Empowering Youth to Stay in School: Strategies for Engagement and Partnership

Purpose

The media and public attention are often focused on issues of public safety and threats of crime, such as the roles of guns, gang violence, drug abuse—all of which have been additionally impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.[i] Unfortunately, it is the large size and complexity of these problems that allow for people to talk about them with family, friends, and community members, yet the same people often struggle with a) knowing what any one person should do to help and b) working together collectively to move forward with prosocial interventions and other solutions.[ii] For those concerned about preventing delinquency and crime committed by youth and young adults, now is the time to come together to empower young people to stay in school and to address the "school-to-prison pipeline" by collectively (adults with youth) addressing the root causes of the issue.[iii] This issue brief taps into the topics related to the lack of connection and commitment felt by some youth inside and outside of the classroom and how the school environment and those who work there can put into place policies and practices that empower young people and those working with them. As the new school year has started already for most Pre-K-12 graders in Connecticut, now is a great time to raise attention to struggles faced with keeping youth in school and to encourage and support adults so that they too can be supportive and empowering to youth and young adults.

## Background on Students Missing School

How do we label missing school? Truancy and chronic absence are two different ways that students who are missing school can be described and labeled.[iv] Truancy is a legal term—which until 2017 was a part of the Family With Service Needs (FWSN) laws—that allowed for the Connecticut juvenile court system to punish minors who refused to attend school.[v] Since July 2001, a truant student in Connecticut is a youth (between ages 5 and 18) who misses school for four unexcused days or more in a month or ten unexcused days or more for the full academic year; for those missing 20 unexcused absences, they earn the additional label of habitual truant.[vi] Outside of the criminal legal system there exist another category of missing school for youth, chronic absence, which as of 2015, is a codified educational term used to indicate that the amount of school day absences (excused and unexcused) by a youth has exceed 10% of the current academic year.[vii] The official definitions and details for these terms are listed as part of Connecticut General Statutes and education policies from the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE).[viii]

"Missing this much school significantly interferes with students' academic progress and social-emotional development" -AttendanceWorks.org

How much school is too much school to miss? Commonly, an academic year for schools serving youth in pre-K up to 12th grade has around 180 days where students spend around 6.5 hours throughout the day.[ix] As some educators have noted, "children spend more awake hours in school than they do at home".[x] However, this is not true for all children since in the
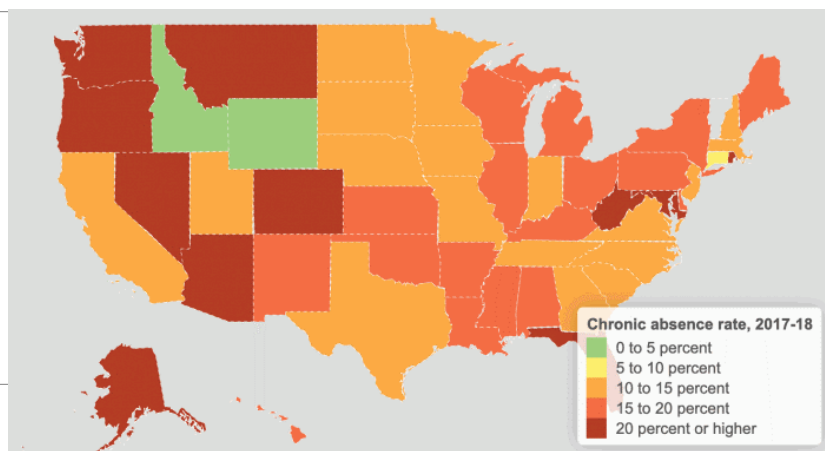
2017-18 academic year it was reported that more than 8 million children in the United States, approximately 16% of all students, miss 15 or more days of school each year.[xi] Locally, and before truancy was removed from the FWSN law, youth who counted as truant made up two-thirds of FWSN charges (see charts below) yet the chronic absence rate was among the lowest (5 to 10%) in comparison to other states in the nation. Even now, as we start the fall of 2022 and declare Attendance Awareness Month every September, keeping youth in school continues to be a rising concern for Connecticut schools and the juvenile justice system as a prevention and intervention priority.[xii]

