



**Testimony of Scott Pearson, Executive Director  
DC Public Charter School Board**  
Truancy Reduction in DC Public School System

Joint Public Roundtable by the Committee of the Whole and the  
Committee on the Judiciary

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Thank you, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Council. My name is Scott Pearson and I am the Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board. I appreciate the opportunity to come before you today to discuss the issue of reducing truancy. With charter schools accounting for 41 percent of DC schoolchildren, I want to highlight our part of the citywide effort to reduce truancy.

The Public Charter School Board cares deeply about this issue. Charter schools are public schools and they are responsible for educating all students. This learning happens when the students are present. Students who are truant, suspended, or withdrawing in the middle of the school year are not learning.

Each charter school has an attendance policy and is responsible for implementing it. Generally these policies call for an escalating series of interventions and consequences up to and including contacting Child and Family Services Agency. PCSB is responsible for ensuring that charters deliver on the commitments made in their charters, including faithfully implementing their attendance policies.

Several years ago PCSB began publicly identifying and sanctioning schools with high levels of truant students or low attendance rates. While this increased schools' focus on the issue, it was not universally

effective. We also heard anecdotally that it led in some cases to more expulsions of chronically truant students. We believe that PCSB needs better and more effective policies around truancy, and are working to develop these.

The place to start is with good data. On this, we are making good progress. We measure the number of students in school, each day, under a shared formula with DCPS and OSSE called “in-seat attendance” -- which measures the rate at which students are present.

Another measure is the rate of instructional time lost to truancy, absences and disciplinary actions. This is another formula that PCSB, OSSE, and DCPS are creating together. In addition, we are working to calculate the chronically absent rate for each of our schools.

While data is important, the purpose of capturing it is so that it can be attached to accountability. For us, accountability means: first,

the school's data submission must be timely and complete; second, PCSB has clear and transparent definitions and formulas for truancy; third, the school and PCSB agree on attainable achievement targets, and on benchmarks to measure progress; fourth, PCSB has a system of consequences and rewards, and fifth, there is public transparency.

We are working to create this accountability system for our 53 public charter schools. As a first step, our board passed an attendance and discipline data policy in April that holds schools accountable to submit to us accurate and timely attendance and discipline data. While PCSB has been collecting this data for years, it was clear when I arrived in January that its collection was spotty, late, and often inaccurate. Schools now receive an official Board action when they miss their reporting requirements.

Where we need help is with a common definition of truancy. We are working with DCPS, OSSE and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education to come up with citywide definitions not just for truancy, but also discipline issues.

For example, right now, in addition to their own attendance policies, charters must provide data for federal reporting purposes using five different truancy definitions, broken out by age starting with five years old and up. On top of this, PCSB is often asked to provide data on truancy with definitions different from the five federal uses.

Other issues exist: For example, there is the lack of a standard definition of an excused absence and an unexcused absence – specifically whether a doctor’s note is needed, or if a parent’s note is sufficient. And there are no good systems for tracking chronic tardiness.

Once we have standard definitions that can be used to determine a truancy rate, we will analyze the data we have to set targets and achievable benchmarks. We are taking steps in this direction and will communicate this at our Back-to-School Charter Leaders meeting in early August, with an eye to creating an attendance pilot this fall.

As a nationally recognized high-quality charter school authorizer, we believe attendance is a key indicator of future student achievement and that truancy hurts academic growth. We remain committed to playing our part in the citywide effort to reduce truancy and its effects, for DC schoolchildren.

Thank you.