



Asia Network of School Social Work



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School Social Work for Non-Attendance at Schools in Japan

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1. Non-Attendance in Japan(Koji Kadota)

In Japan, *futoukou* or non-attendance is defined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, as follows : "Non-attendance refers to a student who do not or cannot attend school for more than 30 days in a school year, due to psychological, emotional, physical, or social cause or background. Those with health and financial reasons are omitted." Since school education in Japan is offered in school buildings, students who do not show up in their classrooms for more than 30 days will be considered chronically absent.

Futoukou was first reported in the late 1950s. Students who had no physical illness or financial reasons but could not go to school began to appear. In the latter half of 1970s, many non-attendance cases were reported in junior high schools. Cases in elementary schools increased in 1980s. As the Chart 1 shows, non-attendance is still on the rise. The percentage of elementary school non-attendance in 2020 is 1.00% (1 in 100persons), and 4.09% (1 in 24 persons) in junior high schools. Although data for 2021 during Covid-19 has not been announced yet, presumably, it is higher than 2020.

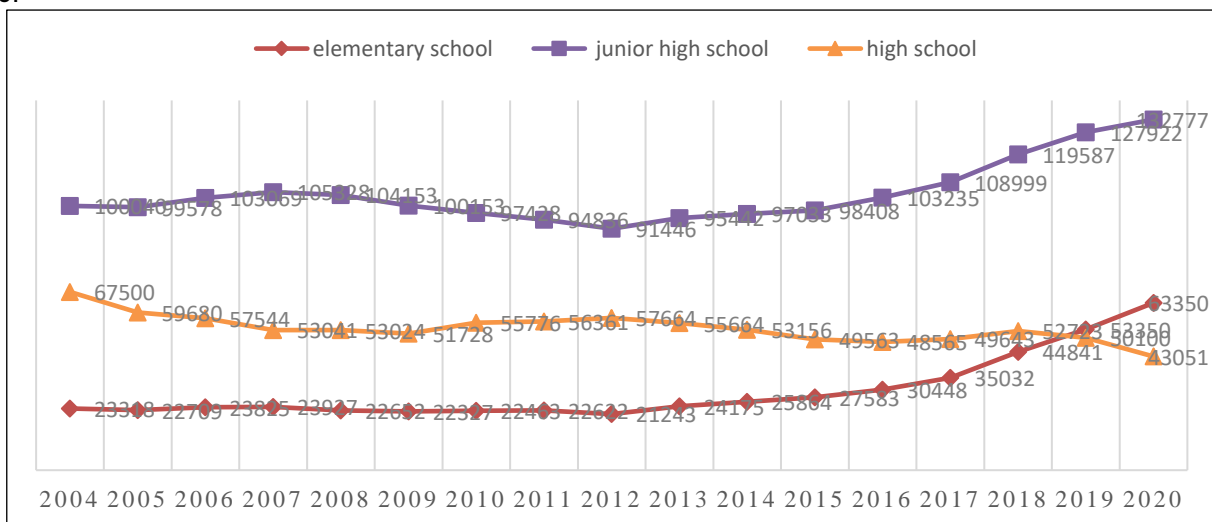


Fig 1. Changes in Non-attendance Cases
(Ministry of Education,Culture,Sports,Science and Technology,2022)

The cause of non-attendance in elementary and junior high school students are shown on Graph 1. The highest cause in both cases is being “unmotivated.” For example, the student may prefer to play video games or watch tv at home over going to school. The student acts violently if urged by the parents to attend class. In some cases, the parents do not encourage them to go at all. In the U.S., the compulsory education law allows “attendance officers” to interact with parents who do not guarantee education to their children. However, in Japan, such public role do not exist, so the school and the education board must convince the guardian. For family related causes, school social worker (hereinafter SSW) will offer support as liaison to the school and the home.

Table 1. Causes of Non-Attendance in Elementary School and Junior High School (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2022)

	School related causes					
	bullying	trouble between friends	trouble with a teacher	under-achievement	anxiety for future goals	school related problems
elementary school	0.3%	6.7%	1.9%	3.2%	0.2%	0.7%
junior high school	0.2%	12.5%	0.9%	6.5%	1.1%	0.8%

	Family related causes			Student related causes	
	drastic change in home environment	parent-child relationship	domestic discord	delinquency	being unmotivated
elementary school	3.8%	14.60%	1.6%	14.0%	46.3%
junior high school	2.5%	6.2%	1.8%	11.0%	47.1%

In high schools, there are about 50,000 non-attendance cases every year. Since high school is not compulsory in Japan, if a student did not acquire credits necessary for graduation due to non-attendance, he/she must repeat the grade. But every year, about 40,000 students decide to leave high school, rejecting to repeat the grade. The specific reasons for students dropping out can be seen on Table 2 where “change in future goals” and “school maladaptation” marks high percentages. Dropping out is equivalent to being a junior high graduate. In Japan, where academic background is a significant factor, a junior high graduate will have far less opportunity than a university graduate to find a full-time job. Because these students will be at a high risk of living in financial distress in the future, high school dropout prevention is crucial. Aside from this prevention measures, SSW support and intervention is also necessary for students with school maladaptive tasks.

