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Dear Chair and Members of the Committee:

There is a clear correlation between attendance rates and school achievement. We know that the more time children spend in school, the more opportunities they have to learn material, get support from teachers and staff, access free breakfast and lunch, and deepen relationships with adults and other children. As the problem of chronic and excessive absenteeism has worsened since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, so too have proficiency levels in reading and math for Minnesota's children and youth. Why are so many kids missing so many days of school? I believe the answer is not as simple as some might think.

According to the most recent data from the Minnesota Department of Education, over 30% of students in Minnesota were chronically absent - they missed 10% or more of the school year - in 2022. Chronic absenteeism is worse among Black and Indigenous children, children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and children who identify as LGBTQIA.

As a parent of two children with disabilities who have both exhibited strong school refusal tendencies over the years, I know this problem of absenteeism all too well. And I also know that it is very tempting to blame parents for being irresponsible or unwilling to get their child to school. While parents (and guardians) do shoulder the burden of ensuring their child regularly attends school, the matter of excessive absenteeism is much more complex than uncooperative parents, and until we fully address the challenges that keep children from attending school regularly, we must use caution in assigning blame and charging parents or children with truancy when there are often many factors that contribute to the problem of absenteeism. My own children, both of whom have neurodevelopmental disorders and have been identified as gifted, find school tiring, boring, overstimulating, loud, and difficult to navigate day after day.

Parents and guardians are responsible for getting children to school - up to age 12, they can be charged with educational neglect if their child misses more than three days for elementary school and seven days of middle or high school for an unexcused reason. Unless a parent or guardian notifies the school of an absence with an excuse that is allowable, any absence is considered unexcused. Children older than 12 can be charged with truancy for excessive absences. Truancy intervention programs operate within county attorney offices throughout Minnesota to help identify causes for absenteeism and determine whether public or community support services or programs would help address basic needs and improve attendance. It would be useful to collect and analyze data from these intervention programs to determine how successful they are in addressing issues related to school attendance and improving outcomes for students receiving services through these programs.

There is a balance between a parent's responsibility to require their child to attend school and a school's responsibility to ensure that the school is safe, engaging, and appropriate for all of its students. We need to consider the challenges facing students that are affecting attendance, including insufficient mental health support at school (social workers, counselors, school-linked mental health providers), school violence (fights between students), and drugs (bathrooms are often locked throughout the day so kids won't do drugs). Further, often children with disabilities have unmet needs due to inadequate training for teachers and staff, insufficient resources to provide for their needs, and larger schools that make for an overstimulating experience.

Minnesota Alliance with Youth released a report entitled *Chronic Absenteeism: A National and Local Challenge* this month with recommendations that include increased family engagement, Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), and Check and Connect, increased caring adults and mentors, data-driven early warning systems, and fair attendance practices. All of these point to improved relationships between children, parents, and school staff, improved focus on school discipline and climate, and more attention to the needs of children and families in today's post-COVID reality.

I believe the data that would be collected if this bill is passed would provide greater insight to the Minnesota Department of Education and schools throughout our state to help inform future policy decisions to improve attendance, but I ask that MDE and our policymakers use caution in using this information to assign blame to principals, parents, and the children themselves while neglecting the many underlying issues facing schools, families, teachers, and others who interface with a complex underfunded educational system that needs significant resources to bring teaching practices, curricula, and school formats up to date to meet the needs of today's children.

Thank you.