

Implementing Belonging and Wellness in Schools

Quality Education Commission Best Practices White Paper Series

School Wellness, Inclusion, Safety, and Health Unit, ODE

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Executive Summary

“Sense of Belonging is a core element in a student’s experience with school and learning. Sense of belonging has been found to be positively associated with motivational outcomes, social-emotional outcomes and behavioral outcomes, and has smaller, yet still significant impacts on academic achievement. Sense of belonging is positively connected to both the experience of learning and the outcomes of learning.”¹

Students who attend a school with a positive school climate experience a stronger sense of belonging and wellness. “School climate” refers to the atmosphere and quality of life within a school and is shaped by relationships, practices, policies and expenditures in a school. A positive school climate offers students and staff an environment conducive to feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe and fosters a productive space for learning and teaching.

Conversely, when a school’s climate needs improvement, students have a decreased sense of belonging that is associated with lower regular attendance rates.² Oregon faces significant challenges in student outcomes, evidenced by 2024-25 measures showing 66.5% regular attendance and 83.0% on-time graduation. These point to unmet needs in belonging, wellness, and well-being. Systems that center equity, relationships, and meaningful content in schools have effectively leveraged public investments. Oregon has an opportunity to increase the return value of existing state education investments by increasing statewide coordination and encouraging local coordination around research-based policy frameworks supporting student belonging, wellness, and well-being.

Belonging and wellness policy frameworks offer a comprehensive, systemic approach that builds upon the strengths of the 2019 Student Success Act and are centered on equity, cultural responsiveness, and evidence-based initiatives. Current example initiatives include the Student

¹ Korpershoek, H., Canrinus, E.T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M. & de Boer, H., “The relationships between school belonging and students’ motivational, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review,” *Research Papers in Education*, 35 no. 6, (2020): 641-680.

² American Educational Research Association. (2013). *Prevention of bullying in schools, colleges, and universities: Research report and recommendations*. AERA.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *School connectedness: Strategies for increasing protective factors among youth*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Cohen, J., McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N. M., & Pickeral, T. (2009). *School climate: Research, policy, practice, and teacher education*. *Teachers College Record*, 111(1), 180–213.

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (2023). *School climate improvement resource package*. U.S. Department of Education.

National School Climate Center. (2015). *School climate and student success: The role of positive school climate in improving academic outcomes*. NSCC.

RAND Corporation. (2020). *Teachers’ working conditions and their impact on teacher retention*. RAND.

Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D’Alessandro, A. (2013). A review of school climate research. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357–385.

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Investment Account, Comprehensive School Mental Health Systems, and Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (TSEL). By coordinating large-scale investments across state partners supporting these various initiatives using a holistic, evidence-based policy framework such as the “Full-Service Community School” Model, Oregon can address challenges around school climate that ensures all students are ready to learn.

Key recommendations to increase belonging and wellness that scale existing state programs are:

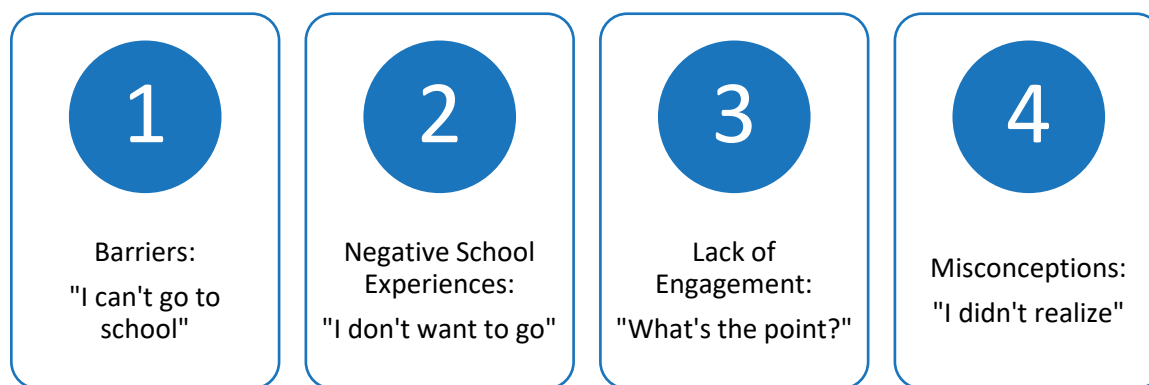
1. Fully fund initiatives and staffing for key roles (e.g., school nurses, social workers, community coordinators).
2. Centering needs of focal student populations in Oregon’s Revised Accountability implementation.
3. Centering cultural and linguistic responsiveness in all systems and practices.
4. Elevating student, staff, and family voice in policy development at all levels of the system (e.g. school site, school district, statewide).

What are Belonging and Wellness?

“Belonging and Wellness” is defined as creating conditions so that students are ready to learn. This includes building interpersonal relationships, practices, policies, systems, and expenditures that affirm student identity and build respect for themselves and others. School system indicators assist in assessing the conditions for belonging and wellness; these include regular attendance rates, exclusionary discipline rates, bullying, as well as social-emotional measures available through formal or informal data collections (e.g. school surveys, student empathy interviews).

Regular attendance for students is a multi-faceted challenge for schools and communities that is impacted by social needs of families, engaging content in the classroom, and feelings of community. Students are Regular Attenders if they attend more than 90% of their enrolled days in a school or district.³ Research shows that students miss school for reasons that fall into four categories: barriers, negative school experiences, lack of engagement, and misconceptions. Research consistently demonstrates that absenteeism is both a symptom and a driver of broader inequities in health, safety, engagement, and access to learning, leading to declines in student achievement.⁴ How does a school community come together to address what feels like an insurmountable problem?

