



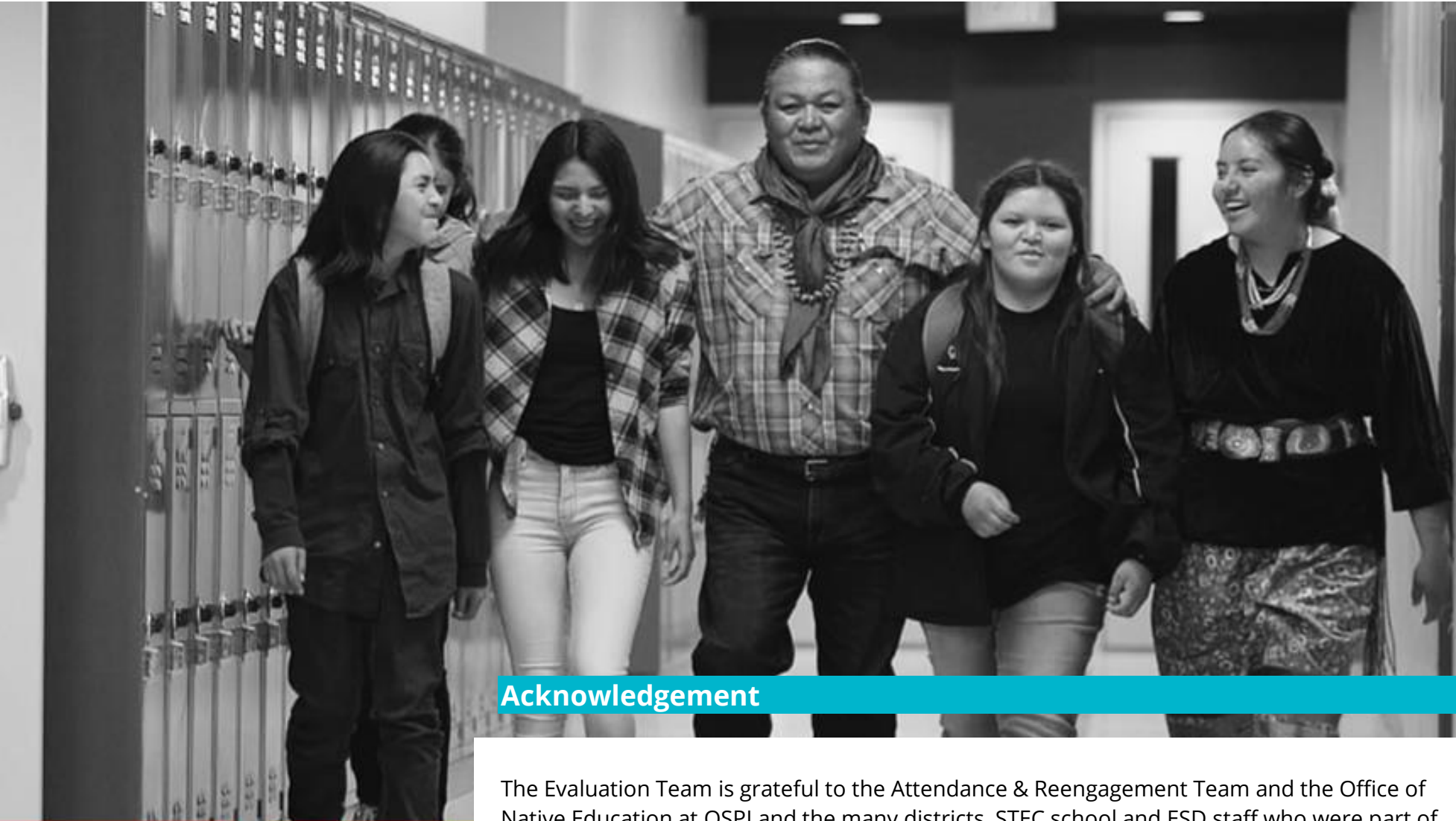
# STEC Schools

ESSER ATTENDANCE & REENGAGEMENT EVALUATION CASE STUDY

*IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE OFFICE OF SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION (OSPI)*

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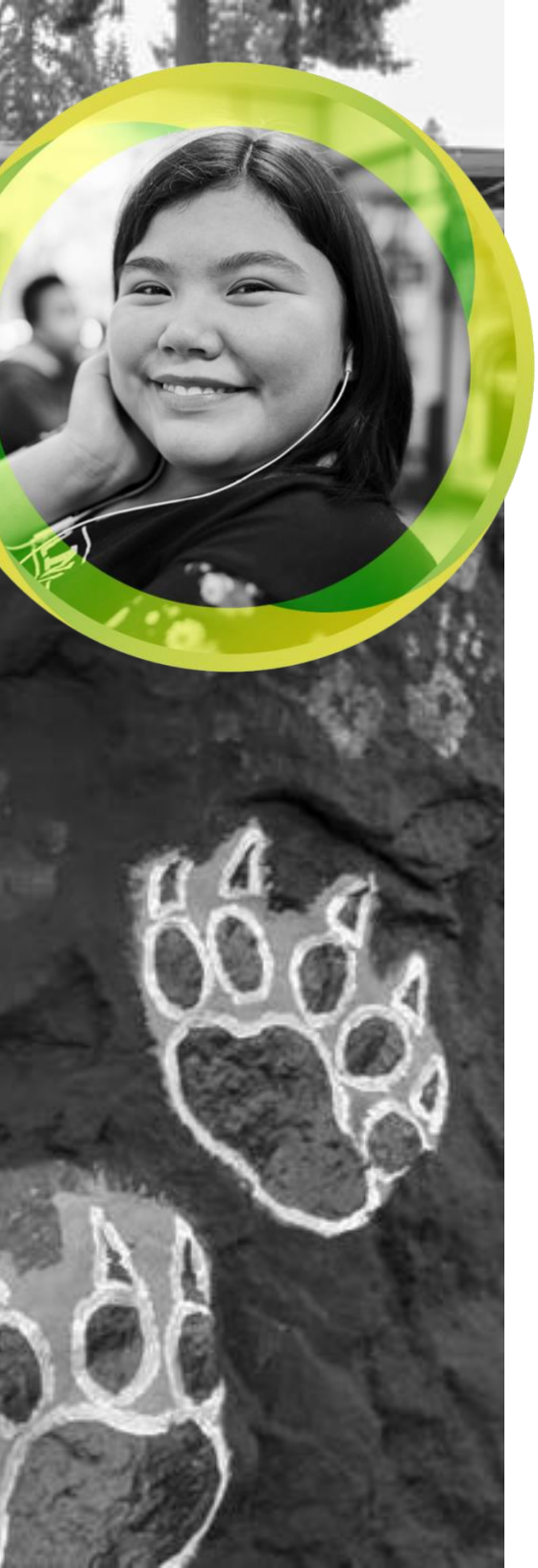
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## Acknowledgement

