DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

# Annual Truancy Report

September 2017

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## Introduction

In compliance with Section 38-203(i) of the District of Columbia Code, DC Public Schools (DCPS) is pleased to report to the Office of State Superintendent of Schools a summary of the District's truancy data for School Year 2016-2017. As required, the report reflects:

- The number of minors, with unexcused absences, categorized by grade, or equivalent grouping for ungraded schools, for:
    - 1-5 days
    - 6-10 days
    - 11-20 days
    - 21 or more days
- A discussion of the efforts of the school-based student support teams to reduce unexcused absences that includes:
    - The number of students referred to a school-based student support team;
    - The number of students who met with a school-based student support team;
    - A summary of the action plans and strategies implemented by the school-based student support team to eliminate or ameliorate unexcused absences;
    - A summary of the services utilized by students to reduce unexcused absences; and
    - A summary of the common barriers to implementing the recommendations of the school-based student support team.
- The number of minors, categorized by grade, or equivalent grouping for ungraded schools, that the school reported to the Child and Family Services Agency pursuant to § 4-1321.02(a-1) and (a-2).
- The number of minors categorized by grade, or equivalent grouping for ungraded schools, referred for truancy to the Court Social Services Division of the Family Court of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia; and
- The policy on absences used, including defined categories of valid excuses.

### HIGHLIGHTS

During School Year 2016-2017, DCPS continued its work at the district level to increase student attendance and reduce truancy. DCPS has worked to increase collaboration across offices to provide supports to schools and to increase the district's accountability for compliance with the truancy protocol and referral processes. DCPS provided intensive training to schools, generated guidance documents featuring best practices in truancy reduction for schools, and leveraged critical supports and resources through our partner agencies. The district has also strived to improve collaboration across agencies and key stakeholders, maintaining membership on the District's Everyday Counts Taskforce (formerly known as the Truancy Taskforce).

DCPS' end-of-year student attendance rates are noted below:

- DCPS ended School Year 2016-2017 with an 88.9 percent In-Seat Attendance (ISA) rate. This represents a 0.8 percent decrease from the 89.7 percent ISA rate for School Year 2015-2016. The School Year 2015-2016 ISA rate had been a 0.2 percent increase over the previous school year (89.5% ISA for SY14-15).
- DCPS experienced an increase in its truancy rate for School Year 2016-2017, ending the year at 25.9 percent – a 5 percent increase from School Year 2015-2016 (20.9%).
- DCPS is continuing analyze the potential causes of these trends. The district is paying particular attention to the potential impact on attendance of extended year schedules, changes in the attendance law (most notably, new restrictions on schools' ability to accept excuse notes), and increases in the fidelity of attendance data entry.

## Unexcused Absences for Minors

The number of minors, with unexcused absences, categorized by grade, or equivalent grouping for ungraded schools, during School Year 2016-2017 is included in Table 1 below. This data represents compulsory school-aged students (ages 5 through 17) enrolled in DCPS.

