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profile

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juvenile justice and delinquency prevention

A New "OPTION" for Chronic Status Offenders

Chronic Status Offenders: the Case in North Carolina

by Vicky Church

With the demstitutionalization of status offenders in North Carolina came a professional cry, "So, what can we do with them?" As the Juvenile Justice Committee of the Governor's Crime Commission explored this issue through public hearings, it became clear that the central question was "How can we more appropriately serve the chronic status offender?"

Professional wisdom varied from removing these juveniles from the court's supervision to placing them in secure treatment facilities for 18 months. In order to resolve the range of approaches, two studies were commissioned by the Committee. The first operationalized "chronicity," and the second sought the wisdom of field professionals concerning the needs of the chronic status offender.

The first study found that juveniles who came to the court's attention three or more times during a year for status offenses were most likely to continue being brought to court for status offenses. In other words, the study found that youth with less than three offenses did not become chronic offenders, and youth committing status offenses did not escalate at a later point into delinquent offenses.

The second study profiled the needs of chronic status offenders through a survey mailed to 1,000 and responded to by 700 service providers (judges, court counselors, community providers, school personnel). Survey items with 80% or better agreement were considered significant issues which needed to be addressed in programming paid for by Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) funds. Some of these areas included dysfunctional families, lack of service continuity, poor school achievement, and a sense of hopelessness.

OPTIONS was one competitive grant response. It targeted school achievement, empowered juveniles and their families, and improved home functioning and coordination among service providers. After a period of demonstrated effectiveness, OPTIONS has been replicated with JJDP monies in many sites in North Carolina.

Vicky Church serves as the Program Director for Minority Issues, Division of Youth Services. She was Juvenile Justice Specialist at the time OPTIONS was discovered.

In North Carolina, chronic status offenders and their families now have a place to go, someone who will listen, and a better chance of finishing school with success thanks to the OPTIONS program.

Created and operated by the Youth and Family Counseling Service originally in cooperation with Lexington City Schools, OPTIONS offers a new academic choice for students plagued by problems at home and in school. Each year 8 to 12 fourth or fifth graders, depending upon the school's preference, spend their school day in an alternative classroom within their regular school environment. According to Carolyn Biggerstaff, co-founder of the OPTIONS program and Executive Director of Youth and Family Counseling Service, this integration avoids the labeling which often accompanies a child being moved to a program because of his/her behavior.

Student selection begins in summer as schools operating the program refer students from within their population, and OPTIONS staff examine referrals to determine eligibility and appropriateness for the program. Participants must have "a history of three or more periods of multiple status offending behavior the year prior to placement." Violent and assaultive students are not suitable candidates.

After some initial screening to insure that candidates meet admitting criteria, parents are notified and encouraged to talk with their child about whether the program is right for them. Once a voluntary commitment is made, staff begin to determine the student's academic status. A first step is the examination of students' previous scores on the CAT, a standardized test given to all school students.

"We use the test only as a springboard," explains Biggerstaff. "Determining what a child can and cannot do using solely the results of a standardized test is unreliable because the test doesn't take into consideration how a child learns."

Past teachers are consulted regarding the student's strengths and weaknesses, and the student himself is involved in the process. "Kids are asked where they think they are academically because they are a viable part of the learning partnership," said Bob Carr, Deputy Director of the Youth and Family Counseling Service. "We help them discover the level they are on and then make the work just a little challenging."

The classroom experience focuses on individual, interest-related learning strategies designed to "meet kids where they learn." Staff believe that using only one teaching method denies the individuality of children who may learn in different ways. For instance, they recognize one child may grasp ideas by hearing them while another child may have to visualize concepts before understanding them. This realization results in an unusual way of teaching requiring staff to observe students prior to determining the most effective individual learning methods. For example, for a child who loves cars but has no interest in reading, writing, or using the library, staff help him become actively involved in all three by asking him to create a new engine for the car of the future and prepare a report to the General Motors Board of Directors in support of it. As Carr explains, "The key word in an OPTIONS classroom is flexibility."