The Evaluation Team is grateful to the Attendance & Reengagement Team and the Office of Native Education at OSPI and the many districts, STEC school and ESD staff who were part of the Attendance & Reengagement Project Evaluation. We also appreciate the students and families who shared their experiences and perspectives in their schools, and who are helping to inform future attendance and reengagement efforts.

Special thanks to the project partners who collaborated with the Evaluation Team on this case study of participating STEC schools and helped to make the site visits possible. We are honored and grateful to have had the chance to help tell the story of their work.



## ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project Background

From late 2021 to June 2024, the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Association of Educational Service Districts (AESD) led the **Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund Attendance & Reengagement Project** in partnership with **Educational Service Districts (ESDs), school districts and State-Tribal Education Compact (STEC) schools across the state**. The Attendance & Reengagement Project sought to address the crisis of engagement and disengagement students experienced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly students and families furthest from educational justice. The project aimed to expand attendance and reengagement supports across the education system by increasing staff capacity for direct service reengagement supports (e.g., case management and group supports for students) and building or enhancing school and district systems (e.g., attendance teams, tiered interventions, actionable data). The project included 23 school district grantees (“priority districts”), 57 school districts that received ESD support, including ESD direct service staff and/or system-building support (“focus districts”), six STEC schools and nine ESDs.

## STEC Schools Case Study

This case study, focused on six STEC schools, illustrates all components of STEC schools’ work through the Attendance & Reengagement Project, including **individualized support to students** and **attendance system-building efforts**.

**This is one of six case studies that are part of the ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project Evaluation, conducted by the Evaluation Team at Puget Sound Educational Service District and in partnership with the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.** The Attendance & Reengagement Project partners selected these case studies to illustrate a range of ways the project was implemented in districts and State Tribal Education Compact (STEC) schools across the state. These case studies are intended to complement the statewide evaluation and results (final report available December 2024) to provide examples of how systems were built and strengthened, and students were served, with support from this project. The case study highlights common themes and efforts across all STEC schools



throughout all the components of their work, including individualized support to students and attendance system-building efforts.

## STEC CONTEXT

**To honor the government-to-government relationship between the state and tribes, the Washington State Legislature passed Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 1134 in 2013.** The bill authorizes the Superintendent of Public Instruction to enter into state-tribal education compacts (STEC) with federally recognized tribes or Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools to implement a school in their community. Schools are operated according to the terms of the state-tribal education compact.<sup>1</sup>

**Due to the individual nature of the compacts, the context of each school differs greatly.** The grade levels offered at each school vary, some offering only elementary or only secondary, while some schools offer preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Enrollment requirements also vary by school. Some schools are considered “choice” schools where enrollment is open to anyone in their community, while schools that receive BIE funding require students to be enrolled tribal members or descendants of a federally recognized tribe.

**Chief Kitsap Academy, Chief Leschi Schools, Lummi Nation Schools, Muckleshoot Tribal Schools, Wa He Lut Indian School and Yakama Nation Tribal Schools participated in the ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project.** All six schools participated in the evaluation and are represented in the case study.

## Methods

### CO-DESIGN OF STEC SCHOOLS EVALUATION

**The Evaluation Team at PSED co-designed the evaluation in partnership with each of the STEC schools.** Evaluation co-design, often also referred to as participatory evaluation, is a process which “invites participants to take part in the defining, questioning, and analysis of their own program experience.”<sup>2</sup> The co-design process is rooted in relationship-building and a

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<sup>1</sup> [State-Tribal Education Compact Schools \(STECs\) \(ospi.k12.wa.us\)](https://ospi.k12.wa.us)

<sup>2</sup> Odera, E. L. (2021). Capturing the Added Value of Participatory Evaluation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, Th42(2), 201-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214020910265>



strengths-based lens and is intended to honor tribal sovereignty and create an evaluation plan that captures the stories, experiences, goals and priorities of each school.

The schools' representative staff, often attendance teams or an attendance lead, steered the focus of the evaluation and its associated data collection activities to best reflect their school's guiding values and focus of their work. Throughout the fall and winter of 2022, the Evaluation Team and OSPI met with individual STEC schools to ask about their work, the data collection they were most interested in doing and the processes that would be most helpful for them their work. From these conversations, an evaluation plan was developed with each school.

## DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES


**In 2022-23, five of six schools participated in the evaluation. The Evaluation Team facilitated site visits at four schools and remotely interviewed an attendance team member from one school.** Site visit activities varied by school. They included conversations with project staff and school administrators at all sites, and interviews with students and teachers at two sites. One school facilitated student-led interviews about their experiences at school. Three schools elected to participate in the direct service reporting for students receiving individualized support (hereafter referred to 'direct service data'). Direct service data was also reported by district and ESD staff, and includes student-level data on student demographics, positive experiences in school, reasons for disengagement, barriers to reengagement and their progress toward reenrollment.<sup>3</sup> One school distributed a family survey in spring 2023 (referred to hereafter as "family survey").<sup>4</sup> One school reported quantitative attendance and academic outcome data, and one school reported case management data.

