

# Building Belonging: How the Community Schools Approach Reduces Chronic Absenteeism

*Session 4  
Spring 2026 Zoom Series*

Bernice Garnett (UVM/Catamount Community Schools Collaborative)  
Maria Davies (Burlington School District)  
Bec Dezan (Washington Central Unified Union School District)  
Lisa Daigle-Farney (North Country Supervisory Union)



# Spring 2026 Zoom Series

## Chronic Absenteeism: Best Practices and Spotlights of Innovation Across Vermont



*All Wednesdays, 12 – 1pm*

- March 25: Chronic Absence 101: A foundational conversation investigating root causes and best practices
- April 8: Building Bridges for Student Success: Student Engagement Strategies
- April 29: Stronger Together: Leveraging Health Personnel and Partnerships to Improve Attendance
- May 6: Building Belonging: How the Community Schools Approach Reduces Chronic Absenteeism

*Recordings of all sessions will be archived at <https://www.uvm.edu/lernermed/vchip/every-day-counts>*

# Every Day Counts



# Building Belonging: How the Community Schools Approach Reduces Chronic Absenteeism

## Every Day Counts: Building Partnerships to Boost Attendance and Health



Washington Central Unified Union School District

# Workshop Presenters

## **Burlington School District**

- Maria Davies, Community Schools Coordinator

## **Catamount Community Schools Collaborative, University of Vermont**

- Bernice Garnett, Associate Professor, College of Education and Social Services

## **North Country Supervisory Union**

- Lisa Daigle-Farney, Community Homeschool Liaison

## **Washington Central Unified Union School District**

- Bec Dezan, Community School Coordinator

Community schools have emerged as a promising approach to mitigate chronic absenteeism, as they are adept at organizing supports for students and families and creating conditions for rich learning and well-being.

# Agenda

*" Kids come to school when they feel they belong here. "*

**HANG NGUYEN, PRINCIPAL, LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD ELEMENTARY,  
HUNTINGTON PARK, CA**



**Setting the Stage  
Community Schools &  
Chronic Absenteeism**



**Washington Central  
Unified Union School  
District Spotlight**

Community Schools and  
Community Engaged Learning



**Burlington School  
District Spotlight**

Community Schools,  
Restorative Practices and  
Equity



**North Country  
Supervisory Union  
Spotlight**

Community Schools,  
Restorative Truancy and  
Integrated Student Supports



**Questions,  
Comments,  
Reflections & Points  
of Connection**

**Community Schools:** are public schools that serve as community hubs, partnering with families and community organizations to provide comprehensive and coordinated services that support students' learning, health, and well-being while strengthening community resilience.



...align with Vermont's student-centered approach to learning

...close equity gaps by providing services, resources, and opportunities for students and families, *in the school*.

... leverage Vermont's unique context, history, and values through place-based services and relational assets in rural communities, **emphasizing deeper learning by doing and schools as community centers.**



