

Chronic Absenteeism – House Education Committee  
Vermont School Counselors Association  
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the issue of chronic absenteeism. We appreciate the committee's focus on this important issue, and we would like to offer our assistance in any way that would help you. As school counselors, we can play a critical role in addressing this issue.

Across Vermont and the nation, chronic absenteeism has risen significantly in recent years. We know that students who are chronically absent—missing 10% or more of the school year—are at greater risk for academic decline, disengagement, mental health challenges, and ultimately dropping out. Attendance is fundamentally about belonging, engagement, and support.

Absenteeism is not simply about attendance; it is often a symptom of deeper challenges: anxiety, depression, family instability, transportation barriers, housing insecurity, bullying, academic frustration, or a lack of connection to school.

School counselors are uniquely trained in mental health support, family engagement, academic planning, and systems-level interventions. As student support professionals, we can help to identify root causes and provide early intervention. When given adequate time to provide direct services to students, school counselors can:

- Identify patterns of chronic absenteeism early through data analysis
- Provide individual and small-group counseling to address anxiety, depression, and school avoidance
- Partner with families to reduce barriers to attendance
- Collaborate with teachers to create engagement strategies
- Connect students to community-based services
- Lead school-wide prevention initiatives that foster belonging and connection
- Develop strategies to reduce repeat absences
- Reduce long-term costs associated with remediation and dropout

Research consistently shows that when students feel connected to at least one caring adult in school, attendance improves. School counselors are often that adult. And when attendance improves, so do academic outcomes.

**Comments and suggestions:**

Overall, we are very supportive of this bill and we appreciate the work that has gone into this so far. We have a few thoughts we would like to share with you.

***1. Prevention***

Absenteeism is not solved through punitive measures alone. It is solved through relationship-building, early intervention, and coordinated supports. Prevention is more effective—and far less costly—than intervention after disengagement has already taken root. Every day a student misses

school is a lost opportunity. But every day a student feels supported, understood, and connected increases the likelihood they will return—and stay. As school counselors, we are always working with students and families to prevent or curtail absences from happening.

In our work with students in schools, we are often confronted with a lack of resources to help prevent absences from occurring. We would be in a much better position to curb truancy if staff and resources are available. Some suggested proactive interventions may include:

- staff for home visits
- time to connect with care teams
- community resource collaboration
- additional school-based supports

### ***2. Transportation barriers***

Based on our experiences in Vermont schools, we are acutely aware of the number of students who have transportation issues, which can result from homelessness, financial situations, etc. They should not be penalized if they cannot get to school.

### ***3. Student records***

Currently, attendance is not always included when students transfer schools. In order to properly track and report attendance data, we should ensure that attendance is included in transferred records.

### ***4. Clear guidelines***

The model policy should have clear guidelines as to what is an excused absence. Currently, the bill sets forth a list of what a superintendent may excuse. In the model policy, for consistency across the state, we suggest that definitive list of reasons why an absence would be excused, especially given the possibility of criminal action.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your commitment to Vermont's students.