

**Testimony of  
The University of Baltimore School of Law’s  
Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC)**

**In Support of Council Bill 25-0002**

**Study and Report – Absences in Baltimore City Schools**

TO: Chair John Bullock, Vice-Chair Mark Parker and Esteemed Members of the Education, Youth, and Older Adults Committee:  
FROM: Aubrey Edwards-Luce, MSW, Esq., CFCC Executive Director

**March 6, 2025**

The Sayra and Neil Meyerhoff Center for Families, Children and the Courts (CFCC) at the University of Baltimore School of Law envisions communities where children and families thrive without unnecessary involvement in the legal system. We engage communities as we work towards transforming systems that create barriers to family well-being.

For nearly 20 years, CFCC has operated the Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Project (TCAP) (formerly called the Truancy Court Program),<sup>1</sup> an award-winning program that addresses the root causes of chronic absenteeism, re-engages families with schools, and disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline. CFCC has been addressing chronic absenteeism by providing a free (to schools and families), holistic, restorative, voluntary program for elementary, middle, and high school public school students in Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Anne Arundel County, and Montgomery County. After years of working across the region in all grade levels, TCAP has focused its efforts and developed a model specifically for middle school students in four Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools) while serving the students’ families in their communities.

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<sup>1</sup> We applaud Council Bill 25-0002’s use of the word “absence” in lieu of “truancy” because “truancy” implies that students are missing school due to their defiance or their negligence. Data we collected showed that for many of our TCAP students, the root causes of the absences had nothing to do with their defiance or failure to prepare. In 2023, we renamed our program to be the Tackling Chronic Absenteeism Project (TCAP) which is more indicative of the reparative, collaborative posture we take in our work with students and families. Additionally, as an organization committed to seeing students thrive, we could not focus exclusively on the unexcused absences that are encompassed in the definition of “truancy”. (See, The People’s Law Library of Maryland. “Truancy,” available at <https://www.peoples-law.org/truancy> ). Addressing unexcused absences did not adequately reflect the effort we put into educating parents and students about the harm that excused absences could do to their educational attainment. When it comes to learning, everyday matters—even the excused ones.

Each week TCAP staff and volunteers provide students with restorative circles, positive reinforcement, mentoring, tutoring, workshops, and individual check-ins to increase their attendance and decrease their risks of delinquency, drug use, and other behavioral issues. Our TCAP Case Manager, Attorney and Mentor provide caregivers and parents assistance with social services and benefits applications, understanding their child's educational needs and rights, legal services referrals, as well as short-term emergency housing support and food assistance. The TCAP has used a supportive and trauma-informed approach to give families wraparound services to improve attendance and promote academic success. As a long-standing direct service provider, we urge the Committee to join us in support of Council Bill 25-0002.

Chronic absenteeism is a national problem, and it remains an even more severe problem in Maryland and Baltimore City. Data from the 2023-2024 school year reveals the urgency of tackling chronic absenteeism: in Baltimore City Public Schools, the chronic absenteeism rate was 49%. This is in sharp contrast to the state's rate of 27%. More affluent districts such as Howard County had a rate of only 17%, while the rate at some of our schools was 70%. The lowest attendance rates are reported among students who belong to communities that frequently experience negative bias and marginalization—including Black and Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. For these youth, having frequent absences exacerbates the challenges they face. While the numbers look daunting, we are confident that the collaborative work we are doing with City Schools, the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (MONSE), Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, Araminta, and Fathers Fighting for Fathers Community Mentorship will facilitate the steady improvement in attendance rates for TCAP students.

CFCC enthusiastically supports increased focus on the issue of school attendance. We are only one of many service providers who are focused on the battle for school attendance in Baltimore, but I would venture to guess that many of our fellow providers see transportation, personal or family health issues, safety concerns and a lack of motivation as some of the most prominent reasons why students miss school. We support Council Bill 25-0002 because we hope it would allow the City Council to have a deeper and wider understanding of the root causes of excused and unexcused absences and lead to the identification of the type, scale, and location of resources needed to help families address the root causes. We also hope that the study required by the bill would afford TCAP an opportunity to share the wisdom we've gained during our nearly two decades of work.

CFCC agrees with the Mayor's Office on Immigrant Affairs that Council Bill 25-0002 should be amended to require that the report and study include the experience of immigrant youth. We have seen the way that federal immigration enforcement changes have negatively impacted the attendance rates at one of the schools TCAP operates in. Additionally, CFCC recommends that the study and report examine the relationship between student absence and both community violence and exclusionary discipline. These are themes that we see as we work with students to understand the root causes of their absences. We also recommend that the study and report use a gender-sensitive lens as it explores the qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, we are worried the deadline for the report will conflict with the shift in capacity that City Schools experience once summer break begins. Therefore, we recommend that Council Bill 25-0002 be amended to either: (1) provide a full year for the report; or (2) provide City Schools with additional resources

so that it can appropriately increase its capacity and complete the report pursuant to the current timeline.

Seven years ago, pursuant to HB 429 The Morgan State University published the report “Winning Strategies on the War against Habitual Student Truancy” which is full of recommendations to address school truancy across Maryland. Much has changed since the publication of this report and updates are undoubtedly necessary. However, we encourage the Council and City Schools to review this rich resource as they work to turn the tide on school absences.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. CFCC stands ready to support the execution of this bill’s intent and we urge the committee to support Council Bill 25-0002.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at [AEdwardsLuce@ubalt.edu](mailto:AEdwardsLuce@ubalt.edu).