



**Altarum**

MDHHS OJJDP TITLE II | 2023

# Genesee County 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court Family Division: Intensive Family Support Program, Promising Practices

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## Introduction

Recent data indicates that students who do not attend school regularly often experience higher rates of physical and mental health diagnoses, face substance use problems, and are more likely to come in contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>i</sup> Children who have been court-petitioned (e.g., summoned by the court regarding truancy) are among the most at-risk for criminal involvement and school failure.<sup>ii</sup> On average, these youth tend to have lower GPA's, have more absences, and tend to be over-age for their grade level.<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, they are more likely to have grown up in a home with domestic violence and or witnessed substance use, to have had a parent who has been or is currently incarcerated, and/or to have experienced other adverse childhood experiences.<sup>iv</sup>

In Genesee County, Michigan 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court - Family Division (Court) approximately 30% of all petitions received are school attendance petitions, both educational neglect and truancy petitions. The Courts' experience with school attendance petitions indicates both youth (ages 6-16) and families within their community, are dealing with mental health and/or poverty issues. Based on these experiences as well as evidence-based interventions, the Court acknowledges that prevention and early intervention with supportive services for children and families is the key to success in improving school engagement and preventing involvement in the criminal justice system.

When assessing the population of Genesee County from Census data as of April 1, 2020, the total was 406, 200, 22.3% of whom are under the age of 18. Breaking the numbers down by age showed that 75.3% of the population is White, 20.3% of the population is African-American, 3.6% is Hispanic or Latino, and 2.8% is two or more races.

According to Kids Count Data, for the reporting period of 10/1/2019 - 9/30/2020, the total population of at-risk youth ages 10-16 in Genesee County was 36,438. Of those youth, 66.9% are White, 25.7% are African American, 5.6% are Hispanic and 1.2% are Asian.

During 2018 and 2019, 30% of *all* petitions filed with the Court were school attendance petitions. 18% of those petitions were African-American males, 18% were African-American females, 20% were White males, and 17% were Whites female. This data represents a disproportionate number of African-

American youth receiving petitions – while only making up 25.7% of the at-risk population, they accounted for 36% of petitions filed in 2018 and 2019. White youth, which represent a third of the entire at-risk population only accounted for just over one third of the petitions filed in the same time period. These numbers the Court petitioned youth and families are most often referred to mental health services or to community resources for poverty driven issues.

The Court has been working to create a comprehensive range of interventions that focus on school engagement for youth and their families. For the past five years, the Court has contracted with Easterseals, a local community mental health organization, to provide an Intensive Family Support

**Table 1. Genesee County Youth Population by Race**

Total Population all ages	406,200
Youth Population (<18)	90, 583
White Youth	68,209
African- American	18,388
Hispanic or Latino	3,261
Two or more races	2,536

**Table 2. Genesee County At-Risk Youth by Race**

Youth Population At-Risk	36,428
White Youth	24,387
African- American	9,350
Hispanic or Latino	2,034
Asian	433



(IFS) program. The IFS program offers supportive, wrap-around services for families under the jurisdiction of the Court in child protective proceedings. The objective of the Court's intervention was to expand their Intensive Family Support program (IFS) by increasing the number of "high-risk" youth that they are able to work with in the [IFS] program and bringing the intervention upstream to an earlier point in time, i.e., prior to the formal petition threshold of 10 trancies.

The Court has worked with the Genesee County Attendance Task Force, over the past few years, and has recognized that court-based interventions do not always lead to success. Early intervention in conjunction with supportive services that address the barriers for school attendance has proven to be successful in diverting youth and families from the "formal system." The IFS program has allowed the court to increase the capacity of the program as well as allowing the referral process to the program to occur pre-petition, meaning the formal court process is now a last resort intervention.

The IFS provides case management support to youth and families, assessing their overall needs and connecting them to services that can support them to stay in school and avoid delinquencies and other risks. The goal of their intervention is to decrease the rate of formal court petitions for youth in the county that are tied to truancy or neglect issues (previously 30% of all petitions). The evaluation plan will compare the rates of petitions prior to the implementation (or expansion) to the rates of formal petitions once the intervention was in place and youth were being connected to services and having their case managed closely earlier.