Since OPTIONS students are chronic status offenders, discipline is often an issue in the classroom as well as at home. "Most of the kids we know would have dropped out by age 16 without this program," said Biggerstaff. "The ones who would have gone to school would have continued to cause trouble and probably would have ended up in training school."

At OPTIONS, these same kids are given a new choice in an atmosphere where discipline is treated

as a learning strategy. "We try to stay away from punitive discipline," explains Biggerstaff. "We train our staff to understand and practice that discipline means to teach, not to punish."

When a potentially disruptive situation breaks out in the classroom, staff heighten their involvement by assisting students to resolve underlying issues contributing to the disruption. A problem-solving conference with a particular student may take place privately in the classroom or hall, or staff may invite a student to take a ride in order to change the scenery and help the student relax. In place of the traditional trip to the principal's office, staff may even drive the student to Hardee's for a coke to enhance the cooperative problem-solving.

"Administrators who hear this concept can't understand how we take uncontrollable kids and just talk to them," said Carr. "There is a misconception that all we do is chit-chat with the child or that it is some kind of sympathy-fest."

In fact, the trip for a coke and a talk is an effective mode of therapy. The therapist and the child talk openly about what caused the disruptive behavior in the classroom, and together they create a specific plan of action to avoid such behavior in the future.

Holly DeCann, an OPTIONS family therapist, gave this example. One OPTIONS child confessed in therapy that his disruptive behavior always began with something little and then built up, like "a snowball rolling down a hill" until he was unable to control it. Through their conversation, it was agreed that when staff noticed his level of tension or anger rising, they would simply say "snowball," and that would be an indication to him that he needed to do whatever it took to calm down. "We try to teach our teachers that they are also learners, and they need to be willing to let the student teach them about a disruptive incident or they end up only treating symptoms," said Carr.

Student grading at OPTIONS is also far from the school norms of A's to F's. As Carr commented, "We have found that a lot of these kids have failed in the classroom so often that they have internalized the perception, 'I am a failure.'" To help students overcome this perception, staff give academic feedback which creates opportunities to improve without penalty. If a student misses 0-1 questions, he receives a "HQ for high quality. If he misses 2-3 questions, he re-



ceives a "Q" for quality work, and if he misses more than 3, he receives an "I" in pencil for "in progress." Once the work is corrected and the teacher feels he understands his mistakes, the "I" is replaced with a "Q" or "HQ".

