

Rob Hunter, House Education Committee

Senate Education Committee:

Since the coronavirus pandemic, chronic absenteeism in Vermont and the United States has risen dramatically. Prior to the pandemic, chronic absenteeism was about 15% nationally. After the pandemic that percentage rose to close to 30%. In Vermont, after a peak of 30%, chronic absenteeism still hovers close to 25%.

We know that the effects of absenteeism is not just for the individual and their loss of learning and connection to the school community, but large swaths of students missing from school affects the entire school community. We know, “The more years students are chronically absent in the early years, the more at risk they are for needing reading interventions by the end of second grade.” In fact, research shows, “When assessing significant test score declines nationwide from pre-to post-pandemic, the US council of Economic Advisors quantified in 2023 that absenteeism explained 16% to 45% of the declines in test scores on the NAEP, also known as the ‘nation’s report card,’ after controlling for other variables.” Other obvious impacts of chronic absenteeism is on high school graduation. “By high school, regular attendance is a better predictor of graduation than test scores. A student who is chronically absent any year between grades 8 and 12 is more than 7 times more likely to drop out than their peer who was not chronically absent.”

H930 represents is a shift in mindset. Where we all may understand the need for truant officers in the past, research has shown that punitive measures, like fines and court appearances, are not effective in getting children back to school. A situation this critical has forced examination of the problem and how best to solve it. There is a myriad of reasons for the dramatic increase in absenteeism—and those reasons vary from in-school situations like bullying, to out of school reasons including chronic health conditions to lack of reliable transportation. The AOE has put forth a bill that is ambitious in its paradigm shift to better get at the root of a student’s chronic absenteeism, rather than the old school way of dealing with it. This bill outlines state level strategies which de-center compliance as a primary outcome and more deeply considers the root causes behind absenteeism and the impact of absenteeism on communities rather than individuals.

Also important in this bill is the establishment of definitions that can vary from school to school. Namely, what is an excusable absence vs. non-excusable. In this way, clear language and clear procedures will help all Vermont school systems be consistent in how they deal with students and parents. The bill calls for a collaborative approach developing a model policy that includes all major stakeholders in the state. The bill does not completely remove truant officers or the possibility of prosecution for those parents/guardians who refuse to comply with state law. Rather, that process is more well defined and consistent, and, it should be noted, serves more as a last resort.

\*\*all quotes and stats taken from the AOE policy brief