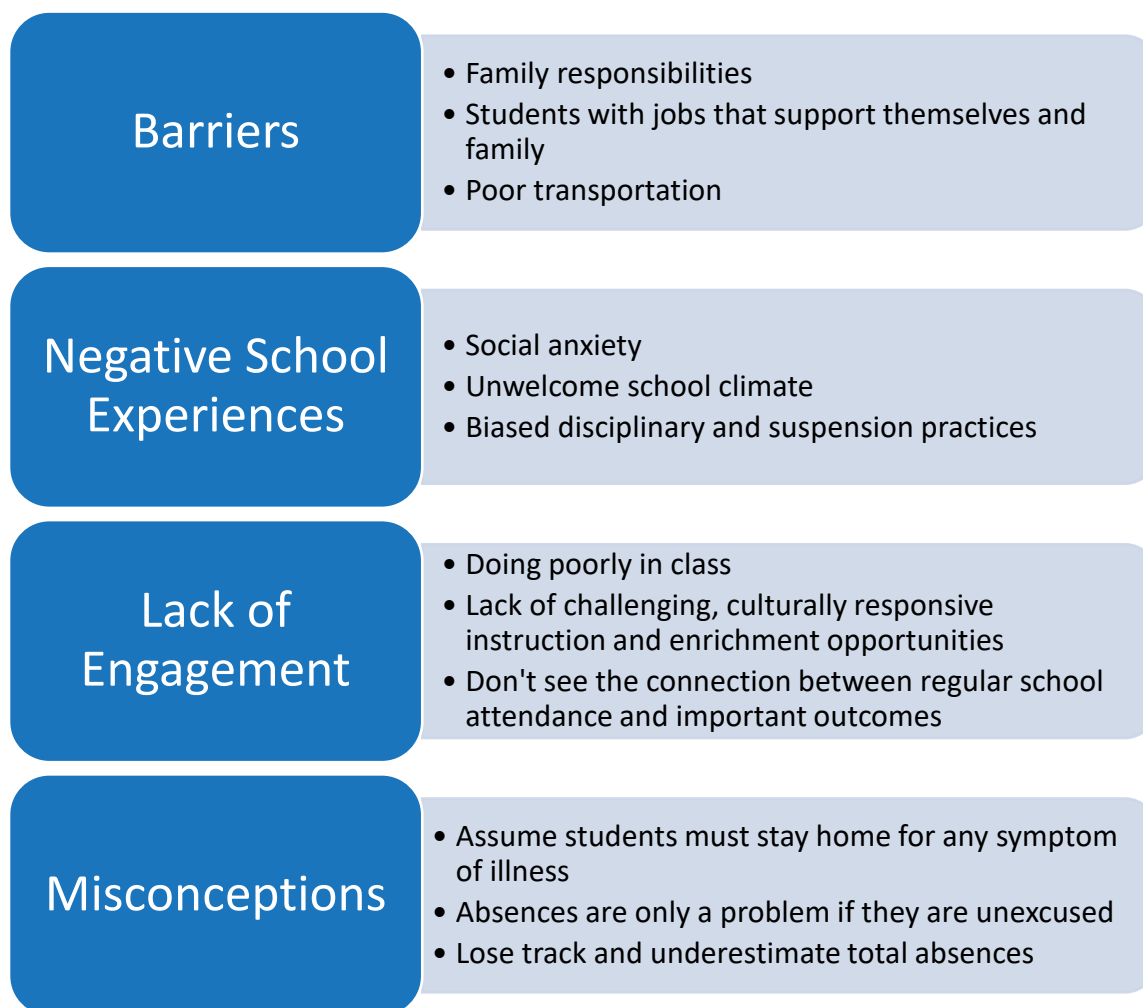
Figure 1: Four Categories of School Absenteeism⁵



³ This metric is based on students enrolled on the first school day in May that have been enrolled for at least 75 days. This aligns with federal accountability requirements and helps ensure the determination for each student is based on a significant period of enrollment.

⁴ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). [The importance of being in school](#). Johns Hopkins University.

⁵ Source: Dr. Robert Balfanz, Director, Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education



States that have successfully increased regular attendance have done so not through isolated attendance initiatives, but by strengthening the underlying conditions that make school accessible, relevant, and supportive for students. Evidence-based strategies for improving student attendance and education outcomes center belonging and wellness in schools. When the social, physical, and emotional health needs of students are supported and addressed, communities feel that their school is a safe place to live, work, and play, school climates thrive, and the student experience transforms from *“I have to go to school”* to *“I’m excited to go to class”*. By supporting the belonging, wellness, and well-being of students and staff in school buildings, communities will feel safe, included, and ready to learn when they come to class.

Oregon’s education system already has the puzzle pieces that support belonging, wellness, and well-being in schools across the state. Education leaders and decision makers can infuse existing funding streams with community connection to create the belonging, wellness, and well-being that underpin safe and inclusive schools. Each district has the opportunity to receive non-competitive grant funding in support of student and staff mental health and well-being through the Student Success Act’s Student Investment Account. The approximate funding

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allocated to schools in Oregon for mental health initiatives in school years 2023-24 and 2024-25, included:

- \$15,500 invested by 2 districts in 1 position for Trauma-Informed Professional Development
- \$114,500 invested by 5 districts in Suicide Prevention Professional Development and Curriculum
- \$1.5M invested by 4 districts in 13 Restorative Justice positions
- \$37M invested by 69 districts in 338 Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) positions, Professional Development, and Curriculum
- \$7.5M invested by 32 districts in 43 Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) positions
- \$5.5M invested by 33 districts in 73 Outreach positions and Outreach Activities
- \$33M invested by 93 districts in 330 School Counselor and Social Worker positions
- \$1.7M invested by 7 districts in 11 Drug and Alcohol Counselor positions
- \$21M invested by 64 districts in 238 Behavior Support positions (Behavior Specialists, Behavior Interventionists, Behavior Deans, Skill-Building Staff, SEL Staff, Student Success Coordinators, Mental Health Counselors, Professional Development, and Travel)
- \$372K invested by 13 districts in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Professional Development and 4 positions

Without belonging and wellness threading together these financial investments, schools run the risk of not fully leveraging their investment and achieving lower educational outcomes than were possible. Students who feel a strong sense of belonging are significantly less likely to be chronically absent and more likely to persist academically.⁶ Belonging, wellness, and well-being are not supplemental supports; they are prerequisites for consistent school attendance. Students are more likely to miss school when they feel unsafe, disconnected, unseen in curriculum, unsupported in their health needs, or alienated by disciplinary practices.⁷ Conversely, when schools cultivate strong relationships, inclusive environments, and responsive supports, attendance improves as a natural outcome rather than a compliance-driven goal.

