GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION

Public Hearing on
Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

Testimony of
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Before the
Committee of the Whole
**The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman**

November 13, 2024
2:30 PM
Council of the District of Columbia

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and staff. My name is Antoinette Mitchell, and I am the Interim Superintendent for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, or OSSE. I am here today to talk about our role as a state education agency in addressing barriers to regular school attendance for DC students. I will discuss three aspects of attendance from our state perspective: first, I will provide information on attendance data and data trends from our newly released annual attendance report; next, I will share what we are seeing in the field that we know works to combat truancy and absenteeism; and finally, I will talk about how OSSE helps foster conditions to support engaging learning environments.

OSSE's Annual Attendance Report

Attendance is foundational to academic growth and achievement and what we want our students to be able to do and achieve for themselves in life.

An important step in understanding and addressing the barriers to attendance is accurate and transparent data. In our state education role, OSSE collects, analyzes, and publishes Districtwide attendance data. This past year, OSSE transitioned from a single, annual report to reporting validated attendance data three times per year. Our recently published annual report shows that while we need to continue to improve student attendance, there is good news to share.

Figure 1. State-level Rates of Chronic Absenteeism and Chronic Truancy by School Year
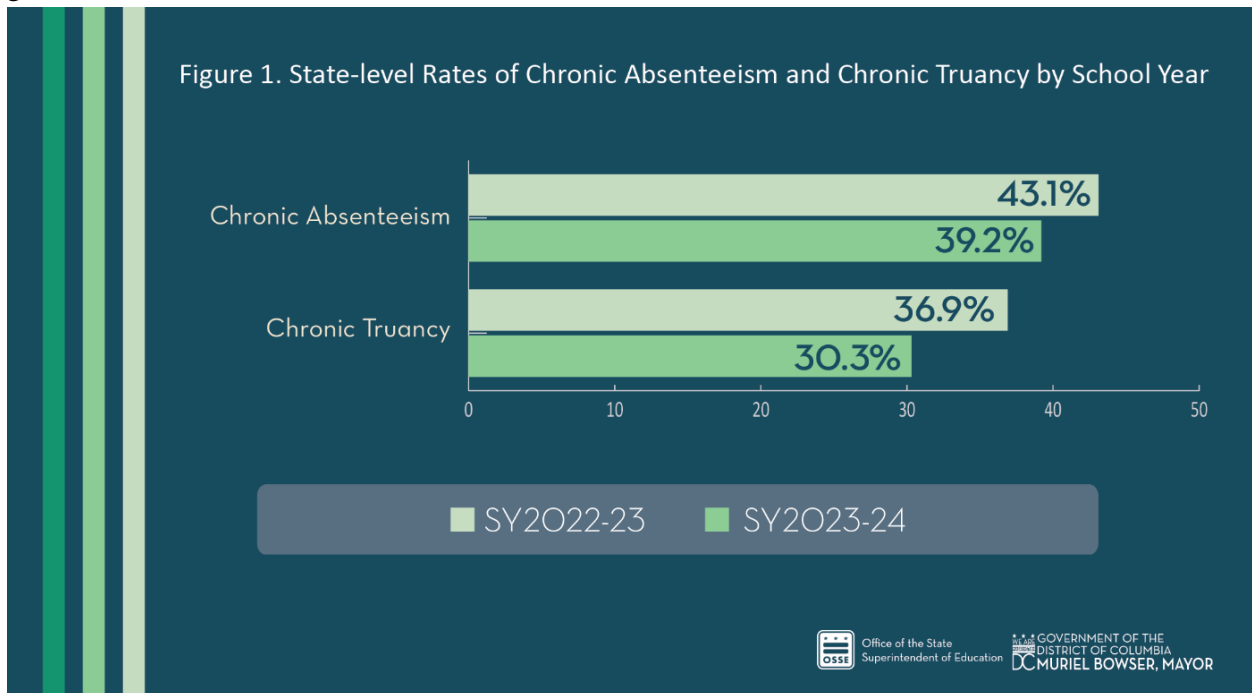
Overall, chronic absenteeism and truancy are down. Chronic absenteeism dropped by 3.9 percentage points and chronic truancy fell by 6.6 percentage points. This decline was particularly driven by decreases in unexcused absences among middle and high school

students. Middle school chronic truancy rates decreased by 7.3 percentage points. High school chronic truancy decreased by 15.8 percentage points. These are encouraging declines. We are moving in the right direction, but too many students are still missing too many days of school.

