

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE**  
**“Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy”**  
**Tuesday, December 12, 2023**

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson, for convening this hearing on chronic absenteeism. My name is Robert Henderson. I am the Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education. These views are my own and do not represent the views of the Board as a whole.

Chronic absenteeism is a severe problem, because we want students to be in school consistently for the sake of their education as well as for the stability and continuity of instruction for their teachers and classmates. Chronic absenteeism at high rates is especially disruptive to learning and to school culture.

Last week, I had the privilege of meeting with two groups of Ward 5 high school students. I asked them why they or their peers might miss school, even missing more than 20 days a year. Here are a few of the reasons they shared: lack of motivation, students can get assignments online, they live far from school and parents can't take them or are afraid to let them take the train, stress, they are not ok mentally, fear of people at school or on the way to school, bullying, and several mentioned that students might need to take care of older family members or younger siblings.

There are other reasons, of course, that students might miss school, and some of the above are likely specific to or at least more prevalent for high school students. Asthma, for example, has long been a primary cause of missed school days, and asthma itself is worsened by environmental factors associated with substandard housing.

Chronic absenteeism is a problem and yet it is also a symptom of a range of underlying problems — some inside the school and others outside the school. I urge the council to see chronic absenteeism as more than just a school issue — it is also a health issue, a housing issue, a transportation issue, and a public safety issue — and thus the solutions cannot just be school-based but must address the full range of causes.

A broad-based response to absenteeism would need to promote healthy homes, free of mold, rodents, roaches, and smoke; to support affordable elder- and childcare; and to ensure safe transportation to and from school each day. You will likely hear calls today for a need to expand the Safe Passage program, and I agree, but will add that the program needs to be improved, with Safe Passage workers being better trained, equipped, and deployed.

At the school level, engaging teaching and learning, strong connections between students and educators, and in- and out-of-school time activities that students want to engage in are essential to improving student motivation. This, in turn, means that we need to support our teachers. I urge again that the council pass the “Educator Retention for Student Success Act of 2023.” And DCPS has to negotiate a new contract with the WTU.

Finally, I want to say that while chronic absenteeism is a risk factor for criminal behavior, the overwhelming majority of chronically absent students are not involved in crime. Conflating the

two categories does not help us solve the causes of absenteeism and harmfully mislabels and alienates students who need encouragement and connection.

Thank you again for your attention to the issue of chronic absenteeism; I am happy to answer questions.

Robert Henderson