**In 2023-24, all six schools participated in the evaluation. The Evaluation Team facilitated site visits at three schools, and remotely interviewed an attendance team member at one school.** Site visit activities varied by school and included conversations with project staff and school administrators at all sites and in one instance included interviewing students and teachers. One school facilitated student-led interviews about their experiences at school. Two

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<sup>3</sup> For the 2022-2023 direct service report, there was data available for 140 students. Not every student had data reported for each section (i.e., student demographics, positive experiences in school, etc.) The percentages throughout this case study include the number of students for whom data was provided in the respective section.

<sup>4</sup> A total of 16 families responded to the family survey. Not every respondent answered every question. The percentages throughout this case study include number of respondents who answered the question.



schools elected to participate in the direct service reporting for students receiving individualized support (hereafter referred to 'direct service data').<sup>5</sup> In Spring 2024, two schools participated in a survey about their attendance efforts (referred to hereafter as "end of grant survey")<sup>6</sup>, and two schools reported attendance and academic outcome data.

## DATA ANALYSIS

**In 2022-23, many schools focused their work and evaluation interests on learning why students and families were engaged or disengaged in school.** As part of the co-design process, the evaluation questions and site visit protocols reflected this interest. The interviews and site visit conversations were recorded by the Evaluation Team, transcripts were created of the recordings and used to analyze the identified reasons for students' disengagement and engagement. The reasons were organized according to the speaker's role (students, teacher, attendance team member) and grouped together into overarching themes, reflected in the Reasons for Student Engagement and Disengagement section of the case study.

**In 2023-24, the site visit and interview protocols focused on system-building and sustainability efforts and were built off data that was shared during 2022-23 site visits.** To help glean meaning from interview data, the attending Evaluation Team members debriefed following all interviews to identify preliminary key themes from each school. The key themes were then synthesized across all schools to identify high-level takeaways, which were shared with STEC representatives to ensure accurate understanding and representation of what was shared. The Evaluation Team then reviewed all interview transcripts, identified details to expand on within the high-level takeaways and incorporated relevant quotes into a detailed draft to share with STEC representatives for any feedback. (Note that quotes are attributed to general role groups, such as teacher or attendance team member to protect anonymity.) Next, the Evaluation Team incorporated any feedback from the site into the final case study. The Evaluation Team analyzed and incorporated any additional quantitative data from 2022-23 and 2023-24 throughout the case study.

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<sup>5</sup> For the 2023-2024 direct service report, there was data available for 70 students. Not every student had data reported for each section (i.e., student demographics, positive experiences, etc.) The percentages throughout this case study include the number of students for whom data was provided in the respective section.

<sup>6</sup> A total of four staff from two schools participated in the end of grant survey. The percentages throughout this case study represent the number of staff who answered the relevant question.



## Staffing and Leadership

### STAFFING

**Although staffing structures varied at each school, all schools hired new staff or provided existing staff with stipends to support attendance and reengagement efforts.** Staff focused on providing direct services to students most disengaged from school, as well as improving school-wide system-building efforts.

**Teachers and attendance team members expressed the importance of having a position dedicated to building and maintaining relationships with families and providing them with individualized support.** Teachers expressed a preference for a “Home Liaison” position that focuses on providing case management services to families, including assisting with transportation, doing home visits and connecting families to resources. In addition to providing direct services, attendance teams emphasized the positive impact of having a dedicated staff member coordinating attendance system-building efforts, especially related to coordinating attendance teams, utilizing attendance data and coordinating external partnerships.


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*“[Our Attendance & Reengagement Specialist] has impacted the whole attendance process immensely. Her position has helped step in with working with the attendance team when needed, talking to families and communicating with teachers and administrators.” – Attendance Team Member*

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**Staff shared that it was important to have someone step into that role, help them “push the norm” on attendance approaches and have the capacity to implement necessary changes.** One major change that was emphasized by school staff is their regular use of attendance data to guide their work. As a result of the Attendance & Reengagement Project, staff began collecting data most relevant to their attendance efforts, including tracking successful contact points with families, counting sent nudge letters, creating case management data processes and collecting data directly from students and their families. They also began regularly using data to guide their work by adding data monitoring as a regular meeting agenda item and documenting processes for accessing several types of data. From the end of





grant survey, on average, staff “agreed” that their schools were improving in utilizing attendance data in their work.

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*“Without [our Attendance & Reengagement Specialist], I don’t know where we would be with tracking students’ attendance, so the data that she inputs to me is amazing. To be able to go in there and see who’s in the red, who we need to focus on... I know exactly where we are and who we need to talk to.” – Attendance Team Member*

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**School staff agreed that staff doing attendance and engagement work must be from the community itself or have been in their position long enough to have built trusting relationships with the community.** They shared that for many families, but especially for Native families, mistrust with school systems runs deep and it takes extra time and effort to prove to students and families that staff understand their culture, the community’s context and that they have their best interests at heart. They recommend that new staff spend time in community and at places where families will be, like community centers, coastal Jams and other community events, in order to build authentic relationships.

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*“People are starting to realize now that...we’re coming to your house. We do want to help you. But we do have the expectation that you do come to school. You know, we’re not going to come out there screaming or yelling at your or anything like that. And not only that, being with an elder is, that is pretty good too because just the respect that they get within the community.”– Attendance Team Member*

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**Although longevity in the community was a critical component to the work, staff turnover continues to be a challenge in STEC schools.** Some schools are also losing their Attendance & Reengagement Specialists providing direct services after the 2023-24 school year because grant funding is ending. They have expressed the negative impact of staff turnover on their relationships with families and creating sustainable attendance systems. Two schools who participated in the end of grant survey, “somewhat agreed” that turnover in 2023-24 had been a challenge in building relationships with students and families as well as with other tribal departments (behavioral health, housing, etc.).



