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Hearing on Improving School Attendance
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
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Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the issue of truancy and chronic absenteeism in our public charter schools. I am Rashida Young, Director of the Equity and Fidelity Team at the DC Public Charter School Board.

When DC PCSB testified last October, we reported that the truancy rate continued to rise for public charter schools. At that hearing you heard from some public charter school leaders about the challenges they face and the solutions they have been employing. To date, our overall numbers show the truancy rate is 5.7%. Compared to last year's truancy rate of 4.9% showing a rise of 0.8%. While the overall rate continues to climb there are examples of success. Of the schools that testified in October, Goodwill Excel PCS saw a decrease in truancy from 84.0% this time last year to a current rate of 40.5% due to the interventions they described in the fall. DC Scholars PCS saw their truancy rate drop from 17.0% this time last year to a current rate of 3.5%. In addition, their chronic absenteeism has decreased from 37.5% to 17.3%. Paul PCS High School continues to show a low truancy rate of 4.5%, a slight increase over last year's rate of 3.1%. The average truancy rate at charter high schools is 5.2%. The charter sector's In-Seat Attendance rate has risen slightly from last year to date, from 92.9% to 93.0%.

We are committed to working across the city to reducing truancy. Our staff has worked closely with partners on the Every Day Counts! Task Force. Further, I served on the technical evaluation team with Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) and DCPS staff to review proposals of prospective truancy prevention vendors as part of the DME's Chronic Absenteeism Research and Consulting project.

However successful partnerships depend on parties coming together. A key part of the city's strategy focuses on partners like Show Up Stand Out (SUSO) and Parent and Adolescent Support Services (PASS). This past fall, DC PCSB staff worked closely with SUSO to develop a data sharing agreement that would create a nightly student-level data feed to SUSO from participating schools. Ultimately, SUSO requested this project be put on hold until SY2019-

20, due to lack of technical capability to implement the agreement. DC PCSB also worked with PASS to enable them to access student-level attendance data, though PASS has only utilized this process once so far this school year.[1] Nevertheless, we will continue to work with our community partners to ensure access to necessary data to improve student attendance. Regarding areas of improvement, it would be very helpful for SUSO and PASS to share data about students that have participated in their program, specifically whether attendance rates for those students have improved, as well as any barriers that CBOs have encountered trying to engage with families who have been referred.

As we have testified previously, DC PCSB uses its oversight authority to require schools to publicly acknowledge and answer for disproportionately high rates of truancy by issuing Notices of Concern to schools that surpass a certain threshold.

But as this committee has learned over years of discussion about this topic, solutions are elusive and there is no one size fits all solution.

The diversity of public charter schools means we have a diversity of approaches to truancy reduction. Recognizing that schools can learn from each other, we create avenues for our schools to share successful attendance strategies with each other.

On December 6, we held a school climate brunch for schools to do just that. Several schools presented to their peers. I'd like to highlight two of these approaches.

Center City Brightwood PCS discussed the importance of reviewing data on absences and late arrival every week in team meetings. If the staff determines an intervention is necessary, they have a system to make automatic wake up calls for families or an Alert Now automated message that goes to the student or parent. If that intervention is not effective, staff conducts home visits to make sure absent students are okay, and sometimes they bring the students back to school with them. Finally, when they have new students, they review those students' attendance data from previous schools to see if they should meet with families ahead of time to proactively address attendance barriers before they become problems. They also found that cohorts of students that move from grade to grade together have better attendance, so having a small school with one class per grade has led to higher attendance.

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[1] This may mean PASS has received this data directly from partner schools. That is ideal; as this process established with DC PCSB should be a back-up when data is not available from individual schools.

