

# CANTON MIDDLE SCHOOL TRUANCY ABATEMENT PROGRAM

## REDUCING CHRONIC TRUANCY AND DAYTIME DELINQUENCY

BALTIMORE POLICE DEPARTMENT, MARYLAND, SOUTHEASTERN DISTRICT

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**THE PROBLEM:** Chronic truancy in an inner-city middle school led to incidents of daytime crime and delinquency in the nearby neighborhood.

**ANALYSIS:** Police determined that no sanctions were taken against truant juveniles or their parents and guardians, even though students are legally required to be present in school. Furthermore, the Baltimore criminal justice system did not view truancy as a high priority.

**RESPONSE:** Police worked with school officials to implement a strategy to reduce chronic truancy and juvenile crime.

**ASSESSMENT:** Incidents of daytime crime and delinquency decreased by 26 percent, and school attendance rose to its highest point ever, topping 90 percent. The targeted school achieved the highest attendance rate in the Baltimore public school system.

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## SCANNING

In 1998, business and community leaders and police managers in Baltimore, Maryland, identified juvenile crime and delinquent acts as a major cause of social disorder in the Southeastern police district. At the same time, the Baltimore public school system was struggling with epidemic truancy, and the Southeastern district community's Canton Middle School was petitioning social institutions for assistance in addressing the suspected causes of dwindling attendance rates.

Three out of 10 students were absent each day at Canton. Both quantitative and anecdotal data indicated that juveniles experi-

enced victimization at rates disproportionate to their numbers and that they committed a large number of the quality-of-life offenses in the district. Many of these offenses occurred during school hours. Typical offenses included graffiti, loitering in public places, petty theft, joy-riding, and daytime burglary. The police department identified truant juveniles as significant contributors to these problems. The correlation between truancy (specifically chronic truancy) and crime and disorder in Baltimore's Southeastern district could not be ignored.

The problem of unsupervised, chronic truants demanded a response from district

police officers. Searching for truants had become a daily game of “cat and mouse.” Officers expended time identifying and taking custody of truants.

## ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

Baltimore City requires juveniles under the age of 16 years to be in class each school day between the hours of 9 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Parents are required by law to assure that their children are supervised and in school during these hours. Police department analysis showed that when truant juveniles were taken into custody, they were released to a parent or guardian with no subsequent institutional sanctions applied to either the student or parent. Repeated infractions were common among a chronic population. Baltimore’s justice and education systems did not accord truancy a high priority.

Southeastern district police took 2,244 juveniles into custody for “daytime curfew violations” in 1998. During this same period, district officers arrested 1,202 juveniles for myriad offenses. These arrests represented approximately 16 percent of all arrests made in the district. Many juveniles arrested were younger than 16 and were classified as truants. Many of them lived in the Southeastern district, were students at Canton Middle School, and were well-known problem students among school personnel.

### Canton Middle School Selected for Intervention

Canton Middle School was selected for the police department’s model intervention strategy for several reasons. First, its administrators were willing participants in this experiment and actively petitioned the Southeastern district to intervene on its behalf. Second, a middle-school population (grades six through eight) seemed ideal for early intervention in the truancy cycle because research indicates that children make formative life decisions at the middle-school stage, as opposed to during later

high-school years.<sup>1</sup> The police department and middle school hoped that an intervention targeting a middle-school population would have a better chance for long-term success than targeting a high-school population. Finally, the community surrounding Canton Middle School was growing more concerned about the area’s increasing rates of delinquency and teen drug use.

Canton Middle School is an urban school with a racially mixed population of 746 students. Most students at Canton historically have come from working-class families, many of whom have been adversely affected during the last generation by economic and technological changes in the workplace. Eight of every 10 students at Canton qualify for the federally funded, free lunch program. Most of the students live in single-parent homes. Canton students come to school with a wide range of emotional, social, medical, and economic needs, all of which must be addressed for them to achieve academic success.

Craig E. Spilman, Canton’s principal, identified poor attendance as a primary barrier to student achievement. The year-end attendance rate for Canton’s 1996–97 academic year was 87 percent. Chronically absent students (defined as absent 30 days or more per school year) represented 36 percent of the total student body.

## RESPONSE

In spring 1998, Canton Middle School and the Southeastern police district forged a unique working partnership to: (1) increase school attendance rates, (2) reduce chronic truancy, and (3) reduce juvenile-related crime and delinquency in the area around Canton Middle School. The partners developed a strategy of progressive interventions that they would deliver through police contacts with families. School and police officials would address chronic truancy in the Southeastern district with all the resources available through the school system, social services, and the juvenile

## The Role of Media Attention

To communicate to the public that the police department and school were addressing chronic truancy in a meaningful and comprehensive manner, the partners issued press releases about their efforts. As a result, local and national media began covering the effort, from the first meeting to the later court hearings. In fact, reporters were so interested in the program that the partners had to limit media access to protect the families of chronic truants from exploitation.

On one occasion, the partners felt that some members of the media were beginning to target individual families for media coverage. The partners' decision to limit media access maintained their credibility with the families and communicated that their goal was not to grandstand, but to assist the families. And the partners learned that by communicating to the media that they were on a "life-saving mission" to assist chronic truants and their families, media coverage was forthcoming and generally respectful of the partners' efforts not to disturb or humiliate the families involved.

and adult justice systems. The partners' goal was to hold parents legally responsible for their children's school attendance.

### Gathering Support

School officials from Canton Middle School and Lieutenant Carmine R. Baratta, Jr., from the Southeastern police district, met with officials from Baltimore's State's Attorney's Office and District Administrative Court to garner support for the chronic truancy abatement program. The State's Attorney for Baltimore, Patricia C. Jessamy, and District Administrative Court Judge Mary Ellen Rinehardt committed to assisting with the effort. In April 1998, Judge Charlotte M. Cooksey and Assistant State's Attorney Laura Mullally agreed to help with the project. The team was taking shape.

