

Opinion: Truancy is a sign of bigger problems

By Ellie Herman

He was 15 years old but looked 12, a reedy, pale little guy with a mop of dark hair. When he stood in front of the class to tell his story, he was so nervous you could see his skinny legs trembling under his khakis. The drama class assignment was to tell a story about a minor life event that led to some new realization about the world – an assignment designed both to help the kids get over their shyness and to teach the meaning of the word “epiphany.”

The “minor” life event the boy chose to relay was the time his father, addicted to meth and hallucinating, threw himself out a fourth-story window and died. At the end of the story, my student, sobbing, told us that his epiphany was that he was alone in the world.

We hugged him, many kids told him they loved him, and he said he felt better for having told the story. But that didn’t fix his life. His mother had remarried a man who disliked him, so sometimes that year, he’d stay after school and do homework in my classroom. But there were also many days he didn’t come to school at all. He didn’t come no matter how much I begged him or called his house, no matter how often our counseling staff met with the student or his mother.

I’ve been thinking of that boy lately as state and national officials are vowing to get tough on truancy. It would be hard to find an educator who doesn’t agree that truancy is a problem. Kids who skip class tend to do poorly in school, and they often don’t graduate. That in turn harms their career prospects and earning ability.

But to hear California Attorney General Kamala Harris or U.S.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan talk about the problem, solving it is simply a matter of holding schools and families accountable.

What do they think we've been trying to do?

Ellie Herman is taking a year away from the classroom to learn from teachers in schools across Los Angeles. She is blogging about it at gatsbyinla.wordpress.com.

Read the whole story