



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

July 2012

# Annual Truancy Report

Submitted by: Office of Youth Engagement

## Introduction

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Pursuant section 38-202 (i) of the DC Code, this report contains an overview of truancy data for school year 2011-2012. Specifically, the report includes:

- data on unexcused absences accrued by minors ages 5-17 years old
- the number of educational neglect referrals made to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) by DCPS school staff working with 5-13 year olds
- valid reasons for absence
- policy recommendations and considerations to strengthen citywide attendance intervention

## Unexcused Absences for Minors

In SY11-12, 30,075 students of compulsory school age (5 – 17 years old) missed at least one day of school without a valid excuse. This represents 74% of the 40,634 compulsory age students enrolled at the end of the academic year. Among those, 4,893 students accumulated more than 15 unexcused absences categorizing them as chronically truant. DCPS' district-wide truancy rate was 11% for the 2011-2012 School Year<sup>1</sup>.

A breakdown of these incidents of truancy is included in the table below.

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	3887	1683	43%	750	19%	395	10%	135	3%
01	3752	1651	44%	649	17%	376	10%	106	3%
02	3289	1432	44%	606	18%	289	9%	97	3%
03	3296	1517	46%	579	18%	298	9%	78	2%
04	3199	1382	43%	610	19%	315	10%	81	3%
05	3062	1434	47%	553	18%	251	8%	67	2%
06	2447	<b>1272</b>	<b>52%</b>	400	16%	168	7%	49	2%
07	2318	<b>1205</b>	<b>52%</b>	441	19%	166	7%	48	2%
08	2485	<b>1281</b>	<b>52%</b>	440	18%	175	7%	74	3%
09	3688	1058	29%	521	14%	461	13%	<b>1067</b>	<b>29%</b>
10	2504	789	32%	362	14%	377	15%	<b>626</b>	<b>25%</b>
11	2327	754	32%	406	17%	355	15%	<b>399</b>	<b>17%</b>
12	2306	657	28%	363	16%	314	14%	196	8%
CE <sup>2</sup>	278	65	23%	32	12%	28	10%	51	18%
EV <sup>3</sup>	1623	4	0%	3	0%	8	0%	12	1%
EX <sup>4</sup>	31	19	61%	3	10%	3	10%	1	3%
G <sup>5</sup>	141	24	17%	20	14%	28	20%	16	11%
UN <sup>6</sup>	1		0%		0%		0%		0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40634</b>	<b>16227</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>6738</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>4007</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>3103</b>	<b>8%</b>

<sup>1</sup> The DCPS truancy rate represents the share of the total registered population (46,027 as of June 30, 2012) that are compulsory school age (5-17 years old) and have accumulated 15 or more unexcused absences within the school year.

<sup>2</sup> CE: Certificate Option

<sup>3</sup> EV: Evening Student

<sup>4</sup> EX: Exchange Student

<sup>5</sup> G: Graduate

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

The data show that:

