

Kisha Clark
Committee of the Whole
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy
Tuesday, December 12th 2023

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and esteemed members of the Committee of the Whole.

My name is Kisha Clark. I am a Citywide and Ward 6 PAVE parent leader, and I am a concerned parent of a student in the District of Columbia Public Schools system. I am here today to express my deep concern about the alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism in our schools.

According to the DC Public Schools data, nearly half (46.5%) of high school students in the District were chronically absent in the 2021-2022 school year. This means they missed 10% or more of their school days, a staggering statistic that represents thousands of students falling behind in their education. In 2022-2023, 43% of high school students and 34% of all students were chronically absent. In 2021-2022, high school students missed an average of 24 days, and all students missed an average of 17 days. For black students, absenteeism was 51.5% in 2021-2022 school year. The truancy rates for the same time were 42% of high school students and 35% of all students were truant (unexcused absences). So far this school year, 37% of high school students and 30% of all students were truant.

The impact of chronic absenteeism is far-reaching and deeply concerning. Research shows that:

- Chronic absenteeism is a major predictor of academic failure and dropout. Students who miss excessive days of school are significantly less likely to graduate on time and prepared for college or career success.
- Absenteeism disrupts learning and hinders students' ability to grasp complex concepts and master essential skills. This can lead to frustration, disengagement, and further academic struggles.
- Chronic absenteeism can negatively impact social and emotional well-being. Students who are frequently absent often feel isolated from their peers and struggle to develop strong relationships with teachers and mentors.

As a parent, I see the daily struggle of students who are caught in the cycle of chronic absenteeism. I have witnessed firsthand the devastating impact chronic absenteeism can have

on a child's education and overall well-being. It hinders their academic progress, isolates them from their peers, and can ultimately lead to disengagement and a sense of hopelessness. But the issue goes beyond mere numbers and statistics. It's crucial to understand that chronic absenteeism is often a symptom of deeper problems, and one of the most significant contributors is mental health challenges.

It is heartbreaking to witness their potential unrealized due to factors beyond their control. We must act now to address this critical issue. I urge this committee to consider the following recommendations:

- Invest in comprehensive data analysis to identify the specific causes of chronic absenteeism in different schools and communities.
- Develop and implement targeted interventions based on the identified causes, such as providing targeted support for students facing mental health challenges, addressing transportation barriers, and strengthening family engagement initiatives.
- Hold schools accountable for reducing absenteeism rates and ensure they have the resources and personnel necessary to provide effective interventions.
- Increase community awareness about the harms of chronic absenteeism and promote strategies to support students and families.

Many students grapple with anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues that make it difficult for them to attend school regularly. These challenges can manifest in various ways, such as:

- Fear of social situations or bullying.
- Difficulties concentrating and managing emotions.
- Physical symptoms like headaches and stomachaches.
- Lack of motivation and engagement in schoolwork.

These are just a few examples, and the reality is that each student's experience is unique. However, the common thread is that these challenges create significant barriers to their education and attendance.

Mental health struggles are another key contributor to chronic absenteeism. Unfortunately, our current system often falls short in addressing the mental health needs of students. While some schools have commendable programs, many lack the resources and trained personnel to provide adequate support. This results in students feeling unheard, unsupported, and ultimately falling further behind. Schools need to develop *comprehensive screening programs to identify students struggling* with mental health challenges early on; *provide evidence-based interventions* such as individual and group therapy, mindfulness training, and social-emotional

learning programs; and *promote mental health awareness and de-stigmatization* through educational campaigns and training for teachers, staff, and parents.

These actions are vital steps towards creating a more supportive and inclusive school environment where all students, regardless of their mental health challenges, have the opportunity to thrive.

As a parent, I am deeply invested in the success of our children. I believe that every child deserves access to quality education and the support they need to reach their full potential. By addressing the mental health needs of students, we can significantly reduce chronic absenteeism and ensure that all children have a chance to succeed. We cannot afford to ignore this issue any longer. The future of our city and our children depends on our collective commitment to ensuring all students can attend school regularly and receive the education they deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Kisha Clark
Citywide and Ward 6 PAVE PLE Board Member

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Overall Absenteeism Rates:

- Chronic absenteeism:
 - 2021-2022: 46.5% of high school students and 38% of all students were chronically absent (missed 10% or more of school days).
 - 2022-2023: 43% of high school students and 34% of all students were chronically absent.
 - Pre-pandemic: Chronic absenteeism rates were around 25% for both high school and all students.
- Average number of absences:
 - 2021-2022: High school students missed an average of 24 days, and all students missed an average of 17 days.
 - 2022-2023: This data is not yet available.

Absenteeism by Subgroup:

- Chronic absenteeism rates are higher among:

- Black students (51.5% in 2021-2022)
- Hispanic students (46.7% in 2021-2022)
- Students from low-income families (55.6% in 2021-2022)
- Students with disabilities (53.1% in 2021-2022)
- Truancy rates:
 - 2021-2022: 42% of high school students and 35% of all students were truant (unexcused absences).
 - 2022-2023: 37% of high school students and 30% of all students were truant.

Data Sources:

- District of Columbia Public Schools
- Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Additional Resources:

- District of Columbia Attendance Report: <https://dcps.dc.gov/attendance>
- Public oversight testimony on attendance, chronic absenteeism, and truancy in the District of Columbia: <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/>