

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force Meeting
December 6, 2013

Chicago Attendees

Ana Alvarado
Jeff Aranowski
Jennifer Berne
Tonya Bibbs (for Juliet Bromer)
Adam Rogalski (for Andrew Broy)
Aarti Dhupelia
Andrea Evans
Kevin Fahey
Rick Gravatt
Bobbie Gregg
Lynda Williams (for Annette Gurley)
Shaalein Carroll Lopez

Mary Howard
Laurene Heybach
Leslie Juby
Crystal Laura
LaTanya McDade
Melissa Mitchell
Heidi Mueller
Theresa Plascencia
Barbara Sherry
Antoinette Taylor
Maria Trejo
Jack Wuest

Springfield Attendees

Robert Lee

Jackie Price

Phone Attendees

Kirsten Carroll
Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia
Fanny Diego Alvarez

Laura Kieran
Paul Sarvela

Members Absent

Christine Boyd
Sen. Jacqueline Collins
Sen. Michael Connelly
Neha Gupta-Patel
Jim Kestner

Kareem Pender
Rep. Sandi Pihos
Arthur Sutton
Neli Vazquez Rowland
Sheila Venson

The meeting was called to order by Jeff Aranowski, a task force member who is employed by the Illinois State Board of Education, at 10:10 a.m.

Introductions were made around the table in Chicago and Springfield and by those participating by telephone.

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia, participating via telephone, introduced her representative at the meeting, Pat Dal Santo, Superintendent of the Kane County Regional Office of Education. Representative Chapa LaVia expressed her gratitude to all task force participants and asked them to invite other professionals with expertise in matters related to truancy and absenteeism to contribute to the work of the task force.

Mr. Aranowski indicated the State Board would like to echo Representative's Chapa LaVia's comments and would like to thank everyone for participating.

Mr. Aranowski reminded task force members to complete their ethics verification statements and Open Meetings Act training.

Mr. Aranowski then asked for volunteers or nominees to chair the task force, and Antoinette Taylor, an Exceptional Needs Consultant who helped Representative Chapa LaVia draft the Resolution, volunteered her service.

Mr. Aranowski asked for a motion to accept Ms. Taylor's nomination as chairperson. Leslie Juby, the Governor's designee on the task force, so moved. A voice vote was called for which was unanimously affirming.

Mr. Aranowski forecast monthly meetings since the task force has a limited amount of time to reach its goals and also asserted the need for by-laws in a public assembly of this nature. Mr. Aranowski asked Ms. Taylor if she wished to adopt by-laws and she agreed. Mr. Aranowski asked for discussion related to meeting by-laws and there was none. He then asked for volunteers to draft meeting by-laws. Heidi Mueller of the Department of Human Services volunteered to work with Mr. Aranowski on drafting by-laws for the task force.

Mr. Aranowski asked Ms. Taylor for background on the resolution. He also reminded everyone that the final report of the task force was due in twenty days, but that Representative Chapa LaVia had introduced another Resolution to extend the deadline to July 31, 2014.

Ms. Taylor noted the short span of time between now and the end of the month, and expressed her hope that the new Resolution would pass to extend the timeline. She advised that the task force work expeditiously and that the result of this effort be sustainable for all parties involved.

Ms. Taylor said the Resolution creating the task force occurred in the wake of a Chicago Tribune series entitled "An Empty-Desk Epidemic" which she described as very compelling as it examined all facets of truancy and absenteeism. Ms. Taylor added that the series informed officials that they must make sure the right systems are in place and that accountability must be shared by all professionals involved as well as the parents.

Ms. Taylor explained that embedded in this series was a concern about students with disabilities which was also a focus in the Resolution. On line 12, it states, "Forty-two percent of kindergarten through eighth grade students with a disability or impairment missed four weeks of classes in the same school year compared to 12% of students without a disability or impairment." She stated there is an obvious concern when any school is being missed by any child, but the rate for students with disabilities or impairments was so much more that Representative Chapa LaVia and she wanted to envelop this factor into the Resolution.

Ms. Taylor added that although she would be remiss if she didn't acknowledge that the combined issues of truancy and absenteeism also affect a large population of students of color, if there is to be forward movement toward the State's goal through the P-20 Council to increase the proportion of adults in Illinois with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by the year 2025, the task force has to look at the entire community -people of color, people who may be disadvantaged for whatever reason, people who may not have the tools they need to advocate for themselves. Ms. Taylor explained further that everyone needs to be at the table, public

schools and charter schools, to come up with a plan to move programming and systems of support forward. When the deadline of July 31 is reached, Ms. Taylor expects the task force will be able to show the General Assembly cost-effective and sustainable methods for improving the lives of all our children and all our families across the city and the state and possible across the whole country.

