

OSPI/AESD ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project Evaluation

Executive Summary – April 2025

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Strategy, Evaluation and Learning
Puget Sound Educational Service District

In partnership with:

Washington Office of Superintendent of
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Introduction

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 experienced by students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly students and families furthest from educational justice. OSPI invested $19.4 million to expand attendance and reengagement supports across the education system.

The ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project included ESDs, districts, and STEC schools from across the state:

- **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)**
- **6 STEC schools**
- **9 ESDs**

Attendance & Reengagement Project Evaluation

The ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Evaluation endeavored to tell the story of how this project served, supported, and reengaged students with high rates of absences and disengagement. The evaluation also sought to understand how project districts and STEC schools built or enhanced systems to support engagement and reduce inequities. Evaluation questions explored what implementation looked like, why students were disengaging from school, what kept them engaged, how the project helped improve attendance, and how this work could be sustained into the future.

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METHODS

Participating districts, STEC schools, ESDs and OSPI contributed data through a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, including survey and direct service data from students and families, project partner interviews and surveys, site visits, and meaning-making sessions.[1]

RESULTS

Students Served

How many and which student groups and families were served/supported as a result of the project?

Individual supports were provided to nearly 8,200 students in 2022–23 and to over 5,800 students in 2023–24. Additionally, Tier 1 supports for all students were offered to 180,000 students in 2022–23 and to over 150,000 students in 2023–24. The project achieved its goal of serving students furthest from educational justice. In both years of the project when compared to statewide enrollment, direct service supports were provided to proportionally more students who were:

- American Indian/AK Native
- Native HI/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latino
- MLL/ELL
- Low-income
- Migrant
- Experiencing homelessness
- Students with disabilities

Disengagement and Engagement

What are we learning about why students and families are disengaging? For the students and families who continue to be engaged, what keeps them engaged?

The table below highlights the most common reasons for disengagement among the students served.

Reason for Disengagement	2022-23	2023-24
Dealing with health (physical or mental) issues	**56%**	**54%**
Home situations that make it difficult to attend school	**45%**	**33%**
Not feeling comfortable or welcome at school	**45%**	**21%**
Other responsibilities	**16%**	**14%**

Students served also indicated a range of barriers to reengagement, outlined below.

Barrier to Reengagement	2022-23	2023-24
School doesn't feel relevant/important to them	**36%**	**49%**
They don't have access to physical/mental health support	**32%**	**22%**
They don't have what they need to get caught up with academics	**23%**	**16%**
They don't have services or support for their home life	**13%**	**22%**

Students' most common positive experience in school was being with friends (70% in 2022–23, 80% in 2023–24).

Native American students attending STEC schools shared that they had an easier time fitting in and making friends than they had at other non-STEC schools they attended. Integrating Native culture throughout the school was an important approach to engaging students and their families.

Student Outcomes

How did the project contribute to reengagement or engagement of students and families?

The project contributed to student reengagement and engagement in school, as evidenced by near-, medium-, and long-term outcomes for students.

[1] The statewide results reflected in the final report are intended to complement six accompanying case studies of participating districts and STEC schools, available here.

- **Chronic absenteeism rates decreased markedly.**[2] Chronic absenteeism among students who participated in the Attendance & Reengagement Project dropped from 71% in school year 2022–23 to 56% in school year 2023–24, a notable reduction of 15 percentage points.[3] Among schools participating in the project over both years, there was a decrease in average chronic absenteeism rate of 9.8 percentage points, compared to schools that did not participate in the project that saw an average decrease of seven percentage points, a 2.8 percentage point difference.
- Student outcomes improved at participating STEC schools.
- Roughly half of unenrolled students supported through this project **reenrolled in school** with support from direct service staff. In 2022-23, 58% of unenrolled students reenrolled in school or another educational pathway.[4] In 2023-24, 41% of unenrolled students reenrolled.[5]
- The project sought to increase students' **sense of hope** through support from direct service staff.[6] Among students for whom these data were reported, 49% had an improved sense of hope.[7]
- **Student and parent/guardian responses were largely favorable** in all areas of the student and parent/guardian survey, including students' relationship with their specialist, their experiences with school services, relationships, and sense of belonging.

System Building

What systems (staffing, policies, procedures, practices) were created or further developed at STEC schools, Priority Districts, each ESD, and across the AESD network to support attendance and reengagement?

Attendance & Reengagement Project districts and STEC schools focused on building and strengthening attendance systems as necessary structures of a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) and to increase attendance and engagement, including:

- **Attendance systems & structures**, including teaming on attendance, policies and procedures, communication structures with families and community engagement boards.
- **Actionable data**, including collecting, accessing, and using attendance data to inform and support their work.
- **Tiered Interventions** to support students and families, including Tier 1 schoolwide supports (for all students); Tier 2 supports, targeted or small groups supports (for some students); and Tier 3 supports, or 1-on-1, intensive supports (for few students).
- **Culture of attendance**, including staff culture and/or commitment to attendance and staff in the district or school having an 'all hands-on deck' mindset related to attendance.

ESDs also strengthened their systems with a focus on internal collaboration and integration of attendance with other programs

Student/Family Input

How have communities of students and families who are furthest from educational justice (including Tribal governments, STEC schools, and Native communities) informed implementation of the project?

- Most commonly, project partners (districts, schools, and ESDs) used individual conversations with students and families to gather feedback. They used feedback from students and families to

[2] Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student being absent for 10% or more of the school days in a year (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).
[3] OSPI (in preparation). *Research Brief on the ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Project to Address Chronic Absenteeism.*
[4] 412 of 716 unenrolled students in 2022-23.
[5] 978 of 2,404 unenrolled students in 2023-24.
[6] From Administering the Hope Scale – Community Toolkit. https://oercommons.org/courseware/lesson/108078. Accessed October 28, 2024.
[7] N=239 with "change in hope" data reported.

improve communication or connections with students and families and provide new services or supports.
- Through the co-design process in the first year of the project, many STEC schools focused on learning directly from students and families about their reasons for engagement and disengagement in school, including through student listening sessions, peer interviews, student leadership opportunities, and a family survey.
- The OSPI ESSER Attendance & Reengagement Team and the Office of Native Education (ONE) collaborated throughout the planning and implementation of the Attendance & Reengagement Project to engage with and support the six participating STEC schools.

Current Collaboration

> **What are current cross-system and cross-agency roles and collaboration?**

The Attendance & Reengagement Project included a wide range of collaborations within and across agencies, including ESDs, school districts, STEC schools, OSPI, tribes and community partners. Such collaboration is illustrated in several case studies:

- District and ESD collaboration in Clarkston, East Valley, and Selah School Districts
- District and community partner collaboration in Tacoma Public Schools
- Collaboration between the district and the Skokomish Tribe in Hood Canal School District
- STEC school collaboration with peers, tribes, and ESDs.

District and STEC School Implementation

> **What are the characteristics of Priority Districts' and STEC schools' implementation? How is district implementation contributing to equitable systems for BIPOC students and other priority student groups?**

Common features across participating districts and STECs included staffing, project priorities and goals, and a focus on relationship-building.

- District and STEC school staffing focused on direct service support and on creating and strengthening attendance systems. Staffing structures to support this work varied.
- Districts and STEC schools initially developed project goals and priorities to guide their work, including student outcomes as well as system-building and relationship-building goals. They used a variety of data points (e.g., number of absences, course grade or credits earned, student demographics) to prioritize students for support. Relationship-building, particularly with students and families, was a key priority in both years of the project.

ESD Implementation

> **What are the characteristics of ESDs' implementation? How is ESD implementation contributing to equitable systems for BIPOC students and other priority student groups?**

Implementation across ESDs included these common features:

- **Supports for districts and STEC schools:** All ESDs provided support, especially for system-building efforts, to partners in their region, including districts and, in some cases, STEC schools.
- **Staffing:** All ESDs had staff dedicated to the Attendance & Reengagement Project, though staffing structures varied for both coordinator/project lead roles and direct service roles.
- **Turnover:** Staff turnover due to uncertain and time-limited project funding was a challenge at ESDs, and many ESD leads noted its impact on their success and project programming.

Sustainability

What is needed to support continued sustainability of school and ESD systems?

Attendance & Reengagement Project partners identified several aspects of the sustainability of their work:

- **Commitment to sustaining this work:** A majority of ESD, district, and STEC school survey respondents noted their organization's commitment to sustaining attendance and reengagement work beyond the 2023–24 school year.
- **Integration of attendance into continuing structures, processes, and roles:** A large majority of survey respondents from districts, ESDs, and STEC schools generally agreed that their organization had integrated their work into structures, processes and roles that would continue beyond the 2023–24 school year.
- **Relationships:** Project partners noted the relationships that were built through the project support sustainability of the work.

Future Collaboration

What did we learn about potential future cross-system and cross-agency roles and collaboration?

Implications of evaluation results can inform future collaboration, including:

- **Among ESDs:** ESD coordinators found that their cross-agency collaboration accelerated what they could accomplish over the duration of the project and provided important peer learning opportunities even when their implementation and regional contexts differed.
- **Within ESDs:** ESD coordinators reflected on the capacity challenges they faced while trying to focus on both system-building and direct service work. ESD attendance staff suggested embedding attendance work in other initiatives within their ESDs, such as MTSS, truancy, and improvement science efforts.
- **Between OSPI and ESDs:** OSPI staff acknowledged the importance of creating a more specific scope of work for staff and ensuring that funding aligns with the expected scope of work. They also shared that a successful partnership with grantees, like ESD staff, requires more support and dedicated time beyond funding to do effective and meaningful work, pointing to the benefits of deep relationships between state agencies and grantees.
- **Between ESDs and districts:** ESD staff reflected on the conditions that allowed them to collaborate well with districts and provide direct services to students, which pointed to the importance of time to build strong relationships with district staff and create expectations and goals alongside district leadership to generate buy-in will strengthen collaboration in future initiatives. ESDs' varying experiences working with districts also point to opportunities to reconsider the funding structure for districts to do attendance work. ESD coordinators noted that relationships were key to working with districts, and collaboration with districts often grew from existing connections.
- **Between ESDs and STEC schools:** Although ESDs' relationships with STEC schools in their region varied, the successful relationships point to opportunities for ESDs to improve relationships with and provide support to STEC schools.
- **Between OSPI and STEC schools:** Collaboration between the OSPI Attendance Team and ONE also created opportunities to advance the ways in which OSPI collaborates with and supports STEC schools. Emphasizing and dedicating resources to building strong relationships between OSPI and STEC partners was key to co-design with STEC schools, and points to opportunities to further the work by investing in relationship-building approaches and the benefits of community representation. Additionally, OSPI staff reflected on the benefits of embracing a flexible approach to different areas of the work to enhance their collaboration.

- **With students and families:** Evaluation results highlight the role of ESD and district collaboration related to student and family voice in attendance and reengagement efforts and the potential to build on and expand the value of these supports to districts.

Implications of Student and Family Input

What did we learn from students and families that will inform the further development of the model?

Project partners, particularly ESD coordinators, identified implications of key results based on data from students and families, including areas for future work.

- **Learning from students and families:** Results based on data from students and families point to opportunities to strengthen relevant supports for school attendance and engagement efforts. These include the prevalence of health issues, particularly mental health issues, and students' need for supports related to their schoolwork. The evaluation results also point to opportunities to build from students' positive experiences in school, particularly being with friends. ESD coordinators noted another implication of learning more about the experiences and perspectives of students and families: **it builds empathy for and understanding of students' lives.**
- **Learning about working with students and families:** ESD coordinators raised the importance of prevention — i.e., supporting engagement and attendance while students are in school before they have started to disengage — in working with students and families, given the challenges in reengaging students who have been unenrolled from school.
- **Learning about using data from students and families:** ESD coordinators noted the importance of data specific to an individual community, district, or school. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of students and families in a local context is crucial to developing supports and systems that are responsive to the community.
- **Gathering and responding to student and family input:** Results indicate different processes to gather input from students and families and to respond to this input. Student and family response data regarding barriers to attendance from the Attendance & Reengagement Evaluation were broad and general. To better understand responses such as mental health issues or "not getting the schoolwork support needed," districts and schools are behooved to engage in more 'street-data' gathering with students and families.[8]
- **Project partners at STEC schools used and developed processes for gathering perspectives for student and family voice that were culturally relevant and specific to their context.**

Once districts and schools have included student and family voice, they may engage in further exploration to help with planning for next steps by considering question such as the following:

- What did staff do with the data that was collected from students and families throughout the course of the project? How was data shared with students and families, and for what purpose?
- Considering student and family feedback, what were school and district personnel able to change/adjust? What did it take to make changes?
- What made it difficult to respond to student and family perspectives? What conditions must be established to facilitate timely and appropriate responses to student and family needs?

8 Safir, S. & Dugan, J. (2021). Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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