



pathways report

Updating school professionals about the challenges and solutions for students struggling with school avoidance.

Collaboration, The Core of Pathways Educational Impact

There is a new face in the Pathways suite - Ms. Emilee Dreier joined Cornerstone's educational team this past July. Ms. Dreier collaborates with content instructors to customize the curriculum for Pathways students and co-teaches each subject. The consistent presence of a teacher in the Pathways suite provides academic structure and spotlights for students our expectation of educational engagement even as we make accommodations to address the severe mental health symptoms that interfere with learning. But her involvement doesn't end there - she is also present to tutor, assist with homework, build executive function skills, and serve as the liaison between content teachers and students and between teachers and parents. She is in regular contact with

the students' clinicians, offering them daily feedback about their students' progress and struggles. She participates in all internal Pathways meetings and joins all student IEP meetings as well.

An additional benefit, in no small part related to Ms. Dreier's energetic personality, is her strong advocacy on behalf of Pathways students. She devotes her considerable knowledge and energy to helping them succeed. "I believe that every student possesses the potential to grow and succeed, regardless of background, personal/ familial circumstances, or learning abilities," Ms. Dreier shared. "Every student has unique strengths,

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School Avoidance vs. Truancy – What's the Difference?

Referral and enrollment patterns tell the story: since 2020 when the pandemic created nation-wide school closures and disruptions, Cornerstone's population of school avoidant youngsters has grown to approximately one third of its student body. There is, of course, a severity continuum and this determines whether a school avoidant child is formally designated a "Pathways student". Some students struggle to attend school 2 or 3 days a week while others can barely tolerate being in the building for a few hours on one day each week. Some do well in regular classes on those days when they make it into school while others cannot tolerate the over-stimulation and anxiety and will only come through

the school's doors if they are guaranteed the opportunity to spend the day in the Pathways suite.

As discussed in this newsletter's other article, Pathways' growth has occasioned programmatic, structural, and staffing changes but the essence of our treatment approach has not changed. This approach includes first and foremost a thorough evaluation to differentiate truancy from school avoidance, and to determine the factors that contribute to the behavior. Once the evaluation is completed each student's customized treatment plan will include some combination of gradual exposure, anxiety-management and self-regulation strategies, the improvement of social skills, parent

coaching about limit-setting and enforcing consequences, and educational accommodations as needed.

Parents and school professionals often ask about the difference between truancy and school avoidance and about how this impacts treatment decisions. A student is considered chronically absent when he misses at least 10% of the school year, or approximately 18 days. Truancy is typically associated with seeking rewards outside of school and is often motivated by rebellious, and at times antisocial, behavior and/or disengagement. School absences are usually hidden from parents and are not accompanied by anxiety or emotional distress of any kind.

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and with the right guidance, support, and encouragement, can overcome obstacles and roadblocks that stand in the way of reaching personal, academic, and social goals. I believe to the core that education is not just about academic achievement but also about fostering the emotional, social, and personal growth of students. All students deserve an equal opportunity to learn and develop in a safe and supportive environment, which is the key to unlocking their potential". In line with her beliefs, Ms. Dreier makes it a point to check in personally with each student every day to foster the personal connection between student and teacher that is known to help students succeed.

Ms. Dreier is a certified K-12 special education teacher and is also certified in general education in both New York and New Jersey, and she is currently working toward a dual master's degree in school and mental health counseling. Prior to joining Cornerstone's staff, she worked in the educational programs of GenPsych treatment programs and at a Montessori school.

School Avoidance vs. Truancy ...

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Interventions for truancy focus on behavior modification techniques that specifically manipulate both rewards and negative consequences, including the use of legal penalties, and on efforts to increase school engagement.

School avoidance, on the other hand, while not a psychiatric diagnosis per se, is a complex syndrome influenced by temperament, genetics, cognitive factors, and both family and school environments. It is largely an anxiety-based condition and, as described by researchers Kearny and Albano, is maintained by some or all of the following factors: to avoid school-related stimuli or situations that cause discomfort or anxiety; to avoid evaluative or social situations related to school performance; to receive attention from parents or caregivers; and/or to access tangible rewards at home that are more desirable than going to school. While it is important to provide structure and routine for school avoidant students, it is generally agreed that imposing negative consequences is unhelpful as in most cases this would involve punishing a student for having mental health symptoms. That said, oppositional behavior can be present with some avoidant students, and CDS staff work closely with parents to balance a nurturing approach toward anxiety-related behaviors with firm limits and consequences for those behaviors that appear to be driven by willfulness and opposition.

As always, we welcome your feedback and questions as we continue to provide state-of-the-art treatment for school avoidant youngsters.



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Cornerstone Day School is the only therapeutic school in NJ that is licensed by the State Division of Mental Health to provide treatment. Cornerstone is also a Chapter of the National Honor Society and accredited as a school by MSA, AdvancedED and NIPSA.

