

Truancy in Chicago Public Schools Task Force



June 19, 2014

I. Call to Order and Welcome

Technical difficulties with the video-teleconference equipment caused the meeting to be called to order well past the 10:00 a.m. start time, at 10:20 a.m.

II. Roll Call of Task Force Members

Chicago

Fanny Diego Alvarez

Juliet Bromer

Aarti Dhupelia

Laurene Heybach

Madelyn James

Representative Linda Chapa LaVia

Michael Seelig

Dana Wright (Tangenise Porter)

Jeff Aranowski

Andrew Broy (Eric Johnson)

Sarah Hains

Mary Howard (Cassandra Thiem)

Leslie Juby

Melissa Mitchell

Antoinette Taylor

Springfield

Arthur Sutton (Richard Tapia)

Telephone

Jennifer Berne

Andrea Evans

Senator Jacqueline Collins

Paul Sarvela

Not Present

Anna Alvarado

Sen. Michael Connelly

Jim Kestner

Crystal Laura

Shaalein Carroll Lopez

Kareem Pender

Theresa Plascencia

Neli Vazquez Rowland

Elizabeth Swanson

Kevin Walsh

Christine Boyd

Kevin Fahey

Laura Kieran

Robert Lee

LaTanya McDade

Representative Sandi Pihos

Jackie Price

Barbara Sherry

Maria Trejo

Jack Wuest

III. Approval of Minutes from the May 12, 2014 Meeting

The minutes were approved and seconded.

IV. Public Hearings Debrief

Jeff Aranowski provided a summary of the results of the parent surveys which were completed by parents at the public forums which were held in three locations across the city. More than half (57%) were familiar with the attendance policy at their children's schools and CPS, and slightly more than half (52%) knew the truancy policy. Eighty-six percent (86%) knew what constituted an excused and an unexcused absence at their children's schools.

On the survey parents were asked what suggestions they had regarding attendance and truancy that they would like the Task Force to recommend to the General Assembly. One of the most common themes in the parent responses was in the reinstatement of truant officers. Another frequent theme was the need to strengthen school/parent communications and partnerships. Another very common theme was the concept of parental accountability as parents felt the district and schools had to do their part but that responsibility extends to parents as well since, as one parent stated, "Good behaviors start in the home."

Some of the common responses to a question regarding the barriers children face in enrolling, attending, and staying in school included bullying and peer to peer relationships while student safety was also cited by many respondents. Student mobility and homelessness were also seen as barriers to school attendance.

Several common themes emerged when parents were asked what else the Task Force needed to know about attendance and truancy in community schools. Homelessness was cited as something that merits closer attention especially as it affects the transportation needs of children whose families are in temporary living situations. Transportation in general was mentioned frequently especially as many neighborhood schools have closed and CPS is not required to provide transportation to a majority of their students, mainly just the homeless and some students with disabilities.

Mr. Aranowski commented that many steps likely to be taken to reduce truancy will have the effect of providing relief in other areas of school for students. If you have comprehensive school and district transformation, you are going to see a reduction in bullying and improved achievement for students, among many other things.

Juliet Bromer asked if Mr. Aranowski could indicate some demographics of the respondents. He said he had no way of knowing that as the survey was not scientific and respondents were not asked for those details. He did say the people who attended the public hearings where most of the surveys were completed were parents of students and some representatives from community organizations. He explained the risk you undertake in holding public hearings, is that the people who attend are the most informed as indicated by their presence at the function. Based on the discussions that occurred at the public hearings, he felt the information they gathered was from the ground level, in the trenches, so to speak.

Rene Heybach said that not everyone had a chance to speak because of the size of the crowd, particularly at the hearing which was held on the southeast side of the city at Pilgrim Baptist Church of South Chicago at 91st and Brandon on Saturday, May 3.

Ms. Taylor said she and several other task force members made it a point to stay well after the meeting ended to listen and take note of the comments voiced by those who were not heard during the meeting.

Mr. Aranowski asked that Task Force members keep the results of this survey in mind as they filter through the recommendations to the General Assembly so the Task Force would be responsive to the parents who participated in the public hearing process and survey.

Aarti Dhupelia asked if he could break down some of the parents' responses to more specific components regarding parental accountability. Mr. Aranowski said many people suggested parents become more involved in their children's schools while others thought a law should be passed restricting public aid to parents who send their children to school. Others suggested parent education forums on the importance of school attendance not only for their own children but for the betterment of the community at large.

