

National Student Attendance, Engagement, and Success Center: Needs Assessment Executive Summary



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Executive Summary

The National Student Attendance, Engagement, and Success Center (the Center), funded by the U.S. Department of Education under contract GS-10F-0136X, is tasked with providing technical assistance (TA) to state educational agencies (SEAs) on topics related to chronic absenteeism and student engagement. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have included chronic absence as a metric in their Elementary and Secondary Education Act consolidated state plans, reflecting the importance of attendance as a predictor of student success (Heppen and Therriault 2008). To identify TA needs and develop an accompanying TA plan, the Center conducted a needs assessment in its base year (2019–2020), which included interviews, focus groups, and an online needs-sensing activity.

Approach

The Center collected information from a mix of SEA representatives, TA providers, and local educational agencies (LEAs). Overall, 38 respondents participated in the needs-sensing activity, and 39 individuals participated in an individual interview or a focus group interview (collectively referred to as stakeholder interviews). Stakeholder interview protocols and the needs-sensing activity were organized to collect information regarding attendance data collection and use; supports and TA currently provided to address attendance, engagement, and absenteeism issues; challenges associated with providing TA; and additional TA support needs.

Adaptations to the Approach in Response to COVID-19

In response to the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, the Center adapted data collection measures to collect additional information about attendance and student engagement in the context of COVID-19 disruptions to schooling. The Center included additional interview questions to understand challenges faced in measuring and addressing attendance and chronic absence and potential opportunities for TA to support SEAs during the pandemic. The Center also shifted the needs assessment data collection to be fully virtual. After completing the data collection, the Center analyzed data from stakeholder interviews and the online needs-sensing activity to identify prioritized needs and key areas for support and propose future TA recommendations based on the findings. The findings are organized according to the larger topics of (1) data collection, analysis, and use; (2) supports for addressing chronic absence; and (3) TA activities, challenges, and recommendations. These findings will inform plans for Option Year 1 TA.

Summary of Key Considerations and Findings

The needs assessment pointed to **four overarching considerations** that will guide TA plans. These themes highlight the importance of supports responding to the unique needs and priorities that have resulted from COVID-19 disruptions to schooling:

- ▶ **Embed continuous learning and improvement in TA design and delivery to support identification of promising practices.** The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruptions to schooling. During interviews, participants repeatedly acknowledged there is no “playbook” for these times: There is little or no evidence describing effective practices for measuring and improving attendance and engagement during extended disruptions to learning during a pandemic. To support SEAs and LEAs in identifying and strengthening best practices in measuring and improving attendance and engagement, the proposed TA makes use of a

continuous learning and improvement approach. Through support, SEAs and LEAs can identify emerging best practices, understand how well they are working, and improve implementation over time.

- ▶ **Focus on improving outcomes for the most instructionally vulnerable populations, with an emphasis on disaggregating data.** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on underserved communities (CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] 2020). The related disruptions to schooling could exacerbate challenges with attendance, student engagement, and chronic absence for the most instructionally vulnerable students who face barriers to successfully engaging in instruction (Dorn et al. 2020) (e.g., students of color, students in rural settings, students from low-income communities, English learners, students with exceptionalities). For this reason, while respondents did not explicitly request supports to address concerns related to the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be especially important for TA supports to focus on improving outcomes and addressing inequities for these vulnerable populations, including an emphasis on disaggregating data to understand and address disproportionalities.
- ▶ **Respond to the urgency of current needs while maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging needs over time.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already a large need to focus TA on attendance data for accountability and reporting and on interventions and supports to increase attendance. New schooling models (i.e., hybrid, remote, or socially distanced in-person learning) add an additional level of urgency to support the field. Across the board, needs assessment respondents expressed an interest in and need for TA supports. The current context is fluid: SEA and LEA needs may shift over time as they launch and refine new learning models. This points to the need to remain flexible in TA offerings. The Center recommends leaving some TA offerings undefined at this time to be responsive to emerging needs during the course of Option Year 1.
- ▶ **Provide opportunities for collaboration and peer-to-peer learning.** Data from the needs assessment indicate SEA staff want opportunities to learn from and with one another. Given the limited evidence base for best practices in measuring and improving attendance and engagement in hybrid and remote learning models, respondents expressed an interest in hearing about promising practices and lessons learned through early implementation as SEAs, LEAs, and schools implement new approaches to schooling.

