

# Government school student attendance 2019 (semester 1)

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

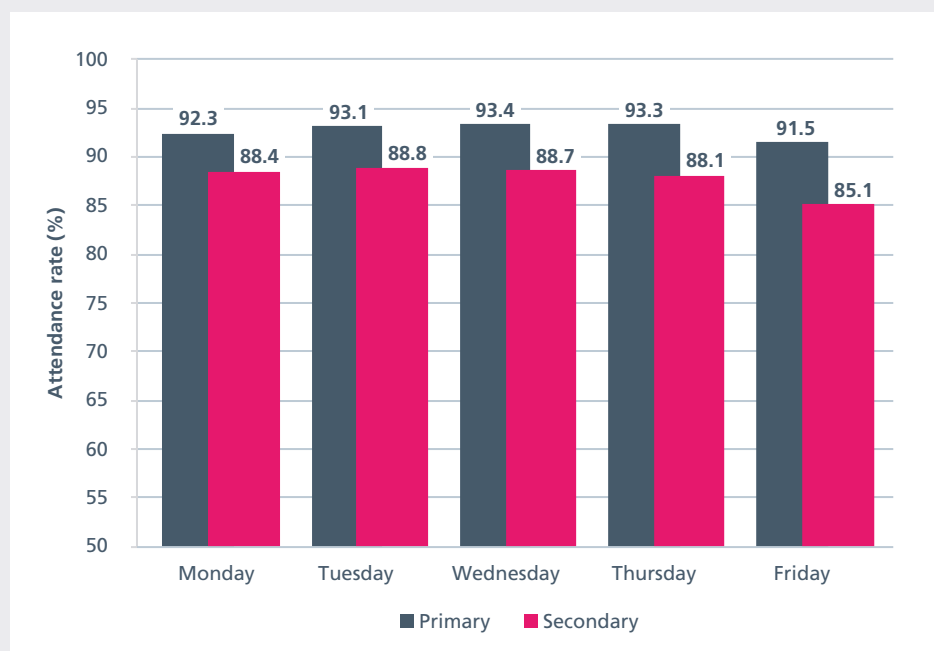
Research indicates a strong link between attendance and student achievement. Monitoring student attendance is an important requirement of a school's duty of care to all students.

## Top 5 findings

- Attendance rates fell slightly in 2019.
- Attendance rates are lower in secondary grades than in primary grades.
- Attendance is lowest on Fridays.
- 72.6% of students attended 90% or more of the time, 25.8% attended 98% or more.
- Days lost through approved leave accounted for the highest proportion of explained absences.

**Figure 1**

**Students' attendance rates by day of the week, Semester 1 2019:  
NSW government schools**



Since 2018 NSW has collected student-level attendance data into a centralised database. The student-level data allows for more detailed analysis such as absence reason and day of the week.

In Figure 1, attendance in 2019 was highest for primary students on Wednesdays and for secondary students on Tuesdays. The lowest attendance for both primary and secondary students was Fridays, with attendance rates averaging 91.5% and 85.1% respectively. The attendance rate gap between primary and secondary students was also widest on Fridays compared to other days of the week.

## Attendance rates by student level of education

Between 2015 and 2019, the average attendance rate in NSW government schools has varied between 92.2% and 90.8%.

The method of calculating attendance rates changed in 2018. As part of the process of making NSW government schools' attendance rates consistent with the National standards for student attendance data reporting, NSW included partial absences and accounted for student mobility in the attendance rate calculations for the first time.

From 2015 to 2017 attendance rates remained largely unchanged, at 92.2% in 2015 and 2016 and 92.1% in 2017. In 2018, attendance rates decreased to 91.4% with the introduction of national standards and then in 2019 decreased further to 90.8%. The fall in 2019 is partly explained by a bad flu season and Eid celebrations falling on weekdays.

**Table 1**

**Students' attendance rates by education level, Semester 1, 2015-19: NSW government schools**

School level	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Primary total	93.9	93.9	93.9	93.3	92.7
Secondary total	89.5	89.5	89.5	88.2	87.8
Junior secondary	89.5	89.7	89.6	88.6	88.0
Senior secondary	89.0	89.0	89.0	87.5	87.3
<b>NSW</b>	<b>92.2</b>	<b>92.2</b>	<b>92.1</b>	<b>91.4</b>	<b>90.8</b>

