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THE VILLAGE FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN
IN SUPPORT OF BILL #5926
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Last year the State made a huge investment in education recognizing that guaranteeing that Connecticut has an educated population is essential to our State. While truancy has a direct and obvious impact on the child that misses school, it also has a large impact on the rest of the learning community. How many of us have participated in meetings or committees in which an inordinate amount of time is used making sure everyone is on the same page because attendance of the group is inconsistent. It is no different in a class room. Truancy is disruptive to the education process and in this new world where educational rigor and school accountability is so important, can we allow this to continue?

According to the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC), a Governor-appointed committee of volunteers charged with advising the Governor and the staff at the Office of Policy and Management, school attendance needs to be a much higher and more visible priority of education policy at the state and local levels in Connecticut. This bill is a small step in the right direction.

A December 2006 report by the Center for Children's Advocacy found that there are many early warning signs of truancy becoming a problem in a student's later academic years including early absenteeism (students were identified with high absentee rates as early as kindergarten), retention and promotion by exception (91% of the children in their study had been retained or promoted by exception at least once), behavioral or psychiatric issues (50% of the children studied had documented behavioral or psychiatric issues) or learning difficulties (including significant academic delays, language disorders and attention or informational processing disorders).

Truancy is often the first step leading to behavior issues, suspension and expulsion, delinquency involvement and drop out. There is a clear link between suspensions/expulsions precipitating dropping out of school which in turn significantly increases the likelihood of a youth ending up in jail. This and the increase of in the number of youth arrested while at school are understood as "the school to prison pipeline." A confluence of challenges to public education in the U.S. has helped construct this pipeline. Under-resourced urban schools that are ill-equipped to address the needs of impoverished students, zero tolerance and other punitive disciplinary policies, "high stakes testing," and racism are all pipeline components.

The first step toward dismantling the pipeline is to take a critical look at existing school discipline policies, the actual practices of schools and law enforcement (school culture), and the impact of those policies and practices on students, teachers and the rates of expulsion, suspension, truancy and arrest. In the vast majority of cases, data demonstrates that policies or practices seen in the School-to-Prison Pipeline are counterproductive and

lack a educational underpinning. In fact, many of these policies not only label children as criminals, but they also encourage children to lose hope, making it more likely that they will wind up behind bars. These policies, and the incentive to pursue them, should therefore be eliminated or suspended while communities propose alternatives.

A critical component in blocking the school to prison pipeline is school culture and its effect on school attendance. A negative school culture leads to lower attendance rates among students who may not feel safe, valued or respected in the school environment. These feelings are especially strong among those who may have learning disabilities, mental health challenges or who have had contact with the juvenile justice system. The overall result then, is a culture of high absenteeism. In a vicious cycle, those high rates of absenteeism and truancy would cause the school culture to further deteriorate and lead to increased suspensions and expulsions.

A handful of local efforts, like Truancy Court Prevention Program, the Hartford Police Truancy Reduction Program and the New Britain Truancy Reduction Program have shown that addressing the problem head on can help improve a child's attendance. While these programs have had some success, none are large enough to have a serious impact on the overall problem. Bill 5926 begins to put the State's focus on the issue and to develop the type of programs that can have an impact on the issue.

If there are two things that you should remember today about truancy, please remember that it does not just damage the child who misses school it affects the entire community and that we can do something about it.