



COVID-19

EDUCATION

OPINION

Pandemic truancy rates reflect technology gap, lack of educational flexibility

| TARA WALLACE

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Many students who grappled with remote learning faced challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially if they lacked high-quality internet connections or technology. (Leonardo Fernandez Vilorio/Getty Images)

The Kansas Reflector welcomes opinion pieces from writers who share our goal of widening the conversation about how public policies affect the day-to-day lives of people throughout our state. Tara D. Wallace is a licensed clinician and trauma therapist in Topeka.

Truancy rates in Shawnee County more than doubled during the 2020-2021 school year.

For minority families, remote learning proved challenging for a multitude of reasons – poor connectivity, inadequate equipment and bandwidth issues, just to name a few. Truancy court notices began arriving in spring 2021, as schools reopened and students adjusted to a new normal that did not include a state assessment requirement.

Setting as one of its priorities “educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic,” the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education allowed schools to lower their annual state assessment rates below 95% participation. Stated plainly, families could opt their children out of taking state assessments. Why would they? Students spent much of fall 2020 struggling to connect to virtual classes and learn new concepts in environments minimally conducive to academics, while attempting to recall concepts learned during spring 2020.

Additionally, schools were given flexibility to administer assessments to the students who chose to take them. A reasonable consideration given the anticipated COVID-19 surges predicted during the spring of 2021, yes?

The Department of Education required schools to provide disaggregated data related to “chronic absenteeism” and access to “technology devices like laptops or tablets and to high-speed internet at home.” Therein lies the rub. Nationally, minority populations experienced higher instances of “chronic absenteeism” based on pre-COVID attendance guidelines.

Remember, minority students’ struggle with basic internet service? Unless the pandemic somehow improved internet quality, significant adjustments were needed to compensate for the massive overload facing outdated systems.

That did not happen.

In the rush to get students in “school”, no consideration was given to attendance policies for remote learning. If for any reason a student was not waiting to be admitted to their virtual class, they were at risk for being counted absent or tardy. If a student was admitted and later disconnected, if their system froze, or they lost access to sound or did not appear or remain on camera, they were at risk for being counted absent.

Minority families with multiple students attempting to access remote learning simultaneously could expect at least one student being counted absent or tardy during the school day due to the previously noted issues. While helpful to inform decisions about resources for student learning in the future, the effect of these inequities to minority families were felt immediately.

Truancy policies require notification to families before involving the district attorney. In at least one instance, the Child in Need of Care hearing letter was the only notice a family

received while maintaining regular contact with the school, including the student being physically in the school during remote learning. Despite the family providing documentation contradicting the CINC claim, a court services worker was assigned to monitor their case.

It should be noted, when asked to justify a truancy report based on these facts, the school indicated truancy is a district matter. This is not true. Truancy is handled by individual schools. The district was extremely helpful addressing truancy matters experienced by many other minority students during the spring 2021 term.

Court services workers insist their presence in truancy cases is not punitive but serves to support families. Historically, the presence of an officer of the court adds undue stress to minority families as they are forced to conform to standards deemed “acceptable” by the court that are incongruent with their own culture and value systems.

Families are set up to fail based on standards that many involved in the truancy process do not have to meet in their own lives. The “support” provided has nothing to do with the underlying cause of the truancy, namely, poor internet service. Yet workers feel justified maintaining a presence in the family’s life rather than recommending dismissal, and report progress based on goals they have identified to restore “stability.” If quality internet is a requirement for stability, we have serious issues.

These goals blatantly disregard the fact that the presence of the court service worker is a source of dysfunction and typically leads to the need for more serious, long-term intervention in a self-perpetuating cycle.

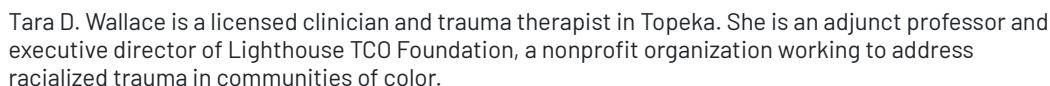
Many of us expected a modicum of grace to do our jobs because of COVID-19. Yet we forgot to extend that same grace to our children who deserve it even more, because our job is to protect them. They deserve forgiveness of *all* truancy charges resulting from virtual schooling for the 2020-2021 school year *and* our pledge to do better as adults.

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