



# Western Educational Equity Assistance Center Areas of Focus

## Eight Themes From Initial Needs Sensing

The Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) at WestEd supports local and state educational agencies (LEAs and SEAs) in building and sustaining the system conditions that promote safe and supportive learning environments and academic excellence for every student.

Needs sensing is an ongoing effort that ensures the WEEAC's technical assistance (TA) is relevant and timely and has impact. It also allows us to stay abreast of the successes, challenges, and priorities of SEA and LEA leaders who are our clients.

Because there is a rich ecosystem of organizations and agencies working toward success for all students, an important initial step for the WEEAC was to actively engage in needs sensing with SEA and LEA leaders, other federally funded TA centers, and thought-leading organizations and agencies throughout the region. Through a series of virtual meetings, a review of current research, and a meeting with our advisory board, we have identified eight themes to serve as the areas of focus for our TA:

- Academic Excellence
- Well-Supported Educator Workforce
- High and Consistent Student Attendance
- Safe and Supportive Learning Environments
- Tailored Supports for Special Populations
- Authentic Family and Community Engagement
- Strategic Resource Allocation
- System Alignment and Coherence

**The Western Educational Equity Assistance Center (WEEAC) is one of four regional equity assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Established by Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, these are the oldest technical assistance centers in the Department's portfolio.**

**The WEEAC serves Alaska, American Samoa, Arizona, California, Colorado, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.**



## Academic Excellence

SEA and LEA leaders consistently shared that improving academic outcomes for all students is a significant priority. Citing their state summative assessment data, leaders have identified which student groups need differentiated or additional support, and they have invested significantly in improving curricula, instruction, and professional development. Math and English language and literacy are particular focus areas. In addition, some system leaders expressed an interest in strengthening their college and career readiness efforts.

*Academic excellence is the theme in our district.*

—Focus Group Participant

*We are working on the pipeline and work-based prospective. ... [We are] watching growth of students via pathways and work opportunities, so they're successful in life after school. We have lots of students that are going to school just to go to school; we want to help them figure out what their options are for after they're done with school.*

—Interview Participant

*We are focusing on math—[we're] at the stage of mindsets, definitions, and understanding. We're looking at math levers—instruction, coaching, funding, etc.*

—Interview Participant

## Well-Supported Educator Workforce

Several state leaders described the importance of initiatives to address teacher shortages and invest in the entire workforce supply line. They shared innovative strategies for recruiting and preparing teachers from the very communities with the greatest shortages and described partnerships with state college systems. They also described holistic and comprehensive professional development to ensure that teachers have extensive content expertise, instructional skills, and an essential understanding of child and youth development that recognizes the importance of providing every student with safe and supportive learning environments and responsive developmental relationships.



*[We are] opening the teacher pipeline so students are moving into the teaching profession. [We are also] taking away financial barriers. We started with paraprofessionals and offered scholarships through [our state university system]. Hundreds have taken the opportunity.*

—Interview Participant

*Emergency credentialing has become more prominent during/after COVID. As a result, I see fewer well-rounded educators than before the pandemic. And [they are] not as well supported.*

—Focus Group Participant

## High and Consistent Student Attendance

SEA and LEA leaders consistently shared their concern about stubbornly high absenteeism rates. Leaders are eager for evidence-based strategies to improve student attendance. Chronic absenteeism nearly doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching about 31 percent in the 2021–22 school year, and has been slow to decline since then.<sup>1</sup> While reasons for chronic absence may vary—including school climate and safety, community safety, health and mental health, and family obligations—the importance of attending school is clear. Students who attend school consistently and experience positive learning conditions once there learn and achieve at higher levels (Liu et al., 2021; Voigt et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup>

*One issue in almost all school improvement plans is addressing attendance. ... Improving school experience is the most powerful way to adjust the attendance issue.*

—Interview Participant

1 Attendance Works. (2024). *Stemming the surge in chronic absence: What states can do, a fourth annual review of state attendance policy and practice*.

