a truancy prevention program in reducing student absences. For example, both the TPDP and the ETPP (Cook et al., 2017) showed statistically significant reductions in student absences for those students who participated in the program. It is important to continue evaluating program components and disseminating results to contribute to the empirical literature of truancy programs to provide a current and effective framework for individuals interested in starting or adapting truancy programs in their communities. Second, this study extends Dachman et al. (2019) by evaluating the effects of essentially identical program components delivered in a virtual environment, which was done in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These results have several implications for the TPDP. The program could potentially be offered to more students, particularly those in rural communities. Further, the high rate of



success across modes permits flexibility in how the program could be offered and potentially allows for a hybrid version of the program to increase accessibility for students and families, as well as for interns who are participating in college courses virtually. The third contribution involves the results of the social validity data, which show high levels of consumer satisfaction across both in-person and virtual services. Students and parents who participate in the TPDP are generally pleased to have an intern support student success. This satisfaction, as well as success of the program outcomes, further emphasizes the mentorship component of successful truancy programs and the importance of having a mentor as a protective factor against truancy.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations are worthy of note. The method by which student attendance was documented during Fall 2019 semester (in-person) and Fall 2020 semester (COVID-19) was different. In Fall 2019 semester, all teachers recorded student attendance by observing whether the student was physically present or not in the classroom for the required class time. During Fall 2020 semester, students were not physically present in a classroom, so teachers could not observe student attendance in the school classroom. Student attendance was not standardized across school personnel. Some teachers maintained their own attendance records, which may have produced inconsistencies. Many students were required to complete a daily check-in with their teachers for attendance purposes. Check-in requirements often varied from school to school. A check-in for a middle school student could involve logging into a seminar class period, whereas a check-in for an elementary school student could be a “meaningful conversation with a teacher,” as defined by the local school board, once per day. If students logged into a class but did not turn their camera on or respond to a teacher’s question either verbally or using the chat

feature in Zoom, they could have been marked unexcused. If a student was present for the daily check-in, the student could be absent (or not working on schoolwork) the rest of the school day.

Another limitation involves challenges experienced by interns with keeping students engaged in weekly virtual meetings, especially primary school-aged students. Some students engaged in tantrums, sat out-of-sight of their computer cameras, or refused to work on school-related activities. Some secondary school-aged students played video games during weekly meetings, making it hard for the intern to have their attention. Unfortunately, the virtual meeting environment made it difficult for interns to address this issue.

Additionally, this study, as with many articles published on truancy programs, focused on one county or school district, making results of this study difficult to generalize. Further challenges include a lack of detailed information on program implementation, challenges, and outcomes (Dembo & Gullledge, 2008); we are beginning to address these issues with the TPDP. Lastly, an a priori power analysis was not conducted as this was a retrospective analysis.

Future research should conduct a concurrent analysis of TPDP delivered in-person and virtually to account for history effects of the pandemic and to further analyze the effectiveness of virtual TPDP services. The TPDP should be expanded, both in-person and virtually, to other school districts to assess program adaptability and implementation. An additional analysis might involve evaluating maintenance data to examine the latency to truant behavior upon exit of the TPDP and whether students return to similar levels of prior to-program hours of absences. Analyzing these data may provide implications for post-exit intervention needed for continued success. For example, if a student becomes truant within a week of exiting the TPDP, knowing this may imply the need for a fading procedure to be implemented to ensure long-term success. Further analysis should look at the degree of intervention needed for long-term, post-exit

success. For example, can students be successful with only the 1.5 hr weekly meetings, or is the behavior contract necessary? The age in which students participate in the TPDP should be noted and maintenance probes should be conducted throughout the student's academic career to analyze intervention occurrence earlier (i.e., with an elementary school student) as compared to later (i.e., with a middle school or high school aged student).

Ongoing evaluation of student absenteeism is essential to the success of our education system and society at large. COVID-19 resulted in months of learning loss, among numerous challenges faced by educators, students, and families. This loss of educational time may result in academic deficits, such as lower testing scores across the county and social deficits, including anxiety related to school performance or attendance. Research into the effects of COVID-19 should be conducted to determine the extent that students were affected. This retrospective analysis determined that virtual TPDP appeared to be as effective as an in-person TPDP, which may help to address these challenges and potential negative outcomes.

