

# **Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Vermont: *A Strategic, Equity- Centered Policy Response***

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**Vermont Agency of Education**

**Updated January 23, 2026**

# Agenda

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- Introductions
- Purpose, Background and Process
- Current state of Chronic Absenteeism in VT
- Stakeholder Engagement and Key Findings
- Levers for Change
- Statutory Updates to Title 16
- Next steps and questions

# Introductions

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**Jill Briggs Campbell**, Deputy Secretary

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# Why Now?

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- Attendance is the gateway to learning: Students must be present to benefit from education investments.
- Chronic absenteeism is an **early warning sign** of academic risk
  - Linked to difficulty learning to read by the third-grade
  - Lower rates of achievement in middle school, and;
  - Lower graduation rates.
- Impacts workforce readiness, public health, and community stability.

# Background and Process

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- AOE began investigating Chronic Absenteeism as a lever for change in **2023** in light of concerning trends during the pandemic and into recovery.
  - Nationally, chronic absenteeism is seen as an early warning indicator of negative outcomes for both individuals and communities.
- Prioritized early and regular engagement with AHS/DCF to understand overlap between statutory requirements and impacts of truancy (Title 33).
- Since 2023, AOE has led robust stakeholder engagement to understand, prevent, and address chronic absenteeism, with a particular focus on root causes.
  - Inter-Agency meetings with DCF and State's Attorneys
  - National and state attendance experts and partners (Attendance Works)
  - Focus groups with school and community partners

# What Is Chronic Absenteeism?

Missing **10% or more** of the school year

Includes **all absences**: excused, unexcused, suspensions

Focuses on **impact**, not blame

Nationally recognized measure used for **equity and accountability**.

# A Necessary Shift in Approach: Truancy → Chronic Absenteeism

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## Truancy:

- Unexcused absences only
- Compliance
- Legal escalation
- Often inequitable
- Driven by penalty

## Chronic Absenteeism:

- All absences
- Prevention and support
- Early Intervention
- Equity-centered
- Driven by partnership

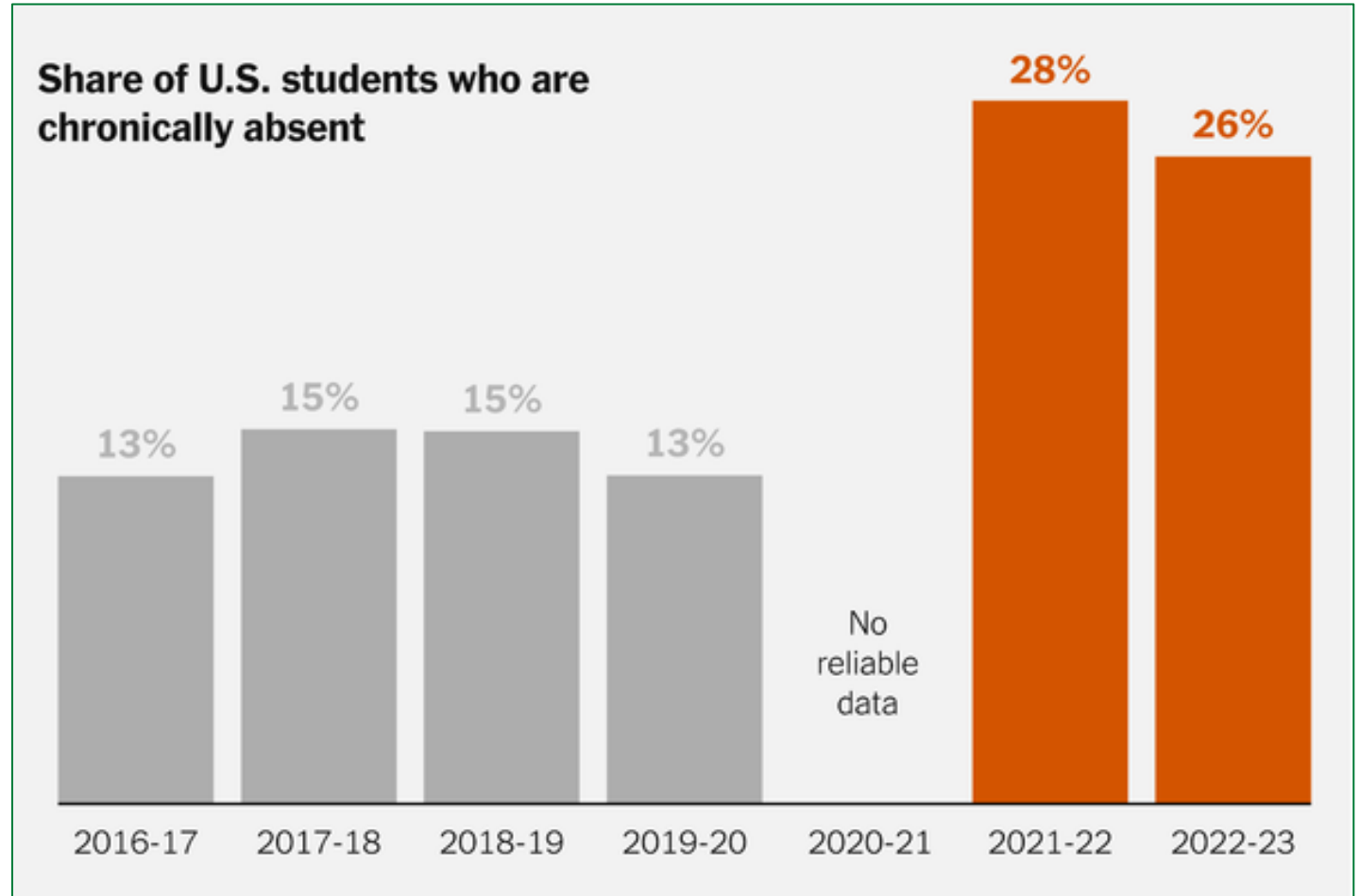
# National Context: A Persistent Post-Pandemic Challenge