Friendship Tech Prep PCS shared that they created a Student Government Association modeled after the DC government (e.g., they have ANC commissioners). They started different committees with the students, including an attendance committee. These student committees meet to problem solve, brainstorm, and create community within the school. The attendance committee is made up of students who have struggled with coming to school on time or are at-risk of becoming chronically absent. These students meet regularly to discuss barriers to on-time attendance, incentives for getting students to school on time, and ways to help their peers be excited about school. During a committee meeting, students shared that certain buses would just drive by them in the morning and not pick students up. A school administrator verified this by waiting at the bus stop and witnessed the bus go by without stopping. The school also conducts home visits for chronically absent students, as well as other individualized intervention. And the school also came up with ideas to make morning entry and getting to school on time fun. For example, they have had a DJ, hot chocolate, and a band marching down the halls while the students made a spirit train.

Additionally, the school partners with various organizations such as the Far Southeast Collaborative. They do individualized interventions (e.g., if they did a home visit and found a student didn't have a bed, they may provide the student with a bed). They also work with SUSO and found it to be helpful.

We will continue to identify schools making progress and have them share their ideas with their peers.

Many of us in this room have been fighting truancy for years, often with limited success. It may be time to think of larger, bolder, citywide approaches. In this spirit, I would make five initial suggestions that we would be interested in exploring with this Council and stakeholders from across the city.

First, would be radically changing the financial incentives for schools through comprehensive payment reform. Many states, including California, pay schools based on daily attendance. Schools are not paid for students who are absent without a valid excuse. Recognizing that such an approach would have a greater impact on high at-risk schools, it could be paired with an increase in the at-risk supplement. This would neutralize the impact – making the overall approach be cost-neutral - while providing schools with powerful financial incentives to get students to school every day.

More modest financial incentives could come through, for example, providing a financial incentive for students or families who participate and successfully complete programming with SUSO or PASS.

Second would be a large pilot around yellow bus transportation. Kids Ride Free helps thousands of families get to school each day, but it is far from perfect. Busses and trains do not always travel direct routes to school. Young children cannot travel alone. And we hear repeated stories of overcrowded, late, and missed busses. Perhaps it's time to seriously consider yellow school bus transportation. The city could try a pilot for, perhaps 10% of our schools and study the impact on truancy as well as other measures such as safe passage and academic success. A pilot could try different approaches, including dedicated busses for specific schools, as well as Circulator-type routes reserved only for students. The results from a large, well-designed pilot could help us all decide if school busses should be expanded citywide and how best to do this.

Third would be to strengthen the referral process to CFSA and Court Social Service Division. This could be done two ways. The first would be to fund a team of dedicated, trained interventionists who are able to follow up promptly on the majority of referrals. Second would be to strengthen the feedback loop between these agencies and the schools. We hear frequently from school leaders that they need more information regarding what happens to students after they have been referred to CFSA or CSSD. Schools are unsure what interventions to implement with students who have been referred but continue to be truant because it is unclear whether the student is already undergoing similar interventions with these agencies. Having feedback from CFSA and CSSD will also encourage schools that the time they take to put together truancy referrals is making a difference and will encourage further compliance.

Related to this would be improved data sharing from SUSO and PASS – Knowing which schools are actively engaged with those programs and how they are addressing truancy would help us identify schools that have not engaged. We could potentially intervene with those schools earlier in the school year. As it stands, we currently have little insight into whether schools are engaging or whether truant students are engaging, and how DC PCSB can bolster the impact of those partner organizations. Over the past few years, DC PCSB and DCPS have shared attendance data with the Everyday Counts Task Force on a quarterly basis. It would be helpful for SUSO and PASS to follow a similar schedule and share data quarterly with the taskforce.

Finally, we could encourage the new Research collaborative to look more deeply at this issue. The collaborative could look at the specific question of

what strategies are most effective. And it can look at deeper connections. For example, to what extent does housing instability contribute to the rise in truancy? Better understanding these deeper issues could inform additional citywide approaches.

We continue to look at the issue and work with our partners and school leaders. Thank you for inviting me to testify today, I am happy to answer any questions.