Graduation Smiles

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The return to in-person learning was a welcomed relief for most families but easier said than done for some. Post-pandemic statistics concerning school attendance problems (SAPs) indicate this continues to be a persistent problem for many schools in Connecticut. The two main types of SAPs are school refusal and truancy. "Truancy is an absence that occurs without the permission of school authorities and an attempt to conceal this from parents." [1] Since students were home learning virtually for long periods due to the pandemic, we have seen a significant increase in school refusal. "School refusal is defined as a young person making no attempt to hide their absence from their parents and school attendance is associated with emotional stress." [1]

Students can experience serious physical symptoms related to social anxiety such as headaches, fatigue, eating disorders, disrupted digestion and panic attacks. These symptoms are extremely frustrating for the student, family and school staff. Everyone typically wants the student to remain in the least restrictive environment learning alongside his or her peers. Communication between home, school teams, and healthcare providers is critical to finding solutions that help students access their education.

With the permission of the family, I am sharing this story that can inspire us to be creative solution finders and hope for a bright future in the midst of intense challenges. In this case, FAVOR worked closely with Community Health Resources (CHR) Care Coordination using the Wraparound plan of care. The name of the student have been changed for privacy.

At age 17, Destiny was struggling in all areas of her life. She had many barriers including a learning disability, mental health challenges, and lack of support from her birth family. Her mother's foster family stepped up and committed to the long battle required to help her become equipped for adulthood and independent living. They called for help. CHR Care Coordination met weekly with the family and FAVOR as well as collaborating with the school. At this time, Destiny had a year left of high school but was not attending regularly. She also engaged in risky behavior, therefore LOVE 146, a child-trafficking prevention organization, joined our team.

Together, the team provided the family with support, encouragement, resources and coaching on how to advocate for Destiny's needs. Near the end of her senior year, the school did not feel she was ready to graduate and wanted her to attend an adult transition program. She was 2.5 credits short and, after all her hard work, was devastated at the thought of not graduating with her class on time. We met with the school and outlined a doable plan. The plan was a reasonable compromise but would require her consistent attendance and full effort.



Destiny's special education case manager absolutely refused to give up on her! We met weekly for the last quarter making sure she stayed on track. Now 18 years old, Destiny ran her own PPT meeting, completed the work required to finish on time, and made the wise decision to attend Futures School for adult transition. The smile on her face at graduation was priceless! Recently, she told me she was learning to play golf, visiting the Air Museum and learning to make ice cream - just to name a few things on her agenda. She is currently getting work experience, mastering her activities of daily living and working on her resume. Destiny knows how to advocate for herself and is excited about her future!

Reference: [1] Nathwani G, Shoaib A, Shafi A, Furukawa TA, Huy NT. Impact of COVID-2019 on school attendance problems. J Glob Health. 2021 Jul 31;11:03084. doi: 10.7189/jogh.11.03084. PMID: 34386209; PMCID: PMC8325878.