

Multiple Challenges Call for a Holistic Approach to Truancy

India, an eighth grader participating in the Spring 2012 session of the University of Baltimore School of Law Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Truancy Court Program (TCP), was her family's primary caretaker for four younger siblings, all under the age of seven. India's mother worked three jobs to make ends meet while India was responsible for cooking, cleaning, and preparing her siblings for school. Homework was something that India did at night – when she had the time and energy. She left the house at 6:30 every morning, dropped off two siblings at a different school, and then took two more buses to reach her own school. It was not surprising that India had missed 26 days of school during the previous two marking periods and was tardy nearly every day.

India was in desperate need of help on many different levels:

- At home to cope with overwhelming responsibilities that stood between her and her education.
- With her school work in order to catch up with her peers.
- With transportation to get to school.
- With self-esteem issues.

How does the TCP address so many challenges? India's case is a perfect example of why the TCP's holistic approach is essential to address the complex problems that underlie truant behavior. The TCP process begins by identifying the child's needs, challenges, and supports. As the TCP judge and team get to know the child, they delve into a child's life to determine the reasons why he/she is missing school. Each week, the TCP participant and his or her family meet with the TCP team to discuss attendance, behavior, and grades. The TCP team includes a volunteer Maryland judge, a school social worker, a school administrator, a law student, and a CFCC staff member. Each team member brings his/her own expertise to bear on the case, and the entire team joins together to support the TCP participant. In addition, the TCP student works with a TCP Mentor to build character and work through social and emotional challenges. The use of this interdisciplinary team of dedicated experts allows the TCP both to identify and to address problems that underlie truancy.

For example, one of the TCP students this year recently had been orphaned by a murder-suicide and was caught in the middle of a difficult and emotional custody dispute. The TCP, using its holistic approach, brought to the weekly team meeting a school social worker, a psychologist, a mentor, a tutor, and a judge. Each of these individuals dealt with different aspects of this tragic situation. While the diversity of expertise was important, the interaction between the student and the experts, all sitting at the same table, was even more effective in re-engaging the student with his school.

What happened in India's case? After learning about her situation, the TCP team explained the circumstances to her teacher, who provided past homework assignments and, together with the school social worker, helped her to work through the curriculum until she was caught up with the rest of the class. In addition, CFCC provided volunteer tutors from the University of Baltimore to help India with math and reading skills. The TCP Mentor spoke with India's mother about her responsibilities and how to manage time. India's mother took this guidance to heart and arranged her work schedule so that she was able to take her two younger children to school, allowing India and two siblings to come directly to school. The judge directed India's mother to resources that offered adult education so that she might eventually be able to find a better job. The school psychologist worked with India to raise her self-confidence so that she could make friends.

India's school attendance improved dramatically. When her siblings got sick, her mother stayed home with them. India's most recent report card was full of A's and B's. She graduated from middle school and is going to one of Baltimore's best high schools next year. India is full of self-confidence and optimism. India's story has a happy ending as a result of her and her family's involvement with the TCP. A program that did not adopt the TCP's holistic approach might have helped her with one or two of her problems – but it was only through the interdisciplinary intervention of the TCP team that all of India's issues were addressed and her life changed.