THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF
PHILADELPHIA

Key Takeaways

**Listening and Learning:
Student Attendance**

Kristyn Stewart, MS, M.Ed.
Adrienne Reitano, Ph.D.
Office of Evaluation, Research, and Accountability

Spring 2023

Attendance is not our primary challenge.

Research tells us that students attend school when positive conditions are in place.

Our primary challenge is ensuring that all schools have what they need to sustain the positive conditions for learning.

The goal of this project is to better understand the challenges and barriers that keep our students from attending school on time every day.
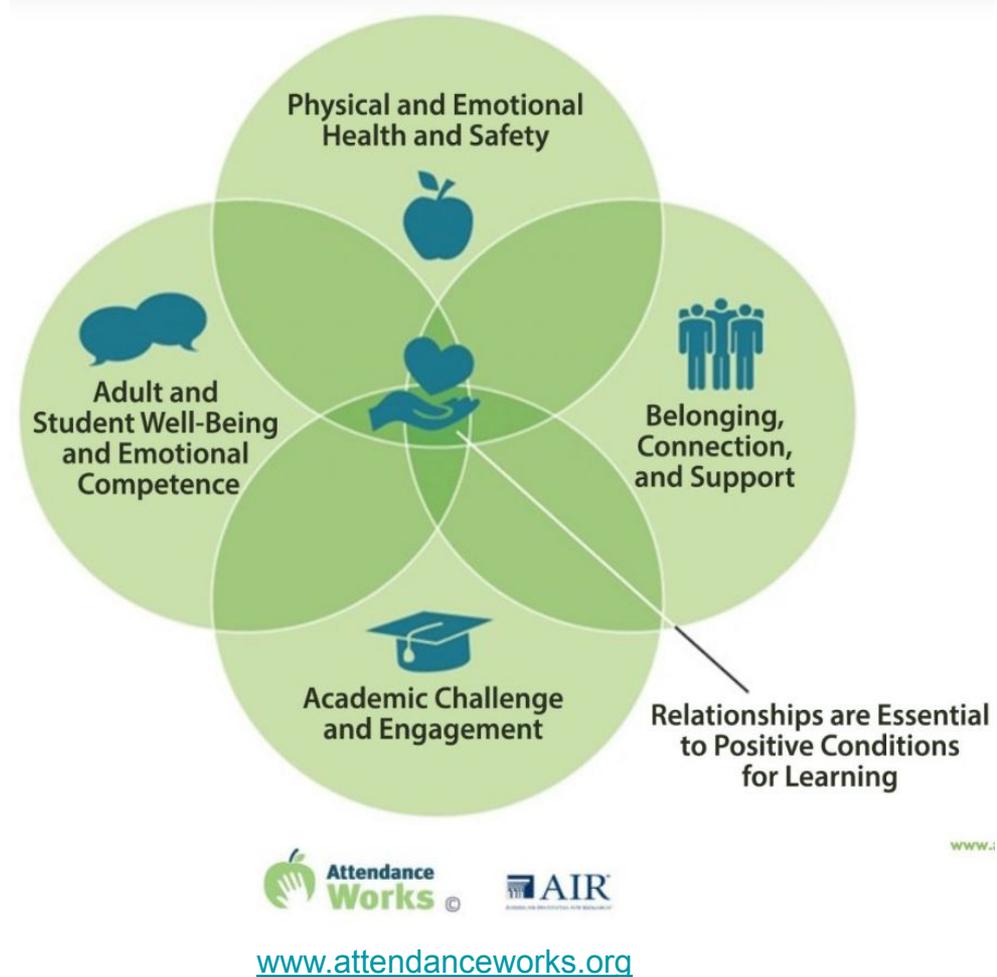

www.attendanceworks.org

Table of Contents

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with students and school leaders held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at https://www.philasd.org/era/2023/06/15/listening-and-learning-student-attendance/.

Who did we talk to?

An overview of the sample and the questions that we asked

In Listening and Learning sessions from mid-February to mid-May, we talked to students, leaders, and key role groups who support attendance related activities. This slide deck presents the findings from sessions with <u>school leaders and students</u>.

