



Pennsylvania Senate – Education Committee Hearing: Chronic Absenteeism

Testimony of High School Counselor Dr. Adam Oldham, LPC, NCSC, PSCA Government Relations

May 12, 2025

Chair Culver, Chair Williams, members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and for your attention to this most important issue of chronic absenteeism in our schools.

My name is Dr. Adam Oldham, and I am here today as a full-time high school counselor, as the chair of government relations for the Pennsylvania School Counselors Association (PSCA), and as one of the over 5,000 school counselors that work in our schools across the Commonwealth.

School counselors are uniquely trained, educational specialists positioned at the intersection of student academic, personal, and career development. We are not only certified educators – we are trained school mental health professionals who work across systems to ensure that every student can access the opportunities and supports available through their K-12 education experience.

We understand the connection between school engagement and success, and we diligently work to build school experiences tailored to each individual student's strengths and interests and goals on our caseload.

We understand the importance of open and effective communication with parents and guardians, and work to support the whole child through meaningful partnerships with our families.

We understand the foundational value of making our schools safe and welcoming places where students feel valued and respected – places where they want to be.

The School Counselor's Role in Promoting Engagement and Student Success

Chronic absenteeism is not just a student issue – it's a community issue that often reflects deeper barriers to school engagement. School counselors serve as frontline responders to these challenges our students and families face.

School counselors collaborate with families, school administration, other student services professionals, and community partners to address these barriers to student engagement.

One key way school counselors do this is by building relationships with our students and their families. Sometimes, this is as simple as learning a student likes to play soccer, then walking them down to the athletic office and helping them learn about tryouts and the paperwork they need to complete to be able to participate. Other times, it may be more complex, like learning a student is struggling with anxiety or depression, which are contributing to absences.

Once these barriers are identified, we develop plans to address them. These plans can be as simple as checking in with us when the student first arrives at school. Sometimes they involve more nuance, such as learning about and helping resolve a conflict that's happening in a student's first period class. We might discover that a student is experiencing medical issues, in which case we work with their teachers to create a plan to work from home, or to catch back up once they're physically able to return to the building.

I once worked with a student who refused to come to school, but was willing to meet with me. Meeting with me got the student in the door. Then we started going out into the building in the classes they enjoyed. Then we adjusted their schedule to make their course work more personally engaging, and to help them earn credits they otherwise would have lost.

To help students feel more connected to school and to each other, I operate what's called the Lego Lounge in my school. It's an empty classroom that I've filled with Legos. The students love playing together. They feel a sense of ownership of the space. They're proud that we publicize the things they build or the competitions we've held. Year after year, I've had students say to me, "the Lego Lounge is the only thing that keeps me coming to school."

Finding that "hook" for every kid – and sometimes creating and being the hook – is a core part of the work school counselors do with students.

School counselors also engage students in their school experiences by connecting their learning to future goals and career development activities. By helping students explore their interests, identify their strengths, and set postsecondary goals, school counselors help students see the relevance of their education. School therefore isn't just about attendance, but about aspirations.

Another way school counselors support student engagement is by monitoring building attendance data and intervening with students who are missing school. By working collaboratively with other student services professionals, these interventions happen earlier, and not after a student has already missed weeks of school.

At my school, we do this by holding regularly scheduled meetings with our administrators, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social worker. We review our attendance data and discuss what supports we've already put in place and identify additional strategies to intervene. Looking at our attendance data from the previous school year, we can provide proactive supports at the start of a school year to break the pattern early.

How the General Assembly Can Help

Speaking from the school level, practitioner perspective, the Commonwealth can do three things to improve our ability to support student engagement and tackle chronic absenteeism head on.

First, we must recognize that schools have an invaluable role to play in engaging our students. Ensuring an adequately funded, thorough and efficient system of public education that serves the needs of the Commonwealth is a constitutional mandate.

Schools need appropriately staffed student services programs to engage students effectively in the opportunities they offer, and to intervene in a timely manner when students disengage and stop showing up. School counselors and other certified student services professionals are not luxury items – they are essential infrastructure to maximizing student opportunity and success.

We fully support working together with our local MDJs and other community-based supports with the tools they need to support student attendance, however schools must likewise be equipped with the tools we need to support our kids. We cannot just hand our students over to the justice system.

If our students are avoiding school due to learning challenges, we need school psychologists to help design instruction to meet their needs. If students are

Second, we must ensure our schools are utilizing school counselors and other certified student services professionals in effective and efficient ways. 22 Pa Code Chapter 12 requires that all schools design and implement a comprehensive program of student services to meet the needs of their students.

Despite this being a decades-old law on the books, there is no accountability from the state to these plans or services, and only minimal support for school districts looking to do it well.

We need more focused, coordinated leadership for student services in Pennsylvania. A cursory glance at other states shows significantly more state-directed coordination of school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and school social workers than Pennsylvania has. As absenteeism is almost always a symptom of other barriers, helping schools organize multidisciplinary teams effectively and efficiently to address it would be a meaningful target for professional development.

As a result, the variation of what these services looks like from district to district can be quite dramatic. With the needs of our students as intense and pervasive as they are – with chronic absenteeism serving as a key example of those needs – having a focused group of professionals to support our schools with their programming and services would be greatly appreciated.

Finally, Pennsylvania is the only state in America that does not guarantee school counseling services to our students. Across the United States, school counseling services are generally guaranteed to students through one of two state practices – requiring school districts to outline comprehensive school counseling programs, or requiring a certain number of staff or a student to school counselor ratio in school buildings. Some states do both of these things.

The Pennsylvania School Counseling Services Act, which passed the House last session and will hopefully be reintroduced in the Senate in the near future, is a necessary solution to this gap. This legislation would clarify the scope of practice for school counselors, and help align the supports students and families can expect to receive at school, including those regarding school engagement.

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is not just a bunch of numbers on a spreadsheet – it's a signal. It tells us that an alarming number of our students are not engaging in their personal growth and development. It's also a sign that a student needs help.

School counselors are here to answer that call, and in partnership with you, with our school leaders, with our families, and our communities, we can reengage our students, strengthen families, and ensure every child in Pennsylvania is truly present, supported, and successful.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion today. I look forward to working with the committee to address this and other important education reform needs in our schools across the Commonwealth.