



House Ways and Means Committee

HB523 – Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism and Expulsion – Investigation and Reporting

February 12, 2025

Position: Letter of Information

Attendance Works is a national non-profit organization that advances equity and opportunity for students through research, professional development, and effective communication about attendance practices that can dramatically improve student attendance. Attendance Works has had the privilege of monitoring and supporting the work of the Kirwan Commission, along with working with local school systems, the state department of education and the Maryland Association of Pupil Personnel Workers over the past many years. Attendance Works strongly supports HB523's goal to expand how school systems monitor, track and report the causes of why students miss school.

Showing up regularly to school matters. Students gain from curriculum and instruction, benefit from connecting with peers and adults, and access critical resources available on school campuses (Attendance Works, 2023). When students miss school, it is easy for them to fall behind academically and socially. Students who are chronically absent from school (missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason) are at risk of falling behind academically, getting suspended in middle school, and eventually dropping out of school (Aucejo, et al., 2016; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gershenson et al., 2017; Goodman, 2014).

In Maryland, like the rest of the country, improving attendance is crucial to advance student success and reduce educational inequities, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. In Maryland, chronic absenteeism rose from 19.5% in 2019 to 30.9% in 2022 (MSDE, 2023). Although still above pre-pandemic levels, chronic absenteeism declined to 30% in 2023 and to 24% in 2024. To better understand what may be impeding Maryland's ability to improve attendance, Attendance Works partnered with researchers to examine how the application of the unexcused absence code could be hindering efforts to improve attendance along with potentially deepening educational inequities.

Although the goal of the truancy system is to improve attendance, when absences are coded "unexcused" too often, it can undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance (Edwards, et al., 2023; McNeely et al., 2021). When absences are coded as unexcused it can affect how the student and their family are treated. For example, in several Maryland school



districts, policies instruct teachers to not provide credit for make-up work after an unexcused absence, but are required to do so after an excused absence. Our analysis of 2021-2022 and 2022 - 2023 SY data showed that on average over 60% of all absences in Maryland are coded as unexcused.

However, what constitutes an excused or unexcused absence is largely an arbitrary distinction governed by COMAR Sec. 13a.08.01.03. Lawful/Excused Absences. As such there are ten legally allowable excused absences along with the option for districts to excuse additional reasons at the discretion of the superintendent or their designee. How that data is coded and reported is governed by the COMAR 13A.08.01.01. Daily Attendance Record.

Many of the worthy and concerning reasons for absenteeism described in HB523 such as school environment and addiction are not currently considered a legal reason for absenteeism, and therefore would be coded unexcused in the student management system and not officially tracked or reported.

Maryland has boldly declared that it is committed to reducing chronic absenteeism by 50% in a year. In order to achieve that ambitious goal Maryland must consider modernizing the laws, regulations and policies that govern how Maryland tracks, monitors, reports, and responds to student absences at the school, district, and state level. Including breaking down the barriers between what is considered legally excused or unexcused, and considering systems and policies that track and respond to all reasons for absences. More nuanced information like understanding the reasons for health related absences allow for better more thoughtful responses.

With a more holistic understanding about why students are not attending school, there is an opportunity for Maryland to build a systemic response that includes prevention measures, such as those that typically organized through a community schools strategy, and incorporates a public health approach to more entrenched reasons for absenteeism through intervention and case management.

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