**Note:** Due to changes in the calculation methods, 2018 and 2019 data is not directly comparable to previous years.

**Figure 2**

**Students' attendance rates by education level, Semester 1, 2015-19: NSW government schools**

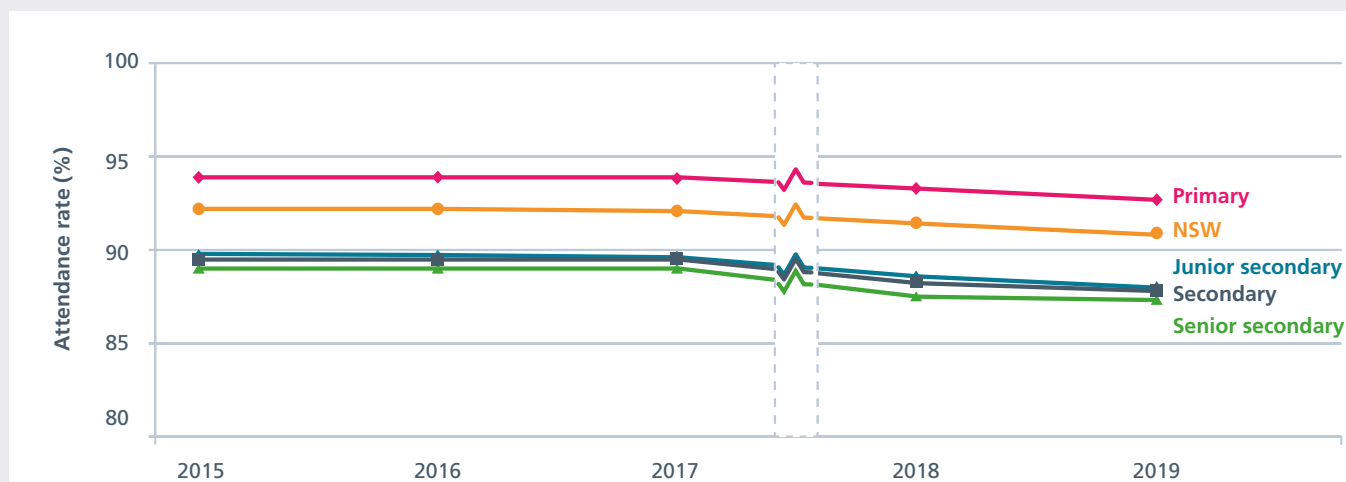


Figure 2 and Table 1 show that attendance rates for primary students were consistently higher than for secondary students. In the last five years, the gap between primary students' and secondary students' attendance rates averaged 4.6 percentage points. Information on attendance rates in earlier years can be found in the 2018 Attendance Bulletin.

Between 2015 and 2017 the attendance rates for **primary students** remained constant at 93.9%. However in 2018 attendance rates fell to 93.3% and declined further to 92.7% in 2019.

From 2015 to 2017 the attendance rates for **secondary students** remained constant at 89.5%. In 2018 attendance rates fell to 88.2% with the introduction of national standards. In 2019 attendance rates for secondary students averaged 87.8%.

**Junior secondary students'** attendance rates were fairly stable between 2015 and 2017 but then fell by a full percentage point in 2018 and 0.6 percentage points in 2019. Nevertheless, junior secondary students' attendance rate remained consistently above senior secondary students' attendance rate, and in 2019 the gap was 0.7 percentage points.

## Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance rates

In November 2013 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a range of measures to improve Aboriginal school attendance. This included new initiatives and monitoring of attendance rates, with the aim of closing the gap in attendance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

8.0% of all students in NSW government schools identified as Aboriginal in 2019, up from 7.0% in 2015.

Figure 3 and Table 2 show attendance rates for students by level of education.

**Table 2**

**Students' attendance rates by education level, Semester 1, 2015-19: NSW government schools**

School level	Aboriginal			Non-Aboriginal			All students		
	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019	2017	2018	2019
Primary total	90.1	89.0	88.4	94.2	93.6	93.1	93.9	93.3	92.7
Secondary total	80.1	77.3	76.6	90.2	89.2	88.8	89.5	88.2	87.8
Junior secondary	80.6	78.0	77.2	90.5	89.5	89.0	89.6	88.6	88.0
Senior secondary	78.6	74.9	74.4	89.7	88.4	88.2	89.0	87.5	87.3
<b>NSW</b>	<b>86.2</b>	<b>84.4</b>	<b>83.8</b>	<b>92.6</b>	<b>91.9</b>	<b>91.4</b>	<b>92.1</b>	<b>91.4</b>	<b>90.8</b>

The average attendance rate for Aboriginal students was 83.8% in 2019, 0.6 percentage points lower than in 2018, while the attendance rate for non-Aboriginal students decreased by 0.5 percentage points in the last year (from 91.9% to 91.4%) (Table 2).

As a result the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance rates slightly widened between 2018 and 2019, from 7.5 percentage points to 7.6 percentage points.

**Aboriginal primary students'** attendance rate decreased by 0.6 percentage points from 89% in 2018 to 88.4% in 2019, similar to the 0.5 percentage point fall for non-Aboriginal students. The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance rates in primary years was 4.7 percentage points in 2019, up slightly from 4.6 percentage points in 2018.

In 2019, the attendance rate for **Aboriginal secondary students** decreased by 0.7 percentage points to 76.6%, 11.8 percentage points lower than primary Aboriginal students.

This is the largest gap recorded in the last decade between primary and secondary Aboriginal students' attendance rates.

Attendance rates are much lower in secondary years for Aboriginal students than for non-Aboriginal students. The gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance was more than twice as large as in primary years, and increased from 11.9 percentage points in 2018 to 12.2 percentage points in 2019 (Figure 3).

**Aboriginal senior secondary students'** attendance rates have fallen by 4.2 percentage points since 2017. In 2019, the attendance rate was below 75% for the second consecutive year.

**Junior secondary students'** attendance rates were around 80% for about 10 years until 2017. In 2018 the attendance rate for these students decreased to 78%, followed by a further decrease of 0.8 percentage points to 77.2% in 2019.

Figure 3

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attendance rates by education level, Semester 1, 2017-19: NSW government schools



## Distribution of students' attendance

In 2019, 72.6% of all students attended at least 90%<sup>1</sup> of the time. This decreased by 0.8 percentage points from 73.4% of all students in 2018 and is consistent with the decrease in attendance rates.

Figure 4 and Table 3 show the distribution of individual students' attendance for primary (K-6, grey bars), junior secondary (7-10,

pink bars) and senior secondary students (11-12, blue bars) in Semester 1 2019.