Table 2. Reasons Students Drop Out of High School (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2022)

Under-Achievement	School Maladaptation	Change in Future Goals	Illness, Death	Financial Reasons	Family Reasons	Problem Behavior
5.8%	30.5%	43.1%	4.7%	1.5%	4.0%	2.8%

2. Non-Attendance Interventions by Elementary / Junior High School SSW (Satoshi Ikeda)

1) An overview of non-attendance interventions taken by SSW

In Japan, elementary and junior high school SSW receive referrals on non-attendance cases from school teachers more than from related organizations such as the Child Consultation Center. Ever since SSW have been placed nationwide, there has always been a demand for SSW to work as liaison to student's home, school, and the community to improve the student's environment. Therefore, in many of these non-attendance referral cases we can see very weak home-school relationship which must be improved. For example, throughout the home visits the teacher was not able to meet the student and/or the guardian. In other cases, the teacher met the two but could not get their consent to cooperate in receiving the necessary support.

When a referral is made to the SSW, we will conduct weekly home visits as an outreach. Our initial goal would be to see/meet the student in person which requires numerous visits. So we may visit together with the school teacher, listen closely to the guardian, and work to build relationship of trust. By having casual conversation with the guardian, SSW will look for the student's strength, interests and concerns, and learn about his/her friends. Then we will write letters based on these information and on every home visits, ask the guardian give it to the student. This process will eventually lead SSW to meet the student in person.

After SSW is able to meet the student, our next goal would be to have the student, the guardian, and the school teacher interact with each other. SSW will work to build trust with the student through strength based conversations and activities. At the same time, SSW will report the family circumstances and student's strength to the school teacher to plan activities based on these information. Eventually they will enjoy sports together and the student will start to attend school only during the lunch time. By having these interactions, home and school relationship will improve

2) Case work - interventions for non-attendance

Below is a case work of intervention taken by a junior high school SSW. Parts of the content have been arranged to protect personal information.

Student "A" is a first year junior high school student who showed tardiness and absences from the beginning of the school year and stopped coming after the summer break. Concerned about the the prolonged absences, the home room teacher did numerous home visits but was not able to meet either A or the guardian. The case was then referred to the SSW.

An assessment was made and SSW gathered information on A's situation prior to the absences and circumstances at home by interviewing A's home room teacher, assistant principal, and the school nurse. It became clear that A is from a single-parent household, the school struggled to contact the family from the beginning of the school year, and that there were no particular sign of peer problems or trouble with school work. Together with the home room teacher, SSW continued to do numerous home visits on various days and hours.

On one occasion, the two finally met the guardian at home and SSW had the chance to explain concerns for A's prolonged absences, how they frequently visited the home, and asked about the student's situation. Through their casual conversation, SSW learned that A is currently interested in baking and often makes sweets by watching videos on smart phones. Also, A still keeps in touch with the staff of the public hall where A had spent time during elementary school. So SSW suggested to the guardian and the home room teacher that they have a baking day together and promised to have the public hall kitchen available for the plan. The guardian was asked to inform A of this plan and later responded explaining that A is looking forward to the baking session. The public hall also approved to reserve the rental kitchen.

On the baking session day, A showed up on time. The home room teacher, SSW, and A interacted by having casual conversations. The home room teacher suggested that A may come to school "after-school" or use other classroom. A responded positively and first began to attend shortened classes after school. Eventually was able to attend school during the daytime to another classroom.

3. School Social Worker Interventions for Non-Attendance at High Schools (Tohko Hama)

1) An Overview of High Schools in Japan

In Japan, 98.9% of the students go on to study at high school after finishing the 9-year-compulsory education from elementary through junior high school. Research shows that 85.1% of those who experienced chronic absenteeism in junior high school proceed to study in high school ("Follow-up report on non-attendance students" Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology.) Furthermore, after graduation, 79.5% of the students enroll to receive higher education. This indicates that students are very well aware that in our society, completing high school is mandatory to become self-sustaining.

