



MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND
WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC CLUB

P.O. Box 34047, Bethesda, MD 20827

www.womensdemocraticclub.org

Senate Bill 865 - Juveniles - Truancy Reduction Pilot Program - Expansion
Judicial Proceedings Committee
February 28, 2024
Support

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony concerning an important priority of the **Montgomery County Women's Democratic Club (WDC)** for the 2024 legislative session. WDC is one of the largest and most active Democratic Clubs in our County with hundreds of politically active members including many elected officials.

WDC strongly supports SB 865, which authorizes county or circuit administrative judges to establish a voluntary Truancy Reduction and School Re-Engagement Program as a problem-solving court in certain juvenile courts in accordance with rules adopted by the Supreme Court of Maryland. It also requires the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Maryland to annually report certain information to the General Assembly.

Chronic absenteeism in Maryland has doubled since 2020. Chronic Absenteeism is defined as a student who is absent for 10% or more of the time that they are in attendance at a school location. These absences include lawful excuses, unlawful excuses and suspensions.

School attendance is critical for a student's success as [students with higher attendance have more positive academic outcomes](#), particularly for African American students and students from lower income families. Preschoolers with higher attendance have higher Kindergarten readiness skills and Grade 3 reading scores. Elementary and middle school youth with higher attendance have higher academic achievement, including GPA and standardized reading and math tests results.

Students who are chronically absent are at greater risk of dropping out of school. This in turn, [reduces a student's employment and earning options well into adulthood](#). The percentage of Maryland schools with [high or extreme Chronic Absence increased from 38% in 2017-2018 School Year \(SY\) to 78% in 2021-2022 SY, according to data analysis from Attendance Works](#). Truancy rates have also doubled in the same time period.

When unexcused absences add up, schools can refer families to the school district for court intervention. Under Maryland law, a truant student is one who is "unlawfully absent" from school for more than 8 days in any quarter, 15 days in any semester, or 20 days in a school year. Depending on where you live the court of referral is either a criminal court or a problem-solving court. Currently only 8 counties have access to problem-solving truancy courts (Dorchester County, Somerset County, Wicomico County, Worcester County, Kent County, Talbot County, Harford County, and Prince George's County all have access). Senate Bill 865 expands these courts statewide so that all students and families will have access to them.

Senate Bill 865 provides judges, schools and families with another tool in the toolbox to address truancy in a positive, supportive manner. The Truancy Reduction and School Re-engagement Program provides resources and services to families to promote the student's engagement or re-engagement with education;



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help to identify the underlying causes of truancy for individual students; and help address these causes in a positive, student/family-supportive and non-punitive way. It will also provide an annual report on the success of the programs.

Addressing truancy through this program is an equity issue. The state's definition of "unlawful" absences disproportionately affects youth of color and those with a lower socioeconomic status. Senate Bill 865 will help to identify and address the root causes of truancy for these youth and provide resources that will keep them out of the criminal court and the Juvenile Justice system, extending the reach of a successful model statewide

We ask for your support for SB 865 and strongly urge a favorable Committee report.

Tazeen Ahmad
WDC President

Karen Finn
WDC Children & Youth
Subcommittee

Melissa Bender
Co-Chair, WDC Advocacy