While the table groups attendance rates between 50% and 80% and separates out attendance of 98% or more, each five percentage point band over 50% is displayed as a separate bar in Figure 4.

**Table 3**

**Distribution of students' attendance, by education level and Aboriginality, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**

Attendance rate	Aboriginal students				Non-Aboriginal students				All students			
	K-6	7-10	11-12	Total	K-6	7-10	11-12	Total	K-6	7-10	11-12	Total
< 50%	1.7	12.5	15.5	<b>6.2</b>	0.3	2.5	3.3	<b>1.3</b>	0.4	3.4	4.1	<b>1.6</b>
50% - 80%	13.9	25.0	24.8	<b>18.3</b>	4.6	10.6	11.5	<b>7.0</b>	5.3	11.9	12.3	<b>7.9</b>
80% - 85%	9.2	10.5	10.9	<b>9.8</b>	5.1	7.8	7.6	<b>6.1</b>	5.4	8.0	7.8	<b>6.4</b>
85% - 90%	14.1	14.1	13.5	<b>14.1</b>	10.1	13.1	12.7	<b>11.2</b>	10.4	13.1	12.8	<b>11.4</b>
90% - 95%	24.5	18.3	16.7	<b>21.9</b>	24.2	24.3	23.6	<b>24.2</b>	24.3	23.7	23.1	<b>24.0</b>
95% - 98%	19.4	11.0	9.5	<b>16.0</b>	25.4	20.2	20.5	<b>23.5</b>	25.0	19.4	19.8	<b>22.9</b>
>= 98%	17.1	8.6	9.1	<b>13.8</b>	30.2	21.6	20.8	<b>26.8</b>	29.2	20.4	20.0	<b>25.8</b>

Although the publicly reported attendance level is 90% or more, many students have close to perfect attendance. In Table 3, 25.8% of all students attended 98% or more of the time and 72.6% of all students attended at least 90% of the time. By comparison only 13.8% of Aboriginal students attended 98% of the time and 51.7% of Aboriginal students attended at least 90% of the time.

These proportions were different for each level of education, with the percentage of students attending 90% of the time higher for primary students compared to secondary students.

Almost 80% of primary students attended school 90% or more of the time, with around one third attending nearly all days (98% or more attendance). For Aboriginal primary students, just over 60% attended 90% or more in Semester 1 2019.

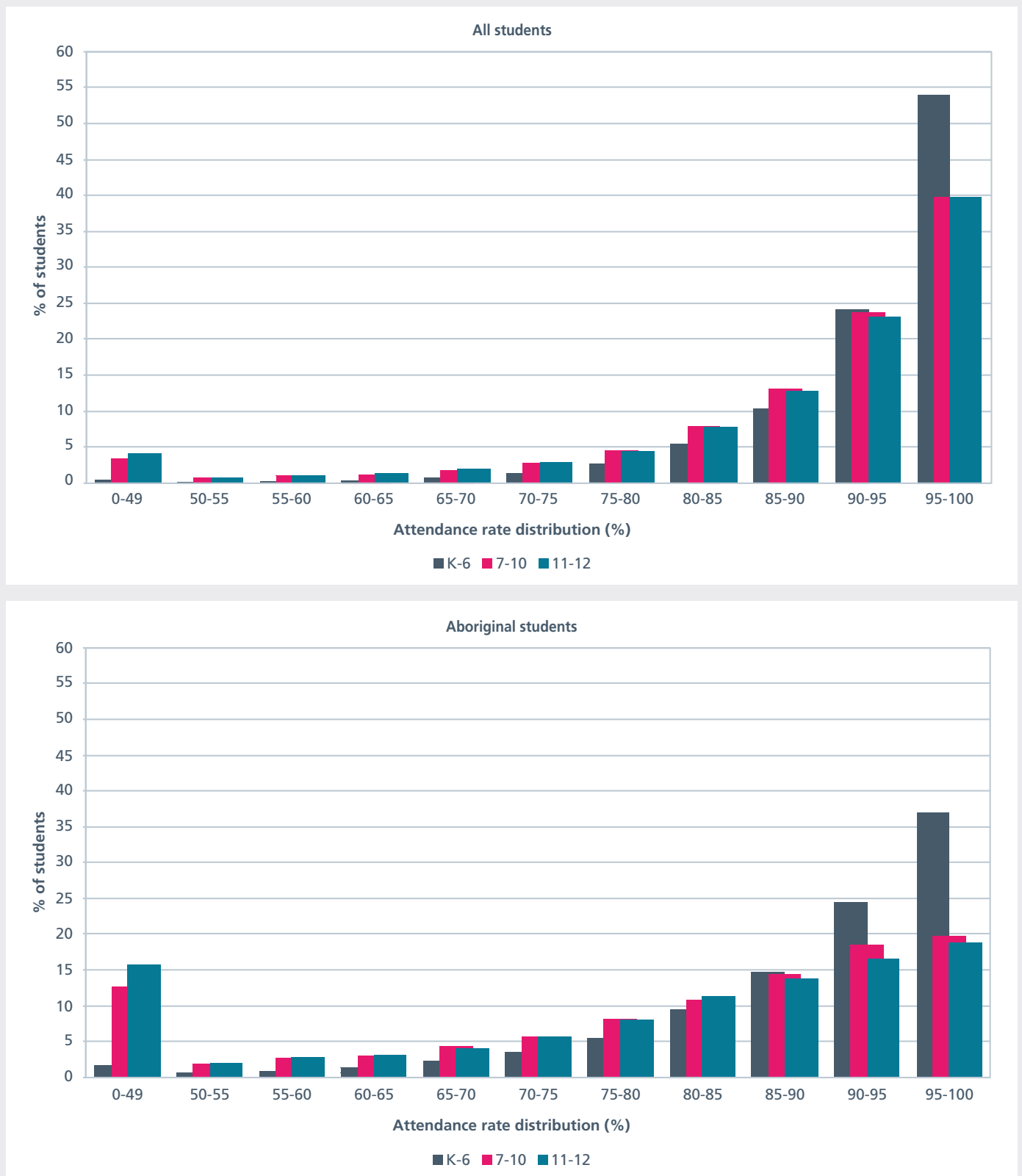
The proportion of primary students attending school less than 50% of the time was small (1.7% for Aboriginal students and 0.3% for non-Aboriginal students).

