



OP-ED | Stay in School (If We Let You)

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Juvenile court judges are passionate about education and frequently tell young people in their courtrooms how important it is to stay in school. Judges know that a high school diploma is a life-changing thing. Most people in state prisons have not completed high school. The average educational level in these facilities is 10th grade.

Unfortunately many children leaving the juvenile justice system find that it is difficult to re-enroll in their former schools — even when re-enrollment is a condition of probation or parole. They are met with disdain and made to feel unwelcome by administrators and staff, who discourage their return. Instead of having one place or point person to go to in order to get re-engaged in school, they and their parent at times are forced run all over town to multiple places just to try to get back into school. They may find that any credits they've earned while in state care have not been transferred back to their home school. These artificial barriers create a thick barrier of red tape that keeps them out of the classroom.

To put that in concrete terms: Suppose John spent a total of six months away from his school between detention and placement in a residential facility. He applied himself in the classroom and completed enough credits to be junior. But upon his release, his home district tells him that they have no evidence of his school work and that he is a sophomore in their eyes. Despite his hard work academically in placement, the lack of communication between the juvenile justice system and the school system means that he is facing the prospect of being a year behind his friends when he walks in the door.

John, I can tell you from years of experience, will drop out. Not being credited with work he has completed, or allowed to maintain his progress by immediately getting back into school, is the type of discouraging outcome that breaks the spirit of a child who has been struggling to get back on track. Furthermore, his 10th-grade education does not qualify him to do much in the working world, but it is the perfect demographic to gain him admission into one of our state's prisons.

The legislature has already reformed school re-enrollment procedures for young people leaving the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. But that leaves out kids who spend time in detention or various congregate care and residential facilities. A bill that would have extended re-enrollment protections to them failed to go anywhere earlier in this legislative session. However, the legislature is slated to act on a comprehensive juvenile justice reform bill in the coming days. HB 7050, An Act Concerning the Juvenile Justice System, could easily be amended to knock down the barriers that keep children who have been in state custody out of school.

As a great deal of conversation recently has been about the need for second chances for youth, the one place where second chances are most important is in ensuring that youth who have made mistakes have a second chance to return to school and complete their education. It is ironic that we spend time talking about preventing at-risk students from being truant or dropping out. The difficulties of re-enrollment impose truancy on students while making it much more likely that they will leave school without a diploma.

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