

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force



January 31, 2014 Meeting Minutes

I. Call to Order and Welcome

Chairperson Taylor called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

Representative Chapa LaVia welcomed the members of the task force and thanked them for the commitment of their time and expertise to a problem affecting the education of children in Chicago and throughout the entire state.

II. Roll Call of Task Force Members

The following task force members were present for the meeting:

Chicago

Fanny Diego Alvarez
Jennifer Berne
Andrew Broy
Aarti Dhupelia
Kevin Fahey
Bobbie Gregg
Leslie Juby
Shaalein Carroll Lopez
Neli Vazquez Rowland
Barbara Sherry
Jack Wuest

Jeff Aranowski
Juliet Bromer
Linda Chapa LaVia
Andrea Evans
Rick Gravatt
Laurene Heybach
Robert Lee (Dakota Pawlicki)
Heidi Mueller
Michael Seelig
Antoinette Taylor

Springfield

Christine Boyd
Arthur Sutton

Jackie Price

Telephone

Jacqueline Collins
Paul Sarvela

Crystal Laura
Maria Trejo

Not Present

Anna Alvarado
Neha Gupta-Patel
Jim Kestner
LaTanya McDade
Kareem Pender
Theresa Plascencia

Michael Connelly
Mary C. Howard
Laura Kieran
Melissa Mitchell
Sandi Pihos

Withdrawn from Task Force

Kirsten Carroll

Sheila Venson

III. Approval of Minutes from the December 6, 2013 Meeting

Chairperson Taylor asked for a review of the minutes. Mr. Aranowski motioned to approve minutes. His motion was seconded by Ms. Dhupelia.

IV. Discussion and Adoption of Rules of Order

Mr. Aranowski gave some context to the rules of order which Heidi Mueller and he drafted. He said the task force is on a sliding scale for the quorum right now since two members submitted resignations and another member intends to do so soon due to a job change out of state. He added that the mayor of Chicago and the sheriff of Cook County still had not made appointments to the task force. The quorum now stands at twenty-one, consistent with the directive within the bylaws for a simple majority to be present in order for the conduct of business to occur. He stated further that proxy votes were not going to be permitted under the proposed rules of order, a standard parliamentary rule of procedure.

Rules of order were reviewed by members. There were no comments or questions.

A motion was made to adopt, and then seconded. Rules of order were adopted.

V. Members' Introductions: Why Are We Here?

Chairperson Taylor asked that all task force members provide some information about themselves since they were all appointed to the task force by virtue of their backgrounds, experience, and knowledge relative to the issues of truancy and absenteeism. These introductions served to reveal that members of the task force are members of the Illinois State Legislature or hold leadership positions in a number of governmental agencies, institutions of higher learning, community-based organizations, child welfare advocacy groups, law enforcement, and the Chicago Public Schools.

VI. Presentations of Current Truancy Provisions, Processes, and Issues

Mr. Aranowski provided the members of the task force with copies of two Illinois statutes and a state regulation related to school attendance:

- Compulsory Attendance 105 ILCS 5/26
- Chronic Truants and the CPS Office of Chronic Adjudication 105 ILCS 5/34-4.5
- Absenteeism and Truancy Policies 23 Illinois Administrative Code 1.290

Compulsory Attendance (105 ILCS 5/26)

He explained that some terms related to truancy and absenteeism are already defined in statute. He began with the handout on compulsory attendance and explained it formed the foundation for why kids have to be in school every single day. Right now compulsory attendance applies if you are between the ages of 7 and 17; starting next school year (2014-2015), that is dropping to age 6.

Compulsory attendance applies to every single child in the state except for children who fall into the following six categories of exception:

1. A child attending a private or parochial school
2. A child who is physically or mentally unable to attend school (becoming less of an issue due to IDEA)
3. A child who is employed in accordance with the provisions of laws regulating child labor
4. Any child over 12 and under 14 who is enrolled in confirmation classes
5. A child whose school day coincides with a day of religious observance
6. A child 16 or older who submits evidence of lawful employment or is enrolled in a graduation incentives program or an alternative learning opportunities program.

A question was raised about home-schooling and Mr. Aranowski explained there is no reference to home-schooling in state law or regulation, but that there was an Illinois Supreme Court case in the 1950s called *People v. Levison* in which the Supreme Court said home-schooling is another form of private schooling.

The subject of home schooling prompted several other questions, mostly about the validity of a parent's claim to be home schooling a child when the school district considers the child to be truant. Mr. Aranowski explained that home schooling falls into a gray area in Illinois because there are limitations to what you can and cannot ask parents or compel them to produce due to parents' privacy rights. If a parent professes to be home schooling his or her child, the truancy investigation stops. He did add, however, there are actually very few parents in the state who home school their children.

