

April 2, 2015

The Honorable Patrick O'Donnell  
Chair, Assembly Education Committee  
1020 N Street, Room 159  
Sacramento, California 95814  
Fax: (916) 319-2187

Re: Assembly Bill 891 (Campos) - Sponsor & Support

Dear Chairman O'Donnell:

We are writing, as sponsors, in support of Assembly Bill 891 (Campos), which will promote student attendance and success in school for low-income students in California by guaranteeing transportation to school and providing critical supports to address barriers created by poverty.

***School Attendance is Undermined by Poverty and Lack of Transportation***

According to the Pew Charitable Trust, 70% of children born into poverty will stay there. Education has the power to level the playing field and enable low-income students to achieve economic security and thrive as adults. According to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau, without a high school diploma, Americans are almost twice as likely to live in poverty. Education is one of the best pathways out of poverty, and we need to make sure our children, especially low-income students, are able to attend school. A robust body of research demonstrates that chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic performance at the elementary, middle and high school levels, and greater likelihood of dropping out.<sup>1</sup> Research also suggests that going to school regularly is especially critical for children from families living in poverty who are less likely to have the resources to help children make up for lost time in the classroom.<sup>2</sup>

According to a report by California Attorney General Kamala Harris, poverty and financial instability are significant causes of truancy in the state.<sup>3</sup> Inability to afford transportation to and from school is one of the most frequently cited barriers that low-income youth face in

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<sup>1</sup> Balfanz, Robert and Byrnes, Vaughan (2013), Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education. [http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Chang, Hedy N and Romero, Mariajosé 2008. Present, Engaged and Accounted For The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP): The Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text\\_837.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://oag.ca.gov/truancy>

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attending school. According to a Youth Justice Coalition survey, 73% of L.A. County youth have been late to school because they could not get reliable transportation and nearly one third have been absent from school due to lack of transportation.<sup>4</sup> A survey of Oakland youth found that 61% of students reported they sometimes use their lunch money to ride the bus, and low-income students reported that it was harder to get to school, to jobs, or to after-school programs without a free transit pass.<sup>5</sup> Providing free transportation, such as free public transit passes and school bus transportation in rural communities, to low-income youth will enable them to attend school and take advantage of after-school programming proven to improve educational outcomes.

Many states guarantee transportation to and from school for public school students who live beyond a certain distance from their school, including New Jersey, New York, and Missouri.<sup>6</sup> A number of successful local models provide free transit passes or transportation to youth in a diverse array of cities and communities from San Francisco to Marin County to New York City to Polk County, Florida. An evaluation of a pilot to provide free transit passes to low-income middle and high school students in Alameda and Contra Costa counties found the program increased student bus ridership and after-school participation.<sup>7</sup> A health impact assessment by the L.A. County Department of Public Health concluded that a free transit pass program would have “significant social and downstream health benefits,” including increased disposable income for families, fewer traffic and violence-related injuries, reduced traffic and greenhouse gas emissions, and increased freedom and mobility for students, allowing them to reach jobs and participate in cultural events.<sup>8</sup>

Access to free public transportation not only improves school opportunity for low-income youth, it reduces criminalization of youth. According to data from the L.A. County Probation Department, fare evasion is the number one reason why youth are cited in L.A. County, and youth of color receive a disproportionate number of citations in L.A. County.<sup>9</sup> Fare evasion citations can result in heavy fines or court appearances, and can create stress for students and families.<sup>10</sup> First-time court appearance during high school quadruples a student’s odds of dropping out.<sup>11</sup> Free transit passes would decrease citations for fare evasion and the resulting criminalization of students.

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<sup>4</sup> Youth Justice Coalition: Metro Pass Campaign Survey Results. February 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Iny, Julie and Lila Hussain. Free Transportation to Get Our Education. *Race, Poverty and the Environment*, Winter 2005/2006.

<sup>6</sup> Children’s Defense Fund-California analysis of state laws on school transportation.

<sup>7</sup> McDonald, Noreen, Sally Librera, and Elizabeth Deakin. “Free Transit for Low-Income Youth: Experience in San Francisco Bay Area, California.” *e*, No. 1887, National Research Council, Washington, D.C. 2004. Pp. 153-160.

