

**TESTIMONY OF TERRI DREW,
DIRECTOR OF STAMFORD YOUTH SERVICES BUREAU,
JUVENILE REVIEW BOARD AND "PATHWAYS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS"
(P.A.S.S.) TRUANCY PROGRAM**

**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
IN SUPPORT OF RAISED S.B. NO. 738 AN ACT CONCERNING TRUANCY**

MARCH 1, 2010

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and members of the Education Committee. I have a special greeting for Senator McDonald and Representative Miller whom both represent my home town of Stamford.

As the Director of the Stamford Youth Services Bureau, I have had extensive involvement with truancy and juvenile justice issues for the past 7 years. In 2005, I helped found the Stamford Juvenile Review Board in order to divert first-time juvenile offenders from the court system, by connecting them back into their community using the model of Balanced and Restorative Justice. Instead of penalizing young people, we try to identify the underlying issues causing them to get into trouble and find solutions based on their strengths to reconnect them to their community. This could be mentoring, community service, tutoring, individual & family therapy, positive activities and many other types of restorative justice initiatives. Based on my experience with the JRB, there were two issues almost always prevalent: The young person was habitually truant and often failing most classes.

We began to see the need for a specific program designed to address the unique needs of truant students before they get arrested and involved in the juvenile justice system. The P.A.S.S. Program (Pathways to Academic and Social Success) is similar to the JRB in that we conduct panel sessions with community members and work to reconnect the young person back into their family, school and community.

We started the program in the fall of 2009, choosing to pilot it in the middle school from which we had the most JRB referrals. We are working with the guidance counselors and social workers to identify kids that are at risk based on attendance, behavior and grades. We are hoping to expand the program to all middle schools next year.

I support Raised Bill No. 278 for the following reasons:

1. We need SDE to be the central organizing body for truancy programs so that program directors can mount a coordinated effort towards reducing truancy statewide. We also need to require SDE to provide truancy data and program information to the Governor and General Assembly in order to hold school districts accountable in their work to reduce truancy.

I've found my participation with the FWSN Advisory Board, Truancy Subcommittee to be extremely valuable to my work in Stamford. I've benefited from the coordination and collaboration this group has created amongst truancy programs statewide by learning about best practices and collaborating with others around the state that are doing this work.

2. I believe that requiring the SDE to report to the Governor and General Assembly will make school districts even more aware of how seriously the State of Connecticut takes the problem of truancy. In addition, requiring this reporting will hold school districts accountable to the results of their anti-truancy efforts. This will allow districts that are successful in their efforts to share their strategies, and will allow struggling districts to get the help they need.
3. We need a uniform definition of "unexcused" and "excused" absences so that we can compare and contrast our district's rates with those of other districts statewide, in an effort to accurately ascertain the scope of truancy issues in Connecticut.

Without a uniform definition of these terms, it is impossible to get the full picture of truancy in Connecticut, and thus impossible to know where our district fares in comparison. Further, it is very difficult for those who direct truancy programs to communicate to parents what constitutes an excused and unexcused absence when the definitions vary so much by district. This inconsistency is confusing for parents and for school districts alike.

4. We need to establish a timeline for SDE and their schools to report truancy cases so they may be handled in an effective and timely manner. Last year our Juvenile Probation received 50 FWSN reports in May. School ends in June. This does not allow for any intervention to be implemented and successful. It means that those 50 kids started this fall behind grade level and with no strategies in place to help them be successful for this year. We need to establish uniform practices around the State so that all districts along with SDE can be held accountable for the truancy cases that exist within each district.

Respectfully submitted,

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