Madam Chair and members of the committee. My name is Joshua Crosson and I represent Ed Allies, an education advocacy nonprofit that works to improve public education for all kids.

I would first like to thank Representative Kresha and Madam Chair for entertaining a bill that would allow so many diverse voices from throughout our Minnesota communities to be able to express themselves on this important matter. As you can see, people are passionate and outraged that we have allowed schools to punish children by withholding their constitutional right of an education for so long.

We know that over 6 percent of our state’s children are suspended or expelled every year and that number is only growing. In just one year, we’ve increased the number of school pushouts by 11 percent. We also know that school dismissals specifically under the general category of “disruptive behavior,” which can range from anything from bringing a weapon to school to rolling your eyes at a teacher, are the leading cause of school dismissals at 40 percent of student pushouts, and schools use this to predominately target Black and Native American kids and kids with disabilities. When we make it easier to suspend and expel kids, as HF905 would do, we will only see our achievement gaps widen.

We also know school dismissals don’t work for both the student being dismissed and those left in the classroom. Dismissals hurt graduation and proficiency rates that then in-turn impact the economy. As educator and school administrator Cristin Murphy said during her testimony on the topic “Minnesota must change the way we do discipline so that young people can have a chance at the education and life they deserve.”

We know school-based exclusionary practices can impact students well into their adulthood. For example, just one suspension is associated with a 32 percent increased likelihood of dropping out of high school. Students that drop out of high school are 63 times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system than graduating college. If Minnesota’s graduation rate increased by 10 percent among males, the state would see an $11 million increase in state and local tax revenues. This issue is as much a rights issues as much as an economic one.

While I appreciate the chance to have this conversation, as it is currently written, I have concerns with HF905. It would remove the word “willful” from the Pupil Fair Dismissal Act and, by doing so, eliminate the limited amount of due process guaranteed to students. In nearly 180 instances in law, the word “willful” provides due process to the adult accused including to protect elected officials yet this bill would remove students from those same protections.

By removing willful, this legislation would remove intent as a variable allowing school administrators who depend on school dismissals to push even more kids out more quickly. We know withholding kids’ Constitutional rights to a public education is a serious penalty with harmful results and, therefore, it must be exercised with fair consideration at the very least. We need more student due process – not less.

Instead of removing the word, Madam Chair, I would like to see us define the word “willful” to provide increased clarity. We must instead codify the Supreme Court’s decision and find a common process by which schools can maintain their commitment to all kids.

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.