V. Focus Group Debrief

Madelyn James presented the results of the Family Focus Group which she chaired on May 12. The demographics of the eight participants included the following factors: six Blacks and two Hispanics, two males and six females, parents of children between the ages of six and eighteen, and six participants who had children currently enrolled in CPS or Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL) schools. Of the eight people, five turned in surveys; of these five, three were completed.

Among the three parents who completed the survey, only one knew the CPS attendance policy, but two knew the CPS truancy policy. All three who completed the survey knew what constituted both an excused and an unexcused absence while only one knew who to contact with a question about enrollment and attendance. When asked for suggestions for recommendations to the General Assembly, one respondent said truancy officers should be utilized.

During a group discussion with the Parent Focus Group participants, the parents of current students said they knew what the attendance policies were. An AUSL parent said he/she polled twenty-five other parents and found none of them knew what the school policies related to attendance, truancy, and code of conduct are. A CPS parent said the only time parents receive a copy of the CPS attendance policy is when children are enrolled in school.

Ms. Taylor stated that although some people said they knew the attendance policy of their school, when asked for deeper information regarding the policy those same people referenced their school's average daily attendance rate. One parent stated, "Our school's attendance policy is supposed to be 94%," therefore, suggesting that when parents or guardians discuss the attendance policy they are actually referencing the attendance rate. Most parents also stated that attendance is rarely discussed after September unless a student becomes a problem or if someone transfers to the school.

When asked to articulate the CPS truancy policy, one parent responded that a student could be absent eight or fewer times, but the ninth absence would trigger disciplinary action. One parent volunteered that three instances of tardiness constitute an absence. Excused absences were understood to involve a sick child, a funeral, or a family emergency.

Suggestions for the Task Force to present to the General Assembly included truancy officers and student support services representatives to help with transportation housing, and more accessible communication. Other parents suggested a statewide truancy office that operates independently of school districts.

Barriers to enrollment and attendance include the fact that parents do not get an access code to the parent portal until the first report card pick-up, some parents do not have access to the internet, and some parents have limited computer skills and do not know how to use the portal. Parents also cited an overall lack of communication and the fact that many parents feel disrespected in the schools and find it difficult to get straightforward answers.

The last question asked of the parents was relative to what they wanted the Task Force to know about attendance and truancy in their neighborhood schools. The answers included deficits in parental literacy, parents' lack of trust in CPS, the tendency to treat the children as commodities or 'seats.' Parents additionally advocated for 'peace centers' where students could go to as needed, holding administrators responsible for the 'educational neglect' of students, staff training on truancy policy, common statewide measures, and a welcome packet of information from ISBE at strategic grade levels (pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and ninth grade).

Juliet Bromer is engaged in a leadership development project in North Lawndale with parents and has found that literacy issues are huge among parents who can only read at early elementary levels. She wondered if parents could even read any informational packets should ISBE or CPS provide them. She also said parents do not have accessibility to schools and therefore have less of an opportunity to learn how to engage school personnel, witness how school personnel elicit good behaviors from children, and find it difficult to advocate for their children.

Melissa Mitchell said she was in a Palatine district where the parents speak seventy-one different languages and they work with different groups of parents from a variety of cultural backgrounds to create handbooks in parents' native languages.

Fanny Diego Alvarez brought up security issues at schools as reason parents do not have accessibility which severely impacts parental engagement. She said school culture varies widely from school to school.

Mr. Aranowski said another task force is being created that is going to look at school safety and security standards. He said this is a difficult area to negotiate. On the one hand, you want your school to be a safe environment for your children, but on the other hand you do not want it closed off to the community.

Rene Heybach said you have to know your families in order to open to open the school doors. Ms. Heybach also said that all the printed materials people get at the beginning of the school is too much, that parents don't read it all. There is no substitute for people talking to one another. When you talk to people they understand what you are talking about.

Ms. Alvarez brought up the fact that suitable identification is hard to get for parents who either lack the money to pay the fee or are undocumented.

Ms. Taylor thanked Mr. Aranowski and Ms. James for their summary reviews of the public hearing and parent focus group outcomes. She added a concern she heard voiced by many parents that schools are not very timely in reporting attendance data to parents when a child has missed a particular class or a portion or all of the school day. Ms. Taylor also explained that parents are

unaware that the mandatory school attendance age has been lowered to six years of age. She advised that the state pursue an effort to communicate this change in the law by enlisting the cooperation of the Chicago Public Library and the Secretary of State's office.

