

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force



April 28, 2014

I. Call to Order and Welcome

Chairperson Antoinette Taylor called the meeting to order at 10:15 a.m.

II. Roll Call of Task Force Members

Chicago

Fanny Diego Alvarez

Jennifer Berne

Andrew Broy (Eric Johnson)

Aarti Dhupelia

Rene Heybach

Madelyn James

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia

Heidi Mueller

Michael Seelig

Antoinette Taylor

Dana Wright (Tangenes Porter)

Jeff Aranowski

Juliet Bromer

Senator Jacqueline Collins

Sarah Hains

Mary C. Howard (Cassie Thiem)

Leslie Juby

Melissa Mitchell

Theresa Plascencia

Elizabeth Swanson (Jennifer Keeling)

Kevin Walsh

Springfield

Jackie Price

Arthur Sutton

Telephone

Christine Boyd

Andrea Evans

Robert Lee

Maria Trejo

Rick Gravatt

Crystal Laura

Paul Sarvela

Not Present

Anna Alvarado

Kevin Fahey

Laura Kieran

LaTanya McDade

Representative Sandi Pihos

Barbara Sherry

Sen. Michael Connelly

Jim Kestner

Shaalein Carroll Lopez

Kareem Pender

Neli Vazquez Rowland

Jack Wuest

III. Approval of Minutes

There was a motion to approve the minutes from the February 28, 2014 and March 31, 2014 meetings. The motion was seconded and carried by a unanimous voice vote.

IV. Special Education Implications and Recommendations

This agenda item was postponed until the next meeting which will take place on May 12, 2014.

V. Best Practices Committee Debrief and Summaries

Chairperson Taylor asked Heidi Mueller to address the task force on the work completed by the members of the Best Practice Committee of which she is the chair. This committee had completed summary reviews of a variety of research reports, articles, and documents related to best practices in truancy solutions that had been emailed to all task force members the previous week so they could prepare for discussion during today's meeting.

Ms. Mueller explained that the summary template she provided the committee members was constructed in accordance with Aarti Dhupelia's 'buckets' which were offered in an earlier meeting as a means to organize the various findings and recommendations related to issue of truancy: 1) data sharing and uses, 2) community marketing and awareness building, 3) community resources, 4) policy barriers and opportunities, and 5) school best practice. She explained further that each reviewer was also asked to supply relevant comments and recommendations as well as related resources as a means of sharing their personal expertise and experience. Ms. Mueller acknowledged that every committee member completed their assigned research summary and expressed her gratitude for their commitment of time and talent.

Heidi Mueller is leaving the task force because she is going to the Department of Juvenile Justice as the Deputy Director of Programs. Ms. Taylor said Ms. Mueller's document summary will provide the baseline for the task force's recommendations to the General Assembly.

Madelyn James said her organization (Voices for Illinois Children) completed an issue brief which contains recommendations to improve mental health outcomes for families and children by developing a comprehensive approach to dealing with community and domestic trauma across the state. In consultation with professionals in early childhood development, 23 community dialogues were held around the state to gauge the needs of families against available resources. They were looking for recommendations to improve the outcomes for families with children from birth to age eight and examined issues specifically related to families with the following characteristics: children with disabilities, a parent on active military duty, and teen parents. One idea that grew out of all this was the need for community hubs, places in the community which could serve a variety of needs of families through coordination and alignment of services which would have a positive impact on school attendance. Her organization has also looked at the effect of homelessness on children especially in terms of their cognitive development.

Laurene Heybach commented that in her work with the homeless, she came to parallel conclusions in that the families were invariably very young and were victims of community and domestic trauma. She also explained that there are significant cognitive effects on children who lack housing or move around frequently. Ms/ Taylor added that the deleterious effects of homelessness or inadequate housing are even pronounced for students with disabilities.

Melissa Mitchell said a contact on the New York City task force said the issues faced by the homeless really tipped the needle in their work because of the need to lend some stability to the lives of these families by providing adequate supports.

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia asked CPS what percentage of their students were homeless or in temporary living situations. Michael Seelig and Aarti Dhupelia said they would find out, but it is more than 10%. She explained she would like additional studies completed to figure out the most effective way to distribute resources to this population.

Ms. James said there were far more resources and services proportionally in Chicago for the homeless than there are throughout the rest of the state, but services suffer from a lack of coordination.

Mr. Aranowski added a cautionary note about solutions for the homeless for education purposes that involve reaching out to shelters due to the fact that the vast majority of the CPS school families, perhaps 90%, that are considered

homeless are actually in temporary living situations doubled up with friends or relatives. It is hard to isolate outreach when the client group you wish to serve is difficult to reach.

