

Understanding attendance

An updated research review on school attendance

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, July 2024, Sydney, NSW

Please cite this publication as:

CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2024) *Understanding attendance – an updated research review on school attendance*, NSW Department of Education.

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Acknowledgements

CESE thanks colleagues across the department for their input into this report. We thank our partners at the University of Queensland for collaborating on the analysis of Tell Them From Me (TTFM) and student attendance data. Special thanks to all the school staff and students who take part in the TTFM and attendance data collections that were used in this research.

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

Table of contents

About this resource	6
Defining school attendance and absence	8
Low attendance	8
Types of school attendance problems	9
Using terminology	10
Attendance in NSW public schools	12
Student attendance of NSW public schools in Semester 1 2022 – key findings	13
Why does school attendance matter?	17
Attendance impacts student learning and academic achievement	17
Attendance impacts wellbeing, development and long-term outcomes	18
Attendance patterns can persist throughout a student’s schooling	18
What drives attendance and absence?	19
Drivers of positive school attendance	20
Drivers of attendance and engagement–evidence from Tell Them From Me	22
Drivers of sense of belonging	23
Tell Them From Me and attendance under Our Plan for NSW Public Education	24
The impact of COVID-19 on attendance drivers	25
What can schools do to improve attendance?	26
A multi-tiered system of support for school attendance	26
Evidence-based strategies for a whole school approach to positive attendance	27
Evidence-based attendance strategies targeted to student need	29
Re-engaging students in school after the COVID-19 pandemic	33
What educators need to know	34

What enables schools to improve attendance?	35
Effective leadership	35
Actionable data	35
Community engagement	36
Shared accountability	37
References	38
Appendix 1: Analysis of TTFM and student attendance	43
Appendix 2: TTFM measures of engagement, wellbeing and teaching practices linked to attendance	48
Related resources	50

List of figures and tables

Figure 1 Relationship between TTFM measures that drive attendance and elements of teaching, learning, student wellbeing and equity under Our Plan for NSW Public Education	6
Figure 2 Attendance rate (%) for Semester 1 2018–2022 by education level, NSW public schools	14
Figure 3 Attendance level (%) for Semester 1 2018–2022 by education level, NSW public schools	14
Figure 4 Absences per 1,000 enrolled days by reason, Semester 1 2021 and 2022, primary and secondary, NSW public schools	15
Figure 5 The effect of attendance behaviours in Year 7 on Year 9 NAPLAN reading scores (CESE 2017:6)	17
Figure 6 Domains of interrelated factors driving positive school attendance	20
Figure 7 Effective teaching practices impact student attendance via engagement and wellbeing	23
Figure 8 Relationship between TTFM measures that drive attendance and elements of teaching, learning, student wellbeing and equity under Our Plan for NSW Public Education	24
Figure 9 Multi-tiered system of support for positive school attendance (adapted from Kearney et al. 2019a, 2019b)	27
Figure 10 Tell Them From Me measures examined in the drivers of attendance project	43
Figure 11 Predicted increase in attended days if students move from low to high engagement and wellbeing	44
Figure 12 Predicted increase in attended days if Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students move from low to high wellbeing and teaching practice	46
Figure 13 Effective teaching practices impact student attendance via student engagement and wellbeing	47
Table 1 Absences per 1,000 enrolled days by reason, Semester 1 2021 and 2022, primary and secondary, NSW public schools	15
Table 2 Student attendance rates (%), Years 1 to 10, by state and territory and school sector, Australia, 2022 (ACARA 2022)	16

About this resource

This resource is an update to the evidence paper on student attendance produced in 2022 by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE). The original paper synthesises the research on school attendance. It identifies key drivers of attendance and absence from school, discusses why regular school attendance is important, and outlines the evidence-based strategies that work best to improve attendance.

Since the original paper was developed, NSW public schools have experienced further disruption from COVID-19, floods and high influenza season outbreaks. The overall attendance rate has declined as students face changing barriers to attending school.¹ This resource updates the original paper with new research on student attendance and expands on issues of particular relevance to schools in a post-pandemic context.

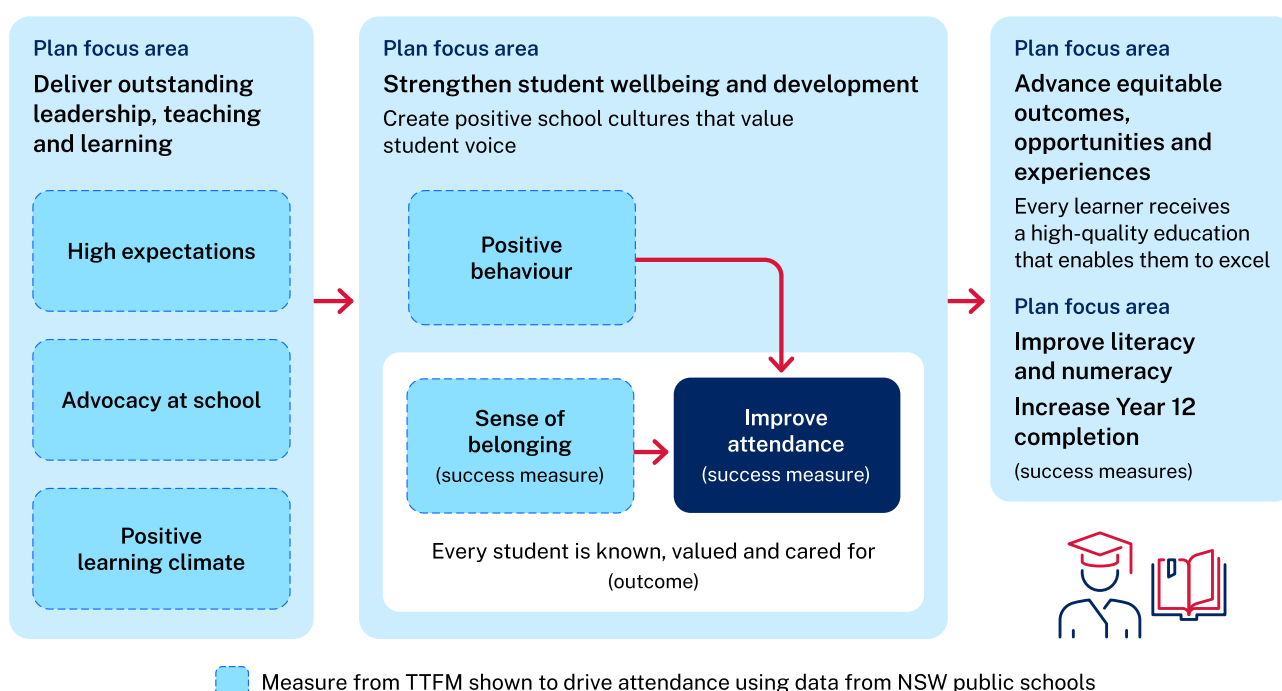
This update and the 2022 resource are available on [Understanding attendance](#) page of the CESE website, along with the following resources:

- **Understanding attendance research review** – a summary of this resource outlining key evidence-based strategies that can support school leaders and teachers to understand attendance challenges and strategically plan to improve attendance.
- **Tell Them From Me and student attendance** – a Scout guide showing how the different elements of the new Plan for NSW Public Education that drive attendance can be seen through Tell Them From Me (TTFM) reports (refer to Figure 1 below).

These resources aim to support principals, school leaders and teachers to make evidence-based decisions when [developing and implementing improvement and progress measures](#) in their Strategic Improvement Plans. Further practical resources for schools can be found on the [Attendance matters](#) webpage and the [Universal Resources Hub](#).

Figure 1

Relationship between TTFM measures that drive attendance and elements of teaching, learning, student wellbeing and equity under Our Plan for NSW Public Education



¹ For more information on attendance data in NSW public schools, including information for different student cohorts and contextual factors, refer to the [2022 Semester 1 student attendance fact sheet](#).

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
- use the Tell Them From Me and student attendance Scout guide to help with developing and implementing their school's attendance improvement measures
- access their school's TTFM data and attendance Scout reports to support improvement strategies and monitor progress
- facilitate discussions with staff about the underlying causes of unexplained and unjustified absences in their school context and areas for improvement at a classroom and whole-school level – also refer to the Attendance matters resources for schools
- 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
- consider which practices to implement in the classroom to strengthen positive attendance – also refer to the summary of this paper, Understanding attendance research review – what educators need to know
- assist school leaders with identifying their students' barriers to attending school and determining the appropriate intervention.

Contact: Email feedback about this resource to info@cese.nsw.gov.au.

You can also subscribe to the [CESE newsletter](#) and connect with us on [Viva Engage](#).

Alignment to system priorities and/or needs: Our Plan for NSW Public Education, School Excellence Policy, Strategic School Improvement 2024–2027 attendance improvement measures

Alignment to School Excellence Framework: Whole school teaching and wellbeing practices – attendance, wellbeing and engagement; Learning domain – learning culture

Alignment with other existing frameworks: School Attendance Policy; What works best – wellbeing, high expectations, classroom management; Australian Professional Standards for Teachers – Standard 4: Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments

Reviewed by: Attendance Tiger Team coordinated by Behaviour and Student Participation in Inclusion and Wellbeing

Created / last updated: Originally published July 2024

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

Defining school attendance and absence

The school attendance research literature often talks about ‘school attendance problems’, ‘absenteeism’, ‘chronic absence’ and an array of other terms that have been defined, assessed and treated in many different ways across different disciplines.

