Beyond Child Protection: Family-Centered Support Strategies for Elementary School Attendance in Minnesota

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Executive Summary

In Minnesota, educational neglect has been treated as a form of child maltreatment under state law. Children under age 12 with seven or more unexcused school absences in a single school year should be referred to child protection services.

In this report, we use the term "support program" to describe the family-centered initiatives developed by counties in Minnesota to address educational concerns and attendance-related issues. These programs— referred to as "diversion" by some agencies—aim to provide supportive, non-punitive responses to address children's and families' needs.

Recognizing that punitive approaches may fail to address challenges experienced by families that are not necessarily due to safety concerns, several Minnesota counties have implemented family-centered supportive strategies. These strategies aim to proactively address school attendance concerns through prevention and early intervention and service coordination between counties and schools, and avoid unnecessary engagement with child protection.

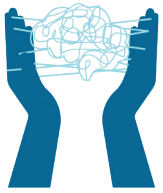
With support from the Sauer Family Foundation and Casey Family Programs, Wilder Research evaluated five counties' support programs—Anoka, Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright—to understand how these programs operate, to inform more equitable and effective practices, and the impact of these programs on families. Between 2023 and 2025, the evaluation used multiple methods and sources to gather information—a literature review, an online Service Tracking Form completed by program staff about families served, an online survey and follow-up interviews with families, school staff interviews, and collaborative co-interpretation sessions or data walks—one with families and the other with county program staff.

The goals were to understand who is being served, the barriers to school attendance, the services families received from the support programs, and the perceived and experienced outcomes of the programs. The findings were intended to inform service coordination and policy decision-making across school districts.

The evaluation results show that families involved in these support programs often face interrelated challenges that contribute to school attendance issues. These challenges, combined with varied school experiences and program service deliveries, shape how families engage with support efforts and the outcomes they experience. Key findings include:

Families face complex challenges related to their children's school attendance. Attendance challenges are often influenced by parents' and children's mental and physical health, parenting and co-parenting dynamics, financial and economic challenges, transportation issues, and work schedule conflicts. Most families face multiple types of challenges simultaneously. Negative experiences with schools—such as bullying and peer abuse, inflexible attendance policies, unsupportive school cultures, and ineffective communication with school staff—further compound the challenges some families face.

Support programs provide diverse services, resources, and supports for families. Schools and counties provide a range of services such as a combination of communication approaches, incentives and rewards for attendance, mental health support, transportation assistance, basic needs support, and special education accommodations. School-county collaboration is essential but capacity issues and inconsistent communication sometimes limit effectiveness.



Families have varied experiences with and services and programs. While many families report satisfaction with services, those facing more complex challenges are less likely to feel supported or to have received all the help they needed. Disparities are observed across cultural groups—non-Black families of color, including Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families who do not identify as Black or African American, are the least likely to report that services are culturally appropriate or sufficient.

Support programs have influenced multiple family outcomes. Many families report improvements in their children's attendance, engagement with school, and well-being as a result of the programs. They also note that the programs improved their access to resources, their understanding of school policies, and their relationships with school staff. Disparities are observed across cultural groups—BIPOC families (families of color, including Black/ African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families) are more likely than White/Caucasian families to report improvements in their children's school attendance and overall outcomes, and a small gap remains between BIPOC families with and without a

Black/African American background. While the data do not explain the reasons behind these differences, it is possible that families with White/Caucasian children may have entered the program with higher baseline levels of school engagement or access to support, leading to less noticeable change over time. Although the number of families in each group is relatively small, the consistent pattern across several outcomes is still worth noting.

Stakeholders have a number of suggestions for program and policy improvement. Support program staff emphasized the importance and effectiveness of non-punitive, early intervention strategies. Families, school staff, county staff, and social workers recommended several improvements to current approaches: tailoring attendance policies to better respond to family circumstances and cultural needs—such as chronic health conditions (including those without formal medical documentation), long-term illnesses requiring ongoing support, and barriers related to transportation or other basic needs; strengthening collaboration between schools and county agencies to ensure timely referrals and coordinated service delivery that support prevention and early intervention; improving communication among stakeholders; and expanding community supports and resources to better serve children and families.

Based on key findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations are offered for stakeholders:

FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

Clarify and consider legislative updates to Statute Section 260C to support proactive, non-punitive responses to educational neglect.

- Reexamine language in Section 260C of Minnesota statutes to ensure that it supports school attendance reporting to local county welfare agencies, distinct from child protection pathways, for cases of potential educational neglect.
- Align statute language with a tiered prevention approach, where school absences due to unmet family needs (e.g., transportation, housing instability, medical caregiving) can trigger supportive outreach—not solely assessment or investigatory action—from a coordinated network of county and community-based services.
- Encourage legislative guidance to distinguish between chronic absenteeism rooted in unmet needs from cases that may necessitate a different child welfare or child protection response; align with Minnesota's 2025–2029 Child and Family Services Plan by shifting from a reporting-focused approach to one centered on identifying family strengths and connecting families to

supportive community resources; provide policy guidance and funding to standardize a reporting, referral, and response framework across counties that enables schools to refer k-5 students to county agencies or local social services teams for supportive intervention—prior to legal involvement or punitive measures.

Allocate funding for pilot initiatives that allow schools and counties to test alternative attendance options (e.g., flexible start times, partial-day-attendance policy, virtual check-ins) for students and their caregivers experiencing health issues, family caregiving responsibilities, or transportation barriers. Evaluate these models to identify effective solutions that maintain engagement without penalizing families.

- ➔ Allocate funding for practices that promote communication and collaboration across schools, counties, and community organizations to serve the needs of families facing school attendance challenges.
- ➔ Expand use of Medicaid and other funding streams, indirectly or directly, to support local Family Resource Centers (FRCs), school-linked mental health services, and mobile outreach teams to do home visits, outreach, and engagement.

Enhance learning from existing support programs by supporting research and evaluation to identify effective practices, assess outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.

FOR COUNTY AGENCIES AND SUPPORT PROGRAM STAFF

Promote mutual understanding, shared accountability, and respectful engagement between county agencies, schools, and families to build trust and ensure coordinated support.

- ➔ Create routine communication mechanisms (e.g., monthly case coordination calls, secure data dashboards) so that schools receive updates on family engagement, service access, and outcomes.
- ➔ Collaborate with school staff or school case workers to establish feedback mechanisms, track families' follow-through on agreed-upon actions or support plans, and develop appropriate, sustainable solutions for families.

Empower, encourage, and support schools to provide early prevention and intervention services for families, while establishing formal criteria for when and how schools should refer families to county support programs, ideally before chronic absenteeism or legal involvement begins.

- ➔ Support schools to provide greater flexibility or differentiated policies (e.g., tardiness policy) that account for the unique challenges families may face, ensuring children and families receive support rather than being penalized for circumstances beyond their control.

Ensure timely access to resources and services for families based on their identified needs.

- Expand partnerships with trusted community organizations and collaborate with community-based organizations, parent peer support programs, and local Family Resource Centers who can provide wraparound prevention and intervention supports informed by those with lived experiences. For example:
- Partner with a community mental health agency to advocate for additional family therapists, and support the co-location of a therapist at an FRC on or near a school campus, increasing access to mental health support for families referred for attendance-related concerns.
- Collaborate with trusted community centers, libraries, or churches to host joint attendance-focused outreach events in community spaces where school staff, county workers, and community partners offer information on supports (e.g., transportation, flexible school options, family therapy, etc.) in a family-friendly setting.

Increase staffing capacity to better serve and meet the growing and diverse needs of families more effectively.

- Ensure caseloads are manageable to allow for sustained relationship-building.
- Provide targeted training for staff on how to identify and respond to the specific needs of families when school attendance concerns are present, so they are better equipped to offer timely and appropriate support.

FOR SCHOOL STAFF

Ensure approaches are responsive and accommodating—within the guidance of policies and laws —when supporting families whose children miss school or face complex or persistent barriers, focusing on tailored solutions rather than punitive responses to keep students engaged in learning.

- Strengthen communication and information sharing with families and support programs by using clear, consistent, and non-stigmatizing, strengths-based language—ensuring families understand how programs work and fostering more coordinated, collaborative support.
- Promote the collaborative approach of the support programs to families, highlighting specific resources they can provide.
- As **Attendance Works** suggests, schools may consider aligning interventions with students' levels of absences—for example, providing all students and families with foundational supports and universal prevention, offering early interventions for students missing 10–19% of the school year, and implementing intensive interventions for those missing 20% or more (Attendance Works, n.d.).
- Normalize early referrals to county and community support services by proactively introducing these resources during family nights, newsletters, and conferences, framing them as strengths-based and collaborative rather than disciplinary.

Create an environment where families feel welcomed, heard, and valued by listening to their experiences and perspectives.

- ➔ Strengthen staff training on trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, and effective communication to better support diverse family needs and strengthen trust.
- ➔ Ensure families are involved in efforts to address bullying—especially those from communities that may feel mistrustful of school systems—by using culturally responsive communication and creating clear, accessible pathways for raising concerns and co-developing solutions.
- ➔ Strengthen home-school partnerships through effective outreach approaches. For example, the **Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV)** model— a voluntary initiative where trained educators conduct at least three respectful, relationship-building home visits per school year and participate in debrief sessions— builds trust with families through non-evaluative, relationship-centered home visits early in the school year.

Implement evidence-based programs to strengthen school climate and prevent bullying. For example:

- ➔ The **Second Step** program model— a weekly, classroom-based curriculum focusing on social-emotional competence and positive peer relationships— proactively prevents bullying by teaching elementary students empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills and practices, while also supporting improved attendance and a stronger sense of safety.

Adopt structured, supportive attendance interventions with proven impact to ensure timely support for students and families within the school. For example:

- ➔ The multi-tiered attendance intervention framework such as **ATI-UP** (Absenteeism and Truancy: Interventions and Universal Procedures), which promotes school-wide norms for attendance, involves problem-solving teams, and engages families and communities collaboratively.
- ➔ The innovative communication approach such as PowerSchool Attendance Intervention, which enables automated messaging to families using real-time attendance data of their children—helping to build trust, reduce stigma, and encourage timely engagement with supportive services; or the EveryDay Intervention, which uses personalized attendance reports to engage families with actionable, student-specific information.

CONTENTS

FIGURES

FIGURES (continued)

Overview

BACKGROUND

Educational truancy and neglect are generally understood as a caregiver's difficulty or inability to ensure a student's enrollment in and engagement with school, which can lead to significant negative outcomes for students' academic achievement, emotional well-being, and long-term life opportunities (Attendance Works, 2016; Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2023).

In this report, we use the term "support program" to describe the family-centered initiatives developed by counties in Minnesota to address educational concerns and attendance issues. These programs—referred to as "diversion" by some agencies—aim to provide supportive, non-punitive responses to children's and families' needs.

Chronic absenteeism is linked to lower academic performance and higher dropout rates, with disproportionate impacts on students experiencing poverty, disability, and systemic inequities (Minnesota Department of Education, n.d.). Students who miss large amounts of school often fall behind academically and socially, which can compound challenges they already face in accessing equitable education (Gottfried et al., 2023).

Previous studies show that missing school in the early grades is closely linked to lower reading and math achievement and increased absenteeism in later years (Applied Survey Research, 2011). Early elementary years are a critical period when children build foundational academic and social skills, and disruptions can have lasting effects on their learning and overall well-being (Coelho et al., 2015). Parents and caregivers play a vital role in ensuring attendance, but some underestimate its importance in these early years or face significant barriers, and children's attendance often improves when families feel schools are safe, welcoming, and trustworthy (Attendance Works, 2014). Understanding the challenges that families with young children face is important when considering solutions to educational neglect and absenteeism, because it means interventions can happen earlier, be more targeted to address specific barriers, and be more supportive of families' lived experiences when working to improve school attendance.

THE EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT LAWS AND POLICY IN MINNESOTA

In Minnesota, educational neglect is treated as a form of child maltreatment under state law. Schools are required to refer children under age 12 with seven or more unexcused absences in a single school year to the local child protection agency (MDHS, 2023). Caregivers are legally obligated to ensure that children attend school or participate in an approved home education program (Minnesota Statutes, section 260C.007, subdivision 6, 2024). However, there is increasing recognition that punitive responses—such as mandatory child protection assessments—may not address the root causes of absenteeism,

especially when these are tied to family instability, poverty, or unmet mental health needs (Jacob & Lovett, 2017).

Bill SF942: In the 2025-2026 legislative session, Bill SF942 was introduced with the aim of mandating a child welfare (rather than child protection) response to school attendance reports (in addition to other changes, such as modifying the habitual truant definition and appropriating funds for grants to fund child welfare response efforts). A version of the bill was passed during the 2025 special session in the Education omnibus bill, with changes going into effect July 1, 2025 (see Section 39. 260E.291). (The request for grant funding to support this change did not pass during the session).

THE ALTERNATIVE APPROACH—SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMMING

Evidence from national and local programs indicates that relationship-based approaches, individualized interventions, and comprehensive wraparound services are more effective than punitive measures in improving student attendance and reducing the risk of educational neglect (Domina et al., 2022; Gottfried et al., 2023; Heppen et al., 2020; Rankine et al., 2023).

Two commonly used frameworks that have demonstrated success in reducing chronic absenteeism among young students—and ultimately preventing educational neglect—are the Early Truancy Prevention Program (ETPP) and Check & Connect (C&C). ETPP emphasizes early intervention through strengthened teacher-parent communication, teacher-led responses to early absences, and referrals to specialists when necessary (Cook et al., 2017). C&C, designed for K–12 students at risk of disengagement, includes mentorship, systematic monitoring of attendance and behavior, personalized interventions, and active family engagement (University of Minnesota, n.d.), though its effectiveness depends on student population and implementation fidelity (Goulet et al., 2018; Holtzman et al., 2017).

Other promising preventive strategies include strengthening communication with families (Heppen et al., 2020; Scala et al., 2024) and increasing access to transportation (Gottfried, 2017; Pedde et al., 2023), food (Olarte et al., 2023), and health-related services (Gottfried et al., 2023). These efforts recognize that chronic absenteeism is often a reflection of broader family and community challenges and aim to support the whole family in achieving educational stability (Attendance Works, n.d.; Evidence for ESSA, n.d.). For more details, please find a literature review on the topic conducted by Wilder Research here.

