



Program Evaluation Summary

Vol. 4 No. 1

March 2006

Jackson County School-Based Probation Program: Lessons learned

By Jessica Ashley

An innovative team approach to working with juvenile probationers in Jackson County schools offers a blueprint for similar initiatives, providing source experience other jurisdictions can utilize.

School-based probation programs allow probation officers to work closely with juvenile probationers in a school setting. These programs have been developed as a way to increase juvenile accountability, reduce violence within schools, increase success rates with juvenile probationers, and foster better communication between probation departments and schools.

Jackson County was awarded a federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act grant for a three-year study to develop and operate a

school-based probation program for juvenile probationers. The Authority is charged with the administration of ADAA funding and awarded the grant.

The Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency, and Corrections of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale evaluated the Jackson County School-Based Probation Program based on an examination of its implementation from summer 2000 through fall 2003. While the program encountered a number of obstacles, the evaluation highlighted some of the lessons learned and offered suggestions for jurisdictions interested in implementing a school-based probation program of their own. This is a summary of the evaluation.

Program description and goals

Jackson County probation and court services administered the school-based probation program for the county. Jackson County, located in the First Judicial Circuit in rural southern Illinois, has a population of 58,976, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. Carbondale and Murphysboro are the largest cities in the county, with populations of 20,651 and 13,295, respectively. The program was designed to supplement juvenile probation supervision by designating specific officers to work intensively with juvenile probationers in schools.

The program's initial goals were:

- Greater juvenile recognition of probation monitoring.
- Improved quality of relationships between probation and schools.
- Improved relationships between probation officers and parents.



Rod R. Blagojevich, Governor
Sheldon Sorosky, Chairman
Lori G. Levin, Executive Director

Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority

120 S. Riverside Plaza, Suite 1016
Chicago, Illinois 60606

Phone: 312-793-8550, TDD: 312-793-4170,
Fax: 312-793-8422
website: www.icjia.state.il.us

Program Evaluation Summaries are derived from program evaluations funded or conducted by the Authority. The full evaluation reports are available from the Authority.

For more information about this or other publications from the Authority, please contact the Authority's Criminal Justice Information Clearinghouse or visit our website.

Printed by authority of the State of Illinois, March 2006.

Jackson County School-Based Probation Program: Lessons learned

Lessons learned during implementation of the Jackson County School-Based Probation Program may be applied in other jurisdictions. When planning a school-based probation program, evaluators suggested:

- Examining the most appropriate distribution of resources to determine the need for independent school-based officers, or whether line probation officers should include school visits as a part of their supervision of juvenile probationers.
- Providing a clear definition of SBO job responsibilities particularly how they will work independently of, and along with, line officers.
- Establishing and continuing to foster cooperative relationships with schools, the courts, and service agencies.
- Creating a plan for continued funding for long-term program stability.

- More immediate attention to potential violations.
- A decrease of 20 percent in juvenile offenses.
- Improvements in the quality of education.

These goals were revised slightly to address issues affecting implementation of the program, such as needs for increased training and improved communication.

School-based probation officer roles

Initially in 2001, two full-time school-based officers (SBOs) were employed in Jackson County. One additional SBO was hired in 2002. During that time the county also employed up to two juvenile line officers assigned to maintain overall responsibility for the caseload of juvenile probationers, sharing supervision of their probationers with the SBOs. SBOs supervised juvenile probationers in the school setting, while line officers supervised them in all other instances, such as during court proceedings.

During the grant period, the SBOs worked in all 18 Jackson County schools and managed 77 juvenile probationers. Although the main probation office is in Murphysboro,

SBOs served in multiple schools with an office in Carbondale.

Daily SBO job activities involved collaborating with school officials and helping to improve academic performance and attendance. School-related job duties initially outlined to be carried out by Jackson County's SBOs included:

- Coordinating activities with school authorities.
- Working with various school personnel to advance academic achievement and promote personal development for juveniles on probation.
- Acting as a resource person for juveniles, families and school personnel.
- Monitoring and enforcing school attendance of probation clients.
- Partnering with school resource officers and local police departments to promote safety and prevent violence and substance abuse.
- Facilitating re-entry of clients into school after residential treatment or detention.
- Promoting parent involvement with the child's academic development.
- Visiting classrooms of juveniles on probation.

SBO job limitations

A number of SBOs' job limitations were identified through grant reports and interviews. Most of the problems were due to the assignment of two different juvenile probation officers—a line officer and a school-based officer—to each probationer.

The two officers had unequal workloads. During most of the funding period, one line officer was assigned to the entire county, managing a juvenile caseload almost three times that of the SBOs. Other issues involved the sharing of cases between line officers and SBOs. An inequitable division of tasks existed between the two types of probation officers, and probationers did not understand the distinction between the two types of officers.

