

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
OFFICE OF VICTIM SERVICES AND JUSTICE GRANTS



April 2, 2019

The Honorable Phil Mendelson  
Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia  
1350 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Chairman Mendelson:

In response to your letter dated March 26, 2019, please find below our response to the requested pre-hearing questions for the April 4, 2019 oversight hearing titled “Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Initiatives.”

- 1. Show Up Stand Out (SUSO) is not as effective as I had hoped. One reason is that intervention by the CBO with the student and his/her family is voluntary. (The engagement rate ranges from 10-35%.) What would it take to make the intervention mandatory, and what are the reasons, if any, advising against doing this?**

As you know, the District has in place mandatory interventions for truancy. After the tenth unexcused absence for any child ages 5-17, schools are required to notify OSSE; for children ages 5-13 the school must submit a referral to the DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) for suspected educational neglect; and for children ages 14-17, after the 15<sup>th</sup> unexcused absence the school must submit a referral to the Court Social Services Division (CSSD) of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia and the Juvenile Division of the Office of the Attorney General (OAG). The *Show Up, Stand Out* (SUSO) Program was designed to offer an opportunity for students and families to address barriers to school attendance at an earlier intervention point (i.e., five unexcused absences) and choose to access supports and services to allow them to avoid the District’s mandatory intervention systems. A primary incentive for families to engage with SUSO is that it is a voluntary program and not a required “government” program, or one that is perceived as punitive should families choose not to participate.

While the majority of families choose not to engage, the intervention is still largely successful. As demonstrated by data we have previously provided, the majority of students referred in one year are not rereferred in the following year. While analysis across years one through five of the program showed an increasing rate of referral, it still demonstrated that the majority of students are not rereferred.

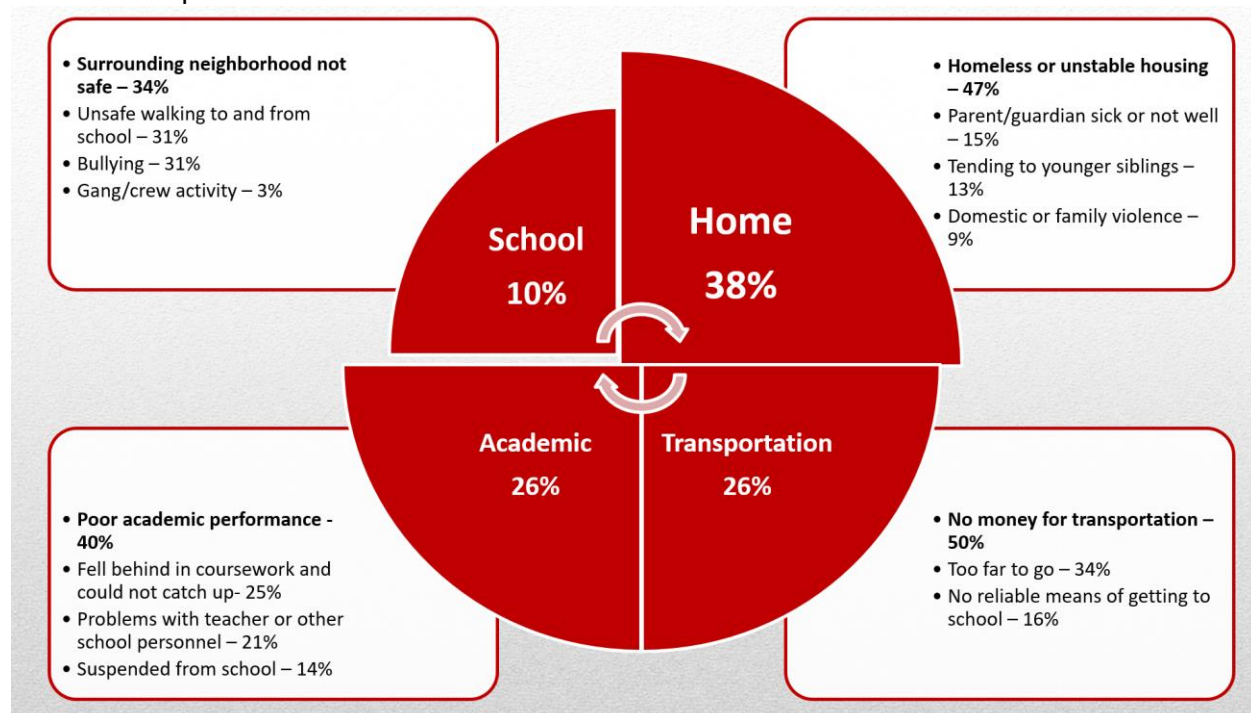
Contemplating making the intervention mandatory is difficult, as OVSJG—unlike CFSA, CSSD, and OAG—does not have an enforcement ability or mechanism. It would also require a fundamental shift in program philosophy as we have historically viewed the program as the “carrot” rather than the “stick.”

Instead of making the intervention mandatory, we believe there are opportunities to enhance the engagement rate and have actively been pursuing several, including moving from an opt-in to opt-out consent model and increasing the number of days that a CBO has to engage families.

**2. SUSO has been in place for at least six years yet truancy has not dropped and maybe is increasing. What changes do you recommend to make SUSO more effective in reducing truancy?**

The data demonstrates that SUSO is an effective intervention. However, it is only one part of the District’s response to truancy and chronic absenteeism and should be viewed in the broader context. SUSO alone cannot, and will not, reduce the District’s truancy rate for multiple reasons. First, fifty percent of chronically truant students are high-school students, a population that SUSO does not work with, as the program targets elementary and middle school students and families. Second, the population that SUSO serves is not static, each year there is new pool of families. Third, the barriers that individual families face with attendance are also dynamic, complex, and often reoccurring.

As we have previously testified, families cite multiple reasons why students are absent and the barriers that impact attendance, including the distance students have to travel to school and other transportation challenges; student medical issues; issues with homelessness or unstable housing; poor academic performance; school suspension; and difficulties with a teacher or other school personnel.



Program participant data from August 2017 through March 2018

The SUSO CBOs work with families to address their needs, but are constrained by limits in systems over which they have no control (e.g., access to housing). That said, we are continuously exploring ways to make SUSO more effective in reducing truancy.

Most recently, we further analyzed the longitudinal rereferral data we presented at the last hearing and found that there were differences in rereferral rates and outcomes when results were broken down by CBO, showing which CBOs were more or less successful in meeting student outcomes. As a result, we will be conducting a formative evaluation in which our evaluator will analyze program processes, review case files, and interview program staff in order to identify practices that may have influenced the increased rereferral rates and student outcomes. The goal is to identify practices that result in increased engagement rates and replicate those across CBOs.

Please let me know if you have any additional questions or if I can provide any other information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle M. Garcia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michelle M. Garcia  
Director