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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Introduction

Good morning, Chairperson Frumin, members of the Committee, 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 provide testimony regarding the FY25 performance of the Department of Human Services (DHS). My colleague Makenna Osborn provided more comprehensive testimony discussing DHS's performance related to housing and public benefits. My testimony will be limited to DHS's Truancy Reduction Pilot Program ("the Pilot" or "the DHS Pilot"). 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, including parents of children with asthma who are hospitalized due to poor housing conditions, parents of children who are being bullied,

and parents of students denied meaningful special education services. 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.

As part of our advocacy in support of these students and families, we have testified repeatedly before the Committee of the Whole on issues related to school attendance and student disengagement.¹ However, as this Committee knows well, the challenges faced by DC students and families are not limited to the education sector. Students have complex lives in which school is just one part. Research tells us that barriers to attendance fall into six domains of functioning: academic, social–emotional, mental health, physical health, family, and school & community.² However, barriers within each domain intersect in ways unique to individual students and their family circumstances.

Given the broad array of reasons that students miss school, there will be no one-size-fits-all program or intervention that will “solve” chronic absenteeism in the District. Each student, family, school, and neighborhood will have their own unique combination of attendance barriers that require tailored interventions. We cannot offer appropriate interventions and supports without first knowing which barriers to attendance a child faces. We cannot effectively allocate resources without knowing which barriers are most prevalent in each specific school. And we cannot scale interventions and supports without knowing which interventions best address each of the most common barriers.

While the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) reports annually on attendance rates in the District, their data do not reflect the drivers of student absenteeism. However, the individualized family engagement undertaken through the DHS Pilot has provided crucial insight into why DC students miss school and what sorts of interventions best support families in overcoming their barriers to regular school attendance. The lessons learned by the DHS Pilot should be central to future decisions regarding DC's response to persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism. The Committee must ensure that the Truancy Reduction Program has the resources necessary to continue meeting the needs of DC students and families as well as providing reliable data to inform the work of DC policymakers.

The District's Response to Chronic Absenteeism Must Extend Beyond the Education Sector

Over the past two years, we have been glad to see the Council maintain focused attention on 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.³ While improvement has been made since its peak in SY21-22, the rate of chronic absenteeism remained largely stagnant between SY23-24 and SY24-25.⁴

As the Council has seen through the numerous 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. 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.

In response, the Council established the proposed pilot through emergency and temporary legislation.⁵ 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.⁶ While there will not be a one-size-fits-all solution to absenteeism, there are certain tools that we know are ineffective at improving attendance and pose risk of harm to DC children and families. Notably, experts in school attendance have explicitly warned against the use of punitive tools noting that “the evidence base is fairly overwhelming that prevention and family engagement is much more effective than punitive.”⁷ As such, Children’s Law Center has supported the Pilot as an intervention that seeks to address the unmet needs of students and families as opposed to more punitive responses.⁸

DHS Truancy Reduction Pilot Program Highlights Most Common Needs

The work to improve student attendance is complex and slow. The DHS Pilot was charged with developing a system to receive referrals of students with unexcused

absences, provide relevant interventions, and monitor outcomes.⁹ As such, DHS needs to both identify and respond to the unique needs of each student referred.

The DHS pilot was rolled out gradually between September 2024 and February 2025.¹⁰ DHS's report to Council regarding the Pilot's first year provided valuable insights into the. In its first year, the DHS Pilot received 480 referrals from the participating schools.¹¹ They successfully engaged 92.4% of families for referred students.¹² Each family was offered case management services to address their barriers to attendance.¹³ Between the school referrals and the engagement with families, the DHS Pilot found that DC students miss school for a wide variety of reasons.¹⁴ Some – like “struggling academically” – fall squarely within the expertise of the education sector. Others – like mental health and transportation issues – implicate needs beyond the schoolhouse gate. This provides further evidence that absenteeism interventions must come from across District government. No one agency will be able to do this work alone.