FWSN Referrals to Juvenile Court *
2016 by Type of FWSN Charge
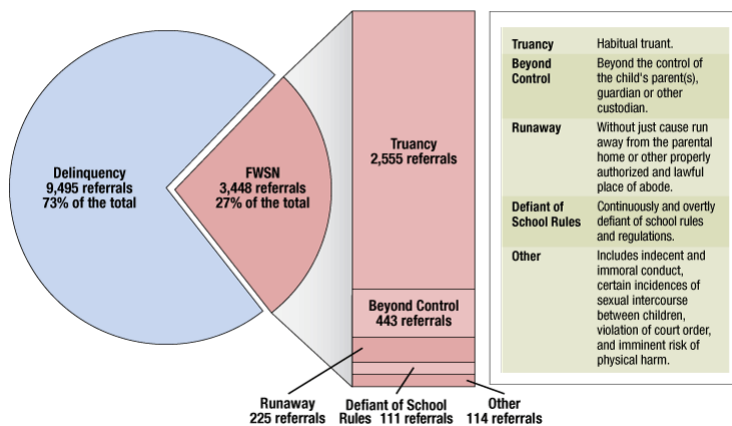
Truancy	Habitual truant.
Beyond Control	Beyond the control of the child's parent(s), guardian or other custodian.
Runaway	Without just cause run away from the parental home or other properly authorized and lawful place of abode.
Defiant of School Rules	Continuously and overtly defiant of school rules and regulations.
Other	Includes indecent and immoral conduct, certain incidences of sexual intercourse between children, violation of court order, and imminent risk of physical harm.

Chronic absence rate, 2017-18
- 0 to 5 percent
- 5 to 10 percent
- 10 to 15 percent
- 15 to 20 percent
- 20 percent or higher

* Individual juveniles may have multiple referrals to court.
Source: State of Connecticut Judicial Branch, Case Management Information System (CMIS)

How many youth are missing from schools? To assess youths' more recent progress, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) releases annual report cards for each district and the state, which show in the most recent trends that fewer youth are enrolled in school—the statewide enrollment has gone down from 527,929 in 2019-20 to 513,615 in 2021-22.[xiii] During that same time period, more youth missed more than 10% of school (chronic absence)--the rate rose from 12.2% (64,408 students) up to 19% (94,506 students) statewide, further supporting that the growing national problem is an issue with greater local consequences as well.[xiv] It has also been more specifically reported that, "[i]n this state, chronic absence has, for example, jumped from 17.2% to 35.2% for English language learners and [has] risen from 20.3% to 34.9% for students eligible for free meals."[xv]

Does the size of the school districts matter? While the CSDE Annual Report Cards highlight the overall number of youths impacted in the state, they do not allow for a full exploration of the truancy data (as offered online through Edsight.ct.gov databases and downloads). Therefore, a different analysis was conducted by the Tow Youth Justice Institute (TYJI) Research Team as they collected the available online data. The Research Team reviewed the rates informed by the overall number of students enrolled (population size) for each school district across each year and then generated the average of the rates among the school districts for each year. Using this approach, the TYJI analysis allows for a broader understanding of the substantive impact experienced by schools since these rates account for schools of different sizes and shifts in enrollment by year.

This extended trend analysis from 2014-2020 shows a steady average rate for chronic absenteeism but an increase in rate of Truancy reported by districts. The average rate of truancy in academic year '14-15' was 5.43% students across districts and for school year 19-20 was 9.8% students. The average rate for chronic absenteeism across districts in school year '14-15' was 11.1% of students whereas for school year '19-20' was 11.8%. Consistent with the CSDE report cards, data show the highest levels of truancy and chronic absenteeism were in school years 2019-2020. Of additional interest was the finding that rates of truancy decrease as grade level goes up, meaning that those students in higher-grade levels are less likely to be truant.