Figure 5. Chronic Absenteeism and Chronic Truancy by grade band
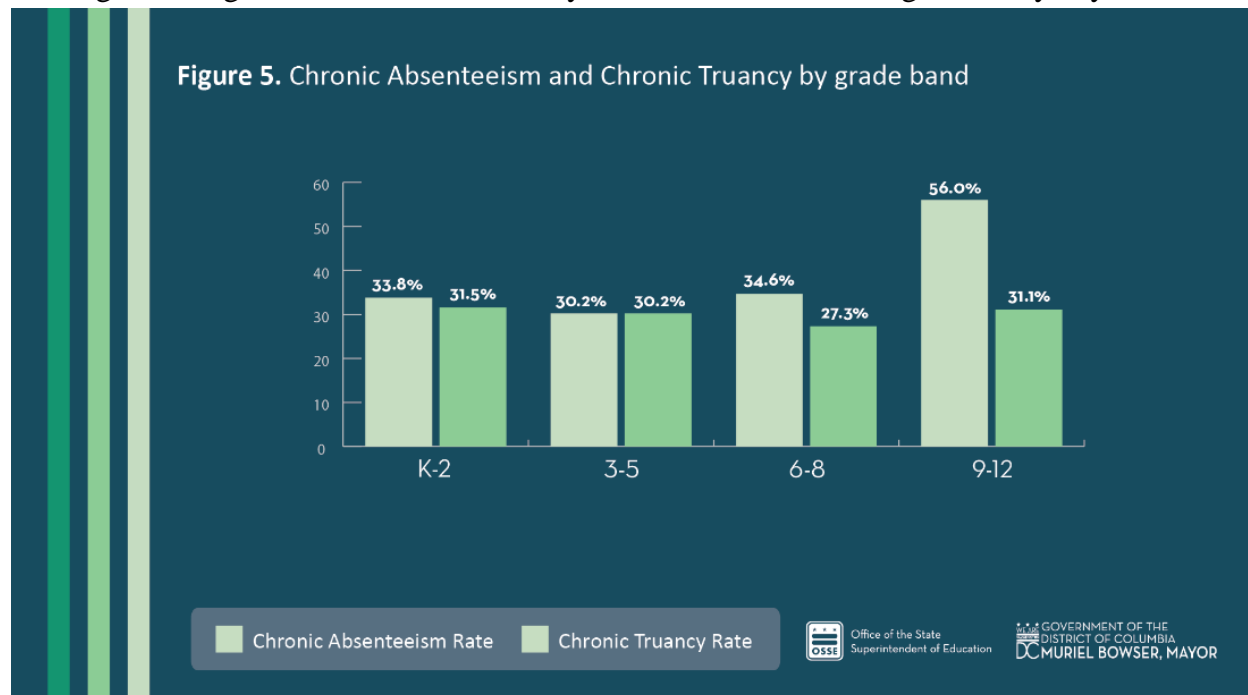
National research is clear that school attendance matters for academic achievement and long-term success. Chronic absenteeism is tied to lower student performance, increased risk of dropping out before high school graduation, and higher unemployment rates.[1] In fact, increased absentee rates observed as early as kindergarten impact academic outcomes and high school graduation rates, and this pattern grows more pronounced as students approach ninth grade.[2]

Our attendance report reaffirms the direct connection between daily attendance and academic performance. The report revealed that a 10-percentage point increase in attendance was associated with an average increase of 2.8 percentiles in a student's English Language Arts (ELA) Student Growth Percentile (SGP). In practical terms, a student attending school 90 percent of the time had an ELA SGP that was 2.8 percentiles higher than a similar student who attended only 80 percent of the time. A similar trend was observed in math, where a 10-percentage point increase in attendance corresponded to an average increase of 3.2 percentiles

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[1] *See e.g.,* Jing Liu & Monica Lee, *Beyond Chronic Absenteeism: The Dynamics and Disparities of Class Absences in Secondary School* (Nov. 5, 2022), IZA Discussion Paper No. 15664, https://ssrn.com/abstract=4268772.