High schools can be categorized into three groups. In full-time schooling (92% of the entire h.s.) graduation is certified upon finishing the 3 year curriculum courses. In part-time schooling (2% of the entire h.s.), students study the courses approximately 4 hours in the evening for 4 years. In credit high schools and correspondence high schools (6% of the entire h.s.) the aim is to graduate after finishing the 74 credits required to be certified.

It is apparent that in many high schools classes are basically taught in groups, similar to that of compulsory education. There, students are introduced to new school subjects, events, and must start new relationships building. While some manage to enjoy the new school life, most of those who experienced long term non-attendance in junior high school often struggle to improve their lifestyles, cannot alleviate the anxiety of interpersonal relationships, and attendance often become unstable right after enrollment.

2) High school SSW : work and assistance for chronic absent students

When working in non-attendance cases, it is our top priority to assess the student and the student's family and see, for example, if there were any records of non-attendance during the compulsory education. Thorough assessments let us understand what the student/family's needs are and what they may be empowered to do. If the student has been chronically absent in the past, we attend information-sharing meetings and co-work with the home room teachers on a daily basis, for early detection of student's unstable attendance, from the time of admission and new school year. If there is an increase in tardiness, missed classes and the teachers feel that attendance is not stable, we offer to give support at school support meetings and to home room teacher and assistance program teachers. This is especially important since, in Japanese high schools also, home room teachers are expected to solve various tasks and individual problems by themselves. So to implement early intervention, the entire school must be notified and be aware to work as a team to support students in need.

When I interview students with chronic absences, I learn that they initially couldn't manage to go to school, not because of academic failure, but because of trouble related to interpersonal relationships, stress derived anxiety and being unmotivated, suffering from a psychosomatic-like disorder and not being able to fit into student groups. Also, developmental tasks affect their cognitive restructuring and the urge to change the environment becomes strong.

In many high schools, if a student cannot attend classes it will affect their passing on to the next grade level and the proper time to change schools is also limited. So for non-attendance intervention, we work to build good relationship with the student and the guardian and do home visits. In the very first interview, the student and the guardian must understand that SSW is there to provide support. Once the relationship is built on trust, we listen and accept, and give advice to ensure the student's future goals. We then consider changing the school environment and the ways to support so that the student will be motivated to attend class. If a student is has difficulty understanding the number of missed classes, a visual chart is useful to see how to participate in classes so they can move on to the next grade. For students and guardians who wish to find another school, we provide them with information on the period of attendance and financial support. We advise the students to actually visit the new school, take the change positively and make sure they determine by themselves.

3) Working as a High School SSW

As a high school SSW, I always keep in mind that high school students entering their adolescence are faced with identity diffusion as part of the developmental tasks. They compare themselves with others and easily feel inferior, causing them to be at a risk of wrist cutting or having suicidal thoughts. I carry out my work so that non-attendance will not lead to low self-esteem or low self-affirmation. I focus to build relationship that would encourage help-seeking behavior. I am concerned about the well-being of the student and the guardians, always hoping that everyone respect themselves, and that their experiencing non-attendance will not lead to an isolation from society.



Students' Absenteeism and Drop-out in a Technical High School

Joe Eun Woo(school social worker)

1. School drop-outs in Korea

According to the Korea Education Statistics Service(KESS)'s data provided by the Korean Ministry of Education, the number of students' who suspended or left from the school in 2019 is 18,366 in elementary school, 10,001 in junior high, and 23,894 in high school¹.

In high schools, there are 6,694 voluntary dropouts and 545 compulsory dropouts. Although the students may say that they drop out to take the graduate equivalency test², field experts believe that the main reasons are school maladjustment and family problems.

Every year, approximately 8,000 students in specialized(technical) high schools(60% of the first graders) leave schools for various reasons and become out-of-school adolescents. To prevent high school students from being suspended and dropping out, the Ministry of Education operated a pilot project by deploying social workers to some specialized high schools with a high school suspension rate in 2015. Currently, there are about 50 school social workers or educational welfare workers in high schools nationwide.

I was assigned to a specialized high school in a city near Seoul in 2015. The school was so notorious for issues such as school violence and delinquency, that it was used as a background for webtoons and movies. Although I had already worked for eight years as a school social worker at a middle school and a high school, the early experience at this high school was chaos itself. The number of students who were absent for a long time was so high, and there were always many students under disciplinary sanctions due to truancy. Parents no longer participated in school counseling for their children (often not responding to their homeroom teachers or blocking school contacts). Neighbors treated the students as troublemakers, and the police often visited the school. Teachers did not trust students, and at the same time, students distrusted teachers. The young students were early labeled as troublemakers at school, at home and in the community, and 10 percent of them left the school each year dropping out or being expelled without even having the opportunity to meet trustworthy adults.

