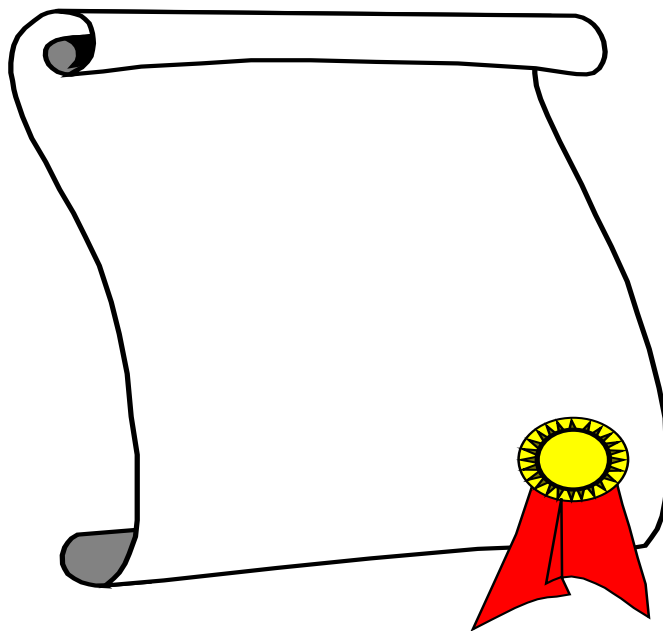


The Impact of North Dakota's Juvenile Drug Court on School Achievement



Report submitted by
Kevin M. Thompson
Department of Sociology
North Dakota State University
Fargo, ND 58105
August 12, 2002

“This project was supported by Award No. 810-04831 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Program, Office of Justice Programs. Also supported by Award No. JAIBG(S)-022 by the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant funds and the Edward Byrne Memorial Foundation Grant.”

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the impact of North Dakota's Juvenile Drug Court on participants' school achievement. Besides reducing recidivism and facilitating a clean and sober lifestyle, drug courts are expected to improve school functioning for substance abusing juveniles.

Eighty-eight percent of the drug court participants were enrolled in school at the time of admission to drug court. Sixty-three percent of the participants were enrolled in a mainstream school, thirty percent were enrolled in an alternative school, several were working on their GED and one was being home schooled.

School records of drug court participants showed that the average GPA among participants in the two quarters preceding drug court was 1.78. In the two quarters following their participation in drug court, the average GPA of juveniles went up roughly one-third of a grade point to 2.08. Attendance records also showed decreases in absenteeism. On average, juveniles were missing 73 class periods in the 90 school days prior to drug court. In the 90 school days following their initiation to drug court, juveniles averaged 53 missed class periods. Finally, qualitative data gleaned from school passports shows that juveniles appeared to be making progress in school as assessed by their teachers. One juvenile was elected to student council, one achieved a perfect grade point average, another scored in the 82nd percentile on the ACT following a very poor score prior to drug court, and several have gone on to or are considering college.

In short, preliminary data suggests that drug court is having an impact on improving the school functioning of substance abusing juveniles.

Introduction

Background

As a result of a year and-a-half planning process, a juvenile drug court (JDC) was implemented in the East Central Judicial District (hereafter EC) and Northeast Central Judicial District (hereafter NEC), beginning May 1, 2000. The planning effort began with a statewide Juvenile Drug Court Study Committee in the fall of 1998, commissioned by the Juvenile Justice Policy Board. This committee was chaired by Justice Mary Muehlen Maring and consisted of representatives from juvenile court, law enforcement, the Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Human Services, the Division of Juvenile Services, the Department of Corrections, and the Turtle Mountain Adult and Juvenile Drug Courts.

The Study Committee recommended that a juvenile drug court be planned and implemented in North Dakota. Following this recommendation, the North Dakota Supreme Court applied for and received a planning grant from the Office of Justice, Drug Courts Program Office. This grant facilitated training for a juvenile drug court team. This second planning and implementation team was comprised of representatives from the schools, juvenile court, treatment agencies, the state court administrator's office, academia, the judiciary, public defenders office, and the state's attorney's office. A project coordinator assisted Justice Maring in coordinating the meetings and workshops for the drug court planning committee. Planning team members attended a number of federally planned and sponsored workshops throughout the year in order to properly implement the juvenile drug court. In addition, staff from both judicial districts observed and interacted with a mentor court in Las Cruces, New Mexico in February of 2001.

