



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 of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Danielle Robinette
Senior Policy Attorney
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Committee members, and staff. My name is Danielle Robinette, and I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center. Children's Law Center 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.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the issues of student engagement and school attendance in DC public schools. Children's Law Center represents DC students who regularly face barriers in accessing their education. Through our medical-legal partnership, Healthy Together, we represent parents whose children are facing school attendance challenges related to chronic health conditions, lack of access to special education, housing conditions, among other concerns. We also represent children in foster care who face myriad challenges accessing and engaging with their education. My testimony and recommendations today arise from our experience representing students who are often furthest from opportunity.

Over the past year, we have been glad to see the District increase its focus on the persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism among DC students. Both the legislative and executive branches have invested time and resources to identifying and addressing students' barriers to regular school attendance.¹ Together these efforts demonstrate a broad coalition of stakeholders committed to improving the District's school attendance landscape. This work culminated in emergency and temporary legislation that created a truancy pilot program within the Department of Human Services (DHS). Children's Law Center supports the truancy pilot and looks forward to learning more about its early efforts. In the meantime, however, there are significant opportunities for the Council and the Executive to do more to improve the District's attendance response system.

My testimony today recommends several improvements to attendance data collection and encourages the Council to increase engagement among DC government agencies outside the education cluster. The Committee of the Whole is uniquely situated to provide leadership across Council committees and the agencies within their jurisdiction to ensure that every Committee and agency is thinking about how their work impacts student attendance.

The Pilot Program's Preliminary Report Should Inform Steps to Strengthen and Expand the Program

Today's hearing marks the fourth time this Committee has convened to discuss student attendance and engagement over the past year.² Moreover, chronic absenteeism and truancy were discussed in several Council committees during the FY25 budget

season.³ At the most recent hearing in June, the Committee discussed four pieces of legislation seeking to improve how the District responds to chronic absenteeism and to develop proactive supports for students facing barriers to regular school attendance.⁴ At that hearing, the Deputy Mayor for Education and Director Zeilinger of DHS proposed a pilot program that would connect students missing significant amounts of school with case management at DHS.⁵

In response, the Council established the proposed pilot through emergency and temporary legislation.⁶ The legislation required DHS to work with five DC high schools to create a process by which the school refers students aged 14-17 to DHS after the accrual of 15 unexcused full school day absences.⁷ Additionally, the legislation requires DHS to publish a preliminary report on the pilot by March 31, 2025 and a final report by August 15, 2025. Children’s Law Center supports moving the responsibility for absenteeism response to DHS and we look forward to any insights that may be available in the forthcoming preliminary report.⁸ However, we caution the Council and others that although we are all hopeful to see evidence that the program is having its intended effect of helping students stay or reengage in school, it is unlikely that sufficient information to evaluate the efficacy of the program will be available by March 2025.

The DHS pilot has undertaken a phased rollout. In Phase 1, the pilot began working with two schools – Anacostia High School and KIPP Legacy College Preparatory – in September. Phase 2 will add two more schools – Eastern High School and Digital

Pioneers Academy PCS – this month and the fifth school – H.D. Woodson High School will join in Phase 3 starting in January. By the March deadline for the preliminary report, Phase 1 schools will have had only a few months of programming, and Phase 2 and 3 schools will only have had even less.⁹

The reasons why they miss school are multifaceted and unique to a student's individual circumstances. As we have argued with respect to Student Support Teams (SSTs), the work of identifying and addressing a student's barriers to regular school attendance require a significant investment of time.¹⁰ Whether this support is provided by an SST or DHS case management, the intervention will take time to identify a student's barriers, connect the student and their family to appropriate supports, and the capacity to provide regular follow up to determine if the proposed support is working. Given the limited time that the DHS pilot will have had to work with schools, especially those in the later phases, we recognize that very little may be concluded from the preliminary report.