<sup>8</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. The Potential Costs and Benefits of Providing Free Public Transportation Passes to Students in Los Angeles County. Full Report. October 2013.

[http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org/SATF\\_DOCS/SATF\\_Library/HIA\\_Full\\_Report\\_October\\_2013.pdf](http://www.educationcoordinatingcouncil.org/SATF_DOCS/SATF_Library/HIA_Full_Report_October_2013.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Data from the Los Angeles County Probation Department, as presented to the School Attendance Taskforce on March 5, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Los Angeles County Department of Public Health.

<sup>11</sup> Sweeten G. Who will graduate? Disruption of high school education by arrest and court involvement. *Justice Quarterly* 2006;23(4):462-80.

AB 891 would improve school attendance, reduce achievement gaps, and increase graduation rates among low-income children by guaranteeing transportation to school for students with incomes below 185% of the Federal Poverty Line and for all students attending very low-income schools.

### ***Prioritizing and Supporting Participation of Very Poor Youth in Afterschool Programs***

There is strong evidence that access to afterschool and summer programs increases the likelihood of success in school and high school graduation.<sup>12</sup> Research shows that students, especially girls, benefit from improved health and academic outcomes when they participate in afterschool programs.<sup>13</sup> Still low income youth face many challenges in participating in these programs. These barriers include lack of transportation, long waiting lists and program enrollment fees, but often have more to do with the child's precarious economic situation. AB 891 would require these programs to better accommodate children with high barriers to participation: homeless children and children living below 50 percent of the federal poverty line.

California's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) and After School Education and Safety (ASES) programs offer this quality, afterschool learning and development opportunities that can make a difference for all children they serve, but especially for low-income children. Evaluations of the program show that, at every grade from kindergarten through eighth grade, the program is associated with substantial decreases in grade retention. The most significant academic gains for students enrolled in the program are among children who face the most significant challenges, including children in special education and those with low academic achievement.

Still, in an independent review of the children served by over 400 grantees and more than 4,000 schools that receive funding through the ASES and/or 21st CCLC programs across California, more than half of the ASES site coordinators reported that they could not enroll all interested students, and had to use waiting lists to manage mid-year enrollment.<sup>14</sup> According to a statement made by the California Department of Education during a hearing on after school programs, they project that 90% of ASES students will be eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch program, that is, they will have incomes below 185% of the federal poverty line or attend a school that is eligible for the program through the new Community Eligibility option because a significant number of the children at the school are below the income eligibility threshold.

Children who are homeless and living in deep poverty are less likely to be able to

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242\\_After-school\\_report\\_10-7-09\\_web.pdf](http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/11242_After-school_report_10-7-09_web.pdf) and <https://www.nmefoundation.org/getmedia/08b6e87b-69ff-4865-b44e-ad42f2596381/Critical-Hours?ext=.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue\\_45\\_Wellness.cfm](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_45_Wellness.cfm)

<sup>14</sup> University of California, Los Angeles Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. Independent Statewide Evaluations of the After School Education and Safety Program and 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. February 2012. <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ba/cp/uclaeval.asp>

participate than children who are not experiencing these significant challenges even when compared to other children who are low-income.<sup>15</sup> This is because children who are homeless or living in deep poverty are less likely to attend the same school from year-to-year and less likely to afford registration fees required by some afterschool programs.<sup>16</sup> This means that children who could benefit most from having a safe and supportive place to learn, exercise, and benefit from afterschool snacks are less likely to be able to participate. We know the program was not designed to intentionally leave the most vulnerable children behind, but unless accommodations are made for families defined by the federal McKinney-Vento Act as homeless or who are participating in CalWORKs, those children will continue to be underserved by afterschool programs.

Not only will very vulnerable youth benefit from being enrolled in these afterschool programs, but so will their parents and the state's bottom line. Parents are more likely to secure employment and to stay employed when they have a safe place for their child to be while they are at work.<sup>17</sup> This means that California's investments in low-income families and their parent's employment through the CalWORKs welfare-to-work program are enhanced when children are enrolled in afterschool programs.

