

Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole, Committee on the Judiciary, and
Committee on Education

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Public Roundtable on Truancy and the
Implementation of Truancy Reform Initiatives

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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and Council members. My name is Joyanna Smith and I am the Ombudsman for Public Education.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is responsible for helping students and parents who have questions, concerns, or complaints regarding the District of Columbia Public Schools and public charter schools. The Office offers conflict resolution services and is committed to resolving complaints quickly and efficiently in all areas that affect student learning.

Since our office's establishment 16 months ago, we have received many calls from parents asking for our help with students who are not attending school. Before I share my recommendations, I'd like to describe several of these students. Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

- Maria and Luis live with their mother in temporary housing. When she tried to enroll them at the DCPS elementary school closest to where they were living, the registrar wrongly told her she had to provide proof of her address. She didn't have any formal documents with her address, so her children stayed out of school while she tried to find a way to get them enrolled.
- James is a first grader at a charter school who struggles with ADHD and behavior problems. His school told his

- parents that they had to pick him up from school two hours early every day. As a result, he missed the last two hours of school for several months.
- Whitney got into a fight at her DCPS high school. Her foster mother received a call telling her not to bring Whitney back to school for 45 days. She did not receive any formal notice that Whitney had been suspended. Whitney missed several weeks of school before the school told her that she could return.
 - Sarah is an 8th grader at a charter school. She was attacked by several students outside her school. Her parents kept her home from school out of fear for her safety until they could get her into a new school.

These are just a handful of the cases we have seen where students missed days or weeks of school. What they have in common is that they illustrate that truancy is not typically a problem in itself but is instead a symptom of an unmet need.

Some of the causes of truancy are outside of a school's control. When truancy is a symptom of an unmet need for safe housing, mental health treatment, or a safe neighborhood, schools are not in a position to fully address those needs on their own. However, schools have a responsibility to make sure that

their response to students facing these problems is to support those students so that they can remain in school.

Moreover, schools have a responsibility to make sure that they meet the needs that are within their power to meet. Schools must ensure that they provide appropriate supports for students with disabilities and for students with health conditions that might cause them to miss school. Schools must ensure that all staff who work with homeless families are fully informed about homeless students' rights to enroll in school and receive transportation assistance. Schools must put in place school-wide behavior interventions to encourage positive behavior in order to create a climate where all students feel safe. When students do misbehave, schools should respond in ways that help those students return to the classroom as quickly as possible.

DC has invested in a number of truancy initiatives in recent years. Our office has had positive experiences with the Re-Engagement Center and the PASS program in particular. Thanks to the various initiatives, DC's truancy rate has declined somewhat. But we continue to have far too many truant students. And if we want to continue reducing the truancy rate, it will not be enough to focus on programs developed for students who are already truant. By the time students are referred to these

programs, we have already missed our most important chance to intervene: before their unmet needs lead them to miss school.

My recommendation is that we redouble our focus on addressing the unmet needs that lead to truancy. Specifically, we should place our focus on improving discipline policies and practices, improving special education screening and services, and ensuring that all schools are able to quickly and appropriately address the needs of homeless and transient students.

Discipline

We have seen that many schools have discipline practices that push students out of school. Informal suspensions cause students to miss days, weeks, or months of school without any due process. Putting students out of school before a suspension hearing deprives students of learning time. Delays in scheduling suspension hearings keep students out of school even longer. Some charter schools go so far as to suspend students for uniform violations or for tardiness, practices that DCPS has appropriately forbidden.

To keep discipline problems from being a cause of truancy, schools should ensure that students' due process rights are protected in all cases. Even more importantly, schools should develop school-wide programs to encourage positive behavior. At

the hearing on trauma-informed schools last week, a number of organizations described innovative programs that build on the recognition that students who act out typically do so for a reason and schools need to address that reason if they want to succeed in improving behavior. Some schools described their success using such approaches. I know other schools have made progress with restorative justice approaches. I encourage all schools in DC to offer robust school-wide positive behavior programs that take into account current research on trauma and development.

Special Education

Unmet special education needs is another top reason that students miss school. Students with undiagnosed disabilities often act out and receive suspensions for behaviors caused by their disabilities. We still receive too many calls from parents who have been waiting months or years for their children to be evaluated for special education.

We have also had several cases of students who have had to miss school because of medical or mental health problems. In some cases, these students' needs could be met by more robust health supports at schools. In other cases, these students need

home instruction. DCPS has an established home instruction program, but many charter schools do not.

Finally, we have also had some cases where students with disabilities who sought to enroll in DCPS after the beginning of the year had to wait a week or more to meet with the DCPS Student Placement Office. While I appreciate that this office takes the time to meet with parents and review students' records, the delay between requesting an appointment and actually becoming enrolled in school causes students to miss learning time.

Homeless Students

The DCPS and OSSE Homeless Children and Youth offices have been wonderful partners for our office. We have also had the opportunity to work with many schools' homeless liaisons and we have seen them work tirelessly to support their students. We have, however, identified a need for additional training for school registrars and other administrative staff who interact with homeless parents. We still receive a number of calls from homeless parents who have been wrongly told that they cannot enroll their children in school. I encourage DCPS, OSSE, and the Public Charter School Board to take steps to ensure that all staff who interact with homeless parents are fully informed about the legal protections and available resources for homeless students

so that no students have to miss school because of misinformation.

Conclusion

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and look forward to working collaboratively with the Council, city agencies, local organizations, and families to improve attendance for all students.

If parents, families, and students have concerns or complaints about truancy or any other issue, they can reach our office by calling us at (202) 741- 0886, emailing us at ombudsman@dc.gov, or visiting the State Board of Education website located at www.sboe.dc.gov/Ombudsman.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.