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New Brief Highlights Chronic Early Absenteeism in District Schools: Every Day Counts from the Start

New School Attendance Initiative Will Promote Awareness, Action

Amid the District's focus on high school truancy, a pernicious problem with absenteeism exists as early as prekindergarten, eroding reading and math skills and exacerbating achievement gaps, according to a new brief released today by DC Action for Children.

More than 17% of DC Public School students and 9% of charter school students in Pre-K through Kindergarten logged more than 10 unexcused absences in 2012-13, according to the brief: *Attendance Counts from the Start*. What's more, these truancy figures do not reflect the full extent of absenteeism in DC Public Schools, because they do not include excused absences, which account for many of the missed days in the early grades.

Research shows that when PreK and kindergarten students miss 10% of the school year, known as chronic absenteeism, they are less likely to read proficiently by third grade and more likely to be retained in later grades. They are also more likely to be chronically absent in middle school, setting them up for academic difficulty and, ultimately, dropping out.

DC Action is launching a new "***School Attendance Initiative***" to promote awareness and responsive action to the corrosive effects of early chronic absenteeism. In partnership with parents, schools, communities and advocates we will work to ensure that children are attending school more regularly and that we are tracking all school absences.

"The nexus between truancy or chronic absenteeism and graduation is undeniable. We know that for students to go on to college and lead successful, independent lives, they must physically be present in the classroom to learn. Students who miss school struggle academically and some drop out entirely," said David Catania, chair of the committee on education for DC Council and Council Member At-Large.

Chronic absenteeism is the measurement most recommended by national experts to identify attendance problems. Chronic absenteeism decreases student achievement and widens achievement gaps because the students who benefit most from each day in the classroom, particularly students from low-income families and English language learners, are also most likely to miss a disproportionate number of school days. These figures have not always been

tracked, shared or used consistently by DCPS or by policymakers. The data shows considerable room for improvement, and needs to be watched more closely.

To ensure ALL DC children achieve their full potential, the report recommends several preventative measures and targeted interventions:

- 1) Improve the measures schools use to track absenteeism,
- 2) Identify and address broad causes of absenteeism among young students,
- 3) Encourage a culture of attendance starting from Pre-K to prevent absenteeism and
- 4) Coordinate strategies across schools and agencies to intervene with young, chronically absent students.

“A truly comprehensive birth to eight system of early care and education would create a solid foundation for future growth and success in DC; achieving this should be a top priority for all DC decision-makers,” said HyeSook Chung, executive director of DC Action.

The attendance brief also identifies some bright spots where positive changes are underway in DC schools. These include work that school leaders are doing to improve attendance starting from Pre-K at DCPS’ Simon Elementary School and Eagle Academy Public Charter School’s Wheeler Road Campus, both in Ward 8. Both schools focus on positive family engagement, and using attendance data to motivate students, families and teachers.

The accompanying Data Snapshots provide brief overviews of important attendance metrics for DCPS and public charter schools from 2012-13, with data points by grade level and school location, and cross-referenced with DC-CAS reading scores.

“The DC KIDS COUNT data snapshot shows us we have much more work to accomplish,” added Chung. “DC’s persistent achievement gaps by family income, race and ethnicity show us that our fight on behalf of all DC children is more critical than ever.”

DC Action is pursuing its School Attendance Initiative in partnership with Attendance Works, a San Francisco-based organization leading the charge nationally to improve academic achievement by focusing on chronic absenteeism.

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Founded in 1992, DC Action for Children (www.dckids.org) is a nonprofit organization that provides data-based analysis and policy leadership on critical issues facing DC children and youth, to promote policies and actions that optimize child and family well-being.

DC Action is the KIDS COUNT grantee for the District, tracking key indicators of child and youth well-being and neighborhood well-being for children and youth.

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