

**MEMORANDUM**

March 16, 2010

TO: Education Committee  
 Public Safety Committee

FROM: Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst *EBT*  
 Leslie Rubin, Legislative Analyst *LR*  
 Office of Legislative Oversight

SUBJECT: **OLO Report 2010-7: *Truancy in Montgomery County***

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, the Education and Public Safety Committees will hold a joint worksession on OLO Report 2010-7, which was released by the Council on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Council Vice President Valerie Ervin requested this study to understand the magnitude of truancy within the County, how agencies are working together to reduce truancy, and best practices for preventing and reducing truancy.

Overall, OLO found that relatively few County students are habitually truant (less than one percent). OLO also found that current County practices partially align with best practices for reducing truancy. To help address gaps in the County's overall approach to reducing truancy, OLO offers four recommended issues for discussion between the Council and agency representatives.

OLO recommends the Joint Committee worksession begin with a briefing on the report by OLO staff, followed by comments from agencies' representatives. The Committee can then address OLO's recommended discussion issues and initial agency responses summarized in this packet.

Representatives of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the Executive Branch, the State's Attorney's Office, and the Housing Opportunities Commission who are scheduled to attend this worksession include:

Agency	Representative(s)
Montgomery County Public Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frank Stetson, Office of School Performance</li> <li>• Chrisandra Richardson, Office of Special Ed. and Student Services</li> <li>• Stephen Zagami, Department of Student Services</li> <li>• Stephanie Williams, Dept. of Reporting and Regulatory Accountability</li> <li>• Steve Neff, Pupil Personnel Services Unit</li> </ul>
Montgomery County Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kate Garvey, Children, Youth and Family Services, DHHS</li> <li>• Assistant Chief Betsy Davis, Field Service Bureau, MCPD</li> <li>• Corporal Gary Turner, Family Crimes Division, MCPD</li> </ul>
State's Attorney's Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John McCarthy, State's Attorney</li> <li>• George Simms, Community Prosecution Unit</li> <li>• Margaret Burrowes, Juvenile Crimes Prosecution Unit</li> </ul>
Housing Opportunities Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eugene Spenser, Resident Services Division</li> </ul>

## A. REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

This section summarizes key findings from the report related to truancy laws, the scope of truancy locally, best practices for reducing truancy, local practices, and the alignment between local and best practices. The report's four-page executive summary is attached starting on ©1.

**Truancy Laws.** State law defines habitual truancy and the sanctions for truancy in the County. State regulation defines habitual truancy as an unexcused absence rate of 20 percent or more within a school year, semester, or marking period. Each Maryland school system's count of habitually truant students, however, is limited to students who have attended the same school for 91 days or more of the given school year. As such, highly mobile students and many dropouts are excluded from habitual truant data counts.

State law allows the prosecution of adults, but not students, for truancy. Since 2005, the Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office has prosecuted 55 parents and guardians for student truancy in the County, representing about one percent of all habitual truancy cases. State law also enables the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services to petition the juvenile courts to declare truant students to be Children in Need of Supervision. Across the state, DJS rarely files formal CINS cases for habitual truancy; locally, DJS has not filed any formal CINS cases in Montgomery County in recent years based on habitual truancy.

**Scope of Truancy.** Based on MCPS' official counts of habitually truancy, less than one percent of all MCPS students were habitually truant in 2009. Further, from 2006 to 2009, the habitual truancy rate of MCPS students decreased by five percent, from 0.75 percent to 0.71 percent of all students. As noted in the table below, high school students made up 64 percent of all habitual truants in 2009.

**MCPS' Habitually Students by School Level, 2009**

	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Distribution</b>
<b>All Schools</b>	<b>984</b>	100%
High Schools	627	64%
Middle Schools	160	16%
Elementary Schools	166	17%
Special Schools	31	3%

Source: MSDE DPRR

State regulations require that MCPS collect habitual truancy data by school level and school, but not by subgroup. To understand the demographics of habitually truant students, OLO reviewed demographic data on six correlate measures that contribute to or result from truancy:

- Chronic absenteeism (i.e., absent 20 or more days during the school year);
- Out of school suspensions;
- Loss of credit in the first semester of 9<sup>th</sup> grade;
- Academic ineligibility in high school;
- Grade retention in high school ; and
- Dropping out of high school.

The higher representation of students who are black and Latino among these measures, as described in the table on the top of the next page, suggests higher rates of habitual truancy among these student groups. Additional data by gender and service subgroup status for several of these measures further suggests that male students and students enrolled in special education, ESOL and FARMs programs evidence higher rates of habitual truancy (see ©12 for data by gender and service subgroup for correlates with available data).