Absences can be considered problematic because of the duration or frequency of absence, or because of the type of difficulty faced with attending school (Heyne et al. 2019; Kearney and Childs 2022). Both of these are discussed below.

A key challenge with defining school attendance problems is that there is no ‘safe threshold’ for absences (Hancock et al. 2013). Even small amounts of school absences can negatively impact a student’s academic achievement and accumulate over time to more severe problems (Hancock et al. 2013; Johnsen 2020). The research highlights the need to take a proactive approach to preventing school attendance problems and, where possible, avoid waiting for them to reach problematic levels (Johnsen 2020; Kearney and Graczyk 2022).

Low attendance

This paper will use the term ‘low attendance’ to describe regular or chronic absences from school. A measure widely used in research and policy is absence amounting to 10% or more of the school year (Heyne et al. 2019). As a common operational definition, it is easy to translate and allows for comparisons across jurisdictions. In NSW public schools, 10% of the school year equates to 4 weeks of school each year, which is equivalent to over one whole school year throughout school life. It is measured by attendance level, that is, the proportion of students attending school 90% or more of the time.

Attendance level data provides evidence that low attendance is prevalent among NSW public schools with considerable declines in 2022 from 2021 (CESE 2023). Similar patterns have occurred in other sectors and states/territories (ACARA 2022) and international jurisdictions such as the UK, USA and New Zealand (Dee 2023; Devine et al. 2023; Long and Danechi 2023).

Student absence categories in NSW public schools

The [School Attendance Policy](#) sets out the requirements for the attendance of students in NSW public schools. In line with the policy, schools use the following categories to record explanation of student absence and/or variation in attendance for the collection and reporting of student attendance data:

- the student’s absence is unexplained or unjustified
- the student’s absence is due to sickness or as the result of a medical or paramedical appointment
- an explanation of the absence is provided which has been accepted by the principal – 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
- the student was suspended from school.

Types of school attendance problems

School attendance problems are also often researched and discussed in terms of the nature of the absence. These definitions attempt to categorise absences by the student behaviours and motivations they represent, the parent/carer’s awareness of or involvement in the absence, and whether the school accepts an absence explanation.

The definitions below are directly from the resource [School refusal: every school day counts](#) (page 4).² It brings together the research on how these terms are conceptualised in the literature (Gentle-Genitty et al. 2020; Heyne et al. 2019; Ingul et al. 2019; Kearney and Graczyk 2020), and summarises them for NSW teachers and parents/carers.

² This resource provides information for teachers and parents/carers about school refusal. It is a collaboration between the NSW Department of Education, Sydney Catholic Schools and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW, and coordinated by the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District School.

School refusal is said to occur when some or all of these are present:

- a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress
- the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents or carers
- the young person does not display severe antisocial behaviour
- the parents/carers have made reasonable efforts to secure attendance at school, and/or express their intention for their child to attend school full-time.

Truancy is said to occur when:

- a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location,
- the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities, and
- the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents or carers.

School withdrawal is said to occur when a young person's absence from school is:

- not concealed from the parent(s) or carer(s)
- attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or
- attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school.

School exclusion is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school:

- employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner
- being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, social-emotional, behavioural or academic needs of the young person
- discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (for example, excluded from NAPLAN).

Using terminology

Some researchers are concerned that some terms for absence problems such as 'school refusal' imply the problem lies with the student, while other terms suggest the problem lies solely with the parents/carers. Care needs to be taken to use these terms to describe the nature of the school attendance problems and not label the student or family experiencing them (Heyne et al. 2019).

In addition, while the categories above are widely used, they do not necessarily capture student motivational drivers accurately. For example, anxiety or other emotional distress may lead to 'school refusal' behaviours in one student and 'truancy' behaviours in another, due to differences in factors such as their family dynamics and how well-equipped parents/carers are to engage with the school.

School refusal is a topical issue in Australia following the COVID-19 pandemic

School refusal is a current concern among school communities. The issue has received media attention across Australia as teachers, school leaders and parents report experiencing growing rates of school refusal following the COVID-19 pandemic (Clark 2023). There is a common view that school refusal had already been increasing and the pandemic intensified the issue (Australian Senate 2023).

An Australian Senate inquiry into school refusal commenced in October 2022. The publicly available report, [The national trend of school refusal and related matters](#) (Australian Senate 2023), outlines the drivers of school refusal and related matters, and the impact on students, families and schools. The report calls for a national approach to strengthen data collection and the national evidence base. It also outlines opportunities to address school refusal:

- improved awareness and understanding of school refusal
- a stronger focus on student wellbeing in schools
- early identification and a framework for evidence-based initiatives
- better cross-sector collaboration
- more support for parents and carers.

Attendance in NSW public schools

This section summarises information on attendance rates and levels for students in NSW public schools in Semester 1 2022.

Student attendance in NSW public schools is reported in [CESE's annual attendance fact sheet](#). The fact sheet provides an overview of student attendance from Kindergarten to Year 12. It contains information on different cohorts of students and shows the impact of contextual factors.

The information provided here is from the [2022 Semester 1 student attendance fact sheet](#). Please refer to the fact sheet for more detail and guidance on interpreting the attendance data for NSW public schools.

There are 2 different measures of student attendance:

- **Attendance rate** is the percentage of days students attended school, compared to student enrolled days.
- **Attendance level** is the proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time.

School Attendance Policy

School attendance is compulsory in NSW. This means that all children from 6 years of age are legally required to be enrolled at and attending school, or to be registered for home schooling.

Parents or carers are responsible for making sure that their children comply with these legal requirements. Schools support parents by monitoring student attendance and helping to address attendance issues when they emerge. Where schools have unsuccessfully tried a range of strategies to help resolve a student's non-attendance, schools can obtain additional advice and support from Inclusion and Wellbeing staff at their local education office (NSW Department of Education 2023).

Please refer to [Compulsory school attendance](#) for more information on the department's School Attendance Policy.

Student attendance of NSW public schools in Semester 1 2022 – key findings

- COVID-19, influenza and floods are important contextual factors driving the 2022 decline in student attendance.
- Attendance rates declined from 2021 to 2022 in both primary and secondary schools (Figure 2):
 - overall attendance rate declined 4.8 percentage points from 89.8% to 85.0%
 - primary attendance rate declined 5.1 percentage points from 92.4% to 87.3%
 - secondary attendance rate declined 4.2 percentage points from 85.8% to 81.6%.
- The proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time (attendance level) declined significantly and was at a historic low in 2022 (Figure 3).
 - overall attendance level declined 22.5 percentage points from 67.2% to 44.7%
 - primary attendance level declined 25.9 percentage points from 75.1% to 49.2%
 - secondary attendance level declined 17.3 percentage points from 55.2% to 37.9%.
- For the first time since 2018 when the measure was introduced, in 2022 the attendance level of Years 7 to 10 (36.5%) dipped below that of Years 11 and 12 (41.2%).
- Attendance rates decreased more for students attending schools in remote areas of NSW than students attending schools in major cities or regional areas of NSW in 2022 compared to 2021. Attendance rate and level both remain lower overall for schools in remote areas than schools in major cities and regional areas.
- Sickness contributed significantly to the increase in absences from 2021 to 2022 for primary and secondary students (Figure 4).
- The number of unjustified explanations for absence decreased for secondary students but considerably increased for primary students in 2022 compared to 2021 (Table 1).
- The number of unexplained days remained high in 2022 and was the second highest category of absences, after sickness (Table 1).
- The number of suspension days decreased for both primary and secondary students in 2022 (Table 1).
- The prevalence of COVID-19 in the community was higher in 2022 than in 2021 and it continued to impact attendance data. All students, staff and visitors are advised to stay home when sick and only attend school when symptom free.
- The decline in attendance rates in 2022 was ‘remarkably consistent’ across all Australian states/territories and school sectors (ACARA 2022; refer to Table 2).