In Minnesota, several counties have implemented preventive and supportive programs designed to assist families in addressing barriers to attendance before involvement with child protection services is necessary (Perez, 2024). Understanding how these models work in practice is essential to advancing more supportive and equitable responses to educational neglect.

THE PROGRAM EVALUATION PROJECT

In 2021, the Sauer Family Foundation and Casey Family Programs began convening counties across Minnesota who were implementing preventative programs for students struggling with school attendance. The convenings conveyed that counties were learning about better ways to serve these students and families and observing positive outcomes, which prompted the desire for a more formal study. To better understand the preventative work happening in Minnesota, including its impact on families, they partnered with Wilder Research to conduct a process and outcome evaluation. In 2022-2023, Wilder Research conducted several preliminary activities to inform the evaluation design. Wilder held virtual meetings with eight counties (five of which ultimately participated in the program evaluation) to discuss their supportive programs' goals, intervention approaches, and evaluation priorities. This was followed by conversations with key partners—including service providers, school staff members, and parent representatives—to gather perspectives on service procedures and evaluation questions. Wilder also reviewed county program materials and literature provided by Casey Family Programs to better understand how educational neglect has been previously studied. These efforts helped shape the evaluation framework and focus.

The current evaluation project, funded by the Sauer Family Foundation and in collaboration with Casey Family Programs, aims to explore how select Minnesota counties (Anoka, Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright) support families facing school attendance challenges outside of the child protection system. It seeks to assess whether these supportive strategies help families experiencing educational neglect and identify opportunities for enhancing both practice and policy in this area.

Specifically, the evaluation project aims to answer the following research questions:

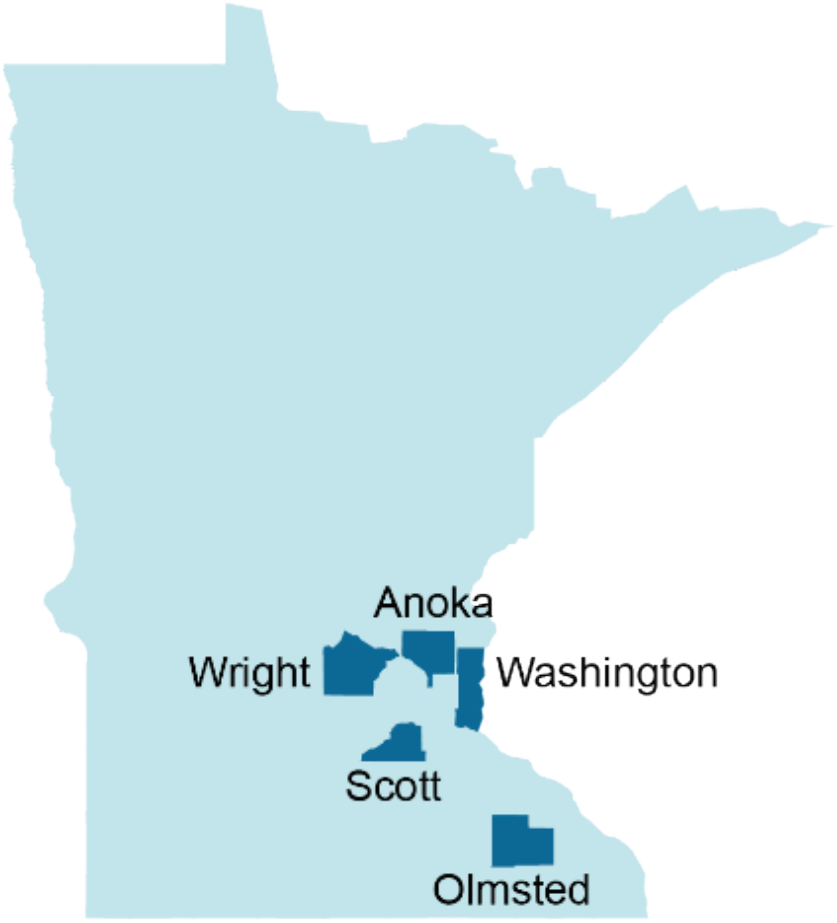
- Who are the children/families being referred to the county support programs (in terms of demographics, absences history, etc.)?
- What are the barriers to school attendance for elementary-aged children and families? What services/programs are being offered (at the school initially, and then at the county support program) to address these barriers?
- How do families experience the services/programs they are receiving? What is most helpful to families? What else do they need?
- How do schools experience the counties' programs? What is working well from their perspective? What could be improved?
- What are the best practices related to supporting elementary students and their families around attendance? What could be improved?

- Of the children referred to the counties' programs:
  - Does attendance improve?
  - What proportion of educational neglect cases warrant a child protection referral, and why?

THE PARTICIPATING COUNTIES

The five participating counties use tiered support programs to address educational neglect through early intervention, school referrals, and collaboration with parents. They typically begin after 3–7 unexcused absences and involve meetings and attendance plans to support families. While most counties rely on direct coordination between schools and county staff, Scott County partners with a nonprofit (St. David's), and Olmsted County uses separate pathways for children of color. CPS involvement is a last resort if preventive efforts fail or if other concerns arise.

1. Location of participating counties



Anoka County. The educational neglect support program in Anoka County was piloted in 2017 and started in 2018, with two full-time staff members. It begins when a student accumulates six unexcused absences. At that point, the school submits a Neglect Diversion Form to the county. The county then conducts a screening process to determine whether the case should be referred to child protection services (CPS) or to the support program. If the case is accepted into the support program, the parents receive an initial notification letter from an assigned social worker. Parents will also be invited to a parent meeting with school staff and the assigned social worker. During this meeting, a Parent Contract is developed to support attendance improvement. Families may also be connected with prevention services, such as the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) or Family Preservation.

Olmsted County. The support program in Olmsted County—known as the Educational Concern Pathway—has been serving families since 2007. The program provides separate pathways for White/Caucasian children and children of color to address racial disproportionality in barriers and system responses related to attendance. The program aims to alleviate these challenges for families of color by providing wraparound services tailored to their needs. Olmsted County's support program begins when a student has 3 to 5 unexcused absences. At this stage, the school sends an initial notification letter to the parents, which may include a meeting invitation to set up a plan and issue a warning. When unexcused absences increase to 5-7 days (or more), the school initiates a phone intake process to the county for White/Caucasian students. The county screens the case to determine whether it should be referred to CPS or to a Child Welfare (CW) response. County caseworkers gather additional information such as medical records and complete the Educational Concern Tracking Sheet for all referral cases. A CW response involves contact attempts (by phone or in person) within 5 days, followed by daily outreach efforts. A county-school-parent meeting is then held to develop an Action Plan, leading to up to 45 days of prevention services. Children of color with multiple days of unexcused absences are referred to the Parents and Children Excel (PACE) Program for assessment and intervention. If unexcused absences continue to rise, the county provides ongoing support through PACE or other services and may refer the family to additional resources as needed.

Scott County. In 2022, Scott County established a procedure consisting of the Promoting Attendance and School Success (PASS) Prevention Program and the PASS Diversion Program, both delivered in partnership with a community service provider, St. David's Center. The program is staffed by two full-time program specialists. When a student has 3-6 unexcused absences, the school submits a PASS Prevention Referral Form to St. David's. If the family engages, a St. David's staff member meets with them to complete a Parent Assessment and develop an Attendance Support Plan (ASP), with monthly family meetings and regular school coordination. If outreach attempts fail, the school is notified.

If a student reaches 7 unexcused absences, the school files a child maltreatment intake with the PASS Diversion Program, including attendance records and the ASP. The county then completes required reports and forwards the case to St. David's, which contacts the family to begin short-term services, averaging four months with at least bi-monthly meetings. Cases involving broader concerns are referred to child protection services (CPS). If absences continue or the family refuses services, St. David's consults with the county to consider a CPS intake, conduct a 30-day review, and hold a case transfer meeting.

Washington County. The support program in Washington County dates back to the late 1990s and has been in place for about 30 years. Four program staff members and social workers are assigned to different schools. The procedure begins when a student has multiple unexcused absences and attendance is impacting the child's education, with the threshold for referral varying on a case-by-case basis. At that point, the school submits an online referral form to the county. Once the county receives referral information, an Educational Neglect Parental Notification Letter with meeting schedule is sent to the parents via email and text message, initiating a meeting with the school staff and county staff. Although not mandatory, the school may also send a separate notification letter to parents. During the meeting, an Attendance Success Plan is developed collaboratively. If unexcused absences continue to increase, as notified by the school, the county will implement additional intervention efforts, such as phone calls, service referrals, or further meetings with parents. If all efforts fail, the case may be referred to CPS.

Wright County. Wright County's support program, called the Wright 2 School Intervention Program, has been in place for 15 years since its launch in 2010. It also follows a tiered process triggered by the number of unexcused absences a student accumulates. When a student has 3 unexcused absences, the school sends a 3-day notification letter to the family and copies the county, initiating the development of a Student Support Plan (SSP). If absences reach 5, the school submits an Initial Referral Form with attendance records to the county, which then sends an attendance intervention meeting invitation letter to the parents. The meeting is held in group, and the SSP continues to be monitored and updated by the school. When a student has between 7 and 10 unexcused absences, the school submits an Intervention Referral Form along with the SSP to the county. A county social worker is assigned to contact and meet with the parents, and a School Attendance Review Board (SARB) meeting is held within 10 days. During this meeting, an Attendance Plan (i.e., SARB Contract) is developed. If all efforts fail, the case may be referred to CPS.

Methods

Wilder Research developed a comprehensive evaluation strategy to systematically understand existing educational neglect support programs and their influences. This approach included a literature review, data collection through surveys and interviews with multiple stakeholders, and service tracking data analysis. Approved by the Institutional Review Board at Wilder Research, the study adhered to ethical research standards. The table below shows the focus of each evaluation method and the total number of respondents and participants.

2. Evaluation methods

Method	Focus	Number of sources and respondents/ participants
Literature review and environmental scan	• The definition and issue of educational neglect • The disparities across demographic groups • Policies, practices, and research in Minnesota and other states related to educational neglect	22 sources of literature
Service Tracking Form (completed by program staff)	• Referral information • Demographic information about the child and parents/caregivers • **Challenges experienced** by the child and family • **Service information**, including details about i**nteractions and services provided** to the family by schools and county programs • Outcomes related to student attendance, family engagement, and well-being	266 referrals in total, with 40 consented cases
Family survey and follow-up interviews	• Families' household information • Challenges and barriers to school attendance • The services children and families received • Overall experience and satisfaction with the support programs • The perceived impact of the services on children's attendance and well-being	97 valid survey responses 20 interviewees
School staff interviews	• Schools' approaches to working with families struggling with school attendance challenges • Schools' experience and processes around working with the county support programs • The perceived impact of these programs on families and students' school attendance • Suggestions for strengthening how schools and counties support families	17 interviewees

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

The literature review and environmental scan explored barriers related to school attendance among families with elementary-aged children, as well as the policies and practices used to address attendance-related issues. The process involved compiling, reviewing, and summarizing relevant literature, as well as identifying successful programs in Minnesota and across the country. The review focused on diverting families with young children away from Child Protection Services and toward supportive interventions that promote consistent school attendance. A total of 22 sources of literature were summarized. The key findings from the literature review and environmental scan informed the design of data collection tools, data analysis, and data interpretation.

THE SERVICE TRACKING FORM AND DATA WALK WITH COUNTY STAFF

Wilder Research developed and administered an online Service Tracking Form (STF) using the QuickBase platform. Wilder Research compiled and synthesized information from existing datasets and referral forms from each county to identify key indicators and data gaps, informing the development of the STF. County agencies and their contracted community partners in the four[1] participating counties completed the STF to document information about families referred to and served during the 2023-24 school year. Basic, de-identified data were collected about all families referred to the program. At referral, families were also invited to participate in the full study. For families who provided written consent, county and partner staff collected and tracked information about the child and family, including demographic information about the student and parents/caregivers, information about the school who made the referral, challenges experienced by the student and family, services provided to the family, and student and family outcomes. The STF was continuously updated throughout their engagement with the family. Data from the STF were analyzed in aggregate through descriptive statistical analyses and cross-tabulation analyses. A total of 266 referral records were entered by program staff from participating counties. Of these, 40 families (15%) provided consent for their information to be used in program evaluation, representing three of the four counties (Scott, Washington, and Wright), and only these records were included in the in-depth analyses.

To clarify and deepen understanding of the data and information gathered through multiple evaluation tools, Wilder facilitated a data co-interpretation session—a data walk—with county program staff and county social workers. Participants were invited to reflect on key follow-up questions. A total of 10 staff members and social workers participated, representing Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright counties.

[1] Anoka County did not participate in service tracking due to limited staffing capacity.

FAMILY SURVEY, FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS, AND DATA WALK WITH FAMILIES

Wilder Research developed and administered a web-based survey in Qualtrics to families who received services through participating county support programs during the 2022-23 school year and the first half of the 2023-24 school year. County and partner staff identified eligible families and distributed the web survey using an email invitation provided by Wilder. Families were included if they had at least **moderate contact**[2] with county and partner staff during their time in the program. The survey was conducted over a seven-week period during March and April 2024. To encourage participation, survey respondents were offered a $20 gift card upon completion. A total of 97 valid responses[3] (response rate = 19%) from five participating counties were included in the analysis.

To gather in-depth information, Wilder invited survey respondents to participate in a follow-up interview. Interested families provided their contact information in the survey, allowing Wilder staff to reach out and schedule an interview. Family interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length and were completed from May to July 2024. Families were offered a $50 gift card for their time and participation. Survey data were analyzed in aggregate through descriptive analyses and cross-tabulation analyses, while open-ended responses were coded and analyzed qualitatively. A total of 20 families completed the interviews, representing families from five participating counties.

After completing the surveys and interviews with families, Wilder conducted a data walk with a subset of five families[4]. These families were engaged in discussions around preliminary findings and provided contextualized information to help with data interpretation. Families received a $100 gift card for their time and input.

