

## Testimony of Susan Lieberman

**LD 322:** An Act to Promote Student Attendance in Schools by Requiring the Commissioner of Education to Implement School Attendance Best Practices

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Susan Lieberman, and I am the co-chair of the State Advisory Committee on Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education (TDAE).

I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony. I am in favor of LD 322, An Act to Promote Student Attendance in Schools by Requiring the Commissioner of Education to Implement School Attendance Best Practices.

In spring 2022, TDAE Committee presented a report to this legislative committee recommending statutory guidance to address the increasing number of Maine students who are chronically absent, missing school for any reason, excused or unexcused. In 2023 the Maine legislature adopted a bill to address chronic absence, which includes students who are truant with unexcused absences.

The natural next step is to update the Maine truancy statute and guidance to align with the existing Maine legislation and evidence-based research that promotes a multi-tiered system of support rather than a punitive model. The truancy rules/guidance have not been updated since 1985.

In 2022-23, 6.5% or over 12,000 students were truant, due to an unexcused absence. When an absence is labeled unexcused or truant, it can affect how a student and their family are treated. Students can be denied credit for missed work, excluded from extracurricular activities, and eventually taken to court and fined for unexcused absences. As absences accumulate, responses often become more punitive. Almost 80% of the Maine students (K-12) identified as truant are economically-disadvantaged. This means that students with the least number of resources receive the harshest response.

We have learned that going to court or referring a student to DHHS typically does not help a student and family to overcome the challenges that caused the absences in the first place, yet schools expend a lot of time to bring families to refer them to DHHS or to court. [A new report from the Council of State Governments \(CSG\) Justice Center](#), notes that “an arrest, court involvement, and/or system supervision for youth who are truant or commit other low-level offenses actually decreases their likelihood of attending school and completing high school.”

Instead, we need to engage families through building connections and with community resources rather than using a legal process. The recent Maine legislation on chronic absence outlines an approach that encourages prevention and early intervention approach and includes steps for a school team to take to partner with students and families. Chronic absence and truancy are solvable problems. Research has proven that when we address the root causes of

absenteeism, whether it occurs in school, the community or at home, we can increase student attendance.

In the upcoming 2025 TDAE Committee report, we will recommend that ME DOE continue with the truancy rulemaking process to update the guidance. We are hoping that ME DOE or through organizations like Count ME In, provide more extensive guidance, professional learning and coaching to districts. Chronic absence, including truancy, can be a sign that students are struggling academically and/or lack connection to peers or adults. Professional learning is an opportunity to build staff capacity to partner with students and families on identifying and addressing challenges and root causes.

In Maine, 23.5% or over 40,150 Maine students, kindergarten through high school, were chronically absent missing over 3 weeks of school compared to 28% in 2022-23 (MDOE, 2025). We need to work together to support districts, schools, students and families to increase student engagement, attendance and achievement.

For these reasons, we strongly encourage you to support LD 322: An Act to Promote Student Attendance in Schools by Requiring the Commissioner of Education to Implement School Attendance Best Practices.

I am happy to further discuss our position or answer any questions.

*Susan Lieberman*