Senior secondary students had a comparatively higher proportion of students attending between 50% and 80%. There was a lower percentage of students with high attendance rates compared to primary students, with only one in five senior secondary students attending 98% or more of the time.

<sup>1</sup> The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) publishes student attendance data for Years 1 to 10 in each state and territory every year on the [ACARA data portal](#).

**Figure 4**

Distribution of all students' and Aboriginal students' attendance rates, by education level, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools



Aboriginal senior secondary students showed a similar pattern, with about one in four of this cohort attending school between 50% and 80% of the time.

Junior secondary students' attendance distribution was similar to the senior secondary students' distribution, with a lower

proportion attending less than 50% of the time (3.4% for junior secondary students compared to 4.1% for senior secondary). Additionally, the proportion of junior secondary students that attended at least 98% of the time was 20.4%, very similar to the proportion of senior secondary students (20.0%).

## Distribution of students' attendance by scholastic year

Figure 5 shows the Semester 1 2019 attendance rates and proportion of students that attended less than 90%, between 90% and 98% and more than 98% of the time by scholastic year.

Except for Year 10, the highest student attendance in each scholastic year was between 90% and 98%. For Year 10 there were more students attending under 90% of the time.

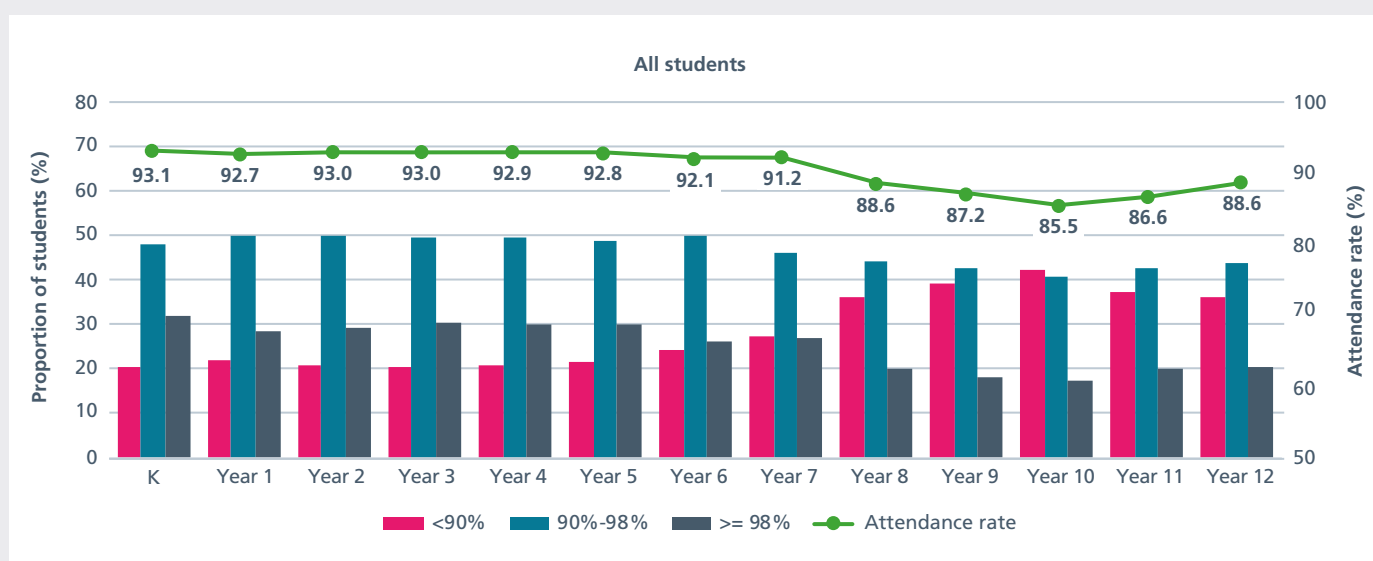
From Year 7 the proportion of students attending less than 90% overtakes the proportion of students with attendance of 98% or more. Over 40% of Year 10 students attended school less than

90% of the time and only one in five Year 10 students attended at least 98%. The average attendance rate for Year 10 students was 85.5%, lower than any other year group.

For Aboriginal students (Figure 6), the proportion of students attending less than 90% is higher than the proportion of students with attendance of 98% or more from Kindergarten onwards. From Year 7 there are more Aboriginal students attending less than 90% than attending between 90% and 98% of the time. By Year 10 over two thirds of Aboriginal students were attending less than 90% of the time.

