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

Bill Number HB322/HRCS/HAFCS **Sponsor** HAFC
Tracking Number .210572.2 **Committee Referrals** HLELC/HEC
Short Title Parental Notifications from School Via Text
Analyst Force **Original Date** 2/10/18
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BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis of Bill

House Appropriations and Finance Committee Substitute for House Rules and Order of Business Committee Substitute for House Bill 322 (HB322/HRCS/HAFCS) creates a new section of the Public School Code to provide for text notifications to parents of high school students in two circumstances. First, parents will be sent a text if their student is scheduled to take a state-, school district-, or charter school-required assessment within two days. Second, a text will be sent if the students' grade point average (GPA) falls below 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. Parents may choose to affirmatively opt out of the program on their children's enrollment form.

The provisions of the bill will take affect beginning with the 2019-2020 school year.

FISCAL IMPACT

HB322/ HRCS/HAFCS does not contain an appropriation. Depending upon how either high schools choose to implement the requirements of HB322/HLELC/HRCS/HAFCS, 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 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

Generally, research on the effects of text-messaging parents about student behavior and outcomes appears mixed, with some studies showing some improvement 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 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.

A study from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, *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.

This study was supported by two more from the same school. 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.

These studies suggest that an intervention program requiring affirmative action on the part of parents to opt out, such as the one prescribed by HB322/HLELC/HRCS/HAFCS that simultaneously targets parent behavior and student achievement may significantly improve student outcomes. 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 schools will keep in contact with families who use disposable phones or otherwise frequently change phone numbers. The purpose of the bill, however, to improve student achievement, may be best accomplished by using text-based communication to inform parents of academic concerns such as imminent assessments and class-cutting, or failing grades.

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/HRCS/HAFCS makes no provision for precisely who would be responsible for executing its requirements, beyond the general requirement that high schools issue the text message. It would seem that 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. 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. 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.

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 exams or declining grades?

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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