



**Date:** February 27, 2015  
**To:** House Education Committee, Chair Doherty and Members  
**From:** Laurie Wimmer, OEA Government Relations Consultant  
**RE:** HB 2657 [*Attendance-based Formula Change*]

On behalf of OEA's 42,000 members, it is my privilege to submit comments regarding the bill you are considering today that would alter Oregon's school funding distribution formula.

First, we would like to acknowledge the bill's sponsor, whose concern for chronic student absenteeism is shared by our members, and whose passion we truly appreciate. We agree that Oregon must search for remedies to this persistent problem, which stands as a barrier to learning for our students. OEA's concerns with this particular proposal have more to do with unintended consequences than disagreement about the underlying problem the bill attempts to solve.

Absenteeism is a phenomenon caused by various factors, and any solution the State may devise must take such factors into account in order to be successful. According to Child Trends,

"Few school districts currently have the capacity to analyze attendance data to identify those students who are chronically absent. Many factors can contribute to student absenteeism. Family health or financial concerns, poor school climate, drug and alcohol use, transportation problems, and differing community attitudes toward education are among the conditions that are often associated with a child's frequent absence from school." - <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=student-absenteeism#sthash.V4EnJQP4.dpuf>

Stanford University researchers have similar findings:

"Research shows that contributing factors to truancy and chronic absenteeism fall into four broad domains:

**Individual:** school phobia, learning disabilities, poor school attachments, behavior problems, perceived or real lack of safety, boredom/indifference in class, lagging schoolwork, need for employment;

**Family:** low family income, single-parent status, child maltreatment, parental disabilities, lack of parental involvement in education, family mobility, family care responsibilities;

**District/School:** district/school attendance policies, diverse student learning styles that make individualized instruction challenging, relationships between students/families and teachers; and

**Community:** high levels of family mobility, violence, child maltreatment, crime, drug abuse, unemployment

The extent to which these factors play a role in chronic absenteeism varies based on a student's age, with family factors more likely to influence elementary school students and all types of factors likely to influence middle and high school students. ." - [http://jgc.stanford.edu/resources/policy\\_fact\\_sheets/Absence\\_Interventions\\_PFS.pdf](http://jgc.stanford.edu/resources/policy_fact_sheets/Absence_Interventions_PFS.pdf)

Given Oregon's disinvestment in its schools over the past 15 years, with attendant reduction in all the factors that help (especially marginal) students succeed – enrichments, individualized attention, electives, extra-curricular activities, counselors, librarians, school nurses, and so on – it is little wonder that Oregon's chronic absenteeism is so high. The state's poverty rate is also an underlying factor. Oregon has the nation's second-highest utilization of food stamps, 50 percent of babies are born on the Oregon Health Plan, and the official poverty count is more than 20 percent of our students.

The solution proposed in HB 2657 to this multifaceted problem falls short on three counts: first, it ignores the underlying causes and assumes all the onus is on the school to solve the problem. Second, by doing so, the funding formula becomes a punitive device that has a harmful impact (reduced funding), however unintended, on students who DO attend their school on a regular basis. Finally, the formula distorts distribution and will unintentionally harm the highest-poverty and rural areas of the state most, and offer benefit to the more affluent districts. We are certain that no one intends that outcome.

Using the distribution formula in this way is objectionable and is a blunt instrument when a targeted intervention is warranted. Better data on the causes in our schools of student absenteeism should guide any solution, and that solution or set of remedies ought to be targeted to the particulars of each school's absentee populations.

What we know anecdotally about our school personnel is that frequently, administrators, counselors, teachers, and even coaches reach out to their truant or absent students to urge them back into regular attendance. The stories we've heard about these children's lives are heartbreaking: some are kept home to care for young siblings when parents can't afford to hire sitters. Some are embarrassed that their shoes or clothing aren't up to the fashionable (expensive) wardrobes of their more affluent peers. Some are struggling with physical or mental health issues, or drug abuse, or family dysfunction. Some have simply given up on themselves because they've fallen too far behind. With respect to the latter cause, that's why OEA members have strongly advocated for more early interventions and such programs as summer school, to stop the summer slide phenomenon.

Punishing all students in a district with high absenteeism will not change the circumstances of these students' difficult lives, nor will it solve the financial issues that cause so many school districts to make hard budgetary choices in these resource-strapped times. HB 2657 as written will not accomplish its worthy goal. We would support turning the proposal into a study on the root causes of chronic absenteeism in Oregon and the best, evidence-based means of ameliorating these causes.

Thank you so much for considering our input.