



Testimony

Date: April 16, 2026

To: Senate Education Committee

From:

- Heather Hobart, Executive Director, Lamoille Restorative Center
- Katie Black, Program Director, Lamoille Valley School Engagement Program
- Heather Freeman, Student Support Services Director, Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union

Re: H.930 Addressing and Preventing Chronic Absenteeism in VT

Thank you for your work on the issue of chronic absenteeism in Vermont and for inviting us to testify.

The Lamoille Valley School Engagement Program's mission is to address chronic absenteeism. We serve students and families in Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union and Lamoille North Supervisory Union.

We support the amendments made to 16 V.S.A Chapter 25 in H. 930. We participated in the Agency of Education's stakeholder meetings and support the AOE's March 26th Policy Brief on Chronic Absenteeism.

LVSEP has significant experience in the areas outlined in the Policy Brief. We are here to share details about our program. We hope you recognize this program as a model to be considered as you move forward.

Program

- Lamoille Valley School Engagement Program (LVSEP) serves **Orleans Southwest Supervisory Union** and **Lamoille North Supervisory Union**.
- Sits within **Lamoille Restorative Center**. Organization served 742 individuals last year, more than 350 of them at-risk youth and young adults.

- **27-Year History:** LVSEP began in 1999, with a state grant and federal dollars. School districts shared the cost of the program after the grant ended. In Covid, the program increased capacity, with each district assigned its own specialist. Now, the districts pay for the service from their district budgets, with some grant funds allocated from LRC, including DCF-Family Services delinquency prevention (BARJ) funding.
- LVSEP served **130 students** and their families last year.
- It's successful: **75% reduced chronic absenteeism** last year.

Elements for success

Community-based

- Independence from school affiliation, which increases families' engagement
- Familiarity with working with the most at-risk and hard to reach individuals
- Partnerships with other human service partners (mental health, health, housing & food resources, employment supports, etc.)
- Coordinate education, legal and health systems

Expertise

- Nearly 40 years of combined case management experience
- Specialized training in restorative interventions, neuroscience, motivational interviewing, coordinated services planning, special education law, etc.
- Receive clinical supervision and support with other staff at organization
- Utilize best practice guidance (i.e. Attendance Works)
- Current on truancy statute, and education & child protection policies related to chronic absenteeism

Funding

- \$135k per full-time school engagement specialist
- Ideally, through state grants (vs. individual school district budgets)

Approach

- Focuses on chronic absenteeism vs. truancy
- Restorative vs. punitive
- Cultivating youth voice
- Serve as bridge between family and school
- Serve as bridge between schools, human service providers (including DCF) and legal system

How it works

- Receive **referrals from schools**, primarily (families can also self-refer)
- Tier 1: **help prevent** chronic absenteeism with policies and procedures, tracking systems, letters (see LVSEP Tiered Approach handout), etc.
- Tier 2 & 3: **help responding to chronic absenteeism** (see LVSEP Tiered Approach handout)

With students & families

- Building trusting relationships with parents and students
- Advising parents of their legal obligation regarding education; reminding them that absences impact their child's education
- Home visits to build connections and explore attendance barriers; often outside of school hours
- Provide concrete supports to address unmet basic needs (i.e. school clothes and footwear, vehicle maintenance; groceries; internet; instrument rentals; camp fees)
- Troubleshooting transportation barriers and other logistical obstacles
- Making referrals to human services in the community; mental health services for children & adults; housing supports, health insurance applications; health visits; basic needs

With schools

- Participate in student support & IEP/504/EST/CSP meetings
- Meet with students at school
- Facilitate groups with students to build stronger relationships with peers
- Meet with school staff who interact with students
- Help with restorative practices coaching in schools
- Helping schools craft and implement policies, attendance tracking, letters, etc.

With legal system

- Help State's Attorney and district & school administration in court intervention, as necessary
- Update attorneys, GAL and Judge updates on attendance and engagement with support services, as case proceeds
- Support family and student through court process

Again, we support the recommendations in the AOE's Policy Brief and want to reiterate that preventing chronic absenteeism requires cross-system collaboration. We hope you'll consider the elements of success we outlined: community-based services, expertise, and appropriate funding.

We appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and welcome further questions.

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