We understand that there is some skepticism around DHS's ability to manage a District-wide response to chronic absenteeism. However, the preliminary report of this pilot is just that – preliminary. It may show marginal or no improvement in attendance rates. But such findings may speak more to the short time frame covered by the report more than to the efficacy of the pilot. While inconclusive or static findings may feel unsatisfactory, we do not want to see this pilot abandoned before it has had a sufficient

chance to build the necessary relationships with schools and students to make meaningful change in DC's attendance response system. We encourage the Committee to continue oversight of the pilot, but to avoid giving up on it too early. This pilot can serve not only an immediate intervention for students, but also as an iterative tool by which the District can monitor trends in chronic absenteeism, evaluate the efficacy of various interventions for different students, and identify unmet needs. We urge the Council to take DHS's preliminary report as an opportunity to strengthen and expand the District's continuum of attendance intervention and supports.

The Council Should Take Further Action to Strengthen the District's Attendance Landscape This Year

We encourage the Council to examine other elements of the District's attendance system requiring further attention. Specifically, we recommend the Committee focus on two areas: 1) improving DC's attendance data reporting and 2) developing buy-in from a broader array of DC government entities. The Committee of the Whole is uniquely positioned to accomplish these goals.

DC Needs More Robust Attendance Data to Understand Why Students Are Not in School

We have testified at length in previous attendance hearings regarding the need for better attendance data to inform the District's attendance policy and practice.¹¹ Specifically, we have three recommendations for ensuring that DC's attendance data is able to inform responses to student absenteeism.

Report Data on Excused and Unexcused Absences by Reason

Chronic absenteeism includes both excused and unexcused absences and is defined as missing ten percent of instructional days¹² – or 18 days in a full school year.¹³ On the other hand, truancy comprises only unexcused absences and is defined by the accrual of 10 unexcused absences during the school year.¹⁴ There is some overlap between the two categories. For example, a student who accrues 18 unexcused absences in a school year is both chronically absent and truant. So is a student who accrues 10 unexcused and 8 excused absences. However, a student with 18+ absences that are all excused is chronically absent, but not truant.

If our goal for the District's public education system is to ensure that students are prepared for post-secondary life, we cannot just focus on unexcused absences. We must also look closely at students with significant excused absences. Perhaps a student has chronic illness that flares up intermittently and results in 25 excused absences during the school year. This student has missed extensive instructional time; but, because all the absences were excused, there is no required process to identify potential supports. Like students who are truant, these chronically absent students need support so they can stay on track academically.

Unfortunately, OSSE's annual reporting does not provide any details on the difference between rates of excused and unexcused absences. There is no way to know from publicly available data, how many chronically absent students were also truant or

how many chronically absent students never had an unexcused absence. As a result, it is difficult to know which interventions or supports would be most helpful for different schools or communities. To address this, the Council should either amend DC Code § 38-203(k) to increase the requirements of OSSE’s annual attendance report or at least request these additional data in OSSE’s performance oversight prehearing responses.

Publish Attendance Data More Frequently

OSSE’s annual attendance report is not released until November 30th of each year – five months after the end of the school year on which it reports – which limits schools’ ability to use the data to timely intervene and meet students’ needs. For SY23-24, OSSE published two mid-year attendance briefs.¹⁵ While this is a step in the right direction regarding timeliness, these mid-year briefs do not provide the level of specificity necessary to inform decision-making in the short term.

Other jurisdictions have noted the challenges posed by delayed attendance data and have started gathering and sharing relevant data several times throughout the school year. For example, during the pandemic, Connecticut began collecting and publishing attendance data monthly.¹⁶ These data allow schools “to engage in continual improvement efforts and take timely action to improve student outcomes” and have been used by state leaders “to inform resource allocation.”¹⁷ In Rhode Island, the state department of education created a public attendance data dashboard that is updated every night and data is checked for errors every morning.¹⁸

In the District, more frequent attendance data with school- and neighborhood-level specificity would allow policymakers to monitor how public transportation routing changes are impacting attendance at schools along the affected routes. It would allow District leadership to determine if public safety interventions in a specific community are improving attendance among students who live or go to school in the area. There are innumerable reasons why attendance patterns may change in the middle of a school year, and more frequent data reporting would allow various parts of the District government to respond nimbly to the needs of different communities. The Committee should increase the frequency of OSSE's attendance reporting requirement. One option would be to move forward with B25-0740, the Truancy Reduction for Student Success Act of 2024, which would require OSSE to publish attendance data monthly.¹⁹ Or, following the model in Rhode Island, the Committee could require OSSE to create a daily attendance dashboard.

