

Attendance initiatives briefing for Minister Seymour

How to improve attendance

1. Increasing parents' awareness and expectations
2. Making learning engaging and school a great place to be
3. Identifying and tackling specific barriers.¹

There isn't a simple explanation for the international trend for less attendance. Good data is needed. System wide improvements in data entry and analysis may provide more insight into attendance.

Research suggests a multi-tiered approach to addressing attendance²:

Tier 1: Universal (80%),

Tier 2: Targeted (15%)

Tier 3: Intensive (5%).

Integrated approaches which use resourcing from different sources are needed for targeted or intensive programmes because the underlying reasons for non-attendance are frequently complex.

School's success in addressing attendance requires consistent approaches with families. It also requires collaboration and usually pooling of resources between schools for effective interventions.

1. Improving the quality of data

Data codes for the recording of attendance in schools are not consistent. There are 26 codes, which a school needs to consider when entering attendance data.

For example one school might use the V code for senior students on study leave while another will use X. Some use F as the school considers the senior students are learning and studying at home in preparation for examinations.

The issue with this is that some codes (like X) are ignored in the data and so the absence rate can be artificially inflated. Variation in practice means clean data is not necessarily available for system wide analysis or even across local clusters of schools.

Refining the codes to ensure consistency in data entry, would improve analysis at school and the system levels.

If you are looking at a national campaign to increase attendance, then parents need a common understanding of what is an **explained and justified** or an **explained and unjustified** absence

¹ <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/attendance-getting-back-to-school>

² Kirsten Hancock – see for example https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/research-q-a-student-attendance-strategies

from school. This needs to be consistent so when families move between schools there is less opportunity for misunderstandings or different coding.

When students attend Alternative Education or Activity Centres the individual student's attendance data is reported as part of the enrolled school's data but is recorded at another centre. This needs to be managed in the simplest way possible.

Research suggests that 90% attendance is an arbitrary data point, it does not indicate a particular risk factor (above or below).

2. Increase parents' awareness and expectations.

There needs to be consistent reinforcement of the importance of attendance and of knowing your child's attendance. ERO makes the following points:

- Make going to school a habit, if all parents have the expectation and attitude that their child goes to school, it helps other parents – build regular attendance as the 'norm'.
- Parental attitudes matter - differences in parental attitudes are apparent in the research e.g., school is not seen as important by all parents but 85% of Asian parents identified going to school as very important, 2/3 of parents are okay for their young person to miss school for an important family occasion and 12% are okay for their child to miss school on their birthday.

Research suggests improving school attendance, needs:

- High quality data
- Non-punitive measures
- Opportunities to build relationships.
- Community engagement

3. Making learning engaging and school a great place to be.

Tertiary and work partnerships

Secondary Schools use work experience partnerships with local business and organisations and tertiary partnerships allowing learners to attend a mixed model of school and tertiary study.

Schools are beginning to make more use of Section 42 of the *Education and Training Act* to create individual plans to re-engage students who disengaged particularly during the Covid pandemic. There is evidence that homeschooling enrolments are dropping which may be correlational to this development.

However, schools are left to devise these programmes on their own and doing this is reliant on specific expertise, time and available educational options.

Hybrid models integrating in school and out of school learning

- Using the reintegration pathway at Te Kura with some online subjects and some face to face on-site until traction has been made to return to full face to face learning.
- Small group work in social and communication skills delivered by Youth Workers from local not for profit organisations or through MSD contracted services provided to some schools.

- Literacy and numeracy booster lessons for small groups of students above and beyond staffing allocation e.g. 'Mecca Maths' for a group of at-risk Y10s prior to numeracy CAA and L1 NCEA to increase confidence and engagement in the subject. Often occurs out of school hours.
- Youth Workers in the school mentoring at risk students and providing life experiences beyond the classroom (Funding from Oranga Tamariki is sometimes, though rarely possible).
- Re-engaging non-enrolled students or those with avoidant behaviour in our mainstream school settings, needs the capacity to provide some features that are similar to Alternative Education providers, to appeal to students - Low teacher-student ratios, high interest contexts, off-site components.

Personal Attendance Improvement Plans

Creating personalised high interest programmes to engage and entice reluctant learners to attend. Schools often use a reinforcement that can only be redeemed by being in the school setting e.g. canteen voucher. This requires additional funding in some cases but certainly assists with retention.

Alternative Education and Activity Centres

Alternative Education Centres and Activity Centres have been part of the school system for many years but are largely under-resourced, despite the fact they are frequently the educational setting catering for our most vulnerable secondary school age learners.

There is huge potential here for this part of our education system to engage the disengaged, support their attainment of qualifications and skills necessary to continue learning at tertiary level and even assist their transition back into successful secondary schooling.

ERO recommendations:

- Build strong relationship with teacher and learner.
- Develop learner interest in learning and link it to their future.
- Ensure students can participate in activities (tackle the barriers)
- Make going to school a habit
- If a student believes school attendance is important for their future, they are much more likely to go to school.

4. Identifying and tackling specific barriers – mental health and learning support needs

ERO recommendation:

- Ensure students can participate in activities (tackle the barriers).

Analysis of the correlation of **unmet mental health needs** and poor attendance is warranted.

Providing support for vulnerable students, including those with mental health issues, is identified as the top-ranking issue facing secondary schools³.

