

HB 3917 Provides Positive Framework for Students, Families and Schools to Address Chronic Absenteeism

Comments in Support of House Bill 3917, submitted to the Texas House Select
Committee on Youth Health and Safety, April 10, 2023

Dear Chair Thompson and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The undersigned education justice advocates respectfully submit these joint comments in support of House Bill 3917.

We appreciate this committee's interest in addressing the serious challenge of chronic absenteeism of Texas students following a global pandemic and over a year of learning disruptions. We urge this committee to reject any proposal that includes imposing fines or criminalizing youth and families for truant conduct, and instead prioritize and pass legislation that addresses the root causes of chronic absenteeism and provides opportunities and resources for schools, families and communities to work together to create supportive environments that engage students in their education and address the systemic barriers that contribute to absenteeism.

HB 3817, which (1) encourages family-school partnerships to address root causes of truancy, (2) provides a pathway out of the criminal system for parents found responsible for contribution to non-attendance, and (3) directs TEA to provide resources and guidance for schools seeking to support students and families in addressing chronic absenteeism, is a strong step in the right direction to address this critical issue.

The reasons for chronic absenteeism are as varied as the challenges our students and families face – including academic struggles, health, lack of transportation, bullying and lack of safety, and exclusionary discipline (OCR, 2019; AAP, 2019; Vasquez, 2018, Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Research has found that the challenges of chronic absenteeism are most prevalent in economically-disadvantaged communities, for students with disabilities, and for students and families of color (OCR, 2019; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). For example:

- In poor rural areas, one in four students can miss at least a month's worth of school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).
- Pregnant students have some of the highest rates of chronic absenteeism (Children at Risk, 2023).
- A study on Houston ISD found that children from low-income families were more likely to be chronically absent than their peers – particularly in lower grade levels (Finck, 2015).

- A 2015 white paper on chronic absenteeism in San Antonio schools found that 24% of economically disadvantaged students were chronically absent, compared to 6% of those with no economic disadvantage (P16Plus, 2015).
- A Central Texas Absence Reasons 2015 study found that although half of Central Texas students are low-income, they account for more than their share of absences (Wiseman, et al., 2015).
- Students with disabilities are about 50% more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities (OCR, 2019).
- Students with chronic health or mental health challenges are more likely to be chronically absent (AAP, 2022).
- Students of color are more likely to be chronically absent. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, compared to their white peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are over 50% more likely to lose three weeks of school or more, Black students 40% more likely, and Latino students 17% more likely (OCR, 2019).

Finally, the pandemic has also created a substantial increase in chronic absenteeism rates. It is estimated that, nationally, chronic absenteeism has more than doubled from the more than 8 million students, pre-COVID-19, who were designated as academically at risk due to chronic absenteeism (Attendance Works, 2018).

Criminalizing parents or punishing families whose children are absent from schools is a harmful and ineffective approach to addressing truancy. Punitive measures, such as fines or criminal charges, do nothing to address the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism and can exacerbate the challenges faced by students and families, leading to further disengagement from school (Fowler, et al., 2015). Studies have found that fines have little to no effect on truancy rates (NCSL, 2017). Additionally, for low-income families, fines create a financial burden that exacerbates the root causes of truancy, such as transportation or housing issues.

Rather than enacting policies that will hurt families, we urge the Legislature to adopt a comprehensive approach to truancy that includes key strategies, such as improving school climate and culture, providing support and resources to students and families, and addressing the root causes of absenteeism through school, family and community partnerships.

Addressing truancy and chronic absenteeism requires a collaborative, holistic approach that recognizes the complex social and economic factors that contribute to absenteeism and empowers students and families to overcome them. HB 3917 offers a positive framework for families to work together with schools to identify problems that contribute to unexcused absences and develop strategies for resolving those problems.

If you have questions or would like to discuss these comments further, please do not hesitate to contact Paige Duggins-Clay, chief legal analyst, IDRA at paige.duggins-clay@idra.org.

Sincerely,

IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)
Texas Appleseed
Texas Center for Justice and Equity
ACLU Texas
National Association of Social Workers Texas

Resources

- Allison, M.A., Attisha, E., Lerner, M., Duncan De Pinto, C., Savio Beers, N., Gibson, E.J., Gorski, P., Kjolhede, C., O'Leary, S.C., Schumacher, H., & Weiss-Harrison, A. (2019). The Link Between School Attendance and Good Health. American Academy of Pediatrics.
<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/143/2/e20183648/37326/The-Link-Between-School-Attendance-and-Good-Health?searchresult=1?autologincheck=redirected>
- Attendance Works. (2018). Chronic Absence, webpage. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>
- Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). The Importance of Being in School: A Report on Absenteeism in the Nation's Public Schools. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.
https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16-1.pdf
- Children At Risk. (2022). Defining Chronic Absenteeism and Utilizing Data to Reduce It. <https://childrenatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/CA-Houst-Districts-2022.pdf>
- Children at Risk. (September 29, 2020). Chronic Absenteeism Legislative Briefing. <https://childrenatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Chronic-Absenteeism-PPT.pdf>
- Craven, M. (June 16, 2022). What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student – A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students, IDRA Issue Brief. IDRA.
<https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIB>
- Finck, J.B. (2015). When Students Miss School: The High Cost to Houston. Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5731ee0840261d67c7155483/t/57645a759de4bb528a12cf78/146619457>
- Fowler, F., Schmid, M.S., Johnson, K., & Craven, M. (2015). Class, Not Courts. Reconsidering Texas' Criminalization of Truancy. Texas Appleseed.
https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/TruancyReport_All_FINAL_SinglePages.pdf
- NCLD. (2018). Absenteeism and Students with Disabilities. National Center for Learning Disabilities.
<https://www.nclld.org/archives/action-center/education-issues/absenteeism-and-students-with-disabilities>
- NCSL. (2017). Truancy: State Policies and Strategies. National Conference of State Legislatures.
<https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/truancy-state-policies-and-strategies.aspx>
- OCA. (2015). Truancy Reform: Changes in the Law Effective September 1, 2015. Office of Court Administration.
<https://www.txcourts.gov/media/1047343/truancy-legislation-power-point-12-15.pdf>
- OCR. (2016). Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools: An Unprecedented Look at a Hidden Educational Crisis. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>
- P16Plus. (2015). Attendance Matters: White Paper on Chronic Absenteeism in San Antonio Schools.
- Vasquez, B. (2018). Three Decades of Groundbreaking Dropout Research – Reflections by Dr. Robledo Montecel. Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2017-18. IDRA. <https://idra.news/Attrition18p>
- Wiseman, A., & Dawson, S. (2015). Why Do Students Miss School? The Central Texas Absence Reasons Study. E3 Alliance. <http://e3alliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/E3-Alliance-Absence-Reasons-Study-Summary-vH.pdf>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by leading policy analyses and advocacy; dynamic teacher training and principal coaching; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; and innovative student, family and community engagement.