



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

August 2014

Annual Truancy Report

Submitted by: DC Public Schools, Office of Youth Engagement

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 to the Council of the District of Columbia a summary of the district's truancy data for School Year 2013-2014. As required, the report includes:

- The number of minors, categorized by grade, or equivalent grouping for ungraded schools, who had unexcused absences for:
 - 1-5 days;
 - 6-10 days;
 - 11-20 days;
 - 21 or more days.
- The work of the school-based student support teams in reducing unexcused absences, including:
 - The number of students who were 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, that the school referred to the Court Social Services Division of the Family Court of the Superior Court of the District of Columbia for truancy; and
- The policy on absences used, including defined categories of valid excuses.

HIGHLIGHTS

This year, DCPS focused on continued improvements in the collection and analysis of attendance data; increased accountability for compliance with the truancy protocol and SST process; more intensive training for school staff and support from central office; and stronger case management, leveraging critical support and resources through our partner agencies.

- In SY13-14, DCPS saw a continued trend of reduction in the truancy rate¹, with 18.2% of our students categorized as “chronically truant.” (Our goal was 22%) The overall truancy rate for last school year was 26.9%.²
- The high school grades continue to represent the largest percentage of DCPS students who are truant.
- High school students also indicate more severe truancy (eg., students truant for 21 days or more) and deeper disengagement from school.
- Ninth-grade students represent the largest group of students in the most severe truancy category (21 or more unexcused absences), and because there are more 9th graders in DCPS than any other secondary

¹ Last year, with the passage of the South Capitol Street Tragedy Amendment Act of 2012, and the Attendance Accountability Act of 2013, the rules defining a student as “chronically truant” changed. Previously, students who accumulated 15 unexcused absences were considered chronically truant, but starting with SY 13-14, the definition applies to students who accumulate 10 unexcused absences. Additionally, the definition of a full day's absence changed to require that students attend 80% of their scheduled periods to be considered present for the day, instead of the 60% that was previously required.

² The 2013 Annual Truancy Report reported an overall truancy rate of 9% for SY12-13 school year, based on the number of students who had accumulated 15 unexcused absences. That number has been converted here, using the calculation of this year's definition of truancy - 10 or more unexcused absences.

school grade, the truancy patterns of these students continue to have a significant impact on secondary attendance data.

- We are encouraged by a reduction in the overall truancy rate for our *first-time* 9th graders by nearly 17% (from 67% to 50.6%) in SY13-14. It should also be noted that the truancy rate for 9th grade repeaters was reduced by 2.5% (from 54.6% to 52.1%) in SY13-14.
- DCPS ended SY13-14 with an 88.5% In-Seat Attendance (ISA) rate, a 2% increase over SY12-13.

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 EOY data represents compulsory school-aged students (ages 5 through 17).

Table 1: Unexcused Absences Counting Towards Truancy by Grade

Grade Level	Enrolled	Unexcused Absences							
		# with 1-5	% with 1-5	# with 6-10	% with 6-10	# with 11-20	% with 11-20	# with 21+	% with 21+
K	4,204	2,403	57%	732	17%	253	6%	104	2%
01	4,140	2,347	57%	753	18%	278	7%	78	2%
02	3,708	2,143	58%	668	18%	196	5%	47	1%
03	3,465	2,018	58%	577	17%	218	6%	35	1%
04	3,063	1,753	57%	560	18%	191	6%	42	1%
05	2,909	1,719	59%	516	18%	153	5%	19	1%
06	2,430	1,252	57%	542	22%	139	6%	44	2%
07	2,448	1,242	59%	598	24%	194	8%	66	3%
08	2,634	1,364	52%	536	20%	225	9%	92	3%
09	3,706	952	26%	626	17%	604	16%	1,178	32%
10	2,655	699	26%	455	17%	479	18%	830	31%
11	2,463	624	25%	456	19%	439	18%	694	28%
12	2,526	492	19%	292	12%	335	13%	526	21%
CE ³	390	91	23%	27	7%	33	8%	38	10%
EV ⁴	1,555	3	0%	1	0%	4	0%	14	1%
EX ⁵	32	6	19%	7	22%	12	38%	3	9%
UN ⁶	3	0	0%		0%		0%	1	0%
Total	42,331	19,108	45%	7,346	17%	3,753	9%	3,810	9%