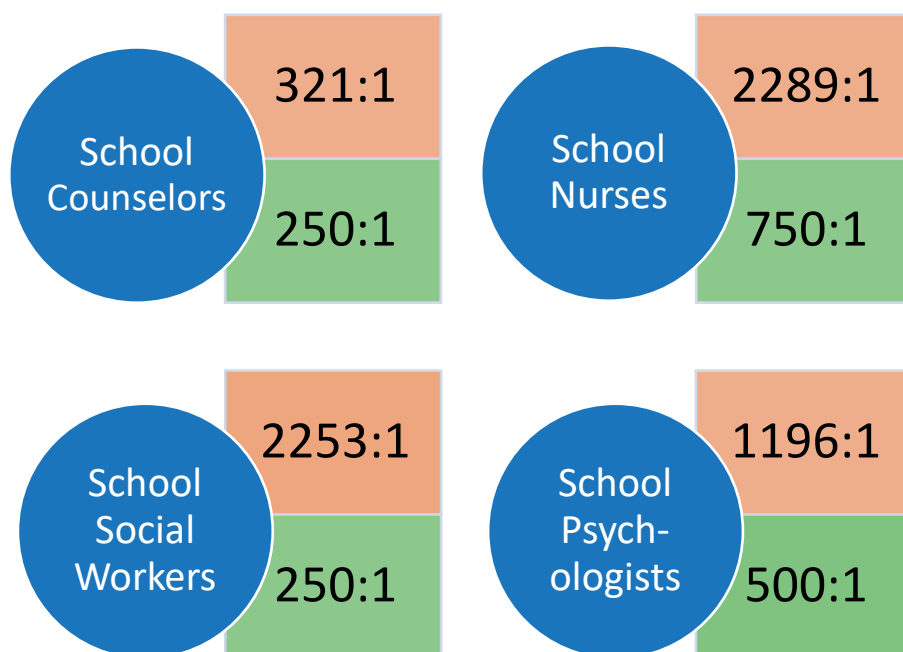
Belonging and wellness further encompass students' physical, mental, social, and emotional health. Health-related barriers—including unmanaged chronic conditions, mental health challenges, hunger, and fatigue—are among the most commonly cited drivers of absenteeism

⁶ Allen, K. A., et al. (2018). School belonging and student outcomes. *Educational Psychology Review*.

⁷ Gottfried, M. A., & Hutt, E. (2019). *Absent from school*. Harvard Education Press.

nationally.⁸ Education systems that integrate physical health services, mental and behavioral health supports, and social-emotional development into the core of schooling reduce these barriers and increase students' capacity to attend regularly.

Figure 2: Ratios between students and mental health providers.⁹



The orange-background ratios are Oregon's 2024 ratios while the green background ratios are the recommended ratios.

Background

Oregon's education system is nationally ranked 43rd for educational outcomes¹⁰ and 48th for regular attendance.¹¹ On-time high-school graduation rates are 83.0% in Oregon, compared to the national average of approximately 87%. How can schools eliminate chronic absenteeism when the root causes are socially complex?

⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Health and academic achievement.

⁹ Data for Oregon are available at the Common Core of Data <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/files.asp>; American School Counselor Association's recommended ratios <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/efe644ea-e26c-4531-82e9-ddbab42227a/24-25-Ratios.pdf>; Nursing Services in Oregon Public Schools, 2025, <https://www.oregon.gov/ode/students-and-family/healthsafety/Documents/schoolhealth/2025%20School%20Nurse%20Report.pdf>; School Social Work Association of America's recommended ratios <https://www.sswaa.org/national-census>; National Association of School Psychologists recommended ratios <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues/shortage-of-school-psychologists>

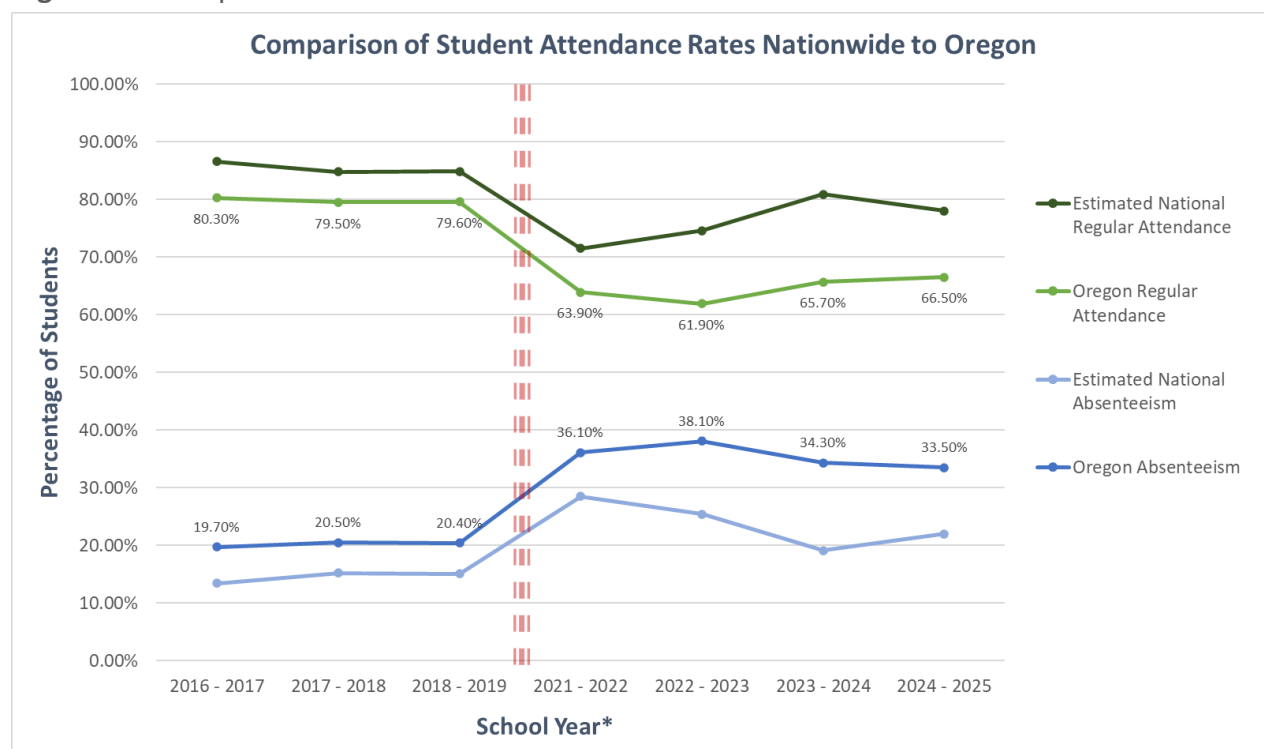
¹⁰ Source: [Kids Count Data Center](#)