Due to its success, the Court expanded the program to an educational neglect court pilot project that was initially limited in scope due to capacity and funding restrictions. With this limit in mind, the Court team set out to write a grant that could increase the capacity of the IFS program and allow referrals to the program to occur pre-petition for all school attendance petitions. The 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Court Family Division has worked extensively to change the perspective of utilizing formal court processes as an intervention for school engagement. As a result of their efforts with Easterseals and the IFS program, the Court has been able to successfully adjust the narrative of traditional court proceedings by showcasing evidence-based practices, data driven results, and the meaningful impacts the program has created for families within their community.

The target population for the Intensive Family Support program (IFS) is youth and families who are likely to come under the jurisdiction of the Court through a school attendance petition, either educational neglect or truancy petition, with ages of the youth being between 6-16 and they have had a mediation through the Genesee Intermediate School District to develop a school success plan.

"As a Genesee Intermediate School District Student Success Coach that works directly with chronically absent students and families, the Easterseals Prevention Program has been an invaluable resource to address barriers relating to chronic absenteeism...Without the Easterseals Prevention Program, many of our families would not have access to a comprehensive support system that can assist in addressing concerns. In addition, our school districts do not have the capacity to provide the level of case management support to our families that the Easterseals program provides, and without this additional support, many of our chronically absent students will continue to miss school. Data shows that chronic absenteeism affects a student's ability to read on grade level and the likelihood that they will graduate from high school. I believe that there is an incredible long-term value in this program and by working with families to improve attendance, students will be more likely to graduate from high school and become upstanding citizens."

**Ashlyn Dotson | Student Success  
Coach | GISD Attendance Liaison Office**

## Implementation

### Collaboration and Buy-In



The Court has worked very closely with Easterseals, the Genesee Intermediate School District, and the Attendance Task Force to address the issue of school attendance, school engagement, and diversion from court involvement. It was critical to the Court that families receive the help and support they need without court intervention. Students who do not attend school regularly have higher rates of physical and mental health diagnoses, substance use challenges, and are more likely to come in contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>v</sup> Children who have been court-petitioned (e.g., summoned by the court regarding truancy) are among the most at-risk for criminal involvement and school failure and criminal involvement.<sup>vi</sup>

With this in mind, the Court worked with their community partners to develop a comprehensive range of responses that included early identification of poor attendance patterns and a supportive response to school engagement. Through the Genesee County Attendance Task Force, the school community meets monthly to discuss successful prevention and intervention strategies. Additionally, the Court has had a contractual relationship with Easterseals for several years and they continue to successfully provide an array of services to affected families through child protective proceedings and juvenile delinquency cases. The services offered to the families of the Easterseals IFS program are collaborative in their own right due to the overarching philosophy to provide a comprehensive, person/family centered approach that assists individuals and their families to reach their goals and outcomes.

Easterseals has a 100-year history of providing services to the most in need in our communities. In 2021, organizationally wide they served over 16,000 individuals and their families. Their mission works to change the way the world defines and views disabilities by making profound, positive differences in people's lives every day. Their dedicated approach through the treatment process is to serve those with "invisible" disabilities such as autism, mental illness, substance use disorders and trauma. They strongly believe in the System of Care philosophy. It is the goal to create and participate in a coordinated network of community-based services and supports that is organized to meet the challenges faced by the individuals and family members of behavioral health services, i.e., building strong working relationships within the court system DHHS, Genesee Health system, school systems, shelters, food banks, etc. By collaborating with other organizations, Easterseals strengthens their ability to provide the most diverse services and supports to meet individual and community needs.

## Established Protocols

Easterseals takes a holistic and collaborative approach to work with and support both the youth and families they work with. Families often encounter multiple layers of both obvious and hidden barriers due to generational patterns in mental health, substance use, parenting, attendance at school and engagement to services. These challenges, when unaddressed and coupled with barriers of family engagement or lack of family resources, can increase involvement in the court system.

The Court, in conjunction with Easterseals, adopted a series of protocols to implement within their IFS program- starting first with early intervention. Early intervention, with supportive services that address the barriers for school attendance, has proven to be successful in diverting youth and families from the formal court system. In the past, the Court had to receive a petition to refer to the IFS program. By offering referrals to mediation and supportive services prior to filed petitions, the Court was able to provide a larger impact to the families it serves by lessening the overall involvement of the Court.