³ CE: Certificate Option

⁴ EV: Evening Student

⁵ EX: Exchange Student

⁶ UN: Ungraded (This code has been retired in the DC STARS system and will not appear on future reports.)

Student Support Teams

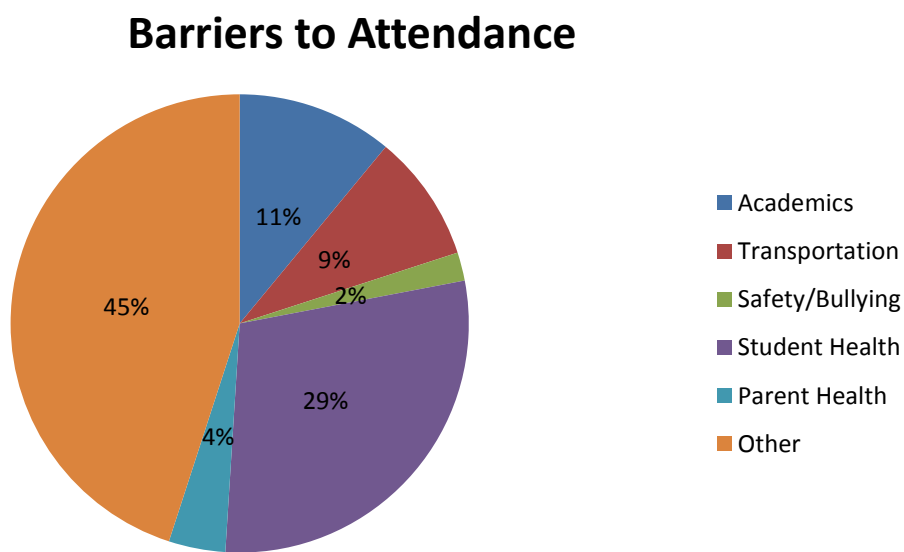
Attendance Student Support Teams (SSTs) are school-based, problem solving teams that provide teachers, students and families with support for students who present attendance concerns. Attendance SST members—including attendance staff, administrators, school counselors, social workers, school nurses and 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 SY 13-14, 16,917 students accrued 5 or more unexcused absences, resulting in the need for attendance SST meeting referrals.⁷ DCPS held SST meetings for 9,285 of these students (55%). (Last year, 2,619 students were referred to a school-based SST for attendance and DCPS held SST meetings for 1,757 of these students (67%). The enormous increase in referrals reflects the shifts in rules defining absences, as well as increased accountability in schools for holding attendance SST meetings.

The attendance SSTs implemented an array of strategies to eliminate or reduce the number of unexcused absences – including making calls and issuing 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, distribution of transportation tokens and attendance incentives and rewards programs, as well as referrals to CFSA and CSS. The services provided to students included support from school-based clinical staff and Department of Mental Health social workers and counselors, as well as community-based case management and health care.

The primary barriers to attendance identified through the SST process are shown below. Academics, transportation and “other” remain the most common barriers. Some examples of “other” reasons cited include homelessness, domestic violence, travel, substance abuse of the parent, and other family circumstances.