¹¹ Source: [U.S. Department of Education](#)

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Supporting the social, physical, and emotional health needs of students can look very different across districts, schools, classrooms, or individuals and are dependent on many complex factors, such as the needs of the community or the abilities of a student. When the belonging, wellness, and well-being of students and staff are addressed holistically, research shows that student attendance increases, with performance outcomes increasing in tandem.

Figure 3: Comparison of Student Attendance Rates Nationwide



*Data are not available for the 2019-20 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. **Source:** U.S. Department of Education; Oregon Department of Education.

Whether at the district or state level, a recurring challenge in supporting regular student attendance are siloed programs and supports. When school systems are designed to meet students' needs holistically, the school system becomes accountable for student attendance rather than placed solely on individual students or their families. Belonging serves as the connective thread and equity platform across education systems. Because belonging needs to be embedded in all practices across a school system such as staffing models, instructional practices, discipline policies, and student services, it cannot be packaged into a single initiative. Instead, it requires coordinated investments in roles such as school nurses, counselors, social workers, and restorative justice coordinators, as well as alignment across policies and a commitment to relationship- and community-building. States that have taken this integrated approach show stronger improvements in attendance and engagement than those relying on attendance enforcement alone.

Importantly, ODE is working to coordinate internal programs to work toward this goal. Student Success Plans, Recovery Schools, Transformative Social Emotional Learning, Comprehensive School Counseling programs, School Safety and Prevention Systems, Every Day Matters and Adi's Act are all current and impactful strategies that support student belonging, wellness and well-being.

Historically underserved students

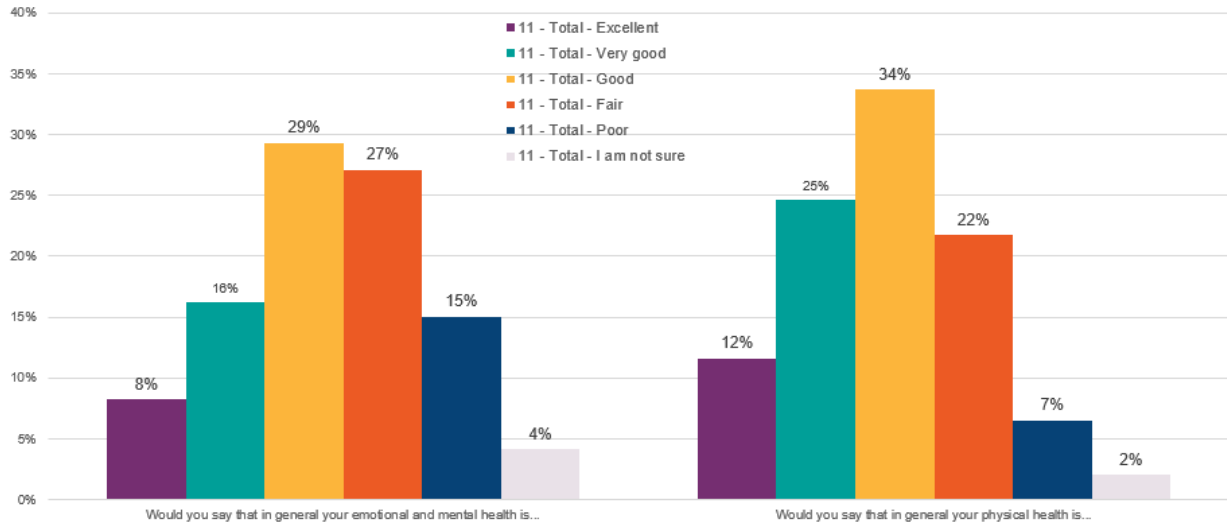
Focal student groups are defined by the 2019 Student Success Act as “students of color; students with disabilities; emerging bilingual students; students navigating poverty, homelessness, and/or foster care; and other students who have historically experienced disparities in our schools.” Overall, focal student groups report lower mental health compared to the general population of students, highlighting a need to develop responsive support for these groups.

Students who need nursing support to navigate their chronic medical conditions, otherwise known as Youth with Special Health Care Needs (YSHCN), miss school at higher rates than peers because of lack of access to school nurses. For example, if a school does not have a nurse to help a student with diabetes access their daily insulin, that student may have to miss school so that they are able to attend to their basic health care needs. On average there is one school nurse for every 2,289 students in Oregon, which is three times higher than Oregon's recommended ratio of one nurse per 750 students (ORS 336.201).¹² 1 in 4 school districts statewide do not report any school nurse on staff; and only 11% of statewide districts meet the recommended nurse-to-student ratio. Oregon's critical shortage of school nurses contributes to the 40% of students with disabilities who were chronically absent during the 2024-25 school year. Improving attendance for all students requires fully funding school nurses across the state to remove barriers to attendance; as well as continued emphasis on upstream, preventative strategies supporting whole child health. Strengthening these conditions not only improves attendance but advances equity, academic outcomes, and long-term well-being for all of Oregon's students.