### Percent of MCPS Students Exhibiting Truancy Correlates, by Race and Ethnicity

	Absent 20 or More Days, 2009*	Out-of-School Suspensions, 2009	Grade 9 Loss of Credit, 2008**	Academic Ineligibility, 2008***	Grade 9-12 Retention, 2009	Grade 9-12 Dropouts, 2009
All Students	6.9	2.5	23.2	21.1	5.3	2.7
<b>Race and Ethnicity Subgroups</b>						
Asian	3.1	0.7	11.0	10.7	2.3	1.0
Black	8.1	5.5	40.1	34.7	8.0	3.9
Latino	10.4	3.0	40.3	36.2	9.5	5.2
White	5.7	1.2	12.4	10.6	2.6	1.3

Notes: \* Grades 1-12, \*\* End of 1<sup>st</sup> semester; \*\*\* End of school year

Sources: Maryland Report Card, MCPS unpublished data, October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet; MSDE-DAA, Summary of Attendance, 2006-2008; MCPS Annual Suspension Reports

**Research-Based Best Practices.** The evidenced-based research on truancy and dropout prevention programs identify a number of best practices for reducing truancy. The research identifies the following program components as most effective at improving student attendance:

1. Interagency collaboration – effective truancy reduction programs rely on collaboration among families, schools, and other public agencies (including law enforcement and social services agencies) to address the personal, academic, school climate, and family-related factors that contribute to truant behavior.
2. Use of data to target programs – effective truancy programs regularly review data on student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement to identify students at high risk for truancy, and to ensure that effective interventions are targeted to students most at risk.
3. School policies that promote attendance – schools with effective truancy programs ensure that their policies promote student attendance and connectedness to school by: (a) implementing effective attendance policies; (b) eliminating “push-out policies” such as suspensions for truancy and automatic class failure for poor student attendance; (c) notifying parents when absences occur; (d) ensuring that teachers respect and support all students; and (e) establishing welcoming and safe school environments.
4. A comprehensive approach – effective truancy programs focus simultaneously on prevention and intervention by implementing: (a) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy; (b) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among at-risk students; and (c) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitual truants. Effective interventions for highest risk students often include a focus on addressing the root causes of truancy, case management, and the use of a dedicated team to deliver intensive services.
5. Program evaluation – effective truancy programs establish concrete and measurable goals for program and student performance. Effective programs also monitor these measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

**Montgomery County Practices.** The County relies on the *Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB)* to address the most egregious truancy cases, representing four percent of habitual truants in 2009. The table at the top of the next page describes the ITRB agency members and representatives.

### List of Agencies with Representatives on the ITRB, 2010

Agency and Number of Representatives	Representative's Department or Office
Montgomery County Public Schools (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Department of Student Services (Chair)</li> <li>● Residency and International Admissions Office</li> <li>● Court Liaison</li> </ul>
Department of Health and Human Services (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Child Welfare Services</li> <li>● School Health Services</li> <li>● Child &amp; Adolescent Outpatient Mental Health Services</li> </ul>
Montgomery County Police Department (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Family Services Division</li> </ul>
State's Attorney's Office (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Community Prosecution Unit</li> </ul>
Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Montgomery County/Rockville Regional Office</li> </ul>
Housing Opportunities Commission (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resident Services</li> </ul>

Source: MCPS Department of Student Services

MCPS manages the ITRB and serves as the lead County agency for addressing truancy, managing the cases of all truant students, including those it refers to the ITRB. More specifically, MCPS tracks data, designs, and implements specific strategies aimed at reducing truancy.

With the exception of the new Truancy Court program co-sponsored by the State's Attorney's Office, the other ITRB agencies do not operate specific truancy diversion programs. Several of the ITRB agencies, however, work independently and in partnership with MCPS to address the root causes of truancy, such as mental health and substance abuse issues and gang involvement.

**Alignment between Best and Local Practices.** OLO found that County practices partially align with best practices to curb truancy as summarized in the chart below.

