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TESTIMONY OF CONNECTICUT LEGAL SERVICES, INC. FOR THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE MARCH 3, 2014 IN SUPPORT OF RAISED HB 5357 AN ACT CONCERNING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM, WITH PROPOSED REVISION

This testimony is submitted to the Education Committee by the Children at Risk Unit at Connecticut Legal Services (CLS). For the last 30 years, the attorneys in the Children at Risk Unit at CLS have represented low-income families on issues of access to educational and behavioral health services for their children.

CLS fully supports HB 5357, an Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism and truancy are significant problems for students, for communities and for society, contributing to increased school failure, school dropouts, and juvenile court involvement. Chronic absenteeism has been identified as the most significant predictor of delinquent behavior.¹

An examination of some of the reasons for truancy and chronic absenteeism through the Truancy Court Prevention Project (TCPP) found many early warning signs, such as absenteeism as early as Kindergarten, retention or promotion by exception, behavioral or psychiatric issues, learning disorders, attention and language disorders. A study by the TCPP described how children who are highly motivated and eager to learn in the early school years encountered downward spirals and school failures when faced with some of these challenges, which ultimately led to truancy and chronic absenteeism.²

Under the current system to address truancy concerns, school districts only intervene after a certain number of unexcused absences. Truancy does not capture excused absences and disciplinary absences. Chronic absenteeism is different than truancy in that it measures the total time a student is out of school (unexcused AND excused absences). This bill will require districts to calculate and submit chronic absenteeism data, which will help districts

¹ OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin, "Truancy: First Step to a Lifetime of Problems," October 1996.

² Center for Children's Advocacy, "Truancy – A Closer Look: The Link Between Unmet Educational Needs and Truancy," December 2006.

identify which students may require interventions, and will help show which districts are falling short of their obligation to serve these needy students. A child is considered “chronically absent” if he or she is absent for 10% of the school year or more. CLS asks you to please revise HB 5357 to reflect this accurate definition.

In addition to measuring chronic absenteeism, this bill also requires schools with a high rate of chronic absenteeism to establish a School Attendance Review Team. These teams will, on a weekly basis, review cases of chronically absent children, discussing school interventions, community referrals, and making any additional recommendations for such children and their families. Children with chronic absenteeism are in need of supportive interventions, and the earlier in a child’s education and in the school year attendance concerns are addressed, the more positive the outcome for the child. The cost of not addressing chronic absenteeism is simply too high – for the students, for communities and for our society. A School Attendance Review Team and a more structured system for monitoring attendance and providing intervention will help this at-risk population of students.

For the above reasons, we strongly urge the Education Committee to support HB 5357, An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism. Please feel free to contact Attorney Jillian Griswold at (860)786-6364 with any questions.

Submitted by:

Connecticut Legal Services, Inc.