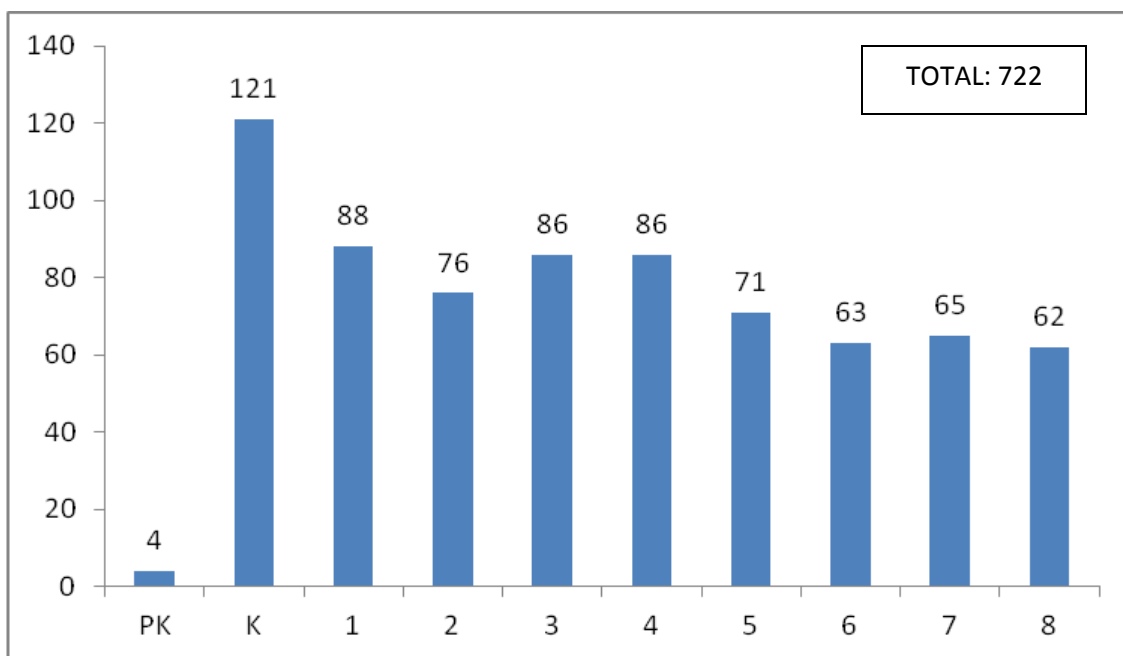
- Incidents of truancy are considerable across grade levels.
- Fewer middle grade students reach more than 10 unexcused absences than any other grade level.
- The high school grades contain the largest percentage of students showing more severe truancy and deeper disengagement from school as evident from the share of students who have been truant from school for 21 days or more – over one month of lost instructional time.
- When comparing grade-level truancy rates, the increase in severe truancy between eighth and ninth grade students is staggering. Only 3% of eighth graders ended the year with 21 or more unexcused absences compared with 29% of ninth graders.
- Overall, ninth grade students have the highest percentage of students in the most severe truancy category – 21 or more unexcused absences. Because there are more ninth graders in DCPS than any other secondary school grade, the truancy patterns of ninth graders disproportionately impact secondary attendance performance.
- Much of the drop-off in truancy rates for twelfth graders relative to other secondary grades is likely due to the high percentage of students who are older than 17, no longer of compulsory school age, and, therefore, are not counted as truant.

## Educational Neglect Referrals

This year, school staff referred 722 students to the Child and Family Services Agency for educational neglect out of 3,510 students who are ages 5 - 13 who accumulated 10 or more unexcused absences. This is a 21% compliance rate with the law.

The below table illustrates the distribution of referrals across grade levels. The largest share of referrals were made to address absences in kindergarten. Kindergarten marks the first full year of compulsory school attendance. While early intervention is critical this year, it is also important to instill a habit of strong school attendance in pre-school and pre-kindergarten.

Figure 1 Educational Neglect Referrals by Grade



Note: Pre-Kindergarten referrals made for students who turned five years old during the school year.

## Valid Reasons for Absence

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Lawful reasons for absence are articulated in DCMR Chapter 21, Section A2102.2. DC Public Schools abides by these regulations in determining valid absences. The following absences may be excused:

- Illness of the student 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 exclusion or expulsion by school authorities
- Temporary facility closings due to weather, unsafe conditions or other emergencies
- Authorized Employment or other volunteer work for student at least 17 years old
- 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 valid excuse from the above list, this absence is an unexcused absence regardless of whether the student has parental approval. Examples of unexcused absences include:

- Babysitting
- Shopping
- Doing errands
- Oversleeping
- Cutting classes
- Job hunting

## Policy Recommendations and Considerations

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As we look to improve student attendance in the SY12-13 school year, this data and the school-level experiences it represents offer lessons for policy and practice both within DCPS and beyond. Truancy has been clearly identified as an early warning sign that students are headed for potential delinquent activity, social isolation, or educational failure via suspension, expulsion, or dropping out.<sup>7</sup>

### **Common Barriers to Attendance**

As school staff intervene with students, they report many common barriers to attendance. Elementary and middle school staff often describe parents who lack an understanding of the importance of attendance during the early elementary years and the impact of absence on student achievement later on. Parents sometimes assume that daily attendance is not as important until the later years of school when “work gets harder.” When in fact, absences accrued in both early childhood and the first few years of elementary make it harder for students to learn to read. By the third grade, these literacy challenges will impact school success deeply. Additionally, in conferences with parents of elementary and middle school students, parents talk of lacking family support to ensure regular school attendance during times of instability. The most common examples of this include a parent falling ill and not having a person to take their child to school. Or, if a sibling falls ill, the parent must stay home with the sibling and does not have a way to get the healthy siblings to school. Other examples include first-time employed parents who struggle to balance new work responsibilities with school schedules. Anecdotal evidence suggests some schools have had success helping parents plan half days far in advance after repeatedly abysmal attendance when parents cannot find alternative child pick-up outside of the normal school day schedule. Garfield Elementary, for example, has employed many creative strategies to engage parents around attendance. They hold special events on half days and before holidays when attendance historically dropped. These events are planned by the attendance designee during the summer and included in the school events calendar distributed to parents. Additionally, the school attendance committee sends a monthly newsletter to parents highlighting upcoming events, strategies to improve attendance, tips to avoid tardiness and giving kudos for students.

