

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7289 Re: AN ACT RELATING TO
EDUCATION -- COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE**

House Education Committee

March 6, 2024

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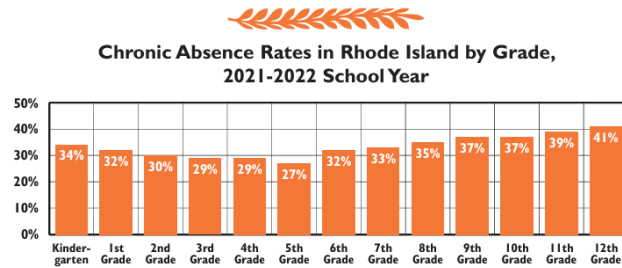
Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to support the intent of House Bill 7289 and thank Chairman McNamara for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Donovan, Cruz, Ackerman, Giraldo, Voas, Potter, and Noret for co-sponsoring. This act would instruct the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to create a two-year pilot outreach and tracking program at two public high schools, aimed at addressing attendance and chronic absenteeism issues among students.

Reducing chronic absence is important for improving high school graduation rates and increasing college and career readiness.

Students being present and engaged in learning daily matters. Young children are chronically absent from school for a variety of reasons. Asthma is a leading cause of school absenteeism, accounting for one-third of all absences, but other physical and behavioral health issues, including dental and vision problems, food insecurity, anxiety, and/or depression can also result in chronic absence.

While illness is a leading factor in chronic early absence, chronic absenteeism also can result from poor quality education, ambivalence about or alienation from school, and chaotic school environments, including high rates of teacher turnover or absenteeism, disruptive classrooms, and/or bullying. Unreliable or insufficient transportation, violence at and around school, multiple foster care placements, lack of clean or affordable clothes, and lack of safe and affordable housing are other factors that can lead to chronic absence.

In Rhode Island, chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. In the 2021-2022 school year, chronic absenteeism affected 34% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 31% of first graders, 30% of second graders, and 29% of third graders, meaning they missed 10% or more of the school year (18 or more days in a 180-day school year). Additionally, 32% of sixth graders, 37% of ninth graders, and 41% of twelfth graders were chronically absent during the same period.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2021-2022 school year.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact attendance in the hardest-hit communities, particularly among students from low-income and communities of Color. In Rhode Island during the 2021-2022 school year, Native American (51%), Hispanic (49%), and Black (39%) K-12 students had higher rates of chronic absence than Asian (27%) and white (27%) students. Rates were also higher for Multilingual Learners (46%), low-income students (50%), and students with disabilities (43%) than for all students (35%)

To address chronic absenteeism, schools, districts, and community partners can collaborate to foster a sense of belonging and connection for all students and families. Programs like home visiting programs, where caring adults establish trusting relationships with students and parents, have been proven successful in reducing absenteeism rates. For instance, Connecticut allocated \$10 million in federal COVID-relief funding to launch the Learning Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), in districts with high levels of chronic absenteeism, leading to promising results.

By partnering with students, families, and community stakeholders to implement outreach strategies, schools can re-engage chronically absent students and address learning loss. Implementing school and district attendance teams can also support combatting chronic absence rates. These teams can increase awareness about chronic absenteeism, employ positive messaging to encourage consistent school attendance, regularly look at chronic absence data, implement school and district-wide strategies (e.g., improving transportation systems and facilitating access to before and after-school care), and provide timely interventions for individual students showing concerning attendance patterns.

Districts such as Newport, Providence, and Woonsocket have established task forces or attendance teams to analyze data and develop district-wide strategies to address chronic absenteeism. Schools statewide have also adopted attendance teams, finding them crucial in reducing chronic absence.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the Governor's Attendance Matters campaign and serves on its related task force. For this pilot to be a success we urge the Committee to consider allocating funds to support the third parties responsible for conducting outreach and tracking activities.

We are dedicated to addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism to ensure that all children are in school learning and thriving. Thank you for the leadership that this Committee has shown in addressing chronic absence and related issues during this session and previous ones and for the opportunity to testify today.