SCHOOL STAFF INTERVIEWS

Wilder Research also conducted interviews with school staff working with the support programs across participating counties. Interviews were approximately 30 minutes in length. County and partner staff helped identify eligible schools and school staff members. Interviews were completed from May to July 2024. Interview data was analyzed thematically. Participants were coded and de-identified during the data analysis and reporting process to ensure confidentiality. A total of 17 school staff members from schools in all five counties completed interviews.

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2 As determined by county program staff, families who did not engage in any program services (e.g., communication, meetings, or supportive activities and services) were not included in the sample list.

3 Valid responses include unduplicated surveys that were either fully completed or partially completed (with at least 47% of questions answered), providing sufficient information on family challenges, services received, and household characteristics.

4 All families who participated in interviews were invited to join the session; eight expressed interest, and five ultimately attended.

Figure 3 shows the county and race/ethnicity distribution of respondents and participants across each data collection method. Additional narratives are provided in Appendix: *Information About Study Participants*.

3. Demographics of respondents and participants by method

Demographics	STF staff records (Consented, N=40)		Family survey (N=97)		Family interviews (N=20)		School staff interviews (N=17)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
County								
Anoka	0	0%	49	51%	7	35%	5	29%
Olmsted	0	0%	8	8%	3	15%	2	12%
Scott	15	38%	5	5%	2	10%	2	12%
Washington	18	45%	20	21%	4	20%	4	24%
Wright	7	18%	15	16%	4	20%	4	24%
Race/ethnicity								
White or Caucasian	24	60%	60	62%	11	55%	N/A	N/A
Hispanic or Latino/a	11	28%	12	12%	4	20%	N/A	N/A
Black or African American	7	18%	25	26%	7	35%	N/A	N/A
American Indian	3	8%	5	5%	2	10%	N/A	N/A
African native, including Oromo, Somali, Ethiopian, etc.	0	0%	3	3%	1	5%	N/A	N/A
Asian, including Southeast Asian	0	0%	3	3%	0	0%	N/A	N/A
Another race or ethnic group	0	0%	1	1%	1	5%	N/A	N/A
Multiracial	3	8%	17	18%	7	35%	N/A	N/A

LIMITATIONS

This evaluation project faced several limitations that impacted the depth and scope of the exploration and investigation. One major limitation was the inability to obtain historical, identifiable, individual-level program participation data from participating counties. Due to data-sharing restrictions and confidentiality concerns, detailed records of past participants' engagement in the program were not available. As a result, the evaluation could not aggregate support program referral and participation data across counties to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Additionally, the lack of individual-level data prevented the project from linking program participation with broader educational outcomes, such as student attendance records or academic performance data from the Minnesota Department of Education. Without this connection, it was hard to determine the direct impact of the program on key school-related metrics, limiting the ability to draw stronger conclusions about long-term student success.

Another limitation was the fact that not all counties who provide support programs in the state agreed to participate in the evaluation, so results may not be representative of all programs in Minnesota. In addition, not all participating counties were able to fully take part in every evaluation activity. Due to differences in staff capacity and workload across counties, some were unable to complete certain components of the study, leading to gaps in data collection. As a result, the dataset captures only a partial picture of the programs' reach and effectiveness. Furthermore, while many families were referred to county services during the project period, only a limited number consented to share their household and program information with Wilder for research purposes. This restricted the sample size and may have introduced selection bias. Even after assessing the representativeness of the consented samples, families who agreed to participate might still differ in important ways from those who did not.

Moreover, this evaluation does not include direct input from children. While we gathered valuable insights from families and program staff members, the absence of children's perspectives leaves a gap in understanding the full range of factors influencing attendance.

Lastly, the study may have captured only short-term outcomes as reported by families and program staff members without evaluating long-term effects on student attendance, engagement, well-being, and other outcomes. Follow-up studies with a longer period would offer deeper insights into the support programs' lasting impact.

Key findings

According to evaluation results, families face complex and interconnected challenges that impact their children's school attendance. Schools and county support programs provide a wide range of services and supports to address these needs. While families' experiences with these programs vary, many report positive outcomes and offer suggestions to strengthen services and collaboration.

Availability of data at the county/school level: Key findings in this report are aggregated across all participating counties. County-level analysis is limited by sample sizes. Although we collected school information through the Service Tracking Form and interviews, we did not disaggregate findings by school because counties often receive referrals from multiple schools, further reducing the sample size per school; school information was also not collected in the survey. To ensure the findings are as relevant and informative as possible, Wilder is providing summary reports for counties with larger sample sizes.

FAMILIES FACE COMPLEX CHALLENGES RELATED TO THEIR CHILDREN'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH CONCERNS AMONG PARENTS AND CHILDREN ARE INFLUENTIAL

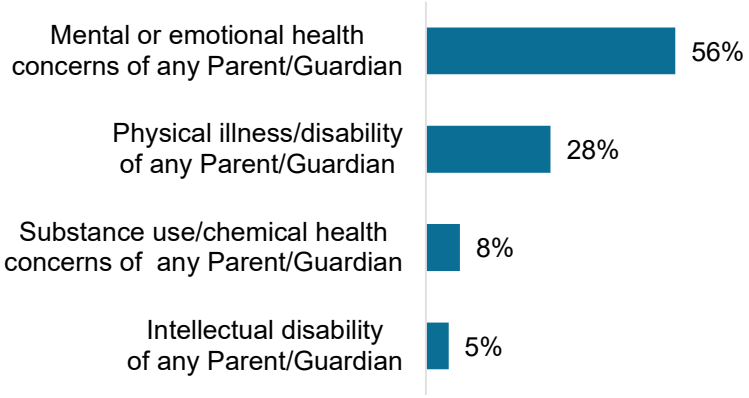
One of the most prevalent issues is mental and emotional health concerns, either experienced by parents/guardians or children.

Parents' mental and emotional health concerns

Service Tracking Form (STF) records indicate that, among families who consented to provide and share information (N=39)[5], over half of them (56%) had a parent or guardian experiencing mental or emotional health concerns, making it the most frequently reported family barrier (Figure 4). For 95% of these families, program staff acknowledged the direct connection between parental mental health challenges and children's attendance issues.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, "STF staff records" refers to program information from families that consented to share information. A total of 40 families provided consent, but the sample size may vary depending on the specific question.

4. Percentage of parents/guardians experiencing health challenges (N=39)



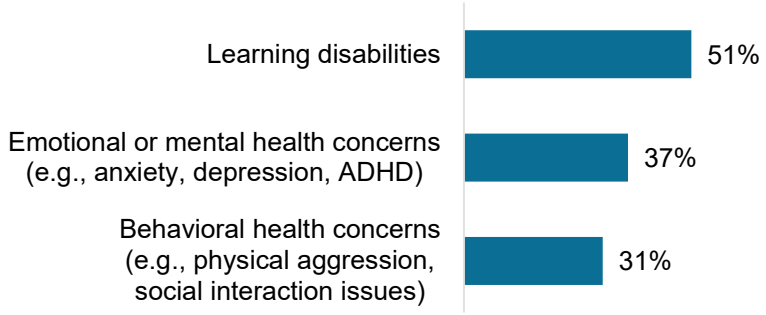
Source. Service Tracking Form

In addition, as reported in the family survey (N=91), 32% of families had adult(s) at home experiencing mental or emotional health concerns while being served in the programs between fall 2022 and spring 2024, ranking as the fourth most common challenge identified by survey respondents.

Children's mental and emotional health concerns

Children's mental and emotional health challenges also emerges as a critical factor influencing their school attendance. According to STF staff records, 37% of children served in the 2023-24 school year had mental and emotional health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, or attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). This is second to learning disabilities (51%) and closely followed by behavioral health challenges (31%).

5. Percentage of children experiencing disabilities or other health challenges, either suspected or diagnosed (N=35)



Source. Service Tracking Form

Family survey responses further emphasized the prevalence of children's mental and emotional health struggles. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the 94 respondents reported that their child(ren) experienced mental or emotional health challenges, ranking it as the most frequently reported health-related barrier experienced by children.

Struggles in reporting and handling children's mental health challenges

The data suggest a disconnect between school staff and families in how unexcused absences related to children's mental health challenges are understood and handled. School staff interviewees expressed concerns that families may struggle to differentiate between feeling unwell and having a medical illness— where "feeling unwell" may be minor symptoms that do not require or result in a clinic visit, while a medical illness typically involves a diagnosis and can be documented with a doctor's note. This confusion can lead to misunderstandings about when absences should be formally reported, or they may forget to report absences appropriately due to mental health issues (53%, n=9). As a school staff member said:

> **We probably have a higher proportion of students with attendance concerns within our DCD [Developmental Cognitive Disability] program, because these students have their own unique needs that can either keep them out of school or make it necessary for them to leave for various therapies and other health-related services during the school day, and sometimes families forget to let the school know, or they don't provide documentation that is needed after 10 days of excused absences. – School staff interviewee**

On the other hand, some families reported frustration with how *schools* recognize and handle mental health-related absences, feeling that their children's needs were not adequately recognized or supported by schools. As parents expressed through the survey and interviews:

> **[My child] has [multiple mental health concerns]. When the child attended school and had rules placed on her, the child didn't have time or space to regulate themselves and the staff will tell her to get back to class and that shut her out. They only had one counselor who understood and gave her time but [the counselor] was gone one day and another counselor who met with her did an awful job. We didn't think they understood much and did a poor job because they didn't understand how severe it was. – Parent interviewee**

> **My [child] was diagnosed with [mental health disorder] and has missed a lot of school due to it and trying to get on medication. The school won't excuse his absences for mental health, so we now have to deal with the county and CPS [Child Protection Services]. Also, he has been unenrolled due to missing 14 consecutive days. Mental health is a serious disability and needs to be excused. – Survey respondent**

SINGLE-PARENT/GUARDIAN FAMILIES EXPERIENCE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

Single-parent or single-guardian families experience significant challenges that can impact school attendance and overall family well-being. According to STF staff records (N=40), just over half of the families (53%) served in support programs consisted of a single parent or guardian. Households with one caregiver managing multiple responsibilities, including transportation and school-related tasks, may face circumstances that increase the risk of attendance challenges for children, particularly when additional support resources are limited. The association between single-parent status and program outcomes demonstrates this challenge, as described in later sections.

> **I got sick and my child got sick a couple of times. Each time I called the school to report my child's absence. I rely on my child attending school because I couldn't miss work, which meant when my child was absent, I also missed work. So, my child's absence wasn't because we didn't value school but due to a stressful circumstance. – Survey respondent**

In accordance with the single-parent/guardian status, parenting challenges, co-parenting conflicts, and challenges between parents and guardians were frequently observed, affecting 38% of families (n=15) in the STF staff records and 34% of family survey respondents (n=30).

MULTIPLE FAMILY BARRIERS COMPLICATE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Work schedule conflicts were reported by 35% of parents in the survey (n=32), and school staff echoed this, noting that parents' work schedules often do not align with school start times (21%, n=8). Transportation challenges—including students missing the bus, families not having a car or reliable transportation, and families experiencing housing instability not having transportation—also emerge as a significant barrier, cited by 31% of parents (n=29), 33% of county staff (n=13), and 65% of school staff (n=11).

> **Most definitely transportation. It has been a struggle for me to get back into a routine since my job shift has changed [worked nights before]. I have a lot of car troubles that were expensive to fix, so sometimes I would go days without a car. My children were too young to walk by themselves even if it was just a few blocks away. – Parent interviewee**
>
> **Other barriers are often [related to] transportation, like if kids miss buses, they're just stuck. They don't have transportation. Another huge one for us is my McKinney-Vento kids with transportation that doesn't come from our regular busing system. If that transportation falls through, they're stuck also. So, transportation is a huge issue for us and getting them to school. – School staff interviewee**

Economic hardships further contribute to attendance difficulties. Unemployment and financial stress, housing instability, and a lack of basic needs were commonly reported (Figure 6), indicating families' socioeconomic struggles. According to STF staff records (N=39), many families relied on social support programs, with 52% receiving benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), 28% accessing housing support or rental assistance, and 16% utilizing emergency or other case assistance services.

6. Family barriers and challenges impacting the student's school attendance

Family barriers and challenges	STF staff records (N=39)		Family survey (N= N=89-96)		School staff (N=17)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Mental or emotional health concerns of any parent/ guardian	22	56%	29	32%	8	47%
Learning, mental health, physical health, or behavioral challenges of the child	21	54%	53	56%	8	47%
Issues with parenting/co-parenting or challenges between parents/guardians	15	38%	30	34%	N/A	N/A
Unemployment/financial stress	14	36%	34	36%	N/A	N/A
Transportation barrier	13	33%	29	31%	11	65%
Physical illness/disability of any parent/guardian	11	28%	16	17%	N/A	N/A
Housing instability	9	23%	22	24%	8	47%
Difficult/intensive work schedules	8	21%	32	35%	8	47%
Lack of basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, utilities, household supplies)	7	18%	21	23%	N/A	N/A
Need to take care of other family members (e.g., siblings, elders) at home	5	13%	6	6%	N/A	N/A

Sources. Service Tracking Form, family survey, and school staff interviews

Note. 1) This table only contains barriers and challenges reported by 10% or more of respondents in any data collection tool. 2) Due to missing values for certain items, the number of valid responses (N) varies across items. This variation applies to all data presentations throughout the report.

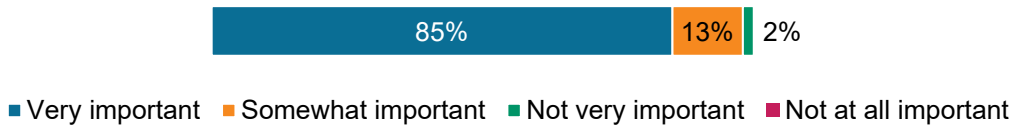
INFLUENCE OF CHILDREN'S AND FAMILIES' EXPERIENCES AT AND WITH SCHOOLS

Families recognize the importance of attendance and attendance policies

While 59% of school staff interviewees (n=10) felt that some parents do not prioritize school attendance—believing absences are perceived as insignificant for younger children, viewing attendance as optional especially post-COVID, or underestimating the long-term effects of school absences—families expressed a different perspective.

