Annual Truancy Report

August 2016

Introduction

In compliance with Section 38-203(i) of the District of Columbia Code, DC Public Schools (DCPS) is pleased to report to the Mayor and the Council a summary of the District's truancy data for School Year 2015-2016. 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

Throughout SY15-16, DCPS worked with the Truancy Taskforce to align the attendance business rules between school sectors (traditional and charter schools) and to prepare a comprehensive list of recommendations for programmatic and legislative changes to better support the attendance process. Internally, DCPS provided focused supports to schools and increased accountability for compliance with the truancy protocol and referral processes. DCPS provided intensive training to schools, designed guidance for school leaders and attendance staff regarding best practices, strengthened case management, and leveraged critical supports and resources through our partner agencies.

This has resulted in modest, but continued improvement in student attendance rates as noted below:

- DCPS ended SY15-16 with an 89.7% In-Seat Attendance (ISA) rate, a .2% increase over SY14-15.
- The district also achieved a continued trend of truancy rate reduction[1], with 16.8% of our students categorized as "chronically truant" during SY15-16 (those with 10 or more absences). This is a notable decrease over the past four years when the truancy rate for SY14-15 had been 17.2%; 18.2% for SY13-14 and 26.9% for SY 12-13.
- During the SY15-16, DCPS experienced a 4.8% reduction in the truancy rate for 9th graders (48.3% to 43.5%) and the truancy rate for *first-time* 9th graders was reduced by 2.3% (43.7% to 41.4%). However,

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[1] The truancy definition for SY13-14 included 5 year olds regardless of whether they were 5 years old as of September 30th of the relevant school year; in SY14-15 (and moving forward), the September 30th age cut-off applies.

9th grade repeaters made a significant reduction of almost 14% (from 65.5% to 51.8%).   Elementary school truancy was reduced by 2.4%, while the truancy rate for high schools remained flat overall and middle schools experienced a 4% increase.

▪ High school students in grades 9 through 11 continue to represent the largest group of students in the most severe truancy category (21 or more unexcused absences), with 9th graders being over-represented. (There are more 9th graders in DCPS than any other secondary school grade, causing the truancy patterns of these students to have a significant impact on secondary attendance data.)

Unexcused Absences for Minors

A breakdown of the incidents of truancy, as required by §38-203(i) (A), is included in Table 1 below. This data represents compulsory school-aged students (ages 5 through 17) enrolled in SY15-16.

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	4268	2443	57%	665	16%	229	5%	104	2%
1	4184	2313	55%	682	16%	225	5%	67	2%
2	4145	2305	56%	697	17%	222	5%	75	2%
3	4108	2382	58%	657	16%	175	4%	52	1%
4	3644	2183	60%	513	14%	172	5%	54	1%
5	3161	1882	60%	417	13%	114	4%	27	1%
6	2185	1285	59%	336	15%	151	7%	89	4%
7	2356	1347	57%	429	18%	187	8%	81	3%
8	2461	1309	53%	412	17%	232	9%	165	7%
9	3638	967	27%	573	16%	526	14%	970	27%
10	2860	702	25%	480	17%	527	18%	808	28%
11	2648	555	21%	435	16%	495	19%	768	29%
12	2903	550	19%	350	12%	381	13%	620	21%
CE[2]	280	60	21%	24	9%	24	9%	30	11%
EV[3]	754	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
EX[4]	15	5	33%	6	40%	2	13%	0	0%
XX[5]	36	1	3%	0	0%	3	8%	0	0%
Total	**43646**	**20289**	**46%**	**6676**	**15%**	**3665**	**8%**	**3910**	**9%**

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[2] CE: Certificate Option
[3] EV: Evening Option
[4] EX: Exchange Student
[5] XX: Students without 9th grade enrollment in DCPS listed

Student Support Teams

Attendance Student Support Teams (SSTs) are 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: (1) assess student needs and set positive goals; (2) identify barriers to attendance; (3) recommend strategies that students, families, and school staff can implement to improve attendance; and (4) develop and monitor attendance support plans.