**Table 1: Unexcused Absences Counting Towards Truancy by Grade**

| Grade | Enrollment | # 1-5 Absences | % 1-5 Absences | # 6-10 Absences | % 6-10 Absences | # 11-20 Absences | % 11-20 Absences | # 21+ Absences | % 21+ Absences |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K | 4579 | 2340 | 51.1% | 882 | 19.3% | 448 | 9.8% | 171 | 3.7% |
| 1 | 4542 | 2397 | 52.8% | 870 | 19.2% | 418 | 9.2% | 143 | 3.1% |
| 2 | 4312 | 2304 | 53.4% | 833 | 19.3% | 354 | 8.2% | 106 | 2.5% |
| 3 | 4362 | 2250 | 51.6% | 885 | 20.3% | 372 | 8.5% | 122 | 2.8% |
| 4 | 4246 | 2316 | 54.5% | 773 | 18.2% | 350 | 8.2% | 109 | 2.6% |
| 5 | 3518 | 1917 | 54.5% | 667 | 19.0% | 247 | 7.0% | 77 | 2.2% |
| 6 | 2889 | 1340 | 46.4% | 509 | 17.6% | 260 | 9.0% | 154 | 5.3% |
| 7 | 2407 | 1221 | 50.7% | 436 | 18.1% | 265 | 11.0% | 177 | 7.4% |
| 8 | 2565 | 1261 | 49.2% | 540 | 21.1% | 300 | 11.7% | 201 | 7.8% |
| 9 | 3962 | 710 | 17.9% | 566 | 14.3% | 660 | 16.7% | 1322 | 33.4% |
| 10 | 2979 | 630 | 21.1% | 438 | 14.7% | 532 | 17.9% | 1133 | 38.0% |
| 11 | 2686 | 486 | 18.1% | 393 | 14.6% | 519 | 19.3% | 1115 | 41.5% |
| 12 | 2098 | 426 | 20.3% | 301 | 14.3% | 389 | 18.5% | 821 | 39.1% |
| CE[1] | 155 | 58 | 37.42% | 23 | 14.84% | 23 | 14.84% | 29 | 18.71% |
| EX[2] | 16 | 5 | 31% | 6 | 38% | 3 | 19% | 1 | 6% |
| XX[3] | 31 | 1 | 3% | 2 | 6% | 5 | 16% | 1 | 3% |
| **Total[4]** | **45350** | **19664** | **43%** | **8124** | **18%** | **5146** | **11%** | **5682** | **13%** |

1 CE: Certificate Option

2 EX: Exchange Student

3 XX: Error code signifying a high school student whose grade is not able to be determined due to missing first ninth grade year entry in Aspen student information system.

4 Total: Evening students were excluded from the total due to the need to exclude aggregate data with group sizes less than 10 and the limits of confidentiality.

## Student Support Teams

DCPS believes that our overall attendance work is driven by four strategies: reducing truancy, increasing the attendance of all students, reducing suspensions and improving school climate.

Attendance Student Support Teams (SST) are the foundational, school-based, problem-solving teams that provide teachers, students and families with support for students who present attendance concerns. Attendance SST members—including attendance staff, administrators, school counselors, social workers, school nurses and other relevant school level support staff, in addition to families, and sometimes students—use a collaborative process to: assess student needs and set positive goals; identify barriers to attendance; recommend strategies that students, families, and school staff can implement to improve attendance; and develop and monitor attendance support plans.

In School Year 2016-2017, 19,792 students accrued 5 or more unexcused absences, resulting in attendance SST referrals. DCPS held SST meetings for 14,873 of these students (75%). By comparison, in School Year 2015-2016, 15,560 students required an SST meeting and DCPS held meetings for 11,592 of these students (75%); in School Year 2014-2015, 16,947 SST referrals were required and DCPS held SST meetings for 10,798 of these students (64%). The increase in the number of referrals over this period reflects increases in enrollment, as well as shifts in the rules defining absences, and increased accountability for holding attendance SST meetings.

DCPS continues to analyze and modify the work of Student Support Teams to ensure that, as currently structured, they are effective in assisting students, and we strive to identify and abate known barriers to attendance.

The Attendance SSTs implement a variety of strategies to eliminate or reduce the number of unexcused absences. In addition to delivering more consistent messaging regarding the importance of students attending school on time every day, DCPS continues general practices designed to address student truancy: making calls to students' homes and issuing required attendance letters to families; conducting parent conferences and home visits; developing attendance contracts with students and parents; providing school-based counseling; making referrals to community agencies and partners; providing attendance incentives and rewards programs; and making external referrals to Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and Court Social Services (CSS). DCPS also provides a number of direct services and supports to help reduce unexcused absences: clothing, transportation assistance, parenting classes, uniforms, child-care assistance, vision care assistance, referrals to school-based and Department of Mental Health clinical staff and counselors, as well as other community-based organizations.

Another strategy for truancy reduction involves the work of the central Behavior and Supports and School Climate teams, that work with schools to identify alternatives to suspensions. DCPS has taken a proactive approach toward increasing positive behavior supports and using alternatives to suspension to maximize students' time in the school and the classroom. This has helped to strengthen school climate, as well as increase in-seat attendance. DCPS has targeted its school climate work in our lowest- performing schools and provides additional professional development for classroom management to build teacher capacity and improve school climate.