Most parents acknowledge the importance of regular attendance. In interviews, 75% (n=15) stated that they understood both the value of school and the need for attendance policies. Similarly, family survey results show that 85% of parents (n=82) believed school attendance was very important for their child(ren)'s academic success, with another 13% (n=13) considering it somewhat important (Figure 7). Additionally, when contacted by the school or county regarding their child(ren)'s absences, 82% of parents (n=79) reported feeling somewhat or very concerned.

7. Parents' perceptions of the importance of school attendance (N=97)



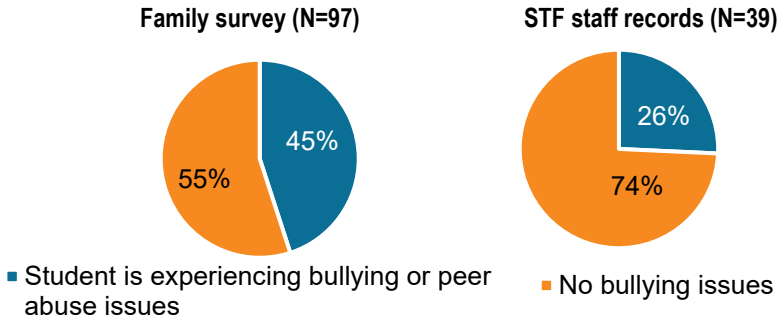
Source. Family Survey

However, even though they may recognize the importance of attendance, many families struggle to comply with attendance policies because these policies do not always align with their lived experiences. Nearly half of parents interviewed (45%, n=9) noted that attendance policies lacked flexibility for families facing significant and multiple challenges, such as health issues or logistical barriers, and some parents had reasons for absences but lacked the necessary documentation.

Some students face bullying and peer abuse issues at schools

Beyond children's health-related challenges (e.g., learning, mental, and physical health issues), families identified bullying and peer abuse as a leading barrier to school attendance, with 45% (n=41) reporting it in the family survey (Figure 8). STF staff records also reflect this concern, with 26% of families (n=10) having children who experienced bullying or peer abuse at school.

8. Percentage of children experiencing bullying and peer abuse at school



Source. Family survey and Service Tracking Form

During follow-up conversations at the data walk event, some parents reiterated their frustration with how schools handled bullying incidents. The perceived lack of resolution to these issues further harmed their children's willingness to attend school, making parents' efforts to support regular attendance ineffective. One parent shared that school staff did not believe their child was being bullied. Another parent recalled how school staff were dismissive and instead questioned whether issues at home, rather than bullying at school, were causing the child's absence.

> **My [child] was being bullied…. I tried talking to the school and I wasn't getting supported on it. Every time that I brought the discussion up at the school, it turned into a "what's going on at home" type of thing. I told them that my [child's] being bullied and nothing is being done. I feel like that school didn't care about how my kids were feeling or how they were really doing… When I finally brought up bringing up a report or taking it further, that's when they suggested that we move our children to another school. – Parent interviewee**
>
> **I did have to bring up something to the principal about bullying and was told my [child] was fabricating things… I shared with the counselor, therapist, and assistant principal that she was getting bullied, and all three told me that if my [child] won't talk to them about it, they can't do anything about it, and they'll just continue to watch the situation, so nothing happened. So, this triggers her and we're back to the same cycle where she doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning, she's looking at herself in the mirror for hours, calling herself fat, and ruminating about it with her friends to the point that they're tired of her. – Parent interviewee**

Interviews with parents and school staff reveal a disconnect between families and schools in recognizing and addressing bullying. Both parents and school staff members noted that children's behaviors at school often differ from what was observed at home, making it challenging for schools to confirm and address bullying situations. This gap in understanding

may contribute to families feeling unheard and schools struggling to intervene effectively, ultimately impacting children's attendance and general well-being.

> **A lot of times, parents will say things about bullying at the County meeting and most of the time it was never mentioned before this meeting or families may have previously brought this issue up with the school and after looking into it, the school had determined it was unfounded.**
> **– School staff interviewee**

> **I advocated for [my child feeling suicidal] and her school counselor said that they see my [child] in the hallways smiling every day and she seems like she wants to be here…I've been trying to work with the school therapist to get [my other child] help but I feel discouraged because the counselor says that they are only observing a normal level of anxiety from her. It's hard to advocate for my children because as a mother, you can feel that something is off. My kids are very good at coming to me and telling me everything when they're not comfortable, but to have a stranger from school ask them these things, it's different.**
> **– Parent interviewee**

> **My [child] goes into the office, and [the school staff] reports that he was smiling that day, told me nothing was wrong. Kids don't like talking to adults, counselors, or being open to people asking them probing questions about their feelings. A child would do anything to get out of the room; they will smile or cry if they need to in that moment. I don't think it's a direct reflection of what they're feeling in the classroom or at home.**
> **– Parent interviewee**

Some families have negative experience at or with schools

Apart from bullying issues, STF staff records and survey responses reveal multiple concerns and negative experiences regarding children's school environments, families' relationships with schools, and other related challenges. Consistent with findings about parents' difficult or intensive work schedules, many families faced difficulties adjusting to the school's start time. Specifically, 41% of STF staff records (n=16) and 25% of family survey respondents (n=24) identified challenges related to school start times, which often conflicted with family schedules (Figure 9).

Relationships with school staff were another area of concern, with 35% of family survey respondents (n=33) and 23% of STF staff records (n=9) expressing parent dissatisfaction or feeling unsupported by teachers and school staff. This issue contributed to negative perceptions of the school's overall culture, with 33% of STF staff records (n=13) and 19% of family survey respondents (n=18) suggesting concerns such as a lack of diversity, unsupportiveness, or experiences of discrimination in school.

9. Families' concerns or negative experience with schools

Concerns or negative experience	STF staff records (N=39)		Family survey (N=92-96)	
	#	%	#	%
Parent(s) have challenges related to the school's start time (e.g., too early/conflicts with family schedule)	16	41%	24	25%
Parent(s) have negative perceptions of the culture at student's school (e.g., lack of diversity, not supportive or welcoming, discrimination)	13	33%	18	19%
Student is experiencing bullying or peer abuse issues	10	26%	41	45%
Parent(s)/student has poor relationship with teachers/ school staff, not feeling supported by the teachers/ school staff	9	23%	33	35%
Parent(s) feel it is an unsafe school environment (e.g., violence, chemical exposure)	6	15%	15	16%
Parent(s) are unfamiliar/dissatisfied with the school's discipline policy	4	10%	17	18%
Parent(s) concerned about the quality of education/ teaching at child(ren)'s school.	3	8%	17	18%

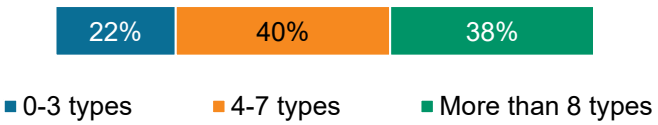
Sources. Service Tracking Form and Family Survey

Note. This table contains only concerns or negative experiences reported by 10% or more of respondents in any data collection tool.

THE COMPOUNDING COMPLEXITY OF CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

Families experiencing attendance challenges, as outlined in the previous section, often face multiple, interconnected barriers and challenges that impact children, parents, or guardians at home and in school. Among survey respondents, 22% (n=20) reported experiencing zero to three types of challenges (of those listed in the survey), while 78% (n=69) faced more than three challenges (Figure 10). Of those 69 families, half (n=34) reported experiencing eight or more types of challenges.

10. Number of challenges experienced by families (N=89)



Source. Family Survey

According to STF staff records, 37% of families (n=13) had children with two or more health-related issues, 80% of families (n=31) had adults experiencing two or more family-related barriers or challenges, and 41% of families (n=16) reported two or more concerns or negative experiences with schools. When considering all factors—including children's

health issues, family barriers and challenges, children's experiences at school, and families' concerns with schools—every family (100%, n=38) had at least two identified challenges or concerns, with 76% (n=29) facing more than three.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

Families with children identified as White/Caucasian had more complex and multifaceted challenges compared to families with BIPOC children. As STF staff records show, while BIPOC families faced greater issues with time conflicts, White/Caucasian families were more likely to experience a wider range of family and personal challenges, particularly in areas related to health, parenting, and financial stability (Figure 11).

11. Comparison of barriers and challenges between families with children identified as White/Caucasian and BIPOC

Family barriers and challenges	Families with White/Caucasian children (N=20)		Families with BIPOC children (N=19)	
	#	%	#	%
Parent(s)/guardian(s) experienced mental or emotional health concerns	16	80%	6	32%
Parent(s)/guardian(s) experienced parenting/co-parenting challenges or challenges between parents/guardians	12	60%	3	16%
Parent(s)/guardian(s) experienced physical illness/disability	10	50%	1	5%
Parent(s)/guardian(s) experienced unemployment/financial challenges	10	50%	4	21%
Parent(s)/guardian(s) had difficult/intensive work schedules	1	5%	8	42%
Family experienced more than 3 types of all kinds of challenges and concerns with schools	18	90%	11	61%

Source. Service Tracking Form

Note. Families with BIPOC children include families with children identified as Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial.

In addition, families with White/Caucasian children were also more likely to be receiving benefits such as SNAP and/or MFIP (64% vs. 43%), emergency assistance or other case assistance (27% vs. 7%), and housing support or rental assistance (45% vs. 14%).[6] Furthermore, 43% of White/Caucasian children came into the program (n=9) with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and/or a 504 plan in place at the time of referral,

[6] The STF staff records include a total of 11 families with White/Caucasian children and 14 families with BIPOC children regarding utilization of benefits.

compared to 21% of BIPOC children (n=4). While the data in this study do not explain the reasons behind these racial and ethnic differences, it's possible that the increased use of services by White/Caucasian families stem from differences in knowledge about the programs, language barriers, or eligibility.

SUPPORT PROGRAMS PROVIDE DIVERSE SERVICES, RESOURCES, AND SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES

Minnesota Statute Section 260C requires that children under the age of 12 with seven or more days of unexcused absences in a single school year be referred to child protection. However, support programs can offer families more flexible and less punitive support, addressing their needs through school or county resources. Among all 228 referrals recorded in the STF staff records, 42% involved students with ten or more unexcused absences at the time of referral to the programs, with absences ranging from 2 to 66 days (median=9 days); of the 40 families who were referred and provided consent in the STF, 63% had ten or more unexcused absences at the time of referral, ranging from 5 to 34 days (median=12 days).

COMMUNICATION AND MEETINGS WITH FAMILIES

Communication and warning letters

STF staff records indicate that all families (100%, N=40) had communication from school staff in the form of letters, phone calls, or texts. Among them, 95% received at least one warning letter from either school staff, a social worker, or county staff, with 66% (n=25) receiving two or more letters. Typically, the first warning letter was sent by school staff or a school social worker. Among those who received a second letter, it was more often sent by county staff or a county social worker than from schools (63% vs. 38%). Additional communications were primarily initiated by the county, accounting for 5 out of 6 cases.

Among family survey respondents (N=94), the majority (87%) confirmed receiving communication from the school, county, or another social worker regarding concerns about their child(ren)'s school attendance. This communication was delivered through email or mail notifications (76%), phone calls (68%), text messages (28%), or in-person/home visits (24%).

Meetings with families

STF staff records indicate that school and/or county staff met with all families (100%, N=39) through home visits or one-on-one meetings to address school attendance concerns, with 33% meeting families two or more times. The first meeting was initiated by school staff or a school social worker in 64% of cases, with 16% (n=4) involving county-assigned social

workers. County staff or a county social worker initiated 36% of first meetings, and in half of these cases (50%, n=7), school staff were also involved.

Among families who provided details about their meetings (N=35), 53% of first meetings took place at the child's school, 42% at the family's home, 14% were unspecified in records, and only one meeting occurred at a county or community partner office. All meetings (100%) included discussions about barriers and challenges faced by the family, as well as potential solutions. Nearly all (97%) covered or reinforced information on educational neglect and truancy policies, and 60% resulted in the development of an Action Plan[7] with the family.

Many school staff (41%, n=7) mentioned that they used communication and meetings to build relationships with families and children, not only delivering messages about policies, rules, and consequences but also demonstrating their care and commitment to supporting school attendance.

> **We try to find what the reason is why they are struggling to attend school. Typically, it's reasons outside of the school, but if it is something that's within the school, we also try to address that too and see how we can make it an enjoyable and comfortable space for them to attend school and not just that they hate coming. So, we try to build those relationships and tell kids and families that if you don't enjoy coming to school, learning is secondary at that point, you need to love coming to school first and what can we do to help make that happen. – School staff interviewee**

Among family survey respondents (N=96), 69% reported meeting with school staff, county staff, or other social workers regarding their child(ren)'s school attendance, either one-on-one (89%), in a group setting (10%), or both (1%). For those who did not participate in any meetings and provided reasons (N=27), the most common reasons were not being invited (56%)[8], not being concerned about their child(ren)'s school attendance (19%), not having time to attend (15%), and not wanting to meet (15%).