Figure 2

Attendance rate (%) for Semester 1 2018–2022 by education level, NSW public schools³

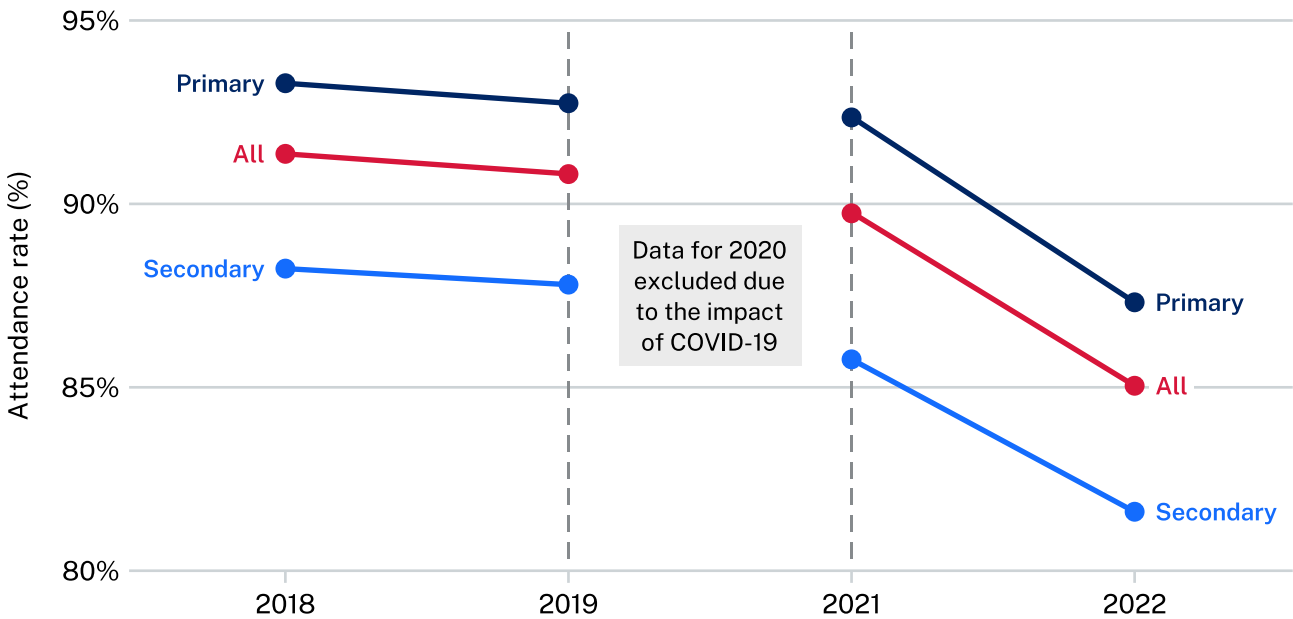
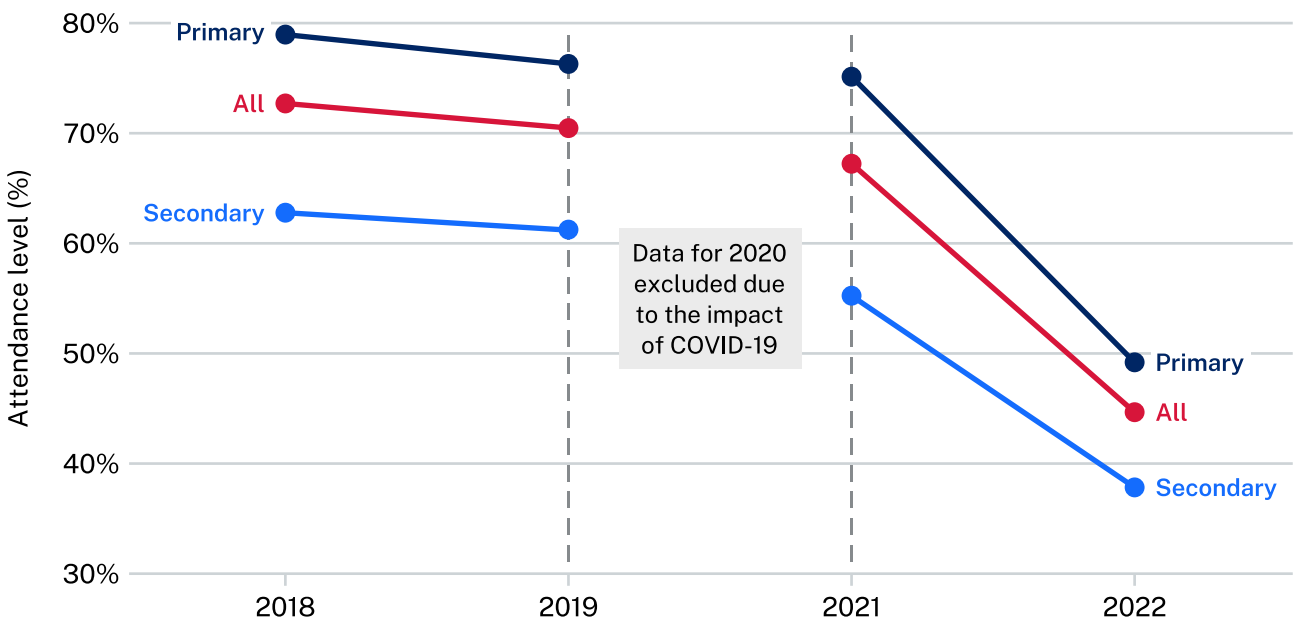


Figure 3

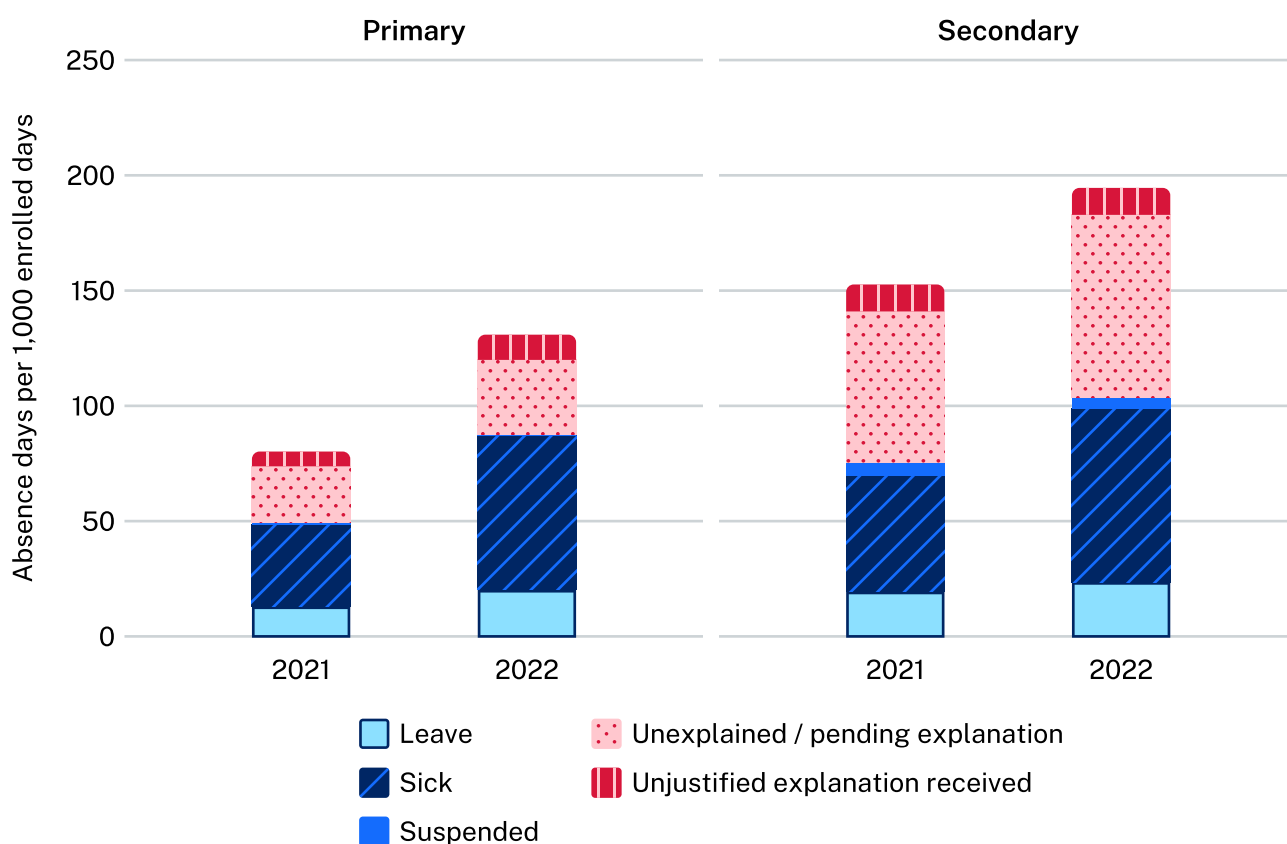
Attendance level (%) for Semester 1 2018–2022 by education level, NSW public schools



³ Student attendance data for 2020 is excluded from Figures 2 and 3 due to the impact of COVID-19. Please refer to [Effects of COVID-19 on attendance during Semester 1 2020](#) for more information.

Figure 4

Absences per 1,000 enrolled days by reason, Semester 1 2021 and 2022, primary and secondary, NSW public schools

**Table 1**

Absences per 1,000 enrolled days by reason, Semester 1 2021 and 2022, primary and secondary, NSW public schools

Reason	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	2021	2022	2021	2022	2021	2022
Leave	12.5	19.7	18.7	23.0	14.9	21.0
Sick	35.6	66.8	50.5	75.4	41.5	70.2
Suspended	0.6	0.4	5.7	4.7	2.6	2.1
Unexplained / pending explanation	24.5	32.4	65.6	79.6	40.7	51.1
Unjustified explanation received	6.5	11.3	12.0	11.6	8.7	11.4
Total	79.7	130.6	152.5	194.3	108.4	155.8

Table 2

Student attendance rates (%), Years 1 to 10, by state and territory and school sector, Australia, 2022 (ACARA 2022)

School sector	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Australia
Government	85.2	87.4	85.6	84.8	84.7	83.9	74.3	85.1	85.6
Catholic	88.1	87.8	88.1	87.0	89.2	86.9	76.5	85.3	87.9
Independent	88.7	89.1	89.5	87.6	88.6	87.9	85.4	88.8	88.8
All	86.4	87.7	86.7	85.6	86.1	85.1	76.0	85.9	86.5

Why does school attendance matter?