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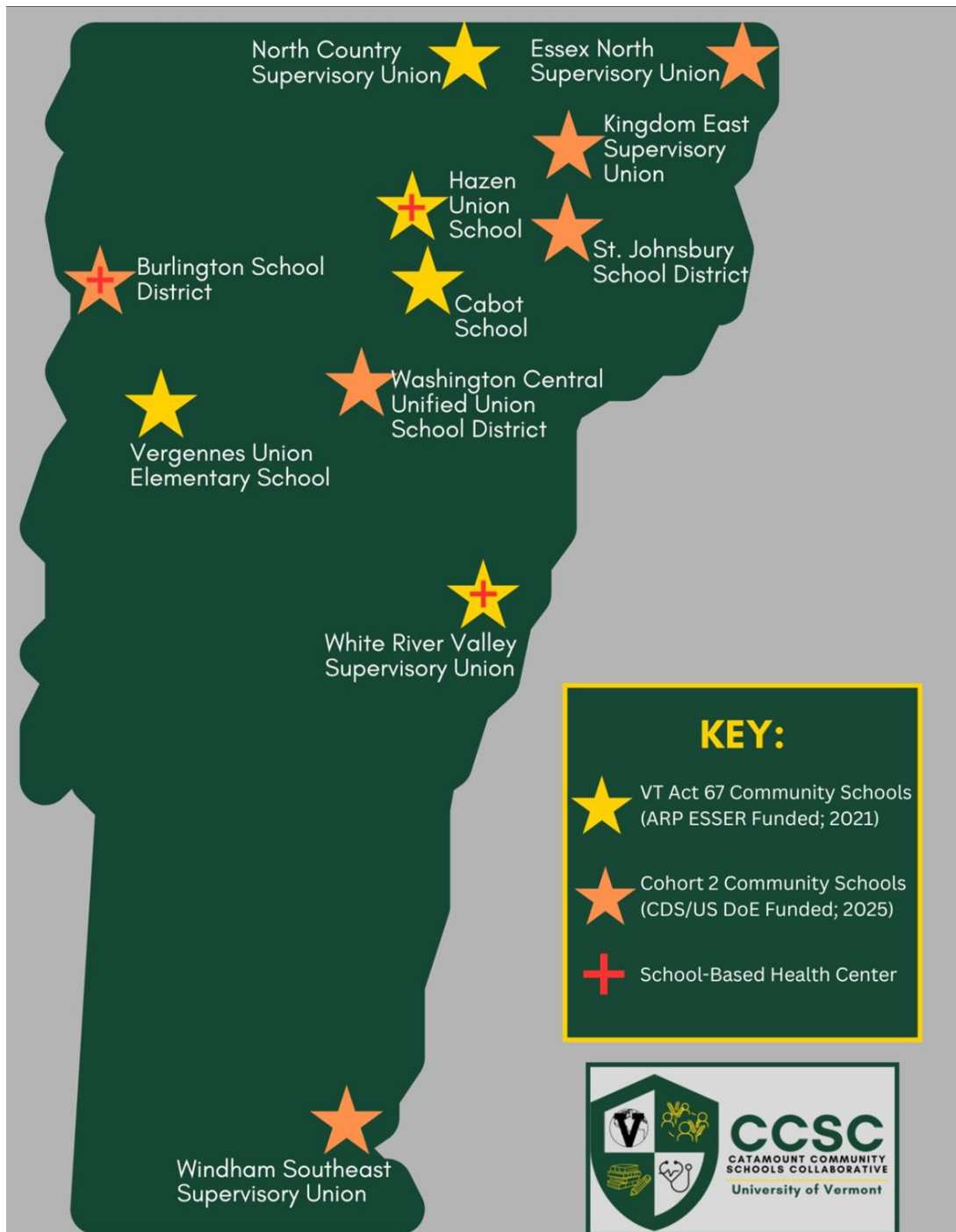
CCSC Supported School  
Districts/Supervisory  
Unions

38

Vermont CCSC  
Supported  
Community Schools

8,966

Students in CCSC  
supported  
Community Schools



# Vermont Community Schools: Key Pillars

# Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

## Lessons From Community Schools

Emily Germain, Laura E. Hernández, Sarah Klevan,  
Rebecca S. Levine, and Anna Maier



AUGUST 2024

Community school staff and school leaders emphasized that developing trusting relationships with families was an essential element of their effective efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

The community schools leverage their tiered systems of support to increase attendance and meet individual student and family needs.

## How Community Schools Have Reduced Chronic Absenteeism

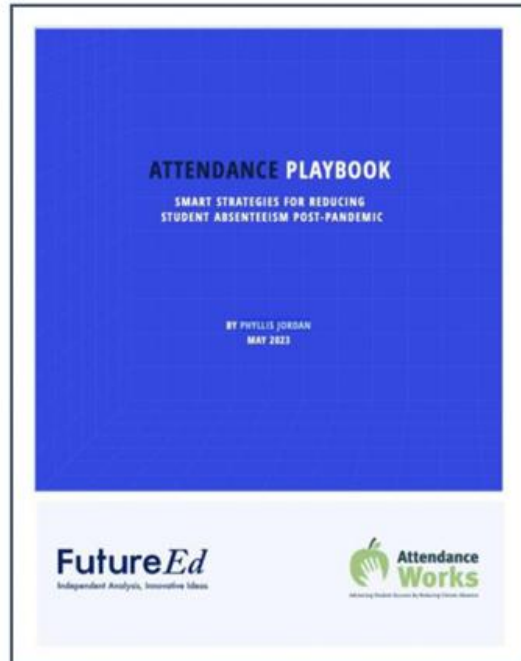
The mission of a community school is to take care of whatever's coming up for a family in service of a student's ability to feel stable enough to learn. ... A community school says our job is to address whatever those stressors are in the child's life so that they can feel calm enough and safe enough to learn in class and so that all their classmates can, too.