In SY15-16, 15,560 students accrued 5 or more unexcused absences, resulting in attendance SST referrals.[6] DCPS held SST meetings for 11,592 of these students (75%). Last year, 16,947 students accrued 5 or more unexcused absences, resulting in attendance SST referrals. DCPS held SST meetings for 10,798 of these students (64%). In SY13-14, 16,917 students were referred to an attendance SST and DCPS held SST meetings for 9,285 of these students (55%). The increases in referrals over this period largely reflect the shifts and clarifications in rules defining absences, as well as the increased accountability for holding attendance SST meetings.

DCPS attendance SSTs implemented a variety of strategies to eliminate or reduce the number of unexcused absences – including making calls and issuing attendance letters to families (reminding of compulsory attendance requirements), 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 CFSA and CSS. The services provided to students to help reduce unexcused absences included clothing, transportation assistance, parenting classes, uniforms, child-care assistance, vision care and referrals to school-based clinical staff, Department of Mental Health social workers and counselors, as well as other community-based organizations.   Additionally, DCPS has made concerted efforts to increase messaging regarding the importance of students attending school on time every day.

DCPS continues to analyze the work of Student Support Teams to determine if the meetings, as currently structured, are effective in assisting students. Our overall attendance work is driven by four strategies: reducing truancy, increasing the attendance of all students, reducing suspensions and improving school climate.

As one approach, the Behavior and Supports and School Climate teams within the Office of Youth Engagement (OYE) have worked diligently with schools to help identify alternatives to suspensions. DCPS has taken a proactive approach towards increasing positive behavior supports and using alternative to suspension to maximize students' time in the classroom. This has helped to build a positive school climate, as well as increase in-seat attendance. In particular, special attention to improving school climate has been given to our lowest- performing schools, with additional professional development and work around building teacher capacity around classroom management.

We have also focused on making the school experience more enjoyable, enriching, and rewarding while maintaining rigorous academics, with the expectation that this will compel students to better attendance and timeliness.

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[6] The South Capitol Street Amendment Act of 2012 and the Attendance Accountability Act of 2013 established requirements for Attendance SST referrals when a student accumulates 5 unexcused absences during a marking or similar period

Referrals to Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)

In SY15-16, 1956 of the 2,439 eligible students[7] (80.2%) were referred to CFSA for educational neglect. In SY14-15, 2,170 of the 2,713 eligible students[8] (80%) were referred to CFSA for educational neglect, and in SY 13-14, 1,177 of 2,550 students were referred to CFSA (46%). The increase in referrals since SY13-14 represents DCPS' stricter application of the rules due to additional training and enhanced emphasis on this requirement, as well as weekly monitoring and support from the OYE Attendance Team. DCPS continues to strive for 100% compliance in this area.

The table below illustrates the distribution of referrals to CFSA across grade levels. Again this year, the largest number of referrals was made to address 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 daycare for these students. We recognize that early intervention and instilling good habits of regular school attendance in early grades is critical to addressing truancy and we continue to communicate to parents that this is a time when key skills are developed. DCPS continues to review best practices to address this concern and has seen a significant reduction of CFSA referrals made for kindergarteners between SY14-15 (412) and SY15-16 (332).