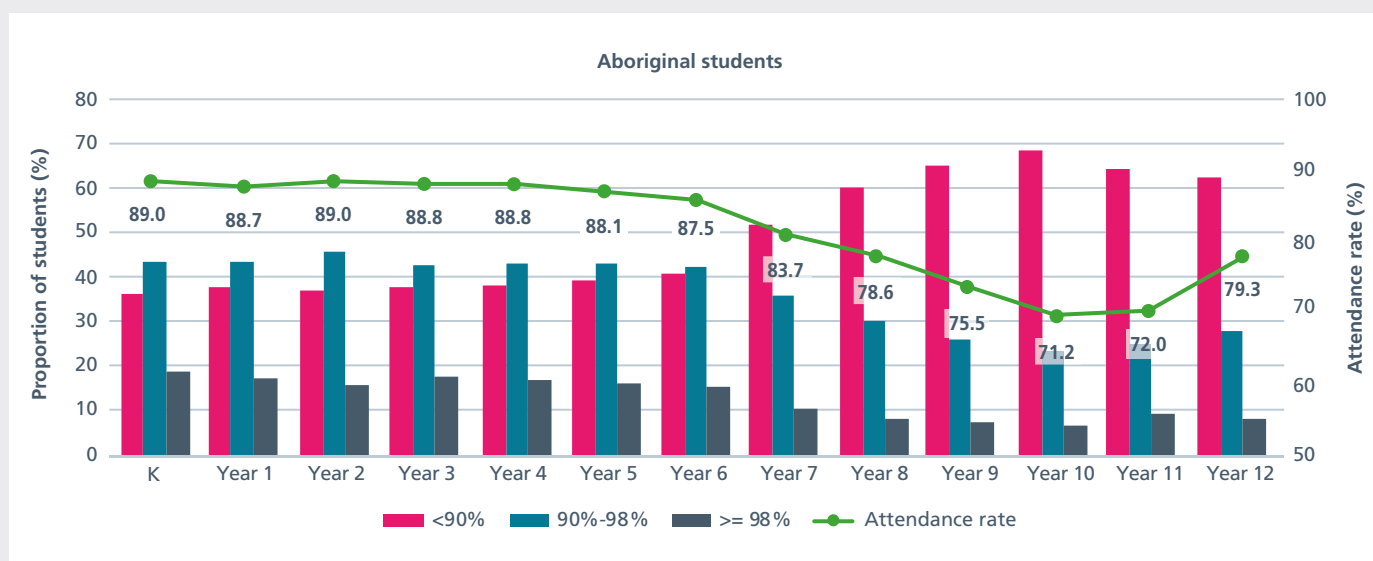
**Figure 5**

**Attendance rate and proportion of students with <90%, 90%-98% and >=98% attendance, by scholastic year, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**



**Figure 6**

**Attendance rate and proportion of Aboriginal students with <90%, 90%-98% and >=98% attendance, by scholastic year, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**



## Students attending 90% of the time by remoteness, SEA quartile and Aboriginality

Figure 7 presents the proportion of students attending 90% of the time by different categories of disadvantage, and shows the impact of multiple factors.

In Semester 1 2019, 799,843 students were enrolled in NSW government schools, with 72.6% of these students attending school for 90% or more of the time. Of the 64,252 Aboriginal students enrolled, just over half (51.7%) attended school for 90% or more of the time in Semester 1.

Figure 7 also presents the proportion of students in socio-educational advantage (SEA) quartile 1 who attended 90% of the time. These students were considered to be in lowest (most disadvantaged) SEA quartile in NSW government school students. The SEA is calculated by CESE as part of the Family Occupation and Education Index analysis, from information relating to parent/carer occupation, school and post-school education obtained from enrolment records.

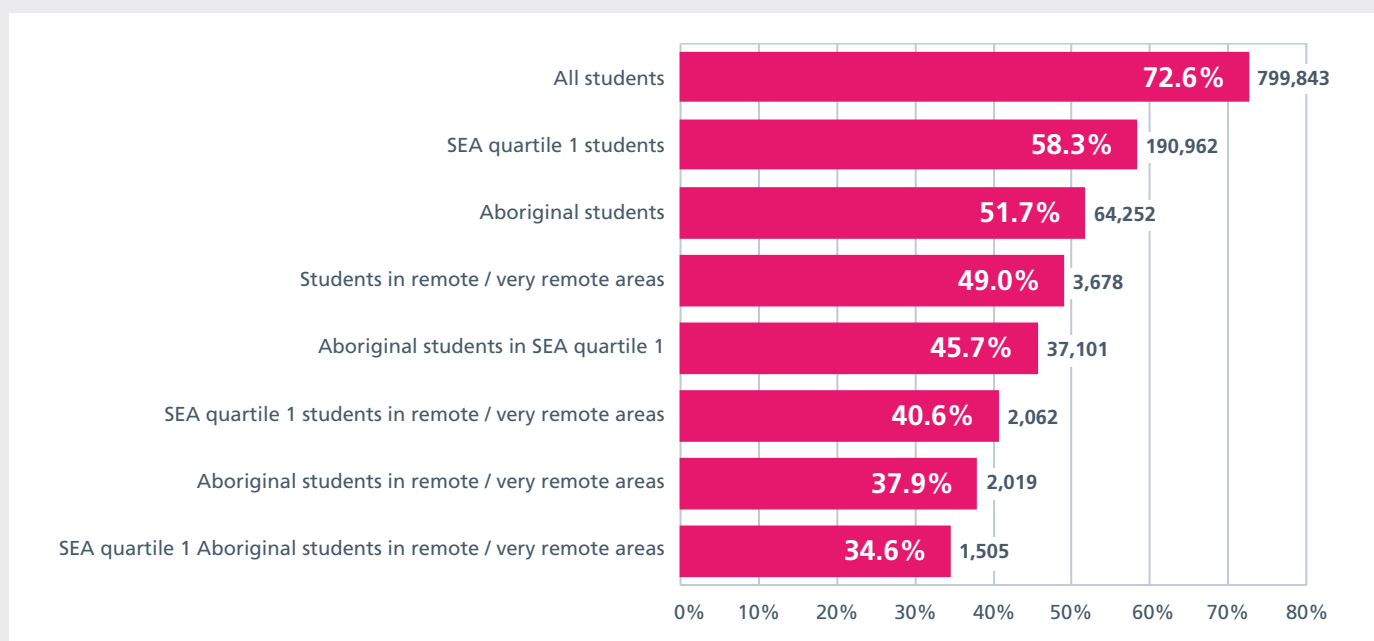
In NSW government schools, 190,962 students were in SEA quartile 1, with 58.3% of these students attending school for 90% or more of the time. Over half of Aboriginal students enrolled in Semester 1 2019 were in SEA quartile 1 (37,101 students). Almost 46% of this cohort attended school 90% or more of the time.