### Alignment between Truancy Best Practices and Montgomery County Practices, 2010

Best Practice	Montgomery County Practices	Alignment
<b>Interagency Collaboration</b>	Informal collaboration between MCPS and the Executive Branch occurs on a case-by-case basis to address the root causes of truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.	Partially aligned
<b>Use of Data to Target Programs</b>	MCPS uses attendance data to identify students in need of truancy interventions. However, research suggests also using behavior and achievement data in addition to attendance data to target truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs.	Partially aligned
<b>School Policies to Promote Attendance</b>	MCPS promotes student attendance through positive behavior supports, fostering awareness of its attendance policies, and after-school programs. However, some policies that impose sanctions for truancy may work at cross purposes to school efforts to re-engage students and improve their attendance.	Partially aligned
<b>Comprehensive Approach</b>	MCPS' approach to providing school-wide, targeted, and intensive interventions according to student need aligns with best practice. The intensity and timing of targeted and intensive interventions, however, lags behind best practices for increasing the attendance of truant students.	Partially aligned
<b>Program Evaluation</b>	With the exception of the ITRB, MCPS has neither evaluated nor established performance measures for its truancy reduction programs. MCPS has begun to collect data that will enable an evaluation of its truancy reduction programs in the future.	Not aligned

## **B. RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION ISSUES AND INITIAL AGENCY RESPONSES**

This section describes four recommended issues for discussion between the Council and ITRB agency representatives to help address gaps in Montgomery County's approach to reducing truancy. This section also describes initial responses from MCPS and the Executive Branch on these recommended discussion issues and related report findings. Written comments from MPCS' Deputy Superintendent of Schools and from Montgomery County Government's Chief Administrative Office (CAO) are attached on ©5-9 and ©10-11, respectively.

### **Issue #1: Use of data to identify habitual truants**

OLO recommends that the Council discuss with MCPS representatives the potential merits and drawbacks of lowering the local threshold for habitual truancy and using factors other than attendance to identify students in need of truancy interventions. Specific questions to consider include the following:

- a. Has MCPS ever considered adopting a threshold for habitual truancy that is lower than the State's definition – that is, student with unexcused absences 20 percent or more of the time?
- b. What are the arguments for and against identifying students at-risk for habitual truancy based on factors other than attendance, such as academic achievement and behavior?

The Deputy Superintendent's written comments indicate that the Department of Student Services is currently working with the Office of Shared Accountability to develop a district-wide system to monitor student attendance and truancy for highly mobile students (i.e., students who do not attend the same school for 91 days of the school year).

### **Issue #2: Interagency collaboration to address truancy**

OLO recommends that the Council discuss with each ITRB agency representative whether additional opportunities for interagency collaboration to address truancy exist beyond the ITRB. More specifically, we suggest that the Council pose the following the questions:

- a. Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?
- b. What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?
- c. If/when additional resources become available, what would be your agency's highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?

In their written comments, both the Deputy Superintendent and CAO cite their work with the Kennedy Cluster Project and Linkages to Learning as examples of cross-agency interventions that either directly or indirectly addresses truancy. The Deputy Superintendent's letter also cites MCPS' collaborative work with the Collaboration Council to meet the mental health needs of truant students; the CAO's memo also cites the Executive Branch's support of after-school programs and youth services.

The CAO's memo further indicates that effective strategies best suited for interagency collaboration include information sharing via the Kennedy Cluster model. The CAO also indicates that replicating the Kennedy Cluster model in other clusters and increasing support for Excel Beyond the Bell and out-of-school-time programs would rank among their highest priorities for targeting additional truancy reduction resources if/when they became available.

**Issue #3: Incentives for truant students to attend school regularly**

OLO recommends that the Council discuss with MCPS representatives the potential opportunities, merits, and drawbacks of enhancing incentives for truant students to attend school regularly. Recommended questions for discussion include the following:

- a. Are there ways to expand access to MCPS’ career technology programs, including Edison, to chronically absent or truant students?
- b. To what extent do MCPS’ Level 1 and 2 alternative programs address truancy? How successful have these programs been at increasing attendance among truant students?
- c. Are there ways to expand access to the Level 1 and 2 alternative programs to meet the needs of chronically absent or truant students?

The Deputy Superintendent’s letter describes several MCPS’ initiatives aimed at addressing the correlates of truancy via the M-Stat process. Staff work groups have been assembled to address several truancy correlates. These include M-Stat teams focused on suspensions and ineligibility and the formation of a Graduation Rate Project Team and a Loss of Credit Work Group. Each work group is charged with recommending strategies that will assist schools in improving student performance.

**Issue #4: Evaluation of local truancy reduction efforts**

OLO recommends that the Council discuss with ITRB agency representatives and MCPS in particular the potential value of evaluating the effectiveness of the County’s truancy programs. More specifically, we recommend the Council pose the following questions during worksession:

- a. How does MCPS currently assess the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent and/or reduce truancy?
- b. In what ways could a district-wide evaluation of MCPS’ truancy reduction efforts inform the school system’s dropout prevention efforts?
- c. How feasible would it be to develop County-wide performance goals across agencies for truancy programs and develop a plan for conducting a formal evaluation of program effectiveness?

