Evaluation of Pennsylvania’s School-based Probation Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This report was prepared by the National Center for Juvenile Justice, the research division of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges for the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency, supported by grant number #1997/1999-J-05-9678.

Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency.
Acknowledgements

This report is the result of a six-month effort by several individuals whose contributions deserve mention. Lead investigators, Ralph Ricci and Carol Brooks, conducted the site visits and compiled copious notes from those visits. They also developed the survey instruments along with Susanna Zawacki who analyzed and summarized the results. Patrick Griffin distilled the essence of the report for the Executive Summary and the Conclusion chapter. Keith Snyder, Jim Anderson and JCJC consultants responded to every request for advice and assistance along the way. Thanks are extended to the many school-based probation officers, chief probation officers, probation supervisors, and school personnel interviewed at the five sites, and to the many respondents who took the time to complete the survey. Finally, the support provided by Ruth Williams in this effort is appreciated.
Executive Summary

This report describes the results of a process evaluation of school-based probation in Pennsylvania, conducted at the request of the Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission (JCJC) by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ). Since the first JCJC-funded pilot demonstration of school-based probation in Allentown in 1990, Pennsylvania has made the nation’s most extensive investment in the school-based probation approach, which physically moves probation officers out of traditional offices and into middle, junior, and high school buildings where juvenile probationers spend the majority of their day. Advocates of school-based probation say that its benefits include not only closer, more effective and informed monitoring of delinquents, but also safer and more orderly schools and better overall communication between juvenile probation and schools. Basing probation officers in schools is also thought to hold potential for preventing delinquent behavior on the part of students who are at risk of becoming court-involved.

A previous evaluation of school-based probation in Pennsylvania documented several important benefits of the program, including closer overall supervision, better school attendance, fewer instances of serious recidivism, fewer placements and far fewer placement days, resulting in an estimated cost savings of $6,665 for every case assigned to school-based probation (Metzger, 1997). Due to these encouraging findings and an infusion of state funding for specialized probation programs beginning in 1998, school-based probation has expanded to more than two-thirds of Pennsylvania counties. JCJC has asked NCJJ for help in documenting the efficacy of school-based probation as it currently functions, and to develop a strategy for identifying performance measures and conducting an intermediate outcome evaluation of school-based probation programs.

The current evaluation effort was aimed at determining (1) the overall satisfaction of key participants in school-based probation; (2) participants’ views of the effectiveness of the program in meeting its objectives and the availability of data for measuring performance in meeting program objectives; (3) the degree of program compliance with JCJC standards; (4) the consistency of perceptions of the duties/roles of school-based probation officers; and (5) the program’s overall strengths and weaknesses.

NCJJ project staff employed three primary data collection methods: a thorough review and analysis of JCJC audit reports and other relevant documentation; statewide mail surveys of school-based probation officers, chief juvenile probation officers/supervisors of school-based probation officers, and school administrators; and on-site visits to school-based probation programs currently operating in Luzerne, Berks, Centre, Erie and Allegheny Counties.
**Overall Satisfaction**

All three groups of survey respondents—probation officers, probation chiefs/supervisors, and school administrators—reported high levels of satisfaction with the school-based probation program overall, as well as with the impact of the program on probationers, the services the program provides, the effect the program has on the school climate, and the communication that the program facilitates between the schools and the juvenile courts. Some dissatisfaction was expressed, however. School administrators frequently complained that school-based probation officers were unable to spend enough time in their schools, being called away by other responsibilities or assigned to more than one school. Probation personnel complained that JCJC standards for school-based probation, especially the standards for the number of contacts with probationers and their families, were unrealistic if caseloads are higher than 30.

**School-based Probation Objectives**

Program objectives for school-based probation cover everything from reductions in recidivism to reductions in tardiness, and improvements in academic performance. Survey respondents were asked to rate the degree to which school-based probation meets these objectives for students on probation. In addition, survey respondents as well as those interviewed in connection with site visits were asked how well the program works to discourage misconduct on the part of nonprobationers or to improve the overall school climate. Probation and school personnel were also questioned during site visits regarding the availability of data upon which to measure program performance in meeting these objectives.

With respect to students on probation, key participants were in agreement viewing the program as generally effective in meeting every objective—particularly in decreasing absenteeism, suspensions, and school disciplinary referrals. Over ninety percent of the probation respondents, and 79% of the school administrators believed the program is effective in reducing recidivism among probationers. Probation officers were least likely to rate the program as effective or somewhat effective in improving probationers’ academic performance.

While somewhat less empathically, the majority of survey respondents believed the program is effective or somewhat effective in improving the overall school climate. School and probation personnel interviewed during site visits tended to agree that the presence of a probation officer in the school deters misconduct and has a positive impact on the general student body.

In general, data against which to measure program performance in meeting objectives are not being collected on a consistent basis. A few individual probation officers interviewed during
the course of the site visits collect relevant data for use in determining the impact of school-based probation on the probationers they serve. But there is no statewide system requiring school-based probation officers to report similar data consistently and regularly. Site visits revealed that probation officers recognize the importance of data collection and look forward to a technology-based solution that can facilitate data collection and reporting without burdening them with paperwork.

