

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force



February 28, 2014

I. Call to Order and Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 10:11 a.m.

II. Roll Call of Task Force Members

The following task force members were present for the meeting:

Chicago

Fanny Diego Alvarez
Juliet Bromer
Aarti Dhupelia
Rick Gravatt
Leslie Juby
LaTanya McDade
Michael Seelig
Antoinette Taylor
Jack Wuest

Jeff Aranowski
Representative Linda Chapa LaVia
Kevin Fahey
Bobbie Gregg (by Kevin Walsh)
Robert Lee
Melissa Mitchell
Elizabeth Swanson
Dana Wright
Rene Heybach (by Patricia Nix-Hodes)

Springfield

Jackie Price

Arthur Sutton

Telephone

Paul Sarvela
Mary Howard
Maria Trejo
Shaalein Carroll Lopez
Neli Vazquez Rowland

Madelyn James
Crystal Laura
Neli Vazquez Rowland
Barbara Sherry

Those who were not present included the following members:

Anna Alvarado
Christine Boyd
Sen. Jacqueline Collins
Neha Gupta-Patel
Laura Kieran
Kareem Pender
Theresa Plascencia

Jennifer Berne
Andrew Broy
Sen. Michael Connelly
Jim Kestner
Heidi Mueller
Representative Sandi Pihos

Kevin Walsh introduced himself as the Cook County Administrator for Education and Transition Services within the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) who was present for the meeting in place of Bobbie Gregg who was appointed interim director of DCFS.

Madelyn James, director of Voices for Illinois Children's "Great at Eight" initiative, was appointed by the governor to the task force.

Patricia Nix-Hodes was present on behalf of Rene Heybach.

Mary Riseling of the Illinois Secretary of State's Office was present to represent the interests of Jackie Price who was unable to stay for the entire meeting.

The Chicago Teachers' Union will appoint a new member in place of a teacher on the task force who cannot attend due to the fact the meetings are held during school time.

III. Approval of Minutes from the January 31, 2014 Meeting

The minutes were unanimously approved.

IV. Miguel del Valle - Chairman of the Illinois P-20 Council and Illinois Commerce Commission Commissioner

As chairman of the Illinois P-20 Council, Mr. del Valle explained the council began operation in 2010, and is charged with fostering collaboration among state agencies, education institutions, local schools, community groups, employers, and families to ensure a successful transition from **preschool (P)** through **post-graduate (20)** studies/training and into the workforce.

To this end, the Council created a Joint Educational Leadership Committee which is comprised of all the heads of state agencies that govern education and workforce issues and meets regularly to align programs and initiatives to ensure that the state meets its goal to have 60% of Illinoisans equipped with high quality credentials by 2025.

The P-20 Council is aligned with reform efforts in the state as it started operating around the time the state had submitted its first Race to the Top application. The Council focused on a number of areas and created a committee structure that is reflective of those reform efforts and supportive of the implementation of recommendations:

- Data Assessment and Accountability Committee;
- Family, Youth, and Community Engagement Committee;
- Finance and Governance Committee;
- Implementation Review Committee;
- School, College, and Career Readiness Committee; and
- Teacher and Leader Effectiveness Committee.

The Data Assessment and Accountability Committee created a subcommittee that developed the current school report card in partnership with the State Board of Education. The subcommittee members consulted with people from across the state and conducted over sixty focus groups to come up with a user-friendly report card that generates the kind of information parents and students can use and informs educators and administrators as well.

During his twenty year tenure as an Illinois legislator, Mr. del Valle served on a task force that recommended that every school utilize a freshman on-track indicator to keep track of students' grades, attendance, and other factors so staff can intervene in a timely manner in order to provide the supports students need to be successful. He said teachers need to track, report, and collaborate about students, because it is not a one person show. They need to all assume responsibility for the success of students, particularly in the very critical freshman year. School attendance issues also motivated him to sponsor bills that added the chronic truancy rate as a report card indicator and increased the compulsory age of attendance from 16 to 17, in part, because of the lack of options in the workforce for a person who lacks a diploma or GED.