Page 4 of the Deputy Superintendent’s letter indicates that the Department of Student Services is collaborating with the Office of Shared Accountability to develop “evaluative measures that specifically address current efforts to reduce truancy, particularly those which occur at lower levels than ITRB referrals.”

**LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Begins at:</b>
Executive Summary, OLO Report 2010-7	© 1
MCPS Deputy Superintendent of School’s letter, February 19, 2010	© 5
Montgomery County Government’s CAO’s Memorandum, February 23, 2010	© 10
Select MCPS Truancy Correlates by Gender and Service Subgroup	© 12

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**TRUANCY IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY**  
**OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT REPORT 2010-7**  
**MARCH 2, 2010**

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## Overview

In Maryland, all children between the ages of 5 and 16 must attend school. State regulation defines excused or “lawful” absences, and absence for any other reason is presumed to be unexcused or “unlawful.” A student absent for an unexcused reason is “truant.” A student with unexcused absences amounting to 20 percent or more of the semester (18 days) or school year (36 days) is “habitually truant.”

Research links truancy to dropping out of school, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and other risky behaviors. This report by the Office of Legislative Oversight responds to the County Council’s request to examine: (1) the magnitude of truancy in Montgomery County Public Schools; (2) how agencies in the County work together to address truancy; and (3) research-based best practices for reducing truancy.

OLO’s review found that relatively few County students are habitually truant (less than one percent). OLO also found that current County practices partially align with best practices for reducing truancy. The issues recommended for Council discussion with agency representatives include: the attendance threshold for responding to individual students’ truancy; opportunities for increased collaboration among County agencies; and the value of formally evaluating County efforts to reduce truancy.

## Habitual Truancy Rates in Montgomery County

The Maryland State Department of Education requires all local schools systems, including Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), to report habitual truancy data for students enrolled in the same school for at least 91 days of the school year.

In 2009, less than one percent of all MCPS students (984 students) were habitually truant; two-thirds of habitual truants were in high school (627 students). This compares to seven percent of MCPS students (8,637 students) who were chronically absent because they missed 20 or more days of school for excused *or* unexcused reasons. Between 2006 and 2009, habitual truancy rates in MCPS declined by five percent and rates of chronic absenteeism declined by 17 percent.

MCPS does not collect demographic data on habitual truants. Demographic data on chronic absenteeism and on five other measures that either contribute to or result from truancy (“correlates of truancy”) suggest that habitually truant students are disproportionately black, Latino, male, enrolled in special education, receive free or reduced priced meals, or are English language learners. The five correlates of truancy are:

- Out-of-school suspensions;
- Loss of credit in the first semester of 9<sup>th</sup> grade;
- Academic ineligibility to participate in extracurricular activities in high school;
- Grade retention in high school (i.e., too few credits earned to advance to the next grade); and
- Dropping out of high school.

## Sanctions for Truancy in Montgomery County

State law enables the criminal prosecution of parents, guardians, and adults who encourage or permit truancy, but not students. Since 2005, the State’s Attorney’s Office has prosecuted 55 parents and guardians for truancy; this equates to about one percent of all truancy cases. Penalties can include fines up to \$500 or jail time. State law does not allow law enforcement to pick up students based on truancy and return them to school. State law allows the Department of Juvenile Services (DJS) to petition the courts to declare truant students to be Children in Need of Supervision (CINS). However, CINS petitions for truancy are not filed by DJS in Montgomery County and are utilized infrequently across the state.

### Truancy Risk Factors and Consequences

Research indicates that school absence frequently is an indicator of challenges occurring among students and within families, schools, and communities. These factors can undermine student engagement, which is the connectedness or attachment that students feel toward school. The table below offers some examples.

Type of Challenge	Factors Related to Truancy
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor academic performance (sometimes due to special education needs)</li> <li>• A lack of vision of education as a means to achieve goals</li> <li>• Unmet mental health, alcohol, drug use, or abuse needs</li> </ul>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of effective attendance policies</li> <li>• “Push-out” policies (e.g., automatic failing grade for poor attendance)</li> <li>• Unsafe environments</li> </ul>
Home and Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abuse or neglect</li> <li>• Safety issues near home or school</li> <li>• Parental substance abuse</li> </ul>

Source: National Center for Student Engagement

Research also indicates that truancy is both a cause and a consequence of many troubling behaviors, including dropping out of high school, high school expulsion, substance use, juvenile delinquency, weapon-related violence, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and becoming sexually active at a young age.

