

TESTIMONY

Testimony To: Senate Committee on Education

Respectfully Submitted by: The Vermont Agency of Education

Subject: Truancy Versus Chronic Absenteeism

Date: April 23, 2026

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify the definitions in H.930. In recent years, national experts have recognized that student absences exist along a continuum. H.930 reflects national best practice by introducing the concept of “chronic absenteeism” into state law, making clear that schools should take early, proactive steps to address attendance before patterns become entrenched. At the far end of this continuum is truancy, where legal intervention may be necessary as a last resort.

The most significant shift in this proposal is moving from a system primarily focused on responding to truancy, centered on rule enforcement, to one that equips schools to prevent and respond to chronic absenteeism through early action and student- and family-centered supports.

This shift is important because it reframes the core question. Rather than asking, “Are families complying with attendance rules?” the focus becomes, “Why are students missing school, and how can we support them to attend more regularly?”

What is Truancy?	What is Chronic Absenteeism?
Only counts unexcused absences	Includes all absences (excused, unexcused, or due to suspension)
20 or more unexcused absences in the last 175 student attendance days	Absence for 10% or more of the school year (around 2 absences per month), so initial actions can start happening very early in the school year
Based on enforcing attendance laws	Based on avoiding the impacts of any missed school, no matter the reason
Can lead to legal action	Would not lead to legal action unless the absences meet the definition of truancy
Used after a student has already missed a large amount of school	Schools are required to take interventions early in the school year, identify problems earlier, and provide early support for students and families <i>before</i> numerous absences



What is Truancy?	What is Chronic Absenteeism?
Truancy is seen through a compliance lens	Focuses on getting students back in school, not punishing families.

How Truancy and Chronic Absence Work in H.930

Both approaches remain in the proposed law, but they are used in distinct and complementary ways:

- Both chronic absenteeism and truancy relate to a single student, but they have different thresholds and different purposes.
- Truancy is positioned as a last-resort legal tool for the most serious cases. The proposed 20-day threshold reflects this level of seriousness and represents the endpoint of a series of earlier, required steps to address chronic absence.
- Truancy is tied to “unexcused absences” as part of its legal definition, helping to ensure that legal processes are not triggered without appropriate cause. The Agency of Education recognizes that distinctions between excused and unexcused absences are not always clear and can involve local discretion. To mitigate potential inconsistencies, the Agency is developing clearer, more consistent policies and procedures in collaboration with stakeholders, including school districts.
- The proposed law shifts the primary emphasis toward preventing and addressing chronic absenteeism before absences reach the level of truancy. This includes providing schools with more **consistent and effective ways** to track attendance and respond early when students begin to miss school.

Current State

- Schools’ practices around attendance and truancy are not consistent.
- Schools are sometimes unsure when and how to refer cases for legal action.
- Families often say attendance expectations and processes are unclear.
- State’s attorneys report they often receive cases without enough documentation of earlier school-based supports.

As a result, some cases may be referred for legal action without consistent or well-documented efforts to support student attendance earlier in the process. H.930 addresses this by prioritizing prevention and early intervention, while preserving truancy enforcement as a tool after school-based supports have been fully utilized.

The goal is a more consistent, statewide approach that emphasizes early support, clearer communication, and stronger systems to keep students engaged in school.