He explained further that structural changes need to take place to provide more options to kids: dual enrollment opportunities, dual credit opportunities, partnerships, and strengthened STEM education such as what the P-20 Council is trying to do through the Illinois Pathways Initiative. He said we should offer more career and technical education, make school more inviting and interesting, and provide more reasons for kids to be in school. We shouldn't just focus strictly on English/language arts and math scores, because if we do, we will continue to see an increased dropout rate, according to Mr. del Valle. We have to provide more options for kids, get them more excited about school, get them to see the connection between school and their lives, and make it relevant.

Mr. del Valle offered some attendance statistics from the report cards for schools in his area on the near northwest side of Chicago which revealed increased chronic truancy rates as students age from pre-kindergarten to adolescence. The problem starts in the early years and worsens as children get older.

Even though he was one of the first legislators who wrote a letter of support for a network of charter schools when they were getting started, he began to become aware that charters were getting rid of kids too quickly, that they had high suspension and expulsion rates, but there were no numbers initially to prove or refute this. He said he has to commend the Chicago Public Schools for finally putting out some numbers that showed the critics were right. Principals in the area were attesting to the fact that kids were coming back to them from the charter schools.

He decried the fact that we don't address the correlation between absenteeism and suspension. He spoke of policy improvements that have resulted in fewer in-school suspensions, thanks to the work of the advocacy groups. He said it has become a national issue to cut down on suspensions and look for alternative ways, like restorative justice, to deal with behavioral issues and other issues as well.

He defended the Common Core saying it provides more rigorous standards and will better prepare students for college and career. He explained that initially student performance on related tests will reflect a downturn, but with time and redirected attention to the details of student behavior and school attendance, the results will improve.

As the director of the Boys and Girls Club in the Humboldt Park area and as the executive director of the Association House, he deals with children and families and is very aware that kids get frustrated because sometimes they do not know what is going on in their classrooms. In schools you see the frustration on kids' faces which leads to dropping out, a situation that reminds him of when he did not speak English and went to first grade and no one could communicate effectively with him. Frustration, he said, leads to absenteeism.

We have to find a way to deal with that frustration so they do not tune out in the classroom or tune out by not showing up in the classroom. He urged the task force to figure out how to count the children accurately who are absent or truant and analyze the data in order to develop the kinds of strategies that will turn the numbers around. He explained that strategies have to be personalized to fit individual students' needs based on their family situations which can only be discerned by going into the homes.

Mr. del Valle thanked Representative Linda Chapa LaVia for her work on behalf of the students of Illinois and reminded the task force of the goal of the P-20 Council is to assure that by the year 2025, 60% of our adult population will have post-secondary credentials: vocational training certificates, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, etc. He said this goal will not be achieved unless we close the achievement gap that separates our children of color, who comprise half the state's school population, from other students. He explained one way to close the gap is to address the chronic truancy rate as well as suspension and expulsion issues.

Discussion followed on the subject of home visits and interventions with families in order to address underlying causes of students' absence. Representative Linda Chapa LaVia spoke of a pioneer program in her district which uses firefighters as mentors to children. Maria Trejo explained her organization uses parents to visit the homes of troubled families to offer help.

Neli Vazquez Rowland said she has information on programs to help students and their families in temporary living situations, including many success stories. Patricia Nix-Hodes, representing Rene Heybach from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, said the Coalition released a new report that finds gaps in educational supports for Illinois homeless students, particularly for students with disabilities and their parents. One particular issue identified by many survey respondents was the schools' capacity to identify and enroll students in temporary living situations was very limited despite the fact this is a priority of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.

Beth Swanson, an appointee of Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and Dana Wright, appointed by Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, introduced themselves to the members of the task force.

V. School to Prison Pipeline

Chairperson Taylor explained that just as there is a correlation between absenteeism and truancy, there is also one from truancy to prison. She called upon three members of the task force who work in law enforcement and corrections to provide their points of view: Rick Gravatt, Kevin Fahey, and Dana Wright.

