

# BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Stephanie Rawlings-Blake  
Mayor, City of Baltimore

Shanaysha M. Sauls, Ph.D.  
Chair, Baltimore City Board of  
School Commissioners

Tisha Edwards  
Interim Chief Executive Officer

April 2, 2014

The Honorable Bernard C. "Jack" Young  
President, Baltimore City Council  
City Hall, Room 400  
100 N. Holliday Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

RE: City Council Bill 14-0162R

Dear Council President Young:

On March 20, 2014, the Baltimore City Council introduced the above-captioned Resolution, concerning **School System Attendance and the Teamwork Required to Address**. The Resolution asks for information and discussion on three major areas impacting student attendance and chronic absenteeism, as follows:

- **The Resolution asks for information about efforts by City Schools and community partners to improve attendance.**

Efforts by City Schools and community partners are comprehensive and extensive, as outlined below.

- **The Resolution calls upon the School Board to reconsider performance improvement plans if principals meet certain conditions.**

Performance evaluation is the responsibility of district staff rather than the Board. The Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) that were recently initiated regarding chronic absence allow principals to end the PIP on a case by case basis if school leaders have developed a plan to engage their school staffs and communities and if they have reduced the percentage of unsubmitted attendance to a level that most schools already meet. As a result, the intent of the resolution is already addressed in the parameters of the Performance Improvement Plans.

In collaboration with PSASA, City Schools has also initiated the formation of a work group comprised of principals and central office staff to review our attendance data systems and policies in order to develop a unified plan of action moving forward. The work group will meet weekly, with the goal of providing recommendations to ensure that we have the systems and structures in place to provide transparent and coherent student attendance information for our school leaders.

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Comments

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- Reduces chronic absence rates in the final quarter by 1 percentage point compared to the second quarter.

Many principals are already working towards these goals and will improve their school's performance by simply executing what they already have planned for the rest of the year. There are examples across the district from which to draw inspiration, in which principals have done extraordinary and creative work to identify students who are struggling with absenteeism, by helping them and their families to overcome barriers to attendance.

Unfortunately, there are also schools where this issue has not received the strategic attention it requires. If a school fails to submit more than 10% of attendance, it will be hampered in implementing an attendance strategy that relies on accurate, timely data. If a school cannot articulate a clear plan of action to address chronic absence, it will be impossible to rally staff, parents, partners and students to help get kids to school every day. The performance plans are aimed to focus attention on these steps.

As stated earlier, in collaboration with PSASA, City Schools has also formed a work group comprised of principals and central office staff to review our attendance data systems and policies in order to develop a unified plan of action moving forward. The work group will provide recommendations to ensure that we have the systems and structures in place to provide transparent and coherent student attendance information for our school leaders.

## Summary

City Schools is committed to reducing chronic absenteeism as an integral element in our ongoing effort to promote increased student achievement and prepare our students for success in college and their careers. We welcome the interest and participation of City Council members and all elected officials in this critically important initiative.

Sincerely,



(Seal)

By: Tisha S. Edwards  
Interim Chief Executive Officer

Attachment



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- How to Frame Attendance training has been provided to principals in six networks and to staff for PBIS Schools
- Network support: Office of Attendance has provided How to Frame Attendance training for network Student Support Liaisons, Family and Community Engagement Specialists; SST chairs, ESOL Paraprofessionals, Attendance Monitors, Director of School Counselors, Director of Social Workers and Psychologists.
- Office of Attendance has conducted truancy referral reviews and consultations with school principal, attendance monitor and network staff in 210 individual cases so far this year.
- Office of Attendance and Truancy staff has visited over 50 schools to provide individual support and guidance with attendance strategies.
- Early Learning Attendance Improvement Strategy provided targeted support to 17 schools with high rates of early grades chronic absence.

## **Rationale for 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter focus on student attendance**

The resolution asks that the district describe the reason for choosing the final quarter of this school year to focus on this issue. Every year we have seen the same pattern -- attendance trails off over the course of the school year and by the end of school about a quarter of our students have missed more than 20 days of school. The fourth quarter of the year typically exhibits a drop in attendance in the period after testing finishes and warm weather begins. This annual trend of declining attendance cannot become an accepted part of the landscape of City Schools.

