

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Child and Family Services Agency



Public Hearing on
Update on Improving School Attendance/Reducing Truancy and
Chronic Absenteeism

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building,
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

March 11, 2022
1:00 p.m.

Live via Zoom Video Conference Broadcast Chairman's Website
www.ChairmanMendelson.com/live

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, councilmembers, and staff. I am Elizabeth Muffoletto, and I serve as the Deputy Director of Entry Services for the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Thank you for this opportunity to testify on Bill 24-428, the *School Attendance Amendment Act of 2021* and provide updates regarding CFSA's activities aimed at addressing chronic absenteeism and supporting schools across the District of Columbia in improving school attendance.

Although schools are required by law to report the accrual of 10 unexcused absences, these absences alone do not necessarily constitute educational neglect. Through its triage and investigative processes, CFSA's Educational Neglect Unit determines whether the alleged educational neglect requires a child welfare agency response. If a child welfare agency response is required, a referral for a Child Protective Services (CPS) investigation is made. A report is accepted for a CPS Investigation when it contains all required information including documentation of exhaustive efforts to engage the student and family and sufficient evidence to support an allegation of educational neglect. Reporters are contacted by the assigned Educational Neglect Social Worker for additional information, and in all cases, the reporter is notified of the outcome of each report. A determination of educational neglect may be reached when a student has missed an excessive amount of school as a direct result of action or inaction by the parent or caregiver.

However, I cannot emphasize enough that CFSA's involvement throughout the educational neglect process is intended to be supportive and not punitive. Our triage and investigative staff work to support schools, their students, and their families. During investigations, we are consistently communicating with our school partners to seek out information to identify the barriers the child(ren) may be facing that prevent them from going to school. Our access allows social workers to use the information we find to help educators understand what is going on in the homes of their students, and how we might all

work together to mitigate. This can look like connecting parents dealing with housing uncertainty to the Department of Human Services, those grappling with mental health issues to the Department of Behavioral Health, or even those struggling with food insecurity to the Healthy Families Thriving Communities Collaboratives. These connections and many others speak to the collaboration that is occurring across teams, agencies, and organizations to support better attendance.

CFSA Updates

CFSA continues to receive reports of educational neglect and conducts its intake process via the CPS Administration. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) report concerns about students ages 5 to 13 who miss 10 or more full unexcused school days from virtual learning, in-person learning, or a combination of both. CFSA employs a specialized unit of social workers with the job responsibility of partnering with CFSA's Triage Unit and DC schools to investigate reports of educational neglect. This unit facilitates improved communication with schools and engagement with families to identify the underlying issues that result in children/youth not consistently attending school. In addition to these staff members, through funding provided by the American Rescue Plan Act, CFSA's efforts have been bolstered by the addition of four resource development specialist (RDS) positions. These RDSs have been onboarded and are set to primarily work in the community with schools conducting wellness checks, locating and engaging parents and guardians, and connecting families to the resources I mentioned that help remove attendance barriers for their children.

This partnership between the District's education and child welfare agencies is strengthened by commitment and consistency. On a monthly basis, we hold check-in meetings with representatives from DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC Public Charter Schools to discuss attendance data, reporting figures, and the impact the operational guidance has on educators' efforts to mitigate attendance issues for the

District's students and families. The launch of CFSA's virtual "office hours" is one of the new strategies implemented this year to support school-based attendance staff. On a weekly basis through the "office hours," staff from LEAs can access the supervisor for CFSA's Educational Neglect Triage Unit in real time and ask questions about educational neglect reporting and the agency's investigative processes. Staff can also vocalize concerns about attendance issues with students within their school and get recommendations for next steps.

Additionally, in accordance with the City Administrator's Order dated November 3, 2021, CFSA has worked with OSSE to refine standards that permit LEAs the discretion to grant virtual learning access to students for whom remote instruction would not present any child welfare concerns. As of February 28, 2022, CFSA has been able to assist 81 families with distance learning applications after deeming that there were no child welfare concerns. CFSA continues to work with families to mitigate barriers to attendance and provides referrals to community-based organizations that will help support the needs of each family.

CFSA recognizes the importance of school attendance, and our agency is committed to being a strong member of the District's team tasked with addressing absenteeism among our students.

Conclusion

CFSA appreciates your interest and oversight on the important issue of attendance. Bill 24-428 does not impact our agency's responsibility to triage and investigate allegations of educational neglect when reported to the hotline. While CFSA is not taking a position on this bill, we do look forward to continuing to strengthen our partnerships across systems to improve attendance outcomes and reduce educational neglect for children and families. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.