Only a small number of students (3,678 students, 0.5%) were enrolled at schools in remote/very remote areas of NSW. 49% of this cohort attended at least 90% of the time, which is similar to the results for Aboriginal students across all NSW government schools.

The lowest proportion was for Aboriginal students in SEA quartile 1 in remote/very remote areas. Only 34.6% of these students attended school at least 90% of the time.

**Figure 7**

**Students attending 90% or more of the time by remoteness, SEA quartile, Semester 1, 2019: NSW Government schools**





## Reasons for absences

Figure 8 illustrates the proportion of justified and unjustified / unexplained absences in Semester 1 2019. Almost half (45%) of the whole day absences were unjustified / unexplained and the majority of justified absences were due to sickness (64%). 62% of absences for Aboriginal students were unjustified / unexplained and the majority of justified absences were also due to sickness (58%).

Due to system limitations, it is not possible to disaggregate unexplained and unjustified absences in 2019. Some of these absences may have been explained by parents/carers (e.g. sickness) and the records were not updated in the department's centralised system.

Only 5% of justified absences were due to suspensions, which equates to 2.9% of all absences. However 16% of justified absences for Aboriginal students were due to suspensions, which was 6.3% of all absences.

**Figure 8**

**Proportion of justified and unjustified/unexplained whole day absences, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**

