

Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools

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Our schools are caring, creative, and equitable communities that empower all children to build on their talents and passions to grow into engaged citizens and life-long learners.

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For the record, my name is Libby Bonesteel, Superintendent of Schools for the Montpelier Roxbury Public Schools (MRPS). Thank you for the opportunity to discuss a challenge that has remained front and center in my district since the pandemic.

I am joined today by Nick Conner, our Director of Student Engagement and Data. If the committee has technical questions regarding the nuances of chronic absenteeism or the mechanics of intentional student support, I will happily yield to Nick. He is a leading expert on this topic and has been instrumental in transforming our district's systems.

We want to thank the Agency of Education for elevating chronic absenteeism to the legislature. While this has been an indicator of school quality in over 35 states for years, we are gratified that Vermont is finally giving this challenge the attention it deserves.

The Vermont Principals' Association has already testified regarding the "why"—the immense academic and social-emotional toll absenteeism takes on a child. We concur entirely. When a child is not accessing their education, there should be enormous red flashing lights signaling that something is significantly wrong. However, the critical question isn't whether absenteeism is a problem, but how we respond to it.

As written, this bill essentially codifies a failing status quo. We have ample evidence that current truancy practices do not return students to the classroom.

Specifically, the mandate that a principal notify a truancy officer after 20 unexcused absences—leading to a DCF report and a formal letter of "obligation"—is a cycle of judgment and shame. Parents are already acutely aware that their children are missing school. A formal reminder of their legal obligation does not solve the underlying crisis; it merely alienates the very families we need to partner with. To be clear, most of the families we are supporting with a high rate of absenteeism are those who are also experiencing poverty.

Furthermore, we must address the distinction between "excused" and "unexcused" absences. Lost time is lost time: regardless of the label, the instructional loss is the same. The provision

allowing "pre-planned family commitments" is laced with systemic privilege. It might imply that a family vacation is a valid reason for absence, while a student staying home to care for a sick sibling because a single parent cannot miss work is a violation. This language, as drafted, risks penalizing poverty and stigmatizing the struggles of working-class families.

At MRPS, we have shifted from a punitive system to a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for attendance. Our results speak for themselves: our chronic absentee rate peaked at 32% during the COVID-19 years and has plummeted to 16%, even amidst the current flu season. For reference, the national average hovers around 24%.

Our framework prioritizes engagement before enforcement:

- **Tier 1 (Universal): Engagement & Belonging.** Kids come to school when they feel they belong and are challenged by high-quality instruction. We monitor attendance data weekly to ensure no student slips through the cracks.
- **Tier 2 (Targeted): Early Connection.** When a child misses just two days, the classroom teacher—the person with the strongest relationship with the student—reaches out. They don't call to scold; they call to ask, "How are you, and how can we help?"
- **Tier 3 (Intensive): Wrap-Around Services.** This is Code Red. We deploy social workers, conduct home visits, and provide tangible support like transportation. We treat absenteeism as a barrier to be removed, not a rule to be enforced.

Punitive action must be the absolute last resort, not the first. We cannot prosecute our way out of an attendance crisis. Support from outside legal agencies should only occur when every internal tier of supportive intervention has been exhausted.

We have significant concerns with any legislation that defaults to punishing students and families before ensuring schools provide essential support. We urge the committee to reconsider the punitive triggers in this bill and instead incentivize the supportive frameworks we know actually work. We would be more than happy to come back and testify about legislation currently in action in states like Connecticut that stands on a supportive frame.

Nick and I are happy to take any questions you may have.

Resource worth studying: [attendanceworks.org](https://www.attendanceworks.org)