2 Liu, J., & Loeb, S. (2021). Engaging teachers: Measuring the impact of teachers on student attendance in secondary school. *Journal of Human Resources*, 56(2), 343–379. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/787063>; Voight, A., Austin, G., & Hanson, T. (2013). *A climate for academic success: How school climate distinguishes schools that are beating the achievement odds*. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resource/a-climate-for-academic-success-how-school-climate-distinguishes-schools-that-are-beating-the-achievement-odds-full-report/>



## Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

SEA and LEA leaders know that high-quality relationships and environments are essential foundations for high academic achievement. Several leaders are prioritizing these conditions of learning by using data to strengthen students' experiences of connection, belonging, and agency in schools. This area of focus includes narrower topics, such as promoting positive classroom behavior, ensuring that discipline policies and practices are fair, and addressing discrimination in schools. System leaders also see the connection with themes such as student attendance and family and community engagement.

*When we improve the learning environment, it improves scores.*

—Interview Participant

*We're thinking about how we're creating safe and supportive learning environments. ... Chronic absenteeism is an issue for underrepresented students [and the] root cause is about safe and supportive learning environments and supports for special populations.*

—Focus Group Participant

## Tailored Supports for Special Populations

Several SEA and LEA leaders talked about disaggregated data that highlight variations in student experiences and success for special populations.<sup>3</sup> These leaders are interested in deepening their understanding of the root causes of this variation, identifying evidence-based strategies to address this variation, and building the capacity of educators to deploy these strategies. In particular, leaders described a desire to support academic achievement for their students with disabilities, Indigenous students, immigrant communities, Black students, students categorized as English Learners, students experiencing homelessness, and students navigating poverty.

*[We] have student success plans, supported by advisory councils with goals, outcomes, and visions for how students are to be served.*

—Interview Participant

*[F]or more vulnerable populations, the gap in performance is a focus.*

—Interview Participant

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. Department of Education recognizes the term *special populations* as students who are experiencing homelessness, students who are neglected or delinquent, students in foster care, and students who are English Learners.



## Authentic Family and Community Engagement

Several SEA leaders recognized the importance of participatory approaches to their change efforts by, among other things, actively partnering with families, communities, and other interest holders in key initiatives. They are seeking new ways to engage authentically with their interest holders, valuing their strengths and assets and centering their priorities and needs.

*Do educators really understand it's really an ecosystem you are trying to build and sustain?*

—Interview Participant

*People support what they help create.*

—Focus Group Participant

## Strategic Resource Allocation

SEA and LEA leaders often noted that while student needs remain high or are even growing, access to resources (such as federal funding or tax income) has been contracting. They are eager to learn about innovative strategies for doing more with less—through collaboration with their ecosystem partners and by leveraging various sources of TA.

*How do we become more effective in this time of austerity? How do we protect learning with fewer funds?*

—Interview Participant

*With strategic resources, you can only do what you have resources for. Resources can become a barrier or a hindrance to success.*

—Focus Group Participant



## System Alignment and Coherence

State agencies often employ a wide variety of initiatives, policies, and funding streams to create the conditions essential for student success. Leaders have shared that they are seeking ways to make sure these strategies are aligned and coherent, working together toward their intended goals. Several system leaders also described a need for support in the area of strategic communication with their interest holders—to communicate in clear and compelling language, to inspire partnership and coherence, and to inform the states' continuous improvement efforts.

*We need to talk about policy, practice, and programming, as we think about serving student groups.*

—Interview Participant

**All of the WEEAC's TA, at no cost to the field, will address one or more of these themes raised from our needs sensing.** The WEEAC offers a rich portfolio of TA organized in three tiers. Our first, or universal, tier of TA is designed to serve the broadest audience and is housed on our center [website](#). The site has a large and growing inventory of evidence-based resources, including webinars, podcasts, practice guides, briefs, and reports. Our second, or targeted, tier of TA includes peer networking opportunities in which participating teams work on individual or shared problems of practice that are relevant to the broader field. Our third, or direct, tier of TA includes one-on-one coaching, consultation, and capacity building designed to address the unique needs of a specific SEA or LEA team.

 To work with us, please reach out via the [Ask the WEEAC](#) function on our website.