On May 1, 2000, the first juveniles appeared in drug court. In the EC Judicial District, participation in drug court was initially voluntary. After receiving participation refusals from at least half of all eligible juveniles, the EC district began court-ordering juveniles into the program in February of 2001. In the NEC Judicial District, juveniles were court-ordered into the program. In both judicial districts, the drug court process/model was explained to each juvenile and his/her guardian(s). Juveniles participating in drug court signed a juvenile drug court contract, a consent for disclosure of confidential substance abuse information, and a confidentiality notification of alcohol and drug abuse patient records agreement.

In October of 2000, a juvenile drug court process evaluation was completed, delineating strengths and weaknesses of the current model. This document contained a series of recommendations for fortifying the drug court process. Some of these recommendations were quickly implemented such as hiring a drug court coordinator for the EC district. Others may take some time to implement such as reviewing and possibly implementing alternative drug therapies.

It is important to acknowledge that the following evaluation is ongoing. Data gathered several months from now may temper some of the educational findings described in this report and possibly alter some of the recommendations contained therein.

Structure of the North Dakota Juvenile Drug Court

The JDC was structured similarly to other JDC models. The JDC team is composed of a judge, treatment provider, school representative, probation officer, Drug

Court Coordinator (NEC), defense counsel, and states' attorney. In the EC district, the school resource officer routinely participated in staffings beginning in December of 2000.

In the EC court, three paths were established to allow juveniles to progress after meeting certain JDC requirement criteria. It was estimated that a juvenile meeting all JDC requirements could graduate from drug court after roughly 6-9 months. The NEC district required participants to move through four paths, spending roughly 7-10 months in drug court after meeting all criteria for graduation. Sanctions and incentives were established to motivate juveniles. Each path carried different expectations.

Juveniles were required to attend school while school was in session or complete summer school requirements. Juveniles who dropped out of school were encouraged by the judge to pursue a GED. Those who had dropped out were required to discuss their employment progress with the judge. Juveniles were required to undergo random drug/alcohol screens and maintain contact 1-2 times per week with their probation officer. Community service was ordered as part of participation in drug court. Finally, JDC participants were required to meet with treatment providers to establish and follow a treatment plan (e.g., individual therapy).

It was decided that the JDC staff would hold weekly meetings to staff JDC cases. At staffing, new cases were scrutinized and discussed and established cases reviewed. Review hearings were then held immediately following staffing.

Currently, both courts maintain a drug court coordinator whose chief task involves information processing. The coordinators are responsible for providing the drug court teams with sufficient information regarding the progress of drug court participants. In so doing, they are responsible for maintaining adequate files and ensuring that proper

services are rendered to participants.

Selection Process/Criteria

The JDC planning team established eligibility criteria for drug court (targeting). These guidelines are consistent with those recommended by federal authorities. In order to be eligible for drug court, juveniles had to meet the criteria below:

Referring offense may be either drug or non-drug related.

Juvenile must be between the ages of 14 and 18.

No prior violent felony level adjudication or pending petitions alleging violent felony level delinquent acts.

No dangerous anti-social behavior as determined by the Juvenile Drug team.

No previous referral to JDC.

No prior or pending charges of selling and/or manufacturing controlled substances.

Admission to the offense and/or a court order to the program.

An assessment must be completed indicating a drug and/or alcohol abuse problem.

The JDC team has some flexibility as to who is eligible depending on their age, drug and/or alcohol history and nature of their prior convictions, to enter the JDC program.

JDC is a post petition/post adjudication program with the option of dismissing the charges in the petition after the participant successfully completes the JDC program.

Educational Emphasis in Drug Court

This report summarizes the findings of the impact of juvenile drug court on the school achievement of its participants. A previous report was released addressing the impact of drug court on recidivism rates of participants. This report describes the effect of drug court on school achievement, including quantitative information academic performance and attendance and qualitative remarks made by teachers and parents regarding changes in school attitudes and behaviors.

