



**DC State Board of Education**  
**Joint Education & Committee of the Whole**  
**Public Hearing on School Attendance Clarification Amendment Act of 2015**  
**Council of the District of Columbia**  
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Testimony of Kamili Anderson  
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Chair, Truancy and Student Engagement Committee

Good morning, Chairmen Mendelson and Grosso and Council members of the Committees of the Whole and Education. My name is Kamili Anderson, and I am the Ward 4 member of the State Board of Education, Chair of the State Board's Truancy and Student Engagement Committee, and member of the Deputy Mayor for Education's truancy task force.

On behalf of the entire State Board, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Truancy and Student Engagement Committee's findings regarding the implementation of the compulsory attendance laws. The State Board undertook this study in response to concerns voiced at our December 18, 2013 public meeting, when the State Board approved several technical changes to attendance policy necessitated by passage of the Attendance Accountability Amendment Act of 2013. Specifically, board members had questions about impact of the policy's "80/20" rule, which defines student who miss 20 percent of the school day as "absent."

Our committee, which included At-Large member Mary Lord, student representative Daniel Spruill, staff policy analyst Amaya Garcia and attorney advisor Kelly Davis, conducted extensive research and engaged school leaders, teachers, students, and community members through roundtable discussions on the effects of these policies. We learned about significant implementation challenges and are glad that truancy, chronic absenteeism, and tardiness are receiving attention throughout the District, because the link between poor attendance and poor achievement is clear.

To this point, I'd like to commend the Council for expanding the students-ride-free program to include Metro. This was among the suggestions to reduce tardiness that our committee heard from educators, who noted that many students were late because they had to catch several buses. In today's school-choice era, with a majority of children crisscrossing town to attend school, transportation becomes a crucial element of providing equal access to quality education.

When the Council addressed the District's truancy issue by passing the South Capitol Street legislation, State Board members were hopeful that the city was creating an early warning system that would allow schools to identify and support students before they veered off their academic tracks. As the recent data presented to the Deputy Mayor's task force reveal, however, our city's schools have not yet succeeded in that goal, and some elements of that legislation—namely, the 80/20 rule—have had a negative impact on the lives of some District students.

The good news is that we are all operating with the well-being and academic success of our students in mind, and I trust that we—the Council, the Deputy Mayor's Office, the State Board, DC Public Schools, the DC Public Charter School Board, and other concerned parties—will continue to come together to reach a solution that best serves our young people.



Last spring, the State Board released an in-depth evaluation of the problems with the attendance laws. After speaking with teachers, administrators, and other community members, the Board found substantial problems with the implementation of the 80/20 attendance rule in the following categories: incompatible attendance systems, inconsistent enforcement, extracurricular conflicts, and paperwork concerns.

**Incompatible attendance systems-** Our research and outreach found that schools have not reconciled their attendance systems with the District’s requirements. This is especially prevalent in high schools with block scheduling, where tardy students are often marked as missing their entire first class and as a result are marked “absent” for over a quarter of the school day. This unintended consequence of recording tardy students as absent can ultimately lead to them being unnecessarily referred to the family court system, thereby further burdening that system with unnecessary caseloads.

**Inconsistent enforcement-** We also found that these varying attendance systems have led to varied implementation of the 80/20 policy. Some schools do not allow tardy students to attend their first period class, forcing them to miss a significant portion of the school day, while other schools allow students to enter class despite their late arrival. The unintended consequence is that schools apply different standards for what counts as an “absence” under the 80/20 guidelines.

**Extracurricular conflicts-** It is common for students who are active members of a sports team, youth orchestra, or other extracurricular activity to miss school to perform. The new rules have created obstacles for families who choose to engage their students in enriching activities during school time. Though we as a Board unanimously believe that students should be in school at all times during the school day, we also encourage students and their families to participate in enriching activities and assert that schools should not be forced to report these families to the court system for their children’s absences or tardiness resulting from involvement in these activities. Some examples we found include a piano prodigy who plays in international music competitions and a woman who took her grandchild to the 50th anniversary of the march on Selma, Alabama. As a policy advisory board, we believe that our schools’ policies should actively encourage this outside learning, not make outside learning a burden for families by imposing inflexible rules.