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**Table 1***Demographics*

Participant	Fall 2019			Gender		Race				Ethnicity		
	School	Age	Program Number	Male	Female	African American	American Indian	Caucasian	Other/Unknown	Hispanic	Non-Hispanic	
1	M	12	2	1				1				1
2	HS	14	1		1			1				1
3	M	12	1		1			1				1
4	Elem	8	2		1			1				1
5	HS	14	1	1				1				1
6	M	14	2	1					1			1
7	M	13	1		1				1			1
8	HS	14	1		1			1				1
9	HS	15	1	1					1			1
10	M	14	2	1					1			1
11	HS	17	2	1					1			1
12	M	12	2	1					1			1
13	HS	14	1		1				1			1
14	HS	15	1	1					1			1
15	Elem	9	4		1				1			1
16	M	13	2		1				1			1
17	Elem	11	2		1				1			1
18	M	13	1		1				1			1
19	M	12	1		1				1			1
20	M	12	1	1						1		1
21	Elem	8	1		1				1			1
22	M	12	1	1			1					1
23	Elem	6	1		1						1	1
24	M	13	4	1					1			1
Totals:				11	13		7		15	1	1	23

*Note.* Asian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander options were included on the demographics survey, however, no participants identified with that race.

**Table 2**  
*Demographics*

Participant	Fall 2020			Gender		Race				Ethnicity	
	School	Age	Program Number	Male	Female	African American	American Indian	Caucasian	Other/Unknown	Hispanic	Non-hispanic
25	HS	15	1		1				1		1
26	HS	15	3		1				1		1
27	HS	14	1		1				1		1
28	HS	14	1		1	1					1
29	HS	14	1	1					1		1
30	M	13	1		1				1		1
31	HS	14	5		1				1		1
32	Elem	7	1		1				1		1
33	HS	14	1	1		1					1
34	HS	14	4		1				1		1
35	M	11	2		1				1		1
36	Elem	9	4		1				1		1
37	Elem	8	1		1	1					1
38	M	12	1	1		1					1
39	Elem	8	1		1					1	1
40	HS	14	1	1			1				1
41	HS	14	3		1		1		1		1
42	M	13	3	1					1		1
43	Elem	6	1	1		1					1
44	Elem	7	1	1			1				1
45	M	12	2	1					1		1
46	HS	14	2		1				1		1
47	M	13	2		1		1				1
Totals:				8	15	5	4	14	1	5	18

*Note.* Asian and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander options were included on the demographics survey, however, no participants identified with that race.

