

February 10, 2026

Chair Conlon and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. For the record, my name is Wendy Baker and I serve as the Superintendent for the Addison Central School District. I want to begin by saying that I strongly support the intent of this bill. Our district's chronic absenteeism rate is 8%. As a district of approximately 1700 students, we employ five social workers, spend over \$800,000 in support of mental health services for students and families through Counseling Services of Addison County, and invest heavily in structures that intervene early and deeply.

Chronic absenteeism is often not about attendance alone. Sometimes it is the first visible sign of deeper issues— including family instability, neglect, or harm. In these cases, the school's role is to notice, document, and connect families with help.

What I have to share with you today is not about broad trends or most families—it is about a small number of cases where the current law creates an unintentional loophole, allowing students to exit oversight precisely when their risk is highest. These situations raise not only educational concerns, but child welfare concerns that deserve the Committee's attention and dedicated language within the bill under consideration.

Recently, we had the experience of working with a family whose student had missed approximately 40% of the required attendance days. While in school, the student was an attentive learner, engaged with peers, and responsive to adults. Multiple offers of assistance by the students' trusted adults to lend support to the family in creative ways went unacknowledged. The family was eventually notified that the case would need to be reported for the court's consideration by our district's truancy officer. On the very same day that Deputy State's Attorney Rick Nolan called my office to discuss next steps the court might take to engage the family, the parent submitted a home study enrollment letter to the school and the student was de-enrolled.

At that moment, the student exited public school oversight. The chronic absenteeism framework of effective practices no longer applied. This situation involved prolonged disengagement by the family, not by the student, leading our team to develop a growing concern about the student's well-being.

During that same period of time, our district also received a home study enrollment letter for another student for whom we had filed multiple reports with the Department of Children and Families, based on disclosures made by the student alleging abuse taking place within the home. That student also left public school oversight at the very moment when concerns were becoming most acute. Schools can not and should not replace child welfare systems; but when educational disengagement and safety concerns overlap, the absence of even minimal educational verification removes one of the few consistent points of visibility for a student.

I have deep respect for families who intentionally choose home study and provide thoughtful, high-quality instruction to their children. The reinstatement of more rigorous application criteria and accountability measures designed to protect the educational rights and well being of home study students reinforces what the vast majority of home study families are already prepared to do as they look to engage in home study

programming.

The recommendations put forward by the Vermont Superintendents and Principals Associations are not about limiting choice. Clarifying triggers for oversight, requiring submission of assessment records, and restoring limited authority for the Secretary of Education when credible concerns arise would not affect most home study families at all. For the small number of cases like the ones I've described, those tools could make the difference between a child being seen—or not.

If we believe that every child in Vermont deserves access to education and protection, then our chronic absenteeism framework must apply consistently across all compulsory attendance pathways. I urge you to include targeted home study provisions recommended by the Vermont Superintendents and Principals Associations so that students who are already vulnerable do not unintentionally disappear from view at the moment they may need us the most.

Thank you for your time and for your careful consideration.