Mr. Aranowski pointed out that compulsory attendance applies to children above and below the compulsory ages of attendance if they enrolled in school and are not present. This applies to students younger than seven (six next school year) years old and older than seventeen (Section 26-2(a) of the compulsory attendance statute).

Section 26-2(a) of the compulsory attendance statute stipulates that a child is truant who is absent without a *valid cause* for any portion of the school day. *Valid cause* is defined as *illness, observance of a religious holiday, death in the immediate family, family emergency*, and other situations that are subject to interpretation as they are described as *situations beyond the control of the student as determined by the board of education in each district, or such other circumstances which cause reasonable concern for the health and safety of the student*.

A chronic or habitual truant is one who has missed nine days of attendance in the last 180 days or 5% of school days. This percentage was just recently revised downward from 10%.

Since many of the districts in Illinois subscribe to the Illinois Association of School Boards model template, they generally share a consistent definition of these terms.

Absenteeism and Truancy Policies (23 IAC 1.290)

Mr. Aranowski then referred to Section 26-13 which states the affirmative obligation of a district to have a policy on absenteeism and truancy policies and the need for the State Board of Education to provide some regulatory provisions for districts. These regulatory provisions were identified in the Absenteeism and Truancy Policies regulation from the Illinois Administrative Code (23 IAC 1.290) which specifies that districts must have the following components in their policy:

- a *valid cause* definition which aligns with Section 26-2(a) of the compulsory attendance statute,
- a description of the diagnostic procedures used to determine the cause of a student's absence, and
- the supportive services to be made available to truant students.

Chronic Truants and the CPS Office of Chronic Adjudication (105 ILCS 5/34-4.5)

School Code Article 34-4.5 specifically creates the CPS Office of Chronic Truant Adjudication and explains the process for adjudication including notices, hearing process, penalties, etc.

Andrea Evans pointed out that although statutes were written for unexcused absences, excused absences require additional scrutiny. She added that there is a cumulative effect when there is a loss of attendance for any reason. Districts make a determination about what constitutes an excused absence and a phone call from a parent does not necessarily rise to the level of an excused absence. Chairperson Taylor asserted the need to engage parents so they understand an absence is not okay if it is called in unless it is for a valid reason and reminded the task force of the mission to heed the president's call to have 60% of our students college ready by 2025.

In response to a statement that parents keep children home because of personal issues faced by the family, Ms. Dhupelia explained that CPS' Family Support Services is creating an online resource of network supports such as the nearest healthcare clinic, the closest social worker, domestic violence counselors, a nearby dentist, etc. to help parents tackle whatever their challenge is that affects their child's attendance.

Juliet Bromer added that schools need to be welcoming environments for parents and suggested professional development be provided to school staffs to communicate more effectively with parents. Rene Heybach cited the transportation challenges faced by homeless students especially with the use of the Ventra payment system as well as the difficulties homeless people have obtaining and paying for sufficient identification to register their children.

Truants' Alternative and Optional Program (TAOEP)

Sally Veach of ISBE's Special Education Services division was present to explain TAOEP, which was created in the 1980s to serve students with attendance problems, including dropouts, up until the age of 21. There are two types of programs:

- Truancy prevention and intervention programs which integrate resources within the school and community to keep students enrolled in their regular school placement
- Optional education programs which serve as the regular school attendance and offer modified educational programs and services to help the students stay in school.

In FY 2012, there were 21,475 students served. Of this number 79% were served in intervention/supplemental programs and 21% were served in optional education programs.

TAOEP divides the students who are served into four categories and the following percentages show the students served by category:

- 42% were truant
- 33% were chronic dropouts
- 17% were potential dropouts
- 8% were retrieved dropouts

TAOEP funding has decreased considerably in recent years. The highest amount of funding recently available was in 2009 when over \$20,000,000 was available in the state budget. This year, there was \$11,500,000 available, a 42.5% decrease in funding which has resulted in fewer students served.

The funding is awarded on a competitive basis except for CPS which receives 26.8% of TAOEP funding as part of their block grant for FY14 (\$3,082,000).

Public school districts, charter schools, community colleges, regional offices of education, vocational schools, and public university lab schools can apply for TAOEP funds. The request for funds is always higher than the funding available. Applicants submit an RFP and the first consideration of the application is based on the need within the service area, the ability of the program to identify and serve targeted students, the achievability of objectives and activities to improve student outcomes, cost effectiveness, evaluation strategies, and the use of strategies not routinely offered by regular school programs. In order to continue receiving funding in the course of the three year cycle, participating schools must submit mid-year reports indicating their progress on and fidelity to their original proposal.

