



53 Oak Street, Suite 15
Hartford, CT 06106
Voice: 860-548-1661
Fax: 860-548-1783
www.ctkidslink.org

Testimony Supporting H.B. 6487, An Act Concerning the Reporting of Truancy Data
Lauren Velazquez, M.P.P., Taby Ali, Alexandra Dufresne, J.D., Jamey Bell, J.D.
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee:

We testify on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children supports H.B. 6487, An Act Concerning the Reporting of Truancy Data and H.B. 6491, An Act Concerning Longitudinal Studies of Student Achievement.

I. Connecticut Voices strongly supports H.B. 6487, An Act Concerning the Reporting of Truancy

Introduction

Truancy is a serious problem in many of Connecticut's public schools. Students who are truant are at great risk for falling behind in school, dropping out and even becoming involved in crime. Urgent attention to truancy is required to ensure that at-risk youth receive the services and programming that they need to stay in school and be successful.

While Connecticut has a myriad of local initiatives aimed at reducing truancy, basic truancy data at the state and local level are not publicly available. The State Department of Education currently collects truancy data from local school districts in order to comply with federal reporting requirements, but it does not publish this data.

Without access to comparable truancy data at the local or state level, organizations and schools within the state must develop truancy prevention programs in isolation. Districts are unable to compare their schools' initiatives to those of peer districts, and are unable to incorporate effective truancy reduction initiatives in their strategic plans. Moreover, parents, students, advocates, and members of the public cannot hold schools and school districts accountable for making progress toward fulfilling one of their most important duties: keeping children in school.

As an organization dedicated to the use of research and data to inform strategic public policy choices, Connecticut Voices for Children recognizes the immense potential that publishing basic data could have. For that reason, we support H.B. 6487, An Act Concerning the Reporting of Truancy Data. This Act would require local school districts to include truancy data *that they already have organized and collected*

in order to comply with federal reporting requirements in their “Strategic School Profile” report to the State Department of Education. Under current law, a wealth of information useful for schools’ and districts’ strategic planning such as test scores, teacher qualifications, class size and number of computers is already included in these reports. These reports are published on the State Department of Education website and are available for public access. Local Superintendents are also required to annually present at a public Board of Education meeting their report.¹ H.B. 6487 merely amends the Strategic School Profile statute to include existing truancy data.

The Dangers of Truancy; Truancy as the “Canary in the Coalmine”

Research indicates that truancy is a leading indicator of low academic achievement, drop out, crime, and drug abuse.

- Low Academic Achievement-Students who are consistently truant are most often the students most in need of academic support. Studies show that negative educational outcomes like low test scores and poor grades are strongly correlated with chronic absences. One analysis conducted by the Center for Children’s Advocacy found that more than a quarter of students who were classified as experiencing “academic difficulty” had demonstrated patterns of chronic school absence as early as kindergarten.¹ The same study also found that 84% of truant students test at least two grades below level on state assessments.² In a national study conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty, data show that there is a significant positive correlation between chronic absence in kindergarten and low performance in first grade.³ These findings illustrate the importance of tracking and analyzing truancy data, as truancy data can be used to predict and proactively work with students who require additional educational support. Early identification of truant students may allow schools and the state to intervene early on in a child’s education to prevent them from falling further behind.
- Increased drop outs- Truant students are at the greatest risk for dropping out of our public school system, and attendance patterns are extremely useful for predicting and addressing drop out rates. Independent analysis by the Manpower Demonstration Research Center (MDRC) found that 9th grade attendance was the best predictor for whether or not a student will graduate high school in four years.⁴
- Increased crime and drug abuse-Prolonged truancy also correlates with crime and drug abuse. Unabated truancy is a gateway behavior leading to crime and drug abuse. Truant students often spend their days unsupervised without adult guidance. Many students who are absent from school become involved with crime, drugs and other dangerous behaviors. A U.S. Department of Justice study confirmed this idea by noting that chronic absenteeism is the “most powerful predictor of delinquent behavior.”⁵ Several municipalities across the nation have found strong links between truancy rates and increases in local vandalism and shoplifting.⁶ Studies have

found that youth who are arrested are not only often truant but are, more than half the time, abusing drugs at the time of their arrest.⁷

