



April 10, 2023

To: House Youth Health & Safety Select Committee
Re: **House Bill 3931, House Bill 2725, House Bill 3917**
Position: On

Chair Thompson and honorable members of the House Youth Health & Safety Select Committee,

On behalf of The Education Trust and Children At Risk, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony as you consider multiple bills related to student attendance, chronic absenteeism and truancy.

The reasons for a student missing school are as complex and varied as the unique students, families and communities of Texas. Whenever a student is absent, the first response for educators is to ask and answer: *Why is this student missing school?* Despite a wealth of research demonstrating the powerful link between attendance and learning outcomes, especially in the early grades¹ and high school years², Texas currently lacks clear, consistent definitions and data to help educators answer this question and then implement solutions that work.

As a reminder, chronic absence is a measure of missed instructional time (commonly defined as 10% over a certain period) regardless of the reason, excused or unexcused. Truancy is narrowly tied to unexcused absences and is inconsistently defined state-to-state.

In 2020-21, 15% of all Texas students were chronically absent; nearly 1 in 5 (19.9%) students from low-income backgrounds were chronically absent compared to 7.3% of their more affluent peers.³ Unfortunately, Texas was headed in the wrong direction before the pandemic: In 2017-18, nearly 4,000 Texas schools had significant, high, or extreme rates of chronic absence (see Appendix A).

The good news is that attendance is a solvable problem if we treat it as the powerful indicator that it is. There are a number of evidence-based interventions ranging from relationship-building home visits⁴ and text messaging⁵ to telehealth,⁶ early warning systems, and mentors.⁷ At the core of students' regular attendance: positive relationships between school, student, and family.

As you shape policy solutions to address chronic absenteeism and truancy, please consider the following:

1. Because chronic absence data is best used as a diagnostic tool to identify where prevention and early intervention are needed, **it is important that definitions for chronic absence and truancy are complementary and encourage effective monitoring.** With consistent definitions (e.g., over a 6-week grading period), school-based personnel can more effectively monitor, investigate and label absences as excused or unexcused, and intervene appropriately.

¹ Attendance in the Early Grades: Why It Matters for Reading, Attendance Works and the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Attendance-in-the-Early-Grades.pdf>

² Why Attendance Matters, E3 Alliance: <https://ace.e3alliance.org/why-attendance-matters>

³ E3 Alliance Attendance Data Dashboard: <https://data.e3alliance.org/attendance-profile/p20/TX/x/p20/ELP/>

⁴ Student Outcomes and Parent Teacher Home Visits, Johns Hopkins School of Education: <https://pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/student-outcomes-and-parent-teacher-home-visits.pdf>

⁵ Can Texting Parents Improve Attendance in Elementary School? A Test of an Adaptive Messaging Strategy, Institute of Education Sciences: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2020006/pdf/2020006.pdf>

⁶ Roadmap for Action, The Children's Partnership, Nemours Foundation and the Winter Park Health Foundation: <http://www.movinghealthcareupstream.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Roadmap-For-Action-Advancing-the-Adoption-of-Telehealth-1.pdf>

⁷ Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism in the COVID Era, FutureEd: <https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook/>

2. Because the distinction between excused and unexcused absences can often be arbitrary – and because the resulting determination can have such high stakes for parents and students – **it is critically important that data regarding both chronic absence and truancy be reported consistently and transparently** so decision-makers at the local and state level can continue to improve policy and practice.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful deliberation concerning the important issue of student attendance.

Sincerely,
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Texas State Director, The Education Trust

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APPENDIX A

Texas Chronic Absence CRDC Changes in Distribution SY2013-14 – SY2017-18

