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## **POSITION ON PROPOSED LEGISLATION**

**BILL: HB 523 County Boards of Education - Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism and Expulsion – Investigation and Reporting**

**FROM: Maryland Office of the Public Defender**

**POSITION: Favorable**

**DATE: February 10, 2025**

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The Maryland Office of the Public Defender respectfully requests that the Committee issue a favorable report on House Bill 523.

My name is Cindy Najhram, and I am a supervising attorney with the Maryland Office of the Public Defender (OPD), Prince George's County. One of my responsibilities is to supervise the panel attorney for the Truancy Docket in Prince George's County.

Proposed bill 523 mandates the investigation and identification of root causes of chronic absenteeism and expulsion in the county commencing January 1, 2026, for each quarter for a period of 10 years. Mandating this type of inquiry is necessary and overdue because understanding the root cause of absenteeism and expulsion gives rise to meaningful discussions and in turn leads to appropriate solutions. Examining the root causes over a substantial period will also assist in developing a long-term and sustainable solution.

In my experience it is often the case that families with children who are chronically absent from school are encountering numerous hardships. This bill specifically mentions examination of a student's history of substance abuse, physical health, and school environment. There are other hardships that a student faces daily that affects their school performance, behavior and attendance. The Office of the Public Defender hopes that these hardships can be addressed under the student's domestic situation factor as outlined in the proposed bill. For example, school transportation is not always reliable or timely thus the child does not attend school timely or at all. A student may not have stable housing and the ramifications of being unhoused is detrimental to the entire family and

ultimately the family is forced to focus on stable housing instead of trying to get their child to attend school.

This bill also examines an issue that arises in court when a parent is petitioned to truancy court, where an older sibling is staying home to take care of a younger sibling because the parents must leave the home to go to work and there are no funds or adults that can care for the younger sibling.

Removing barriers and economical obstacles are achievable with the help of programs, specialists, educators, and other individuals that have a specialized knowledge and skill. However, we must be able to identify the root causes so that we are in a position of preventing school absenteeism and expulsion instead of reacting to the problem.

**For these reasons, the Maryland Office of the Public Defender urges this Committee to issue a favorable report on House Bill 523.**

**Submitted by: Maryland Office of the Public Defender, Government Relations Division.  
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