Connecticut's History of Truancy Prevention Programs

Truancy prevention programs are not new to the state. For the past several decades, school districts, municipal police agencies and community groups have organized to address the problem of truant students in their communities. Currently, a host of programs are being implemented throughout the state to address poor student attendance. Programs differ in their focus ranging from court intervention to law enforcement to direct service intervention. Several models currently in use are outlined below:

- Court Models-Throughout the nation, "truancy courts" are being adopted to promote collaboration between the judicial system and schools in preventing truancy. Such an initiative is in effect in Hartford. Run by the Center for Children's Advocacy, the Truancy Court Prevention Project⁸ uses a multi-tiered approach to reduce truancy. This project partners judges, social service providers, case managers and educational experts to work with students one on one.
- School Based Models- School districts all over the state like New Britain, New Haven, and New London are attempting to reduce truancy within their schools. Such districts are working with truancy supervisors and staff to address truancy. Programs such as the Connecticut Bar Association/ Truancy Intervention Project⁹ partner legal experts in the state with schools to work on truancy cases.
- Law Enforcement Models- Several municipal law enforcement offices like Hartford Police Department have taken proactive approaches to truancy and have created programs to identify truant students and work with schools to increase those students' attendance.

While the initiatives named above represent just a fraction of the work going on across the state to address this issue, it is vital that the State of Connecticut support these ongoing initiatives by providing a mechanism for schools, nonprofit organizations, parents, citizens, and policy-makers to access and evaluate state-wide truancy data. Access to basic truancy data will allow all those involved to measure and improve their refinement of programming and ultimately be more successful at achieving their end of reducing student truancy.

Currently, Connecticut Truancy Data is Collected, But Not Published.

Under existing Federal "NCLB" (No Child Left Behind) mandates, each district in Connecticut already collects truancy data.¹⁰ The federal government, for purposes of monitoring Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) has defined truancy as "a student who has at least 15 unexcused absences in a school year."¹¹ While such federal reports are useful tools for schools and researchers, they grossly undercount the truancy rate in Connecticut's schools. Under Connecticut statute, a student is defined as truant by having 4 unexcused absences within a month or 10 unexcused absences over the course of a year.¹² In addition, under Connecticut law, school administrators are required to meet with students and the parents of students who are "habitually truant" (as defined by Connecticut statute 10-200: "*habitual truant*" means a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has twenty unexcused absences within a

school year). Presumably, in order to comply with this law, individual schools keep track of the number of students who are truant.

Why Existing Truancy Data Should be Published

If the state of Connecticut and its municipalities want to continue to reduce dropout rates, then there must be a coordinated effort to collect and analyze attendance and truancy data. Once data are available, organizations and agencies will have an opportunity to craft specific interventions that prevent drop outs by identifying which students are currently most at risk. For Connecticut to implement a system of data driven action in response to truancy, existing data on truancy needs to be publicly accessible. Currently, the attendance data collected and published on the state's "Strategic School Profiles" reflect only attendance at a snapshot in time (October of each year). Such data do not illustrate long-term absence patterns within a district or across the state and are not useful in understanding attendance behavior over time.

Organizations and agencies that are currently working to remedy truancy have stressed the need for data. In its presentation to the Connecticut consortium on attendance, the National Dropout Prevention Center stated that the first effective strategy that must be adopted to address truancy is "A systemic renewal" by schools and communities.¹³ Systemic renewal is defined as a process that intentionally evaluates and refines goals and strategies.¹⁴

Many regions across the nation, in response to their truancy problems, have implemented systems of data driven decision making that allow them to understand and proactively respond to attendance problems within their schools. The U.S. Department of Justice relies on systemic data collection in its model truancy programs.¹⁵ National model programs in regions like Florida, Texas and New York all have implemented systems of truancy data collection and collaboration.¹⁶

Connecticut should follow other states in enacting legislation that would create consistent and detailed reporting mandates for truancy and absence data. In an era of accountability and strategic planning, data driven decision-making is crucial to creating efficient and effective reforms. The status quo provides no consistent reporting from school districts with regard to truancy, making it impossible to compare districts to each other or even to compare a district to itself over time.