The data have also been analyzed for other correlations in one or more school districts that have common characteristics to be studied. For example, the findings indicated that truancy is also related to gender with male students being significantly more likely to be truant. Overall, the trends show a steady increase in the level of truancy and chronic absenteeism over time—as did the CSDE school report cards. Especially in the last two years, the rates of truancy and chronic absence are increasing, likely because of the shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.[xvi]

Consequences of Missing School

Practically, it does not make any difference whether the label truant or chronically absent is used for youth missing school—they both represent a lack of engagement with and access to education. The research has unfortunately connected school engagement, future employability, justice involvement, and quality of life. This connection between truancy/chronic absence and justice involvement, known as the "School to Prison Pipeline," is a well-established phenomenon in education and criminological literature.[xvii] Over 30 years ago, the "zero-tolerance" and "get-tough" movements led to far more punitive policies being used in both the criminal justice field and in public education.[xviii] While the use of these policies is justified by claiming that they will create safer and more effective schools, the most significant effect of those reforms has not been higher-quality education, but rather that they have combined to deprive countless young people of opportunities to reach their full potential.[xix]

School is a well-researched protective factor to help prevent youth from future justice-involvement.[xx] It is also known that once a youth becomes justice-involved that school disengagement is likely to get worse and dropping out becomes more likely.[xxi] Alto-gether, youth who are disinterested and disengaged in school have a greater chance of becoming truant youth.[xxii] Chronically absent youth are at risk for becoming truant youth.[xxiii] Truant youth are more likely to drop out of school before completing high school.[xxiv] They are also more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors, experience troubled family situations, and have early juvenile justice system involvement.[xxv] As both youth and adults, individuals without high school diplomas are more likely to experience victimiza-tion and engage/be arrested for criminal activities.[xxvi]

Strategies for Better Engagement and Partnerships

In his 2003 speech titled, "Lighting your way to a better future", Nelson Mandela stated boldly that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world". Nearly 20 years later, this quote should still encourage everyone to see the need for all people to have access to a supportive education environment, but it should also give hope to young people and those who are working to build prosocial relationships with them. Both groups—of those younger and older—benefit from the growth and edu-cation of the other group, and despite the differences in what is being learned by each group, the power of education for engage-ment and partnership is strong. All members of the community can help identify possible solutions by bringing forth discussions of strategies and resources that are most helpful to address the issue of youth missing school.

What issues are driving the current problem? Over the past two years, a lot has changed in the world. There has been a collec-tive trauma experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been so much loss—of both people and opportunities.[xxvii] Over 10 million children no longer have the support system at home they used to before one or more parent of caregiver died from COVID-19, and they are left to grieve through a situation that may not make any sense to them as it continues to change over time. [xxviii] In addition to those who have lost people who have died, many people have suffered differently due to the loss of opportunities to participate in traditions and rites of passage, such as homecoming, prom, and even graduation.[xxix] Undoubtedly, the past few years have led to many big emotions that may still be unresolved and show up in disruptive ways, especially for youth.
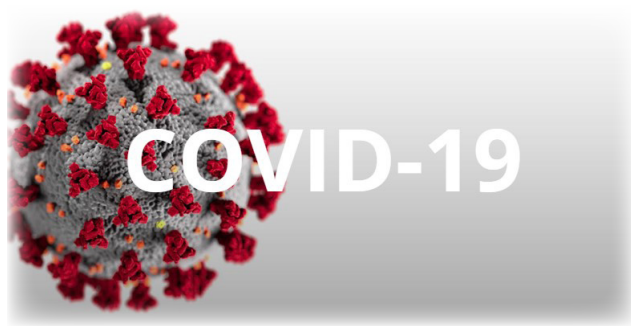
The reality that youth are struggling while experiencing (or missing) an important developmental period is made worse because adults are also struggling through the current times. This includes teach-ers, principals and administrators having to work harder than ever to keep the schools staffed and safe while dealing with pay cuts, increased duties, and lower staff morale.[xxx] It also includes parents, especially those of younger children who have reached maximum frustration while having to stay at home during the pandemic with fewer supports and resources than they expected.[xxxi]

The current situation is even more alarming when you consider that young people have been reporting issues with their mental health before the pandemic. The 2019 Youth Risk Behaviors Survey report from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) already identified mental health and suicide as one of their four main areas to watch due to several troubling statistics.[xxxii] Thirty seven percent of youth reported "persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness in the past year" and 19% of youth considered suicide (with girls being even higher at 24%). In both their 2020 and 2022 reports titled, "Ending the Criminalization of Youth: Address the Root", the Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA) detailed conversations with youth, many of whom where justice-involved, and "Lack of Hope" was one of seven root causes identified as how young people become parts of the juvenile and criminal justice systems.[xxxiii]

What strategies are available and recommended? There are evidence-based tools available to help with school performance, but can also increase compassion and consideration for other humans more generally. While there are many solutions beyond those listed, the following three are selected because they are accessible regardless of skillset or profession, either free or low-cost, and they can be com-pleted one on one or as a collective.

