

# Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline

SUPPORT  
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"Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline" is a monthly publication addressing issues of community school reintegration, sharing practical recommendations to support returning students, tracking relevant public policy and legislation, and addressing racial and other inequities in Pennsylvania's educational system.

## Truancy Consequences Open the Door to the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Attendance plays a huge role in student achievement. Research has shown consistently that the more time a student spends out of the classroom, the lower their overall academic performance will be (1). In the United States as many as 7.5 million children (over 15% of the student population) will miss approximately one month of school each school year (2). Such significant rates of out-of-school time can have long-term consequences for students both in and out of school. The serious long-term effects of truancy include: poor graduation rates, poor academic performance, school drop out, delinquency, and teen pregnancy (3).

In Pennsylvania, a student is considered truant when the child has 3 or more unexcused absences in a given school year (4). A child is deemed habitually truant when the child accumulates more than 6 unexcused absences in a single school year (4). Consequences for truancy can range from implementation of a positive attendance improvement plan to adjudicating those students dependent and removing them from their homes (5). Youth who are placed in foster care or an institutional placement through the dependency system have a much higher likelihood of involvement in the juvenile justice or adult criminal justice system (6).

Although Pennsylvania no longer punishes absent students through the juvenile justice system, that is not the case everywhere. Over 1000 students are removed from their homes each year in the United States for being truant, some of whom are placed in juvenile detention centers (6). In addition, 15,000 youth annually are placed on juvenile probation for truancy (6). It is not uncommon for students to violate probation for minor offenses such as breaking curfew or missing additional days of school, making them vulnerable to delinquent placement and a revolving door of juvenile justice involvement (6).



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Rachael Miller is the Policy Director at Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). Her work is focused on state and federal legislative, administrative, and fiscal policy in the areas of child welfare and K-12 education. Prior to joining PPC, Rachel was the co-chair for the York County Truancy Taskforce, which is a convening of local school districts, human services agencies, and private providers that look to improve educational outcomes for children and youth. Further, she led the implementation of ensuring educational stability for foster youth and focused on policies to improve educational success. Rachael has been with PPC since 2018, and has continued to advance policies that improve outcomes for children, youth, and families involved in the child welfare system with a particular focus on cross-system issues. Among the advocacy work that Rachael has advanced includes the Pennsylvania state implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, legislatively codifying a tuition waiver program for foster youth, and developing new state policies specific to older youth in and transitioning out of foster care. Most recently, Rachael has convened a Pennsylvania-wide working group of advocates focused on the intersection of child welfare and public education, specifically focusing on improving attendance barriers and truancy. This group has been meeting with the Office of Children, Youth, and Families and the Department of Education to hold them accountable in improving state and county guidance, developing technical assistance, and considering legislative opportunities to improve the law.

## From Policy to Practice

Creating a school community where all feel welcome takes intentional effort from the school, community, and families.

Here are some tips that can help:

- Identify students in danger of accumulating unexcused absences as soon as possible. Early intervention is key to preventing truancy. Students who miss more than 2 days of school a month, are habitually late, or who receive frequent out-of-school suspensions or disciplinary referrals could benefit from tier one attendance intervention services, or an attendance improvement plan. Tier one attendance intervention refers to targeted strategies to improve absenteeism before it affects academic achievement.
- Assess students' academic performance to ensure they are on track with their academic progress. This is important because work the student finds too easy may result in the student being bored and disengaged from school. Conversely, if the work is too hard, the student may have feelings of frustration or insecurity, which can also lead to school disengagement.
- Convene a meeting with the school team, parent(s), and student to understand if there have been any changes at home that may be affecting the student or their family's engagement in school. Some of the traumatic events most often experienced by school-age children include: parental separation or divorce, experience of violence in the home or community, death or illness of a loved one, incarceration of a family member, eviction or house fire, and physical or sexual abuse. Students who experience these or any other life-altering event may benefit from connection to community services
- Always provide a safe and welcoming environment for students to come into. Check in with students after they return from an absence to make sure everything is okay and show that their presence was missed.

# The Road from Our Reality to Our Responsibility

Every issue of this digest addresses issues of racial disparity and other inequities in the systems of education, juvenile justice, child welfare, and behavioral health by identifying systemic barriers, introducing evidenced-based research for dismantling current practice, and creating a blueprint for structural change and empowerment.

## Learning Loss During the Pandemic and its Disproportionate Impact on Students of Color

With the unanticipated outbreak of COVID-19 in March of 2020, most U.S. schools closed for the health and safety of students and staff. Many of these schools then faced the challenge of pivoting to a remote instruction model for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year and beyond. Though most schools eventually returned to in-person learning, remote instruction has recently been at issue again as the country faced widespread COVID-19 infection due to the Omicron variant. Data show a significant racial disparity among districts and their ability to provide quality education virtually.

- Students of color were found to have experienced on average 3-5 months of learning loss, compared to their white peers who experienced an average of 1-3 months of learning loss (1).

- African-American and Latino/a/x students were at higher risk of not receiving remote instruction of average or above-average quality (1).

- Only 60% of students in low-income communities were logging on regularly compared to more affluent communities that saw a 90% remote attendance rate (1).

Recommendations to help remedy learning loss for students:

- Provide high-dosage tutoring, which has been proven to increase student performance in reading and math (2).
- Expand access to mental health resources for students and families (3).
- Integrate the pandemic into the curriculum. Studies show students learn better when the information being taught is relatable to their personal lives (3).

### Resources:

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