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Testimony Re: House Bill 7825 Regarding Compulsory Attendance Monitoring

House Health, Education & Welfare Committee

March 11, 2020

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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 voice its strong support for House Bill 7825. This bill would make public schools responsible for attendance data monitoring and detection of emergent truant behavior.

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) defines truancy as ten or more unexcused absences in a school year. During the 2017-2018 school year in Rhode Island, 25% of middle school students and 35% of high school students were considered truant by RIDE. Truant students in Rhode Island may be referred to the Family Court's Truancy Calendar, a community and school-based intervention program. In 2018, 1,729 juveniles were referred to the Truancy Court by schools, up from 1,264 in 2017.

Black youth are disproportionately represented at every stage of the juvenile justice system including truancy court. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth experience bullying and harassment in school due to their gender identity or sexual orientation which increase LGBT youth's risk of being chronically absent and eventual involvement in family court for safety-related truancy.

Schools, districts, and community agencies can improve student attendance by developing systems that provide frequent reports on student absenteeism and reasons for the absenteeism, problem solve to address reasons for absenteeism, build and sustain relationships with students and their families, develop a community response that involves adults who interact with students outside of school, and recognize and reward good attendance.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports efforts that encourage schools to serve as partners with families. This partnership should include the use of restorative justice practices, the incorporation of attendance into early warning systems, utilization of mental health resources and professionals to address absenteeism and use of attendance teams to monitor attendance data.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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