



250 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Suite 350
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
February 25, 2026

Public Oversight Hearing
Deputy Mayor for Education

Danielle Robinette
Senior Policy Attorney
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, 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 testify today regarding the FY25 performance of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). Children's Law Center represents DC students who regularly face barriers in accessing their education. The DME houses two coalitions relevant to the students and families we work with, the DME houses the Every Day Counts! Taskforce (EDC!) and the Students in the Care of DC Coordinating Committee (SCDC). Addressing student absenteeism has been a focus of many across the education sector for the past several years. EDC! brings together agencies from across government as well as community partners to collaborate on ways to support DC students and families in overcoming barriers. This work, alongside the Truancy Reduction Pilot

Program within the Department of Human Services (DHS), has provided key insights into outstanding needs and the limits of our existing system. When considering changes to DC's response to chronic absenteeism, we urge the Council and the Executive to rely on the expertise of EDC! and the lessons learned from the DHS pilot.

Like with absenteeism, the work to support Students in the Care of DC implicates agencies across District government as well as federal partners. The unique needs of students in care require thoughtful planning and collaboration. The work will not be quick, but it must keep moving forward. We continue to believe that the SCDC Coordinating Committee could be a valuable tool to identify and respond to the complex needs of this population. Looking forward, we urge the DME to ensure Students in Care continue to be prioritized.

Supporting School Attendance Must Continue to Be a Priority for the District

DME has provided continued leadership in the District's response to the concerning routes of chronic absenteeism and truancy. In recent years, it became clear that a comprehensive response to chronic absenteeism in the District would require not only the education sector, but also agencies responsible for health, human services, public safety, transportation, among others. In response, the DME was charged with the difficult task of gathering, organizing, and facilitating cooperation among disparate DC agencies. The EDC! Taskforce comprises representatives from across District government to identify the leading drivers of DC's chronic absenteeism and what tools exist (or should

exist) to support students and families. Children’s Law Center has worked with the EDC! Taskforce for many years and we currently serve on the Steering Committee.

We hope that the recent focus on improving school attendance continues. When an issue is as complex and broad as chronic absenteeism is for the District, it can be easy to lose momentum. Progress may be slow and/or hard to quantify. However, the past two years have shown that focused attention on this issue can lead to meaningful change that supports students and families rather than punishing them. We encourage the Committee to continue its commitment to meeting the needs of DC students.

A key strength of the EDC! Taskforce is the involvement of a wide array of DC agencies lending their expertise to address barriers to attendance. EDC! provides an opportunity to dismantle the siloes between sectors of DC government. Moreover, this diverse expertise strengthens the recommendations for improvement developed by the Taskforce. EDC! can and should be a useful tool for the Council in crafting policy in this realm. When considering any future changes to DC’s response to chronic absenteeism, we urge the Council and the Executive to rely on the expertise of the Taskforce.

DHS Truancy Reduction Pilot Program Highlights Most Common Needs

As this Committee knows well, the work to improve student attendance is complex and slow. DHS’s Truancy Reduction Pilot Program (“the Pilot” or “the DHS Pilot”) was charged with developing a system to receive referrals of students with unexcused absences, provide relevant interventions, and monitor outcomes.¹ As such,

DHS needs to both identify and respond to the unique needs of each student referred. In its first year, the DHS Pilot found that DC students miss school for a wide variety of reasons. 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. As such, absenteeism interventions must come from across District government. No one agency will be able to do this work alone.

In October 2025, DHS issued a report sharing insights gained from the first year of the pilot program which provides some valuable insight into why DC students miss school.² Specifically, it notes that the primary barriers to attendance for students in the pilot, as reported by schools, are struggling academically, struggling behaviorally, and youth sick.³ Notably, these trends are consistent with those observed in research by national experts.⁴ It is particularly concerning to see how many students are missing school because they are struggling academically.⁵ 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, CFSA and DYRS 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

Slow but Hopeful Progress to Support Students in the Care of DC

We appreciate the DME, particularly Phillip Copeland, for their work to better understand the unique needs of students in care of the District. At last year's DME oversight hearing, we testified that the SCDC Coordinating Committee was slow to get off the ground. Today we are glad to report that the Committee has met regularly over the past year. While we are still awaiting the publication of the Committee's first annual report, we are encouraged by DME's consistent engagement with SCDC.

The purpose of the SCDC Coordinating Committee is "to identify challenges and resolve issues that students in detention, commitment, incarceration, and foster care face in order to improve educational outcomes."⁸ Over the past year, the full Coordinating Committee met quarterly, but there have been several working groups that have been meeting monthly. These working groups allow members to more closely examine the unique needs of students in care as well as the gaps in the District's current array of supports. Over the past year, the working groups have developed several recommendations for how to better meet the needs of students in care. Last week, SCDC met to review draft recommendations for inclusion in the first annual report. The Committee is scheduled to vote to finalize those recommendations on March 19, 2026. When SCDC's first annual report is published in the coming months, we urge this Committee to engage with the recommendations therein to ensure that the District meaningfully supports all DC students.

¹ B25-0913, *Pilot Truancy Reduction Temporary Amendment Act of 2024*, line 12-15.

² DC Department of Human Services, “Truancy Reduction Pilot Program: Final Report Year One,” (Oct. 7, 2025), available at: <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/downloads/LIMS/60478/Introduction/RC26-0105-Introduction.pdf?Id=224535>.

³ See *id.*, at 14 (Figure 10).

⁴ 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/>.

⁵ See DC Department of Human Services, “Truancy Reduction Pilot Program: Final Report Year One,” *supra* note 2, at 14 (Figure 10).

⁶ *Id.*, at 14.

⁷ *Id.*, at 15.

⁸ DC Law 22-303, *Students in the Care of D.C. Coordinating Committee Act of 2018*.