

Testimony to the Senate Education Committee re: H. 930  
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I am here today to express my strong support for the intent of H930. Moving Vermont from a truancy-only model to a chronic absence model is a necessary shift both technically and philosophically. Chronic absenteeism, missing 10% or more of school for *any* reason, is our most reliable early warning indicator for academic and social emotional outcomes.

The impact of this bill will depend on whether it encourages a mindset of compliance or a mindset of connection. According to Attendance Works, a national non-profit dedicated to advancing success for all students by addressing chronic absenteeism, the foundation of any successful attendance strategy requires addressing mindsets first. To ensure H930 creates a system of support rather than a system of punishment, I offer three specific recommendations.

1. Remove the excused and unexcused list from statute.

Section 1123 of the current bill attempts to codify a specific list of 13 reasons and absence may be excused. While I appreciate the attempt at uniformity across the state, putting this list in legislation creates significant problems. The first is inequity through subjectivity. This bill grants broad discretion to superintendents or designees to make judgement calls on what constitutes a “worthy” reason for missing school. We have seen in [California](#) and in [Maryland](#) how students with marginalized identities are disproportionately assigned unexcused absence codes at rates higher than their peers. I would specifically like to note the preplanned absences for up to 10 days found in this section. This often reflects a family vacation. In this scenario, a student on vacation in Europe is “excused” for 10 days; they are given grace and makeup work. Meanwhile a student missing school to work a survival job to help their family make rent is labeled as “unexcused.” That student is met with a potential court summons rather than support. I ask that the committee remove the static list from the bill and task the Agency of Education or the State Board of Education - working with experts in the field - to establish these definitions in a way that is equitable, adaptable and focused on responding to lost instructional time.

2. Move beyond the language of “Truancy Officer”.

Language shapes culture. Throughout H930 the term “Truancy Officer” is used repeatedly. This title invokes fear and signals to families that the school is here to be an enforcer, not a partner. I request the committee consider replacing “Truancy Officer” with “Attendance Support Specialist” or similar language to signal to families that we are here to support them, not scare them into coming to school.

3. Remove financial penalties outlined in section 1127.

In my experience in truancy courts in both Vermont and Colorado, the families I have seen have to go through this process are almost exclusively those living in

poverty. These families don't need the threat of increased financial burden or having to go through a Child in Need of Supervision (CHINS) hearing. They need resources, understanding and compassion. While educational neglect exists, it is rare. Many of the families put through this punitive truancy process are not neglectful, they are doing the best they can with what they have. We must find other ways to provide support that do not require a family to stand before a judge.

H930 is a turning point for Vermont. We have the data to see the problem; now we need the courage to change how we respond. Let's move from criminalization to compassion and from enforcers to partners.

Thank you for your time and your dedication to Vermont's students. I am available for any follow-up data requests or questions the committee may have.