Finally, DCPS is striving to make the academic experience more joy-filled, enriching, and rewarding while maintaining rigorous instructional expectations; we believe this will inspire students to improve their timeliness and school attendance.

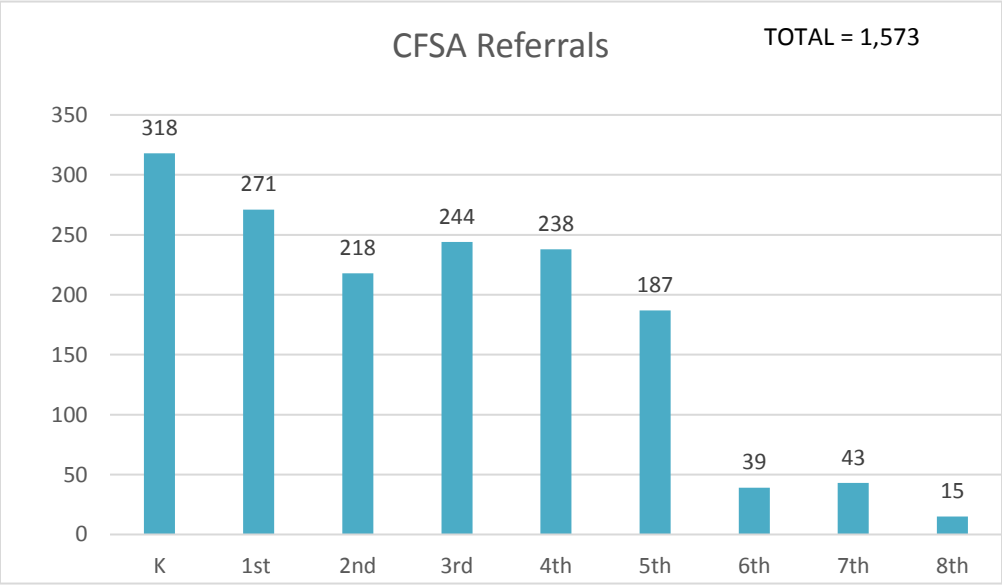
## Referrals to Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)

Over the last several years, DCPS has maintained a consistent rate of educational neglect referrals.

| | |
|---|---|
| School Year 2016-2017 | 1,573 of 1,969 eligible students[1] (80%) were referred to CFSA for educational neglect. |
| School Year 2015-2016 | 1,956 of 2,439 eligible students[2] (80.2%) were referred to CFSA |
| School Year 2014-2015 | 2,170 of 2,713 eligible students[3] (80%) were referred to CFSA |

The district attributes this improvement to increased accountability for school leaders, increased training, and regular monitoring and support from the DCPS Attendance Team. The table below illustrates the distribution of referrals to CFSA across grade levels. Again this year, the largest number of referrals addressed unexcused absences in Kindergarten. Kindergarten marks the first full year of compulsory school attendance, yet our schools are challenged to correct the impression that Kindergarten is optional (or the equivalent of daycare) for these students. We continue to emphasize that early intervention and communication around the importance of establishing good habits of regular school attendance in early grades is critical to addressing truancy.

**Figure 1: CFSA Referrals by Grade**




[1] Students between the ages 5 - 13 who accumulated 10 or more all day unexcused absences. 1,573 reflects referrals made for currently enrolled compulsory education- aged students. There were 2,342 actual referrals made, some of which were duplicative and others are for students who subsequently withdrew or were over the required age.

[2] Students between the ages 5 - 13 who accumulated 10 or more unexcused absences. 1,956 reflects referrals made for currently enrolled compulsory education-aged students. There were 2,733 actual referrals made, some of which were duplicative and others are for students who subsequently withdrew or were over the required age.

[3] Students between the ages 5 - 13 who accumulated 10 or more unexcused absences. 2,170 reflects referrals made for currently enrolled compulsory education-aged students. There were 2,713 actual referrals made, some of which were duplicative and others are for students who subsequently withdrew.

