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BILL: HB 523

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

DATE: February 12, 2025

POSITION: Oppose

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents **opposes** House Bill 523.

This bill requires each local board of education to investigate, identify, and report on root causes of absenteeism and expulsion.

Since the pandemic, chronic absenteeism has plagued school districts, exacerbating the learning losses suffered by students. Trends in chronic absenteeism are moving in more positive directions, but not quickly enough. Superintendents recognize the devastating impact of chronic absenteeism on academic success, including an increased risk for dropping out of school. Additionally, the impacts of missing school and learning valuable social skills and personal growth opportunities create even more risks for long-term emotion and financial security.

Superintendents and their student support services staff use a number of strategies to combat chronic absenteeism, including repeated communication and outreach to parents and students, and extensive support services to alleviate individual reasons for absences, such as health issues and family challenges. While chronic absenteeism is a widespread problem, the root causes are often very specific to students and their families, and teachers and principals use all their resources to address individual needs.

While we support the well-meaning intentions of this bill, we respectfully ask that the Legislature refrain from imposing such a prescriptive approach to solving this problem. In addition to the varied local school systems' efforts to battle chronic absenteeism, the State Department of Education (MSDE), under the State Superintendent's leadership, has established a task force made up from a wide-ranging group of professionals to help guide a statewide comprehensive approach. The task force includes local superintendents, as well as mental health specialists, teachers, principals, school, parents, higher education, and community schools' personnel.

We strongly support this task force's work that will:

- "Bring together experts to identify and share successful strategies for reducing chronic absences.
- Create a comprehensive attendance guidance document that will provide actionable strategies for schools at all levels.
- Offer resources for both students and schools, from early interventions to intensive supports, to address the root causes of absences."

(<https://marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/2025/0128/AM/Chronic-Absenteeism-A.pdf>)

Again, we appreciate the bill's good intentions but ask the Legislature to allow the education experts at the local level, as well as the MSDE-convened task force, to continue to examine this issue to determine the most effective public policies.

For these reasons, PSSAM **opposes** House Bill 523 and kindly requests an **unfavorable** report.