

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



Public Hearing on

School Nurses  
and

Bill 25-278, the “School Student Vaccination Amendment Act of 2023”

Written Testimony of

**Dr. Brenda Elliott**

Chief, School Improvement and Supports

Before the

Committee of the Whole

The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

June 22, 2023

At DCPS, we want our students to be healthy and in school each school day, safely learning. Vaccinations are safe, effective, and help ensure our students can learn in-person. We strongly encourage our families to ensure that their children are up to date with their immunization and annual well child visits with their health professional. Last school year, our schools worked diligently to support immunization compliance and enforcement for all students. I want to applaud the incredible hard work of our school leaders, front office staff, and other members of our school-based health teams to support immunization compliance and enforcement. During School Year 2022-23, DCPS worked closely with DC Health and the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) to design and implement immunization compliance protocols that helped us to move the mark on our immunization compliance rates and taught us a lot about what is required to support families for which immunization hesitancy is a major challenge. In School Year 2022-23, our school staff could be found greeting families of noncompliant students in the parking lot or entry of the school to encourage them to get their children vaccinated, providing information about where immunization resources could be found in the community, and translating the content in the DC Health noncompliance letters to families who were not fluent in English or Spanish. In School Year 2022-23, DCPS hosted over 30 vaccine clinics at our schools, engaged our health staff in making more than 28,000 phone calls to families and spent countless hours collecting immunization forms and answering immunization related questions. This was a Herculean task, and our school staff and contracted health staff worked incredibly hard to limit the number of students that were subject to school exclusion due to immunization noncompliance. We sincerely thank our school leaders and staff for all their efforts.

I also want to thank our families that have and continue to make immunization compliance a priority. As of June 13, approximately 35,750 DCPS students are compliant with the routine pediatric immunizations. This is approximately 81% of our total student population and we have moved our compliance rate up almost 10% from this time last year. We also are happy to celebrate the 17 DCPS schools that already have a compliance rate of 90% or greater.

Our first attempt at immunization enforcement last year taught us some important lessons regarding the complexities of excluding students for immunization noncompliance. The lack of full-time, consistent nursing coverage, a clear definition for compliance, and reliable data were significant barriers to ensuring that our data was correct and that families had accurate information regarding their immunization status. These challenges were exacerbated by the fact that the criteria for which a student could be excluded, and the definition of compliance were different. For example, students experiencing homelessness and students who had received part of any required vaccination series by July 1 were not eligible for exclusion but were still listed as noncompliant in the immunization database. Additionally, there were many families that insisted that the database was wrong and/or that paperwork had been lost. As a result, our front office staff and principals often found themselves in the middle of very emotional and sometimes volatile conversations with families. Other families would continue to send their children to schools although they had been repeatedly informed of their noncompliance and, due to

supervision concerns, our schools would have no options but to allow them to stay in schools and continue to try to reach out to families. Our high school principals also struggled with exclusion of their most vulnerable students for which school attendance was already a challenge, fearing that once excluded, it would be very difficult to re-engage the students.

We are appreciative of the ways that OSSE and DC Health have engaged our team as thought-partners in the next iteration of the enforcement of routine pediatric immunizations for school attendance. Our school-level experiences have helped to inform the process and resources for School Year 2023-24, which will be a more manageable process with improved metrics, more consistent nursing support and database improvements.

DCPS is also pleased to support our city partners as we come together to expand access to vaccines over the summer. Beginning on the first day of school, we will accelerate our support for families who are non-compliant with immunization. School health teams will be speaking to parents in-person, conducting phone calls, and connecting families to resources closest to their homes. Our school nurses, who serve as the Immunization Point of Contact (IPOC) at our schools, are an essential component in our immunization compliance response. School nurses must be counted on to ensure that immunization records are accurate and to talk to families who are concerned about the safety of vaccinations. The national shortage of school nurses has seriously impacted DCPS schools as well, with on average only about 40% of our schools having full-time coverage. DCPS is very hopeful about the shifts in the nursing model that will provide more predictable and consistent coverage and thus help our health suite professionals to be more integrated members of the school community.

DCPS continues to build a robust plan of outreach and touchpoints with our families over the summer and from the first day of school to the first day of immunization exclusion, which will complement the public outreach and communications work led by our partners at DC Health and OSSE. Once school starts, schools will regularly review the updated noncompliance roster, as well as work with our school nurses and school health teams to provide targeted outreach to families still not on-target with the required immunizations. We will follow the law and notify families that students who do not yet have the required vaccines will not be allowed to attend school in keeping with the district-wide timeline. Immunization noncompliant students will be coded as “Unexcused Absence – Immunization” and we will continue supporting families in reaching compliance as soon as possible.

DCPS is very proud of our efforts to ensure all students are compliant with childhood immunization requirements and appreciative of our partnerships with DC Health and OSSE. We will continue to work collaboratively with our sister agencies using the lessons learned during last school year to improve our structures, supports, and protocols to ensure a smoother process for our schools and families. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.