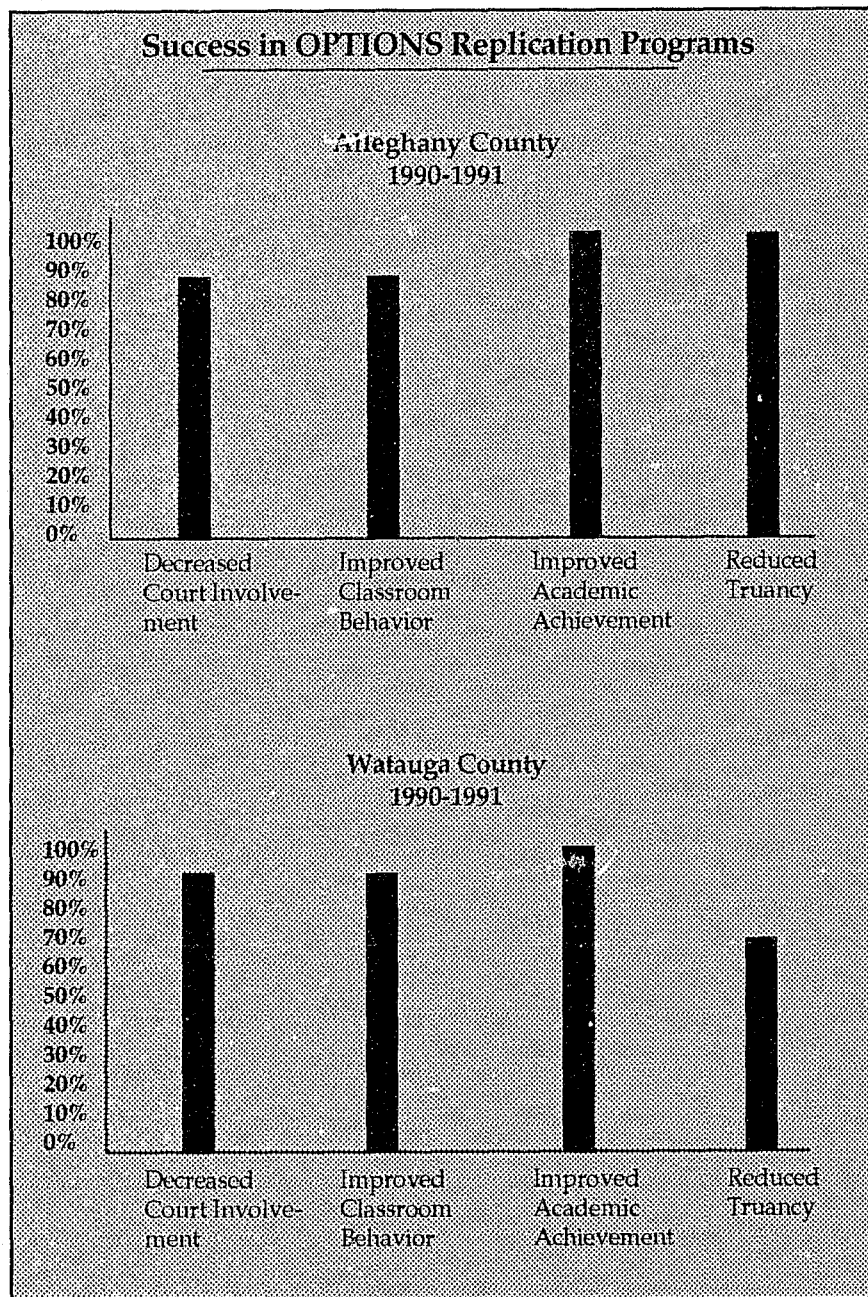
"Our system says that if you make a reasonable effort, there is no reason why you can't be successful. By doing so, you instill a value that it's good for one to improve oneself," said Carr.

Recognition is shared regularly with parents as teachers send home a "Good News" progress report to parents every two weeks to alert them of their child's progress in each subject area. Focusing on progress rather than problems, "Good News" outlines the student's "grades" in each subject matter and includes teacher comments on the child's behavior.

Students also produce a newsletter which outlines their perceptions of what is happening in the classroom. Twice a year, students and parents participate in an Awards Ceremony for all those in the OPTIONS program. Students are given recognition for supporting their children's efforts. "If we want parents to be engaged for us and the program, we have got to create an atmosphere where they can come and hold their heads up," said Biggerstaff. "Most of these parents have never been called to school for anything but to discuss their child's disruptive behavior."

Family Therapy

Families of OPTIONS students open their homes to the staff therapist who meets with the family at least an hour a week, but who is on call virtually all times. At the time of acceptance into the program, staff meet with each family to discuss the family



therapy component of the program. During this initial conversation, therapists are often seen as a liaisons between the parent the program, and the school. However, according to DeCann, it is usually not long before a family opens itself to real therapy.

"Families are usually receptive to us after a while because they need help," DeCann explained. "They are usually at the end of their ropes with both their children and their own problems."

Since "multiproblem families often need multisystem intervention," the family therapist also serves as a liaison/advocate for the family in the community, attempting to empower families to access community services established to meet their needs. According to DeCann, approximately five out of every eight children

in the OPTIONS program come from some type of abusive home, and drug abuse and financial problems are common. "A lot of each parent's response depends upon how the idea of therapy is presented to them," said Biggerstaff. "We try to present therapy as the installation of hope."

Follow-up therapy begins immediately upon each school year's completion, and if necessary, the therapist assists parents in the transition of the child from the alternative classroom to the conventional school setting. Further follow-up evaluations are conducted six-months and one year after program completion.

Evaluation and Results

The OPTIONS program bases its effectiveness on four specific criteria. 1) 60% of the students will improve in school

attendance; 2) 60% of the students will improve academic performance (in fact, students have even been double promoted following their involvement); 3) 60% of the students will improve classroom behavior; and 4) 60% of the students will decrease juvenile court involvement.

