



**Before the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
House Bill 348– Create pilot programs to increase student attendance, graduation
Sponsor Testimony by Representative Bill Seitz and
Representative Dani Isaacsohn
Tuesday, January 16th, 2024**

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to provide sponsor testimony, along with my joint sponsor Representative Seitz, on House Bill 348. This legislation would pilot the use of financial incentives to boost school attendance and graduation rates in the highest need urban and rural school districts.

Imagine you're in 9th grade, just starting high school. Your alarm goes off at 6:30am, and you're exhausted because you were up late playing the new Halo game, so the last thing you want to do is go to school. And you know that it's an option not to go, because you spent two years barely attending school when you were in 6th and 7th grades, and you never really got back into the rhythm. To be fair, most other kids at your school didn't either. So, you're probably just going to skip that day - your parents are already at work, so it's all good. So, you skip - you miss out on learning how to differentiate between sine and cosine, or how to parse a critical essay, and you fall behind in Spanish. And most importantly, you continue your participation in the group of more than a quarter of all Ohio students who are chronically absent from school - which means missing more than 10% of school days.

That's the scenario for a devastating number of Ohio's students, who haven't adjusted back to a culture of attending school all the time. And it's not just Ohio - there has been a cultural shift away from attending school across the country. Chronic absenteeism rates have skyrocketed everywhere, almost doubling from pre-pandemic levels. The trend has been most acute in lower-income school districts, further widening the education gap between wealthy communities and poorer ones. This is the number one issue we are facing in education, and it is an absolute emergency.

Because it doesn't matter how qualified a teacher is, or how great the new science of reading curriculum is at teaching a student to read, if students aren't there to learn. And think about this my friends: We can't even have our battles over bathrooms or controversial subjects if there are no kids in the classroom! The most urgent problem in education today - by far - is the fact that students are not in schools nearly enough. It hurts their ability to learn, to develop social skills, and to adjust to the discipline and stability that sticking to a schedule brings.

Additionally, in some of our schools, too many students still don't see the benefit of graduating on time.

Our bill is aimed at piloting an innovative, data-driven approach to drive attendance and improve graduation rates in the lowest-performing schools. Known as a conditional cash-transfer, these types of policies are just like they sound: financial incentives are utilized to promote shifts in positive behavior. In this case, \$50/month to either the parent or student to drive attendance, and \$250 to encourage graduation, with additional incentives for graduating with good grades. Conditional cash-transfers have been utilized to drive school attendance all over the world for decades, and the evidence is extremely compelling.

Brazil's Bolsa Familia program has seen [attendance rates increase](#) by more than 20%,¹ and has added to the average length of schooling by two years. In another long-term CCT initiative, the program increased the likelihood of high school graduation [by 18%](#).²

Closer to home, a [study](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that incentives of \$50 per month for attendance, behavior, and grades led to recipients outperforming their control group peers a year after the financial incentives began.³

Finally, this is a smart fiscal approach to this issue. By spending money upfront on incentives to drive attendance, we are saving huge amounts down the road.

Lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates contribute to lower future taxable earnings and greater societal costs through increased utilization of public

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2013/11/04/bolsa-familia-Brazil-quiet-revolution>

² https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3112035

³ https://rady.ucsd.edu/_files/faculty-research/sadoff/Levitt_List_Sadoff_Incentives_Education_NBER_WP22107.pdf

benefits and rates of incarceration.⁴ [A study out of Northeastern University estimated that](#) there are over \$300,000 in additional costs to the system between those who graduate high school and those who do not.⁵ Put simply, it is better to pay now than pay later. Let's get kids in school so they can learn to read and do long division, rather than address the fact that we have a workforce that struggles with basic math and reading comprehension.

So, I want to take you back to the hypothetical we started with. Now when you're up at 6:30 and thinking about skipping, you remember that new game you've been wanting, and how if you just go to school 90% of the days this month, you'll get \$50. Fiiiine, you think, you'll get up and go.

Let's save some money and get kids back in the classroom. Chairman Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and Members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for your consideration of H.B. 348. I look forward to your questions.

⁴ https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/07-08_rep_educationandpublicsafety_ps-ac.pdf

⁵ https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/downloads/neu:376324?datastream_id=content