9 June 2017

The 128th Legislature of the State of Maine
State House
Augusta, ME

Dear Honorable Members of the 128th Legislature:

Under the authority vested in me by Article IV, Part Third, Section 2 of the Constitution of the State of Maine, I am hereby vetoing LD 96 “An Act to Improve Attendance at Public Elementary Schools.”

While this bill may be well-intentioned, it is not the solution for chronic absenteeism at public schools, and it may even make the problem worse. Data shows this approach does not work. Instead of welcoming or inspiring students to attend school, this bill places blame and shame on students and their families for absenteeism by permitting the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to enter the home of our state’s youngest students and force them to attend school. This not only interferes with the rights of parents, but also reinforces the worst fears of parents who themselves may have had negative experiences at school. To be successful, our schools must foster positive relationships of trust with these students and their parents; this bill does the opposite.

There are more appropriate and effective approaches available to encourage and inspire students to attend to school, such as those found on the Count ME In website (http://countmeinmaine.org), including initiatives such as the walking school bus. I recently had an opportunity to visit the East End Elementary School in Portland to observe their “Rise and Shine” program. That program is a great example of how a school can motivate students, facilitate mentorship relationships and inspire students to truly love coming to school. Identified for a school improvement grant, the leaders at East End designed a program to put the best part of the day at the beginning, offering students a stimulating 30-minute first period to start the day. Along with other initiatives at the school, this has led to improved attendance and greater student engagement. The students at the school come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but share a great enthusiasm for coming to school every morning for “Rise and Shine.” Other school districts would do well to study their example.

I am all in for efforts that inspire students to come to school every day, excited to learn. This bill doesn’t do that. Instead, it promotes punitive action that risks stigmatizing students and their families, all through an approach that has no proven results. I cannot support it.

For this reason, I return LD 96 unsigned and vetoed. I strongly urge the Legislature to sustain it.

Sincerely,

Paul R. LePage
Governor