2. My experience as a school social worker

1) Students' conditions

Meeting the students, I found that each one of them has his or her own story. Some didn't come to school due to the accumulated lack of learning from elementary school, which made it difficult to follow the curriculum and to find things interesting. For some it took more than 2 hours to commute due to the inconvenient transportation. Some couldn't get up in the morning because they had to take care of themselves and the family doing part-time work at night. Some didn't have caregivers to take care of them, to encourage them to go to school. Some couldn't understand the classes and felt the school life boring and useless because of their borderline intelligence or low language fluency after the family's immigration. Some didn't have friends to talk together or eat lunch with. And there were students under probations related to delinquency or crime, or from poor families engulfed in complicated family history and challenges. All of them were students who had to be contacted by the single school social worker – me.

2) partnership with teachers

I couldn't do the work by myself, so I needed a collaborator in the school. The teachers who didn't trust students, went out for home-visits with me. Meeting their (grand)parents in their homes, the teachers slowly opened their heart and understood the children. They met the students over dinner after school. And the talks at the table traveled to this school social worker by various ways. Now the teachers became my co-workers and we shared important information about the students and utilized informal case conferences to help them effectively.

At the same time, through vigorous teacher-student cooperative activities and relationship-based education methods, the school climate changed and students thought their school a safe and happy place.

¹ It includes students leaving schools to study abroad and because of diseases. Korean elementary and middle school registration and attendance is compulsory, and there is no such concept as dropping out, only delaying. The statistics here are from the year 2019, as classes were operated on-line in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19.

² It is like GED (general educational development/graduate equivalency diploma) in the U.S.A.

The student who came to school after a long absence with a frying pan, rather than books, for the barbecue party with the classmates and teachers was remembered again and again among teachers.

3) school regulation for home-visits

The Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in Korea has a separate provision for high school student attendance, and the contents are as follows.

Article 92-2 (Management of the high school students' registration, etc.)

- ① When a student is absent for more than two consecutive days without justifiable grounds, the head of the high school shall immediately confirm the grounds for absence with the student and his/her guardian.
- ② The head of a high school shall notify the district superintendent of education of the names of any of the following children or students and the administrative actions following long-term absence, expulsion, dropout, or expulsion from school:
 1. A student who is attending the school and has been absent for more than seven days without justifiable grounds
 2. Children or students who have been removed, dropped out, or expelled from the relevant school

Our high school has created a case management bylaws that requires the school social worker to visit the student's home in person after five days of absence. Without a school social worker, it is virtually impossible to home-visit. It is stipulated that "The school social worker may conduct home visits and counseling with students and guardians (parents), and if necessary, they may accompany public officials, department heads, homeroom teachers, professional counselors, police officers, etc."

4) Experiences and memories

The fact is different from the preconception that the home visits will be somewhat uncomfortable and stiff. To meet parents available only on weekends, I take the time to visit on weekends. When the student is sleeping and didn't open the door, his (grand)parents willingly tell me the password of the front door. I ask the grandmother of a student before visit, "Grandmother, shall I buy some steamed corn today?" Sometimes I exchange greetings with the parents by phone, and then sit at the table in their living room and chat with them. When I visit immigrant families, I use Google Translator to communicate with the parents, write handwritten letters and make video calls using body languages. Once I had to visit a student during the Muslim Ramadan period, and the mother gave me a carefully prepared refreshment table with jujube and traditional tea even during their fasting period. I won't forget this experience. After the student and family returned to his home country due to the visa problem, his mother sometimes sent me text messages about how he was doing there.

While visiting many families and meeting the (grand)parents, I came to understand the parents from a different point of view. They have lived until now with all their efforts and strengths but now they are exhausted. I could imagine how many calls and messages they had to answer from the son's homeroom teacher, school counselor since elementary school to high school for various reasons regarding the school life -truancy, school violence, low academic achievement and various accidents. Of course, it is inexcusable to turn a blind eye to matters such as domestic violence and child abuse, but I could understand the parents' chronic mistrust and fatigue that the school could not actually help children.

When a student doesn't come to school, I make announcements looking for the student through social media. Friends giggle and let me know the whereabouts of the student. Then, the student appears in front of me soon saying 'that was embarrassing'. So, it is not only the home that I go to meet students who do not come to school. Sometimes it's PC rooms and part-time job locations.

