

Educational Neglect for Teenagers

New Strategies for New York State

Jessica Gunderson • Megan Golden • Lizzie Elston

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY • November 2009

Under New York State law, a parent or guardian who does not ensure that his or her child attends school regularly can be found to have neglected the child. Since 2004, educational neglect allegations have increased by 34 percent statewide. In 2008, one in every 10 children whose parents were investigated for abuse or neglect was the subject of an allegation of educational neglect. Concerned about this increase, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, with support from Casey Family Programs, asked the Vera Institute of Justice to study New York State's approach to educational neglect and to suggest strategies for improving the system's response.

The study, which included interviews with stakeholders, analysis of data, and reviews of case files and research literature, focuses on teenagers, who comprise over 60 percent of the state's educational neglect cases. Vera investigators found that cases involving teenagers do not fit well in the traditional child protective system process. A central purpose of child protective services (CPS) investigations into allegations of educational neglect is to determine whether absence from school is a symptom of abuse or serious neglect that threatens the child's safety. But reports involving teenagers rarely uncover safety concerns. They do, however, reveal other issues which the child protective system is not always well-equipped to address, including complex educational needs, conflict between parents and teens, homelessness, and mental illness.

This report, a follow-up to a preliminary assessment conducted in December 2008, identifies the following 10 strategies for improving the state's approach to educational neglect cases involving teenagers:

1. Amend the law to clearly state the actions schools must take before calling the state's child abuse and neglect hotline, the State Central Register for Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR).
2. Require SCR staff to request specific information about a parent's responsibility for school absences.
3. Develop a resource within the child welfare system for schools to consult when there is concern about a child's absence.
4. Expand the use of the family assessment response, an emerging non-investigative approach to child protection, for educational neglect cases involving teens.
5. Make experts in educational issues available to CPS staff.

6. Develop preventive services models for chronically absent teens and fund service providers to implement these models.
7. Coordinate the responses of the child protective system and the state's persons in need of supervision (PINS) system to improve services for families and conserve resources.
8. Encourage data-driven interagency approaches with clear goals of reducing chronic truancy without increasing SCR reports for teenagers.
9. Create a model program for re-engaging chronically absent teens in school and test it in schools with large numbers of educational neglect reports.
10. Explore amending the child protective statute to eliminate educational neglect as a ground for child protective proceedings for children ages 13 and older, while also funding and authorizing programs specifically designed to address chronic school absences among this population.

Many counties are already working to improve their responses to educational neglect and school absenteeism. State officials can build on these efforts by allocating limited child protective resources more effectively and implementing new approaches to produce better outcomes for teenagers and their families.

For More Information

This report was prepared for the New York State Office of Children and Family Services and made possible in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, a national foundation whose mission is to provide, improve, and ultimately prevent the need for foster care. The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the Vera Institute of Justice and do not necessarily reflect the views of Casey Family Programs.

Copies of the full report may be obtained from the communications department of the Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th floor, New York, New York, 10279, (212) 334-1300.

Requests for additional information about the research described in this report should be directed to contactvera@vera.org.