—Buena Vista Horace Mann Principal

- **Community school coordinators played a critical role in reducing chronic absenteeism, pointing to the importance of dedicated capacity to address the challenge.** All practitioners at the featured schools played a role in partnering with families and developing the trusting relationships that form the backbone for supporting school attendance. However, given the range of challenges that contribute to chronic absenteeism—some of which, such as mental health, have been exacerbated by the pandemic—schools need capacity to address attendance barriers. The community school coordinators met this need. The coordinators played a key role in tracking and analyzing data and in brainstorming solutions. They were central figures in strengthening family engagement, building trusting relationships, and managing external partnerships at school sites—the latter of which also provided resources and support to increase attendance at many of the community schools.



# Interventions that can be found in the Attendance Playbook



## TIER I: Foundational Support and Schoolwide Prevention

- Community Schools
- Engaging with Families
- Student-Teacher Relationships
- Relevant—and Culturally Relevant—Instruction
- Restorative Discipline Practices
- Summer Learning and Afterschool Strategies
- Positive Greetings at the Door
- Incentives
- Rethinking Recess
- Healthy School Buildings
- School-based Health Services
- Telehealth
- Free Meals for All
- School Buses and Public Transit
- A Safer Walk to School
- Laundry at School

## TIER II: Targeted Support

- Early Warning Systems
- Targeted Home Visits
- Mentors and Tutors
- Targeted Youth Engagement
- Addressing Asthma
- Mental Health Support and School Refusal
- Students with Disabilities
- Immigrant Students

## TIER III: Intensive Support

- Interagency Case Management
- Housing Insecurity
- Truancy

Addressing [attendance] challenges piecemeal won't bring students back to the classroom. Instead, schools need to adopt a comprehensive, non-punitive approach to addressing [the] underlying issues.

Attendance Playbook: <https://www.future-ed.org/attendance-playbook/>

Implementation Guide: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/attendance-playbook/>

# Leveraging Community Schools to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism: Panel Prompts

## **Vision and Implementation**

- What key community school strategies have you implemented to strengthen student and family engagement and reduce chronic absenteeism?

## **Data and Partnerships**

- What data sources and indicators have been most useful in guiding your community schools work related to belonging and attendance?
- Which partnerships have been instrumental in reducing chronic absenteeism and fostering belonging?

## **Lessons Learned and Impact**

- What key lessons have you learned in leveraging the community schools approach to improve belonging and attendance?

## **Challenges and Priorities**

- What challenges remain in fully realizing the community schools vision to strengthen engagement and improve attendance? What resources or supports are needed to sustain and deepen this work moving forward?

