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TO: Senator Judy Emmons, Chair
Senate Families, Seniors, and Human Services Committee

FROM: Jerry Johnson, Assistant Superintendent for Legislation and Education Policy

RE: Testimony on SB405-SB408
School Attendance & Truancy

DATE: April 20, 2016

Good afternoon Committee Chair Emmons and Members of the Families, Seniors, and Human Services Committee. My name is Jerry Johnson and I am the Assistant Superintendent for Legislation and Education Policy at Calhoun Intermediate School District. In addition to Calhoun, I represent the school districts within the Barry, Branch, Jackson, Lenawee, and Monroe ISD's through our South Central Education Policy Consortium.

Joining me today is Jill Slaght. Jill currently serves as CISD's Pupil Auditor and Truancy Officer. She provides truancy monitoring and pupil auditing services to three counties. Prior to joining CISD six years ago, Jill worked in the Michigan State Senate and the US House of Representatives.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today on Senate Bills 405 through 408 that address attendance and truancy in Michigan schools. As currently written, we are opposed to the package of bills. However, we certainly thank the bill sponsor and the committee chair for their leadership in bringing attention to this important issue.

Continuing the discussion about school attendance and truancy in conjunction with the energy over the last three years to build partnerships across the state to address chronic absenteeism and truancy is commendable. We agree – kids can't learn if they are not in school. We also agree – continued chronic absenteeism leads to poor outcomes not only for children, but our entire community.

We are concerned that the bills, as written, include burdensome requirements for schools, do not recognize the unique characteristics that vary from district to district, and that they may not adequately address the important role that local human service agencies and the justice system play in the equation of school attendance.

Therefore, we have several suggestions to offer for your consideration that we believe could move this legislation in the right direction.

SB405

- We certainly support the provision that a child shall not be suspended or expelled solely for being truant or chronically absent.
- In Section 1561, we suggest deleting subsection 1 as the compulsory law currently requires attendance until age 18. That makes this language unnecessary.

- We advocate that compulsory attendance be extended earlier to age 5 or Kindergarten. As has been noted in earlier testimony, the patterns of poor attendance begin early. We currently have no ability to address that pattern, however, until age 6 or 1st Grade.
- In subsection 3, we recommend that a provision be included to address online learning options. "In attendance" within the context of the expanding menu of full-time or blended online learning options can mean different things. From the perspective of absenteeism and truancy, this is an area that lacks clarity.
- We appreciate the bills effort to provide consistency in definition for chronically absent and truant. However, we believe many (if not all) of the additional definitions should be left to local district policy. We recognize there are differences and nuances within communities across the state. As such, the terms late arrival, tardy, excused, unexcused, and any of the listed circumstances that may result in these classifications are best left for local district determination.
- We suggest a slight modification to the definition of chronically absent; such that the language says "...absent for 10% or more of the scheduled school days in the immediately preceding 12 months for which the pupil is enrolled in school." We believe this would allow more of a continuum of time rather than a finite window to monitor attendance and intervene as soon as possible.

SB406

- We again suggest that there is language being added that we believe is best left to be defined by local district policy.
- We would suggest that there be additional language added in reference to the required letter from schools to parents and caregivers. We recommend that if there is no response to the first communication from the school, that there be a second communication from the local Prosecutor's office to increase leverage for engaging families in crafting an appropriate resolution to truancy and chronic absenteeism.

SB407

- We are very concerned that this bill includes significant reporting requirements that we view as burdensome and for which the purpose is unclear. While we understand that gathering information for identification of patterns or trends can be valuable, we do see any consistency or clarity of the factors, situational criteria, or specific characteristics that should be documented.
- Brief narratives from across the state will not get us any closer to being able to sort information for data driven decision making. In the absence of a platform for classification and coding, the content of the narratives simply becomes added noise in our collective effort to solve the challenges of truancy and absenteeism in the state.

SB408

- The concept of willfully we suggest needs to be removed. Students are either in school or not; period. Whether willful or not, our challenge is to monitor attendance and when a child is not in school we want to be able to intervene. Certainly, then, if our proactive approach to engage families doesn't work, we have the leverage to work with the justice system to compel them to.
- Just as the added language in Section 5 provides the truant definition, we suggest another subsection that mirrors that language for the purpose of referencing chronically absent.
- Another consideration is to amend the Juvenile Code to allow courts to work with 17 year olds. At present, there is a gap in alignment of the compulsory attendance age and the court's ability to engage 17 year-old students.