

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education



Public Oversight Hearing
On

Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Initiatives

Testimony of
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Before
The Honorable Chairman Phil Mendelson
Committee of the Whole
&
The Honorable Chairman David Grosso
Committee on Education

Council of the District of Columbia
Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairmen Mendelson and Grosso, Councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Education and the Committee of the Whole. I am Deputy Mayor for Education Paul Kihn and I am pleased to provide testimony at today's hearing on student attendance.

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation for the continued participation and collaboration of both Chairmen Mendelson and Grosso with the Every Day Counts! Task Force. The collaboration and engagement of city leadership and other public partners on the Task Force in Washington, DC's attendance strategy is among the greatest strengths of the current approach. In October, Interim Deputy Mayor Smith laid out six areas in which the DME and education partners on the Every Day Counts! Task Force were embarking on new work. I am happy to report that the work described is now well underway in all of those areas, as anticipated.

Where We Are Today - Our Strengths

Since assuming the role of deputy mayor, it has been a priority for me to understand and assess the current state of the District's efforts to reduce student absenteeism. While it was immediately clear that we have a long way to go to reach our goals of reducing chronic absenteeism and truancy, I also found there are a number of important areas in which the District has made significant progress and become stronger.

Primary among these areas is the public commitment of city leadership to addressing attendance and broad engagement from stakeholders participating in the Every Day Counts! Task Force. While meeting together won't solely produce the results we seek, the buy-in, attention to, and collaboration around this multifaceted issue is critical to identifying and implementing the needed solutions.

A second area of strength in Washington, DC started as an area of growth. While it took sustained focus to set desired metrics and methodologies, the District now has the ability to report out on meaningful and uniform measures of attendance, including in-seat attendance, truancy, and chronic absenteeism. OSSE's quarterly and annual reporting on student attendance provides useful and reliable information to the Every Day Counts! Task Force and other stakeholders. OSSE's analyses have provided what the District needs to both monitor progress and answer important questions raised by stakeholders. For example, the most recent report not only gave us comparable year-over-year absenteeism rates, it examined the relationship between factors like travel distance and presence of a sibling in a home in determining attendance—two areas raised by student feedback and Task Force participants.

Since School Year 2017-18, the District has also had a positive, robust citywide message that provides a banner for agencies, non-profit partners, and families to organize and engage around. According to analysis provided our partner, the Every Day Counts! Campaign garnered 48 million impressions, or views, in FY18. This is the result of strategic ad placement using social media (11,120,814 impressions), print ads (5,393,270), radio (7,503,960), and advertising on public transportation (24,770,900). This year we are able to sustain the message at a lesser cost and refine our targeting based on what we learned from the first year of the campaign. In addition, this campaign employs a best practice of rewarding and highlighting schools and students who show signs of progress.

Washington, DC has also shown a commitment to accountability for results. As data have become stronger, we have taken important steps like including attendance metrics in OSSE's STAR framework for school quality. The District has also set, but not yet met, public goals related to attendance that are articulated in the Task Force strategic plan and in agency performance plans. The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) has incorporated attendance into its authorizing and monitoring decisions by issuing warnings to schools with high absenteeism that do not show signs of improvement and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has adopted an attendance monitoring framework that provides them with actionable data they use to better support schools.

Finally, as I look across the various policies, investments, and convenings—artifacts of the current Task Force, as well as the work that preceded it—I see a District that has demonstrated an openness to shift strategies based on what has been learned from families and research. These areas of strength - committed leadership, rigorous data and reporting, a shared message, accountability for results, and an openness to the feedback of students and families - have been identified as hallmarks of other jurisdictions making progress to address attendance.

Where We Are Today - Progress Towards Our Goals

Despite an increasingly strong foundation from which to build, chronic absenteeism continues to be a significant challenge in the District of Columbia. For the past two years, the rate of chronic absenteeism among students in grades K-12 has remained just below 30 percent. Truancy rose by 2 percentage points to 27.4 percent in the 2017-18 school year.

Although the statewide rates across all schools did not shift much over the past two years and broad trends remain the same, some school—and student—level trends show promise. The vast majority of elementary and middle school students who were chronically absent or profoundly chronically absent the prior year increased their attendance rates, aligned with District work focused on students with a history of chronic absenteeism. Additionally, while chronic absenteeism in high school continues to be approximately triple the rate of students in lower grades, high schools in the District saw noticeable improvements in chronic absenteeism and truancy in the 2017-18 school year. Approximately 60 percent of high schools showed a reduction in chronic absenteeism and 51 percent saw an improvement in their truancy rate. Notably, these improvements appear to align to two areas of focus in the Every Day Counts! Work: focusing on students with a history of absenteeism by using historical data to predict future attendance, and focusing on high school students who show the highest rates of chronic absenteeism as compared to other grade bands.

