

**Testimony of Susan Lieberman,
Co-Chair State Advisory Committee on Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education
LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism**

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

The TDAE Committee fully supports LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism. In spring 2022, the TDAE Committee presented a report to this legislative committee recommending statutory guidance to address the increasing number of Maine students who are chronically absent. By aligning with the Maine Every Student Succeeds Act plan which includes a multi-tiered system of support, Maine will be better equipped to address attendance, truancy, and chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% of school for any reason, excused or unexcused. Truancy targets **only** students with unexcused absences. According to ME DOE, 28.4% or over 48,600 Maine students, kindergarten through high school, were chronically absent, missing over 3 weeks of school during the 2021-22 school year. Sixty-four percent of Maine students who are chronically absent are also economically disadvantaged, and eligible for free and reduced meals. Good attendance means students can access learning opportunities and needed support such as two meals a day or basic physical and mental health support. Chronic absences impact everyone in the classroom and community.

Presently **only** truancy, unexcused absences, is in statute. Truancy can hide the deeper problem of chronic absence. Students who are chronically absent miss just two to three days a month. This translates to 20 to 30 days over the course of a year, the equivalent of one month of lost instruction.

Chronic absence is an early warning sign that students are at risk of not reading proficiently by the end of third grade, struggling academically in middle school, and leaving high school.

Absenteeism is a problem with cumulative effects extending from one school year to the next. A Count ME In study of 40 Maine elementary schools documents that students who were chronically absent had statistically significant lower scores in math and reading on the spring NWEA assessment than their peers who attended regularly. The students who were chronically absent scored on average a grade level lower than their peers who attended regularly. This Count ME study mirrors national research.

Addressing chronic absence is a key strategy for meeting our goals of increasing academic achievement and graduation rates. By incorporating a whole school approach and utilizing current school teams, schools can decrease chronic absenteeism. This bill aligns with the Maine State Every Student Succeeds Act and solidifies the existing work in statute.

For these reasons, we strongly encourage you to support LD 1861: An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism.

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

Thank you for your time today.

Susan Lieberman, Co-Chair State Advisory Committee on Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education