

**Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
RE: June 26, 2024, Public Hearing on Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy
Official Written Testimony of Kimberly R. Humphrey, Esq.,
Ombudsman for Public Education
Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education**

Greetings Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee, and esteemed colleagues. My name is Kimberly Humphrey, and I serve as the Ombudsman for Public Education. The Office of the Ombudsman is responsible for helping students and parents who have questions or concerns involving the District of Columbia's (the "District") traditional public and public charter schools. We are dedicated to advocating for equitable, supportive, and effective educational practices that ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed. We also provide conflict resolution services to schools and are committed to resolving complaints in all areas that affect student learning, including attendance.

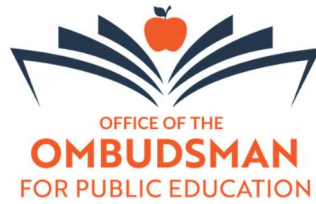
Thank you for holding a hearing on the following bill proposals: B25-0740 - *Truancy Reduction for Student Success Act of 2024*; B25-0754 - *Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Reduction Amendment Act of 2024*; B24-0758 - *The Showing Up for Students Amendment Act of 2024*; and B24-0791 - *Utilizing Partnerships and Local Interventions for Truancy and Safety (UPLIFT) Amendment Act of 2024*. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on these critical and interconnected issues that significantly impact students' academic achievement and overall well-being. With worthwhile solutions represented in several of the above proposals, we support a comprehensive approach, especially solutions advancing data collection and additional funding to support data-driven responses.

Office of the Ombudsman Trends

Our office has observed several significant trends regarding student absenteeism through our intake and case data for the 2023-2024 school year. Last school year, we addressed many cases where families and/or students expressed concerns regarding absenteeism and truancy. The cases highlighted the complex and multifaceted nature of absenteeism, which often reflects the following broader systemic issues.

- **Safety Concerns:** A notable number of families have reported students feeling unsafe either on their way to school or within the school environment. Safety concerns, including bullying, violence, and unsafe neighborhoods, are significant barriers to consistent attendance. For instance, Janie*¹, a high school student, reported being physically assaulted by multiple students and subjected to ongoing bullying. Despite some of her bullies transferring schools, friends who remained continued to harass Janie by

¹ *Names of students and families have been changed to protect confidentiality.



monitoring and reporting her route home. Fear of further bullying, both inside and outside of school, led Janie's mother to opt for online schooling as an alternative. Cases like Janie's illustrate how safety issues can dramatically impact student experience and extend beyond the school's walls.

- **Discipline:** Our office has worked with families to navigate disciplinary practices that contributed to increased absenteeism. Suspended or expelled students often face significant barriers to re-engaging with their education. Additionally, students have expressed a sense of alienation and disengagement.
- **Inadequate Communication:** Families have frequently reported that absenteeism was exacerbated by improper or inadequate communication with school staff. Parents have made reported miscommunications of attendance policies, lack of follow-up on absences, and unresponsiveness to their concerns.
- **Resource Needs:** Parents expressed a variety of socio-economic barriers that led to the decrease in student attendance in the past school year. Families report enduring student behavior challenges, mental health issues, housing insecurity, physical health issues. For instance, a mother contacted our office with concerns about her son, Michael, who was frequently truant from school and exhibited severe behavior issues. The school had not reported that Michael had been absent for over 80 days, a severe lapse in communication and intervention. Michael's mother was desperately seeking intensive support to address his truancy and behavior problems. Our office referred Michael to the PASS (Positive Approaches to Student Success) program, which provides comprehensive support to students with significant attendance and behavioral challenges.

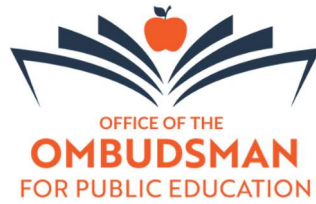
Mitigation, Intervention and Family Supports

Research shows that addressing absenteeism effectively requires a comprehensive approach that includes mitigating the underlying issues and providing robust family supports. It is crucial to recognize that absenteeism is often a symptom of a myriad of problems that students and their families face.

- **Holistic Support Services:** Holistic support services that address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students have been shown to improve attendance and overall student well-being. These services include access to mental health services, social workers, and community resources. For example, a case study by Anderson (2018) highlights how a school-based mental health program significantly reduced absenteeism and improved academic outcomes.²
- **Family Engagement:** Engaging families in the educational process is essential for addressing absenteeism.³ Schools should work closely with families to understand their unique challenges and

² Anderson, J. (2018). School-Based Mental Health Programs and Student Outcomes: A Case Study. *Journal of School Health*, 88(9), 669-675. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/josh.12672>.

³ Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. *National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools*. Retrieved from <https://sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>.



provide the necessary supports to ensure students can attend school regularly. Studies show that effective family engagement strategies can lead to improved student attendance and performance.

- **Restorative Practices:** Implementing restorative practices in schools can help address disciplinary issues in a way that promotes healing and reconciliation rather than punishment. Recent studies demonstrated that schools using restorative justice practices saw improved attendance rates and reduced disciplinary incidents.⁴
- **Partnerships – Community Schools:** Developing partnerships with community organizations can provide additional resources and supports for students and their families. Research demonstrates how community schools, which integrate academic, health, and social services, have effectively reduced absenteeism and promoted student engagement.⁵ Collaborating with community partners allows schools to offer a range of services that support student well-being and attendance.

Importance of Data and Additional Research

To develop effective strategies that respond to the unique needs of the District for reducing absenteeism and improving student discipline, we must prioritize data collection and research. For this reason, Bill 25-740 is an important initial step and a crucial component for any future action. This bill proposes enhanced tracking and reporting of truancy data, which aligns with our emphasis on the importance of data-driven decision-making. It also includes provisions for increased parental engagement, a strategy we support to address absenteeism at its root. Comprehensive data on student absenteeism, including disaggregated data by race, socio-economic status, and other key factors, is essential for identifying patterns and understanding the specific needs of our students.

In closing, we thank you for your leadership and full consideration of the range of factors driving attendance and discipline issues. The Office of the Ombudsman is an example of the successes possible when there are more problem-solving and collaborative resources for students and families. If parents, families, and students have concerns or complaints about truancy, bullying, special education, school discipline or any other issue, they can reach our office by calling us at (202) 741- 0886, emailing us at ombudsman@dc.gov, or visiting us at www.educationombudsman.dc.gov.

We look forward to the Committee’s comprehensive action toward data-driven solutions. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to testify.

⁴ González, T. (2015). Socializing Schools: Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through Restorative Justice. *In Theory Into Practice*, 54(3), 1-8. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00405841.2015.1040596>.

⁵ Baker, L. (2019). Leveraging Community Resources to Address Absenteeism in Schools: A Case Study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 111(3), 450-468. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000307>.