**Table 3***Consumer Satisfaction Survey*

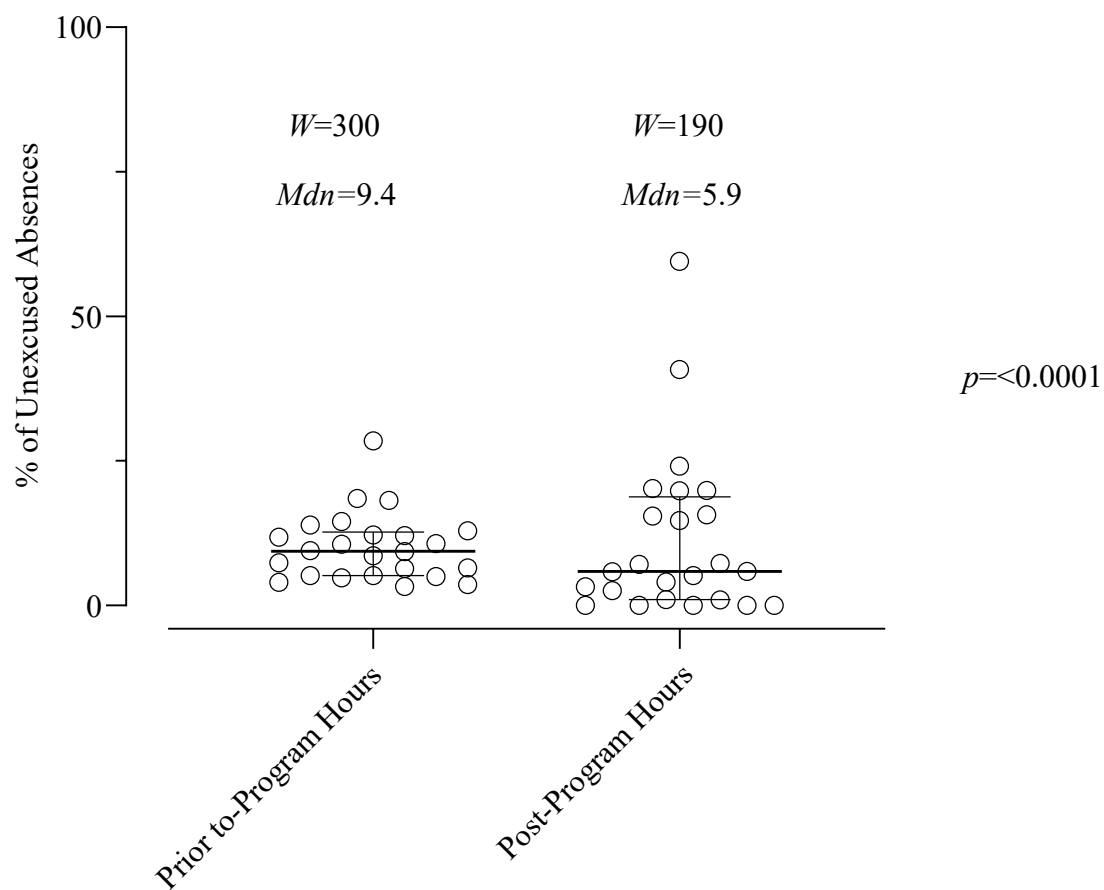
<b>Question</b>	<b>Fall 2019</b>		<b>Fall 2020</b>	
	Mean	Range	Mean	Range
Are you satisfied with how often you see or talk to your intern?	4.6	3 - 5	4.6	3 - 5
Are you satisfied with your intern's ability to talk about and help with school-related problems (e.g., attendance, homework, problems with teachers)?	4.4	2 - 5	4.3	2 - 5
Are you satisfied with your intern's pleasantness and willingness to be a friend to you?	4.9	3 - 5	4.7	4 - 5
Are you satisfied with the overall performance of your child's truancy intern (e.g., pleasantness, keeps scheduled meetings)?	4.9	3 - 5	4.8	4 - 5

**Table 4***50% Reduction and Graduation Outcomes with Percentage*

<b>Outcome by year</b>	<b>50% Reduction</b>	<b>50% Reduction Percentage</b>	<b>Graduate</b>	<b>Graduate Percentage</b>
<b>Fall 2019</b>	16 out of 24	67%	5 out of 24	21%
<b>Fall 2020</b>	15 out of 23	65%	8 out of 23	35%

**Figure 1**

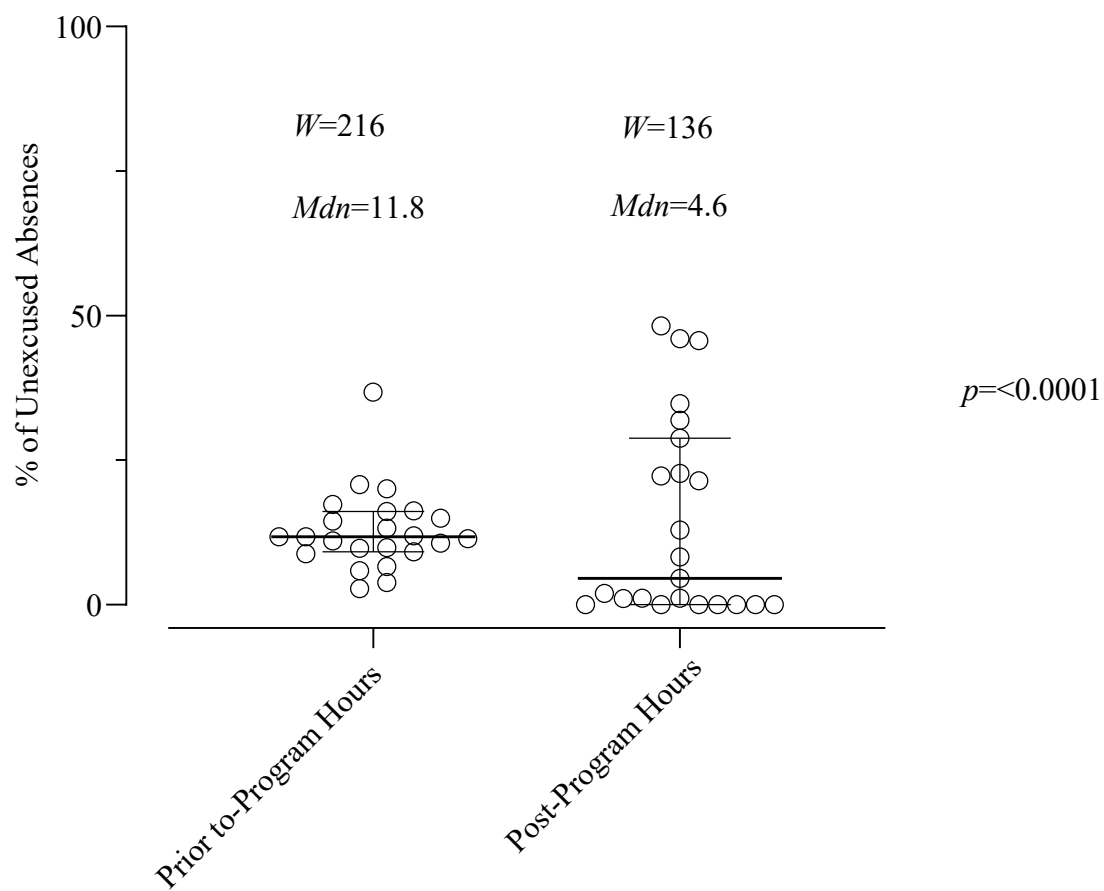
Comparison of Fall 2019 Prior to-Program to Post-Program Hours of Unexcused Absences



