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LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS
53rd Legislature, 2nd Session, 2018

Bill Number	<u>HB22/aHLELC</u>	Sponsor	<u>Gentry/Ivey-Soto</u>
Tracking Number	<u>.209185.1</u>	Committee Referrals	<u>HLELC/HEC</u>
Short Title	<u>Parental Notifications from School Via Text</u>		
Analyst	<u>Force</u>	Original Date	<u>1/30/18</u>
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BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis of HLELC Amendment

The House Local Government, Elections, Land Grants & Cultural Affairs Committee amendments to House Bill 22 (HB22/aHLELC) make several changes to the bill. First, the title of the bill is changed to refer to notifications by text being sent for “certain school events,” instead of “at least two days before a test.” Second, the entirety of Section 2 of the bill, requiring notification from schools at least two days before a test, is stricken and replaced with requirements that high schools notify a parent by text of several school events, including: a test coming within two days that will affect the student’s grade point average (GPA); the student’s GPA falling below 2.0 on a 4.0 scale, or 70 percent on a 100 percent scale; and failure of the student to submit homework.

Synopsis of Original Bill

HB22/aHLELC requires schools to notify student’s parents by text in two instances unless, on the student’s enrollment form, the parent affirmatively opts out of receiving text messages. First, when a student is absent from school, the parent is to be promptly notified by text message. Second, parents are to be notified by text message at least two days prior to a student being administered a test that will affect the student’s grade point average.

FISCAL IMPACT

HB22/aHLELC does not contain an appropriation. Depending upon how either the Public Education Department (PED) or public school districts choose to implement the requirements of HB22/aHLELC, local school districts and state-chartered charter schools may need to purchase software and equipment at indeterminate cost.

The House Appropriations and Finance Committee substitute for House Bills 2 and 3, however, contains language allocating \$300 thousand “to purchase equipment and software for automated text messaging systems in school districts or state-chartered charter schools statewide that notify parents of high school students about student absences and tests in fiscal year 2019.”

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

Many states have begun shifting the focus of their efforts to maximize attendance from “truancy” to “absenteeism,” recognizing that the reason for a student’s absence, while perhaps legitimate, is immaterial in consideration of the loss of instructional time. According to the Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) program evaluation, “Assessing ‘Time-on-Task’ and Efforts to Extend Learning Time,” 62 days of instructional time per year are lost to in-school factors such as late starts, recess, and breakfast after the bell. Previous LFC evaluations have consistently shown that chronic absenteeism is a factor in low rates of student achievement and low-performing schools; as instructional time decreases, student achievement scores decrease. Absenteeism can dramatically affect student success and is a major indicator of dropout risk. Students with regular attendance, in contrast, tend to score better on standardized tests, and are less likely to be retained and less likely to drop out. Regular daily attendance is even more important for at-risk students, such as English learners (ELs) and students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. This loss of instructional time is particularly keenly felt in schools with high levels of poverty or ELs, both of which are common in New Mexico. Unfortunately, many of the factors leading to poor attendance, such as lack of transportation, illness, and other household burdens, are often beyond school control, although parents and guardians have some control over these issues.

Generally, research on the effects of text-messaging parents about student behavior and outcomes appears mixed, with some studies showing some improvement in attendance and academic achievement to varying degrees, and others showing very little change. Other studies suggest, however, that the method by which information about students is communicated to parents can have an effect on how the information is acted upon by families.

Research on Text-Messaging Parents about Absenteeism and Academic Achievement. The *Parent Engagement Project*, a 2016 joint study from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), conducted by Harvard University and the University of Bristol, reviewed the effects of sending parents one text message per week with information such as dates of upcoming tests and warnings about missed homework. Students who received the intervention were shown to have made an additional month’s progress in math with reduced absenteeism.

Likewise, *Leveraging Parents: The Impact of High-Frequency Information on Student Achievement*, a 2017 study from the Teachers College of Columbia University of 22 middle and high schools, where parents were texted about absences, missed assignments, and grades found course failures were reduced by 39 percent while class attendance increased by 17 percent. This study, it should be noted, included text messages to parents about class-level absences rather than only full-day absence.

