

Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative

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Working Together...

Serving Families

... Improving Lives

Truancy Prevention Work Group

9:00 – 10:30 AM December 4, 2009

Otter Tail Operations Center, Ottertail City

Attendance: Jeff Drake and Julie Carlson (Battle Lake School-35); Joannie Gontarek (OTC Probation-66); Tindy Rund & Shane Thielke (Fergus Falls Schools-132); Blaine Novak & Travis Hensch (New York Mills School-30); Nicole Hansen (OTC Attorney's Office -66); Brad Vold (OTC Human Services-66); Connie Wenker & Caryl Gordy (Parkers Prairie Schools-60); Sheila Flatau (Pelican Rapids Schools – 80); Angie Schreder & Julie Vomacka (Perham Schools-48); and Jane Patrick (Collaborative Coordinator).

1. John Hamann welcomed the group. Introductions were made including new member Julie Carlson the new Dean of Students for Battle Lake who will be replacing Jeff Drake on this work group.
2. Nicole Hansen provided an update to the question raised at the last meeting about students withdrawing from schools. Nicole confirmed that the law has not changed and that a student between 16-18 can withdraw from school if the parent/guardian attends a meeting to discuss educational opportunities and signs a written election to withdraw from school. Nicole indicated that she did not foresee any changes to this law in the immediate future. The group also discussed laws pertaining to elementary school enrollment. Nicole will send the law/requirements for elementary age enrollment to the group.
3. Jane updated the group about the attendance report and indicated that she now has the information needed to complete the 2008-09 annual summary report for the entire county. Preliminary results show that we are moving the wrong direction. The summary will be shared at the next meeting. The group discussed the value of continuing to collect this information.
4. Each member spoke about what they hoped to gain from attending and participating in the Truancy Work Group. Below is a summary of the ideas mentioned:
 - Connie Wenker (Parkers Prairie High School) – hoping to get more information to put into newsletters, more resources to share. Meeting three times a year is good and keeps the group connected.
 - Caryl Gordy – (Parkers Prairie Elementary) - Attendance is important to her and she sees the connection to truancy later in life. She has started a new process where letters go out at 5 days and 8 days to remind students/parents of the important of attendance. Currently there are just a few kids over the 10 day mark, but each as legitimate excuses. H1N1 has been a key factor this year. Values this group and hopes to earn support at the elementary level to promote attendance.

- Angie Schreader (Perham High School) – values hearing what everyone else is doing in their schools and takes ideas back to share with Perham staff and administrators. It is helpful to involve teachers in identify and addressing attendance issues.
- Travis Hensch (New York Mills) – is a new administrator and hoping to learn as much as he can about what other schools are doing; Blaine Novak (New York Mills) – having issues with excessive excused absences and dealing with parents – would like more direction as far as what other schools are doing
- Brad Vold (OTC Human Services) – has had more phone calls from parents this year than any other year with parents who have questions about truancy and what the schools are doing. He likes to meet and keep the lines of communication open with the schools.
- Sheila Flatau (Pelican Rapids Elementary) – a new administrator in Pelican Rapids who appreciate the tools and outline provided by the group. Some interventions work well and some don't fit quite right so appreciates the chance to share ideas with others.
- Tindy Rund (Fergus Falls Elementary) – It is helpful to have dialogue with the other schools on what is working in other districts. Tried to explore increasing physical rewards as an option to good attendance, but put it aside this year due to H1N1. There is a lot of gray area with unexcused and excessive absences especially at the elementary level. Feels meeting three times per year is perfect to keep connected.
- Shane Thielke (Fergus Falls High School) – Is a new high school administrator this year and walked in to a tough situation with things somewhat out of control. Short office staff which is common in all schools – looking forward to next year when they will have a secure building.
- John Hamann (Underwood) - Elementary the teachers are pretty involved in identify kids with attendance issues. The high school students are tougher because there is less you can do that is effective.
- Nicole Hansen (OTC Attorney's Office) – appreciates the middle and high school interventions and feels they are key when making recommendations to judges when truancy petitions are filed. She feels it is important to hear from the schools about how things are going and appreciates being able to develop the relationships so that she can communicate what is happening to the judges. Nicole would like to see more of the elementary referrals with the habitual attendance problems which would potentially be educational neglect cases with families that have a long history of attendance and truancy problems.
- Julie Carlson (Battle Lake) – new administrator and dean of students and is looking for new information and ideas to carry back to her district. Jeff Drake (Battle Lake) finds all the templates and process very helpful. Values working collaboratively with the county to ensure that everyone keeps a healthy perspective on tough issues. Found several different components from other school's policies to be effective interventions in Battle Lake. Jeff finds value in collecting a data county wide and individually as a district.
- Joannie Gontarek (OTC Probation) - probation is less involved with truanancies, but if they have someone on probation it is important that they get involved. She enjoys getting to know the new faces so that she knows who to contact in each community.
- Julie Vomacka (Perham Elementary) - new to the group and values the ideas and thoughts about connections with families trying to figure out what is working and what is not.
- Share emails/phone addresses within the group – Jane will update the website and circulate

