

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



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

**Antwan Wilson  
Chancellor  
District of Columbia Public Schools**

**Before the  
Chairman Phil Mendelson  
Committee of the Whole  
And  
Councilmember David Grosso, Chairperson  
Committee on Education  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Monday, October 23, 2017**

**John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Room 412  
Washington, D.C. 20004**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, members of the Committees, and staff. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today about the work we are doing to increase attendance and reduce truancy in DC Public Schools (DCPS). We are grateful for the support of the Mayor and for the attention both of you and your committees have continued to bring to this important issue. I assure you that we are prioritizing supports for strong student attendance as part of our new *Capital Commitment*, and I am confident that our plans will help us realize improvements in student attendance going forward.

Over the past several years, DCPS has continued to make progress in data quality and districtwide implementation and monitoring of attendance processes. During School Year 2016-2017, DCPS worked to increase collaboration across offices to provide supports to schools and to increase the district's accountability for compliance with the truancy protocol and referral processes. We have provided intensive training to schools, generated guidance documents featuring best practices in truancy reduction, and leveraged critical supports and resources for schools through our partner agencies and organizations. Our cross-agency and stakeholder collaboration has also been enhanced by our participation in the District's Everyday Counts Taskforce (formerly known as the Truancy Taskforce). Even with all of the work our teams and schools do every day to address student attendance, we ended School Year 2016-2017 at 88.9 percent In-Seat Attendance (ISA), a 0.8 percentage point decrease from the 89.7 percent ISA rate for School Year 2015-2016. We also realized an increase in the truancy rate, ending the school year at 25.9 percent, which represented a 5 percentage point increase from School Year 2015-2016.

Specifically, we can see that truancy remains highest in high school grades; however, the biggest increases in truant students in School Year 2016-17 were in the elementary grades. In fact, truancy increases in 15 schools accounted for 84% of the district's truancy increase. Most of these schools were

either Extended Year elementary schools or high schools. In Extended Year schools, unexcused absences increased during periods when traditional schools were out of session.

We are not satisfied with these shifts in our attendance rates, and we are analyzing the potential causes of these trends. We are paying special attention to the potential impact some changes in the attendance laws may have on attendance, our implementation of extended year schedules in some schools, and districtwide increases in the fidelity of attendance data entry.

As you are aware, the definition of “chronically truant” students changed in 2016. This new definition had an impact on our truancy accounting. Under the new definition, we now count any students who were *ever* truant at the school or district level, rather than the previous metric, which counted only students who were *currently registered*. This metric was modified to give a better picture of students’ attendance patterns; however, it did change the School Year 2015-2016 truancy rate from 16.8 percent to 20.9 percent.

Over the last several years, DCPS has maintained a consistent rate of referrals to the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Last year, DCPS referred 80 percent (1,573) of 1,969 eligible students to CFSA for educational neglect. This rate of referral was consistent with the two previous school years. With respect to referrals to Court Social Services (CSS), DCPS actually improved the rate of referrals for court-eligible truancy cases. For the two preceding school years (2014-2015 and 2015-2016) we referred 28 percent of these cases, and last school year (2016-2017), we referred 34 percent. For School Year 2016-2017, we referred 46 percent of the combined cases eligible for referral to CSS and the Office of the Attorney General.

While this was an overall improvement, as we have discussed with you previously, schools continue to struggle to provide the extensive proof of all of the steps required for making court

referrals. The 2016 School Attendance Clarification Amendment changed the requirements for referring students, which contributed to a significant decrease in the number of students requiring referral to these agencies. Still, it is in our secondary schools – both middle and high schools – where the challenges persist, largely owing to the greater volume of eligible cases in these grades.

We all know that student absenteeism is a complex issue which reflects challenges beyond students' academic lives. We also know that our attendance challenges can only be vanquished by a complex mix of compliance with reporting requirements and implementation of thoughtful policies and interventions. What is inarguable is the notion that, in order to reduce student absences, we have to identify the root causes of students' absences, address those causes by connecting students and their families with a system of supports, and ensure excellent schools where our students are challenged and engaged.

