

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
District of Columbia Public Schools



Public Oversight Hearing
on
Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Activities

**Testimony of
Amanda Alexander
Interim Chancellor**

Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman
and
Committee on Education
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

Council of the District of Columbia
Room 412
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

[Slide 1] Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Amanda Alexander, Interim Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I am honored to testify before you today as we continue the conversation about DCPS' work to improve student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism. At DCPS, we know that our students are capable of greatness, but we also know that attending school is the first step toward ensuring that our young people are on a path to success.

I am here today knowing that DCPS must do more to address chronic absenteeism and truancy in the District. Our students and schools require a diverse system of supports to address underlying challenges with daily student attendance. With the partnership of the Mayor, the Council, and our fellow agencies, I am committed, on behalf of DCPS, to overcoming these barriers, because our students deserve every opportunity to succeed.

[Slide 2] Commitments

DCPS approaches this commitment with a sense of urgency and has refined our strategy for supporting daily student attendance.

1. First, we are prioritizing strong **Systems and Actionable Data**. We believe that compliance and support systems must operate seamlessly. In order for data to be actionable, it must be accurate and easily accessible.
2. Second, we are **Informing and Educating** our students, families, and staff. We believe students and families must be empowered with information to understand the impact of each day of learning. We also believe in training school staff to promote attendance best practices.
3. Finally, we are **Proactively Engaging** all of our partners. We believe that engaging and partnering with our stakeholders will allow us to appropriately prioritize and address barriers to attendance. Our schools are focused on creating a positive learning environment where our students and families feel supported and loved.

Our supports start with strong systems and accurate data that drives decisions and interventions. Last school year, DCPS attendance staff focused their supports on 13 schools experiencing high levels of chronic absenteeism. Through differentiated, school-based support, DCPS helped these schools improve their attendance team structures; develop and implement a school-wide attendance plan; and provide professional development around best practices and interventions for chronically absent students.

[Slides 3] Data

DCPS' efforts have led to progress. Overall, students attended more school during School Year 2017-2018 compared to prior years.

- We remained stable with our in-seat attendance, ending the year at 88.9 percent.
- Last school year, chronic absenteeism rates dropped by three percentage points across the district and 8.9 percentage points in our high schools. The work of our students, families, and staff is having a positive effect on attendance.
- At the same time, our truancy rate increased by 2.6 percentage points. While we believe this increase is partially due to our focus on accurate attendance entry, we know that we must continue to support our students with attending daily.

- Last year's focus on accurate data entry led to an increase in attendance entry from 94.1 percent to 97.6 percent.

[Slide 4] Systems and Actionable Data

This summer, we made strategic updates to our systems to make them more user-friendly for our teachers and staff. First, we streamlined the data entry process by adapting our attendance codes to align with the School Year 2018-2019 attendance policy. We also limited access to prior attendance data to improve security and ensure accuracy.

[Slide 5] Attendance Planning

School attendance plans lay out a system of universal and targeted supports for students and families. Our teachers, school leaders, and attendance staff rely on this data to differentiate their supports for students and families. Building on last year's progress, we are making attendance planning and tiered support systems a priority at all our schools this year.

[Slide 6] Inform and Educate

Our second key commitment is informing and educating our students, families, and staff. Throughout School Year 2017-2018, DCPS facilitated training and best practice sharing across schools to support the development of robust attendance intervention strategies. Our schools focused on creating relationship-based, attendance goal-setting programs, targeting students with a history of chronic absenteeism. They also implemented competitions and incentives to recognize improved student attendance.

This year, we also shared personalized information with parents of students with a history of chronic absenteeism on how their student's attendance compares to other students. Behavioral science research shows that providing comparisons leads to greater awareness and better attendance habits.

[Slide 7] Summer Bridge for Rising 9th Graders

For the first time, DCPS fostered "Summer Bridge" activities between rising 9th graders and their feeder high schools¹, inviting school leaders, athletics coaches, and others to share information and build relationships. These programs were designed to provide personalized outreach and support to previously chronically absent students. Those who participated had positive takeaways and were excited to begin their first year of high school. One Walker-Jones student shared an appreciation for learning more about Dunbar's mission and history.

[Slide 8] Summer Bridge for Rising Kindergarten Families

For our youngest learners, DCPS worked with select elementary schools² to design a Kindergarten Readiness orientation for PreK-4 families. These orientations welcomed rising Kindergarten families and reinforced the importance of strong attendance, especially in the early grades.

