

Public Testimony – H.B. 5423: An Act Concerning Juvenile Justice Initiatives

Good afternoon Chairs and members of the committee.

My name is **Deivone M. Tanksley Sr.**, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak today in support of the recommendations connected to H.B. 5423.

I want to start by saying I really respect the direction these recommendations are going, because they are trying to understand young people before they get pulled deeper into the justice system.

When I read about the transportation pilot, that really hit home for me. Sometimes when a young person misses school, the first assumption is that they don't care or that they're being irresponsible. But the truth is, a lot of times it's something much simpler and much more real. It's transportation. It's family circumstances. It's instability at home.

When I was a kid, I was actually charged with truancy at 12 years old. Some days I missed school because I missed the bus. Some days there wasn't always a parent available to get me there. And the truth is, many of our parents were struggling with the same barriers too. Some didn't have a driver's license, some didn't have reliable transportation, and many were working or dealing with their own challenges just trying to keep the family afloat.

Instead of someone stepping in to ask what was going on in my life, the system labeled me as the problem. That label eventually led to me being incarcerated as a child. When you're twelve years old and the system responds that way, it doesn't feel like support. It feels like you've already been judged.

That's why I strongly support the recommendation to move away from the word "truancy" and toward the term "chronic absenteeism." That change might seem small, but it's actually very powerful. Words shape how systems respond. Truancy assumes wrongdoing. Chronic absenteeism asks a different question: what is happening in this young person's life that is keeping them from school?

Sometimes that answer is transportation. Sometimes it's mental health. Sometimes it's family instability. But many times, it's something deeper.

Many of our young people are growing up in environments where their brains are constantly operating in fight-or-flight mode. Poverty, violence, scarcity, pain, trauma, and instability all affect how a young person develops. When a child is growing up worrying about safety, food, housing, or what's happening at home, their brain is focused on survival, not always on algebra or attendance.

Science is now confirming what many people who grew up in these environments have known for a long time — that brain development continues well into a person's twenties. But I think it's important to connect that science with the human side of the story. For many youth, the stress and trauma they experience from childhood into early adulthood can dramatically shape how they think, react, and make decisions.

That's why I also support the discussion around emerging adult protections up to age 26. This isn't about making excuses for behavior. It's about recognizing that development, environment, and opportunity all play a role in how young people grow and who they become.

If we build systems that understand those realities, we create pathways that help young people recover, grow, and contribute to their communities instead of pushing them deeper into cycles that are hard to escape.

For me, these recommendations represent something important. They represent a shift away from simply reacting to problems and toward understanding the conditions that create them in the first place.

Because sometimes the difference between a child being labeled a problem and a child finding their path forward is simply whether someone stopped long enough to understand their situation.

I'm grateful to see Connecticut moving in that direction, and I appreciate the work being done to build policies that focus on support, stability, and opportunity for our youth.

Thank you for your time.