Rates nearly doubled during  
COVID-19

Still far above pre-pandemic  
levels

Disproportionately affects students  
in poverty and marginalized groups

Vermont is not alone—but how we  
respond matters.



April 2, 2024 [New York Times](#).



# Vermont's Current Reality: Progress, But the Challenge Remains

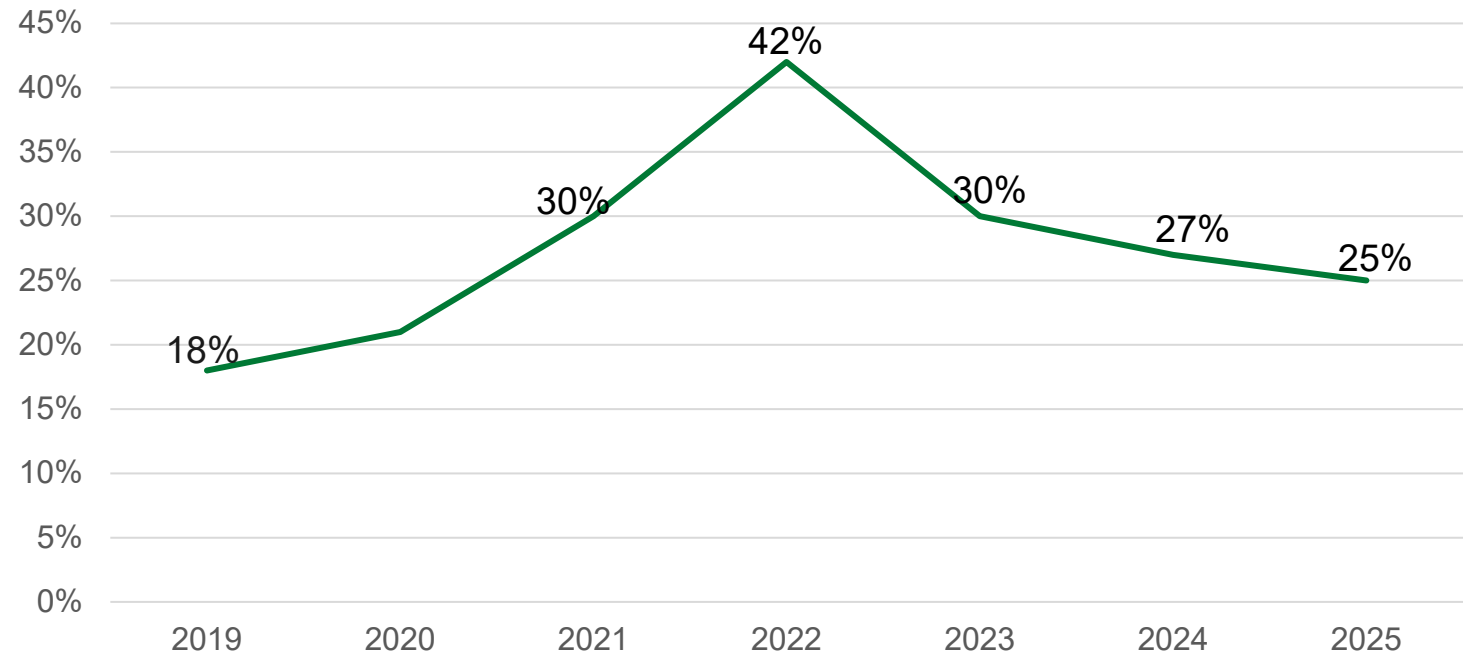
Chronic absenteeism rose 67%  
from 2019–2023