Figure 1: CFSA Referrals by Grade
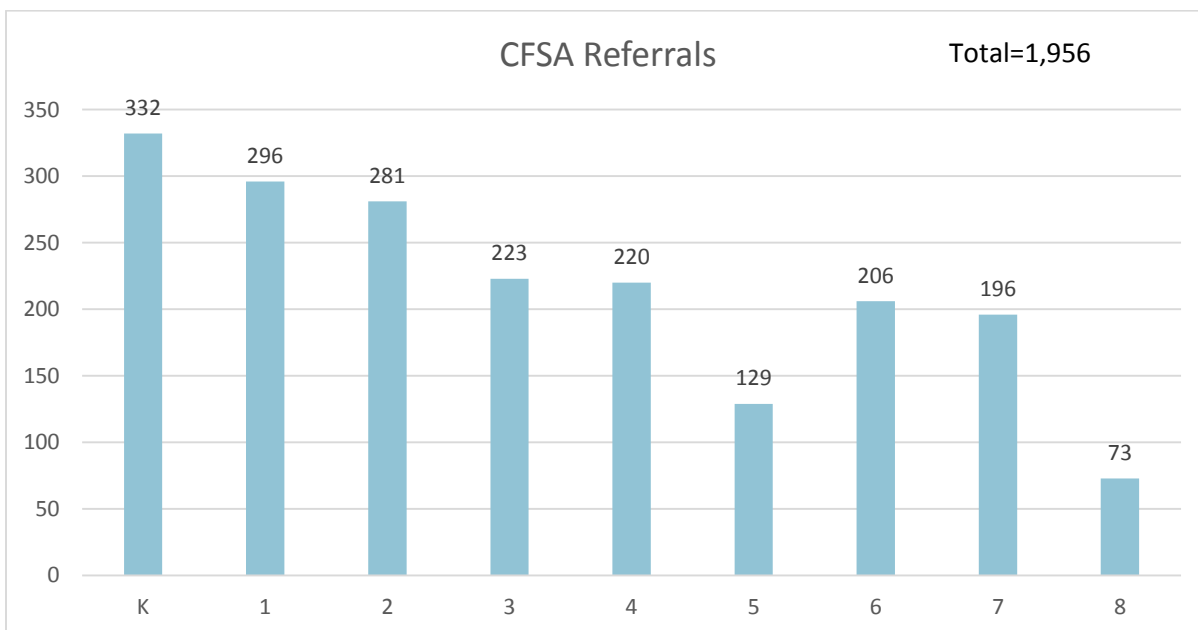

Referrals to Court Social Services (CSS)

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[7] 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.

[8] 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 2,739 actual referrals made, some of which were duplicative and others are for students who subsequently withdrew.

In SY15-16, DCPS referred 1023[9] of 3,710 eligible students[10] (28%) to Court Social Services (CSS). Last year, DCPS referred 1,032[11] of 3,721 eligible students[12] (28%) to CSS.   In SY13-14, DCPS referred 690 of 3,738 eligible students (18%).   In SY12-13, DCPS referred 897 of 1,578 students (57%) to CSS. The compliance rate for court referrals has not moved much over this period, as schools continued to struggle to provide the extensive (paperwork) proof that each of the attendance protocol steps were completed before court referral may be made (for example, with 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).   Additionally, because of the length of time it takes before students receive diversion or other services following these referrals, schools/staff don't easily recognize the value of making court referrals.

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

Figure 2: CSS Referrals by Grade
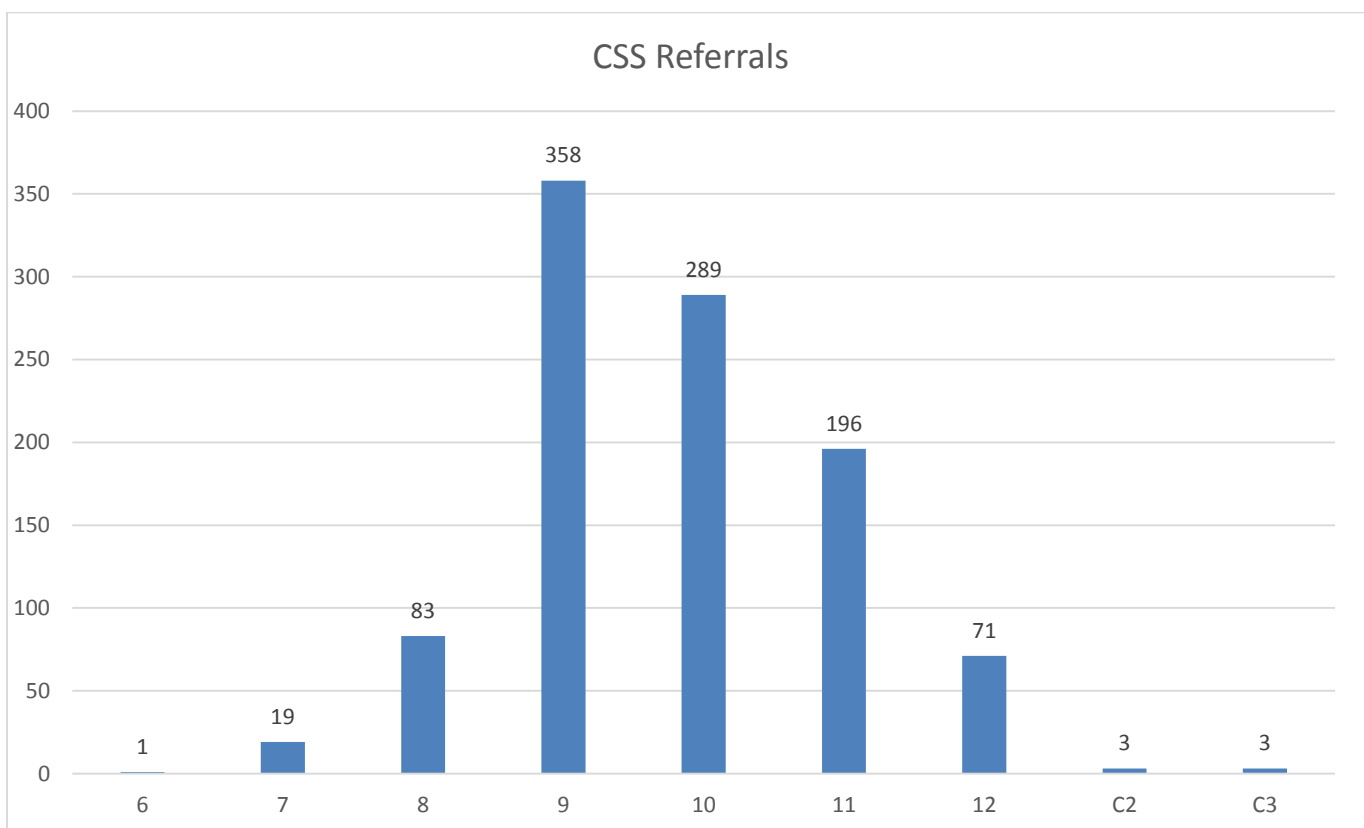
Total= 1,023

