A Tale of Two States: Reducing Chronic Absence

July 30, 2026 | 12:30-2 pm ET/9:30-11 am PT

PRESENTERS

Sandra Faioes
Interim Superintendent
Norwalk Public Schools
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Sandra Faioes has served Norwalk Public Schools since 2013 and currently serves as Interim Superintendent, following her appointment as Deputy Superintendent in 2023. Throughout her tenure, she has held a range of leadership roles, including principal of Brookside Elementary School, Director of School Improvement, Assistant Superintendent of Business and Operations, and Deputy Superintendent. She has led districtwide improvement efforts, overseen major operational initiatives, secured significant grant funding, and played a key role in the safe reopening of schools during the pandemic.

Faioes holds a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in Educational Leadership from Simmons University, a Master of Education in Educational Leadership from Boston College, and superintendent licensure through the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in English and Black Studies from Boston College.

Faioes attended Boston College for where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English and Black Studies.

Justin D. Hill, Ed.S.
Deputy Superintendent, Office of Whole Child Supports
Georgia Department of Education
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Justin Hill. Ed.S., is the Deputy Superintendent for the Office of Whole Child Supports overseeing Georgia Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (GaMTSS), student attendance, school safety, and activities concerning student health and wellness at the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE). He is the former Associate Superintendent for the Division of Curriculum, Instruction, and School Climate at GaDOE. Justin is a former state director, state program manager, school administrator, and classroom teacher. He is a veteran of the U.S. Navy achieving the rank of Commander and currently serves as the Commanding Officer for a Navy Reserve unit supporting the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Charlene Russell-Tucker
Commissioner
Connecticut State Department of Education
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Commissioner Russell-Tucker was appointed by Governor Ned Lamont as Commissioner for the Connecticut State Department of Education in August 2021 after having served as Acting Commissioner. Commissioner Russell-Tucker is a performance-driven, visionary education leader with over 20 years' experience in successfully leveraging the inter-connectedness of the social, emotional, physical, and mental wellness of students and their families as a foundation for student success.

Commissioner Russell-Tucker has participated on various state and national committees and testified at the US Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) hearings on *Supporting Students and Schools: Promising Practices to*

Get Back on Track (June 2022); and *Why Are So Many American Youth in a Mental Health Crisis? Exploring Causes and Solutions (June 2023).*

She has served as an expert panel member on committees of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. She has also served in the role of president of the Connecticut Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and as a member of the national Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Commissioner Russell-Tucker has extensive teaching experience, formerly serving as an adjunct faculty member at Albertus Magnus College School of New Dimensions.

She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education Friend of Public Education Award and MENTOR National's Public Service – State & Local Excellence in Mentoring Award. In 2018, she was welcomed to the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading's Council of Champions.

Kari Sullivan Custer
Attendance Lead
Connecticut State Department of Education
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Kari Sullivan Custer is the Attendance Lead at the Connecticut State Department of Education, bringing over 35 years of experience in student supports and education to her role. She leads statewide strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and ensure students are supported, engaged, and connected to their school communities. Her leadership bridges agency divisions, state partners, and community providers to address non-academic barriers such as health and housing instability—while also helping schools and districts build strong, trusting relationships with students and families that foster a sense of belonging.

Kari provides targeted guidance to Connecticut's 10 Opportunity Districts and serves as program manager for the state's research-based Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), a home visiting initiative with proven outcomes in re-engaging students and reducing chronic absence. LEAP currently operates in 25 high-need districts across the state. She also staffs the Interagency Council for Ending the Achievement Gap, advancing cross-sector collaboration to improve student outcomes.

Prior to her work in Connecticut, Kari served as Communications Project Manager at Philadelphia Safe and Sound, a leading research and advocacy organization supporting over 24,000 children. She also worked for the School District of Philadelphia's Family

Resource Network, coordinating integrated student supports in health, safety, special education, and parent engagement.

Charity W. Trowbridge, MSW, M.A.

Director of Attendance Improvement
Fulton County Schools
Trowbridge LinkedIn | Fulton County Schools Facebook

Charity Trowbridge is an experienced educational leader and social worker with over 20 years of experience advancing student achievement through strategic innovation and whole-child development. As Director of Attendance Improvement for Fulton County Schools, she supports the district's strategic improvement plan through leading the district's attendance engagement plan. Her leadership is grounded in data-driven decision-making, whole-child development, and collaborative planning. Charity has designed and implemented district-wide frameworks in Attendance Improvement, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), and school social work—resulting in measurable improvements in student outcomes, school climate, and family engagement.