☑ 184 students representing 10 schools

☑ 49 school leaders representing 50 schools/programs

☐ 58 support staff representing 14 roles related to attendance

Findings from support staff interviews are forthcoming.

About our Sample: School Leaders

We talked to leaders from 44 schools that have lower rates of 90% attendance and serve larger populations of marginalized student groups.

	All Schools*^	**44 Sample Schools***
Percentage of Students with 90%+ Attendance (March 2023)	**65.2%**	**51.6%**
Economically Disadvantaged	71%	81%
Black/African American	45%	61%
Hispanic/Latino	26%	28%
Receiving Special Education Services	16%	21%
English Learners	17%	17%

*Based on an October 1, 2022 enrollment snapshot. ^Does not include Alternative school students or Charter school students.

About our Sample: Students

We visited 10 of the 44 schools whose leaders participated in the School Leader Listening and Learning Sessions and conducted 90 minute student sessions using a design thinking approach.

- We reached out to all leaders who serve **students in grades 6-12** and participated in the School Leader Listening and Learning Sessions. Ten leaders invited us to come talk with their students.

- Design thinking sessions are done in an interactive workshop style. Students identified attendance challenges, prioritized key challenges, and worked in small groups to identify and/or design possible solutions.

School 1	Whole Class: 9th grade
School 2	Small Groups: Mixed grades with working students, ELs, newcomers, frequently absent (9-12)
School 3	Small Group: Mixed grades with working students, ELs, and newcomers (9-12)
School 4	Small Group: Mixed grades (9-12)
School 5	Whole Class: 9th grade

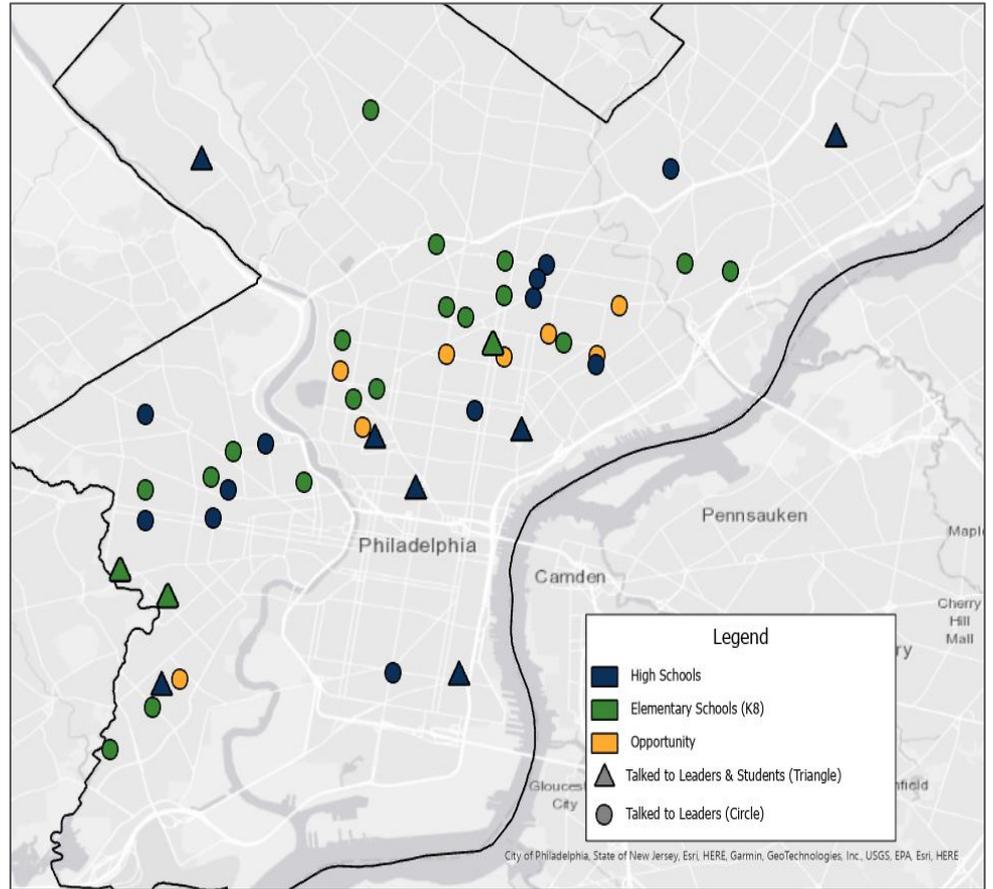|	
School 6	Whole Class: 6th grade
School 7	Small Group: Mixed grades (9-12)
School 8	Whole Class: 6th grade
School 9	Small Group: Students who are frequently absent (9-12)
School 10	Whole Class: 8th grade

