

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force



March 31, 2014

I. Call to Order and Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 10:15 a.m.

Senator Jacqueline Collins was present and addressed the committee to communicate her gratitude to the task force. She said everyone is concerned about our children and education is a key component of their development. Unless a child is in the classroom, there is no opportunity to access all the advantages a good education provides.

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia was on the phone and was represented at the meeting by Pat Dal Santo, Superintendent of the Kane County Regional Office of Education.

II. Roll Call of Task Force Members

Chicago

Fanny Diego Alvarez	Jeff Aranowski
Jennifer Berne	Juliet Bromer
Andrew Broy (Represented by Eric Johnson)	Senator Jacqueline Collins
Andrea Evans	Rene Heybach
Madelyn James	Leslie Juby
Crystal Laura	Melissa Mitchell
Heidi Mueller	Michael Seelig
Antoinette Taylor	Maria Trejo
Kevin Walsh	Dana Wright
Jack Wuest	

Springfield

Christine Boyd	Jackie Price
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Telephone

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia	Paul Sarvela
Barbara Sherry	

Those who were not present included the following members:

Anna Alvarado	Sen. Michael Connelly
Aarti Dhupelia	Kevin Fahey
Rick Gravatt	Sarah Hains
Mary C. Howard	Jim Kestner
Laura Kieran	Robert Lee
Shaalein Carroll Lopez	LaTanya McDade
Kareem Pender	Representative Sandi Pihos
Theresa Plascencia	Neli Vazquez Rowland
Arthur Sutton	Elizabeth Swanson

III. Approval of Minutes from the February 28, 2014 Meeting

The minutes were subject to review by Mr. Miguel del Valle of the P-20 Council; once reviewed, the task force did not have a quorum to approve.

IV. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Presentation/Discussion

Chairperson Taylor introduced Michele Carmichael from the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and Roberta Brown of the Illinois Statewide Technical Assistance Collaborative (ISTAC) who were asked to explain the programming available for districts that wish to increase their capacity to address a variety of student needs. Multi-tiered Systems of Support have proven successful in directing resources to the areas of greatest need as determined through a careful examination of data. Ms. Taylor explained that a systemic approach to student and parental supports is something the task force might want to promote in the Chicago Public Schools as these supports can be utilized to remedy absenteeism, chronic truancy, and related problems.

Michele Carmichael, an ISBE principal consultant for behavioral supports, student wellness, and the ISTAC initiative explained that as of July 1, 2014, there will no longer be a separate, state-sponsored initiative for PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Services) as emphasis is shifting from separate, siloed initiatives to integrated solutions for whole child wellness and success. Evidenced-based practices will be applied to truancy, student health, school improvement, and student with disability needs, etc. in an effort to promote career and college readiness. Insofar as truancy is concerned, Ms. Carmichael explained, the emphasis should be on the community perspective because truancy relates to student disabilities, behavioral issues, parental problems (substance abuse, mental health issues), and a host of other difficulties related to family life and the communities in which students dwell.

ISBE's Center for Specialized Instruction, Nutrition, and Wellness is funded under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) and uses discretionary funds to contract with several non-profits to provide training and technical assistance to schools on certain initiatives such as PBIS for behavior supports, RTI for academic interventions, and others - but all functioning separately from one another. ISTAC had found that while providing training to districts on specifically requested programming, they would pull data and methodology from other programs, many of which were structured to offer multiple tiers of services. ISTAC also found districts felt they did not have time to implement separate programs and requested specific alterations to suit their needs. According to Ms. Carmichael, "We looked at our financial resources, human resources, and our best practices," for the most cost-effective programs "and realized there was a duplication of effort amid a vast array of acronyms."

Ms. Carmichael explained the graphic used most often to illustrate Multi-tiered Systems of Support is a triangle. (The broad triangle base is illustrative of the widespread, core supports/instruction provided to an entire student group. The narrowing of the triangle represents the decreasing number of students who require additional layers of targeted supports to meet academic or behavioral goals. All supports/instruction offered are evidence-based in that data have shown them to be successful.)

ISTAC is now the larger umbrella or service entity for training and technical assistance in the application of Multi-tiered Systems of Support in the following five focus areas which are identified with their previous affiliation:

1. Behavior - PBIS,
2. Educational Environment - Project CHOICES,
3. Family and Community Engagement - PEP (Parent Educator Partnership),
4. Special Populations - IATTAP (Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Project), and
5. Transition.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support have their basis in the public health model of promotion/prevention which has been around a number of years and is evidenced by the campaign to educate people about the dangers of smoking, from broad-based marketing efforts to promote nonsmoking habits among all people to specific instructions from a surgeon for someone stricken with a smoking-related disease.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support offer a continuum of services where you start with all students and provide similar promotions for well-being. At this first level of tiered support, you also apply universal screening for academic,

behavioral, and emotional barriers to learning. As barriers emerge (typically for about 20% of students), evidence-based interventions are implemented that increase with intensity as needed (for approximately 5% of students). Student progress is monitored in response to implemented interventions, and staff engages in systematic data-based decision-making about services needed for students based on specific outcomes.