Declining since 2023—but still high

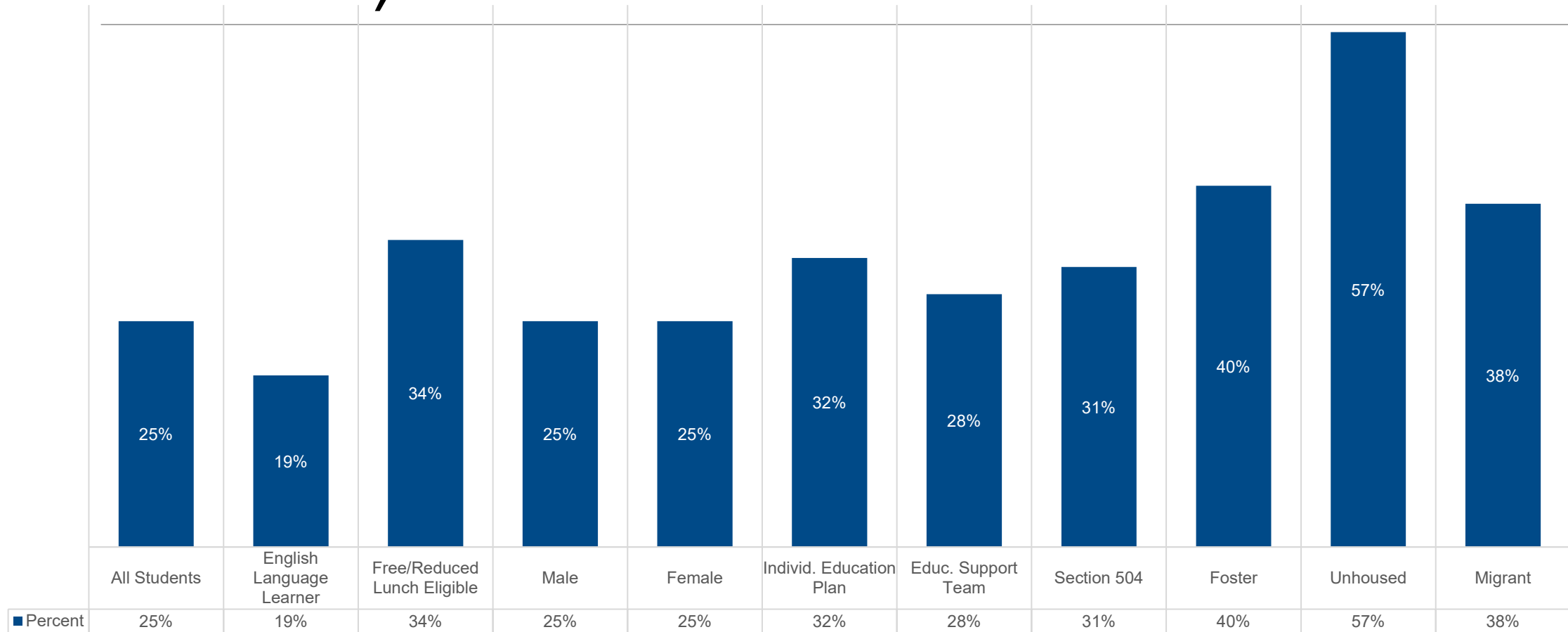
1 in 4 Vermont students chronically  
absent in SY 2024–25

Improvement is real, but we must  
tackle the issue as a statewide  
priority

## % of Chronically Absent Students Over Time



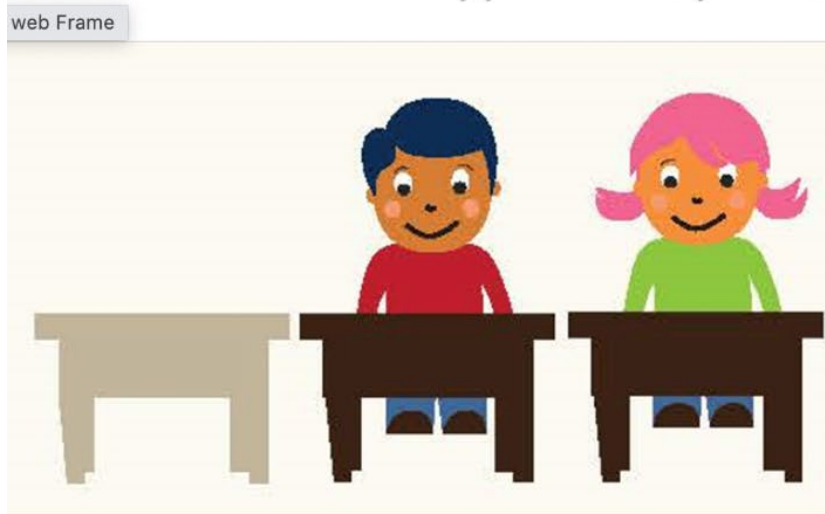
# Percent of Students Chronically Absent, 2025