[2] *Every School Day Counts: The Forum Guide to Collecting and Using Attendance Data*, Nat'l Ctr. for Educ. Statistics (Feb. 2009), available at https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/attendancedata/chapter1a.asp#f3 (last visited Nov. 12, 2024).

in math SGP. These findings demonstrate what is likely intuitive to all of us – higher attendance rates are directly linked to greater academic achievement.

Because attendance affects everything about how a student progresses through their education, a key aspect of attendance data is grade-level trends. We are seeing notable connections in our local data around attendance behaviors at two distinct transition years: from pre-K 4 to kindergarten; and from eighth grade to ninth grade.

We found a significant relationship between pre-K attendance rates and kindergarten attendance rates. Students who were chronically absent in pre-K 4 were 41.5 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent in kindergarten. Daily attendance is a habit, and building an attendance habit in preschool is directly related to kindergarten attendance – a grade that is foundational for learning to read. When I talk to educators about this on school visits, they confirm the challenge of engaging some preschool parents who feel that pre-K attendance doesn't matter. But the research is clear: everyday counts, even in pre-kindergarten.

Figure 10. Probability of Chronic Absenteeism in Kindergarten by Status in Pre-K
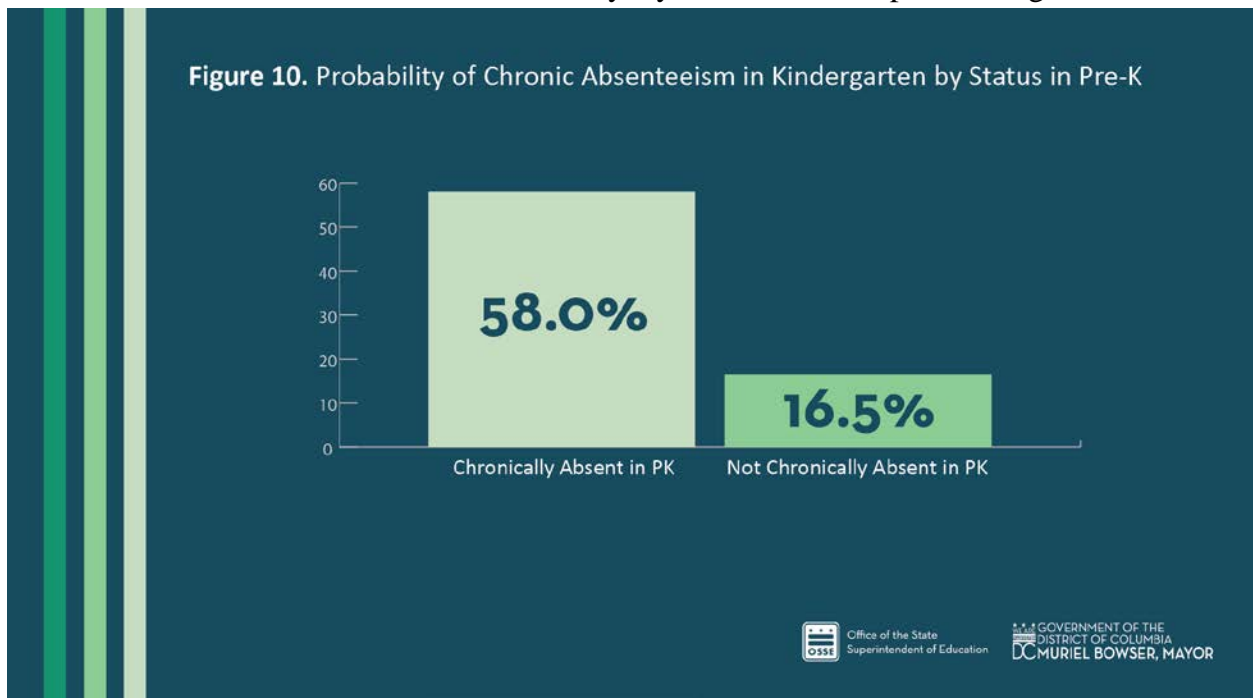
Another critical transition is from middle school to high school. Last year, 36.6 percent of eighth-grade students were chronically absent, compared to 57.7 percent of ninth grade students; this is an improvement of 4.6 percentage points from the year before but still notably high.

