



1 D.C. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TESTIMONY

2
3 PRESIDENT & WARD 6 REPRESENTATIVE DR. JESSICA SUTTER

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5 *“Attendance, Chronic Absenteeism, and Truancy in the District”*

6
7 November 30, 2022

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9 Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, Members of the Council, and staff. My name is Dr. Jessica
10 Sutter, and I am the President and Ward 6 Representative of the D.C. State Board of Education
11 (State Board). I am pleased to be here today on behalf of the State Board to provide testimony on
12 our work on the issue of attendance, chronic absenteeism, and truancy in the District of
13 Columbia—and, importantly, our collaboration and work with the Office of the State
14 Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to establish the new “60/40 Rule”.

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16 The State Board remains convinced that the best way to ensure educational success is for students
17 to be in their classrooms each and every day. Schools have spent countless hours and funds
18 tracking absences to comply with regulations, hours and resources that could instead have been
19 spent working with individual students and their families to remove attendance barriers. The new
20 “60/40 Rule” helps account for the inequitable distribution of transportation resources across
21 families in the District, reduces the tracking burden on school personnel, and allows student
22 support teams (SSTs) to better focus attendance intervention resources on a smaller subset of
23 students with significant attendance challenges. The State Board remains in fully unanimous
24 support of the new “60/40 Rule”.

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26 In March 2022, the State Board testified on [Bill 24-428](#), *School Attendance Amendment Act of*
27 *2021* and, more generally on improving school attendance and reducing truancy and chronic
28 absenteeism. The focus of the State Board’s testimony at that time was to highlight the significant
29 and ongoing challenges in school attendance that the District has experienced for far too long—
30 and the punitive and weaponized nature of the District’s previous “80/20 Rule”. We shared a 2015
31 State Board report by then-Ward 4 Representative Kamili Anderson titled *“Challenges Associated*
32 *with Implementation of the District of Columbia’s New Compulsory Attendance Laws and*
33 *Recommendations for Addressing Them”*. We also called on the Executive to bring forward
34 regulatory changes and a shift to a new definition of “present” for the State Board’s review and
35 vote.

36
37 We are grateful that following this March 2022 hearing, the Office of the State Superintendent of
38 Education (OSSE) and the State Board were able to get to work on regulatory updates at our May
39 2022 Working Session—and continued that work until our July 2022 approval of [SR22-3](#), *To*
40 *Approve the District of Columbia’s Amendments to the Compulsory Education and School*
41 *Attendance Regulations*. During the State Board and OSSE’s work over summer 2022, the State
42 Board raised concerns related to regulations about taking attendance via camera for routine
43 distance learning, defining the acceptable threshold for student engagement in distance learning





44 postures, and ensuring that the new “60/40 Rule” would be less punitive than the “80/20 Rule”.
45 The State Board was pleased with the final proposed regulations presented by OSSE and voted
46 unanimously to approve them.

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48 However, during our discussions with OSSE over summer 2022, there were a couple of
49 outstanding questions and items that the State Board raised, which were outside the scope of the
50 work and might require additional action by OSSE or individual LEAs. The State Board would
51 like to note those items for the record. Members raised questions about how grades, graduation
52 promotion, and referrals to Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) were being addressed and
53 impacted by the new “60/40 Rule” and attendance regulations. Further, members also had concerns
54 around how students arriving late to school, commonly referred to as “tardies,” affect defining
55 absences and attendance—and whether the current regulatory language should have included
56 specific references and language around tardies. The State Board knows that Councilmember
57 Trayon White has also raised this issue.

58
59 At the State Board’s November 2 Working Session, members heard directly from the Office of the
60 Ombudsman for Public Education and the Office of the Student Advocate as they presented their
61 respective Annual Reports. Ombudsman for Public Education, Serena Hayes, shared that nearly
62 100 of their office’s SY2021–22 cases related to attendance—and in most cases, safety and
63 attendance concerns overlapped (e.g., parents kept their student home from school because they
64 feared their student was unsafe). Chief Student Advocate, Dan Davis, shared how his team has
65 been using social media tools to provide families with necessary information related to attendance
66 laws and policies. His office also noticed a higher volume of calls related to attendance and truancy
67 in SY2021–22—with more families requesting assistance related to attendance due to their
68 hesitancy of sending their children in-person to school during a time of significantly limited virtual
69 options. The State Board is appreciative of our sister offices’ work in this area, and we are glad to
70 be able to share this information with Council.

71
72 The State Board is also grateful to the Deputy Mayor for Education’s (DME) Every Day Counts!
73 (EDC) Task Force—and specifically our inclusion in its work over the past few years. This
74 important citywide effort initiated by Mayor Bowser to ensure every student attends school every
75 day has been an important venue for data-driven reflection on the many challenges our students
76 face around school attendance, chronic absenteeism, and truancy. As the State Board understands,
77 the DME has shifted its focus and work related to EDC due to a personnel vacancy; however, the
78 State Board looks forward to being looped back in when the EDC work resumes.

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80 Recently, at the November 16 Public Meeting, the State Board heard testimony from a concerned
81 DC Public School (DCPS) elementary school teacher about the impacts of chronic absenteeism on
82 teachers and school communities. She shared that teachers continue to be tasked with immense
83 amounts of monitoring and reporting on student academic performance but noted that many
84 students are chronically absent, negatively affecting their academic outcomes and, in her
85 experience, the time schools spend reviewing academic data far outweighs the time spent engaging
86 with families of students who are chronically absent. She also reflected on the idea that the





87 foundation for student success is grounded in a triangle with teachers, families, and communities
88 working together and that without one of these three pillars, student success becomes increasingly
89 challenging. She suggested that the lack of time teachers or dedicated school staff have to spend
90 engaging with families, especially those whose students are chronically absent, is having a clear
91 negative impact on academic outcomes.

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93 This testimony resonated with my colleagues and I—and served as a reminder of the deep
94 connection between student attendance and other ongoing educational concerns. We must
95 recognize and acknowledge that school attendance affects youth and community violence issues,
96 mental health concerns, and the ever-noted learning loss. As an education community, we can and
97 must do more to support our students. We need a concerted effort to establish specific and
98 actionable policies and programs that address barriers to attendance and ensure that students view
99 school as a place where they feel safe, welcomed, and authentically engaged every day.

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101 I want to thank the Chairman and Council for this time and for continuing this critical discussion
102 with today’s hearing on attendance. I am happy to answer any questions you may have at this
103 time.

