

## Truancy Rates and Truancy Reduction in the District of Columbia

Testimony before the Committee of the Whole and the Committee of the Judiciary  
of the Council of the District of Columbia

Nov. 8, 2012

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Good morning. My name is Akiva Liberman. I am a Senior Fellow in the Justice Policy Center of the Urban Institute, and Associate Director of the DC Crime Policy Institute (DCPI) there. I appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony concerning truancy in the District.

As part of DCPI, I led evaluations of two pilot interventions that were launched by the Interagency Truancy Task Force during school year (SY) 2011–12; those evaluations have been released. We are also days away from releasing a report on variation among schools in truancy rates. These three reports provide the basis for my testimony today.

### **School Variation in Truancy**

I want to highlight three key points from our examination of differences among the truancy rates across high schools in SY2010–11. First, truancy rates vary dramatically among schools. I will focus here on the rate of chronic truancy as defined by 25 or more unexcused absences. At the high end, the *majority* of students were chronically truant in four schools; in three others, over 40 percent of students were chronically truant. At the low end, five schools had chronic truancy rates of less than 4 percent. One implication is that the average truancy rate across schools does not describe any “typical” school and is not a meaningful metric.

Second, more than 2,500 high school students were chronically truant. The family court could not possibly handle them, if all were referred. Nor can we refer the majority of the student bodies of several high schools to truancy court. Clearly, the court cannot be the primary response to chronic truancy. Moreover, a truancy policy that *mandates* such referrals, rather than *authorizes* them, is not realistic.

Third, what predicts absenteeism and truancy rates among high schools? We find that the absenteeism history of a school’s students when they were in 8th grade is a very strong predictor of the high school’s absenteeism rate, even though absenteeism escalates considerably from 8th grade to high school. That is, what differentiates high schools in terms of truancy is primarily the student body that comes in the door, rather than the schools’ effectiveness in mitigating truancy risk. Personally, I believe that this suggests that the most effective thing we can do to reduce truancy *in* high school is to reduce absenteeism *before* high school.

### **The Case Management Partnership Initiative**

The first pilot program that we evaluated was an attempt to link 9th graders who had been chronically truant in the prior year, and their families, to assessment and services provided through the Far

Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative. This was a collaboration between CFSA, DCPS, and the Deputy Mayors of Education and Human Services. The underlying idea is that barriers to school attendance are often found in the family, so an effective response will require intervention with the family. The pilot program was mounted in Anacostia and Ballou high schools.

Our evaluation focused on implementation of the pilot program, which involved about thirty youth. We found that the interagency partnership seemed to function well, that the families involved had significant human service needs, and that the intervention helped address those needs and likely improved family well-being.

Whether these benefits also reduced absenteeism is not clear, because the pilot program was small and did not have a strong comparison group. But we see three things clearly. First, in 9th grade, both program participants and their classmates missed considerably more school than in the prior year, when most of them were in 8th grade. Second, program participants both began and ended with more absenteeism than their classmates. Third, whatever effect the program may have had was not large enough to bring participants below the chronic truancy threshold.

Our report recommends several changes that might strengthen the program, including possibly moving it back into 8th grade, *before* the large increase in absenteeism. In addition, my own reflection is that such a family-based intervention may be able to effectively increase attendance in schools where truancy is atypical. But in schools where *most* students are chronically truant, mitigating family-based attendance barriers may not be enough to motivate attendance.

### **The Truancy Court Diversion Program**

We also evaluated a pilot program launched in two middle schools, Kramer and Johnson. The Truancy Court Diversion Program (TCDP; sometimes called the Byer model), combined service provision with a program led by volunteer judges and a CJCC program manager. The program involved both students and their parents weekly for about 10 weeks. The curriculum included group discussions as well as projects and homework, and each family also met separately with the judge once during the program. The program and judicial involvement aimed to change students' and parents' attitudes toward school attendance, academic achievement, personal responsibility, drug use, delinquency, and the courts, as well as to improve parent-child communication.

Here, too, our evaluation focused on program implementation. One major challenge was program participation; the voluntary program was inherently limited to 10 to 15 students and their families at each school, but was unable to fill those slots. A gap in the pilot program was that it did not include regular case management meetings with the entire team, as has been part of other truancy court diversion programs. As a result, the service coordination aspect of the program had considerable room for improvement.

Despite these implementation problems, the program seemed to have improved the attitudes, school aspirations, and attendance for those families who participated regularly. The program was too small and was implemented too late in the school year to allow us to examine attendance outcomes.

The Truancy Court Diversion Program is an interesting one that has shown some promise elsewhere, although there are no rigorous evaluations in the literature to date. To achieve its potential will require further experimentation, and our report contains recommendations for program improvement. Implementing the program on a larger scale will also require more formalization, dedicated resources, and additional support from participating schools and DCPS.

I would be happy to answer any questions.