GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
D.C. Public Schools

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

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, Chairperson

Council of the District of Columbia
Room 120
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

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1:00 pm

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Dr. Amy Maisterra, Deputy Chancellor of Innovation and Systems Improvement for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am honored to speak before you today about DCPS' work to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism.

Every student should experience a safe and welcoming school environment where they feel loved, challenged, and prepared. With your partnership and the support of the Mayor, we are working to accelerate progress and to meet the needs of all our students, especially those furthest from opportunity.

DCPS remains committed to our attendance strategy and our efforts to ensure daily student attendance. We believe that by prioritizing **data systems and actionable data**, **engaging authentically with our stakeholders**, and **developing strong city partnerships,** we will effectively address barriers to attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism. We know that each of our students brings with them a unique set of talents, experiences, and interests, and it is our job to support students on their paths to graduation and prepare them for success in life.

Data Systems and Actionable Data

I want to take this opportunity to share data on attendance outcomes for DCPS schools. In our schools, DCPS has seen increased investment from stakeholders and our work continues to show progress in certain areas.

- We have increased our focus on accurate daily attendance entry, which has risen to 98 percent.
- We have also maintained a 90 percent rate of in-seat attendance.
- Our rate of chronic absenteeism remains stable from last year.

At the same time, our truancy rate has increased by three percentage points compared to this time last year. While some of these trends are not what we want to see, we believe that they could in part be due to improved oversight systems and updates to our attendance policy to ensure ongoing compliance. We know our efforts to improve data integrity are resulting in a better understanding of excused and unexcused absences, an increased focus on attendance entry, and timely student or family notifications.

We are seeing improvements in our referrals to Student Support Teams (SSTs) and the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), both of which lead to strong supports for our students. In the current school year, DCPS has referred:

- 79 percent of eligible students for SST meetings. We anticipate this rate to increase in the coming months; and,
- 79 percent of eligible students to CFSA, compared to 63 percent at this time last year.

Engaging Authentically with Stakeholders

Since the last hearing, we have continued to implement our Continuous Improvement Framework. Specifically, we have worked with our instructional superintendents to develop actionable data snapshots tailored for their use, and we have created a sequence of monthly touchpoints between the central office attendance team and the instructional superintendents, to assist them with working with school leaders in a targeted way. In addition, we have conducted quality reviews of SST plans and used the results to inform additional guidance for school-based staff members.

We know that SSTs provide a critical opportunity to engage and support DCPS families. Through additional trainings, we will ensure SST members prepare for high-quality meetings and have the content they need to address concerns and questions from our families. We are conducting the first of these trainings today.

In addition, as we have previously shared, DCPS has worked with Harvard University's Proving Ground to roll out its first pilot attendance intervention that involved sending individualized attendance data letters to a subset of students and families who have a past history of absences. The goal is to learn the most effective ways to communicate absenteeism interventions and to make sure every impacted student receives appropriate outreach.

DCPS' pilot showed that personalized letters are an effective way to reduce absences. Letters comparing individual students to the average rates reduced absences by 2.7 percent overall. While this may sound small, we estimate that if DCPS scaled letters up to all students, total absences would be reduced by over 17,000 instructional days. Based on these results, DCPS will be sending our next round of letters to families in April.

Strengthening City Partnerships

At DCPS, we know that we can best serve our students when we work in partnership with families, communities, and our fellow agencies. As discussed at the attendance hearing in January, DCPS is excited to be launching a new partnership with CFSA, which has created a specialized social worker unit to quickly identify and investigate cases of education neglect.

In May, we plan to roll out a new process where CFSA staff work in conjunction with DCPS as part of our SSTs to address the root cause of chronic absenteeism and determine the best student-centered solutions. Our hope is that through this partnership, DCPS staff members will be better equipped to intervene earlier. Initially, this new process will be implemented in targeted schools before full implementation in School Year 2019-2020.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about this important topic. DCPS believes that attendance is a first step towards accelerating student achievement and recognizes that every stakeholder has a role to play. We look forward to working with community partners,

fellow agencies, and Council to ensure every student is given the opportunities and support they need to thrive in life. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.