Charity's has previously roles include Coordinator of Social Work Services for Fulton County Schools and Assistant Principal for Hawthorn District 73. Prior to working in educational leadership, Charity served as a school social worker and community mental health crisis social worker. Her professional work has contributed to multiple district and school level recognitions including: Fulton County Schools: SSTAGE Award for Promising Practices (2022, 2025), Hawthorn District 73: ASCD Whole Child Award (2018) and State Exemplary Performance School Designation (2019). These reflecting her commitment to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), and student engagement.

Charity holds a Master of Arts in Educational Leadership from Northeastern Illinois University, a Master of Social Work from Loyola University Chicago, and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. Her career reflects a deep dedication to empowering students, supporting educators, and building resilient school communities through visionary leadership and collaborative planning.

Claire Voorhees

Senior Program Lead
Walton Family Foundation
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Claire Voorhees is senior program lead at the Walton Family Foundation. In this role, Claire oversees the education program's policy, implementation, data, and leadership portfolios. Claire is formerly the National Director of Policy at the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd). Prior to ExcelinEd, Claire worked at HCM Strategists, where she provided clients with strategic advice on new approaches to education reform. Claire was also an instructor at Koç University in Istanbul, teaching a comparative course on education rights and policies in the U.S. and Turkey. Claire was previously an associate at Hogan Lovells law firm and served as an associate director in the White House Domestic Policy Council. Claire began her career as a fourth-grade teacher at P.S. 43 in the South Bronx, New York. Claire graduated with a B.A. from Duke University and a M.S. in elementary education from Mercy College; she earned her M.A. in public policy from Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute and a J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center.

Arianne Weldon
Strategic Innovation Manager and Get Georgia Reading Campaign Director
Georgia Family Connection Partnership
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Arianne Weldon serves as Strategic Innovation Manager & Get Georgia Reading Campaign Director for Georgia Family Connection Partnership (GaFCP). Her work includes connecting decision-makers across Georgia to create the conditions essential to achieve measurably better outcomes for children, families, and communities. An innovator in population health and systems change, she brings over 25 years of expertise in maternal and child health, early childhood development, and community engagement to help leaders apply data and research toward new — often unexpected — solutions.

Arianne was recently appointed by the Commissioner of the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to serve as Chair of the State MATCH (Multi-Agency Treatment for Children) Committee. She was also appointed by Georgia

Governor Nathan Deal to the Governing Board of the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy, where she currently serves as Board Chair.

Arianne introduced the concept of “language nutrition”—a term she coined to describe the vital role of language-rich social interactions in nurturing brain growth and language development. This concept has since gained national and international recognition. The term “language nutrition” is widely used in education and healthcare research and practice. She is a co-author of Language as a Missing Link — concepts and practices designed to address the gap between knowledge of the impact of language and communication development as a well-being indicator and universal practices and policies. Arianne is also co-developer of Mom’s Heart Matters, a comprehensive digital maternal health support initiative that functions as connective tissue, enhancing engagement between and among participants and their circle of care — including health and social care providers — to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.

Arianne’s experience includes facilitating multiple state partnership and regional strategies for GaFCP where she served as liaison to population-based initiatives across multiple state agencies, private sector organizations, and communities to assure coordination and collaboration in efforts to improve child and family well-being.

Arianne is a recipient of the Black Child Development Institute Community Leadership Award, the Georgia Association of School Nurses Hero Award, and the Georgia Senate’s Yellow Rose Nikki T. Randall Servant Leader Award. She holds a Master of Public Health from Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Georgia State University.

MODERATOR

Hedy Chang

CEO and President
Attendance Works
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Hedy Nai-Lin Chang is the founder, CEO and President of Attendance Works, a national and state level initiative aimed at advancing student success by addressing chronic absence. A skilled presenter, facilitator, researcher and writer, she co-authored the seminal report, Present, Engaged and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades, as well as numerous other articles about student attendance. Deeply committed to promoting two-generation solutions to

achieving a more just and equitable society, Hedy has spent more than three decades working in the fields of family support, family economic success, education and child development. She served as a senior program officer at the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund and as co-director of California Tomorrow, a nonprofit committed to drawing strength from cultural, linguistic and racial diversity. In February 2013, Hedy was named by the White House as a Champion of Change for her commitment to furthering African American Education.