

**Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
The Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education**

**Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education
Public Oversight Hearing on Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism,
and the Implementations of Reform Initiatives
Monday, October 23, 2017**

Good Afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, and to all the members of the Council. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard. I am a proud Ward 5 resident, DCPS parent, a member of the Every Day Counts! task force (focused on attendance and truancy) and I honored serve as the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on this important topic.

The Office of the Student Advocate was established in May 2015 to provide guidance and resource supports to families in order to assist them in navigating our complex system of public education in the District of Columbia, both DCPS and public charter schools. Our office offers a wide array of services to families, from our “311” system for public education better know as our Request for Assistance line, which we operate live Monday through Friday and answer any public education related questions families might have; to our online informational resources and toolkits; to the trainings we provide to schools, parent groups, and community stakeholders; it is our goal to ensure that families are able to be informed, be connected, and be empowered to not only be able to understand our complex public education landscape and available resources but that they are also equipped to be their own best advocates.

Since the establishment of our office a little over two and half years ago, we have received several calls from families regarding attendance or truancy related issues. While we have very robust attendance and truancy laws and policies, it seems that our best intentions have sparked great improvements while also fueling some unintended consequences. What we have found in our interactions with families who reach out, or are referred, to our office is that attendance and truancy related challenges are not typically they families’ primary issue in itself but is

instead a symptom of an unmet or undiagnosed need. Those unmet needs range from homelessness, transportation challenges and the distance students travel to/from school, undiagnosed special education or mental health needs, communication challenges between schools and families, our diverse student discipline policies, issues of safe passage and student safety, and a lack of understanding of the laws and policies governing attendance and truancy.

Safe Passage and Student Safety

We have countless examples of parents who have kept their students home for issues of student safety inside and outside of school buildings. The safe passage of our students is an issue that our office, schools, and the Deputy Mayor for Education have worked to address but many schools still struggle with school climate and student safety issues. Families feel if educators and schools cannot keep their children safe then they will do whatever it takes to ensure the safety of their students. Many families feel unsatisfied with the responses they receive from schools regarding the options they are offered to protect their children – such as safety plans and school transfers. While some parents know about the student safety measures that can be taken by schools, many families do not. They feel the concerns they raise go unaddressed unless they can find outside support to resolve the issues. While we have school climate and safety pilots in progress, there are still schools that are untouched by this work yet leaving parents and students feeling unsafe.

Homelessness

In addition to the safety of our students, the number of families experiencing homelessness continues to grow. While many families seek support countless other families feel a sense of shame regarding their lack of safe and secure housing and try to do their very best to manage the situation on their own. I can recall a recent conversation with a parent regarding her child's school attendance; I talked to this parent several times before she felt safe enough to share with me that her family was currently dealing with homelessness. She was concerned about the actions the school would take if they knew her child did not have a stable home and shied away from talking with her child's teachers or school administrators about the challenges at hand.

This parent is just one example of so many parents dealing with a similar challenge. It has been an honor to work with many homeless liaisons at schools and other partners at OSSE, DCPS, PCSB, and individual charter LEAs who work with homeless families. While they work tirelessly on behalf of students and their families, many students and families go without valuable information regarding the services and supports that can assist them in their time of need. Families experiencing homelessness are not fully informed about the legal protections and available resources for homeless students – this valuable information would clarify so much for families experiencing homelessness and keep students from missing precious classroom time and instruction due to a lack, and unawareness, of information.

Lack of Understanding Regarding Attendance/Truancy Policies

In school year 2016-17, our office increased our outreach to community-based organizations and service providers who provide direct supports to families. We expanded our outreach because we know that families show up in many places outside of school buildings and develop trusting relationships with those organizations. Over the course of this outreach we met with community-based organizations and services providers who work in our schools and interact with students regarding issues of truancy and attendance. We worked with the organizations to help them better understand our city's public education governance structure and over the course of our conversations realized they not only had confusion about the governance of our schools but also the very policies they were tasked with supporting students and families in understanding. Attendance and truancy policies are one of the few streamlined policies we have in the city which apply directly to both DCPS and public charters. While the policies are applicable to both sectors the unevenness of its implementation and application leaves not only services providers to schools and families confused but also families themselves.

I myself am the parent of a DCPS student. At back to school night, and our first parent teacher conference, we discussed many school level policies and procedures in depth but attendance/truancy policies were not a large part of that discussion. Since the school year has started this year, my son's school has only sent out one email outlining the attendance policy.

Fortunately I work in this space and intimately understand the policies governing attendance and truancy but for many families these policies are an afterthought until a problem arises. I understand that schools have many things to discuss with families and our attendance policy is only one of those things but schools, and LEAs, but make the discussion of our attendance and truancy policies a priority and it must be shared with parents on several occasions in a variety of ways in order to stress its importance, its elements, and leave room for families to share areas of confusion and concern. Most families are not at all familiar with the policies that govern attendance and truancy in our public schools. Attendance campaigns such as the Attendance Works “Every Student, Every Day” national campaign and our local focus on attendance through our Every Day Counts! task force (attendance.dc.gov) and initiatives directs resources and attention to the issues of attendance and truancy on both the local and national level. Yet we still struggle with pushing down recognition and understanding of these programs to the every day awareness of students and families. This work is vital but we must continue to find ways to ensure that students and families also understand what this work means to them and promote their buy-in of the initiatives goals and purpose. In talking with fellow public schools parents and families about these initiatives it is clear they are totally unaware and unfamiliar with this work. There needs to be a real sense of campaign awareness.

