



Testimony of Susan Lieberman, Director, Count ME In

LD 261 Directing the Department of Education To Study Truancy Trends in the State and Develop Recommendations for Increasing Student Attendance and Reducing Truancy

Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan and distinguished members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. My name is Susan Lieberman, and I am the Director of Count ME In. Count ME In is a program working to increase student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism in Maine through data-driven strategies.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. Count ME In is in favor of LD 261- Directing the Department of Education To Study Truancy Trends in the State and Develop Recommendations for Increasing Student Attendance and Reducing Truancy, and strongly recommend including the study of chronic absentee trends in the State. We believe to effectively develop comprehensive recommendations and increase student attendance it is imperative to study both chronic absenteeism and truancy.

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, 16.8% or 30,390 Maine students, kindergarten through high school, were chronically absent missing over 3 weeks of school during the 2018-19 school year. 64% of Maine students who are chronically absent are also economically disadvantaged, eligible for free and reduced meals. Good attendance means students can access learning opportunities and needed supports such as two meals a day or basic health and mental health support. Chronic absences impact everyone in the classroom and community.

In many cases, studying only truancy can hide the deeper problem of chronic absence. Students who miss just two to three days a month translates to 20 to 30 days over the course of a year, the equivalent of one month of lost instruction.

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 data.

Addressing chronic absenteeism is a key strategy for meeting our goals of increasing academic achievement and graduation rates and thus chosen as an indicator in Maine's Accountability system as part of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.

Count ME In is presently working with districts schools serving Pre-K through high school. Our data shows that schools following the Count ME In program with fidelity have on average a 20% reduction in their chronic absentee rate. These results are driven by a whole school, whole community approach which incorporates five key components: universal messaging and positive engagement; early warning and response system; an established review structure; data-driven interventions; and partners to ensure shared accountability.

Attendance is not just a school issue but a community issue. Current research shows chronic absenteeism predicts negative consequences for students, including lower achievement, disengagement from school, course failure, and increased risk of dropping out.

It is more important than ever we examine statewide chronic absence trends to better assess who is at risk due to attendance barriers and intervene to prevent learning loss, so all Maine students have equitable education opportunities needed for future success.

For these reasons, I strongly encourage you to include chronic absenteeism in the proposed study to increase attendance.

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

Thank you for your time today.

Susan Lieberman
Count ME In, Director