

**Truancy Testimony Before the Pennsylvania House Education Committee
Dr. Kenneth A. Williams – Principal, Mount Pleasant Area Junior-Senior High School**

My name is Kenneth Williams. I am the principal of Mount Pleasant Area Junior-Senior High School located in rural Mount Pleasant Westmoreland County where I have served in that capacity for the previous 6 years. Prior to my current position, I was the principal of the Fox Chapel Area High School for six years.

In my 23 years as an educator and administrator in two widely different school districts I have worked with students and families from vastly different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. While there are obvious differences in the make-up of these school systems, there are also many commonalities. There is a great deal of truth to the statement, kids are kids no matter where you go and that is perhaps most evident when it comes to student attendance at school.

As my colleagues here today have or will share, student engagement in school and the value individual families place on education are major determining factors of a student's success. When a child feels welcomed and engaged, and not disenfranchised, he or she is more likely to attend school regularly. When a family places a high value on education, students learn from a young age that school is a pathway to success in life.

If you look deeper into the make up of the truant child and family, you will find a great correlation between socio-economic status and truancy. While students from more affluent families are not immune to truancy, it has been my experience that children from lower SES backgrounds who are not engaged in school are much more likely to be absent. Why is this? If you extrapolate that over the family make up, you will find that typically these parents are less educated and they don't emphasize the importance of school. It has become a vicious cycle that continues to be pervasive from generation to generation. If the parent did not complete high school or did not have value placed on schooling as a child, there is a high likelihood they will do the same with their own children.

Another troubling outcome of truancy is the enabling that is permitted to happen with students avoiding consequences. While Truancy Elimination Plans, or TEPs, have shown some success, it happens with regularity in my current school district that students are able to avoid consequences by transferring schools. More often than not, these schools take the shape of cyber, charter, or cyber-charter schools where the emphasis on attendance is practically absent itself. That part of our system is broken yet no one seemingly wants to confront the elephant in the room. This is what we refer to in education as enabling behavior. It is extremely costly to school districts, society, and students themselves.

An equal partnership between school and families is essential. Schools must continue to do their part in engaging each and every child. Parents must also fulfill

their responsibilities by preparing children to be ready for school and for emphasizing regular school attendance. Accountability must exist for both the school and parent.

It will come as no surprise that the principal in me values consequences, but I also value rewards as well. Parents must have consequences for not having their children attend school regularly. As students become young adults, they must also learn that there are consequences for their actions. I was asked to help provide solutions to the truancy issues we face in the Commonwealth. While some of these are similar to what is already in place, others may encourage creative thought to potential solutions. Some examples may seem more radical and challenge the status quo, yet I believe there is something worth entertaining with each of these suggestions:

Consequences:

- Continued use of fines; - affecting one's pocket book is an uncomfortable feeling. Fines are levied for other summary offenses in our Commonwealth, truancy is no different, yet magistrates must be sensitive to a family's ability to pay fines.
- Option of community service; - while there are liability issues, community service and repaying the debt to society through service to others is a viable option.
- Driver's license suspension or delay of receiving it; The removal of a teen's driving privilege can be the ultimate insult. A driver's license is a sign of independence to a young adult. As easily as it can be earned, they can have it slip away as well.
- Suspension of hunting license; I am a hunter. I am passionate about wildlife and conservation. I take tremendous pleasure and find relaxation in being in Penn's Woods. Many students in my current school district hunt. The threat of losing this privilege would certainly get the attention of communities like mine. If the parent knew that he or she could also lose hunting privileges as a result of their child's truant behavior, I believe they would do anything in their power to get their child to school.
- Reduction of welfare/public assistance benefits; While this may seem quite radical to some, emphasis needs to be placed on this identified group of individuals who, in my experience, are more likely to have a child experience attendance issues. If the thought of losing or having benefits reduced was real, I believe parents would emphasize the importance of attending school. If this were to become reality and more students attended school, it would stand to reason we would produce more graduates which would increase the likelihood of a more productive society. In effect, we could break the cycle of generations remaining in and taxing the welfare system. Maintaining benefits for being a responsible parent is a reward.
- Students may not transfer to a cyber, charter, or cyber-charter school to avoid truancy charges; To be blunt, we should eliminate the ability for students and

families to run away from the issue. Other obvious factors aside, a student should only be permitted to enroll in one of these schools if truancy is a non-factor.

I agree with my colleagues that truancy is a multi-faceted issue with no clear solution or magic bullet. With the proper care and attention to clearer definitions of the law, consistency in school engagement efforts, and an emphasis on parental responsibility, we can continue to make progress on addressing this issue.

I would like to thank the Education Committee for affording me the opportunity to share with you my experiences and thoughts about a critical issue affecting our public schools.