D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

PUBLIC HEARING ON

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND TRUANCY

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

November 12, 2026 at 10:00 am

Hearing Room 500 (Track A)

John A. Wilson Building

Testimony of Anoosha Imran

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D.C. Policy Center

Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy in the District

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Anoosha Imran, and I am a data analyst at the D.C. Policy Center, an independent think tank focused on advancing policies for a growing, vibrant, and compelling District of Columbia. My focus today is on the need for monitoring and assessing ways to improve chronic absenteeism rates in the district.

Progress has stalled, with chronic absenteeism well above pre-pandemic levels

In school year 2025-26, 38.8 percent of D.C. students were chronically absent, meaning they missed at least 10 percent of school days for any reason.[1] That is down from a peak of 48 percent in 2021-22, but still nearly 10 points above the 29 percent rate in 2018-19.[2] Most of the recovery came in the first two years back in person. Since 2023-24, the rate has moved less than one percentage point a year: 40 percent, then 39.5, then 38.8[3]. At that pace, the District would need roughly two decades to reach its 2025 goal of cutting chronic absenteeism in half to reach 24 percent.[4]

The headline rate also likely understates how much has changed. Since 2022-23, D.C. counts a student as present if they attend 60 percent of the day, compared with 80 percent before the pandemic.[5] A student who misses a third of the day today is counted present; before the pandemic, they were not.

What influences chronic absenteeism now is a mix of long-standing barriers, such as poverty and unstable housing, and new post-pandemic patterns in who misses school and when. The new patterns matter most for policy, because many existing interventions were designed for the old ones.

Absenteeism now starts earlier, sticks, and follows students to high school

Three findings stand out from a D.C. Policy Center analysis of student-level OSSE data for students in grades 8 through 12, comparing two school years before the pandemic with two afterwards.[6]

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[1] Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). OSSE Attendance Dashboard.
[2] OSSE. 2025. District of Columbia Attendance Report, School Year 2024-25.
[3] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C. D.C. Policy Center.
[4] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.
[5] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C. D.C. Policy Center.
[6] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.

First, the problem is starting earlier. Grade 9 is still the steepest climb: post-pandemic, 65 percent of ninth graders were chronically absent, 21 points more than eighth graders Ninth-grade repeaters were chronically absent at a higher rate of 87 percent.[7] But the biggest increase since the pandemic was in grade 8, while grade 12 was essentially unchanged.[8] High school chronic absenteeism rates were already elevated, with most of the increase coming from middle school. Many students now arrive in ninth grade with established patterns of chronic absenteeism, so high school interventions alone come too late for them.

Second, attendance status is sticky, and change happens at the margin. Of students chronically absent in 2021-22, 82 percent were chronically absent again the next year.[9] The students who did move were close to the 10 percent threshold. Of those who improved their attendance, 77 percent had been in the moderate tier, missing 10 to 20 percent of days. Of those who became chronically absent, 71 percent had been just below the line, missing 5 to 10 percent.[10] Outreach is most likely to pay off for students a few days on either side of the cutoff.

Third, the stakes extend past high school graduation. About 7 in 10 graduates with satisfactory attendance enroll in college within six months, compared with 3 in 10 graduates with profound chronic absence. The gap in postsecondary enrollment is also true for at-risk students, with 54 percent enrolling with better attendance and 23 percent with worse attendance.[11]

Warning signs, and one improvement to read with care for 2026-27

The first weeks of school set the pattern for the year. In Baltimore, students who missed 2 to 4 days in September were 5 times more likely to be chronically absent for the year, and those who missed more than 4 days were over 16 times as likely.[12] Early data are less a preview than a forecast. OSSE's monthly Attendance Dashboard, launched in April, gives the District that forecast in time to act on it.

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[7] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.

[8] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.

[9] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.

[10] Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.

[11] On the SAT, 35 percent of students with satisfactory attendance meet the college-readiness benchmark, compared with 3 percent of those with profound chronic absence.

[12] Olson, L. S. 2014. Why September Matters: Improving Student Attendance. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

Chronic absenteeism is up slightly compared with the same point last year. Two increases deserve attention:

- **Upper elementary and middle school students**. Chronic absenteeism increased by 1 percentage point for both grades 3-5 and 6-8 in the first months of school year 2026-27. This fits the research showing the post-pandemic rise is concentrated before high school and may signal that it now begins even earlier. Because attendance status is sticky, these students are likely to carry chronic absence into high school unless they are reached this year.
- **Economically disadvantaged students**. Chronic absenteeism for students living in low-income households increased by 3.6 percentage points in the first few months of school year 2026-27. This group had among the largest post-pandemic increases and was also the most likely to improve from one year to the next. A rise this school year may mean supports that were working have weakened.

Chronic absenteeism is down for English learners and Latino students.[13] This is likely, at least in part, a change in who is enrolled rather than a change in attendance. Latino enrollment fell 3.8 percentage points in 2025-26, one of the largest drops of any group, ending years of steady increases.[14] A recent city report found that the presence of immigration agents and the National Guard hurt attendance for some Latino and newcomer students.[15] Families most affected by enforcement may have left D.C. schools, leaving a smaller and more secure group with better attendance. If so, the lower rate does not mean these students are better served, and the students who left are not counted at all.

Recommendations

OSSE school-level attendance dashboard already show which schools have improved most since last year. OSSE should reach out to those schools now, while the first months still shape the rest of the year. Three steps would make this outreach more useful:

1. **Identify schools that improved more than schools among those who serve similar students.**
2. **Ask schools what is behind these improvements (which students improved; or what changed this year in staffing, family outreach, mentoring, or scheduling.**
3. **Share out findings from schools with improvements with the broader community and update the analysis with each OSSE update to attendance data within a school year.**

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[13] Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). OSSE Attendance Dashboard.

[14] Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. Public School Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity. EdScape.

[15] Gelman, S. 2026. DC report offers insight into why some Latino, Hispanic students are missing school, citing ICE as one factor. WTOP, October 26, 2026.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

Sources

1. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). OSSE Attendance Dashboard.
2. OSSE. 2025. District of Columbia Attendance Report, School Year 2024-25.
3. Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C. D.C. Policy Center.
4. Coffin, C., and Mason, H. 2025. Patterns and predictors of chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s middle and high schools. D.C. Policy Center.
5. Olson, L. S. 2014. Why September Matters: Improving Student Attendance. Baltimore Education Research Consortium.
6. OSSE. 2026. OSSE Launches Citywide Dashboard to Help Track Student Attendance Across DC. April 22, 2026.
7. The Washington Sun. 2026. D.C. Schools May Soon Have a Big Problem: Fewer Kids. October 9, 2026.
8. Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. Public School Enrollment by Race and Ethnicity. EdScape.
9. Gelman, S. 2026. DC report offers insight into why some Latino, Hispanic students are missing school, citing ICE as one factor. WTOP, October 26, 2026
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