

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants



Public Oversight Hearing

On

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

Testimony of

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Truancy Reduction Program Coordinator

Before the

Committee of the Whole

The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

&

Committee on Education

The Honorable David Grosso, Chairperson

Council of the District of Columbia

John A. Wilson Building

Room 120

1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20004

December 5, 2019

10:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, Councilmembers, and staff. I am Brenda Aleman, the truancy reduction programs coordinator for the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG). I am pleased to share OVSJG's efforts to reduce truancy in partnership with our seven community-based organizations (CBO) working in 75 schools in all eight wards of the District.

Mayor Muriel Bowser has made substantial investments in our public schools and public charter schools and is committed to ensuring our students are making it to every class, every single day. Consistent student attendance is a citywide challenge that touches every grade level, ward, and school, but by working together as a community and involving students in the process, we can ensure that Every Day Counts!

My testimony will provide updates since the previous hearing in April. At that hearing, we discussed the formative evaluation OVSJG had launched to analyze program processes, review case files, and interview program staff in order to identify practices that may have influenced the increased re-referral rates and student outcomes. As a result, we have identified several areas for enhancement, including strengthening the intake and assessment process, building more consistency in data capture/recording, integrating more explicit connection to truancy in youth clubs, and developing greater program monitoring and quality assurance procedures, and we are working with our CBOs to implement these updates.

For School Year 2019-2020, we have enhanced our capacity to assess CBOs' adherence to program standards and will be meeting quarterly with the CBOs to provide technical assistance and ensure fidelity to the program model. OVSJG also will be providing ongoing training on data entry to enhance consistency in data collection and reporting. We have recently entered into a data sharing agreement with OSSE to allow us to provide student level data to the CBOs so they can better monitor attendance and respond to student and family needs.

We continue to work with the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) through quarterly partnership meetings to identify strategies to increase student/family engagement, with a goal of increasing engagement by 10 percent by the end of this school year. DCPS is also facilitating an opportunity for Show Up Stand Out (SUSO) program staff to connect with school administrators and attendance staff to explore ways to strengthen the referral process within DC public schools.



To increase the likelihood of family engagement, we have expanded the window in which CBOs have to initially connect with families and gain consent from 14 to 21 days. This will prove beneficial in situations where CBOs have challenges locating and contacting families and allow them to engage in additional efforts before having to close out a referral. Additionally, this summer during our SUSO Training Academy, CBOs received training from the Flamboyant Foundation to build capacity on engaging families.

We have previously discussed our efforts with DCPS and the Public Charter Schools Board (PCSB) to import student data into our SUSO database, Efforts to Outcomes (ETO). At the recommendation of both LEAs, and through the support of the Deputy Mayor for Education, we are in the process of entering into a data sharing agreement with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to receive student attendance data. We have also entered into a data sharing agreement with DCPS and have drafted a data sharing agreement with PCSB to share student level data to increase transparency with our partners on the students that are engaged with SUSO.

Additionally, OVSJG has entered into a data sharing agreement with the District of Columbia Courts to assess SUSO's efficacy in disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. Juvenile court data will be used to compare outcomes between engaged and non-engaged students' contact with and penetration into the successive stages of the juvenile justice system (*e.g.*, diversion, initial hearing, consent decree, deferred disposition, and outcome of adjudication).

I will now turn to the OVSJG High School Truancy Reduction Pilot (HSTRP) Program. The HSTRP is in its third year and funds three CBOs to implement truancy reduction programming in six DCPS and DC Public Charter Schools (DCPCS) high schools. During School Year 2018-2019, OVSJG administered a short pre/post program survey via CBOs to student participants of the HSTRP program. The survey focused on student attitudes on attendance and school resources, perceptions about schools, and self-reported attendance behavior. On average, students reported neutral to positive attitudes about school and, overall, a statistically significant improvement was found for "I have an adult I can talk to if I'm having problems at school." On average, students' responses to attendance and behavior showed positive increases with statistically significant improvement found on the survey item "I access school engagement services such as tutoring and extra-curricular activities." We also compared



student outcomes in attendance for School Year 2017-2018 and found that students in the program reported higher in-seat attendance and lower rates of unexcused absences compared than students that did not participate in the HSTRP. While we have focused on quantitative data related to the SUSO and HSTRP program, we also want to highlight qualitative data and the impact of the program on families. Attached to my testimony are several stories collected by our CBOs from SUSO families and HSTRP students that demonstrate the real-life impact of our truancy reduction programs.

Lastly, I want to highlight work we are doing in other OVSJG programs to address truancy. The Juvenile Justice Advisor Group (JJAG) – which is charged with making recommendations to the Mayor and Council related to juvenile justice system improvement and reform efforts – is focused on improving outcomes for youth designated as Persons In Need of Supervision (PINS) (*i.e.*, status offenders) in the juvenile justice system, specifically youth charged as PINS for truancy or habitual runaway behaviors. While recent District legislative reforms banned detention of status offenders, the JJAG and cross-system partners believe that the District could improve its coordinated community-based response to the needs of this population of youth and that creation of such a response would alleviate the need to involve this subset of young people in the justice system at all. The JJAG is working to develop formal recommendations related to building a stronger and more coordinated continuum of community-based services and supports that meet the needs of youth and families to both prevent and divert youth from court involvement.

I appreciate the Council's efforts to improve attendance in the District and look forward to continuing to work with you on these initiatives. I am available to address your questions.

