

Maryland Education Coalition

The Maryland Education Coalition is dedicated to raising the academic achievement of students in Maryland public schools by promoting adequate funding and systemic accountability for improving results.

House Ways and Means Committee Testimony in Support of House Bill 207: Education – Chronically Absent Students

February 6, 2013

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Chronic school absenteeism is an issue plaguing the education system. Formal learning is a sequenced-based practice in which lessons learned one day are key to understanding ideas and principles in later lessons. Students who consistently miss class are left behind and miss instruction and interactions with teachers essential to knowledge development. Simply put, if students are not in school, then they likely are not learning. Several studies have found a direct correlation between high absence and decreasing grades and test scores.

House Bill 207 addresses the problem at the level of the individual student and family by requiring an analysis of the causes of a child's chronic absence and the development of a plan to address the causes. We are supportive of this approach, but suggest some amendments to strengthen the bill:

- The bill proposes a new definition of chronic absence: "a student who is unlawfully absent from school for more than 10% of the school days...." We suggest retaining the current definition of 20 days per school year in order not to lose comparability with historical data. For the purposes of intervening, there could be a provision allowing intervention if more than 5 days are missed in any quarter.
- We ask that pre-K students also be included in the active intervention protocol mandated in paragraph (E).
- We would like to enhance the details of the system of active intervention as described in paragraph (C) so that plans must be *implemented*. In addition, there should be follow-up every 90 days to determine how well school system, family, and any other involved service providers performed their tasks under the plan and then a revision of the plan in light of any changed circumstances, if appropriate.
- Because data show that certain transition years can create special risk for chronic absenteeism, we ask that a provision be inserted to require that the county board's plan contain special provisions for focusing on students in kindergarten, 6th grade, and 9th grade.

Nationally, one in ten kindergarteners and first graders misses a month of school each year. The skills and habits developed in the early years often determine the chances of graduation and academic achievement in later years. Non-punitive solutions, such as the University of Baltimore's Truancy Court Program, are being pursued in Maryland and show promise in responding to the absentee issue. Schools and families can and must work together to help identify and remove barriers to attendance such as transportation, implementation of after-school programs, health care issues and bullying. This bill is a helpful step toward finding the best solutions that will ensure that students are in the classroom and learning.

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We urge you to support HB 207 with the proposed amendments. Thank you.