Ms. Mitchell commented that many of the issues that affect the homeless are like “low hanging fruit” as their needs are so basic and related that she knew of a school where the janitor regularly washed the clothing of some inadequately housed students to help them avoid embarrassment in the classroom.

Representative LaVia cited the efforts of a school district outside of Chicago that provides their homeless children with cash cards to use for clothing and other purchases. As a result of this effort, school attendance is way up.

Ms. Heybach brought up the fees the homeless kids have to pay that they cannot afford. She said that CPS students are overwhelmingly poor and the increasing number of participation fees is burdensome for people who cannot afford them, whether they are homeless or not. She also said that if people are not associated with a school, they get no services; yet, enrollment is still a problem for children in temporary living situations.

Representative La Via asked if there was a hotline number in Chicago for parents to call, and Ms. Dhupelia said that there was a parent support hotline number which is put out by the Local School Councils and the Parent Advisory Councils. Talk ensued about the best way to reach homeless parents and suggestions were offered to advertise opportunities for assistance on public transportation, in libraries, and in laundromats. The fact the Chicago Transportation Authority always charges for advertising, even that which is related to public services such as information about the start of the school year, was brought up as an example of the lack of inter-agency cooperation.

VI. Protocol for Recommendations to the General Assembly

Mr. Aranowski drew up a protocol for recommendations of the task force to the General Assembly that is aligned with the specific responsibilities the group as delineated in the joint resolution.

1. Identify different strategies and approaches to help educators and the City of Chicago School District 299 administration address the truancy and excessive absences epidemic in the City of Chicago.
2. Support community-based organizations and parents in their ongoing efforts to encourage youths to adopt and practice positive social behaviors that will allow them to be successful in school and in their communities.
3. Promote ongoing professional development to equip school personnel with the skills and knowledge necessary to reduce contributing factors to truancy and excessive absences.

The task force members were told they would receive the template for recommendations for action that day and that it was due back by close of business on Friday, May 2. Ms. Taylor stressed the importance of meeting this deadline in order to be able to discuss recommendations at the next meeting and to lay the groundwork for the Report Writing Committee to begin their work.

Michael Seelig addressed the fact that there should be some recognition of city-wide partnerships and public initiatives in Chicago such as job training programs and business relationships. He explained that because some older kids are disinterested in school and do not see a connection with the workforce, their attendance suffers. He said dual credit programs and work internships would provide advantages for these kids, but the participation of business leaders is essential.

Ms. Taylor said such a concept should be placed under Implications for Further Review in the recommendations template.

Questions were asked about offering a comprehensive set of best practices recognizing that some of them may not be financially feasible in the near future like having a nurse in every school to assist children who miss school frequently due to ongoing health issues.

Ms. Taylor said it is up to the task force to make recommendations and it is up to the members of the General Assembly to sponsor legislation and pass funding bills.

Representative LaVia said sometimes everything is not accomplished with one task force and said there may be a need for additional task forces in order to forge relationships with business or have more nurses employed in city schools. She said some of these things require ongoing conversations as this is an issue that is not going to be solved immediately. She went on to suggest that the task force reconvene periodically to gauge progress and inform legislators.

Jennifer Berne said we should be proactive and think of things that can really be moved and present our ideas as possible solutions.

Mr. Seelig said one thing we should discuss is whether we want to do a specific solution set versus building the capacity for constant inquiry. He said we have to be aware of how the landscape has changed because of school closings.

Ms. Taylor said the P-20 council put truancy on its agenda, and since this is a standing council, there will always be an effort to move this initiative forward.

Juliet Bromer asked about the process to sort the recommendations, if there is some merit to consensus building. She is interested in some discussion to narrow the field especially since she feels the task force should veer away from recommendations to criminalize parents for the students' absences. She also suggested the task force should propose definitions, not just say common definitions are needed. Mr. Aranowski said we should be specific about what language should be employed for standardized definitions.

Ms. Taylor said everyone should just put in what they feel are the best solutions, and on May 12 the members will have a chance to discuss what is in and what should be in. She cautioned that if something is important to a task force member, he or she should include it.

Representative Chapa LaVia advised the task force to keep it simple and make it a living document, something that provides an online resource for legislators to find more information.

