

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**DC Public Schools**



Public Oversight Roundtable on  
Graduation Rate Accountability

Testimony of  
**Antwan Wilson**  
Chancellor, DC Public Schools

Before the  
Council of the District of Columbia  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman

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Room 500  
John A. Wilson Building  
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Good morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. For the record, my name is Antwan Wilson, and I am the Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Thank you for the opportunity to come before you today to discuss graduation rates, absenteeism, and our commitment to DC students. I'd also like to thank the students, teachers, and staff who testified before me today, as well as during last week's youth hearing.

A number of issues have been raised that touch on matters central to our work – what progress our students are really making and the integrity with which we, as adults, act. I take these matters seriously, and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss them with you.

Before we dive into detail, I want to say very clearly that at DCPS the vast majority of our staff show what commitment and integrity look like, and our city owes so many of our teachers, principals, and other school staff a debt of gratitude. They are the reason DCPS has made great progress over the past 10 years. While Washingtonians should be proud of that progress, we all know how much further we have to go. DC students have made some of the greatest progress of any major city in the country – yet we still face some of the biggest challenges.

The situation at Ballou High School has raised a number of important questions for our community, and for this Council. To summarize, they boil down to:

1. Were students given diplomas or grades they hadn't earned, particularly in cases where students were out of school a great deal of time?
2. Did anyone, at any level of the school system, pressure or encourage staff to pass students, to raise grades, or otherwise to credit academic progress that wasn't genuine?
3. Are we doing enough to respond to the needs of students on the threshold of dropout and failure – particularly those who are chronically absent or carrying multiple failing grades?

All of these questions, and especially the last, touch on the question that matters most to me: Are we giving our students what they need to succeed in their current and future educational endeavors and in their lives? I'm personally sensitive to the question of whether we do enough for students on the cusp of failure, students with the deck already stacked against them.

I see myself in the students at Ballou. I am here today because my mother and my teachers invested in me and gave me the tools to be successful. I would not be where I am if someone had passed me through a class or through graduation without me earning it. I want no less for the students we serve.

One of the central questions is how it was possible for so many students to graduate despite apparently missing enormous amounts of school. It's not news to anyone here that truancy is an ongoing and deep concern across the District of Columbia. I was struck by it on arriving in DC. I have worked in many urban school districts—from Denver to Oakland—and none had such high truancy rates.

- The Office of the State Superintendent's (OSSE) most recent attendance report released last week finds that one in four kids in DC are chronically absent from school – which means missing 10 percent or more of the school year. At some DCPS high schools, three out of four students were chronically absent.
- In the same report, OSSE found that truancy is more prevalent for students of color, students who are overaged, and students who are identified with special needs. These facts are all well known to our educators.



- At DCPS, the concern around attendance extends to students' senior year and their path to graduation. More than one-third of students in each of our comprehensive high schools graduated after missing 30 or more days in at least one course that was required for graduation. At Ballou, it was a majority of students.
- At our comprehensive high schools, student absences were not just tardiness or missing first period. For two-thirds of the absences, students missed more than 60 percent of the day.

The attendance problems have been well documented by both OSSE and DCPS reports in the past, and we have had several Council hearings on the issue, most recently this fall. Our students miss school for many reasons, including, but not limited to, employment so they can provide for their families, the responsibilities of parenthood, and lack of transportation. It is important that our students are in school, and we must support them to get there. That's why I've partnered with Mayor Bowser and Deputy Mayor Niles on the Every Day Counts! initiative. Attendance is both a symptom and a cause of many of our students' educational challenges, and I'm glad to have the Mayor as an ally in taking this issue seriously.

Attendance is a priority in DCPS' new strategic plan, *A Capital Commitment 2017-2022*, where we will create real solutions so that students are coming to school every day. I am engaging with the community right now about what attendance policies and supports will help our students in order to inform our plan to address these issues moving forward.

Despite the attendance challenges many students at Ballou or any other high school faced, I believe that our students earned their diplomas by reaching a level of mastery deemed appropriate by our teachers. We are investigating the adherence to our policies related to grades and graduation. What we've learned thus far is that we need to improve adherence to our current grading policy, while also ensuring consistent practices across the District with assigning grades and credit to students. I will use what we learn from these investigations to inform our updated policies, training, and supports at Ballou and other schools.

As I said earlier, one of the most pressing questions for me is whether we're doing enough to help students on the cusp succeed. Poor attendance, as I've noted, is a cause of problems, but it's also a symptom – frequently a sign of challenges students face, including a failing connection to school and other institutions, or the strain of having to take care of younger siblings or other family members. One part of dealing with that is ensuring that students have as many paths to graduation and college and career success as possible, and that the relevance of their high school studies to their future is as clear as possible – and that when students do fall off track, it's not an irreversible spiral. As we tackle those issues, we have to support teachers and staff to consistently document student performance and ensure that student records are a reflection of what students have mastered.

Our students' realities are complicated. Of course, students should be in school, but when they aren't or they can't be, we must provide solutions. We will be most successful when we create multiple pathways for our students to meet high levels of academic rigor and have a path toward graduation. This is a citywide issue that we have to address to give all students an equal shot at success.

There's a lot we still need to know, and my promise to you is to follow the facts where they lead and take action where necessary. I can assure you all that DCPS will lead with our values of equity and putting students first to improve our systems and supports.



Thank you for your willingness to have an open and honest conversation today about graduation accountability and student preparedness in DC Public Schools. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

