



Testimony
On
Chronic Absenteeism (S-3245 (Allen / Ruiz))
Before the
Senate Education Committee
November 16, 2015

Thank you for the opportunity to share the thoughts of the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) on S-3245 (Allen / Ruiz) which would require the Commissioner of Education to include data on chronic absenteeism and disciplinary suspensions on School Report Card and require public schools to make efforts to combat chronic absenteeism.

Our members are the principals, assistant principals and supervisory employees at the school building level who are responsible for: developing the educational vision of a school; ensuring a safe and secure learning environment for students and staff; implementing curriculum and assessment; and, leading teachers and school staff.

NJPSA has long supported efforts to address student absenteeism as it can contribute to low academic achievement, school dropout, delinquency and even gang involvement. As such, we support the intent of S-3245 (Allen / Ruiz) as the legislation attempts to spotlight this critical issue with students, parents, educators, schools, and the community. However, we implore the sponsor to consider existing school based structures that can, and have, historically worked to address student absenteeism in our schools.

Current Requirements & Action

Current law, *N.J.S.A. 18A:38-28 through 31*, requires all children between the ages of 6-16 to attend school. Existing attendance regulation, *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.6*, require each district board of education to develop, adopt and implement policies and procedures regarding the attendance of students. These policies must include a definition of "unexcused absence" (which can vary in terms of severity with some districts even considering tardy students (those fifteen minutes or more late) 'unexcused.' Policies must also include a provision on mandated services for students with between one and nine cumulative un-excused absences. A mandated court referral process is required for truant students (those with ten or more cumulative un-excused absences). We have included a copy of the current checklist that district's must use to ensure that their student attendance policies are compliant.

I&RS Work

Each school must also have an Intervention and Referral Services Team (I&RS) to assist students who are experiencing learning, behavior, or health difficulties, and to assist staff who have difficulties in addressing students' learning, behavior, or health needs. *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8 et. seq.* Attendance and truancy issues are included under this umbrella.

A school's I&RS Team must develop and implement individual action plans for students in need. These plans must provide appropriate school or community interventions or referrals to school and community resources, based on learning, behavior, and health needs identified.

In configuring building programs of I&RS, district boards of education are required to:

"...choose the appropriate multidisciplinary team approach for planning and delivering the services..." N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.1(a). The process requires schools bring together representatives from all professional constituencies in a school to support a student. This process is essential for effective problem solving.

Teams typically consist of:

- The Building Principal or designee with the authority of the principal to make decisions to fully develop and implement I&RS action plans
- General Education Teacher(s): representatives of the instructional staff for the building. The team include more than one teacher to represent various grades or disciplines
- Student Support Staff: (One or more representatives from among the following student support titles should be included on the team: substance awareness coordinator, guidance counselor, school psychologist, learning disabilities teacher-consultant, school social worker, speech language specialist or correctionist or school nurse).

However, this 'core team' is supplemented by a larger 'standing committee' that can include appropriate school, home and community members, based on the need identified, In addition to the parent or guardian of the student, when developing an appropriate action plan. Some of the individuals who may participate in this 'standing committee' are:

- Members of the social and human services community
- Health care professionals
- Clergy
- Individuals with transportation knowledge
- Law enforcement or security personnel
- Food service individuals
- Administrative support personnel
- Athletic/extracurricular staff

District boards of education are required to establish guidelines for the involvement of school staff and community members in each building's system of intervention and referral services. *N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7.3*. This helps ensure that student privacy and confidentiality issues are minimized.

In addition, annually I&RS teams are required to conduct a systematic review of I&RS plans and actions taken as a result of the building's system of I&RS, and make recommendations to school leaders for improving school programs and services. This review provides schools with the opportunity to identify patterns of academic, behavior and health concerns in the school and develop proactive responses. The information obtained from the review also supports the school-wide needs assessment process.

Given the existence and historic work of the I&RS Team in school buildings in identifying and addressing student needs, coupled with the fact that this school based structure has working rules that already address non-school member access to student information, as well as annual analysis of trend data, we would urge the sponsors to consider modifying S-3245 (Allen / Ruiz) to task the I&RS team with a specific review of chronic absentee data, rather than establish a new adhoc group to review trend data where a school is exhibiting issues with chronic absenteeism. The I&RS team has existing knowledgeable about individual student issues, as well as barriers to student attendance generally, in light of their regular responsibilities. NJPSA believes that a review of these metrics is essential for student and school success, we merely urge the sponsors to consider existing resources and expertise in a building.

Reporting

Thankfully New Jersey's Performance Reports currently include metrics on chronic absenteeism for students in grades K-8. This metric was used a proxy for 'college and career readiness' as research has identified chronic absenteeism as a persistent problem related to poor academic performance and potential behavioral and developmental issues. This metric was incorporated into the college and career section of the report back in the 2013-14 school year.

There is general agreement among researchers that being chronically absent places students at risk of negative academic consequences. See Chang, H. N., & Romero, M., *Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades*. Report. New York, N.Y.: National Center for Children in Poverty (2008); See also Moonie S., Sterling D.A., Figgs L.W. & Castro M. The relationship between school absence, academic

performance, and asthma status. *Journal of School Health*. 78(3): 140–148, (2008). Chronic absenteeism can also be an early predictor of dropping out of high school. See Mac Iver, M. A. & Mac Iver, D. J., Gradual disengagement: A portrait of the 2008-09 dropouts in Baltimore city schools, Baltimore Education Research Consortium (2010). **This is why we support the inclusion of this metric on the current Performance Report.**

Unfortunately, this metric is not currently extended to the upper grades since other, more direct, metrics related to college and career readiness, are included at the upper grade levels. NJPSA does support efforts to include this measure on the report going forward, however. Similarly, the Association supports the continued inclusion of information on school suspensions within the school climate section of the Performance Report.

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on this important proposal. As you can see, school districts across New Jersey have multi-systemic approaches and policies in place that seek to address chronic absenteeism, among other student challenges. We applaud statewide efforts to spotlight this critical issue and stand ready to work with the Sponsors, this Committee, and our fellow advocates on this important initiative.