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## **West Valley's truancy board a model program**

District's skipping solution a community effort

**Jody Lawrence-Turner**

Bored with his West Valley High School classes, Harrison Calligan thought skipping school with friends might be more challenging.

The teen figured out how to block the school's numbers from his home phone so his mother couldn't be alerted to his absence, and after lunch he'd leave school.

"We'd set little goals for skipping ... like see how far we can get on our bikes in one afternoon," said Calligan, now 17. "It's almost embarrassing now."

The teen escaped detection until the law caught up with him. If a student in Washington has more than five to seven unexcused days in one month or 10 days in a school year, they are considered a truant. For the offense, a student can face time in juvenile detention.

So Calligan and his mom, Tanya Spaulding, were relieved when they learned about an alternative to juvenile court – the West Valley Community Truancy Board.

The program is a collaborative effort among school district officials, Spokane County Juvenile Court Services and volunteers from local social service agencies – Job Corps, the NATIVE Project, Lutheran Community Services, Daybreak and SNAP.

The board helps students and their family members with solutions to put the child back on track in school.

In response, the share of West Valley School District truancy cases that ended up in juvenile court has declined from more than 65 percent in 1996 to 6.5 percent in 2010, according to Spokane County Juvenile Court Services.

With West Valley's success, the community truancy board model is being replicated in school districts throughout the region, including East Valley, Mead and Spokane Public Schools, and in Western Washington.

And it could spread even farther. A team presented the model in Washington, D.C., earlier this week at the national Models for Change conference, which focuses on juvenile justice reform, for possible use in schools nationwide.

The program can be replicated for little or no cost by reallocating current resources, officials said.

“We don’t think court is always the best option for kids,” said Martin Kolodrub, a Spokane County Juvenile Court Services truancy specialist who has offices in the West Valley high schools. “The whole goal is to keep kids out of secured detention.”

Students appearing before the board have been helped with problems such as drug use, mental health issues, illness, counseling, transportation, food or school supplies.

“You get to listen to these kids,” Kolodrub said. “Are they being teased? Do they need glasses? Maybe they can’t read.”

Every case is different, program coordinators said.

“What’s unique about this is it’s a community truancy board. We use the experts in the community,” Kolodrub said. “They have truancy boards in California, but they don’t use community members.”

He added, “I hate to use this phrase, but it’s a one-stop shop. The kids leave there with a game plan.”

### **How it works**

West Valley’s truancy board has been a work in progress since 1996. Superintendent Polly Crowley came up with the idea in response to the passage of the Becca Bill in 1995, which addressed runaways and truancy. It was named after a 13-year-old runaway who was murdered in Spokane in 1993.

State law requires schools to report student absences to the county’s juvenile court when the child misses five days, which is equal to 30 classes in a month, or 10 days in a school year.

The law also allows schools to ask the court for a “stay,” or a chance for intervention with the student before the violation goes to court.

“When a kid gets to the truancy board stage, they are teetering on the edge; it’s kind of their last opportunity to make some changes,” said Sue Holly, an advocate and volunteer coordinator at Lutheran Community Services who sits on Mead’s truancy board.

Since the West Valley board's inception, community social service agencies and experts have been added. Spokane County became part of the program in 2007 through a grant from Models for Change supported by the John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

"The focus is how to be an advocate for the kids, and the parents, and keep them in schools," said Bonnie Bush, Spokane County Juvenile Court Administrator.

The benefit of the community truancy board is having all the potential needs for a student and his or her family in one place at one time, officials said.

"We don't see many repeat offenders because the board was able to help," said Cheryl Keating, a West Valley Community Truancy Board member and representative of Job Corps. "It's matching up what would be the best program or education for them. Most of the time students don't even know what resources are out there."

### **Back at school with straight A's**

Harrison Calligan was a sophomore when he was caught skipping two years ago.

The truancy board determined he should go to West Valley's Contract-Based Education to catch up on credits. He was provided with a bus pass to get there. The Next Generation Zone, which is also represented on the board, helped him find work because he wanted job experience.

Now the teen is back at West Valley High School where he's getting straight A's and is expected to graduate on time, his mother said.

Said Kolodrub, "Harrison is a perfect example of a student coming full circle."

In the 2010-'11 school year, 59 students from West Valley High School went before the district's Community Truancy Board, according to Spokane County Juvenile Court services:

- All eight seniors who had truancy petitions graduated, even though one had to make up considerable credit deficiencies.
- Ten of 14 juniors were on target for graduation; the other four students were within two credits of being on target.
- Of the 29 ninth- and 10th-graders, 11 were on target by the end of the year; most were enrolled in summer school and set to begin the next year on target.

"I'm so proud of the changes I've seen through this for kids," Kolodrub said. "It's unbelievable."