Research consistently shows that regular school attendance is important to students' learning, wellbeing and development. Attending school gives students the opportunity to benefit from the teaching and learning programs and other educational and developmental experiences that school environments provide. This section summarises the research findings on the impacts of school attendance.

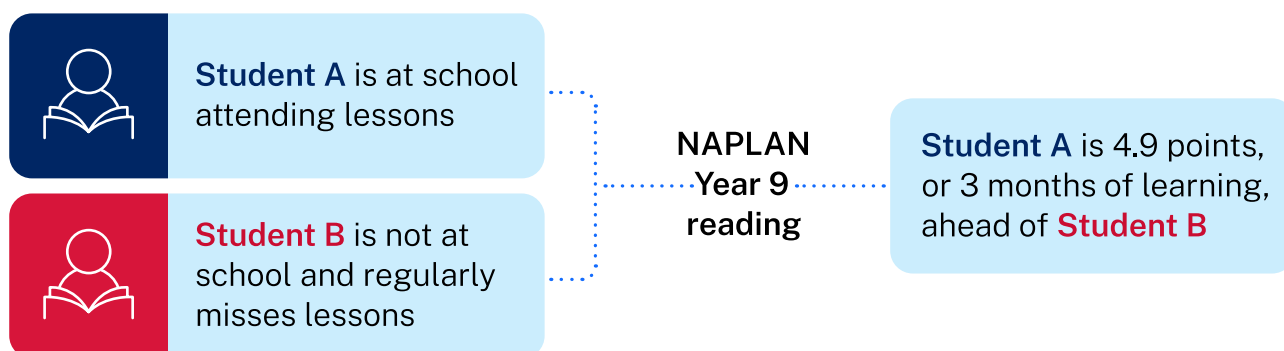
Attendance impacts student learning and academic achievement

Low school attendance is linked with poorer academic achievement and other educational outcomes. Key findings from Australian research are summarised as follows:

- Higher rates of absence from school are associated with lower NAPLAN scores (Daraganova et al. 2014; Hancock et al. 2013).
- The link between student absence and achievement is stronger among students who are disadvantaged due to structural inequities (Hancock et al. 2013).
- Unjustified absences may have a greater impact on achievement than authorised absences, likely due to co-varying factors. That is, students who are more likely to have unjustified absences are also more likely to be from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds or face other kinds of disadvantage that impact their academic achievement (Hancock et al. 2013; Hancock et al. 2018).
- 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 (Figure 5 CESE 2017).
- The Australian research is generally consistent with international evidence for low attendance having a detrimental impact on student learning and achievement (for example, Aucejo and Romano 2016; Carroll 2010; Gottfried 2015; Liu et al. 2021; Paredes and Ugarte 2011).

Figure 5

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



Attendance impacts wellbeing, development and long-term outcomes

Students who are frequently absent from school are more likely to not complete Year 12 and experience poorer long-term social, health and economic outcomes.

These include:

- increased likelihood of dropping out of school (Rocque et al. 2016)
- social isolation from the school community and peers (Gottfried 2015)
- poorer mental health and social functioning (González et al. 2019)
- negative effects on income and long-term earnings potential (Cattan et al. 2023)
- increased likelihood of involvement in the youth justice system (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).

Attendance patterns can persist throughout a student's schooling

Australian research shows positive attendance patterns are often established in early primary school, with positive school transitions playing a key role in setting these patterns (Daraganova et al. 2014). The research suggests it is important to identify and address problematic attendance behaviours early on in students' schooling.

Small improvements in attendance can have meaningful impacts on student outcomes

Research shows promising evidence for several school-based strategies to improve student attendance, though more high quality research is needed. A recent review by the Education Endowment Foundation (2022) found several approaches to be effective in improving attendance in ways that lead to meaningful change in student outcomes.

This paper outlines evidence-based strategies for improving attendance under 'What can schools do to improve attendance?' (page 26). Teachers and school leaders can use the accompanying resource [Understanding attendance research – what educators need to know](#) when unpacking the evidence to inform their planning and implementation of attendance strategies.

What drives attendance and absence?

There are many reasons why students may be regularly absent from school. Attendance problems are complex and have different drivers for different students at different times. Drivers of positive attendance can be thought of as the contextual factors of a student's background and experiences that serve as buffers to developing school attendance problems or equips them to overcome barriers to attending school.

It is important for teachers and school leaders to understand what drives attendance and absences for their students. School strategies to improve attendance need to be based on a clear understanding of the range of factors that may be impacting their students' attendance and consideration of which factors are within the school's influence (Mills et al. 2018).

The research literature typically groups drivers of attendance into 4 domains: student factors, family factors, community factors and school factors (Figure 6).⁴ Drivers under each domain are summarised below from multiple research sources (AIHW 2014; AITSL 2019; Gottfried 2009; Gubbels et al. 2019; Mills et al. 2021; Marvul 2012).

The domains are not mutually exclusive. Students may have several interrelated factors driving their attendance, or multiple barriers stemming from a shared root cause. For example, structural inequities can be experienced in multiple ways and present multiple barriers to attending school regularly. State and national disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic, floods and bushfires can have a lasting impact on drivers across all domains.

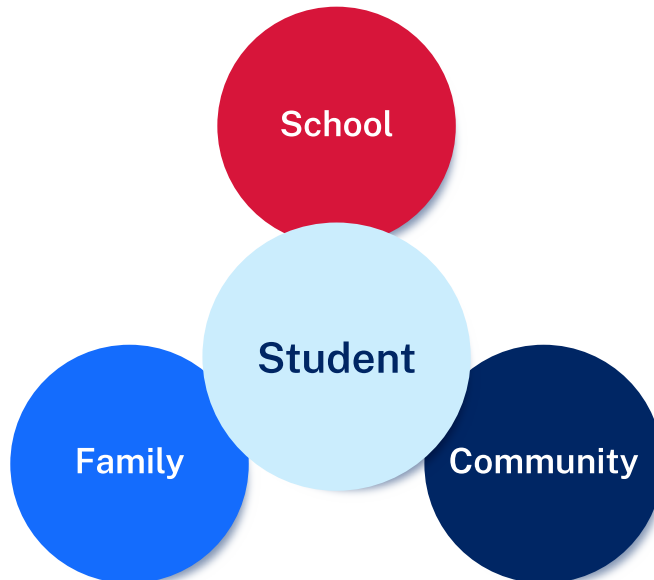
It is important to consider a student's needs holistically and consider the array of potential influences on their attendance, including factors that may be outside the school gate (Childs and Lofton 2021; Reid 2008).

⁴ Refer to Kearney and Graczyk (2020) for a review of how drivers of attendance are categorised and described.

Drivers of positive school attendance

Figure 6

Domains of interrelated factors driving positive school attendance



School factors

School factors linked to student attendance include factors related to teaching and learning, wellbeing and safety. These are enabled by factors of the physical school environment.

Teaching and learning:

- 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 use effective and engaging teaching practices.

Wellbeing:

- the school fosters positive cultures that value feelings of belonging, positive peer relationships, and friendly and approachable staff
- students perceive positive learning environments and well-managed classrooms
- the school fosters a sense of belonging or connectedness to the school community, for students and their families
- the school fosters a culture of meaningful and authentic parental and community involvement
- the school fosters positive relationships between teachers and students.

Safety:

- the school ensures students are physically and emotionally safe and secure at school
- the school conveys zero tolerance for bullying and racism
- the school fosters a culture of safety, inclusion and belonging

Physical environment (enabling factors):

- the school is equipped with adequate teacher resources together with appropriate technology, school infrastructure and class sizes to support quality teaching
- the school physical environments have adequate ventilation, lighting and temperature control.

Student factors

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

- having basic needs met, such as food, shelter and clothing
- 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.

Family factors

Family-related factors likely to influence a student’s attendance include:

- the parent or carer’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 their children, and that education is a resource that 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 unstable relationships, child maltreatment, conflict such as domestic violence, or substance abuse⁵
- 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.

Community factors

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

- 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.

Drivers of attendance and engagement– evidence from Tell Them From Me

Longitudinal research among NSW secondary school students shows that student engagement and wellbeing, as well as teaching practices, help to predict attendance (CESE 2022a). The research analysed TTFM survey responses from Year 7 and Year 9 students over 2 calendar years.

Key findings are outlined below, with more detail provided in Appendix 1.

