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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7167 Regarding Compulsory Attendance**  
**House Education Committee**  
**February 9, 2022**  
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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 7167 and thank Chairman McNamara for sponsoring this legislation and Representatives Shallcross Smith, Donovan, and Diaz for cosponsoring. This proposed legislation will focus attention on chronic absenteeism, which research shows is strongly connected to lower levels of reading and math achievement and increased likelihood of a student being retained and dropping out.

Focusing on reducing chronic absence is an important strategy for increasing high school graduation rates and college and career readiness. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of education including how attendance is defined and measured, however, the need for students to be present and engaged in learning every day remains.

**In Rhode Island, chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school.** During the 2020-2021 school year, 23% of Rhode Island kindergarten students and first graders, 20% of second graders, and 21% 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). During this same school year, in Rhode Island, 26% of sixth graders, 33% of ninth graders, and 33% of twelfth graders were chronically absent.

**The students with the highest levels of chronic absence were also in the populations hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.** 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%).

Partnering with students, families, and community partners to develop outreach strategies can help schools re-engage chronically absent students and address lost learning opportunities. 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 includes 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, 2023 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.