Rene Heybach brought up the state figures on truancy which had been distributed to task force members via email and a hard copy in their folders. She wanted clarification on the numbers provided for the number of truants by gender for the 2012-2013 school year as the numbers for CPS were extremely high (181,252 for boys and 176,052 for girls). Mr. Aranowski explained that these were instances of truancy, or any unexcused absence from just one class. He then explained that the middle set of numbers (61,724 for boys and 58,050 for girls) identified the number of students who missed 5% or more of school days. The final group of numbers (86 for boys and 55 for girls) indicates the number of schools with truant minors. Task force members were concerned about the first set of numbers because that number would mean that 90% of CPS students had at least one instance of being truant. The chronic truancy numbers would indicate that nearly one-third of CPS students were chronically truant, missing 5% or more of their school days. Mr. Aranowski said he would clarify these numbers at the next meeting.

VI. Facilitated Discussion of Recommendations to the General Assembly

Ms. Taylor referred to the 2010-2011 school year as that is what was referenced in the Chicago Tribune article and explained that contrary to what some people thought, that school year with its high truancy numbers was not an anomaly. Ms. Taylor backed this statement up by briefly discussing the Illinois State Board of Education's analysis report from the 2012-2013 school year that lists 119,774 students from Chicago Public Schools as chronic truants. This is roughly one-fourth of the district's student population. She reminded everyone that on December 6 at the first meeting, there was a discussion of what constituted the definition of attendance at school and reminded the task force that there is still not a consensus on that. She said that on February 28, at the third meeting, Leslie Jubly had asked for CPS's administrative policy, and as of the date of that meeting, June 19, the task force had still not received that policy. She said that she was not saying the policy does not exist, but that it was not readily available and if it is not available administratively, how is it available on the building, parent, or student levels? At the very minimum, this is something that probably should be addressed at the state level

Ms. Taylor introduced Sue Horan, an educational consultant, who was trained on National School Reform and Critical Friends Group protocols who was asked to facilitate the discussion of the recommendations to the Chicago Public Schools, the Illinois State Board of Education, and the General Assembly. She explained that if members of the task force consider a particular action important enough, they shouldn't worry about cost.

Ms. Horan said that in order to facilitate the discussion of recommendations, she advised the use of the small group model, a process that would enable the expression of multiple points of view in response to strategic questions. She directed the groups to consider the three separate responsibility areas within the document and consider what should be included, what should not be included, and what should be amended or changed. Representatives from each group posted their favored recommendations on a series of poster sheets on the wall.

As the group reassembled, Ms. Horan asked for the common themes, surprising elements, and the most important issues identified by the groups.

Ms. Dhupelia identified parent engagement as a common theme, the need to make parent engagement tactics part of professional development with current staff and to incorporate an understanding of these tactics part of university preparation programs for teachers and administrators. Another common theme identified by Ms. Dhupelia was the necessity of forming and/or enhancing partnerships with community-based organizations. A third area of emphasis is data tracking and early warning indicator systems as well as quarterly and annual reporting to create more accountability for schools and districts. Data sharing across organizations also came up often as community-based organizations could use that information to support their work with families. She said transportation came up several times, particularly for several priority groups, but since it is a cost issue there are no easy answers.

Melissa Mitchell indicated the need for coordination - of efforts, of data, of schools and community organizations, and of teacher preparation programs - to address the underlying causes of absenteeism and truancy. She said there is a lot of policy in place already, but there is now opportunity to strengthen policy and strengthen practice around policy. She thinks it would be beneficial in the report to the General Assembly if recommendations for policy changes are listed with current policies so the differences would be apparent. Things might be more actionable if ISBE and/or the General Assembly can see the differences and what needs to be amended.

Mr. Aranowski wanted to interject that he doesn't think we need to add more data systems but to improve the ones currently being utilized. Once you have the data, what you do with it is important. He said CPS has too much data which is almost worse than having no data at all.

Ms. Mitchell said the longitudinal data collection system would be great and then discussion would need to occur about how to access that data.

Michael Seelig said all pieces of data have to be coordinated and examined through a strong cycle of inquiry in order to inform best practice; otherwise, it is just data. He said we need to guide schools to use the data to inform best practice for their specific situations and help them with implementation through professional development either from ISBE or from the CPS central office.

Mr. Aranowski said some of the directives for ISBE were misplaced and there are things the state cannot do without legislation. ISBE provides guidance about what is best practice and is very careful about mandating change. Some things have to come from the district.

