

Testimony in Support of House Bill 879: Task Force to Improve Attendance and Reduce Chronic Absenteeism in Schools

House Ways and Means Committee
February 25, 2025

The Baltimore City Public School System (City Schools) supports House Bill 879, which seeks to establish a Task Force that will ultimately make recommendations on the best practices for data collection relating to student chronic absenteeism and tracking student attendance, as well as the most effective practices that are culturally responsive and nonpunitive to prevent and eliminate chronic absenteeism.

Thanks to a yearlong focus on attendance, City Schools' year-to-year districtwide attendance last year increased by 1.8 percentage points over the previous year, meaning more than 30,000 students improved their attendance. Also encouraging, the number of chronically absent City Schools students decreased by 5.4 percentage points last year, while every other large Maryland school district experienced an increase.

City Schools' chronic absenteeism rate is falling while other large Maryland districts experience increases

LEA	% Difference 2022 to 2023	Difference by students 2022 to 2023
City Schools	- 4.0 %	- 4,021 students
Baltimore Co.	+ 1.5 %	+ 1,405 students
Mont. Co.	+ 2.1 %	+ 3,565 students
Prince George's	+ 3.3 %	+ 4,479 students
Anne Arundel	+ 1.1 %	+ 1,094 students

Source: Maryland Report Card -
<https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov>

The district's improvements can be attributed to several factors, most notably our work to reduce chronic absenteeism through research-based strategies for school attendance teams. Highlights of these strategies include:

- Establish an attendance team that meets weekly to review and take action on data and keeps school's School Family and Community Council apprised of challenges and next steps.
- Create and put in motion a plan to call all families of students who are not at school by a designated time in the morning and/or throughout the school day.
- Identify and align resources that address the most common attendance concerns within the school and address root causes of individual student's absenteeism.
- Develop incentives at the school, grade, classroom and/or student level to encourage and celebrate strong and most improved attendance.
- Implement a system of matching students who are chronically absent with resources and supports (i.e., check-in/check-out, a mentor) that can be monitored for effectiveness of improving outcomes.
- Engage families through back-to-school celebrations and other events throughout the year.

In addition to the efforts outlined above, City Schools' creation of an onsite support model to 96 schools has also contributed to improvements in chronic absenteeism. The onsite support model includes three teams from the district's Attendance Team that go into schools to provide in-person support on chronic absenteeism, as well as barriers to attendance and truancy related issues and concerns. Each support team works collaboratively with schools on case management, attendance strategy, data, and other incentive programs in order to improve outcomes.

Among other efforts to combat chronic absenteeism is Baltimore's citywide initiative between City Schools and the Mayor's Office to emphasize the critical importance of daily school attendance. At the end of each quarter, Mayor Brandon Scott presents a trophy to the school that shows the greatest reduction in chronic absenteeism. The attendance campaign is continuing throughout the 2024-25 school year.

While these examples of critical district progress demonstrate City Schools' ongoing commitment to prioritizing attendance while seeking to reduce chronic absenteeism, the fact remains that much more work lies ahead in getting our students to where we want them to be. This is precisely why we support HB879 and welcome its focus on identifying and evaluating local and national strategies and best practices, as well as differentiated and comprehensive responses, for chronic absenteeism. Should the legislation advance, City Schools would be grateful for the opportunity to participate as a Task Force member.

We appreciate the committee's consideration and respectfully urge a favorable report of HB879.