The Drug Courts Program Office highly recommends the continued monitoring of educational achievement among juveniles as part of a drug court evaluation. As part of The Key Components involving evaluation and monitoring (#8), The National Association of Drug Court Professionals recommends that the research evaluator track and record changes in literacy and other educational attainments among participants. Many of the juveniles who are court ordered into juvenile drug court enter the process with low levels of school achievement and a sour outlook on education. While it is unclear whether youth substance use is the cause of school performance or whether school performance contributes to drug use, these two variables are highly correlated in the delinquency literature. Regardless of the temporal sequencing of these behaviors, juveniles who are under the power of chemicals may simply lack motivation to find meaning in their education. This is particularly evident with drugs such as marijuana which can facilitate an amotivational syndrome in school. Other juveniles may simply be high at school or consumed by thoughts of drug consumption which erodes their ability to concentrate and therefore perform adequately in school. Consequently, one of the objectives of the juvenile drug court is to provide juveniles with the tools to initiate and maintain sobriety so that they can claim or reclaim their commitment to education.

Because school is central to the lives and future of youth, juvenile drug court participants are held accountable for school performance, effort, and attitude. During their drug court appearance, participants are required to discuss school issues with the judge and provide evidence of school progress via a passport signed by each teacher. Students not meeting the demands of the school due to skipping class, behaving disorderly, or flunking classes are sanctioned in drug court by the drug court judge. Sometimes juveniles were court ordered to spend 2-3 hours per week in juvenile court studying when they yielded evidence of falling behind in their work. Students meeting the expectations of the school also received incentives as a reward for demonstrating educational progress.

Methodology

Juveniles appearing in drug court signed an agreement allowing the research evaluator and drug court team access to their school records. All of the juveniles appearing in drug court who were currently enrolled in school were enrolled in a public school at the time of drug court. As a result, two sets of school records were gathered. Quantitative data included information on school grades and attendance. Qualitative data included comments from teachers and parents regarding school progress.

Table 1 shows the school status of juveniles at the time they first appeared in drug court. Of the 72 juveniles admitted to drug court at this writing, 87.5% of them were

Table 1. Status of juveniles at first drug court appearance.

	YES ^a	NO
In School at Time of Drug Court	63 (87.5%)	9 (12.5%)

^a **Included participants who were working on their GED.**

either in school or were working on their GED. Twelve percent of the participating juveniles were either not attending school or were not working on their GED at the time of drug court admission. Figure 1 shows where these juveniles were attending school at the time of their initial drug court appearance. Sixty-three percent of those enrolled in school were in a mainstream, public school, thirty percent were attending an alternative school, five percent were working on their GED, and one juvenile was being home schooled.

Figure 1. Distribution of school enrollment for those attending school.

By June of 2002, 40 juveniles qualified to appear in the school achievement study by accumulating at least two quarters (or one semester if attending an alternative school) of grades following their first drug court appearance. Juveniles not meeting these criteria were not included in the study results. Some numbers may not add up to n = 41 due to incomplete records being available for an individual student.

Grades

Grades were gathered from the various school districts for each of the participants. In order to assess school progress, school officials were requested to provide the drug

court coordinator and research evaluator with grade information for each participant for the two quarters *prior* to their first drug court appearance and for the two quarters following their initial drug court appearance. In this way, we could assess whether drug court modified the juvenile's academic achievement. Regrettably, some of this information was not made available by one of the school districts in the early phase of data collection. Hence, incomplete records exist for six drug court participants. These juveniles were not included in the analysis. Other juveniles were excluded from the study because they were currently in drug court and had not yet accumulated two quarters of grades following their initial drug court appearance.

Attendance

Attendance records are kept by the school for each student. The school tracks attendance and assigns a code for each absence. Because these codes are not always decipherable, it was decided to simply examine total absences. Since being clean and sober should increase the likelihood of being healthy, it was felt that this was a satisfactory indicator of school participation, while acknowledging that some of the absences counted in this report could constitute legitimate excuses such as being ill or taking a school-related field trip. Attendance differences were assessed by examining the number of class period absences in the 90 day period prior to commencing drug court and comparing these absences with the number of class period absences reported in the 90 day period after commencing drug court.

Qualitative Remarks

During the course of the study, juveniles were required to bring their passports to court, signed by each teacher. These passports contained evaluative information from

some of the teachers regarding the juvenile's school progress. These passports were included in the drug court file and information was gleaned from them that proved helpful in determining whether the juvenile was improving or regressing in school. These comments will be interspersed with the quantitative information to lend support to some of the findings.