The loss of precious learning days and the impact on students' long term academic trajectory are too damaging for this 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter trend to be acceptable to parents, teachers, or principals. In order to encourage schools to redouble their efforts to maintain student attendance, Executive Directors will work with principals who are facing this challenge to develop a performance improvement plan that accomplishes the following goals:

- Develops a solid plan of action to reduce chronic absence.
- Reduces unsubmitted attendance to less than 10%, a rate that a majority of schools already reach.

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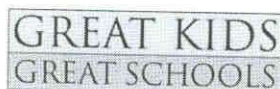
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- Attendance was a main focus in Back to School Campaign. School readiness for beginning of school is a key component of attendance. Back to School efforts have highlighted importance of attendance and being ready for first day. This has included phone calls to all City Schools households from students and celebrities.
- Take Home Attendance folder was provided to parents of pre-K and K students emphasizing attendance and providing practical information about what children will be learning. Research shows that better parent understanding of day to day learning is more likely to result in better attendance.
- City Schools and other partners have worked with the Baltimore Education Research Consortium on attendance related studies and research.
- Health Department developed a 1-page tip sheet for schools to provide parents on guidelines for keeping children home if they are sick.
- The Grade-Level Reading Campaign, involving multiple foundation, nonprofit, and public partners, includes attendance as one of three top focus areas to improve reading achievement.
- Parent-Student pledge introduced in SY 13-14 with attendance focus.

## **City Schools has provided extensive guidance for school leaders in supporting system attendance goals.**

- Appropriate roles for school leaders in supporting system attendance goals
  - The Best Practices Attendance brochure outlines appropriate roles to improve attendance for a variety of school personnel, including school leaders.
  - The Office of Attendance has also conducted “How to Frame Attendance” trainings for school staff, including school leaders.
- School system resources and services provided to school leaders in support of this effort
  - Climate training: Student Support & Safety conducted district-wide training of administrators and key staff over the summer, focusing on creating a positive climate in schools. These trainings focus on building positive relationships and alternatives to suspensions, both of which help to bring down rates of chronic absence.

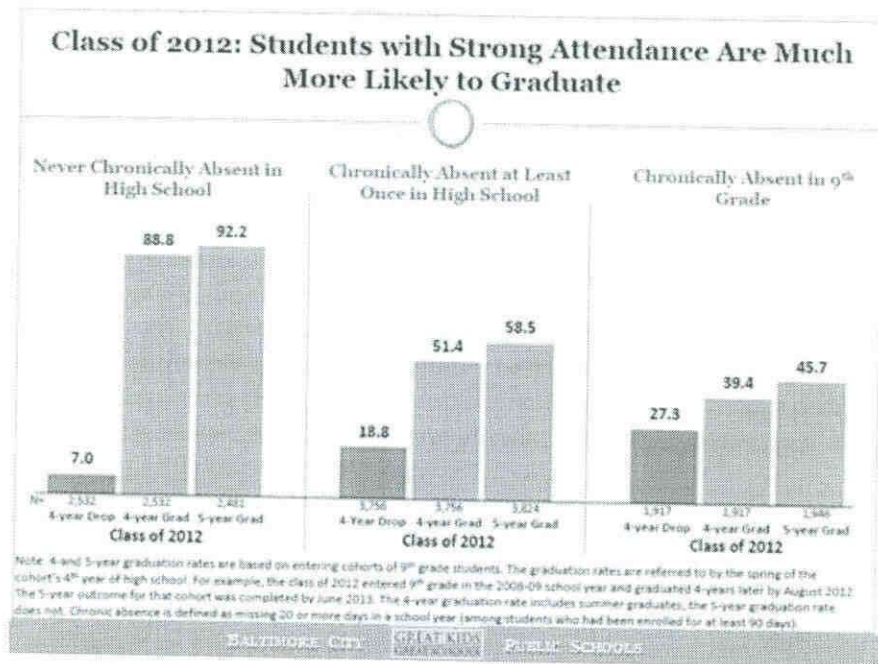


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**City Schools and the School Board have taken the lead in engaging the entire Baltimore community in a citywide attendance campaign.**

- Director of Office of Attendance and Truancy co-chairs the Baltimore Attendance Collaborative, which consists of multiple partners (partners are listed in Attachment A).
- Mayor's Attendance Campaign (highlighting importance of attendance, rewarding elementary and high school with most improved attendance)
- Mayor's Attendance Roundtable was held during American Education Week, involving 10 principals, parents, students, city schools, non-profits, and some City Council members, to discuss importance of attendance.
- Community Schools provide a focused, sustained partnership effort, which includes an emphasis on improving attendance and reducing chronic absence. Community Schools have expanded from 19 in 2011 to 43 in 2014. Attendance is a key focus area for community schools partnerships.



