

**Testimony of Judge Christine Keller
Chief Administrative Judge for Juvenile Matters
Connecticut Judicial Branch**

**Education Committee Public Hearing
S.B. 278, An Act Concerning Truancy**

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Caligiuri, Representative Guiliano and members of the Education Committee. My name is Christine Keller and I am the Judicial Branch's Chief Administrative Judge for Juvenile Matters.

I am here today to testify in support of **Raised Bill, *An Act Concerning Truancy***. This proposal stems from recommendations adopted by the FWSN Advisory Board, of which I am a member.

First, I would like to express that for too long, we have not taken truancy, especially of very young students, seriously. When you examine the reasons for underachieving schools in certain areas, I am certain you will find that missing school has a lot to do with a child's ability to learn and perform well on standardized tests.

The truant children we often see in juvenile court are adolescents, referred as children from families with service needs. However, when I receive additional information on these children, and the children who are the subject of a neglect or abuse proceedings, I often see evidence of extensive absences from school. Frankly, sometimes it's shocking -- 40 days missed, 80 days missed in a single year. In the past, the local schools often waited until the end of the year to refer any truants to us, and even now, nothing is done about the extensive truancy of children who are under 12.

One thing we accomplished in implementing the new FWSN laws you passed in 2006 is to mandate that no school can refer a case to court without first fulfilling its responsibility to hold a meeting with the parent of each truant child. The purpose of this meeting is to allow school personnel and the parent or guardian to review and evaluate the reasons for truancy. This is supposed to be done when the child has missed four unexcused days in a month or ten unexcused days in a school year. What one proposal in this bill will do will be to require the school, after efforts to work informally with the parents of any truant child, no matter what the child's age, are met with no cooperation, to refer the matter to court as a case involving a child from a family with service needs. When these matters are referred to court under current law, the courts are offering diversionary services to the families. If they don't cooperate with those diversionary services, a court case, either a FWSN or neglect petition, can be filed.

I think this mandate would catch a lot of truancy problems long before the child's education has been severely compromised due to excessive absence, and it would call for intervention in an earlier, essential stage of a child's school career. I recently read that if

you do not teach children to read before the 3rd grade, it is extremely difficult to do that afterward. If a young child misses a great deal of school, you have prepared that child for a lifetime of failure.

As you can see, the referrals come when so many "unexcused" absences occur. One additional problem that needs addressing is to define, uniformly, in all town, what is an excused, and what is an unexcused absence. Some towns are quite clear and strict on this; others are more lenient. It should not matter which town you are in if we intend to impress upon all parents the importance of school attendance to their child's educational progress.

Many communities are implementing truancy prevention initiatives. Some are involving judges. The final new section of the bill would require the State Department of Education to report on these initiatives and to collect and report on truancy data, which will be easier to collect when you have a uniform definition of unexcused absence, so we can pinpoint where the truancy problems are most severe, and also determine what innovations are decreasing the amount of truancy in a particular system.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify..