



# Tacoma Public Schools

ESSER ATTENDANCE & REENGAGEMENT EVALUATION CASE STUDY

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

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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 Tacoma Public Schools and helped to make the site visit 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.

## Tacoma School District Case Study

This case study, focused on Tacoma Public Schools, illustrates the work of building and strengthening systems in several areas:

**Teaming on Attendance (District and School)  
Implementation based on the Whole Child Principle  
District and Community Partner Collaboration  
Elevating Student and Family Voice**

**This district-level report 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 (PSESD) in partnership with OSPI.** Attendance & Reengagement Project partners selected these case studies to illustrate a range of ways the project was implemented in districts and in STEC schools across this state. These case studies are intended to complement the statewide evaluation and results (final report available



December 2024) by providing examples of how systems were built and strengthened and how students were served through support from this project.

This case study is focused on Tacoma Public Schools (also referred to as the Tacoma School District #10). The intent is to help tell the district's story of its attendance and reengagement efforts and provide some ideas and approaches that may support similar work in other contexts. This Tacoma Public Schools case study illustrates the work of building and strengthening systems in the areas of teaming on attendance at the district and school levels and implementation based on the Whole Child principle, district and community partner collaboration and elevating student and family voice.

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*"...when [the District A&R Specialist] did the survey, it said that kids care about academics, but the number one thing was relationships. [It] was the thing that they all agreed on, and even today, with the 4th and 5th graders... when we asked them, that's why they are most excited to come to school. It's the relationships. It's the belonging. So, I'm really proud of [the A&R Specialist] and the team and just our district for embracing the human side of attendance." - District Staff Interviewee*

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## District Context

### LOCATION AND SIZE

Tacoma Public Schools is a school district in Tacoma, Washington serving 28,374 students. Composed of 35 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 10 high schools and 4 early learning centers, it is the third largest school district in Washington State. Tacoma Public Schools is in the Educational Service District (ESD) 121 region.

### STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS (2023-24)<sup>1</sup>

#### RACE & ETHNICITY

- 65% Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC)
  - ◆ 23% Hispanic/Latino of any race
  - ◆ 17% More than one race
  - ◆ 13% Black/African American
  - ◆ 9% Asian
  - ◆ 4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
  - ◆ 1% American Indian/Alaska Native
- 35% White

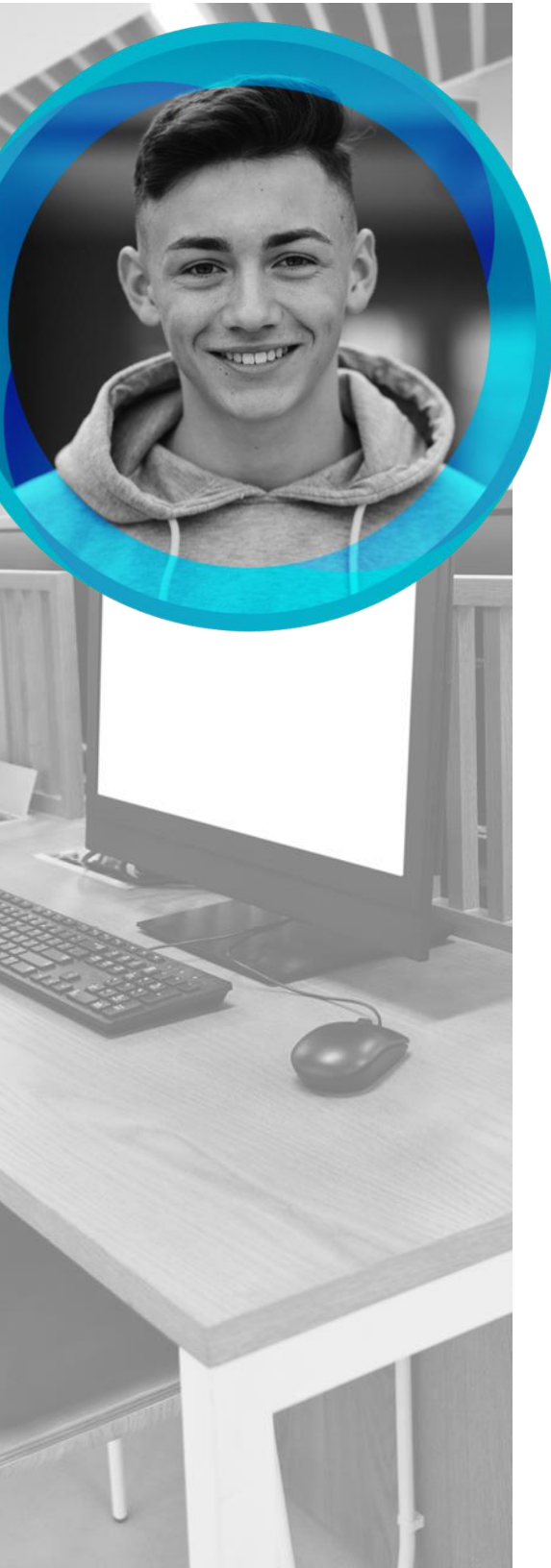
#### OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS

