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BY **SAM DRYSDALE**

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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, May 21, 2026.....The Senate on Wednesday moved to repeal a decades-old welfare reform rule that allows the state to reduce and end public benefits for families whose children have excessive unexcused school absences.

Senators voted 36-4 to adopt the Sen. Jason Lewis amendment (#815) to their fiscal year 2027 budget, which Lewis said would repeal an "outdated and antiquated policy."

Under current law, families receiving Transitional Aid to Families with Dependent Children can lose aid tied to a child if that child under the age of 16 misses too much school without an approved excuse. TAFDC is the state-run cash benefit program for

eligible families with children and pregnant individuals in Massachusetts.

The existing policy, enacted as a part of the state's 1995 welfare reform law, requires parents receiving assistance to regularly submit school attendance records to the Department of Transitional Assistance. Families can be placed on probationary monitoring if a child accumulates too many unexcused absences, and benefits for that child can be suspended if attendance problems continue.

The amendment would eliminate those attendance-based penalties and reporting requirements by repealing that section of the 1995 law. It would also undo updates adopted in 2014 that expanded the rule from children under 14 to 16, and allowed GED and alternative education programs to satisfy the attendance requirement.

"Everyone agrees that, of course, it's important that children are in school as much as possible," Lewis said Thursday. "But it's turned out over the years that that policy has not been effective. It has not actually resulted in children in these families being in school more, and in fact, it has proven the opposite. It's actually been harmful to them, because these are families who are living on the edge daily and making ends meet."

During floor remarks, Lewis said the policy was intended as "a stick" to pressure parents and guardians into improving attendance, but said in practice the policy has been "ineffective, it's been inequitable, and it's been needlessly punitive."

Families must provide attendance documentation at least quarterly to DTA proving that a child missed no more than eight school days during the previous quarter without an approved excuse. Excused absences include illness certified by a physician, hospitalization, disability, death of a family member, or other crisis situations certified by the education commission.

Families who fail to submit attendance records, or whose children exceed the absence threshold, can be placed on probationary status and required to submit monthly attendance reports. If a child accumulates more than three unexcused absences during a probationary month, aid for that child can be suspended until attendance improves.

"Chronic absenteeism for low-income students often comes from barriers that they and their families face such as housing and food insecurity, lack of transportation, illness, mental health struggles, disabilities, both those that are diagnosed and sometimes undiagnosed, and the myriad of family responsibilities that they are dealing with," Lewis said. "Stripping financial assistance away from these families only makes things worse."

Lewis also said the policy has disproportionately harmed students with disabilities because disability-related absences are sometimes incorrectly categorized as unexcused. He said roughly 27% of Massachusetts students with disabilities were chronically absent during the 2024-2025 school year.

"Chronic absenteeism is an enormous systemic problem that we saw skyrocket during the pandemic," Lewis said. "But the solutions to chronic absenteeism involve more mental health resources for students, housing and food stability programs for them and their families, making sure class content is obviously engaging, more supports for students with disabilities, more wraparound services for these students and their families."

Republican Sens. Kelly Dooner, Peter Durant, Bruce Tarr and Ryan Fattman voted against the amendment. Republican Sen. Patrick O'Connor joined Democrats in voting in favor of the amendment. No senators spoke against the proposal during floor debate.

Lewis said advocacy organizations including Massachusetts Law Reform Institute and Greater Boston Legal Services had pushed for repeal of the policy for years.

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