Due to the prolonged Covid-19, many schools reported difficulties in managing online class attendance, but our school didn't. Because there was a school social worker with well-established relationships with students and parents, and the students and teachers were familiar with a friendly and comfortable talking(counseling) with the social worker at any place, any time.

Nevertheless, many students left school due to their absenteeism. In the early days, I felt sad and upset. "How much have I tried..." As time went by, I found myself walking with them so that they make a smooth exit, and guiding them back to school when they want to re-enter.

3. Conclusion - 'relationship is everything'

It has always been the "relationship" that matters across various programs, along with flexible social work interventions, the principal's leadership and teachers' efforts. And at the center of it, it is posited that the role of a school social worker was the most essential.

How should school social workers practice to prevent students' absenteeism and help them stick to the school system? I think the most important thing for school social work is "relationship." Until 10 years ago, "relationship building" seemed to have little importance in school social work. School social workers met parents and students with forms filled with difficult social work jargon. We thought that was professional. But relationship is simple and easy. It is the real core of the expertise of a school social worker. Relationship can change not only students but their parents, teachers, and the society.

I recently moved to another high school right next to the previous school. With the hope that there will be an adult who believes in young students in every school, I would like to conclude the article with an interview with a teacher in the report on the school's prevention program, "The presence of a school social worker was a big boost. Because she was passionate, energetic, and confident, all the teachers willingly cooperated and helped her. Even if students run away from home or don't contact their homeroom teacher, they contact the school social worker because she has a good relationship with them. I think that's because she invested a lot of time connecting and spending with the students. After the school social worker left to another school, this high school was terminated from the Education Welfare Priority Support Project, and there are currently no education welfare office or school social worker. It's true that the energy of this school is not as good as it used to be."

P.S.

Among the people who read this article, someone might ask "Do Korean school social workers have no personal time? Do you have to work that hard even after work while taking care of your family? You're doing home visits by yourself? Isn't it dangerous?" Or you might wonder, "Are you opening a personal contact number and a social media account to the students and parents?"

I think this is a somewhat unique relationship-oriented 'cultural social work practice technique' of Korean school social workers. Wouldn't it be a relationship-oriented practice to see students not as "he, them", but as "you", and to make a good neighborhood of teachers and parents at school and the community? The dynamic school life for the past six years that I spent with the students who frequently caused accidents, made me grow big and deep. I really enjoyed myself. And I believe young students do not grow thorns against those 'relational' adults.



Youth career guidance under the framework of national compulsory education 「Youth Career Explorer Program」

Chun-Heng Shih

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Hsinchu City, Student Counseling Center former counselor

I . **When did "going to school" become something everyone should do?**

In order to implement the "Constitution", "the people have the right and duty to receive national education", Taiwan has long had the concept of "compulsory education", expecting that people "will not be limited by status or ability, and can receive education", but at the same time, it also regulates that "receiving education should be one of the responsibilities of the people." However, the relatively early compulsory education in Taiwan was actually limited to 6 years of national primary school.

Later, with the transformation of the economic and political environment, social changes and the needs of national construction, in order to improve the overall education level of the people, in 1968, the government officially and systematically promoted the extension of national compulsory educational affairs, carried out a reform of the school system, and extended the compulsory education age from 6 years old up to 12 years old, it has evolved into "Nine-Year Compulsory Education", and the government has funded the establishment of additional classes and teacher training, striving to increase the attendance rate of schoolchildren. After the "Primary and Junior High School Act" appeared in 1979, it was amended by the "Compulsory Education Act" in 1982, which formally established the overall structure of compulsory education in Taiwan.

Today, although the regulations have been revised many times, the overall appearance has not changed dramatically. Therefore, if our students are in the stage from elementary school to middle school, but their studies are unstable, they will easily encounter the following situations and be notified by the school:

1. Drop out

Absence from school for more than 3 consecutive days without asking for leave or unexplained reasons.

2. Long absences

Absence from school for more than 7 days in one semester without asking for leave or for unknown reasons.

The competent education authority, the Compulsory School Entrance Committee, etc., upon receiving the notification of the relevant case, will initiate the follow-up corresponding counseling intervention measures. Because the issue of "not going to school" is restricted by laws, it is now not only a matter of "personal or family choice", but also a "violation of national obligations". Therefore, the Compulsory School Entrance Committee can also issue an "penalty fine" to the guardian according to the situation after persuading the student's guardian to be invalid.

