

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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Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairperson Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Patrick Davis, Chief of Operations for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am honored to speak before you today and continue the conversation about DCPS' work to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism.

We believe that every student should experience a safe and welcoming school environment where they feel loved, challenged, and prepared. With the support of the Mayor and your partnership, we are working to accelerate progress and to meet the needs of all our students, especially those furthest from opportunity. We also appreciate OSSE's work through their recent annual Attendance report. Their analysis allows us to proceed with research-based interventions and a more targeted approach. We know more must be done to improve attendance and address chronic absenteeism in our schools.

DCPS remains committed to ensuring daily student attendance improves. 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. 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 an update 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. Compared to this time last year:

- We continued our focus on accurate daily attendance entry, which remains at 98 percent.
- Our current in-seat attendance is up slightly from 90.8 percent this time last year to 91.1percent.
- Our rate of chronic absenteeism has dropped to 22.3 percent, compared to 23.7 percent last year at this time.
- The year to date DCPS truancy rate is 8.6 percent, down from 9.3 percent last year at this time.

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 School Year 2018-19, schools held SST meetings for 79 percent of eligible students, which is eight percentage points higher than the prior year. We anticipate this increasing further for the current school year.

Engaging Authentically with Stakeholders

DCPS continues to implement our Continuous Improvement Framework. This framework allows us to monitor, respond to, and support schools through the implementation of attendance protocols and appropriate interventions. Specifically, we have begun to work more closely with our instructional superintendents and principals through the Cluster Support Model, which is designed to support our school leaders. At DCPS, we recognize a deep understanding of each school's needs is critical for success and have re-aligned our supports centrally to provide the best services to schools.

DCPS has empowered a team of instructional superintendents, or principal supervisors, who are skilled at helping principals grow through both one-on-one and group interactions. The Cluster Support Model includes regular cluster meetings with principals, content leads, and instructional superintendents.



Schools have been strategically organized into clusters to ensure that schools receive the level of support needed to ensure successful implementing of their attendance efforts. DCPS' attendance team has regular opportunities to connect with school leaders as members of the Cluster Support Model and share actionable data, best practices, and highlight areas of concern.

Strengthening City and External Partnerships

At DCPS, we know that we can best serve our students when we work in partnership with families, communities, external partners, and other DC Government agencies. We appreciate the relationships we have built with our partners in this work, some of which include: Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Office of the City Administrator and The Lab @ DC, Office of State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Harvard University's Proving Ground, Office of the Attorney General (OAG), Show Up, Stand Out (SUSO), Kininvolved, DCPS' Connected School Model, and the Mayor's Every Day Counts! Task Force. I would now like to take the opportunity to highlight some of our partnerships and new initiatives.

DCPS is excited to have launched a new partnership with CFSA, which created a specialized social worker unit to quickly identify and investigate cases of education neglect. Members of this unit serve as thought partners for school-based attendance staff at Excel Academy and Moten ES. These social workers support school staff on communication with families and on appropriate interventions for families.

In partnership with the Deputy Mayor of Education (DME), DCPS is piloting the Kininvolved Attendance Intervention Program that will provide classrooms in three DCPS schools¹ access to KinVO, a mobile-based platform, which allows for increased two-way communication between teachers and parents around student attendance and promotes parents' awareness of potential attendance supports. To ensure strategic investments, DCPS also partnered with The Lab @ DC in the City Administrator's Office to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of the tool.

With support from the DC Council, DCPS was awarded a grant from OSSE to support creation of a Community Learning Center (CLC) at Turner Elementary School. The goal of the CLC is to cultivate Turner Elementary into becoming a resource hub for school and community stakeholders. The CLC will work to combat chronic truancy, improve community relations, provide mental health support, and assist with student achievement on the state ELA assessments.

Through our Connected Schools Model, DCPS is partnering with community organizations and leaders to provide an integrated approach to academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement to ensure all students, regardless of background or neighborhood, are able to thrive in school and in life. This year, these efforts are led by Connected Schools Managers at Anacostia HS, Ballou HS, Cardozo EC, Eliot-Hine MS, Hart MS, Kelly Miller MS, Kramer MS, Sousa MS, Langley ES, and Moten ES. Examples of new Connected Schools programming include relationship-building home visiting at Anacostia HS and Moten ES, the expansion of afterschool programming through Afterschool Allstars at Kelly Miller MS, and the establishment of peace rooms at Ballou HS.

Finally, I would like to share an update on the Harvard University's Proving Ground attendance intervention pilot rolled out last year, which involved sending individualized attendance data letters to a subset of students and families who have a history of absences. The goal of the program was to learn the most effective ways to communicate absenteeism interventions and to make sure every impacted

¹ Anacostia HS, Columbia Heights EC, and Dunbar HS



student receives appropriate outreach. Results of the pilot revealed that personalized letters are in fact, an effective way to reduce absences. Families that received letters comparing individual students to the average rates saw reduced absences by 2.7 percent overall. If we scaled letters up to all students, it is estimated that the total absences would be reduced by over 17,000 instructional days. We know that young people deserve every pathway to success, and that begins when students spend more time in school and we reduce the barriers that keep them from missing instruction. Based on these results, we have scaled up the intervention for the current school year. In early November, over 19,000 letters were sent to families.

As an expansion of our work with Proving Ground, DCPS is piloting a research-based Postcard Project. This involves the use of targeted post cards to ensure that parents received communication about not only the number of student absences, but also the content missed because of a student's absence. When piloted in other school districts, student absences were reduced by 6 percent. We are currently piloting this project across three clusters. Teachers in those clusters were randomly selected to participate. The chosen classroom staff members complete an individualized postcard for each student who was absent in the previous week. The post card includes the number of absences the student has year-to-date, as well as examples of a lesson or skill that was taught on that day.

Through these and other partnerships, and innovative initiatives, DCPS is highlighting our commitment to addressing chronic absenteeism and improving student attendance in our schools. We recognize a need to continue implying this innovation with a focus on research-based best practices.

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 DC 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.

