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To: Senate Committee on Education  
From: Cara Gleason Krebs, Howard Center Director of School Services  
Date: April, 16 2026  
Subject: Howard Center School Services – Chronic Absenteeism Legislation

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Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

My name is Cara Gleason Krebs, and I am the Director of School Services at Howard Center. Our program operates in every school across Chittenden County through a co-hired model, placing 65 mental health clinicians directly in schools. We currently serve approximately 900 students, those identified as facing the most significant barriers, including mental health challenges, economic hardship, family system stressors, and other social determinants of health.

I am here today to speak in **strong support of a comprehensive, prevention-focused, and systems-based approach to addressing chronic absenteeism.**

**The Scope of the Problem:**

Chronic absenteeism is both widespread and deeply complex.

A significant number of students are **missing 10% or more of the school year; roughly two days per month.** This level of absence not only impacts individual academic progress but also disrupts classroom environments and affects all students.

We are also seeing a broader shift since the pandemic:

- Decreased student engagement and connection to school
- Lagging social skills and learning readiness skills
- Increased overwhelm with school expectations



Importantly, high rates of absenteeism impact entire school communities, not just the students who are absent, due to the ongoing need to reteach and manage inconsistent attendance.

At the same time, there is a subset of students experiencing extreme absenteeism, missing most or all the school year. These cases are rarely about a single issue; they reflect a complex intersection of student needs, family circumstances, and community factors, often with long histories of intervention and limited success.

### **System Challenges**

For many years, our systems have lacked:

- Clear, consistent definitions and expectations
- Reliable and shared data systems
- Alignment across schools, agencies, and state guidance

This has led to confusion, inconsistency in practice, and, at times, conflict among stakeholders.

Historically, truancy responses have relied on compulsory or punitive measures. Across Chittenden County, educators, service providers, and community partners are increasingly adopting proactive, relationship-based approaches, which are more effective in addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism. **Punitive interventions can inadvertently deepen disengagement among students and families and should be reserved for narrowly defined, carefully vetted circumstances as a last resort.**

### **Local and Regional Efforts**

In 2019, we convened the Chittenden County Chronic Absenteeism Work Group to bring together partners across education, mental health, healthcare, community organizations, and the legal system.

This group has focused on:

- Building cross-sector collaboration
- Increasing data awareness and use



- Developing consistent, relationship-based approaches
- Promoting early intervention and family engagement

In February 2025, we shared a Model Policy with over 100 community stakeholders. This work reflects strong local readiness and alignment around a prevention-focused approach.

We have also piloted targeted strategies for students with the most significant needs, including:

- Empaneled Kid Safe Collaborative Meetings can now be utilized for Chronic Absenteeism
- Collaborative Youth Participatory Research class at Burlington High School for students going to school but not attending class
- Development of an intensive chronic absenteeism in-home support program (still in process)

These efforts are promising but remain limited without broader system alignment and resources.

### **Support for Current Legislation**

**We strongly support the Agency of Education's current efforts and this legislation.**

This work is critical because it:

- Establishes clear definitions and expectations
- Supports consistent data collection and monitoring
- Creates a framework for a tiered, statewide response
- Aligns systems around prevention and early intervention

Clarity at the state level will reduce confusion, improve efficiency, and allow local systems to focus on implementation rather than interpretation

### **Key Recommendations**

As this work moves forward, we encourage consideration of the following:



- **Provide strong model policies with local flexibility:** A consistent framework paired with local adaptation is essential.
- **Ensure access to technical assistance:** Districts will need support to implement with fidelity.
- **Invest in implementation:** Schools and communities will need adequate resources to build and sustain effective systems.
- **Promote cross-sector responsibility:** Schools cannot address chronic absenteeism alone, healthcare, community organizations, and state systems must remain engaged, particularly for high-need students.
- **Prioritize early identification:** Tracking the percentage of days missed provides a real-time indicator of disengagement. **Missing just two days in September is already predictive of chronic absenteeism.**
- **Center relationships and engagement:** Sustainable improvement depends on trust, connection, and shared problem-solving with families.

Chronic absenteeism is not solely an education issue, it is a community issue that requires a coordinated, systemic response.

We are encouraged by the direction of this legislation and the Agency of Education's leadership. With clear guidance, adequate resources, and shared accountability, we have an opportunity to meaningfully improve outcomes for Vermont's students and school communities.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to this work.