Participants elevated needs that can be organized into **two broad topical strands**:

- ▶ **Measuring, collecting, analyzing, and reporting attendance data.** The field is grappling with how to measure, collect, analyze, report, and use attendance data as schools navigate transitions between fully virtual, hybrid, and in-person schooling models. SEAs want to ensure data are useful for accountability and reporting purposes in these various contexts, while LEAs are trying to determine how to collect attendance data. Both SEAs and LEAs also want support for disaggregating data and conducting root cause analyses so data are actionable for school leaders, teachers, and students.
- ▶ **Providing supports and interventions to improve attendance and engagement.** Data from the needs-sensing activities indicate a need for supports and interventions to increase student attendance and engagement, including social-emotional learning supports and materials for engaging families on attendance issues. Both SEA staff and statewide TA providers noted the need for schools to receive TA on school-based mental health supports for students.

Technical Assistance Recommendations

The needs assessment findings suggest SEAs need support in the interrelated areas of (1) measuring, collecting, analyzing, and reporting **attendance data**; and (2) providing **supports and interventions** to improve attendance and engagement. As COVID-19 continues to influence the 2020–2021 school year, the Center is prepared to provide ongoing support to SEAs and LEAs by strengthening their ability to use data to drive decisions and implement strategies in real time.

Taking the underlying themes and the two topical strands into consideration, the Center proposes a combination of universal, targeted, and intensive TA for Option Year 1. A targeted Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Learning Network will serve as the “engine” for TA, providing opportunities to learn about emerging best practices across states and districts, serving as a platform to pilot and disseminate universal briefs, and identifying specific needs that can be addressed through intensive implementation support. Table E1 provides an overview of the proposed Option Year 1 TA.

Table E1. Overview of Tiered Approach for TA Delivery

TA tier	Brief overview of proposed Option Year 1 TA offerings
Universal TA	<p>Promising practices briefs, tools, or other resources. The Center proposes producing up to three promising practices briefs, white papers, or tools showcasing promising practices or national trends related to attendance and engagement that emerge through ongoing TA. These products may highlight specific examples of SEA or LEA practices in vignettes or case studies, as appropriate. The Center will disseminate these briefs through other TA offerings.</p> <p>Webinars. The Center proposes hosting a series of up to three national webinars to disseminate lessons learned from ongoing TA and promising practices briefs. These webinars may be supplemented with conferences or other requested webinar presentations from other organizations or federally funded centers.</p>
Targeted TA	<p>P2P Learning Network. The Center proposes facilitating a P2P Learning Network of up to 16 P2P sessions to support SEA staff and LEA partners from up to 7 states to support (1) measuring, collecting, and reporting attendance data during COVID-19 disruptions to schooling; and (2) improving attendance and engagement during COVID-19 disruptions to schooling. Some sessions will be set aside for smaller groups of peers to engage on a particular problem of practice using a consultancy-style protocol. P2P sessions will also provide an opportunity to showcase and gather feedback on universal briefs and other resources.</p>
Intensive TA	<p>Side-by-side implementation support. The Center proposes providing intensive implementation support for up to three SEAs (and partner districts) to closely examine and address individual challenges through Plan-Do-Study-Act (known as PDSA) cycles. The Center envisions working with a SEA and one or more partner LEAs from the state to identify, implement, and improve strategies, policies, or interventions related to reducing chronic absenteeism and improving student engagement. Each intensive opportunity will consist of up to four virtual meetings. The meetings will also provide opportunity to pilot and improve tools and resources.</p>

LEA = local educational agency; P2P = Peer-to-Peer; SEA = state educational agency; TA = technical assistance