Results

School Status

As of August, 2002, 26 drug court participants successfully completed academic requirements enabling them to graduate from high school (either through traditional curriculum or through acquiring a GED). Due to the lack of a comparison group, we do not know how many of these juveniles would have completed high school requirements in the absence of drug court. The lack of national data on this subject further restricts our ability to evaluate whether drug court facilitates graduation from high school in the absence of such an intervention.

School records also show that some juveniles were either not attending school at the time of drug court or were no longer attending school following admission to drug court. Records show that nine participants were not enrolled in school at the initial drug court appearance. Another seven discontinued school following admission to drug court. At this stage, it is unclear how many of these juveniles planned to completely drop out of school vs. pursuing a GED at a later date. Again, we do not know if this school non-completion rate is significantly different for juveniles not in drug court and we lack comparative national data on high school non-completion rates among drug court participants.

Grades

Data for the 40 juveniles meeting the grade criteria are summarized in Figure 2. Data show that the average (mean) GPA of drug court participants in the two quarters *prior* to their initial drug court appearance was 1.78 on a 4.0 scale. This would likely place the average drug court juvenile in the bottom ten percentile of their graduating class. To wit, one of the drug court participants in the study currently ranked 519 out of 532 classmates in terms of GPA class standing. So, the data clearly reveal that juveniles meeting criteria for substance abuse struggle in school.

The question addressed in this report was whether being exposed to drug court significantly raised the GPA of drug court participants over and above chance or randomness. In other words, is drug court associated with improvement in educational achievement and if so, is this improvement due to more than a chance occurrence?

Figure 2 shows that the average GPA of drug court participants in the two quarters following drug court exposure was 2.08. The student's t distribution

¹ shows that this difference of roughly one-third of a grade point was statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, indicating that the difference between the pre and post drug court GPA was due to more than chance. There may of course exist other explanations for the rise in GPA but the only credible factor that changed for these participants was their exposure to drug court and the constant urgings that they received from the drug court team to improve

Figure 2. GPA before and after drug court.

¹ The Student's t distribution is a test statistic used to determine whether two means in the population depart significantly from zero. If the obtained t statistic is much larger than the critical value of t (in this case, 2.02), we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the difference between the two means was not attributed to chance.

their school functioning and achievement.

Attendance

Attendance in school was assessed by examining the number of class periods absent from school in the 90 day school period before drug court and the 90 day school class period during drug court. Absences could include truancy, illness, or personal reasons given by the parent for the child's absence.

Complete attendance records were available for 23 drug court participants. Of these participants, the average (mean) number of class periods missed in the 90 days prior to drug court was 73.1 (range = 16 – 181). For these same participants, the average number of class periods missed in the 90 days after commencing drug court was 53.7 (range = 9 – 157). While this difference of roughly 20 class periods appears to be large, the difference was not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level of rejection but was significant at the $p < .10$ level of rejection.

Figure 3. Class Periods missed 90 school days prior to and during drug court.

We can generally conclude that participating in drug court reduces the probability of absenteeism in school but we are not sure of how or why this might work. One possibility is that drug court increases the likelihood that juveniles will be chemical free, thereby increasing achievement motivation and increasing functioning. Another possibility is that being clean and sober increases physical well being and health, thereby reducing illnesses. Finally, absenteeism might be reduced by the greater level of accountability and monitoring of school performance making it more socially costly for the juvenile to skip classes.

Qualitative Remarks

Improvements in school attitudes and behaviors can also be assessed by examining the nature of comments made by teachers and parents. Drug court participants were required to bring passports to each drug court hearing while in school so that the judge and drug court team could get some assessment of school progress as perceived by the teacher. The passports contained comments by the teacher regarding school progress and were signed by each teacher.

For the most part, it was common to find drug court participants struggling with academic issues, mostly dealing with achievement motivation. When asked to write a paragraph regarding how drugs were affecting his life and his family, one drug court participant wrote:

“another big thing that suffered was my school (work). I didn’t care about it.”

One drug court participant’s initial drug court appearance was in August of 2001, around the time when the school year began. The following excerpts were written by various teachers in the months following admission to drug court and demonstrate qualitatively, how the juvenile was progressing:

Sept. 13, 01 “_____ is doing very well and participating very well in class.”