### Summary of Best Practices

The following five best practices emerge from OLO’s review of the research literature on effective truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs:

- **Interagency collaboration** among schools, families, and community service agencies – including law enforcement, social services agencies, and mental health organizations – to address personal, academic, school climate, and family-related factors that contribute to truant behavior.
- **Use of data to target programs** to students at highest risk for becoming truant, including a review of data on student attendance, behavior, and academic achievement to ensure that effective interventions are targeted to students most at risk.
- **School policies that promote attendance** and student attachment by having schools:
  - a. Implement effective attendance policies and apply them consistently;
  - b. Notify parents when absences occur;
  - c. Establish welcoming and safe school environments;
  - d. Eliminate “push-out policies” such as suspensions for truancy; and
  - e. Ensure that teachers respect and support all students.
- **A comprehensive approach** that focuses on prevention and intervention through (1) school-wide efforts to prevent truancy, (2) targeted initiatives to improve attendance among chronically absent students, and (3) intensive interventions to improve the attendance of habitually truant students.
- **Program evaluation** that includes the use of performance measures for programs and students and the monitoring of these measures to identify opportunities for program improvement and to ensure that truancy programs work as intended.

## Montgomery County Practices

### Montgomery County Practices

Representatives from the following agencies participate on the County's Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) to address truancy issues in Montgomery County:

- Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
- Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- Montgomery County Police Department
- Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office (SAO)
- Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County; and
- Maryland Department of Juvenile Services

MCPS serves as the lead County agency for addressing truancy. Unlike the other five agencies on the ITRB, MCPS tracks data, designs, and implements specific strategies aimed at reducing truancy. MCPS also manages the cases of all truant students in the County, including those referred to the ITRB.

MCPS' truancy practices – in partnership with other County agencies – include informal collaborations with DHHS to address the root causes of truancy (e.g., referrals for mental health services) and convening the ITRB to address the most difficult habitual truancy cases. In 2009, 43 students were referred to the ITRB – representing four percent of all habitual truancy cases. Most students (74%) improved their attendance after the hearing, but nearly half (49%) remained chronically absent or habitually truant following their hearing.

### Alignment between Local and Best Practices

OLO found that County practices partially align with best practices to curb truancy. The chart below summarizes the alignment between five best practices and current County practices.

Best Practice	Montgomery County Practices	Alignment
Interagency Collaboration	Informal collaboration between MCPS and the Executive Branch occurs on a case-by-case basis to address the root causes of truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.	Partially aligned
Use of Data to Target Programs	MCPS uses attendance data to identify students in need of truancy interventions. However, research suggests also using behavior and achievement data in addition to attendance data to target truancy reduction and dropout prevention programs.	Partially aligned
School Policies to Promote Attendance	MCPS promotes student attendance through positive behavior supports, fostering awareness of its attendance policies, and after-school programs. However, some policies that impose sanctions for truancy may work at cross purposes to school efforts to re-engage students and improve their attendance.	Partially aligned
Comprehensive Approach	MCPS' approach to providing school-wide, targeted, and intensive interventions according to student need aligns with best practice. The intensity and timing of targeted and intensive interventions, however, lags behind best practices for increasing the attendance of truant students.	Partially aligned
Program Evaluation	With the exception of the ITRB, MCPS has neither evaluated nor established performance measures for its truancy reduction programs. MCPS has begun to collect data that will enable an evaluation of its truancy reduction programs in the future.	Not aligned

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## Recommended Discussion Issues

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To help address gaps in Montgomery County's overall approach to reducing truancy, OLO offers four recommended issues for discussion between and among the County Council and agency representatives.

**Issue # 1: The merits and drawbacks to lowering the threshold for "habitual truancy" in MCPS and using factors other than attendance to identify students in need of truancy interventions.**

- a. Has MCPS ever considered adopting a threshold for habitual truancy that is lower than the State's definition – that is, student with unexcused absences 20 percent or more of the time?
- b. What are the arguments for and against identifying students at-risk for habitual truancy based on factors other than attendance, such as academic achievement and behavior?
- c. How do/could MCPS' efforts to reduce its loss of credit rates in high school square with efforts to identify and address the needs of students at highest risk for truancy?

**Issue # 2: Identifying additional opportunities for systemic collaboration across agencies to address truancy exist.**

- a. Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?
- b. What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?
- c. If/when additional resources become available, what would be your agency's highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?

**Issue # 3: Opportunities for enhancing incentives for truant students to attend school regularly.**

- a. Are there ways to expand access to MCPS' career technology programs, including Edison, to chronically absent or truant students?
- b. To what extent do MCPS' Level 1 and 2 alternative programs address truancy? How successful have these programs been at increasing attendance among truant students?
- c. Are there ways to expand access to the Level 1 and 2 alternative programs to meet the needs of chronically absent or truant students?