About our Sample: Schools

We talked to leaders and students from schools throughout the city.

44 total schools

Talked with **LEADERS** only

34 schools*

Talked with both **LEADERS & STUDENTS**

10 schools
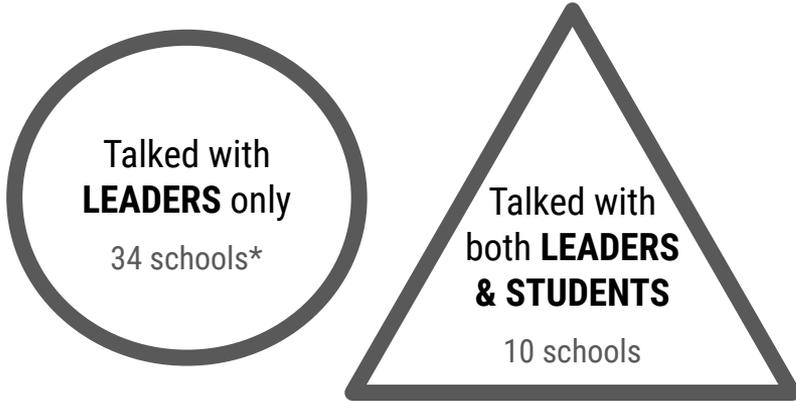
*Includes leaders of programs that are located at more than one physical site. In those instances, all program locations are included on the map.

Legend

- ■ High Schools
- ■ Elementary Schools (K8)
- ■ Opportunity
- ▲ Talked to Leaders & Students (Triangle)
- ● Talked to Leaders (Circle)

City of Philadelphia, State of New Jersey, Esri, HERE, Garmin, GeoTechnologies, Inc., USGS, EPA, Esri, HERE

What did we learn?

An overview of key findings about primary attendance challenges and school and student needs

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with students and school leaders held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at https://www.philasd.org/era/2023/06/15/listening-and-learning-student-attendance/.

184 students representing 10 schools wrote down <u>691 reasons</u> why they or their peers were unable to attend school, get to school on time, or stay all day.

NOTE: 691 represents the total number of responses, NOT unique reasons.

Students mentioned **FIVE reasons more than 50 times.**

Mental Health (60)

Depression, anxiety, burn-out

Classroom Engagement (58)

Boring coursework, lack of active engagement in class

School Food (52)

Poor quality, lack of choice, not culturally appropriate, early lunch times

Transportation (89)

Unreliable, unsafe, too far to travel/walk

Too tired/Start time (78)

Cannot wake up, traveling too far too early, drop-off conflicts

The number of times each issue was mentioned is indicated in parentheses.

Students mentioned **SEVEN reasons 25-50 times**.

Bullying/Negative Peer Relationships (40)

Negative Student/Staff Relationships (31)

Personal/Family Emergencies (28)

School Safety and Disruptive Climate (27)

Working (46)
Inside or outside of the home

Fallen behind/failing (44)

Physical illness (42)
Especially without nurses

Mental Health (60)
Depression, anxiety, burn-out

Classroom Engagement (58)
Boring coursework, lack of active engagement in class

School Food (52)
Poor quality, lack of choice, not culturally appropriate, early lunch times

Transportation (89)
Unreliable, unsafe, too far to travel/walk

Too tired/Start time (78)
Cannot wake up, traveling too far too early, drop-off conflicts

The number of times each issue was mentioned is indicated in parentheses.

