

# Legislative Analysis

---



## RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS NOT COUNTED AS SCHOOL ABSENCES FOR ATTENDANCE AWARD ELIGIBILITY

Mary Ann Cleary, Director  
Phone: (517) 373-8080  
<http://www.house.mi.gov/hfa>

**House Bill 4454 (reported from committee without amendment)**

**Sponsor: Rep. Kate Segal**

**Committee: Education**

### **First Analysis (5-7-13)**

**BRIEF SUMMARY:** The bill would prohibit a public school that gives an attendance award from counting a student's absence due to a religious holiday as an absence in the student's attendance record for the purpose of determining eligibility for the award.

**FISCAL IMPACT:** The bill would have no fiscal impact.

### **THE APPARENT PROBLEM:**

High achievement at school requires regular school attendance. To encourage regular attendance and ensure achievement, many schools provide incentives to students that reward their efforts to attend classes each day.

Some schools reward perfect attendance each month. Others present an extra-special award for perfect attendance over the course of a student's entire school career. For example, Burton Elementary School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, designates each of its students having perfect attendance for one month as a STAR Student, an acronym meaning Studious, Thoughtful, Accountable, and Respectful. Each student earns a gold t-shirt saying "I am a STAR student"; their picture is displayed on a television in the school lobby; and they join the principal for ice-cream sundaes. In contrast, Kalamazoo Central High School presents a perfect attendance award to deserving seniors upon graduation.

Some observant Jewish students are unable to earn perfect attendance awards at Kalamazoo Central, because they observe the high holy days of their faith. The days of school they customarily miss include the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, when much of the day is spent in synagogue, and no work is permitted. In addition, Jewish students cannot attend school on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. That day, too, is spent at worship with members of their congregation. See *Background Information*.

Legislation has been introduced to ensure that students remain eligible to earn a school's perfect attendance record, despite absences due to religious observation.

### **THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:**

The bill would amend the Revised School Code to prohibit a public school that gives an award (or other recognition) to students for school attendance from counting a student's

absence that is due to a religious holiday (or other religious observance) as an absence in the student's attendance record for the purpose of determining eligibility for the award (or recognition).

MCL 380.1566

***ARGUMENTS:***

***For:***

Proponents of the bill say Michigan law should prohibit schools from counting religious absences against a student's perfect attendance record. They argue it is important that schools respect religious diversity, never forcing students to choose between observing their faith or earning perfect school attendance, as long as students make-up any missed work.

***Against:***

Some health educators discourage perfect attendance policies in schools. They say this particular school-wide attendance incentive encourages students to attend school when they are sick, and consequently to spread contagious disease.

***POSITIONS:***

The American Federation of Teachers - Michigan supports the bill. (5-1-13)

The Michigan Catholic Conference supports the bill. (5-1-13)

The Kayla Foundation supports the bill. (5-1-13)

The Calhoun Intermediate School District supports the bill. (5-1-13)

Two citizens, Madeline and Carrie Richman, expressed support for the bill. (5-1-13)

Legislative Analyst: J. Hunault  
Fiscal Analyst: Bethany Wicksall

---

■ This analysis was prepared by nonpartisan House staff for use by House members in their deliberations, and does not constitute an official statement of legislative intent.