5. Questions to consider:

- How long to give parents to excuse the absence – (24 or 48 hours?)
- How many days are acceptable to miss for farm work, hunting, etc.?
- Can we review the state approved of recommendations for excused and unexcused absences – Connie will get this and share with the group.
- Would like to share policies among the administrators.

6. Brad Vold reminded the group that the County is willing to go out to each of the elementary schools and talk with parents of students that have excessive absences. These can be arranged by contacting Brad directly. Schools simply need to identify the parents and invite them to attend the meeting which would be held at their school. The County Attorney's Office will also participate in these meetings. Jane encouraged the elementary schools to review their attendance and identify students/families that might benefit from this newly offered intervention.
7. Most successful attendance strategies:
 - Current policy is based on six absences in a semester not counting doctor visits, college visits, etc. When student hits seventh absences in a semester, they have to pay it back to the teacher or suffer a two percent reduction for each absence over six. School does give some consideration for extenuating circumstances. This policy gives families/students choices.
 - Getting parents involved – going out to pick students up seems to work! Setting aside time just to take care of attendance is important with so many demands on administrator time.
 - Connecting families to resources such as home-based services makes a big difference in attendance.
 - Honest discussions directly with students- building those personal relationships when the student is young. Developed a check-in/check-out schedule so student is responsible for tracking her own attendance with the principal and is rewarded daily for good attendance.
 - Grade reduction after three unexcused absences with an option to make up time – ran Saturday schools – working on involving parents – have an “Experience Works Worker” helping to make phone calls during the day – made in school suspensions uncomfortable for students – uses out of school suspensions only rarely – involving coaches – using resources such as school based services.
 - Open lunch privileges are denied after three unexcused absences.
 - Give uptown pass/open lunch for good attendance.
 - Open gym for good attendance – credit recovery – anything over 10 in a semester without time made up and the student fails the class – use lunch detention.
 - Only uses detention sparingly as it doesn't seem to be effective - grade reduction of two percent for every unexcused absence – no chance to make up time and do not do detention. For some kids it isn't working – those kids failing already it has no teeth – may try a summer school recovery program.
 - All schools greatly valued and feel a lost from the funding cuts several years ago which helped to support a person to track attendance.
 - If someone comes across a really great resource to share it with the group.
8. Information sharing within the districts - teachers and staff need and want to know what we are doing. However, attendance isn't at the top of their list and they count on administrators to do the hard jobs. Need to communicate regularly with leadership teams and at school staff meetings. It is also important to ask staff for feedback so they feel like a part of the solution to good attendance.
9. The meeting was adjourned by consensus. The next meeting will be held on **Friday, February 12 at 9AM in Ottertail City**. All principals are encouraged to attend.