Ms. Carmichael explained further that RTI (Response to Intervention) is the umbrella over Multi-tiered Systems of Support as it is fully data-reliant for progress monitoring. It is the process through which you see how effective the interventions you have provided students are working. You decide what data to collect first, which data informs about student progress, and which data informs your effectiveness.

She said a misunderstanding had occurred among people in regard to RTI and other tiered programming about whether you should jump immediately to the third tier for some students. She advised that you measure success and layer on additional supports as needed which are tailored to a student's specific need according to collected and analyzed data: "Look at all student needs, not just academic. What gets monitored is what gets focused on." She explained that ISTAC works with districts "to help them understand the types of data they should be collecting to identify the types of issues they need to work on. Some of those issues will be more than behavior – they will also include educational environment, attendance, special populations - so we look at data specific to each problem and conduct training processes."

Ms. Carmichael emphasized that the whole child, integrated approach reduces the fragmentation of efforts to support learning and deters the marginalization of programs that contribute to the social/emotional well-being of a student. In schools, people tend to look at things from a governance and management perspective and make financial decisions about programming in ways that sometimes do not benefit children, such as cutting music and art programs while there may be a duplication of efforts related to curriculum and instruction initiatives. With ISTAC, she explained, they are taking a more holistic approach and adjusting their focus to what makes a child, a school, and a community whole. An integrated approach that relies on data gathering and analysis helps to organize programs and manage resources to maximize the benefit to students.

A question was asked about whether or not this methodology would ever incorporate data related to crime rates in the school community. Ms. Carmichael said it would because when you are considering issues related to truancy and absenteeism, local crime statistics come into play, including data about the rates of child abuse and neglect. This analysis helps you make decisions about the type of programming that should be explored.

With regard to the community, Ms. Carmichael addressed the need to identify the community providers that have evidence-based practices with successful outcomes for children and families and how they should be at the table to solve the truancy problem and other problems as well. She added a note of caution about efforts to combat the effects of life in a community plagued by violence, however, as schools cannot offer therapeutic levels of interventions. They can instead choose to be welcoming and safe environments and ensure each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged in the school setting. She added that both Superintendent Christopher Koch and Assistant Superintendent Elizabeth Hanselman are huge proponents of the social/emotional development of children and how the participation of parents and community providers can enhance these efforts within a school.

Ms. Carmichael said schools have to develop protocols, procedures, and practices to foster school improvement and responsiveness to student academic and functional needs. Alignment of goals, collaboration of efforts, and integration of solutions will improve the educational experience of many students by removing barriers that inhibit success.

An integrated approach is the efficient and the most effective. "Instead of just focusing on truancy, you should figure out how this issue impacts other areas of students' lives. Truancy is just one indicator of a problem. Data is not a four letter word. Data in and of itself is useless if it is not used for problem solving. Drill down into the data and keep asking why."

She likes the fact that CPS has school improvement aligned with college and career readiness and asked where special education was. She said the child with a disability has issues related to the ones they are talking about but is kept separate. The special education population has a lot of the issues related to truancy.

Ms. Carmichael offered an additional explanation of ISTAC's new direction: "We provide foundational services for all. We build local capacity. Our role is to basically train CPS to do its own work so we can leave. We don't want to be in there for more than a couple of years. With our PBIS initiative, we have been in and out of Chicago for the last 17 years. We are starting from scratch now and our services are going to look very different from before."

ISTAC has some strategies that have worked well in other locations, and district trainings will be coordinated through the Center for School Improvement (CSI). These trainings will be offered in accordance with the Multi-tiered Systems of Support model, starting with foundational services in best practices which will suffice for 80% of districts, 'focus' districts receiving targeted supports for achievement gaps (15%), and 'priority' districts receiving intensive supports for large scale systemic changes (5%). CSI is the single point of entry and will be coordinating all the services that once were fragmented and unconnected. The will provide external partnerships and resources for all these districts, including CPS.

Per the federal government and IDEA, the state has to measure the performance of districts according to over twenty indicators related to special education: graduation rates, suspensions/expulsions, transition, disproportionality, preschool outcomes, educational environment, to name a few. If a district is not a focus or priority district but has findings with regard to SPP indicators, ISTAC will provide support to them, according to Ms. Carmichael. "Supports are not just training. It means follow-up coaching to build internal capacity in accordance with our service delivery cycle:

- Look at the data.
- Assess the data.
- Make decisions.
- Make a plan.
- Support the plan through professional development.
- Monitor how effective the interventions are."

Chairperson Taylor thanked Michelle Carmichael and expressed her happiness that so many initiatives which were operating in silos have all been joined together under ISTAC. This collaboration and integration of efforts and best practices will mean a lot for our state in general and CPS specifically.

V. Response to Intervention (RTI) Presentation/Discussion

Larry Fairbanks of the ISBE office in Springfield announced he would be taking over as state director of the State Personnel Development Grant which funds RTI in Illinois. These funds facilitate a coordinated statewide system of professional development through instructional leaders/coaches so districts can increase their capacity to provide a Multi-tiered Systems of Support. He introduced Patricia Graczyk of the Illinois RTI Network who was there to present an RTI overview as it is a multi-tiered system of academic support that has applications for districts seeking to address truancy and absenteeism.

