

Wednesday, April 15, 2026

Good morning, members of the House of Education Committee-

Thank you for inviting me to testify about chronic absenteeism in Vermont and my school district's response. My name is Chelsea Lareau, and I am the school engagement clinician for the Colchester School District. This is my fourth year with the district, and before this position, I was an investigator at the Burlington Department for Children and Families, Family Services Division. I mention my previous role as a DCF social worker because I have 13 years of unique experience that has shaped my role as the school engagement clinician.

While working for DCF when an assessment for truancy came across my desk, there was a standard process in place. Families, schools, and students were contacted; truancy was confirmed; and a truancy petition was filed. The court hearings were held within a day or two, and supports were put in place to support the student and family. There was the threat of education neglect and a question of whether the child's needs were being met. Truancy court was not as effective as we had hoped, but for some families, the law was enough to get students back on track.

With the ever-changing challenges families face, forced compliance through truancy court has become ineffective and is usually the last hope schools have after exhausting their efforts. While the barriers and challenges students face continue to grow each year: mental health, trauma, unhoused families, food insecurity, substance use, financial insecurity, the list can feel endless. Filing a truancy petition may help some families; however, the courts and DCF are stretched thin, and students who struggle with school attendance are often sitting home alone and don't rise to the level of immediate intervention by the courts and DCF. The nature of DCF is that the immediate danger is addressed first, and with the number of emergencies that come through the system, students who are avoiding school may go unnoticed.

For students who struggle with chronic absenteeism, once a truancy petition is filed and the State's Attorney accepts it, it can be months before families have a hearing and even longer before support is recommended. For some families, chronic absenteeism has been an issue throughout their school career. Another example of why attending court for truancy is not an effective approach is that our State's Attorney does not file truancy charges against students over 16, leaving a population of students at risk of graduating with no system in place to catch them.

It is important to consider what the profile of a student who may struggle with school attendance looks like and why it looks that way. For younger students, it's missed days that add up or long stretches of absences with minimal contact from caregivers. What we don't see up front is a caregiver whose car broke down, and there's no money for gas, or a family exhausted because there are 7 people in a hotel room, and the baby was crying all night.

For older students, they either stop attending school or refuse to attend, and caregivers become frustrated with the constant struggle to get them to school. What we may not see is the student who is too anxious to walk into the building, or the student who is worried about their caregiver, who is using substances and may not be alive when they return. When families are struggling, connection and support are what will build trust.

As the school engagement clinician, my role is to create systems within our district to help address the barriers our students and families face that impact their ability to attend and engage in school. Although chronic absenteeism numbers have been declining over the last 4 years, the number of students struggling with chronic absenteeism remains staggering. **The shift from compliance to connection is how we will increase school engagement.**

I am going to give you five examples of how we are incorporating connections within our district.

1. Universal notifications- we send monthly attendance notifications to all caregivers and students, grades K-12. Notifications have a resource embedded in the message, such as podcasts, articles on routine setting, upcoming local learning opportunities, research on chronic absenteeism, and missed learning.
2. School engagement referral- When school teams need extra support with re-engaging a student who has been struggling to come to school or a parent reaches out for additional support, school support teams fill out a school engagement referral. This initiates additional support from me. I reach out to the family, schedule a meeting with the student's team at school, and work to connect the family with community resources. In addition, I offer in-the-moment support to caregivers and students in the mornings as they try to get their child to school. This type of support varies from text messaging ideas and encouragement to a home visit offering in-person support.
3. Trusted Adult Model at CHS- With the help of a committee and leadership, we identified 2-3 chronically absent students per adult. Each time those students are out, the "trusted adult" who is an identified teacher reaches out to the student and family to let them know that they were missed in class. The results are hard to ignore. During the first 3 months, 50% of the students were no longer chronically absent, and the results continue to be the same.
4. No Hungry Weekends Program- This district-wide initiative provides food to families over the weekend. We recognize that transportation can be a barrier for families, so we send food home with students. Each Friday, a wheeled bag is packed with nutritious items such as meat, dairy products, pasta, fruits, vegetables, and snacks, and students bring the bags home to their families. School support teams refer identified students. We are currently sending 47 bags home each week. This program is funded through donations and grants.

5. Fresh Rescue Program - We formed a partnership with the Colchester Community Food Shelf and the VT Food Bank to break the stigma around food insecurity. Every Thursday, Shaw's donates varying amounts of food that need to be moved from the shelves, and I bring it to the high school. Additionally, there is a table and a fridge in the hallway for anyone who wants to grab food.

Closing: All five of our uniquely designed responses in Colchester have helped to build the connection with students and families, ultimately increasing students' attendance. When we focus on compliance features like attendance codes and punishment, we do not see results. Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

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