Therefore, in many cases, students' unstable learning is an opportunity for the emergence of school social workers. The importance of school social workers is because the instability of schooling is often the result of multiple factors. Someone needs to be able to play the role of resource integration and coordination, to understand the needs of students and parents, to communicate and cooperate, but also from the perspective of external social structures, talk to students' families about the developmental impact of school attendance on their

children. If there are "individual" adjustment difficulties, how to improve them; if there are "collective" adjustment difficulties, the school social worker also needs to advocate changes in the environment.

Some cases of unstable schooling also require the help of social affairs, health affairs, police and judicial units. For example, some children did not come to school to take care of sick family members, families with financial difficulties, or some contacted gang organizations and were lured into risky activities, etc. These all require the cooperation of professionals across different fields and looking for different systems.

II. The time everyone spends in school is getting longer and longer with the times?

The second stage of reform, 2008 was a turning point, because the education level of the people was generally improved, and the country began to think about whether it should readjust the compulsory education curriculum that has been implemented for many years to be more in line with the contemporary social status quo. The voice of the public advocating education reform It is also more and more diverse and prosperous. In 2014, the " Curriculum Guidelines of 12-Year Basic Education " was released, and began to promote the integration of teaching content across the school system.

This education reform has many goals, for example, hope that students can study in schools near their homes, avoid spending a lot of time and money on transportation to school, and get admission without exams, that is, no longer use unified test scores as an indicator for enrollment distribution, balance urban and rural development, and exempt tuition fees to balance Public and private schools, etc. It is expected to cultivate students' literacy skills such as "self-directed action", "communication and interaction", and "social participation".

However, the 12-year state education is not a forced system! So although it is very rare, there are still a group of young people who leave the education system after graduating from high school, but they do not necessarily enter into a smooth development. And many of them are the students mentioned in the first paragraph who are unstable in school and lack career goals.

III. After leaving school, who can help children who are not going to school?

People are gradually realizing that some teenagers seem to be in a state of "invisibility". They are between the ages of 15 and 18, and they have not yet reached adulthood in criminal or civil law, but they do not need the care of others like children in elementary school, or are tied to their families in everything. If they left school and didn't go on to high school, where did they go?

The government education authorities track and mentor these young people through a commissioned program. The promotion of the service plan can be roughly pushed back to 2008. It was originally called the "Youth OnLight Project", which entrusts NGOs and NPOs to mentor young people who are not targeted in their careers. It is expected that after entering the training, through self-exploration and career testing, they will gradually be able to gradually return to school, participate in vocational training, or find a more suitable and stable job. In 2017, the program was transformed, with the direct cooperation between the central government and the local county and city governments, hoping to increase more horizontal integration of public sector services and improve the coherence of services. By

2020, it will be renamed the "Youth Career Explorer Project" and will continue to be implemented.

1. Potential clients

- (1) After graduating from high school, students who have not continued their studies and have not been employed.
- (2) Students who have been admitted to high school in the new school year but have not registered for registration.
- (3) Students who have suspended or dropped out of high school

2. Main Service Architecture

- (1) Individual or group counseling sessions
- (2) career courses or activities
- (3) work experience
 - Subsidies provided by the program to reduce barriers to employment, such as transportation allowances, payment of labor training insurance, work allowances, personal accident insurance and medical insurance, etc.
 - Individualized job preparation, matchmaking, tracking and accompany during work, follow-up employment change or long-term job transition counseling by the program counselor.

80% to 90% of the direct service personnel of this program are social workers. Counselors need to carry out individualized counseling work, contact young people and their families, and maintain a good relationship and close contact with the school counseling unit, but they also need to be familiar with various social resources, especially the knowledge of labor-related laws and regulations, and the ability to develop stores and deal with the different challenges faced by teenagers in returning to the workplace.

The importance of focusing on unemployed and unemployed youths lies in the fact that the state, through the education system, provides resources to give children who are in the middle of "welfare status" a chance to develop. We found that many teens receiving services did not qualify for other benefits. For example, the family may not be in poor financial condition, the caregiver may not be lacking in function, the youth themselves may not be at risk of breaking the law, and there may be no physical or mental disabilities or health issues. But they are confused about their careers, or lack opportunities for guidance and experience. Unfamiliar with other government resources. It is impossible to understand what you want by learning through the experience of try and error in the original environment.

Of course, there is another group of teens who are "merged issues" teens. Career interruptions are part of their many life issues, and they also face drugs and crime, intimate relationship or domestic violence, sexual violence, childhood trauma, or are limited by physical and mental health disturbances that make it difficult for them to live in a single life. Institutions get help and require integration across networks. There are also cocooned teenagers who have lost the confidence to express themselves because of frustrations or hurtful experiences in their growth process, and stay at home without leaving home. They may stay at home for many years, and it is easy to miss their teenage years. critical development time.

