Testimony – May 12, 2025 (5 minutes) – Samantha Murphy

Allegheny County Department of Human Services

Bio: Samantha Murphy earned her master's degree from Duquesne University in Counseling Education with a focus in Community Counseling in 1999. She began her work with Allegheny County Department of Human Services in 1995 as a child welfare caseworker and has been serving the community since the year 2000 as a resource & referral specialist (now manager), assisting helping professionals with thoughtful and precise information and resources in order for them to best serve their consumers. She was tapped for the supportive role of Education Liaison in 2011 with the ultimate goal of improving educational outcomes for children served by the department.

General outline:

- o Where Allegheny County Department of Human Services started - 15 years ago
- o What we learned
- o Local strategies based on the deep dive
- o Recommendations moving forward

In 2011 I stepped into a newly created role as "Education Liaison" to help coordinate our integrated human services efforts (services meaning - behavioral health, child welfare, homeless services) with our work in k-12 schools. All stakeholders were eager to find creative and new ways to support students who were truant. (stakeholders meaning - schools, courts and child welfare)

This is **what we learned** through doing needs assessments, starting pilot projects and having lots of conversations with our partners and families. We found:

- Punitive practices & assumptions that parents are the only people at fault if children miss school
- Threats from all partners that promised warrants, jail time, hefty fines and promising that children would be removed from their parent's custody.
- A lack of services available to children and families with *expertise* around this issue
- A lack of integrated data
- Many children who were truant were already deeply involved in human services
- Many of the families where children were truant experienced significant housing crisis.

Using the foundation of our ***data partnerships*** with schools, a strength-based approach and a fresh look at this work by staff who were ***not*** burned out, we took some time to learn about this issue from the school lens, from the MDJ lens and from the child welfare lens. We learned that generally speaking.......

- Parents love their children
- Addressing this issue proactively (with strength-based supports) shows us that more than half of students will increase rates of attendance
- There is a lot happening in our communities and in our school policies/practices that contribute to many many missed days of school.
- Often, families have so much stress and trauma in their lives that they have difficulty prioritizing school outcomes. Honestly, they have difficulty picturing NEXT WEEK – let alone picturing the future life outcomes of their children.
- Court involvement, Childlines, threats and fines can create more stress and trauma. And they push families away from potential help. And parents decide to enroll their children in new schools. And students get less and less engaged in schools.
- Since no one from the child welfare world was asked to testify today, I made sure to include their voice in this testimony. According to my child welfare colleagues who address safety and risk every day -
    - Of the families who were referred to child welfare for support for truancy in the past few years, less than .06% are typically active 3 months later and receiving support.
    - Placing kids in foster care doesn't FIX school attendance, it actually makes it much much worse.
    - Group Homes with on grounds schools no longer exist and even when this was an option, their education was minimal.
    - First and foremost, child welfare work is about safety and risk. Truancy is NOT a safety concern with teenagers who are choosing not to attend school.

Local strategies:

1. We find ***success*** when school partners and families reach out proactively for help. And we find ***success*** when we serve them in a strengths-based way. Our schools are our partners, and we do not make this work more complicated for them.
2. I supervise a team ***outside*** of the child welfare office focused on ***community supports***. We worked closely with our behavioral health partners who manage the Student Assistance Program within schools. We use some child welfare funding for higher risk situations, and now our 43 public school districts and 27 charters and cyber charters can reach out for help for families who might need help at home. As

a Community Based Attendance Improvement option, IF school partners can identify families who have barriers to positive school attendance AND those families WANT help outside of school buildings, our Resource Navigation Hub (formerly known as Focus on Attendance) can introduce services to support them.

3. We also created an Adjudication Alternative at the Magisterial District Court level and embedded resource support inside of our 46 courtrooms. I helped to develop this team **outside** of our child welfare office and they manage all truancy citation notices and at truancy citation **hearings** in Allegheny County. Our judges now have more tools in their toolboxes and can encourage participation in **helpful** supports.

4. As an example of a drilling down to root causes and offering solutions, I've attached "Appendix A" to my testimony below from colleagues at the Homeless Children's Education Fund who share more about how a service focused on homelessness & education influences positive change.

Recommendations:

- Support more efforts **at the school** level to encourage them to develop and use their own **School Based** Attendance Improvement programs that increase parent engagement and create a positive culture around school attendance. This work is about addressing the root cause of school absences and encouraging schools and parents to work together. No one student or family is the same. ANY REFERRAL FOR A HELPFUL SERVCE can be considered a school or community based attendance improvement program. There is no one-size-fits-all government service that can magically fix this issue for the schools.