- 46% low-income students
- 16% students with disabilities
- 10% English language learners
- 7% students experiencing homelessness

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<sup>1</sup> Washington State Report Card.

<https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>



## REGULAR ATTENDANCE RATES<sup>2</sup>

- ◆ 2018–19 (pre-COVID) ..... 76%
- ◆ 2021–22:..... 60%
- ◆ 2022–23: ..... 62%
- ◆ 2023–24: ..... Available January 2025

## PARTICIPATION IN ESSER ATTENDANCE & REENGAGEMENT PROJECT

**Tacoma Public Schools received ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project funding in 2022-23 and 2023-24. Among its use of the investments, the district created a role dedicated to the project.** This role included working with schools to build and strengthen attendance systems. Moreover, this grant-funded role collaborated with the ESD 121 Attendance Coordinator and Reengagement Specialist in 2022-23 and 2023-24, and with other grant-funded roles in other grantee and focus districts in other ESD regions during convenings throughout the grant period.

## Methods

The Evaluation Team conducted this case study using the following methods:

- **Site visit to the district in Spring 2024 for in-person individual and group interviews with:**
  - ◆ Five members of the District Whole Child Team
  - ◆ Two elementary school staff, six middle school staff and three high school staff
  - ◆ 13 elementary, middle and high school students
  - ◆ Four community partners
- **Virtual interviews with:**
  - ◆ Two ESD 121 staff members who provided support to and worked with Tacoma School District

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<sup>2</sup> Washington State Report Card.

<https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300> Regular attendance is defined as the percent of students with fewer than two absences per month, on average.



To glean meaning from interview data, the attending Evaluation Team members debriefed following all interviews to identify preliminary key themes and synthesized them into high-level takeaways to share with the points of contact at the district 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 the district for any feedback. (Note that quotes are attributed to general role groups, such as district or school staff, or ESD staff, student interviewee or community-based organization [CBO] partner to protect anonymity.) Next, the Evaluation Team incorporated any feedback from the site into the final case study.

The Evaluation Team incorporated additional data from the district, including 2022-23 student and parent survey data and relevant communications materials on various programs. Further, the Evaluation Team also examined data from statewide data collection for the Attendance & Reengagement Evaluation, including from students and families who received direct service support and from a year-end district assessment.





## Building Systems

### WHOLE CHILD FOCUS

**The Whole Child wraps around Tacoma youth 24 hours every day- when they are home with families, during school, while participating in expanded learning opportunities and as they move about in their neighborhoods.** It takes all of us, working as a village, to ensure every student is safe, healthy, challenged, engaged and supported.

Tacoma Public Schools is dedicated to the Whole Child approach to student success and learning by recognizing that students want to be at school when they are able to form strong, trusting relationships with peers and staff. With a primary focus on students' sense of belonging and social-emotional learning, the Whole Child approach allows for an adaptive response to developing systems of intervention and prevention for supporting student attendance and reengagement.