Conduct a Root Cause Analysis of Chronic Absenteeism in the District for Student Groups Known to Miss the Most School

OSSE's annual attendance reporting identifies several groups of students who consistently miss more school than their peers, but does not offer any analysis into the root causes of these persistent attendance trends.²⁰ For example, OSSE's annual attendance reporting shows that at-risk students are more likely to incur absences than their peers.²¹ Their barriers to attendance are likely to be numerous and comprise both school- and non-school-based concerns. However, without an analysis of the reasons why at-risk students in specific schools are absent, targeted interventions and supports cannot

be developed. We encourage the Committee to create a requirement for OSSE to conduct and publish a root cause analysis that is updated at regular intervals. For example, B25-0758, the Showing Up for Students Amendment Act of 2024 includes a requirement that OSSE publish an annual report that identifies root causes of chronic absenteeism and assess efficacy of various interventions.²²

The Council Should Engage Agencies Outside of the Education Cluster Regarding Attendance Issues

In a recent report, national attendance expert Liz Cohen, examines the statewide coalition developed in Rhode Island to address chronic absenteeism rates following the pandemic.²³ Governor McKee enlisted leaders outside of the education sector to help lower absenteeism,²⁴ resulting in the lowest chronic absenteeism rate the state since the pandemic.²⁵ Since the start of Gov. McKee's statewide strategy, 82% of Rhode Island schools have lowered their rate of chronic absenteeism.²⁶ Lessons learned in Rhode Island provide opportunities for the District to adopt a similar approach. We encourage the Committee to seek ways to get more of DC government invested in student attendance.

As the Committee has seen through the series of hearings on student attendance over the past year, the reasons why students miss school include transportation, unstable housing, food insecurity, physical and behavioral health, unmet special education needs, community violence, laundry access, bullying, academic challenges, among myriad others. Given the numerous and nuanced needs of DC students, the education sector cannot meet the challenge alone. Like in Rhode Island, the District needs agencies across

the government to examine how their work impacts attendance and how they might support efforts to broaden DC’s array of resources.

To do this, the Council must not be siloed by committees’ jurisdiction over certain agencies. Joint committee hearings and roundtables are one way to bring together stakeholders from across District government. For example, in December 2023, the Health Committee convened a pair of hearings examining the behavioral health needs of DC children and youth.²⁷ These joint hearings offered opportunities to bring together agencies that are typically confined to a single committee to examine how they work together to meet the needs of DC’s young people. We urge the Committee of the Whole to apply similar model to future attendance hearings. Below are some recommendations for some joint hearings that the Committee of the Whole could lead:

Hearing Topic	Committees	Agencies	Potential Focus Areas
Attendance & Student Health and Wellness	COW Health	DME, DCPS, OSSE, PCSB DC Health, DBH	Home & Hospital Instruction SBBH, School Nursing, School-Based Health Centers
Attendance & Student Homelessness	COW Housing	DME, DCPS, OSSE, PCSB DHS, DCHA	Students Living in Shelters McKinney-Vento spending
Attendance & Student Commutes	COW Transportation Public Works Judiciary	DME, DCPS, OSSE, PCSB DDOT, WMATA DFHV DMPSJ	Gaps in public transit, Kids Ride Free utilization, OSSE-DOT, Safe Passage, DC School Connect
Attendance Barriers for Student in the Care of DC	COW Family Services Judiciary	DME, DCPS, OSSE, PCSB CFSA OAG, DMPSJ, DYRS	Status of the SCDC Coordinating Committee, School continuity when placements change, SPED in secure facilities

