Understanding attendance

A review of the drivers of school attendance
and best practice approaches

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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- national engagement on research agenda and data strategy
- driving capability uplift in the use of data and evidence as part of everyday practice
- trialling innovative initiatives to improve student outcomes.

Authors

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

About this resource

This resource is an evidence paper that synthesises the research on student attendance and identifies key factors that influence attendance. It explains why attendance is important, and outlines evidence-based strategies to improve attendance.

This resource is aligned with the **NSW Department of Education Strategic Plan 2018-2022 Wellbeing outcome** – 'Increased proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time'. It also aligns with the attendance targets set under the **School Success Model**.

When and how to use

School leaders and teachers can read, consider, discuss and implement themes and strategies highlighted in the evidence paper as part of school-developed High Impact Professional Learning (HIPL). The appropriate time to use this resource may differ for each school, leader and teacher.

School leaders can:

- unpack the paper as part of whole-school professional development and/or stage or grade team meetings
- reflect on what practices are currently being implemented to improve attendance
- access their school's Tell Them From Me data and attendance Scout reports to support improvement strategies and monitor progress
- facilitate discussions with staff about the underlying causes of non-attendance in their school context and areas for improvement at a classroom and whole-school level – also refer to the Attendance matters resources
- determine whether additional support is needed – contact the Attendance support program for further information.

Teachers can:

- read the evidence paper and reflect on current practice
- determine which practices to implement in the classroom to foster a positive culture of attendance
- assist school leaders with identifying their students' barriers to attending school and determining the appropriate intervention.

Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: NSW Department of Education Strategic Plan 2018-2022 – Wellbeing outcome: 'Increased proportion of students attending school at least 90% of the time'

School Success Model – Attendance targets

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Learning domain – learning culture

Alignment with other existing frameworks: What works best – wellbeing, high expectations, classroom management

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers – Standard 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments

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To be reviewed: CESE publications are prepared through a rigorous process. Resources are reviewed periodically as part of an ongoing evaluation plan.

Contact

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Table of contents

List of figures

Key findings

Chapter 1: What is attendance and non-attendance and why does it matter?

School attendance impacts students' academic achievement and other long-term outcomes

- Non-attendance is linked with poorer academic achievement and long-term student outcomes.
  - Higher rates of absences have been associated with lower NAPLAN scores (Hancock et al. 2013; Daraganova et al. 2014).
  - The association between absences and achievement is stronger among students in disadvantaged schools (Hancock et al. 2013).
  - Unauthorised absences have a greater impact on achievement than authorised absences (Hancock et al. 2013; Gershenson et al. 2017).
  - In NSW, students who report positive attendance behaviours in Year 7 are on average 3 months ahead in their learning by Year 9, compared with students who have poor attendance behaviours (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) 2017).

The effect of attendance behaviours in Year 7 on Year 9 NAPLAN reading scores (CESE 2017:6)

Student A is at school attending lessons

Student B is not at school and regularly misses lessons

NAPLAN Year 9 reading

Student A is 4.9 points, or 3 months of learning, ahead of **Student B**
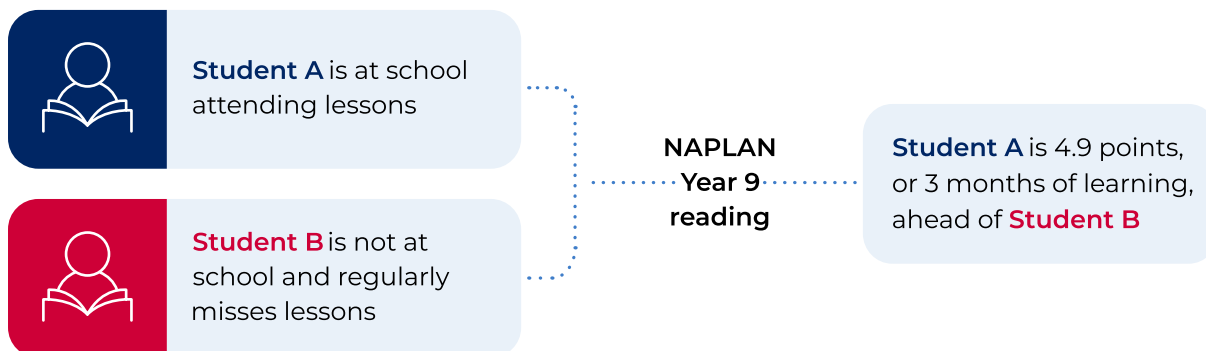
- Students' prior attendance is a strong predictor of their future attendance. A student's attendance patterns may be established in early primary school, with school readiness being an important protective factor.
- Students with chronic absenteeism are more likely to drop out of school and experience poorer long-term health and social outcomes.

Chapter 2: What influences school attendance?

Attendance is driven by a complex range of factors inside and outside of school

- School attendance is influenced by a complex range of factors relating to the individual student's engagement and wellbeing, their family and community context, and the school (for example, Kearney 2020; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) 2021; Childs and Lofton 2021).

- Factors influencing attendance are not mutually exclusive. Students may have several interrelated factors driving their attendance, or multiple barriers to attending school that stem from a shared root cause.

- School-related drivers of attendance are factors relating to a school's academic climate, social climate, safety and institutional environment.

New longitudinal research among NSW secondary school students shows that student engagement and wellbeing, as well as teaching practices, help to predict attendance

- Homework behaviour, positive behaviour at school and sense of belonging are relatively strong predictors of attendance.

- The engagement and wellbeing effects are stronger for students with lower attendance.

- For students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, homework behaviour and sense of belonging are stronger predictors of attendance than for students from other backgrounds.

- For younger Aboriginal secondary students, wellbeing is particularly important.

- For older Aboriginal students, teachers' high expectations are particularly important.

- Teaching practices indirectly affect attendance by influencing engagement and wellbeing.

| Effective teaching practices affect attendance via student engagement and wellbeing
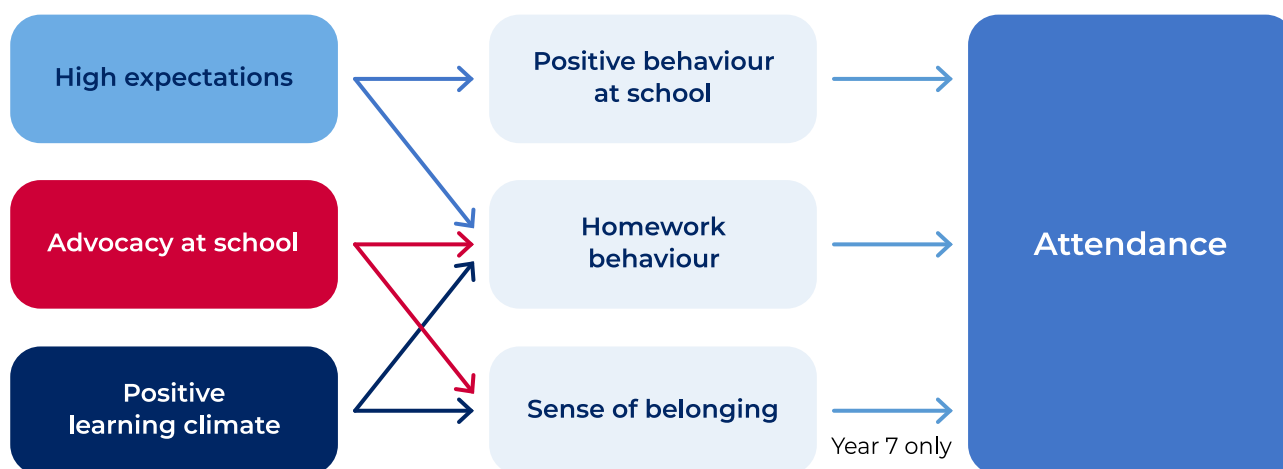
Note. Earlier longitudinal analysis of NSW Tell Them From Me data showed that drivers of sense of belonging include positive teacher–student relations, teaching relevance, valuing school outcomes, positive friendships, absence of bullying, optimism and positive self-concept, co-curricular participation as well as high levels of effort, interest and motivation (refer to CESE 2020e).

Chapter 3: What can schools do to improve attendance?

Evidence-based strategies for improving school attendance are framed in a tiered model of prevention and intervention

- A tiered model of support takes a multi-faceted approach to prevention and intervention strategies for improving attendance that recognises the complexity of non-attendance problems and the need to tailor interventions to each school's context (Kearney 2021).

▋ **A multi-tiered system of support for strategies to address school non-attendance**

Tier 3
Intensive individual intervention

Tier 3
Intensive intervention for individual students with severe and chronic attendance problems and/or complex barriers to attendance.

Tier 2
Early intervention

Tier 2
Early intervention or secondary prevention strategies to address emerging attendance problems and mild to moderate absenteeism.

Tier 1
Universal prevention

Tier 1
Universal prevention strategies for all students, to promote a positive culture of attendance and prevent absenteeism.

Adapted from Kearney et al. 2019a and 2019b

Universal prevention strategies aim to foster a positive school culture of attendance for all students

- Strategies for establishing and sustaining a positive attendance culture in schools draw from the research literature on the relationships between attendance and aspects of student engagement and school climate (Epstein and Sheldon 2002; Railsback 2004; Stone and Stone 2011; Van Eck et al. 2017; Karlberg et al. 2020). Strategies include:
  - using effective classroom management and motivating learning goals
  - setting clear standards and high expectations for attendance
  - increasing family engagement with the school
  - promoting positive relationships between teachers and students
  - promoting connectedness and belonging
  - implementing an anti-bullying plan
  - ensuring cultural safety.

Early intervention strategies and intensive intervention strategies should be matched to students' needs and the root causes of non-attendance

- Targeted intervention and prevention strategies are intended for smaller groups of students or individual students. It is important to match strategies to students' needs by identifying the root causes of non-attendance for the targeted students and then selecting the appropriate strategies (Hanover Research 2016; Kearney et al. 2019).

- Successful strategies often involve a multi-faceted program rather than a single isolated practice, particularly for students experiencing severe absenteeism with complex causes. These often rely on coordinated efforts across multiple service providers and partnerships with the student's family members (Kearney et al. 2019).

- Few interventions have well-implemented experimental research studies to evaluate their effectiveness. However, other forms of evidence suggest promising positive effects for several types of targeted interventions:
  - meal programs such as breakfast clubs (MacDonald 2018)
  - school-located flu vaccination programs (Hull and Ambrose 2011; Keck et al. 2013; Pannaraj et al. 2014)
  - improving transport access (Fan and Das 2015; Gottfried 2017)
  - mentoring programs such as Check and Connect (Guryan et al. 2017).

- Among studies that are able to show strong evidence of positive effects on attendance, the interventions commonly involve one or more of the following elements (Freeman et al. 2019):
  - individualised training in personal and social capabilities
  - active participation of family members
  - incentive-based strategies that are carefully designed to target sustainable, long-term behaviour change.

Chapter 4: What do schools require to improve attendance?

Improving attendance in schools relies on adequate resourcing and other system supports

- Key enablers for successful implementation of attendance improvement strategies in schools include leadership, actionable data, community engagement and shared accountability (Louis et al. 2010; Reid 2012; Graczyk and Kearney 2014; Balu et al. 2016; Dreise et al. 2016).

- The enablers are an integrated set of conditions for sustainable implementation, rather than isolated factors. They require adequate resourcing and capability building for sustainable implementation.