On the other hand, a 2016 study of public schools in New York City by MDRC, a corporation focused on difficult societal problems, *Can Informing Parents Help High School Students Show Up for School?* found that this sort of intervention did not change attendance rates. In this study, parents were sent daily absence updates and weekly attendance summaries as a supplementary measure to already existing procedures such as robocalls. Both the control group and text-message group had post-study attendance rates of approximately 86 percent, showing a practical effect of an increase of only 0.5 percent, or one half-day of additional attendance. The study indicated potential ways of avoiding issues that may have influenced the final net effect, suggesting alternatives in follow-up studies, such as greater focus on chronically absent students over the general school population, greater intensity or frequency of the messages, and greater differentiation between new notification methods and existing procedures.

Research on the Effect of Program Uptake Strategies and Parent Behavior. A study from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government examines some of those alternative factors suggested in the MDRC study. *The Impact of Defaults on Technology Adoption, and Its Underappreciation by Policymakers* indicates the form of interventions — in this case, how parents opt in or out of a notification system — can have at least as profound an effect on student and parent behavior as the notice itself. This study reviewed parent behavior and changes to student achievement and attendance resulting from receiving three texts per week: one notifying parents of the classes their children had missed in a given week; one alerting parents of the assignments their child missed that week; and a third informing parents of the classes in which their child is receiving a grade below 70 percent. The study divided families into four groups: the control group, which had access to the schools’ parent portals and could sign up there to receive the text messages, but received no encouragement or instructions on enrolling; the standard group, which was prompted by text to enroll in the program on the parent portal; the simplified group, which could enroll in the system by replying “start” to the schools’ initial texts; and the automatic enrollment group, which was informed that they could enroll in the system by *not* replying “stop” the initial text, effectively creating an “opt-out” model.

The study revealed that parents in the standard and simplified groups who did choose to enroll in the program were parents of students who were already high-achieving, indicating that passive enrollment via an opt-out procedure drew more parents of lower-achieving students into the efforts to improve their children’s attendance. Further, the results of the study indicated the standard and simplified groups made no academic gains relative to the control group, while the automatic enrollment group saw a 0.05 to 0.06 gain in GPA, with course failures reduced by 0.2 courses per student, or about 10 percent. This is the equivalent of each student increasing their grade by a third, from C+ to B-, and one in four students not failing a class he or she would have otherwise.

These conclusions are supported by another study from the Harvard Kennedy School of Business, *Reducing Student Absenteeism in the Early Grades by Targeting Parental Beliefs*. The study notes a number of parental beliefs that targeted interventions potentially can change leading to improvements in student attendance and achievement. These include the belief that attendance in kindergarten through fifth grade is less important than in higher grades and parents’ misconceptions regarding the total number of their children’s absences. This study consisted of delivering mail-based information to parents of high-absence students, including an emphasis on the utility of regular attendance in early grades, and accurate reports on the number of absences their children had accrued. Results indicated a 7.7 percent reduction in absences for students whose parents received the mailers, and a 14.9 percent reduction in chronic absenteeism. Notably, the mailings appeared more effective for students who already had the poorest attendance. Further, the mailings were more effective for at-risk students; ELs showed a reduction in absences of 0.84 days over native English speakers’ reduction of 0.39 days, while socioeconomically disadvantaged students’ absences were reduced by 1.02 days compared with a reduction of 0.42 days for more economically secure students.

Another study from the same school, *Reducing Student Absences at Scale by Targeting Parents’ Misbelief*, also noted that mail-based interventions are not only effective in reducing student absence, but are also cost-effective when compared with current best practices such as truancy coaches, which can cost between \$121 and \$500 per incremental school day generated. By contrast, mail-based interventions only cost approximately \$6 per incremental school day.

According to Todd Rogers, Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and one of the primary authors of all three of the Harvard studies, two of the studies use mail-

based communication, and the third text-based communication, as an attempt to match the mode of communication to the behavior they are seeking to change. For immediate, acute academic issues, such as failing to complete homework or cutting class, text-messaging is best, because it is immediate, and parents can react in kind, emphasizing with their child the importance of attending class and completing their work on time. Texting about full-day absenteeism, on the other hand, tends not to work, because it is a quick and transient communication attempting to change long-term and chronic behavior; text messages about absenteeism tend to get lost in the routine of daily life. Mail-based notifications about chronic absenteeism, on the other hand, were found to be effective because parents saved their mail as “social artifacts,” to be discussed thoroughly when parents and child could take time to come together to review it.