AB 891 would ensure that vulnerable youth have access to these state-funded, powerful learning opportunities by ensuring priority access to afterschool activities for homeless and very poor youth living in a home that participates in the CalWORKs program.

#### ***Requiring Additional Investments in Youth Served Through the CalWORKs Program***

AB 891 would require increased investments by the Department of Social Services to establish several proactive initiatives to increase educational outcomes of low-income youth who reside in a CalWORKs family, including establishing a youth jobs program, incentivizing high school graduation, and providing transportation to afterschool and summer programs.

The Department of Social Services currently administers the Cal-Learn program, which provides incentives and intensive case-counseling to high school students who live in a CalWORKs recipient home and are parenting or are pregnant. Specifically, the 2014-15 budget includes \$915,000 federal funds for Cal-Learn bonuses and \$23.4 million (\$628,000 GF) for intensive case management.<sup>18</sup> Research shows that children who drop-out of school are more likely to become a teen parent, who, if in a CalWORKs recipient household, would then be served by the Cal-Learn program. AB 891 would work to circumvent the cycle of poverty by encouraging children in CalWORKs recipient homes to return to school by

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<sup>15</sup> As of January 2015, the maximum cash grant for a family of three is \$638/month, just 41% of the FPL.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the statute doesn't require or ban the use of registration fees and many parents have reported barriers to enrollment related to fees.

<sup>17</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics and UC Berkeley Labor Center

<sup>18</sup> DSS estimates an average monthly caseload of 6,996 cases in FY 2014-15 and 6,347 cases for the budget year.

extending Cal-Learn incentives and supports to them before a youth becomes pregnant or a teen parent.<sup>19</sup>

There is strong evidence that access to afterschool and summer programs increases the likelihood of success in school and high school graduation. However, rates of participation in after-school programs remain relatively low among low-income youth – the very youth who may be most in need of academic assistance.<sup>20</sup> Barriers to participation for low-income youth include lack of transportation, long waiting lists and program enrollment fees. By requiring the CalWORKs program to support children within a family receiving aid to attend afterschool programs by providing for transportation, the outcomes for school participation, graduation rates and parental work outcome are all enhanced.

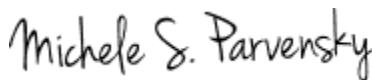
***It is Time to End the Child Poverty Trap – Support AB 891***

AB 891 gives us several more tools to improve school attendance and success and the promise of economic mobility for our state’s poorest children and for this reason, our organizations are proud to sponsor and support this legislation and respectfully request your ‘Aye’ vote.

Sincerely,



Jessica Bartholow  
Legislative Advocate  
Western Center on Law and Poverty



Michele Stillwell-Parvensky  
Senior Policy Associate  
Children’s Defense Fund – California



Cathleen Deppe  
Legislative Policy Director  
9to5, National Association of  
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Kim McGill  
Organizer  
Youth Justice Coalition

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<sup>19</sup> Several states include “LearnFare” in the implementation of their TANF programs in order to support education and graduation rates among very poor families. An early report on the outcomes of learnfare found that participants had higher enrollment, a higher rate of attendance, and a lower rate of unexcused absence than the control-group teenagers. *Source:* Frye, Judith, and Emma Caspar. An Evaluation of the Learnfare Program: Final Report. Rep. Madison: State of Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau, 1997.

[http://www.disc.wisc.edu/archive/Learnfare/learnfare\\_evaluation.html](http://www.disc.wisc.edu/archive/Learnfare/learnfare_evaluation.html)

<sup>20</sup> Garden, M, J. Roth, & J. Brooks-Gunn. Can After-School Programs Help Level the Playing Field for Disadvantaged Youth? *Equity Matters: Research Review* No. 4. October 2009.

cc: Honorable Nora Campos, California State Assembly (Author)  
Members of the Committee on Education, California State Assembly  
Honorable Toni Atkins, Speaker, California State Assembly  
Superintendent Tom Tolarkson, California Department of Education  
Will Lightbourne, Director, California Department of Social Services

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