

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY MAYOR FOR EDUCATION



Public Hearing on Bill 24-428, School Attendance Amendment Act of 2021
and Update on Improving School Attendance/Reducing Truancy and
Chronic Absenteeism

Testimony of Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education

Before the
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman

March 11, 2022
Live via the Zoom Platform

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, staff, and members of the public. My name is Paul Kihn, and I am honored to serve as the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) for the District of Columbia. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's public hearing on Bill 24-428, the School Attendance Amendment Act of 2021 and an Update on Improving School Attendance and Reducing Truancy and Chronic Absenteeism.

We can all agree that attendance is critical to student success. While there are bright spots, chronic absenteeism and truancy generally remain persistent challenges in the District, as they have been for many years and as they are in many peer cities. During SY 20-21, chronic absenteeism crept up to 31% by the end of the year (a one point increase over SY 18-19), and truancy rose to 39% (almost entirely caused by a substantial increase in absences that were unexcused rather than excused).

We also know that attendance issues are particularly pronounced among certain grade levels and populations, including 9th graders and overage high school students, and students classified as "at risk." We feel intense urgency to address these issues, even more so as we recover from the pandemic and students face additional social-emotional and academic challenges.

DME Role

The DME plays an important coordinating and leadership role in improving school attendance in Washington, D.C. We manage the citywide taskforce on attendance (Every Day Counts!), work with education agency partners and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to identify and pilot interventions, and monitor and scale evidence-based and promising practices. We also support programs across agencies, such as the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement's Leadership Academy and programs such as the Department of Human Services' Parent and Adolescent Intensive Case Management (PASS), and the Alternatives to the Court Experience (ACE).

The Every Day Counts! task force, which supports and shepherds citywide attendance work, meets regularly (on the fourth Tuesday every quarter) and also comprises four active committees (steering, policy, data, and programs). The task force is composed of representatives from over 15 agencies across the education, health, human services, safety and justice clusters, as well as community partners. Task force meetings are open to the public, and typically have over 30 regular participants.

Our collective work is guided by an attendance framework (see Attachment 1) that describes our strategic approach to improving attendance. This approach is anchored in three goals: 1) to provide actionable data and root cause analysis throughout the system, 2) to drive attendance best practices in all public schools, and 3) to remove system-level barriers.

In addition to its strategic coordination and agency support role, the DME directly oversees a portfolio of attendance initiatives. This includes our Back to School Campaign, which includes a social media campaign, ads, events, and phone banking, and reached over 20,000 students this year through our back to school website alone. Over this past year of the pandemic, DME has

partnered with DC Health to expand the campaign to include outreach to families to promote immunization.

Another example of our work is Every Day Labs, an evidence-based initiative piloted in Spring 2021 that leverages personalized text and mail nudges to inform and remind parents about their children's attendance, build positive attendance habits, and help families overcome barriers to attendance. Additionally, we are expanding another promising pilot: Kinvolved's communication technology solution. This software facilitates direct contact between teachers and families in a way that is personalized and does not overburden teachers. These are examples of initiatives that have been developed, monitored, and expanded as a result of the work of the Every Day Counts! task force and the DME.

Stepping back, many of our core education initiatives encourage attendance. Our safe passage initiatives, including our work in safe passage priority areas and our new Safe Blocks program, help students stay safe on route to and in school. Our new micro-transit pilot, DC School Connect, and Kids Ride Free, both provided at no cost to families, help students get to school. And our expanded mental health services, out of school time programs, and the Mayor's Reimagine High School initiative promote youth engagement in school. During the COVID-19 crisis, our intensive and successful efforts to safely reopen schools was essential.

Our path forward must remain focused on surmounting individual challenges, promoting positive and engaging school cultures so students feel welcome and excited to learn, and removing systemic barriers. The DME's pre-pandemic EdSight analyses, which looked at schools where chronic absenteeism fell by 5%, and our ongoing evaluation of attendance initiatives, demonstrate that targeted, personalized approaches, regular communication with students and families, clear attendance goals, effective use of data, and robust systems of support are all important components of a collective solution. These principles continue to guide our work.

Bill 24-428

Regarding Bill 24-428, the School Attendance Amendment Act of 2021, while we believe that being in school for the full day is extremely important, we support the intent to shift the definition of a student being categorized as "present" (DCMR, Chapter 5-A2199) from at least 80% of the school day to at least 60%. We believe this shift will allow schools to focus resources more effectively. Specifically, this shift can help schools differentiate services between students who are tardy and those who are chronically absent and truant, reduce case backlogs for student support teams, and more accurately capture students' attendance patterns and address issues.

While we support the shift from the "80/20 rule" for these reasons, based on data and community input, ultimately, this shift will not change the fact that too many students miss full days of school. This is an area on which we must all focus and where the DME will continue to concentrate its energy. In addressing chronic absenteeism and truancy, the DME looks forward to continuing its coordinating role; identifying and scaling promising and evidence-based practices; and supporting LEAs and schools in this critical work to support students and families.

Thank you for your engagement on this issue, and I look forward to taking your questions.