

**Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard  
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DC State Board of Education**

**Public Hearing on School Attendance Clarification Amendment Act of 2015  
Council of the District of Columbia  
January 21, 2016**

Good Morning, Chairman Mendelson; Councilmember Grosso; and to all of the members of the Council. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to serve in the role of the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia in the Office of the Student Advocate, which is an independent office housed within the DC State Board of Education. In addition to this role, I have also had the pleasure of serving on the Truancy Task Force.

In my role as Chief Student Advocate I am charged with assisting students, parents, and families in navigating the DC education landscape in a way that allows them to be informed, be connected and be empowered. As we all know, despite the best of intentions, the landscape is extremely complex; and the very uniqueness of our education system is both an opportunity and a barrier. Since my appointment to this role in May 2015, I have worked in a capacity that has uncovered both the wonderful opportunities and services for students and their families to access as well as the challenges and hurdles that families face in our public education system. One example of such a challenge is the unintended consequences that have stemmed from the implementation and lack of flexibility in our school attendance policies.

One of the most interesting things that I have noted from my work is that when a family reaches out to enlist the services of our offices it is not usually in regards to an attendance issue; but what we quickly discover is that although the question, need, or challenge is not initially linked to attendance, there is almost always a correlation. What I have also noticed throughout the time that I have spent in schools and in the community is the lack of clarity that not only students and families have about our attendance policies, but also the schools and

educators as well. Furthermore, our current school attendance policy is vastly uneven in actual practice; in some cases from school to school, or even within a school.

The truancy issues and incidents of the past lead us to the South Capitol legislation for very good reason and that legislation in practice has allowed us to see areas of success and the need for improvement. The hard work, diligence, and voice of many has highlighted a need for us to make course corrections in our school attendance policy in order to better serve the students of the District of Columbia.

There are three areas of the newly proposed legislation that I am most encouraged about:

**First, the language that “prohibit[s] the suspension, expulsion, or unenrollment of a [student]...due to an unexcused absence or due to a late arrival to school.”** I doubt that my excitement about this particular component needs much more explanation – it is just the right thing to do.

**Second, the ability of “...educational institution[s]...{to} have discretion with regard to referral requirements...”** This change is vitally important. Our current legislation has greatly tied the hands of our educators and fails to recognize that more often than not, our schools and educators know our students and families best. As a city, we have made such great strides to nurture and strengthen relationships while also building trust with families; this legislative change will serve as another opportunity to continue to foster those efforts. Resolution at the school level, whenever possible, is always best and giving discretion to those closest to our families makes that possible. Furthermore, it is my hope that this shift in the legislation will alleviate the pressures that have been applied to several city agencies that have been overwhelmed by mandatory referrals required by our current attendance policy. Many referrals made by LEAs could be resolved at the school level, which would focus the attention of other city agencies on students, and situations, that truly need intensive interventions.

**Lastly, the change in definition from “unexcused absence” to “unexcused full day absence.”**

This legislative clarity of definition is huge. From my work with families and time in the community, as well as the conversations that I have been a part of on the Truancy Task Force, we know two things: there is absenteeism and then there is tardiness. We have to continue to work toward dealing with attendance, and the policies that govern it, as such. We do not want to punish our students and their families for an issue that definitely needs to be solved but not categorized in a way that is unfair and punitive. This clarity moves us in the right direction.

As I close, I want to commend all of the great work that has been done by so many on behalf of this issue and brought us to this place:

the hard work and thought-leadership of our DC State Board of Education on the issue of truancy; the great strides that have been taken by the Mayor and Council on the host of programming and funding focused on this issue; the hard work of countless city agencies and community organizations; and most importantly, all of the students, parents, educators, and community voices that have gotten us to this point. We have taken some monumental steps but as we continue to move forward I would be remiss if I did not note the need to continue to engage the real experts – our students, parents, and educators – every step of the way. Each day I remind myself of the need to truly tap into these experts in a way that is not only authentic and genuine, but in a way that remind us that the decisions we make can have real consequences if we do not loop in those who are truly impacted on a daily basis.

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.