**Paperwork concerns-** School staff and administrators have a wide range of day-to-day responsibilities, and the paperwork demanded of them can be burdensome. The new law has not only buried school officials in additional work tracking and referring of tardy students but also obstructed the responsibilities of staff who would normally be focused on addressing the root causes of truancy issues. We are getting in the way of our own progress, and as policy shapers, we believe the potential impacts of the additional workload being placed on school officials demands a response. We cannot afford to have more children slip through the cracks because school personnel are overextended with superfluous paperwork.

The State Board’s research and outreach also encompassed the professional opinions of several advocacy organizations that are very concerned with the root causes of truancy. Their representatives confirmed that school climate plays a major role in student attendance (and in-class performance), not just in terms of safety and engagement, but also with regard to whether students feel welcomed and encouraged by their schools. They further underscored our contention that a large part of the work that must be done if we want to reduce truancy District-wide is to ensure that students want to be in school.

The Board’s Committee also found that although school-level officials and district administrators may differ in their evaluation of the attendance laws and its implementation, most agree that the problems posed by the uncoordinated high school schedules and varied late arrival policies across the city remain to be addressed. They also recognize that changing the attendance status of late-arriving students is a



cumbersome task. Setting clearer parameters and providing guidance to schools is a responsibility schools and their governance bodies must undertake if we expect to achieve the desired results.

In its report to the State Board, the Committee determined that more information was needed to properly assess the truancy laws and determine proper next steps. That report, and the recommendations of the Board resulting from it, called for the following information from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, which the Board has yet to receive:

- OSSE should investigate the challenges and inconsistent findings reported by school-level officials across the public and charter school sectors, along with other practices employed based on the 80/20 rule and provide a report of its findings.
- OSSE should also evaluate the impact of attendance regulations, including but not limited to the 80/20 rule, on students, their families, criminal justice and human service systems, and school climate.
- Given that the District's adoption of the 80/20 rule represents an outlier in terms of standards of school presence or absence adopted elsewhere nationwide and not the norm, OSSE should further investigate the rationale for implementing that rule in the District of Columbia, and conduct other comparative research on truancy- and tardiness-prevention practices in the District and other states.

The report additionally called upon the Council to appropriate funds to be used for the development and implementation of solutions that will ensure proper, uniform adoption of the District's attendance laws, provide support for school staff, and strengthen truancy prevention operations in schools. It also asked the Deputy Mayor's office to evaluate the extent to which the District's new compulsory attendance regulations affect student learning, with a special focus on how changes in practice could guide learning and extend beyond the classroom.

The bill being considered at this hearing, the School Attendance Clarification Amendment Act of 2015, would make a number of alterations to the District's Code. The State Board has not adopted a position on the bill itself, but I do want to take the opportunity to highlight a few sections.

First, the bill would codify for the first time a citywide policy that gives parents and guardians five (5) days to provide written justification of an absence. This provision is important because it clarifies reporting responsibilities and gives a clear deadline for all District parents and guardians.

Second, the bill eliminates the ability of schools to suspend or expel students solely on the basis of late arrival. This clause will help to ensure stability for students who may already be having difficulty and keep them in school. Subsequently, a student who misses a fraction of a school day will not be counted as absent for the whole day, and thus not be placed at even greater risk of disciplinary action, adjudication, or expulsion.



Third, it is our understanding that this proposed bill would, in effect, create a dual system for counting absences. The new structure would be used for referrals to Child and Family Services, the police, and the Attorney General's office, while the current 80/20 rule would be used for other processes. We are hesitant about saddling schools and districts with additional administrative tasks, but have been informed that because the new process will reduce the number of referrals, this will actually lessen the burden on staff, giving schools more flexibility to work with students on attendance issues rather than being forced to refer them.

We all need to work together to ensure that we properly address the issues with the District's attendance system and create a workable solution for everyone involved. The State Board will certainly continue its work to increase student attendance, and looks forward to more collaboration with the Mayor and the Council. Thank you all for this opportunity. I am open to any questions you may have.

