

**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  
**Hanseul Kang**  
**Superintendent**

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

December 5, 2019  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Room 412  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20004

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and Chairperson Grosso. My name is Hanseul Kang, and I serve as the State Superintendent of Education for the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education to discuss efforts to improve school attendance in Washington, DC.

High levels of chronic absenteeism and truancy remain a pressing concern for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and our sister agencies. Not only will poor attendance hold back the achievement of our students, it will slow and even threaten the progress we have made to improve student achievement District-wide. My testimony today will briefly outline the steps OSSE will take to address this important issue, and I will also share some highlights of our annual attendance report.

As the state education agency, OSSE plays a significant role in sustaining, accelerating, and deepening educational progress in Washington, DC. One way that we do that is by ensuring that our education partners, such as local education agencies (LEAs), community-based organizations, policymakers, advocates, parents, and the general public, have access to high-quality data about our schools so that they can make informed decisions and better support all learners.

To fulfill our local requirements, OSSE receives daily attendance data from LEAs from automated data transfers. With those daily attendance records, we provide the data back to LEAs in a manner that is easily accessible and actionable. For example, we provide attendance data in easy to read and sort reports to LEAs and schools using a data visualization. We enter into data sharing agreements with sister government agencies, like DC Health, so they may fulfill their lawful functions and provide better supports to students. We share attendance data with bodies that are working on addressing attendance in a coordinated effort, like the Every Day Counts! Taskforce and the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. We also provide data and analysis to the broader public through the DC School Report Card and our annual attendance report. We know that addressing attendance and truancy will require effort from many partners, and OSSE has taken numerous steps to make sure these partners have what they need to engage in this work in a thoughtful way.

OSSE has also implemented the “Truancy Prevention and Literacy Pilot Program Amendment Act of 2019” as required by the Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Support Act. This grant awarded two competitive one-year grants in the amount of \$300,000 each. The goal of the pilot program is to increase attendance and literacy support for students in grades kindergarten through 5. After an external panel review of applications, OSSE awarded grants to DanceMakers-Students Motivated through the Arts at Langdon Elementary School and Turner Elementary School.

### ***Attendance Report***

OSSE released its annual report on the state of absenteeism in the District of Columbia on December 2, 2019. This year’s report, presented final attendance data for the 2018-19 school year at the state and school level. The report includes state level rates of chronic absenteeism and truancy for all students and by student group.

Overall, chronic absenteeism among students in grades K-12 surpassed 30 percent in the 2018-19 school year with 23,376 students missing 10 percent or more of school. This reflects an increase of more than four percentage points, or 4,899 students, since 2015-16. Over the span of four years, truancy rose by

8.5 percentage points, reaching 29.9 percent in 2018-19. The number of truant students increased from 15,215 to 22,460.

This marks the fourth year of the attendance report, and we wanted to provide a longitudinal look at the progress schools were making on addressing these issues. Since the 2015-16 school year, 12 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and four high schools have reduced chronic absenteeism by more than 10 percentage points. Several schools have reduced chronic absenteeism rates every year since the 2015-16 school year. Yet, school-level rates of chronic absenteeism have worsened in some high schools. In the 2015-16 school year, six high schools reported rates of chronic absenteeism above 75 percent, by 2018-19, there were 13 high schools in which more than three-quarters of students were chronically absent. Increases in middle school chronic absenteeism is driven by a small subset of schools, even though a number of middle schools are also improving. This year's attendance report uses this growing longitudinal data on attendance to clearly show what schools appear to be proof points to reducing chronic absenteeism, and those that may need more intensive supports and attention.

Previous attendance reports concluded that a student's prior attendance is a strong indicator of future attendance. This year, we wanted to look longitudinally at chronic absenteeism student cohorts in key grades, like pre-K. While we have historically seen high rates of chronic absenteeism in pre-K, some have speculated that this is due to pre-K attendance being non-compulsory. While it is true that children are not required to attend pre-K, what we see is that a record of chronic absenteeism in these early grades has a lasting effect. When analyzing student attendance from pre-K3 through first grade, OSSE found that students who were chronically absent in pre-K were nearly seven times as likely to be chronically absent again in kindergarten compared to students who were not chronically absent in pre-K. This shows that it is important for parents and schools to address chronic absenteeism at this early age.

The sharp increase in absenteeism between eighth and ninth grade, combined with how predictive attendance in ninth grade is of future outcomes, motivated OSSE to further investigate the attendance behavior of the Washington DC's ninth-grade students. This year's attendance report provides compelling support for a deeper, sustained focus on ninth graders—especially those that are repeating ninth grade. In the 2018-19 school year, more than 25 percent of ninth-grade students were repeating ninth grade. First-time ninth graders and ninth-grade repeaters demonstrate starkly different attendance patterns. Fewer than half of all first time ninth graders were chronically absent in the 2018-19 school year, while 88.3 percent of ninth-grade repeaters were chronically absent. Further, when examining the historic attendance for 9<sup>th</sup> grade repeaters that were profoundly chronically absent, just over a majority of students were profoundly chronically absent the prior year. Yet, when we examined historic attendance records, 20 percent of this year's ninth grade repeaters that had the worst attendance actually weren't chronically absent three years ago. In short, some of our students that are repeating ninth grade and struggling to come to school today, had strong attendance in their past.

The attendance report adds value and important perspectives to our conversations on chronic absenteeism and truancy by examining the relationship between attendance with other variables, such as student mobility, housing stability, and neighborhood safety. We believe that this analysis is powerful not only for education leaders but for other parts of our government as well. When we envisioned providing the public and stakeholders with access to actionable data, this is precisely the value we hoped to add.

### ***Conclusion***

Although overall attendance rates have increased, we strongly believe that chronic absenteeism and truancy are not insurmountable. There are some schools that have successfully reduced chronic absenteeism, and we should learn from them. There are also schools that have not improved, and we must do more to support them.

OSSE continues to play an important role in addressing this issue. Our annual attendance report provides helpful information that can better target and direct our efforts. We will continue to share attendance data in meaningful ways, so stakeholders can take action. To respond to the concerning findings on 9<sup>th</sup> grade highlighted earlier, OSSE will continue to leverage the Bridge to High School Data Exchange. Through this effort, OSSE facilitates the sharing of student level data between a student's sending middle school and their receiving high schools, with the goal of equipping high schools with key student-level data for their incoming ninth graders quickly, securely, and consistently. We believe that opportunities for middle schools and high schools to discuss and plan for specific student needs is a powerful opportunity for schools in addressing this challenge.

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