However, as students get older, the barriers to attendance also change. For high school students, safety concerns and academic failure become a much larger contributor to high absenteeism. Students regularly report staying away from school because they lack safe routes to or from school, or fear attending school with students who reside in a neighborhood that is “beefing” with their own. Additionally, the high rates of truancy in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade correspond to high rates of academic failure among students. Beyond the normal challenges associated with the high school transition, our data show that our 9<sup>th</sup> grade students suffer from high rates of failure in the two core classes required for promotion to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade – English and Algebra. By March of this year, 67% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who had missed 25 or more days of school were failing English. Their course failure rate was over nine times that of their peers who attended school regularly and accumulated less than five absences by the same time

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<sup>7</sup> National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Drug Prevention and School Safety Program Coordinators, US Department of Education Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools

in the year. The number of students requiring intensive academic intervention due to being two or more grade levels behind is significant. As academic challenges grow, despite the interventions provided, some students do not persist through those challenges as well as their peers. Motivation decreases and students – both first time 9<sup>th</sup> graders and repeating 9<sup>th</sup> graders – begin to disengage from school and often, ultimately drop out. By that same point in March, 27% of first-time 9<sup>th</sup> graders had missed at least 3 weeks of school. In contrast, 75% of their peers who were repeating the 9<sup>th</sup> grade had missed the same amount. Repeating 9<sup>th</sup> graders were three times more likely to miss a significant amount of instruction.

Finally, across all grade levels, a frequently reported barrier to attendance is transportation. School principals, teachers, attendance staff and students report that transportation is one of the most common reasons for absence in DCPS due to the costs of daily transportation to and from school. This is particularly problematic when the family has one or more students in the household, who attend schools beyond walking distance from their residence. Fortunately, the city provides a student subsidy that lowers the rate of monthly passes to \$30. Despite this discounted rate, many of our students, 70% of whom qualified for free or reduced lunch in SY11-12, continue to find this cost a barrier. For a family with two children, who travel beyond their neighborhood to attend school, total transportation costs have amounted to \$600 a year to access otherwise free public education. Moreover, when students are older than compulsory school age and attending either our traditional high schools or alternative programs, they are not eligible for the discounted rate. These students may pay as much as \$10 per day in their quest for academic success.

### **Moving Forward**

As part of our efforts to reduce truancy and ensure full compliance with educational neglect referrals, we believe that the following areas must be considered in policy formulation.

- **Make transportation to and from school more affordable**

A quick survey of other urban districts with a significant share of students riding public transportation to school, try to find a way to subsidize transportation for students. (See survey results in Appendix Table 1.) Using free and reduced lunch qualification, **DC Department of Transportation (DDOT)** should explore expansion to a full WMATA transit subsidy for enrolled students who meet amended eligibility criteria. For DCPS, using the FARM eligibility standard, 69 percent of students would be eligible for a full transportation subsidy. DDOT could maintain distance from home to school as an additional criterion. In addition, DDOT should amend the eligibility criteria by raising the age to include older students at traditional high schools, STAY schools and alternative programs.

- **Increase support for the transition from middle school to high school**

The striking increase in truancy that occurs between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade years indicates we must strengthen our existing commitment to programs that prepare our students to successfully transition to high school. Summer Bridge and High School Orientation currently anchor our approach. The DCPS Summer Bridge program launched this summer with 400 rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders,



who spent six weeks at McKinley HS or Woodson HS, doing a combination of academics and socio-emotional skill-building. Using an innovative, career-themed online learning model, students improved their literacy and numeracy to prepare for high school coursework. Participating in an Advisory program, students learned about high school expectations and build the non-cognitive skills necessary to succeed. Students finished the program by completing an independent project reflecting on their experience and growth. And, at least seven DCPS high schools are hosting their own school-specific orientation program to introduce rising 9th graders to the particular school environment and expectations. As a district, we continue to explore creative avenues to ensure our students enter and complete 9<sup>th</sup> grade successfully.