## Referrals to Court

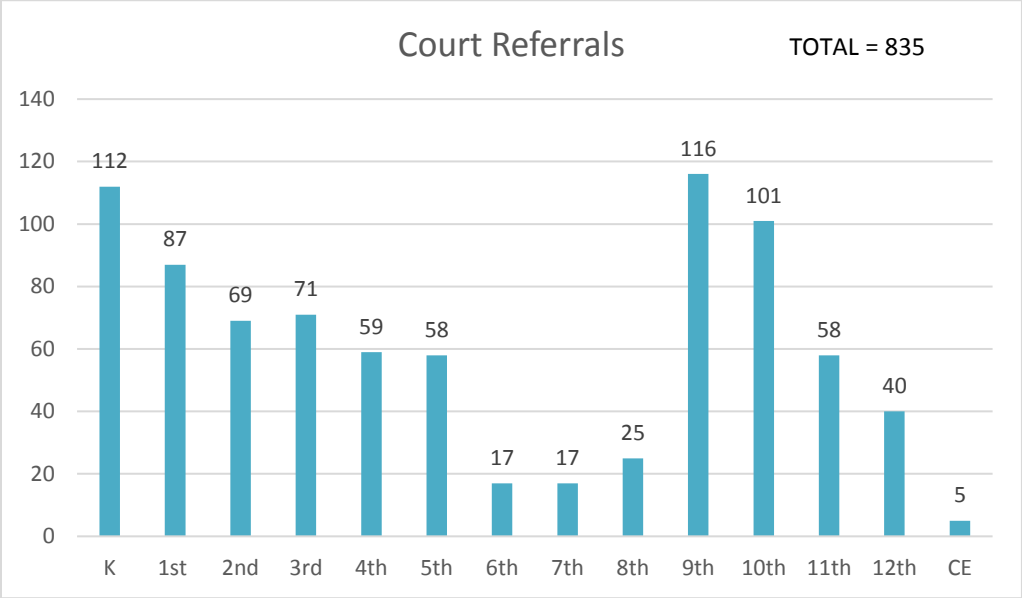
DCPS has also improved its rate of referrals for court-eligible truancy cases.

| | |
|---|---|
| School Year 2016-2017: | 835 of 1,820 eligible students[4] (46%) referred to Court (including Court Social Services and OAG) |
| School Year 2015-2016 | 1,023[5] of 3,710 eligible students[6] (28%) referred to CSS |
| School Year 2014-2015 | 1,032[7] of 3,721 eligible students[8] (28%) referred to CSS |

Previously, schools struggled to provide the extensive proof of the requisite attendance protocol steps for court referrals (e.g., copies of 3, 5, 7, and 15-day letters mailed to a family; CFSA referrals; attendance records; special education or Section 504 records; evidence of intervention services and copies of referral to outside resources; as well as SST plans and social history narrative). However, the shift from the previous "80/20" rule prompted a decrease in the number of students requiring referral, and generated more manageable numbers of student referrals.

The table below illustrates the distribution of referrals to court for SY15-16. The largest number of referrals was made to address absences at the ninth grade level.

**Figure 2: Court Referrals by Grade**




[4] Previous years report included only students between the ages 14 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences regardless of whether absences were the result of all day or 80/20% rule. SY 16-17 report includes students between the ages 5 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences for all day absences.

[5] Note: The total of 1,023 reflected in Figure 2 includes students between the ages 14-18 in grades 7-12. There were 7 additional CSS referrals made for six graders, certificate, evening students and "other" category).

[6] Students between the ages 14 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences.

[7] Note: The total of 1,008 reflected in Figure 2 includes students between the ages 14-18 in grades 7-12. There were 24 additional CSS referrals made for six graders, certificate, evening students and "other" category – 2 sixth graders, 10 certificate students, 10 evening students and 2 "other" category students).

[8] Students between the ages 14 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences.

