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Testimony on Assembly Bill 1029: Including truancy information in the school district and school accountability report.

Chairman Kitchens and members of the education committee, thank you for hearing my testimony to Assembly Bill 1029, a bill requiring truancy information be included in the school district and school accountability report. This bill is part of the Speaker's Task Force on Truancy, and it aims to tackle the issue of students regularly missing school in Wisconsin.

The alarming surge in truancy rates within the state of Wisconsin demands our immediate attention. Various factors contribute to the challenge of students not attending school, and the proposed bill aims to bridge the gap between different school districts in addressing this issue.

Our children represent the future, and their educational foundation is paramount to their success. While we collectively acknowledge the significance of regular school attendance, certain obstacles faced by students often go unnoticed. This legislation is of great importance as it focuses on the inclusion of information pertaining to habitually truant pupils in the annual school district and school accountability report.

Habitual truancy, characterized by a student's unexcused absence for part or all of five or more days during a school semester, not only impacts academic performance but also affects the overall well-being of our youth. By integrating this data into school and school district report cards, we take a substantial stride towards fostering transparency and comprehension.

It is crucial to emphasize that the objective of this bill is not to criticize or penalize schools or districts but to enlighten and stimulate dialogue. The gathered information will serve as a potent tool for identifying areas where additional support and resources may be required.

Now, more than ever, it is essential that we join forces to advocate for initiatives focused on cultivating an improved educational environment for our children.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Melotik". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Representative Paul Melotik
24th Assembly District



WISCONSIN STATE SENATE

DAN KNODL

STATE SENATOR • 8TH DISTRICT

Assembly Bill 1029

Public Testimony

Assembly Committee on Transportation

February 7, 2024

Thank you Chairman Kitchens and members for holding this hearing on Assembly Bill 1029.

This bill is the culmination of months of work undertaken by the Speaker's Taskforce on Truancy. I would like to thank Representative Binsfeld, who chaired the committee, and Representative Drake, who was the vice-chair.

AB 1029 requires the Department of Public Instruction to include statistics on truancy in their school district report cards. The bill will allow us legislators, and the general public to have a better grasp as to the problem on an annual basis so we can revise and improve our legislative policies to address the growing problem of increased truancy in our schools.

The bill defines habitually truant as absent from school without an acceptable excuse for part or all of five or more days during a school semester.

I'd like to thank Representative Melotik for introducing this bill. Thank you for your time, and we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.



February 7, 2024

Assembly Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2023 Assembly Bills 1024, 1025, 1026, 1027, 1028, and 1029**

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify on the legislation proposed by the Assembly Speaker's Taskforce on Truancy.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is appreciative of the attention and policy proposals before the committee related to truancy. While we oppose most of what is before the committee today, we are optimistic that an ongoing conversation with policymakers will result in solutions that will benefit kids. Wisconsin, like states across the nation, is attempting to re-engage learners and families and make sure they attend school regularly.

Wisconsin is entering the challenge of student and family engagement from a position of deficit when compared to other states. During the pandemic, many states leveraged pandemic relief dollars to test and explore evidence-based strategies to draw learners back to school. By contrast, Wisconsin used a small portion of its state set-aside to contract with the Graduation Alliance to provide counseling and services to encourage families to re-enroll. While using Graduation Alliance proved to be a smart strategy, those funds are set to expire this Fall, and the service covers learners who disenroll – the deepest end of the continuum related to interventions related to attendance.

Before addressing the individual bills, the department wants to draw attention to the national trend related to using chronic absenteeism in place of truancy. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) altered state activities and data collections around truancy by asking states to focus on chronic absenteeism and ending the requirements that states report truancy to the federal government. Chronic absenteeism is strictly defined as missing instruction, where truancy focuses on whether a learner has an excuse for missing instruction. Many districts across Wisconsin are attempting to tackle their chronic absenteeism rates by leveraging strategies that focus on engagement and removing barriers to receiving instruction. There is an overlap between truancy and chronic absenteeism, and they also measure distinctly different things.

The department is providing testimony for information only on AB 1027 and 1028, the truancy grant program and enabling language. DPI is supportive of the intent of these bills and believes additional funding is needed to address student engagement issues. The need is far greater than a \$2 million, one-time grant that supports a single staff position within a district.

The department is opposed to AB 1024, the proposal to provide notification to parents of students experiencing truancy regarding special education services. We are open to an ongoing conversation

about how to improve notification and believe the eventual outcome of this bill will lead to better policy development. While this legislation targets one underlying factor which can contribute to truancy through notification changes, it does not consider a number of other factors known to be barriers to student engagement (transportation, the child or a family member's mental health challenges, substance abuse, economic instability and/or homelessness) DPI is concerned that focusing on disability status alone misses the opportunity to provide outreach to families who may be facing the other challenges that contribute to a child's truancy. It also may have an unintended outcome of families assuming that truancy is a condition of receiving special education services from their local districts.

The department opposes AB 1025, creating a uniform definition of truancy. We support the intent of the authors to create a statewide, clear definition of truancy. However, additional time and input is needed to ensure implementation is possible without adverse impacts to local communities and policies. The issue deserves additional time and input from all the impacted parties, as well as a longer implementation period to ensure proper services are in place to support the systems that will be impacted by using a more stringent definition of truancy.

The department opposes AB 1026, which requires retention of pupils based on truancy rates. Mandatory retention is not an evidence-based solution to attendance issues and increases the likelihood of dropouts. DPI can find no evidence of retention based on truancy alone across the nation, nor can it find any supporting evidence that the strategy will improve student outcomes. In fact, according to a recent [American Institutes of Research national scan of state attendance policies \(2023\)](#), state activities are trending toward diversion and juvenile justice reform, along with a combination of prevention strategies to intervene and remove barriers families face.

Finally, the department opposes AB 1029, requiring the publication of truancy rates on school and district report cards. DPI already includes chronic absenteeism as a part of its report card system. As discussed earlier, the state followed national trends in ending its focus on truancy, meaning we would need to begin collecting truancy data again, which would take time to implement. The 2024-25 timeframe cannot be met. We are also concerned that reporting on two closely related measures may cause confusion for schools, families, and communities.

We appreciate the ability to engage with committee members on the policies before you today, and hope these bills spur additional conversation to tackle the significant issues we agree need attention. There are far too many technical and implementation issues left in these bills that require time and energy to solve. We encourage this committee to take the additional time to get this right for the kids and communities you collectively serve.

If you have questions or want additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov or (608) 264-6716.