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- Family League program directors meet regularly with Office of Attendance around incorporating best practices, sharing data, and building the capacity of coordinators and school teams to tackle the barriers to school attendance. Family League funds at least one OST program at each of the elementary and K-8 Community Schools. Based on a report published last fall, participants in Family League-funded OST programs showed improved attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism.
- All community schools went through a month long site-based planning process in June 2013 to develop collaborative strategies for reducing chronic absenteeism by 25% over the next two years. Strategies include: creating a home visiting program, creating attendance incentive programs with partner and business sponsorship, increasing extra-curricular opportunities through partnership development and grant writing, addressing school climates issues through increasing alternatives to suspension and mentoring, while strengthening family engagement.

Efforts also include addressing health barriers through school- based health centers to improve attendance and reduce the need for hospital and clinic visits

- Success Mentoring initiative with Mayor's Office of Volunteerism focusing on students with attendance challenges in seven schools.
- Big Brothers and Big Sisters conducted training for school police on natural mentoring; mentoring of various kinds has been demonstrated to have an impact on attendance.
- Beginning in spring 2013, City Schools worked with the MTA to put into circulation 40 individual bus ads highlighting students who go to school and their reason why they go to school everyday
- Videos and PSAs air on school websites, City Schools Vimeo account and on Ch. 77.
- School Everyday initiative 2011-13 focused on connecting faith-based partners and schools to work on attendance issues and on helping schools get organized to work with partners. These trainings are now offered as a course within City Schools' Family Institute.
- Attendance is highlighted on an ongoing basis in Family Menu (goes home to all families each month), school websites, and connection to achievement.

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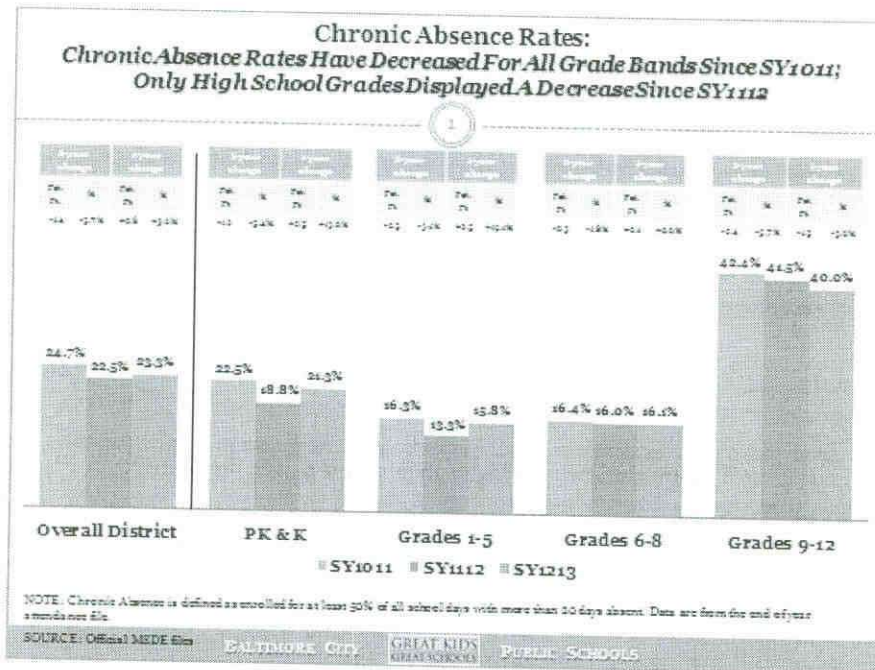
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- **The Resolution calls on the School Board to put efforts into outreach in a planful, multimedia campaign.**

City Schools has been engaged in an extensive multi-media campaign as described below. Participation and additional assistance is welcome from City Council members.

## Increased student attendance is a top priority for City Schools

Recognizing the critical importance of regular student attendance in achieving City Schools' goal of preparing students for success in college and careers, the district and its community partners have made concerted efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism across the school system. Student achievement data reveals a wide gap in both achievement and graduation rates between students who attend school regularly and those who do not. While the district has made progress in reducing chronic absence rates at all grade levels since SY2010-11, far too many students still do not attend school regularly.



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