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*"Turnover is a challenge. We're going to lose our current attendance person and so we are always... you take two steps forward and then three steps back... always having to retrain, always having to start from zero. And that is extremely frustrating."- Attendance Team Member*

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## LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

### **A key factor to the STEC schools' success has been support from their leadership.**

Participants shared that strong guidance from the schools' leadership helps create consistency in the goals and messaging related to attendance and sends the message to staff, students and community members that attendance is a priority.

**Participants also shared the importance of school leadership being immersed in the community, working to build relationships with families and learning the culture if they're not familiar.** Participants recommend that school leadership attend community events, learn the tribes' teaching and values and greet students in the mornings and throughout the day.

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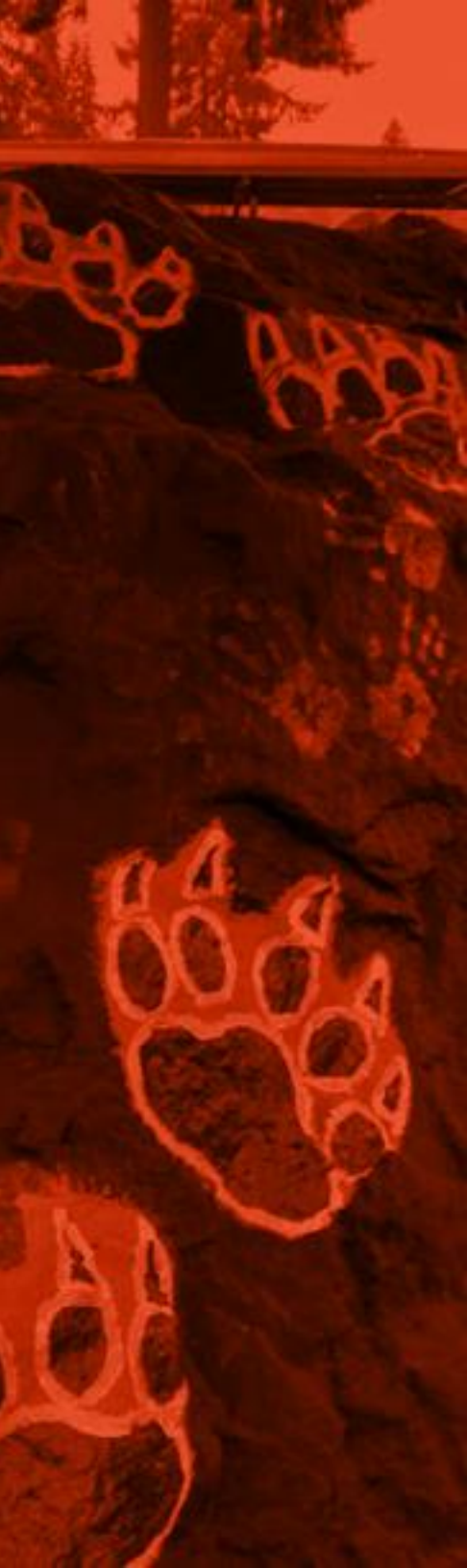
*"My hopes for new administration would be the relationship building... getting out into your communities, knowing and understanding the diversity of the population of students that you work with and always being inclusive in everything that we do.... definitely people don't understand like the patience it takes to come into a new community and like the relationships...you literally have to put in so much work." - Teacher*

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High turnover in school leadership and administrators has been a barrier to relationship building within the community and expectation setting for staff. STEC staff shared that leadership instability at STEC schools has a greater impact than at traditional districts because of their small size and the shared responsibilities among staff.

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*"I think that one of the biggest challenges that kind of affected everything we do is just the instability of leadership... you know when you have [leadership] change it just affects the building and you know, we're the district where they're housed, right? [They're] across the hall from where I'm sitting right now, it's not one of these things to where you're you always hear*



*that term 'they're at the district office'. Well, we don't, they're right here. So it affected things hard." – Attendance Team Member*

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Participants also shared a desire for greater accountability from their school's leadership, especially related to delegating and following through with attendance responsibilities and building relationships with students and community members.

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*"I think it has to do with our leadership. For people to come here and feel welcome...[admin] would stand out there at the gate [saying] 'Good morning! Good morning, parents'...I like my kid coming here because they make my kid feel welcome." – Teacher*

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## Reasons for Student Engagement and Disengagement

**In 2022-23, many of the schools focused on learning about students' reasons for engagement and disengagement from school as a way to understand and improve their experiences in school.** Many staff collected this data as a part of their direct service work providing individualized supports to students who were most disengaged. In 2022-23, three schools decided to report direct service data, and in 2023-24, two schools decide to collect and report direct service data. This information, as well as the data collected from student, teachers and attendance team interviews in 2022-23, are reflected in the following section.

