



# **Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators**

## **Testimony to the Senate Education Committee**

**Monday, May 12, 2025**

### **Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism in PA Schools**

**Dr. Sherri Smith, Executive Director, PASA**

Good afternoon Chairwoman Culver, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee. I am Dr. Sherri Smith, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). Thank you for convening this hearing and for inviting PASA to share the perspective of more than 1,100 members, including over 600 currently serving as school superintendents, assistant superintendents, and executive directors across the Commonwealth.

Student truancy and chronic absenteeism are urgent concerns for our schools and communities. As the U.S. Department of Education notes, school attendance is a powerful predictor of student success—often more so than test scores. Many school leaders continue to face significant challenges in re-engaging students in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. My testimony today aims to highlight the scope of the issue and offer potential strategies to improve student attendance and, ultimately, their academic and post-secondary outcomes.

#### **Understanding the Data**

On the Future Ready PA Index, chronic absenteeism is measured as "Regular Attendance," generally defined as students missing 10% or more of scheduled school days, for any reason, including excused and unexcused absences.

Statewide data indicates that Regular Attendance hovered around 85% in 2018–19, 2019–20, and 2020–21. However, this dropped sharply in 2022 to 73.9%. Encouragingly, rates rebounded slightly in 2023–24 to 78.1%, although this remains well below pre-pandemic levels. It's important to note that regular attendance is a lagging indicator, meaning there is a full school-year delay in reporting and publishing this data.

#### **Post-Pandemic Attendance Challenges**

While many students have successfully returned to in-person learning, a significant number are exhibiting persistent school avoidance. This trend—fueled by increased mental health needs,

disengagement, and home-related challenges—has become a new and difficult norm that traditional strategies alone are not effectively addressing.

Meanwhile, support systems such as Children and Youth Services (CYS), the Student Assistance Program (SAP), and local magistrates are overwhelmed, delaying timely interventions. Compounding this issue is the lack of available counseling and wraparound services essential for removing barriers to regular attendance.

A troubling pattern we observe is that when truant students or their families face legal or academic interventions, many transfer to cyber charter schools to avoid accountability. Unfortunately, this move often results in continued absenteeism, further academic decline, and an increased risk of dropout. This not only drains state and local resources but also reinforces avoidance behaviors and contributes to long-term student outcome failure.

### **Recommendations for Action**

To address these critical challenges, PASA recommends the following:

#### **1. Close Loopholes Between District and Cyber Charter Enrollment**

- **Limit mid-year transfers** for truant students to prevent evasion of accountability.
- **Redefine attendance in cyber programs** based on work completion rather than mere logins.
- **Mandate transparency** by requiring cyber charter programs to share real-time attendance and academic data with sending districts and participate in regular accountability meetings.
- **Empower the judiciary** to mandate a return to in-person instruction for chronically absent students when guardians are unable or unwilling to ensure attendance. Cyber education must remain a proactive choice—not a means of school avoidance.

#### **2. Increase Family and Student Accountability**

- Reinforce the requirement for regular school attendance across all educational settings.
- Consider measures such as community service requirements for parents and students, and explore driver's license restrictions for chronically absent students as seen in other states.

#### **3. Expand Support and Early Intervention**

- Provide families with **free, mandatory training** focused on creating routines, establishing home structure, and fostering engagement.
- Prioritize **early intervention** to prevent absenteeism from becoming a long-term pattern.

PASA greatly appreciates the opportunity to share these insights with the Senate Education Committee. We look forward to continued collaboration and conversation around bold, creative strategies that will improve student attendance and support the success of all learners across the Commonwealth.

Thank you for your time and consideration.