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## **ACLU OF RI POSITION: AMEND**

### **TESTIMONY ON 24-H 7289, AN ACT RELATING TO EDUCATION – COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE March 6, 2024**

As people are aware, Rhode Island has a very serious school absenteeism problem, and this bill commendably attempts to establish a pilot program in two high schools to try to increase student attendance through the aggressive provision of supportive services. In adopting such a program, however, we believe that a few key issues related to the implementation of such a program, though probably implicit, should be explicitly set out in the legislation. We would therefore urge consideration of the amendments suggested below.<sup>1</sup>

- Although we assume this is the intent of the pilot program, we believe that the legislation should clarify that participation is voluntary and will be conducted through a parental or guardian opt-in process.
- Similarly, although we also assume there is no intent to charge any fees to parents for participating in the program, we would urge that this be made explicit in the bill.
- We believe it would be helpful if the bill contained language that the program would be non-discriminatory and open to students with disabilities and students and parents who are non-English speakers. The extra support that might need to be provided for such families should not serve as a disqualification for their voluntary participation. Indeed, in light of the additional barriers such families face, their participation should be encouraged.
- Finally, and importantly, the legislation does not address what provisions will be made for the confidentiality of the assessments and the very sensitive familial information that will likely be gathered through the program. We consider it important that participating families not have to fear that this information will be shared with other agencies, such as DCYF, for potentially punitive purposes where not required by law. We would encourage the inclusion of language that addresses these confidentiality issues.

We commend the sponsor for pressing for legislation attempting to tackle this daunting educational issue, and we hope that our proposed suggestions for amendments will be seen as clarifying and fortifying the bill's intent. Thank you for your consideration of our views.

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<sup>1</sup> We recommend similar amendments to a companion bill, H-7195, establishing a pilot absenteeism program relating to students with asthma, and our testimony on that bill can be reviewed in tandem with this one.