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Dalio Education
2 Sound View Drive
Greenwich, CT 06830

To Whom it May Concern,

Stonington Public Schools, like other districts, faces numerous challenges both preventing students from becoming at risk and re-engaging the disengaged youth in our schools. Below find an outline of the challenges we face and possible areas for the legislators in Hartford to intervene. In addition, we have identified the promising practices we are expanding upon to ensure all of our students become graduates with the self-leadership skills for success in employment, enlistment, or enrollment.

Challenges

Truancy and School Refusal

For the past several years there has been no support from State agencies including the Department of Children and Families, the Connecticut State Department of Education, and the Connecticut Judicial System on how to practically deal with truancy and school refusal. Instead, without adequate support to assist us, Stonington and all other Connecticut school districts are penalized through the Connecticut Accountability System for students who are chronically absent. School administrators and social workers are left to do home visits to address truancy and school avoidance issues only to have caregivers throw their hands up in the air and students close doors in their faces. Many families are struggling with broader mental health issues, substance abuse issues, lack of affordable housing, etc. and are not equipped to support their disengaged youth. These social issues are beyond the school district's capacity and scope of responsibility.

Districts are not incentivized financially or with other resources to explore and expand innovative ways to keep students interested in programming such as the Home Builders Institute Pre-Apprenticeship Certificate Training program, Certified Nurse Assistant programs, on site alternative education programs, and student created learning experiences at local non-profits. If anything, the course of studies for students in Connecticut becomes more prescriptive each year. The current K-12 model is broken and as evidenced by the chronic absenteeism rates is not working for all students and yet no one wants schools to be different. The Tier 1 programming in grades K-12 needs to be reimaged to align with the current and future needs of students and communities.

Promising Practices

Social Media and Adolescent Mental Health

Stonington Middle School is participating in a research project through UCONN examining the relationship between social media and its impact on adolescent mental health. As part of the study all students will be required to secure any interactive personal device including smartphones in Yondr pouches for the entire school day. Additionally, all students will be participating in lessons from the Common Sense Media Curriculum on the following related topics: Media Balance & Well-Being Privacy & Security, Digital Footprint & Identity, Relationships & Communication, Cyberbullying, Digital Drama & Hate Speech, and News & Media Literacy.

Heads Up, Ocean Community! Less Screen Time, More Connection, is a parent led movement generated by the UCONN research project and the publication of Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation-How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Parents, business owners, and educators are all rallying behind limiting the access and use of smartphones in schools and at home for the benefit of children's mental health. Several different events/activities are being planned for the fall and next spring. Stonington will be tracking attendance and discipline data over the course of the year to assess the impact of these interventions.

Sincerely,



Mary Anne Butler
Superintendent of Schools