

Testimony Re: R.B.5357

The proposed revisions to C.G.S. 10-198a defining chronic absenteeism and providing statutorily prescribed processes for schools to address chronic absenteeism will greatly enhance the ability of educators to assure that children and their families receive the educational and related services necessary for their academic success. Recent amendments to the state's truancy statute helped but did not assure early and effective systemic response. As a superior court judge assigned to the juvenile court for three years I saw firsthand the impact of years of chronic truancy on the youth who appeared before me. Unfortunately, by the time that students appear in juvenile court their deficits are so severe and behavioral patterns so entrenched there is little possibility for them to overcome the deficits of years of chronic absenteeism. One of the inevitable consequences of chronic absenteeism is that the nature and extent of the student's needs is lack of understanding and awareness due to the child's absence from school. This became even clearer from my experience of implementing a voluntary truancy prevention program in which students, parents and school representatives met in court to determine truancy causes and implement solutions. In almost every case, chronic truancy was related to unidentified need for educational testing and resources, social services or mental health treatment. Although this small program helped the majority of the students to remain in school, it was clear that had intervention occurred earlier and had the schools had the benefit of established systems for communication and access to services, the results for the students and their families would have been even better. In every case, these students, 8th-10th tenth graders were already critically behind their peers and at the risk of failure regardless of intervention. Even a few days of absence places so many children who are at risk academically on the margin. Unfortunately, they remain unidentified until later grades when it becomes nearly impossible to overcome their educational deficits. Too frequently, behavioral issues compound poor academic performance. As overwhelming as these problems may seem, they are largely preventable if identified and dealt at the earliest point. I am currently participating in a volunteer truancy prevention program with 7th grade students which has reinforced the importance of early and systemic intervention at the elementary and middle school level. The proposed statutory revisions will insure such timely and effective intervention to benefit vulnerable students before it is too late.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Hon. Mary E. Sommer