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## School and city officials address truancy rates in District

By [Emma Brown](#), Published: November 8

D.C. Schools Chancellor Kaya Henderson said Thursday that the school system's high truancy rates amount to an educational "crisis," as D.C. officials disclosed that more than 40 percent of the students at Ballou, Anacostia, Spingarn and Roosevelt high schools missed at least a month of school last year because of unexcused absences.

"We are in a crisis situation," Henderson said at a D.C. Council hearing on anti-truancy efforts. In addition to the social problems that plague families and contribute to absenteeism in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, she said, many older students are years behind grade level in reading and have given up.

"Why would I want to go to school if I can't read the book, I can't do the work, I'm 17 and in the ninth grade?" she said. "It should be no surprise to us that students we have failed for many years are now failing to come to school."

Henderson outlined some efforts the school system is making to reduce the rates, but she said there is a need for far more progress.

The impact of the poor attendance was underscored by the release Thursday of the school system's four-year graduation rates. Schools with the most truancy had some of the lowest on-time graduation rates. At

Ballou, half of the student body graduated on time. At Anacostia, 40 percent graduated on time.

The school system's overall graduation rate ticked up three points to 56 percent — an improvement, but one that will have to accelerate if Henderson is to meet her goal of graduating three-quarters of students on time by 2017.

The D.C. Council has increased pressure on Henderson to address the city's long-standing truancy problems.

“No matter how much money we spend on educating children, if they are not in school they are not going to learn,” said David Catania (I-At Large), who along with Chairman Phil Mendelson (D-At Large) has been one of the council's strongest voices demanding change.

In response, the school system is complying with a law that requires it to call the Child and Family Services Agency when students younger than 13 have more than 10 unexcused absences. Last year, elementary school principals referred only one in five students with such attendance problems; now that number is up to 95 percent, Henderson told the council.

The school system also has strengthened partnerships with neighborhood collaboratives, which reach out to truant high school students to determine what is causing the absences. And Henderson has spent \$800,000 on extra social workers at high schools with the worst attendance.

The efforts appear to be making a difference: The number of students with more than 10 absences by the beginning of November has fallen compared with last year.

But the numbers remain stubbornly high, especially for freshmen. About one in six freshmen — and 25 percent of those who are repeating the grade after failing last year — have missed at least two weeks of class this year.

Henderson said the city needs more alternative high schools, more career and technical education, and a focus on literacy to change those trends.

Council members urged the chancellor not to neglect younger students' poor attendance, which — if not addressed — could lead to problems later on. Nine elementary or K-8 schools had at least 10 percent of students miss more than a month of classes last year.

“We've got to be focusing more on the younger grades ... or else we're continuing to grow new cohorts that are harder to deal with,” Mendelson said.

Catania called for prosecuting parents “who have essentially relegated their children to a diminished future” by failing to get them to school.

“What if we had theft as a crime but you were never arrested or prosecuted for that?” he said. “What would the city look like?”

The council did not address truancy rates at the city's charter schools, where average graduation rates ticked down this year to 77 percent, still significantly higher than the city's traditional public schools.

Henderson urged the council to continue to “hold our feet to the fire” on improving truancy rates.

“The council’s relentless focus on truancy has helped to focus us and ensure that we are monitoring and addressing this issue in a way that we frankly had not been doing before,” Henderson said. “I can’t reach my academic goals if the children are not in school.”

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