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*"There's a heightened awareness and better understanding of a holistic vision for attendance and I love the teams because then even if the administrator changes, that work can continue."*  
- District Staff Interviewee

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*"We've worked a lot with relationships, building relationships with kids, getting kids to come to school because they know that they're missed, that we care about them, that we'll help them. And so that's one of the other reasons why we have the restorative justice class [that] is giving students voice, giving them management tools for if they have conflict, how they can deescalate those things, working [with] and leading other students. So, we want to pair those two together [restorative justice and relationship-building] then kind of increasing that care team, right? So, we have more of attendance piece."- School Staff Interviewee*

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*"And one of our equity goals too - we really want to view families as being at the table together with us. So, when we're making those attendance phone calls or that messaging, [we're] really trying to get families to understand that 'we want to work with you'. That there is no judgment...that it's more of 'how do we help you get your child to school?' And then even with our late passes, it's just 'welcome! we're glad you're here.' So, it's not like, 'oh, you're late'..."*

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*So, we try to really make sure that our messaging is working with families, it's not like we're talking at you but more of like we want to partner with you to support you and your child." – School Staff Interviewee*

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## **STAFFING FOR WHOLE CHILD SUPPORTS**

**Tacoma Public Schools has a Whole Child Team (Department) which supports district-wide and school-specific initiatives. As previously described, the district utilized Attendance & Reengagement Project funds to add an Attendance & Reengagement Specialist who led efforts to engage and reengage students, supported schools in developing or identifying relevant programs and participated in attendance teaming at specific schools.**

Having a dedicated district staff member focused on attendance and reengagement efforts and a strong proponent of the Whole Child effort was key to the district's accomplishments over the project. As a certified school counselor, the district's Attendance & Reengagement Specialist had strong connections with counselors in the schools and supported roles in attendance teams across school buildings to develop systems within an MTSS framework that supported student attendance and reengagement.

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*"I came in gentle with the school...I realize that everyone is working at capacity, and they have a lot on their plates. And so, sometimes this attendance and reengagement work can feel like an extra thing on their plate. So, it's really coming in gently and saying, 'Here's a low-level lift of something we could try, and here's how this lift is going to be in the long run', and potentially have a positive impact and lighten the load in the long run...part of my role also...[is] providing professional development and just a space for us all to grow and learn." - District Staff Interviewee*

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*"We have someone to call now and not only do we have someone to call, but we have someone who is actively wanting to come into buildings. And it's not just an e-mail of 'try this, this, and this', but it's someone who can sit down with us and say like, 'hey, here's what other schools are doing.' So, it's really nice having someone to call and not just hoping that people will reach out to you in an e-mail. So that's been huge." – School Staff Interviewee*

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**The Attendance & Reengagement Specialist collaborated with school staff and leadership in addressing school-specific needs.** Over the course of the project, the Attendance & Reengagement Specialist helped establish and supported programs such as:

- **Walking School Bus** at Birney Elementary, Fawcett Elementary, Stafford Elementary and Baker Middle School
- **Sound Bath - Mindfulness & Movement Program** at Reed Elementary and Arlington Elementary
- **Embodied Leadership Program** at Baker Middle School
- **Native Student Clubs** at Lincoln, Mount Tahoma, Tacoma School of the Arts (SOTA) and Stadium High Schools and First Creek Middle School
- **Guidance with attendance teams** at Reed Elementary, Arlington Elementary, Mann Elementary, Manitou Park Elementary, Lister Elementary, Travis Elementary, Sheridan Elementary, Whittier Elementary, Franklin Elementary, Stanley Elementary, Baker Middle, Grey Middle, Lincoln High, Mount Tahoma High, Science and Math Institute (SAMi), SOTA and School of Industrial Design, Engineering and Art (IDEA) (in 2022-23 and/or 2023-24).

The Attendance & Reengagement Specialist achieved this expansive inclusion of different and age-appropriate interventions and programming for various Tacoma schools by listening to and understanding the needs expressed by school staff, students and families. Bridging partnerships with local community organizations that demonstrate expertise in youth development was also a key component of the work.

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*“...having someone in that role of attendance to push out into the buildings and support buildings I think is key to bringing some clarity... I think for me, for people in similar roles as me at the district level, it's about building that relationship; and it was helpful that I served as a school counselor in this district prior to that role. So, like we already had some relationship there. But it's also because the school must be willing to engage with you. And that's where that relationship comes in and like when I present things to [school staff person's name], it's like I know this Sound Bath program sounds a little bit wacky or weird, but what do you think? And there's that trust in the relationship there. So, [the school counselor] says, 'yeah, let's try it.' And so, my advice for people in a similar role in other districts is really focus on that relationship.” – District Staff Interviewee*