Figure 6. Absenteeism Risk Tiers by Grade
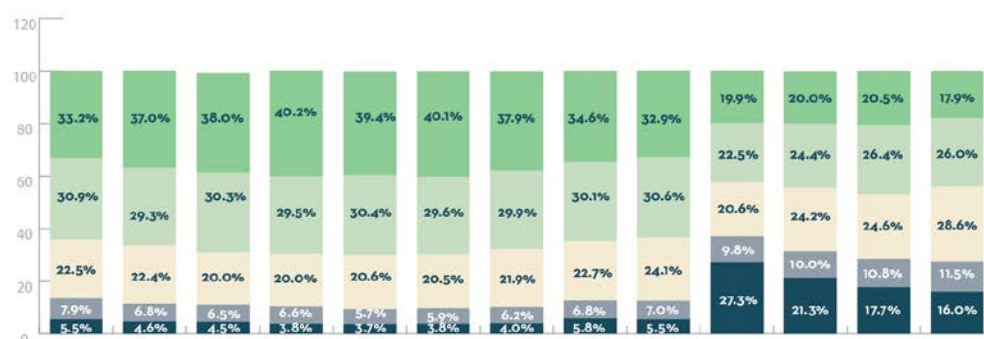
Ninth grade is a critical transition – most students are changing schools, and there are normal developmental shifts happening in the adolescent brain that can make peers more influential than parents.[3] While we are seeing improvements, grade level transitions, particularly during the sensitive transition to ninth grade, remain an area of need across the District. OSSE highlights these important trends so that DC LEAs can focus efforts on supporting transition points, like DCPS is doing through their sixth and ninth grade academies work.

Research-Based Best Practices

In addition to collecting, validating, analyzing, and publishing Districtwide attendance data, one of OSSE's central roles in supporting student attendance is to elevate research-based best practices.

Emerging research demonstrates the vital role that school culture and climate play in student attendance. A recent national study by Panorama Education found different reasons for absenteeism based on grade level. In elementary and middle school, in-school safety and school climate were most associated with chronic absenteeism, indicating that reducing physical fights and building student joy are key at these grade levels. In high school, chronic absenteeism was most strongly linked with social awareness, self-management, supportive

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[3] *See e.g.,* Emily P. Backes & Richard J. Bonnie*, The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth,* Nat'l Library of Medicine (May 16, 2019), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK545481/.
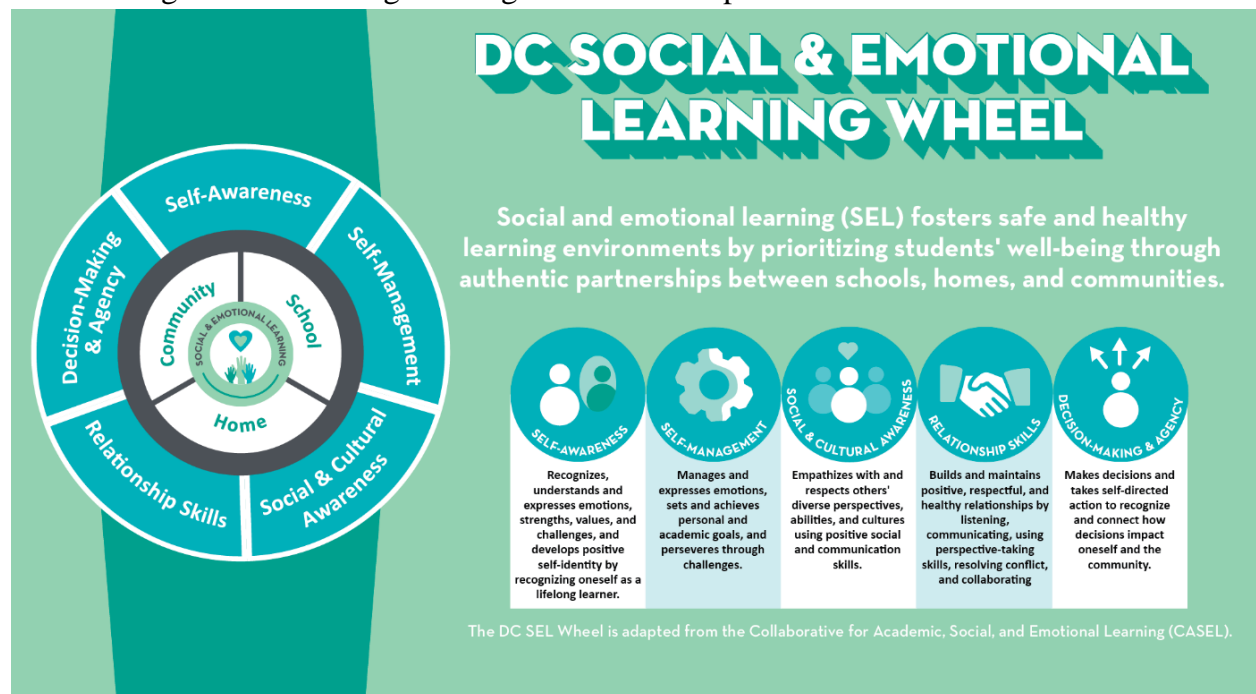
relationships, and growth mindsets. These findings highlight the importance of cultivating students' sense of belonging in high school.

