

## **Statement by the Acting Child and Youth Advocate on the announcement by Ontario Education Minister of changes to his province's English school system.**

As the Acting Advocate for Children and Youth of Newfoundland and Labrador, I would like to comment on the April 13th announcement by Ontario Education Minister Paul Calandra, regarding changes to his province's English school system.

I have concerns about incorporating student attendance into high school final marks as a remedy for chronic absenteeism. Factoring school attendance into final marks as an incentive to combat absenteeism, as Ontario is proposing, fails to recognize the complexity of the issue for each individual student. Doing so may penalize vulnerable students, does not address the underlying reasons why students are absent, and may cause further absenteeism.

In January 2019, my office released a report entitled **Chronic Absenteeism: When Children Disappear** which was the result of a systemic review that explored high absenteeism within Newfoundland and Labrador. This report describes what chronic absenteeism is, the factors that influence it, its impact on students, as well as strategies to address the problem.

The report identifies the many influencing factors that impact school attendance, including: learning disabilities, mental health issues for children and parents, child disengagement from school, negative parental attitudes about education, parental substance abuse, poverty, abusive parenting, domestic violence, weak relationships between teachers and students, inadequate connection between school and parents, racism in school, violence in school, insufficient school personnel, homelessness, and a community environment that does not support education.

Key findings of this systemic review noted:

- Chronic absenteeism is complex and is influenced by the individual characteristics of students, their families, their schools, and their communities.
- An effective response must be comprehensive by addressing factors associated with individual children, families, schools, and communities.
- Early intervention is essential to successfully address absenteeism and is achievable since a pattern of absenteeism is established and identifiable during the early school years.

- Child protection services and health services are vital collaborators in the design and delivery of responsive services.
- Schools are in the best position to identify and lead responses to chronic absenteeism, but they do not have the capacity and mandate to independently provide a complete response.
- Leadership and resources are required for effective strategies.

The findings above are clear that chronic absenteeism is not solely a school issue, cannot be addressed by schools alone, and must include a multifaceted approach to support a young person's attendance at school. Understanding the social determinants of health can help us understand the many varied and complex factors that contribute to poor outcomes for young people, including poor educational outcomes.

We know that chronic absenteeism rates remain a significant issue today in our province as well, despite much focus on the subject and concerted efforts made by government entities to address this concern. While we have seen some progress as it relates to the recommendations of the 2019 report, more is needed. In March 2025 my Office provided a submission to the Education Accord that emphasized the need for collective action in addressing chronic absenteeism; recognizing that the needs and issues of children and youth can be quite complex, even beyond academics.

As the Department and its stakeholders look to reimagine the education system here in Newfoundland and Labrador, I encourage all to look beyond the recent approach taken in Ontario, and instead, more comprehensively and holistically look at this issue. We invite all to revisit the full report and its resulting four recommendations before contemplating any initiatives to address this very important and complex concern. We also eagerly await the resurgence of the Education Accord as a blueprint to address this important, challenging issue, as well as others in the education system.

The Report can be found by visiting:

<https://www.childandyouthadvocate.nl.ca/files/ChronicAbsenteeismJan2019.pdf>.

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