Capability building

Adequate resourcing

System level enablers

Aspects of school attendance culture

Leadership

Actionable data

Academic climate

Social climate

Students and families

Institutional environment

Safety

Community engagement

Shared accountability
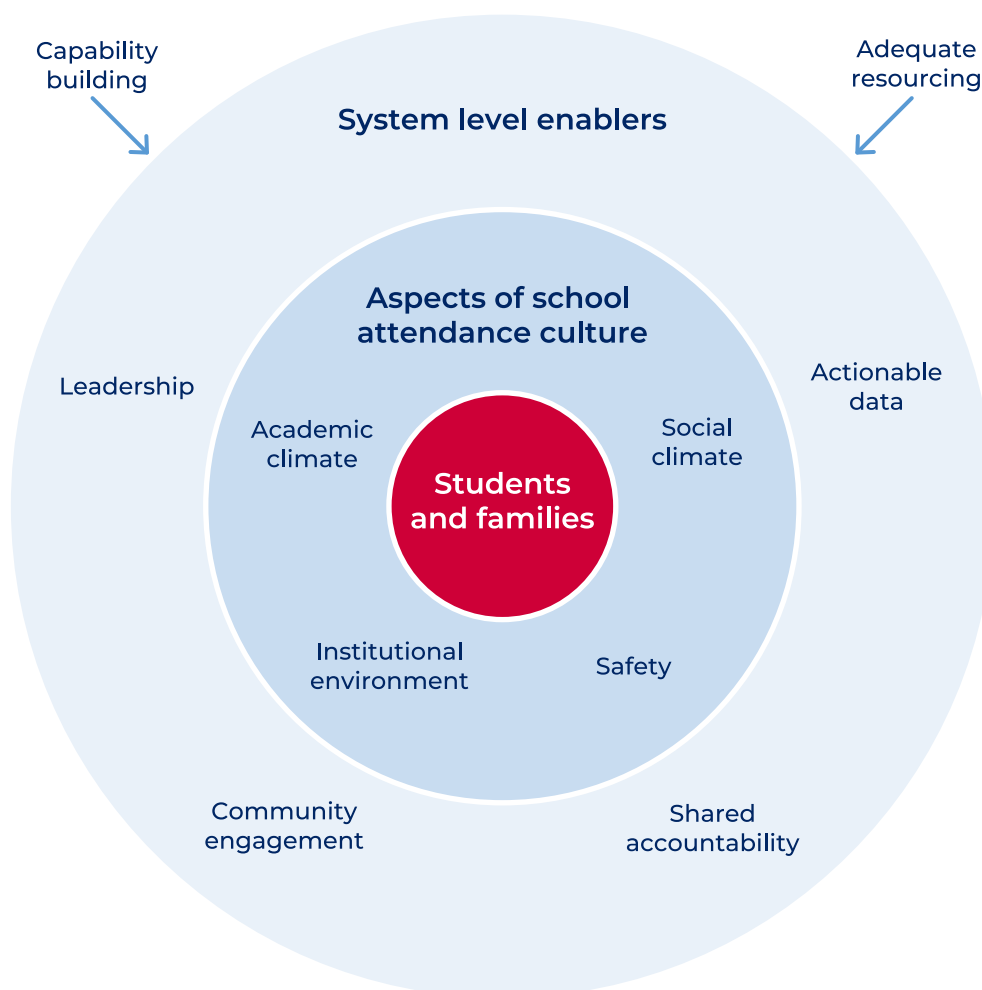
Chapter 1:
What is attendance and non-attendance and why does it matter?

Defining non-attendance

School attendance literature tends to focus on problems of non-attendance, which can be defined in several different ways. Clarifying the terminology around non-attendance is important to strengthen relations between attendance policies and the approaches used in schools to encourage student attendance.

In NSW, student absences are divided into 2 categories: **justified** and **unjustified**. Absences are justified in the Education Act 1990 (NSW) if 'the child was prevented from attending school because of some medical condition, or because of some accident or unforeseen event' (section 23). Justified absences are sometimes also referred to in the literature as explained, excused, authorised or approved absences.

Unjustified absences (sometimes also referred to as unexplained, unexcused or unauthorised absences) include a broad range of behaviours. A distinction has been drawn between school refusal, caused by emotions such as anxiety or worry related to school, and truancy, explained by lack of engagement with, or lack of motivation to attend school. An important dimension of unjustified absenteeism is its duration. Chronic absenteeism means missing too much school for any reason – justified or unjustified. There are different cut-off points defining how much is too much. A common cut-off point in the international literature is 10% of the school year (Heyne et al. 2018). That is, student attendance rates below 90% are considered as chronically absent. In Australia, this aligns with the school system key performance measure of **attendance level**, which is the proportion of students who attend 90% or more of school days (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) 2019). In NSW, 10% of the school year is 18.8 full-time equivalent days.

Framing student absences as either **voluntary** or **involuntary** may be useful in addressing non-attendance problems as this recognises the role of student agency in some absences, and barriers beyond their control in others (Birioukov 2016; Mills et al. 2019):

> **Voluntary absenteeism** is defined in terms of individual students' motivation to attend school which recognizes students' agency in their decision to attend. **Involuntary absenteeism** conversely refers to the life conditions which can impact upon young people's capacity to attend school.
>
> Mills et al. 2019:2.

The legal definition of attendance in NSW

The Education Act 1990 (NSW) states that 'a child attends a school if, and only if, the child attends the school at all times while the school is open for the child's instruction or participation in school activities' (section 3).

'A child is of compulsory school-age if the child is of or above the age of 6 years and below the minimum school leaving age' (section 21B). NSW raised the minimum school leaving age in 2010. All NSW students must attend school until they complete Year 10 or turn 17 years old. After Year 10 and until age 17, students must continue in school, approved education or training, full-time paid work or a combination of these activities.

'It is the duty of the parent of a child of compulsory school-age to cause the child to be enrolled at, and to attend, a government school or a registered non-government school, or to be registered for home schooling' (section 22).

Student attendance in NSW Government schools

Student attendance data for NSW Government schools is reported in CESE's annual attendance bulletins.[1] The key findings from the 2019 (semester 1) data[2] are:

- 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, and 25.8% attended 98% or more.
- Almost half (45%) of whole day absences were unjustified/unexplained.

Between 2015 and 2019, the average attendance rate in NSW Government schools varied between 92.2% and 90.8%. The method of calculating attendance rates changed in 2018 to be consistent with the national standards, which means NSW attendance rates from 2018 onwards are not directly comparable to attendance rates prior to 2018. The decline from 2018 to 2019 from 91.4% to 90.8% overall is partly explained by a bad flu season and Eid celebrations falling on weekdays (CESE 2019a).

Figure 1 shows that attendance rates are consistently higher for primary students than secondary students, and that rates were stable between 2015 and 2017 before falling in 2018 with the changes in attendance data processes and calculation methods.

1   data.cese.nsw.gov.au/data/dataset/government-school-student-attendance-bulletin
2   Findings from 2019, rather than 2020, are summarised here because student attendance in 2020 was seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and there was wide variation in attendance reporting by schools.

Figure 1

Student attendance rates by education level, Semester 1 2015-19 – NSW Government schools
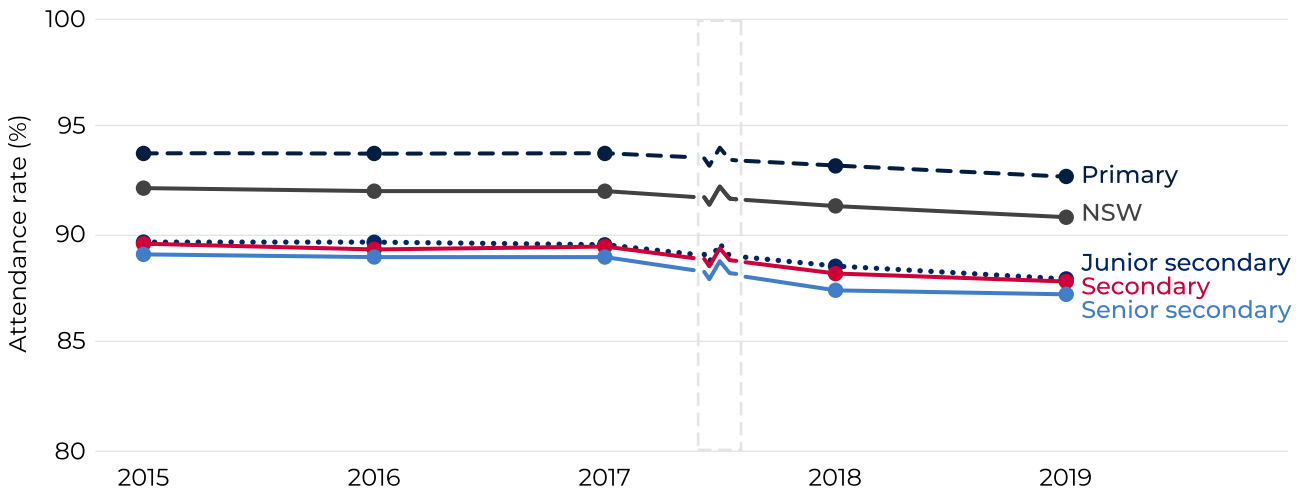
Note. Due to changes in the calculation methods, 2018 and 2019 data is not directly comparable to previous years. Reprinted from 2019 government school student attendance bulletin (CESE 2019a:4).

In Semester 1 2019, 72.6% of students attended school 90% or more of the time. Disadvantaged students were susceptible to having more absences – the proportion attending 90% or more of the time was lower for students in remote or very remote areas (49.0%), Aboriginal students (51.7%), and students in the most disadvantaged quartile of socio-educational advantage (58.3%) (CESE 2019a:8).

Attendance by day of the week

Attendance was lowest on Fridays compared to other days of the week for both primary and secondary students (averaging 91.5% and 85.1% respectively). Attendance was highest on Wednesdays for primary students and Tuesdays for secondary students (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Students' attendance rates by day of the week, Semester 1 2019 – NSW Government schools
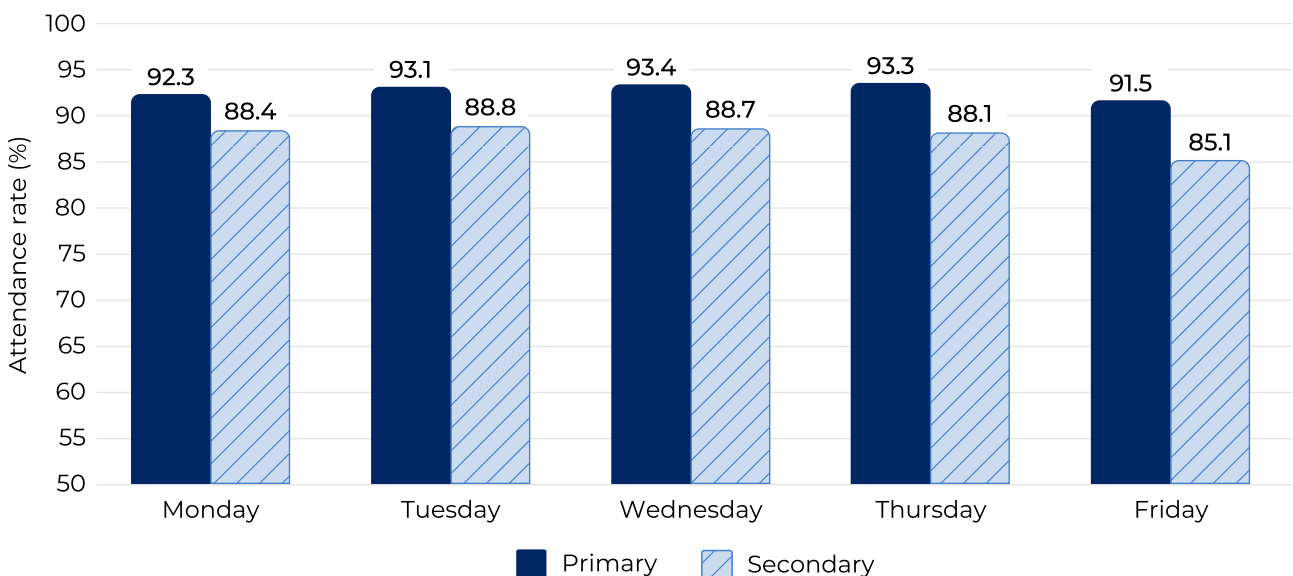
Reprinted from 2019 government school student attendance bulletin (CESE 2019a:1).

Attendance by week of the term

Attendance declined significantly in the last week of term. Figure 3 shows attendance rates for each week of Term 1 2019 for primary and secondary students. The fall in attendance rates in the last week is particularly apparent for secondary students, from 87.2% in Week 10 to 81.4% in Week 11.

