

Another Triumph for Ideology over Evidence at AEI: Is it Really Time to Bring Back Learnfare?

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In “Bring Back Learnfare,” Howard Husock, a Senior Fellow in Domestic Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), reports that, “In the wake of the pandemic, chronic student absenteeism has hit 40 percent in the New York City public schools.”² To address this problem, the subtitle of his article suggests an easy solution – “Rising school truancy could widen educational gaps, but a remedy is already in place.” His solution – enforce financial penalties on families receiving cash assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program whose children do not meet specified attendance standards.

Unfortunately, as with so much of AEI’s work in the “poverty studies” space, Husock’s arguments are based on ideology – he provides no evidence to support the effectiveness of his approach, ignores implementation challenges, and does not account for a host of possible negative outcomes on family and child well-being. Moreover, his area of expertise seems to be housing policy – not welfare or education policy. This response highlights many of Husock’s claims. Each of the selected statements below is followed by a “PC Response” – short for “Peter the Citizen.”

Husock: “New York schools chancellor David Banks set the modest goal of reducing absenteeism from 40 percent to 30 percent by June, but neither he nor Mayor Adams has mentioned a tool that state law provides them: financial penalties for the parents of truant children. The state’s compulsory education law makes all parents responsible for ensuring that their kids attend school. A first offense comes with a maximum fine of ten dollars or ten days in jail, but each violation after that could result in a fine of \$50 and 30 days in jail. It’s a state law, but it’s up to local authorities to enforce it.”

PC Response: Husock provides no data about how this policy has been implemented and whether there are any evaluations of its effectiveness. This law is secondary to Husock’s learnfare proposal, so this response will not address this provision except to note that there is already a penalty on the books – one that Husock wants to add to for New York’s poorest families.

Husock: “The potential financial hit of such penalties is even greater for those whose households receive public assistance. The 1998 ‘learnfare’ law, still on the books, empowers school systems to reduce public assistance for households whose children accumulate five or more unexcused absences in any school quarter. Five absences means “the social services district must withhold \$60 from a household’s public assistance grant for three consecutive months.”

PC Response: It is not correct to say that the law “empowers school systems to reduce public assistance,” but rather the TANF agency, using school attendance data.

Husock: “The evidence of a widening educational achievement gap means that overlooking learnfare is harming those whom public assistance is meant to help: children in poverty. ...Because minority families are more likely to live in poverty, making public assistance contingent on school attendance could help narrow it.”

PC Response: Husock’s problem specification ignores a host of factors related to absenteeism, including but not limited to: homelessness; the need to supplement family income with work; responsibilities related to caring for younger siblings; the physical, social and emotional trauma of a pandemic; and depression and other health issues. Simply reducing a cash benefit does nothing to address these (and other) underlying reasons – and may well worsen them.

As with the state’s compulsory education law, Husock presents no data regarding whether the existing learnfare provisions are being enforced and whether there is any evidence of its effectiveness. He also makes no reference to findings from experimental evaluations of learnfare programs in Wisconsin, Ohio and San Diego, and the Teen Parent Demonstrations in New Jersey and Illinois. These programs differed in terms of target groups (with most focused on teen parents), the nature of the financial incentive (sanction and/or bonus), and whether ancillary services were provided, such as case management and support services. The findings from these evaluations were mixed and are now dated, but anyone advocating a sanction-only learnfare program might still have gleaned some lessons. For example:

- Comparing results across studies, suggests that financial sanctions are less likely to be effective when used alone vs. as part of programs that offer related services and case management.³
- Some studies found evidence of reduced family well-being. For example, in the Ohio LEAP program, researchers noted that, “those with multiple sanctions reported resulting hardship for themselves and their families, in some cases lacking essentials such as food and medicines.”⁴

There are likely many other lessons about data collection, issues related to sanctions, service delivery, etc. Responsible policymaking should be based on a much more comprehensive examination than the one Husock provides.

In short, Husock makes no mention of services that might address the underlying causes of truancy, does not consider whether a sanction-only learnfare policy like the one he advocates might lead to better results, and ignores completely possible adverse effects on other outcomes.

Husock: “Enforcing learnfare would be no easy task in a system that can barely even settle on a mask policy. The Department of Education bureaucracy would likely have difficulty linking the public assistance and food stamp rolls with attendance records, themselves notoriously spotty.”

PC Response: There are likely to be significant data quality/matching problems and significant administrative costs in collecting and verifying the data, as well as in enforcing sanctions and dealing with appeals. These may well exceed any savings from reduced benefits. Husock

provides no data and only acknowledges there are likely to be problems – yet, he advances learnfare as a solution anyway.