IV. The road that needs to go on

In recent years, the COVID-19 epidemic has changed the service methods of many school social workers. School social workers need to be more flexible, be familiar with equipment and

platforms for network or electronic communication, and need to try to transform some of the entity's courses into other forms to execute. For example, in the second half of 2021, in the process of helping children match, we found that it is very difficult to find jobs in the catering and service industries. Due to the epidemic, many companies have reduced staff and reduced business hours, or all the college students return to their hometowns and distance learning, the business district of the university town will appear deserted and bleak, with no business. But network marketing type of work, began to become more.

In the future, our next generation will face more changes and challenges, and the changes in life patterns and work patterns will become more and more abundant and unimaginable. With the amendment of the Civil Code, Taiwanese teenagers will be adults at the age of 18 after January 2023! In addition to being able to implement their own decisions earlier, they are bound to take on more responsibilities.

Concerning the career development of young people, it is a field that requires continuous cultivation and accumulation, investment and support, understanding and innovation. But it is our efforts that make up for this embarrassing area of excessive adolescence. Let our children have more people to accompany, explore, and move forward with in the journey from children to adults.



School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit: **A Guide for Social Workers working with Students with School Absenteeism Issues**

Yum Sin Ting
Co-Chair, School Social Work Chapter
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In Singapore, long-term school absenteeism, which refers to absence from school without valid reasons for more than 60 days in a school year, has generally been reported to be low at about 3 per 1000 students³. However, there had been observations and concerns raised by social service professionals that COVID-19 related control measures and protocols had disrupted school routines in the past two years and affected different students' motivation to return to school⁴. Some COVID-19 measures that were implemented in 2020 till 2021 included 5-days mandatory sick leave for any persons with respiratory symptoms, leave of absence, stay-home notices and quarantine orders being close contacts to persons who contracted Covid-19. With extended time spent at home, students who were already lacking motivation to attend school were further detached from the system.

While the pandemic may have worsened the school attendance of some students, it is noted that factors contributing to school absenteeism are usually complex. Common personal and family related factors underlying poor school attendance include poverty-related concerns, mental health issues (e.g. anxiety), and parental conflict or divorce.

Systemic policies and interventions have been put in place over the years to address the issue of school absenteeism. At a macro level, the government enacted, in 2000, a Compulsory Education (CE) Act which regulates parents to take responsibility in ensuring that their children attend primary school regularly. A "Uplifting Pupils in Life and Inspiring Families" Taskforce (UPLIFT) was also set up in 2018 to facilitate collaborations between the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) including various community and social supports to address school absenteeism issues early. Social service agencies have also been appointed by MSF to engage and intervene students with chronic absenteeism rates of above 20% through the Enhanced STEP-UP (ESU) programme. This is a 12-month intervention programme that provides holistic case management services to support these students to return to school or be meaningfully engaged.

School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit Application

In recent years, social workers conducting the ESU programme have been introduced to the *School Refusal Assessment Scale* (revised edition; SRAS-R)⁵ as a systematic tool to identify the key functions for a child/adolescent's school refusal behaviour. The four key functions posited by SRAS-R are:

Negatively reinforced school refusal behaviour

- 1) To avoid school-based stimuli that provoke a general sense of negative emotions.

³ Ministry of Education (2021) Parliamentary Replies: School Absenteeism. Retrieved from: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/parliamentary-replies/20210201-school-absenteeism>

⁴ Today (2021) School, interrupted: Repeated disruptions to school routines may lead to bigger problems, social workers say. Retrieved from: <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/school-interrupted-repeated-disruptions-school-routines-may-lead-bigger-problems-social>

⁵ Kearney, C.A. (2002). Identifying the function of school refusal behavior: A revision of the School Refusal Assessment Scale. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 24, 235-245.

- 2) To escape aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations

Positively reinforced school refusal behaviour

- 3) To seek attention from significant others
- 4) To pursue positive tangible reinforcement outside of school.

AMKFSC Community Service Ltd Youth Infinity department is one of the agencies that conducts the ESU programme. Having used the SRAS-R, social workers from Youth Infinity felt a need for further guide to help concretise action plans after identification of the key functions. Hence, they created the "*School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit*", which may be used by social workers, teachers and counsellors to guide students in returning to school and maintaining school-going behaviour⁶. The 70-page toolkit is structured by providing worker's guide and strategies to address each of the four functions of school refusal.