Figure 3

Students' attendance rates by week of Term 1 2019 – NSW Government schools
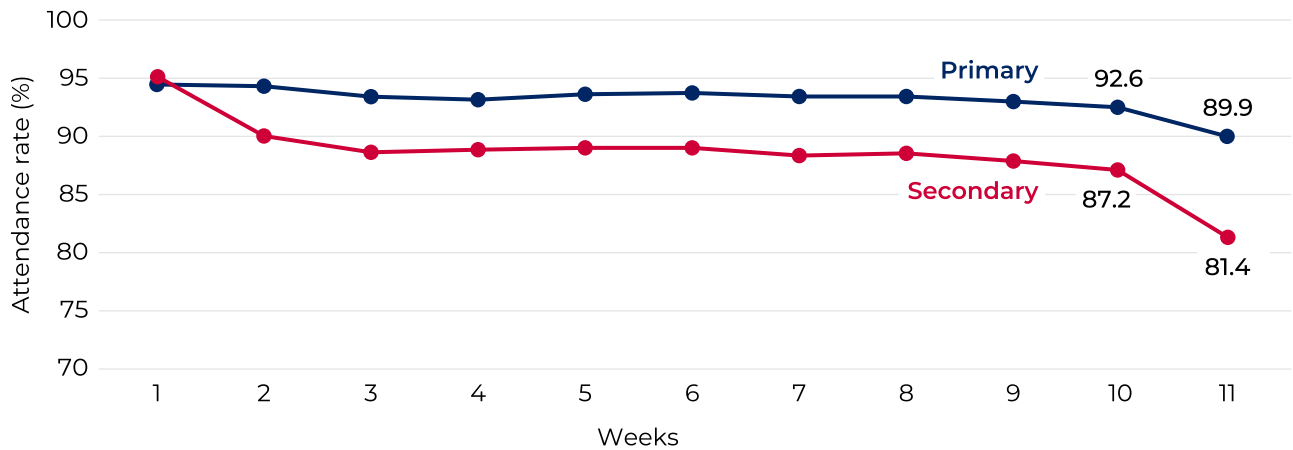
Source: Analysis by Education Statistics and Measurement, CESE

Reasons for absences

The proportion of justified and unjustified/unexplained absences is shown in Figure 4. Almost half (45%) of whole day absences were unjustified/unexplained. The majority (64%) of justified absences were due to sickness and 5% were due to suspensions.

Breaking down reasons for absences by year level shows that secondary students had a higher number of absences per student and were more likely to be absent for unjustified/unexplained reasons, compared with primary students (CESE 2019a:10).

Figure 4

Proportion of justified and unjustified/unexplained whole day absences, Semester 1 2019 – NSW Government schools
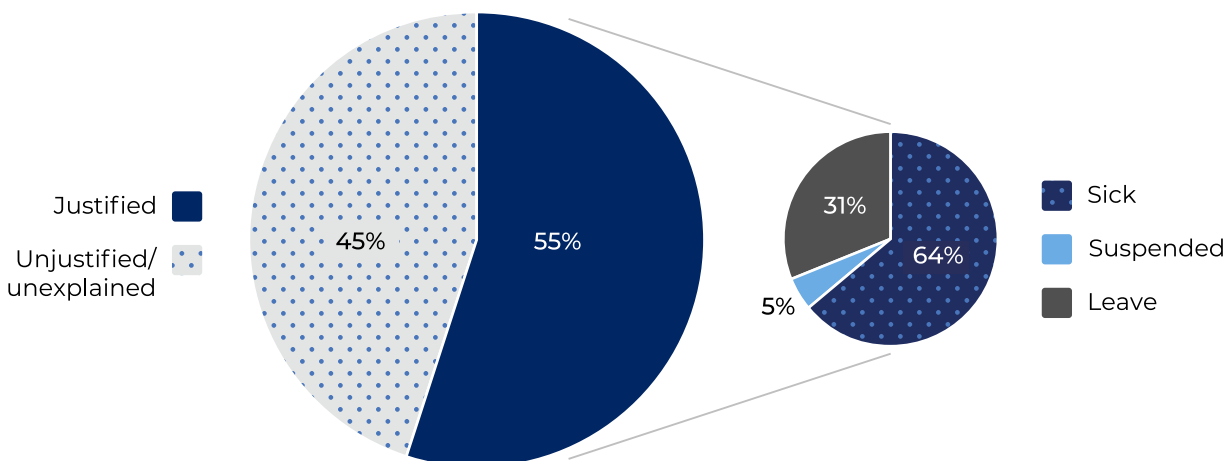
Reprinted from 2019 government school student attendance bulletin (CESE 2019a:9).

The importance of attending school

Non-attendance at school is associated with a variety of poorer outcomes for students, both academically and socially, as summarised in Figure 5.

Absences from school are associated with lower academic achievement, particularly in numeracy. A Western Australian study of student absences and NAPLAN scores found that the correlation between absence and achievement was consistently negative across all year levels and levels of school socioeconomic status, although the relationship was stronger among students in disadvantaged schools (Hancock et al. 2013). Additionally, the amount of non-attendance matters – the strength of the association between absence and poorer academic achievement increased with the number of absences.

Another Australian study highlighted the importance of setting positive patterns of school attendance early in primary school. An analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children[3] (LSAC) data suggested students' attendance patterns established in early primary school carry through to the later years of primary school (Daraganova et al. 2014). High levels of non-attendance early on in primary school predicted both further non-attendance and lower numeracy (but not reading) NAPLAN scores 4 years later. School readiness played an important role in primary school attendance – students who had lower school readiness, assessed by a measure of general cognitive abilities, were more vulnerable to non-attendance at age 4-5 years and 6 years later at age 10-11 years. Again, this suggests the importance of identifying and addressing non-attendance early on in students' schooling.

The Australian research is broadly consistent with international literature showing that higher rates of non-attendance are associated with lower academic achievement (for example, Gottfried 2009, 2010, 2011, 2015; Carroll 2010; Paredes and Ugarte 2011).

In addition to lower academic achievement, international studies have found that non-attendance is linked with other longer-term negative effects including:

- increased likelihood of dropping out of school earlier (Rocque et al. 2016)
- social isolation from the school community and peers (Gottried 2014)
- poorer mental health and social functioning (Kearney and Graczyk 2014; Gonzálvez et al. 2019)
- increased likelihood of involvement in criminal activity (Epstein and Sheldon 2002; Tanner-Smith and Wilson 2013 as cited in Kearney and Graczyk 2014)
- increased likelihood of requiring social assistance (Christenson and Thurlow 2004 as cited in Kearney and Graczyk 2014).

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Figure 5

Effects of absenteeism on students' academic, socioeconomic and health outcomes

Lower scores and poorer academic outcomes	Increased likelihood of dropping out of school earlier	Increased risk of social isolation from the school, community and peers
Poorer long-term mental health and social functioning	Increased likelihood of involvement with criminal activity	Increased likelihood of requiring social assistance
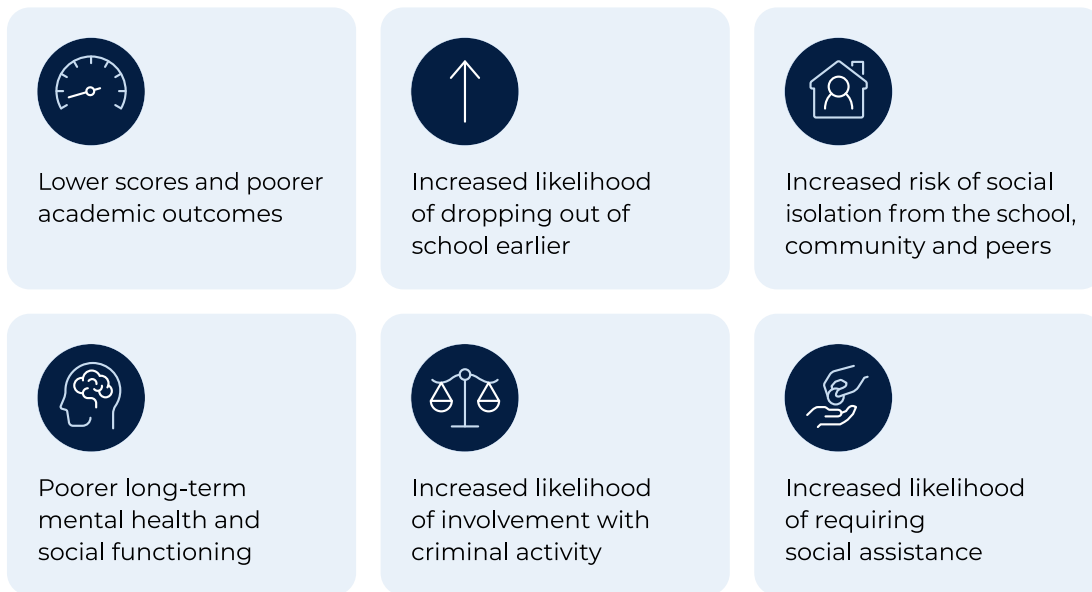
However, not all absences are equal. For example, an Australian study of longitudinal data found that students with more than 20% authorised absences and no unauthorised absences still achieved higher Year 5 numeracy NAPLAN results than students with 5% unauthorised absences of up to 10 unauthorised full day absences per year (Hancock et al. 2018).

It is likely that co-varying factors influence the academic achievement of students who are likely to have unauthorised absences. Factors such as socioeconomic background have a stronger impact on achievement than attendance. Additionally, it is possible that authorised absences have less of an effect on student academic achievement because students who are absent due to illness or other excused reasons, such as family holidays, are appropriately assisted, either at home or at school, to 'catch-up' (AITSL 2019, citing Hancock et al. 2018).

Another explanation is that students who are absent from school due to illness or other excused reasons may still be engaged with school and so may be able to catch up more readily than a student who is absent because they are disengaged. Engagement may have a stronger impact on achievement than attendance. A student who attends school regularly but is disengaged may not achieve as well as a student who is engaged in school but is absent due to illness or other excused reasons. Unexplained absence may indicate disengagement.

Self-reported truancy impacts Year 9 NAPLAN in NSW

The NSW Tell Them From Me (TTFM) student survey includes a measure of truancy that indicates the extent to which students report that they skipped classes, missed days at school without permission, or arrived late for school or classes. A longitudinal analysis of TTFM data published in 2017 examined the effects of students' self-reported truancy in Year 7 on their NAPLAN achievement in Year 9.

Where 2 students were equally matched in terms of socioeconomic status and prior academic performance, a student who did not miss lessons in Year 7 was, on average, 3 months ahead in their learning by Year 9, compared with a student who reported truancy (Figure 6).

'It is the duty of the parent of a child of compulsory school-age to cause the child to be enrolled at, and to attend, a government school or a registered non-government school, or to be registered for home schooling' (section 22).

▎Figure 6

The effect of Year 7 truancy on Year 9 NAPLAN reading scores (2013-15)

Student A is at school attending lessons

Student B is not at school and regularly misses lessons

NAPLAN Year 9 reading

Student A is 4.9 points, or 3 months of learning, ahead of **Student B**
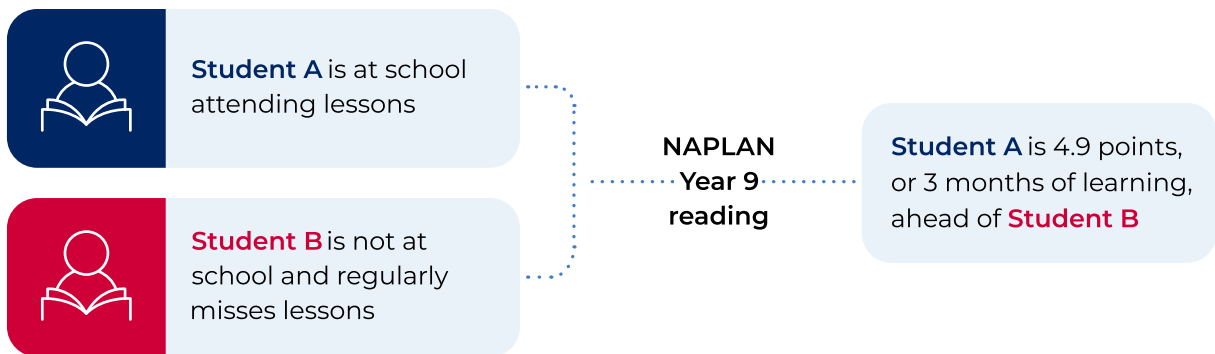
Further detail of this analysis can be found in CESE Learning Curve Issue 18: Improving high school engagement, classroom practices and achievement (CESE 2017).