There seems to be a barrier to information sharing with families to ensure their understanding of the policies and initiatives regarding attendance and truancy. Resources on the LEA level regarding attendance and truancy need to be continuously pushed downward to the school level for families to process and understand. Additionally, citywide resources, such as the attendance and truancy resources for parents (<https://osse.dc.gov/publication/attendance-and-truancy-resources-parents>) compiled by OSSE, need to be more readily available to families. Even with my work in this space, I was not aware of some of the resources until recently. This level of information sharing would ensure students and parents familiarity with these policies – and the actions that stem from reoccurring unexcused absences or excessive tardies. For example, we have worked with a few DCPS families who did not realize that excessive tardiness or numerous unexcused absences would result in them being uninvited

from a school in which their student was attending due to an out-of-boundary lottery placement. Furthermore, regularly sharing and educating parents and students about our attendance policies will ensure families have an easier understanding of the terms we use, such as chronic absenteeism, and the high-level details of our attendance and truancy policies – right now, for many families, it is all rather mysterious.

Undiagnosed Special Education/Mental Health Needs

Special education needs and the services provided to students continues to be a top public education issue for families. While some families have uncovered how to access the services their child needs on their own, or families have found the resources and service supports our office or other offices like ours can provide, many families continue to look to their child's school to assistance. For the most part, I wholeheartedly believe that most schools and educators want what is best for all students and work diligently to ensure that all student needs are met there are still student who all too frequently slip between the cracks. Student with undiagnosed disabilities often act out and receive disciplinary action in an attempt to control their behaviors, which are ultimately caused by their disability. Parents call our office noting a change in their child's behavior, which they raise to school staff, but still wait for months for their child to be evaluated or are told their child doesn't need an evaluation because their child is not far enough behind academically. Many parents try to have deeper conversations with schools regarding these issues but often feel ill equipped to handle the conversations or just do not feel heard or respected.

When it comes to issues of mental health needs, more robust services and the ability for evaluation and support at the school level is still a huge need. In some cases, students and their parents need mental health services and supports but struggle to get the attention and support they need. Schools, and LEAs, should work to be more proactive in sharing with families the supports available at the LEA and citywide level. Resources such as the Behavioral Health Resource Directory (<https://dbh.dc.gov/page/behavioral-health-resource-directory>), which is located on the Department of Behavioral Health's website, is a very useful tool to

support families in understanding the support available at the school and citywide levels for their child and their family. These resources help families understand "...mental health and substance use disorder services for all ages, and specific services and information for children, youth and families, as well as a myriad of additional resources to foster self-reliance and recovery." Until we can get to the point of more robust and comprehensive services at the school level, providing these detailed resources to families can help in the facilitation of their needs and ensure student do not miss valuable school time because of a lack of services. When mental health needs go untreated or unresolved students not only run the risk of chronic absenteeism but such issues can lead instability in their childhood and enduring consequences which could be irreversible.

Student Discipline

Finally, I want to touch on the challenges our diverse set of student discipline policies also raise in regards to attendance and truancy. In our conversation with service providers and families we have found a common thread of confusion. Most families have no idea that different LEAs have different student discipline policies. While Chapter 25 governs our DCPS schools, many families have no idea about the different student discipline policies that govern each of the charter LEAs. In a city like ours, with a strong system of school choice, families exercise their right to choice on an almost yearly basis. As I mentioned previously, families lack a full understand of our citywide policies on attendance and truancy, which govern all schools, so, you can imagine that most families also are not fully aware of the details of the student discipline policy at their child's individual school or LEA. Most families only tend to think about student discipline when an issue arises. Over the last two school years, our office in partnership with the Council for Court Excellence and the Howard University School of Law have worked to collect and analyze all of the student discipline policies in the city in order to have a better understanding of the policies and to offer policy recommendations toward the streamlining of these policies in order to better serve the needs of students and their families. I can recall several conversations with parents who have kept their child home from school after a period of suspension has ended because they did not know their responsibility for contacting the school for a meeting in order

to get their child back into school. Or parents who do not understand why there is a delay in the process of getting their student back into school after a disciplinary action due to a need for a hearing, which might have been delayed, or another action step that needs to be taken. Schools need to be more proactive in helping students and their families in understanding the student discipline policy, which governs their school, in addition to the student's due process rights. Furthermore, it is vital that parents also understand the roles and responsibilities that LEAs expect of them in the process. Working on these steps will make sure that a student does not miss school due to a disciplinary action that has been fulfilled.

We know that many schools have moved to programming that encourages positive behavior and restorative in action. Such moves have worked to keep students inside of school building instead punitive actions thus leading to suspensions and countless days out of school.

Before I close, if there are any students, parents, or community members that if you would like to reach out to our office you can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692, email us at student.advocate@dc.gov, or find us online at studentadvocate.dc.gov. Again, thank you for this time to testify and I look forward to being a resource in any way that I can as this process moves forward. I welcome any questions that you might have.