



March 2, 2014

My name is Teresa Nieves and I am the Supervising Case Manager of the Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP) with the Village for Families & Children. The TCPP program is a collaborating partnering program between the Village, Center for Children's Advocacy (CCA) and Capital Regional Educational Council (CREC). Our program works with students that have missed a significant amount of school and would be considered chronically absent. We work with the families and the student to re-engage them back in their schools and in their communities by providing assistance with improving their attendance, improving their academics and by connecting the students to pro-social activities.

I support this bill for the following reasons. Chronic absenteeism is a much more accurate measure of student attendance and will help us identify the kids who need help sooner. However, we need to make sure that the definition includes all kinds of absences, including excused, unexcused, and disciplinary absences. Early intervention is absolutely crucial for this population because when a student has missed multiple days of school consistently through out the years they fall seriously behind in their academics; which can then hinder their emotional well being. Students begin to lose confidence and believe that they aren't smart enough to complete their assignments. Due to this low self esteem these students then begin to act out and cause disruptions to draw away from the fact that they can't do the work placed in front of them. The longer it takes to get a child the support they need, the further they fall behind and the more of a struggle they'll face to get back on track in school.

Student Attendance Review Team (SART) is a great model because it requires the school to spend the time and attention necessary to look at each kid who is struggling with chronic absenteeism, and determine the root causes, and then provide interventions to address those root causes. These teams would be even more successful by inviting parents and outside agencies to attend these meetings to make a truly collaborative team to surround the well being of this child. Being able to see the whole picture of the child, all the factors that may be contributing to the chronic absences and having discussions to put referrals in support is the best way to all around support the future success of this child. By inviting everyone to the table to be a part of the team additional resources could be set up as soon as possible to assist the family, such as counseling services and/or basic needs support.

Without early intervention these kids are far more likely to drop out, become involved with the Juvenile Justice system and/or become a teen parent. The further that a child becomes disconnected from their school the more interest they lose in school because they believe they aren't good enough or smart enough to be there. At times, these children can get involved in gangs and begin acting out severely at school, which gets them suspended and eventually expelled. Once a child is on this track, without an intensive plan to assist all the challenges that are occurring, this child will most likely get arrested and end up in the system.

It's important to acknowledge any absence from school as a problem and identify the students with chronic absences as soon as possible so that any and all support that the families and students needs can be set up and addressed. The longer the challenges the families are facing continue without interventions the more likely this child will suffer and become another statistic that didn't make it.

A positive example of identifying a student that had chronic absences is about a 14 year old Hispanic female named Joan from Hartford. Joan missed over 30 days of school as a 7th grader and began working with the TCPP program as an 8th grader. While working closely with Joan, she divulged that she had been sexually abused by her brother for years before finally telling someone while in the 7th grade. Throughout that school year and continuing into her 8th grade year, Joan had to go through legal proceedings and deal with

1680 Albany Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105

331 Wethersfield Avenue
Hartford, CT 06114

105 Spring Street
Hartford, CT 06105

telling her parents/families about the abuse and watching her abuser/brother go to jail. Joan struggled academically and didn't feel smart enough to be in her classes. She felt that she had missed too much school and it was hard to focus while in class because she sometimes was triggered about the abuse and would just shut down. Through the TCPP program, Joan's family was provided educational advocacy through CCA and through the PPT process Joan was correctly identified under the label of Emotional Disturbance due to the past abuse she suffered. The TCPP program was also able to advocate for Joan to attend a therapeutic school to assist her through out the day with counseling services when she was triggered. Being present at the table as an outside agency was extremely helpful in Joan's case because the school system was unaware of the circumstances of the abuse. With Joan's parents permission TCPP was able to explain what Joan was actually going through and how long she suffered before speaking out about it. Joan was able to state that the reason she finally spoke out against the abuse was because she couldn't hold it in anymore and didn't feel like anyone understood her. She wanted to do well at school but didn't know how to get the help she needed.

I'm grateful that our program was able to work with Joan and her family and get them the support they needed. I can say that Joan continued on into high school and was doing well the last time I spoke with her. I do wish that the school had looked at her previous record of attendance issues. Joan missed many days each year. Maybe if a meeting had occurred earlier more resources could have been put in place earlier to get her counseling and the academic support she needed to feel successful in school.

Thank you.

Teresa Nieves

Supervising Case Manager
The Village for Families & Children, Inc.