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*"I feel like it's felt especially strong in Tacoma, and I think that's because of [the Attendance & Reengagement Specialist's] leadership... And specifically, like I think there's been a real emphasis in Tacoma around innovating some of their practices and doing things [less traditionally]." – ESD Partner*

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## SCHOOL-BASED ATTENDANCE TEAMS

**At each of the schools mentioned above, the district's Attendance & Reengagement Specialist supported the staff in creating and maintaining an Attendance Team which included staff with various roles (e.g., attendance staff, school counselors, family liaisons, social workers, teachers, admin) allowing for different ways to approach and be in relationship with families.** Attendance teams varied at each school, allowing for a more organic and humanistic approach to attendance. Each school did something different around attendance depending on the needs of their population and the status of the systems-building required to support the work. For example, Baker Middle School built a strong attendance infrastructure that includes the use of an intervention spreadsheet to track student needs; while SOTA needed more help to develop a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) structure that fits their needs even as the school staff built strong relationships with students.

Individual Tacoma schools had different iterations on the attendance team composition, with some teams larger than others. One common characteristic was the inclusion of staff who performed different roles based on the premise that students' reengagement to and attendance in school is everyone's work.

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*"When I came in, you guys were already talking about like everybody's role is so similar and also different and so being able to have [name of school social worker and name of family liaison] is like it's a game changer because I think it gives us different voices as well because we're all able to access families and different students in different ways and build relationships with them in different ways... I think that has helped us wrap around kids in a different and more effective way... [the school social worker] can speak to certain things that I can't speak to, [the family liaison] can speak to certain things that you can't. I mean it really helps us engage with different families. Different families respond differently to different approaches. And I feel like while we all have the same goal in mind, we all have different*



*approaches as well, so I think it's very helpful to have a diverse team... especially based on the diverse needs that the families have.” – School Staff Interviewee*

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## **DATA INFORMED PLANNING**

**The district’s Attendance & Reengagement Specialist worked closely with school-based staff to access and use data reports to build their capacity and support sustainability.**

Based on attendance data, schools provided attendance and reengagement support in 2022-23 and in 2023-24. The school district believed in the importance of using street data<sup>3</sup> which meant endeavoring to hear directly from students and families. The district engaged students and families via surveys and through conversations and results from the 2022-23 attendance survey were used to help with planning. By and large, hearing and amplifying student/family voice continues to be a strength and an ongoing focus for Tacoma Public Schools.

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*“When [the District Attendance & Reengagement Specialist] did the survey, it said that kids care about academics, but the number one thing was relationships. [It] was the thing that they all agreed on, and even today, with the fourth and fifth graders... when we asked them, that's why they are most excited to come to school. It's the relationships. It's the belonging. So, I'm really proud of [the A&R Specialist] and the team and just our district for embracing the human side of attendance.” – District Staff Interviewee*

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*“The Attendance Team at the [school] has utilized district support with data through an intervention tracking spreadsheet. We did have a lot of help from the district folks. Like I said one of them created this tracking spreadsheet or I think that she borrowed it from another school... but it morphed into what we now use and so I think it's made first and foremost made us just more aware of the students that are the worst offenders in terms of not coming to school. And I no longer feel blindsided when a name comes up and teachers say like 'hey, you know, what's going on?' [And I can say], 'oh yeah, I know what they have going on in the spreadsheet'. And then we've been reviewing [in our] bi-monthly meetings.” – School Staff Interviewee*

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<sup>3</sup> Safir, S. & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street Data – A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*. Thousand Oaks, CA.



## Partnerships and Collaboration

### COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS

**In addition to collaborative efforts among school staff, strong community partnerships were built for purpose beginning in 2022-23.** To support community partnerships, the district created a 'vetting process for equity' to help identify community partners that brought age-appropriate programs. Such strong school-community partners' processes included establishing communities with and for students and, when possible, included families.

**Community partnerships led to programs that were age-appropriate and representative of the students they were serving.** This included Sound Bath – a Mindfulness & Movement Program for the young students at Reed and Arlington Elementary Schools. To provide safety for young students when they go home, there was the Walking School Bus, established in partnership with the City of Tacoma and Tacoma Pierce County Health Department, at Birney Elementary, Fawcett Elementary, Stafford Elementary and Baker Middle. For young teens at Baker Middle School, there was the Embodied Leadership Program to help promote problem-solving skills and mentorship. To recognize the importance of cultural belonging, there were Native Student Clubs supported at Lincoln, Mount Tahoma, SOTA, Stadium High Schools and First Creek Middle School.