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with students and school leaders held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at https://www.philasd.org/era/2023/06/15/listening-and-learning-student-attendance/.

Office of Evaluation, Research, and Accountability • 12

Students also mentioned **NINE additional reasons.**

Class Options (9)	**Econ. Instability (9)**	**No Extra Currics. (5)**	**Family Trips (5)**	**Suspensions (2)**

"No Motivation" (21)	**Rules and Policies (19)** Phones, uniforms, late policies	**Neighborhood Safety (14)**	**Facilities/Building Conditions (12)**

Bullying/Negative Peer Relationships (40)	**Negative Student/Staff Relationships (31)**	**Personal/Family Emergencies (28)**	**School Safety and Disruptive Climate (27)**

Working (46) Inside or outside of the home	**Fallen behind/failing (44)**	**Physical illness (42)** Especially without nurses

Mental Health (60) Depression, anxiety, burn-out	**Classroom Engagement (58)** Boring coursework, lack of active engagement in class	**School Food (52)** Poor quality, lack of choice, not culturally appropriate, early lunch times

Transportation (89) Unreliable, unsafe, too far to travel/walk	**Too tired/Start time (78)** Cannot wake up, traveling too far too early, drop-off conflicts

The number of times each issue was mentioned is indicated in parentheses.

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with students and school leaders held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at https://www.philasd.org/era/2023/06/15/listening-and-learning-student-attendance/.

Most of the challenges that students named were also raised by school leaders, as denoted by the check marks.

Transportation	✔
Too tired/ School starts too early	✔
Mental health	✔
Classroom engagement and length	✔
Food	✔
Working inside or outside home	✔
Fallen behind/failing	✔

Physical health	✔
Bullying/negative peer relationships	
Teacher relationships	
Family/personal issues/emergencies	✔
School safety and climate	✔
Don't want to go/ no motivation	
Rules	

Neighborhood safety	✔
Facilities	✔
Class choice	✔
Instability (housing, food access, etc)	✔
No fun activities or trips	✔
Family trips/holidays	
Suspensions	

Challenges named by school leaders that were not named by students:

- Schoolwide climate programming is a critical component of creating a positive school environment, but it is not enough for many of the students experiencing chronic absenteeism.

- Transition planning and services for students (middle to high school, between schools, and from placement) are ineffective.

- Truancy process and procedures are time consuming and do not result in meeting student and family needs.

- There is an inadequate focus on home visits and family engagement.

- Teacher, bus driver, and student support staff vacancies make it hard for students to get to school and also create unsupportive conditions for student learning.

- There is mistrust between families and the District.

- Some families believe that absences are ok as long as they are excused.

- There are no immediate consequences or solutions for chronic absences.

- Lack of communication to families that missed instructional time can impact their child's learning.

When asked which challenges, if addressed, would most improve attendance, students at **3+ schools prioritized the following topics:**

Topic	# Schools
Students too tired/start time too early	8/10
Mental health issues	6/10
Working inside or outside the home	4/10
Classroom engagement	4/10
Transportation	3/10

Attendance Challenge:

Students too tired/ start time too early

Students said…

Some students are not getting enough rest because they are working very late.

Other students are staying up too late because they are talking to friends, on their phones, and gaming, making it hard to wake up.

Students & Leaders said…

Students are unable to wake up on time or are too tired to make it to school in the morning.

Start time is too early for most students, especially those who have to travel far distances to school and those who work late into the night.

Early start times combined with transportation delays make getting to school on time challenging.

Early start times for high school students often conflict with their responsibility for getting siblings/younger students to school.

Leaders said…

What they are seeing is in line with the research that students learn better later in the day.

Even when work hours do not directly overlap with school hours, working late sometimes causes students to oversleep and miss school.

How might we support students who are too tired to get to school?

Students want…

- Later whole school start time (8:30-9:00am) or flexible start times for students who must come later or leave earlier

- Time built into the schedule to catch up on school work so that students do not need to stay up so late to get it done, especially those working inside or outside of the home

- Access to coffee and standing desks

Leaders want…

- More autonomy in selecting start times

- Flexible seat time

- Start times that don't conflict with sibling drop-off

Attendance Challenge:
Mental health issues

Students said…

They suffer from stress, "burn-out," depression, and/or anxiety, and that these symptoms are manifesting in many different ways.