**Issue # 4: The value of evaluating the effectiveness of the County's truancy programs.**

- a. How does MCPS currently assess the effectiveness of its efforts to prevent and/or reduce truancy?
- b. In what ways could a district-wide evaluation of MCPS' truancy reduction efforts inform the school system's dropout prevention efforts?
- c. How feasible would it be to develop County-wide performance goals across agencies for truancy programs and develop a plan for conducting a formal evaluation of program effectiveness?

For a complete copy of OLO Report 2010-7, go to: [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo).  
This document is available in alternative formats upon request.



February 19, 2010

Dr. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst  
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Dear Dr. Bonner-Tompkins and Ms. Rubin:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff with the opportunity to review and comment on the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report on Truancy in Montgomery County. Comments and suggestions for technical changes were previously provided. MCPS staff members who participated in the review appreciated the collaborative process used throughout the development and review of this report. The data and findings will help in our ongoing, collaborative interagency efforts to reduce and prevent truancy in Montgomery County.

It is evident that much of the feedback provided by MCPS throughout the development of the report was carefully considered and incorporated into the draft. The following comments on the completed draft are included below:

- As evidenced in your report, there is much to celebrate as MCPS continues its efforts to address the issue of truancy. Between 2006 and 2009, habitual truancy of students in MCPS declined by 5 percent and the rate of chronic absenteeism declined by 17 percent. These are substantial decreases. MCPS' habitual truancy rate for Fiscal Year 2009 was 0.7 percent, considerably less than the rate in Maryland of 2.8 percent. MCPS' 0.7 percent habitual truancy rate compares very favorably with similarly sized jurisdictions in Maryland—Prince Georges County (9.6 percent), Baltimore County (1.9 percent), and Anne Arundel County (0.8 percent). Local jurisdictions with lower habitual truancy rates, Frederick County (0.6 percent) and Howard County (0.3 percent), enroll fewer than half of the students in MCPS.
- The MCPS Department of Student Services (DSS) is collaborating with the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability to develop a system to capture highly mobile students. The report clarifies that students may not be identified as truant due to the fact that they are not enrolled in a single school for 91 or more days. Although the attendance rates for these students are currently monitored at the school level, the data system now in development will ensure a system-level review of every student.

Office of the Deputy Superintendent of Schools

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- State guidelines dictate how attendance is reported for secondary students, specifically those students who “skip” or are tardy to individual class periods. Instances of skipping a class and arriving tardy to class are monitored by teachers. Following MCPS procedures, three unexcused instances of tardiness equal one unexcused absence. School teams do specifically intervene with students who skip a class or who arrive tardy to develop interventions to encourage improved class attendance.
- While it is acknowledged that there is not a system-level, truancy-specific work group, there are multiple concentrated MCPS efforts that address the five correlates to truancy identified in the report (suspensions, ineligibility, loss of credit, grade retention, and dropout). MCPS has engaged in the M-Stat process for several years. M-Stat is a comprehensive process that provides ongoing access to quantifiable evidence of student progress toward identified key targets and a forum for in-depth analysis and action planning. M-Stat teams are focused on both suspension and ineligibility. MCPS created a Graduation Rate Project Team to recommend policies, procedures, and strategies to increase graduation rates and decrease the dropout rates for all students. Finally, a Loss of Credit Work Group is examining all aspects of the current loss of credit policy and developing recommendations to assist schools in reducing the number of students who lose credit due to excessive unexcused absences. Through the comprehensive efforts of these work groups, MCPS will continue to positively affect truancy in the county, resulting in improved student performance.
- The statement, “Pupil Personnel Workers (PPWs) often serve as the primary staff for mitigating truancy,” does not take into full account the numerous interventions implemented at the school level before a PPW becomes involved. Table 5-8, “Summary of Montgomery County Truancy Intervention Process” (page 44), identifies no fewer than eight actions that school-based staff members can, and do, engage in before referring a case to the PPW.

School staff members are expected to develop and implement interventions when attendance issues first arise. These early interventions are consistent with the tiered level of service delivery established in MCPS, and are most often implemented by a teacher, school counselor, school nurse, or other school-based staff member who has a relationship with the student and/or family. These interventions are in place prior to making a request for more intense support, like that provided by a PPW.