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*“One of the things early on that we were a part of with [Attendance & Reengagement Specialist] as he was looking at the partnership work and collaborations, is we had a chance to sit in and I want to say interview, but they weren't like formal interviews. Instead, getting a chance to meet the partners and then having conversations around fits and direction and those kinds of things. So, that was fun. Meeting all the different people and hearing about what they wanted to bring to kids around the engagement and attendance and then even getting to participate in [programs like] the Sound Baths. You know, be able to visit some of that programming.” – District Staff Interviewee*

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*“Especially with our community partners and being in diverse school settings, it was important that not only that they're qualified in their skill and their service, but also representative of the students that they're serving. And when that wasn't possible, just being very mindful of how to deliver it in a way that is appropriate. So, there has been community partners that we sat with and because it was pretty evident, [they] weren't thinking through things with an equity lens or*



*who was doing that work that we paused on partnering with and really focus on people that you could tell like was really invested in the work.” – District Staff Interviewee*

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Overall, community partners reported positive outlooks and experiences related to Tier 1 or Tier 2 program supports that they offered to students in collaboration with school partners.

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*“A lot of what was making the [program] work and what's worked here at [school] has been the ability to actually listen and see what's needed.” -CBO Partner*

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*“[The goal of the [program]] has been to create a safe space for the kids to be really heard and to have their voice and what's important to them be the most important thing... [the program] has just been an opportunity for them to really feel the support of an adult saying ‘hey, what is going on for you and where are you at and what matters to you?’ And being supportive, hearing them in that and if they don't want to participate, that's fine, and if they... needed extra support we were there for that.” - CBO Partner*

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*“The successes I see and just like how [students are] relating to each other because it's ultimately like, that's what it's about - it is how to create kind of a web of having folks be solid in themselves to then be able to solidly hold the networks around them and so to see the different points. I feel like that looks like the space of human connection, the space of play, this kind of laughter and also just feel the moments of success are where they also discover different ways that they can kind of transform some of their emotional landscape and pick up new tools to then be able to diffuse that.” - CBO Partner*

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## **DISTRICT/SCHOOL AND ESD PARTNERSHIP**

**Both ESD 121 and Tacoma Public Schools received funding through the Attendance & Reengagement Project.** This enabled the district to receive both system-building and direct-service supports via the ESD, and the district's schools to benefit from support offered by the district's Attendance & Reengagement Specialist. The relationship with ESD 121 changed between 2022-23 and 2023-24 as the ESD team supporting the Attendance & Reengagement Project changed in late fall 2023. While positive experiences were reported, challenges were also named. Specifically, school staff noted the difference in support received in the first



versus in the last year of the project, such as regarding learning about and codeveloping attendance tracking tools. Thus, in late spring 2024, ESD 121 responded to the need for more specific guidance on setting up MTSS infrastructure by tapping the services of the ESD's MTSS expert and organizing an Attendance & Engagement Summit.

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*"I do think that the person the ESD had last year was really helpful in helping us pull back a little bit from just intervening at that Tier 3 level with families because they helped us think more broadly and in the one sense in terms of talking with families about what excused versus unexcused absences are, talking to their teachers about their barriers are in terms of tracking and taking accurate attendance every day... so that I think is huge." – School Staff Interviewee*

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*"When I look at this question like our strengths, we've identified the barriers and equities. We did a ton of listening. I think the partnership with the ESD was helpful to keep us moving along. And that it was helpful to have them facilitate the listening sessions and write up the report. That was helpful. I think we have really worked to mobilize everyone in the community." – School Staff Interviewee*

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*"We're working with Tacoma around the [school] and in one of our conversations we always talk about different tiers of work, even in attendance and reengagement, but [school staff] really wanted to dig deeper... And then I thought of [the PSESD MTSS Regional Implementation Specialist] ... and this is what she does for a living, you know. So, we just met last week and invited her, and she came and talked to them about MTSS." – ESD Partner*