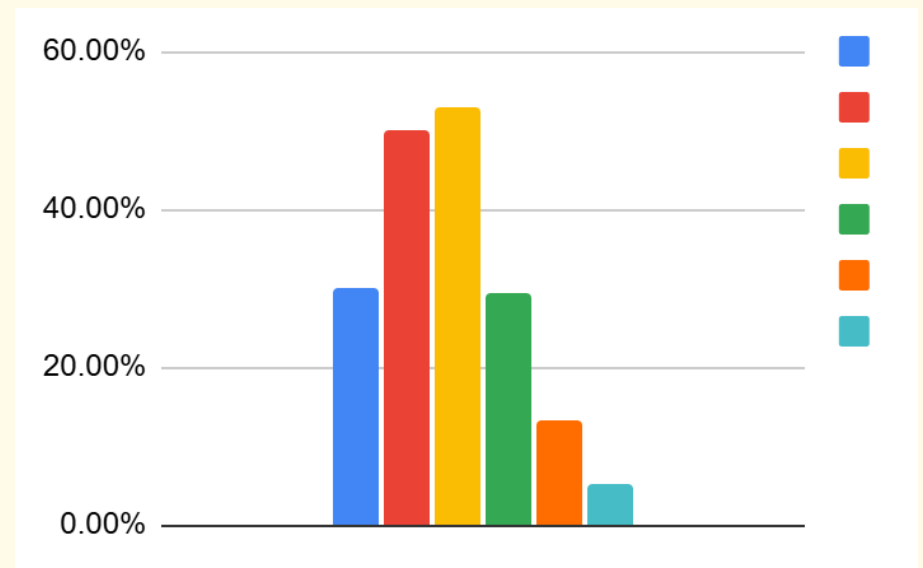
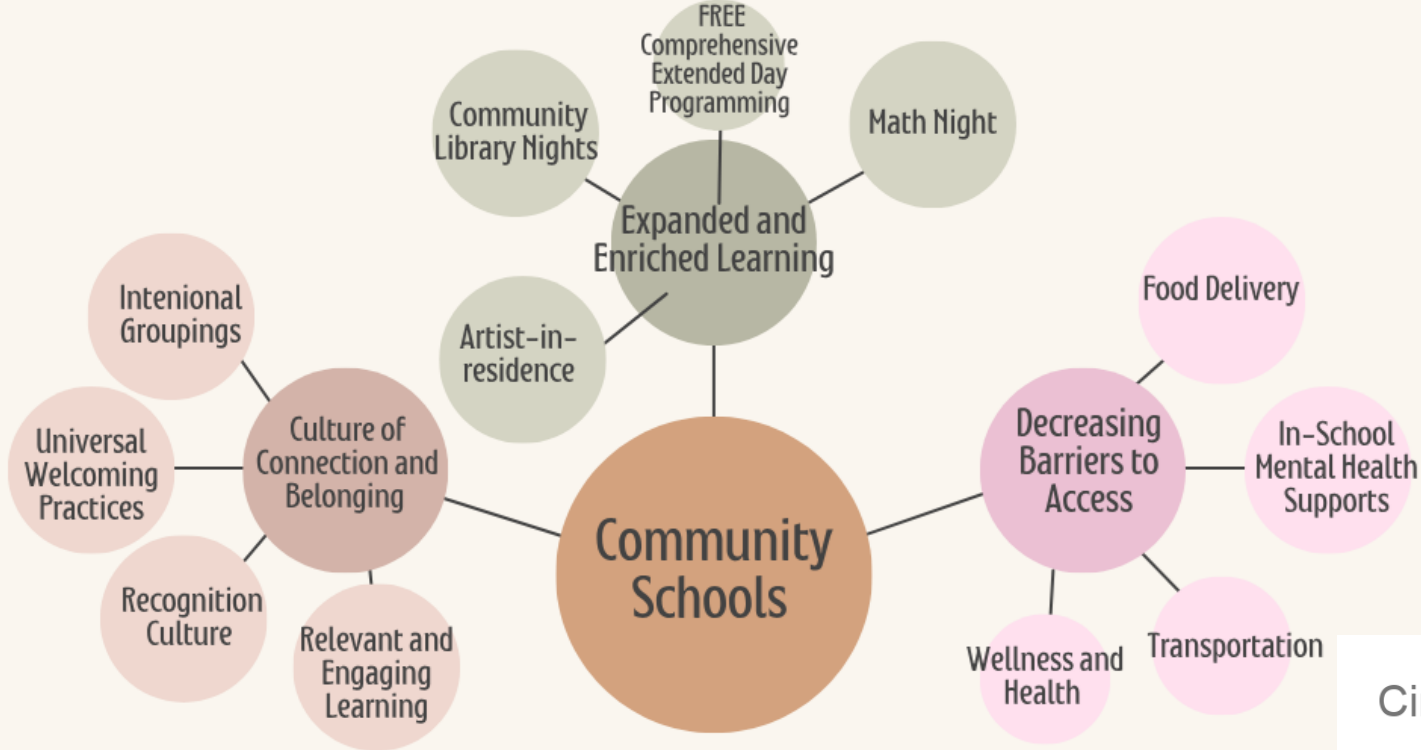
# Washington Central Unified Union School District

Community Schools  
Spotlight:  
  
