
TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: Vermont Agency of Education

Subject: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Vermont

Date: April 7, 2026

Purpose and Background

Thank you for this opportunity to discuss bill H. 930. The Agency appreciates the efforts and attention of both House and Senate committees to address pervasive chronic absenteeism across the state, and this bill provides needed clarity on the standards and definitions for managing and addressing absenteeism in schools. We recognize that addressing the comprehensive root causes of absenteeism requires statewide, coordinated commitment from State Agencies, schools, families, community partners, and businesses, but meaningful change must start with clear definitions and expectations of how we, as a state, define and address chronic absenteeism in schools.

Education Strategy for Improving Attendance

The Agency of Education is advancing a **prevention-focused, equity-centered strategy** that includes:

1. **Targeted statutory updates to Title 16** to establish clarity of definitions for excused and unexcused absences, reframe truancy as part of a continuum of chronic absenteeism, clarify expectations of school districts in managing early intervention, require tiered and documented interventions to ensure equitable and consistent processes and documentation, and reduce ineffective punitive practices.
2. The development of a **statewide model policy** to establish consistent definitions, data practices, and evidence-based intervention frameworks while preserving local control. This model policy will be supported by procedures and guidance along with;
3. **State-level support and implementation assistance**, including training, technical assistance, improved data guidance, and cross-agency coordination.



The [Agency's Chronic Absenteeism Policy Brief](#) represents a summary of the work to date, and the introduction of a multi-year strategic plan to reduce chronic absenteeism in Vermont, including policy recommendations and key considerations for rigorous implementation. The revisions proposed by H.930 provide the necessary framework for consistent practices and state-level resources. Absent these changes, absenteeism is managed entirely at a local (district) level and variance of policy and procedures limit our collective ability to manage, monitor, and strategically address persistent absenteeism.

In parallel, the Agency is advancing several strategic activities that address in-school root causes for absenteeism, including improving student engagement, Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying (HHB) prevention, and building sustainable, inclusive school climates. While these efforts are each managed as individual components of a larger vision for Vermont education, attendance is a key measure of success. Absent clear expectations for attendance practices and data, we are unable to meaningfully assess whether these objectives are successfully achieved.

Response to Recent Amendments

Several amendments to the original bill have been introduced since our last testimony. The Agency is generally supportive of these amendments with a few exceptions:

- *Specific provisions for how to address the absence of a child with a disability in accordance with state and federal law.*

Both State and Federal law provide protection for students with disabilities. To avoid duplication or confusion around regulatory requirements, we suggest that specific considerations, best practices, or procedural requirements are best addressed by model procedures and/or technical resources and not in statute.

- *The addition of protocols to respond effectively to bullying and harassment, acknowledging the unique aspects of each case, including best practices for reentry into education spaces.*

State-wide requirements for Harassment, Hazing, and Bullying Prevention are provided by [16 VSA 570](#) et seq. The Agency has been engaged in a multi-year endeavor to update and modernize existing model policy, and to expand requirements, definitions, and data practices for HHB Prevention. This work is underway and a revised set of policies, procedures, and state-level resources is expected to be published in 2026. We strongly disagree with the inclusion of HHB Prevention protocols as a component of H. 930 and suggest that any future consideration for amendment to 16 VSA 570 be considered as



part of a comprehensive strategy for HHB prevention and response, rather than a sub-component of absenteeism law.

- *Inclusion of absences “incidents of hazing, harassment, or bullying;” as a category of excused absences.*

It is our recommendation that this category be struck from the bill language. Absences due to health or mental health concerns or limitations that are related to an open, ongoing, or previous HHB incident should be reported as a “health or mental health absence”. This added category does not provide enough specificity to address the potential short- and long-term impacts of HHB, and is likely to create significant confusion about the appropriate use of this code. As noted above, the Agency’s larger strategy around HHB involves an in-depth review of existing data collected around HHB incidents, and an alignment to meaningful data practices. We expect that future data collections will include more information about the impact of HHB, including time missed from school, class, or certain activities as a result of a pending HHB investigation and do not recommend that this requirement be included as a specific subset of absenteeism law.

- *Required use of certain templates for documentation of actions and for communicating w/ families.*

Again, we suggest that this level of detail would be most appropriately suited for model procedures or technical assistance, rather than in policy. Both documents will likely need to be updated responsively and in consideration of evolving needs and expectations around documentation and engagement by education administrators, Dept for Children and Families, and State’s Attorneys and Sheriffs. Embedding these specific provisions in policy greatly limits our ability to provide real-time revision in the future.

Other additions:

- The inclusion of guidance that emphasizes the importance of tailored responses to all students struggling with safety and emotional issues and shall emphasize emotional, academic, and social support to facilitate a successful reintegration for returning students.
- Inclusion of a Home Study report due December 2026.

The Agency does not have any objection to the above additions and agrees that these additions will strengthen the comprehensive statewide strategy for supporting attendance.

Why Legislative Action Matters



Beyond establishing critical definitions and standards for managing absenteeism, modernizing attendance law and supporting consistent implementation will help ensure students are identified early, families are engaged constructively, and schools have clear tools to address attendance barriers before problems escalate. Improving attendance strengthens student outcomes, reduces inequities, and increases the return on Vermont's education investments. It is important to remember that these statutory changes are a critical first step in setting strong foundations for how Vermont views school attendance. Education cannot drive change alone, and we must continue to work closely with other sectors, such as healthcare, human services, rural housing and development, transportation, and public health, to ensure a long-term, comprehensive approach to improving attendance.

Bottom line: Chronic absenteeism is a solvable challenge, but requires consistency and clarity of expectations. With clear statutory direction and coordinated support, Vermont can ensure more students are in school, learning, and prepared for the future.