¹ Anacostia HS, Ballou HS, Dunbar HS, Eastern HS, and H.D. Woodson HS

² Browne EC, Hendley ES, Moten ES, Plummer ES, Thomas ES, and Walker-Jones EC

[Slide 9] Attendance Policy

In preparation for this school year, we also engaged with the community to review our attendance policy. Stakeholder feedback informed our updated School Year 2018-2019 attendance policy, which reflects our commitment to supportive, inclusive, and equitable practices. Specifically, we:

- Created a standardized secondary tardy policy, which provides consistency for our students and families;
- Clarified communications expectations. Schools now call home after the fourth absence to ensure families receive frequent touchpoints with DCPS staff;
- Removed the previous out-of-boundary attendance policy. Now, all students receive the same attendance interventions; and
- Finally, we updated the policy for parenting students. Students may now be excused from school if their child is sick, and they submit a doctor's note.

To ensure awareness of these changes, we provided staff with comprehensive training over the summer and released for families a Pre-K to Graduation Policy Guide.

We know that compliance, systems, and training build a foundation for addressing chronic absenteeism and improving attendance in the District. These changes are one step to solving a systemic issue facing our city.

[Slide 10] Proactive Engagement

DCPS also recognizes a need to shift student, family, and staff mindsets. Using School Year 2017-2018 as a baseline, DCPS shared our new vision for attendance: Every student should feel welcomed and encouraged to attend school by every adult, every day.

Last school year, we worked to increase the range of supports available to chronically absent students. By emphasizing the role of school-based "Student Support Teams," we empowered a core group of people at each school to address students' attendance needs. These teams built relationships with students and their families and connected them with the resources they needed.

[Slide 11] Engagement and Partnership

This school year, we are accelerating our work by proactively engaging our students and families through socio-emotional supports, home visits, and strong school-based relationships. To meet our vision, we must go beyond referrals and compliance measures.

Engaging and educating our families is essential to improving attendance at our schools. We are partnering with Harvard's Proving Ground collaborative to research and design communication systems, providing opportunities for two-way communication. DCPS is excited to collaborate with KIPP DC and the Deputy Mayor of Education to maximize our research potential and extend our reach to as many DC families as we can.

[Slide 12] Partnerships

We will continue to invest in quality programs that show results. Through our Family Engagement Partnership division, we aim to transform the ways teachers and families collaborate. As a part of this initiative, teachers receive training on a research-based model to facilitate home visits. Researchers evaluated these efforts and found that students from families where a home visit occurred have 24 percent fewer absences and better academic outcomes.³ Last year, DCPS teachers were able to visit the families of 12,870 students, 49 percent more than the prior year. We are projected to exceed that number in School Year 2018-2019.

At the same time, DCPS is working to expand and strengthen our partnerships with community volunteers, nonprofits, and business leaders. We continue to leverage partners like Show Up-Stand Out, Roving Leaders at the Department of Parks and Recreation, the Department of Behavioral Health, City Year, and Flamboyant Foundation to maximize our impact.

Our commitment to partner with the larger District community will help ensure that every student feels loved and welcomed at their school every day. This will be a focus of the DCPS Back to School Block Party on September 22. I hope you'll join me in celebrating students' attendance and the strides our schools, students, and partners are taking to help the District win the battle against chronic absenteeism.

[Slide 13] Conclusion

DCPS is committed to making attendance matter for all our young people. We recognize that a citywide effort is needed to support students, parents, and schools toward this goal. I am eager to work with you as valued partners to address chronic absenteeism and truancy. We appreciate the support of the Mayor, and our colleagues in the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the Public Charter School Board, the Child and Family Services Agency, and the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants. We also appreciate your continued support as we move forward with our vision.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you about this important topic. DCPS will continue to focus on building attendance systems and supports that meet the needs of every student. Our young people deserve every pathway to success, and that starts in our schools. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

³ Sheldon, S. B., and Jung, S. B. (2015). [*The Family Engagement Partnership: Student Outcome Evaluation*](#).



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Attendance and Truancy

September 20, 2018

**Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism,
and the Implementation of Reform Activities**

DCPS Testimony



Our Commitment

Our vision for attendance is that ***every student*** is welcomed and encouraged to attend school by ***every adult, every day***.



**Systems and
Actionable Data**



**Inform &
Educate**



**Proactive
Engagement**

Overall, students attended more school during School Year 2017-2018 compared to prior years.

