Testimony of
Rashida Young, Chief School Performance Officer
DC Public Charter School Board

Improving School Attendance: Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Initiatives
Committee of the Whole
December 5, 2019

Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the issue of truancy and chronic absenteeism in our public charter schools. I am Rashida Young, Chief School Performance Officer at the DC Public Charter School Board.

As an authorizer, the DC PCSB is tasked with providing effective oversight and meaningful support to every public charter school. We fulfill our mission, in part, by providing clear and transparent reporting on public charter school performance. In addition, we monitor academic performance and non-academic outcomes, such as attendance and discipline rates, to ensure our schools are effectively serving students from all backgrounds and levels of need.

DC PCSB has robust processes to ensure public charter schools collect and report their monthly exclusionary discipline and attendance data with fidelity. Since 2012, it has been our practice to analyze these data monthly, look for campus and sector level trends, and report back to schools to let them know if they are outliers in any metrics. We make attendance data public on our website and through various public reports and work with OSSE to ensure schools' discipline data is accurately reported. That data is then made public on each school's state report card. We have seen large reductions in expulsions and out-of-school suspensions over the last seven years. The suspension rate within the charter sector dropped to 6.2% in SY 2018-19, which is less than half the suspension rate during the 2012-13 school year. Similarly the public charter school expulsion rate was 0.17% in SY 2018-19, significantly lower than its peak of 0.48% in SY 2012-13.

However, these headline numbers only tell part of the story. Our Fidelity, Applications and School Climate team uses several strategies to monitor

equity in its various forms, including our focus on outlier attendance data, frequent communication with school staff, and data audits, as needed. If we see disproportionate rates among student subgroups, we follow up with the schools. For example, if a school suspends students with disabilities at a much higher rate than general education students, we alert them to this disproportionality. If the trend persists, we may conduct an audit on the school or request a meeting with the school's board to both get insight on the issue, and ensure the school's board is holding the school's staff accountable in this area. We share this information about discipline to remind you that our goal is to ensure that students are in school and learning.

As you know, DC PCSB participates in multiple initiatives across the city aimed at improving attendance, including the Every Day Counts! Task Force and the Juveniles in the Care of the District of Columbia working group. We continue to partner with groups such as Show Up Stand Out and host events where best practices are shared, such as school leaders meetings and school climate brunches. DC PCSB found that among DC public charter schools participating in two or more city-wide attendance initiatives tracked by Every Day Counts, five out of eight saw improved YTD attendance and chronic absenteeism. We encourage Every Day Counts to continue to track the efficacy of these initiatives to determine which should be scaled, and which are not moving the needle. In the past, we have used these roundtables as an opportunity to discuss the issue of transportation, and how access to reliable transportation impacts students' ability to get to school. Today, however, we would like to discuss a related but no less important issue: safety and trauma.

In 2017, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), which breaks down data on youth risk behaviors and school health policies and practices. DC YRBS data revealed that violence, or the threat of violence, has a significant impact on the lives of some students, even causing them to miss school regularly. Additionally, the data provides important insight into the correlated factors and behaviors of young people who experience violence.

Among the percentage of middle school students who missed one or more days because they felt unsafe, Latinx and African American students reported the highest rates of missed school days at 18.5% and 16.2%, respectively. Among high school students who missed one or more days because they felt unsafe, Latinx and African American students once again reported the highest rates at 11% and 8.7%, respectively. This data reinforces the urgent need to act on our students' behalf to create a safe city, so they can focus on learning.

The solutions to these problems are not easy. As Councilmember Grosso noted in a hearing last month, the solutions to many issues plaguing public education require city agencies to work together to alleviate some of the stressors caused by poverty. Until we confront these realities, we cannot move forward.

We think that a renewed focus by MPD on cultivating relationships with school administrators and students could be a first step in addressing some safety challenges. This could take the form of dedicated school resource officers in each school, rather than having one assigned to a cluster of schools. It also involves better communication between MPD and schools when a serious safety incident occurs.

Another step should be a renewed commitment to improve coordination between CFSA, DYRS, DBH, the DC Housing Authority, and any other agency that is in regular communication with families. While some laws prevent the free flow of student level data between agencies, it is imperative that we find a better way to share information so that efforts to support students can be reinforced and not duplicated. Where barriers to information sharing do exist, we should figure out ways to thoughtfully break down those barriers so that everyone is working in service of the students. It is also critical that schools have a designated point of contact at critical city agencies, such as CFSA and CSS, to ensure an ongoing feedback loop about students in need of services.

I do not have all of the answers today. These ideas are offered to start a conversation about how we can more effectively coordinate as a city and support our students. As a former classroom teacher and as someone who has worked with schools for almost 20 years, I know that schools are doing great work and employing many techniques to lower the truancy rate. Without a more holistic approach, I fear that we will continue to see the numbers trend in the wrong direction.

We will continue to identify schools making progress and have them share their ideas with their peers. Thank you for inviting me to testify today, I am happy to answer any questions.