Figure 1: Barriers to Attendance



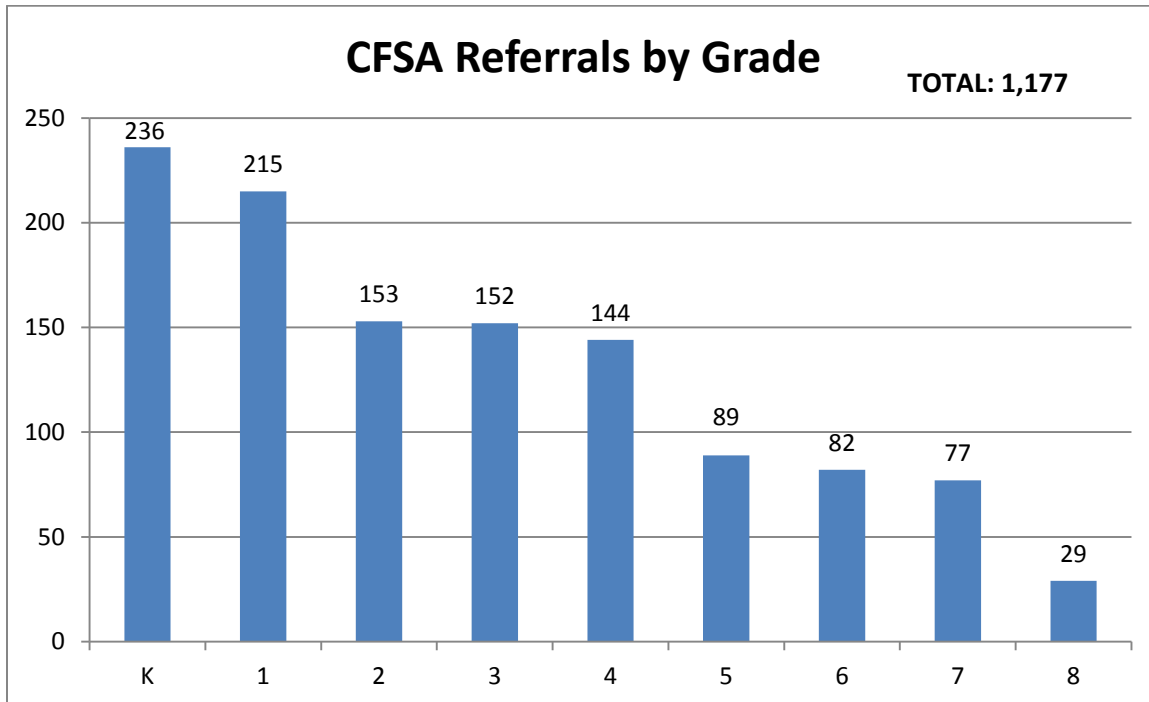
⁷ The South Capitol Street Tragedy Amendment Act of 2012 and the Attendance Accountability Act of 2013 established requirements for Attendance SST referrals when a student accumulates 5 unexcused absences during a marking or similar period.

Referrals to Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)

In SY13-14, 1,177 of 2,550 eligible students⁸ (46%) were referred to the CFSA for educational neglect. Last school year, 1,722 of 2,736 students were referred to CFSA (63%). DCPS' compliance rate fell, in large part, due to a stronger emphasis on ensuring that the mandates for holding SST meetings were met and that quality interventions were put in place prior to making referral to outside agencies (absent extreme, emergency circumstances). It is encouraging that the number of students requiring CFSA referrals decreased due to the intensive focus on SST supports.

The table below illustrates the distribution of referrals to CFSA across grade levels. The largest share of referrals was made to address absences in Kindergarten. Kindergarten marks the first full year of compulsory school attendance and we recognize that early intervention and emphasizing good habits of regular school attendance in early grades is critical to addressing truancy.

