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Testimony Re: Senate Bill 2281 Regarding Compulsory Attendance Monitoring

Senate Education Committee

March 9, 2022

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Madam Chair 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 Senate Bill 2281 and thank Senator McCaffrey for sponsoring this legislation and Senators Coyne, Goodwin, Euer, Murray, and Archambault for cosponsoring. This bill would make public schools responsible for attendance data monitoring and detection of emergent truant behavior so schools can address early signs of chronic absence and prevent loss of important instruction time.

The Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) defines truancy as ten or more unexcused absences in a school year. During the 2019-2020 school year in Rhode Island, 27% of middle school students and 36% 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 2020, 375 juveniles were referred to the Truancy Court by schools, down from 1,350 in 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students who are chronically absent are more likely to be referred to truancy court. In Rhode Island, during the 2020-2021 school year, 43% of Native American, 42% of Hispanic, and 36% of Black K-12 students were chronically absent. Chronic absence rates were also higher for Multilingual Learners (44%), students in families with low incomes (43%), and students with disabilities (34%) compared to all students (28%).

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.