Specifically, DHS's Year One report notes that the primary barriers to attendance for students in the pilot, as reported by schools, are struggling academically, struggling behaviorally, and youth sick.¹⁵ Notably, these trends are consistent with those observed in research by national experts.¹⁶ It is particularly concerning to see how many students are missing school because they are struggling academically.¹⁷ When schools were asked to identify the reason for a student's absence, their most common response was

“struggling academically.” This primary reason was reported more times (169) than the second (struggling behaviorally, 90) and third (youth sick, 74) reasons combined.

Where a school believes that the issue underlying a student’s absence is academic in nature, the responsive intervention must be driven by the school’s expertise in educational supports. When a middle school student with a 2nd grade reading level misses school because they are embarrassed to be so far behind their peers, no amount of punishment will address their underlying needs. Just as schools cannot be expected to solve a family’s housing insecurity, non-education agencies should not be expected to teach reading and math. The District’s education sector must do more to ensure that students’ academic needs are met and that students struggling academically are uniquely supported to prevent disengagement and absenteeism. To the extent rates of chronic absenteeism and truancy are driven by schools failing to meet students’ academic needs, the District must focus on what schools need to strengthen student achievement.

In addition to students’ unmet academic needs, common barriers to attendance identified by the Pilot include physical illness, mental health, and transportation issues.¹⁸ In order to support the diverse needs of DC students and families, the Pilot must be flexible and well-resourced. As such, it will be important to ensure that future expansions of the DHS Pilot account for the resource needs in the immediate program as well as the investments in those supportive services to which DHS refers students and families. For example, in their Year One report, DHS shares an example where a student had

accumulated many absences due to illness caused by poor housing conditions.¹⁹ Here, the DHS case manager supported the student's attendance by assisting the family in applying for another housing unit. For this family, the case manager's administrative support would have been hollow without the availability of alternative housing. The Pilot alone will not be able to meet the needs of all the students referred to them. As the program grows, so must the programs that directly address the student's unmet needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions.

¹ See e.g., Judith Sandalow, Executive Director, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the DC Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Roundtable on Student Absenteeism and Discipline, (May 13, 2024), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/committee-of-the-whole-public-roundtable-student-absenteeism-and-discipline/>.

² See Christopher A. Kearney, et al., *School attendance problems and absenteeism as early warning signals: review and implications for health-based protocols and school-based practices*, 8 *Frontiers in Educ.* (August 30, 2023), available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1253595/full>.

³ 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=PLc9Yoaf1xFROBfIO-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/>.

⁴ See D.C. Policy Center, “2024-25 State of D.C. Schools: Forward Momentum,” (Mar. 11, 2026), p. 32, available at: https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/v3_SODCS_2024_25_full_report-2.24-copy-2.pdf.

⁵ See B25-0912, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Emergency Amendment Act of 2024* and B25-0913, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Temporary Amendment Act of 2024*.

⁶ B25-0912, *the Pilot Truancy Reduction Emergency Amendment Act of 2024*, line 32-34.

⁷ Dr. Robert Balfanz, DC Council Committee of the Whole Public Roundtable on Student Absenteeism and Discipline (May 13, 2024), at 47:25, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9jrS7XS4OQ&t=4061s>

⁸ Compare Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy, (Nov. 12, 2024), p. 3, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-chronic-absenteeism-and-truancy/> with

Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on B25-0740, B25-0754, B25-0758, and B25-0791, (June 26, 2024), p. 17-21, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-public-hearing-on-student-absenteeism-and-discipline/>.

⁹ See B25-0913, *Pilot Truancy Reduction Temporary Amendment Act of 2024*, line 12-15.

¹⁰ DC Department of Human Services, “Truancy Reduction Pilot Program: Final Report Year One,” (Oct. 7, 2025), p. 3, available at: <https://lms.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/60478/Introduction/RC26-0105-Introduction.pdf?Id=224535>.

¹¹ *Id.*, at 6

¹² *Id.*, at 11.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*, at 14.

¹⁵ *Id.* (Figure 10).

¹⁶ Compare *id.* with Attendance Works, “Identify the root causes of absence” (rev. Sept. 8, 2025), available at: <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/>.

¹⁷ See DC Department of Human Services, “Truancy Reduction Pilot Program: Final Report Year One,” *supra* note 10, at 14 (Figure 10).

¹⁸ *Id.*, at 14.

¹⁹ *Id.*, at 15.