Ms. Horan asked how do you decide what is practice and what is procedure and how can some of the recommendations be collapsed?

Juliet Bromer addressed the fact there is a lot of redundancy among the recommendations, and many things are said at different levels of specificity, but they are all saying the same thing which makes it really hard to sort through. You might find the same recommendation under procedure, practice, and policy. She said some recommendations are so broad and vague such as, "Schools should be welcoming." There should be more specificity to the recommendations in order to be prescriptive.

Mr. Aranowski agreed that the range of recommendations included many that were very broad and some which were overly detailed and asked if there were some things people absolutely did not want in.

Responses included the determination that some things were great ideas but were not really prescriptive to truancy issues as the task force needs to focus on moving the needle on this issue to come up with actionable items that can produce measurable data.

Professional development on absenteeism data on a quarterly basis was criticized as excessive as teachers already feel they have too much professional development and this time could be used to introduce other related items such as how to use the data.

Ms. Mitchell said the term *truancy officer* needs to be redefined to be a person who can support the students and the family and connect them to resources so they can overcome barriers to attendance. She is not comfortable with the term *truancy officer* as it does not incorporate all the roles this person must play.

Mr. Aranowski asked why CPS eliminated truancy officers.

Ms. Dhupelia said the positions were eliminated partly because of budgetary issues and partly because there was little evidence of effectiveness. She said you have to get to the root causes of why a student is absent and that may take a social worker or a psychologist; it might also be a physical health problem that needs to be addressed. She said there is still a function of outreach that occurs in different ways in different schools, and sometimes at a regional level there will be efforts toward reengagement. She said CPS has tried to balance outreach and the provision of services. She thinks the recommendations for CPS to hire specific personnel are too specific and granular because there should be strategies and practices in place that address the root causes of absenteeism which may mean to work with a non-profit partner or a social worker. Instead of hiring truancy officers, Ms. Dhupelia explained, there is a need to use our resources better and address strategies and functions better.

Tangenise Porter, in attendance for Dana Wright of the Cook County Sheriff's Department, addressed the task force and reminded them of her function within the Department as the truancy coordinator. She is a member of law enforcement with a background in psychology who calls on truant students and their families. She said she is in a position to respond to families' needs because of her background and is able to research solutions and connect them with the appropriate resources. As an officer, she also can use the knowledge she acquires from her fellow officers as leverage in a non-adversarial way. There is some extra weight attached when you receive a visit from law enforcement, but the sheriff has tried to make it more about social service rather than a law enforcement thing, she explained.

Rene Heybach said she understands Ms. Dhupelia's point about how the hiring of additional personnel doesn't necessarily solve the problem, but the thing that is hard about working with families is finding someone who will respond to them. She explained that callers to the CPS hotline do not get assistance especially since the hotline is not always functioning. At some point, they need to feel that someone has heard them and someone is responding. She said we can collect all the data we want, but if we are not delivering something concrete back to the families, we lose them. "So we can think in these long arcs about policies and practices, if we don't offer something in the moment that matters, we have lost that moment. That moment of crisis is a transforming moment. It is transforming for the allegedly abusive or neglectful parent. Are we missing those moments?" Ms. Heybach explained that if they are reaching out because they have a problem and if someone like Tangenise Porter shows up and responds to their problems, they stand a better chance of becoming engaged.

Ms. Dhupelia responded that we have to figure out a really seamless integration of services, so as we find out about issues, we can determine where people can be referred to.

Ms. Heybach said in seeking to identify all the services for homeless youth when working with community-based organizations, she found there was no one to take them from the school to the service. Something huge was missing. There is no transportation for that purpose, and there is no person to do that.

Ms. James asked if members of the writing team were present. She was told yes and that they were going to meet on June 27 and all members of the task force would receive an agenda and an emailed notice of the meeting as it was open to all. She wanted to know if the members of the writing committee have a framework to work with and if punitive measures were going to be included in the report to the General Assembly. She did not think we had sufficiently discussed the recommendations for the writing to begin.

Ms. Heybach said one idea she wanted incorporated is the fact schools belong to the families and wanted specifics in the report about making them more responsive to the families.

Since several people have alluded to their distaste for punitive measures, Mr. Aranowski asked if anyone wanted punitive measures. No one articulated their preference for such measures then or in the recommendations made to the task force.

Ms. James said there was no group consensus about whether families' benefits should be cut if their children do not attend school. She said we never got to the point of saying we should be supportive of families, supportive of schools. She said we need a framework of what we believe to be best practices.

