

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education



Public Oversight Hearing
On

**“Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation
of Reform Initiatives”**

Testimony of
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Deputy Mayor for Education

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

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

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Chairperson Grosso, Councilmembers, and staff of the Committee on Education and the Committee of the Whole. I am Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) Paul Kihn and I am pleased to provide testimony at today's hearing on "Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Activities."

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation for your continued focus on this issue and active participation in solution building as members of the Every Day Counts! Task Force. I would also like to thank my agency partners here today who are also all Task Force members. Mayor Bowser remains committed to transparency in our education system and we are fulfilling this charge with unprecedented levels of data transparency, as evidenced by the nature of the reporting that makes not only today's discussion possible, but reducing absenteeism plausible. Being transparent about the work related to attendance and truancy is vital to moving the District of Columbia forward.

Academic achievement is increasing and public schools are growing in Washington, DC. The foundation that we have laid for public education under Mayoral leadership and Council oversight is delivering objectively strong results for our students.

- According to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) we are one of only two states to show significant gains in three subject/grade assessments.
- We have continued to see steady increases for the fourth year in a row on the annual statewide assessment, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), which many states have abandoned due to its difficulty. In addition to more students performing at or exceeding their grade levels in both English Language Arts and Math, a smaller share of students are performing at the lowest levels of the test in both subjects; meaning not only are students achieving at higher levels, but less students are scoring at the lowest levels.
- In 2019, 76 public and public charter schools in DC earned 4- or 5-STAR ratings, the highest possible ratings on the STAR Framework, up from 56 schools in 2018. More than a quarter of all schools across the city improved by one or more STAR.

While the improvements in our schools are undeniable and are to be celebrated, and as we stay on the course of continued success, we know that there are also challenging areas that must be addressed; absenteeism is one of them. While the vast majority of students were not chronically absent or truant last school year, citywide approximately 70 percent were not, and about 30 percent of students were, with stark concentrations in some schools and at certain grade levels. As our schools are improving academically, we need to ensure that all students are benefiting from these improvements and they have to be present in order to do so. The sense of urgency around this issue cannot be more emphasized.

The School Year 2018-2019 attendance reports from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) on behalf of charter local education agencies (LEA), and the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) highlight both positive and negative trends in chronic absenteeism and truancy at individual school and grade levels. For the

first time, the OSSE report presents a deep dive on trends over four years. The report provides key insights in quite a few areas including: (a) students retained in the ninth grade; (b) the growing gap between at-risk students and students with disabilities and their non-identified peers; (c) the predictive nature of pre-k student attendance; and (d) risk factors that impact attendance including student mobility and safety. This deep level analysis produced by our state education agency will provide LEAs, and policy and law makers, with the insights needed to further develop targeted strategies on improve attendance. This reporting reflects our Administration's steadfast support for transparency and producing actionable data.

DME's Role in Attendance

We know that absenteeism can be an indicator of other root educational, health, housing, and safety challenges families face, and that better supporting families in these areas will lead to improving attendance. While schools cannot solely resolve these issues, they do play an important role in attendance. In fact the most critical work in attendance, outside of a student's home, lives in schools and occurs on a daily basis. My office's goal is to support that work by:

- (1) Bringing awareness of attendance issues to families and other stakeholders citywide, and support LEAs with attendance work through things like the Every Day Counts! Campaign;
- (2) Designing and implementing a comprehensive citywide attendance strategy through engaging with youth and families to provide direct input, and managing the Every Day Counts! Task Force (EDCTF), a body of government agencies, the DC Council, LEAs, community based organizations, and other stakeholders who work together to collectively advance and coordinate strategies to increase attendance and reduce truancy in our schools; and
- (3) Making data driven investments to identify and scale up initiatives that work and discontinue initiatives that do not.

From its outset the EDCTF has focused on identifying appropriate barriers to attendance, coordinating offices across government, standardizing data reporting, and supporting schools in attendance work. That was no small feat. This school year the Task Force's work is growing to take deeper dives into the robust data sets that are being produced, examine initiatives across agencies, holding agencies accountability, and piloting and scaling initiatives aimed at improving student attendance.

Innovation

Families play a key role in student attendance and research has shown that providing families with information on student absences and how that can affect students' academic futures have been successful. DME is focused on reducing chronic absenteeism and truancy in Washington, DC and we are utilizing various pilot programs to identify the best solutions to support schools and families and bring them to scale.

As you may know, in School Year 2018-2019 DME supported a cross-sector pilot with Harvard's Proving Ground to partner with DCPS and KIPP DC on evidence-based strategies to improve student attendance. Year 1 examined the impact of sending evidence-based "energy

bill” style communications to targeted families on their child's attendance. The pilot showed that these attendance letters have a positive impact on student attendance, by improving attendance by 2+ percentage points.

This school year four pilot initiatives are underway:

1. Specific DCPS and KIPP schools are participating in the Proving Ground letter initiative started last school year. In addition, the pilot has expanded to include a Postcard Project in which parents of kindergarten students at 41 schools will receive handwritten cards from teachers encouraging them to improve their attendance. The pilot will begin with 1-3 teachers at each school.
2. Kininvolved is a powerful, user-friendly web and mobile family engagement app that strengthens the school-home connection by equipping educators, parents, and students with the information they need to be active participants in preventing student disengagement. Five schools are currently enrolled in the Kininvolved pilot, including two high schools and one education campus.
3. Every Ride Counts! is a transit benefit pilot for families experiencing homelessness. The pilot will provide families experiencing homelessness an opportunity to receive a flexible ridesharing or gas benefits during a two-week transition period into short-term family housing.
4. Carpool to School offers school administrators the ability to leverage technology to offer diverse, low maintenance resources parents and students need to organize carpools, walk pools and bike pools. With_Carpool to School, schools can provide a trusted environment for parents to meet, collaborate, and schedule carpools in order to get their children to and from school. Carpool to school is currently in four schools, with plans to expand to four additional schools next month.

These initiatives align with issue areas identified by the OSSE report. We will evaluate these pilots to ascertain their effectiveness.

Conclusion

I have shared numerous ways in which we are working to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy in Washington, DC. As we look forward, it is vital that we only focus our efforts and resources on proven interventions. We must also continue to listen to, and partner with, our students and families, as we align the work of entities both in and outside of education on tackling issues that contribute to absenteeism. I look forward to continuing to work with the Council and all of our stakeholders to ensure every student can get to school on time, every single day. Thank you for holding a hearing on this important topic. I am happy to take any questions you might have for me, at this time.