> *"Without an orderly classroom it's hard for teachers with upward of 25 kids in their class-rooms to lead effective lessons, help students who are struggling, and perhaps most import-ant, to trust students."*
>
> *–Michael Essien; Principal at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School (MLK) in San Francisco.*

Strategy #1 is to recognize the current situation and how it has changed for many. It cannot be overstated that COVID-19 disrupted everyone's schedules and contributed to isolation and loneliness in about 1 in 3 people, which created even more negative experi-ences and environments for youth as well.[xxxiv] Whatever normal was before COVID-19, it has not returned and likely never will.[xxxv] Due to the shorter life span of youth, this shift may feel even bigger for them than for adults with greater context and life experi-ences.

Strategy # 2 is to check in starting with adults of different ages and professions who have different opportunities to engage with youth and other adults. Taking into consideration the individual and collective trauma discussed above, adults have suffered and many have unmet needs at home and at work that make it difficult for them to appropriately respond to the unmet needs of youth, as well as other adults. Through training on restorative practices and improving school climate over the past decade, many schools in Connecticut have implemented check-ins for youth in classrooms.[xxxvi] The more inclusive step is to realize that adults need some of the considerations they are being asked to give to also be applied to them. Engaging restoratively with youth will also require adults to engage with each other in more prosocial ways and, more importantly, for school systems to not neutralize their experi-ences in pursuit of using these practices for youth.[xxxvii]

Strategy #3 is to take bold action to interconnect resources. Within a school there will be many different youth facing different issues and adults with different relationship and skill preparation to deal with the array of issues that will arise. One way to better support both youth and adults is to create a better system to access the resources available in a timely fashion.[xxxviii] Adults inside and outside of the school must work together to connect resources from the school and community to the families, and vice versa. Parents are a key connector that are not always accessible to or accessed by the schools in ways that encourage engagement or advocacy.[xxxix] Additionally, community partners are advocating that schools become even more connected as partners to addressing mental health and behavior needs of youth through screenings at school.[xl] For example, some schools have immediate access to health clinics and other schools are conducting brief interventions and making referrals to youth-serving partners in the community.[xli]

In addition to the information and strategies outlined, there are several resources outlined below that may be of assistance:

- Example of whole-school approach to behavior- https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/49558/a-deeper-look-at-the-whole-school-approach-to-behavior

- RJ Toolkit Diversion- https://impactjustice.org/resources/rjdtoolkit-org-a-diversion-toolkit-for-communities/

- Take note of the impact people are making in the community around you- https://uwgnh.org/sites/uwgnh/files/2022-09/Impact%20Report%202021-2022.pdf?utm_source=Master&utm_campaign=fd5240d23b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_08_03_07_23_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_85d72b4277-fd5240d23b-49454820&mc_cid=fd5240d23b&mc_eid=ee72deb24b

- 2021 Youth Policy Advances- https://www.njjn.org/our-work/2021-youth-policy-advances

- Trends in Youth Arrests for Violent Crimes - https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/library/publications/trends-youth-arrests-violent-crimes?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=publications

Conclusion

While not an easy task, it is critical that youth and adults create solutions together that help empower youth to stay in school. Each person can make a difference if they see themselves in the solution. Any one person can make a difference in the life of an adult or youth that may be struggling without it showing. Furthermore, many people are already working together to address these issues and would appreciate more support from those who now also recognize the problem is growing.

Thanks to the diligent reporting of CSDE, the state of Connecticut is one of the few states that reports its chronic absence numbers for its districts and statewide with such consistency and transparency, leading AttendanceWorks to recognize the state as a model.[xlii] Additionally, the work of the Tow Youth Justice Institute researchers will add to the robust understanding provided by the CSDE reports and a full report on truancy trends in Connecticut is forthcoming.

This Issue Brief was prepared by Dr. Danielle Cooper, Associate Professor of Criminal Justice and Director of Research at the Tow Youth Justice Institute, and former TYJI Graduate Researcher, Paula Nwanna, UNH MA in Business Analytic '22 Graduate.

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