The GISD Liaison and the school staff refer youth based on identified risk factors such as attendance concerns, behavioral challenges, socioeconomic factors, and others. They will complete the IFS Referral Form and email it to the Easterseals supervisor. Once the referral is received, Easterseals will assign an Intensive Case Manager and the family will be contacted within three days of the referral and the initial appointment will be scheduled within seven days of the referral. The Intensive



Case Manger will utilize engagement strategies to take a multifaceted approach to working with assigned families. Each family will have an assessment and a plan driven by needs identified by the youth, family, court, school, etc. Each plan will be laid out explicitly using actionable objectives for the youth and families to reach their goals. Easterseals of Michigan (ESM) IFS Intensive Case Managers provide intensive, enhanced casework services to families and children. The Intensive Case Manager offers support to families that have demonstrated challenges in substance use, improper housing, lacking necessities in their home, poor school attendance, parenting skills, relationship skills, mental health challenges, and lack of participation in court hearings. The Intensive Case Manager not only provides a referral to community resources, but also to obtain the services as identified in the treatment plan or identified as barriers to having their children attend school. The Intensive Case Manager also offers to complete housing applications, provide transportation to parenting time and/or court hearings, obtain basic necessities, or work with the schools to remove any barriers to school attendance. Participating families also receive coaching/skills visits to model, educate, promote, and support increased positive parenting interactions utilizing the Incredible Years model.

The Intensive Case Manager meets with each family weekly with an intensity and length of service determined by the team with staff available seven days a week with flexible appointments to accommodate working families. Intensive Case Managers also accompany the family to all court proceedings and provide services in the home, community, school, court, etc. The Intensive Case Managers strive to work closely with the referring school to ensure attendance has improved, school engagement is progressing, and a petition is not filed. Monthly reports are provided to the referring schools and to the Court regarding progress of the referred youth and families. Further, Easterseals provides monthly statistics to the Court on number of referrals, number of cases opened, and number of cases closed and the reason for the case closure.

## Results

Since the IFS program began serving youth in February 2022, Easterseals and the Genesee Court teams have taken direct efforts to increase the number of youth that are referred to the program and connected to the Easterseals case workers to receive the intensive case management support. This has included working across the community to increase awareness of the program and the available supports to youth in need. Through these efforts, the program has received 158 referrals to the program as of June 30, 2023. Of those that were referred, the level of engagement has varied. Easterseals case managers find that youth and families have a wide range of responses to the initial intake meetings. Some families and youth refuse connection to services or working directly with the case manager involved with the program. Other youth work with the case managers for initial intake appointments but do not follow through to engage with services or their care plan. They're considered lost to follow up and not involved as clients of the IFS program. However, there are numerous youth and families that connect with the case worker for their intake appointment, screening and assessment, care plan review, and follow up with case management meetings and connections to services.

With this in mind, the current numbers for the program are focused on engagement with intake appointments and care plans developed. Of the 128 referrals as of March 24, 2023, 58 youth went through an intake appointment and there were 55 care plans of service were developed. Following that point in the program, these individuals meet regularly with their case managers to follow up on services and progress.

The IFS program began in early 2022. The County regularly tracks formal petitions related to delinquency and truancy across all youth in the county. The IFS program is designed to address the rate of formal petitions for Educational Neglect, under the formal category of Neglect, and Truancy, under the formal category of Delinquency. Table 3 shows the number of formal petitions that were



filed in Genesee County prior to and following the implementation of the IFS intervention with the MDHHS Title II Grant in FY 2021/2022.

