

## Op-ed: Teaching to an empty seat

By: KATHRYN SCHEINBERG MEYER AND LEON SMITH | March 19, 2014

In classrooms throughout Connecticut, seats are empty because of policies that make it difficult or impossible for students to attend. We cannot reform our schools without making sure that children are actually in them.

From kindergarten through third grade, 8.2 percent of Connecticut students are chronically absent, missing more than 10 percent of the school year. By high school, 16.2 percent of students are chronically absent. Reasons for these absences vary: unmanaged asthma, academic struggles, responsibility for younger siblings, and many others. These problems are solvable when families and schools work together, but there is currently no accountability for schools to do so.

Districts with high rates of chronic absenteeism should establish School Attendance Review Teams, a strategy successful in other states, to get families and educators collaborating to keep children in school. Truancy laws already require specific interventions for absent students—SARTs will give schools an effective structure for providing these interventions. Dealing early with the root causes of poor attendance prevents these often-struggling students from falling further behind academically.

Students are also excluded from class for disciplinary reasons. In the 2011-2012 school year, there were nearly 2,000 suspensions of children under the age of 7. Five- and 6-year-olds miss significant learning time because of repeat out-of-school suspensions. This over-reliance on exclusionary discipline continues despite a great body of research that shows that children who are suspended are more likely to drop out of school and become involved with the juvenile justice system. In fact, in 2008 the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law with the express purpose of curtailing unnecessary out-of-school suspensions. The law states that students shall not be suspended out of school unless they pose a danger or disrupt school in a significant way. State Department of Education guidelines also discourage suspensions for minor misbehavior. Unfortunately, schools often disregard this law and the state guidelines -- or find ways around them.

Suspensions, expulsions and arrests in schools, are disproportionately imposed on children of color. Thus they contribute to the “achievement gap,” or more accurately, the “opportunity gap.” Black students are 3.8 times likelier to be expelled or suspended in Connecticut than white students. Hispanic students are 2.8 times likelier to experience those consequences. Research shows that students of color are punished more harshly than white students for the same behavior. A national review of studies in the field concludes: “New research continues to find no evidence that disciplinary disparities are due to poverty ... nor is there evidence that students of color engage in rates of disruptive behavior sufficiently different from others to justify higher rates of punishment.”

This is a civil rights issue in which families lack due process and the right to be heard. There should be a clear procedure in place giving families the right to a meeting with school administrators before a long suspension can be imposed. Suspended students should also have the opportunity to keep up with their work. But in-school suspension programs often do not allow students access to their schoolwork, causing an already disadvantaged group to fall behind further.

Expelled students are also badly served. By state law, youths under 16 are entitled to alternative education when expelled for the first time. After the first expulsion, districts are not required to provide anything. The age should  
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be raised to 18, as is the trend nationally. Furthermore, the quality of those services must be improved.

Here is a letter from one of our 14-year-old clients, whose standards are clearly higher than her school district's: "My tutor is barely in the room ... Sometimes he just says, 'free read' because he hasn't brought my assignments ... I'm supposed to get 2 hours a day, but so far it has been about half of that and they credit me anyway. I'd like to make up the hours I've been falsely given."

We hear variations on that story all the time.

Arrest is also a common discipline strategy. School arrests are declining in Connecticut, in part because of the good work done by some of our larger school districts. Yet children are still removed from their schools and sent to the juvenile justice system for behaviors like skipping class.

Every school district should be adopting the strategies of those that have reduced student arrests without compromising safety. Police stationed in schools should be trained in child and adolescent development and should operate under parameters that separate law enforcement from school discipline.

After years of exclusionary discipline, many students experience "push-out." They are encouraged or outright forced to withdraw from their neighborhood schools to attend "alternative schools," many of which are characterized by poor facilities and poorer education. Some of these programs have astronomical rates of truancy and failure and are in dilapidated settings that can scarcely be called "schools" at all. They are the last stop on a journey toward failure that began the day a child stepped onto a yellow school bus. First, we do nothing to encourage a child's attendance; then we actively discourage it; finally we forbid it. This is not our children's failure -- it is ours.

The legislature can keep more Connecticut students in school through several pieces of pending legislation designed to boost attendance, inject reason and fairness into the way we handle exclusionary discipline, and create standards for alternative schools.

That is an ambitious agenda. But Connecticut's children have waited long enough.

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Both projects are under the Center for Children's Advocacy**