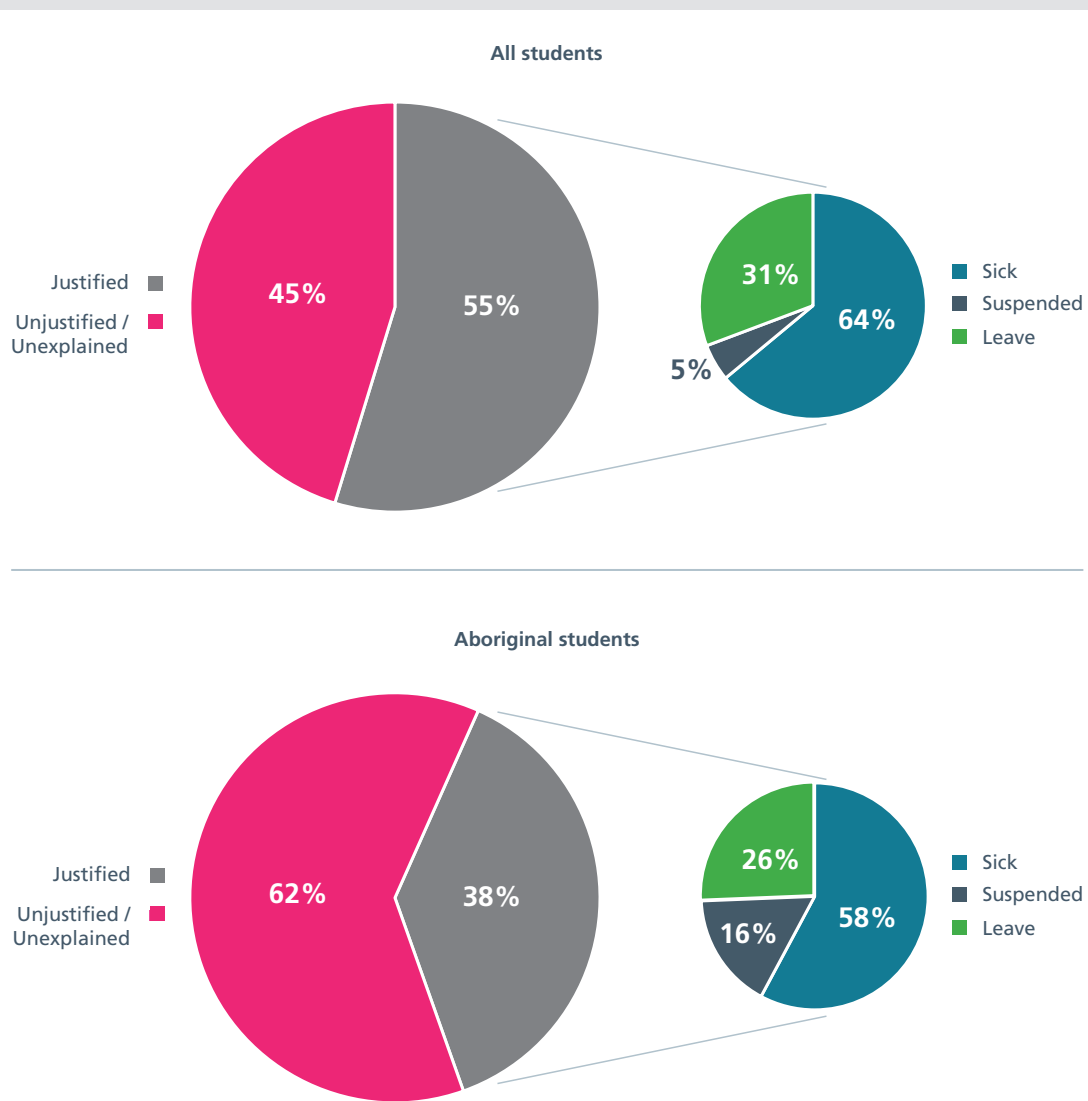


Figure 9 presents the average number of whole day absences per student in Semester 1, 2019 by absence reason. Students in Years 7-10 had a higher number of absences per student compared with students in K-6 and were more likely to be absent for unjustified/unexplained reasons. A similar trend can also be observed in Aboriginal students (Figure 10).

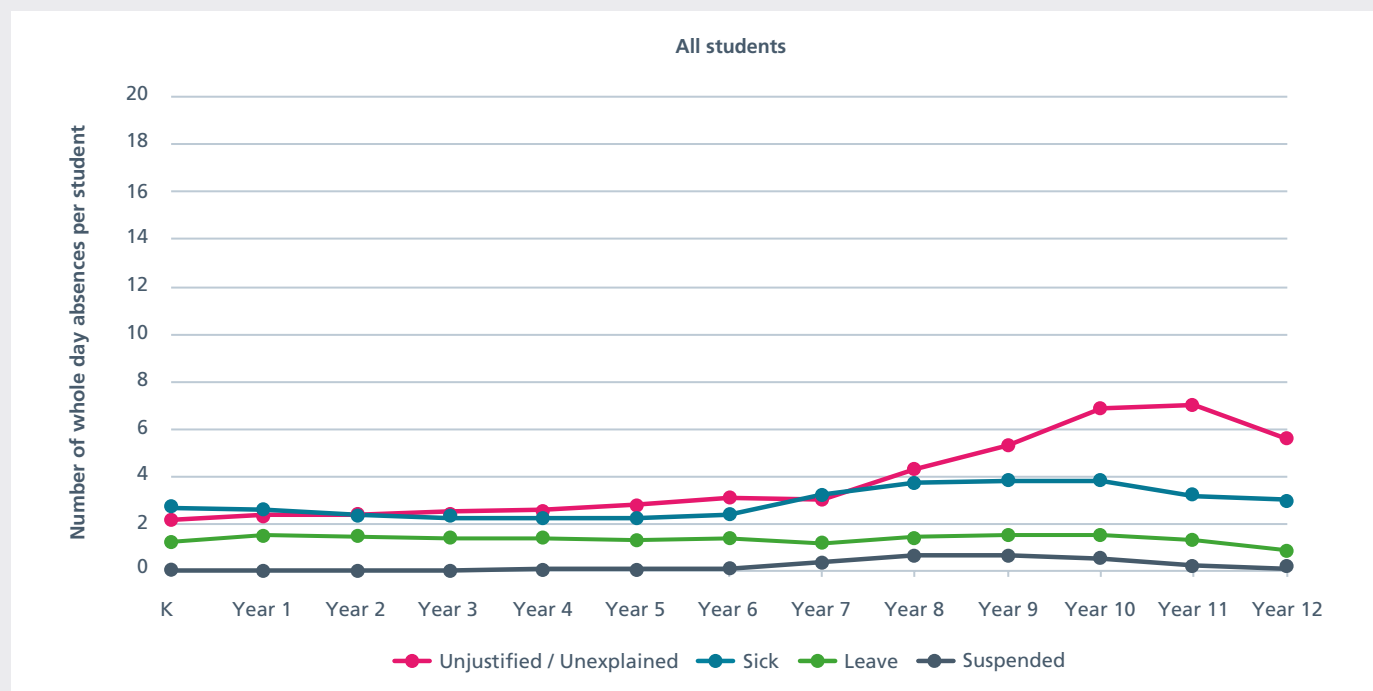
For Year 11 students in Semester 1, 2019, an average of 7.1 days of absences were due to unjustified / unexplained absences.

In comparison Aboriginal students Year 11 students missed 19.4 days of school on average due to unjustified / unexplained absences. This was the highest number of whole days absent in the Aboriginal student cohort.

Absences due to suspensions (green line) were higher for Years 7-10 than for other students. It is notable that Year 8 Aboriginal students missed more days on average due to suspensions than for approved leave (2.5 days compared with 1.7 days).