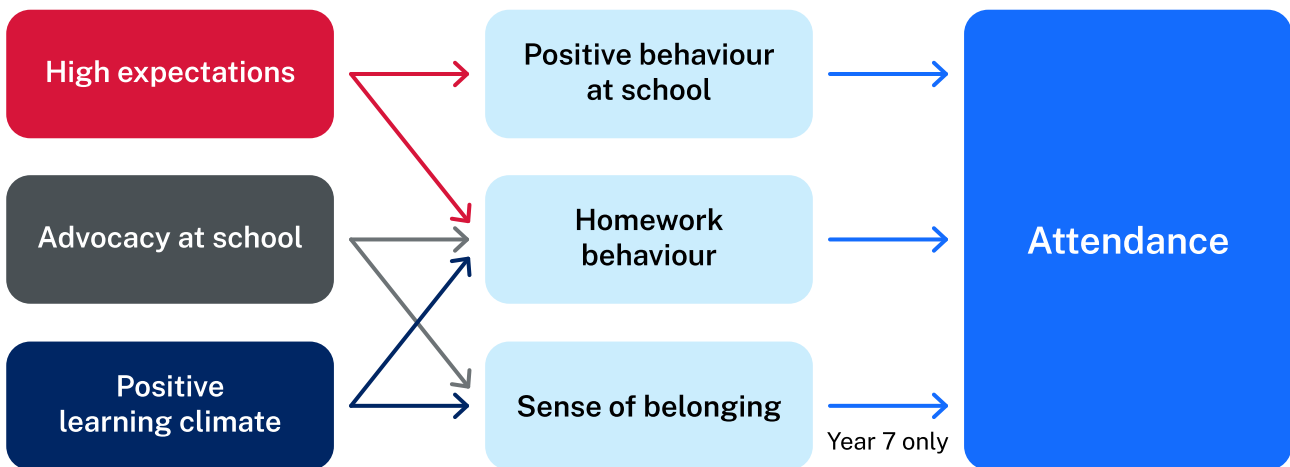
- Sense of belonging, positive behaviour at school and homework behaviour were relatively strong predictors of attendance.
- The engagement and wellbeing effects were stronger for students with lower attendance.
- For students from low-SES backgrounds, sense of belonging and homework behaviour were stronger predictors of attendance than for students from other backgrounds.

⁵ Readers concerned about the wellbeing or safety of a child or young person are encouraged to use the [Mandatory Reporter Guide](#). All department staff have a responsibility to recognise and respond to safety, welfare or wellbeing concerns for children and young people. Refer to [Mandatory reporting obligations](#).

- For younger Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander secondary students, wellbeing was particularly important.
- For older Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, teachers' high expectations were particularly important.
- Teaching practices indirectly impacted attendance by influencing engagement and wellbeing (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Effective teaching practices impact student attendance via engagement and wellbeing



Drivers of sense of belonging

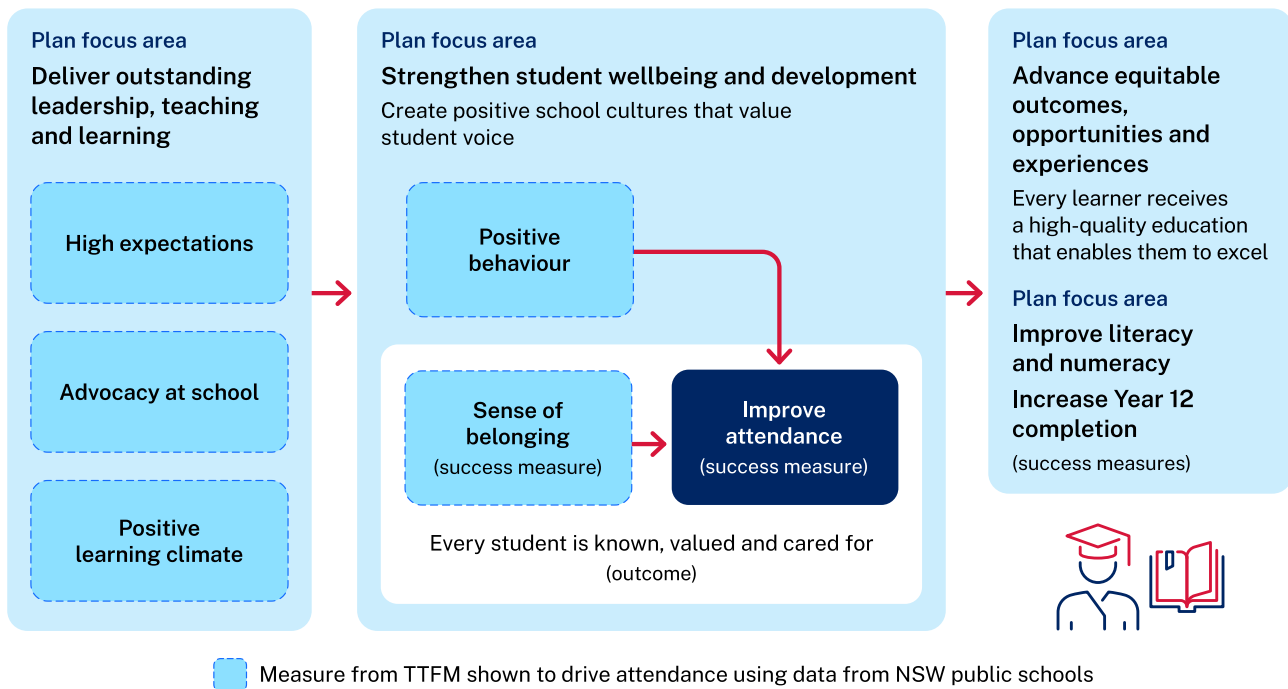
CESE has previously conducted longitudinal modelling using the TTFM data for both primary and secondary students to identify which teaching practices, engagement and wellbeing factors can drive a positive sense of belonging for students (CESE 2020a).

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 (CESE 2020a).

Tell Them From Me and attendance under Our Plan for NSW Public Education

Figure 8

Relationship between TTFM measures that drive attendance and elements of teaching, learning, student wellbeing and equity under Our Plan for NSW Public Education



Evidence from TTFM data highlights how good teaching practices, coupled with positive student engagement and wellbeing, drives attendance in NSW public schools. Figure 8 shows the TTFM measures that are particularly important for driving positive attendance. It sets out how focussing on these areas acts on the department's commitments in *Our Plan for NSW Public Education* to improve attendance to help every student learn, grow and belong at school.

For more information on how to use TTFM to complement your strategies to improve student attendance, please refer to the [Tell Them From Me and student attendance guide](#).

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](#)
- [Supporting high academic expectations](#)
- [Supporting students' sense of belonging](#).

The impact of COVID-19 on attendance drivers

An emerging body of research seeks to elucidate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student attendance. While COVID-19 had direct impacts on absences due to sickness, there is evidence the pandemic had indirect impacts too, through the effects on student contextual factors that drive attendance. In particular, COVID-related disruptions may have intensified some of the challenges in students' families, communities and personal experiences that contribute to school disengagement and absences.

The following research findings help to explain potential impacts of COVID-19 on drivers of student attendance. Further research relating to re-engagement in school-based learning after lockdowns is discussed in the next section (page 25).

- COVID-19 had a greater impact on attendance for students from low-SES backgrounds than high SES backgrounds in a sample of Tasmanian secondary students (Tomaszewski et al. 2023). Students who face socioeconomic disadvantage may have experienced more learning loss while learning from home, and/or greater challenges in the home related to finances, housing instability and health factors, which could affect their subsequent attendance and engagement with school. Findings point to the need for targeted efforts to support student engagement and attendance following periods of disruption (Tomaszewski et al. 2023).
- An Australian parliamentary research paper on school refusal concluded that disruptions from the pandemic, bushfires and floods have 'created contexts rich in the risk factors identified as contributing to school refusal, such as stressful life events or big changes, school transitions, family illness or fear of harm coming to a parent, and friendship difficulties.' (Clark 2023:17).
- A UK study highlights how seeking parent and community perspectives can help with understanding student attendance problems in the context of COVID-19 (McDonald et al. 2023). The researchers found attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly challenging for students with complex educational needs and pre-existing anxiety problems. They interviewed parents and educators to identify potential drivers, which include COVID-related anxiety, difficulties adapting to new school routines, poor home-school communication and collaboration, and concerns about academic catch-up. Perceptions of effective support were characterised by schools and families working closely together (McDonald et al. 2023).

What can schools do to improve attendance?

A growing research literature on strategies to support school attendance reveals some common themes among successful approaches. The overarching recommendation is to foster a positive attendance culture at school in which students and their families feel safe, welcomed and included (Hanover Research 2016; Humm Patnode et al. 2018; Kearney et al. 2019a, 2019b).

