



Testimony
Senate Education Committee
Matt Stem, Deputy Secretary
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Chairman Smucker, Chairman Dinniman, and members of the Senate Education Committee, my name is Matt Stem and I am the Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Thank you for giving me the opportunity to submit comments regarding school attendance improvement and truancy reduction. Acting Secretary Rivera sends his regards and apologies for not being able to be here in person.

The School Code states that every child residing in Pennsylvania between the ages of 6 and 21 years is entitled to a free and full education in the Commonwealth's public schools. Throughout its history, Pennsylvania has relied on an educated citizenry to support the economic prosperity and growth of this state. Therefore, it is critical that the educational experiences of our children are academically rigorous and connected to the needs of a 21st century, global workforce.

PDE's goals are clear: every child should be known by name, able to achieve academically at proficient levels or above, and graduate college and career ready. The emphasis is on strong results for students. Many students in Pennsylvania's schools face serious challenges that impact their abilities to be successful in the classroom. With those challenges in mind, PDE promotes a wellness approach to build resiliency in all schools across the Commonwealth.

House Bill 141, sponsored by Representative Mark Gillen, and Senate Bill 359, sponsored by Senator Stewart Greenleaf, both seek worthy aims: shifting the focus on the root causes of truancy, rather than imposing unfair and harsh punishments on parents. PDE is supportive of both pieces of legislation – HB 141 with an amendment to remove the incarceration provisions which exist in current law – because we believe sending a parent or guardian to prison is not an appropriate or effective way to improve school attendance and truancy reduction.

The costs of truancy are real and significant. Regular attendance is critical in order for students to be promoted and graduate in a timely manner. Truancy is a challenge in many of Pennsylvania's districts, and is widely recognized as an early indicator of potential student dropout.

As mentioned earlier, too many of Pennsylvania's students experience unimaginable challenges that require specific interventions and supports. Research and data demonstrate that urban districts with high diversity and our schools with over-age youth have some of the highest dropout rates in the state. Improved educational experiences and opportunities at the secondary level have the potential for increased student engagement and higher graduation rates.

When we discuss truancy, it's important to dig deeper – to figure out why our kids don't come to school, and what factors contribute to truancy.

There are many factors that contribute to truancy, including student factors, family and community factors and schools factors. In general, there are three categories of students who don't come to school, with various underlying causes attributed to each.

1. Students who *cannot* come to school:
 - Illness
 - Challenges in the home
 - Family responsibilities
 - Housing instability
 - Involvement with juvenile justice system
2. Students who *will not* attend school:
 - Avoidance of bullying
 - Unsafe conditions
 - Harassment or embarrassment
 - Feeling unsuccessful
3. Students who *do not* attend school:
 - They, or their parents, do not see the value in being there
 - They have something else they would rather do
 - Nothing stops them from skipping school

Oftentimes, the school may not be aware of the challenges students face at home. Students may be caring for younger siblings or an ill family member. They may be homeless and move from place to place for food and shelter. They may be residing in an unstable or abusive environment.

The school environment itself may not be perceived as safe or welcoming. Students may avoid coming to school due to a fear of being bullied or teased. Students who have not had academic success often feel hopeless; they do not have the confidence or motivation to continue to come to a school where they think they will never succeed academically. School phobia can also be a truancy factor for students who have a genuine fear of the school and only feel comfortable at home.

Parents or guardians of a student may not have had a positive school experience. They do not send their children to school because they perceive schools negatively and do not see the value in sending their child to school. Students may feel completely disconnected from school; they may not have established connections with caring adults in the school, or they may be struggling academically.

Many times, parents who value school attendance may not have the control needed to ensure their child come to school each day. They often turn to the school for help and support with a truant child.

The need for early intervention is crucial in regard to truancy issues, as unhealthy patterns are set very early in a child's education. When students and parents understand early the importance of regular attendance, as well as the negative impact of regular absenteeism, the stage is set for a successful educational career. School personnel have a responsibility to ensure that all families are aware of the school's attendance policies and to follow up with any student that begins to demonstrate a pattern of absenteeism.

If absenteeism, tardiness or truancy is a recurring problem, a referral to the Student Assistance Program and contact with the student's parents/family is imperative. When these patterns begin to emerge, it is often an indication of challenges in the home or student struggles that may require intervention. These intervention strategies will differ depending on the needs of the student and the root cause of the problem.

In order to help eliminate truancy, PDE – in collaboration with the Department of Human Services and the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission – has issued a new truancy Basic Education Circular, BEC 24 P.S. 13-1327, Compulsory Attendance and School Attendance Improvement Plan, which aligns state agency efforts and provides comprehensive guidelines for schools, families and communities. These collective resources are housed within the PDE Truancy Toolkit. This toolkit, created by PA educators

and practitioners, accompanies the BEC and offers many resources, such as copies of all laws, effective practice descriptions, sample materials and reference and research listings.

To address the diverse reasons for truancy, PDE's Truancy Toolkit offers many approaches and programs that schools can utilize to mitigate truancy and encourage student attendance. The agency recommends a continuum approach to truancy reduction, beginning with prevention, implementing appropriate interventions, and evaluating impact. When schools establish and utilize a comprehensive system of services and supports for students, attendance outcomes improve dramatically.

The Department, with input from stakeholders, has created the School Attendance Improvement Plan (SAIP). This model is housed in the PDE Truancy Toolkit, and provides schools with a process to determine the root cause of poor or inconsistent attendance as well as create a plan for improvement. Through this plan, schools leverage appropriate internal and external resources to meet academic needs and address existing social, emotional, physical, mental and behavioral health issues of each student. The school, parents or guardians, students and appropriate outside agencies all work together to implement the plan.

Importantly, the PDE Truancy Toolkit provides the legal framework and context for addressing compulsory attendance and truancy. By becoming aware of and understanding the legal requirements concerning attendance, school staff will be able to develop policies and programs that are both compliant and responsive to local concerns. Using this Toolkit, schools will be in a better position to establish sound, evidence-based procedures that more effectively support students.

While schools play a critical role, improving attendance and student achievement is a shared responsibility. The most effective strategy for reducing truancy is when parents, schools, public agencies, the legal system, non-profit organizations, businesses and all members of the greater community understand truancy's impact and work together to create school environments where all students can fully participate.

More importantly, we need true collaboration between schools and county children and youth agencies to ensure that services are made available to meet the needs of truant students and their families, and that the division of service issues does not create unnecessary barriers.

The evidence is clear: putting parents in jail will not solve truancy. At PDE, we are working to support districts and schools as they develop better systems for identifying – and addressing – the root causes of truancy. It's a strategy that works – and our students deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your attention, and I will be happy to address any questions you may have.