## THE INTERVENTION BEGINS

Because the 1997-98 school year was in its last semester, the team decided to target at-risk sixth and seventh graders who would be returning to school the following year. The school prepared a rank-ordered list of the 50 most truant children based on attendance records.

### Phase I: Police Serve Notice and Families Meet With Project Partners

The project partners prepared a letter on police department letterhead notifying parents of the 50 truant children of a mandatory meeting with police and school officials to discuss their children's attendance. A uniformed outreach officer delivered these letters to each target family. One of the main purposes of the meeting, which was held toward the end of the 1997-98 school year, was to start the next school year with a chronic truancy abatement program in place.

Parents, police officials, school administrators, and social service representatives attended the meeting. The police department gave parents notice that their children were considered chronic truants and that they were responsible for their children's attendance at school. The partners presented the program as a life-saving mission for their children and advised parents that now was the time to request any assistance needed from the partners in ensuring that their children were in school. The partners also notified parents that if they could not fulfill their obligations, they would be required to appear in court. Forty-five of the 50 targeted families attended the meeting, as did the local print and broadcast media.

### Phase II: Parents Appear in Court, Police Conduct "Knock & Talk" Visits With Targeted Families

By mid-October 1998, an analysis of attendance rates showed that 28 of the 50 targeted students had dramatically improved their attendance at school. This time, the partners summoned the remaining 22 families to a meeting in Judge Cooksey's courtroom. Parents, police, school officials, and social service providers attended the meeting.

Judge Cooksey admonished the parents, giving them notice that this was their last chance to seek assistance in improving their children's school attendance. The judge advised parents that they would be charged as defendants if their children did not attend school. This meeting also received media attention.

Officer Sam Hood, the Southeastern district-designated truancy abatement officer, visited the targeted at-risk students at their homes to ensure that they were attending school and to let them know that the police department was monitoring them for delinquent behavior. Officer Hood photographed targeted students with a digital camera. These students were profiled in the district database for future reference. This procedure was meant to deter juveniles' attempts to remain anonymous.

### Phase III: Formal Criminal Court Hearings

Of the 22 families attending Judge Cooksey's first meeting, 10 families' children still remained truant. Officer Hood and Assistant State's Attorney Mullally targeted these families for prosecution and served charging documents against the families. Criminal hearings were set before Judge Cooksey. In early April 1999, the partners held the first of several court appearances for truancy. All 10 families eventually were found guilty of "Failing to Send Child to School." One parent was incarcerated for a weekend; nine others received sentences combining probation and community service. The hearings received local and national media attention.

### ASSESSMENT

This program is focusing on its fourth group of at-risk students. The partners con-

**Table 1: Attendance Data—  
Canton Middle School**

<b>Preliminary Results (as of April 1999) 650 students</b>		
	<b>1997-98</b>	<b>1998-99</b>
<i>Overall rate</i>	87%	92%
<i>Students absent less than 5 days</i>	18	38
<i>Students absent more than 20 days</i>	36	12

tinue to assess school attendance records and police data, and the results are promising.

### Attendance Tops 90 Percent

For the first time in Canton Middle School history, the attendance rate is more than 90 percent. As of May 1998, the overall attendance rate was 92 percent. Canton Middle School has the highest attendance rate of any school in Baltimore. Chronic truancy has been redefined from 30 days absent to 20 days absent; 12 percent of the student population fits this new profile. The number of students absent fewer than 5 days doubled during the 1998 school year.

### Daytime Crime Drops

Police department data show that no longer are truants in the area around Canton Middle School. From January through October 1999, 440 children were cited with truancy violations in the Southeastern district—a 5-fold reduction. In addition, research indicates that since the beginning of the intervention, overall daytime crime in the neighborhood of Canton Middle School decreased 26 percent. Specifically, larcenies dropped 26 percent and auto thefts decreased by 30 percent. Total UCR (Uniform Crime Report) Index crime during daytime hours dropped 20 percent. This compares with an overall 13-percent decrease in daytime crime districtwide.

## Minimal Resources, Big Payoff

Police and school officials have developed a working relationship with a commitment of minimal resources. A police sector commander and an officer work part-time with school officials on the project. The results are encouraging, and the possibilities for replicating this project are great.

In tandem with this project, 230 Canton Middle School students participated in a children's bicycle rodeo organized by the Southeastern district officers during the summer of 1998 to foster bicycle safety. The police department also developed a mentor program that is part of the ongoing relationship between the school and the police.

The effects of a well-publicized truancy abatement program are quite evident in this Southeastern Canton neighborhood. Residual effects also may be at work in other Southeastern Canton communities. Recent ride-alongs with Sector Commander Baratta and Principal Spilman revealed that loitering in and around these neighborhoods was virtually nonexistent. Where once during school hours teens would congregate on corners and loiter in front of businesses,

sidewalks now are clear. The message was out: Children belong in school—not only for their own benefit, but also for that of the entire community.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the partnership between the Baltimore Police Department and the Baltimore City Public Schools, contact Lieutenant Carmine R. Baratta, Jr., Sector Commander, Southeastern District, 601 East Fayette Street, Baltimore, MD 21202; phone: 410-396-2422; fax: 410-396-2172; e-mail: CRBARATTA@aol.com.

## NOTES

1. Humphrey, K.R., and P.R. Baker, "G.R.E.A.T. Program: Gang Resistance Education and Training," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* 63(9), September 1994, 1-4.