



RIPEC

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May 9, 2024

The Honorable Joseph M. McNamara
Chairperson, House Committee on Education
Room 101
Rhode Island State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: Testimony on House Bill 8190 – Relating to Education – Attendance for Success Act

Dear Chairperson McNamara,

I am writing on behalf of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC) in support of House Bill 8190 – Relating to Education – Attendance for Success Act. This legislation would require local education agencies (LEAs) and schools to maintain and make public attendance policies. It would also require LEAs to develop and make public attendance improvement plans that include data on student absenteeism, resources and supports to address absenteeism, and recommendations for improvement at the district and school level. Schools with chronic absenteeism rates of five percent or greater would also be required to develop attendance improvement plans. In addition, this legislation would require schools to provide interventions for chronically and excessively absent students and would establish new reporting requirements for LEAs to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE).

House Bill 8190 would serve as an important tool in addressing Rhode Island’s crisis in chronic student absenteeism (defined as having missed at least one in ten school days). In December 2023, RIPEC published a comprehensive report analyzing chronic absenteeism in Rhode Island, and among our findings was that the state has an alarming issue with chronic absenteeism that predates—but was significantly worsened by—the pandemic. In the year before the pandemic (2018-19), about one in five students statewide were chronically absent and by 2021-22 this figure had ballooned to more than one in three students. In the last full school year (2022-23), chronic absenteeism improved somewhat from this apex but was still markedly high, with over 38,000 students statewide chronically absent (29 percent). Many students, moreover, had significantly higher absenteeism rates, with over 12,000 students statewide (9 percent) missing at least one in

five school days. While schools nationwide have seen increases in chronic absenteeism, RIPEC also found that Rhode Island has a larger problem with chronic absenteeism than most states; a U.S. Department of Education study of 2015-16 data found Rhode Island had the nation’s fourth highest chronic absenteeism rate, while a 2022-23 survey of 28 states and Washington D.C. found Rhode Island ranked eighth highest.¹

This issue is of critical importance to the success of Rhode Island’s K-12 education system. A wide breadth of research has shown that students with high levels of absenteeism tend to have lower math and reading scores, lower graduation rates, and are less likely to pursue postsecondary education. The effects of absenteeism also have been shown to follow individuals into adulthood and have been linked to higher rates of poverty and involvement in the criminal justice system. High levels of absenteeism within a single school also have been linked to lower levels of learning and worse outcomes for all students.²

Despite the urgency of this issue, not enough has been done to reduce chronic absenteeism in Rhode Island. RIDE has done important work in the last several years, establishing data systems to track chronic absenteeism and launching tools like the Attendance Nudge Tool and the Student Attendance Leaderboard that aid local-level educators and administrators. More recently, Governor Dan McKee and RIDE launched the Attendance Matters campaign, bringing increased awareness to the issue of chronic absenteeism. At the local level, moreover, some districts in the state have worked aggressively to improve attendance. Most notably, Central Falls reduced its chronic absenteeism rate by nearly 20 percentage points between 2021-22 and 2022-23 by prioritizing the issue, establishing a data-driven approach, implementing an aggressive outreach plan, led by family and community teams, and including a home visiting program that connect families as necessary with the services they need. There appears to be a wide range among districts in terms of attention to this issue, however. And, even with the enhanced focus brought by the Attendance Matters campaign, nearly one-in-four students statewide (24 percent) are presently on track to be chronically absent in the current school year.³

Using methods with demonstrated success in Rhode Island and elsewhere, the proposed legislation is critical to building on recent efforts to address the chronic absenteeism crisis in Rhode Island. As previously noted, Central Falls has seen significant improvement in student attendance by prioritizing the issue, using data effectively, and implementing a clear plan. However, without

¹ R.I. Public Expenditure Council, [Empty Seats: Enrollment and Chronic Absenteeism in Rhode Island’s Public Schools](#), December 2024.

² For example: Hedy N. Chang and Mariajosé Romero, “[Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades](#),” National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008; The Campaign for Fiscal Equity, “[Taking Attendance Seriously: How School Absences Undermine Student and School Performance in New York City](#),” May 2011; Alan Ginsburg, Phyllis Jordan, and Hedy Chang, “[Absences Add Up: How School Attendance Influences Student Success](#),” Attendance Works, August 2014; Jing Liu, Monica Lee, Seth Gershenson, “[The Short- and Long-Run Impacts of Secondary School Absences](#),” EdWorkingPaper No. 19-125, Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, May 2021; Phyllis W. Jordan, “[Present Danger: Solving the Deepening Student Absenteeism Crisis](#),” FutureEd, May 2021; Emma Dorn, et. al., “[COVID-19 and education: An emerging K-shaped recovery](#),” McKinsey & Company, December 14, 2021.

³ RIDE, [Student Attendance Leaderboard](#), Accessed May 7, 2024; RIPEC calculations.

clear guidance and direction from the state, few districts have shown similar rates of improvement. House Bill 8190 would hold LEAs accountable for mapping out their approaches to improve attendance and would better enable the state to coordinate and facilitate local-level programs that follow evidence-driven strategies for mitigating chronic absenteeism. This is of critical importance given that teachers and local administrators interact most frequently with students and families about school issues and are consequently best positioned to positively affect student attendance.

RIPEC additionally supports this legislation as a founding member of the Rhode Island Businesses for Better Education (RIBBE)—an alliance of businesses and business organizations committed to taking action that improves Rhode Island’s public K-12 system. RIBBE’s top priority is ensuring that every student is provided a high-quality education to meet the demands of Rhode Island’s future competitive economy, and the group has identified addressing chronic absenteeism as a legislative priority. RIBBE’s 2024 Legislative Priorities can be found [here](#).

For these reasons, I urge the committee to support House Bill 8190.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael DiBiase". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue highlight effect.

Michael DiBiase
President & CEO
Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council

RIPEC is a nonpartisan and nonprofit public policy research organization dedicated to providing objective research and analysis that addresses the critical challenges surrounding public finance and economic opportunity in Rhode Island.