- **Strengthen interagency coordination and communication about truant students and their families**
  - In the elementary and middle grades, we are well positioned to support families through better utilization of existing vehicles to access external agency services. By increasing local school fidelity to educational neglect reporting for students ages 5 – 13 years old, schools will increase access to supportive services for their families with the greatest need that extend beyond the school’s control. DCPS and **CFSA** have enjoyed a strong partnership around attendance intervention – including CFSA’s participation in school staff attendance trainings and regular meetings with the Office of Youth Engagement. Our agencies will strengthen our work together in anticipation of dramatically increased referrals, as a result of increasing compliance rates at local schools. In addition to the initial referral process, DCPS and CFSA will continue to strengthen communication between schools and caseworkers to ensure strong attendance for students and families with open cases.
  - For high school students, there is not a formal avenue to access external agency support for students prior to referring a student to DC Superior Court following 25 unexcused absences. In recognition of this, DCPS is working with the **Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services** and CFSA to target school-based partnerships to our highest truancy high schools. The purpose of these partnerships is to expand the early intervention and case management capacity. The greatest gap exists between our high school support staff capacity and the number of truant high school students, which requires early intervention and on-going case management to address the root cause of their truancy.
  - Other avenues for partnership include:
    - **Department of Health** – We are eager to work with health system stakeholders, such as Children’s Hospital and local pediatricians, to reduce health-related absences. While illness is a valid excuse, and thus not truant behavior, excessive excused absences often contribute to a habit of poor attendance that may become truancy in the later grades. And, if parents or guardians do not submit sick notes, these absences will be documented in the student’s record as an unexcused absence, triggering the truancy protocol at specific benchmarks.

- **Department of Health Care Finance** – Given the high incidence of truancy related to parental illness, DC HMOs should be encouraged to engage client case managers in supporting strong attendance. These workers can support clients in planning to maintain their children’s attendance through periods of health challenges or immobility.
- **Department of Employment Services** – It is critical that students and parents receive consistent messages from multiple agencies reinforcing the importance of regular school attendance. For example, the city could explore adopting a tiered salary structure for the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) that allows students with strong attendance to be paid more than their peers. Currently, three 17 year olds – one who only missed school three days for illness, one who was truant for more than 30 days of school and one who is not enrolled in school at all – will all be paid the same rate if they are accepted into SYEP. Additionally, for younger children, local schools should work with DOES to host workforce development trainings or workshops for parents at school sites to facilitate increased parent engagement and increase opportunities to reinforce the importance of daily, on time attendance at both school and on the job.
- **Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services and DC Superior Court Division of Court Social Services** – School attendance staff, DYRS case managers and CSS probation officers should continue to strengthen communication about students shared on their case loads to ensure individual education plans through the delinquency system and school-based interventions complement each other.
- **Metropolitan Police Department** – DCPS and MPD share a strong partnership to ensure safety and security inside school buildings and for students in the community. Moving forward, DCPS will work with MPD to strengthen communication with school principals of high priority schools to ensure high-risk students and high-risk communities benefit from our collaborative intervention.

## Appendix

Table 1: Student Transportation Subsidies in Sample Districts

District	Child Poverty Rate	% FARM	Public Transportation Infrastructure	General Student Transportation (Yellow bus, full subsidy, partial subsidy)	Eligibility Criteria
DC	30.4% (2010 citywide)	61%	Subway, bus	Partial subsidy	Under 19 DC resident Enrolled in DC school Lives more than .5 miles from school
Baltimore City	34.3% (2010)	N/A	Bus	Yellow bus and full subsidy	ES who live more than 1 mi. from school ride yellow bus; MS/HS who live more than 1.5 mi. receive MBTA bus passes
Boston	25.6% (2010 citywide)	74%	Subway, bus	Yellow bus, full and partial subsidy	Transportation provided via bus or free transit pass for students who live more than 1 mi. from ES, 1.5 mi. from MS, 2 mi. from HS; Discounted \$20 unlimited student pass on MBTA available for all other students
Chicago	N/A	84% (2009)	Subway, bus	Yellow bus (limited)	Limited to specific school programs and SPED
New York City	25.4% (2009)	N/A	Subway, bus	Yellow bus (limited), Full and partial subsidies	All students living more than 1.5 mi. from school receive full fare, other eligibility is function of grade level and distance from school
Prince George's County	N/A	57.3%	Subway (limited), bus	Yellow bus	N/A