The report includes a statement regarding “Delays by schools in referring students to the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB).” MCPS believes that this perceived delay is actually the appropriate use of early interventions in the attempt to ameliorate the attendance concern at the lowest and most personal level. Schools are expected to be in frequent communication with parents to inform them and problem solve with them about their child’s attendance. Additionally, school staff members work directly with the student and family to build relationships, implement interventions, and create contracts

with incentives to further encourage the student to attend school more regularly. It is only after these interventions are implemented and there is no significant improvement in attendance that cases are moved to the more intensive levels of PPW involvement. If attendance does not improve, a referral is then appropriately made to the ITRB.

The ITRB attendance improvement data (Table 5-9, page 45) do not fully capture the improvement most students display because of the cumulative effect of the student's absences. For example, a student who demonstrates a 50 percent attendance record through the first quarter of the year, and raises their attendance level to 85 percent for the second quarter, would still have an overall semester attendance rate well under the 80 percent threshold because of the cumulative effects of the first quarter absences. DSS is developing a data collection model which will capture and record attendance data immediately before and after the family participates in the ITRB process. This tool will allow the ITRB to more easily note attendance improvements and can be used in making the decision to recommend a student/family to the Assistant State's Attorney.

- Table 7-4, "Description of OJJDP Truancy Reduction Demonstration Projects" (page 71), delineates numerous key program features found in the six identified demonstration projects. We are pleased to note that the majority of the key program features are already incorporated into MCPS's efforts to reduce truancy as follows:
  - Presentations to parents groups on the importance of school attendance
  - PPW case management of the most challenging cases
  - Schoolwide interventions with attendance rewards
  - Educational Facilities Officers (EFO) in high schools
  - Attendance contracts developed at the school and ITRB level
  - *Check In/Check Out* systems for chronically absent students (in schools implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS))

Additional enhancements that align with these key program features could be easily incorporated into current MCPS practices as follows:

- Use the "10% Unexcused Absence" report in regular school-based team "data chat" meetings
- Increase referrals and collaboration with community agencies

MCPS acknowledges that increasing early outreach to parents around issues of school attendance has the potential to further reduce chronic absenteeism.

MCPS offers the following comments on four findings included in the report:

- **Finding #2: The Maryland State Department of Education's method for counting habitually truant students excludes students enrolled for fewer than 91 days in the same school.**

Official counts in every Maryland school system, including MCPS, would be higher if these students were included.

- **Finding #17: MCPS' limited evaluations of existing truancy reduction programs does not align with best practices.**

MCPS demonstrated significant progress in reducing the truancy rate and the rate of chronic absenteeism. We acknowledge the opportunity for improvement in the evaluation of truancy reduction interventions and agree that there are ways to effectively capture data that would identify and address highly mobile students who have attendance issues. DSS is collaborating with the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability to develop evaluative measures that specifically address current efforts to reduce truancy, particularly those which occur at lower levels than ITRB referrals. We will identify a way to more clearly report attendance data for those students who move between schools frequently.

- **Finding #7: MCPS acts as the lead agency in preventing and reducing truancy. The Interagency Truancy Review Board is the only formal interagency activity explicitly designed to address truancy.**

Truancy is most often a symptom of broader issues that reflect more intense needs of the student and/or family. MCPS is engaged in several interagency collaborations that either directly, or indirectly, impact student attendance and truancy as follows:

- The Kennedy Cluster Project, whose purpose is to support children, families, and communities so that student achievement is no longer predictable by social determinants such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, is highlighted in the report.
- All schools have the opportunity to work with the Montgomery County Collaboration Council's Local Access Mechanism (LAM) to support families in obtaining intensive mental health services.
- MCPS is a key partner in Linkages to Learning, a program to deliver mental health services, prevention programming, and social services to students and families in 28 school communities.
- MCPS is a gatekeeper agency working collaboratively with Interagency Family Preservation Services (IFPS). IFPS is an intensive, short-term program that combines the wraparound process with Parent-Child Therapy to offer families opportunities to develop and access comprehensive community-based supports and support the development of parenting skills.

- o DSS works with the Montgomery County Collaboration Council to develop Tier III intensive wraparound supports for students through Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
- **Finding #16: MCPS' use of a three-tiered strategy to prevent and reduce truancy partially aligns with the best practice of using a comprehensive approach to curb truancy.**

The correlates to truancy identified in this report, including behavioral and achievement data, are considered throughout the tiered problem-solving model implemented in every school. Targeted interventions are identified and implemented in each tier. The effectiveness of each intervention is documented and evaluated, using the newly developed MCPS Form 272-10: *Documentation of Interventions*. All staff members in MCPS have the primary duty of improving student outcomes, including attendance.

