

# Centering Equity in Student Engagement and Attendance



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A commitment to addressing issues of equity is central to the [Student Engagement and Attendance Center's](#) (SEAC) effort to develop technical assistance (TA) resources and services that reduce chronic absenteeism and increase student engagement. It is [well known](#) that the effects of chronic absenteeism reflect and often exacerbate existing inequities in schools and communities.<sup>1</sup> For example, [data](#) from the Connecticut Department of Education show students are disproportionately affected by chronic absenteeism based on racial/ethnic identity and physical or cognitive ability as well as circumstances such as housing stability and socioeconomic status.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to exacerbate existing inequities. Although students are returning to the classroom, attendance inequities are still a concern. A recent SEAC webinar on first semester attendance data demonstrated continued high levels of chronic absenteeism among students of color and students from families with low incomes.

A primary focus of SEAC's work on chronic absenteeism is to ensure state education agencies (SEAs) and local education agencies (LEAs) are centering equity. SEAC's TA experts work with SEAs and LEAs to develop data collection practices, integrate chronic absenteeism into a multitiered system of supports (MTSS),<sup>3</sup> and incorporate authentic youth and family engagement strategies through sharing more equitable practices and tools to support their work. For example, SEAC hosted a webinar on first semester attendance trends in March 2022 with presenters from [Connecticut](#) and [Ohio](#), who shared how they disaggregated their first semester student attendance data to inform policy and practice related to chronic absence. Data disaggregation ensures states can identify student populations most affected by absenteeism, which, in turn, strengthens their ability to address negative trends.

SEAC also hosted "Building Systemic Supports for Better Attendance," a three-part virtual learning series that covered the following topics: incorporating attendance into MTSS, authentic youth and family engagement, and truancy policy and practice. The MTSS session of the series encouraged SEAs and LEAs to incorporate attendance into new and existing MTSS strategies. To equitably address chronic absenteeism and student engagement, support systems need to be in place for students most affected by absenteeism. The authentic youth and family engagement session of the series informed SEAs and LEAs on how to consider students, families, and communities as full partners in making key decisions about school policy. The session emphasized the principle that students and their families should be actively involved in conversations about how to create conditions for students to achieve improved attendance and engagement. This involvement is a way to balance power and ensure more equitable solutions. The truancy policy and practice session presented SEAs and LEAs with alternative approaches to the often punitive measures used in many current truancy policies. Much like the objective of the MTSS session, an equitable approach to addressing truancy means SEAs and LEAs have



support systems in place to help students deal with the underlying causes of absenteeism without resorting to punitive measures such as exclusionary discipline.

SEAC also partners with other TA centers to broaden the impact of addressing student engagement and chronic absenteeism. SEAC is collaborating with the [Intercultural Development Research Association Equity Assistance Center-South](#) (IDRA EAC-South) to develop an equity and attendance tool with reflective prompts to guide SEAs and LEAs in keeping equity at the forefront when examining attendance-related issues. The tool will encourage SEAs and LEAs to examine how their attendance policies and practices improve equity for students of color, students with disabilities, or other historically marginalized student groups. Prompts specific to attendance policies and definitions, data collection and analysis, or initiatives to support improved attendance help users reflect on and plan for more equitable attendance initiatives.

In addition to SEAC, the Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) of the U.S. Department of Education supports a variety of other TA centers that integrate equity into their services. The [Comprehensive Center Network](#) provides capacity-building services that improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, and improve the quality of instruction. Just under 20 Comprehensive Centers offer TA services to the 56 U.S. states and territories. PGSS also supports four regional [Equity Assistance Centers](#) to provide requested TA and training in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion to public school districts and government agencies to promote equitable education opportunities. The IDRA EAC-South is a federally funded equity assistance center focused on securing an equitable learning environment for all students in federal region II, which serves school districts in Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. There are equity assistance centers for all four federal regions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chang, H.N. (2018, October 18). Monitoring Chronic Absence Is Key to Creating an Equal Opportunity to Learn. *Realizing ESSA's Promise Blog Series*. Learning Policy Institute. Retrieved May 5, 2022, from <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/blog/monitoring-chronic-absence-key-creating-equal-opportunity-learn>

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut State Department of Education, EdSight. (n.d.). *Supporting Student Participation in 2021-22*. Retrieved May 5, 2022, from <https://edsight.ct.gov/relatedreports/Supporting%20Student%20Participation%20in%202020-21.html>

<sup>3</sup> Multitiered system of supports is a [framework](#) that focuses on intervention best practices within the areas of academics, behavior, and social and emotional supports. Tiers are based on student need and increase the level of support to targeted and intensive interventions. To learn more about MTSS strategies, review Attendance Works' [three-tiered approach](#).

<sup>4</sup> The [Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium](#) supports states and territories in federal region I, which serves Connecticut, Delaware, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virgin Islands, and West Virginia. The [Great Lakes Equity Center](#) supports states in federal region III, which serves Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The [Metropolitan State University of Denver](#) supports states and territories in federal region IV, which serves Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, California, Colorado, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.