¹² Oregon Department of Education, 2025. [Nursing Services in Oregon Public Schools: 2024 – 2025 Legislative Report](#).

Figure 4: General student population positive youth development shows standard bell curves for reported student happiness.

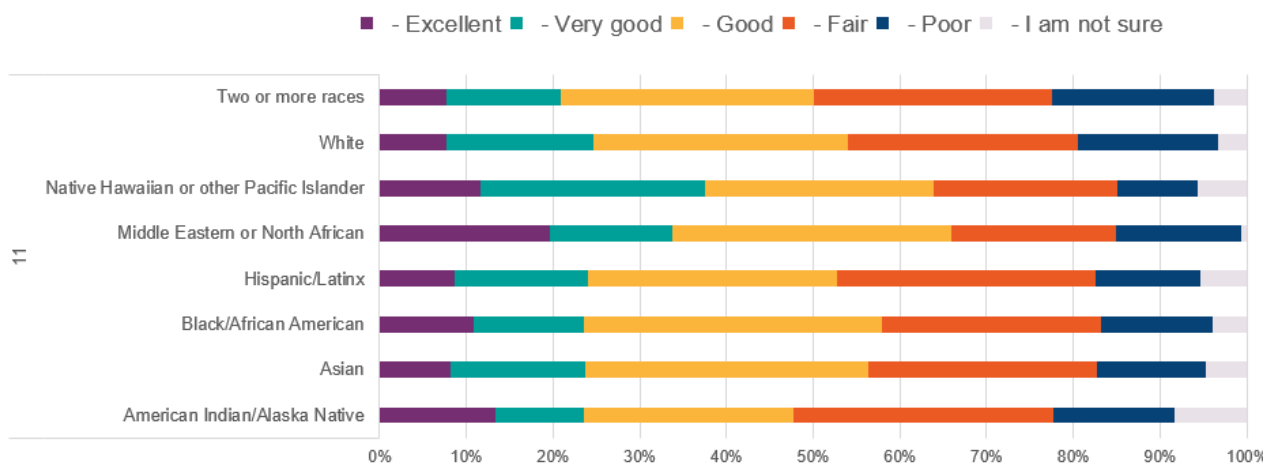
Individual Positive Youth Development: General and Emotional Health (11th Gr)



Source: Oregon Health Authority; Student Health Survey 2024-2025 Data

Figure 5: When disaggregated by race and ethnicity, students of color are more likely to report “fair” or worse mental health.

Self-reported Mental Health By Race And Ethnicity (11th Gr)



Source: Oregon Health Authority; Student Health Survey 2024-2025 Data

Opportunities to Strengthen Belonging, Wellness, and Well-being

Strategies intentionally strengthening belonging, wellness, and well-being are shown to positively impact student attendance. When students experience school as a place where they are safe, known, valued, and supported, attendance improves, followed by gains in academic achievement.¹³ ODE operationalizes belonging, wellness, and well-being by centering three cross-cutting strategies:

1. Create structured engagement venues to elevate student and family voice. Feedback loops that inform policy, practice, and service design increase trust and relevance, which are strongly associated with improved attendance.
2. Center equity, cultural responsiveness, and linguistic responsiveness in implementation. Because absenteeism disproportionately affects historically underserved students such as the Focal Student Groups outlined by the 2019 Student Success Act, equity-centered design is essential to closing attendance gaps.
3. Schools intentionally infuse connection into daily practice, reinforcing relationships and relevance of material.

The following opportunities build upon these strategies by leveraging existing or upcoming state support or initiatives.

Collaboration with state and local partners on supporting students' Social Determinants of Health, including braided and blended funding

Creating and sustaining upstream investments in belonging, wellness, and well-being is an evidence-based preventative strategy that reduces the need for reactive interventions. By addressing root causes of absenteeism such as bullying, unmet health needs, exclusionary discipline, and lack of connection, education systems can reduce chronic absence while simultaneously improving academic, behavioral, and health outcomes.¹⁴ Holistic supports for

¹³ MacNeil, A. J., Prater, D. L., & Busch, S. (2009). The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12(1), 73–84.

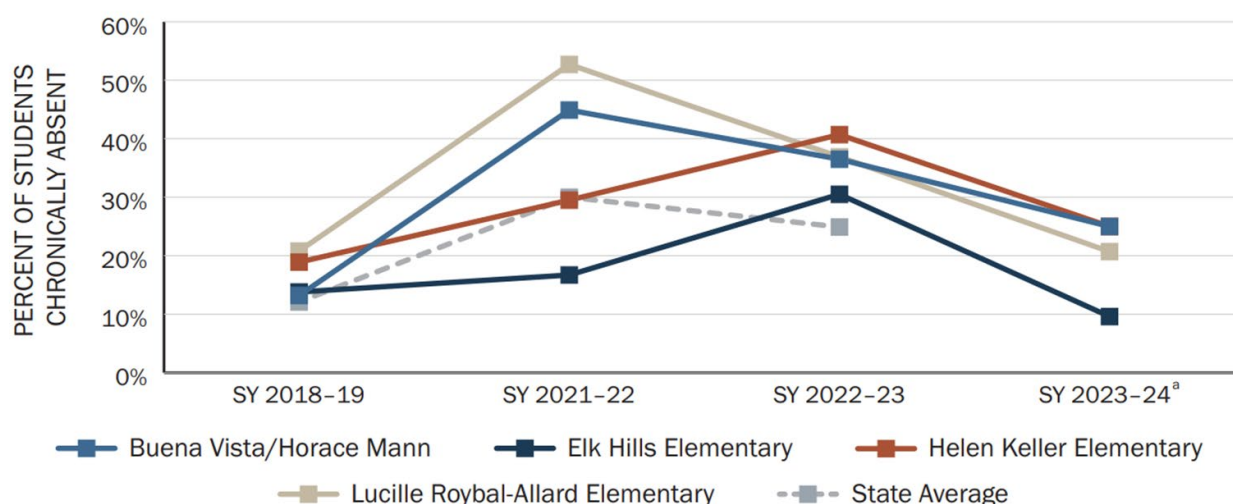
¹⁴ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). [The importance of being in school](#). Johns Hopkins University.

