

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)**



Public Hearing on  
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy in the District of Columbia

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Committee of the Whole  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
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11:30 AM

Good Afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public. I am Cinthia Ruiz, Chief Integrity Officer of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). I lead the DCPS teams responsible for enrollment and attendance. Over the past decade I have worked to support schools’ operational excellence, in both the public and public charter sectors in Washington, DC. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on chronic absenteeism and truancy. DCPS is committed to ensuring that every student reaches their full potential through rigorous and joyful learning experiences. Simply put, students can only benefit from these experiences if they are in school.

DCPS, like school districts around the country, is seeing an increase in chronic absenteeism and truancy after the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> We know this challenge requires hard work and we are committed to collaborating with parents, community organizations, and our government partners to ensure that students are in school learning as many days as possible each year.

Today, I want to (1) review our data from last school year, (2) note promising trends we are seeing year to date, (3) explain our approach to improving attendance, and (4) commit to working with partners to continue improvements.

**During the 2022-2023 school year, DCPS saw attendance metrics improve from the 2021-2022 school year but still saw lower overall attendance, higher chronic absenteeism, and higher truancy rates than before the pandemic.** During the 2022 – 2023 school year, DCPS maintained an in-seat attendance rate of 85.9%, meaning that on a typical day, 85.9% of students were in school. In-seat attendance increased by 1% from the previous school year. During the 2022 – 2023 school year, 41.3% of DCPS students were chronically absent, meaning they missed 10% or more of the school year, for any reason, including excused absences. Chronic absenteeism fell by 1.2% from the previous school year. During the 2022 – 2023 school year, 34.9% of DCPS students were truant, meaning they accrued 10 or more unexcused absences during the school year. DCPS’ truancy rate fell by 4.8% from the previous school year.

<b>Attendance Metrics for SY 21-22 and SY 22-23</b>			
<i>School Year</i>	<i>In-Seat Attendance</i>	<i>Chronic Absenteeism</i>	<i>Truancy</i>
2021 – 2022	84.9%	42.5%	39.7%
2022 – 2023	85.9%	41.3%	34.9%

<sup>1</sup> See for example <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/11/american-schools-absenteeism/675892/>.

While these improvements from the 2021 – 2022 school year are encouraging, we know that we need to accelerate improvement to achieve the robust academic gains DCPS has seen over the past decade.

**This fall, we have seen attendance metrics improve with higher in-seat attendance rates and a lower chronic absenteeism rate than at this point last school year.** So far this school year, DCPS’ in-seat attendance rate is 3.8% higher than at this point last school year. DCPS’ chronic absenteeism rate is 7% lower than at this point last school year. DCPS’ truancy rate is at the same level as this point last school year.<sup>2</sup> We are encouraged by this progress and expect continued improvements during this school year given the focused efforts underway. Please see the table included in my written testimony for more information on our attendance metrics for this school year.

<b>Attendance Comparison 22-23 vs. 23-24</b>		
<i>Attendance Metric</i>	<i>SY22-23 LYTD</i>	<i>SY23-24 YTD</i>
In-Seat Attendance	90.2%	94.0%
Chronic Absenteeism	37.7%	30.7%
Truancy	10.6%	10.4%

**DCPS employs both system-wide strategies as well as strategies targeted at groups of schools to support attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy.** Two key system-wide strategies are Comprehensive School Plans (CSPs) and a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).

First, I want to share more about our annual comprehensive school planning process. This planning process is anchored in each school’s performance data across multiple domains. With the guidance of central teams and our Instructional Superintendents, school leaders and their teams outline targeted improvement strategies. All Comprehensive School Plans must include strategies to improve attendance. Schools select strategies that are evidence-based interventions recognized by OSSE and promoted by Attendance Works and other leading attendance partners. These can include mentorship, regular check-in / check-out times with students to monitor attendance, connecting students to an adult in the building they can consult with regarding their concerns, and home visits. As part of this process, schools are required to continue truancy compliance work and execute the specific strategies they identified to address

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that truancy rates can fluctuate greatly throughout the year as staff update absence codes in response to receiving doctors’ notes or other documentation excusing absences.

chronic absenteeism. Attendance team staff and instructional superintendents work to ensure that goal setting and monitoring occur.

While CSPs address attendance intervention at a system level, MTSS supports our work at a student level. DCPS's approach to implementing MTSS is grounded in a holistic approach to understanding student strengths and needs. Schools triangulate attendance data alongside academic, social emotional, and behavioral data to understand and address root causes to each student's challenges. Through this process schools can:

- *Incorporate data regarding the outcomes of Student Attendance Conference discussions into their decision-making process.* For example, if a student says that academics is a reason they are not coming to school, the school staff can consider putting a Tier 2 or Tier 3 academic intervention in place (instead of a more explicit attendance intervention) to address this root cause.
- *Engage more stakeholders in addressing attendance concerns.* Providing support to students begins with collaborative conversations that involve a team of adults who know each student well – typically school leaders, teachers, and caregivers.
- *Consider outcomes more holistically.* Through DCPS' integrated data platform, school teams can see the impact on academics, social emotional skills, and behavior for students who are receiving attendance interventions in real time.