Why Strategic School Profiles Are the Best Place to Publish Already Existing Truancy Data

Strategic school profiles are detailed, indispensable tools published annually that are used by schools, organizations and advocacy groups to drive strategic analysis and planning. The Connecticut General Assembly created these profiles nearly two decades ago.¹⁷ The strategic school profiles were created to compel each school district to report annually to the Commissioner of Education along a variety of areas including "factors which may place a student at risk educationally."¹⁸ *Truancy is arguably the biggest red flag to identify such students at risk yet truancy data is not currently collected in the Strategic School Profiles.* Currently schools already collect and report detailed information in their reports including average size of biology classes and number of print materials in the library. Clearly, schools have become adept at collecting and organizing the most detailed information in their SSPs. Including such important data as truancy rates (which by law they already have recorded) should be no additional burden to these schools. The Department of Education has defined the purpose of the current reporting system as serving.. "as an accountability system which informs the public about what is happening in Connecticut schools and to stimulate school improvement through shared information."¹⁹ Inclusion of truancy data in the profiles

would further this goal by promoting transparency in attendance accountability and truancy prevention programming through sharing of existing truancy information.

The Timeliness of HB 6487

In this time of economic uncertainty and tight budgets, we cannot fall behind in our responsibilities to improve our public education system. This legislation provides the unique advantages of being proactive and cost effective. Increasing access to this already existing data would promote useful research and strategic program planning that could successfully reduce the problems of truancy, youth crime, high school drop out and low achievement. Passage of HB 6487 would support already existing truancy prevention programs and would promote further innovation and progress within Connecticut's schools.

II. Connecticut Voices for Children also supports H.B . 6491, An Act Concerning Longitudinal Studies of Student Achievement.

We believe that increased access to educational data will promote strategic planning and innovation, and is critical to the development of programs that better serve our children. Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

¹¹ Connecticut General Statute 10-220. *10-220(c) Annually, each local and regional board of education shall submit to the Commissioner of Education a strategic school profile report for each school under its jurisdiction and for the school district as a whole. The superintendent of each local and regional school district shall present the profile report at the next regularly scheduled public meeting of the board of education after each November first.* <http://search.cga.state.ct.us/dtsearch/pub/statutes.html>

² *ibid.* Sample n-91

³ Chang and Romero, Hedy N. and Mariajose. "Present, Engaged and Accounted For: the critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades." *The National Center for Children in Poverty.* (September 2008). P.9 http://nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf

⁴ "Fast Fact: Ninth-Grade Attendance Rates Predict High School Graduation." (August 2007). http://www.mdrc.org/area_fact_35.html

⁵ Garry, Eileen M. "Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems." *The Office of Juvenile Justice Bulletin.* (October 1996) P 2. <http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/truancy.txt>

⁶ Baker, Sigmon and Nugent, Myria, Jane and M. Elaine. "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Kids in School." *The U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice Bulletin.* (September 2001). P. 2 www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/188947.pdf

⁷ Garry, Eileen M. "Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems." *The Office of Juvenile Justice Bulletin.* (October 1996) P 1. <http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/truancy.txt>

⁸ http://www.kidscounsel.org/aboutus_programs_tcpp.htm

⁹ <http://www.cga.ct.gov/kid/fvsn/NOTES%20from%20Truancy%20Subcommittee%20Meeting.pdf>

¹⁰ NCLB Annual Yearly Progress Reports include truancy as a category that schools must include. The Federal definition for "truant" is any student who has "at least 15 unexcused absences a year" and the truancy rate is "the percent of all students who are enrolled in a school during the school year who were chronic truants." <http://nclb.osse.dc.gov/>

¹¹ <http://nclb.osse.dc.gov/>

¹² Section 10-198a thorough 10-202f of Connecticut General Statute

¹³ Reimer and Smink, Mary and Jay. "15 Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention." *The National Dropout Prevention Center.* (April 2005) P .6 www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/CJPPD/CJjyd/JjydPublications/AtaStrategies.doc

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ Baker, Sigmon and Nugent, Myria, Jane and M. Elaine. "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Kids in School." *The U.S. Department of Juvenile Justice Bulletin.* (September 2001). P. 9 www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/188947.pdf

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *Section 10-220c of the Connecticut General Statute.*

¹⁸ Connecticut State Department of Education/CEDAR "About Strategic School Profiles." <http://www.csde.state.ct.us/public/cedar/profiles/about.htm>