Data on program performance in these areas is gathered throughout the year and compiled weekly for academic performance and monthly for attendance. Information concerning juvenile court involvement is given to program staff by intake officers as soon as a complaint is made.

In an independent evaluation conducted in June, 1989, by the Department of Sociology at Duke University, the model was found to be a "strong one" that was "being executed well." "Based on the measurable objectives of the program, the program is enjoying clear success," the report went on to state. "Based on program data, all four targeted areas appear to be substantially impacted... this assessment concludes that the program is serving the purposes which it seeks to address."

Training Efforts

New OPTION staff participate in a five day training session at a location away from their environment to increase concentration.

While two complete staffs are trained at once to encourage counterpart interaction, it is not uncommon for previously trained teachers or assistants to return for refresher courses.

"Teaching OPTIONS is not an automatic process so our training is different than what most people are used to," explained Biggerstaff. "We teach the OPTIONS philosophy and staff develop their

own techniques for teaching the material." Since training does not resemble a "to do" list for trainees, much time is spent role playing and practicing effective communication and, as in every other component of the program, training focuses on the three person staff team. According to Biggerstaff, promoting the family therapy aspect is the only way a child may avoid taking a new behavior into the same bad family environment.

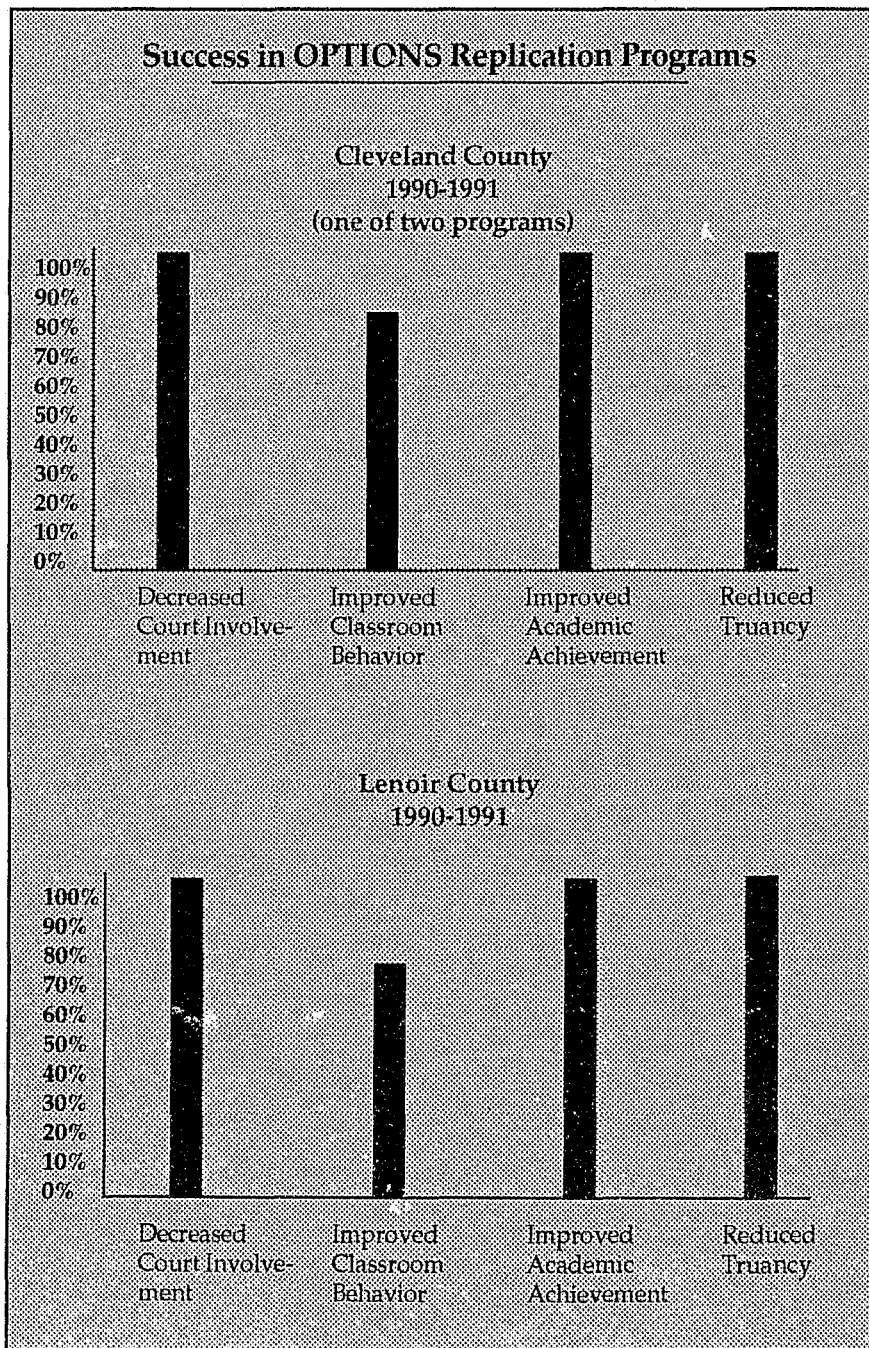
OPTIONS teachers must have a teaching certificate, but do not need to have a Master's Degree. Assistants do not need to be certified teachers, but must have a background in youth work, and all family therapists must have a Master's Degree in counseling as well as experience in family therapy.