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belonging, wellness, and well-being are known in the public health sector as the “Social Determinants of Health”, which have additional decades of evidence underpinning their impact.

The State of Oregon has been working on supporting the Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) for nearly two decades through partner state systems at Oregon Health Authority, the Department of Early Learning and Care, Oregon Department of Human Services, Oregon Housing and Community Services, and the System of Care Advisory Council, among other state partners. Meanwhile, schools and districts largely work to provide housing, economic, and social supports in silo from these systemic state services. In education systems, a comparable policy framework to SDoH is the Full-Service Community School (FSCS) Model¹⁵, which can be utilized to create understanding of how to operationalize health into education settings.

Figure 6: Title I schools utilizing belonging and wellness frameworks (i.e. Full-Service Community School model) decreased chronic absenteeism rates by 20% to 30% in two years



Source: Germain, E., Hernández, L. E., Klevan, S., Levine, R., & Maier, A. (2024). [Reducing chronic absenteeism: Lessons from community schools](#). Learning Policy Institute.

ODE is working to bridge the systemic gaps that exist between state agencies to get supports closer to students and their families; however, without on-the-ground staff in school and district buildings statewide providing coordination as outlined in the FSCS Model, the community connections crucial to getting these services to families are still missing.

Students who experience supportive, inclusive school environments demonstrate improved long-term health, economic, and overall well-being outcomes. By connecting the existing SDoH systems in Oregon into schools, ODE can leverage a cost-effective approach to improve overall

¹⁵ Learning Policy Institute. [Key Practices for Community Schools Transformation](#).

student attendance and academic achievement; and state partners are more able to deliver services to the families that are difficult to reach through traditional communication strategies. While partner state agencies have to seek out families who qualify for health and economic supports, those families walk into the doors of the education system every day.

Expanding existing evidence-based strategies supporting belonging

Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (TSEL) is the framework through which Oregon operationalizes belonging, wellness, and well-being. TSEL provides the roadmap for embedding social and emotional development into instruction, relationships, and school culture rather than treating it as a separate curriculum; including embedding representation and lived experiences of Oregon's diverse students into instructional materials.

TSEL is a process where students and adults can build strong, respectful, lasting relationships that facilitate co-learning, critically examine the root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions that promote personal, community, and societal well-being.¹⁶ Oregon's Transformative SEL Framework describes the conditions that transform learning environments to support whole child approaches in meeting the full scope of students' social, emotional, and academic needs.¹⁷ The framework and standards utilize and expand on CASEL's definition of Transformative SEL to help build capacity for strengthening school cultures that center equity, and support student and adult well-being through a systemic approach.

TSEL has been shown to positively impact regular attendance for students. Students who experience strong relationships with educators, culturally responsive learning environments, and meaningful opportunities for agency are more likely to attend school consistently and less likely to disengage over time.¹⁸ TSEL is utilized to improve school climate and inclusion, strengthen peer and adult relationships, increase academic achievement, reduced disciplinary incidents, and lower levels of emotional distress.¹⁹

For SEL to be transformative, implementation must move beyond compliance with a curriculum and toward embedded practices across content areas and daily interactions. Student voice is centered in decision making and programs. Collectively, TSEL strategies equitably address both

¹⁶ [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

¹⁷ [Oregon's Transformative Social and Emotional Learning Framework and Standards](#)

¹⁸ Jagers et al., 2019. [Transformative Social and Emotional Learning: In Pursuit of Educational Equity and Excellence](#). University of Michigan.

¹⁹ Durlak et al., 2011. [The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions](#). Loyola University Chicago.

the motivational and structural drivers of absenteeism to improve regular student attendance. ODE continues to provide guidance and technical assistance to districts for TSEL and instructional standards with equity-focused content, though accountability and increased funding are challenges to strengthening statewide impact.

Accountability Framework Implementation

The legislature passed Oregon’s Education Accountability Act (EAA)(Senate Bill 141, codified into [ORS 327.222](#)) in June 2025. To implement this Act, the state is focusing on shared responsibility, streamlined reporting, better data, and tailored supports and interventions for districts. The state has an opportunity to holistically address belonging, wellness, and well-being within the intensive coaching requirements by fully funding ODE to provide school districts with a continuum of supports, including intensive coaching programs. Intensive coaching includes engaging with schools, districts, and ESDs to identify and respond to a district’s unique needs for school climate supports, resources, and models.

ODE has the capacity to leverage and build upon existing whole-child staff expertise to support the state’s systemic ability create positive school climates that are foundational to increased regular attendance, academic outcomes, and graduation rates, especially for historically underserved populations; establish and begin to deliver a well-rounded, evidence-based continuum of supports that are sufficient and responsive to meet the need of school districts statewide; and meet the statutory requirements of ORS 327.222.

By fully leaning into the intensive coaching requirements of the EAA implementation, the state has the opportunity to improve: regular attendance; feelings of belonging, trust, and emotional well-being for students and staff; student safety (by seeing decreased incidents of harm); streamlined existing state systems; greater access to school safety and prevention, mental and physical health supports for students and staff; and reduced use of exclusionary discipline, especially for disproportionately impacted student populations.

Strengthening Data Collection for Measuring Belonging and Wellness

Oregon has five surveys that function as important tools for understanding the experiences and needs of students and staff in Oregon’s public schools, especially in supporting student and staff belonging and wellness. The five surveys include:²⁰

²⁰ View a [comparison summary of the SHS, SEED, and EVE surveys](#) for more information on survey administration.

