

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DC Public Schools



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

**Testimony of
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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
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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I am Amanda Alexander, D.C. Public Schools' (DCPS) Interim Chancellor. I am honored to testify before you today and continue the important conversation about DCPS' work to increase student attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism. Attending school is the first step toward ensuring that our young people are on the path to success. We recognize that our students face very real barriers and challenges that prevent them from coming to school each day, and we are committed to partnering with stakeholders across the District so that every student feels welcome and is encouraged to attend school every day.

Chronic absenteeism and truancy are longstanding and significant problems for parents, students, and families in the District. More than one in four DCPS students are chronically absent. Last school year, DCPS students lost more than 900,000 instructional days due to absences. I come before you understanding the severity of this crisis. DCPS students require a diverse system of supports, and our schools require a unique blend of resources to address the enrollment, programming, and neighborhood contexts that affect attendance rates. We are committed to overcoming these challenges, because our students deserve every opportunity to succeed.

This school year, we have focused on compliance and data integrity. We have built capacity in schools to track attendance throughout the year, which has led to better data and better decisions. We will continue to build on this foundation of system-building and knowledge-sharing. During my 20 years as a teacher, principal, and instructional superintendent, I have learned that the first step to addressing attendance challenges is getting to know our students, understanding personal and family patterns that affect attendance, and building strong relationships within school communities.

DCPS is committed to increasing the range of supports available to chronically absent students. By expanding the role of school-based "Student Support Teams," we have empowered a core group of people at each school to address students' attendance needs. These teams build relationships with the students and their families, and work to connect them with the appropriate resources. We have also worked with other agencies within DC Government to find cross-sector solutions through the Every Day Counts! initiative. At DCPS, we know that attendance is not an issue that we can solve solely with school-based interventions and recognize that any real solution must involve the whole community.

As an educator, I have always believed that attendance is a foundational step for an excellent education. When I served as an Instructional Superintendent for a cluster of schools, I recognized we could do more to address chronic absenteeism. In the summer of 2012, I met with school leaders in my cluster and, together, we came up with a plan to address attendance proactively. The greatest predictor of chronic absenteeism is previous chronic absenteeism. By using the previous school year's data, we identified students who were at risk of chronic absenteeism. We then paired students with a staff member to ensure that each student had an adult that was responsible for seeing and welcoming them to school every day. As a cluster, this focus on attendance, through data and engagement, contributed to strong gains in student achievement. That year, my cluster saw an eight percentage point increase in proficient students in Math and a six percentage point increase in reading.

At the time, I remember receiving a call from a concerned parent. She was receiving attendance notifications from Tubman ES and wanted to understand why. The team at Tubman had used data to identify her daughter as needing additional support and had begun reaching out proactively. The parent and I talked about the challenges that her family experienced in getting to school each day, but we also talked about the hopes and dreams that both she as a parent had for her child, and we as a school had

for her child—that her child would thrive not just at Tubman, but in middle school, high school, and beyond. The parent wanted her child to have a better life than she had, and we discussed how that started with coming to school every day. This conversation, and others like it, built on DCPS’ community-driven approach to attendance by emphasizing the importance of partnering with families to promote student success. That school year, similar to my cluster as a whole, Tubman ES saw increases in proficiency: 14 percentage points in Math and 11 percentage points in Reading.

It is imperative that we continue to work with our families to provide attendance solutions for DCPS students. The recent concerns over graduation highlights the urgent need to address truancy and chronic absenteeism across all grade levels. Since our last discussion on attendance in October, DCPS has developed a plan of action to increase attendance through a series of targeted, multi-tier, initiatives that complement programs like, Show Up Stand Out.

Today, DCPS knows more than we did several months ago, and we are using this information to inform several critical shifts. Moving forward, our attendance work will be driven by three beliefs:

- First, we believe that our compliance systems and support structures must operate seamlessly. Toward this goal, we are prioritizing **systems integrity and the use of actionable data**. We believe that for data to be actionable, it must be accurate, accessible, automated, and reviewed regularly.

We will continue to promote actionable data and to monitor compliance, focusing on automating processes that produce high-quality data. Looking forward, we will implement a 100 percent expectation for quality attendance plans from schools in 2018-2019, and focus on leveraging the role of attendance counselors in our schools. Our goal is to empower DCPS staff with smarter data systems that allow us to work more efficiently and effectively.

- Next, we are focusing on **increasing education** for students, families, and staff on attendance issues, because we believe all stakeholders must become invested in attending daily, and understand the impact of every instructional day on a student’s life. DCPS plans to focus on training and developing school staff on attendance best practices as part of this effort.

DCPS has already begun sharing absence notifications with families. We will continue this by designing a targeted campaign for families through the summer and School Year 2018-2019. This step is critical for building understanding for students, staff, and parents about why every day counts.

- Finally, we will focus on **proactive engagement**. We believe that engaging and supporting all of our stakeholders will allow us to address barriers to attendance.

We are creating 9th grade “Bridge” programs at campuses with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. Key high schools will connect with feeder middle schools to engage rising 8th graders and prepare them for the academic rigor of our high schools. Schools will engage in regular data reflections over the course of the school year to ensure successful transitions from middle school to high school.

DCPS plans to move forward quickly on these attendance supports. We believe that when systems are aligned to provide actionable data; stakeholders are educated on the why, how, and what of strong attendance; and engagement with students and families is proactive, consistent, and frequent; we will reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy. DCPS will use these interventions to create a targeted, tiered approach, because every student deserves supports that meet his or her needs.

As we think about new programs to address truancy and chronic absenteeism in the District, I also want to discuss how this will feel for students, because, for DCPS, their experience is at the core of what we do. We will continue to prioritize educating the whole child, with a focus on social emotional learning. At DCPS, we are committed to ensuring that every student feels loved at school. We want our students to enter school buildings where adults welcome them, value their presence, and understand the root causes of their absences. To accomplish this goal, DCPS will implement interventions at all levels. Our pre-k and kindergartners and their families will learn about the important connection between attendance and success in school. Rising 9th graders, who are at risk of becoming chronically absent, will be paired with high school mentors, who will stress the importance and pride of attending high school daily. At every grade level, we will continue to create positive learning environments that support high rates of attendance.

Thank you once again, for the opportunity to speak before you about this important topic. DCPS is committed to making attendance matter for every student, family, and staff member. We recognize that a citywide effort is needed to support students, parents, and schools toward this goal. I am eager to work with you, our city's leaders, and 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 Grants. These partnerships, through initiatives like Every Day Counts! and others, give us more information and more holistic resources to tackle this problem. We also thank you for your continued support as we move forward.

DCPS will continue to analyze the needs of our students and use accurate and timely attendance data to identify evidence-based alternatives and supports. We know that it truly takes the work of the entire community to see dramatic and system-wide increases in attendance. Together, we can build a strong system of supports for our students. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.