



David Murphy
Superintendent of Schools
135 Berkshire Street • Cambridge, MA 02141
dmurphy@cpsd.us • www.cpsd.us

To: Cambridge School Committee
Fr: David Murphy
CC: Allan Gately Gehant; Tamara Stras
Date: 10-19-26

Re: CRLS Attendance Policy and Motion 26-229

Multiple committee members have asked for background on shifts in attendance policy that have been undertaken at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School (CRLS) in recent years. I am providing this information in response to those requests but will also be happy to answer questions members might have before or during the meeting. There are four important caveats to preface this summary with:

- (1) First, I want to express our team's deep and sincere appreciation of the objectives underlying Motion 26-229. Both in the attempt to clarify the communication about the attendance policy and for the reaffirmation of the existing policy's essential structure, I am grateful for the nuance the sponsors have embedded therein. I know there are shared objectives around student attendance and equity.
- (2) Second, [as shared at your September 1st meeting](#), the significant reduction in chronic absenteeism from SY 24-25 to SY 25-26 represented a substantial improvement in the school's attendance rates and in effect meant a major increase in the amount of instruction students received last year. As detailed below, this was attributable not so much to a change in substantive policy as a commitment to enforce long-standing policy and to modify the team's strategy as it relates to getting students to school and keeping them there.
- (3) Third, I know there are several students within the CRLS school community who feel strongly about this policy and potential changes. I have met with groups of students about this matter on three occasions. I believe it is the intention of both committee members and building administrators to both make sure our students feel heard and to genuinely incorporate their feedback into our policy making efforts. Like the committee members, I am very grateful to the students for their engagement on this issue, and I am confident we can maintain the positive discourse that these types of discussions require.
- (4) There is a clear need for the district and school to better align on the messaging around the importance of attendance and the implications of "excused absences." We need to shift away from messaging that essentially "counts down" toward a "violation" and move toward more affirmative messaging around the importance of positive engagement with school and how we support students when circumstances prevent that from happening.

We are actively working on the aforementioned shifts in messaging and have been for some time. For the reasons noted below, I think it is important that we continue to engage students on this issue and report back on our progress, but if Motion 26-229 were to pass this evening, it could significantly derail the efforts we have undertaken and ultimately diminish the committee's work to deepen student engagement and improve attendance.

SY 25-26 Changes:

As noted in Motion 26-229, on [September 2, 2025 there were language changes](#) that were incorporated into the Policy JE, which governs student attendance and is reflected in our handbooks. At the time, I communicated that these modest changes had come at the recommendation of the district's then legal counsel to clarify that the school *could* solicit from students appropriate documentation as a basis to "excuse" an absence. To be clear, there was no prohibition *prior* to this amendment on requesting documentation to justify the excusing of an absence. In addition, *subsequent* to the adoption of this amendment, there is neither a requirement that absences only be excused *if* "documentation" is furnished nor an *affirmative per se commitment* to excuse absences in the event "documentation" has been furnished.

The language of the policy only attempted to clarify that when determining if an absence or absences *should* be excused, the administration may request documentation. The bases for actually determining if an absence *should* be excused are essentially whether (1) it is unavoidable and (2) could reasonably be expected to lead to a number of absences that exceeds the allocation contemplated by the policy as in the case of a serious illness (while still allowing the student to complete beyond a sufficient proportion of the coursework) and/or (3) if the absence is for the purpose of advancing the student's educational interests (i.e. field trip, etc.) while, again, still allowing the student to complete beyond a sufficient proportion of the coursework.

The reason that the district's then legal counsel advised that the language around documentation should be clarified was related to the announcement made at the [August 5, 2025 meeting of the school committee when then Interim Principal Gately Gehant and I](#) discussed the need to begin enforcing *the existing* "no credit" policy that was already incorporated into the CRLS student handbook (and had been for several years) for the purpose of combating chronic absenteeism and shifting the school culture around attendance expectations.

In other words, at some point in the years preceding 2025, in an effort to adhere to what were considered to be more equitable grading practices, CRLS had transitioned to a practice of awarding academic credit regardless of the number of absences accumulated by a student. Based on a significant amount of feedback we solicited and collected from educators at CRLS, and in a genuine attempt to keep more students in class throughout the fleeting 180 day school year, we transitioned to the current policy of no academic credit being awarded when a student accumulated more than 14 unexcused absences in a semester-length class or more than 21 unexcused absences in a year-long class.

This along with several other tactics employed by the team at CRLS, led to a reduction in chronic absenteeism of 36% in SY 24-25 to 24% in SY 25-26.

Major Distinction Between CRLS Approach and Most Other High Schools:

The conventional approach to combating chronic absenteeism in public high schools in Massachusetts is for schools to have the authority to effectively waive only **seven absences per semester**. This means that at most schools, based on articulated reasons for the absence, students could receive no penalty (credit accumulation or otherwise) in a year-long class for missing up to **14** classes over the course of the year. But that discretion is with the school.

In the case of CRLS, the policy mandates that there will be no penalty in a year-long class for missing up to **21** classes over the course of the year, and further, that there will be no penalty in a semester-long class for missing up to **14** classes regardless of the basis for the absences.