The national data align to what we have heard locally through anecdotes. At the recent re-launch of the cross-sector *Every Day Counts!* taskforce, students, school administrators, and advocates shared stories about what made a difference for student attendance. Accounts included hosting an 8th grade attendance dance, installing a red carpet for a festive entrance to school, and warmly greeting students when they are tardy or have been absent from school. While these examples may not lend themselves to state level policymaking, they speak to the critical importance of developing a strong culture and climate inside the school building.

OSSE's Role in Supporting Student Attendance

OSSE is taking action aligned to the national research and local context to build LEAs' and schools' capacity to create environments that support student attendance and engagement.

Specifically, in May, OSSE published DC's first-ever Districtwide social and emotional learning (SEL) standards, covering kindergarten through adult learners. The SEL standards help students learn and apply the knowledge and mindsets to develop a healthy identity, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, show empathy toward others, build and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. We know these skills are broadly needed for success in school and life, and Panorama's research shows that they are also directly aligned to factors linked to chronic absenteeism. If we build students' self-confidence, empathy, perseverance, and related skills and attitudes, we will see both attendance gains and lifelong learning and relationship returns.

DC SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING WHEEL

Social and emotional learning (SEL) fosters safe and healthy learning environments by prioritizing students' well-being through authentic partnerships between schools, homes, and communities.

SELF-AWARENESS — Recognizes, understands and expresses emotions, strengths, values, and challenges, and develops positive self-identity by recognizing oneself as a lifelong learner.

SELF-MANAGEMENT — Manages and expresses emotions, sets and achieves personal and academic goals, and perseveres through challenges.

SOCIAL & CULTURAL AWARENESS — Empathizes with and respects others' diverse perspectives, abilities, and cultures using positive social and communication skills.

RELATIONSHIP SKILLS — Builds and maintains positive, respectful, and healthy relationships by listening, communicating, using perspective-taking skills, resolving conflict, and collaborating

DECISION-MAKING & AGENCY — Makes decisions and takes self-directed action to recognize and connect how decisions impact oneself and the community.

The DC SEL Wheel is adapted from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

In addition, after partnering with 16 LEAs for an initial advisory cohort last spring, OSSE, in partnership with Panorama Education, is launching DC's first annual Districtwide school climate survey in the spring of 2025. With this state-level school climate data, OSSE can provide LEAs and the public with comparable, high-quality survey insights from students, families, and school-based staff. We will publish the data on the DC School Report Card, and it will serve as a critical tool to improve school culture and climate by shining a spotlight on what works locally, as well as those areas in need of improvement.

In addition to using research to guide our own actions, we help elevate data-informed best practices to DC LEAs through a regular attendance community of practice that brings together school practitioners from across the District. We are looking to further strengthen this community of practice and our cross-divisional attendance initiatives through the forthcoming hiring of OSSE's first State Attendance Coordinator.

