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**Michigan House Testimony on Senate Bills 103 to 106 aka Truancy Bills
February 27, 2018**

My name is Dorene S. Allen and I am the Midland County Probate & Juvenile Court Judge and have been for 18 years now. I am also the President of the Michigan Probate Judges Association.

Michigan ranks 37th in the United States in high school graduation rates. Also, 49% of our prisoners at the Department of Corrections have no high school or GED. 72% of Michigan inmates read at less than a third grade level. These bills make the start of changing those numbers.

The roots of truancy start at a very young age. A lot of times the reasons for a child being truant are not in the child's control. There is in fact the misperception that this is the 16 year old hanging out on the corner who is just "skipping" school. We know that it starts much earlier than that. Not going to school in fact starts in elementary school. When people think of truancy they think of kids making a decision to run with the wrong crowd. Instead, most truancy is the result of circumstances the kid can't control such as they are babysitting younger siblings, they don't have a coat, or they are being bullied. The proposed changes to the law are meant to address what actually causes the children to miss school in the first place so that we can set them up for long-term success. This is an issue that touches the lives of all of our children.

Truancy is a major problem in Michigan. The key focus of this legislation is to keep kids in school and as a result of that out of the justice or legal system. This is a very simple premise and goal. However, Michigan has no statewide definition of truancy. In addition, there is no guidance statutorily to the response when truancy does happen. The variance throughout the state is quite startling. These laws look to change that. This is part of the statewide attempt to stop the School to Prison Pipeline.

We have the resources already in place that can effectively address truancy. But a legal framework is badly needed. This will not add layers to this process but rather allow all of the various organizations to work more effectively. In fact as a result of this legislation the School Code would "talk" with the Juvenile Code. The definitions will be the same both places and there will be an ability to move effectively between both arenas.

We will be hearing from Judge Mayfield from the Berrien County and John Searles ESA Superintendent for Midland County. This is truly a statewide problem looking for statewide solutions with this legislation.

The key concepts of this legislation are truancy and chronic absenteeism. The laws proposed look to define a truant as a child/youth who misses school for 10 days. Further, there is a graduated set of interventions for the child and the parents to avoid getting to that point. The goal is to keep kids in school and not have to go to the final step of consequences: the court petition with court involvement. There is also a definition of chronic absenteeism – missing 10% of the days in school. There is solid research that a child missing school for greater than 10% of the time is compromised as far as education and therefore graduation.

This proposed legislation has been vetted by DHHS, Department of Education and our statewide School-Justice Partnership. I attach a picture of the most recent School-Justice Partnership meeting in Michigan. There was also an “Attendance Works” conference here in Lansing. It was robustly attended as well.

This is not just a high school issue. As I have said, it begins with elementary age kids. If we don’t address truancy while our children are young, the prognosis for the child’s educational future becomes bleaker and bleaker. Often the reasons for kids of any age being truant are outside of their control.

In my experience as a juvenile judge, the root of absenteeism or truancy can be an abusive or chaotic home; a lack of warm boots; a child being told by a single working parent that they need to babysit a younger sibling. There are many root causes. Very rarely is it the lazy kid avoiding a test.

The bottom line is that if we don’t address these very basic issues, then the fallout for Michigan is truly a tragedy. That fallout is the cost of dealing with a child who ends up in the justice or legal system and often our prisons.

But even more importantly, the cost is the waste of a child’s future.

The resources are there: education, social services, law enforcement, CMH, courts. Those resources are all in place. The legislation would give all our embedded resources a tool to deal with truancy and to deal effectively and cooperatively on truancy.

The approach will work. We have had a robust statewide Initiative – summits starting in 2013 and statewide meetings of the county teams continuously since then. These teams are made up of multi-disciplinary collaborative agencies and individuals. Schools, law enforcement, DHHS, mental health, faith community, foundation community and the courts. There are more than 800 members of this Partnership. The reason for statewide participation is simple: this is a statewide issue that is very frustrating at the front lines. In really an unprecedented collaboration – where all these stakeholders sit down for their county across the table from one another -- they talk about what to do about this problem and are acting on the problems with wonderful success stories. These county teams are in your counties. And they have all said the same thing: this is a problem and we need the solutions that are proposed in this legislation. This is a statewide issue. The problem is in Wayne County, it is in Oakland County, it is in Midland County and it

is in Houghton County – all very demographically diverse counties – urban, suburban and rural. The problem is in all of our counties. When people think of truancy they think of kids making a decision to run with the wrong crowd. Instead, most truancy is the result of circumstances the kid can't control such as they are babysitting younger siblings, they don't have a coat, or they are being bullied. The proposed changes to the law are meant to address what actually causes the children to miss school in the first place so that we can set them up them for long-term success. This is an issue that touches the lives of all of our children.

There has been local use of the proposed legislation as the template for their work in many counties.

I would ask on behalf of Michigan Probate Judges Association that this legislation be supported as the tool that it really is – a template for the success of our children and our state.

Thank you so very much for holding this committee hearing and your attention to this problem within our state.

School-Justice Partnership Forum
Grand Traverse, Michigan
September 25-27, 2017



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