



**Testimony of
Rashida Young, Chief School Performance Officer
DC Public Charter School Board**

**Attendance, Chronic Absenteeism, and Truancy Hearing
Committee of the Whole
March 11, 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.

As I testified in December, in-seat attendance declined and the truancy rate rose last school year compared to SY2018-19, which was the last full school year prior to the pandemic. We flagged some trends, namely that elementary schools saw steeper declines in attendance than did high schools, which saw an increase in attendance. In my testimony today, I will not repeat all the numbers and trends I shared in December but focus on the larger conversation around attendance in our schools.

The issues our schools and families face mirror those that existed before the pandemic. Often when we ask school leaders what the barriers are, they cite transportation, safety, housing instability, and specific life circumstances for each student. Schools try to address these barriers, sometimes providing buses, sometimes giving incentives to students, sometimes doing home visits, and sometimes employing an all of the above strategy. The pandemic has only exacerbated the underlying circumstances but certainly did not create them.

As this relates to the legislation before us today, the "School Attendance Amendment Act of 2021," we believe the time is right to investigate an alternative to the 80/20 rule but do not have sufficient data to prefer 60/40 to any other threshold. Applying a 60/40 rule to the data may be an approach that could help improve attendance. However, changing how schools and our city calculate truancy will not address the root causes. Our concern is that if we make a change based on this legislation, we will have missed an opportunity, to tackle the attendance issue comprehensively, especially ahead of budget season.

DC PCSB strongly believes we need to have a larger conversation to look into attendance. This hearing is certainly one component, but it will be important to also hear directly from families and all LEAs at times of the day that are not during school or work hours. It will be important to have multiple feedback sessions and meet people where they are to truly understand the motivations and disincentives behind attending school. This includes doing the hard work of connecting with families who do not usually testify in front of the Council, State Board of Education, or other public entities.

Similarly, when and if we do move to a new threshold, it will be imperative to not only give schools sufficient notice but also provide support and training for staff to communicate the new policy. Many say that students skip school altogether if they miss their first period class because of the 80/20 rule. If we accept that premise, families will also need time to adjust to the new threshold and understand what it means for them.

In terms of solutions, we have identified a few places where we could better support families in service of higher attendance. First, we know participation in attendance improvement programs like Show Up Stand Out (SUSO) and Parent and Adolescent Support Services (PASS) is optional, and the option is often declined by families. One way to increase participation is to introduce an incentive program much like we did with the COVID vaccine. That incentive may be monetary, perhaps prizes or something else. If we can offer an incentive for families that supports improving student attendance, our hope is that the needle may move a bit. While we view incentives as the best way to increase engagement with SUSO and other attendance intervention programs, perhaps these programs could also increase participation by transitioning to an opt-out model.

Second, schools often cite transportation as the biggest barrier. Historically schools have tried to tackle it in a few ways, namely with providing private transportation to families and by adjusting opening times. The city has also tried to address transportation with the Kids Ride Free Program. While students currently have access to free transportation and have enjoyed this benefit for years, their parents and guardians do not. That is why DC PCSB supports the Metro for D.C. Amendment Act of 2021. For parents and guardians who accompany their children on the Metro or bus to school each day, fares can add up quickly. With a Metro stipend, those families could accompany their child to school, potentially making the student feel safer and more comfortable on public transportation while boosting attendance. This could be an important first step in addressing the issue. But it is only a first step.

On another front, we need to have a plan for families experiencing homelessness. Not every DC resident has convenient access to a train or bus line. In fact, many of the family short term housing solutions are not close to a metro station. For example, the Ward 7 shelter at D St SE, is almost mile away from the Benning Road Station, or a 15 minute walk. In Ward 8 the 6th St SE shelter is even further from a train station at 1.7 miles or a 34 minute walk. Walking the roads from these shelters to a train station is not easy, especially with children. We also know that buses are not always reliable. That leads to homeless families having to utilize rideshare services to get to school, especially if they have children attending more than one school in different locations. Even that solution is not perfect because some children need booster seats, nor can they ride by themselves under the age of 18. In addition, when families experience traumatic life events such as homelessness, getting their children to school every day may take a back seat to finding safer and more permanent housing. So, providing families with other wrap around supports is important, as well.

We are not transportation experts and unfortunately do not have simple solutions to these issues. In conversations with school leaders, it is clear just how complex and varied the issues that schools are trying to solve can be. However, what we know is that we need to provide reliable transportation whether by train, bus, or car. In all likelihood, each of these solutions will only help around the margins. That is because each family's situation is different and requires a different set of supports. School leaders stand ready to help and can offer us all valuable insight into what drives and prevents attendance. We hope the Everyday Counts Task Force or another group can facilitate these conversations as we work our way through the pandemic and into the future of education.

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