

Otter Tail Family Services Collaborative

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Working Together...

Serving Families

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Truancy Prevention Work Group

7:45 - 9:30 AM December 12, 2008

Betty's Pantry – Ottertail City

Attendance: Tindy Rund (Fergus Falls Elementary Schools); Thomas Williams (Henning School-25); Blaine Novak (New York Mills School-30); David Hauser (OTC Attorney's Office -70); Joannie Gontarek (OTC Probation-60); Brad Vold (OTC Human Services-70); Connie Wenker (Parkers Prairie Schools-60); Brian Korf (Pelican Rapids Schools – 80); Angie Schreader (Perham Schools-26); and Jane Patrick (Collaborative Coordinator). Guest: Debra Carpenter (Planning and Evaluation Work Group – 40).

1. Joannie Gontarek agreed to chair the meeting in the absence of chair John Hamann who was ill today. The group welcomed new principals to the group, and also Debra Carpenter from the Planning and Evaluation Work Group. Deb joined the group today to learn more about the Truancy group's activities, challenges and anticipated outcomes.
2. The group reviewed the minutes of the August 2008 meeting. Jane reported that one attendance report is still missing from the 2007-08 school year. Until this report is received, Jane cannot do a summary report to see the attendance trends and compare trends to previous years. The group discussed collecting graduation rate data from the districts. The schools explained that there are many variables that go into calculating graduation rates according to the State's methodology. The group decided to track their own internal data regarding graduation rates and also track the variables for those students that drop out or do not graduate on time. Jane will send a revised spreadsheet to the schools to collect:
 - a) The number of students starting 12th grade at the start of the school year;
 - b) The number of students graduating on time at the end of the school year;
 - c) The number of students that formally drop out of school during the year;
 - d) The number of students that do not drop out but that do not graduate with their class on time; and
 - e) The variables for those students that withdraw from traditional school settings and move to ALCs, on-line classes, etc.

Jane will send the revised spreadsheet to the school members and ask them to fill in the missing information. Connie also mentioned that the State guidelines for tracking graduation rates would soon be changing. Connie agreed to send Jane information on the new guidelines that can be forwarded to the other districts.

Brian Korf also reported that their new attendance clerk is Karen Jongeward. Brian will visit with Karen about the requirements for attendance reporting for the work group.

3. Jane shared a summary of the attendance patterns for the students that participated in courthouse meetings for the past two years. The data was available for four of the schools that participated, not able to be collected in one district and one district is still outstanding.

There were also some variables in the data in that at least one student dropped out after the courthouse meeting so this student did not record any additional absences after the meeting. The raw data showed that on average the total number of absences per week decreased by 10 days overall for students whose information was collected and reported. Jane will try to collect the missing information and continue to track the data over a longer period of time. The group felt that the overall results were not all that impressive. However, several schools also reported that even though attendance for those students actually attending the courthouse meetings was not greatly improved the very fact that the program was available provided an incentive for some students who had poor attendance and were threatened with the courthouse meeting.

4. The group discussed attendance challenges and successes including:
 - a) Elementary attendance is a challenge because there isn't a consistent process for tracking attendance. Each school has their own criteria in determining what an absence is and what is a tardy at this level. Because of these inconsistencies, the schools are not sure when to make referrals to Human Services for Educational Neglect. The group discussed the fact that according to the law, three tardies equal one unexcused absence and if a student skips one hour or a full day it still counts as an unexcused absence. Schools can use this guideline when determining when intervention should be started. Brad noted that Human Services will follow the guidelines and recommendations of each individual school's policy. The group discussed the possibility of developing a guideline for the elementary schools to follow for tracking half-day attendance.
 - b) Excessive excused absences continue to be a challenge across the board. Parents continue to excuse absences despite the fact that some students are missing a considerable amount of school. The group discussed the fact that schools have the authority to disallow excuses from parents and even physicians if they do not feel the excuse is valid. Schools should be sure to notify students and parents when excessive excused absences will no longer be excused.
 - c) The group also discussed the challenge for students that excessively miss school, but somehow manage to keep passing with above average grades. Several schools have a policy in place so that grades will be reduced for excessive absences and this policy seems to be pretty effective;
 - d) When students are pressured about attendance, some choose to drop out or go to other ALCs, or on-line schooling. This causes a problem for schools and their No Child Left Behind requirements.
 - e) The group also discussed the issue of bussing for students between the districts. In some instances there are 3-4 different districts bussing students from one district into another when the families choose open enrollment. The group discussed the benefit to having a district border for purposes of bussing. In some cases when attendance becomes an issue, students are able to jump from district to district and are not held accountable. The group also discussed the cost of transportation for tax payers when 3-4 busses are driving on the same roads picking up students that wish to open enroll.
5. The group reviewed and discussed the chemical use pre-assessment forms that Jane had sent out earlier in the school year. Both of these tools will be added to the "Tool Box" for schools to use. It is suggested that schools complete a pre-assessment form with the student prior to attending the meetings at the courthouse. The tool is helpful at the meetings for discussing suspected chemical use issues. The schools will count the number of students that they have used these or other chemical use assessment for so it can be reported as part of the work plan outcomes. The school partners will also share the assessment forms with others in their buildings, including mental health workers, who might find the tools useful.

6. The group discussed elementary principal participation in this group. Since the group is only meeting a few times throughout the year, they requested that Jane invite all building principals to each of the truancy work group meetings and also add them to the email list serve so they receive the minutes and other updated information.
7. The group reviewed and gave updates on the FY09 Work Plan.
 - Increase physical activities as a reward to good attendance ideas:
 - Taking students with good attendance outside to play football or some other sport/game with the principal. This works well for both elementary and high school students;
 - Sliding party for students at or above 90% attendance;
 - “Mini Course Day” – students with good attendance get to choose from a list of activities such as ice fishing, skiing, skating, hockey, etc.
 - Students at the ALC with good attendance, who are caught up on work and have good behaviors can have be excused early on Fridays, or can choose to stay in school Friday afternoon and “bank” the time for later use;
 - Jane reminded the schools to keep track of attendance activities and interventions that they are doing so it can be reported at the end of the year pursuant to their work plan.
8. Jane updated the group on school-based mental health programming. Five of the six districts have implemented an individualized mental health program by working in conjunction with the local mental health providers and the county. One district will be utilizing their collaborative dollars to increase time for their part-time school counselor. Two districts are not pursuing individualized programming to replace the services lost by the discontinuation of the Collaborative’s SBMH program.
9. The group discussed Opportunities for Collaboration. Jane shared concerns about continuing to review and look for grants that might help reinstate afterschool programming. Information about a potential grant proposal was circulated to the entire work group in November but only half of the schools gave any kind of response to the email that was sent out. Jane asked the group if they were still interested in pursuing grants that might be available on a collaborative basis or if she should stop reviewing grants due to lack of interest. The group said they were still interested in pursuing opportunities that might be appropriate and agreed to give more consideration to reviewing those emails being sent by Jane so as ensure Jane’s time is not wasted on reviewing information that the districts are not interested in.
10. The group discussed the Planning and Evaluation Work Group questions including challenges, successes and things the group was particularly proud of. The group noted parents and students as the number one challenge for attendance issues. The group also noted they were particularly proud of their continued work together, the interventions provided in collaboration with the county and the fact that they have good communication. It is also helpful to them to have others to brainstorm with on occasion throughout the year.
11. **The meeting was adjourned by consensus. The next meeting will be held on Friday, February 20th 7:45 AM at Betty’s Pantry in Ottertail City.**