

Testimony in Support of House Bill 523

County Boards of Education - Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism and Expulsion - Investigation
and Reporting

Before the Ways and Means Committee: 2/12/25

I submit this testimony in support of House Bill 523 and its important implications for the human development of children in Maryland. Through the lens of child development and educational scholars, this bill represents a pioneering step toward mitigating highly detrimental behavioral issues in Maryland's schools. By requiring school boards to investigate and report root causes of chronic absenteeism and expulsion, and by directing them to focus on certain key areas, this bill would ensure that Maryland has relevant empirical data that could inspire action to meaningfully address these issues. My expertise is in chronic absenteeism, so I will focus on that aspect of the bill in my testimony.

Chronic absenteeism is a severe current issue in Maryland schools. In 2025, the Maryland State Board of Education issued a report outlining the troubling current trends in chronic absenteeism. Maryland defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% of school days in a year. Since 2017, chronic absenteeism has risen by 8%, with a sharp increase in 2022 and 2023. Although levels fell by 1-3% in 2024, Maryland already ranks above average nationally on rates of chronic absenteeism (United States Department of Education, 2023). **Such statistics clearly outline a recent epidemic of chronic absenteeism that, if not improved immediately, could severely limit the effectiveness of Maryland's schools.**

Research consistently links absenteeism to poor academic performance (Gottfried, 2014; Liu et al., 2021) and school dropout (Shoeneberger, 2012), but there are broader psychosocial effects of chronic absenteeism. Kindergarteners who miss even 10 days of school show a significantly lower desire for learning than their regularly attending peers (Gottfried, 2014). Chronically absent middle schoolers perform significantly worse than peers on emotion regulation, self-efficacy, and social awareness (Santibañez & Gaurino, 2021). Chronic absenteeism is also a significant risk factor for substance abuse use among older students (Gakh et al., 2018). Even the peers of chronically absent students perform worse on academic assessments than they would otherwise (Gottfried, 2019). Negative effects persist in adulthood, where absenteeism links to poorer employment outcomes and lower civic engagement (Ansari et al., 2020).

Importantly, student behavior shifts over time, and at risk students may not have always been chronic absentees. Education and child development researchers have found that such a behavior is the result of long term social, emotional, or environmental processes that drive a child's behavior in a certain direction over time. Average rates of absenteeism across all students seem to rise each grade, with the steepest increases occurring in secondary school (Shoeneberger, 2012). Students who add more and more absences each year tend to have worse educational outcomes, being at significant risk of dropping out. Some research has also suggested that absences in the earliest years of education can have long-term negative effects on a student's educational future and later attendance (Hickman et al., 2008).

One of the most progressive aspects of this bill is under subsection B, where it states school boards should specifically examine six key contexts of students' environments. This supports the idea that absenteeism is likely a behavioral consequence of larger issues within one of the student's

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developmental contexts, such as the family system, school environment, or the student's personal health and wellbeing. Scientific research supports this bill's perspective, as it offers several factors within those contexts as potential causes for chronic absenteeism. Such notable risk factors include school climate, student substance abuse, parental relationships, exposure to community violence, and transportation time to and from school (Gubbels et al., 2019). The influence of such risk factors in students' broader environment is consistently supported by data and thus demands further investigation within Maryland's unique student population.

Absenteeism can result from many factors, but the sharp increase in recent levels of chronic absenteeism in the state of Maryland suggests that one or several of these factors may have changed to cause this recent absenteeism epidemic. All evidence seems to support the value of the investigation called for in this bill. **If school boards can identify the specific risk factors that put their students at high risk for chronic absenteeism, the state can support them in mitigating these factors to see fewer students fall into the behavioral cascade of absenteeism that puts their futures at risk.**

Not only will this bill help the state of Maryland, but it could influence the nation at large. Education researchers all over the country are devoting effort to understanding these issues, but databases that encompass the many potential root causes are very rare. By investigating these issues in a manner that provides sources of data with unique usefulness affirmed by scholarly theories, **Maryland has an opportunity to become a leader in the ongoing efforts to address the chronic absenteeism epidemic across the nation.**

Given this bill addresses a potent risk for student success, responds to calls from the scientific community, and has the potential for impact beyond state borders, I urge a favorable report on HB 523 to ensure our schools can best promote every student's educational and psychological development.

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