The more conventional approach followed by the majority of schools in Massachusetts is grounded in statute, and the CPS approach is purposely designed to afford students greater flexibility and grace. A more rigid adherence to the

statutory framework in the Commonwealth could result in a significantly more restrictive approach to the recording of absences.

Implementation Challenges in SY 25-26 and Attempt to Resolve in SY 26-27:

In reviewing how the reaffirmation of the policy was implemented last year, it became apparent that different Learning Community (LC) offices were interpreting it differently from one another during SY 25-26. In some offices, staff would “excuse” an absence merely because a caregiver called and attested to the validity of their child’s illness by recording “excused absence” in the student information system. In other instances, the (electronic) call by a teacher to an LC office to report a student’s absence in class would result in the student merely being listed as “absent,” which was effectively the same denotation that would be made if no call had come in and the student had just shown up to class.

In an attempt to tighten the student information system for the purpose of ensuring student safety, to maintain greater consistency across LCs and to advance the goal of reducing student absenteeism, LC offices were provided more specific instructions for recording student absences in SY 26-27.

When a student does not show up for class in SY 26-27, the student is coded as “absent.” When a student is absent and a caregiver has attested to the validity of the absence by calling the LC office (validity being defined here merely as the adult(s) in the student’s life being aware that the student is not in school) the absence is coded as “absence recorded.”

If the caregiver attests to the student’s absence and accurately attributes that absence to one of the specifically enumerated purposes for an absence to be excused, or communicates some other specifically extenuating circumstances to an appropriate CRLS administrator (i.e. Dean of Students or Assistant Principal), the absence may be coded as an “excused absence.” Adding *absence recorded* as a reporting category was intended to eliminate the confusion that was caused last year when LC staff would somewhat arbitrarily deem an absence “excused” but “not exempt” from the count toward a not credit designation in a manner both inconsistent with how other LC staff was handling these designations and, generally, inconsistent with the policy. This year, there is no distinction between “excused” and “exempt” as was detailed for [students during the first week of school](#).

While documentation may be requested and can certainly help substantiate the claimed basis for the request to excuse an absence, documentation is not *per se* required for an absence to be excused, nor will any form of documentation automatically be considered a valid *per se* basis for excusing an absence.

There are no punitive or academic penalties of any kind attributable to whether absences are coded as “absent,” “absence recorded” or “excused absence.” The only implications for the distinction of an absence being coded as “excused absence” is when the student’s cumulative absences exceed the policy-based cap, which again, is a substantially higher number than the cumulative number contemplated by state law, specifically G.L. c. 76 §1.

The intent of the policy is generally for routine illnesses to not be “excused” on the basis that in the cases of most routine illnesses, the absences are unlikely to exceed the number of absences allowed without any penalty.

There are specifically enumerated bases for absences to be excused that include religious observations, legal matters, medical appointments, college visits (capped per grade level), or matters specifically connected to the student’s educational pursuits, i.e. field trips, testing, performance in a highly competitive production, etc. There is also room in the policy for the school administration to exercise its discretion to excuse absences based on extenuating circumstances.

While LC clerks are authorized to (and actually required to) grant excused absences on the basis of the specifically enumerated criteria, only a Dean or an Assistant Principal has the discretionary authority to grant excused absences based

on additional extenuating circumstances, including a significant illness that is expected to - or has - resulted in a student exceeding the allocation of non-penalty-generating absences. A committee made up of building administrators also hears appeals during the later part of each semester with the Principal having final authority to grant excused absences as detailed in the table below from the fall semester of SY 25 - 26.

This September it came to my attention that a small representation of the faculty at CRLS was communicating to students the need to obtain a doctor's note for classes that were being missed. Upon learning of this I directed that this misinformation be clarified. No student is ever required to get a doctor's note, nor is a doctor's note (or any note) ever a per se guarantee of an absence being excused.

Motion 26-229 Policy language:

To be clear, a plain reading of the motion related to these matters is not problematic, specifically because of the highlighted portion below:

*Resolved: That the Superintendent shall instruct building leadership that a student's absence because of personal illness or quarantine **may** be counted as an excused absence if a caregiver provides the school with supporting documentation in a timely manner, and that such documentation need not be from a physician;*

Along with the succeeding provision below:

Nothing in this Motion shall be interpreted to amend or alter the district's Student Attendance Policy as amended on September 2, 2025.

My reservation though, which frankly was confirmed in a conversation I had with members of the student body who had read the motion on the agenda that was published last week, is that there is a *perception* that with the passage of this motion, any "documentation" would constitute a per se basis to excuse an absence. That is not what a plain reading of the policy amendment requires, but given the stated objectives, I am concerned that more people in the community will expect that to be true.

Conclusion:

It is critical that building administrators continue to hold the responsibility of exercising sound and equitable professional judgment that instills predictability and consistency across our policies. Our team will continue to support CRLS in the development of better and more effective communication strategies. Consistent with the policies set forth by the school committee, we will continue to work to ensure a fair, consistent and transparent policy landscape that induces more consistent engagement and therefore stronger attendance among all students. And importantly, we will do all of this through an equity lens that takes into account extenuating circumstances and exercises discretion in a manner that advances rather than diminishes our shared goal of stronger and more meaningful student engagement and consistent student attendance.

[**SY 25-26 Semester 1 Attendance/Absence Data**](#)