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- Student Health Survey (SHS): A comprehensive, school-based, anonymous, and voluntary health survey of 6th, 8th and 11th graders conducted yearly. The SHS is designed to address student health and safety, student mental and behavioral health, and school climate and culture.
- Student Educational Equity Development Survey (SEED): Offered annually to students in grades 3-11 and designed to gather information about the educational experiences of students across eight domains: Access to Learning Resources, Sense of Belonging, Opportunity to Learn, Self-Efficacy, Career Connected Learning, Post-Graduation Planning, Well-Rounded Education, and Extracurricular Engagement.
- Elevating Voices in Education (EVE): This workforce survey is open to all licensed and classified staff employed or under contract with a public K-12 public education provider that includes questions on topics such as workplace climate, professional learning, well-being, students, equity, and job satisfaction.
- Student Voice Summer Survey (SVSS): A student perception survey designed to help leaders better understand students' experience in summer programs.
- School Administrators Survey (COMING SOON): Beginning in SY 2026-2027, this survey will collection information from school staff about health policies and practices in place in their school that can help leaders explore the connection between school health policies and programs with student health and education outcomes.

In 2023, the Oregon State Legislature demonstrated a commitment to collecting student and staff voice by mandating administration of these school surveys that ODE and OHA are working together to implement and scale. [ORS 329.078](#) requires all school districts in Oregon to make the SHS and SEED Survey available to students in grades 3 through 11; [ORS 342.676](#) requires public education providers to encourage their workforce to respond to the EVE survey.

Before these surveys were mandated, Oregon had no way to systemically measure belonging and wellness centered in community voice. While the survey results are meaningful in silo, streamlined analysis of survey data offer powerful insight into how communities and state agencies can support school communities' climate. ODE and OHA are working together to strengthen tools for both state agency and community analysis of data and trends available within the survey results; and all surveys have seen participation climb steadily since the 2023 legislative mandate. The surveys are a new and meaningful tool in illustrating issues in school climate from student and staff perspectives and will continue to grow in impact as survey administration reaches full implementation over the next biennium.

Proposed Solutions: Comprehensive and Community-Centered Approaches

Proposed solutions build on strengths of Oregon’s education system and provide a roadmap for state leaders to leverage current education investments to fully actualize increases in belonging and wellness outcomes for school communities.

Coordinate local and statewide funding utilizing a comprehensive policy framework centering community voice

ODE, in collaboration with partner state agencies, implements many evidence-based policies and programs to support students. A proven way to organize these policies and programs into a framework that encourages cohesion and collaboration across government and communities is the Full-Service Community School (FSCS) Model, which acts as a filing system for education leaders and policymakers to understand how to implement supports that help a student be ready to learn. FSCS strategies have driven clear, measurable improvements in student attendance and reductions in chronic absenteeism across diverse districts nationwide by constructing a framework that centers student and staff voice and illustrating strategies that education leaders can pursue to support feedback.²¹ Districts that implement integrated student supports, family engagement structures, expanded learning time, and collaborative leadership consistently increase daily attendance and re-engage students who were previously disengaged.²² When schools connect students and families to health services, mental health care, food access, housing stability resources, and academic supports, they remove the structural barriers that keep students out of class. These strategies produce the strongest gains for historically underserved student groups. FSCS does not rely on isolated programs; it restructures school systems to actively eliminate attendance barriers and sustain engagement at scale.

Additionally, FSCS strategies have been shown to reduce exclusionary discipline and create safer, more supportive learning environments.²³ Schools that adopt restorative practices,

²¹ Frankl, Evie, 2016. [Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools](#). Southern Education Foundation.

²² Community Schools: An Evidence-Based Strategy for Equitable School Improvement, NEPC and LPI, 2017, p.13.

²³ Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools, 2021. [Addressing education inequality with a next generation of community schools: A blueprint for mayors, states, and the federal government](#). Brookings Institute.

coordinated behavioral health supports, and individualized student plans cut suspensions and disciplinary referrals while strengthening school climate. By replacing punitive responses with relationship-based interventions, schools keep students in class and prevent the cycle of disengagement that fuels chronic absence. Districtwide FSCS implementation has repeatedly demonstrated that when systems align around whole-child supports, they decrease disciplinary exclusion and increase consistent attendance. The evidence shows that FSCS is not a pilot-dependent reform; it is a replicable, systems-level strategy that advances equity by removing barriers that have disproportionately impacted historically underserved students.

Full Staffing for Health Services

Belonging and wellness are not ancillary supports but core system conditions that shape whether students are able and willing to attend school. Oregon's existing policies and frameworks provide a strong foundation for this work, yet gaps in staffing, funding, and implementation coherence continue to limit impact. Oregon has a critical school nursing shortage that disproportionately impacts students with chronic health care conditions or special health care needs, such as students with diabetes who need nursing support to receive insulin. Without nursing support, these students cannot attend school regularly. School nurses can improve attendance by increasing return-to-class rates, supporting chronic disease management, among other duties.

With 24% of school districts reporting 0 school nurse staff and only 11% of districts meeting the recommended ratio of one nurse to every 750 students, Oregon has a clear opportunity to improve student health, reduce absenteeism, and promote equitable academic success statewide. To fully fund school nurses to meet minimum requirements for ratios, there are two clear pathways identified:

1. Increase health services funding allocation in State School Fund to explicitly and fully fund the amount of school nurses necessary for each school district to meet required nurse-to-student ratios.
2. Create new population for Medically Complex or Nursing-Dependent students in the State School Fund enrolled students allocation that matches payments for other underserved populations. School districts receive specific funds from the State School Fund to support specialized populations in receiving their free and public education, such as pregnant or foster students. There are currently no defined reimbursement populations that specifically support the needs of medically complex students in these calculations.

Flexible Funding for Wraparound Supports

Without on-the-ground school staffing to coordinate the wraparound supports provided by state systems, services never make it to the students who most need them. Oregon can fully leverage its investments in health and economic supports for schools by including flexible funding for school staffing to meet community needs for complex challenges. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Social Workers
- Quality Mental Health Providers
- Restorative Justice Coordinators
- School Climate Coaches

Leverage state system investments in Education Accountability Act implementation by expanding Education Service Districts

There is needed capacity within ODE to implement coaching program requirements required by ORS 327.167 outlined in the 2025 Education Accountability Act (EAA)([SB 141](#)). The EAA requires ODE to monitor student outcomes and provide assistance to school districts that do not meet statewide performance metrics,²⁴ including regular attendance and early-grade regular attendance rates.

