



John M. Searles
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**Michigan House Testimony on the Truancy Bills
Senate Bills 103 to 106
February 27, 2018**

My name is John M. Searles, and I have the privilege of serving as superintendent of the Midland County Educational Service Agency. Over the past 27 years as a public educator, I have taught English and Spanish to middle and high school students, served as a curriculum director at a large school district in West Michigan, and for the past 13 years as superintendent of a small rural district and at the Midland County ESA. Over the years, I have met many students who have struggled daily to make it to school. Most have had responsibilities far beyond what our society would deem as appropriate to their age. For example, I have met elementary-aged students who are responsible for cooking breakfast, when there was food in the house, helping their younger siblings get dressed in the morning, and then must get everyone to the bus stop on time. Similar stories are common across the state and are the result of current economic conditions facing many of our families.

The United Way has been publishing their ALICE Project data from 18 states across America. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. In Michigan, 40% of the working age population fits this designation. We might also call them the "working poor." And least you think that I come from an "affluent county" where these problems do not exist, please note that our number in Midland County is at 38%. The point is that many people are working very hard but are still struggling to survive. They are unable to purchase the necessities that you and I take for granted. Behind these figures are real families with students who sometimes find it difficult or impossible to come to school.

The proposed legislation will define truancy, help to align resources, and establish triggers that will require school administrators to meet with families and students to get to the root of attendance problems. Our work in Midland County, led by the Honorable Dorene Allen, has redefined how the schools partner with the court, the Department of Health and Human Services, Community Mental Health, the Juvenile Care Center, and other private providers. We work together to identify students who are struggling with truancy, meet as a team to better understand the specific barriers faced by each family, then work through various partnering agencies to remove those barriers. In an important way, this legislation will "mandate" collaboration and foster new partnerships among agencies who have resources aimed at helping families. When the limited resources of each of the partners are aligned and focused on the needs of students and their families, seemingly insurmountable roadblocks can be navigated, forever changing the trajectory of students.

Four years ago, I was appointed by Governor Snyder to the Mental Health Diversion Council as a school representative for youth. What I have learned in that time is that while there are a number of excellent examples of governmental agencies working together with schools on behalf of our children, these examples are more the exception rather than the rule. I have also learned that across our state, people believe that our children hold the promise of a bright future for Michigan, and they are willing to work hard on their behalf. This proposed legislation gives us a common language to discuss truancy and puts a real child's face on a problem that can be solved by a team of caring adults who advocate on behalf of that same child.

As you know, some of my colleagues oppose this legislation for many reasons, often citing the loss of local control. Let me say that it has been my experience that superintendents care deeply about the wellbeing, the achievement, and the future success of their students. Superintendents also know that missing school is strongly correlated with lower achievement over time. Therefore, it is critical that kids attend school, and barriers must be removed wherever present. While some have stated that the limits imposed by this legislation, coupled with the new reporting requirements, will adversely impact local school districts, I believe that the proposed compromises will create pupil accounting structures that will inadvertently miss students who are struggling to come to school, or who struggle to arrive on time.

In closing, let me restate that I believe most students who become chronically absent from school do so because of conditions beyond their control. Likewise, their parents are often ill equipped to problem solve solutions that may seem obvious to you and me. This legislation will initiate new conversations, foster partnerships among agencies, and develop new relationships that cultivate opportunities for success in school for many of Michigan's children who are often relegated to the shadows. We want every student in Michigan to flourish in school and beyond. Let's continue to work together to remove all impediments to success for our children. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

Respectfully submitted,



John M. Searles