MCPS is concerned about the recommendation to assign case managers whose sole responsibility is to address truancy. This recommendation is in conflict with the MCPS tiered service delivery model that builds on the relationships established within school teams and with students and families.

The collaborative problem solving team may identify a member to serve as the "case manager." In accordance with this process, we respectfully do not agree that the appointment of an external case manager is a best practice that would significantly impact attendance and truancy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review and respond to the findings and recommendations. Although I am pleased with the progress the school system has made in reducing the truancy and chronic absenteeism rates, I agree that we must always reflect upon and improve our practices. I believe our collaborative work will only enhance the services we provide to the students and families of Montgomery County.

Sincerely,



Frieda K. Lacey, Ed.D.  
Deputy Superintendent of Schools

FKL:gh

Copy to:

Dr. Weast  
Mrs. Richardson

Mr. Neff  
Mr. Zagami



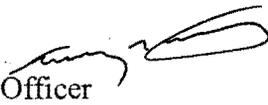
OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE  
ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND 20850

Isiah Leggett  
County Executive

MEMORANDUM

February 23, 2010

TO: Karen Orlansky, Director  
Office of Legislative Oversight

FROM: Timothy L. Firestine   
Chief Administrative Officer

RE: OLO Report 2010-7, Truancy Report in Montgomery County

We appreciate the opportunity to review the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) report on Truancy in Montgomery County and the inclusion of cross departmental issues in that report. The report provides important information on truancy and methods to address it.

As the recommendations largely lie within the purview of the Board of Education, we have very few comments. Discussion Issue # 2 entitled "*Additional opportunities for systemic collaboration across agencies to address truancy*" and its sub-items are the only items that have relevance for County Government and we offer our comments below.

**OLO Language**

*To encourage greater collaboration across agencies to reduce truancy within the County, OLO recommends the Council discuss the following with agency representatives during work session: Are there ways to use the Interagency Truancy Review Board (ITRB) as a forum for increased collaboration among the participating agencies to address truancy?*

**Response**

The scope and capacity of the ITRB would need to be reviewed to determine if this group could address broader issues in addition to the direct review of students. This additional burden may cause fewer students to be reviewed by the panel and this is not desirable. It may be possible for the group to identify trends and raise issues to another body that may take action on increasing collaboration. Ideally, each high school cluster could develop a multi-agency team to periodically review and staff chronically truant students in their cluster. The Kennedy Cluster Project is an example of such a model.

**OLO Language**

*What sorts of programs or strategies are best implemented across agencies?*

**Response**

The strategy of information sharing is one that has merit and has precedence in the Kennedy Cluster and other initiatives. This practice is helpful in creating comprehensive approaches to address the needs of students and their families and in intervening earlier when students have issues. It is critical that students' privacy be protected and that the purpose for sharing information be very clear if this avenue is pursued. The Kennedy Cluster Project has developed a Memorandum of Understanding among key partners that addresses these issues and could be used as a template. Programs that reflect interagency cooperation and are effective in engaging youth in positive activities and increasing their connectedness to school include: After school programs, Sports Academies, the Street Outreach Network, Linkages to Learning, and Regional Youth Services Centers. The Screening and Assessment Services for Children and Adolescents (SASCA) program provides assessments and referrals for students identified by the schools, and is a gateway for students to become engaged in the programs mentioned above.

**OLO Language**

*If/when additional resources become available, what would be your highest priority strategies or programs to implement to increase school attendance?*

**Response**

The strategies we would support that are within the purview of County Government include: (1) increased support for Excel Beyond the Bell, including capacity building; (2) training and direct funding of out-of-school time programs; and (3) increased staffing capacity to coordinate activities and information sharing; and support for school-based services, especially those that support and engage families. The Kennedy Cluster Project model can be replicated in other high school clusters with additional funding to support case managers and infrastructure.

**Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this study. The success and safety of our youth are priorities for our County and their engagement in school is a critical ingredient to ensure both of these goals. We look forward to future discussions on this issue.

**Percent of MCPS Students Exhibiting Select Truancy Correlates by Gender and Service Subgroup**

	<b>Absent 20 or More Days, 2009*</b>	<b>Out-of-School Suspensions 2009</b>	<b>Grade 9-12 Dropouts 2009</b>
<b>All Students</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.7</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	7.1	1.4	2.1
Male	6.6	3.6	3.3
<b>Service Subgroups</b>			
FARMS	11.2	4.6	4.5
Special Education	12.6	6.2	3.8
ESOL	6.9	1.5	5.9

Notes: \* Grades 1-12

Sources: Maryland Report Card, October 26, 2009 Board of Education Packet; MCPS Annual Suspension Reports