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*"We are offering support and offering some strategies to continue to keep [students] engaged. And as we were looking at all of that, my question that keeps coming up was 'what are we reengaging them to?' So, how can we reimagine what we're reengaging them to, so we can keep [students] engaged because I didn't want [students] to continue the cycle where they either get kicked out, they're suspended, or they just don't come, or they just disengage. And then we engage them and then they go through the same cycle again. And out of that came a planning of a Reengagement Summit." – ESD Partner*

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## Student Perspectives

**As mentioned above, student and family voices were integral to the attendance and reengagement work in Tacoma. The Evaluation Team spoke to students participating in Tier 1 and 2 supports (e.g., Sound Bath, Embodied Leadership; Native Student Clubs). Students expressed appreciation about how they benefitted from these programs, noting that these activities provide a safe space where they can be themselves while being with peers.**

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*Regarding the Sound Bath program: "I like coming to school, Sound Bath make it feel safer. Like when the kids are not talking over the teachers and yelling at them." "Just makes you makes you feel what's happening at home, at school, what's happening, and it makes you just feel calm. And have a nice week and have a nice day". "It makes them more fun because it just makes you happy and calm and makes you have a great day." "The reason why we do this is, this is my reason is cause that as example it's my sister, my sister is annoying me so much I can just do blocks, breathing, and like just be stretching." "This sound bath can change a rough life to a calm life." – Various Student Interviewees*

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*"That everyone has like an opportunity to be their self without being like judged or like corrected in the wrong way. So, if you know we didn't do something that's respectful or appropriate, [Embodied Leadership Program staff] don't come at us and yell at us. And they really make us like comfortable to be in there." – Student Interviewee*

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*"What I like most about Native Sewing [Student] Club is being able to be yourself, but also be part of something bigger, like a group. It may not be filled up with a bunch of people, but like you get to be yourself in any kind of form, right? But what I like the most is how many people can be themselves at once and at the same place. And that just connects us in different ways." –Student Interviewee*

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*"I think the best part is like getting somebody to relate to you. And get some aspects of your culture that others don't get. And in my fifth period, we are talking about native stuff, and [classmates] were just like knocking it down like every single time they were like, 'Why do they*



*do that? Why do they do that? Those are ugly. Don't do that.' And then in a native club like, [peers] actually like and appreciate it and like where it comes from." – Student Interviewee*

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Outside of program spaces, some students – especially older ones – reported their struggle to feel a sense of safety, welcome and belonging in their schools.

*"It really depends on where you are at and at what moment, who is there. There are times where sometimes people make certain comments when you're talking about cultural things and it just makes you feel uncomfortable and you don't really, because you don't really have to explain yourself or anything to anyone. You don't owe anyone anything, but at the same time sometimes it's necessary, and even though you don't want to, you have to speak up and talk about it and just be heard, and that just puts you in the uncomfortable position where you're like, oh, what should I do?" – Student Interviewee*

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Overall, students across grade levels were able to identify specific adults in their schools who care about them. Students want to have an opportunity to build relationships and establish a humanizing relationship with school staff outside of school tasks.

*"When something happens, they make sure that you're okay. Maybe sometimes when you get like example when you hurt yourself and finger, the teachers might get you a Band-Aid or send you to the nurse." "They give you an ice pack." "...they take care of your needs." – Various Student Interviewees*

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*"In the school I'm going to name [Teacher's Name] and she's very open to me to talk and she gives me great advice and that shows that she cares about me and also our vice principal, she's very caring about us, too. And she talks to us like fun. And she makes, like, us feel happy or me, not us... she makes me have a good attitude about stuff." – Student Interviewee*

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*"Maybe like if [school staff] like, weren't focused so much on not your grades, but if we're getting to class on time...and all this stuff I think they should be focused a little bit on how we're doing and ... so we're actually happy to come to school." – Student Interviewee*

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## Serving Students

**In the 2022-23 school year, 129 students received Tier 1 and/or Tier 2 support programs. And in the 2023-24 school year, more than twice the number of students (N=313) received similar services that included Sound Bath, the Embodied Leadership Program and the Native Student Clubs.** Because of the broader focus on Tier 1 and 2 supports, Tacoma students with Tier 3 or intensive direct service needs were referred to ESD 121. Limited data were reported on students served via ESD direct service staff through the project, though the district provided other data from students and families.