³ <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/secondary-principals-perspectives-nzcers-2022-national-survey-schools>

A recent report of the Auditor General School noted that school-based services are critical to improving primary mental health care access for students⁴.

These student absences can be hidden in the **sickness absences data**. For there to be a focus on attendance, the mental health and social support services need to collaborate with schools.

When schools collaborate on an initiative, the systems within and across schools support its success. Innovation can best develop in environments of collaboration and professional autonomy. For example, A Kāhui Ako has used the regional response funding to employ a shared mental health nurse and a social worker in 2022 and 2023. They have worked with chronic non-attenders and their families and have been successful at turning attendance around.

These are probably the hardest initiatives for schools to support themselves because there isn't a good funding stream available.

Target support for students with mild to moderate learning support needs – including neurodiversity

Some students do not come to school as they and/or their families do not feel that their learning needs are being met. These students can be hidden in the “sickness” statistics.

Learning support coordinators are specialist teachers who are employed and successful in making the learning environment more inclusive and responsive to those with mild to moderate learning support needs. The improvements in the ability of kura/schools to identify and support these learners, kaiako/teachers and whānau reflect this.

Learning support coordinators work intensively with whānau and provide tools and strategies for teachers working with specific students.

The learning support coordinator was intended to be rolled out to all schools – continuing this roll out would assist with attendance especially for students with mild to moderate learning needs.

Principals note the presence of this dedicated resource in schools assists with supporting students with higher needs that may be referred for additional support but then subject to a wait of 3 or more months. While the LSC is there to help children with learning disabilities and additional learning needs, their expertise permeates into a school so those kids who are not the direct target that the LSCs were set up to support, are also being addressed more effectively.

⁴ <https://www.oag.parliament.nz/2024/youth-mental-health/docs/youth-mental-health.pdf>

They're helping with the identification and planning for the needs of learners in our schools; they're starting to connect with a range of specialist supports and services so they're able to make direct connections with the likes of other Ministry expertise and resource teachers, and all that will feed into part of the overall plan for an individual learner.

Evidence Base

Education Review Office most recent data

[Attendance: Getting Back to School 21 Feb 2023](#)

Summary:

- There is a link between attendance and achievement.
- There has been an alarming fall in regular attendance for all school types and there is no real understanding as to why this has happened.
- Covid has had an impact, however the attendance rate has been falling since 2015.
- Parental attitudes matter - differences in parental attitudes are apparent in the research e.g., school is not seen as important by all parents but 85% of Asian parents identified going to school as very important, 2/3 of parents are okay for their young person to miss school for an important family occasion and 12% are okay for their child to miss school on their birthday.
- Barriers to regular school attendance are illness, mental health, staying up late, wanting to miss something e.g., sports day, not liking the teacher/s, not liking what is taught.
- If a student believes school attendance is important for their future, they are much more likely to go to school.

Recommendations:

- Increase parental awareness of attendance – know it is important, know their child's attendance, are messaged often.
- Build strong relationship with teacher and learner.
- Develop learner interest in learning and link it to their future.
- Ensure students can participate in activities (tackle the barriers)
- Make going to school a habit, if all parents have the expectation and attitude that their child goes to school, it helps other parents – build regular attendance as the 'norm'

Kirsten Hancock – an international researcher on school attendance.

Internationally there has been a decrease in school attendance. Decline after 2019, lots said but nothing tangible e.g., Covid, school refusal, mental health but no evidence. Pre- Covid there were issues in Australia. Suggest a multi- tiered approach to addressing: Tier 1 Universal (80%), Tier 2 Targeted (15%) and Tier 3 Intensive (5%)

Hancock's research 's research suggests that to improve school attendance, we need:

- High quality data

- System level and school commitment
- Open, non-judgmental attitudes
- Opportunities to build relationships.
- Community engagement

Other interesting points:

- A day in school is worth more to some students than others e.g., less interest – less risk, high interest in school, absences will impact
- 90% attendance is an arbitrary data point, it does not indicate a particular risk factor (above or below)
- Punitive measures e.g., fining parents do not work

Current state in NZ – information from Ministry team (2023)

The MOE is currently pulling data, specifically about moderate absenteeism. They have found differences:

- Secondary rates are worse than primary, but the differences are not great.
- There are regional differences - Te Tai Tokerau has lowest regular attendance rate and Otago Southland has highest.
- There are ethnic differences - just over a third of our Māori and Pacific students have regular attendance, over half of Asian students and less than half of European.
- Differences in medium are evident - Māori medium education has higher regular attendance than mixed medium but lower rates than English medium. Numbers in Māori medium are small, under 8000 Māori medium education compared to 150,000 upon English medium.

PISA 2022 feedback

Parents matter in educational outcomes – parental interest in their child’s education contributes to educational success. At home, parents asking students about their learning has a positive impact on results, as does sharing family meals together.

In NZ parents taking initiative is an area we are not doing so well, parents have less engagement in school compared to other OECD countries. Keeping parents involved in students’ learning is a factor of the resilient systems.

School life matters to young people - student wellbeing data highlights parents then life at school as the two most important things for young people (student feedback). NZ students’ sense of belonging is relatively low compared internationally, and vandalism is higher. There has however been a decrease in reported bullying since 2018, indicating progress in fostering safer school environments.

Learning Support Coordinator Evaluation

<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/learning-support/learning-support-coordinators-evaluation-phase-3>