Husock: “But Banks could make a difference simply by announcing that learnfare enforcement was looming. Economists call this the ‘signaling effect.’ That proved the case with the 1996 federal welfare-reform law, which imposed time limits and work requirements on households receiving public assistance. Even before the law took effect, caseloads began to drop after Bill Clinton announced his intention to ‘end welfare as we know it.’”

PC Response: There is a big difference between “learnfare enforcement” and “welfare reform.” In particular, welfare reform was already being implemented in many states through waivers from the old Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program and the implementation of work requirements established under the Family Support Act of 1988. In addition, caseloads dropped due a variety of other factors – a strengthening economy and expansions in programs designed to “make work pay.” And, most of the caseload decline occurred after the enactment of the law – not before. Considering these factors, any “signaling effect” would likely have had a small effect on caseloads. For learnfare, simply announcing a policy would likely have even less effect, particularly given the fact that past research suggests zero to small effects from the policy itself.

Husock: “As absenteeism has emerged as a nationwide problem, learnfare and parental financial sanctions for truancy are not getting the consideration they deserve. Instead, there’s been more emphasis on bribing students to attend class, using gift cards and dance contests. There’s no reason to use only carrots and no sticks.”

PC Response: There are at least two reasons for relying on carrots instead of sticks.

First, the reach of the policy described by Husock would be limited because TANF caseloads have declined and many poor children do not receive it. For example, in 2020, for every 100 families living in poverty in New York, only 39 received TANF cash assistance. This “TANF-to-poverty ratio” is down 40 points since 1996.⁵ This means that children in most poor families would not be affected by the policy. However, if the state were to provide a financial bonus for school attendance, then it could reach a much larger share of children in low-income families. For example, the bonus could be provided to those receiving food stamps (now SNAP) or Medicaid. States have considerable flexibility in designing programs with TANF dollars; their use is not limited to those receiving cash assistance.

Second, as Husock noted at the outset, the state already has penalties for parents whose children are truant, including fines and jail time. Adding an additional financial penalty and limiting it only to the poorest families raises the possibility of severe financial hardship that could seriously undermine family well-being. At the very least, the policy should be tested on a small scale with a rigorous evaluation design to assess its possible effects. Even better, the policy could be tested using bonuses for school attendance vs. sanctions. (Attendance incentives have been part of experimental cash conditional programs tested in New York City.⁶)

Husock: New York should not only reemphasize the learnfare law but also increase the sanction from its outdated 1998 level and include food stamps as part of it, as well.

PC Response: There is no authority in the “food stamp” law to undertake a learnfare program like the one Husock describes – even with waivers.

It is astounding that someone at a “think tank” who professes to care for low-income families takes such a cavalier attitude toward increasing sanctions without any evidence of effectiveness or regard to the potential well-being of the families involved.

Husock: “New York is not the only state with a learnfare law. Before the pandemic, Massachusetts would deduct \$100 per month from child-welfare assistance because of school absenteeism.”

PC Response: Husock does not provide any data or assessment of the Massachusetts program – it appears that he just cites it as a way to make his proposal seem reasonable. The fact that another state has a similar policy, however, doesn’t make it good policy.

Husock: Mayor Adams has signaled his concern about minority children who cannot read and write at grade level. Absenteeism will only worsen those problems. Learnfare can help address them.

PC Response: Absenteeism is a serious problem, but Mayor Adams would be served better by seeking advice from experts in the field who take a comprehensive view of the problem and who base policy recommendations on facts and evidence rather than ideology.

In fact, this is advice that the American Enterprise Institute should consider as well, particularly when it comes to policies affecting those living in poverty.

¹ The views in this document reflect my own as a citizen and do not reflect the views of any organization I am now or have ever been affiliated with. By way of background, I am an evidence-based conservative and have worked on welfare issues for the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the White House under both President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush.

² Howard Husock, “Bring Back ‘Learnfare’: Rising school truancy could widen educational gaps, but a remedy is already in place,” *City Journal*, May 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/bring-back-learnfare/>.

³ David Campbell, and Joan Wright, “Rethinking Welfare School-Arrival Policies,” *Social Service Review*, vol. 79, no. 1, March 2005, available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/426716>.

⁴ Julia Griggs and Martin Evans, “Sanctions within conditional benefit systems: A review of evidence,” December 2010, available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/conditional-benefit-systems-full.pdf>.

⁵ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “TANF Cash Assistance Should Reach Many More Families in New York to Lessen Hardship,” available at: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/tanf_trends_ny.pdf.

⁶ See MDRC, “Opportunity NYC Demonstrations,” available at: <https://www.mdrc.org/project/opportunity-nyc-demonstrations#overview>.