

TESTIMONY

Testimony To: House Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Vermont Agency of Education

Subject: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Vermont

Date: January 23, 2026

Why Chronic Absenteeism Is a Priority

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of the school year—is one of the strongest early warning signs that a student is at risk of falling behind academically and disengaging from school. Research shows that frequent absences are linked to difficulty learning to read by third grade, lower achievement in middle school, reduced graduation rates, and poorer long-term outcomes. Students must be in school to benefit from Vermont’s education investments, including instruction, school meals, mental health supports, special education services, and career pathways.

The Current State in Vermont

Vermont mirrors national trends following the COVID-19 pandemic. Chronic absenteeism increased by 67% between 2019 and 2023, rising from about 18% to nearly 30%. Rates have declined since 2023, but the challenge remains significant: one in four Vermont students was chronically absent in the 2024–25 school year. The impact is not evenly distributed. Absenteeism rates are highest among students experiencing homelessness (63%), students living in poverty, students with disabilities, students in foster care, and migrant students—making attendance a clear equity issue.

What Drives Chronic Absence

Students miss school for a range of interconnected reasons. Out-of-school factors include health and mental health needs, housing instability, transportation barriers, caregiving responsibilities, and economic stress. In-school factors also matter, including bullying or safety concerns, academic anxiety, weak relationships with trusted adults, disengaging coursework, and exclusionary discipline practices. Chronic absenteeism is rarely about families not caring—it reflects barriers that require early, coordinated support.



What Stakeholders Told Us

Through extensive engagement with educators, school leaders, families, State's Attorneys, health and human services partners, and community organizations, several system-level challenges emerged:

- Inconsistent definitions and attendance practices across districts
- Fragmented data systems and unclear expectations
- Uneven and sometimes ineffective reliance on court-based responses
- Lack of clear, documented intervention pathways before legal escalation

Stakeholders consistently emphasized that punitive approaches alone do not improve attendance and can erode trust with families.

The Proposed Path Forward

The Agency of Education is advancing a **prevention-focused, equity-centered strategy** that includes:

1. **Targeted statutory updates to Title 16** to reframe truancy as part of a continuum of chronic absenteeism, clarify expectations, require tiered and documented interventions, and reduce ineffective punitive practices.
2. **A statewide model policy** to establish consistent definitions, data practices, and evidence-based intervention frameworks while preserving local control.
3. **State-level support and implementation assistance**, including training, technical assistance, improved data guidance, and cross-agency coordination.

Why Legislative Action Matters

Modernizing attendance law and supporting consistent implementation will help ensure students are identified early, families are engaged constructively, and schools have clear tools to address attendance barriers before problems escalate. Improving attendance strengthens student outcomes, reduces inequities, and increases the return on Vermont's education investments.

Bottom line: Chronic absenteeism is a solvable challenge. With clear statutory direction and coordinated support, Vermont can ensure more students are in school, learning, and prepared for the future.

