

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
District of Columbia Public Schools



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

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

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

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10:00am

Introduction

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Amy Maisterra, Interim Deputy Chancellor of Innovation and Systems Improvement for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am honored to testify before you today as we continue the conversation about DCPS' work to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism. At DCPS, we know that our students are capable of greatness, but we also know that attending school is the first step toward ensuring that our young people are on a path to success.

Every student should feel welcomed and encouraged to attend school by every adult, every day, and barriers to attendance must be actively identified and resolved. With the partnership of the Mayor, the Council, and our fellow agencies, I am committed, on behalf of DCPS, to overcoming barriers to attendance because our students deserve every opportunity for success.

As we shared in the fall, DCPS approaches this commitment with a sense of urgency and has refined our strategy for supporting daily student attendance in the 2018-19 School Year.

1. First, we are prioritizing strong **Data Systems and Actionable Data**. We believe that compliance and support systems must operate seamlessly, and in order for data to be actionable, it must be accurate and easily accessible.
2. Second, we are **Engaging Authentically** with our students, families, and staff. We believe students and families must be empowered with information to understand the impact of attendance on learning and equipped to promote attendance best practices. We also believe we must learn from them to make sure that we understand the challenges they are facing and put the right supports in place.
3. Finally, we are **Proactively Engaging** our city partners. We believe that partnering with our stakeholders will allow us to effectively address barriers to attendance that may sit outside of our school walls.

I would like to now discuss this three-pronged approach in more detail, beginning with a look at our data and data systems.

Data Systems and Actionable Data

Over the past year, we have worked to strengthen our systems for collecting attendance data. First, we made key improvements to our student information system, Aspen, such as clarifying attendance reporting codes, creating the capacity to upload attendance -related documentation, and locking attendance data on a monthly basis. Second, we focused on creating clear policy and procedures around attendance, and providing extensive training to staff to support compliance. Last, we initiated a process for proactively reviewing attendance data to identify practice challenges on a weekly and monthly basis, through our continuous improvement framework.

Overall, our work is resulting in improvements. Compared to last year at this time:

- We have maintained our focus on accurate attendance entry, which has increased from 96 percent at this time last year, to 98 percent currently.
- We remained stable with our in-seat attendance, at 90 percent, and our rate of chronic absenteeism has decreased by approximately 2 percentage points.
- We have made progress with many of mandated referral processes: Compared to last year at this time, we have increased our referral rate for Student Support Teams (SSTs) by 10 percent and for the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) by 11 percent. DCPS' referrals to the judicial system have remained steady.

At the same time, our truancy rate has increased by 2 percentage points compared to this time last year. While this trend is not what we want to see, we believe that this increase could in part be due to improved oversight systems resulting in more accurate data around excused and unexcused absences, combined with our focus on accurate attendance entry.

While we know we have much more work to do on attendance as a city, we have also made it a city-wide priority, and we are seeing early wins at several of our schools. I'd like to share some of our points of pride with you.

- At Jefferson MS, where the chronic absenteeism rate has *decreased by 12 percent*, attendance staff have reached out to families of students with a prior history of low attendance. The school has also built on universal supports like attendance blasts in their weekly community newsletter.
- At Columbia Heights EC, school administrators review attendance and reach out to students and families daily. Social workers, counselors, office staff, and teachers are all integrated through an attendance intervention process. Everyone is involved. *The school's in school attendance (ISA) has increased by 2 percentage points, while the chronic absenteeism rate has decreased by 13 percentage points.*
- At Nalle ES, school leaders have focused on consistency and created frequent incentives for daily attendance. *Their ISA has reached 95 percent, an increase of 2 percentage points from last year at this time.*

Engaging Authentically with Schools, Students, and Families

As noted above, we recognize that in order to really move the needle on this city-wide challenge, we need to engage authentically with schools, students, and families. We have taken several steps to do so this year:

- ***Comprehensive School Plan (CSP) Updates:*** Each school in DCPS is required to develop an annual strategic plan, the CSP, which spurs improvement and growth. This year, we worked with schools to incorporate attendance strategies into all CSPs. These strategies are individualized and are tailored to the school community.
- ***Continuous Improvement Framework Implementation:*** This year, DCPS launched a continuous improvement framework anchored in the consistent review of data with

schools. The focus areas of this framework are attendance, graduation, and behavior. Through the Framework, we look at compliance, but we also look at quality. For example, we are looking at data to inform how to improve the quality of our Student Support Team process and ways to enhance family engagement. The Framework ensures accountability at all levels.

- ***Proving Ground Partnership:*** Last year, we initiated a partnership with Harvard University's Proving Ground collaborative to research and design effective attendance communications. This year, while we implement our communications pilot, we are beginning to plan for what the 2018-2019 work with Proving Ground will entail. Earlier this month, we launched our 2018-2019 design process with a focus group for principals, and this week Proving Ground has been meeting with additional stakeholders to get input, including staff, parents, and students.

City Partnerships

Last, DCPS is actively working to maintain and strengthen our partnerships with key city agencies in this work.

- We continue to value the partnership with the Deputy Mayor for Education and others through the Every Day Counts! Taskforce. It serves a valuable role in outreach and coordination and has led to real changes in the District's approach to attendance.
- We are particularly excited to share that we have restarted our collaborative planning meetings with the Child and Family Services Administration (CFSA) this school year. Through these cross-agency meetings, senior leaders and staff share resources, problem-solve, and brain-storm new ways of doing the work. For example, CFSA has shared that they will be creating a dedicated social work unit to better respond to educational neglect referrals. The social workers will be assigned to a cluster of schools to serve as the point of contact for attendance coordinators. CFSA has also agreed to pilot an approach in which their social workers serve as members of the student support team, making the referral process seamless and not punitive. There are more details to follow as CFSA and DCPS are working jointly to further develop and pilot this re-envisioned referral and early intervention process.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about this important topic. DCPS will continue to focus on building attendance systems and supports that meet the needs of every student. Our young people deserve every pathway to success, and that starts in our schools. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.