In accordance with District law and regulation, DCPS holds Student Attendance Conferences (SACs) with students who accrue five or more full-day unexcused absences in a term. These meetings are intended to support students and families and are part of DCPS' attendance protocol. During these meetings, DCPS staff emphasize compliance with attendance policies while uncovering barriers to attendance. DCPS staff work with students and families to implement appropriate strategies and interventions to abate truancy. Student health, including student mental health and COVID concerns or diagnoses, is the most common barrier to regular attendance cited during these meetings.

DCPS also engages in several strategies with groups of schools to support improved attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism. One strategy to accelerate learning for our students furthest from opportunity is DCPS' Connected School Model, which we have instituted at eleven schools. These schools are seeing higher attendance rates and reduced chronic absenteeism and truancy rates compared to this time last year. These schools are resource hubs in their community to meet student and family needs in and out of the classroom. Connected Schools take a whole child, whole school, whole community approach by making schools spaces that support not only

a student’s academic development, but also a family’s overall wellbeing through providing access to resources related to health, employment, housing, and more. This model builds on the full-service community school model and is grounded in national research and educational best practices. Each Connected School employs Connected School Managers who coordinate with principals to connect school communities with needed resources.<sup>3</sup>

<b>Connected Schools are Seeing Attendance Metrics Improve</b>			
	<i>In-Seat Attendance</i>	<i>Chronic Absenteeism</i>	<i>Truancy</i>
SY 22-23 Last Year To Date	82.3%	52.2%	25.2%
SY 23-24 Year To Date	85.4%	45.7%	21.9%

Another strategy that DCPS employs with groups of schools are Sixth and Ninth Grade Academies. These academies are specifically located at Title I schools. The Ninth Grade Academies were established in School Year 2013-2014 in response to low promotion rates for ninth graders attending comprehensive high schools, with the goal of increasing four-year graduation rates. Our Academies support first time ninth grade students’ successful transition to high school, providing clear expectations and ensuring frequent feedback with a network of social, emotional, and academic personalized interventions. Ninth Grade Academies are led by Academy Assistant Principals and teams of teachers work together to analyze student attendance and academic data and design appropriate interventions. Through this strategy we serve students at Anacostia, Ballou, Cardozo, Coolidge, Dunbar, Eastern, Ron Brown, Roosevelt, and Woodson. Over the past ten years, Ninth Grade Academies in DCPS have increased promotion rates from 54% to 75-85%.

Like ninth grade, we know that sixth grade is a critical juncture in a young person’s life and that the transition from fifth to sixth grade can be similarly challenging. For these reasons, DCPS launched Sixth Grade Academies in eleven middle schools this past summer, to help students make a smooth transition to sixth grade and improve their chances of graduating from high school. We are excited to see this strategy already paying dividends. Students who are economically disadvantaged in these academies are seeing higher in-seat attendance than economically disadvantaged students who are not participating in these academies.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Connected Schools are Anacostia HS, Ballou HS, Cardozo Education Campus, Eliot Hine MS, Hart MS, Johnson MS, Kelly Miller MS, Kramer MS, Langley ES, Moten ES, and Sousa MS.

<sup>4</sup> Economically disadvantaged students in 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academies have an in-seat attendance rate of 79.4% compared to 67.4% for economically disadvantaged students not engaged in these Academies. Economically disadvantaged students in 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Academies have an in-seat attendance rate of 90.7% as compared to 89.8% for economically disadvantaged students not engaged in these Academies.

In addition to building nurturing, trusting environments within the school setting, we know that trusting relationships are the foundation for connecting with our families. Historically, one evidence-based way that DCPS educators build these trusting relationships with families is through home visits. To ensure the quality of home visits and other family engagement work at the school level, each school participating in our Family Engagement Program has a Family Engagement Leadership team comprised of 1-4 teachers or staff and an administrator. Teachers and staff serving on these teams receive additional compensation of approximately \$2,000 for work outside of contract hours. Nine schools that participated in the program are returning this year, nine new schools are joining the program, and 18 schools are receiving more limited support now that they have “graduated” from the program. Over the last decade, two studies of DCPS Home Visits have shown positive impacts, including on student attendance, behavior, and literacy.<sup>5</sup> In teams of two, school staff visit families in a location of their choosing and focus on getting to know the family and child. Educators and families both share their hopes, dreams, and expectations for the student. The program is funded via the DCPS Office of Engagement and Partnerships local budget with support from the Flamboyan Foundation.

**While we are encouraged by continued progress this fall, we know that families, schools, communities, and government partners must continue to work together to improve attendance and reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy.** We are committed to collaborating with all partners on this important challenge. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering your questions.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example [https://flamboyanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/JHU-STUDY\\_FINAL-REPORT1.pdf](https://flamboyanfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/JHU-STUDY_FINAL-REPORT1.pdf) and [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL\\_2022128.pdf](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/pdf/REL_2022128.pdf)