DCPS' In-Seat Attendance has remained stable at 88.9%, with some gains in our high schools (+1.6% from SY16-17).

Chronic absence rates dropped by 3 percentage points across the district, with an 8.9 point reduction in high schools. Therefore, the **absences were distributed across fewer students**.

Truancy increased by almost 3 percentage points. In other words, a **larger share of students reached the 10-day truancy threshold** compared to SY16-17.

All school types entered attendance with greater fidelity, leading to **more accurate and actionable attendance data**.

Our Commitment: Systems and Actionable Data

School Year 2017-2018

- ✓ Provided intensive supports to 13 schools experiencing high-levels of chronic absenteeism
- ✓ Focused on accurate and comprehensive attendance entry

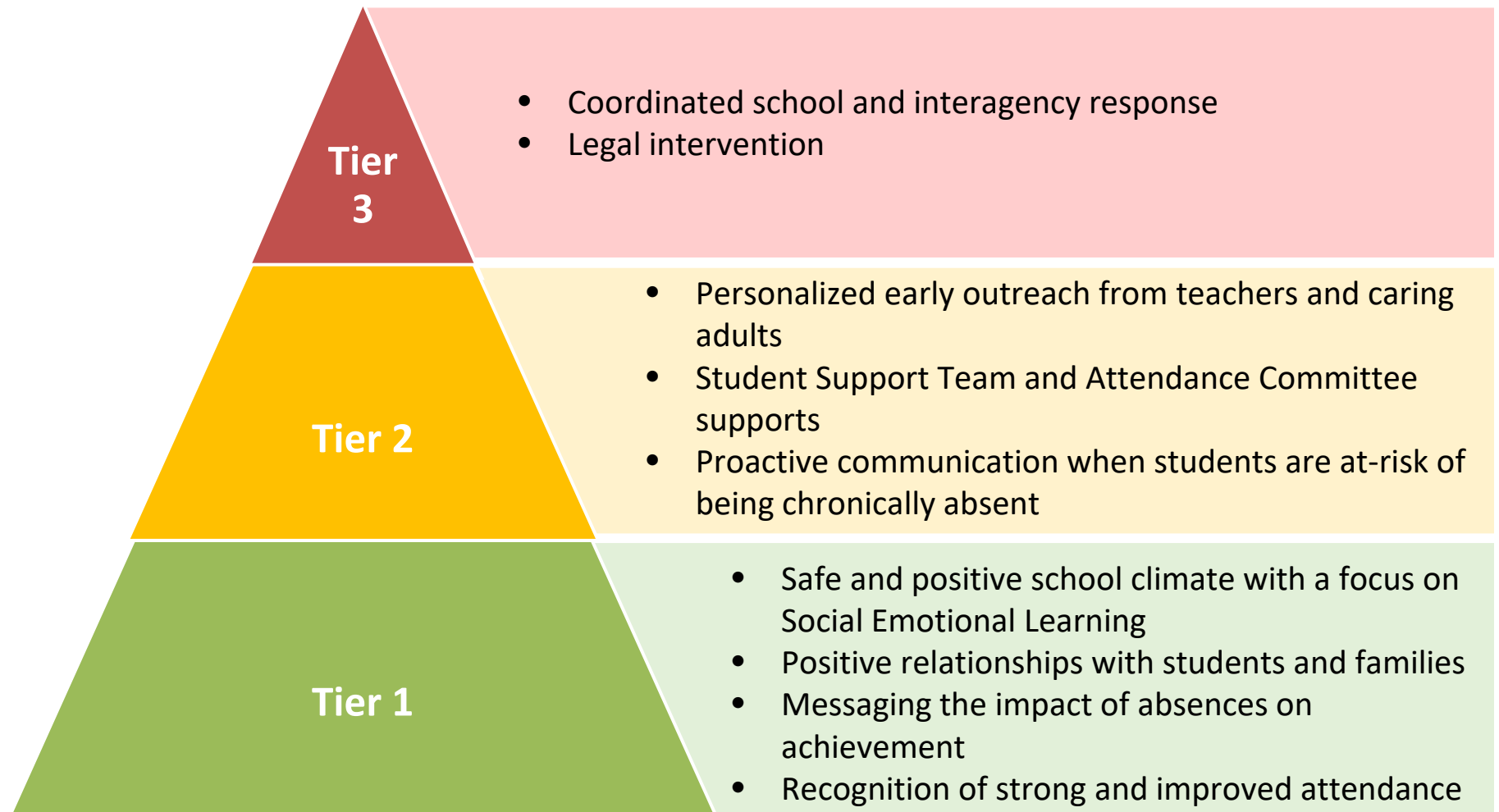


School Year 2018-2019

- Streamlined attendance entry process to align with new policy
- Added data security to limit changes to attendance records and ensure data accuracy
- Support attendance plans for every school to reduce chronic absenteeism
- Provide tiered supports to students based on chronic absence rates

We are making attendance a planning and systems a priority at all of our schools.

