

**Remarks in Support of
LD #96
An Act to Improve School Attendance**

**Before the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee
By Bill Webster, Superintendent of Schools, Lewiston
February 27, 2017**

Senator Langley, Representative Kornfield and members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Bill Webster, Superintendent of Schools in Lewiston. I am here today to urge your support of LD #96, legislation proposed by Senator Libby of Lewiston, entitled "An Act to Improve School Attendance."

This legislation is virtually the same to what was endorsed by this Committee two years ago and supported by the full Legislature. It was then vetoed by the Governor, and the veto was upheld. The Governor expressed concern about reducing the rights of parents. I hope on a closer reading of the legislation, you and the Governor will conclude that parent rights are protected. This legislation keeps in place a parent's right to not enroll their children in school until age 7. I ask you to focus on the children who are in school and are falling further and further behind because of chronic absenteeism.

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 chronical 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.

In Lewiston typically 25% of our preK, 20% of K and 15% of 1st grades are chronically absent. We are working hard to improve this numbers. One of our 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 fact, the low graduation rate at Lewiston High School is significantly impacted by dropouts who developed poor school attendance habits in elementary school.

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. Also know that under this legislation parents still have the right not to enroll their children or if enrolled, to withdraw them. LD #96 is a positive step for Maine. Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer any questions that you might have.