

## *The TCP's Many Moving Parts*

Failure to attend school is only one issue addressed – the tip of the iceberg – by the University of Baltimore School of Law Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Truancy Court Program (TCP). School absence is the result of a much larger pattern of problems and events encompassed by the TCP, problems that can include bullying, academic struggles, substance abuse, negative peer relationships, low self-esteem, poverty, and homelessness, to name a few. The scope and breadth of issues that underlie truancy demand a holistic approach that connects students, families, courts, schools, and service providers.

What are the parts that make up the TCP? Weekly teacher reports are the central component of the information provided to the TCP team. At Violetville Elementary/Middle School, which is in its third year of operation of the TCP, Janice McKinnon, the school social worker, and Arlene Ditty, a second grade teacher, serve as the main contacts for the TCP. They indicate that the teachers' input is essential to the process of re-engaging a student with the school. For example, each teacher's report includes a positive comment about the student, providing the TCP judge and team with a springboard to emphasize a child's success at the very beginning of the TCP meeting. Ms. McKinnon notes that "this kind of regular positive reinforcement is something every child deserves. So many don't get that, and to hear it from a real judge and the principal, as well as from a large team of caring adults, makes such a huge difference for them."

Accountability is another factor that is central to the effective operation of the TCP. Theresa Gladden, Violetville's attendance monitor, includes a weekly attendance report in each TCP student's file. The students know that absences and tardies will not slip under the radar. Catherine Villareale, a University of Baltimore law student participating in the TCP as part of the CFCC Student Fellows Program, takes notes that remind participants of the goals and action items discussed during each meeting and that keep track of the promises team members make to the child and family. Anthony Green, the TCP Mentor Coordinator, explains: "The TCP eliminates excuses – when the students have an excuse for their attendance or behavior, we address it, and they know it falls on them to do what they're supposed to do."

Another critical element of the TCP is its ability to forge connections among a student, his/her family, and community resources. For example, Violetville's principal, Catherine Reinholdt, has made it possible for a "troubled student" to work in the school, where he has specific responsibilities and the chance to develop self-confidence and self-esteem. Another student has noted that he needs help with reading, so TCP Manager Catherine Jackson has partnered him

with a volunteer University of Baltimore student who serves as a reading tutor. Cherry Squires, a Violetville guidance counselor, has explained to a talented but underachieving seventh grader the importance of this year's attendance and grades, as they impact his application to a great citywide high school.

Teacher reports, attendance information, and community resources and services are only several of the TCP's many moving parts. The TCP has grown in the past seven years to offer a large menu of interventions that all have the same goals: to re-engage a student and his/her family with the school; regular and on-time school attendance; graduation from high school; and, ultimately, a fulfilling and productive life in the community. Principal Catherine Reinholdt sums it up: "The TCP has changed the lives of many students who have reconnected with our school, their families, and their communities."