Finally, OSSE recognizes that rigorous, engaging academic instruction is foundational to a high-quality education and an essential ingredient in school enrollment and attendance. We support this goal by adopting rigorous, relevant academic standards and by providing high quality professional development to DC educators, such as those focused on structured literacy. Our investments in supporting learners through evidence-based interventions like high-impact tutoring also improve attendance. Further, we are taking new steps to increase relevance for students by reimagining the District's graduation requirements and bolstering the Advanced Technical Center to increase student choice and provide clear onramps to well-paying, local careers in high-demand fields.

Conclusion

In summary, the recent data demonstrate that Districtwide attendance is improving. This reflects a combined effort from families, students, schools, and government. It is incumbent on families to ensure that their students build strong daily attendance as early as pre-K and to help foster the social emotional skills, such as empathy, that will keep their students engaged and connected to school. Schools must ensure that they have policies and procedures in place that keep students safe, build joy, and enhance students' sense of belonging. OSSE must remain committed to meeting LEA needs to cultivate a culture of attendance and strong academic outcomes. We also help set the tone on the importance of daily attendance. That is why DC joined 14 other states in signing onto a national pledge to reduce chronic absenteeism by 50 percent over five years following the pandemic surge in absenteeism, and I am pleased to report that we are currently on track to meet this very

ambitious goal.[4] We need students to attend school every day because daily attendance is foundational to academic achievement, social emotional growth, and lifelong success.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the important issue of daily student attendance. I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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[4] *States Participating in the 50% Challenge*, ATTENDANCEWORKS, available at https://www.attendanceworks.org/states-participating-in-the-50-challenge/ (last visited Nov. 12, 2024).

Appendix: OSSE's Chronic Absenteeism Theory of Action

Office of the State Superintendent of Education

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM THEORY OF ACTION
OSSE's Role in Cultivating a Culture of Attendance in the District of Columbia

If OSSE:

- Clearly defines its solution levers
- Identifies and evaluates state education agency (SEA) investments where we can leverage our solution levers in support of local education agencies (LEAs) and schools
- Strengthens alignment, coordination, and implementation of initiatives among key (government and community-based) partners
- Communicates, convenes, and coaches LEA stakeholders

THEN SCHOOLS WILL BE ABLE TO:

- Reframe absenteeism conversations through a coordinated, whole-child support lens
- Better coordinate early warning and intervention systems
- Cultivate a culture of attendance

Which will help students to engage, feel supported, and thrive.

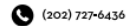|	DATA	POLICY	OVERSIGHT	CAPACITY BUILDING
VISION	Collect, analyze, and publish data to inform program and policy decisions at the LEA—and state—level.	Use policy to set a meaningful standard for student attendance.	Through federal and local program administration and oversight, elevate activities to improve student attendance.	Provide targeted technical assistance, professional development, and other resources to further develop schools where students want to attend and learn.
ACTIONS TO REALIZE VISION	• Provide guidance on best practices for data tracking and monitoring. • Share attendance-related data and analysis to inform stakeholder efforts. • Publish actionable data to inform LEA and school interventions.	• Set standards and expectations that set the bar for high quality schools and instruction. • Elevate and provide guidance on strategies and policies to address chronic absenteeism. • Coordinate data sharing, funding and other efforts with stakeholders (e.g., Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), community-based organizations [CBOs], LEAs) to support and empower stakeholder-led initiatives.	• Assess existing programs for opportunities to make stronger connections to addressing chronic absenteeism. • Maximize opportunities to include evidence-based activities that may reduce chronic absenteeism in federal and local grant applications. • Administer and monitor funds to understand where programs may drive the most impact on student outcomes. • Communicate clear expectations for programmatic success.	• Convene stakeholders to share and learn best practices for supporting school attendance. • Provide resources to LEAs and schools that address attendance through a multi-tiered system of supports. • Provide professional development and technical assistance for educators and school leaders. • Provide guidance on implementation best practices to support LEAs in utilizing funds. • Use lessons learned from program oversight to leverage future investments for impact.

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