Attendance and engagement

In the National Education Reform Agreement (2013), the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set national targets for school attendance to monitor the extent to which all school children are engaged in and benefitting from formal schooling. Alongside engagement in the classroom, improving attendance rates is seen as a critical step in closing the gaps in educational outcomes for disadvantaged students (cited in AITSL 2019). The connection between student attendance and engagement, however, is not straightforward, as 'improving attendance requires a deep appreciation of the complex and myriad factors that influence student, family and community engagement' (AITSL 2019:3).

Engagement entails a sense of connection with activity (what you are doing) or with a place (a sense of belonging). If students have a sense that school is a place to which they belong and that education is a resource they can use, then they are more likely to attend school than if they are less invested in school.

Student attendance, however, does not necessarily imply student engagement. Students may attend school because they have to, but they may quietly disengage or tune out (Goss and Sonnemann 2017).

In the NSW context, the interconnected relationship between attendance and engagement was explored in-depth for this report by linking data from TTFM student surveys to student attendance rates. Key findings are summarised in Chapter 2, Section 2 (p.22).

Chapter 2:
What influences school attendance?

The drivers of attendance are complex and varied. In this chapter, we first examine recent research that investigates factors that influence student attendance. We then consider factors that help predict student attendance in the NSW context by reporting on a recent research project conducted by CESE in collaboration with the University of Queensland.

Section 1: Drivers of attendance and non-attendance reported in research literature

Understanding the factors that influence attendance can help with identifying the kinds of support students and schools may need to lift attendance rates (Chang et al. 2018). Drivers of attendance are often grouped into 4 domains: student factors, family factors, community factors and school factors.[4]

The domains are not mutually exclusive and factors should not be considered in isolation. Students may have several interrelated factors driving their attendance, or multiple barriers stemming from a shared root cause. For example, a student disadvantaged by low socioeconomic status could also be facing a lack of transport, family transience and employment obligations, all of which may contribute to a perceived irrelevance of school. It is important to consider a student's needs holistically and recognise the potential array of influences on their attendance, including factors that may be outside of the school's control (Ried 2008; Childs and Lofton 2021).

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4   Note that a change in the collection of student-level attendance data from 2018 led to comparatively lower attendance rates in 2019.

Student factors

Factors related to the individual student that are likely to influence attendance include:

- having basic needs – such as for food, shelter and clothing – met
- having good physical and mental health
- having a sense that school is a place that works for them and that education is a resource that they can deploy in the present and the future
- feeling a sense of connectedness to school, including to peers and to the physical place of the school – a strong sense of belonging
- feeling safe at school
- feeling positive attitudes towards teachers and fellow students
- feeling happy and relaxed
- having strong motivation or goals around achievement
- liking school, being interested in schoolwork and activities (curricular and co-curricular activities)
- having academic self-concept and self-esteem – positive beliefs about one's academic abilities and feeling academically able

(AIHW 2014a; AITSL 2019; Mills et al. 2019).

Family factors

The family-related factors likely to influence a student's attendance include:

- the parent or caregiver's relationship with the school and school community, which may involve
  - having strong respect for education
  - feeling a sense of connectedness to the school – a strong sense of belonging to the school community
  - feeling that the school respects the culture to which the family belongs
- having a sense that school is a place that works for one's children and that education is a resource that one's children can deploy in the present and the future
- providing support with homework and academic progress, active monitoring of attendance and participation in the school community
- stability and harmony in the home – no stressful family circumstances such as divorce, separation, child maltreatment, conflict such as domestic violence, or substance abuse
- access to stable employment near to home and school
- no additional commitments for students to supplement the family income or provide care for family members
- access to affordable transport to and from school for children

(AIHW 2014a; AITSL 2019; Mills et al. 2019).

Community factors

Community factors are out-of-school, community-wide influences on attendance and can include:

- cultural obligations such as Sorry Business (that is, funerals), or commitments by families to significant cultural celebrations (for example, Chinese New Year)
- employment arrangements – for example, flexible employers can make it easier for parents and carers to balance school obligations with their employment obligations
- employment opportunities in the local community, which may impact student expectations of schooling
- access to safe and affordable transportation to and from school
- community crime initiatives to address risky behaviour, participation in criminal activities and involvement with juvenile justice
- geographic remoteness and distance to services, which affects access to transport and other services and choices of secondary schools (Gottfried 2009; Marvul 2012).

A Policy Insights paper on Aboriginal student attendance from the Australian Council for Educational Research identified key contributing factors for non-attendance in some communities in Australia (Dreise et al. 2016):

- 'Sorry Business', or funerals, as a significant reason for not attending school
- geographic isolation and limited schooling options
- social and economic disadvantage hampering families' abilities to establish and sustain engagement.

School factors

School climate consistently emerges as a key theme in the literature on how schools can impact student attendance (Van Eck et al. 2017; Gentle-Genitty et al. 2020; Karlberg et al 2020; Kearney 2021). School climate relates to how school staff, students and parents experience school life from academic, social, ethical, and emotional viewpoints. School climate can be considered in the following dimensions.

Academic school climate includes curricula, teaching practice, teachers' professional development and school leadership. It includes students' perceptions of teacher expectations and orderliness of the environment. For example:

- Teachers clearly communicate high expectations for their students' achievement.
- Students perceive that school staff emphasise success in school as relevant and important for the future of all students and not only for the top achievers in the school.
- Teachers employ pedagogical practices that engage students.

Social climate concerns the quality of interactions among school personnel and students, including sense of connectedness to school. For example:

- The school fosters emotional environments, including feelings of belonging and positive peer relationships, and organisational leadership, including access to adequate resources and a friendly and approachable staff.
- Students perceive the learning environment to be orderly.
- The school fosters a sense of belonging or connectedness to the school community, both to students and their families.
- The school fosters a climate of meaningful and authentic parental and community involvement.
- The school fosters high quality relationships between teachers and students, and positive peer to peer relationships.

Safety relates to physical and emotional security at school, including order and discipline. For example:

- The school conveys zero tolerance for bullying and racism.
- The school fosters a culture of safety and inclusiveness to promote student belonging to their school community and encourages all students to participate in their schooling.

Institutional environment refers to infrastructural factors such as teacher resources, technology, school buildings and class size. For example:

- The school ensures adequate teacher resources together with appropriate technology, school infrastructure and class sizes to support quality teaching.
- The school ensures that physical environments include proper ventilation, lighting and temperature control.

Section 2: Drivers of attendance in NSW Government schools – findings from the Tell Them From Me secondary student survey

In the NSW context, CESE recently conducted a research project in collaboration with the University of Queensland, which examined TTFM student survey data to explore potential predictors of attendance among NSW secondary school students. The project followed over 25,000 students from Years 7 and 9 over 2 years to examine how student engagement, student wellbeing and teaching practices may affect attendance rates:[5]

- Of the 20 measures considered,[6] 3 engagement and wellbeing measures emerged as the strongest predictors of attendance: homework behaviour, positive behaviour at school and sense of belonging.

- Student perceptions of effective teaching practices help to predict attendance through their influence on student engagement and wellbeing. High expectations, advocacy at school and positive learning climate affect behaviour and belonging, which in turn predict attendance.

These results account for student socioeconomic status (SES), prior achievement, other engagement, wellbeing and teaching practice indicators, and school context. Refer to Appendix 1 for further information on the TTFM measures analysed.

Finding 1: Homework behaviour, positive behaviour at school and sense of belonging are relatively strong predictors of attendance

Homework behaviour and positive behaviour at school emerged as the strongest predictors of attendance for both the Year 7 and the Year 9 cohort, compared with the other TTFM measures included in the model. For the Year 7 cohort, sense of belonging also plays an important role in driving attendance.

Figure 7 illustrates how much a hypothetical student's attendance could increase if their engagement or wellbeing improved from a low to a high level.[7] For example, if a student in the Year 7 cohort moved from low to high levels of homework behaviour, their attendance could increase by 1.6 additional days in school (Figure 7, first bar). Taken together, improvements in all 3 factors could result in more than 5 additional days in school for Year 7 students and more than 4 additional days in school for Year 9 students (Figure 7, bars at the left of each group of bars).

It is important to note that, like attendance, homework behaviour and positive behaviour at school are measures of students' institutional engagement with the school. That is, rather than causing attendance, they may parallel or foreshadow it. Negative behaviours may potentially act as early warning signs for non-attendance (refer to CESE 2019b).

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5   Note that a change in the collection of student-level attendance data from 2018 led to comparatively lower attendance rates in 2019.

6   For more information, refer to Appendix 1.

7   Average and indicative effect sizes, calculated on a scale of 0-10 if a student moved from 2.5 (low) to 7.5 (high) levels of homework behaviour, positive behaviour at school or sense of belonging. Number of days calculated on the basis of 188 school days in a typical year.

Finding 2: The engagement and wellbeing effects are stronger for students with lower attendance

The results in Finding 1 are averaged across all participating students in the Year 7 and Year 9 cohorts. If we break down the cohorts by students with varying bands of initial attendance, it appears that the predicted effects are not the same for all students.[8] Students with lower levels of attendance (between 80 and 90%) could see a substantially larger increase if their belonging and behaviours improved from low to high levels – 8 additional days of schooling for students in the Year 7 cohort and nearly 7 additional days for students in the Year 9 cohort (Figure 7, middle bars in each group of bars).

▮ **Figure 7**

Predicted increase in attended days if students move from low to high engagement and wellbeing

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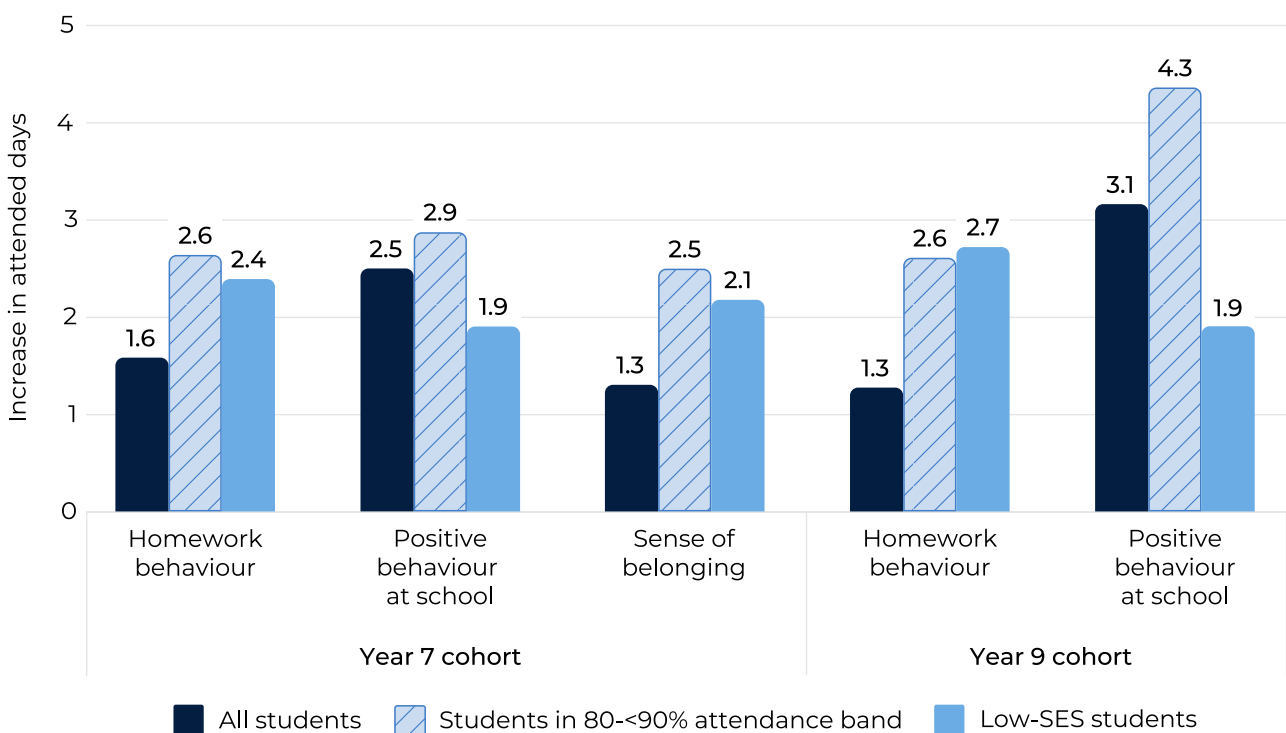
8   This variation between students in varying attendance bands is at least partly due to a ceiling effect – students in higher attendance bands do not have as much room for improvement as students in lower attendance bands.