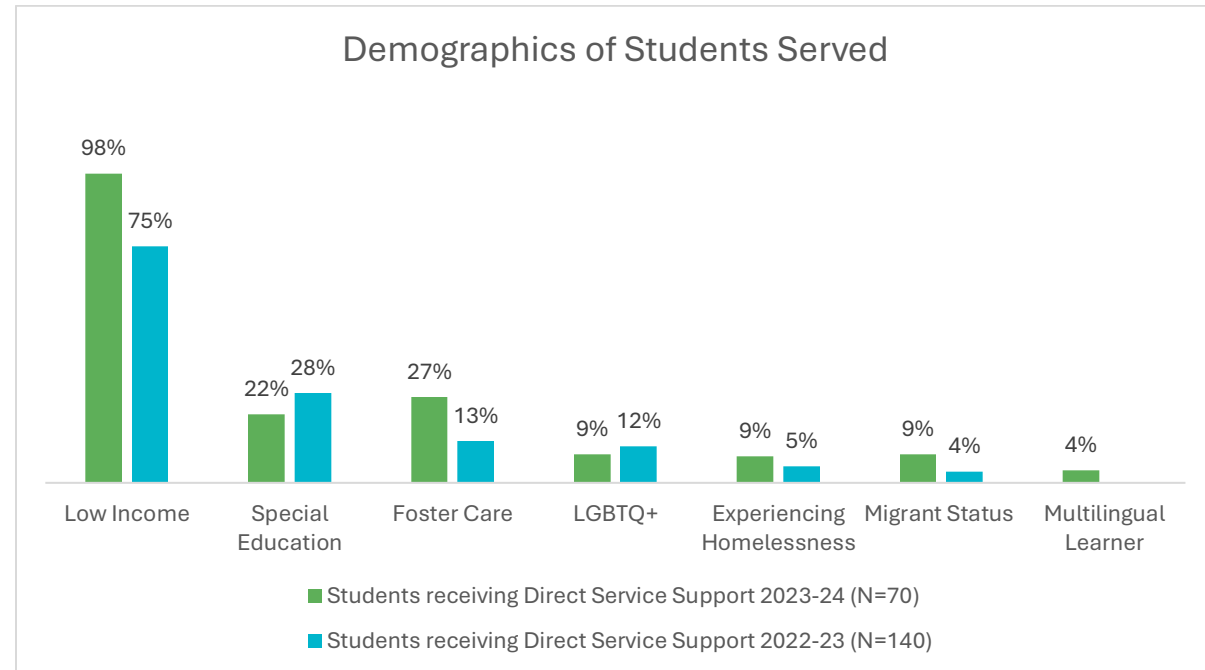
**Of the students for whom direct service was collected, 81% of students identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native in 2022-23. In the following year, 100% of students identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native.** In 2022-23, 20% of students identified as two or more races, 6% identified as White, 1% identified as Hispanic/Latino of any race(s) and 1% identified as Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander.

Direct service reporting included race/ethnicity data collected in a way that allows for maximum identification, meaning that students who identify with more than one racial/ethnic group are represented in each of those groups (e.g., Bi/Multicultural, or Hispanic/Latino of any race). Of those who identify with more than one category in 2022-23, the most common racial/ethnic categories are:

- American Indian/Alaskan Native: 104 students

- White: 12 students
- Black/African American: 8 students

**The majority of students in both years were identified as low-income.** In 2022-23, 75% of students identified as low-income and in 2023-24, 98% of students were identified as low-income.



### PEER RELATIONSHIPS

**“Being with friends” was a positive experience at school for 79% of students included in direct service data in 2022-23, and 71% of students in 2023-24.** Student perspectives across all participating schools reflected similar themes, sharing that they go to school to see their friends and they enjoy being around other Native students who they can relate to. Students found it easier to make friends at STEC schools and some shared that the environment was more positive and supportive compared to non-STEC schools they had attended.

An elementary student shared *“[my school is] really special to me cause... if you’re Native you can come over here and have tons of fun with the other Native kids.”* They shared that their



relationships with their peers relate to the small school and class sizes, which help create a sense of community.

Teachers also noticed that students had a greater sense of belonging at the STEC school than they had in previous non-STEM schools, one saying *“I do a questionnaire and one of the questions on there...is “why did you come here to [our] school? And a lot of the kids’ responses is ‘I feel I’m with my tribe, I’m with the people that accept me for who I am. I’m getting noticed and teachers are actually helping me’. And all of that I felt like everything that I was reading... [other schools] look at Native kids as not a value.”*

## CULTURE

**Students, teachers and attendance team members emphasized the important role that integrating Native culture throughout the school plays in student engagement.** Students shared their love of the cultural activities at their school, like opening the week with traditional music and dance, having wood carving classes or berry-picking field trips. One teacher shared that the goal is to empower students through cultural activities, saying *“that is what we believe, that is what we really want, like holding them up and giving them the space, but also like putting the drum in their hand teaching them to take a lead of this song.”*

Staff shared various ways they center their culture into the school, including having traditional language classes; having consistent times for all students to sing, dance and drum together; opportunities to make their regalia; and centering traditional values. Staff have seen the positive impact of these activities on the students’ engagement.

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*“[Our teacher] has even opened up the kids bringing in their own drums and things like that, and for them to sing along at the Circles. And I think that’s helped us, well, getting kids more excited about Circle. It’s really cool seeing these [students] have their drums in their backpack...It’s really cool [seeing] them getting excited.” – Attendance Team Member*

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School staff have noticed that students were missing school often for cultural activities, like fishing or pow-wows, and many schools implemented or updated school policies to recognize those activities as excused absences and even give them opportunities to earn school credit for them.



Many participants shared that families often devalue and are disengaged from the school system because of trauma they experienced while in school. Staff also shared that incorporating culture is an important way to build relationships with families and work to show families that things will be different for their student.

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*“If Grandma had a negative experience with school, then she might not be the most supportive person to be going to school, right? So understanding that and how they can... instead of being...like this mindset of ‘well, I don't know why their grandma would not want them to come to school’, right? You have this understanding of like ‘that's what happened and I can see that...’ I think it's really rehabilitative to show Grandma as well that the school isn't like that anymore, right, that this is very different that we're very centered on them, very centered on the culture in a very positive way. So I think it's good for them and also good for families” – Attendance Team Member*

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## RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT


**Students, teachers and attendance team members also shared that students are more engaged in an environment with individualized support and flexibility.** Students appreciated opportunities to get 1-on-1 support from teachers and build relationships with them. Direct service data showed that their classes were a positive experience in school for 47% of students in 2022-23 and 17% of students in 2023-24. Students felt frustrated and shared it was hard to stay engaged with school when their teachers didn't have the capacity to support them.

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*“[I'm] going to like one teacher, they'll be like ‘oh I gotta help this person right now, so you gonna have to come back at the end of the day’. So I gotta come back at the end of the day and there's like more than one person in there and... so she told everyone to come back at the end of the day to get help.” – Student*

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Staff also emphasized that family obligations, like taking care of siblings or having to attend funerals, are the priority for many Native families, which can often lead to disengagement from school. Staff noted the importance of being flexible to students' home obligations, and to build family buy-in for school. In 2022-23, “having other responsibilities” was a common reason



for disengagement for 49% of students included in direct service data and 11% of students in 2023-24. The direct service data also indicated that 64% of students in 2022-23 and 63% of students in 2023-24 identified “their home life making it difficult to attend school”.