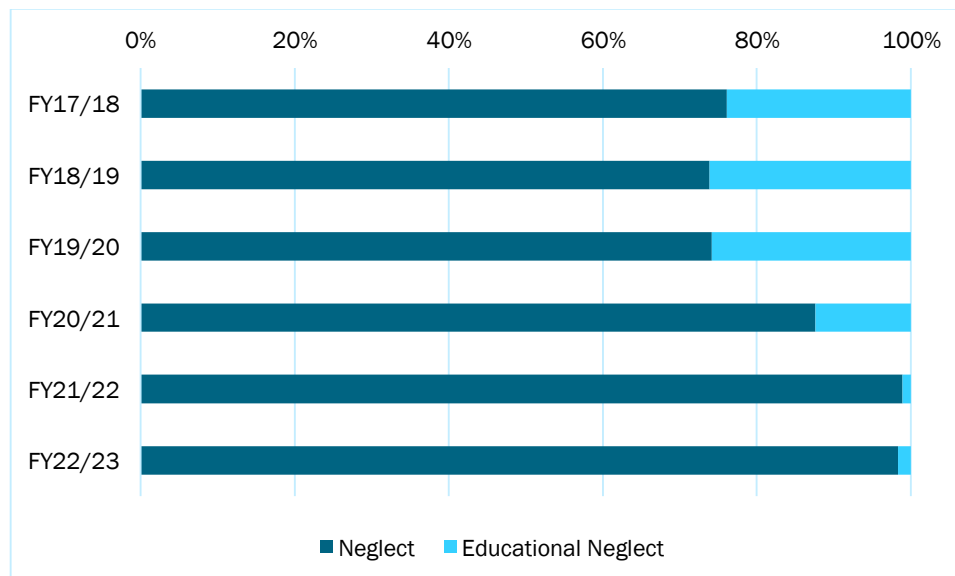
**Table 3. Formal Petitions Prior to Intensive Family Support Program**

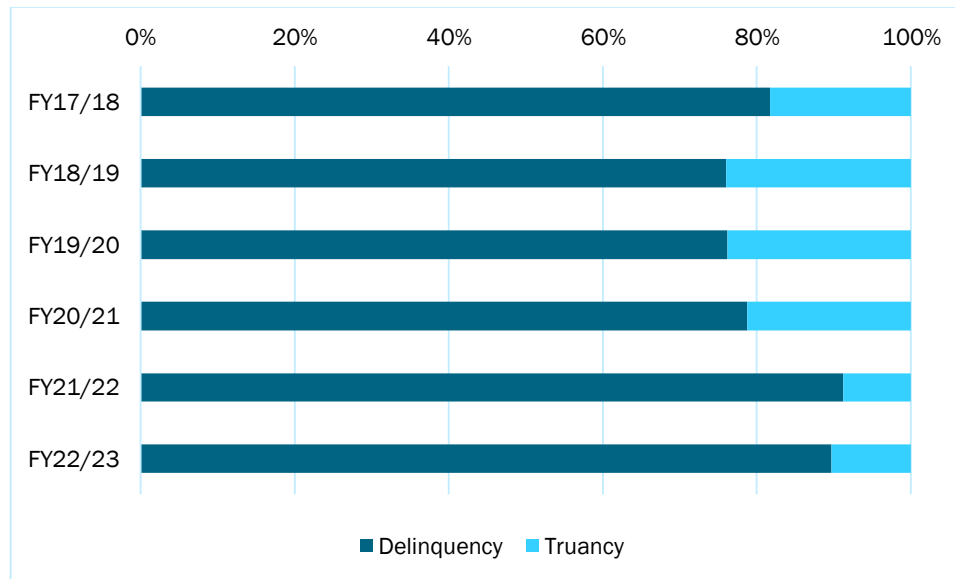
Category	FY 2017/18	FY 2018/19	FY 2019/20	FY 2020/21	FY 2021/22*	FY 2022/23*
Neglect	520	467	342	396	274	295
Edu. Neglect	163	165	119	56	3	5
% Total:	31%	35%	35%	14%	1%	2%
Delinquency	752	756	563	423	810	688
Truancy	168	238	176	114	78	79
% Total:	22%	31%	31%	27%	10%	11%

\* Followed Implementation of IFS program in early 2022.

