



Bob Behning

Re: City Connects Pilot Program

October 24, 2023

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you, again, for taking the time to learn more about City Connects and the many benefits this practice can have on students, their families, and Ohio's educators. My name is Bob Behning. I am an assistant vice president of Marian University and the director of the Center for Vibrant Schools. I also serve in the Indiana House of Representative as the chair of the House Education Committee.

Over the last several months, our team has shared with many committee members and legislators the incredible impact the City Connects practice has on kids. From improved academic performance to a decreased likelihood of repeating a grade, this comprehensive student support practice addresses out-of-school factors that impact a child's ability to learn.

One of the biggest challenges hindering student success is chronic absenteeism. Preliminary data from a recent New York Times [study](#) shows on an average day last year, nearly 10 percent of K-12 students nationwide were absent. About 25 percent of U.S. students qualify as chronically absent, missing at least 10 percent of school days or about three and a half weeks. This number has been on the rise since 2020 and is a contributing factor to lagging academic performance.

Even missing just three days puts a student at risk of falling behind his or her peers. Each time the National Assessment of Educational Progress—also known as NAEP and the nation's report card—is administered, students are asked how often they were absent the previous month. A recent [analysis](#) of this question showed a correlation between attendance and academic performance on the exam. Fourth graders who reported missing three or more days the previous month scored 17 points lower than their peers who missed zero days, and 12-13 points lower than those who reported missing 1 to 2 days.

There are a variety of factors that cause a child to miss a day of school. While many will miss a small number of days due to illness, doctor's appointments, and other common reasons, those who are chronically absent may have an underlying reason. Perhaps a child has a particularly difficult home situation—suffering from abuse, struggling with homelessness, or helping support the family with a part-time job. Maybe the student does not have reliable transportation to and from school. Or maybe the student does not enjoy school because he or she has fallen behind and cannot catch up on their own.

Students cannot focus on learning if they are focused on other more pressing issues like where their next meal will come from or where they will be sleeping that night. The City Connects practice puts guardrails in place to prevent students from falling through the cracks and to help thoughtfully address their challenges.

If a child habitually misses class, a City Connects site coordinator can meet with the student to determine why. Once an issue is identified, the student and their family can be connected to resources and support.

Then, that child may be in a better position to attend school more regularly. When a student's needs are met, when they are known and understood, they are more likely to come to school.

Recent data shows that in just year two of City Connects implementation, Indiana schools experienced an average decrease of 11 percent in chronic absenteeism.

Academic interventions are not enough to move the needle on student success. If we are serious about addressing the learning loss the vast majority of students are still experiencing due to the pandemic, then we must address out-of-school factors. City Connects can be the final piece of this complex puzzle.

The most successful policies I have seen implemented in Indiana and across the country have been rooted in evidence with demonstrated success. City Connects was founded more than 20 years ago by Boston College, and decades of evidence and research prove that schools implementing the practice have increased academic performance, decreased absenteeism, and improved life opportunities for their students. In just two years, the Indiana schools the Marian University Center for Vibrant Schools works with have experienced a four percent growth above the statewide average in English Language Arts and mathematics. And we expect to see that number grow with continued implementation.

Those results are no accident. Utilizing evidence-based practices is the only way to address learning loss effectively. Adding a comprehensive student support practice to your academic interventions can dramatically increase student growth.

As you consider ways to improve academic performance, I urge you to incorporate integrated student supports, like City Connects, into Senate Bill 162. Without addressing all the challenges kids face, we will not begin to see significant academic improvements.

Thank you for your time and continued consideration. I wholeheartedly believe City Connects is a critical piece to driving long-term student success inside and outside the classroom.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bob Behning", with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

**Bob Behning**

Assistant Vice President  
Director, Center for Vibrant Schools  
Marian University