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Testimony of Rep. Tiffany Roberts presenting
LD 1861, An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Good afternoon, Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Tiffany Roberts and I represent House District 149 and the communities of North Berwick and South Berwick. I am here before you today to present **LD 1861, An Act to Reduce Chronic Student Absenteeism**.

In the 130th Legislature, one of my school districts approached me with concerns about truancy rates in their district. Upon looking into their request, it became apparent that this was a broader issue across the state. I determined that more data was needed to adequately understand the scope of the problem. The study I submitted that session was folded into the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education Advisory Committee research, bringing us here. This bill is one of two bills I will present to the committee as a result of research done by the TDAE Advisory Committee. This bill aligns with the existing Maine State Every Student Succeeds Act and is not a new program but is simply codifying it in statute.

Too often, students, families and school staff do not realize how quickly absences - excused or unexcused - can leave children falling behind. Chronic absenteeism - missing 10 percent of the school year - or just two or three days each month, predicts lower third-grade reading proficiency, course failure in middle school and an increased likelihood of no longer attending high school.

Chronic absenteeism and truancy have been on the rise in Maine. Since 2019 Maine has seen a 25 percent increase in chronic absenteeism and a 117 percent increase in truancy. In the 2021-22 school year, almost 49,000 Maine K-12 students were chronically absent.

To help tackle this issue, this bill would ensure the Maine Department of Education is monitoring chronic absenteeism and require a school with a 15 percent or higher chronic absenteeism rate to establish an attendance review team. An attendance review team may consist of but is not limited to school administrators, guidance counselors, school counselors, school social workers and teachers. This team will provide programs and services to truant and chronically absent students and their parents.

Currently, Maine has a statute on truancy that solely targets students with unexcused absences. This is not sufficient and legislation is needed to address the increasing number of Maine students who are chronically absent for a variety of reasons.

Thank you for your consideration, and I would be happy to answer any questions, but I would rather defer to those more knowledgeable in the room who will follow.

TDAE Report

TDAE Mission

The mission of the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education Advisory Committee is to advise the Commissioner on the development and implementation of state and local policies and programs that are needed to deal effectively with the incidence of truancy and dropouts in state schools.

Process 2021/22

- **Brainstorm**
- **Impact Survey**
- **5 Recommendations**

Notable Trends

- **Chronic Absenteeism** - Data from 2020 and 2021 shows an increase in Chronic Absenteeism (missing more than 10% enrolled days) of 25% from 2019.
- **Truancy Rate** - Data from 2021 shows an increase in Truancy of 117% from 2019. (2020 data, 40% decrease, likely skewed due to remote learning statewide)
- **Impact on Graduation Rates** - 2021 Graduation rates did not significantly change, however, the above data would be considered leading indicators, so impact should be noted in 2022 and 2023 graduation rates.

Recommendation 1 - Alternative Ways to Graduation.

- **Consideration of Life Circumstances.**
- **Create Programs and Alternate Pathways students could choose to receive a High School Diploma.**

Consideration of Life Circumstances

- **Ensuring all Administration, Student Services personnel and Counselors have a plan in place to inform and educate students and parents about the options available to them in terms of applying for and earning a DOE HS Diploma.**
- **Require all SAU's to create their own Diploma pathway that takes into consideration Life Circumstances and allows students a pathway to graduation with their cohort at the local SAU.**
 - **Local control of the diploma requirements by setting the credits they will adjust their diploma to**
 - **Reduction in dropout rates**
 - **Ability for students to graduate with their class and school**
 - **Personalized plan which could include supports and mentors**

Alternative High School Programs

- **Local SAU's model/use successful programs like Take 2 YouthBuild, Job Corps and LearningWorks YouthBuild, that local districts may replicate to meet the needs of students at risk of not making it to graduation day.**
- **Support for these programs outside of just Urban areas in Maine**

Recommendation 2: Destigmatize the 5th Year Student

- **Allow students who have registered for a 5th year to be removed from their current cohort and transferred to the following year's cohort.**
- **Require that schools are required to meet with all students who after their 10th grade year are not on a track to graduate and develop a written plan which may include 5 year plans.**
- **Recommend Course Guides prepared by all High Schools include a 5 year Pathway.**

Recommendation 3: Keeping Maine's Youth Connected Liaisons Statewide

Require a liaison position be created that will assist in creating seamless transitions and connections to educational, child welfare, and mental health programs/support for students.

Recommendation 4: Promotion of Community Schools

Maine Department of Education and Maine Legislature take the following actions to implement more Community Schools in the State of Maine

- 1. The Department of Education applies for available federal funding that may be utilized to support the work of community schools in our state.**
- 2. The Department of Education include sufficient funds for 18 designated community schools coordinators for FY21-22 and 28 coordinators for FY23-34.**
- 3. The Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs and the State Legislature enact the proposed community school budgets.**
- 4. The Department of Education support a Maine Community Schools Coalition that will offer statewide informational materials and technical assistance for district leaders regarding community schools**

Recommendation 5: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

The TDAE Committee recommends that statutory guidance be added to the Maine Every Student Succeeds plan to address the increasing number of Maine students who are chronically absent.

Suggestions Include:

- **A school be required to have an Attendance Review Team if the school has a chronic absentee rate of 15% or higher.**
- **A District be required to have an Attendance Review Team if the District or multiple schools in the district have chronic absentee rate of 15% or higher.**

Future Work of the TDAE Committee

- **Solicit More Diverse Input**
- **Needs Assessment Protective Factors**
- **Alternative Education Report**
- **Data Dive**

Conclusion

Practical - Sustainable - Actionable