

Testimony Before the House Education Committee Regarding Truancy

From: Dirk Matson, Human Service Director of Westmoreland County

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My name is Dirk Matson. I am the Human Service Director for Westmoreland County. As the Human Service Director I oversee the departments of Children's Bureau, Behavioral Health, Developmental Services, Area Agency on Aging, and Juvenile Detention and Shelter. I have served in this capacity for the past two years.

For the previous 35 years, I worked for a private provider of children and family services. The provider I worked for served delinquent, dependent, and at-risk youth and their families in a variety of services. Some of the services my former employer provided include a lock down secure residential facility, group homes, day treatments, in-home services, a private charter school, and a variety of other services. During those 35 years I worked as a live-in counselor in a group home, supervisor of a residential facility, an aftercare worker, and in a variety of administrative positions. During the course of that time, I read hundreds if not thousands of youth's files, ran hundreds of group therapy sessions, hundreds of individual therapy sessions, and spoke to thousands of kids and parents over the course of that time.

What I learned, was that youths who ended up getting in trouble started with not going to school. For the provider I worked for, we saw many kids who ended up in the deeper end of care who had years of truancy problems. Many of them missed 25 days or more and it wasn't uncommon to miss as many as 60 days of school. There was little evidence in their files to show that any early intervention had taken place.

What really brought truancy as a significant problem home to me was when I spoke to the Principal of the Charter School that was associated with my former agency. The charter school did pre- and post-testing of all youth who attended the charter school for what academic grade level they were performing at, not what grade level they were placed in. He told me that the youth in the residential facilities on average were 2.5 years behind grade level. He indicated to me that after 6 to 9 months his charter school students were able to make up 1.5 years in grade levels. I asked him how students could make up that much ground in such a short amount of time, anticipating that he would tout the abilities of his curriculum or special teaching methods. He said the reason they were able to make up that much ground was that the students came to class every day.

Putting together what I already knew from youths' records with this hard evidence drove home the necessity of dealing with truancy. It led to a conversation with Judge John Driscoll of Westmoreland County, then eventually to speaking with Shara Saveikis, the Director of Westmoreland County Children's Bureau to start a project in our County to do something about truancy.

What evolved from these discussions was the start of a truancy pilot program in Westmoreland County, which began in the summer of 2012.

My experiences with the private provider I worked for are borne out in the literature. Among truant 9th graders, 2/3^{rds} are unlikely to graduate with their peers and nearly 1/3rd will be charged with a criminal offense within two years¹. Other research shows that there is a link between truancy and behaviors such as: delinquency, dropping out of school, first time drug

use as well as other at-risk behavior such as alcohol use and teenage pregnancy, as well as adult negative outcomes such as marital problems, unemployment and adult incarceration².

The ties between truancy and many of these problems in our state are particularly troubling, given that we have not found solutions for them. A case in point are the ties to drug use. Our state is now in the midst of a drug epidemic, with record overdose deaths happening each succeeding year, at least in Westmoreland County.

When schools are able to identify truancy early enough in a child's life, it gives them the opportunity to intervene early and stop the trajectory of many problems that could happen down the road. Interventions early will save many from possible poverty, drugs, and criminal activity.

Our philosophy in dealing with truancy is to start early with children and use the least punitive methods possible first. For instance, engaging students and families in school is the very first way to avoid truancy. If students and families believe schools are safe, nurturing places to be, students will be more likely to attend.

We advocate the use of Truancy Elimination Plans (T.E.P's) as an early intervention as well. Once a student has been identified as having three illegal absences, the student and the family are engaged in developing a TEP. Essentially, this is a root cause analysis of why the student is missing class and then developing a plan to address the problem. The family and student are important ingredients in developing the plan. Schools and families acting as partners can help stop truancy. It doesn't work in every case but we have found it to be extremely useful with good results.

These are just two examples of numerous steps that should be taken. The most important part of this equation is that we need to pay attention to truancy and address it in a systematic way.

This brings us to the legislation being proposed in HB 2356. I am in support of this legislation because I believe all tools brought to bear should be available. However, the provisions of this bill should only be applied as a last resort. Non-punitive measures should be applied early in a student's career. These have been found to be most effective in dealing with truancy. Punitive measures being applied too early send a message that the school is an adversary, not a positive place to be. For some parents, this reinforces their perception of schools from their public school days.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee. Your attention to this critical issue is greatly appreciated.

¹ George, Thomas (2011). Truancy in Washington State: Trends, Student Characteristics, and the Impact of Receiving a Truancy Petition, p. 38. Olympia: Washington State Center for Court Research. Soder, Jeff (2011). 2009-10 Truancy Report, Chapter 28A.225 RCW: Report to the Legislature. Olympia: Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

²Truancy Reduction: Keeping Students in School. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Sept. 2001) available at <https://www.ncirs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/188947.pdf>.