Figure 2: CFSA Referrals by Grade



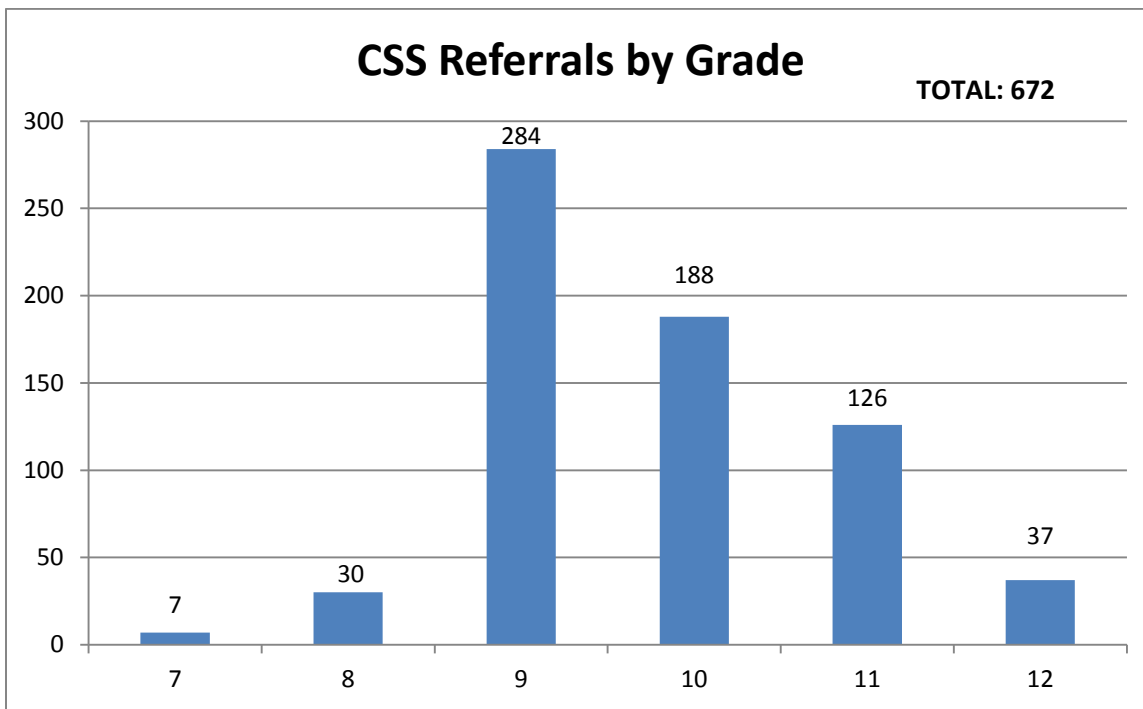
⁸ Students between the ages 5 - 13 who accumulated 10 or more unexcused absences.

Referrals to Court Social Services (CSS)

In SY13-14, DCPS referred 690⁹ of 3,738 eligible students¹⁰ (18%) to Court Social Services (CSS). Last school year (SY12-13), DCPS referred 897 of 1,578 students - or 57% - to CSS. As described previously, the number of students reaching the threshold for referral based on new truancy definitions increased significantly. Our compliance rate for these referrals dipped, in part, due to a greater focus on the requirements for holding SST meetings prior to the submission of court referrals.

The table below illustrates the distribution of referrals to CSS for SY13-14. The largest share of referrals was made to address absences in ninth grade. In SY13-14, DCPS made this a priority grade level for academic and attendance support.

Figure 3: CSS Referrals by Grade



⁹ Note: The total of 672 reflected in Figure 2 includes students between the ages 14-18 in grades 7-12. There were an additional 18 CSS referrals made for certificate and evening students - 7 certificate students and 11 evening students).

¹⁰ Students between the ages 14 - 18 who accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences. In SY13-14, the rules changed to require referrals to Court Social Services (CSS) students have accumulated 15 unexcused absences; previously, students were referred at 25 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 (a doctor's note is required for a student absent five or more days)
- 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 transportation where legally responsible
- 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 whether the student has parental approval.

