Comments on House Bill 410
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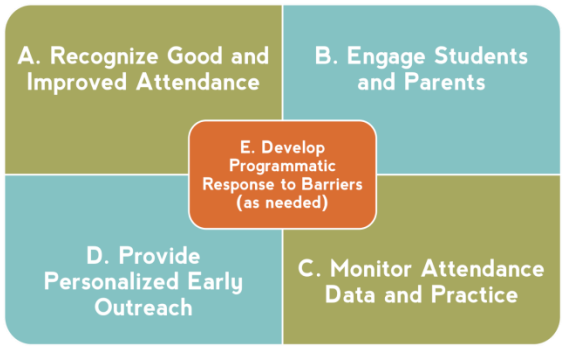
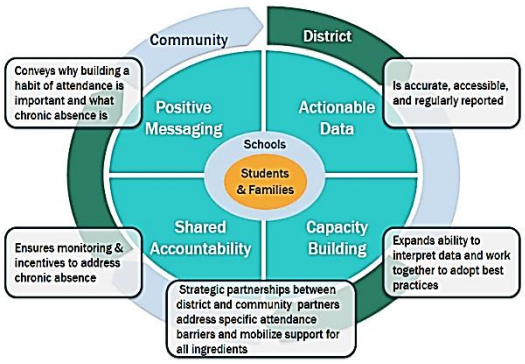
Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman Hayes, Ranking Member Fedor, and members of the House Education Committee:

Thank you for considering the Ohio Poverty Law Center's written testimony in support of Substitute House Bill 410 as an important reform to Ohio's truancy laws. My name is Janet Hales and I am the Director of the Ohio Poverty Law Center. Our mission is to reduce poverty by protecting and expanding the legal rights of all Ohioans living, working, and raising their families in poverty.

The AIE-Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity recently confirmed what many know – that education can and should be a powerful tool in reducing poverty. In their report, *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream,*[1] a bipartisan group of experts on poverty identified education as one of three domains that must be strengthened and supported if we are going to reduce poverty and increase economic and social mobility in our nation. The report underlines the importance of bipartisan education reform and reminds us of the important work of this Committee. The report does not address truancy directly, but it calls for policy changes that aim to help poor children improve their academic achievement and educational attainment and observes that school systems must employ greater innovation and family engagement to face today's challenges. HB 410 moves Ohio's schools forward by requiring Ohio's boards of education to adopt new or amended policies to address or ameliorate school absence and by eliminating suspension and expulsion as a remedy for truancy.

States and school districts all over the nation are already embracing their responsibility to find ways to reduce chronic absences. They are making investments in students with evidence-based and promising practices, which are described in *The Attendance Imperative: How States Can Advance Achievement by Reducing Chronic Absence,* published by Attendance Works.[2] This policy brief describes states such as Indiana, Georgia, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, New Jersey and others utilizing chronic absence[3] data to develop school accountability systems and they are intervening earlier with families to identify and help remove barriers. The brief makes other recommendations for state and local interventions, which are summarized in the diagrams below.





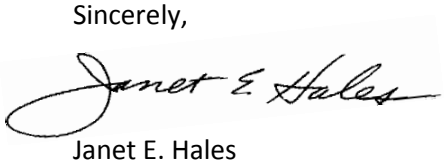
[1] *See* http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/12/aei-brookings-poverty-and-opportunity
[2] Attached to this testimony and available at this link: http://www.attendanceworks.org/policy-advocacy/state/state-policy-brief-the-attendance-imperative/
[3] Chronic absence occurs when students miss an extended period of school and takes into account both excused and unexcused absences. Chronic absence affects school performance, regardless of its cause.

Ohio is a leader in its capacity to collect and use education data.[4] Schools, therefore, have the information and capacity available to provide parents and guardians with actionable data before students have missed many hours of valuable instruction time. Ohio's schools should be able to use their recognized ability to capture and utilize data to reduce chronic absence in Ohio's schools. Studies show that such efforts will yield better attendance, which in turn, will greatly increase chances of school success.[5]

Chronic absence from school substantially correlates with poverty levels.[6] Families living in poverty face many barriers to school attendance. High rates of chronic illness due to housing conditions, unreliable transportation, housing instability, variable work hours, the need for older children to care for pre-school children, and lack of effective community supports, are all more likely to occur when families are struggling to live in poverty. We can all think of extreme examples of children who did not attend school due to parental neglect. But the real reasons for chronic absences are varied, complex, and often relate to problems associated with generations of struggle and poverty.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this issue in the context of education's powerful role in reducing poverty in Ohio.

Sincerely,



Janet E. Hales

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[4] *Data for Action 2012: Focus on People to Change Data Culture*, published by the Data Quality Campaign.
[5] *Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades* (September 2008), Hedy N. Chang with Mariajosé Romero, PhD.
[6] *Id.*