Finding 3: For low-SES students, homework behaviour and sense of belonging are stronger predictors of attendance than for students from higher SES backgrounds

For students from low-SES backgrounds (Figure 7, bars at the right of each group of bars), homework behaviour is a stronger predictor of attendance than for students from other socioeconomic backgrounds – moving from low to high homework behaviour predicts an increase of approximately 2 and a half days attending school for students in either cohort. This is about one day more than for the cohorts as a whole.

Similarly, improvements in sense of belonging for low-SES students in the Year 7 cohort predict an increase in attendance of over 2 days, considerably more than if looking at the Year 7 cohort as a whole.

In contrast, positive behaviour is not as strong a predictor for low-SES students as for all students in the sample. While moving from negative to positive behaviour predicts an increase of nearly 2 days for low-SES students, this is about half to one day less than for all students in the sample.

Finding 4: For younger Aboriginal secondary students, wellbeing is particularly important

For Aboriginal students in the Year 7 cohort, 3 wellbeing indicators predict increases in attendance: sense of belonging, pride in school and feeling that their culture is understood by their teachers (Figure 8).[9] Together, improvements in these 3 factors could result in about 5 additional days in school for Aboriginal students in this cohort.

Figure 8

**Predicted increase in attended days if Aboriginal students move from low to high wellbeing and teaching practice**
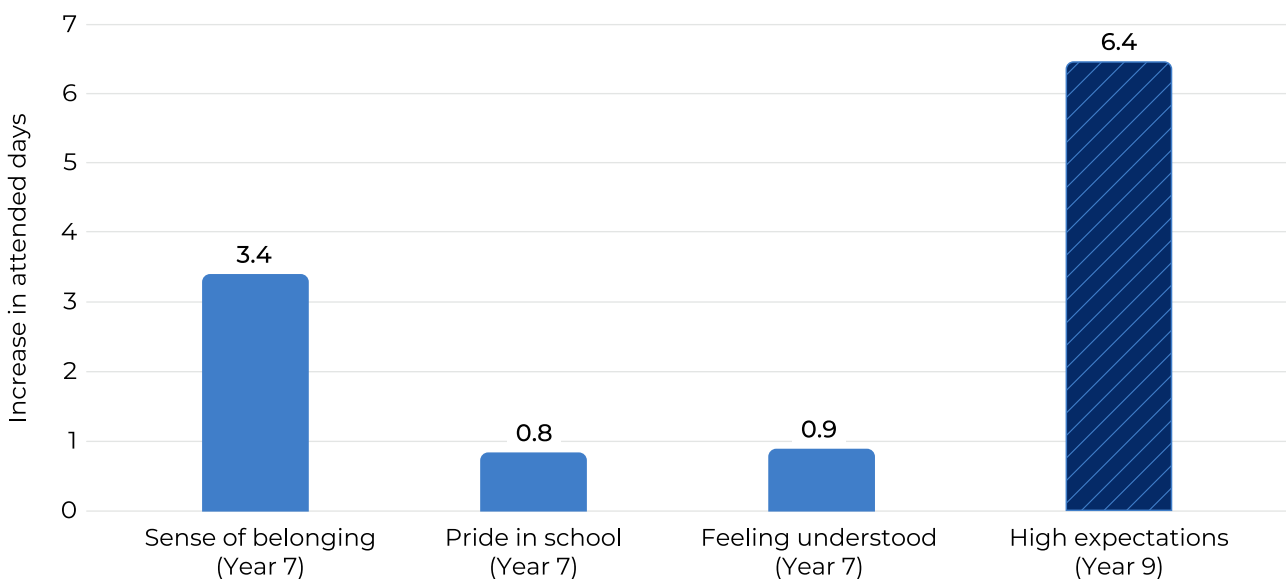
9   Average and indicative effect sizes, calculated on a scale of 0-4 if a student moved from 1 (low) to 3 (high) levels of feeling their culture is understood and pride in school, and on a scale of 0-10 from 2.5 (low) to 7.5 (high) levels of high expectations and sense of belonging. Number of days calculated on the basis of 188 school days in a typical year.

Finding 5: For older Aboriginal students, teachers' high expectations are particularly important

For Aboriginal students in the Year 9 cohort, teachers' expectations for academic success play an important role in attendance. Moving teachers' expectations from low to high levels could increase Aboriginal students' attendance by more than 6 additional days per school year (Figure 8, bar on right).

Finding 6: Teachers indirectly affect attendance by influencing engagement and wellbeing

For all students, student perceptions of effective teaching practices affect attendance indirectly through their influence on student engagement and wellbeing. The project examined students' views on 4 teaching practices that link to the academic and social school climate factors identified under 'School factors' in Section 1 (page 21-22): high expectations for success, positive learning climate and explicit teaching practice (academic climate) as well as advocacy at school (social climate). Figure 9 illustrates the indirect pathways:

- Teachers' high expectations directly affect homework behaviour and positive behaviour at school, which then predict improvements in attendance in both the Year 7 and the Year 9 cohorts. When students feel that their teachers value academic achievement and hold high expectations of them, their institutional engagement increases and they are more likely to attend school.

- Advocacy at school and positive learning climate directly affect sense of belonging and, to a lesser degree, homework behaviour, which positively predict attendance rates.

- Students who feel they are being supported at school and who feel safe and fairly treated in the classroom have a higher sense of belonging to school and are more likely to attend.

| Figure 9

Effective teaching practices affect attendance via student engagement and wellbeing
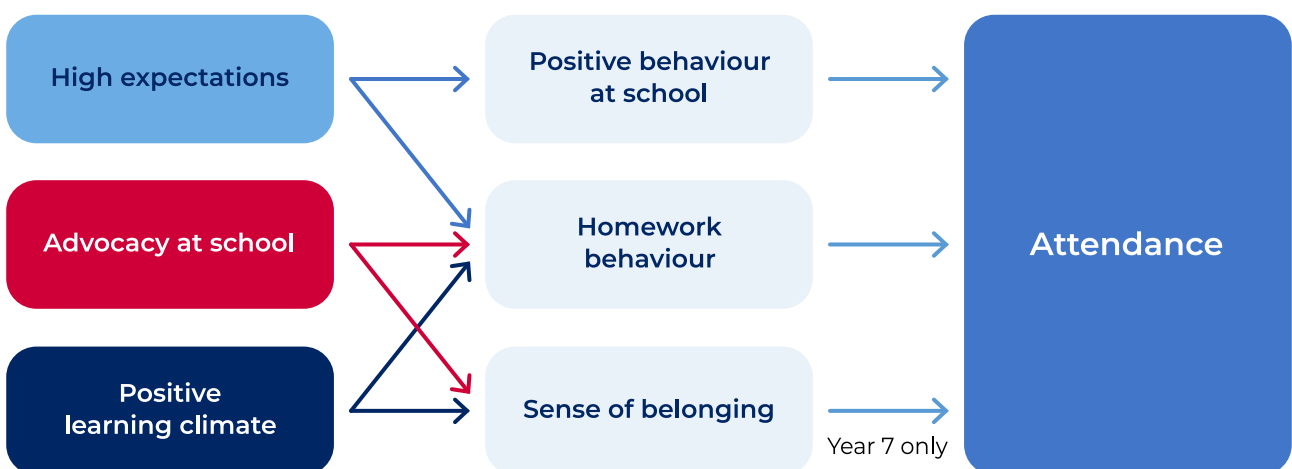
For strategies to support high expectations for academic success, advocacy at school and classroom management to foster a positive learning climate as well as sense of belonging, refer to CESE's practical guides for educators (CESE 2020a-e):

- What works best: 2020 update
- What works best in practice
- Supporting advocacy at school: synthesis paper
- Supporting high academic expectations: synthesis paper
- Supporting students' sense of belonging: synthesis paper.

Drivers of sense of belonging

CESE has previously conducted longitudinal modelling using the TTFM data for both primary and secondary students to identify which teaching practices, engagement and wellbeing factors can drive a positive sense of belonging for students (refer to CESE 2020e).

In addition to providing a positive learning climate and advocacy for students, teachers can influence students' sense of belonging by engaging in frequent and meaningful conversations with students and by teaching relevant content. Outside of the classroom, positive friendships, the absence of bullying, being optimistic and having a positive self-concept are all factors that can affect an individual's sense of belonging. Students who participate in co-curricular activities, value school outcomes and show high levels of effort, interest and motivation also tend to have a stronger sense of belonging.

Chapter 3:
What can schools do to improve attendance?

Emerging literature on strategies to address non-attendance reveals some common themes among successful approaches. The overarching recommendation is to establish and sustain a positive attendance culture (Hanover Research 2016; Humm Patnode et al. 2018; Kearney et al. 2019a, 2019b).

A culture of school attendance is one that values presence and creates a welcoming school environment for students and their families. Strategies for developing a positive attendance culture are often grouped in relation to tiered models of evidence-based prevention and intervention support (Figure 10). Typically, the 3 tiers include:

1. universal support strategies implemented for the whole school
2. early intervention support for smaller groups of students who are at risk for particular non-attendance problems
3. intensive interventions or specialised support to help individual students address their barriers to attendance (Kim and Streeter 2016).

Research in this area also emphasises a multifaceted approach to address both prevention and intervention in all tiers.

Figure 10

Multi-tiered system of support for strategies to address student non-attendance

Tier 3
Intensive individual intervention

Tier 2
Early intervention

Tier 1
Universal prevention

Tier 3
Intensive intervention for individual students with severe and chronic attendance problems and/or complex barriers to attendance.

Tier 2
Early intervention or secondary prevention strategies to address emerging attendance problems and mild to moderate absenteeism.

Tier 1
Universal prevention strategies for all students, to promote a positive culture of attendance and prevent absenteeism.

Adapted from Kearney et al. 2019a and 2019b

Successful implementation of a multi-tiered system of support relies on embedding new strategies within existing culturally responsive initiatives. This helps to reduce potential burden on schools and build on existing improvements (Jordan and Chang 2015; Kearney 2021).

In the NSW Government school system, existing frameworks related to school climate also use a multi-tiered system of support model. The existing framework for school improvement is the School Excellence Framework, which underpins the school planning and reporting cycle.[10] The School Excellence Framework describes high quality school practices across multiple elements, with attendance-related practices sitting within the learning culture element. Positive Behaviour for Learning[11] and the Wellbeing Framework for Schools also support schools to 'create teaching and learning environments that enable students to be healthy, happy, engaged and successful'.[12]

Universal prevention: fostering a positive school culture of attendance

School-related factors such as academic climate, social climate, safety and institutional environment influence student attendance in important ways and contribute to a school's attendance culture.[13] Strategies to enhance a welcoming school environment, where presence is valued, are considered preventative and generally implemented across a school, often in conjunction with system enablers.[14]

Research on attendance interventions as a first tier of support does not tend to focus directly on aspects of academic climate. Consequently, there are few robust evaluations of the effects of intervention. Research on school climate and attendance tends to focus on how schools foster a climate in which students want to attend school, and increasing engagement once they are there. Causal relations between attendance and engagement remain unclear. However, literature on engagement suggests a mutually reinforced relation between student engagement, school climate and attendance. The following aspects of school climate appear to be important for establishing a positive attendance culture:

- **Ensuring effective classroom management and motivating learning goals.** Positive student perceptions of classroom management and learning goals have been linked with higher attendance, particularly student perceptions of 'order, safety and discipline' and 'teachers' ability to make learning goals interesting and motivating' (Karlberg et al. 2020).
- **Setting clear standards and high expectations for student attendance.** This includes monitoring attendance data to identify students whose patterns of attendance do not meet the expected levels (Epstein and Sheldon 2002; Railsback 2004).

