



501 3rd Street, NW · 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
www.childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
April 13, 2023

Public Hearing:
Budget Oversight Hearing
Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants

Danielle Robinette
Policy Analyst
Children's Law Center

Chairperson Pinto, Members of the Committee, and Staff:

My name is Danielle Robinette. I am a policy analyst at Children's Law Center and former public-school teacher. I am submitting this written testimony on behalf of Children's Law Center which believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children's urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

I appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony regarding the proposed FY24 budget for the Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants. Through our work, Children's Law Center represents DC students who regularly face barriers in accessing their education. Our medical-legal partnership, Healthy Together, represents parents who are fighting for their child's right to access special education services. Additionally, we represent children and youth with child welfare involvement. These students face myriad challenges with educational continuity. Based on our experience representing students who are often furthest from opportunity, we ask the committee to restore

\$500,000 to OVSJG's truancy reduction budget for the "Show Up, Stand Out" (SUSO) program to pilot the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program.

Since 2013, the District has made various efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism, decrease high school dropout rates, increase grades and graduation rates, and reduce juvenile crime and recidivism.¹ However, 10 years later, these goals have not yet been met. In fact, between SY15-16 and SY20-21 chronic absenteeism rates grew by 5.1% and then, in SY21-22 it spiked an additional 17%. Over the same period, the truancy rate has nearly doubled.² Children's Law Center supports investing in student-centered supports that help schools to identify a student's barriers to attendance and to connect them to relevant services. Attendance data shows that at-risk students³ are more likely to incur absences compared to their peers.⁴ At the same time, at-risk students report higher instances of feeling unsafe due to bullying, harassment, and embarrassment.⁵ They are more frequently enrolled in schools with poor facility conditions, are more disconnected and disengaged from adults in the school community, have limited transportation options, and have additional familial responsibilities.⁶ Failing to meaningfully address these issues only increases student absenteeism.⁷

In hearings and roundtables before the Committee of the Whole, Children's Law Center has supported the use of Student Support Teams (SSTs)⁸ to create individualized solutions to address a student's unique set of barriers to attendance.⁹ However, in our experience, insufficient resources have led to SST meetings that are frequently brief and

superficial rather than a meaningful opportunity to bring together relevant stakeholders to devise a plan to support a student's attendance. To be impactful, SSTs need the time and information to identify a student's barriers, connect the student and their family to appropriate supports, and the ability to provide regular follow up to determine if the proposed support is working. To do this, SSTs cannot be managed by existing school personnel who are already overburdened and lack the resources to focus on personalized attendance interventions. For schools to implement SSTs with fidelity, SSTs must be adequately resourced and staffed – and there must be meaningful connections between schools and the existing supportive services offered by District government.

Fortunately, DC already has several programs that have the expertise and foundational infrastructure to offer this sort of support to students and young people. Specifically, DC funds the "Show Up, Stand Out" program through OVSJG which works with schools to increase their capacity to hold meaningful school-based attendance meetings. Additionally, SUSO has collaborated with the DME in their Student Support Team Working Group which is examining SST processes across DC schools and developing best practices and tools to improve SST implementation.¹⁰ Given this experience, SUSO has the existing infrastructure and expertise to support the improvement of SST work in DC schools.

Unfortunately, SUSO's budget has been slashed by 57%.¹¹ As such, the truancy reduction work funded by OVSJG will be severely limited. Currently, the Mayor's

proposed FY24 budget cuts \$2.9 million in funding from SUSO. We ask the Council to restore \$500,000 in local funds to SUSO to support the piloting of the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP). LEAP is a research-based, home visiting program that identifies and partners with families to improve student attendance and family engagement.¹² This model of intensive support for students and families has shown impressive improvements to student attendance.¹³ According to a study of LEAP conducted in public schools across Connecticut:

“attendance rates increased by approximately four percentage points in the month immediately following the first LEAP visit. Attendance rates then continued to rise in subsequent months, reaching an average increase of approximately seven percentage points for students treated in the summer of 2021 and nearly 15 percentage points for students treated during the 2021-22 school year in the 6 months or more after treatment.”¹⁴

Given that SUSO already has the foundational skills and infrastructure to implement a program like LEAP and that they are already connected to DME’s work on SST implementation, they seem a natural fit for this pilot. With \$500,000 in FY24, SUSO could implement a pilot at 3-4 DC schools and could offer the intensive, personalized intervention needed to meet the unique needs of families who are struggling with barriers to attendance. Therefore, we ask the Committee to restore at least \$500,000 in local funds to SUSO’s budget to support a LEAP pilot in SY24-25.

Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony and I am available for any questions or follow up that the Committee may have.

¹ See District of Columbia State Board of Education, Letter RE: Challenges Associated with Implementation of the District of Columbia’s New Compulsory Attendance Laws and Recommendations for Addressing Them (April 1, 2015), p. 4 *available at*:

https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/release_content/attachments/Chronic%20Absenteeism%20-%20ADOPTED%20-%200040115_0.pdf

² District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, *District of Columbia Attendance Report, School Year 2021-2022* (November 30, 2022), p. 11, *available at*:

<https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2021-22%20Attendance%20Report%20%28Nov%2028%202022%29.pdf>

³ District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, *District of Columbia Attendance Report, School Year 2018-2019* (November 30, 2019), p. 25, *available at*:

<https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2018-19%20School%20Year%20Attendance%20Report.pdf> (outlining that at-risk students are defined as those receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); students who are homeless: students under the care of CFSA; and students who are in high school and are at least one year older than the expected age for their grade).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Valerie L. Marsh, *Understanding Chronic Absenteeism: What Research Tells Us about Poor Attendance at School*, American Federation of Teachers (AFL-CIO) (Winter 2019–2020) *available at*:

<https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2019-2020/marsh>

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ The term “Student Support Team” or “SST” is drawn from the South Capitol Street Memorial Act of 2012 § 302, codified at DC Code § 38-201(3B). A recent presentation at a recent presentation before the Every Day Counts! Taskforce, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education noted an effort to rebrand SSTs as “Student Attendance Conferences (SACs).” For the purposes of this testimony, we will use SST, but we acknowledge the potential change in terminology.

⁹ See, e.g., Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, (March 1, 2023), *available at*: https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/CLC_Education-Agencies_PerformanceOversightTestimony_Final.pdf.

¹⁰ FY2022 Office of Victim Services and Justice Grants Performance Oversight Responses, responses to Q56 and Q57, *available at*: <https://dccouncil.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Office-of-Victim-Services-and-Justice-Grants.pdf>.

¹¹ Mayor’s Proposed FY 2024 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 2 Agency Budget Chapters – Part I, Table FO0-4 (5010), p. C-143.

¹² Connecticut’s Official State Website, *Learner Engagement and Attendance Program – LEAP*, *available at*: <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Chronic-Absence/Learner-Engagement-and-Attendance-Program-LEAP>

¹³ Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration, *An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Home Visits for Re-Engaging Students Who Were Chronically Absent in the Era of Covid-19*, December 31, 2022, *available at*: https://portal.ct.gov/ccerc/-/media/CCERC/Reports/CCERC-Exec-Summary-LEAP_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴ *Id.*, at 7-8.