Aarti Dhupelia asked in if there could be an emphasis in the recommendations template on high school as the number of absences doubles between eighth and ninth grades. Coincidentally, the task force members had been provided copies of a recent news story and editorial regarding efforts to address ninth grade absenteeism from the [Chicago Sun-Times](#). The newspaper story cited the results of a University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research study which extolled the effectiveness of attendance interventions provided to ninth graders at 20 CPS high schools and the editorial supported the expansion of this project to all city high schools as the interventions resulted in high graduation rates.

Leslie Juby said we should include an emphasis also on kindergarten, not just pre-kindergarten because pre-kindergarten is not mandated.

These two grade areas were specifically included in the recommendations template as these are levels at which absenteeism and truancy are most pronounced. Supports on these levels are different as there are different root causes; pre-kindergarten and kindergarten is a parent problem, and high school is the student's problem.

Kevin Walsh asked if all CPS schools are on board with the interventions for ninth graders, and Ms. Dhupelia said it is no longer just a policy, it is a practice. Principals are being held accountable, and they are seeing results. She said the article reflects a close partnership between the Consortium and CPS as they did the research and developed the metric many years ago. The network chiefs work closely with their principals they supervise and look at that metric, develop freshman watch lists and see how each freshman is doing, gather real time data, assemble attendance-specific reports, and develop personalized strategies.

Tangnese Porter, truancy coordinator for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, started a truancy initiative in the low-income suburbs of Posen and Robbins. She spoke about the problems with attendance recordkeeping and whether absences are considered excused or not. She looks for resources for people with problems that can be remedied by

social services and helps get parents the assistance they need. Ms. Porter explained that a lot of the kids on her list are now attending school, and she is waiting for results of exit surveys as formal data assessing the success of her initiative are due out soon. Early indicators show her project has been very successful.

Madelyn James commented on how we have to help schools understand the connection between chronic absenteeism and low achievement and provide supports as needed. Schools with good attendance rates post high achievement test scores. She wondered if chronic absenteeism is reported on school report cards.

Melissa Mitchell recalled the discussion that had occurred during another task force meeting about the revised state report cards and how chronic absenteeism was going to be reported. These report cards report the chronic truancy rate by school, students who have missed 5% or more school days without a valid excuse. (The chronic truancy rate on the City of Chicago 299 report card for 2013 was reported to be 31.9 %.)

Mr. Seelig said the task force needs to promote a core set of beliefs. He said whenever the subject of truancy comes up, many people conclude that it is the parents' fault. He explained that CPS is not taking a punitive stance and not treating kids like they are animals that have to be caught, but he stated that people may ask, "What is all this soft support stuff?" He said the task force should explain that they are introducing responsive systems, integrated community supports, and removing barriers rather than just be disciplinary in approach.

Mr. Aranowski said we have tried punitive measures for years, and they have not worked.

Mr. Seelig went on to say that the task force should be very thoughtful about the kinds of things to be done to lower the chronic absenteeism numbers, like not shaming or de-incentivizing principals. He said principals should be encouraged to provide a welcoming environment for kids, especially those children and teens who are in temporary living situations or coming out of the juvenile justice system, but if we focus solely on numbers this will not happen. Principals' numbers might take a bit of a hit if they welcome those kids in, so the task force should be mindful of this fact. "We de-incentivize them if we make lowering the (unexcused absence) numbers our priority because they will not extend themselves towards these kids. Their number one goal should be serving students, not a numbers goal." He said the numbers are productive numbers because they shine a light on where services need to be provided and should not serve to just put a red 'x' on a school.

Ms. Taylor echoed these sentiments and said the task force is going to avoid accusatory language and punitive measures and that the emphasis will be the application of supports in the community, in the home, and in the school.

VII. New Business/Open Discussion

Chairperson Taylor directed everyone to the contents of the folders which included a notice of a public hearing that had been held on February 2, 2013 on the west side, hosted by Representative La Shawn Ford, Representative Linda Chapa LaVia, and Ms. Taylor. She said she was aware that people have wondered about the community outreach that has occurred in order to query families about school attendance issues and disseminate information regarding services available for families. She said since the Chicago Tribune's series on truancy ran, much has been done to address the issue. Representative Chapa LaVia, Senator Jacqueline Collins, Senator Kimberly Lightford, Representative La Shawn Ford, and Alderman Emma Mitts have all been actively involved in community outreach and the search for solutions to absenteeism and truancy. Ms. Taylor praised the efforts of Senator Jacqueline Collins for her participation in the truancy solution effort and for her hosting duties at the public hearing that was to be held that evening.