School attendance plans lay out a system of universal and targeted supports for students and families.



Our Commitment: Inform and Educate

School Year 2017-2018

- ✓ Provided professional development and facilitated best practice sharing across schools
- ✓ Fostered “Summer Bridge” activities for students in critical transition years



School Year 2018-2019

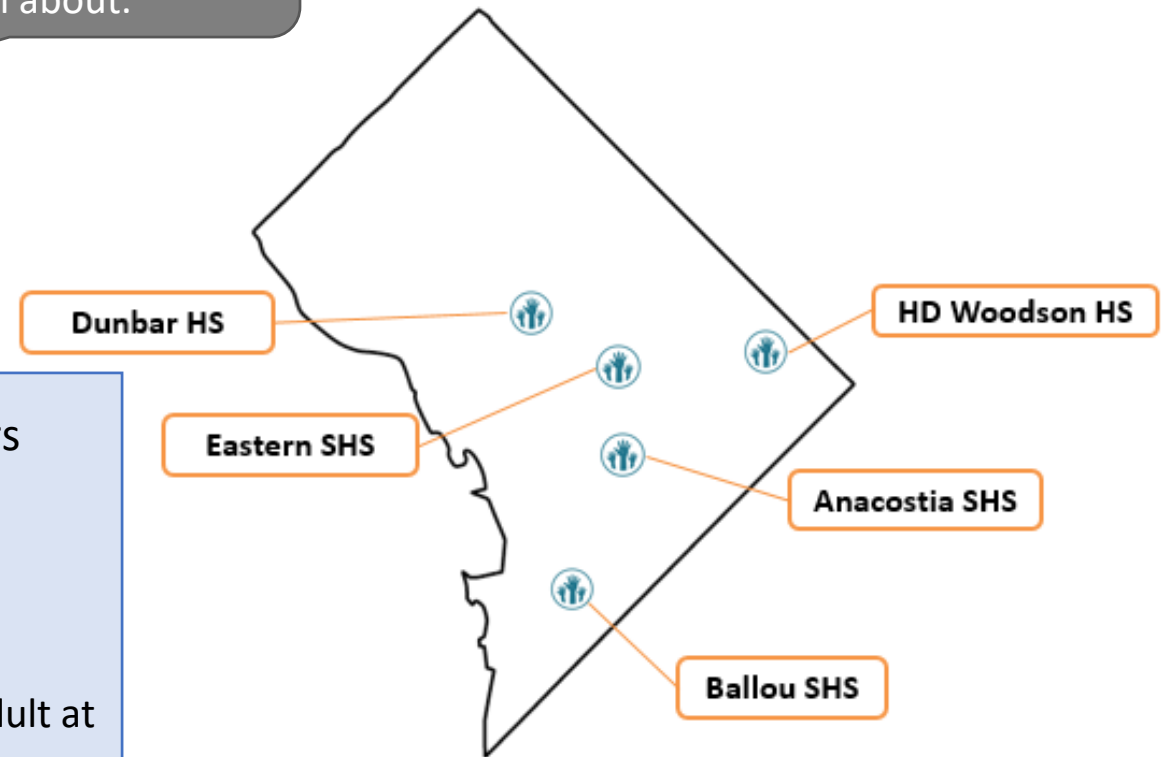
- Released PreK to Graduation: Policy Guide for Families, including an updated attendance policy
- Provided comprehensive training for staff including clarification of roles and responsibilities
- Distributed personalized information with parents on how their student’s attendance compares to other students to increase awareness

Summer Bridge: High Schools connected with select feeder middle schools to engage rising 9th graders.



I liked how they explained what Dunbar is all about.

