GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Public Oversight Hearing on
Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Activities

Testimony of
Shana Young
Chief of Staff
Office of the State Superintendent of Education

Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman
and the
Committee on Education
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

January 31, 2019
Council of the District of Columbia
Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Shana Young, and I serve as the Chief of Staff to the State Superintendent of Education. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education to update you on our efforts to address student attendance in our schools.

A student must regularly attend school to learn, and attendance rates in the District of Columbia are in need of improvement. Cross-agency and government cooperation is important to addressing this problem. That is why OSSE is pleased to participate in the Every Day Counts! Taskforce, which plays an important role in coordinating strategies across government as we strive to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy.

One of the main ways that OSSE contributes to this work is by collecting daily attendance from our LEAs and reporting statewide attendance data. We aim to make all of our reports accurate, accessible, and actionable. We believe this work informs stakeholders, so we may more effectively address this pressing problem.

One way that OSSE reports attendance data is on the DC School Report Card, which was built in partnership with DC families. OSSE worked with thousands of parents, families, and community members to create a tool that presented material in a clear, consistent, and meaningful way.

The DC School Report Card includes the STAR Framework which uses multiple types of data to measure a school's outcomes. To address attendance, OSSE incorporated two measures of chronic absenteeism, 90% Attendance and Attendance Growth. The 90% Attendance metric rewards schools with low rates of chronic absenteeism. Because we know that absenteeism is an area of focus for many of our schools, the inclusion of Attendance Growth allows schools with lower rates of attendance to receive credit for improvements in their attendance rates from one year to the next.

We hope this information will allow school leaders, educators and families to have meaningful conversations about student attendance.

Another way OSSE provides data on attendance is through its annual attendance report. In fact, representatives from OSSE presented the 2017-18 school year attendance report at the Every Day Counts! Taskforce earlier this week. This report, released in December, presents final attendance data for the 2017-18 school year at the state and school level.

This morning, I would like to share some of the findings from this report.

Attendance Report Findings

I want to start with high-level findings on chronic absenteeism. A student is considered chronically absent when they miss 10 percent or more of instructional days for which they were enrolled - whether excused or unexcused. As the Deputy Mayor stated, 29.3% of District students were chronically absent in the 2017-18 school year. This was statistically the same as the prior year.

Although far too many students are chronically absent across all grades, the problem worsens in high school. Students in high school are four times more likely to be chronically absent than those in lower

grades. The rate of chronic absenteeism jumps by 25 percentage points between students in eighth grade and students in ninth grade. More than 12 percent of high school students accumulated 50 or more unexcused absences over the course of the school year.

As we have said before, the best indicator of chronic absenteeism is the student's prior school attendance. In elementary school, the proportion of students in each grade who were chronically absent in both 2016-17 and 2017-18 ranges between 55.1 and 61 percent. Whether or not a student is chronically absent in eighth grade is a powerful predictor of whether the student will be chronically absent in ninth grade. Nearly 88 percent of students who were chronically absent in eighth grade during the 2016-17 school year were found to be chronically absent again as ninth graders in the 2017-18 school year. Throughout high school, more than 80 percent of students who were chronically absent the prior year remained chronically absent.

We also see troubling rates of chronic absenteeism among some of our most vulnerable populations. Students with the most significant special education needs present the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. We also see higher rates of chronic absenteeism among students that receive TANF or SNAP and those in the care of Child & Family Services Agency (CFSA) compared to those who are not.

The attendance report also included new analysis on the attendance of homeless students. Across the District, 48.8 percent of students experiencing homelessness were chronically absent in the 2017-18 school year. Students who experienced homelessness were nearly two times as likely to be chronically absent.

We also collect information on truancy. Recall that a student is considered truant after the accumulation of 10 or more full-day *unexcused* absences in a given year. From 2016-17 to 2017-18, truancy increased by two percentage points. This increase is driven by a four percentage point increase in truancy among middle school students and a three percentage point increase from elementary school students.

Barriers to Attendance

As we have heard in this setting and others, transportation and the responsibility of taking a younger sibling to school have been described as barriers to regular attendance. The attendance report attempts to evaluate the extent to which these barriers impact attendance.

When we examine distance to school and attendance within individual schools, students who live farther from the school are more likely to be chronically absent.

To examine sibling attendance, we matched attendance records of older and younger siblings. We found that households with multiple students have higher rates of chronically absent, and there is some relationship between the attendance of older and younger siblings.

Conclusion
We hope that the suite of resources and reports that OSSE provides informs our ongoing efforts to address chronic absenteeism and truancy in the District of Columbia.

Thank you again, Chairman Mendelson and Chairman Grosso, for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.