

Testimony on House Bill 141 and Senate Bill 359

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Good morning, Senator Smucker, Senator Dinniman, and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Cathy Utz, and I serve as the Deputy Secretary for the Office of Children, Youth and Families in the Department of Human Services (DHS). I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the very important matter of truancy.

House Bill 141, sponsored by Representative Mark Gillen, seeks to amend the Public School Code so that parents and guardians will no longer bear the brunt of the punishment for a student's truancy. This bill, as you know, was introduced in response to a tragedy in Berks County. A single mother of seven children, Eileen DiNino, was ordered to pay more than \$2,000 in truancy fines or go to jail. Mrs. DiNino could not pay her fines and was ordered to Berks County jail where she died. The Department supports this bill with amendment to remove the incarceration provisions which exist in current law.

The Department is also in support of Senate Bill 359, sponsored by Senator Stewart Greenleaf, which seeks to amend the Public School Code to prohibit a school district from referring a child for services or possible disposition as a dependent child or the case to a magisterial judge *unless* the school district has exercised "due diligence" to compel the child's compliance with compulsory school attendance. Due diligence by the school district would include the development of a Truancy Elimination Plan (TEP) that would be developed cooperatively with teachers and appropriate school personnel through a conference with the child's family following the first notice of truancy. The TEP must also include best practices in truancy prevention and may include a referral for the child and family to evidence-based intervention programs for at-risk children and families.

The research is clear that the early identification of students' absenteeism trends and the reasons behind truant behavior, as well as the timely and effective intervention/s to address the issues surrounding the absenteeism or truancy are critical to ensuring student success. According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the average school dropout costs society more than \$800,000 during the course of a lifetime. Cost-benefit studies indicate that truancy reduction programs are inexpensive when compared to the cost of students who drop out of school. On a human level, the lost potential of these students -- to their families, friends, communities -- cannot be quantified. We must strategically utilize our resources to ensure these children are able to reach their full potential. We must think of truancy reduction programs as an investment in the future -- both that of the child's and the Commonwealth's.

Committed and consistent long-term community action will be a key to reducing truancy. Each community must identify the specific issues that are contributing to the truancy, student as well as school-specific issues contributing to truancy, and then create targeted strategies and services to resolve them. It is clear that focusing on school attendance is not enough; truancy is a symptom of larger problems that need to be addressed in order to resolve the problem of absenteeism. Some students skip school because they feel unsafe at school while others may miss school due to family health issues, financial demands, substance abuse, or mental health problems. According to OJJDP, and what we typically know, there are three main contributors to truancy: school, family and community, and individual student characteristics. We also know that students' families may have already come to the attention of the public child welfare system. Attempting to combat the issue of truancy with fines or incarceration can further destabilize an already vulnerable family situation and ultimately result in the necessity of having the children in the family being placed in out-of-home care if the adult caregiver is removed from the home.

Preventing truancy requires a partnership between schools, families, and communities. Truancy prevention efforts are typically school-based, court-based, or community-based. The best efforts incorporate all three components to provide a continuum of prevention and intervention strategies. In my view, a fourth partner providing critical involvement and intervention is the public child welfare system. As I previously mentioned, many of the issues contributing to an individual child's truancy would already have been brought to the attention of the public child welfare system. As a result, child welfare agencies are uniquely positioned to provide insight into the underlying causes of truancy and help create innovative strategies to resolve those causes so that children and families can lead happy and productive lives. The Office of Children, Youth and Families (OCYF) has been supporting public child welfare agencies in their role as partners in preventing truancy by allowing them to identify one practice or program designed to address truancy issues among school-age children and youth through the Needs Based Plan and Budget Process. Since State Fiscal Year 2009/10, we have provided \$16,167,066 in funding to 54 county children and youth agencies to support truancy prevention programs.

In the past decade, the problem of truancy in Pennsylvania has been productively addressed by a number of strong cross-disciplinary and cross-agency collaborations. The first occurred in the early 2000's when the Pennsylvania Department of Education convened a statewide Task Force on School Attendance and Truancy Reduction, which developed and issued the Pennsylvania Truancy Toolkit in 2006. A cross-agency collaboration between the Department of Education, the Department of Human Services, and the Juvenile Court Judges' Commission, the task force aligned state agency efforts and provided comprehensive guidelines for schools, families and communities.

To gather information about critical systemic issues in Pennsylvania regarding truancy and offer an approach for counties to address truancy issues, Pennsylvania State Roundtable commissioned and formally launched the Educational Success and Truancy Prevention Workshop in December 2009. In 2011, the Pennsylvania State Roundtable expanded the mission of the group to include educational stability and success for children in foster care. The Workgroup is chaired by the Honorable John Kuhn, Court of Common Pleas, Adams County, Judge Mary Ann Ullman, Court of Common Pleas, Berks County and Cynthia Stoltz, Esq., Children's Court Administrator, Allegheny County. Workgroup members include a variety of respected experts representing multiple disciplines including courts, child welfare and education.

OCYF continues to be a partner in making enhancements to the Pennsylvania Truancy Toolkit and working with other key stakeholders through the Educational Success and Truancy Prevention Workgroup to develop legislation to provide clarity to definitions and procedures, as well as meaningful incentives designed to increase school attendance, in the Public School Code related to compulsory attendance. We have also supported our partners at the University of Pittsburgh's Child Welfare Resource Center to develop curricula to enhance the knowledge and skills of child welfare professionals working with families where truancy concerns exist.

In closing, on behalf of the Department of Human Services, I would like to thank you for your dedication to the children and families of Pennsylvania and for allowing us this opportunity to share our thoughts today. We look forward to continuing our partnership with you to ensure that the Commonwealth's children achieve their potential and successfully transition to adulthood.