With that said, our attendance work at DCPS is grounded in several strategies: creating welcoming school environments, reducing absenteeism and increasing the attendance of all students, and reducing suspensions. Since I arrived in February, I have spent a lot of time talking to students, families, educators, and staff about social emotional learning (commonly referred to as SEL) as a critical school climate improvement lever. As a school district, we must approach every day as an opportunity to help every student learn, feel loved, and thrive in our schools. Part of that work is ensuring that our students are attending school every day, being challenged academically and personally, and learning and growing from these experiences. In addition to our social emotional learning (SEL) work, which will involve training for our educators, we are working to strengthen our overall approach. This includes identifying specific approaches to support students depending upon their risk factors for excessive absences. Such strategies would include a range of information on the importance of attendance,

supports to help students experience greater success at school, and the pursuit of additional partnerships and resources for students and families in need.

At the same time, school staff are being reminded that all students should feel welcomed in our buildings every day. There is no excuse for denying a student entry to school, and suspensions should be a last resort of discipline – after all other interventions have been exhausted or where there is an unmistakable safety threat caused by the student remaining at school.

We know that our students learn acceptable ways of behaving through purposeful instruction and thoughtful attention to the whole child. We have many schools doing great work promoting positive student behavior while creating and sustaining a nurturing school climate. I can share just a few examples:

- **Hendley Elementary School** has reduced suspensions by implementing behavior ladder procedures; utilizing Restorative Justice practices when welcoming suspended students back to school; programming for building rapport and relationships between students and teachers; and conducting home visits that have contributed to increased family engagement.
- **Hart Middle School** has focused on using Restorative Justice practices to curb exclusionary practices in their building. Through their use of restorative circles, they continued a trend of decreasing suspensions during School Year 2016-2017, seeing both a drop in total suspensions and the total number of suspension days.
- All students at **Luke C. Moore High School** have Personal Responsibility Coaches (PRCs). They are matched with the teachers and staff members in the school who help them plan and serve as mentors. These coaches meet with students in groups every Tuesday and Thursday to discuss academic and personal challenges, share ideas about how to deal with conflict and what courses to take next, and check in on how students are doing mentally, emotionally, and socially.

DCPS has conducted a lot of hard work at the school and district level over the past several years to address the district's attendance challenges, and we know that there is much more work to do. We believe that the combination of our strategic school climate and culture initiatives, our focus on data reporting and compliance, our work with the nationally-acclaimed Attendance Works group, and our

own, local Every Day Counts campaign, will position us for the improvements in student attendance we all want to see.

We could not have done this work alone or without support of the Mayor, this Council, and our external and agency partners. As we look ahead to what's next for this work, it is most important to note that we have included (the improvement of) attendance as a key initiative in our strategic plan, and we are developing a larger plan for it. Our elementary schools are implementing a Chronic Absence (CA) Engagement initiative, which is designed to better monitor student attendance and increase the level of family engagement, with the goal of reducing all absences by 50 percent. We are also increasing home visits since we know these connections with families have a positive impact on In-Seat Attendance. Finally, we are looking at ways to extend our case management capacity, internally, through more collaboration with our existing partner agencies, as well as through new partnerships with organizations that can help us build a strong system of healthy, safe community schools.

As we look ahead, I assure you that we will not ignore the crisis of truancy while we work to continue to improve our schools, and we will not ignore the broader needs of our students as we focus on truancy. Rather, we will continue to explore ways to enhance the school experience while equipping our educators to meet the comprehensive needs of our students. We know some of the things that are working, and we will continue to push on those. We are also looking to new, evidence-based approaches, particularly ones that will help us address attendance among our oldest students. What is absolutely clear is that we cannot do this work alone, and we are grateful for the support of our agency and district partners, as well as this Council to help build the messaging and establish the supports emphasizing that Every Day Counts.

Thank you for your time today, and I look forward to your questions.