As those numbers show, there was a large drop in the number of youth cases that have had a formal Educational Neglect or Truancy petition filed since the onset of the IFS implementation. The number of petitions did decrease in FY2020/21. However, this decrease was impacted by the global pandemic for COVID-19 and the closing of in-person school. This impact is also reflected in the number of overall significantly higher than in years prior to the pandemic. However, once school resumed and petitions did start getting filed again, the Court received a number of petitions that jurisdictions were holding onto from previous years, in addition to current offenses. The numbers seen that year would have been expected to be on par with the previous year in typical circumstances. Figure 1 shows the graphic representation of the decrease in Educational Neglect petitions as a total of all Neglect petitions and Figure 2 shows the decrease in Truancy petitions as a total of all Delinquency petitions across the county from FY 2017/18 until current.

**Figure 1. Educational Neglect Petitions in Genesee County as Portion of All Neglect Petitions**



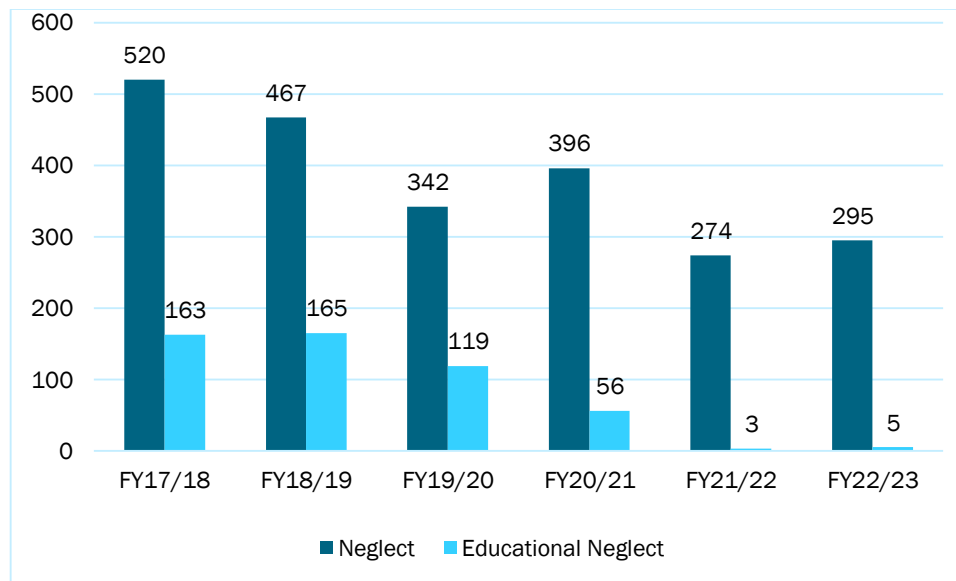
**Figure 2. Truancy Petitions in Genesee County as Portion of All Delinquency Petitions**

It is clear in these figures that the portion of Delinquency and Neglect petitions that were attributed to Truancy and Educational Neglect, respectively, decreased significantly during the year that IFS was initiated. This is especially the case for Educational Neglect petitions. While there was a drop in those petitions in FY2020/2021, that was likely due to COVID-19 impacting the number of youth in schools. However, the abrupt drop from 14% of cases to 1% of cases in FY2021/2022 and 3% in FY2022/2023 is in line with the beginning of this grant program. On a slightly lesser scale, dropping from 27% in FY2020/2021 to 10% and 11% in the grant period years is also a noticeable shift.

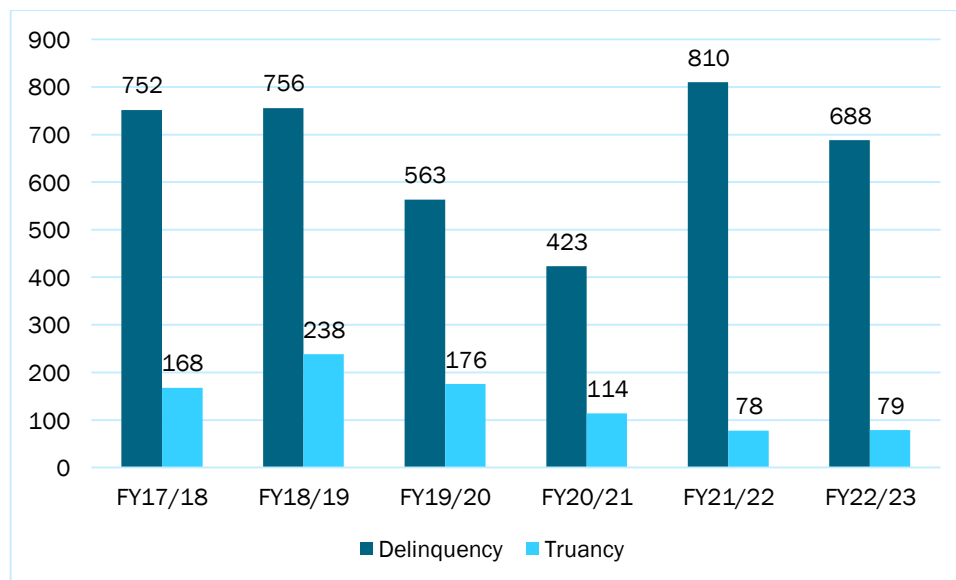
While those figures show the difference in Educational Neglect and Truancy petitions as a part of a whole, Figure 3 and Figure 4 show the raw numbers. This highlights how significant of a drop the cases had year over year prior to the implementation of IFS and once the program was in place.



