

Katrice Fuller
Committee of the Whole
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy
Tuesday, December 12th 2023

Greetings Chairman Mendelson & the Committee of the Whole;

My name is Katrice Fuller. I am a native Washingtonian and current Ward 5 resident serving on the Citywide PLE board with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), and an Organizing Fellow with EmpowerEd DC. Additionally, I am a bonus mom, teacher, advisor and confidant to the hundreds of students and families I serve under my role as Chief of Family & Community Engagement at Monument Academy PCS. Last but certainly not least, my favorite title is Mom, to my 4 school-aged sons.

On November 30th when articles in both the Washington Post and DCist were shared with me, showcasing glaring chronic absenteeism and truancy rates, I remember a few colleagues of mine stating how those numbers seemed too alarming to be true. I glanced at both articles, saw that the articles were reporting that more than 40% of District students were “suffering” from chronic absenteeism (more than 60% in high schools) and nonchalantly retorted, “that’s it?”. Chronic absenteeism and truancy rates were on the rise pre-pandemic due to what I personally saw (and still see) as an inequitable housing crisis across our city. While the COVID pandemic exacerbated this influx, unless we act now, this current social pandemic comprised of youth violence, the opioid crisis, Safe Passage issues, lack of robust Out of School Time opportunities for teens, lack of School Based Bx Health staffing, and STILL the lack of equity in our housing market, will continue to propel chronic absenteeism and truancy rates.

As an advocate and school leader with a Family and Community Engagement focus, I see and hear first hand the barriers our students and families face. Sadly, many black and brown families highly distrust schools and their governing systems. Thus, typically, over the summer months, I spend my time conducting home visits and communicating with every newly enrolled family in my LEA multiple times to not only provide my teachers with the information they need but to build relationships, create and sustain trust, but most importantly to foster a safe space for families to feel safe enough to show vulnerability. My families, prior to school even starting, then feel safe enough to share their stories with me which leads me to these series of questions: How can we expect our scholars to “Show Up and Stand Out” if once they leave school, they are unsure of where they will lay their heads for the night due to housing instability? How can we expect our students to be on time and not marked tardy or absent even if they are later than 1 hour and 45 mins, if they have to assist in the economic welfare of their homes by working to earn income or by transporting their younger siblings to and from school so that their guardians can work to earn income? By the way, we should truly think about later school start times for

our secondary students and earlier start times for our younger, elementary students. How can we expect our scholars to want to venture to schools when on their journey they are ostracized, abused, and traumatized by the people and experiences they encounter along their journey? Also, by the way, The Safe Passage “ZONE” we should prioritize, IS the entire District of Columbia at this time. Lastly, how can we expect our scholars to “Show Up and Stand Out” when they are grieving, hurt, and/or saddened by this social pandemic, yet mental health days aren’t technically “excused absences” in all of our schools? I am sure that as I read aloud these unrealistic expectations of our scholars, you envisioned many children that you may have served or encountered either directly or indirectly; I bet those scholars you envisioned were black and brown and I bet you too can see why our black and brown students are 10 times more likely to “suffer”, and I say suffer intentionally, from chronic absenteeism and truancy.

As I prepare to conclude, I want to acknowledge the many amazing community based organizations serving our students and families all across our District, that should be a state. Did you know that in the current published SUSO Process Standards, which details how families should be referred to services first line states “CBOs shall follow the below guidelines for all outreach and enrollment activities:”; that’s right - CBOs shall, yet CBOs are not properly funded, prioritizes or utilized properly in the city. I do wish to recognize the \$2.2 million recently awarded to 127 CBOs. I do wish to also recognize amazing locally funded grants such as DC Connected Schools or the Community Schools Incentive Initiative that not only provide funding to schools but the CBOS who assist the school community with overall student well-being and family stability which we KNOW, propels the attendance rates and academic success of our students. While we are experiencing a nationwide shortage of clinicians, we have many CBOs right in our backyards, ready and willing to continue the work necessary to eliminate barriers for our DC families. As we prepare for the next budget cycle, I ask that we first stop penalizing families and educators for an internal citywide legislative and funding issue, and that we reimagine schools by allotting roughly \$25million to fund and sustaining funding for School Based Behavioral Health Program community based clinicians and auxiliary staff (mentors, advisors, community leaders, etc.) across all 254 DC schools. This funding consideration will not only benefit our school communities, but has the opportunity to socially stabilize and properly economically mobilize our city as a whole.

Thank you for your time.
Katrice Fuller