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Government of the District of Columbia



Child and Family Services Agency

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Testimony of  
**Brenda Donald**  
Director

**Joint Public Oversight Hearing**  
***“Truancy Reduction in the D.C. Public School System”***

Council of the District of Columbia  
Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Committee of the Whole  
David Catania, Chairperson, Committee on Education

October 10, 2013

John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW • Room 412  
Washington, DC 20510-6250  
10:00 am

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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Chairperson Catania, and Councilmembers. I am Brenda Donald, Director of the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). I appreciate the opportunity to update you on our efforts in responding to educational neglect referrals both internally and through our collaboration with the DC Public Schools (DCPS) and the Public Charter School Board (PCSB).

### **CFSA Educational Neglect Referrals**

Truancy reporting for students 5-13 years old is making steady progress in the District. In SY2011-2012, there were just over 1,100 reports of educational neglect. Reports of educational neglect in SY12-13 increased by over 1,200 reports.

In SY 2012-13, CFSA accepted 2,432 reports of educational neglect for investigations involving 2,482 children. Of these reports, we substantiated 258 representing 328 children. Of the educational neglect reports CFSA received during SY 2012-13, 63 percent came from DCPS, 21 percent from the public charter schools, and the remaining 16 percent came from other sources.

In SY 2013-14 to date, CFSA accepted 55 reports of educational neglect for investigations involving 70 children. There were no substantiated referrals in this school year. During SY 2013-14 to date, 11 percent of the reports came from DCPS, 14 percent from public charter schools, and the remaining 75 percent came from other sources.

### **Reporting Compliance**

CFSA has undertaken a variety of reporting activities in partnership with DCPS and PCSB which are resulting in better compliance.

- CFSA produces a weekly educational neglect report based upon referrals from DCPS and public charter schools (PCS).
- CFSA produces a monthly Educational Neglect Trends and Outcomes Report. The report contains details of underlying issues, barriers and recommendations related to closed, substantiated and unfounded investigations.
- CFSA designated a data analyst to serve on the City-wide Truancy Data Committee. As a result of this city wide effort, our representative is able to partner with other representatives of sister agencies to share data and understand the barriers and identify interventions needed in reducing truancy in the District.
- CFSA reconciles monthly truancy reports from DCPS. The report includes the 5 to 13 age group of students with more than ten absences. CFSA facilitates a monthly call with DCPS to discuss the educational neglect reports and trends.
- In the summer of 2013, CFSA and PCSB established a new partnership. We met with representatives of the Public Charter School Board to refine the process for educational neglect referral reconciliation and accountability.

## **Trends**

For the period February 2013-July 2013, CFSA reviewed 70 reports of educational neglect representing 41 families to identify underlying reasons for the absences. We are continuing to find that educational neglect is an indicator for a range of issues related to other allegations of abuse and neglect such as hitting, physical violence, inadequate food, and inadequate shelter. Other issues related to the caretaker included domestic violence and substance abuse. While educational neglect was identified as the primary issue for 31 reports (44 percent), a review of the investigations found additional risk or safety factors exist for families who come to our attention through an educational neglect report.

Underlying issues found in investigations showed financial challenges which included lack of uniforms for children, housing and transportation. Other barriers to school attendance revolved around parental behavior such as erratic work schedules, medical and mental health issues. Of note, additional identified challenges involved a caretaker's history of mental health issues where support was required for a bipolar disorder diagnosis. Further challenges related to school attendance included children with behavior issues. Several investigations involved a caretaker's work schedule undermining children getting to school on time.

CFSA found that nearly half of the 41 families reviewed translated into an open case to In-Home and Community Partnerships. A review of the 20 families representing 22 children reflected the following: 15 children had improved attendance; two children had a court removal; and five children needed additional case work in the areas of mental health, housing and home schooling follow-up.

## **CFSA Strategies to Address Reports**

On April 1, 2013, CFSA's Educational Neglect Triage Unit was established to address the growing number of educational neglect referrals that were being reported to CFSA from both DCPS and public charter schools. This specialized unit:

- Screens and triages all educational neglect referrals.
- Obtains information, if needed, about the efforts made by the school to engage families and provide needed services and resources.

The triage process allows CFSA to obtain more information than previously provided in reports to the hotline. This additional information allows CFSA to make a better initial decision on whether the referral should be reviewed through our multidisciplinary team. The team makes the final decision on whether the report meets the threshold for neglect and therefore warrants a response through either a child protective services investigation or family assessment. By making informed decisions, CFSA is able to focus its resources for families who need our intervention to address child neglect.

## **Conclusion**

CFSA knows that chronic truancy signals that family challenges may be getting in the way of children attending school. As a result of new reform efforts in the District and internally launching our own Differential Response best practice, we are seeing real opportunity for systemic change in reducing truancy in the District.

We appreciate the Council's interest and oversight on this important issue, and we look forward to strengthening our partnerships across systems to gain better results for children and families. Thank you.