**Figure 3. Count of Neglect Petitions, by Type**



**Figure 4. Count of Delinquency Petitions, by Type**



### Qualitative Information

Beyond this quantifiable impact that the program has had across the county, the qualitative information that has been gathered by the Easterseals case workers further highlights the positive impact they have been able to have on the youth they serve. Family members of youth that have been served by IFS have indicated that having their support has been “such a relief...normally [they] would be so overwhelmed trying to figure this out...but having your help takes a lot of the pressure off.” The support is appreciated immensely by the clients that are served. For many, they noted it was wonderful to feel as if an organization was there for them and felt they were deserving of help. The program helps youth that are struggling in school get back on track, supporting their families to get connected to the services they need whether that be in the school’s realm or outside of it.



For instance, many of the families are connected to services that are outside of the school jurisdiction and focus on general social services such as housing, transportation, food assistance and many others. One family supported by a single mother that was experiencing homelessness was connected to secure housing through IFS. In a testimonial from the mother, she shared her gratitude by saying “thank you for being the main person in my life to help me build a sturdy foundation, I have never felt comfortable trusting anyone to help me before.” Their close family friends echoed that sentiment, noting that they knew how happy they were to have their own place. IFS supports meet the family and the youth where they are – connecting them to services that are geared towards their needs and work with them closely to achieve success, whatever that may look like. But this program has shown through the numbers and the qualitative data shared with EasterSeals that it is having a positive impact on the individual youth, families, and County as a whole.

## Limitations

It is important to note that this data has its limitations. Due to data collection capabilities, we are unable to tie the intervention directly to all cases that received a petition or not. Furthermore, there is no way to define the level of engagement in services and the number of resources received by the youth or their families. Lastly, due to the timeline of the grant, the information tracked youth for 18 months. This does not allow for a very long study of the impact of the intervention in the longer-term, but future efforts could look into the lasting impacts.

## Conclusion

Truancy and Educational Neglect petitions were the specific focus and priority of IFS. The decrease in the number of these petitions following the implementation of the program indicates the positive impact that the work of Easterseals case workers has on youths’ lives. While the data doesn’t specifically explore the level of program involvement or the number of services that the individual was connected to as a result of the program, referral to Easterseals and connection to the program has proven effective at addressing risk factors and needs of youth. This has shown an impact on delinquency of the same youth. As noted above, delinquency rates in youth can indicate subsequent issues with the juvenile or adult justice system. The impact this program has for the youth involved has enormous potential to support youth in avoiding connection to the juvenile justice system. Connecting youth and their families to highly needed mental health and social services can help change the course of a youth’s life, if provided earlier and at the first referral based on need, rather than waiting for the individual’s case to reach a point of justifying a court petition for involvement.