A multi-tiered system of support for school attendance

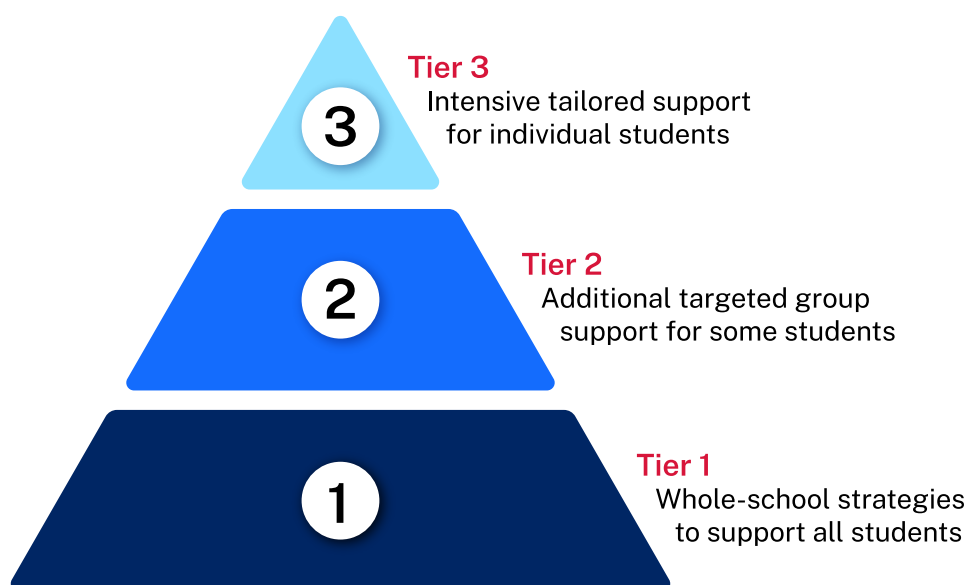
Attendance research and policy often use a multi-tiered model of support as a framework for implementing evidence-based strategies in schools. The framework is designed to support students' achievement and their social, emotional and behaviour needs from a strengths-based perspective. It aims to help schools to take a proactive, preventative approach to attendance problems and support all students based on their need (Kearney and Graczyk 2022). Principals and school leaders can use the model when planning a strategic approach to improve attendance.

The system is organised across 3 tiers of support (Figure 9):

- **Tier 1** is the foundation of a whole-school approach to improvement. Tier 1 comprises strategies that can be applied universally to support all students. The strategies focus on prevention, early intervention, and strengthening positive school cultures that enable every student to learn, grow and belong at school.
- **Tier 2** strategies are for students who need targeted support in addition to the Tier 1 strategies. Tier 2 strategies are typically provided to smaller groups of students within a school. This approach works best when strategies are targeted to students' needs and the specific factors that drive their absences from school.
- **Tier 3** involves intensive, individualised support for a few students. Students who need this level of support typically have complex barriers to attending school. Strategies include expanded Tier 2 strategies and specialised support.

Figure 9

Multi-tiered system of support for positive school attendance (adapted from Kearney et al. 2019a, 2019b)



The following sections summarise findings from research studies on effective school-based strategies to address attendance. Tier 1 strategies to reach all students are discussed first as they relate to school-wide systems of support for the broader student population.

Targeted strategies are then discussed together. These are evidence-based strategies that schools may decide to use if they match the needs of their students. Targeted strategies can be used at any of the 3 tiers, depending on the unique school context. The tiered system is to help schools decide on strategies appropriate to their context and allocate resources strategically. For example, Tier 3 strategies may include expanded or more intensive versions of Tier 2 strategies that are tailored to each individual student's needs.

Evidence-based strategies for a whole school approach to positive attendance

Student attendance, engagement and positive school cultures are closely interlinked. Many of the factors driving low attendance for a student can work in tangent to create a cycle of disengagement and absence (AITSL 2019). Creating positive school environments, in which students feel a sense of belonging at school and connection with their education, is fundamental to preventing the absence-disengagement cycle.

Research on positive school attendance cultures suggests 3 interrelated aspects:

- motivating students to attend school by ensuring school is a welcoming place in which all students and their families feel safe, included and like they belong
- strengthening engagement with learning when students are attending school
- building a shared understanding of the school's expectations and goals for attendance, with clear communication of the policies, processes and responsibilities involved.

The strategies outlined below have evidence of a clear link with higher attendance. They can be thought of as foundational support that all work to foster a positive attendance culture at school.

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).

Promoting connectedness and sense of 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 2020a).

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. 2021). 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 2020b).

Ensuring cultural safety

Cultural safety recognises that individual students have distinct cultural identities that shape their school experience and use whole-of-school practices to make students feel welcome and supported, and families and communities feel connected to the school (CESE 2022b). Research on attendance for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students shows how ensuring cultural safety for students and their families is critical to supporting positive attendance (AIHW 2014).

For more information on cultural safety in schools and supporting the educational goals of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, refer to [Strong strides together: Meeting the educational goals for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students](#) (CESE 2022b).

Implementing an anti-bullying plan

Bullying, including cyber bullying, has a significant impact on attendance (Reid 2008; 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. 2021).⁶

⁶ CESE’s [review of anti-bullying strategies](#) (2017) contains further information on effective approaches to addressing bullying in schools.

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/carers about school attendance:

- communication with families when students are absent
- tailored workshops to educate parents/carers about non-attendance issues
- home visits for students who have severe non-attendance problems.⁷

Evidence-based attendance strategies targeted to student need

The whole-school strategies are broad-based approaches that work to support positive attendance for all students. However, some students have additional challenges with attending school regularly and need additional support to address them.

This section summarises evidence-based strategies that aim to address or lessen the effects of particular challenges some students face to attending school.

Reviewing the research evidence

The current research review identifies several school-based strategies that show promising evidence of effectiveness in improving student attendance. However, school attendance is also an under-studied area in need of more high quality evaluations. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of attendance strategies find there are many strategies in the literature with insufficient evidence to draw conclusions on their effectiveness (EEF 2022; Eklund et al. 2022; Freeman et al. 2019; Maynard et al. 2018).

The lack of strong evidence is partly due to the high variation among studied attendance strategies. There are many approaches targeting different drivers of attendance, and they may be implemented in different ways that are not always adequately described in the research study (EEF 2022; Eklund et al. 2022).

Despite the research limitations, it is evident that schools can have positive effects on student attendance and meaningful impacts on the subsequent long-term impacts (EEF 2022). Targeted school-based strategies must be based on a clear understanding of their students' attendance challenges and needs (Kearney and Graczyk 2022).

⁷ There is evidence that home visits may also be effective in addressing student absence and disengagement from school due to the COVID-19 pandemic when implemented as a purposeful, holistic program. Refer to the full evaluation report of the [Learner Engagement and Attendance Program \(LEAP\)](#), a home visit program in the USA (CCERC 2022).

Summary of evidence-based strategies

Meal programs

Meal programs involve the school providing meals to students for free or at a reduced cost. The 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).

Other school-based health services

In some areas, COVID-19 drew more attention to school-based initiatives for students' physical and mental health (Santibañez and Guarino 2021). School-located health services such as school nurses, dental care and school-based health centres, including hybrid models of on-site and telehealth services, show promise for supporting attendance through increasing access to health services and reducing sickness (Allison et al. 2019; Maughan 2003; Padula et al. 2018; Seirawan et al. 2012).

Mental health care

Mental health care may benefit attendance for students experiencing school refusal and other absences related to emotional distress or mental health problems such as anxiety or depression (Allison et al. 2019). Mental health treatments are particularly beneficial for attendance when they are specifically designed to help students overcome the negative emotional states that underpin their school refusal (Maynard et al. 2018). Mental health treatments for attendance problems at the Tier 3 level (intensive individualised support) may involve schools partnering with local community services including mental health services, general practitioners, justice system personnel and social services (Kearney and Graczyk 2021).

The impact of in-school mental health services, including school counsellors, on student attendance is an under-researched area (Allison et al. 2019; Kearney et al. 2021). The limited evidence available does suggest a link between access to school counsellors and improved student outcomes (Donohue et al. 2022; Kearney et al. 2021).

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 US-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).

School-based mentoring

Mentoring programs are relationship-based interventions for students with truancy and chronic absence problems. A common model in the literature is 'Check & 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 & 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 (2013) suggest co-curricular after-school programs can improve engagement and attendance by strengthening a student's sense of belonging and positive relationships with teachers.

Common elements of effective strategies

A systematic review of effective strategies for improving attendance identified 3 most common elements (Freeman et al. 2019), outlined below. These are particularly applicable to the more intensive strategies used in Tier 3 and some Tier 2 supports.

- **Individualised training in personal and social capabilities:** strategies 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:** programs involving the active participation of parents or other family members. Family support strategies include 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.
- **Positive rewards tailored to student circumstances:** positive rewards and recognition that incentivises attendance (for example, token economies), typically used in combination with other intervention elements and tailored to the individual student's motivations and behaviours.

Incentive-based strategies should be used carefully

Incentives for attendance should be used with care or they can undermine other strategies to support engagement and positive school cultures (Balu and Ehrlich 2018; Gentle-Genitty et al. 2020). A study on using rewards to motivate student attendance found it can disengage some students and decrease their attendance rather than improve it (Robinson et al. 2021).

When used appropriately incentives for improved attendance can work. However, attendance incentives tend to be less motivating for older students than younger students. Incentives that focus on perfect attendance are also less likely to be effective and may in fact lead to lower than expected attendance after students receive the incentive (Robinson et al. 2021).

Missing out on rewards can contribute to disengagement for some students, particularly when they feel they have little agency over their absences (for example, absences due to sickness, safety concerns or family issues).

Balu and Ehrlich (2018) provide the following framework to help schools decide when to use incentive-based strategies:

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

Check & Connect – an effective school dropout prevention strategy

The Check & 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:

- **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.
- **‘Check’ component:** systematic monitoring of student performance data to identify indicators of disengagement.
- **‘Connect’ component:** provision of timely, personalised support matched to the individual student’s needs.
- **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.

