



Student Advocacy Center of Michigan
Public Comments re SB 405, 406, 407 and 408
Senate Committee: Families, Seniors, and Human Services
Wednesday, April 13, 2016

The Student Advocacy Center of Michigan has worked with students in educational crisis for 40 years, helping them get back into school, stay in school and become more engaged in their learning. We work with many students who are chronically absent and find that the reasons for those absences vary widely, including family crises and demands, mental and physical health challenges, boredom and not feeling welcome at school. The impact of these absences is often devastating to their education.

With that in mind, we applaud Senators Schuitmaker and Emmons for introducing SB 405, 406, 407 and 408 to bring attention, clarity and nuanced responses to this critical issue.

We are particularly supportive of SB 405, which explicitly disallows suspension or expulsion for absenteeism. Research and our own experience with students has revealed the negative impact that school removal has on absenteeism, exacerbating the problem, rather than addressing any root cause. Chronic absences increase dramatically when a student has a suspension or expulsion, according to data recently presented to the State Board of Education. We distinctly remember a student whose mental health issues made school attendance challenging. She was making slow and steady progress – but her school kept suspending her for multiple days when she missed a day – a response that became so frustrating to her, she eventually dropped out of that school. When other students have been suspended for truancy, they say to us, “What’s the point of going back? They obviously don’t want us there.”

Suspending for absenteeism sends the absolute wrong message. On the other hand, SB 406 flips that message in the way it emphasizes support services and prevention before involving the courts. Our hope is that this approach will get to root causes and foster true positive change.

The stakes are high. Absenteeism is connected to future school dropout. Balfanz and Herzog (2005) found that more than half of sixth graders with low attendance (attended less than 80% of the time), poor final grade in behavior, and failing grades in either math or English eventually left school. Sixth graders with at least one risk factor had only a 10 percent chance of graduating within four years of entering high school and only a 20 percent chance of graduating a year late (Balfanz & Herzog, 2005).

We urge support of these bills. Thank you.

- Peri Stone-Palmquist, LMSW, MPP
Executive Director