Rick Gravatt, Acting School Superintendent for the Department of Juvenile Justice, explained there are six facilities across the state that house approximately 800 juvenile offenders: Chicago, Warrenville (females), St. Charles, Kewanee, Pere Marquette, and Harrisburg. He said they are trying to confine only the students that literally need to be there, and their enrollment is down from 2,500 several years ago.

Their school district is currently under a consent decree. Their truancy issues stem from the difficulty of hiring teachers and support staff. It takes them, on average, eight months to post a position and eventually hire someone for it. Expediting the hiring process is a critical issue.

The Department of Juvenile Justice was separated from the Department of Corrections in 2006, and their students come from districts across the state. A large majority of their students have experienced trauma (i.e., physical or sexual abuse); at least half have suffered multiple incidents or such trauma. Many of their students have experienced school failure and since one of the ways you are identified for special education is through failure in school, half have IEPs, and most have less than the appropriate amount of high school credits. They have a virtual high school that meets some of their needs and helps to bolster their efforts to aid in students' credit recovery.

He considers his program a shot at a second chance. He explained that many of their students wind up in the Department of Corrections, and they often see some of their former students on the news, unlike other teachers across the state who run into their former students in a grocery store. Mr. Gravatt explained that there are those, however, who do seize the opportunity for a second chance. He related the story of a young man who was the valedictorian of his graduation class whose mother and grandmother marveled at his success, recalling the days he was a truant running the streets. In the environment of the Department of Juvenile Justice, he was able to achieve because it is mandatory that the students go to school all year long. Most of their students succeed at school and recover credits because education within their department is a very positive thing and there are fewer distractions.

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia said she is sponsoring legislation to have the money follow the kids as they are in the juvenile justice system for four to seven months.

Mr. Gravatt said he wants to reduce the rate of recidivism, so when an incarcerated student walks in the door, he is planning for when that young person walks out the door. He explained they are trying to address the academic and social needs as well as the job readiness of the students. He feels that if they don't address the trauma, the mental health issues, and the substance abuse issues which affect 70% of the students, it will be difficult to educate them.

He explained further that there is so much that needs to be done. It is up to teachers everywhere to provide an atmosphere that makes students want to be there. He said we have to correct the situations that cause children to miss school or drop out of school or we will be facing dire consequences with these young people. He said 70% of his students are from Cook County, but he had no specific data on Chicago.

Sgt. Kevin Fahey explained that officers fill out school absentee forms for kids found on the street during school hours. Depending on the situation, they either bring them home or to school; in some instances they are brought into the police station.

The number of students for whom absentee forms were issued:

- 2011 – 34,770 – 69 arrests
- 2012 – 36,669 – 260 arrests

The number of young people arrested on school grounds:

- 2011 – 4,429
- 2012 – 3,768

Since the law gives officers a little leeway, they make judgment calls and approximately 40% are given informal or formal station adjustments, referred to an agency, and sent home to parents; the remaining 60% are referred to court or detained. Of these arrestees, about 60% are given an alternative by the state's attorney office, so out of 4,000 arrests, about a thousand go through the criminal justice system.

The vast majority of kids who are stopped by the police are going to school, they are just late. You can tell by looking at their address and comparing it to the address of the school. The number of absentee reports went up during 2011-2012, but the number of actual arrests went down. CPS is copied on the absentee reports.

Chairperson Taylor said when students are tardy, they are missing school, they are not in the seat learning. She said she applauds the police department for monitoring neighborhoods for absent and tardy kids and intervening. She wondered how many kids only went to school because they saw a squad car.

A discussion ensued about reasons high school students are tardy or absent from school. Suggestions included fear of other students or neighborhood thugs, low self-esteem, substance abuse among students and/or their parents, negative school experiences, etc.

Dana Wright: Ms. Wright suggested task force members visit the websites for the National Criminal Justice Reference Services and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention which have articles posted about factors - low self-esteem, child neglect, abandonment, mental and physical health concerns, substance abuse among parents, poverty, family dysfunction, and negative school experiences – which contribute to school attendance issues. One of the articles from the National Criminal Justice Reference Services was about a juvenile court judge who explained a typical day in which he encountered 40 juvenile truants and found that 37 of them were victims of abuse, neglect, endangerment, alcohol and drug abuse within the family, and mental health issues; in fact, 18 of the juveniles had prior referrals for mental health issues themselves.

