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TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: Child Poverty Council  
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TOPIC Chronic Absenteeism

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## INTRODUCTION

We are being called to act!

In Every Student, Every Day: A Community Toolkit to Address and Eliminate Chronic Absenteeism\*, four key steps are suggested:

- 1) Generate and Act on Absenteeism Data
- 2) Create and Deploy Positive Messages and Measures
- 3) Focus Community on Addressing Chronic Absenteeism
- 4) Ensure Responsibility Across Sectors.

## WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Chronic absenteeism; defined as excused and unexcused absences from school that are greater than or equal to 10% of a student's school year. In Vermont that would be about 17.5 days or more than three weeks! When a student spends this much time away from learning and interacting with their peers, they risk getting behind their peers academically, which correlates to challenges in behavior as well as potential social challenges.

## GENERATE AND ACT ON ABSENTEEISM DATA

Earlier this month the Civil Rights Data Collection shared its latest data from the 1314 SY. The data is collected directly from the schools in every state. Beginning with 1617 SY chronic absenteeism data will be reported to the United States Department of Education (USDOE) as the reporting transitions from the Office of Civil Rights to the USDOE. Even in the absence of this data for Vermont students we can still act to address chronic absenteeism. But it is not enough to know how many students are chronically absent. We need find out *why* the student was absent. Students in Vermont can be absent from school for a myriad of reasons, and these absences effect students in different ways. Consider, for example, the difference between the accumulated absences of a student who has been hospitalized with those of the student whose family was visiting museums in France, with those of the student whose family does not have their own car yet live too close to school to take the bus. The more we know about the reason for the absence the better we are able to match the students and their family with the correct level of intervention.

## CREATE AND DEPLOY POSITIVE MESSAGES AND MEASURES

Title 16 V.S.A. §2902 and State Board Rule 2194 state that each school in Vermont, "shall ensure that a tiered system of *academic and behavioral* supports is in place to assist all students in working toward attainment of the standards." In the past few months, the Agency of Education has reorganized our work and staff, which has resulted in the creation of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Workgroup, of which I am the program manager. We believe that tiered supports improves student outcomes by building capacity within schools and supervisory unions to meet the academic and

behavior needs of all students. We know that when all students, including those with the most extensive needs, experience high-quality instruction within inclusive educational settings outcomes improve. That high-quality instruction for all begins at the Universal level (Tier 1). Many Vermont schools are using the evidence-based practices of integrated education frameworks such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Practices, State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG), Trauma-informed Schools, Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWiFT) as well as advisories and mentoring. We have seen evidence in both the PBIS and the SPDG that tiered supports improve student outcomes for all students.

#### FOCUS COMMUNITY ON ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

School staff, students, family and communities need to know the causes and effects of chronic absence from school. The sharing of presentations, publications, toolkits, websites, and professional learning are ways we can take action to address and eliminate chronic absenteeism.

#### ENSURE RESPONSIBILITY ACROSS SECTORS

*How can we build on what is already in place to increase access to universal instruction and behavior supports for all students in Vermont? We can continue to act in partnership with community health, family support, and justice providers to support all students and their families within a multi-tiered system of supports in every school and supervisory union in Vermont.*

Keeping in mind that chronic absenteeism is not the same as truancy (unexcused absences from school), we would like to suggest that *restorative* solutions are offered to parents to replace the current punitive ones that exist for truants, such as Title 16: Education, Chapter 025: Attendance and Discipline, 1127. Notice and complaint by truant officer; penalty:

- o (b) When, after receiving notice, a person fails, without legal excuse, to cause a child to attend school as required by this chapter, he or she shall be fined not more than \$1,000.00 pursuant to subsection (c) of this section.

You can take action through a change in statute that puts aside the punitive associations of absenteeism for students and their families. In lieu of the fine in 16:1127(b), which is a hardship for families living in poverty, we suggest the engagement of a family in a parenting course, or other supports from partners in the community. Help us bring our students back into the classroom to learn and interact with their peers in a restorative, caring environment.

\* [www.2ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf](http://www.2ed.gov/about/inits/ed/chronicabsenteeism/toolkit.pdf), U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Department of Education, 2015.