

**Testimony Supporting Changes to the Truancy Statutes as Proposed in H.B. 6499:
An Act Concerning Minor Revisions to the Education Statutes**

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Education Committee

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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We are testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices for Children *strongly supports* changes to the truancy statutes as proposed in H.B. 6499.

Truancy¹ is a significant risk factor for dropout, delinquent behavior, and school failure.² Research shows that attendance rates in ninth grade are the best predictor of whether a high school freshman will graduate on-time from high school.³ In Connecticut, police officers have noted the significant link between reducing truancy and preventing juvenile delinquency.⁴ Truancy is also a risk factor for adult criminal justice involvement and incarceration.⁵ Given the serious consequences of truancy, it is clearly an issue to be monitored and addressed.

We can infer from school attendance data that truancy is a significant problem in Connecticut.⁶ A recent study by the Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance found that nearly one-fifth of students in selected districts were absent for more than 10% of the school year.⁷ Those students who were absent for more than 10% of the school year, on average, missed almost a month of school each year.⁸ Even the "typical attendance" student in consortium districts missed more than two weeks of school, with the average high school student absent for 17 school days per school year.⁹

Extensive research indicates that unmet educational and mental health needs are significant causes of truancy.¹⁰ Accordingly, it is critically important for truant students to access support services as soon as possible. The passage of a few weeks before a truant student receives services – what might seem to an adult like a reasonable delay – can make all the difference to a teen who is struggling academically, socially, and emotionally.

H.B. 6499 would help reduce truancy and improve academic success by requiring schools to file a FWSN within thirty (30) calendar days after the failure of a parent or guardian to cooperate with the school's attempts to solve the truancy problems. Connecticut law already requires schools to file FWSNs to report failure of parents or guardians to cooperate with their efforts to reduce a student's truant behavior.¹¹ This amendment to the law would simply help ensure that students access CSSD and/or other agency support services in a timely manner. Although this time limitation would

represent a significant improvement over the *status quo*, Connecticut Voices for Children supports a much shorter time limitation of 5-10 calendar days.

In addition, H.B. 6499 would include a requirement that the student's parent or guardian be notified by mail of the legal consequences of unexcused absences. Such notice is critical to helping parents and guardians understand the seriousness of truancy. In addition, we recommend that the notice be provided in both English and in the primary language spoken at the child's home, as Connecticut data suggest that Latino students experience significantly disproportionate rates of absenteeism.¹²

In short, given the connections between truancy, increased drop-out rates, low academic achievement, and increased crime and drug abuse, Connecticut Voices approves of efforts designed to identify truant students and help them quickly and effectively improve their attendance record. Accordingly, we support the truancy-related changes recommended in H.B. 6499.

¹ Section 10-198a of the Connecticut General Statutes defines a truant student as "a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has four unexcused absences from school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from school in any school year." Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-198a(a) (available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2011/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-198a.htm>). A habitually truant student is defined in statute as "a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who is enrolled in a public or private school and has twenty unexcused absences within a school year." Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-200 (available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2011/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-200.htm>).

² See Myriam L. Baker, Jane Nady Sigmon, and M. Elaine Nugent, "Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School," *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice* (September 2001) on pg. 1-3 (available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/188947.pdf>).

³ See "Fast Fact: Ninth-Grade Attendance Rates Predict High School Graduation," *Manpower Demonstration Research Center* (August 27, 2007) (available at http://www.mdrc.org/area_fact_35.html).

⁴ See, e.g., S Goode, "Officers Find Few Truants in City Sweep," *Hartford Courant* (May 4, 2007); M Garriga, "Police, Panel Staffers Will Visit Truant Students," *New Haven Register* (February 15, 2007).

⁵ See endnote 2.

⁶ While attendance data are not an exact measure of truancy, as truancy relates only to unexcused absences, attendance data provide a related measure. Chronic absenteeism and truancy, therefore, are closely related but not identical.

⁷ See "Attending to Attendance – Student Attendance Data: Key Findings 2006-2007 School Year," *Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance* (July 2008) on pg. 6-7 (available at http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjjyd/jjydpublishations/reportstudentattendancedata7_2008.pdf). In 2006-2007, 25 school districts provided attendance data as part of the consortium.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

¹⁰ See Andrea Spencer and Emily Breon, "Truancy: A Closer Look – The Link Between Unmet Educational Needs and Truancy," *Center for Children's Advocacy* (December 2006) on pg. 4 (available at <http://www.kidscounsel.org/final%20truancy%20report%20dec%2020%2006.pdf>); See also endnote 2 on pg. 2.

¹¹ Connecticut General Statutes, Section 10-198a(c) (available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2011/pub/chap168.htm#Sec10-198a.htm>).

¹² See "Attending to Attendance – Student Attendance Data: Key Findings 2006-2007 School Year," *Connecticut Consortium on School Attendance* (July 2008) on pg. 15-16 (available at http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjjyd/jjydpublishations/reportstudentattendancedata7_2008.pdf). Again, note that while attendance data are not an exact measure of truancy, as truancy relates only to unexcused absences, attendance data provide a related measure. Chronic absenteeism and truancy, therefore, are closely related but not identical. Also note that the data provided is only for certain districts: in 2006-2007, 25 school districts provided attendance data as part of the consortium.