Reflective of their commitment to elevating student and family voices, Tacoma Public Schools created and distributed student and family surveys during the 2022-23 school year to collect information on student and family perspective such as reasons for disengagement and positive experiences in school. This survey was widely distributed across the district, allowing Tacoma to incorporate the perspectives of 789 students, spanning Grades 4 to 12. Families also participated in the survey (N =615).


In the following sections, the Evaluation Team includes data from the 2022-23 district survey in comparison to the direct service data gathered via the statewide Attendance & Engagement Project Evaluation in 2022-23 and 2023-24 to highlight overarching themes in students' positive experiences in school and reasons for disengagement/barriers to engagement.

### POSITIVE EXPERIENCES IN SCHOOL

**Tacoma student survey respondents indicated that the most common reasons they come to school were to spend time with friends (73%), to avoid falling behind in school (59%) and to get good grades (56%).** The primary reason given in the district survey is consistent with statewide trends found in direct service data which showed that spending time with friends was the most common positive experience for students in both 2022-23 and 2023-24 (70% and 80%, respectively).

### REASONS FOR DISENGAGEMENT

In the Tacoma Public Schools' student and family surveys, both students and parents were asked what the most common reasons for their student(s)' absences were.



**Most students (71%) and families (80%) noted illness was the primary reason.** The second reason, doctor's appointments, was reported by 47% of students and 51% of parents. Students identified other reasons including that they were experiencing stress (29%), they didn't wake up on time or get enough sleep (26%) or their home life made it difficult to attend school (17%).

According to statewide data, in 2022-23, 56% of student direct-service recipients said that their mental or physical health was a reason for disengagement. In 2023-24, it was 54% of students.<sup>4</sup>

## OTHER PARENT REFLECTIONS

**In responding to the 2022-23 district survey regarding why it was important for parents to have their child attend school, the top three parent responses were “our family believes education is important” (65%); “to acquire new skills through learning” (49%); and “to develop social skills by being around peers” (44%).**

## Looking Ahead

**The Attendance & Reengagement Specialist will continue as a member of the Tacoma Public Schools' Whole Child Team, with funding from a mental health grant.** Hope was expressed that efforts around attendance may continue in partnership with community organizations and ESD 121.

Other suggested possible directions for continuing work beyond the 2023-24 school year were noted from reflections of Tacoma school district and individual school staff.

To wit, some school staff expressed a commitment to continue building systems. This included ensuring that connections between systems that impact attendance work well, and that everyone in the school community, particularly school staff, have common ground and agree with what is needed to further their attendance and reengagement work.

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*“I think that we look at our system it's like we have it, but it's like scattered and nothing's conjoining, you know. So, the goal was to create clear systems and so teachers, students,*

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<sup>4</sup> In 2023-24, the statewide direct service reporting tool included two options to reflect student health – one for mental health, one for physical health. 54% reflects students who were experiencing mental and/or physical health issues. In 2022-23, the reporting tool included one option for mental or physical health issues.



*families all understand the same thing and that's kind of where we're at. We're definitely in a construction phase. And we have a care team and it's not very functional. So, most of our planning is for next year. But we are getting data, and some teachers are piloting like our new flow chart and things we have come up with.” – School Staff Interviewee*

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*“And we have not yet built the system... still to follow up with all of that. And so, people are starting to use the language and starting to use the practice and really what we need most is for teachers to contact home and let people know and not just assume that it's known or that the system is going to take care of it. And there are teachers who do that already. There are teachers who have been reinvigorated to do that more consistently because of these conversations. And there are teachers who still don't want to do that and don't think it's their job. But we still are in the process. We need to build out the system. We're not done with this project.” – School Staff Interviewee*

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**And, finally, a call to action is made to improve services for students and their families while creating conditions for schools to be welcoming spaces for all through community-centered and humanizing practices.**

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*“I think, historically speaking, schools have just naturally kind of been like the community hub of the neighborhood, but schools have not always or have sometimes catered to certain demographics and populations, and there's a real effort to break those down and be welcoming of all. And especially in Tacoma schools, which are highly diverse, [school name] is extremely diverse, and how do we really build this place up to be that community center of the neighborhood, which is so desperately needed? You know, claiming back the space in this area. I get a little bit emotional because I just love this work.” – Staff Interviewee*

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