**Compliance with JCJC Standards**

Mail survey responses, site visit observations, and analysis of JCJC audit reports indicated that many school-based probation programs have some difficulty complying with JCJC standards for such programs in six key areas:

1. **School as the primary work site:** Most school-based probation officers—and particularly those in rural areas—are assigned to multiple schools; they may work “primarily” in school, but not in any one school. School administrators generally reported that their assigned school-based probation officers spend more of their work time out of their schools than in them.

2. **Written agreement defining probation officer role:** Both school-based probation officers and school administrators were unaware of the contents of agreements that were supposed to delineate the respective responsibilities of probation officers and school staff. In particular, the lack of a clear job description that defines the roles and duties of school-based probation officers has caused problems when school administrators have expectations different from those of probation officers.

3. **Assignment of experienced officers:** While over half of the school-based probation officers responding to the survey had two or more years of experience in juvenile probation, 30% reported having no prior probation experience at all. Clearly a significant challenge facing chief probation officers is the lack of funding to attract and retain high quality staff over time, particularly in rural areas.

4. **Written supervision plan:** The site visits revealed that supervision plans are not consistently developed for individual probationers, and JCJC audits confirmed that most counties are not incorporating balanced and restorative justice principles into either their conditions of probation or their supervision plans.

5. **Contact requirements:** Although two-thirds of the school-based probation officers reported being able to meet the standard of three face-to-face contacts with probationers per week, some were not. Due to caseloads that are sometimes larger than the optimum, assignments to multiple schools, and other duties unrelated to supervision, about a third of the school-based
probation officers surveyed reported being unable to make the required contacts with adjudicated probationers. The standard requiring weekly contact with parents or guardians of probationers is even more of a challenge.

6. **Chronological record of contacts:** Site visits revealed that probation officers do not consistently maintain chronological records of all direct and indirect contacts made on behalf of probationers and often consider this requirement to be of secondary importance. In addition to the chronological record, good data with which to make comparisons or monitor probationer progress are not consistently available.

**Perceptions of Duties and Roles of School-based Probation Officers**

School-based probation officers may be called upon to assume a variety of duties and take on multiple roles, many of them nontraditional. Because of concerns that conflicting or unclear views of the school-based probation officers’ role could hamper their effectiveness, survey respondents were asked for their perceptions about the primary role of school-based probation officers. The responses of probation officers and school personnel were then compared to determine whether there was a pattern of disagreement or confusion. No such pattern emerged. In general, it appeared that the two groups largely agree on the primary role of school-based probation officers—officer of the court. School-based probation officers and school administrators were also asked to rate the importance of various duties that could be undertaken by probation officers in the schools. Both groups tended to consider that a school-based probation officer’s most important duties are to set limits and expectations for probationers and to help them to improve their school attendance and conduct. However, school administrators rated more of the duties as somewhat important or important more often than probation officers, particularly duties related to the general school population.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of School-based Probation Programs**

School-based probation in Pennsylvania enjoys widespread approval and acceptance among juvenile probation and school personnel. Both probation personnel and school personnel believe it allows for closer and more informed supervision of probationers and fosters communication and a positive working relationship between the courts and schools. The process evaluation clearly revealed variations in the implementation and delivery of school-based probation services across the state. This was not unanticipated given the autonomy of a county-based system. However, such autonomy does present challenges when replicating a program
statewide. To assist the Juvenile Court Judges’ Commission and juvenile probation departments in improving and enhancing the school-based probation program, the process evaluation addressed certain characteristic weaknesses, some of which are related to areas in which they struggle to meet JCJC standards for such programs that were mentioned above. Others are related to the supervision of school-based probation officers and data that monitors probationers’ progress.

Apart from these clear strengths and weaknesses, a number of larger questions emerged from this assessment of school-based probation. The best ways to attract and retain experienced probation officers to school-based work, and to train and orient new officers to their duties must be addressed. There is a clear need for leadership at the state level in defining what is and is not acceptable school-based probation practice, particularly with respect to such widespread practices as multiple school assignments and large caseloads—both of which tend to negate many of the supposed advantages of the school-based approach. A clear and consistently applied definition of a “contact” is needed as well. And guidance about what to do with probationers during the summer is also recommended.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The previous and current process evaluations of school-based probation in Pennsylvania demonstrate it to be a worthwhile program with many allies. It makes sense and fits squarely with the juvenile justice system’s new mission of balanced and restorative justice. However, limitations exist that impede answering the definitive question of its impact. First, good data that describe the types of cases assigned to school-based probation, monitor a probationer’s progress while on probation, and track long-term success after supervision has ended are not routinely compiled or analyzed, although probation officers are collecting some of this information. Second, several of the program’s core components need to be strengthened, especially the written agreement that defines the roles and duties of school-based probation officers and the supervision plans that should be based on good assessments and balanced and restorative justice principles. Third, supervision of line staff must be enhanced in order to monitor compliance. Fourth, JCJC needs to address a number of larger questions in defining what is and is not acceptable school-based probation practice. These and other conditions hinder any effort to evaluate the concrete effectiveness of school-based probation programs.

Accordingly, NCJJ, in collaboration with JCJC, has developed a plan in the form of a grant application to PCCD that will address program deficiencies so that its effectiveness can be assessed. This is as it should be—evaluators and program staff working together to make good
programs better. The plan will put in place a data collection system that will support ongoing monitoring and evaluation efforts at the local level. It will also provide state-level policymakers with aggregate information upon which to judge the program as a whole beyond the initial impact evaluation.