Ms. Heybach asked if Ms. James would like to summarize those principles for the framework of the report.

Juliet Bromer said the recommendations are organized around three responsibilities in four areas but she wondered if it should be organized around topics such as family engagement or school/family collaboration, data, or any of the main principles the task force discussed; otherwise the same ideas are going to pop up in individual recommendations over and over again.

Mr. Aranowski reminded everyone that the responsibilities came out of the resolution.

Ms. Taylor explained the writing committee will provide the task force with a draft before the July meeting so everyone will have a chance review and edit it. People will have the opportunity to make suggestions. The writing committee will work together to draft a cohesive document.

Mr. Seelig said the report will shine a light on need and removing barriers

VII. New Business/Open Discussion

Before the meeting was adjourned, Ms. Dhupelia said she wanted to make comments pertaining to a document she provided which was a draft of the CPS strategy for improving attendance and preventing truancy.

Ms. Taylor read from a prepared statement before yielding the floor to Ms. Dhupelia. She said CPS “was sharing a draft of something that was internal to the Chicago Public Schools system, that sharing the draft should not be seen as anyone accepting or rejecting the document in part or whole. The task force does not represent an authoritative voice on this document and any feedback coming from members of the task force does not represent any organization appointed to this task force. It was previously shared with me and forwarded to Senator Collins and Representative Chapa LaVia and the only suggestion coming from us was for CPS to be in touch with ISBE to work in tandem with any guidelines they may have and to be in touch with the Illinois Association of School Boards to find out what if any guiding documents or templates they are using with other districts. Jeff Aranowski provided a contact to Aarti Dhupelia at the Illinois Association of School Boards. We are not aware of what any follow-up occurred. Finally, because members of the public, including but not limited to, members of the press who may be present in person or by phone and will also have access to this document, the task force holds no accountability or responsibility for the sharing of this document by anyone at any time after this meeting concludes.”

Ms. Dhupelia said tackling their attendance and truancy issues is a top priority. CPS absolutely recognizes that the numbers for attendance, chronic absence, and chronic truancy are not where they want them to be. Ms. Dhupelia said CPS acknowledges that but over the last few months they have made very intentional strides to focus on it, particularly by developing a draft of an attendance and truancy plan and piloting aspects of the plan this year which they intend to strengthen, based on input they received. Ms. Dhupelia was hopeful that task force members would see a lot of alignment with the things the task force had been talking about, but there are areas CPS needs to develop more. She would like the opportunity to talk with people about it and she welcomes comments and feedback. She said the plan does include definitions that had been agreed on with regard to attendance, chronic absence, chronic truancy, etc. She added that the administrative guidelines that were requested earlier were not in the strategy document she was discussing but part of this plan is CPS actually updating the guidelines, something that was currently in process so they would provide a more comprehensive best practice guide for schools. She also said at the next meeting, CPS wants to share their attendance, absence, and truancy data which they are in the process of cleaning up and refining since school just ended. They expect an improvement in the numbers due to the intentional efforts that they made this year, and they hope to further strengthen it with the feedback of the task force. She added that the plan explored the elementary trends in particular and CPS agrees that improvements need to be made and some have been made at the high school level. One is the intentional freshman on-track work which has really been driving improvements with regard to attendance and grades. CPS has launched significant efforts around supportive practices in greater magnitudes at the high school level and has changed disciplinary tactics. They have reduced suspensions and expulsions and are looking to make these improvements at the elementary level insofar as declining suspensions and improving attendance are concerned.

VIII. Old Business/Open Discussion

Ms. Taylor thanked everyone for their contributions and said she wants the work of the task force to continue its life in Springfield.

She additionally reminded everyone on the task force to be mindful of the email they received pertaining to their completion of new ethics requirements since the last meeting of the task force falls within a new fiscal year.

IX. Public Comment

Sergio Hernandez of the Illinois Early Childhood Fellowship thanked the task force for tackling the complex issues of absenteeism and truancy. He said, “We talk about budgetary constraints but we have to remember not to lose those moments when we can really help students and families. All it takes is for people in the building to reach out and help families. Some professionals do not trust the ability of parents to really collaborate. LSCs work in varying degrees in different communities. We have to engage them more and all community stakeholders who volunteer their time

The senior manager of attendance and truancy for CPS, Dr. Zakieh Mohammed, was present also.

X. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:22 p.m.