

Katrice Fuller
Committee of the Whole
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy Hearing
Wednesday, June 26th, 2024

Greetings Chairman Mendelson and the representatives of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Katrice Fuller. I am a Ward 5 resident and I serve as a PAVE Citywide member. I am also a proud mother of four boys who attend Monument Academy and Miner Elementary. Additionally, I am a bonus mom, teacher, counselor, and confidant to the hundreds of students and families I serve under my role as Chief of Family and Community Engagement at Monument Academy Public Charter School; a place that I consider to be a gem within our city due to the plethora of programming and resources we can provide for our school environment.

Today we are here talking about problems and solutions surrounding the plague of chronic absenteeism and truancy in this city. As a mother, advocate & school leader I have a lot of experience on this issue that may prove to be beneficial. I lead a team that holds weekly robust multi-disciplinary SST convenings to assess, triage and directly “treat” student specific issues. We also conduct multiple home visits weekly to get our students in school while simultaneously connecting our families to necessary resources to assist with eliminating some, if not all, of their barriers. Despite our best efforts, large systematic issues still persist keeping our kids out of school.

The biggest problem that I see on the ground is twofold: I see students that want to get to school but can't and I see policymakers that do not address all of the issues that overlap with absenteeism and truancy. We must realize that safety is a large, if not the largest, component as to why students are not getting to school on time, if at all. Time and time again I have been told by the kids I serve that they don't feel safe on the journey to and from school; having to cross into neighborhoods that are not their own to receive what they feel to be the best educational experience for them. There might be safer options available for students to utilize, but those options come at a cost. For instance, at Monument last school year, we spent \$70,000 on Uber and Lyft to transport kids between home and school. This school year we worked to get that number down and find other ways, however, we still found ourselves spending \$40,000 on Uber and Lyft. Why are we doing this? Because kids are scared of the metro or don't want to walk the long distance it takes to get to school. If families or schools were given subsidies for these available resources, it would relieve the burden.

Sadly, I keep watching parents and students get penalized for that in various ways, but those penalties do little to nothing to solve the problem.

Along with safety, another huge barrier as to why students aren't getting to school is familial financial hardships, which honestly, needs to be addressed if we want to see the rates of absenteeism and truancy decrease. Due to trauma and other life circumstances, many of our youth are supporters of their families and have familial obligations that prevent them from going to school on time or at all. This can show up in a variety of ways from food and housing insecurity, child-rearing, and being household financial contributors. I have one student who was consistently truant due to taking his 5 younger siblings to school daily because his mom finally found employment and didn't want to risk losing a job she worked so hard to attain. I had a student this year that asked if he could attend school virtually because his mom was in the hospital due to a domestic abuse incident and he needed to help his elderly grandmother with getting his younger siblings to school which prohibited him from coming to school himself. I think about situations like that where kids are caretakers for ill loved ones and siblings and wonder how many other students this applies to. Another one of my students was evicted from their home and couldn't get to school due to being shuffled around from one shelter to another. They wanted to be at school but life happened. I want everyone here to know that when it comes to absenteeism and truancy, a lot of times it's not that kids and families are choosing to be truant, which is often the perception, but that they are genuinely struggling with safety, finances, and family responsibilities.

We must work together to fix these overlapping issues so that students can receive the quality education they deserve. Schools in the cities have done a great job at making a place where students and families want to be, students are just having trouble getting there.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to future collaboration and am available for questions.

Sincerely,

Katrice Fuller

Chief of Family and Community Engagement at Monument Academy PCS

Citywide and Ward 5 PLE Board Member, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)