# Chronic Absenteeism is an equity issue: Who Is Most Affected

1 in 3 VT Students is Chronically Absent

*Approximately 1 in 3 Students in 2023*



Used with permission from Attendance Works

- 30% of all VT students
- 37% of students with disabilities
- 41% of students living in poverty
- 63% of students experiencing homelessness

# Root Causes: Why are students missing school?

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Health &  
mental health  
needs

Housing  
instability

Transportation

Caregiving &  
economic  
stress

Bullying or  
safety  
concerns

Academic  
anxiety

Weak adult  
connections

Exclusionary  
discipline

# Stakeholders Engagement: who we spoke to

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- Vermont Interagency Prevention Committee (2023-2024) to gather initial input on scope, severity, and available data
- Department for Children and Families, VT State's Attorneys and Sheriffs (2024) to coordinate on draft amendments to Title 16
- Review of proposed changes with education leaders, professional organizations, community partners in restorative justice, and representatives from VT's legal community (2024-2025)
- Facilitated focus groups with representatives from various State Agencies, educators, community partners, school healthcare staff, and student support leaders (2025)
- Every Day Counts Summit co-hosted with Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP) (November 2025)

# What Stakeholders Told Us: Key Takeaways

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## Systemic Barriers Are Limiting Progress

- **Inconsistent attendance definitions and data practices**
  - Widespread confusion about “excused” vs “unexcused absences
- **Fragmented systems & unclear roles**
  - Shared commitment to the cause but variability in process
  - Many reported feeling disconnected or confusion about ownership of roles/responsibility
  - Often leads to an overreliance on schools to lead and implement all interventions
- **Uneven legal responses across regions**
- **Overreliance on punitive tools**
  - Across all sectors, participants called for moving away from fines and punitive measures toward early, tiered interventions that prioritize prevention and support.
- **Erosion of trust with families**

# Levers for change

## Goals



Elevate what works today



Preserve local control while creating clarity and equity statewide



Create a statewide expectation and shared sense of responsibility to tackle absence

# Levers for Change: Key Deliverables for State-Level support

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Statutory updates to reflect a new approach and align our systems



State-level leadership through creation of model policy on attendance



Ongoing State support, training, and coordination



# Why Statutory Change is Needed

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- Current provisions of Title 16 do not align with the change in approach to absence.
  - Centers truancy over prevention.
- Lacks consistent definitions and expectations
- Encourages late, punitive intervention.
- Does not align with evidence-based practices for intervention and improvement.

# National Examples

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- One study in California (Attendance Works, 2020) found that rewriting truancy notifications to focus on clear, actionable data instead of state mandated legalistic language saw an increased effectiveness by 40%.
- In South Carolina, a study by the Council of State Governments found that students involved in the juvenile justice system not only didn't improve their attendance but actually missed 5 or more days than they had the previous year (Weber, 2020).
- Restorative justice efforts (specifically those shifting away from punitive, legal interventions) in Pittsburgh, Minnesota, and Houston reduced suspension and absence rates, with some sites also seeing reductions in differences by race and socioeconomic status (Gottfried, M., Page, L., Edwards, D., 2022).

# Title 16 Summary of Changes

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- Clear, consistent definitions of absence, excused absence, chronic absenteeism, and truancy, among others
- Ensures application of these requirements extends to all schools receiving public tuition dollars
- Enables AOE to create a model policy, adopted by SU/SDs and independent schools that will identify tiered, documented, consistent interventions to proactively encourage attendance
- Defines reasons an absence can be excused
- Identifies when legal involvement will be triggered
- Removes application of ineffective punitive fines, while maintaining other legal tools to encourage attendance
- Identifies clear roles for schools, families, and partners

# Next Steps

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- Strategic Planning Steering Committees to be established by AOE to help define success for Chronic Absenteeism, and establish clear performance measures
- AOE to lead development of Model Policy for districts (in progress)
- Coordinated, State-wide delivery of training and technical assistance
  - Will require partnership across Agencies, specifically DCF and State's Attorneys
- Data alignment and evaluation
- Continued cross-agency collaboration and continued engagement with key community partners

**Revision to law alone isn't enough— ongoing support, community partnerships, and a commitment to rigor and fidelity ensures results.**



**Questions?**