

**Remarks in Support of
LD #311
An Act to Improve School Attendance**

**Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee
By Tom Jarvis, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Lewiston
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Senator Langley, Representative Kornfield and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Tom Jarvis, Assistant Superintendent of Schools in Lewiston, and I am sharing the remarks of our Superintendent, Bill Webster, who is unable to be here today, in favor of LD #311, legislation proposed by Senator Libby of Lewiston, entitled "An Act to Improve School Attendance."

Research is clear that school readiness, summer programming and school attendance are three critical contributors to student success in school. You will find this research at www.attendanceworks.org, and attention to these three contributors is a major focus of our work in Lewiston. This legislation deals with school attendance.

There is no one solution to improving school attendance, but this proposed legislation will help communities like Lewiston improve student outcomes. Before talking about the specifics of this bill, I would like to introduce this Committee to the concept of chronic absenteeism. A student is chronically absent if they miss 10% or more of school for any reason, excused or unexcused. Poor attendance is often a key indicator of challenges at home and foretells future dropouts and poor workplace habits.

Here are some facts from the Attendance Works research bank. In one attendance study, students who missed 10% of school days in kindergarten and 1st grade were four times more likely not to be proficient in reading or math in 3rd grade. Another study concluded that over 50% of students who were chronically absent for just two years would eventually drop out of school. A third recent study found that students who are chronically absent are much less likely to ever complete post-secondary education.

Even in the first month of school, absenteeism takes its toll. Research has identified that students who miss even 2 or 3 days of school in September are four times more likely to be chronically absent during the year. Students who are absent

for 4 or more days in September are 16 times more likely to be chronically absent for the year.

Last year in Lewiston 21% of our preK, 16% of K and 14% of 1st grades were chronically absent. Through various efforts we have made some modest improvements this year, but the figures are still high with 15% of our preK, 13% of K and 11% of 1st grades chronically absent thus far this year. One of our follow-up efforts is to engage community partners to assist families struggling to get their children to school. Families who are unsuccessful, however, are likely sealing the fate of their children to be not only unsuccessful in school but also unsuccessful in life.

In one particular case, a 6-year old had missed over 50 days of school last year. We communicated our concerns to DHHS in hopes that they would do a home visit. Imagine our surprise when the DHHS case worker told us that they would not become involved because by law in Maine children need not be in school until age 7. Now, a 7-year starting point may well work fine for children of families with the resources to provide the learning experiences they need to develop and be successful in school. This is not the case with many of our families in Lewiston, however.

Please help Lewiston children and other children throughout Maine by giving local school boards the authority to set school attendance age requirements to be as young as 5 years old. LD #311 is a positive step for Maine. Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have.