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[9] 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).
[10] Students between the ages 14 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences.

[11] 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).
[12] 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 SY15-16

In SY15-16, DCPS continued to provide focused training and support for schools to address attendance and truancy prevention strategies, strengthen school accountability for attendance goals, generate incentives and outreach to students and families, and connect with our community and agency partners for support. We also focused on in-seat attendance (ISA), which measures students who are in seats each day. It is a much higher standard, and one that sends the message to families and students that daily attendance matters. The following is a list of strategies schools used to improve their in-seat attendance:

- Schools implementing an all hands-on-deck approach to attendance, with virtually all staff members supporting attendance work (teacher phone calls, staff mentorship, leveraging natural or established student/staff relationships in the building, school based Check and Connect initiatives).
- Additional professional development opportunities were provided to improve staff competencies.
- Ongoing focus on improving school climate and reducing suspensions.
- School leaders, especially those with school ISA lower than 93%, developing their own ISA goals and attendance plans.
- Awards for the most improved ISA and compliance.
- Student/staff incentives and giveaways.
- Radio and bus ads stressing the importance of school attendance.
- Enhanced communications with parents/students about attendance including telephone outreach by central office attendance staff.
- Deployment of attendance specialists who focused their supports on schools with intensive attendance concerns.
- More strategic use of external partner supports

This year, we ended the school year with an 89.7% ISA rate for the district (ISA goal-90%) This is an improvement over the SY14-15 ISA rate of 89.5% (The rate for SY13-14 and 12-13 were 88.5%, 86% respectively). This rate is a critical indicator because it shows that each year more of our students are in school each day. DCPS monitors "in-seat attendance" — a measure that shows how many students are actually present on any given day. It also helps staff determine which schools and students have the greatest attendance challenges and assists in identifying periods of low attendance in order to proactively plan interventions.

DCPS continues to work with schools to review current staffing models and identify ways to provide additional supports for home visits, calls to parents, and SST meetings – both within their buildings and through partnerships. Schools were trained in best practices for using the resources of PASS, JGA, Access Youth, Social Worker interns and MPD to increase their capacity to conduct SST meetings and provide case management. Additionally, our ongoing implementation of a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach is designed to address students with individualized needs. RTI represents a broader approach that augments the SST meeting process, and addresses students' needs relative to academics and behavior, as well as attendance.

Overall, DCPS has continued to trend in the right direction regarding truancy and ISA; however we understand that in order to curtail chronic truancy, we will continue to aggressively approach the problem by identifying the root causes of unexcused absences, addressing the causes by connecting students with support systems, and ensuring that students and parents are appropriately engaged. We will move forward with the current approach, combined with our school climate work, public attendance awareness campaigns, continued focus on our Ninth Grade Academies, implementation of RTI and improving the overall quality of school experiences for our students to make additional strides in reducing school truancy.