## Valid Reasons for Absence

Lawful reasons for absence are defined in DCMR Chapter 21. Section 2101.2 defines the following absences as excused:

- Student illness or medical cause (absences for five days or more require a doctor's note)
- Medical or dental appointment for the student
- Death in the student's immediate family
- Exclusion due to quarantine, contagious disease, etc.
- Necessity for a student to attend a judicial proceeding as a plaintiff, defendant, witness or juror
- Observance of a religious holiday
- Lawful suspension or exclusion from school by school authorities
- Temporary facility closings due to weather, unsafe conditions or other emergencies
- Absences to allow students to visit their parent or a legal guardian, who is in the military; immediately before, during, or after deployment
- Failure of DC to provide legally responsible transportation
- Emergency or circumstances approved by LEA

When school-aged students are absent from school, without a written excuse indicating a lawful reason for the absence, this absence will be deemed an unexcused absence, regardless of parental approval.

Examples of unexcused absences include:

- Providing child care for siblings
- Personal errands
- Oversleeping
- Skipping classes
- Job hunting
- Family travel

## Strategies for Improvement

In School Year 2016-2017, DCPS continued to provide focused training and support for schools to implement best practice intervention strategies, generate incentives and outreach to students and families, and to connect with community and agency partners for external support. With a focus on improving ISA, DCPS continued to provide data and guidance to school staff for the students who are chronically absent (those who have missed ten percent or more of the school year, regardless of whether those absences were excused). Following is a list of strategies schools used to improve student attendance:

- DCPS created relationship-based, attendance goal-setting programs at the school level, targeting students who had been chronically absent in the prior school year. These programs were implemented at the beginning of the year, and involved weekly check-ins centering around positive attendance reinforcement and problem-solving.
- DCPS sent over 3,000 individualized letters to families of students who have been chronically absent.
- DCPS continued its focus on improving school climate and reducing suspensions. The School Climate Initiative worked to increase student achievement by contributing to a decrease in student discipline infractions and suspensions, an increase in student engagement and attendance, an increase in overall stakeholder satisfaction and voice (students, staff, and families), and an increase in staff capacity in building positive relationships with students.
- DCPS expanded its Restorative Justice (RJ) program from seven schools to 20 schools. The participating schools have been exposed to RJ through training provided in collaboration with School Talk Inc., Youth and Families in Crisis LLC, ACCESS Youth and OSSE.
- DCPS attendance specialists provided targeted supports for specific schools with high truancy concerns, and ACCESS Youth also provided three (3) paid, full-time staff at Ballou HS, Eastern HS, and Washington Met HS, focused on Restorative Justice and truancy reduction.
- DCPS offered student incentives and giveaways for improved and/or attendance.
- DCPS conducted a variety of professional development opportunities including small-group and communities of practice discussions for schools, in addition to sharing district-level policy and program guidance.
- DCPS partnered with local businesses to request posting of signs stating that the businesses would not serve students during school hours.
- DCPS placed radio and transit ads stressing the importance of regular school attendance.

DPCS ended the school year with an 88.9 percent ISA rate (against a goal of 90.5 percent), which represents a decline of 0.8% from the 2015-2016 school year. Previous years' rates were 89.5 percent for School Year 2014-2015; 88.5 percent for School Year 2013-2014; and 86 percent for School Year 2012-2013).

For School Year 2017-2018, DCPS has partnered with Attendance Works, a national organization known for improving attendance, to help us review our processes and practices to ensure best practices. DCPS will also provide enhanced individualized professional development and intervention guidance to eleven secondary schools that have struggled with low ISA rates and other attendance concerns. Further, DCPS will continue its Response to Intervention (RTI) approach to providing individualized supports for students. The district will expand the Restorative Justice cohort with 20 additional schools next school year, and the School Climate Initiative will increase the number of participating schools. These approaches are all designed to build staff capacity to build positive relationships with students, reach more students, and increase student engagement. This, in turn, should result in fewer student discipline infractions and suspensions and increased student attendance.

While DCPS recognizes that there is no magic bullet for improving attendance, the district is committed to communicating that every day is critical for student achievement. DCPS is deeply committed to the District's citywide

effort – Every Day Counts! – to support improved student attendance, and the district will continue to engage and inform our students and parents about the importance of regular attendance, and provide our schools with data and resources to better communicate this to students and parents. We believe that our enhanced work around chronic absenteeism, in combination with our consultation with national leaders in attendance intervention, and the continued improvement of school climate and restorative justice initiatives will result in increased attendance and student achievement.