There are multiple factors leading to these issues, including concerns about school and community safety and balancing home, work, and school responsibilities.

Teachers and staff members do not understand their mental health challenges.

Students & Leaders said…

Students have mental health issues that, when not addressed, keep them from coming to school.

Some students are self-medicating with drugs both outside and inside school.

There are not adequate supports, both formal and informal, given the depth and breadth of mental health challenges.

The transition to high school is particularly anxiety inducing and can cause absences at the end of 8th grade and into 9th grade.

Leaders said…

Students that have unmet mental health needs prevent school from being a safe and welcoming place for other students.

Bringing in external mental health professionals (IBHS) can be helpful, but positions are often vacant and it is not as effective as having consistent and reliable therapists on staff that students can build relationships with.

For younger students especially, the mental health issues that their families are facing can contribute to absences.

This slide presents summary findings from a series of Listening & Learning sessions with students and school leaders held from February to May 2023. The full results are available at https://www.philasd.org/era/2023/06/15/listening-and-learning-student-attendance/.

How might we support students with mental health needs?

Students want…

- In-school mental health days with access to yoga, journaling, painting, meditation, supported conversations, etc.
- Quiet space to decompress with adult support and/or incorporation of mental health breaks during the day
- Access to affinity discussion groups for specific mental health issues to improve coping skills and reduce stigma
- Staff mental health awareness training focused on the different ways that mental health issues manifest
- Greater access to counselors and/or informal, confidential talk therapy
- Explicit teaching of coping skills as part of 9th grade transition, health curriculum, etc.
- Increased focus on bullying prevention and support for both the bullied and the bullies
- Access to sensory items to manage in-class anxiety (e.g., stress balls, spinners, etc.)

Leaders want…

- More mental health staff training
- Fully staffed Intensive Behavioral Health Services (IBHS) partners, partners who can effectively meet the needs of students
- Additional counselors, social workers, and mental health support staff

Attendance Challenge:
Working inside and outside the home

Students said…

They are sometimes the default caregivers for younger children and/or sick family members because parents need to work.

They often work very late, then must travel home and try and complete school work, leaving little or no time for sleep. Not being able to use their transpass after 8pm accentuates this issue.

Students & Leaders said…

Lack of flexible scheduling may require them to to leave school early or arrive late because of work schedules or caretaking responsibilities.

Even when their work hours do not directly overlap with school hours, working late sometimes causes students to oversleep and miss schools.

Leaders said…

During the pandemic when school was virtual, many students got jobs to help support their families and are continuing to work even though school is no longer virtual.

When there is not a clear connection for students between school and employment/ economic opportunities, they are unmotivated to go to school instead of working.

The work release roster is helpful, but should be expanded to additional grades.

How might we support students who are working inside or outside of the home?

Students want…

- Flexible start and end times
- Access to SEPTA passes after 8pm so that students can get home from work earlier and have time to complete school work
- Systems for students to communicate their responsibilities and a process for requesting to complete coursework online when needed
- Flexibility in how they schedule their classes, especially if they already have the credits they need to graduate, with the options to complete some non-core, coursework online
- Work/internship rosters for high school students

Leaders want…

- Innovative, flexible seat time that includes school-based options for asynchronous/hybrid instruction
- Integration of internship and work experiences into credit-bearing classes and staff to manage partnerships to do this work
- Development of ways that students can be paid for the work that they do though their CTE programs or other internships

Attendance Challenge:
Classroom engagement
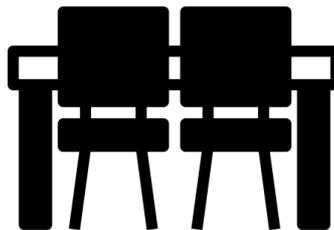
Students said…

They are "bored" by the coursework and/or teaching methods.

Teachers may not allow them opportunities to move around and interact to complete assignments.

