

April 21, 2019

To Chairman Wagner and the Senate Committee on Education,

I am speaking in support of HB2191 with a caveat. As a clinical psychologist who worked as consultant to many school districts through the years, I applaud the parity this bill gives to mental, emotional, and physical health. Students have testified to the serious impact that missing school for an emotional problem has on their grades when it is treated as an unexcused absence. In a perfect world, this bill could stand by itself.

However, in too many of our schools, absences are not fully tracked and an excused absence is not responded to, even if it is repeated many times. I have worked with many students over the years who suffer from school anxiety and who find it hard to get to class. Their parents responded with appropriate search for answers and attempts to return their kids to school as soon as possible.

But in other circumstances parents have neither the resources or, even, awareness of what to do when a child refuses to go to school. As long as the child stays at home, the problem is ignored by the school. However, the school is frequently the child's best chance of identifying the emotional problem and getting help. Think of a stressed mother, rushing to work, whose child starts to cry and says that they can't go to school. For one day, this is not a severe problem, but this kind of fear may actually become worse if not addressed. So this one excused absence grows into an increasing withdrawal.

The best solution I can see is that, in regulation, a clear pathway be established when students miss school - even with excused absences. If this is excessive, it is important that the school assess the problem and the appropriate response. In many cases, this may be work best with a Section 504 designation - including a clear plan how to address the problem and get the student back to school, or, as a last resort, to identify alternative educational alternatives.

The most important thing is that this well intentioned bill doesn't lead to more students falling through the cracks.

Thank you,

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