

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/when-engaging-kids-in-school-becomes-everyones-business>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

It's widely accepted that keeping kids in school can be a prevention strategy from many different angles; research has shown time and time again that truancy is a predictor of negative outcomes such as dropping out of school and involvement with the justice system. The more difficult part is what to do about it.

In Baltimore, city schools CEO Andres Alonso has made it his business to keep kids engaged in school, with inspiring results, as a recent [New York Times](#) article by Sabrina Tavernise reports. Since he began running the Baltimore public school system, one of the most troubled in the country, with a history of soaring dropout rates, he's turned the tide. The results speak for themselves: a 50-percent improvement in the dropout rate, and a growing number of high school graduates.

At the Vera Institute of Justice we have been studying why teenagers miss school, exploring existing systems to serve these young people and their families, and assessing the most effective ways to reengage teenagers in school. Across the country, the standard response when a young person is habitually absent is punitively to threaten the student or parent about the need to attend, to report the family to the local child welfare agency for investigation, or threaten the family with court involvement.

[We found](#) that the prevailing approach to teen truancy is at odds with research on adolescent development and school engagement, and, as Tavernise notes in her article, can even be counterproductive in some cases.

It's time to rethink this model and try something else. Adolescents are more responsive to encouragement than to threats, and focusing on a young person's strengths can improve her school attendance. Moreover, when young people are connected to caring adults, they are more likely to stay in school and graduate.

As the *New York Times* article illustrates, the circumstances underlying school absence can be complex and messy, and responding to them takes courage and creativity. In addition to rejecting traditional punitive responses that are demonstrably ineffective in both Baltimore and New York City, where Dr. Alonso worked with Chancellor Joel I. Klein, approximately 40 percent of high schoolers are missing over a month of school. Dr. Alonso has encouraged citywide collaboration to reverse the schools' negative trends. Although collaborative leadership from multiple levels of government is hard to achieve, it is exciting to see that when the issue of school engagement and attendance becomes a high community priority, results in multiple systems can follow. What is going on in Baltimore proves it.

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