The following are examples of school absenteeism issues and discussions of how the toolkit may be used to guide intervention. (Note: Names in case examples are fictitious and scenarios have been adapted to ensure confidentiality)

Case Example 1:

Daniel, aged 13, came from single parent family, residing with his mother and one older sibling. Daniel's mother and father were constantly fighting verbally and physically before the divorce. Some of such incidents were witnessed by Daniel. Daniel used to get bullied in primary school. He hoped for a change in his secondary school life. However, upon entering secondary school this year, he stood up for one of his classmates once and became targeted by the bullies. Daniel felt socially isolated in school again and his attendance started to drop in April. He would experience somatic symptoms such as headache, nausea and breaking into cold sweat in the morning.

Using School Refusal Assessment Scale, it was assessed that Daniel's school refusal was a negatively reinforced school refusal behaviour, particularly function 2: "escape aversive school-based social and/or evaluative situations". In his case, Daniel's aversive school-based situation was that of the bullying and social isolation in school.

Daniel's somatic symptoms are likely to be signs of anxiety in response to the anticipated distress of possible bullying when he goes to school. One of the interventions highlighted in the toolkit was to help the youth identify his distress sequence so as to increase awareness of his responses. The worksheets can be used to facilitate discussions with Daniel on his cognitive, behavioural and physical responses when he feels anxious about going to school.

As Daniel also exhibited somatic symptoms, it is also helpful to educate him on Somatic Management Strategies (page 12 to 15 of toolkit) so he is able to better manage the physical components of his distress sequence.

Case Example 2:

Julia is a 9-year-old girl, studying in Primary 3. She shares a very close relationship with her mother. In Primary 2, she had good results and coped well academically but soon found it difficult to catch up with her studies upon promotion to Primary 3. Julia started crying every

⁶ AMKFSC Community Services (2022) School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit. Retrieved from: <https://www.amkfsc.org.sg/publications/books>

morning after March school holidays when her mother wakes her up and refused to go to school. Julia feels safe with her mother around. In Primary 1 and 2, she would occasionally throw tantrums in the mornings to stay home with her mother who would give in to her. During the days when she stays at home, she would spend her time with her mother who is a homemaker. They would have shared activities like drawing, reading story books and playing with toys at home.

Based on School Refusal Assessment Scale, it was assessed that Julia’s school refusal was a positively reinforced school refusal behaviour, particularly function 3: “seeking attention” from her mother. It may also be noted that Julia’s mother’s permissive parenting further reinforces Julia’s behaviour. Julia also receives positive reinforcement through the activities with her mother when he is not attending school.

One of the key goals of intervention, according to the toolkit, will be to increase mother’s ability to attend to and reward Julia’s appropriate school attendance behaviour and to downplay or ignore school refusal behaviours. In this case, action plans are focused on the parent to equip her with skills to focus on establishing rules and consequences for negative behaviour. This includes supporting Julia’s mother to work on establishing boundaries and expectations with Julia so she is able to build personal responsibility and self-discipline. Another task to help parents re-establish parental control will be to institute a morning routine that is specific and timely yet flexible enough to accommodate some possible misbehaviours by the child without compromising school attendance. References were made to pages 33 to 36 of SRAS toolkit to address this case example.

Limitations and Feedback on School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit

It is acknowledged that the intervention methods stated in this toolkit is non-exhaustive and that the SRAS-R requires cultural adaptations, as it was developed in the Western context. Despite so, social workers appreciated the systematism of the scale and suggested action plans highlighted in the toolkit.

A sharing session by Youth Infinity was held with social service professionals at the



Singapore Association of Social Worker's School Social Work Chapter Sharing and Networking session on 8 July 2022. Below are some photos from the event.

Social service professionals who were introduced to the School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit generally felt positive about SRAS and the toolkit. Some feedbacks are as follow:

"The assessment scale and the toolkit are useful when working with students with low attendance."

"The SRAS toolkit can be catered to different youths with varying needs"

"Discussion on the toolkit helped me to think about engaging both parents and child/youth, if not any caregiver or school personnel"

"I'm able to use this as a tool to identify pre-disposing factors that can attribute to school refusal"

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no one direct solution to the issue of school absenteeism due to its complexity. It is hoped that structured guidance through the use of SRAS toolkit will be helpful for social workers as they engage and intervene with students exhibiting school refusal concerns.

Youth Infinity is glad to share the School Refusal Assessment Scale Toolkit and the e-book is available for viewing at <https://www.amkfsc.org.sg/publications/books>