Mr. Aranowski said one of the purposes of the task force is to review the policies of the Chicago Board of Education and ISBE and make recommendations either for legislative change or changes to truancy tracking rates or the allocation of funding to truancy efforts.

Melissa Mitchell of the Federation for Community Schools asked if the State has a consistent or statewide definition on absenteeism or truancy used by every district.

Mr. Aranowski explained that districts have the discretion to define an unexcused absence for their own use. He added that technically, according to the law, a student is truant if he or she misses any day or part of the day. There is also a formal definition within the law of chronic or habitual truancy which in 2011 was changed from 10% of the 180 day school year to 5% (unexcused absences totaling no more than nine days).

Ms. Mitchell asked about students whose absences may be excused by virtue of explanatory notes from parents or guardians and the possibility that excused absences could total a number of days that would create concern.

Mr. Aranowski said districts have the discretion to define what an unexcused absence is and that districts approach absences, such as those that accrue due to family vacations, in different ways.

Aarti Dhupelia of the Chicago Public Schools asked if the focus was going to be chronic truancy or if the scope could be expanded to include chronic absenteeism which she feels is a much broader issue, due in part to a lack of parental awareness of the importance of high attendance.

Ms. Taylor said we should approach all aspects of the issue and asked Melissa Mitchell to provide some details of a summer symposium at the University of Chicago that was sponsored by Ms. Mitchell's organization, the Federation for Community Schools, and attended by Representative Chapa LaVia and Ms. Taylor.

Ms. Mitchell explained the roles the Federation for Community Schools plays as an advocate for community school partnerships and a provider of learning experiences for community school practitioners. In August the Federation had asked Hedy Chang from Attendance Counts to address absenteeism issues. Ms. Mitchell explained that "truancy is one thing but when you have a kindergartner not getting to school, that's another thing. We have to look at the underlying causes" (transportation, failure to set an alarm, etc.). The purpose of the symposium was to dissect absenteeism data in order to understand the myriad causes, the potential outcomes, and the support that is necessary for struggling families.

Ms. Mitchell was asked to contact Attendance Counts for permission to share the symposium materials with the task force. Ms. Taylor was particularly interested in reconciling that

organization's probe into truancy and absenteeism data with a report card issued by the Family and Youth Community Engagement Committee within the P-20 Council that found some schools' attendance data masked the real truancy figures: "We saw their attendance might be at 93%, but their truancy was at 46%; nevertheless, they were applauding their high attendance rate."

Laurene Heybach of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless asked if the ISBE website could feature all related documents to the truancy task force, all relevant CPS policies, ISBE policies, the Chicago Tribune series, the Attendance Counts training materials, etc. could all be in one place. Mr. Aranowski informed the task force that a special page had been created the previous day on the ISBE website that already featured certain information relative to the task force such as the meeting agenda and task force members' names and would be expanded to include all relevant materials.

Aarti Dhupelia of the Chicago Public Schools said CPS is very excited about the formation of the task force and that the CEO has made it a priority to tackle their absenteeism challenges by developing new strategies. There has been a lot of research that shows that student attendance is more of a predictor of student success than test scores. Ms. Dhupelia indicated further that CPS see this as an "It takes a village issue," as they know they cannot tackle this alone. She further suggested the task force read a report that was recently issued documenting New York City's efforts to stem chronic absenteeism ("Meeting the Challenge of Combating Chronic Absenteeism").

Ms. Taylor said it was important to point out that the Chicago Tribune series captured school year 2010-2011, and many people who are now in leadership positions at CPS were not in those positions then, but they have indicated their commitment to the work of the task force.

Tonya Bibbs of the Erikson Institute said we need to separate numbers about expulsions and suspensions from attendance data. Ms. Taylor referred to the Chicago Tribune article again to support Ms. Bibbs' statements and referred to the disproportionality of students of color when it comes to suspensions and expulsions.

Heidi Mueller of the Illinois Juvenile Justice Commission suggested that the task force also focus on the barriers that exist for children who have been involved in the juvenile justice system and the problems they face when it is time to re-enroll in school.

Ms. Taylor suggested that in order to address all issues, committees may need to be formed to report back to the larger group.

Ms. Juby, the governor's designee, said the School Success Task Force is working on a report about suspensions and expulsions on the high school level that will likely be of interest to members of the truancy task force.

Ms. Heybach informed the task force of another source of information related to truancy issues, a report by VOYCE (Voices of Youth in Chicago Education) in Albany Park that highlighted truancy's deleterious effects on school budgets and truants' well-being especially since many

feel excluded and unwelcome. She also addressed the problems faced by children, homeless and otherwise, and the barriers they face in school enrollment.

Mr. Aranowski posed a question to CPS regarding their adoption of policies which de-emphasize exclusionary policies and focus on restorative justice.