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10 education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/school-excellence-and-accountability

11 education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/attendance-behaviour-and-engagement/student-behaviour/positive-behaviour-for-learning

12 education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools

13 Refer to page 19 of this paper, Drivers of attendance and non-attendance reported in research literature.

14 Refer Chapter 4 (page 36) of this paper, What do schools require to improve attendance?

- **Increasing family engagement**. Improving communication and relationships between the school and students' families enables school staff and parents/carers to work in partnership to address a student's individual needs and potential barriers to attendance (Stone and Stone 2011). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) describe 3 effective strategies schools can use to engage with parents about school attendance:
  - communication with families when students are absent
  - tailored workshops to educate parents about non-attendance issues
  - home visits for students who have severe non-attendance problems.

- **Promoting positive relationships between teachers and students.** Teacher-student relationships are critical to creating a welcoming school environment where students feel safe, respected and valued (Mills et al. 2019). In NSW, TTFM data suggests that there are positive links between student motivation and effort in school and students who report having good relationships with their teachers (CESE 2020c).

- **Promoting connectedness and belonging**. Students' positive sense of belonging is linked with wellbeing, school transitions, effort, attendance and general academic success. Effective classroom management, teaching relevant content, leading by example in the classroom, positive teacher-student relationships and advocacy (or support) at school can all enhance students' sense of belonging (CESE 2020e).

- **Implementing an anti-bullying plan**. Bullying, including cyber bullying, has a significant impact on attendance (Reid 2010; Stone and Stone 2011). In a series of interviews about their approaches to improving school attendance, Australian principals identified that addressing bullying is critical to ensure a safe school climate (Mills et al. 2019).[15]

- **Ensuring cultural safety.** In Australia, there is a significant gap between the attendance rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019). Across NSW, the Semester 1 2019 attendance rate was 83.8% for Aboriginal students, compared to 90.8% for all students (CESE 2019a). Some research suggests that cultural safety is critical to making schools welcoming environments for Aboriginal students (Bourke et al. 2000 and Purdie and Buckley 2010, cited in AIHW 2014a). In a review of effective strategies for improving school attendance among Aboriginal students, the AIHW identified a number of school characteristics that affect the likelihood that students will attend school. These characteristics, reprinted verbatim below, are considered 'amenable to change if backed by appropriate policies, funding, leadership and training' (AIHW 2014b:8).

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15 CESE's 2017 review of anti-bullying strategies contains further information on effective approaches to addressing bullying in schools.

Characteristics of cultural safety and other school factors linked with school attendance among Aboriginal students

- Whether the school is a welcoming environment for Indigenous students
- Whether the school has a culturally appropriate and inclusive curriculum
- Having school calendars that align with cultural practices
- Classroom teaching practices through which teachers demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of their Indigenous students
- Staff turnover rates, which affect relationship development
- Whether the school engages with parents on a 'problem-based' model or actively encourages engagement throughout the school year
- The match between the language of instruction and students' language spoken at home
- Whether the school monitors attendance and how it follows up with families
- Punitive policies for non-attendance versus positive rewards systems for good attendance
- Whether the school employs Indigenous staff members
- Whether schools communicate with each other regarding attendance issues when students move schools
- School policies regarding suspension and bullying, which affect how safe children and young people feel in their school
- The quality of leadership in the school
- Whether there is an attitude that non-attendance is an inherent and unmalleable issue within the Indigenous community that cannot be fixed and is therefore assigned a lower priority in the school

Reprinted from AIHW 2014b:8 (verbatim)

Early intervention and intensive support strategies

Research studies and reviews on specific intervention and prevention strategies take care to point out the importance of matching these strategies to the root causes for non-attendance. Although the universal approaches listed in the previous section work to address the broader student population, they are not sufficient to improve attendance for individual students if those students face other barriers to attending school. The strategies outlined below may be used as prevention or intervention efforts to target non-attendance at any level of a multi-tiered system of support, depending on the context and needs of a school's student population. Matching and delivering the appropriate strategies to students' needs relies on support from school leadership with actionable data, community engagement and shared accountability, as well as adequate resourcing and capability building.[16]

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16   Refer to Chapter 4 (page 36) in this paper, What do schools require to improve attendance?

Elements of effective strategies

A recent systematic review identified 3 common elements of effective interventions for improving attendance in high school (Freeman et al. 2019). The review identified 13 published studies that met the inclusion criteria and found a statistically significant improvement in attendance (of over 1,500 reviewed abstracts). The 3 most common elements of these interventions were:

- **Individualised training in personal and social capabilities:** interventions that help students to develop social and emotional skills specific to their individual needs – for example, life skills, self-management, study skills and social skills.

- **Family support:** interventions involving the active participation of parents or other family members. Family support interventions included improved communication between school and home, intensive case management support and building positive relationships between the school and parents to engage the parents as active partners in their child's success.

- **Incentive-based strategies:** positive rewards and recognition (for example, token economies), typically used in combination with other intervention elements.

A note on incentive-based strategies: care must be taken with the design of incentive-based strategies in particular, as there are seemingly contradictory findings in the literature around incentives for attendance. Some research suggests the use of incentives may undermine other strategies to support re-engagement in school as a place of learning and to foster a sustainable positive attendance culture (Balu and Ehrlich 2018; Gentle-Genitty et al. 2020). A recent study on using awards to motivate student attendance found awards can decrease student attendance rather than improve it (Robinson et al. 2021). The study authors suggest that using extrinsic awards can 'crowd out' a student's internal motivation to continue their positive attendance behaviour, and signals that students with strong attendance are exceeding the school's expectations, inadvertently 'licensing' them to miss school.

Balu and Ehrlich (2018) provide the following framework to help disentangle the research around using incentives for attendance by clarifying the key considerations for designing and implementing an incentive-based intervention:[17]

1. What are the specific attendance problems and/or root causes that need to be addressed?
2. What type of incentive should be implemented to address the identified problem and sustainably change behaviour?
3. How can the incentive be structured and implemented to maximise the benefits and reduce trade-offs?
4. What do evaluation results of the intervention indicate about its effectiveness and ways to improve it?

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17   Refer to Balu and Ehrlich (2018) for a more detailed guide to the framework.

Student voices poll: should good attendance be recognised?

A student poll was hosted during November 2020 on the Student Voices webpage, the NSW Department of Education's channel for students to share their perspectives, ideas and information. The poll received 709 responses from NSW Government school students in Year 5 or under to Year 12.

Students provided free-text responses to the question, 'Should good or improved attendance be recognised?'

Students gave a variety of reasons both in favour of and against recognition of good or improved attendance. Schools are encouraged to investigate the factors contributing to attendance, students' experiences and viewpoints relevant to their school community.

"Good attendance is nothing special, and even if someone does not have good attendance, **it doesn't necessarily mean that they don't want to go to school**. Attendance isn't like grades where if you put enough work you can improve marks, **usually depends on factors that the children cannot control.**"

"You should understand that some students have mental illnesses e.g. anxiety. I physically can't go to school some days because of my high level anxiety. **Not everyone's attendance should be counted the same.**"
Year 10 female student

"At our school in the 2 minutes we have to go to the toilet, music plays and the class that had the best attendance the week before […] **gets to choose the bell song.**"
Year 5 or under male student

"[Student] has had 100% attendance for the last 3 years of his schooling. I got nothing in return, and **I don't even think anyone really cared to be honest.**"
Year 12 male student

"I think attendance does matter but if it is given an award I think it's a bit unfair for **people who can't come due to family reasons or genuine illness.**"
Year 12 female student

"We don't need an award or anything, it just needs to be **recognised that we are putting an effort in.**"

education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/student-voices

Programs with promising evidence

There is promising evidence for several kinds of strategies that help to address or lessen the effects of particular barriers some students face to attending school, when the strategies have been delivered to target an identified need. Very few interventions have well-implemented experimental research studies to evaluate their effectiveness. However, evidence from correlational or quasi-experimental studies suggests promising positive effects of the types of strategies outlined below.

- **Meal programs:** meal programs involve the school providing meals to students for free or at a reduced cost. Meal programs aim to improve students' nutrition to decrease sick days taken from poor nutrition and improve concentration and engagement. For example, the Victorian Government runs a School Breakfast Clubs Program in partnership with Foodbank Victoria. The program provides free breakfast to students at disadvantaged schools. An interim evaluation conducted 2 years into the program indicated it had a positive impact on teachers' perceptions of their students' concentration, classroom behaviour, punctuality, social skills and academic outcomes, in addition to attendance (MacDonald 2018).

- **School-based flu vaccination:** school-located influenza vaccination programs involve using school facilities for influenza vaccination clinics. Most studies are from the USA. The programs are associated with significant declines in influenza rates and illness-related school absences, with possible positive effects of herd immunity for students in the school who were not vaccinated (Hull and Ambrose 2011; Keck et al. 2013; Pannaraj et al. 2014).

- **Improving transport access:** transport programs improve students' access to reliable and safe transport to and from school. In metropolitan areas, one study suggests providing high school students with free access to the public bus system improves attendance rates as the public system allows students to be more flexible with timing than a fixed school service (Fan and Das 2015). Another USA-based study suggested school bus services may remove barriers to attendance for Kindergarten students. Kindergarten students who regularly commuted to school via bus had fewer absent days and were less likely to be chronically absent compared with children who commuted to school in any other way (Gottfried 2017).

- **Mentoring:** mentoring programs are relationship-based interventions for students with truancy and chronic absence problems. A common model in the literature is 'Check and Connect', an intervention used with Kindergarten to Year 12 students who show signs of disengagement with school and who are at risk of dropping out. There is strong evidence that Check and Connect and similar high-quality mentoring programs improve attendance and school engagement (Guryan et al. 2017).

- **After-school programs:** high quality after-school programs and co-curricular activities can promote regular attendance at school by improving student engagement. Programs may include music, art and sports programs, expanded learning programs, or personalised learning plans for students with more intensive needs. Chang and Jordan (2012) suggest co-curricular after-school programs can improve engagement and attendance by strengthening a student's sense of belonging and positive relationships with teachers.

- **Psychosocial treatments:** students experiencing school refusal related to emotional distress or mental health problems such as anxiety or depression may benefit from psychosocial treatments aimed to help students overcome the negative emotional states driving their school refusal (Maynard et al. 2018). Psychosocial treatments are often Tier 3 (intensive support) interventions that schools are not expected to deliver themselves. Rather, psychosocial treatments for attendance problems may involve partnerships with local community services including mental health services, general practitioners, justice system personnel and social services (Kearney 2021).

Check and Connect: an effective dropout prevention strategy

The Check and Connect program for students at risk of dropping out of school relies on mentoring, closely monitoring school performance, case management and other personalised supports. It is delivered as a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention in the multi-tiered system of support, in partnership with school staff, family members and service providers.

The program has 4 main components:

1. **The mentor:** a person assigned to the student who works to build trust and open communication with them and liaises with their family, school and community partners.

2. **'Check' component**: systematic monitoring of student performance data to identify indicators of disengagement.

3. **'Connect' component:** provision of timely, personalised support matched to the individual student's needs.

4. **Family engagement:** the mentor partners with the student's family members and conduct case management for at least 2 years, aiming to build positive family-school relationships.

Information and resources on the program and implementation: checkandconnect.umn.edu

Full review of the effects of Check and Connect on student outcomes: ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/EvidenceSnapshot/78

Chapter 4:
What do schools require to improve attendance?

A set of enablers to achieving positive attendance outcomes was identified from analysis of the research literature. These enablers are stronger when well-integrated instead of applied in isolation. They also require adequate resourcing and capability building for sustainable implementation.