- Understand the difference between chronic absence and truancy. It is not the same thing and teases out the community concerns, policies and practices that contribute to school absence.

- Stop the practice of sending every truancy citation notice to the local child welfare organization. The large majority of the truancy citation hearings are dismissed. Every hearing notice sent to the local child welfare organization is an allegation of child abuse. And alleging child abuse with a hearing notice is like finding someone guilty of a crime before a fair and impartial hearing. It's backwards......and just feeds into the negative and punitive thinking. It's just wrong.

- Our collective practices – with ALL STAKEHOLDERS – will be more successful if we focus on proactive family engagement and school stability.

- And finally, align state recommendations with **a strengths-based** internal dialog, not a compliance-based assumption of wrong-doing. We want to encourage engagement with families.

- Remember - Parents love their children.

Director of Community Engagement
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Re: testimony for PA General Assembly Subcommittee Hearing on Chronic Absence

It surprises almost no one that Pennsylvania's homeless students are chronically absent from school at rates far higher than the general student population (**54% of homeless students** vs **approx. 22% all students**). Similarly, if I have been doing my job at all, it hopefully will surprise few of you that each year, a greater and greater share of our total student population in Pennsylvania is identified as homeless **(41,442 students enrolled in preK-12 identified as homeless in school year 22-23**, and **34,043 in school year 21-22**, each a record high at the time).

The reasons these students miss school more often are probably less thoroughly understood by many, although ChatGPT seems to have an excellent grasp of the situation and was able to list most of the following when prompted, all of which I can confirm as accurate from 8+ years of experience:

- **Disruptive Crises and Emergencies**
  Losing housing is an emergency that usually demands all of a parent's attention. Whether due to domestic violence or eviction, parents keep their kids close when they are alone in the midst of an unexpected crisis, and with many families moving multiple times in a year, school absences add up.
- **Lack of Reliable Transportation**
  Although the federal McKinney-Vento Act mandates school-of-origin transportation, implementation is often delayed due to lack of resources, and students almost always miss days or weeks of school waiting for schools to set up new transportation routes to accommodate them.
- **Health and Hygiene Barriers**
  Without stable housing, students may lack access to showers, clean clothing, or a healthy home environment. This leads to embarrassment, bullying, and chronic health problems like asthma that discourage or prevent school attendance altogether.
- **Mental Health and Trauma**
  Housing instability is traumatic. Many homeless students struggle with anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Without adequate social support, school can be overwhelming and unmanageable.

- **Lack of Awareness of Rights and Supports**
  Families and youth often don't know that they have the right to enroll immediately in school, remain in their school of origin, or receive transportation. When schools do not proactively offer these supports, students miss time as parents in crisis try to figure out what to do.
- **Responsibilities Beyond Their Age**
  Unaccompanied homeless youth, and even those with families, may be caring for younger siblings, working to help with income, or navigating social services on their own. These adult responsibilities force them to prioritize survival over schooling.
- **Lack of Required Documentation**
  Homeless students often lack proof of residency, immunization records, or prior transcripts. While federal law allows immediate enrollment, many districts still delay or deny access, resulting in missed days or even weeks.
- **Breakdowns in Communication**
  Families without stable internet, phone service, or permanent addresses often miss messages about bus routes, schedules, or school events. These missed connections lead to missed days.

I share these challenges to hopefully emphasize two things: 1 is that the student groups with the highest rates of chronic absence are usually facing challenges beyond their family unit's ability to control or effectively manage. 2 is that, because of 1, chronic absence for a huge number of students in our state is not a behavioral problem that can be fixed with stricter disciplinary interventions.

We can't materialize a bus route for a kid whose mom can't drive him to school with stricter attendance policies.

What we can do:

- We can work to improve relationships between schools and communities/families so that parents see school staff as people they can turn to for help in a crisis, rather than adversaries.
- We can make sure that our schools are sufficiently funded to provide flexible transportation options when needed
- We can maintain adequate social work and attendance staff who proactively work with families to meet their needs when they notice them missing school.
- We can explore innovative options like investing in dedicated homeless outreach staff who work to support each district's most complex family cases.

Because it's the students and families with the highest needs who are missing the most school. If we can move the needle on attendance rates for them, the rest should be easy.