Additionally, records management presented difficulties. Each probation officer kept his or her own files, so there were multiple files for each probationer, and officers frequently did not share information with each other.

Also, staff turnover was very high. SBOs remained in their position an average of 8.6 months. Individuals hired for SBO positions were often new to a career in proba-

tion, and tended to be the most inexperienced officers. The evaluators cited a constant need for recruitment and training.

Finally, it was unclear how the SBOs were to spend their time during the summer months and during other periods when schools were not in session.

Program practices

Information on the activities of school-based officers and the schools in which they worked were obtained through interviews, observations, and school survey data. Evaluators participated in 20 ride-alongs with SBOs, conducted five in-depth interviews with probation officers, and received nine completed surveys of school personnel.

Evaluators found that SBO contacts with juvenile probationers were generally brief (10 to 15 minutes), and focused on school issues and other life factors. Further, when probationers were absent from school, home visits were not routinely conducted, so there was little contact with parents. SBOs generally had very little contact with teachers.

Nine of 40 school personnel who were surveyed completed questionnaires about their school's SBO. Evaluators found that the frequency of contacts SBOs maintained with individual school personnel varied considerably, from once a week to once a month. Seven of the respondents were not familiar with the objectives of the SBO program. Evaluators, noting the low level of response to the survey, speculated that personnel had only a limited awareness of the program.

There was strong agreement that juvenile offenders were better behaved due to the SBO involvement. But respondents differed on whether there were grade improvements. School personnel generally regarded the program as successful, with more overall positive impact on juvenile probationers than negative.

Probation data

Data was collected on 66 of the 77 juveniles who participated in the Jackson County School-Based Probation Program. Evaluators examined travel log sheets, school records, and juvenile case files. However, travel log data were inconsistent and incomplete; and school data, such as academic and disciplinary records, were missing from files and could not be obtained due to confidentiality concerns.

School personnel generally regarded the program as successful, with more overall positive impact on juvenile probationers than negative.

Juvenile case files also were incomplete and disorganized. These problems may have stemmed from SBO turnover and multiple officers supervising the same client.

The files did allow for some basic descriptions of program participants. Approximately 70 percent of juvenile participants in the program were white, and 30 percent were African American. Participant ages ranged from 11 to 16 years old, averaging 14 years old. The majority resided in the largest cities in Jackson County—Carbondale and Murphysboro—and 24 percent attended Carbondale Community High School. About 15 percent of the participants resided in a more rural part of Jackson County.

From 2001 to 2004, 64 percent of the participants had committed misdemeanor offenses and 27 percent committed felonies. Most had committed property offenses (65 percent), followed by violent offenses (20 percent), and drug offenses (9 percent).

A total of 68 percent of juveniles placed in the program were sentenced to a term of 12 months, and 32 percent were sentenced to a term of 18 months. Most juveniles placed on probation were not required to perform community service. The researchers found evidence of drug testing in 11 cases with seven juveniles testing positive for an illegal substance. No evidence existed in the juvenile probation case files that showed probation conditions were changed as a result of positive drug tests.

Due to design and implementation issues, an evaluability assessment determined that the program was not ready for an impact evaluation. Evaluators provided Jackson County with a list of short-term and long-term recommendations to address the two issues.

Lessons learned

Similar jurisdictions considering implementing a school-based probation program can benefit from the lessons learned in the Jackson County program. This type of program would be particularly useful to rural jurisdictions with multiple schools to be covered by one SBO. Suggestions

made in the assessment that would benefit other jurisdictions considering implementation of a school-based probation program include:

- Examine the most appropriate distribution of resources to determine the need for independent school-based officers, or whether line probation officers should include school visits as a part of their supervision of juvenile probationers.
- Provide a clear definition of SBO job responsibilities, particularly how they will work independently of, and along with, line officers.
- Establish and continue to foster cooperative relationships with schools, the courts, and service agencies.
- Creating a plan for continued funding for long-term program stability.

By taking into account these suggestions, a similar program may potentially avoid some of the implementation problems that the Jackson County program faced.

Conclusion

Participants in this innovative school-based team approach to working with juvenile offenders encountered several program design and implementation limitations. Jackson County SBOs indicated they faced significant challenges in performing job functions, including overlapping job activities, personnel turnover, and data retrieval problems.

Despite these difficulties, the program illustrated that school-based probation officers can provide more intensive supervision of juvenile clients, help improve school performance of probationers, and foster collaboration between the county and the schools. The results of the Jackson County program offer other jurisdictions an example of a potentially positive new way to help troubled youth.



Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority

The Jackson County School-Based Probation Program evaluation was conducted by M. Joan McDermott, Ph.D., and Martha Henderson, Ph.D., of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. This summary was written by staff Research Analyst Jessica Ashley.

This evaluation was supported by grant #01-DB-BX-0017 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.