

Roy S. Johnson: Do we want our children in prison or school? State funding offers an answer

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More than 40 percent of homeless students were chronically absent in school years 2017-18 and 2016-17. Higher than the absenteeism rate than other subgroups in which data was available.

This is an opinion column.

Almost six years ago, I challenged Gov. Kay Ivey and our erstwhile state lawmakers to fund a program that had already proven to reduce one of the primary indicators that someone is likely to commit a crime in the future, that they're likely to land in the crosshairs of the criminal justice

system, that they're likely to end up swallowed by Alabama's unconstitutional prison system: school absenteeism.

Chronic school absenteeism, specifically. That's defined as missing at least 10% of the school year.

Those who do so are most likely to, well, see above.

Typically, they were sucked into truancy court and, well, see above.

The Helping Families Initiative (HFI), overseen by the same district attorneys who once hauled absent kids and their families to court, instead sought to break that cycle by discerning and addressing the root cause, or causes, of the absenteeism without branding the student a truant and doing more to ensure they didn't ultimately drop out of school and, well, see above.

It worked, was working already six years ago when eight of the state's 42 districts were implementing the program and seeing significant declines in absenteeism.

John Tyson is the patron saint of HFI. A former Mobile County DA, he launched the program there in 2003. When I caught up with him in 2017, he said Mobile County experienced "stunning results" with HFI.

Unexcused absences were reduced by 24.5% since 2012-

2013 and suspensions declined by 30%. Moreover, more than 8 in 10 students whose families were aided by HFI were not arrested the following year. (55% previously possessed an active or disposed juvenile record.)

“It worked better than we thought,” Tyson said.

In Jefferson County, District Attorney Danny Carr liked to share the story of a student who skipped school regularly because he was ashamed his uniform was not clean.

The solution? A donated washer and dryer, provided by a local non-profit through HFI. “Sometimes major problems only require a small solution,” Carr said.

This was the rub: DAs had to scrape together their funds to support the program. In the two years prior to my column, HFI had been a line item in the state legislature’s school budget allocation—\$500,000 annually.

Tyson said then he was trying to get the ear of Governor Kay Ivey on the initiative.

Well, she and state lawmakers listened. They actually listened.

Recently, my colleague [Savannah Tryens-Fernandes](#) [reported that more than one in 5 Alabama students missed more than 10% of classes during the last school year.](#)

More than one in four students nationwide missed more than 10% of the 2021-22 school year, she reported. Before the pandemic—which has jacked up absenteeism—just 15% of kids missed that much school.

Why is something most families rarely even think about so vital? Because chronic absenteeism is often yet another ramification of poverty-related conditions and circumstances with which most (lucky) families never contend.

Chronic absenteeism breeds myriad consequences: diminished learning (see our state's reading scores), missed meals (when for many students, school meals are their best meal of the day), and, ultimately, a higher drop-out rate.

All of which contribute to Alabama perennially languishing at the bottom of the education pool. Our kids, simply put, are drowning.

"[HFI] is the middle piece that our education and criminal justice systems don't offer: the social system that really helps families," is what Kay Warfield told me. She's the education administrator at the Alabama State Department of Education. Absenteeism, she said, "is the number one indicator of our students not being successful in school."

Facts:

A five percent increase in the male graduation rate statewide would save Alabama \$82 million in annual incarceration and crime-related costs, according to James J. Heckman, a Nobel-winning economist at the University of Chicago.

Heckman says this, too: If one year's high-school dropouts were converted to high-school graduates, Alabama households would have an additional \$67 billion in accumulated wealth over the lifetime of those students.

And those students would be less likely to commit a crime.

You can see where I'm going with this.

Back in 2017, just eight districts statewide were operating HFIs. Now, as Tryens-Fernandes reported, 21 districts have embraced the program in some form. (Four are still in the process of launching the program.)

Back then, Tyson said, 37 of the state's 42 District Attorneys said they would implement HFI "if they could get a little bit of funding."

Many did. In the most recent state budget, \$2.8 million was allocated to support HFI, \$500,000 more than in the previous budget.

"That's pretty serious money for us," Tyson says. "Funding

is still an issue. When was talking to you [in 2017], I had letters from DAs who said they would do HFI's if funded. We've moved beyond that. The Governor's office has been generous with what it recommended to the legislature and the legislature's also been generous."

All good. I'll join Tyson in celebrating the state's commitment to funding HFI, to funding—let's be real—something that's already proven it works. Proven it helps scrap us from the bottom of the education pool.

Proven it helps our kids breathe and not drown. Breathe and not be swept away by the undercurrent of an injustice system waiting to pull them under.

The legislature is wrestling with this, too: [Spending \\$1 billion to build one new prison](#).

Interestingly, six years ago Tyson estimated it would cost \$10 million annually to fund HFI statewide. That's just one percent of the amount Alabama is planning to spend to build a single prison.

Imagine if that one percent was siphoned from the prison to people. To young people. Our young people. How much could be saved? How many could be saved?

How many of our children could be spared from landing behind the walls of a system—or behind the walls of a

billion-dollar prison—from which they might never escape?

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