School principals or superintendents interested in placing the OPTIONS model in their school systems, may contact OPTIONS staff for assistance in replicating this program. The cost is dependent on the salary scale for school employees, and each new program must create its own funding sources and must agree to implement the OPTIONS model in its entirety.

Additional training and technical assistance is offered through regular onsite visits with replication programs. This has become the standard because, as Biggerstaff explains, "the concept is so new that often it is easy to slip back into what you have always known. We don't expect staff to understand it all the first time around."

Replication Efforts

In 1991, five OPTIONS programs were operating in North Carolina, and according to Vicky Church, former Juvenile Justice Planner for the North Carolina



Governor's Crime Commission, as many as ten have been funded intermittently during the last several years. "Training and technical assistance is essential to this program, and these people are masters," said Church. "Our idea now has been to try and get enough programs up and running so that we can say authoritatively that it isn't the people or the geography, but the concept that keeps this program running effectively."

OPTIONS (originally titled Grimes Alternative Program) was originally funded by a two year Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) grant through the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission. Due to the project's success, Youth and Family Counseling Service applied for and received another two year JJDP grant to work with status offenders in the fourth and fifth grades at Dunbar Intermediate School.

From 1989-91 OPTIONS was funded entirely by the North Carolina General Assembly as a laboratory for the state. During this time OPTIONS was operated in partnership with Thomasville City School District.

Also in 1989, Youth and Family Counseling Service was awarded a two year JJDP grant in conjunction with the Community Based Department of Public Instruction to provide training and consultation for replication projects and to present the project to professionals in education and criminal justice throughout the nation. Due to the significant success of the OPTIONS model, the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission has allocated a portion of its JJDP funds to replicate the model throughout North Carolina since 1988.

Funding was also secured to begin an OPTIONS model for high schools with an emphasis on job training and vocational education. The pilot project began January, 1992, at South Davidson High School.

The model is also currently being implemented into North Carolina's Samarkland Manor Training School in their New Beginnings program. The training school has been incorporating OPTIONS classroom components since last year, and began the family therapy portion in January, 1992.



For more information on OPTIONS, please contact Carolyn Biggerstaff, Executive Director, Youth & Family Counseling Services, P.O. Box 1226, Lexington, NC, 27292-1226, or call 704/249-0237.

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Profile is written and designed by Rebecca Maniglia. Additional design and artwork by Michael McMillen. For information about other issues in the *Profile* series or related programs on juvenile justice and delinquency prevention, contact: Community Research Associates, 115 N. Neil St, Suite 302, Champaign, IL, 61820 or call 217-398-3120.
(Printed May, 1992)