Figure 11

Enablers for implementing strategies to improve attendance and establish a positive attendance culture in schools
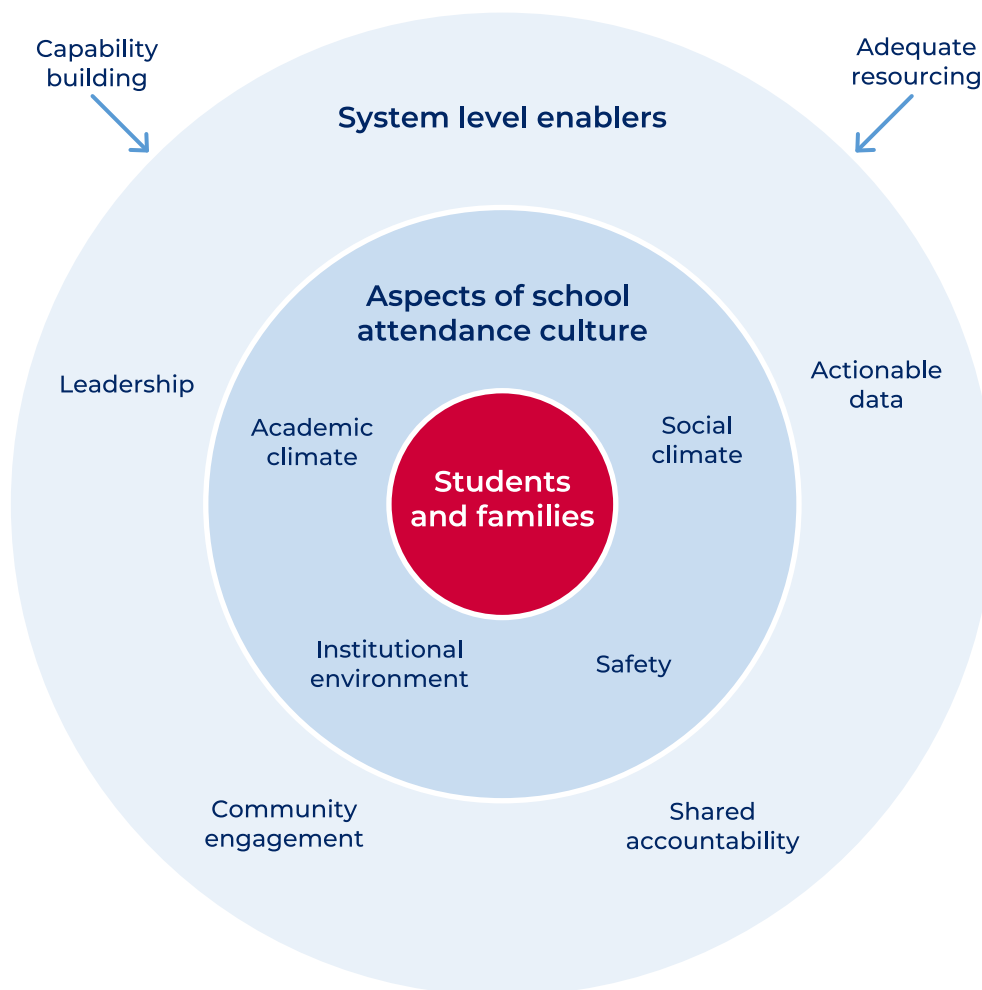
Leadership

Effective school leadership is a pre-condition for whole-of-school success. School leaders play a key role in ensuring coherence across aspects of a school's attendance culture, setting the school's vision and enabling the conditions to achieve it.

In the USA, research conducted in 9 states confirmed that talented leadership was vital to improve student outcomes: 'To date, we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership' (Seashore et al. 2010).

At a system level, research identifies that professional development provided to principals can support them in achieving positive attendance outcomes in their schools. In New York City, USA, the Department of Education developed a professional development program after identifying an assumption among principals that attendance was primarily about compliance rather than improving outcomes. The department supported principals' capability around absenteeism through principal summits, targeted materials, site visits and inclusion of this issue in their regular training and website communications (Balfanz and Byrnes 2013). Moreover, professional responsibility training and materials were also delivered to school staff and network leaders. The department's leadership reported that these initiatives created a culture shift in how the department thinks about attendance.

Actionable data

Research indicates that **early interventions to address non-attendance are 6 times more likely to be successful** than initiatives tackling already established patterns (Reid 2012). Data monitoring systems enable schools to identify early warning signs of non-attendance and offer an opportunity to act on concerns before they escalate.

At a school level, frequent monitoring of attendance helps schools identify characteristics of absent students, investigate the underlining cause of non-attendance and plan for the right support to meet individual students' needs (Sanchez 2012; Graczyk and Kearney 2014; Hanover Research 2016). Frequent monitoring also identifies problem areas and informs the allocation of resources and interventions to targeted patterns, such as demographic trends or specific grade level absence.

At a system level, effective ongoing data monitoring enables the identification of statewide patterns, trends and areas of need (Reid 2012; Hanover Research 2016). For example, in Central Texas, a study of absences in school districts in 2013 identified that 48% of absences were due to acute illness, including colds and flu (Attendance Works 2015). Knowing the main reasons for absences is important to develop a targeted strategy to improve attendance, which in Central Texas was the largest Texas in-school flu immunisation campaign.

Moreover, the collection and analysis of data are also important to help schools monitor targeted students, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, and adjust them if necessary on time (Sanchez 2012; Graczyk and Kearney 2014). At a system level, it can also support the assessment of statewide attendance strategies.

Monitoring and early warning systems can help to increase the likelihood of succeeding in improving student attendance. In Western Australia, the Department of Education introduced the Student Attendance Reporting system in 2013 and developed a framework that schools should adopt to manage non-attendance:

- **Recognise** – attendance is monitored daily and every absence is identified.
- **Resolve** – every absence is investigated within 3 days and the reason is recorded.
- **Restore** – school strategies are implemented for attendance below 90% .
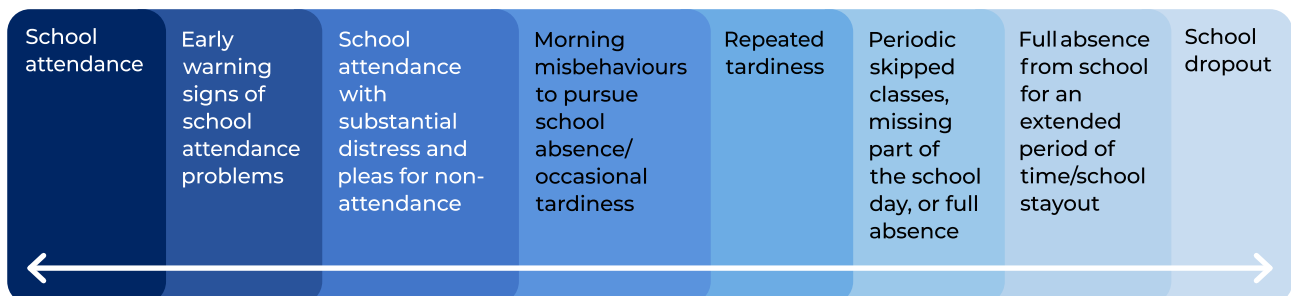- **Record** – accurate records are maintained.

An audit conducted in 2015 found that at a local level, schools that were following the framework were achieving positive results. Somerly Primary School increased the proportion of students attending more than 90% of the time from 75% to 79%, and unauthorised absences decreased from 48% to 27%. Likewise, Carine Senior High School increased the proportion of students attending more than 90% of the time from 69% to 77%, and unauthorised absences decreased from 27% to 18% (Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2015).

Monitoring attendance and attendance problems

Recent models of school attendance problems recommend understanding attendance problems using a combination of categorical indicators (for example, attendance rate cut-points such as <90%) and spectrums of non-attendance severity (Kearney et al. 2019a, 2019b). A spectrum approach describes attendance problems along a continuum from complete presence to complete absence (Figure 12, reprinted from Kearney et al. 2019a). The spectrum represents potential early signs of absenteeism on the left, through to moderate absenteeism in the middle (for example, repeatedly arriving late or missing classes), through to extended absence on the right and complete school dropout at the extreme end (Kearney et al. 2019a).

Figure 12

A proposed spectrum of school attendance and attendance problems

| School attendance | Early warning signs of school attendance problems | School attendance with substantial distress and pleas for non-attendance | Morning misbehaviours to pursue school absence/occasional tardiness | Repeated tardiness | Periodic skipped classes, missing part of the school day, or full absence | Full absence from school for an extended period of time/school stayout | School dropout |

Reprinted from Kearney et al. 2019a

What does the evidence base recommend for data monitoring and identifying early warning signs?

- A core component is developing an efficient information management system to enable the collection and analysis of student attendance data at school and system levels (Leithwood 2010; Hanover Research 2016).

- While data monitoring is important to identify early signs and track students' progress, success depends on properly collecting, interpreting and effectively using data to make informed decisions (Togneri and Anderson 2003; Leithwood 2010; Hanover Research 2016). Clear collection guidelines and professional development for school staff in classifying, collecting, reporting and interpreting data are needed (Hanover Research, 2016). Moreover, research on high-performing districts identified that a critical component of success was providing support for schools in using data to guide strategies and make evidence-based decisions (Togneri and Anderson 2003; Leithwood 2010).

- The fluid nature of absenteeism requires ongoing and holistic attendance assessment which considers attendance, academics and behaviour indicators (Graczyk and Kearney 2014). Relying on a single set of indicators may miss subtle signs of absenteeism.

- Professional learning for school staff about the early warning signs of absences can support the school leadership team and classroom teachers to identify students at risk (Graczyk and Kearney 2014).

- Demands related to data can increase the administrative burden on schools. The research identified different practices to support school staff, such as the development of data analysis tools that are easy to access and understand, provision of interpreted data reports, and funding to allocate administrative staff to help analyse school-specific data (Togneri and Anderson 2003; Hanover Research 2016).

- The importance of effective data analysis and reporting extends beyond schools. Research identifies that to achieve statewide sustainable improvement, it is critical to routinely assess attendance patterns across the state and use them to guide important decisions (Togneri and Anderson 2003; Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2015). In Western Australia, the 2015 audit on managing student attendance found that although some schools were achieving positive outcomes, there was no statewide improvement in student attendance at public schools between 2009 and 2014. According to the audit, the department failed to 'routinely assess how many children do not attend regularly, or which schools have significant attendance issues, or those that have improved performance. Nor has it reviewed recent major attendance strategies' (Office of the Auditor General Western Australia 2015).

Community engagement

The underlying factors for absences are multi-faceted and often require a response involving the school community, including parents and the broader community.

Parent involvement

Parents may underestimate how many days their children have missed in primary school, thinking they have missed fewer days than they actually did (Robinson et al. 2018). As students become more independent in high school, parents might not know if their children did or did not attend school (Balu et al. 2016). Likewise, families might not realise the impact of days missed on their children's learning (Balu et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2018).

Hancock et al. (2018) suggest that parent-driven absences might be predominant amongst younger students, and student-driven absences amongst older students. Nevertheless, it is recognised that to address many factors impacting older students' attendance, schools need support from parents and carers.

Research identifies that high-quality family and community involvement with schools increases the likelihood of students' attendance (Sheldon 2007). A key component is helping families understand school attendance policies, their children's attendance and the negative influence of absence on education.

Parental involvement can be strengthened by tailoring the communication and by considering the different languages and cultural backgrounds in the community. Parents with low levels of literacy or language backgrounds other than English might have difficulty engaging with school communications (Graczyk and Kearney 2014).

Parental awareness of the importance of attending school is a vital step in building partnerships between schools and parents to improve a student's attendance (Epstein and Sheldon 2002; Hancock et al. 2013; Robinson et al. 2018). A study of 12 primary schools in the USA found that as the schools developed school-family partnerships to help improve attendance, the average rate of chronically absent students decreased from 8% to 6.1% (Epstein and Sheldon 2002). The partnership involved constant and personal communication between the family and the school and, in some case cases, home visits.

Broader community engagement

Schools often need to partner with the community to address underlying factors of non-attendance and meet students' needs.

Partnerships with community members are central to building the school community's awareness of the importance of attending school. Strong partnerships with the community can help schools to engage students and families in identifying attendance barriers and mobilise resources to deliver interventions. As pointed out by the John W Gardner Center (2012):

'Make attendance a community priority; communicate that this is not about blaming schools or families but about galvanizing the resources of the entire community to ensure all students have the chance to succeed.'

Creating broader community awareness around attendance can improve school attendance.

In Queensland, the Every Day Counts campaign aimed to change parent, community and student attitudes to school attendance by applying early intervention strategies such as:

- monitoring attendance
- building community capability through awareness of the importance of attendance.