Implementation and follow-through on action items

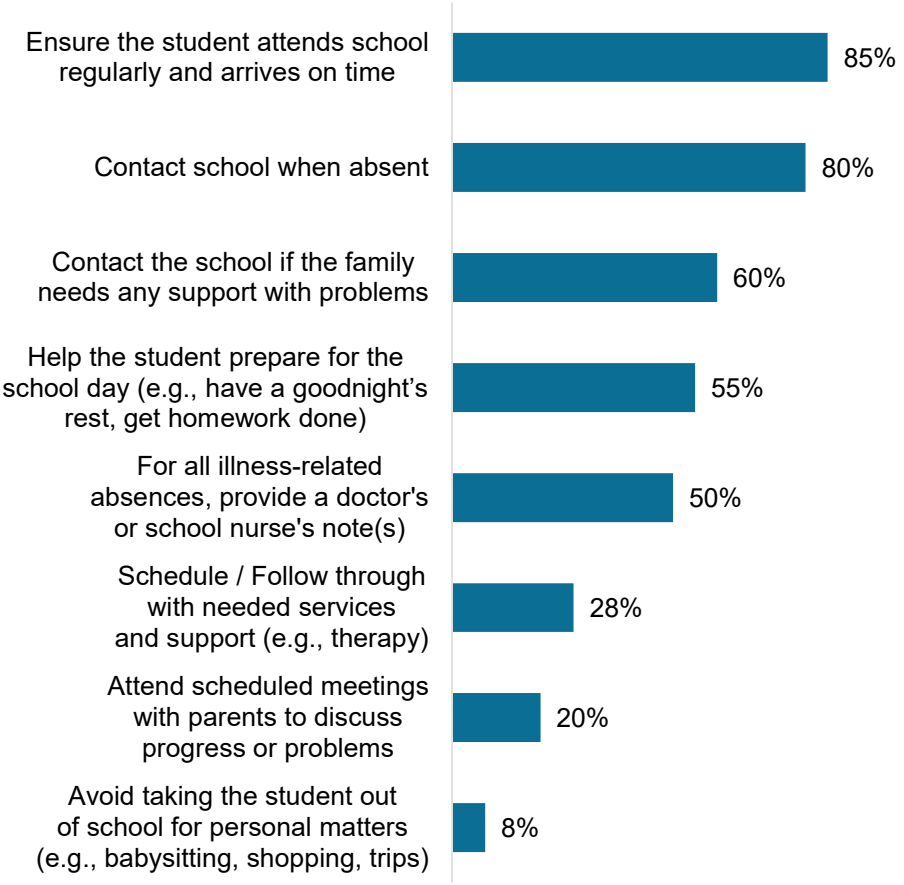
In addition to communicating state and school policies, school staff, county staff, and social workers worked with families to develop and implement key action items through

[7] Different counties use various terminology (i.e., Attendance Plan, Action Plan, or Parent Contract) for the document outlining specific requirements for parents or guardians to follow in order to reduce and prevent unexcused absences. In this report, we will refer to it as the "Action Plan."

[8] There is some inconsistency between the results of the family survey (parent-report) and the STF (staff-report) on this topic. Staff records indicate that school and/or county staff met with all families. Over half of the families who said they were not invited to a meeting (10 out of 15) were from Anoka County, which did not participate and is therefore not reflected in the STF data collection. Additionally, families represented in the STF data may be more closely connected or engaged with program staff, which could introduce sample bias when comparing their experiences with those of survey respondents.

communications, meetings, and Action Plans (N=40). The most common action items for parents included ensuring the student attends school (85%), contacting the school when the student is absent (80%), and reaching out to the school for support with any problems (60%; Figure 12).

12. Percentage of families with Action Plans including each item (N =40)



Source. Service Tracking Form

Eighty-seven percent of families followed through on contacting the school when their child was absent, doing so "most of the time" (45%) or "some of the time" (42%). Additionally, six out of seven families attended scheduled meetings. However, follow-through rates for many other items (e.g., "contact the school if the family needs any support with problems," "help the student prepare for the school day," "provide a doctor's or school nurse's note(s) for all illness-related absences") were lower, with approximately 65% of families adhering to them either most or some of the time. Scheduling and following through with critical services and support (e.g., therapy) proved particularly challenging, with only three out of ten families following through "most of the time."

SERVICES AND RESOURCES PROVIDED TO FAMILIES

In response to the diverse challenges and needs of families, schools and counties provided a range of services and solutions to children and their families (Figure 13).

13. Supports and referrals provided by schools and counties

Supports and referrals	STF staff records (N=40 & 33) #	STF staff records (N=40 & 33) %	Family survey (N=91) #	Family survey (N=91) %
School supports offered prior to the referral to the county				
Incentives/rewards for improved attendance	11	28%	14	15%
Help with basic needs and concrete supports around daily life (e.g., food, clean clothes, alarm clocks, hygiene products)	7	18%	19	21%
Arranged morning sign-in procedures with school staff	6	15%	N/A	N/A
Provided intervention with school resource officers (SRO)/counselor	5	13%	4	4%
Engaged students in school social support groups	5	13%	N/A	N/A
Encouraged student's involvement in extracurricular activities	4	10%	6	7%
Arranged academic tutoring or mentoring services	4	10%	5	5%
Changes to adapt to child(ren)'s schedule	3	8%	9	10%
County/provider referrals for additional services				
Mental health counseling/rehabilitation	23	70%	18	20%
for student	13	57%	N/A	N/A
for parent/guardian	12	52%	N/A	N/A
Transportation support/services	9	27%	25	27%
Medication and/or treatment for physical health issues	9	27%	5	5%
for student	4	44%	N/A	N/A
for parent/guardian	5	56%	N/A	N/A
Basic needs support (e.g., food, clothes, alarm clocks, electricity)	4	12%	N/A	N/A
Other community/social services (e.g., financial support, housing, homebound assistance, school cultural liaison, & family resource center)	7	21%	5	5%

Source. Service Tracking Form and Family Survey

Note. (1) This table contains only supports and referrals reported by 10% or more of respondents in any data collection tool. (2) Most special education services were provided by schools before the referral, while county staff or social workers supported a few cases needing special education services (9%, n=3) after the referral, as recorded in STF. (3) A smaller list of supports and services was included in the family survey. Items marked 'N/A' were not asked in the survey. (4) In the family survey, families were asked whether they received listed support from the county, school, or community service providers, without differentiating among the different sources. As a result, family su0.rvey counts and percentages for basic needs support reflect combined responses from all sources. In contrast, STF data identifies whether the support was provided by county vs. school staff.

Generally, schools focused on logistical arrangements and resources that impact children's daily engagements and families' daily and basic needs. The most significant effort was providing special education services— with approximately half of STF staff records (48%) and family survey respondents (50%) reporting access to them, followed by incentives or rewards for improved attendance (28%, STF staff records and 15%, survey respondents) and basic needs support (18%, STF staff records and 21%, survey respondents). Many school staff members also discussed the various ways to incentivize children (53%, n=9) and address and meet families' basic needs (47%, n=8). For example:

> **We put together an incentive. We use spot charts. If they [kids] show up to school five days in a row, they may get to pick a prize or iPad time, especially those kids who have a hard time coming to school. – School staff interviewee**
>
> **The school has some shared community resources, so for some of our families we might offer the Early Childhood Parent Educator who works with students up to grade 3 as a support for families, especially things like sleep routines, getting up and out in the morning routines, those kinds of things. This person can also help with family and parenting support if, for example, the family is having a hard time getting their kid to school or getting them on the bus. – School staff interviewee**
>
> **We've got a community resource room here, to provide food, clothing, hygiene products, and computers to help them [parents/guardians] get on the internet in case they need to find a job or need help with anything computerized that they can't get to a place for. – School staff interviewee**
>
> **Depending on our families, our district offers a free clothing resource where they can come get clothes if that's one of the issues. We do have some gift cards through the County, and we will use those if families need basic necessities, sometimes prescriptions if they're looking for that, gas cards, whatever it is to help supplement. I have school supplies for all the students here. I have shoes in my room. I have all the winter clothing in my room if students need any. I have a resource list on my web page that's available to parents that I will email them the contact for. I also mail out or send copies home with kids of resources. We have a food bag program, sending food home with kids if that's part of the issue. – School staff interviewee**

Counties made additional and greater efforts to connect schools and families with health-related resources and services, including mental health counseling, medication, and treatment for physical health issues affecting both children and adults. Schools contract with organizations to offer in-school therapy services and supports, while also collaborating with counties for many of the services, as discussed by 59% of school staff interviewees (n=10). For example:

> **There is a DCD [Developmental Cognitive Disability] program based in the school. Often these are students with high-level medical needs or Autism and the school can get them connected with County services and supports, particularly through Waivered Services and those kinds of things. – School staff interviewee**

The school has a contract with independent mental health therapists in the building…I have referred families to Fraser, to the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) connected to the County—they do some short term case management… [and] for Children's Mental Health Case Management through the County. – School staff interviewee

We work with Canvas Health here to provide in-school therapy services. That's only three times a week. We also have a connection through the Children's Mental Health Collaborative that we can provide our families with resources and referrals for therapy sessions or free resource navigation. –School staff interviewee

Schools and counties also collaborate to help families navigate and connect with social services available through various systems, such as assistance with transportation and housing issues:

We have people specialized in the district that deal with the McKinney Law with homelessness and students in transition. We've got two social workers in our building. We've got three counselors. We work with the county real close on how we can help those folks and now we've got what's called a Hope Navigator that works out of our building that stands for Housing and Outreach Program and she comes to our student support services meeting to help. – School staff *interviewee*

Some families have transportation barriers, so we try to figure out if they can qualify for transportation assistance. Our district has an opt-in transportation system and some families don't opt-in. Sometimes it's as simple as letting the bus company know that the family does want a bus and making sure the family knows the time and location of the bus stop. Some families might have a problem with transportation because the student does not qualify for a bus, and the family is struggling financially. The school can provide gas cards (not as a long-term solution, but a temporary support). The district has a walking boundary of up to one-mile radius. All students in kindergarten qualify for bussing. We try to pair up families whose children walk to school and try to figure out walking buddies or other arrangements where families can help each other get their children to school. – School staff interviewee

COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COUNTIES

As mentioned above, these support programs require collaboration between schools and counties, not only in making and receiving referrals but also in updating information on families' needs and children's attendance, and providing services and support collaboratively. The process can become complicated when it involves multiple school staff members, school-based social workers, county staff managing the programs, county social workers working closely with referrals, and community providers providing services. In terms of the dynamics and experience of collaboration, school staff expressed both positive feedback and challenges.

During the interviews with school staff, researchers asked about their experiences working with the county and its support program, including what was working well in the partnership and what could be improved. According to respondents (N=17), working with a consistent county staff member or county social worker (41%) and having a consistent referral process (18%) helps ensure smooth coordination, timely communication, and relationship building. Additionally, when schools and counties establish intentional partnerships to address families' needs, there is better prioritization of connection and communication between the two parties (29%).

> **I think one thing that works well is having the same person each year. That allows me to build that working relationship with [the county social worker] and allows us to have good communication too. And that she's the person for all the families that we have helps make it smooth. And then it's nice to just know that you have the support of an extra person or that there's someone else sharing the same messages with the family.**
> **– School staff interviewee**

> **One of the things that I very much appreciate is that the County tries to assign the same worker to the same building over time. I have had the same worker for the last 3 years. I feel this is also in the best interest of that student and that family, because we know each other and we have worked together before and we have a relationship. I would imagine that if you asked the County worker who works with my school if she trusts the referrals that we send and that we have done all that we needed to and have done our best until we needed that level of intervention (the county's support program), she probably would say yes, because we have worked together a lot. I find this very beneficial.**
> **– School staff interviewee**

Challenges in the collaboration, as school staff identified, included concerns about timely and adequate information sharing when county staff and county social workers communicate with families (41%), the need to reopen cases every academic year even for chronically absent students (41%), and the county's limited capacity due to staff turnover, resource constraints, and workforce shortages, which impact its ability to manage workloads effectively

(35%) and connect families to needed community resources (24%). In addition, school staff expressed concerns about the redundancy in support, where county efforts sometimes duplicated services already provided by schools without introducing new or more effective interventions (24%).

> **This year, I don't recall the county providing any services based on the information shared in any of the meetings I have attended. The county does not work independently with the family. That's a frustration. I understand that the county's stance is that they want it to be a collaborative way to support the family, but at the school, we are already providing the family with resources, and doing what we can. If the family could have more one-to-one contact with the county social worker, and the county did things to support the family after the referral, that would be really helpful—not just the one-and-done meeting. – School staff interviewee**
>
> **I realize the county does not have endless resources of time or people… The school is sometimes limited on what they can do, and sometimes we lean on the county program to have more teeth than what we have, and sometimes they don't have the teeth either. – School staff interviewee**

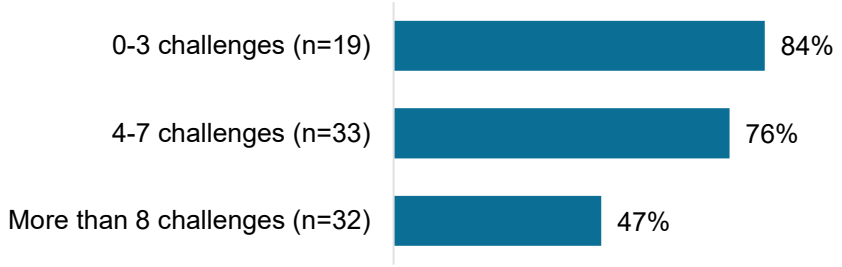
FAMILIES HAVE VARIED EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

EXPERIENCE AND SATISFACTION WITH SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Overall, 67% of family survey respondents (n=57) strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied with the support and services provided by school staff, county staff, and social workers. Satisfaction levels varied according to the number of challenges families were experiencing, such that those experiencing a higher number of challenges were less likely to be satisfied (Figure 14).

14. Satisfaction with support and services by n umber of challenges in the family

Proportion of respondents in the specific group who strongly agreed or agreed that "Overall, I was satisfied with the support and services provided by my child(ren)'s school staff, county staff, and/or social workers."



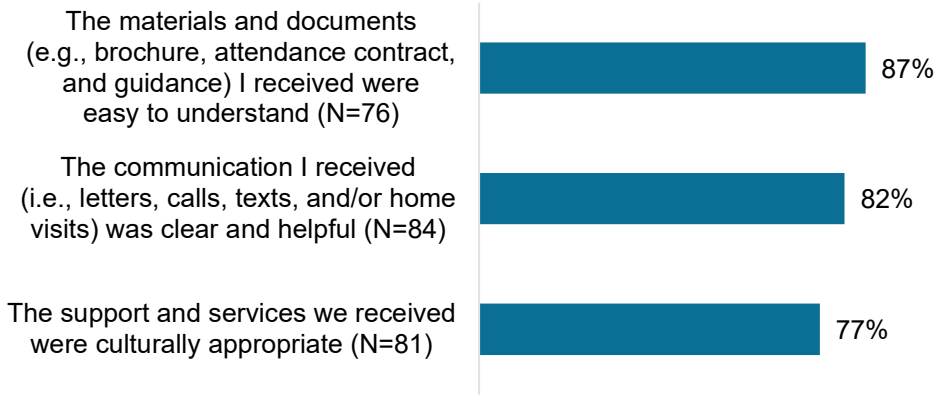
Source. Family Survey

Note. The Pearson Chi-Square test shows that the group with 8 or more types of challenges differs significantly from the group with 4-7 types of challenges group.