Oct. 11, 01 “_____ is doing well and working hard.”

Nov. 1, 01 “_____ has improved and is trying very hard.”

Jan. 3, 02 “_____ is keeping up with assignments and is working hard.”

Jan. 10, 02 “_____ scored at the 82nd percentile on the ACT test. This is a significant increase from his previous ACT exam. I am pleased with his progress.”

Another participant appeared to be struggling with responsibility issues with schoolwork. She commenced drug court participation in June of 2001. That fall, her teachers noted some change in her school attitude but in the winter she was again falling

behind. The drug court team attempted to address some of these school issues with her and by later in the spring the comments about her school attitude were reflective of a person who was taking school seriously as indicated by the following teachers' comments:

April 11, 2002 "_____ is doing great work."

April 18, 2002 "_____ is an excellent student who is working very hard, on time, and is extremely productive. To her credit, she has spent most of the last few class periods working on her own in the library trying to catch up. She has the ability to do well but sometimes fails to balance her time between school work and visiting with other students."

May 2, 2002 "_____ has been doing very well. She is focused, very academic, and able to put outside issues away while in class."

One juvenile began drug court in early January of 2002. By the middle of February a teacher remarked that:

"_____ 's grades are way better."

Some of the drug court participants appeared to be spinning their wheels in school while failing to live up to their intellectual ability. One participant in particular seemed mired in poor to mediocre school performance. The school person on the drug court team commented that this juvenile was quite smart and capable of achieving much better grades. His quarter GPA prior to entering drug court was 1.43. The first quarter while in drug court his GPA increased to 2.4. His next three quarter GPA's were 3.4, 3.5, and 4.0, respectively.

Another drug court participant had dropped out of school prior to being admitted to drug court. While in drug court, the judge strongly urged him to seek his GED which he pursued and completed approximately seven months after entering drug court. His interest in education was piqued sufficiently by this process that he then began taking classes for college credit.

One drug court participant commenced drug court in March of 2001. As a result

of excessive trancies and disorderly school conduct, he was termed from school shortly after entering drug court. That summer, he initiated summer classes at the alternative school and achieved all A's in his classes. By October of that year, he was sufficiently motivated in school to run for and achieve election to student council.

Not all drug court participants acquire immediate achievement motivation from drug court participation. Some continue to struggle with academic issues for several months before they turn things around. One participant commenced drug court in the middle of the summer of 2001. As soon as the school year began he was termed from school for chronic truancy and disorderly conduct. By early October, he returned to school but continued to skip classes, miss assignments, and exhibit failing work. By the middle of December, the juvenile had begun to demonstrate school progress. His parent remarked that:

“_____ continues to show progress in school and now has more concern about completing and graduating.”

This juvenile was motivated enough to acquire employment in the school store which required him to get up at 7 a.m. each morning twice a week.

Conclusion

The preliminary evidence gathered thus far on the school progress of drug court participants suggests that drug court may be facilitating improvement in school. Why this occurs is not clear. Juveniles may be improving their school attitudes and performance because they are being held accountable weekly for adequate academic progress in front of a judge. Or, drug court might increase sobriety and a chemical free lifestyle thereby increasing juveniles' cognitive and motivational powers in school. Finally, being clean and sober increases physical health which reduces absenteeism. Any or all of these

mechanisms may be operating to improve school functioning.

Several limitations of this study deserve mention. First, we do not have school information from a comparison group of juveniles who were court ordered to undergo standard treatment and probation. We can state with some confidence that drug court promotes better grades and attendance, but we do not know if these outcomes would be evident in the absence of such an intervention. This question can only be addressed by using a standard quasi-experimental design with a comparison group of juveniles who were not exposed to drug court. Second, we lack complete school records on several of the drug court juveniles. While the number of incomplete records would not be sufficient to markedly alter the results, it would be helpful to have complete records on every juvenile who entered the program.

Nevertheless, the quantitative and qualitative data suggest that drug court is making some difference toward promoting better academic achievement. In light of earlier evidence that drug court significantly reduces recidivism relative to substance abusing juveniles undergoing standard treatment and probation, it is recommended that drug court be continued.