



1785 NE Sandy Blvd #300
Portland, OR 97232
youthrightsjustice.org
(503) 232-2540

To: House Committee on Education
From: Chris Shank, SchoolWorks Attorney
chris.s@youthrightsjustice.org

Re: Support for HB 3199

Dear Chair Neron, Vice-Chair Dobson, Vice-Chair McIntire, and members of the Committee:

Youth, Rights & Justice (YRJ), a non-profit public defense provider, has been dedicated exclusively to juvenile law for 50 years. Each year, we provide holistic, client-centered representation to hundreds of children, youth, and parents in Oregon's juvenile court system.

Youth, Rights & Justice created our SchoolWorks program over twenty years ago to address the lack of school success and the poor educational outcomes our juvenile court clients were facing. Since its creation, our SchoolWorks program has provided individual education advocacy in over 3900 cases to help our clients enroll in school, stay in school, succeed, and graduate.

YRJ supports HB 3199.

YRJ supports HB 3199 because it seeks to provide school districts with the tools that they need to support students who struggle to maintain consistent school attendance.

Chronic absenteeism rates have reached a crisis level in Oregon. In 2022-23, only 62% of students attended school regularly (in school 90% or more school days).

The COVID pandemic, with the resulting extended periods of remote schooling and quarantines, exacerbated an already serious problem. It disrupted student and family routines. It altered students' perceptions of the importance of school and, most significantly, it disconnected students from their friends, teachers and other caring adults in their school communities.

There are many reasons behind chronic absenteeism. Family demands, unstable housing, unreliable transportation, violence, bullying or harassment at school, and mental health challenges caused by stress and trauma can all be contributing factors. School districts need tools and resources to identify students quickly who are struggling with regular attendance, and help families connect with resources to address barriers to attendance.

The impact of chronic absenteeism on outcomes for kids is dramatic. Students who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by third grade—which makes them four times more likely to drop out of school prior to graduation. A student who is chronically absent in high school is seven times more likely to drop out of school. We know that people who don't achieve a high school diploma are more likely to live in poverty (24% lower wages than a high school graduate) and to die prematurely.

HB 3199 provides districts with tools and resources to begin to address this crisis. It provides technology and data analysis systems so districts can identify students quickly and connect students and families with resources needed to remove barriers to school attendance. It also gives school districts access to data compiled by ODE on a quarterly basis, so they have the information needed to accurately assess if their systems and supports are working. Finally, it provides for an advisory committee that can distill information for districts and help identify practices that have been successful across the state.

Additionally, HB 3199 doesn't revert to using tools that have been proven ineffective, such as truancy courts. Referrals to the court for truancy are not effective in increasing graduation and attendance rates and in at least one study, students who received a truancy petition had less favorable outcomes than similarly situated students who were not referred to court.

Addressing this crisis will require considerable effort and resources, but it is imperative that we engage in this work. Oregon school districts need more resources and tools to be able to support students who are missing crucial educational opportunities. HB 3199 helps get Oregon students back in the classroom and on track to graduate so they can grow into thriving adults.

We urge the committee to support HB 3199. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue.

Sources:

Presentation by Oregon Department of Education to the Chronic Absenteeism Workgroup: Attendance, Every Day Matters and High School Success, April 19, 2024.

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<https://odphp.health.gov/healthypeople/priority-areas/social-determinants-health/literature-summaries/high-school-graduation>

The Relationship Between School Attendance and Health, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Snapshot. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592870.pdf>

The Impact of Chronic Absenteeism on Student Success, Wayfinder.

<https://blog.withwayfinder.com/impact-of-chronic-absenteeism-on-student-success#:~:text=Chronic%20absenteeism%20also%20profoundly%20impacts,of%20college%20and%20the%20workforce.>

Truancy in Washington State: Trends, Student Characteristics and the Impact of Receiving a Truancy Petition, Washington State Center for Court Research.

<https://www.courts.wa.gov/subsite/wscrr/docs/TruancyEvalReport.pdf>