- Current high school students served as peer ambassadors
- The purpose of the engagements was to:
 - Get rising 9th graders **excited** about high school
 - Have students **commit** to reduce absences in SY18-19
 - Foster a **personal connection** between students and an adult at their receiving high school



Summer Bridge: DCPS designed targeted Kindergarten Readiness orientations for PK-4 families.



Welcome to Kindergarten!!!!

We are looking forward to an exciting and rewarding year with you and your child.



- Browne EC, Hendley ES, Moten ES, Plummer ES, Thomas ES, and Walker-Jones EC
- The purpose of the engagements was to:
 - **Welcome** former Pre-K families to Kindergarten
 - **Inform** families about the importance of strong attendance in our early grades
 - Help parents **understand** their own student's attendance data
 - **Connect** families to key Attendance and Family Services points of contact at their school

Attendance Policy – What’s Changed?

School Year 2018-2019

Created a standardized secondary tardy policy

Schools call home after the fourth absence

Removed the out-of-boundary attendance policy; All students receive the same attendance interventions

Parenting students may be excused from school if their child is sick, and they submit a doctor’s note



Pre-K to Graduation: A Policy Guide For Families

Attendance
Discipline
Grading and Promotion
Graduation

Our Commitment: Proactive Engagement

School Year 2017-2018

- ✓ Strengthened the role of “Student Support Teams” (SSTs) in addressing students’ attendance needs
- ✓ Increased home visits by nearly 50% compared to prior school year

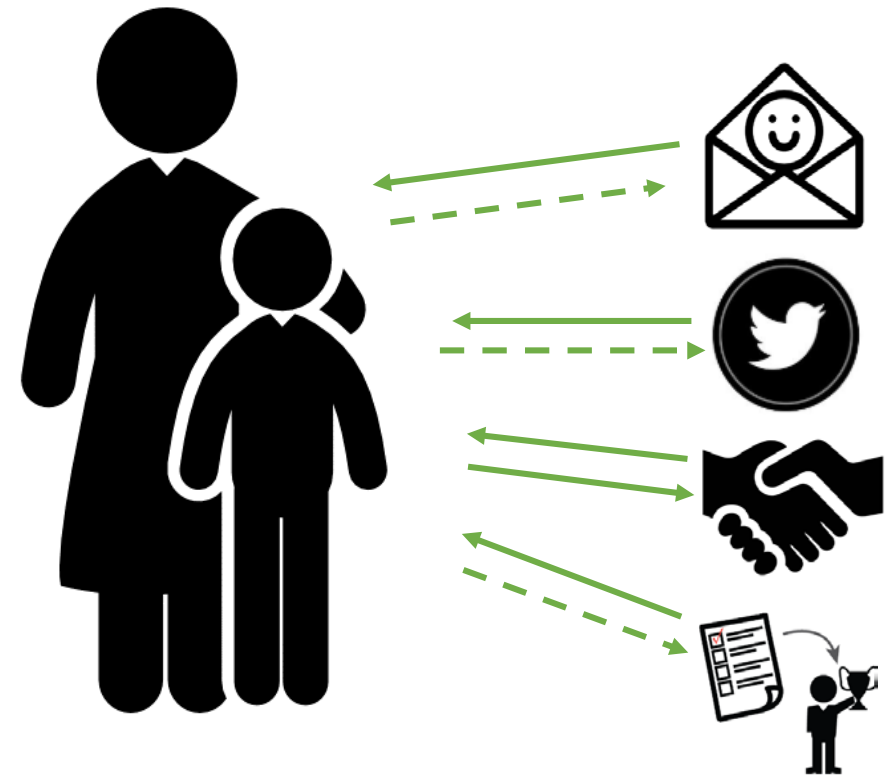


School Year 2018-2019

- Expanding and strengthening partnerships with community organizations and fellow agencies
- Leveraging the Harvard Proving Ground collaborative to research, design, and pilot communication strategies with families of students with high levels of chronic absenteeism
- Celebrating student attendance through community-wide events

We are working to shift away from solely reactive, punitive messaging to proactive engagement and partnership with families and students.

- We plan to utilize Harvard Proving Ground's model and analytics to:
 - Design and pilot our chronic absence letter campaign
 - Evaluate the impact of our targeted messaging campaign
 - Hone our messaging strategy using chronic absence data and feedback from the network



DCPS is expanding and strengthening partnerships to maximize our collective impact.



Home Visits lead to
24% fewer absences.

Our vision for attendance is that ***every student*** is welcomed and encouraged to attend school by ***every adult, every day.***