Although there were challenges around the implementation of the campaign across the state, a local case study of the effects of the program at Woodridge State High School in Logan, Queensland, showed that from 2008 (when the campaign was implemented) to 2011, attendance increased from 80.2% to 90%. **A key element of the success of the program was the partnerships** created with local businesses, community agencies, the Logan City Council and Logan Police, as well as a focus for students on attending school all day, every day (DETE 2013).

What does the evidence base recommend for community engagement?

- Attendance monitoring programs that include genuine communication with families have a positive impact on student attendance. Research indicates that monitoring attendance enables the school to inform parents of the number of school days their child has missed and the ongoing impact of non-attendance on their learning. A study on the West Coast of the USA across 10 school districts with Kindergarten to Grade 5 students found that a parental awareness campaign decreased student non-attendance by 15% (Robinson et al. 2018). The program involved sharing with families how many days of school their children have missed, and sending parents personalised mailings containing messages such as 'attendance in early grades affects student learning' and 'absences result in missed opportunities that cannot be replaced'.

- Clear communication about attendance policies and the importance of student attendance is critical. This can be done through a parents' guide to student attendance, personalised phone calls, regular attendance updates and letters, and/or appointing a designated contact to discuss attendance matters (Sanchez 2012, Hanover Research 2016). Practices identified through the research to bridge language and cultural differences include adopting accessible formats, using interpreters and translating in multiple languages (AIHW 2014a; Graczyk and Kearney 2014; Hanover Research 2016).

- School attendance policies and communication should be aligned with the overall state policy and guidelines to ensure consistency and promote an equal understanding across community members (Hanover Research 2016).

- Strategies to strengthen family and the broader community engagement in students' education have to be structured (Sheldon 2007; Dreise et al. 2016). This can be enabled through professional learning in establishing school, family and community partnerships, and providing tools and guidelines. In the USA, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) offers tools and guidelines for establishing, maintaining and improving school-wide partnership programs to develop stronger connections among the home, school and community contexts.

- Addressing challenges to engage with community groups and agencies is important to support schools in creating partnerships. Lonsdale and Anderson (2012) identify some of the challenges faced by schools:

- 'Finding potential partners and resources, knowing who might have the professional expertise to advise and guide program development, gathering information about an area of identified need, knowing how to monitor and evaluate the impact of a collaboration all take time and require different kinds of knowledge and skills.'

- In the USA, the City Connects model aims to support students (academically, socially, emotionally and physically) by connecting them with services in the school community (City Connects 2020). An evaluation of the model found that City Connects students had a significantly lower total number of days absent than students from the comparison group.

- Coordinated community awareness campaigns set a common vision across the state, led at the local level by schools, but supported at a system level through the allocation of resources, toolkits, promotional material and, in some cases, media strategies. In Pittsburgh, USA, public schools, in partnership with the United Way of Allegheny County, launched the 'Be There' campaign in 2013, aimed at reducing absenteeism. Its key components were a partnership with community organisations to make attendance a community priority, a data-driven approach, and communication with families about the attendance policy and the impact of non-attendance on their children's learning (Hanover Research 2016). As of 2016, student attendance increased in 45 of the 49 participating schools within the county, 40% of the targeted at-risk students had shown an increase in attendance and 32% of at-risk students moved out of chronic absence.

- Dedicated staff resources to lead collaboration and build community awareness offsets the additional workload of these tasks for school staff. Creating partnerships can be time consuming for school staff. Having dedicated community engagement staff can help schools coordinate community efforts.

Shared accountability

Improving attendance depends on a number of stakeholders, as underlying causes of non-attendance relate to cross-cutting issues. Research identified that community-based collaboration is effective when a coordinated approach is adopted and partners are held accountable for their involvement (Bathgate et al. 2011). Therefore, it is important to hold stakeholders (students, families, school staff, government agencies and community partners) responsible for helping to improve attendance.

'The idea of shared accountability is to not just coordinate these disparate efforts but also to focus them on a common vision for student success that is backed by the collection and analysis of data on a range of related indicators' (Bathgate et al. 2011).

Bathgate et al. (2011) described 4 key elements of shared accountability:

- an overarching vision
- performance targets aligned with the vision, including individual targets for each partner
- a structured system for collecting, analysing and sharing information about student outcomes and partners' organisational performance
- stable leadership, supported by a dedicated organisation to coordinate efforts.

What does the evidence base recommend for shared accountability?

- Collaborative development of a common vision for students' outcomes in order to build mutual trust and agreed-on goals to make the vision actionable (Bathgate et al. 2011).

- Clear accountability indicators and transparent communication of outcomes. In the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), California, USA, the district monitors new metrics and built dashboards to compare data across schools. School staff have access to detailed school data, and community members can access public dashboards with chronic absence data (Attendance Works n.d.). However, Togneri and Anderson (2003) comment about the importance of 'making the data safe', fostering an environment of openness and trust. Data is embraced as a tool to support change instead of punishment.

- Explicitly defined roles and contributions of each stakeholder (Bathgate et al. 2011). This can be supported by building stakeholders' capability and involving students, families, school staff and local community partners in the planning and implementation of interventions (Sanchez 2012).

- Mechanisms to enable data sharing between different organisations working with students and their families. This can be enabled through a memorandum of understanding, ideally developed at a system level and reinforced at a school level.

In summary, leadership, actionable data, community engagement and shared accountability describe the conditions for schools to successfully implement positive change to student attendance. They are interrelated and intended to be considered as a holistic set of conditions rather than individual, isolated enablers. Factors influencing attendance are multi-faceted and require a whole system approach that strategically incorporates combinations of the 4 enablers, at both system and school levels.

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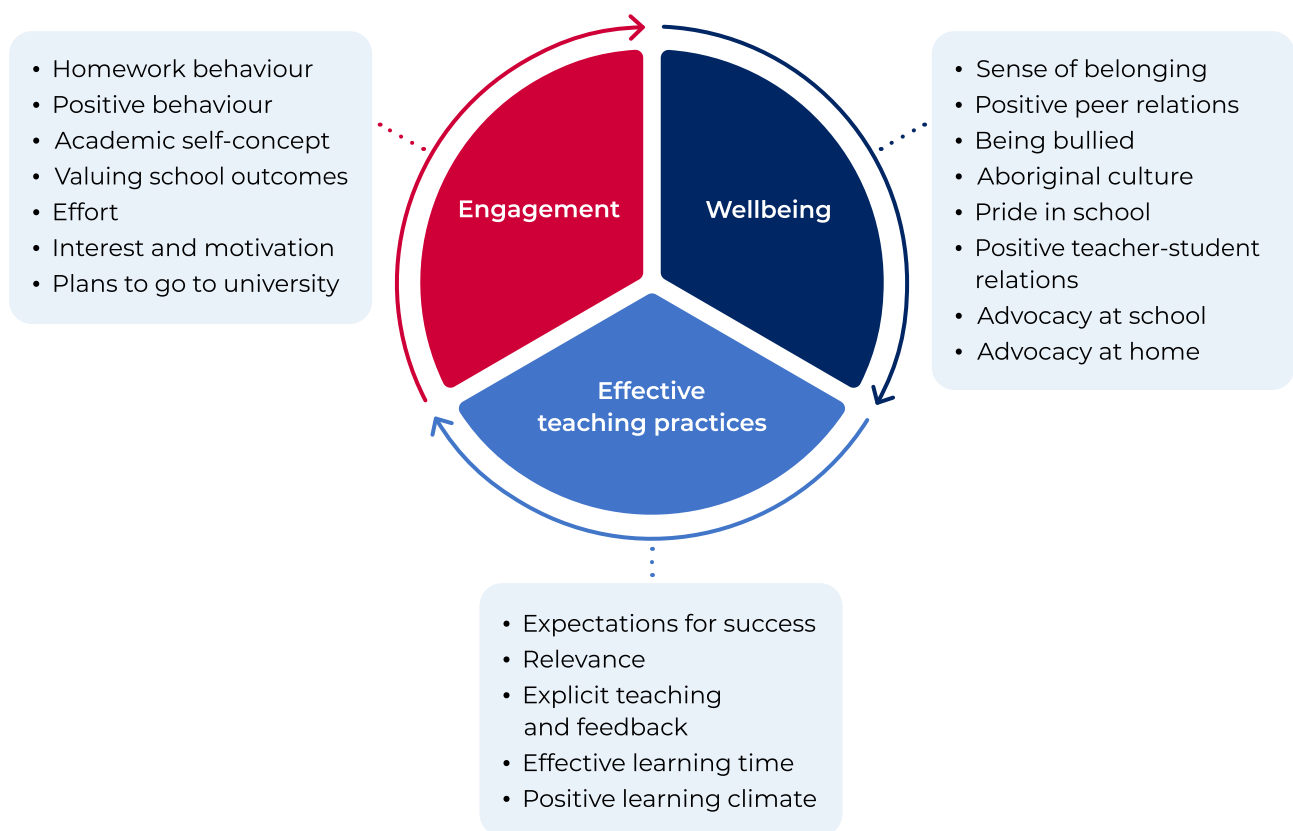
Appendices

Appendix 1.1
Tell Them From Me: overview of the student survey

The TTFM student, parent and teacher surveys have been used in NSW public schools since 2013.[1] They provide data on a range of aspects of school life, practices and procedures from the perspectives of students, parents and teachers. This data provides valuable insights that can inform school planning and decision-making.

The TTFM student survey includes measures of engagement, wellbeing and classroom experiences, reflecting effective teaching practices. The Drivers of attendance project examined 20 of these measures as predictors of attendance for secondary school students.

Engagement

- Homework behaviour
- Positive behaviour
- Academic self-concept
- Valuing school outcomes
- Effort
- Interest and motivation
- Plans to go to university

Wellbeing

- Sense of belonging
- Positive peer relations
- Being bullied
- Aboriginal culture
- Pride in school
- Positive teacher-student relations
- Advocacy at school
- Advocacy at home

Effective teaching practices

- Expectations for success
- Relevance
- Explicit teaching and feedback
- Effective learning time
- Positive learning climate

For more information on the TTFM surveys, refer to CESE's Supporting school improvement: Using the Tell Them From Me student, parent and teacher surveys (CESE 2020f).

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1   Tell Them From Me is provided by, and is the intellectual property of, The Learning Bar.

Appendix 1.2
Tell Them From Me: measures of engagement, wellbeing and teaching practices linked to attendance

Homework behaviour

Homework refers to the time invested by students learning and studying core subjects outside of school hours. In TTFM, students respond to questions about their attitudes towards homework and their effort in completing it. Like attendance, homework behaviour is a measure of students' institutional engagement. As such, it may parallel or foreshadow attendance rather than directly affect it.

Positive behaviour at school

Student behaviour refers to behaviours that occur in the learning environment, such as whether students are listening to their teacher or being disruptive. In TTFM, students respond to questions asking how often they have been in trouble at school. Students with a low score are considered to have 'positive student behaviour'. Like attendance, positive behaviour at school is a measure of students' institutional engagement. As such, it may parallel or foreshadow attendance rather than directly affect it.

For strategies to encourage positive behaviour at school, refer to CESE (2017).

Sense of belonging

Students' sense of belonging at school refers to the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic school activities. It is a key component of social engagement. In TTFM, students respond to questions about their sense of belonging at school.

Sense of belonging emerges as one of the main student-level drivers of attendance across the literature (refer to Chapter 2, page 20). When students feel a sense of belonging at school, they have positive relationships, value learning and engage with their school environment.

High expectations for success

Expectations for success represent the extent to which school staff value academic achievement and hold high expectations for all students. In TTFM, students respond to questions that gauge the extent to which school staff value academic achievement and hold high expectations for all students.

Advocacy at school

Advocacy at school refers to the support students receive from adults in the school who consistently provide encouragement and who can be turned to for advice. In TTFM, students indicate to what extent this is the case at their school.

Positive learning climate

Positive classroom climate is concerned with the extent to which students internalise the norms and values of the classroom, which is affected by the formal and informal rules of the classroom, the effectiveness of classroom management strategies and the relationships between students and teachers. In TTFM, students respond to questions regarding the extent to which students internalise the norms and values of the classroom.

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