In addition to convening joint hearings, the Committee of the Whole (and any other committee) should raise the issue of attendance whenever it is relevant in hearings set by any committee. For example, next week this Committee is holding a hearing to provide oversight on the education of students with disabilities.²⁸ We encourage the Committee to use that hearing to, among other things, explore rates of chronic absenteeism among students with disabilities and how improved provision of special education could support improved attendance among this student group.²⁹

Conclusion

Absenteeism has long been a challenge for the District, but the past year has shown that focused attention on this issue can lead to meaningful change. We encourage the Committee to continue its commitment to meeting the needs of DC students and families in overcoming barriers to attendance.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions.

¹ The State Board of Education held a panel on Identifying Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism Interventions in Schools, *see* District of Columbia State Board of Education, Public Meeting (Jan. 17, 2024), *recording available at:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vpEFsIIY30&list=PLc9Yooaf1xFROBf1O-6dvWvSleaVGZUO8&index=7> (panel begins at 20:42); the SBOE also passed a Resolution recommending policies that address chronic absenteeism and truancy, District of Columbia State Board of Education, SR24-7 Recommending Policies that Address Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy, *available at:* <https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/Recommending%20Policies%20that%20Address%20Chronic%20Absenteeism%20and%20Truancy%20SR24-7.pdf>; and the SBOE published an analysis of the four attendance bills considered by the Committee, District of Columbia State Board of Education, “Crosswalk: Chronic Absenteeism & Truancy” (Sept. 2024), *available at:* https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/release_content/attachments/2024-09-17-SBOE_Crosswalk_ChronicAbsenteeism%26Truancy_0.pdf.

The Office of the State Superintendent has begun publishing mid-year data snapshots, *see e.g.,* Office of the State Superintendent of Education, “2023-24 Mid-Year Attendance Brief,” https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Mid_Year%20Attendance_1_Pager%203_29_2024.pdf;

The Every Day Counts! Taskforce, housed within the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, undertook a year-long strategic planning process that culminated in their recent relaunch summit that brought together government and community partners to hear from panels comprised of national experts, DC school leaders, and DC students, *see*

<https://meetingthemomenteverydaycounts.splashthat.com/>. At this summit, Deputy Mayor Kihn announced that D.C. has joined 14 states in a commitment to cut chronic absenteeism by 50% over the next five years. For more information on the 50% Challenge, *see* Attendance Works, Toolkits, “50% Challenge: Crating a State Road Map” (Sept. 2024), *available at:*

<https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/the-50-challenge-crafting-a-state-road-map/>.

² *See* District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Hearing Notice for Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy, (Dec. 12, 2023), *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/171>, District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Hearing Notice for Student Absenteeism and Discipline, (May 13, 2024), *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/414>, District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Hearing Notice for Student Absenteeism and Discipline, (June 26, 2024), *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/441>, and District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Hearing Notice for Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy, (Nov. 13, 2024), *available at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/536>.

³ *See, e.g.,* Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, Budget Oversight Hearing for the Office of the Attorney General (May 1, 2024), *available for download at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/397>

⁴ *See* B25-0740, *Truancy Reduction for Student Success Act of 2024*; B25-754, *Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Reduction Amendment Act of 2024*; B25-758, *Showing Up for Students Amendment Act of 2024*; B25-791, *Utilizing Partnerships and Local Interventions for Truancy and Safety (UPLIFT) Amendment Act of 2024*.

⁵ *See* Laura Green Zeilinger, D.C. Department of Human Services, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Student Absenteeism and Discipline (June 26, 2024), *available for download at:* <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/441>.

⁶ *See* B25-0912, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Emergency Amendment Act of 2024* and B25-0913, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Temporary Amendment Act of 2024*.

⁷ B25-0912, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Emergency Amendment Act of 2024*, line 32-34.

⁸ Judith Sandalow, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole, Public Roundtable on Student Absenteeism and Discipline (May 13, 2024), p. 24-26, *available at*: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/committee-of-the-whole-public-roundtable-student-absenteeism-and-discipline/>

⁹ Presentation before the EveryDay Counts! Taskforce Steering Committee, presented Oct. 23, 2024, on file with the Children’s Law Center.