She said a juvenile facility is split between the abused and neglected youth on one side and the delinquents on the other side typically in one building. Many people think the delinquent side is the side that presents more problems, but you find the problems run deeper with the abused and neglected children. Abuse and neglect lead to truancy and other complications.

Ms. Wright spoke of a pilot program operated by the Cook County Sheriff's Department in the south suburbs in which a non-uniformed staff officer with a degree in psychology is working on the middle school level to reach out to students with attendance difficulties and interacting with their families and schools. She has discovered that some students miss school because of bullying, undiagnosed learning deficiencies which cause them to feign illness, ineffective parenting and supervision, and responsibility for other siblings. Ms Wright said the last issue is huge because older siblings have to look after the needs of the younger ones while the mother, who is usually a single parent, works. The lack of structure in many of these homes compromises both regular attendance and the school experience for the children, and the resulting difficulties cause many children to run afoul of school authorities and eventually the law.

Mr. Aranowski asked about roadblocks to the provision of services in a jail environment, and Ms. Wright indicated the security clearances at correctional facilities are a challenge as is the lack of communication among agencies.

A discussion ensued about the need to organize resources in a systemic fashion and forge better partnerships between schools and agencies. Representative LaVia expressed concern about the insufficient number of counselors and social workers to interact with troubled families. Chairperson Taylor voiced her regret over the fact many agencies offer quality programs but function in silos. Rick Gravatt cautioned that you have to harness resources and build them around the kids and get all the related service personnel to work together.

Further discussion provided some examples of systemic cohesion. Patricia Nix-Hodes stated she was recently gratified to learn that the Cook County Sheriff's office refers families facing evictions to a social worker who can help them find support services. Leslie Juby said the Best Practice Committee is tracking things that worked in other states. An underlying similarity is there usually is a judge on the side of successful truancy initiatives who stays on the side and works with all the agencies. This committee has also found examples of collaboration among state and city agencies in certain locales that have found ways to fund initiatives. They have also uncovered the fact that there is a similarity to the composition of groups who come together to solve the truancy problem and a similarity of tactics.

In reference to students with disabilities who miss school for an extended period of time, Chairperson Taylor reminded the task force of a family in the Chicago Tribune series with a child whose disability had not been diagnosed and was "at risk." By the time the problem was addressed with an evaluation process, the child needed a therapeutic day school. Then there had to be a reintegration process back to the home school. Representative LaVia said there are gaps within the system and reminded everyone that the absentee rate for students with disabilities was extremely high.

Mr. del Valle brought the discussion around to the subject of early childhood education and explained that Illinois is ahead of many states in this area despite many budgetary cuts. He said the state has a statutory goal for universal pre-school, and this is the level you have to start at because you have a captive parent then. He said you have to get the parent fully engaged and, in the process, you have to train them to be their child's first teacher, to be advocates for their child, and to know how to deal with the systems all around them. It is easy to engage the parent at this stage because their child is little.

Madelyn James echoed Mr.del Valle's comments about increasing family engagement at the early childhood level since this is where the truancy habit is rooted. The families that are the hardest to serve with the most stressors and challenges, she explained, are the families who will have the highest rates of

absenteeism. She said the task force has to address family supports and school policies in order to reduce chronic truancy and absenteeism rates. She said ISBE has a draft of guidelines for family engagement.

VI. The Focus on Truancy and Excessive Absenteeism Results

Chairperson Taylor directed people to the worksheet summary entitled “The Focus on Truancy and Excessive Absenteeism” in their folders. Everyone had been asked to fill out the form and indicate what they knew about the reasons students are not in school - truancy and absenteeism, suspension, expulsion, parental choices - around three focal points: students with special needs, students in temporary living situations, and students who are or have been involved in the juvenile justice system.