Note. Bars denote median and interquartile range.

**Figure 2**

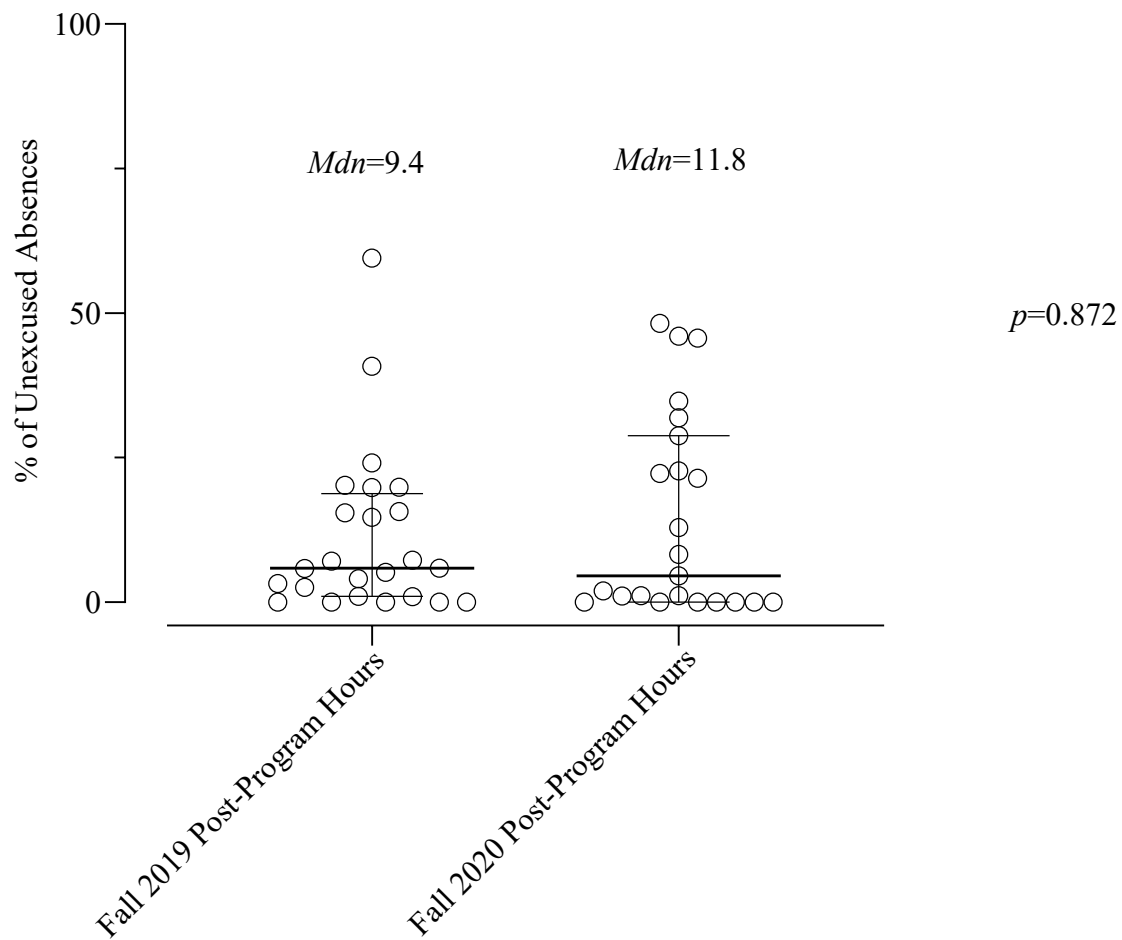
*Comparison of Fall 2020 Prior to-Program to Post-Program Hours of Unexcused Absences*