Teachers and attendance team members observed this as well, commonly sharing that lack of family buy-in and lack of transportation are common barriers for Native students, especially at STEC schools where students may live much farther away from their schools than students attending traditional districts. Because of this, staff shared the importance of building relationships with students and families, and being flexible so that students are able to honor their obligation to their family while still engaging in learning. In the family survey, 23% of respondents suggested “more personal check-ins/support from teachers and other staff” as a way to improve their child’s attendance or the attendance of other children in the community. One teacher shared that a student was behind on credits because they had to be home to take care of their grandfather, but the school was able to help get them caught up by providing opportunities to complete work at home and even present work remotely

## MENTAL HEALTH AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

**Students, teachers and attendance staff noticed that students struggling with mental health is a common barrier to school engagement.** Direct service data identified health issues as a common reason for student disengagement for 61% of students in 2022-23. In 2023-24 direct service data, 37% of students had records of mental health issues as a reason for disengagement, while 19% of students identified physical health issues as reason for disengagement. Schools are responding by implementing talking circles and mental health groups, and staff have noticed an increase in attendance on days those supports are offered.

In the family survey, 38% of families shared that their child was experiencing physical health problems and 19% shared that their child was experiencing mental health problems. When asked how the school could improve their child’s attendance or the attendance of other children in the community, 23% suggested increasing access to services to support mental or physical health.

## SPORTS

**Sports, especially basketball, also play an important role in students’ engagement at many of the STEC schools.** Direct service data also showed that “participating in sports or other afterschool activities” as a common positive experienced in school for 47% of students in



2022-23 and 21% of students in 2023-24. Students shared that they know their attendance at school is required in order to play, and some shared that their coach will check attendance daily to hold students accountable.

## System Building

### ATTENDANCE TEAMING

**Many STEC schools built strong internal collaboration systems and attribute their success improving student attendance and engagement to that cohesion.** Attendance teams that collaborated well had regular attendance meetings with consistent agendas and expectations for their time together, and a shared vision for the work. They also recommended larger attendance teams so that each staff member would have fewer responsibilities and not feel pulled in as many directions. Attendance team members consisted of a variety of positions, including teachers, parent liaisons, attendance mentors, reengagement coordinators, school resources officers and staff from other tribal departments. Some teams also met regularly with non-school staff, like the school board to share updates and collaborate on tribal-wide efforts.


**Attendance teams who shared they struggled with internal collaboration had trouble with communication, felt pulled in too many directions, had high staff turnover and needed more guidance and support from their school leadership.** Participants shared that these factors create more singular issues, like needing to re-train staff often or causing stress from their workload, but they also contribute to a school-wide culture that dissuades collaboration and encourages frustration. Students from one school also shared that they can tell when staff aren't on the same page or collaborating well and that creates additional barriers for them to get the support they need and that their parents have been frustrated with the inconsistent communication from staff.

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*"Staff have to be able to work together to work in the building because adults, can be... pretty interesting sometimes with working with each other and stuff so that can cause a lot of problems within your own system... So if you can have a good healthy environment, that's very helpful too." – Attendance Team Member*

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**Attendance teams also shared that their efforts became more effective when they had buy-in from all school staff and not just those focusing on attendance-specific efforts.** Some attendance teams focused on collaborating with staff in a strategic way, getting buy-in from each position. They also incorporated attendance work into existing efforts, like Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS), which helped get teachers on board with the work in a way that didn't feel like they were giving them additional responsibilities.

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*"The consistency, the flexibility within the staff...not just from the kids but the buy-in from the staff as well and a lot of this wouldn't be possible if everybody or most of everybody wasn't bought in and willing to be flexible here and there because there's different things that just come up and we have to rely on someone." – Attendance Team Member*

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*"Better than last year with buy in with all staff instead of just certain staff. We were very intentional with having a small meetings with like custodians, bus drivers and then the rest of the teachers." – Attendance Team Member*

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## **TIER 1 EFFORTS**


**As a whole, STEC attendance teams have worked to build an environment where students feel they belong at school, are invested in their own attendance and building good attendance habits.** Rather than shame students for missing school, staff rewarded students who did attend and created an environment they wanted to be a part of.

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*"We make it exciting to come to school instead of a bad thing that you didn't. And the kids can tell when you care, when you truly care about them, they can totally tell. And that's when they build a relationship with you and have more buy-in." – Attendance Team Member*

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To do this, many teams implemented attendance incentives, such as class competitions, prize carts, recognition assemblies and other rewards. Some schools also used attendance-based incentives and messaging through other through positive school culture initiatives already in place, like MTSS and PBIS. Staff shared this has had an overwhelmingly positive impact on



students' attendance and anticipate it will set expectations for the students' attendance that will build good habits for their future.

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*"The kids always say, 'I did it!' They take a lot of pride in it. They earned it. They own it. And they're proud. When the team gets together and we celebrate [the students], it makes a big difference for them." – Attendance Team Member*

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Attendance team members shared that their efforts to improve school culture around attendance has not only improved students' individual attendance but has created a culture where students are encouraging their peers to attend as well. An attendance team member shared *"I've noticed other kids in the class...they're like praising [another student] for being here. 'Yeah, you're here. That's great. We're glad you're here'... sometimes they're calling a kid like, 'no, we're going on this field trip tomorrow or we miss you,' or they're asking their teacher to call home to check on the kid."*

Some staff shared that it's important to recognize that many Native students are taught not to center themselves or their accomplishments and may be uncomfortable receiving public acknowledgement. For that reason, they suggested allowing students to choose how they'd like to be acknowledged. One teacher shared their strategy, *"I always tell those new teachers, so you just [say], 'Good job. I'm glad you're here.' I don't need to tell the whole class, but in a small moment. Thank you for being here today. It shows in your grades."*

Participants also emphasized the importance of centering the students' and the tribe's cultures in creating a positive school climate and keeping students and families engaged. Attendance team members, teachers and students shared the positive impact on students' engagement and sense of belonging in school when their culture is integrated throughout the schools' curriculum and day-to-day activities. See Reasons for Student Engagement and Disengagement section for additional information on centering culture throughout STEC schools.