Berlin Elementary  
School

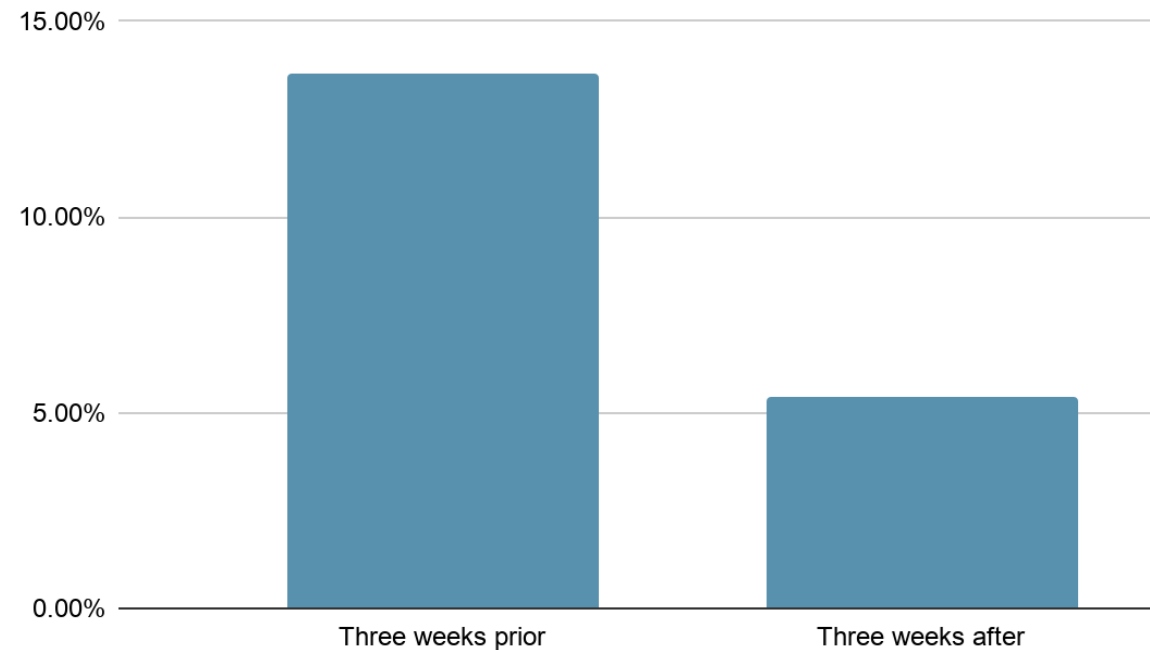
**INCREASING STUDENT SUPPORTS**  
**EXPANDED AND ENRICHED LEARNING**

→ **CULTURE OF CONNECTION  
AND BELONGING**





Circus Hypothesis: Connection and Belonging



***Because we are thinking about chronic absenteeism, and because we are able to see in data the impact and shift in students when there are experiences of connection and belonging, we are thinking about places where we intentionally build shared practices in our school.***

# Burlington School District:

## District Priorities:

**1** Belonging & Well-Being

**2** Deeper Learning for Every Student

**3** Reimagined High School

**4** Educators who look like our students

**5** Relationship-Based Communities through Restorative Practices

## Community School Pillars

- 1) Integrated Student Supports
- 2) Expanded and Enriched Learning Time & Opportunities
- 3) Active Family & Community Engagement
- 4) Collaborative Leadership & Practices
- 5) Safe & Inclusive Learning Environment



## OUR GOAL

To address this issue directly, we will unite around this goal:

**Burlington School District will be student-centered and responsive to the full range of identities, abilities, cultures, and languages in our community, such that every student is challenged, empowered, and engaged in their learning throughout their time in our schools.**

# Community Schools Spotlight: Burlington School District

## PRIORITY AREAS

### 1 Belonging and Well-Being

Students, families, and staff will experience a sense of belonging and students and staff will feel their well-being is supported in our district.

## PRIORITY AREAS

### 2 Deeper Learning for Every Student

Students will feel challenged, empowered and engaged in learning environments with rigorous and inclusive curricular materials and practices that meet the individual needs of students while cultivating, promoting, and celebrating identity, ability, language and culture.

Burlington School District student demographics:

- 50% are from households that qualify for free & reduced lunch (FRL).
- 40% are students of the global majority.
- 21% have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- 16% are English Learners (EL)

## METRICS

- 90% of students and staff say they belong and that their wellbeing is supported at their schools.
- Decrease in the disparity between students on IEPs and students not on IEPs.
- Increase in the percentage of families that feel they belong in our district.
- Decrease in chronic absenteeism for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

## METRICS

- Increase in overall proficiency and decrease in the disparity in math and reading proficiency (based on free and reduced lunch status) in grades 3, 8, and 11.
- 90% of students say they are regularly challenged, empowered, and engaged in learning.
- Decrease in the disparity in responses with students who have IEPs.
- Decrease in the disparity of responses with students of the Global Majority.
- 90% of students say their identity, ability, language and culture is cultivated, promoted, and celebrated.
- Notable decrease in chronic absenteeism.





