



THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

March 22, 2024

Dear Chief State School Officers:

We know that one of the most important things we can do to help our students learn is to make sure they come to school consistently and make our families and communities strong partners in this effort. As the school year has progressed, States, local educational agencies (LEAs), and other partners have continued to share their work and progress in improving regular student attendance in school. In the Fort Worth Independent School District, for example, 100 family engagement specialists hired using American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds have helped improve regular daily attendance for nearly 3,000 students. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, staff conducted more than 19,300 home visits to establish stronger and trusting relationships between schools and families, reducing chronic absenteeism by more than a third. And Rhode Island launched *Attendance Matters Rhode Island*, creating community data dashboards to spur an all-hands-on-deck approach to increasing the number of students who attend school regularly. But we know there is still more work to do. That is why the Biden-Harris Administration has made addressing chronic absenteeism one of the focal points of its [Improving Student Achievement Agenda](#) and is using every tool in its toolbox to help schools and communities address this issue.

I'm writing today to ask each State to commit to three key actions that can help more students attend and engage in school each day; ensure more students attend school regularly for the remainder of the 2023-24 school year; and lay an early foundation for additional progress in the 2024-25 school year. As you continue the hard work of re-engaging students, the Department is committed to increasing technical assistance, guidance, and other resources to support your efforts in each of these areas.

Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days, or 18 days in a year, for any reason, excused or unexcused. Chronic absenteeism [increased](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic at troubling rates, nearly doubling between 2018 and 2022. As of the 2021-22 school year, over 14 million students nationwide were chronically absent, missing valuable instructional time and posing serious implications for students' overall academic success and wellbeing. Research suggests that children who are chronically absent for multiple years between preschool and second grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade. This has been shown elsewhere to make students four times more likely to not graduate from high school. Chronic absenteeism can also further disengage students from their learning and connections with their peers and with other caring adults.

Though chronic absence derives from multiple, often interconnected factors, research points to student disengagement, lack of access to student and family supports, and student and family health challenges as significant drivers. These challenges may present differently by school type—for example, high school-age students are more likely to cite competing demands such as staying home to be caregivers to younger siblings or a sick family member or working outside the home to financially support themselves or their families.

While any effort to address chronic absenteeism must begin with an understanding of the factors

contributing to it, urgent actions by State and LEAs can set the foundation for strong local responses. Actions you can take include:

1. **Support schools in increasing regular school attendance through your State’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) Consolidated State plan.** Identifying schools for support and improvement using their accountability systems, and awarding Federal school improvement funds to identified schools, is one of a State’s most important obligations under the ESEA. While States have significant discretion in operationalizing these requirements, States must include at least one School Quality or Student Success (SQSS) indicator as part of their accountability systems to promote and reflect a well-rounded, positive learning environment. Currently, more than 75 percent of States use a measure of chronic absenteeism in their accountability systems used to identify schools for support and improvement. States can enhance their accountability systems by partnering with local universities or their Department [Regional Educational Lab](#) to analyze data and ensure that a chronic absenteeism or related measure is playing a meaningful role in school identification. This could involve analyzing how well the indicator differentiates among different school types and how potential variations in the calculation and reporting of the measure might alter the list of identified schools. For States that do not use a measure of chronic absenteeism, I strongly urge you to consider adding such a measure as an indicator of SQSS as you consider possible ESEA State plan amendments. And for schools identified for Comprehensive, Targeted, or Additional Targeted Support and Improvement, I encourage you to provide them with access to evidence-based interventions designed to improve student attendance and engagement.

In addition to annually reporting chronic absence data, I encourage you to invest in and use real-time tracking and intervention systems that identify students who are—or are at risk of becoming—chronically absent. More real-time reporting allows schools to quickly adjust programming in response to downward trends in student absenteeism, often mitigating the need for more expensive and intensive interventions. For example, Connecticut and several other States have found success in reporting chronic absenteeism data on a monthly, as opposed to annual, basis. For more information on Federal education funds that may be used to support systems and interventions to address chronic absenteeism, see [Raise The Bar: Strategies to Improve Student Achievement](#).

2. **Access Department resources and training to promote regular school attendance—and encourage your LEAs to do the same.** The Department’s [Student Engagement and Attendance Center](#) (SEAC) can help support States and schools in designing and implementing evidence-based strategies to improve student attendance and engagement, including by connecting education leaders with critical resources on multi-tiered systems of support, home visiting practices, and parent and family communications that reinforce the importance of routine, in-person attendance. The Department’s National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments ([NCSSLE](#)) provides resources and offers technical assistance to LEAs, schools, and teachers on how to improve school climate. And The National Partnership for Student Success ([NPSS](#)) can help States, schools, and community-based organizations improve, expand, and scale high-quality programs that increase student engagement and attendance through the use of tutors and mentors in schools.

I am pairing this letter with a [fact sheet](#) summarizing these and other resources, including key discretionary grant programs. For example, the [Full-Service Community Schools](#) grant program supports schools designed to meet the holistic needs of students by integrating wraparound services directly into educational settings, including meeting basic needs such as laundry services, school supplies, and hygiene products. Please share this resource with LEA leaders in your State, urge them to access or join at least one Department-supported program to improve regular student attendance, and consider options for your own team to engage in State-level initiatives, such as the learning series [Proactive Schoolwide Strategies for Supporting Attendance](#).

- 3. Redouble efforts to urgently invest remaining ARP funds in evidence-based strategies for improving regular school attendance.** According to the most recent data on State and local use of COVID-relief funds, more than 80 percent of LEAs invested in at least one strategy to re-engage students and increase student attendance. Earlier this year, the Department released [guidance](#) outlining how any remaining, timely obligated ARP funds can support initiatives to address chronic absence and improve regular school attendance, including by providing a critical pathway to continue to use ARP dollars in the 2024-2025 school year. As you lead planning for the school year ahead, please remind LEAs of the Department’s guidance on use of ARP funds, work with LEAs that may benefit from liquidation extension, and let my team know if we can offer additional support or technical assistance to help you maximize the benefits of these funds. And because students experiencing homelessness face particular challenges in attending school regularly, please make sure that your State and LEAs are on-track to [exhaust](#) funds this fall. These critical resources can support reliable transportation to school, robust wraparound services, and contracting with community-based organizations to help families navigate housing.

Every goal we hold for our students—increasing academic achievement, delivering a well-rounded education, and creating pathways to college and a career—requires that they be regularly in school and are engaged in their learning and connecting with others. Thank you for the extraordinary work you lead each day to support your LEAs and schools in improving regular school attendance, especially among the student groups most impacted by the pandemic. Continued improvement in regular attendance over the last two school years shows that our investments, your leadership, and our collective commitment to and investment in our students are working. As always, if there is anything the Department can do to support you, please contact us at OESE.Attendance@ed.gov.

Sincerely,
/s/

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.
U.S. Secretary of Education