For this year there are 73 grantees, of which 28 are school districts (including CPS), 30 are regional offices of education, and six are community colleges. Last year CPS served almost 2,000 students, and they are currently in their second year of their TAOEP grant at three re-engagement centers in high need communities. The other major local grantee is the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) which serves about 500 students in ten optional education programs. Together, CPS and CCC receive approximately 40% of TAOEP grant funds. Each year, there is a statistical report available on line at the ISBE website.

<http://www.isbe.net/research/htmls/taoep.htm>

Mr. Aranowski said he would provide enrollment and truancy data at the next meeting for the state and for CPS.

Ms. Veach's TAOEP information prompted questions about the success of program participants, to which she responded that programs are unique to the needs of the educational entities in each area. Some

programs are optional educational programs, some target elementary students, others target middle school students, some focus on chronic truants, and some focus on potential dropouts. They serve different groups, all ages, all situations, some pre-dropout, some dropout, some dropout prevention, etc. There is no such thing as a typical program.

Ms. Veach said Chicago's three re-engagement centers are run by CPS in conjunction with neighborhood organizations because they found that young people who drop out of school are more likely to go to the community organization than to the school for help. There is a two week induction program where they get counseling, learn healthy habits, and are then placed in a setting appropriate for them.

Task force members commented on several issues in response to the information provided by Ms. Veach including tracking foster children's school attendance rates, the relationship between poverty and truancy, addressing reductions in funding for truancy programs by weighting different categories of assistance and awarding more money to districts that face the greatest challenges (in line with Sen. Andy Manar's Education Funding Advisory Committee recommendations), and the fact that missing students result in lowered funding for districts.

CPS - Students in Temporary Living Situations (STLS)

Prior to comments by Ms. Amber Damerow, manager of the STLS programs for CPS; Michael Seelig, Executive Director of CPS' Student Support and Engagement Office; and Aarti Dhupelia, CPS Deputy Chief of Staff, Fanny Diego Alvarez addressed the crowded living conditions experienced by many Hispanic families who reside with large groups of relatives and their pride in refusing to acknowledge these difficult and burdensome living arrangements as anything akin to homelessness. The people in these situations, therefore, do not avail themselves of programs that would provide assistance.

Mr. Seelig offered several vignettes of families in crisis who face problems related to community/domestic violence, temporary living situations which hamper a student's ability to attend to personal needs, transportation hardships, lack of childcare, and adolescents who are forced from their homes over issues related to abusive situations or differences over sexual orientation. He explained that CPS currently has about 18,000 students in temporary living situations and expects this number to go up to 20,000 by the end of the school year as this population grows by about 12% each year.

He explained that it their job is to mitigate the challenges these kids face on a daily basis and facilitate their access to a quality education. He explained further that there are so many issues impacting the parents who are doubling up with relatives, out of work, or fighting illness, they cannot do what they should for their kids; chaotic lives affect decisions.

CPS has a cost projection of \$7.4 million this year to help students in various stages of homelessness, of which \$6.8 million goes directly to the CTA to cover transportation costs for students (federal requirement) and parents of younger students who escort their children to school. Money comes from general district funding with \$800,000 provided via the McKinney-Vento Education Assistance Act through ISBE. The projection for next year is \$8.2 million due to increased CTA charges. Money set aside at the school level is for Ventra card management and security related costs (8%), uniforms, and fees. Many task force members expressed their surprise that one agency had to pay another agency such a large amount of money and wondered if there could be some inter-agency funding compromises.

Discussion was then focused on the fact that homeless people are not aware of the services available to them and how it is incumbent upon CPS staff to ask the right questions in order to determine the extent of a student's need. Professional development for CPS staff was discussed in order to increase staff awareness both of student needs and solutions. Mr. Seelig suggested reaching out to the universities to incorporate some of these ideas into teacher training programs. Ms. Damerow explained that agencies that help the homeless should guide people to her office since they identify and address all barriers for

children experiencing homelessness. Her office also does outreach, but she has only five full time workers and five part time workers, a group with high morale and a strong work ethic.

Ms. Dhupelia explained CPS is committed to developing new attendance strategies as a result of the task force's scrutiny of the truancy problem. Expectations include guidance for schools toward attendance improvement and truancy reduction in line with state expectations as well as the identification of common standards such as what defines an excused absence as well as definitions of key indicators.

