



**Testimony of
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DC Public Charter School Board**

**Attendance, Chronic Absenteeism, and Truancy Hearing
Committee of the Whole
November 30, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's hearing on attendance and truancy. I am Rashida Young, Chief School Performance Officer for the DC Public Charter School Board.

I want to start by thanking all our school leaders, teachers, staff, and students for a great start to the school year. For nearly three years, schools have served their communities under the cloud of the pandemic, and they continue to do all they can to increase attendance by supporting students and providing resources to families.

As we discussed in previous years, there have always been barriers to students' attendance, including chronic homelessness, transportation issues, concerns for safety, out of school employment, and family commitments. Students and their families continue to face those challenges, and in many cases, these problems are even more acute after the height of COVID. Across the nation, the trends in truancy and chronic absenteeism show how the pandemic exacerbated problems. 45% of Chicago students and 48% of Philadelphia students were chronically absent last year. Most large cities also saw rises in truancy and declines in in-seat attendance. And just like DC, these thousands of students missed school for a host of reasons. Given this, there is no one size fits all solution to decrease the number of students unable to get to school on time or at all. It will require a multi-pronged approach to support students, families, and schools with accessing and offering wrap around services.

Due to the continuing challenges of the pandemic and surges in cases, we expected in-seat attendance to decrease compared to school year 18-19, the last fully in-person school year. In-seat attendance decreased by 6.8 percentage points from 91.8% in 18-19 to 85% in school year 21-22. We also experienced an increase in truancy from 28.6% to 44.3%. These rates concern

us, but we also recognize that last year presented many new challenges as the first fully in-person year with COVID-19. Many families feared sending their children to school for risk of contracting the virus. They were also understandably hesitant to send children to school with any potential symptoms of COVID. And the Omicron wave greatly impacted the city in December and January, causing anxiety among families, and some made the choice to keep their kids home.

Despite all these challenges, schools emphasized engaging students to ease families' anxieties about COVID. Many school leaders took the lessons they learned from encouraging attendance during distance learning and incorporated them into their current practices. During virtual learning, several schools drastically increased their engagement with families. At many campuses, leaders and teachers made weekly phone calls to nearly all families to update them on student engagement and progress. That strategy led to both increased parent satisfaction and increased student engagement at many schools. Now, multiple leaders report keeping those weekly points of contact and believe it helps with attendance.

Following the height of the pandemic, schools knew students were struggling with their mental health. That increased need led to challenges engaging students and, in some cases, increased absences. For anyone, but especially for a young person, it is an immense challenge to complete daily responsibilities with the cloud of poor mental health hanging over you. We appreciate all the investments Mayor Bowser and Council have made in the School Based Mental Health Program. In addition to utilizing these resources, schools are doing all they can to support students' mental health, such as hiring additional social workers, incorporating social-emotional learning into lessons, and adding mental health days. Teachers and school leaders will do everything in their power to keep those challenges from becoming an impediment to students' attendance or other daily responsibilities.

COVID and mental health are only two of the many barriers our students continue to face when it comes to attendance. Schools consistently cite transportation challenges and safety concerns. We hope the return of 7000 series trains to Metrorail means students will have quicker commutes to school and that will alleviate crowding and frequency issues on Metrobus. We also appreciate all the Council's investments in safe passage, and we know that families still need more support to feel comfortable with their children walking or taking transit to and from school. The smoother, quicker, and safer we can make the trip to and from school for students, the easier it is to increase student attendance.

Public charter schools are committed to creating engaging learning environments and ensuring students are consistently in school to learn. They continue to innovate and find creative solutions to the challenges students face in and out of school. DC PCSB and LEAs will continue to engage in meaningful partnerships with government agencies, the Council, and community organizations on these challenges, and we all commit to coming out of the pandemic stronger than before.

Thank you for allowing me to testify, and I look forward to your questions.