Thirteen out of 20 family interviewees (65%) reported receiving effective communication from school or county staff. Figures 15-16 illustrate the extent to which family survey respondents were satisfied with specific program elements and the staff. While most parents/caregivers (77%-87%) were satisfied with different elements of the program, satisfaction with staff was somewhat lower (58%-66%).

15. Satisfaction with the program

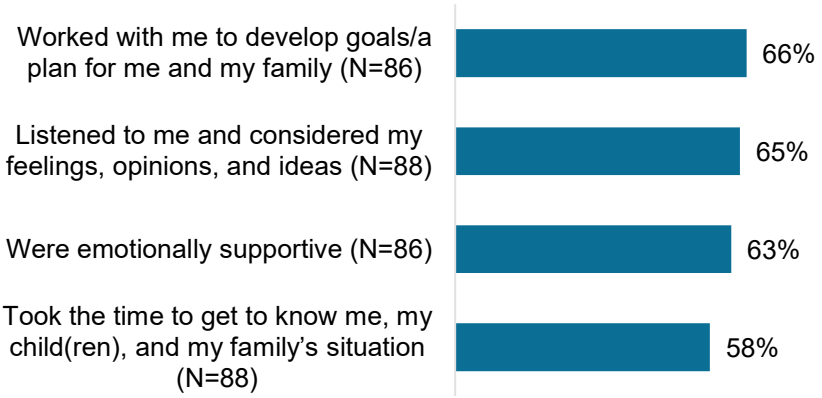
Proportion of survey respondents who strongly agreed or agreed



Source. Family Survey

16. Satisfaction with school/county staff and social workers

Proportion of survey respondents who strongly agreed or agreed that school/county staff and social workers…



Source. Family Survey

Disparities exist across racial and ethnic groups in perceptions of the cultural appropriateness of support and services. While over 80% of White/Caucasian families and Black/African American families (84% and 83%, respectively) felt the services they received were culturally appropriate, only 50% of BIPOC families without a Black/African American background—primarily Asian and Hispanic or Latino(a) families—reported the same, the lowest among all groups (Figure 17).

17. Families within each racial/ethnic group who strongly agreed or agreed that the support and services they received were culturally appropriate

Racial/ethnic group	#	%
White/Caucasian only (n=38)	32	84%
BIPOC (n=38)	27	71%
With a Black/African American background (n=24)	20	83%
Without a Black/African American background (n=14)	7	50%

Source. Family Survey

Note. BIPOC families include Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families.

During the interviews with families, interviewees shared additional comments on their experiences with support programs, highlighting both positive collaboration and effective support from staff. Among the 20 interviewees, 14 (70%) acknowledged the effectiveness of staff support from both schools and counties, noting strong communication, attentiveness to follow-ups, and the ability to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for families. Additionally, 12 interviewees (60%) expressed appreciation for the support received from the programs, emphasizing that county staff members served as advocates for families, which encouraged parents and guardians to accept help.

> **The county and the social worker helped with many things such as using resources and connections with the county to talk to people that I wouldn't be able to talk to on my own. I had a lot of issues with [a public service provided by the state] and the social worker discussed options and made me aware of the problems. Resources in the community that were very helpful such as getting furniture was helpful. They are a really good advocate for the family. – Parent interviewee**

> **They listened to me, asking questions such as "What would I like to do?", getting my input and things like that. They asked me what would make us go backwards and what would not be good for us to keep making the [child] miss school. – Parent interviewee**

While some interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with certain program elements, their concerns were primarily related to insufficient communication (35%) and ineffective assistance or support (30%). Some noted that they lacked a reliable point of contact and their social workers did not provide useful resources or advice for their specific situation, such as access to long-term housing beyond a few days in shelters. Others felt that culturally appropriate services were lacking for their families or that their voices were not heard. For example:

> **I like the school but wished they had better communication with each other and understood the kids better. I called and gave a lot of information on what works with my child but it wasn't shared with the other counselors and felt that was where the big downfall happened. – Parent interviewee**
>
> **When the referral was made, I didn't think the school did their due diligence. There has been instances when the staff wanted to send my child home but there was no need to. I felt that there was prejudice and racial difference–especially the way they handled the situation and how my family was talked to. – Parent interviewee**
>
> **I try to do some things or implement some things at home, but the school tells me not to do it. For example, I tell my kids if they miss school one day this week, they're grounded for the next weekend, but the school tells me not to do that. Well, I'm just trying to get my kids to school, and I want the school to know that I take their education very seriously. It puts the families in a difficult position, especially single moms or one-person caregivers. It gives me anxiety to know that my kids are not going to school and they're falling behind. Sometimes I wonder, "What does the school think about me? Do they think I'm a bad parent?" It's almost snowball effect. – Parent interviewee**

NOT ALL FAMILIES RECEIVED ALL THE SERVICES THEY NEEDED

Not all families received services from schools and counties, aside from the required communications and meetings. Twenty-one out of 89 family survey respondents (23%) indicated that they did not receive *any* services from schools and counties—including 10 families who said they were experiencing more than three types of barriers, challenges, and/or concerns with their children's schools (Figure 18).

18. Families who reported receiving no services from schools and counties by number of challenges the family experienced

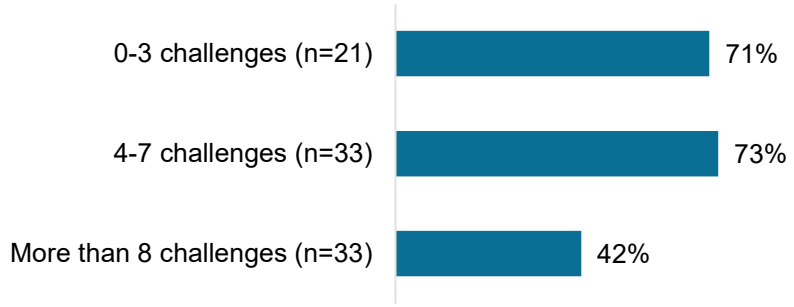
Number of challenges	#	%
0-3 (n=20)	11	55%
4-7 (n=35)	6	17%
8 or more (n=34)	4	12%

Source. Family Survey

Overall, 61% of family survey respondents (n=54) strongly agreed or agreed that they received all of the support and services they needed to improve their children's school attendance. Across groups with varying levels of challenges, families experiencing eight or more types of challenges and concerns with schools had different perceptions compared to those facing fewer types of challenges, such that they were less likely to feel they received all of the support they needed (Figure 19).

19. Perceived sufficiency of supports/services by number of challenges the family experienced

Proportion of families who strongly agr eed or a greed that "We received all of the support and services we needed to improve my child(ren)'s school attendance."



Source. Family Survey

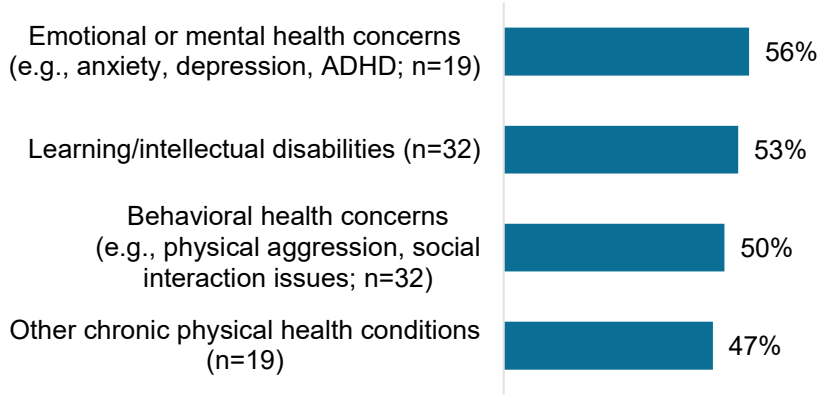
Note. The Pearson Chi-Square test shows that the group with 8 or more types of challenges differs significantly from the group with 4-7 types of challenges.

Figures 20 through 22 illustrate family survey respondents' perceptions of receiving adequate support and services, categorized by the specific *types* of challenges and concerns they experienced.[9] Across challenge types, about half to two-thirds of families (42%-67%) said they received all of the necessary support and services. Families who did feel supported by school staff in general (42%), parents with mental health concerns (48%), and families of children with chronic physical health conditions (47%) were the least likely to report receiving all of the support they needed.

[9] Figures 20 through 22 only show the results of items having adequate number of responses (19 or more).

20. Perceived sufficiency of supports/services among families whose children experienced health-related challenges

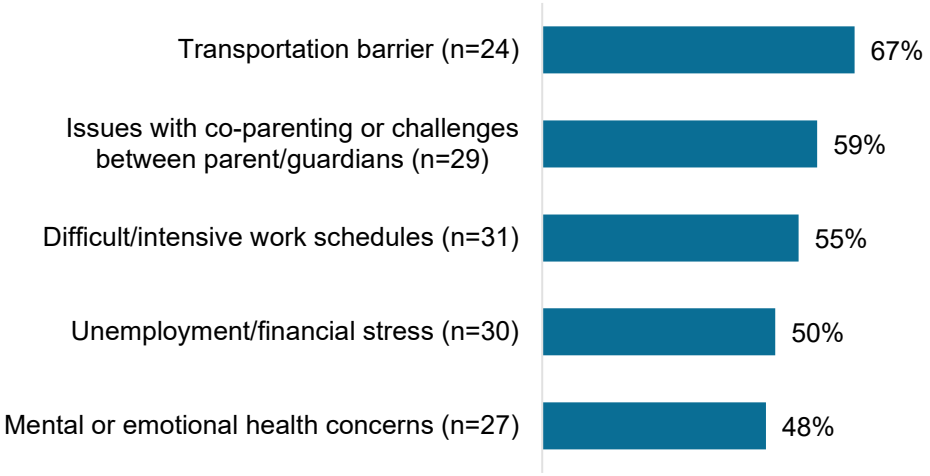
Proportion of families who strongly agreed or agreed that "We received all of the support and services we needed to improve my child(ren)'s school attendance."



Source. Family Survey

21. Perceived sufficiency of supports/services among families in which parents/guardians experienced the listed challenges

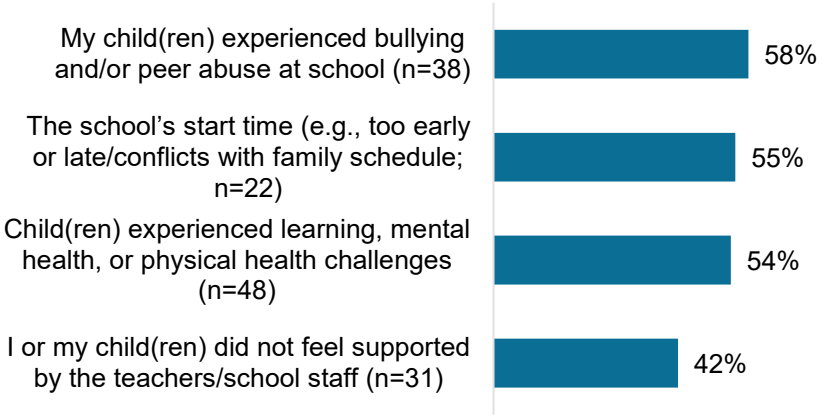
Proportion of families who strongly agreed or agreed that "We received all of the support and services we needed to improve my child(ren)'s school attendance."



Source. Family Survey

22. Perceived sufficiency of supports/services among families who experienced listed concerns with the school

Proportion of families who strongly agreed or agreed that "We received all of the support and services we needed to improve my child(ren)'s school attendance."



Source. Family Survey

Disparities also exist across racial and ethnic groups in perceptions of receiving adequate support and services. While 65% of White/Caucasian families and 65% of Black/African American families felt they received adequate support, only 47% of BIPOC families without a Black/African American background—primarily Asian and Hispanic or Latino(a) families—reported the same, the lowest among all groups (Figure 23).

23. Families within each racial/ethnic group who strongly agreed or agreed that they received all necessary support and services

Racial/ethnic group	#	%
White/Caucasian only (n=43)	28	65%
BIPOC (n=38)	22	58%
With a Black/African American background (n=23)	15	65%
Without a Black/African American background (n=15)	7	47%

Source. Family Survey

Note. BIPOC families include Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families.

During the interviews with families, researchers asked about their experiences with and satisfaction regarding services they received. Among the 20 interviewees, 20% (n=4) expressed concerns about the lack of or insufficient support they received. Similarly, during interview with school staff members, 11 out of 17 (65%) interviewees acknowledged that they did not have adequate resources to support children facing attendance challenges. Specifically, five staff members pointed to an inadequate number of school personnel

available to provide necessary support, while two noted the limitations of schools in addressing some challenges (e.g., transportation barriers, mental health issues) effectively within schools.