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*"[Community members] don't feel like part of part of the school at different districts. When they come to tribal school, [their culture] is not as looked at as "off" or different and so they're*



*more accepted and they're able to feel more comfortable... they're in this school with their peers. But they're able to just, like, go to school, right?" - Attendance Team Member*

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## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT**

**STEC schools have also been focusing on family engagement efforts to improve the school's relationships with family and community members and to communicate expectations around their students' attendance.** Participants shared that many families in the community are mistrustful of school staff because of their own traumatic experiences in school, or because of negative experiences with school staff in their students' previous schools. Attendance team staff are working to build trusting and authentic relationships with families, sharing that it takes a lot of time and intentionality to do so. They shared that families are often scared of being judged by school staff or being punished if they disclose sensitive information, so it takes time to show families that their priority is to support them.

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*"A lot of the times, the people that are in this department are people that have been here a long time and that the community does trust. [Families] know that [staff are there for them] and not just for a paycheck. [Families] like to know that [staff are] actually there for them and [they're] actually going to stay." - Attendance Team Member*

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80% of family survey respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the school staff want to build a positive relationship with them and their family, and 80% also "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that there is at least one school staff member that they are comfortable reaching out to regarding their child(ren) or family's needs.

**Schools have also worked to build relationships with families by hosting family events,** including movie nights, appreciation lunches, offering Positive Indian Parenting classes and partnering with tribal culture departments to host cultural activities and dinners for families. Although schools have seen various levels of parent engagement with these activities, many have found that offering participation incentives such as gas cards has increased engagement and attendance teams are looking to expand the types of events offered to families and offer creative incentives for participation.



**Attendance teams have focused on increasing effective communication with families to set expectations for students' attendance.** They have updated family handbooks to have consistent language on attendance policies, implemented procedures for contacting families including implementing automated call systems, sending nudge letters and using apps to make it easier for families to communicate about their students' attendance. Teachers have also started using language around attendance expectations in their syllabi. 80% of family survey respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that school staff communicate with them in an effective way, and 70% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the school consistently notified them when their child(ren) are tardy or absent.

In the end of grant survey, schools shared they were implementing and strengthening communication mechanisms with families around attendance efforts through attendance awareness campaigns, family newsletters, individualized communication (phone calls, texting, email), robocalls and communication regarding upcoming meetings or appointments (Community Engagement Board, court dates, etc.).

**Attendance staff have noticed that families have been more communicative about their child's attendance.** Although schools are still struggling to engage some of the most chronically absent families, overall families have been more likely to proactively excuse absences and communicate about reasons their student is absent. An attendance team member reflected, "*[The work] is touching the community in a way that the community is beginning to change their perception of the importance of attendance, the importance of their children attending regularly and how that impacts their learning. I'm proud of the team and the tribe's effort to put something together.*"

Another attendance team member reflected on the unique position of STEC schools to engage Native families and build a sense of community:

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*"This is an Indian school. We think differently. We feel differently. Just because the outside world has a way of doing things, that's not our way. So when children choose to come here, they're given a chance to be themselves...I've always said this school is like a cathedral to the Indian population in this little area here...those are the things that I feel in my heart to keep things going and we want to draw these parents in because of their experience with school."* - Attendance Team Member

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## PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION

### STEC PEER COLLABORATION

**Participants across STEC schools highlighted the importance of collaborating with partners outside of their own schools.** Although there were peer learning opportunities with all grantees throughout the project, STEC schools felt it would be more helpful to collaborate with their STEC peers. They felt they would be more comfortable talking through their school's challenges and better understood speaking to other staff who better understand the culture and context of their schools. One attendance team member shared *"I felt way more supported in [areas with other STEC schools]. I felt more understood, and I felt like we could be more honest about the stuff that we're actually going through. Yeah, because I think tribal schools are very, very different than public schools."* In addition to collaborating with their STEC peers, staff also shared that it would be helpful to have more specific guidance from professionals who could provide training specific to their attendance efforts and context.

### COLLABORATION WITH TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS

**Participants also shared that they rely on their own tribe's support, or support from tribes in their area, to set expectations for the community's engagement in school and connect students and families to resources.** Attendance teams shared that tribal attendance ordinances and related laws that support students' attendance are helpful in ensuring the community, including students, families and other tribal departments, are on the same page about the importance of attendance and in creating a shared vision for the work. For example, some tribes have attendance ordinances which lay out distinct steps that must be taken to support a student with chronic absenteeism that involve collaboration across school staff, court staff and other tribal departments, like behavioral health. Others have graduation requirements related to tribal employment and other benefits tribal members may receive as adults.

Many STEC schools collaborate with other tribal departments and rely on these partnerships to bring in mental and physical health services for students and families. This might include conducting home visits, providing drug and alcohol prevention services and career readiness opportunities, like having classes at the tribe's fishery. Some STEC schools are also collaborating with other tribal departments to hold their Community Engagement Board meetings. Participants shared that having staff who are from the community or have worked in other tribal departments is helpful to build sustainable and effective intratribal partnerships.



Although there were many successes in their collaborative efforts, some schools also experienced challenges in partnering with tribal governments. Schools faced barriers to building partnerships with tribes when the school itself or the attendance staff weren't directly housed within the tribe. In such cases, staff experienced challenges building trust and gaining access to the tools they needed, such as access to data systems, or support from tribal leaders. Some schools also experienced difficulties connecting students to resources when students when tribal departments could only support students who are enrolled members of that tribe or who live on the reservation.

### **ESD COLLABORATION**

Participants also talked about external supports for their attendance and reengagement efforts, especially from their Educational Service District (ESD). The Attendance & Reengagement Project supported participating schools and districts to work with their ESD.