A letter from President Cullerton and Speaker Madigan was also provided in the members' folders to serve as reminder that we are following necessary guidelines and protocols related to the mission of the task force to ensure the results are valid and sustainable. Ms. Taylor said she wants the conversation to be about the work and not anything else surrounding it in order that our recommendations are not faulted in any way.

Representative Chapa LaVia asked if CPS has eighth grade graduations, and it was acknowledged that most of the schools do. She said in Massachusetts, they did away with them because too many kids, especially in Hispanic communities, thought eighth grade graduation was a major milestone, and it affected high school attendance rates.

Representative Chapa La Via referenced the ongoing struggle she faces trying to incorporate children with special education and English language learning needs into the charter school community. She said she wants the charter schools to exist, but she has encountered difficulties with organizations that are pro-charter who perceive her efforts as running counter to their beliefs. She explained that she feels that “it is no longer about the child, it is about the success of the school, but that is not why schools were created. So it is important that we work hand in hand. I want the charter schools to be successful but I want them to succeed with all children and adhere to federal law.”

Representative Chapa La Via said when charters were introduced 20 years ago, they were allowed to have a lot of flexibility and some of them do a great job. She explained that when legislation is written, lawmakers do not include the charter statute as they just refer to districts. So, she explained, there has been a lot of ambiguity with regard to the charter school commission about what they had to do. Coupled with the fact that the charter school statute was written without consideration for certain specifics such as providing services to students with disabilities and English Language Learners, it is apparent that officials were not purposeful and intentional in their oversight when charter schools began operation.

Mr. Aranowski said that special education and ELL services are implicitly required by the state.

Representative Chapa La Via said it is not codified within the statute, so it is not forced upon them to change by their commission. She said some charters are doing well and are responsive to the communities they serve including those characterized by poverty or homelessness; whereupon, Eric Johnson said that if there are some doing well according to her assessment, he would like her to identify them for the benefit of INCS.

Representative Chapa La Via said we can do better to help them with resources. Some are set up for failure in some areas. She explained that when she met with some of them privately, she found that some felt like second class citizens because they do not get funded at the same rate as other schools by CPS, so they have to go to their other funding sources where they have to prove they are performing at a certain rate in order to get more money from investors. She said additionally some of these schools are being demonized and it is not fair because there are policies and practices they do not know about, like the state report card for example. She told CPS representatives to include in their recommendations something about charters to get them where they need to go.

Eric Johnson also brought up the CPS School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP*) which is CPS's policy for measuring annual school performance and is new for the 2013-2014 school year. He explained that the process by which many different parties including charter community unions, CPS, former educators, etc, came to this new performance has given him hope that even though something was not codified in SQRP, there is still an ongoing conversation amongst all of these parties, and it is important to keep that dialogue going, especially as it concerns different issues like truancy.

Ms. Dhupelia spoke about a new collaboration between CPS and INCS in the revision of the student code of conduct (suspensions and expulsions initiative in February), creating a new level of sharing and collaboration.

Ms. Heybach said charter schools fees are an issue. Regular schools charge fees, but they are able to be waived. Families that cannot afford things are entitled to a fee waiver process. Charter schools are allowed to charge ‘reasonable’ fees which are not defined anywhere.

Fanny Diego Alvarez brought up the fact that in the neighborhoods where there have been school closings, charter schools have opened to fill the gap. She expressed fear that if the charter schools are not compliant, are not servicing students properly, and not held to the same standards as public schools, that what the task force accomplished would not be implemented in the charter schools.

Representative Chapa La Via said the charters have agreed to partner with CPS and the task force.

Ms. Taylor said the charter schools were intentionally written into the resolution. She also explained that as an advisory body, INCS can help us with the red button issues, with the preventive and proactive measures developed by

the task force. Ms. Taylor also explained that INCS is aligned with charter school advisory bodies nationally which can drive further collaboration. She expressed her belief that because of the alliances formed, this task force has the potential to drive change that is actionable, sustainable, and doable – some to impact in the near future and some to have more long term effects. This task force will help a lot of people for a long time, especially those populations characterized by special needs, homelessness, or involvement in the juvenile justice system. The task force can be very intentional and explicit with regard to statute and regulation. The task force has the potential to have a huge impact because Chicago is such a major city and people are looking to see how we solve this problem.

VIII. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

IX. Adjournment

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

**The SQRP is a five-tiered performance system based on a broad range of indicators of success, including, but not limited to, student test score performance, student academic growth, closing of achievement gaps, school culture and climate, attendance, graduation, and preparation for post-graduation success. (Chicago Public Schools' website).*