



Two Prospect Street, Suite 3
Montpelier, Vermont 05602-3555
802-229-0547
<http://www.vpaonline.org>

To: House Education Committee

Date: February 10, 2026

Subject: Chronic Absenteeism

From: Jay Nichols, Senior Executive Director Vermont Principals' Association

For the record, Jay Nichols, Senior Executive Director, Vermont Principals' Association. The VPA agrees with the Agency of Education that Chronic Absenteeism is an issue both in Vermont and nationally. We also agree that the tools we have used in the state and nation have to be updated. In Vermont, we have had at least from a legal context, more of a truancy and punishment-based mindset. It is time to officially move to more of an early intervention and prevention approach.

- Researchers consistently find chronic absenteeism is strongly linked to:
- Lower standardized test scores and learning loss.
- Reduced likelihood of grade-level reading proficiency in early grades.
- Increased risk of long-term negative outcomes like dropout, unemployment, and economic inactivity in adulthood.

Anecdotally, school principals can share examples of students who struggle with issues of absenteeism that become behavioral problems in the school. All of this is connected. Students who are at school regularly and participating in the fabric and culture of the school are much more likely to be successful than students who are regularly absent – regardless of the reason.

Students from low-income backgrounds, historically marginalized groups, and disadvantaged communities tend to have higher chronic absence rates, suggesting absenteeism exacerbates long-standing educational inequities. When children are struggling with food insecurity, housing insecurity, and turmoil in their lives outside of school it often has a direct negative impact on school attendance. Early grades, especially kindergarten, often show the highest chronic absence, underscoring the importance of early intervention. I should mention that a number of states have moved to requiring Kindergarten for students/families. I think this is a concept that Vermont should at least consider. The earlier we have students in the system, the sooner we can provide necessary support for them. It is much harder to improve the attendance patterns of a middle school student, for example, than it is for an elementary student in general. Ultimately, early intervention, especially in elementary grades, shows better results than waiting until later grades.

We would expect that chronic absenteeism would be reducing since the end of the pandemic; and, to be fair, statistically we are seeing that trend. However, all of the research I've looked at thus far has shown that we are still at chronic absenteeism rates that are above what we were experiencing just prior to the pandemic. Additionally, we have seen some data that indicates in places in which there have been major chaotic immigration & customs enforcement actions that those communities (and like communities in other states including in Vermont) have led to increased chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism is a complex, persistent issue—exacerbated by the pandemic, rooted in inequities, and affecting long-term student outcomes. Current research is actively identifying strategies to reduce absenteeism, with family engagement, early intervention, and whole-family support systems among the most promising evidence-informed approaches.

Strong, proactive communication between schools and families (positive outreach rather than punitive contact) is one of the most effective strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism.

Key Themes From Research:

Research Insight	What It Means
Chronic absenteeism remains higher than pre-pandemic levels	The “new normal” attendance crisis needs sustained attention.
Causes are multi-layered (health, engagement, systems, external shock)	Solutions must be holistic, not only punitive or administrative.
Family engagement and early interventions work best	Schools should prioritize strong partnerships and early grade support.
Programs addressing students' basic needs improve attendance	Wraparound services for families are part of effective strategies.

In terms of the proposed bill we have one area of change that we are concerned about that is under the area of Suspension or Expulsion of Students. Section E. has proposed language that:

“A public or an approved independent school shall provide access to alternative education, such as tutoring, instructional materials, and assignments to a student during any period of suspension of three or more days.”



Two Prospect Street, Suite 3
Montpelier, Vermont 05602-3555
802-229-0547
<http://www.vpaonline.org>

We respectfully request that the word “*shall*” be replaced with “*may*.”

We are always concerned about unfunded mandates. Schools often do not have resources to really provide alternative education and tutoring. Where appropriate, they can provide some instructional materials and assignments that a student may miss. However, instruction happens in the classroom. Schools can't simply replace instructional time missed with a worksheet. When students are suspended out of school this is usually due to a significant safety concern. We certainly don't want to incentivize students and families into thinking that being suspended for more than three days is something that becomes an extra educational and instructional duty for the school. We should do everything we can not to connect required discipline to attendance.

Respectfully submitted,
Jay Nichols