# Thank You to Our Partners



# NCSU: Restorative Truancy & Restorative Truancy Tutoring

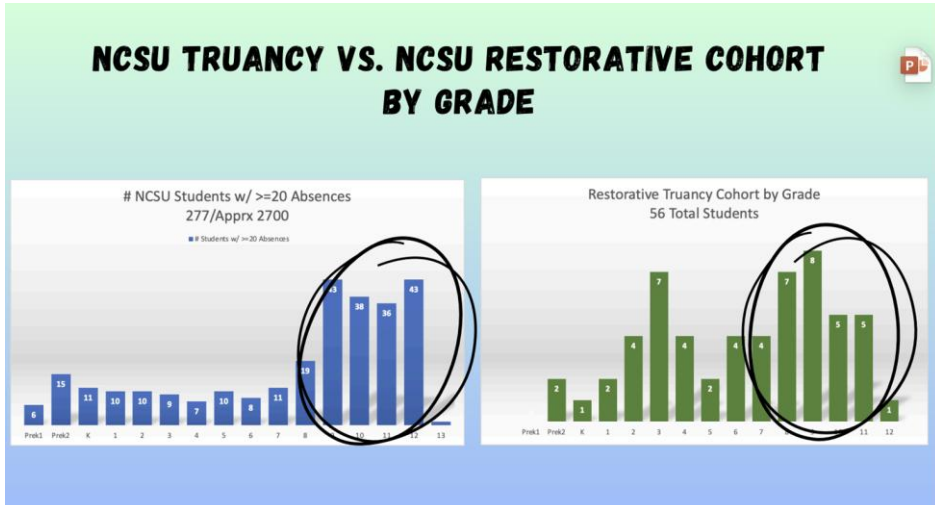
- Restorative Truancy Program (N= 55 over 3 years)
- Restorative Tutoring/Mentorship Program (2024)
- Community School Coordinator, Samantha Stevens, described this program, stating, “The work of the restorative truancy project is in that middle place of like needing to help build and return students to their buildings and to play a mediation role sometimes, to play that resource and referral role, and we will always need that, and I cannot see a time in the near future when that is not going to be a critical role.”



**NCSU  
RESTORATIVE  
TRUANCY  
TUTORING PILOT**



**NCSU RESTORATIVE  
TRUANCY  
Going Upstream in  
2024-2025**



*Figure 7. Educator feedback on NCSU Restorative Truancy Program.*

To whom it may concern,

My name is Kristen Roberge, I am the preschool teacher at Troy School. This year we have had a lot of hardship for a couple of our preschool families. These hardships caused an emotional withdrawal for one student and lack of attendance for another student. Restorative truancy has been able to help and support these families in many different ways and have successfully made positive changes for the students and their families.

For my student who was going through emotional withdrawals due to family separation, restorative truancy was able to work with this family to help support them. They were able to meet with the family and plan positive goals that reflected upon a positive/healthy lifestyle for the children involved. Due to restorative truancy's endless dedication and time with this family. I noticed my student smiling more, playing with peers again and coming into school happy. This student is no longer emotionally withdrawn and is fully engaging with peers and activities throughout the preschool day. A big thanks goes to this program for the support and guidance they have given this family.

I also have a student who has struggled with truancy this year due to transportation. Our school has had a sufficient number of staff shortages, a big one with bussing. There are some days we do not have a bus to transport preschoolers home at 1:00pm. This student would not come to school on these days because the family only had one vehicle that dad used for work. This family also suffered some hardship with illness and due to hospital stays for mom and infant, dad had to take time off from work to take care of the other children and the home. This left the family with financial hardship. Restorative truancy has been able to support this family immensely by providing the family resources to help with food and providing transportation for my student. My student is now at school more and attends on days when we do not have available busing. I am seeing huge developmental growth in this student due to the consistent attendance, all thanks to the support of restorative truancy.

The growth for both of these students is a pure reflection of the support restorative truancy is providing for these students and their families. As a teacher it has made a world of a difference in my student's health, behavior and development. This program is doing great things for our children and their families in this community and it is something that should be reconized.

Our preschool program is very grateful for the support restorative truancy is providing for our preschool families.