Dr. Graczyk said RTI provides a framework for students to receive appropriate (tailored to student need) instruction to maximize student achievement and reduce behavioral problems. This is important in terms of truancy because if students are successful in school, they are more likely to attend. Studies have shown that RTI has a huge impact on student achievement.

The five critical elements of RTI are the following:

- Multi-tiered System of Support based on student needs
- Quality instruction (evidence-based)
- Focus on prevention
- Accurate data guide decisions about instruction
- School-family partnerships

The multiple tiers of RTI include the following:

1. Tier One - universal tier featuring core curriculum, can feature differentiated instruction (pacing, grouping)
2. Tier Two- instructional supports and interventions in addition to the core curriculum, typically in small groups
3. Tier Three – individualized, intensive supports in addition to core curriculum, usually individualized to bring students closer to grade level expectations.

The RTI process requires the collection of data to determine student progress and the effectiveness of instruction at every tier. Tracking data is gathered via benchmarking (periodic assessments) and progress monitoring (weekly) and determines if interventions need to be withdrawn or changed.

It was asked what constitutes an intervention, and it was explained that a change in instructional practice or instructional programming (like LEXIA, Reading Recovery, explicit instruction) constitutes an intervention.

School/Family partnerships are very heavily emphasized in Multi-tiered Systems of Support. Parents must be informed and educated about the supports, how they can access resources for their students, how monitoring is done, and how their children are performing. Schools should have multiple methods of communication with parents, including inviting them to participate in advisory bodies.

Truancy prevention starts in preschool at Tier One with strong attendance focus, promote a culture of attendance. According to Dr. Graczyk, Attendance Works advises the following tiered model for attendance:

1. Tier One – satisfactory attendance
2. Tier Two – at risk attendance (5-10% absent)
3. Tier Three – significant absence (+10%)

Data must be gathered relative to a student's attendance patterns and the reasons school days are missed which then determine the interventions to be applied.

VI. March 10, 2014 Public Hearing Debrief

Jeff Aranowski provided an update on the first public hearing which was held on March 10 at the New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church with 16 people in attendance. A questionnaire was distributed which polled parents about their knowledge of their children's schools' attendance policies, barriers to school enrollment in their communities, a contact person to answer their attendance and enrollment questions, etc. He said that a review of the data gathered via the questionnaire and statements expressed at the forum revealed a strong indication that people want truant officers back. They thought that state law and CPS policy are satisfactory but lack teeth as there are no consequences. The problems brought up involved crossing gang lines and socio-economic issues. Mr. Aranowski said there were many informational pieces available for parents on homelessness, special education, etc.

Maria Trejo wanted to know if we are targeting organizations or parents because the first meeting was attended by organizations and not parents. Should we be more strategic about inviting parents? She also said one size does not fit all and that different communities have different needs.

Chairperson Taylor expressed concern about the small number of parents at the first forum. She explained that attendance by the community organization representatives is wonderful and she is depending on them to bring the message back to the community as well as encourage parents to participate in future forums.

Fanny Diego Alvarez asked about distributing the questionnaire to parents outside of the public forums, perhaps through the community-based organizations or at the school level. Ms. Taylor expressed concern about the willingness of parents to speak candidly if forums were held at schools or if questionnaires were distributed by the schools.

Maria Trejo wondered if there could be additional forums in Latino communities as she represents people on the northwest side (Logan Square). Madelyn James said parents are just as uneasy about crossing certain lines as children are. She suggested that some Latino families from the northwest side are not likely to travel to the forum planned on the southeast side.

Andrea Evans shared with the task force some root cause possibilities for truancy and excessive absenteeism at the school level: teacher absenteeism is often linked to student absenteeism, student fear of bullying inside the building affects attendance, and students who have been retained are absent more than other children. She said it isn't always connected to the family as there are problems within a school and hopes that the task force recommends that principals collect data to see how teacher absenteeism affects student attendance and to identify other root causes. Sometimes students cannot develop a proper relationship with teachers, are experiencing unchecked academic difficulties, or are receiving special education services, so they disengage. Healthcare issues also contribute to attendance difficulties, according to Ms. Evans who added that attendance is better at schools that have a nurse on staff.

VII. Best Practices Committee Debrief

Heidi Mueller said the Best Practice Committee needs clarification on the process for the reviews of documentation. She wondered if she should combine it all in one document, and how the information should be digested and fed to the committee.

Chairperson Taylor said the goal is to hear from everyone because of the enormity of information and each summary will be presented to the task force in a brief, condensed manner so it can be decided what we would use as recommendations from the task force.

VIII. Special Education Implementation and Recommendations

Olga Prybl from Equip for Equality, a federally-funded legal advocacy organization for people with disabilities across the state, will come back in April as there was not sufficient time for her presentation.

Madelyn James asked if she can have information relative to the student with disability truancy rate according to diagnosis and grade level.

IX. Discussion of Old Business (as needed)

X. New Business and Open Discussion

XI. Public Participation

XII. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 1:10 p.m.