

Support SJ4 with Amendments

Division of Children and Youth – Student Truancy From School – Unit, Policies, and Report
Testimony of Aubrey Edwards-Luce, Esq., MSW
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Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee

Chair Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher and Esteemed Members of the Committee:

I am the Executive Director of the Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) at the University of Baltimore School of Law. CFCC envisions communities where children and families thrive without unnecessary involvement in the legal system. For nearly 20 years, CFCC has operated a restorative program to help elementary, middle, and high school students and their families overcome barriers to school attendance and academic success. As a long-standing direct service provider, we welcome the collaborative resources and leadership of the State Department of Education (SDE) and the Division of Children and Youth in the Governor’s Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services and urge your **support of SJ4**.

Chronic absenteeism is a national problem, and it remains an even more severe problem in Maryland and Baltimore City, where we are operating exclusively this school year. The latest federal data from school year 2021-2022, showed that 29.7% of students national wide were chronically absent from school.¹ According to the Maryland Report Card, Maryland’s chronic absenteeism rate is 30.9%; Baltimore City’s rate during that time was 58.1% -- nearly double the state rate. Moreover, for the latest reported school year, throughout Maryland 20.7% of elementary students, 22.2% of middle school students, and 30.7% of high school students missed more than 20 days of school. This is in sharp contrast to Baltimore City’s rates. During the same school year in Baltimore City, 46.2% of elementary students, 43.1% of middle school students, and 62.7% of high school students missed more than 20 days of school. While the numbers look daunting, we are feeling hopeful that Baltimore City will improvements in our attendance rates as the leadership at Baltimore City Public Schools is leading collaborative newly developed relationships with our local education and judicial systems to help

At CFCC, we consider ourselves veterans in the battle to help students attend school ready to learn and enthusiastically support increased focus on the issue of school attendance. For nearly 20 years, we have been addressing chronic absenteeism by focusing providing a free (to schools and families), holistic, restorative, voluntary program for elementary, middle, and high school public school students in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Montgomery County. We are only one of many service providers who are focused on the battle for school attendance in Maryland, but I would venture to guess that many of our fellow providers see transportation, personal or family health issues, safety concerns and a lack of motivation as some of the most prominent reasons why students miss school. We employ a trauma-informed, team-based, incentive-based, holistic approach that encompasses mentoring, continual and consistent follow-up and oversight, tutoring, social services and referrals, and legal guidance and referrals to help TCAP students.² We support SJ4

¹Elvie Blad, “High Absenteeism Hits More Schools, Affecting Students With Strong Attendance, Too,” Ed Week.

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-absenteeism-remains-at-a-crisis-level-but-shows-signs-of-rebounding/2023/10>.

² The TCAP program supports families to obtain essential needs and referrals to services to help reduce the barriers that keep children and families from engaging in and attending school. Based on a trauma-informed approach that incorporates legal, psychosocial, and social service expertise, the TCAP Team (a volunteer Judge, Mentor, Coordinator, Attorney, and Case Manager) works to reduce social, emotional, economic, and environmental barriers to a student’s education and to develop and capitalize on each student’s connections to their family, school, and community. All students receive: one-on-one weekly conversations with a judge, mentoring, parent/caregiver outreach, case management services, and resource referrals, as needed. In addition, the TCAP Case Manager provides resources, referrals, and case management services, and the TCAP Attorney provides legal services, advocacy, and guidance, as needed, to all families whose children participate in the TCAP. The TCAP Mentor provides individual mentoring, reaches out to every family each week, and facilitates restorative circles during weekly sessions. Volunteer tutors from the University of

because we hope it would allow us learn about other strategies that we could leverage for the students in our program and also afford us an opportunity to share the wisdom we've gained during our nearly two decades of work.

If passed SJ4 would direct SDE to create a unit focused on student truancy and a compel the Division of Children and Youth in the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services to develop comprehensive strategies to address student truancy. Seven years ago, pursuant to HB 429 The Morgan State University published the report "Winning Strategies on the War against Habitual Student Truancy" which is full of recommendations to address school truancy across Maryland. Much has changed since the publication of this report and updates are undoubtedly necessary. SJ4 is not the first legislative action to require a report on this important problem, but it is the most recent action that is establishing governmental responsibility and accountability for addressing this student truancy. Like we tell our TCAP students, taking responsibility is the first step towards change. We are hopeful that locating a home for the issue of truancy inside the school system and in the executive branch will help turn the tide on attendance for Maryland's students.

We have just two recommendations to improve SJ4. Firstly, pursuant to Executive Order 01.01.2024.05, the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention, Youth, and Victim Services has been separated into the Governor's Office for Children and the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy.³ It appears that the Division of Children and Youth is in the Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy. SJ4 should be amended to reflect this change. However, we also think SJ4 should require input from the Office for Children and Youth in the development of the Division of Children and Youth's truancy strategies report because our experience shows there are several systemic, poverty-related obstacles to student attendance.

Secondly, we recommend that SJ4 be amended to limit the use of the word "truancy" and include "chronic absenteeism." For 18 years, CFCC's program was called the Truancy Court Program. However, CFCC has moved away from the language of "truancy" because it implies that students are missing school due to their defiance or their negligence. Data we collected showed that for many of our TCAP students, the root causes of the absences had nothing to do with their defiance or failure to prepare. In 2023, we renamed our program to be the Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Project (TCAP) which is more indicative of the reparative, collaborative posture we take in our work with students and families. Additionally, as an organization committed to seeing students thrive, we could not focus exclusively on the unexcused absences that are encompassed the definition of "truancy".⁴ Attending to unexcused absences did not adequately reflect the effort we put into educating parents and students about the harm that excused absences could do to their educational attainment. When it comes to learning, everyday matters—even the excused ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and we urge you to **support SJ4**.

Baltimore community are recruited and trained, who provide academic support both during the weekly sessions, as well as virtually, if requested.

³ Office of Governor Wes Moore, "Establishing the Governor's Office for Children and Governor's Office of Crime Prevention and Policy," (Jan. 18, 2024), available at <https://governor.maryland.gov/news/press/pages/governor-moore-signs-executive-order-establishing-the-governor%E2%80%99s-office-for-children-and-governor%E2%80%99s-office-of-crime-prevent.aspx>

⁴ The People's Law Library of Maryland. "Truancy," available at <https://www.peoples-law.org/truancy>