After two years of not meeting growth targets, districts will be required to accept coaching from ODE to address specific areas of need. After three or more years of not meeting growth targets, districts will be required to participate in an intensive coaching program with a dedicated team of experts to implement specific changes. To support ODE in delivering a well-rounded continuum of supports that are sufficient and responsive to meet the need of school districts statewide, there is a wider need to support the state's systemic ability to create positive school climates that are foundational to increased regular attendance, academic outcomes, and graduation rates, especially for historically underserved populations.

Intensive coaching as required by ORS 327.169 includes engaging with schools, districts, and ESDs to identify and respond to districts' unique needs for school climate supports, resources, and models. By funding expanded partnerships with Education Service Districts (ESDs) to create a regional continuum of supports, Oregon would be able to exponentially increase ODE's ability

²⁴ See the Performance Growth Target website for more information:
<https://www.oregon.gov/ode/accountability/Pages/PGTResources.aspx>

to serve all school districts in belonging and wellness as part of EAA implementation. An expanded partnership with ESDs could look like implementation of evidence-based operational models that leverage existing state support systems; and provide resources and consultation to assist schools, education providers, and families in preventing students from being taken out of school because of behavior or other issues. By providing support for teachers and education staff to meet the needs of students, ESDs can prevent both students and teachers from withdrawing from school.

Conclusion

“Belonging and Wellness” can be defined as creating conditions so that students are ready to learn, which includes building the interpersonal relationships, practices, policies, systems, and expenditures that affirm student identity and build respect for themselves and others. Regular attendance for students is a multi-faceted challenge for schools and communities that is impacted by feelings of belonging and wellness, social needs of families, and engaging content in the classroom. Oregon faces many challenges in supporting its K-12 system, from low regular attendance rates for students (and especially those representing historically underserved populations) to uncoordinated investments around supports for students, families, staff, and communities.

Proposed solutions build on strengths of Oregon’s education system and provide a roadmap for state leaders to leverage current education investments to fully actualize increases in belonging and wellness outcomes for school communities. Without on-the-ground school staffing to coordinate the wraparound supports provided by state systems, services never make it to the students who most need them. Oregon can fully leverage its investments in health and economic supports for schools by including flexible funding for school staffing to meet community needs for complex challenges. An opportunity for ODE to support statewide implementation for community coordinators includes the upcoming Education Accountability Act coaching pathways.

Leaders across Oregon can utilize the Full-Service Community School model to help organize the funding, policies, and programs currently serving students to fully coordinate and leverage existing funding. By centering student, family, and staff voice in policy and program decision making or coordination, education administrators can vastly expand impact of existing funding. Additional funding to expand foundational health services staff (school nurses) and school-level system coordination would exponentially increase impacts of current systems and services statewide; and are research-backed strategies to increase regular student attendance.

Appendix: ODE Strategic Plan

In 2026, ODE published the [Agency Strategic Plan \(2026-2028\)](#), which commits to implementing the following strategies aimed at supporting belonging and wellness in schools:

Belonging and Wellness Priority Outcome 1: Increased regular attendance

- BW.1.1: In partnership with the Oregon Health Authority, provide schools and districts with integrated wellness, inclusion, safety, and health data analysis and interpretation
- BW.1.2: Focus on blending and braiding funding to de-silo attendance approaches and supports
- BW.1.3: Develop and implement School Wellness, Inclusion, Safety, and Health Framework
- BW.1.4: Disseminate and center strategies to reduce absences and increase regular attendance, particularly for focal student populations

Belonging and Wellness Priority Outcome 2: Increased feelings of belonging, trust, and emotional well-being among students and adults

- BW.2.1: Expand district use of Student Educational Equity Development (SEED) Survey analysis protocols and communication toolkit resources
- BW.2.2: Establish system for data collection and analysis on district expenditures related to mental and physical health and safety
- BW.2.3: Embed Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) standards into learning standards, guidance, and professional development at all levels
- BW.2.4: Ensure statewide implementation of ODE's Community Engagement Toolkit and best practices
- BW.2.5: Strengthen government-to-government Tribal partnerships and tribal consultation efforts between school districts, ESDs, and Tribe

Belonging and Wellness Priority Outcome 3: Increased feeling of student safety in schools (and decreased incidents of harm)

- BW.3.1: Examine and improve existing belonging, wellness, inclusion, safety and health data collections
- BW.3.2: Establish a statewide definition of safety and harm to be utilized by civil rights, school safety and prevention, School Safety and Emergency Management (SSEM), and facilities
- BW.3.3: Design, implement, and evaluate an Oregon Model for Behavior Safety Assessments
- BW.3.4: Utilize a whole-child framework to address wellness, inclusion, safety, health and mental health

Shared Accountability Priority Outcome: Established continuum of supports

- SA.2.2: Expand ODE's defined, dynamic, and differentiated continuum of supports aligned with the Priorities for Student Success
- SA.2.3: Improve support to districts through implementation of an aligned regional support team model across the agency

ODE will be monitoring the following systemic outcomes during implementation to understand success contributions to continuous improvement practices:

Short-term outcomes:

- Measurable improvements in indicators of belonging and connection (through SHS, EVE, and SEED surveys)
- Lower reports of unmet health care need; and improved student health, mental health (measured through SHS)
- Higher levels of staff satisfaction (measured through EVE)
- Increased regular attendance for all schools and students, but especially historically underserved populations, focal student groups, and schools receiving intensive coaching for school climate

Medium-term outcomes:

- Increased Regular Attender rates for all students, and especially K-2 students
- Increased 3rd Grade English Language Arts Proficiency rates
- Increased 8th Grade Math Proficiency rates
- Increased 9th Grade On-Track rates

Long-term outcomes:

- Increased 4-Year Cohort Graduation rates
- Increased 5-Year Cohort Completion rates