The IFS program offers clear and attainable programming that can be sustained and implemented in ways to best suit any jurisdiction regardless of size. By adopting the processes and wrap-around services referenced within the “Established Protocols” section, a community has the opportunity to impact the lives of some of their most vulnerable citizens by offering intervention strategies and in turn decreasing the number of youth and families within the criminal justice system. When

**“I super appreciate you! I am glad to know someone thinks I am deserving of help.”**

[Statement from mother whose son missed over 100 days of school]

**“Having you is just such a relief normally I would be so overwhelmed trying to figure this out all on my own but having your help takes a lot of the pressure off.”**

[Statement from single father with special needs daughter facing unexpected and abrupt eviction]

**“Thanks so much for all of your help through all of these tough times. He loves school now and is passing all of his classes and was even chosen for student of the month!”**

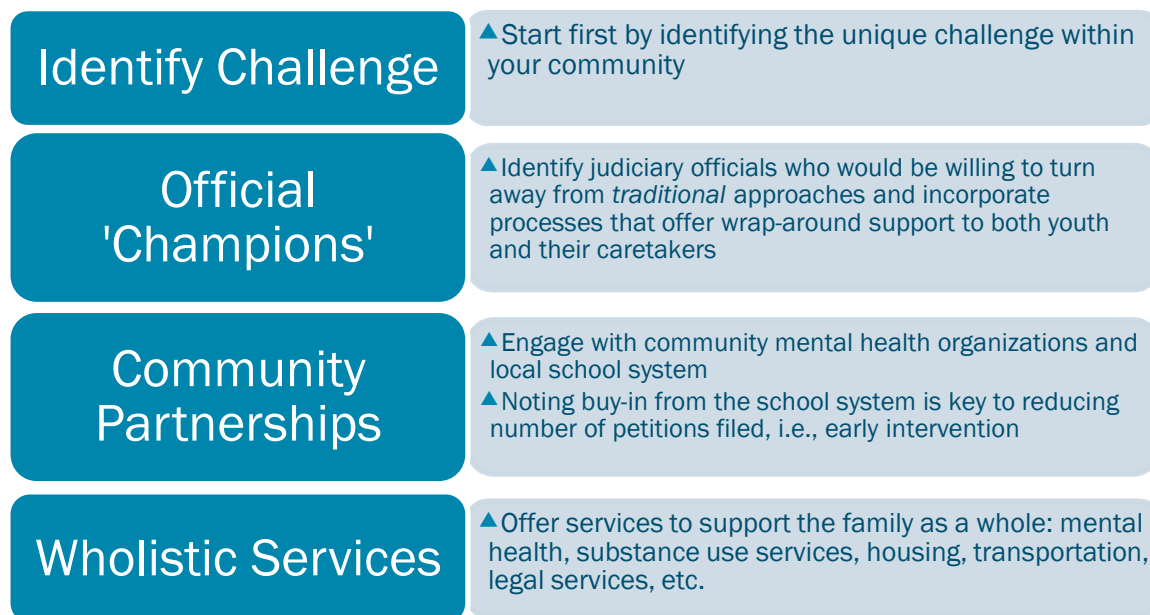
[Statement from mother whose son missed over 100 days of school]



considering opportunities for sustainability, communities should look to the qualitative and quantitative data presented and the larger implications and impacts programs of this nature will have on their communities as a whole. While there are limitations to the [current] quantitative data reported through this program, the responses from the school systems, the court systems, and the consumers indicates immense success. Success of this nature amplifies the opportunity for community buy-in and funding sources resulting in ongoing sustainability of this program. Funding sources can be varied in nature but data showing positive impact, as outlined in this report, goes a long way in bringing partners together and making the case for expansion or initiation of a program of this nature to support youth and divert at-risk youth before formal involvement with the juvenile justice system.

As a municipality considers incorporating a program of this nature, it is important to notate recommendations and to further highlight the notable resources, approaches, and protocols utilized by the Genesee County 7<sup>th</sup> Judicial Circuit Family Division’s IFS program operated in conjunction with Easterseals.

**Figure 5. Recommendations for Replicability**



## Citations

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- <sup>i</sup> Youth.gov. (2023). *Youth involved with the Juvenile Justice System*. Youth Involved with the Juvenile Justice System | Youth.gov. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/juvenile-justice/youth-involved-juvenile-justice-system>
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- <sup>vi</sup> Balfanz, R.W., Spiridakis, K., Neild, R.C., & Legters, N.E. (2003). High-poverty secondary schools and the juvenile justice system: how neither helps the other and how that could change. *New directions for youth development*, 99, 71-89 .