Taken together, the three studies suggest that an intervention program requiring affirmative action on the part of parents to opt out, such as the one prescribed by HB22/aHLELC, that simultaneously targets parent behavior and student absenteeism may significantly improve student achievement. These results would be particularly effective for at-risk students, including ELs and students affected by poverty, two groups that are prevalent in New Mexico schools. It is uncertain how receptive families in New Mexico would be to such a program, and how much cost may ultimately be imposed upon families for receiving text messages from which they must affirmatively opt out. Moreover, it is unclear how school districts and state-chartered charter schools will keep in contact with families who use disposable phones or otherwise frequently change phone numbers. The purpose of the bill, therefore, to improve both attendance and achievement, may be better accomplished by using modes of communication reflecting those in the three Harvard Kennedy Schools studies. That is, using text-based communication to inform parents of academic concerns such as imminent assessments and class-cutting, but using a mail-based system to inform parents of full-day and chronic absenteeism.

Best Practices. According to EdWeek, *Thinking About Texting Parents? Best Practices for School-to-Parent Texting*, there are a number of ways to maximize the effects of text message communication. First, it notes one must be aware of legal limitations, including privacy laws and spam regulations. Next, the best texting platform should be designed for educational purposes, and should suggest possible actions the parent might take. An introductory text, sent from a local area code, may help reduce the number of unsubscribers. Being considerate and frugal with the number of messages sent out, as well as the brevity of the messages themselves, may help parents avoid feelings of being overwhelmed with the communication. Finally, because some of these programs provide for parents’ response to these text messages, it would be helpful to streamline communications by preparing answers to common parental responses and questions before the messages are sent.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

HB22/aHLELC makes no provision for precisely who would be responsible for executing its requirements, beyond the general requirement that “schools” issue the text message. It would seem that, particularly if class-level absences are to be reported, classroom teachers are the most logical choice to send messages, but it remains unclear as does the precise mechanism for transmittal of the required messages. This is the sort of matter that may be appropriately left to rule, though the bill makes no explicit requirement for PED to adopt any rules related to text-messaging parents.

According to Dr. Rogers, some school districts that have tried to adopt the sorts of communications tested in the Harvard Kennedy School studies have found the actual administration of the program,

including up-to-the-minute data management, to be problematic. In recognition of that, Dr. Rogers helped found In Class Today, an organization that helps school districts administer notification programs for absenteeism: <http://www.inclasstoday.com/>.

In Class Today addresses only issues of absenteeism, not missed class assignments or upcoming assessments, and they only do so by mail, recognizing Dr. Rogers' research indicating that mail-based notification is more effective for absenteeism than text-messaging. The organization does five to six rounds of notices per year, at a cost of \$10 to \$12 per student per year, with mailings typically targeting approximately 40 percent of a school's enrollment. Because they work with the National Change of Address archive, their mailings achieve approximately 97 percent arrival at target families (300 or so returns from every 10 thousand mailings).

TECHNICAL ISSUES

The use of the term “promptly” in the bill may be problematic. Promptness is a relative concept, and the bill lacks clarity regarding whether the text is to be initiated by absence from school for the day or only absence from a single class. The sponsor may wish to consider including a definite span of time by which the text messages must be sent, and clarify whether the message is to be sent for class-level absences, full-day absences, or both.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Who would be responsible for sending text messages? The district, the school, or the classroom teacher?

Are there areas of the state where cellular coverage is insufficient to guarantee prompt receipt of text messages? If so, are there any other practicable methods by which parents in these areas might receive timely notice of their child's absence?

Do New Mexico schools have the capacity to send these text messages? If not, what technology would be required to enable them to do so, and at what cost?

How will schools track these text messages, their receipt, and any responses? How will schools respond to text messages from parents?

RELATED BILLS

HB297, School Attendance Interventions, which provides for early, intensive interventions for students who are chronically absent.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- LESC Files

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