Further reading

- [Check & Connect Student Engagement Intervention Model](#) – information and resources on the program and implementation
- [Check & Connect intervention report](#) – full review of the effects of Check & Connect on student outcomes

Re-engaging students in school after the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 disrupted the lives of Australian families through social distancing, school closures, temporary moves to home-based online learning and lockdowns. At a population level, children and young people experienced heightened levels of mental health symptoms since the pandemic began, with negative lasting impacts on learning, friendships and family relationships (Li et al. 2022; Sicouri et al. 2023).

At the same time, some students experienced no change or improved mental wellbeing during COVID-19 lockdowns, driven by stronger relationships with friends and family, less loneliness and exclusion, reduced bullying, better management of school tasks, and more sleep and exercise during lockdown (Soneson et al. 2023). These students may also have experienced difficulty transitioning back to school-based learning and subsequent attendance challenges.

Australian research suggests even relatively short periods of learning from home risked detrimental changes in students’ wellbeing and behaviour after lockdowns, and that students who disengaged with learning when learning from home were likely to have difficulty re-engaging following return to school-based learning (Fray et al. 2022). Teachers, school leaders and parents/carers have also reported experiencing greater incidents of school refusal following the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting student attendance (Australian Senate 2023).

School attendance initiatives that target mental health in the context of COVID-19 is still a new area for practice and research at the time of the current review. Research will likely grow in this area as the evidence mounts in relation to the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health, learning and wellbeing (for example, Li et al. 2022; Goldfeld et al. 2022; Sicouri et al. 2023).

The emerging research on re-engaging students in school after the pandemic suggests schools may be well-placed to make a positive difference to COVID-related attendance challenges using strategies from the wider evidence base (Australian Senate 2023; Havik and Ingul 2022; Li et al. 2022).

What educators need to know

CESE's review of new research on attendance along with the broader attendance literature on drivers and effective school-based strategies suggests 3 key areas to support a whole-school approach to positive attendance:

- **Nurture a positive attendance culture** by making school a welcoming place to be for students and their families, through practices that build academic engagement, sense of belonging and positive learning environments.
- **Strengthen attendance data systems and processes** to ensure teachers and school leaders have quality data and the resources they need to use it well to identify attendance concerns, track progress and measure success.
- **Enhance engagement with students, parents and community** with timely 2-way communication between schools and parents, and positive messaging about expectations for attendance and the value and impact of attending school regularly.

A summary of these 3 areas can be found in the accompanying resource to this paper, [Understanding attendance research review – what educators need to know](#), along with suggestions for putting the strategies into practice in NSW public schools.

In the context of NSW public schools, modelling of TTFM data suggests a pathway through which teaching practices may drive positive attendance by impacting student engagement and wellbeing (refer to Appendix 1). TTFM measures of teaching practices that may drive attendance in this way are high expectations, advocacy at school and positive learning climates. For guidance on exploring TTFM measures that drive attendance in Scout, refer to the [Tell Them From Me and student attendance guide](#).

In addition to school-wide strategies, some students need extra support targeted to their particular challenges to attending school regularly. Teachers and school leaders can refer to the department's [Planning to improve attendance](#) resource for guidance on improving attendance in their school context to best meet the needs of their students.

What enables schools to improve attendance?

Improving attendance in schools relies on adequate resourcing and other system-level supports. A review of the research literature identified a set of enablers to achieving positive attendance in schools (CESE 2022a). These can be thought of as conditions or factors that can increase the chances of successfully implementing a new strategy. They are stronger when well-integrated and grounded in system-level support with resourcing and capability building.

The key enablers are outlined below. More information and discussion of the research base is in [Understanding attendance – a review of the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches](#) (CESE 2022a).

Effective leadership

School leaders play an essential role in whole-of-school success. Effective school leaders set the stage for implementing positive attendance strategies. They ensure coherence across aspects of a school's attendance culture, set the school's vision and manage the strategic planning for effective and sustainable improvements to attendance.

For guidance on leading strategic attendance in your school, please refer to the Attendance Matters resource [Planning to improve attendance](#).

Actionable data

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

By regularly examining and reflecting on their attendance data, school leaders and teachers can identify students in need of targeted support, evaluate the effectiveness of attendance strategies, and determine what adjustments to make (Kearney and Graczyk 2014; Sanchez 2012). At a broader level, network leaders and support staff use data systems to identify statewide patterns, trends and areas of need (Hanover Research 2016; Reid 2012).

Community engagement

The underlying reasons for regular absences from school are multi-faceted and often require partnerships between schools, families and communities.

Parents and carers

One key factor is parent/carer awareness of the importance of attending school. 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 parent-driven absences might be predominant amongst younger students, and student-driven absences amongst older students. For both kinds of absences, schools need positive communication with families so they can work together to address the causes of absence.

Research identifies that high-quality family and community involvement with schools can increase positive student 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 (Kearney and Graczyk 2014).

School community

Schools may need to partner with the community to address underlying factors of non-attendance and deliver some types of targeted programs.⁸

Strong partnerships with the community can help schools to engage students and families in identifying attendance barriers and mobilise community resources to deliver interventions.

A Queensland case study illustrates how creating broader community awareness around attendance was a key element of one school's program to improve attendance rates (DETE 2013). It describes how Woodridge State High School in Logan, Queensland, implemented the state government's Every Day Counts initiative, which aimed to change parent, community and student attitudes to school attendance. Overall attendance rates at the school increased from 80.2% in 2008 (when the initiative was first implemented) to 90% in 2011. School leaders attribute their success to 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).

⁸ Refer to [5 main approaches](#) the department recommends using to improve health and wellbeing in schools.

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 (that is, 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 goals aligned with the vision and clear roles 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.

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 supported by school and system leaders.

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Appendix 1: Analysis of TTFM and student attendance

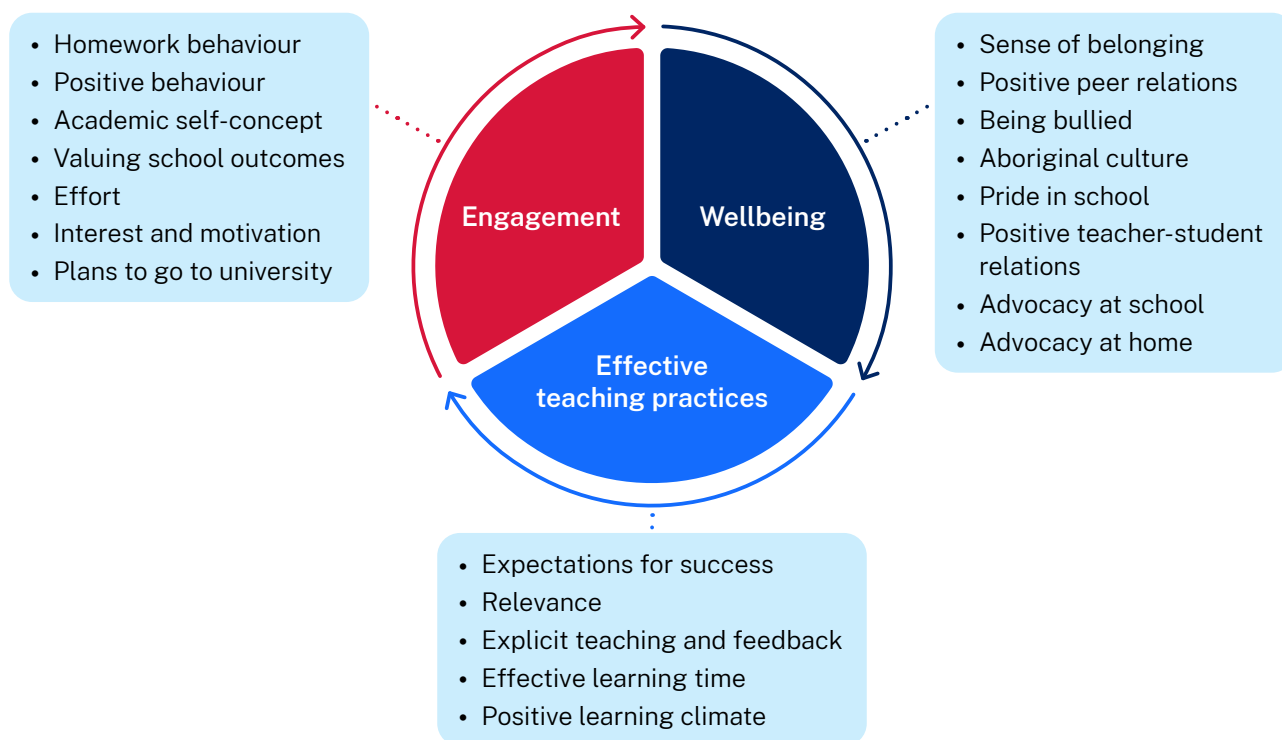
To investigate drivers of attendance in NSW public schools, CESE conducted a research project in collaboration with the University of Queensland. The work examined TTFM student survey data to explore potential predictors of attendance among NSW secondary school students. The project followed over 25,000 students from Years 7 and 9 over 2 years to examine how student engagement, student wellbeing and teaching practices may affect attendance rates:¹

- Of the 20 measures considered (Figure 10), 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 (or support) at school and positive learning climate affect behaviour and belonging, which in turn predict attendance.

These results account for student socioeconomic status, prior achievement, other engagement, wellbeing and teaching practice indicators, and school context. Refer to Appendix 2 for further information on the TTFM measures analysed.