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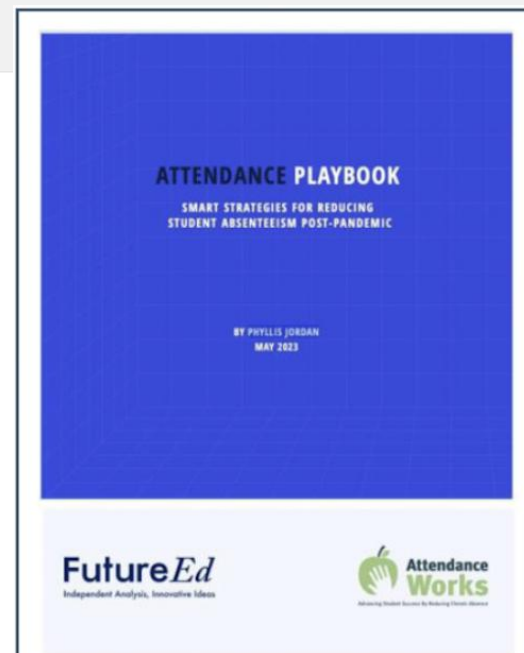
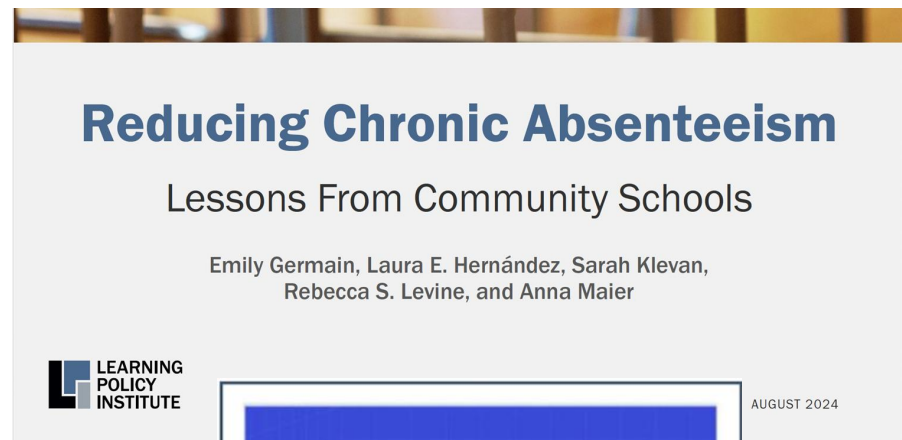
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# High Priority Resources: Community Schools & Chronic Absenteeism

1. [Learning Policy Institute \(2024\): Reducing Chronic Absenteeism, Lessons From Community Schools](#)
2. [Attendance Playbook \(2023\): Smart Strategies for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic](#)
3. [Leveraging Community School Interventions to Boost Student Attendance and Engagement, USDOE \(2024\)](#)



*From Absence to Engagement: Community Schools' Innovative Approaches to Reducing Chronic Absenteeism and Increasing Attendance*

# Acknowledgements

- University of Vermont, College of Education and Social Services
- Vermont Child Health Improvement Program (VCHIP)
- Senator Sanders & United States Department of Education
- Leahy Institute for Rural Partnerships
- Vermont Agency of Education
- Community Schools Partners



# Connected Voices: A Community Schools Digital Storytelling Project

## Vermont Act 67 -

### The Pilot

[Short Version](#)

[Full Length Version](#)



[The Five Pillars of Vermont Community Schools](#)

## The VT Community Schools Research-Policy-Practice Partnership (RP3)

[Short Version](#)

[Full Length Version](#)



Follow the QR code to learn more about the **Catamount Community Schools Collaborative!**

# Connected Voices: A Community Schools Digital Storytelling Project

★ [North Country Supervisory Union](#)

★ [Hazen Union School](#)

★ [Cabot School](#)

★ [Vergennes Union Elementary School](#)

★ [White River Valley Middle School](#)

**Follow the links above to see and hear the experiences of Vermont Community Schools students, families, educators, and leaders.**

**Stay in Touch!**

**Bernice Garnett**  
[bgarnett@uvm.edu](mailto:bgarnett@uvm.edu)

Thank you to our speakers!



Please give us your feedback via our exit ticket!

We'd love to hear from you!

Questions? Other ideas? [EveryDayCounts@med.uvm.edu](mailto:EveryDayCounts@med.uvm.edu)

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