*Note.* Bars denote median and interquartile range.

**Figure 3**

*Comparison of Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 Post-Program Hours of Unexcused Absences*



*Note.* Bars denote median and interquartile range.

## Appendix A

County Criminal Justice Services  
-Youth Services  
123 Truancy Lane  
City, ST 12345 (555)  
555-5555 (555)  
555-5555 Fax

### Truancy Diversion Contract

Truancy Supervisor  
Truancysupervisor@county.org  
(555) 555-5555

On \_\_\_\_\_, I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby agree to abide by the following conditions of diversion from the court:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I agree to attend school daily with NO unexcused absences.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I agree to meet with my truancy diversion intern weekly and my Truancy Supervisor monthly.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I agree to work on improving my grades, if needed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I agree that if I miss a weekly meeting with my intern, I will schedule an alternative meeting with the intern within one week of the originally scheduled meeting. Additionally I understand that if I miss two or more meetings, an early Truancy Review Hearing will be held.

As the responsible parent, I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to abide by the following conditions:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. I agree to enforce the above.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I agree to allow the Truancy Prevention and Diversion intern and truancy supervisor to transport my child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I agree to allow the Truancy Prevention and Diversion intern and truancy supervisor to pick up my child's attendance, grades, and other relevant information and to talk with school personnel for 12 months following exit of the program.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I agree to allow CCJS-YS and the Truancy Prevention and Diversion Program to notify the schools of my child's involvement in the Truancy Diversion Program.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. I agree to allow this information to be presented at the truancy diversion hearing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I agree that for my child's absences to be excused, my child must be seen by a medical professional. I will either have my child seen and excused by the school nurse or provide the school with a Doctor's note from my child's Doctor to excuse any absence due to illness while participating in the truancy program.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. I understand that Out-of-School Suspensions are considered unexcused absences. Should I qualify for the Suspension Alternative Program (SAP) I agree to attend the SAP with United School District 123.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I agree that if my child misses a weekly meeting with the intern, I will schedule an alternative meeting with the intern within one week of the originally scheduled meeting. Additionally, if my child misses two or more meetings, I understand that an early Truancy Review Hearing will be held.

This diversion will last approximately 45 school days or 9 weeks. If your child has no unexcused absences during this period, he or she will graduate from the program and will no longer be considered truant. If your child does have unexcused absences during the program, then the District Attorney will decide if your child needs to go to court.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
CCJS-YS Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date





## Appendix C

### Individualized Truancy Intervention Plan

**Intern:**

**Student:**

<b>Student's Name</b>		<b>Sign Date</b>		<b>Mother's Name</b>	
<b>Start Date</b>		<b>End Date</b>		<b>Father's Name</b>	
<b>DOB</b>		<b>Program Number</b>		<b>Sibling Names</b>	
<b>School</b>		<b>Student's Phone Number</b>		<b>Student's Address</b>	

**What seems to be the function(s) or cause(s) of the student's truancy? In other words, why is the student not attending school?**

**Please create a behavioral intervention to address the function(s) or cause(s) described above. What components would you include in the intervention and why?**

**Appendix D**

**Cole's Behavior Contract**

**Responsibility**

1. Cole will attend school every hour of every day school is in session with no unexcused absences.

**Privilege**

1. If Cole meets his responsibility, he can choose an activity for us to do during the second half of our meeting.

**Sanction**

1. If Cole fails to meet his responsibility, he will have to write a two-page essay on the importance of attending school.

**Bonus**

1. If Cole meets his responsibility for 3 consecutive weeks, he may choose an activity for us to do during our entire meeting.

<b>Responsibility #1</b>						
<b>Privilege #1</b>						
<b>Sanction #1</b>						
<b>Bonus #1</b>						

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Intern Signature      Date