> **I don't think we received any services. We fell into what they called the "butt crack." There wasn't much of anything that applied to our family. But now we are looking at other services and waiting for that phone call – we don't know exactly what those services would be but are currently waiting... Once the county realized what our family was doing on our part, they decided we didn't need to get services. – Parent interviewee**
>
> **I am the only staff person in our school who is directly working on attendance issues. It takes a full day of my work week each week. We could definitely use more staff to work on attendance and to have time to actually call all the families and discuss their situations; I have found that this kind of communication really helps. The school has a home/ school liaison, but he is too busy to help me with phone calls. – School staff interviewee**

SUPPORT PROGRAMS HAVE INFLUENCED MULTIPLE FAMILY OUTCOMES

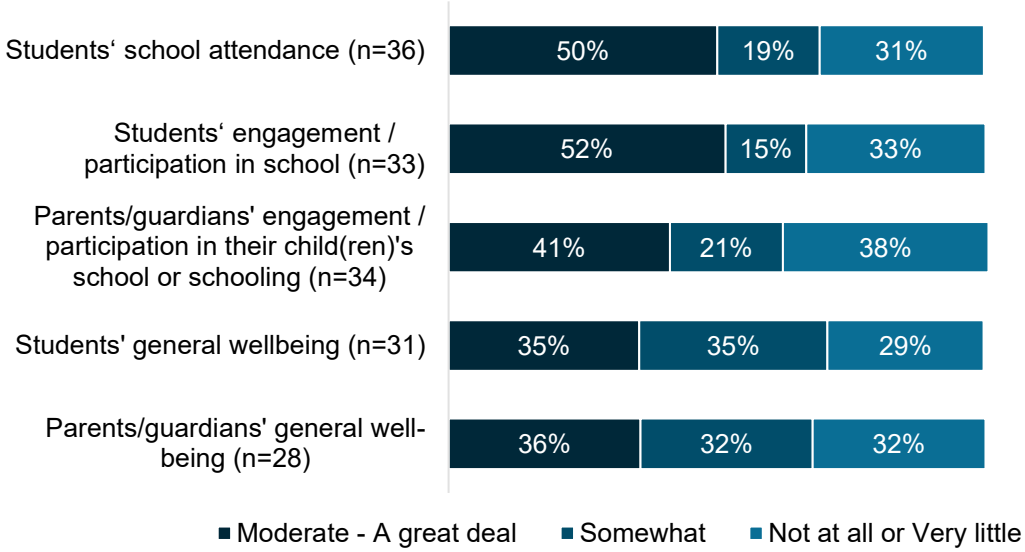
The STF tracked reasons for case closure (N=38), with the most common being the approach of the school year's end (47%). Eight families (21%) successfully completed services and achieved their attendance goals. Six families (16%) were referred to Child Protection Services during program participation—four for a Family Assessment response and two for an investigation response, with half of these cases (50%, n=3) related to non-educational neglect or attendance concerns. The remaining 20% of cases were closed due to program staff losing contact with families (11%, n=4), families declining services (5%, n=2), or other unspecified reasons (8%, n=3).

IMPROVEMENTS IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOL ATTENDANCE, ENGAGEMENT, AND WELL-BEING

Program staff observed and noted, as reflected in STF staff records, that half of the families (50%, n=18) showed moderate to great improvement in children's school attendance. Similarly, children's engagement in school demonstrated positive changes, with 52% of families (n=17) demonstrating a moderate to great improvement. In terms of family members' well-being, approximately one-third of children (35%, n=11) and parents or guardians (36%, n=10) experienced moderate to great progress (Figure 24).

24. The extent to which families improved in listed outcomes from program entry to case closure

Ratings of improvement in outcomes, as reported by program staff



Source. Service Tracking Form

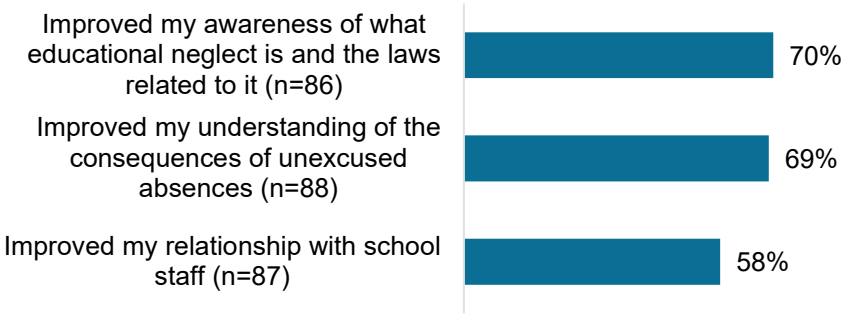
Compared to program staff (Figure 24), parents and guardians had a more optimistic perception of the outcomes. More than half of the 88 family survey respondents reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that the support programs improved their children’s school attendance (68%) and enhanced their family’s overall well-being (52%).

More than half of family interviewees (55%, n=11) and school staff interviewees (65%, n=11) described positive impacts of support programs on children’s school attendance; 3 family interviewees (15%) also noted improvements in family well-being, sharing that their families were able to establish a better rhythm and routine to help children sleep better, feel happier, and improve parents' mental health; 12 school staff interviewees (71%) observed an increase in family communication and engagement with schools.

IMPROVEMENTS IN ACCESS TO RESOURCES, AWARENESS OF POLICIES, AND RELATIONSHIPS

Apart from program outcomes related to school attendance, engagement, and well-being, families identified intermediate outcomes that contributed to program impacts. Many family survey respondents reported positive changes in their knowledge of educational neglect laws and school policies (70%) and consequences of unexcused absences (69%) as a result of the program. Just over half of families (58%) also reported improved relationships with school staff (Figure 25).

25. Percentage of parents/guardians who strongly agreed or agreed with the listed improvements



Source. Family Survey

During the interviews, both family and school staff interviewees echoed these influences when asked whether families had experienced any additional changes or improvements—beyond school attendance—as a result of the support program. Five out of 20 (25%) families had access to additional resources**,** including housing assistance, extra commuting time for children to avoid rushing for the bus, and support for basic needs. Seven of 17 (41%) school staff members confirmed that the programs increased families' use of community resources and support.

> **It [the support program] has indirectly helped with the adult mental health in families. Because when there's truancy involved, the parents learn of more resources for their kids, but they also realize that those resources are available for them as adults as well. In my previous job, we had one student in our building but had multiple siblings throughout the district. The parents needed help, and them just being open to the support program contract helped us break down that barrier for the entire family to get support and the help they needed. It just doesn't help the kid who's not coming to school, it helps the whole family. – School staff interviewee**

In addition to improved relationships between parents/guardians and school staff, as shown in Figure 25, communication and connections have also strengthened among children and school staff, children and peers, and school staff with county staff. This was reported by 25% of family interviewees (n=5) and 29% of school staff interviewees (n=5).

> **One of the things that I learned that is part of [the county program], was that they have this mentorship program where they match high school students with elementary students and have monthly outings together. It's not focused on attendance, but it's mentoring, having fun, building relationships and sometimes that has been what we used to also get a foot in the door with families, like providing these outings and activities for their child. When they see that these events are about their school attendance, and their county worker is there, they just start paying attention a bit more. – School staff interviewee**

We have also seen an improvement in our children in establishing relationships, especially with the second [child] who used to not talk about his feelings or cause trouble at school, but the teacher has sat down and built a relationship to open up more. – Parent interviewee

KEY INFLUENCES ASSOCIATED WITH OUTCOMES

During the interviews, researchers followed up with participants who perceived little or no impact of the program on school attendance to explore the reasons why. Several family interviewees mentioned difficulties with their children's health status and mental health challenges (n=7), while others felt the services did not meet their needs (n=5). School staff interviewees attributed low impact to families not attending meetings or communicating with schools and counties (n=5) and to a lack of collaboration among schools, counties, and families (n=5).

More broadly, Figure 26 presents key aspects that were significantly associated with one or more moderate to great improvements in outcomes related to school attendance, engagement, and well-being. These findings suggest that families with these characteristics were more likely to achieve better results compared to their counterparts. For instance, compared to families attending only one or no meetings with school and county staff, a higher percentage of families who attended two or more meetings reported moderate to great improvements across all outcomes.

26. Key factors influencing moderate to great student and family outcomes (N=25-36)

Key influential factors	Improved students' attendance	Improved students' engagement	Improved parents' engagement	Improved students' well-being	Improved parents' well-being
Family attended two or more meetings with school and county staff	√†	√†	√*	√**	√*
Parents/guardians did not have emotional or mental health challenges	√†	√**	√**		
Not a single parent	√**	√**	√*	√**	√**
No parenting/co-parenting challenges		√†			√†
No unemployment/financial stress			√*		
Fewer (0-3 types) barriers and challenges			√*		
Received more than 3 types of services from children's school or the county				√*	√†
Child's race/ethnicity is BIPOC	√*		√*		√*
Child's gender is male				√*	√†

Source. Service Tracking Form

Note. (1) These factors were identified through crosstabulation analyses comparing the above-mentioned groups with their counterparts, including families: Attending fewer than two meetings with school and county staff; having parents/guardians with emotional or mental health challenges; being a single-parent household; having parenting/co-parenting challenges; experiencing unemployment/financial stress; having more than 3 types of barriers and challenges; receiving fewer than 3 types of services from children's school or the county; the child's race/ethnicity being White/Caucasian; and the child's gender being female. (2) Differences between groups were tested using Pearson's chi-square tests and are significant at ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, and †$p < .1$. Please interpret p-values with caution due to limited sample sizes.

Beyond the above key influential factors, families who experienced improvements in various outcomes may have distinct characteristics or experiences. As noted in STF staff records, 15 of 40 families (38%) showed moderate to great improvement in students' school attendance, along with improvement in at least one other outcome—including students' school engagement, parents/guardians' engagement, students' well-being, or parents/guardians' well-being (this group is referred to as "the improved group"). Compared to the families referred to Child Protection Services, a higher portion of families in the improved group had young children in the K-2 age group; two or more parents/guardians at home; and received economic benefits such as SNAP, MFIP, or emergency assistance. In contrast, families referred to Child Protection Services were more likely to receive housing or rental assistance and faced a greater number (i.e., three or more) and a more complex combination of barriers and challenges.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES IN OUTCOMES

Unlike program experience and satisfaction reports in the family survey, where BIPOC families (especially those without a Black/African American background) reported lower levels of satisfaction, a smaller proportion of White/Caucasian families (61%) strongly agreed or agreed that their children's school attendance improved compared to BIPOC families (76%). A small gap remains between BIPOC families with and without a Black/African American background (78% vs. 71%, respectively; Figure 27).

27. Families within each racial/ethnic group who strongly agreed or agreed that their children's school attendance improved

Racial/ethnic group	#	%
White/Caucasian only (n=46)	28	61%
BIPOC (n=37)	28	76%
With a Black/African American background (n=23)	18	78%
Without a Black/African American background (n=14)	10	71%

Source. Family Survey

Note. BIPOC families include Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families.

For other family outcomes related to engagement and well-being, a higher percentage of BIPOC families with a Black/African American background showed improvement on several measures, while BIPOC families without a Black/African American background reported the lowest levels of improvement (Figure 28).

28. Families within each racial/ethnic group who strongly agreed or agreed that their outcomes improved

Racial/ethnic group	Increased awareness of policies		Improved relationship with school staff		Improved overall well-being for family	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
White/Caucasian only (n=45-46)	31	69%	27	60%	24	53%
BIPOC (n=36-37)	26	72%	19	51%	19	50%
With a Black/African American background (n=22-23)	18	82%	13	57%	13	57%
Without a Black/African American background (n=14-15)	8	57%	6	43%	6	40%

Source. Family Survey

Note. BIPOC families include Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial families.

STF staff records further indicate that families with children identified as White/Caucasian were less likely to demonstrate moderate to great improvements across outcomes compared to families with BIPOC children. For example, fewer families with BIPOC children (1 of 6) were referred to Child Protection Services compared to families with White/Caucasian children (5 of 6). While these results represent a small number of families overall, limiting the representativeness of the results, the consistent pattern of findings in Figure 29 across multiple outcomes is worth noting.

29. Comparison of program outcomes between families with White/Caucasian children and BIPOC children

Outcomes	Families with White/Caucasian children	Families with BIPOC children
Referred to Child Protection Services	5 of 6	1 of 6
Case closed for completing services/accomplishing goals	1 of 8	7 of 8
	(N=14-18)	**(N=14-18)**
Improved in students' school attendance	33%	67%
Improved in students' school engagement	35%	69%
Improved in parents/guardians' engagement	24%	59%
Improved in parents' well-being	14%	57%

Source. Service Tracking Form

Note. (1) Families with BIPOC children include families with children identified as Black/African American, Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a, American Indian, African immigrant, and multiracial. (2) The outcome questions asked: "At the time of closing, to what extent has the following improved since the family began participating in your program?" The reported percentages reflect the proportion of positive responses indicating "a great deal" or "a moderate amount" of improvement among families. Therefore, the smaller percentages of observed improvements among families with White/Caucasian children may be due to a comparatively higher baseline at the start of the support program, resulting in less room for noticeable change over the course of the program.

STAKEHOLDERS PROVIDE SUGGESTIONS FOR PROGRAM AND POLICY IMPROVEMENT

Seven out of 20 family interviewees (35%) and 24 out of 69 family survey respondents (35%) felt that no program improvements were needed, reflecting their positive experience with the support programs. The following recommendations, drawn from the insights of other families, school staff, county staff, and social workers, emphasize the need for stronger collaboration, early intervention, tailored approaches, and expanded resources and services. These strategies are suggested to be essential for effectively addressing attendance barriers and providing comprehensive support to families.

TAILOR ATTENDANCE POLICIES FOR SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Family interviewees expressed an understanding of the importance of the Minnesota statue and the school's attendance policy—most parents recognized the value of regular school attendance and the need for such a policy (n=15, 75%). However, many felt that the policy does not provide flexibility or reflect the realities of their family circumstances, particularly for those facing multiple challenges or undocumented health issues (n=9, 45%). Several parents also noted that the policy adds stress and requires them to navigate burdensome processes, such as returning to doctors to request documentation (n=5, 25%).

These families—particularly those dealing with complex challenges and health barriers—wanted more nuanced, compassionate, and equitable approaches in the support they receive, particularly for children and families dealing with ongoing challenges such as emotional and mental health issues, chronic medical conditions, or transportation barriers. Unlike temporary barriers, emotional and mental health challenges often require long-term support and cannot be resolved through a couple of meetings or communications. Progress through therapy and other interventions is gradual, making it essential for schools to adopt flexible policies that acknowledge these realities.

ENHANCE INDIVIDUALIZED AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACHES

During the interviews, families emphasized the need for schools and counties to increase flexibility and better understand each family's unique needs and circumstances by engaging in active listening, building relationships, and acknowledging the diverse cultural backgrounds of children and their families. To be culturally responsive, some families wished program staff to adapt their communication styles to be inclusive and respectful, informed by their understanding of the cultural practices, values, and preferences of the communities they serve (n=3, 15%).