Aarti Dhupelia said CPS has made many changes including reducing the number of days for suspension for disciplinary infractions, reducing the types of infractions, excluding pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students from consideration for suspension, changing the number of infractions that precipitate disciplinary action, and pushing restorative justice practices. Ms. Dhupelia stated further that CPS is establishing foundational practices for a positive climate of cultural acceptance and uniform standards from both a policy standpoint and a practice standpoint.

Rick Gravatt of the Department of Juvenile Justice explained that the students in the care of his agency miss school through no fault of their own but because of staffing shortages, due in part to a restrictive hiring process. He is interested in some administrative or legislative relief so he can fill teacher vacancies and provide an education to all incarcerated youth.

Ms. Taylor suggested charter schools be included in any task force discussions, considerations, and solutions as they are the academic service providers for many Chicago school children.

Ms. Heybach of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless said there are some problems particular to charter schools which she thinks should be on the table as well: school fees, timeliness of enrollment, harsher discipline, and low special education population. "If we look broadly at the things that keep kids out of schools," Ms. Heybach explained, "we have to look at charters because they are Chicago Public Schools also."

In reference to charter schools, Ms. Taylor spoke about the accountability of charter schools and referred to the fact that CPS is the local educational agency (LEA) for any charter school in District 299. She indicated also that many charter schools are part of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) and expressed the belief that any concerns we have about the services available to all children through charter schools can be handled through these entities.

Adam Rogalski, INCS Director of Policy and Advocacy Leadership, said he looked forward to being a resource for the people on the task force.

Andrea Evans of the University of Illinois at Chicago explained she is starting a research project on chronic elementary absenteeism, a growing challenge for schools, and had two concerns: how you count student absences when districts have different policies about what constitutes an excused absence (in the case of family vacations and other non-medical reasons) and whether schools are welcoming environments or not.

Ms. Taylor said we might adopt our own definition of truancy and absenteeism and determine what should be a policy for the State. She also reflected on the implementation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative and the effect of absenteeism and truancy on student

performance on assessments related to the new learning challenges. Ms. Taylor added that unaddressed truancy issues could impact funding for district programs.

Ms. Taylor explained that the Resolution calls for public hearings. The task force discussed particular items for consideration in planning for public meetings such as outreach to specific target groups, possible locations, meeting protocols, survey documents, attendee confidentiality, and meeting timelines. Ms. Juby, the governor's designee, had organized community meetings as part of her involvement in the School Success Task Force, so she was asked to prepare a blueprint for public hearings covering all considerations from audience and outreach to locations and agendas. Dr. Shaalein Carroll Lopez from Governor's State University volunteered her assistance.

Ms. Taylor said it is a good thing we have access to both the Illinois State Board of Education and the Chicago Board of Education because the task force has to look at current policies and the implementation of the policies. When policies are created, she explained, there is an expectation for certain outcomes; the task force has to see if these expectations are being met with regard to attendance issues.

Jack Wuest of the Alternative Schools Network commented that there have been successful independent programs to address truancy which could inspire solutions, but cautioned that these programs have seen losses in funding. Two in particular were a regional safe schools program that worked with suspended or expelled students and a truant alternative education program which both brought about a decrease in dropout rates.

Barbara Sherry of Northeastern Illinois University is a former public defender for Cook County and said there is a connection between absenteeism, truancy, and incarceration, and there are additional effects on communities and their institutions. She explained that 73% of the university's students are CPS graduates and those with attendance issues achieve less, have difficulty selecting a major, and take a much longer time to graduate than do students who attend classes.

Mr. Aranowski recommended that ISBE staff do a report on the impact of absenteeism and funding issues and asked CPS to do the same. He also indicated that all items in the Resolution have to be addressed including professional development to educators and community organizations.

Mr. Aranowski reminded people that they can't do blanket email or committee emails because of the protocols set forth in the Open Meetings Act. Emails can be sent to the chairperson, but decisions cannot be made in emails. One cannot email members of a committee but can email a chair who can then send it out.

Mr. Aranowski was asked what constitutes a quorum for the task force. He indicated that 22 of 43 task force members had to be present for a meeting.

Mr. Aranowski also said official business cannot be conducted without notice to the public.

Ms. Juby said if you have a call in number and agenda posted 48 hours before, you have met the standard.

Information was passed out related to Open Meetings Act training.

Ms. Heybach suggested that we seek out a student helper from one of the local universities to assist with task force business. A student from a legislative law class might want to help. Her office has relationships with John Marshall Law School and Loyola University.

It was agreed that during the January meeting, the following items would be available and subject to discussion:

- Public hearing template
- Committees
- By-law draft
- Focus of public hearings

Ms. Taylor asked members of the public for comment, but there was no response. There were additionally no items presented for general discussion.

Ms. Taylor entertained a motion to adjourn at 11:45 a.m. The motion was seconded.

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