Examples of unexcused absences include:

- Babysitting
- Shopping or performing errands
- Oversleeping
- Skipping classes
- Job hunting
- Family travel

Conclusion

Strategies for Improvement in SY 14-15

In SY13-14, we provided more focused training and support for schools to address attendance and truancy prevention strategies, strengthened school accountability for attendance goals, generated incentives and outreach to students and families, and tapped our community and agency partners for invaluable support. We also focused more intently on in-seat attendance (ISA), a more rigorous and more authentic standard for measuring attendance. All of these things together helped us focus more on implementing effective intervention strategies to change the trajectory of critical groups of truant students.

For example, we were able to change the trajectory of 9th grade students - those students who often disengage after struggling to approach high school-level academics and who also represent our most challenging cohort of truant students. Nine of our high schools created 9th Grade Academies, dedicated to supporting first-time 9th graders,¹¹ with staffing and instructional supports designed to provide the structures and guidance they need to be successful at the high school level. This strategy contributed to a 14% reduction in the truancy rate for first-time 9th graders in the schools with 9th grade Academies - from 81.6% in SY12-13 to 67.6% in SY13-14; overall, truancy rates for first-time 9th graders across the district fell by nearly 17% - from 67% in SY12-13 to 50.6% in SY13-14. For the first time (in early 2014), we also began moving 9th grade repeaters to alternative programs such as Luke C. Moore HS, Washington MET or one of two STAY programs. The truancy rate for these students fell by only 2.5% (from 54.6% in SY12-13 to 52.1% in SY13-14); however, this strategy was only implemented for a partial school year. We will continue the practice of giving multiple-year repeaters a fresh start in alternative environments and tracking the impact on their attendance.

In an effort to increase our compliance rate for referrals, we are prioritizing support to schools with the highest truancy rates (e.g., the five comprehensive high schools that represent more than half of all DCPS chronic truants); addressing the most chronically absent students (e.g., students in early grades and grades 9-12); and focusing on emphasizing and improving ISA. We will also work with schools to review current staffing models and find ways to utilize additional supports for home visits, calls to parents, and SST meetings – both within their buildings and through partnerships. Schools have already been trained in best practices for using the resources of PASS, JGA and MPD to increase their capacity to conduct SST meetings and provide case management. JGA, in particular, will increase their support to 50 schools next year (from 38 last year). Also, DCPS is currently working to secure social work interns from local universities to support school-level attendance work. For the needs of other very specific populations, the Neediest Kids Fund, which provides essential/tangible items that students need for school (e.g., uniforms, eyeglasses, clothing, transportation, food and medicine) has been reorganized under the Office of Youth Engagement (OYE), and the Homeless Children and Youth Program within OYE will continue to monitor the attendance of and provide supports for our homeless students. OYE will work closely with schools on their data entry and tracking through the student information systems; execution of SST meetings and the implementation of attendance support plans; and use data reports to centrally track attendance outcomes data for students going through the SST process. We know that the implementation of a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach addresses the needs of students with individualized supports and will give us the data we need to provide more effective truancy interventions to improve student attendance.

Finally, we will continue to improve our communication with parents – by placing attendance data on report cards, sending the required attendance notification letters to parents and students, making calls and home visits, and connecting with families through the attendance SST process. Our partnerships with government

¹¹ 9th graders repeaters were not placed in academies; they were given opportunities to participate in online credit-recovery programs, afternoon “twilight” classes and alternative DCPS programs.

and community partners skilled at providing supports for parents, as well as students, will also be a critical component of our approach. We recognize that some families may not prioritize attendance because they do not appreciate the value of attending school every day, the threats that absenteeism creates for long-term academic success, or even that school attendance is legally required. We believe that more effective outreach and communication of these basic messages will help to reduce our students' attendance challenges.

We are pleased with the progress we have shown over the last year; however, we recognize the persistent challenges we face in addressing truancy, and we continue to believe that a focus on changing academics and improving school culture, along with continuously reviewing data to determine appropriate supports will serve as the best long-term solutions to our truancy crisis.