STRENGTHEN EARLY INTERVENTION AND COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND COUNTIES

From school staff interviewees' perspective, county-provided case management and in-home services were identified as helpful strategies for assisting families in navigating school systems and addressing barriers to attendance (n=7, 41%). Therefore, they suggested counties provide more intensive and wraparound support and services for families (n=5, 29%). Increasing schools' capacity and empowering schools to provide early and direct support will also be beneficial, making the supportive system more responsive and effective (n=6, 35%).

> **[There should be] more people as a team involved in supporting the family. For example, it takes me an entire day in a work week to do all the letters and phone calls to families, and then the other days I am supposed to be doing my direct work with students. There needs to be more resources of people and time if we want to actually do the home visits or make multiple phone call attempts and build connections and relationships with families. – School staff interviewee**

During the data walk session with counties, county staff members indicated that they would encourage schools to meet with students and their families early on to create Action Plans that address concerns before involving counties. It was noted by county staff that schools are generally successful when they initiate interventions early, which suggests that a proactive rather than reactive approach is more effective. County staff members also expressed a desire to collaborate with schools and establish a more seamless and supportive process that benefits children and their families.

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND BUILD TRUST BETWEEN SCHOOLS, COUNTIES, AND FAMILIES

Miscommunication or lack of communication often breaks the trust that families have in schools, especially when county involvement is perceived as punitive. Families appreciated when schools made efforts to build trusting relationships and foster a more collaborative environment. Several family interviewees expressed a desire for schools to be more understanding of children's needs and family circumstances (n=11, 55%), and to improve and increase communication (n=4, 20%). Similarly, survey respondents called for better communication from school staff, emphasizing the importance of showing greater empathy and listening to families—particularly when families are dealing with illness, health challenges, or other difficult situations (n=18, 26%), and addressing concerns collectively with families (n=16, 23%).

> **Instead of just addressing concerns, [school staff should] ask about the reasons behind them, listen to my perspective, and try to understand what was going on. – Parent interviewee**

Some school staff interviewees (n=5, 29%) emphasized that establishing and improving communication with county staff is also critical, as one interviewee explained:

> **It would be helpful to have a system where I can see that a family was reached out to [by the county], that someone is working on a case, or has been assigned to it, and to have a meeting and be able to see the notes, or to have a follow-up after the meeting –and to know if the resources that the family asked for during the meeting were provided to them and on what date they were provided. Those things would be really helpful, because then I can follow up with [the family].**
> **– School staff interviewee**

EXPAND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES TO BETTER SERVE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Family interviewees (n=3, 15%) and school staff interviewees (n=7, 41%) emphasized the importance of and need for additional services and resources—such as mentorship programs outside of school hours, expanded transportation options, and support for basic needs like food and clothing. These supports are especially important for marginalized or disadvantaged families, including immigrants, families with disabilities, and those experiencing economic hardship. Although many schools and counties already employ such staff, some interviewees felt that adding a dedicated program staff member or school social worker who can connect families with appropriate resources, such as mental health support, housing assistance, and financial aid would be a helpful enhancement to the system.

> **The County needs more staff resources, so they can conduct home visits, connect families to the right services in the community for mental health.**
> **– School staff interviewee**

> **I wish they [schools] had other options for us when kids missed the bus, so that they can get to school rather than missing it. They could also have a remote class… People travel, not only for work, even if they're homeless. Schools should have something after school. Instead of penalizing parents for not bringing our paperwork in, they should be able to provide other options. – Parent interviewee**

Conclusions and recommendations

As Minnesota moves forward with the 2025 legislative changes in Statute Section 260C to require school attendance reporting to local welfare agencies for educational neglect, it is essential to recognize that school attendance is closely tied to family stability and the broader social environment. A child's ability to consistently attend school is not solely a matter of compliance but is shaped by concrete factors in daily life, including a family's access to transportation, housing stability, financial security, work schedules, the ability to meet basic needs such as clean clothing and food, and the overall well-being of both children and adults at home. Addressing educational neglect, therefore, requires a holistic and supportive approach that helps families overcome these barriers rather than relying on punitive measures.

School services and county support programs have made significant efforts to address the complexities of families' challenges by providing a range of services and resources tailored to their needs. These programs recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution; instead, they explore flexible approaches that allow schools, counties, and community service providers to collaborate in supporting families. This collaborative approach requires ongoing communication, coordination, and direct engagement with families. By working closely with parents and caregivers, these programs strive to adapt to each family's unique circumstances, ensuring that interventions are both responsive to their specific needs and grounded in meaningful and supportive relationships.

Overall, this study provides some evidence that the programs may have moderate positive effects on improving school attendance and supporting broader family outcomes, such as increased engagement with services, stronger relationships with children's schools, and greater stability at home. Many families have perceived benefits from both preventive and intervention-focused services that help reduce barriers to consistent attendance. However, some limitations persist. Not all families have received the full range of support they needed — particularly those experiencing more severe and complex challenges. Program capacity and staffing constraints at both the school and county levels sometimes limit the ability to provide intensive support. As a result, families facing the most significant barriers were not always fully, efficiently, or adequately served. This highlights the need for greater investment in resources and personnel, and more integrated services that can effectively address complex and multifaceted family needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on key findings from this evaluation, the following recommendations are offered for stakeholders:

FOR STATE POLICYMAKERS

- Clarify and consider legislative updates to Statute Section 260C to support proactive, non-punitive responses to educational neglect.
  - Reexamine language in Section 260C of Minnesota statutes to ensure that it supports school attendance reporting to local county welfare agencies, distinct from child protection pathways, for cases of potential educational neglect.
  - Align statute language with a tiered prevention approach, where school absences due to unmet family needs (e.g., transportation, housing instability, medical caregiving) can trigger supportive outreach—not solely assessment or investigatory action—from a coordinated network of county and community-based services.
  - Encourage legislative guidance to distinguish between chronic absenteeism rooted in unmet needs from cases that may necessitate a different child welfare or child protection response; align with Minnesota's 2025–2029 Child and Family Services Plan by shifting from a reporting-focused approach to one centered on identifying family strengths and connecting families to supportive community resources; provide policy guidance and funding to standardize a reporting, referral, and response framework across counties that enables schools to refer K-5 students to county agencies or local social services teams for supportive intervention—prior to legal involvement or punitive measures.
- Allocate funding for pilot initiatives that allow schools and counties to test alternative attendance options (e.g., flexible start times, partial-day-attendance policy, virtual check-ins) for students and their caregivers experiencing health issues, family caregiving responsibilities, or transportation barriers. Evaluate these models to identify effective solutions that maintain engagement without penalizing families.
  - Allocate funding for practices that promote communication and collaboration across schools, counties, and community organizations to serve the needs of families facing school attendance challenges.
  - Expand use of Medicaid and other funding streams, indirectly or directly, to support local Family Resource Centers (FRCs), school-linked mental health services, and mobile outreach teams to do home visits, outreach, and engagement.
- Enhance learning from existing support programs by supporting research and evaluation to identify effective practices, assess outcomes, and inform continuous improvement.

FOR COUNTY AGENCIES AND SUPPORT PROGRAM STAFF

- Promote mutual understanding, shared accountability, and respectful engagement between county agencies, schools, and families to build trust and ensure coordinated support.
  - Create routine communication mechanisms (e.g., monthly case coordination calls, secure data dashboards) so that schools receive updates on family engagement, service access, and outcomes.
  - Collaborate with school staff or school case workers to establish feedback mechanisms, track families' follow-through on agreed-upon actions or support plans, and develop appropriate, sustainable solutions for families.
- Empower, encourage, and support schools to provide early prevention and intervention services for families, while establishing formal criteria for when and how schools should refer families to county support programs (i.e., programs supporting families with identified attendance issues), ideally before chronic absenteeism or legal involvement begins.
  - Support schools to provide greater flexibility or differentiated policies (e.g., tardiness policy) that account for the unique challenges families may face, ensuring children and families receive support rather than being penalized for circumstances beyond their control.
- Ensure timely access to resources and services for families based on their identified needs.
  - Expand partnerships with trusted community organizations and collaborate with community-based organizations, parent peer support programs, and local Family Resource Centers who can provide wraparound prevention and intervention supports informed by those with lived experiences. For example:
  - Partner with a community mental health agency to advocate for additional family therapists, and support the co-location of a therapist at an FRC on or near a school campus, increasing access to mental health support for families referred for attendance-related concerns.
  - Collaborate with trusted community centers, libraries, or churches to host joint attendance-focused outreach events in community spaces where school staff, county workers, and community partners offer information on supports (e.g., transportation, flexible school options, family therapy, etc.) in a family-friendly setting.
- Increase staffing capacity to better serve and meet the growing and diverse needs of families more effectively.
  - Ensure caseloads are manageable to allow for sustained relationship-building.

- Provide targeted training for staff on how to identify and respond to the specific needs of families when school attendance concerns are present, so they are better equipped to offer timely and appropriate support.

FOR SCHOOL STAFF

- Ensure approaches are responsive and accommodating—within the guidance of policies and laws—when supporting families whose children miss school or face complex or persistent barriers, focusing on tailored solutions rather than punitive responses to keep students engaged in learning.
  - Strengthen communication and information sharing with families and support programs by using clear, consistent, and non-stigmatizing, strengths-based language—ensuring families understand how programs work and fostering more coordinated, collaborative support.
  - Promote the collaborative approach of the support programs to families, highlighting specific resources they can provide.
  - As **Attendance Works** suggests, schools may consider aligning interventions with students' levels of absences—for example, providing all students and families with foundational supports and universal prevention, offering early interventions for students missing 10–19% of the school year, and implementing intensive interventions for those missing 20% or more (Attendance Works, n.d.).
  - Normalize early referrals to county and community support services by proactively introducing these resources during family nights, newsletters, and conferences, framing them as strengths-based and collaborative rather than disciplinary.
- Create an environment where families feel welcomed, heard, and valued by listening to their experiences and perspectives.
  - Strengthen staff training on trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices, and effective communication to better support diverse family needs and strengthen trust.
  - Listen to and validate families' concerns around peer bullying, and ensure they are involved in efforts to address bullying—especially those from communities that may feel mistrustful of school systems—by using culturally responsive communication and creating clear, accessible pathways for raising concerns and co-developing solutions.
  - Strengthen home-school partnerships through effective outreach approaches. For example, the **Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV)** model— a voluntary initiative where trained educators conduct at least three respectful, relationship-building home visits per school year and participate in debrief sessions— builds

trust with families through non-evaluative, relationship-centered home visits early in the school year.

- Implement evidence-based programs to strengthen school climate and prevent bullying. For example:
  - The **Second Step** program model— a weekly, classroom-based curriculum focusing on social-emotional competence and positive peer relationships—proactively prevents bullying by teaching elementary students empathy, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills and practices, while also supporting improved attendance and a stronger sense of safety.
- Adopt structured, supportive attendance interventions with proven impact to ensure timely support for students and families within the school. For example:
  - The multi-tiered attendance intervention framework such as **ATI-UP** (Absenteeism and Truancy: Interventions and Universal Procedures), which promotes school-wide norms for attendance, involves problem-solving teams, and engages families and communities collaboratively.
  - The innovative communication approach such as **PowerSchool Attendance Intervention**, which enables automated messaging to families using real-time attendance data of their children—helping to build trust, reduce stigma, and encourage timely engagement with supportive services; or the **EveryDay Intervention**, which uses personalized attendance reports to engage families with actionable, student-specific information.

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Appendix

INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY PARTICIPANTS

SERVICE TRACKING FORM (STF)

During the 2023-24 school year, a total of **266 referrals** were recorded across the four participating counties. Among them, **40 families from three counties (i.e., Scott, Washington, Wright) provided consent** for their information to be tracked in the STF. Of all referrals, 96% were from public schools, 77% were first-time referrals, and students were evenly distributed across grade levels, with 49% in K-2 and 51% in Grades 3-6. Racially, 41% had children identified as White/ Caucasian only, while 59% identified with one or more non-White racial and ethnic group, including Black/African American (28%), Hispanic or Latino/a (22%), Asian American (3%), American Indian (3%), African immigrant (2%), another race or ethnic group (2%), and multiracial (3%). The median number of unexcused absences at referral was 9 days, with 58% of students having fewer than 10 unexcused absences.

The consented sample was representative of all families referred to educational neglect support programs in terms of student grade levels and first-time referral status. Compared to all referrals, the consented group had a higher median number of unexcused absences at referral (12 days), with 38% having fewer than 10 and 19% exceeding 20 unexcused absences. Racially, 53% had children identified as White/Caucasian only, while 47% identified with one or more non-White racial and ethnic group, including Hispanic or Latino/a (28%), Black/African American (18%), American Indian (8%), and multiracial (8%).

FAMILY SURVEY

Among 515 eligible families served through the support programs across five counties (i.e., Anoka, Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright), a total of 119 families (23%) at least partially completed the survey, while 97 families (19%) completed enough of the survey to be included in the full analysis. Of those, 51% were from **Anoka County**. Most participants identified as White/Caucasian (62%) or Black/African American (26%), with 24% identifying as Hispanic or Latino/a (12%), American Indian (5%), Asian American (3%), African immigrant (3%), another race or ethnic (1%), and multiracial (18%). Additionally, 11% of participants declined to provide racial or ethnic information.

FAMILY INTERVIEW

A subset sample of 20 family survey respondents participated in interviews, bringing perspectives from a range of diverse lived experiences. Of those, 6 families (30%) identified as only White/ Caucasian, while 60% identified with one or more non-White racial and ethnic group, including

Black/African American (n=7), Hispanic or Latino/a (n=4), American Indian (n=2), and African immigrant (n=1), another race or ethnic (n=1), and multiracial (n=7). Additionally, two participants declined to provide racial or ethnic information.

SCHOOL STAFF INTERVIEW

Wilder conducted **17 interviews** with school staff from **five counties** (Anoka, Olmsted, Scott, Washington, and Wright). All interviewees worked in different local **elementary or middle schools.** Among them, **11 were social workers,** while the remaining **6 held roles such as principals, deans of students, student services specialists, and counselors**.

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