
AMY BINSFELD

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 27TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Education

Representative Amy Binsfeld

February 7, 2024

Chairman Kitchens and Members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of Assembly Bill 1028, which focuses on funding a truancy reduction grant program.

During much testimony throughout the many listening sessions held on truancy, I've witnessed the far-reaching consequences of chronic absenteeism on the academic and personal development of our students. Assembly Bill 1028 emphasizes proactive intervention through a truancy reduction grant program is a first step approach. This initiative recognizes the urgent need to invest in targeted strategies, support services, and resources that can effectively tackle the root causes of truancy.

Assembly Bill 1028 provides a grant under certain parameters including 1) school district must be in the top 10% of highest truancy rate 2) the school district must have a plan to combat truancy in their district and 3) the school must have set hours Monday-Friday.

I understand the importance of responsible fund allocation, and while concerns may arise, the long-term benefits of preventing academic underachievement and reducing dropout rates are compelling. The proposed legislation aligns with the sentiments of our community, reflecting a shared commitment to providing every student with an equitable chance at success.

This legislation represents a step towards fostering a positive and supportive educational environment for our youth, ensuring that they have the necessary resources to thrive academically and personally.

Thank you for listening to my testimony and I am happy to take any questions you may have.



February 7, 2024

Assembly Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2023 Assembly Bills 1024, 1025, 1026, 1027, 1028, and 1029**

Thank you, Chairman Kitchens and members of the committee, for the opportunity to testify on the legislation proposed by the Assembly Speaker's Taskforce on Truancy.

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) is appreciative of the attention and policy proposals before the committee related to truancy. While we oppose most of what is before the committee today, we are optimistic that an ongoing conversation with policymakers will result in solutions that will benefit kids. Wisconsin, like states across the nation, is attempting to re-engage learners and families and make sure they attend school regularly.

Wisconsin is entering the challenge of student and family engagement from a position of deficit when compared to other states. During the pandemic, many states leveraged pandemic relief dollars to test and explore evidence-based strategies to draw learners back to school. By contrast, Wisconsin used a small portion of its state set-aside to contract with the Graduation Alliance to provide counseling and services to encourage families to re-enroll. While using Graduation Alliance proved to be a smart strategy, those funds are set to expire this Fall, and the service covers learners who disenroll – the deepest end of the continuum related to interventions related to attendance.

Before addressing the individual bills, the department wants to draw attention to the national trend related to using chronic absenteeism in place of truancy. The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) altered state activities and data collections around truancy by asking states to focus on chronic absenteeism and ending the requirements that states report truancy to the federal government. Chronic absenteeism is strictly defined as missing instruction, where truancy focuses on whether a learner has an excuse for missing instruction. Many districts across Wisconsin are attempting to tackle their chronic absenteeism rates by leveraging strategies that focus on engagement and removing barriers to receiving instruction. There is an overlap between truancy and chronic absenteeism, and they also measure distinctly different things.

The department is providing testimony for information only on AB 1027 and 1028, the truancy grant program and enabling language. DPI is supportive of the intent of these bills and believes additional funding is needed to address student engagement issues. The need is far greater than a \$2 million, one-time grant that supports a single staff position within a district.

The department is opposed to AB 1024, the proposal to provide notification to parents of students experiencing truancy regarding special education services. We are open to an ongoing conversation

about how to improve notification and believe the eventual outcome of this bill will lead to better policy development. While this legislation targets one underlying factor which can contribute to truancy through notification changes, it does not consider a number of other factors known to be barriers to student engagement (transportation, the child or a family member's mental health challenges, substance abuse, economic instability and/or homelessness) DPI is concerned that focusing on disability status alone misses the opportunity to provide outreach to families who may be facing the other challenges that contribute to a child's truancy. It also may have an unintended outcome of families assuming that truancy is a condition of receiving special education services from their local districts.

The department opposes AB 1025, creating a uniform definition of truancy. We support the intent of the authors to create a statewide, clear definition of truancy. However, additional time and input is needed to ensure implementation is possible without adverse impacts to local communities and policies. The issue deserves additional time and input from all the impacted parties, as well as a longer implementation period to ensure proper services are in place to support the systems that will be impacted by using a more stringent definition of truancy.

The department opposes AB 1026, which requires retention of pupils based on truancy rates. Mandatory retention is not an evidence-based solution to attendance issues and increases the likelihood of dropouts. DPI can find no evidence of retention based on truancy alone across the nation, nor can it find any supporting evidence that the strategy will improve student outcomes. In fact, according to a recent [American Institutes of Research national scan of state attendance policies \(2023\)](#), state activities are trending toward diversion and juvenile justice reform, along with a combination of prevention strategies to intervene and remove barriers families face.

Finally, the department opposes AB 1029, requiring the publication of truancy rates on school and district report cards. DPI already includes chronic absenteeism as a part of its report card system. As discussed earlier, the state followed national trends in ending its focus on truancy, meaning we would need to begin collecting truancy data again, which would take time to implement. The 2024-25 timeframe cannot be met. We are also concerned that reporting on two closely related measures may cause confusion for schools, families, and communities.

We appreciate the ability to engage with committee members on the policies before you today, and hope these bills spur additional conversation to tackle the significant issues we agree need attention. There are far too many technical and implementation issues left in these bills that require time and energy to solve. We encourage this committee to take the additional time to get this right for the kids and communities you collectively serve.

If you have questions or want additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov or (608) 264-6716.