

Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Education committee:

For the record, my name is Linh Oliver. I'm submitting this testimony in support of HB 4154 in my personal capacity as a former chronically absent student.

My story is not remarkable — which, if anything, is more telling. I am just one of countless students who slipped through the cracks while dealing with problems far bigger than any adolescent should have to face on their own. What set me apart were the resources and support I had to get back on track before suffering the consequences, a luxury that many students did and still do not have.

I suffered a severe mental health episode in my junior year of high school. I started staying in bed all day, skipping class, excusing myself for illnesses that never seemed to go away. In just a few short months, I went from being a lifelong straight-A student to a midterm report full of failing grades. There was no warning system or early intervention: no one knew anything was wrong until it was almost too late.

Luckily, my guidance counselor and teachers gave me an almost exorbitant amount of grace to forgo assignments, drop classes, and fix my grades before they became permanent. I went on to attend a good university with a nearly full-ride scholarship, solely because I had the opportunity to salvage my academic record. But I was far too close to slipping through the cracks for good, and I know many students who weren't given the same opportunities: who missed their chance to bounce back and have suffered the consequences for it.

My story is ultimately one drop in the ocean: a part of a pattern, which has been exacerbated in recent years by the COVID pandemic and a complex, comorbid assortment of other issues, all of which we struggle to grasp but feel the strain of firsthand. To understand these issues, their impacts, and how they manifest in the classroom, we need a better grasp on the data. We need to know when students are absent, which demographics are disproportionately affected and why — and that data needs to be available early enough to still be relevant when we respond.

It's important to remember the humanity behind the data. A 33% chronic absenteeism rate is not just an alarming statistic: it's thousands upon thousands of students, every single one of which is, for whatever reason, facing barriers to showing up and in need of support. If Oregon is serious about addressing our chronic absenteeism crisis and providing that support, we need to be proactive and set the foundation for success.

HB 4154 is a crucial part of that foundation and a step in showing up for our students. I'm grateful for Rep. Wise and the late Rep. Nguyễn's advocacy, and respectfully urge your support.