

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

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

Good afternoon, 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. It is a pleasure to, once again, appear before the Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education. My testimony today will present updated numbers on statewide chronic absenteeism and truancy rates, as well as provide an update on a new pilot program at OSSE that is meant to reengage students with significantly poor school attendance.

It is clear that chronic absenteeism and truancy hold back the achievement of too many students in DC, and we know that this is not an issue the education cluster can address alone. 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. I was pleased to join the taskforce personally, along with many OSSE staff, at our most recent meeting on March 26, 2019.

One of the main ways that OSSE contributes to this work is by collecting daily attendance from our LEAs and reporting statewide attendance data. Whether the DC School Report Card or through our annual report on attendance, 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.

Attendance Data

As we discuss attendance, it is important to keep some facts front and center in this discussion. These findings are reflected in our school year 2017-18 attendance report that was released last fall.¹ Overall, we are not seeing changes in attendance from year to year. Our 2017-18 attendance report found that 29.3 percent of District students were chronically absent in the 2017-18 school year. This was statistically the same as the prior year. From 2016-17 to 2017-18, truancy increased by two percentage points. 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 school students who were chronically absent or profoundly chronically absent the prior year increased their attendance rates.

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. Yet, we also see challenging 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 along with students that receive TANF and/or SNAP benefits, those in the care of Child & Family Services Agency (CFSA), and students experiencing homelessness.

As we have said before, the best indicator of chronic absenteeism is the student's prior school attendance. We have provided schools and LEAs with a suite of tools to help them view their attendance data in a meaningful way to take action. We are seeing some improvement in statewide attendance

¹ "District of Columbia Attendance Report, SY 2017-18." Office of the State Superintendent of Education. November 30, 2018.

rates. From the start of the 2018-19 school year until January 25, 2019, statewide numbers for chronic absenteeism stand at 25.7 percent, and the truancy rate stands at 11.8 percent. Although this reflects an improvement when compared with final attendance numbers from the previous school year, it is important to note that these numbers are close to where we stood at the same time last year, and statewide student attendance decreased as the year progressed.

This is particularly concerning, because as we stated in our most recent attendance report, elementary and middle school students have more unexcused absences as a share of total absences toward the end of the year. From February to June, unexcused absences increase steadily for this group of students.² That is why we must make sure to convey the message that every instructional day matters – even at the end of the school year.

DC Reengagement Center

OSSE has also taken steps to pilot a new initiative that would reallocate some of our existing direct supports to better address the needs of students who significantly struggle with attendance. The goal of this pilot is to support students in reengaging in their current school or to find another program that is a better educational fit for their needs. Currently, the DC Reengagement Center (REC) is working with three DCPS high schools – Anacostia, Ballou, and Roosevelt. DCPS Central Office identified an initial list of students based on extreme lack of attendance (20 consecutive days) and then sent that list to school-based counselors and other staff. These school-based staff identified students on the list with whom they were already working and referred the remaining students to the REC. Staff at the REC are currently attempting to contact students through phone calls, texts, emails, and letters sent to the address in the students' files. Once students are contacted, REC specialists will work with them to conduct a full-intake interview. After the full intake is completed, the REC specialists will work to identify the root cause of the student's limited attendance and connect the student to additional resources/supports as needed, including childcare, public benefits, mental health services, and housing. The last step in the process is determining whether the students should stay at the current school or move to another educational setting. Either way, the REC continues to counsel the student to ensure a good fit. The REC will continue to receive referral lists from schools throughout the spring. We hope to use this pilot to sharpen the referral process and learn more about which approaches best reengage this vulnerable population of students. If the pilot is successful, we will seek to expand to other schools and LEAs.

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. OSSE will continue to support the District's efforts to address these challenging issues, and looks forward to working alongside our sister agencies, the Mayor, and Council to collaboratively support LEAs, students, and families.

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

² *Ibid.* See Figure 6.