With regard to valid causes for absence, Ms. Dhupelia explained, it is not enough if a parent calls in, and the principal has the flexibility to make a decision about whether an excuse is legitimate. Her explanation of CPS definitions demonstrated they are parallel to the state's definitions. Truant means a student is absent for no valid cause. Valid excuses include illness, death in the family, family emergency, special religious holiday, and case by case special circumstances. Truancy is absent without cause for one or more days. Although chronic truancy is still defined in their policy as being absent for 18 days without an excuse or 10% of the school year, with the state's change to 5%, she said they are operating under the assumption this is the policy; it just has not been written in yet but will be when policy is rewritten this year. She also said there is nothing currently in policy about chronic absences which is a huge gap given that there are far too many excused absences.

Ms. Dhupelia said CPS attendance policies may be expanded to include some system-wide changes to address attendance such as mandated attendance tracking for schools, central office school audits, auditing attendance tracking quality, developing strategies for improving attendance, and inter-agency cooperation. Schools below 95% attendance will be asked to produce an attendance plan that outlines specific strategies to address attendance improvement (counseling, social work supports, access to healthcare, etc.).

There are general mandates around baseline school requirements to protect the rights of students and families, such as those who are homeless. STLS liaisons have to be in place to ensure homeless students and their families are receiving the support they need: student counseling supports, family counseling supports, parent conferences, etc.

If students have stopped showing up and there is no transfer verification from a receiving school or district, they can be removed from rolls if their whereabouts cannot be determined after calling all numbers, sending letters to the last known address, and conducting home visits and not getting a response from all these efforts.

Rep. Chapa LaVia asked about transcript transfers to the Department of Juvenile Justice when they contain IEPs. She said the money CPS gets doesn't transfer when a student enters juvenile detention and that there is lack of communication between agencies. It costs \$72,000 for a child in juvenile detention, so she suggested there needs to be more communication between agencies.

A common theme in the discussions about student transfers, juvenile detention, and chronic truancy centered on the need for better tracking of students. Some are registered at two or more schools with slight variations to their names, some cannot be found after transferring, some are chronically truant, and some end up in detention facilities.

Rep. Chapa LaVia spoke about the Longitudinal Data System being developed by ISBE, which should help in tracking kids within and outside districts when it is fully deployed. Some students could have duplicate numbers and/or multiple registrations so something permanent is needed to identify children. She also suggested that the Secretary of State's office could help in the dissemination of information.

VII. Task Force Committees

Chairperson Taylor said the committee ideas came from the Chicago Tribune series and December meeting discussion and reiterated the need to differentiate about the reasons kids miss school. She cited the newspaper series' data as it breaks down by race and disabilities.

The overall rate of truancy in the Chicago Public Schools is 12.9%, but among Black students (who comprise 39.8% of students), 20.4% missed at least four weeks of school. Students with disabilities miss school in disproportionate numbers to the general school population: 42.2% of students with emotional disorders; 21.7% of those with cognitive impairments, sensory dysfunctioning, or autism; and 15.4% of students with learning disabilities have all missed four or more weeks of school. Ms. Taylor cautioned that these student-with-disability absences do not include students who have 504 plans as they have disabilities that do not impede learning but their illness or condition may, nevertheless, cause time away from school, i.e., students with diabetes, epilepsy, asthma, etc. There are also more chronic truants in kindergarten through second grade than in all other elementary grades.

Ms. Taylor announced that according to suggestions of task force members, three committees would be formed to allow for a more focused approach to the mission of the task force:

- Public Hearing Committee – will organize three public hearings in the south, west, and central portions of the city in March and April, including one to be held on a Saturday and will create a template to provide a framework for planning and executing the meetings.
- Best Practice Committee – will read and extract salient information from a number of truancy studies which had been recommended for their relevancy and report to the task force.
- Report Writing Committee – will provide an executive summary for the legislature and make recommendations to address the truancy problem that plagues CPS and other large districts across the state.

General discussion ensued around the following topics: organization of information, categorization of pertinent issues, determination of priorities, decisions about what constitutes an appropriate resource, and harnessing the knowledge of task force members by virtue of their positions and experience.

In reference to the form “The Focus on Truancy and Excessive Absenteeism” which task force members were asked to complete, Shaalein Carroll Lopez suggested organizing task force priorities into “buckets.” Ms. Dhupelia suggested the buckets could focus on things such as policy determination, inter-agency collaboration, student services at the school level, effective parenting, etc.

Andrea Evans suggested dividing all topics into three categories of orientation:

- school (policy, climate, student/teacher relations),
- family (extenuating circumstances),
- student (social/emotional, academic)

Ms. Evans stated that she has done some work in this area and would send a template for consideration and review.

VIII. New Business and Open Discussion

There were no additional ideas presented for discussion.

IX. Public Participation

Two college students who came to observe introduced themselves to the task force.

X. Future Meeting Dates

- February 28, 2014
- March 31, 2014

- April 28, 2014
- May 12, 2014
- June 19, 2014
- July 14, 2014

XI. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:21 p.m.