Chairperson Taylor said there has to be a standardization of terms. Some people think of truancy as the refusal of a child to go to school on a regular basis, and they present many questions about the child. Truancy is not just the child who refuses to go to school; in fact, it may be the parent who doesn't clearly understand the child needs to go a certain number of days each school year. Parents and school officials have to be on the same page regarding what constitutes an excused absence. A parent needs to understand that even though the school was called and a note was written, non-attendance can be a problem (unless the absence is necessary because of sickness or a family emergency or another rare circumstance). She said we have to make it clear to parents their children shouldn't stay home from school.

Mr. Aranowski said ISBE has no rules regarding truancy; the general assembly has defined truancy, and we have some remediation policies for chronic truancy. The general assembly's definition of truancy is quite simple and straightforward: if you are absent for all or part of a school day without an excuse, you are truant. The hard part is what you do with that.

Representative LaVia said we need a baseline for CPS on attendance - a solid, uniformed, communicated message. Mr. Aranowski explained he presented the statutory side and now we have to drill down to the uniform application.

Ms. Dhupelia said we have to create the understanding that absences are not good for the students and repeated absences contribute more to the dropout rate than low test scores.

VII. Chicago Public Schools Policy on Attendance and Truancy

Chairperson Taylor referred to the CPS Policy Manual excerpt on Absenteeism and Truancy which was included in the prepared packets for task force members. This policy was adopted in 2006, so she said we have to determine what is appropriate now and what is no longer sustainable.

Mr. Aranowski presented graphs which compared the number and percentage of chronic truants and students in CPS and across the state from the 2008-2009 to 2011-2012 school years. Prior to July 28, 2011, chronic truancy was defined as 10% or more days of unexcused absences; on that date the law changed to 5%. That accounts, in part, for the spike in truancy rates as state rates tripled as a result. Before this change, the percentage of CPS students who were chronically truant ranged from 7-11% between 2008 and 2011; after the standard for chronic truancy was changed, the rate for CPS soared to 30% and that statewide percentage went up from 3% to 9%. In terms of numbers, 181,785 students statewide were chronically truant during the 2011-2012 school year and 110,960 were chronically truant in CPS; prior to 2011, the numbers of students who were chronically truant ranged from one-third to one-half of these numbers.

Ms. Juby asked CPS for a copy of their administrative policy manual because she said the devil is in the details. Mr. Aranowski said he would reach out to the Illinois Association of School Boards for theirs because they provide template policies and policy reference which districts use to ensure they are up to date on the latest provisions.

VIII. Task Force Committees, Assignments, and Updates

- A. Best Practices Committee – Work is well underway as committee members are in the process of reviewing a variety of documents and studies relative to issues of truancy and absenteeism. Heidi Mueller is chair.
- B. Public Hearing Committee – This committee has planned for three public hearings, the first of which will be held on March 10.
- C. Report Writing Committee

IX. Public Hearing Schedules and Logistics

The public hearing dates have been scheduled for March 10, April 28, and May 3. Chairperson Taylor said the task force tried to be sensitive to public need and planned one hearing for a Saturday, the other two at night. Senator Jacqueline Collins will host the April 28 meeting, and the L.E.A.D.E.R.S. network on the west side will chair the first one. The final meeting will be hosted by the Pilgrim Baptist Church of South Chicago.

It was determined that information about a variety of available resources would be available at the hearings for families in temporary living situations, with special needs children, and with children in the juvenile justice system. There will be ADA accessibility, Spanish translators, and an interpreter on hand to sign for the hearing impaired.

Juliet Bromer asked about the format for public hearings because, as she explained, the information you get depends on the questions you ask, so you must be very intentional. Representative LaVia stated that the conversation will be directed through a series of questions that can be answered on paper hard copies or via smart phones and supplied laptops. The Public Hearings Committee will develop questions for parents to gauge their understanding of what the policies are, why their children are absent, the definition of truancy, the difference between excused and unexcused absences, etc. There will also be forms available for them to submit ideas and suggestions.

X. New Business and Open Discussion

Mary Riseling of the Illinois Secretary of State's Office informed the task force that this office has 136 statewide locations at which people in temporary living situations can obtain free identification cards. Representative La Via said the Secretary of State's Office and public libraries are good sources of information for the public.

XI. Public Participation

There was no comment offered by a member of the general public.

XII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:55 p.m.