There may not be appropriate supports in place for all students to engage in coursework.

Students & Leaders said…

Students do not see how the material they are engaging with in their classrooms is tied to the work they will need to do to make money and build economic capital.

90 minute class periods are too long for students to be in one classroom and focus on one class.

Students would be more engaged in class if they had more course options/greater say in their class selection.

Leaders said…

Large classes make it difficult to ensure all students are getting the support and enrichment they need.

Students are required to take too many assessments in certain months.

There should be more coursework tied explicitly to 21st century skills.

Mismatch between school offerings and student interests reduces student interest and engagement.

How might we make classes more engaging?

Students want…

- Opportunities during the school day for students to catch up on work so that they can participate in engage in current classroom activities
- Opportunities for students to select HOW they are completing assignments (independently, in small groups, etc)
- Course offerings and content that reflect the interests and cultures of students in the school
- Opportunities to choose from a variety of courses
- "Fun activities" and competitions to be incorporated into lessons
- Engaging instruction that allows students to move around the classroom
- Shorter class blocks and/or the incorporation of brain breaks
- More rewards and incentives for classroom participation and performance

Leaders want…

- Literacy instruction integrated into all content areas
- High school math and reading specialists to accelerate mastery of foundational math and reading skills

Attendance Challenge:

Transportation

Students said…

It is too expensive for parents to spend gas money to drive students to school and parents are often working during start times.

Students do not always feel safe on SEPTA.

SEPTA drivers sometimes don't stop to pick up students.

Students, especially girls, do not feel safe traveling without pepper spray which is not allowed in schools.

Students & Leaders said…

Many students travel far distances and through unsafe conditions to get to their school.

Students have inconsistent access to reliable transportation methods.

Walking 1.5 miles to school is too far and makes getting to school challenging, especially in unsafe neighborhoods and bad weather.

SEPTA is not always reliable because of driver shortages.

Younger students often rely on older students to get them to school on time every day.

Leaders said…

Yellow school busses can be unreliable, often because of driver or bus attendant shortages.

When students transition into a new school they may miss their first days because it takes time for them to get their SEPTA pass.

These issues are greatest for our most vulnerable students including those with housing instability and those receiving special education services.

Transportation on half days is especially challenging.

How might we improve transportation for students?

Students want…

- A decrease in the miles requirement to access a SEPTA pass and/or make Key Cards accessible for all students

- Improved SEPTA safety by increasing the presence of SEPTA police, adding adult chaperones, and creating student-only chaperoned SEPTA cars

- Organized car pools (like Uber) that allows vetted adults/parents to drive students to school and receive pay/gas money in return

- Access to SDP busses for more students

Leaders want…

- Transpasses for all students who need them, not just those living outside of 1.5 miles

- Partnerships with community organizations to help monitor the neighborhood around the schools during arrival and dismissal

- Transpasses for new students that leaders can use at their discretion

Summary of Findings:

Compounding challenges require unique, multifaceted, cross-sector solutions.

Sabrina didn't come to school because:	Anthony didn't come to school because:	Jay didn't come to school because:
She has to **walk 1.5 miles** to school and it's raining and cold. **+** She **doesn't get to choose her electives** and was placed in drama which gives her anxiety because she is shy. **+** She knows will be **hungry** by 11am because she had a 9:30 lunch time and **doesn't like the food**. **+** She **doesn't need her afternoon classes** because all of the classes she needs to graduate are in the morning.	He is a **newcomer** who **works until midnight** everyday making it hard to wake up on time for school. **+** It took him an **extra hour to walk home** from work because his SEPTA pass stops at 8pm. **+** He **didn't get to complete his school work** and is anxious about teachers being upset with him. **+** He has **asthma** and is scared because there isn't a nurse in the building.	Their parent works two jobs so they have to **get their sibling to school**. **+** They recently experienced the loss of a family member due to **gun violence** and are scared when walking to school. **+** Their first period is a 90 minute algebra class and it feels **too long** to sit in a seat, especially because they **don't plan on using algebra** in their career. **+** They are **falling behind** and feel like they have no chance of catching up.