¹⁰ Judith Sandalow and Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole, Public Roundtable on Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy (Dec. 12, 2023), p. 3, *available for download at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/171>

¹¹ *See id.*, at 8-11, Judith Sandalow, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole, *supra* note 8 at 4-11, and Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the Council of the District of Columbia, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Student Absenteeism and Discipline (June 26, 2024), p. 4-9, *available for download at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/441>

¹² *See* Office of the State Superintendent of Education, District of Columbia Attendance Report 2022-23 School Year, p. 5 (November 30, 2023), *available at*: https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2022-23%20Attendance%20Report_FINAL_0.pdf

¹³ Assuming the minimally required 180 instructional days in a school year.

¹⁴ *See* OSSE, District of Columbia Attendance Report 2022-23 School Year, *supra* note 12, p. 5.

¹⁵ *See* OSSE, “2023-24 Mid-Year Attendance Brief,” *supra* note 1.

¹⁶ *See* Attendance Works, “Monitoring Who Is Missing Too Much School: A Review of State Policy and Practice in School Year 2021-22,” p. 6 (June 2022), *available at*: https://www.attendanceworks.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/Attendance-Works-State-Policy-Analysis-2022_061422.pdf

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ Liz Cohen, FutureEd, “Team Sport: Rhode Island’s Statewide Strategy for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism,” p. 3 (Aug. 2024), *available at*: <https://www.future-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/FutureEd-Report-Team-Sport.pdf>

¹⁹ B25-0740, the Truancy Reduction for Student Success Act of 2024, line 53-64

²⁰ *See, e.g.*, OSSE, District of Columbia Attendance Report: 2022-23 School Year, *supra* note 12, Appendix B, p. 38-44.

²¹ *See, e.g.*, OSSE, District of Columbia Attendance Report: 2022-23 School Year, *supra* note 12, Appendix B, p. 38-40.

²² B25-758, *Showing Up for Students Amendment Act of 2024*, lines 55-61.

²³ Liz Cohen, FutureEd, “Team Sport: Rhode Island’s Statewide Strategy for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism” *supra* note 19.

²⁴ *Id.*, at 3-6.

²⁵ *Id.*, at 1.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ The first of these hearings brought together the Committee on Health and the Committee on Facilities and Family Services to discuss Behavioral Health for Child and Youth in Foster Care. *See* District of Columbia Council Committee on Facilities and Family Services and Committee on Health, Hearing Notice for Mental Health in the Child Welfare System, (Dec. 6, 2023), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/hearings/168>.

The second included the Committees on Health, Judiciary and Public Safety, and Recreation, Libraries, and Youth Affairs to discuss “Public Safety and Behavioral

Health Services and Support for Youth. District of Columbia Council Committee on Health Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, and Committee on Recreation, Libraries, and Youth Affairs, Hearing Notice for Public Safety & Behavioral Health Services and Supports for Youth, (Dec. 13, 2023), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/hearings/200>.

²⁸ District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Hearing Notice for Oversight of Education for Students with Special Needs, (Nov. 20, 2024), *available at*: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/521>.

²⁹ OSSE's annual attendance reports show that students with disabilities consistently miss school more than their nondisabled peers, see OSSE, District of Columbia Attendance Report: 2022-23 School Year, *supra* note 12, Appendix. B, p. 38, 41. Additional data from OSSE shows that, among students with disabilities, absenteeism risk varies based on a student's primary disability, see Office of the State Superintendent of Education, District of Columbia Attendance Report: 2018-19 School Year, p.24 (November 30, 2019), *available at*: <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2018-19%20School%20Year%20Attendance%20Report.pdf>. OSSE's annual report notes the fact of these data trends but does not identify or analyze any potential underlying cause for the discrepancy, see *id.* In our experience representing families of students with disabilities, we see that an a school's failure to offer appropriate special education services increases disengagement among older students with disabilities.