Work Already Underway

While there is no doubt that we need to do more to see broader and larger improvements in attendance, my office and our partners on the Every Day Counts! Task Force have targeted work in some important areas underway. For example, inspired by previous reports highlighting the rise in absenteeism between eighth and ninth grade, the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG) competed and awarded a new grant to pilot an extension of the Show Up, Stand Out (SUSO) program in high schools. Notably, DCPS also took a closer look at the ninth grade and initiated a summer bridge program this year in select feeder patterns to support students with

a strong likelihood of becoming chronically absent. The work is part of a broader DCPS strategy to identify students with a history of low attendance for additional outreach early in the current school year, leveraging OSSE's finding that students' past attendance record strongly predicts future absenteeism. Through a collaboration between DME, the Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Lab at DC, the DME is also piloting work focused on supporting students who are experiencing homelessness based on OSSE's previous analysis of factors associated with high absenteeism. The pilot will focus on understanding the impact of flexible transit benefits for homeless students and is one of two transportation-related investments DME is making. The second is focused on support for safe passage of students to and from school, reflecting data from schools and program partners about the role of safety and transportation in attending school every day. This work complements other citywide work, piloting data-informed communications with families, trainings, and convenings, and other ways to increase knowledge and awareness of important attendance information.

Where We Are Headed

In addition to our solid foundation and promising work underway, I am encouraged by the clarity around the areas in which the District needs to grow. There is significant national literature and learning from local investments in this area, including the SUSO, ACE, and PASS programs, and stakeholder feedback from student design challenges, a citywide summit, and recent youth engagement sessions. There are at least three distinct areas in which we need to do more work: 1) Regularly communicating attendance information to students and families; 2) engaging and building relationships with students and families, particularly using a trauma-informed approach; and 3) removing non-educational barriers to attending school every day, on time.

First, we must ensure that all families have basic information about attendance and other topics related to their child's educational progress. We have learned from case managers, attendance counselors and others engaged in our work locally that, all too often, families are unaware of the number of absences their students have accrued and/or the consequences associated with missing school. No student or family in Washington, DC should be surprised by our attendance policies or their own attendance record. The national literature suggests that simple letters or other communications to families displaying students' absences can nudge them to improve their attendance. Through a partnership with Harvard's Proving Ground initiative, both DCPS and KIPP DC are testing versions of these communications this school year.

Second, positive engagement, relationship building, and follow-up when signs of trouble emerge are critical. Yet, whether due to a lack of capacity or training, too many students and families do not receive outreach that is timely or effective. We find that where relationships have not been built, calls from school staff and their partners are ignored. DCPS has been making significant progress in proactively building relationships with families through the evidence-based practice of home visiting. Meanwhile, D.C.'s Show Up, Stand Out program results also tells us that outreach and consistent follow-up can make a difference in the immediate. However, the current reach of home visiting and SUSO programming is limited when you consider that *every* family should have relationship with their school.

Moreover, even where engagement is attempted, many times adults fail to reach out in a manner that makes parents or guardians feel comfortable and makes students feel that school is a safe

place to be. This is made more difficult by policies that implicitly blame students and families for absenteeism by mandating punitive consequences. National research encourages adults to employ trauma-informed practices and build relationships early so that outreach about attendance is grounded in a history of caring and support. Here, too, there are signs of progress in the District, including a cross-sector training on trauma-informed practices and steps taken by OVSJG to support a trauma training bank for a wide range of adults. Nationally, other districts have observed results, including improved attendance after implementing a social emotional learning (SEL) classroom curriculum, schoolwide climate development, and teacher and staff training at the beginning of each academic year.

Finally, beyond schools, there is work we can do through data sharing and strategic investment to leverage non-education partners poised to help meet other needs identified by families, including housing, transportation, and health. Nationally, research shows that tackling these barriers can significantly improve student attendance. Recent attendance data sharing agreements between DHS, OSSE, DCPS and the Office of Out of School Time Grants and Youth Outcomes help move us forward, but more and deeper partners are needed to address the challenge at hand.

Conclusion

I believe the Mayor and the Every Day Counts! Task Force have laid important groundwork towards our goals related to reducing chronic absenteeism and truancy citywide, but to move forward faster we need to ask ourselves how we can make rapid progress in our growth areas. This likely means doing more with our resources to support our students and families, and looking to data to help us understand what is and is not leading to improved outcomes. It also means listening carefully to the input of students and families who have been feeling the impact of our policies and living through the evolution of D.C.'s journey to addressing absenteeism. I am optimistic that if we take these steps, we are indeed on the path to progress because, despite the complexity of truancy and chronic absenteeism, we have a stronger foundation than ever before; we have more leaders around the Task Force table than ever before, and we have more students and families engaged in conversation on this topic than ever before. We look forward to continuing to work with the Council and all of our stakeholders to ensure every student can get to school on time, every single day.

Thank you for holding a hearing on this important topic. I am happy to take any questions you might have for me.