**However, most STEC schools shared that they don't have a relationship with their ESD and didn't know there were supports available from their ESD.** Attendance team members shared that lack of trust is one barrier to working with state agencies and STEC schools are often hesitant to accept or ask for help until trust and relationships are strengthened. STEC schools' unique context also creates a barrier to receiving support from ESDs, since their policies and systems are often more aligned with the requirements set forth by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) requirements than with other schools in their region.

**One STEC school did participate in the project through their collaboration with the ESD in their region to hire and support an Attendance & Reengagement Specialist.** That relationship with the ESD was instrumental to overcoming some of the bureaucratic challenges within tribal hiring and financial procedures that were initially a barrier to their participation. The ESD also provided essential guidance on system building efforts around attendance, especially related to data collection and usage. The relationship eventually expanded beyond attendance to provide additional supports for the students, like health services.

Other STEC schools received some support from their ESD around data systems and communication. Another school shared in the end of grant survey that their ESD was very helpful in building and strengthening systems for teaming on attendance as well as in attendance policies and procedures. This school mentioned receiving one-on-one coaching or other individualized supports from their ESD as well as participating in regional trainings/convenings in their ESD region.



## Student Outcomes

### CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Two schools used rates of chronic absenteeism to understand the progress and outcomes of their attendance and reengagement work.

**One school saw a five percentage-point decrease of chronically absent students at the elementary level and a two percentage-point decrease at the secondary level from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 school year.** (This school defined chronic absenteeism as “missing 18 or more school days.”)

**Another school saw a four- percentage point decrease in average monthly rate of chronically absent students from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 school year** (with chronic absenteeism defined as missing 20% or more of school days). At this school, third grade students had the largest decrease in percent of chronically absent students during the 2023-24 school year, declining 10 percentage points from September 2023 to May 2024.<sup>7</sup>

### ATTENDANCE RATES

**One school monitored average daily attendance and perfect attendance to understand the impact of their work and saw increased attendance on both measures.** Average daily attendance increased about three percentage points from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 school year. There was also a 24 percentage-point increase in students with perfect attendance from the 2022-23 to 2023-24 school year. Perfect attendance also increased from 24 students in May 2023 to 41 students in May 2024 (perfect attendance has exceptions for excused absences such as doctor’s appointments, cultural reasons and family emergencies).

**Another school also monitored attendance rates from 2020 through 2024. Attendance rates increased approximately 5 percentage points from the 2021-22 to 2022-2023 school year.** As of February 2024, there was a four percentage-point increase in attendance from the 2022-23 year to 2023-24 school year.

### REENROLLMENT

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<sup>7</sup> Only percentages, and not N values, are available from this school.

**Among the 12 unenrolled students for whom direct service data was reported in 2022-23, four reenrolled in an educational pathway,** including the Open Doors Youth Reengagement Program and a comprehensive school.

**Out of the 13 unenrolled students in the 2023-2024 direct service data, two reenrolled in an educational pathway.**<sup>8</sup> One student reenrolled in an alternative school.

## ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

**In the 2022-23 school year, one school saw an eight percentage-point increase in their graduation rate and an eight percentage-point increase in number of students with a 2.5 GPA or higher from the previous year.**

## Looking Ahead

**Attendance teams have seen some of their most significant improvements in staff-buy in for attendance-focused work, and plan on continuing to promote a culture of strong attendance by sharing data back with teachers, continuing Tier 1 efforts such as PBIS and classroom competitions and updating attendance policies.** Attendance teams are also collaborating with staff to explore ways to sustain attendance throughout the year, and not experiences “dips” in attendance at certain points in the year, like after a sport season ends.

Although some schools continue to face high staff turnover, many schools shared plans for their attendance-focused positions to continue in their role through creative avenues like tribes continuing to fund the Attendance & Reengagement Project-funded staff or hiring for a similar position. Schools also plan on incorporating attendance focused work with other mental health and behavioral health initiatives and funding sources at their school.

Additionally, in the end of grant survey, on average, staff “agreed” that their school had made an intentional effort to sustain their work as well as integrating their work into structures, processes and roles that will continue beyond the 2023-24 school year and the Attendance & Reengagement Project.

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<sup>8</sup> No educational pathway was reported for one student.





## Appendix: Co-Design Process

**In Spring 2024, the Evaluation Team asked STEC partners if they would like to give feedback on their experience co-designing the evaluation.** An attendance team member from two schools elected to give their feedback during site visits that took place in Spring 2024. Both interviewees appreciated that the co-design process was grounded in a positive and respectful relationship. One participant shared *“I’m really grateful that you guys honor this school. We do have certain staff members that do...they’re very sensitive about certain things because of history and stuff.”* Interviewees also shared that they appreciated the flexibility of the co-design process and that the evaluation was responsive to staff capacity and the focus of their work. They felt that the flexibility allowed the data collection to align closely with their implementation and focus their resources on supporting students and families.

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*“OK, we’ve had a very difficult year this year at our school and then me personally. So it’s been a harder year. So I did appreciate that flexibility. But I do think that it is something you do have to do with tribal schools because there is a lot more...I don’t know. It seems like we’re not as structured... I don’t know if the word structured that I would use, but we’re not so traditional. And so I think the fact of doing it a little bit more flexible is helpful, more responsive” – Attendance Team Member*

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Participants experienced the process to finalize the data collection activities differently. Although one staff member appreciated the flexibility, they also found the process to be too abstract at times and would have benefited from more structure in creating the evaluation plan itself. Another interviewee felt that their team had a clear vision for the data their team needed to track their work before the co-design process began and were happy to be able to use those data for the evaluation, as well as incorporate some of the tools offered by the Evaluation Team. One interviewee felt that the relationship-centered evaluation captured important parts of the school’s story that wouldn’t have otherwise been told, like centering the students’ voices, but didn’t include some important components of their work, like the amount of time spent supporting and reaching out to students and their families.