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## Testimony Re: House Bill 7797 Regarding Compulsory Attendance

House Health, Education & Welfare Committee

March 11, 2020

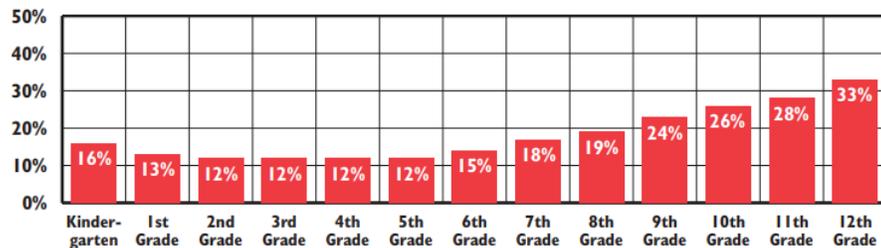
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 7797. This proposed legislation will focus attention on chronic absenteeism, which research shows is strongly connected to lower levels of reading and math achievement, the likelihood a student will be retained, and dropout risk.

The legislation is also nicely aligned with the state's efforts to improve third-grading reading, including Rhode Island Reads: The Campaign for 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Reading, and the Governor's target of doubling the percentage of children reading proficiently in third grade by 2025. Children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are more than four times more likely to drop out. Focusing on reducing chronic absence is also an important strategy for increasing high school graduation rates and college and career readiness.

During the 2017-2018 school year, 16% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 13% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 12% of third graders were chronically absent, meaning that they missed 10% or more of the school year (18 or more days in a 180-day school year). Chronic absence rates are generally high in kindergarten and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school.

**Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade,  
2017-2018 School Year**



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2017-2018 school year.

School and district attendance teams like those proposed in this legislation can help address chronic absence rates by raising awareness about the problem of chronic absence, using positive messaging to encourage parents

to send their children to school on time and every day, regularly reviewing data on chronic absence, identifying school and district-wide strategies to address chronic absence (e.g., improving transportation systems and connecting families to before and after-school care), and identifying and intervening with individual students as soon as troubling attendance patterns appear.

Districts like Newport, Providence, and Woonsocket have established taskforces or attendance teams to look at data and develop district-wide strategies to tackle their chronic absence problems. And schools around the state have attendance teams like those recommended in this legislation and have found these teams to be a vital tool for reducing chronic absence. This legislation would encourage those districts and schools that are not already directly addressing chronic absence to do so and provide important tools to aid in these efforts.

The federal *Every Student Succeeds (ESSA)* required that state accountability systems (often called report cards) include measures of school quality or student success. Rhode Island's *ESSA* state plan included several measures of school quality or student success, including a Chronic Absenteeism Indicator that examines the percentage of students and teachers who are chronically absent in grades Pre-K through 12. Student chronic absence rates are now included on school and district report cards and these rates are factored in when schools are classified. You can find these report cards at <https://reportcard.ride.ri.gov/>

This legislation directs the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) to develop a chronic absence prevention and intervention plan by January 1, 2021 and include data on chronic absenteeism in annual school discipline reports submitted to the General Assembly. It also requires that school report cards include district and school chronic absence rates. RIDE already includes chronic absenteeism data on school and district report cards, and we believe that the additional requirements proposed in this legislation, including creating a Chronic Absence Plan and including chronic absence data in required annual school discipline reports, will support school, district, and state efforts to reduce chronic absence and support efforts to improve third-grade reading, school climate, student engagement, high school graduation rates, and college and career readiness.

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.

I have attached our most recent indicators on Chronic Early Absence and Chronic Absence, Middle and High School. Please let us know if we can provide any additional data or information on best practices to support this work going forward.