

Testimony to House Education Committee re: H. 930

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Chair Conlon and members of the Committee,

As a general pediatrician and former school administrator, it is a pleasure to testify before this committee on a topic that concerns all of us who care about children and families – school absenteeism. I am pleased that the House has advanced H. 930, “An act relating to addressing and preventing chronic absenteeism,” and in so doing emphasized a continued **shift from compliance to connection** that we need to make in our approach to address school absenteeism, one of the most consequential issues impacting the education and overall wellbeing of communities in Vermont.

When I worked in schools, my division’s mission statement included the phrase: “Healthy bodies and minds are the foundations of academic success.”

Indeed, through my clinical practice and work in schools, I have experienced that when kids and families are healthy and their basic needs are met, they’re more likely to attend school every day. While attending school regularly, they’re able to access high quality instruction, build relationships with peers and trusted adults, eat healthy meals, access therapeutic services, and many other resources. When they attend school regularly, they are more likely to meet their academic milestones as early as in third grade, they’re seven times more likely to graduate high school, they’re better prepared for the workforce, and they’re much more likely to live longer, healthier lives. All along the way, their parents and caregivers are better able to attend and be productive in the workforce.

In this way, I have really become convinced that regular school attendance and engagement for young people is the foundation for – and an indicator of – a healthy, thriving community.

But how about when there are health, social or other barriers that make it hard for that child to get to school every day? Common health and social concerns are leading causes of absenteeism: mental health and substance use for the child or family, asthma, unmet oral health needs, transportation insecurity, unreliable childcare, among others. I will never forget when I saw a 7 year old in my office for a well child check a number of years ago, and we were discussing his asthma. When I asked the mom how he was doing, she said “seems okay,” and offered no concerns. It was only when I asked how many days of school he’d missed – “I don’t know, maybe 30?” – that I realized how poorly controlled his symptoms were, and uncovered a need to adjust his medication. After adjusting his medication, and just as importantly after discussing why I as his doctor felt so strongly that he be in school every day, his attendance improved significantly the following year.

Compounding these barriers are misconceptions about school attendance, as well as aversions and disengagements, where young people may feel unwelcome, unsafe or disconnected from their school communities.

In total, now, those obstacles to regular school attendance have resulted in **one in four students in Vermont being chronically absent (missing 10% or more of school days for any reason)**, a significant increase from pre-pandemic levels. This translates to about 18,000 students in Vermont who are not regularly present in school.

And those absences don't just impact those 18,000 students. We see a significant ripple effect when students are absent – social relationships are impacted for all students. Classroom dynamics and instructional flow is interrupted, as teachers have to reteach. In a 2025 survey that my team fielded of 241 Vermont educators and school staff, two thirds reported feeling less efficacious and 60% reported less satisfaction in their work as a result of their students' absenteeism. And as a result of this student absenteeism, thousands of parents and caregivers who are less present and productive in the workforce.

Of course, the root causes and impact of school absenteeism are too big and complex for schools to solve alone. And **we cannot punish our way out of those root causes** – we have to collectively leverage missed school as an early warning indicator of something amiss for the child and family, and together to **move from a mindset of compliance to one of connection**. We ALL play a role within the school and community to focus our efforts in multi-tiered ways, to desilo our efforts and to wrap around students comprehensively.

With a foundation of a holistic mindset and high-quality data, there are many evidence-based interventions that can be used to prevent, identify and respond to absenteeism. When rooted in data, I believe that any intervention that prioritizes student health and wellbeing or school culture IS an attendance intervention – school nurses are an attendance intervention. School-based physical and mental health services are an attendance intervention. School meals are an attendance intervention. I could go on....

One particular effort I'll highlight has been work we've done this year through the [Every Day Counts project](#), funded through a grant from the UVM Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships. Through this work, we supported a school district and primary medical home in four rural communities across Vermont to build their internal capacity through trainings and technical assistance, to revise their attendance policies and procedures to focus on connection instead of just compliance, to align their messaging, and to improve the coordination and integration of their care so that no children fell through the cracks. There are SO many bright spots to celebrate that I'm happy to share in detail, but I'll share that **many of these districts dramatically improved their chronic absence rates in span of ONE school year**. By leveraging strengths-based policies, and physically sitting around the same tables, cross-sector teams, including academic leaders, school nurses and counselors, community-based health practitioners have partnered with one another and with families to address unmet needs, dispel misconceptions and re-engage the family in the school and in health care.

We need other sectors to come into this work – faith, business, housing, business communities all play a role to ensure that kids are in school so that they can learn and grow, their caregivers can contribute in the workplace, and communities can thrive.

I am grateful and inspired that the House has taken up the issue of chronic absence and passed H. 930, which takes an important step forward to continue our progression to a supportive mindset of

connection over compliance. I would be happy to share feedback on some specific provisions within the bill at another time, and am happy to be a resource to the Committee at any time as we collectively work to improve school attendance for all of Vermont's children.