POVERTY & SCHOOL ATTENDANCE (THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE)

INTRODUCTION

Children who live in poverty are affected daily by the lack of resources available to their families. Poverty has an impact on access to housing, food, health care, reliable transportation, and clothing, including school uniforms. Getting to school can be a herculean task when faced with the myriad challenges associated with poverty.

POVERTY AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

For many children, the reasons for their absenteeism are attributable in large part to poverty. Many families who live in poverty have limited access to essential resources, such as food, permanent shelter, health care, mental health services, employment, and addiction treatment, to name a few. Poor children often have a hard time securing reliable transportation to get them to and from school. The children may be responsible to care for younger siblings in the mornings, which hinders their own ability to get to school; or they may be homeless and unsure of where they will be staying from one day to the next. All of these issues can affect a child’s ability to attend school and can result in chronic absenteeism.

According to a study conducted by Johns Hopkins University in six states, chronic absenteeism occurs at rates 3-4 times higher in high-poverty areas than in other areas. Additionally, teachers have stated that “in these low-income communities, it is normal to find a quarter of the class missing every day, with some students missing 30-40 days a year ....”¹ “For Maryland in 2011, chronic absentee rates for students eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program were 10.9 percent in elementary schools, 15.8 percent in middle

schools, and 30.8 percent in high schools. Conversely, for students who were not eligible for the lunch program, the comparable rates were less than 5 percent in elementary and middle schools and 11.8 percent in high schools. Thus, chronic absentee rates were three times higher among economically disadvantaged students in middle and high schools and at least twice as high in elementary schools.\(^2\)

Several studies report that kindergartners have the highest rate of absenteeism after high school students.\(^3\) This finding is particularly alarming in light of the fact that early intervention is crucial in a child’s development. “[F]alling behind before 3rd grade has a high correlation not just with high school dropout rates, but with incarceration rates as well.”\(^4\) Chronic absenteeism and the effects of poverty have lifelong consequences that can fuel a cycle of poverty for generations.

Further, many impoverished students lack the motivation to attend school. They have been held back or have failed a grade (or more), and, consequently, they feel uncomfortable about being in classes with younger students. Some reports state that, “high-poverty students may feel excluded from mainstream opportunities or goals. They may feel that, even with dedication and hard work, their benefit attainment will not match that of their middle-class counterparts.”\(^5\) Students who are disengaged from their education and struggling everyday to overcome the challenges associated with poverty cannot see the importance of going to school everyday and on time.

**COMMUNITY BASED INITIATIVES**

Programs such as the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff’s Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) Truancy Court Program (TCP) work to identify and address the reasons why students are truant. Based on a holistic approach to truancy, the TCP team consists of a volunteer District or Circuit Court Judge, a TCP Coordinator, a TCP Social Worker, a TCP Attorney, a TCP Mentor, and a school contact. The team works to re-engage students and their families with their education, schools, and communities. When appropriate, the team may link families to social services, housing, and physical and behavioral health services. In addition, the team may provide resources, such as tutoring, uniforms, and material goods.

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