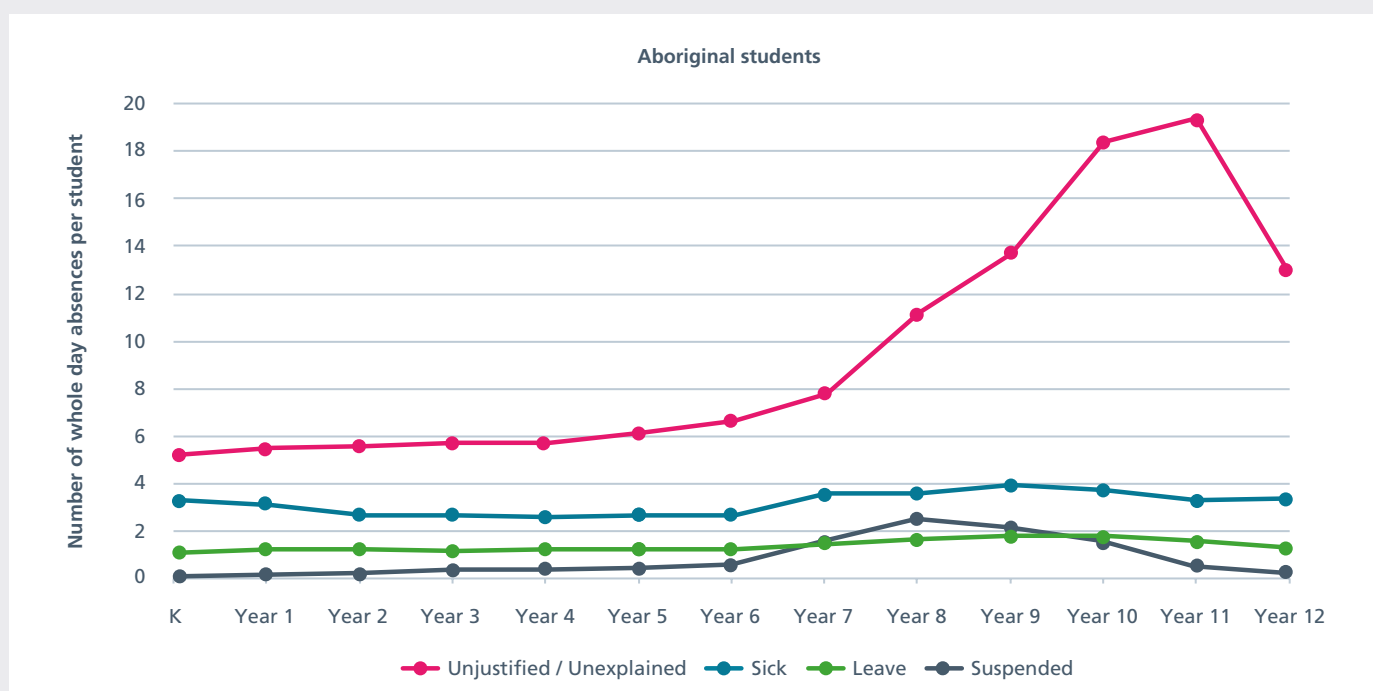
**Figure 9**

**Number of whole day absences per student by absence type, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**



**Figure 10**

**Number of whole day absences per Aboriginal student by absence type, Semester 1, 2019: NSW government schools**



## Why collect attendance data?

Students' attendance is recorded by schools for various reasons such as meeting legislative requirements to determine the whereabouts of each student on each school day. While there is a legal obligation for schools to record attendance and absences, there is also a parental obligation to ensure their children attend school.

Higher or increasing rates of attendance are desirable. Poor attendance has been related to poor student outcomes, particularly once patterns of non-attendance are established. (Report on Government Services 2019, Chapter 4, 4.10).

'Attendance' is used as a key indicator of governments' objective to develop fully the talent and capacities of young people through equitable access to education and learning.

Attendance is specified as an outcome within the National School Reform Agreement and as Key Performance Measures in the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia approved by the Education Council.

## Notes

Government school systems in Australia measure attendance rates throughout the first semester (Terms 1 and 2). This is the time period specified for data collection in National Education Agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Schools for Specific Purposes' attendance data is not currently collected.

Nationally, the attendance rate is defined as the number of actual full-time equivalent student days attended by full-time students in Years 1–10 in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended in Semester 1 (Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia - Key Performance Measure 1(b)).

The attendance level is defined as the proportion of full time students in Years 1-10 whose attendance rate in Semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90% (Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia - Key Performance Measure 1(c)).

National student attendance data for Years 1 to 10 are published annually on the [ACARA data portal](#). The data portal also includes more information on the Measurement Framework for Schooling Australia and both Key Performance Measures previously mentioned.

Ongoing data quality improvements can result in changes to the business rules in reports and affect the comparability of data with previous years.

## Reasons for absences

Students may be absent from school for a number of reasons, including sickness, suspension, truancy or a range of other reasons. For example:

- misadventure or unforeseen event
- participation in special events not related to the school
- domestic necessity such as serious illness of an immediate family member
- attendance at funerals
- travel in Australia and overseas
- recognised religious festivals or ceremonial occasions
- other absences not explained by parents, or the principal does not accept the explanation offered for the absence.

In particular communities, attendance rates can be affected by a number of factors including the level of sickness in the community and natural events such as floods.

Absence reason is only available in a centralised system from 2018. All these categories are included in the attendance data reported in this bulletin.

## Remoteness

Location refers to the region where a school is situated. There are five possible locations: Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote. The Inner Regional and Outer Regional categories, and the Remote and Very Remote categories have been combined in this bulletin. The locations mentioned in this bulletin are determined according to the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) – 2016 Remoteness Structure.

## National standards for student attendance data reporting

The standards were agreed to by education authorities in October 2012. Between 2012 and 2017, NSW government schools did not comply fully with the national standards. From 2018, NSW government schools were able to report attendance data in accordance with the national standards with the inclusion of partial day absences and student mobility in the attendance rate calculations. Hence, 2018 is indicated as a break in series in tables and charts in this publication.

## Family holidays

From 2015, as part of the implementation of the **National standards for student attendance data reporting**, holidays taken by students during school term time are now included as absences, when previously they could be exempt from attending school.