Figure 10

Tell Them From Me measures examined in the drivers of attendance project



¹ Note that a change in the collection of student-level attendance data from 2018 led to comparatively lower attendance rates in 2019.

Finding 1:

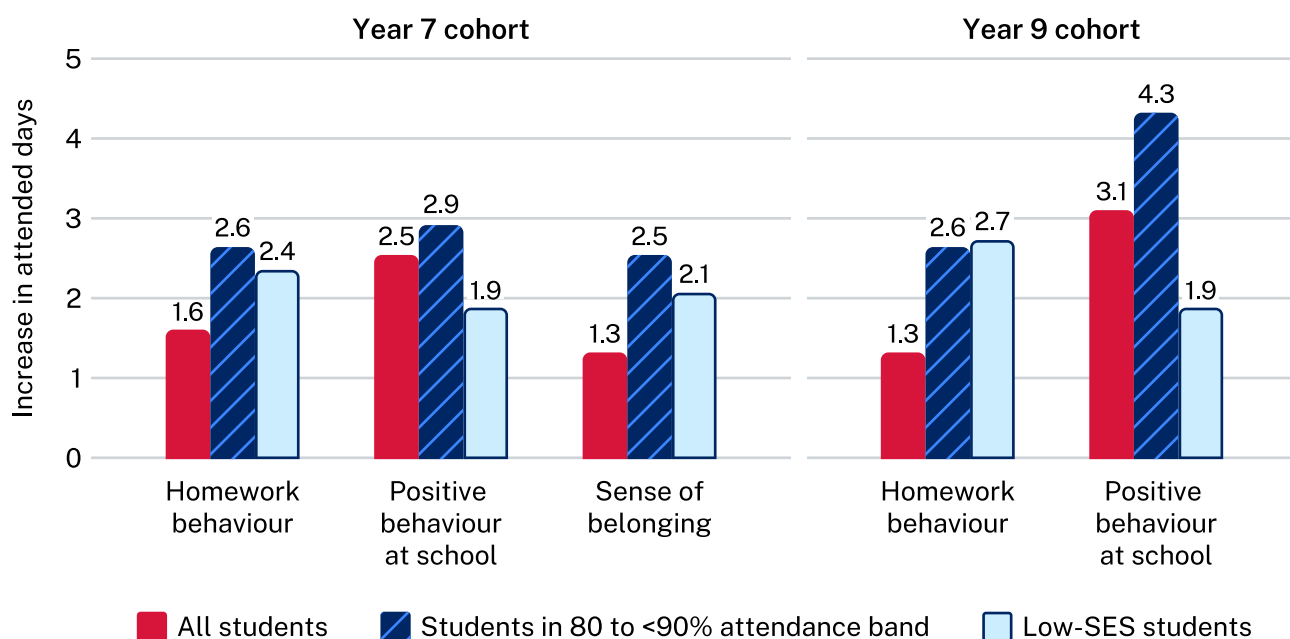
Homework behaviour, positive behaviour at school and sense of belonging are relatively strong predictors of attendance

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 11 illustrates how much a hypothetical student's attendance could increase if their engagement or wellbeing improved from a low to a high level.² 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 11, 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 11, bars at the left of each group of bars).

Figure 11

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



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 2019).

² 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.³ 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 11, middle bars in each group of bars).

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 11, 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.

³ 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 4:

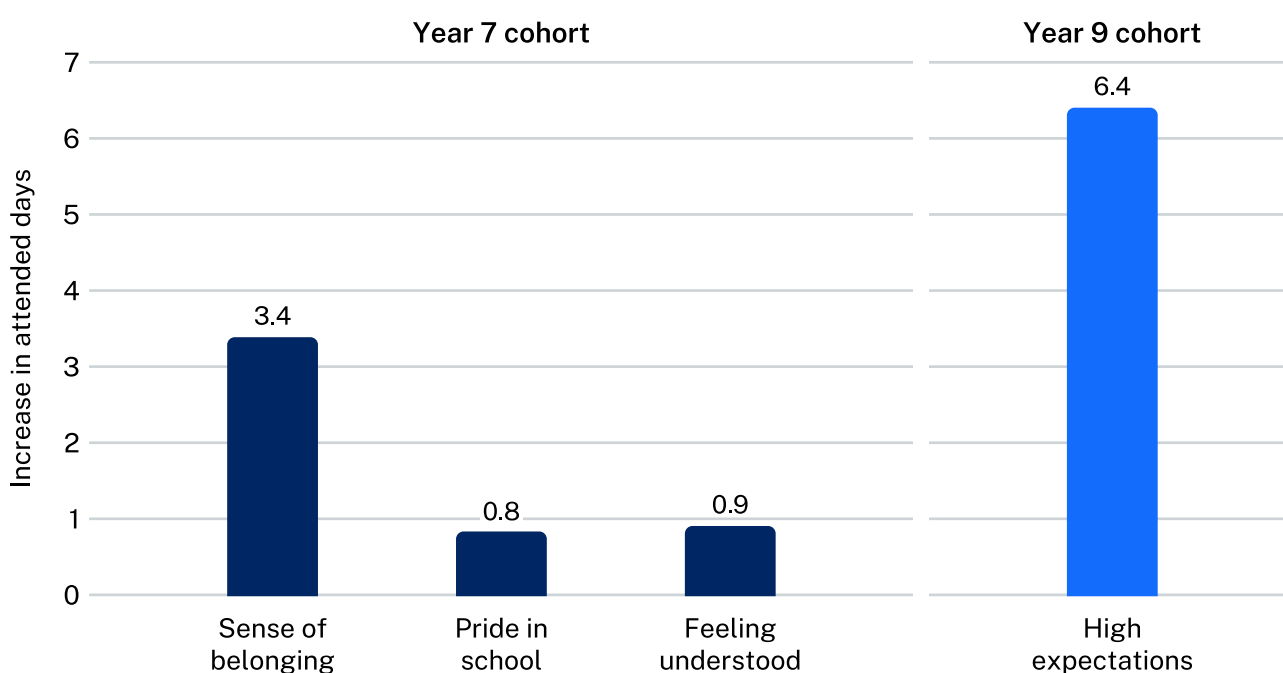
For younger Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander secondary students, wellbeing is particularly important

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander 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 12, dark bars).⁴

Together, improvements in these 3 factors could result in about 5 additional days in school for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in this cohort.

Figure 12

Predicted increase in attended days if Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students move from low to high wellbeing and teaching practice



Finding 5:

For older Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, teachers' high expectations are particularly important

For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander 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 and/or Torres Strait Islander students' attendance by more than 6 additional days per school year (Figure 12, bar on right).

⁴ 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 6:

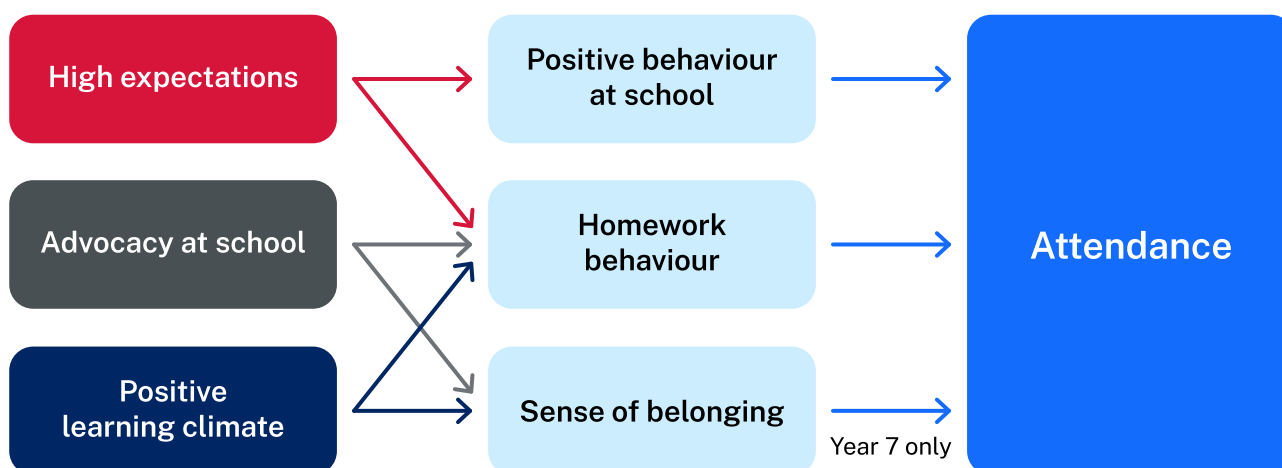
Teachers indirectly affect attendance by influencing engagement and wellbeing

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 school-based factors related to positive attendance (refer to section 'Drivers of positive school attendance', page 20): high expectations for success, positive learning climate and explicit teaching practice (academic climate) as well as advocacy at school (social climate). Figure 13 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 13

Effective teaching practices impact student attendance via student engagement and wellbeing



Want to know more? 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:

- [What works best: 2020 update](#) and [What works best in practice](#)
- [Supporting advocacy at school](#)
- [Supporting high academic expectations](#)
- [Supporting students' sense of belonging.](#)



Appendix 2: TTFM 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 'Drivers of positive school attendance', 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.

Related resources

CESE's Understanding attendance resources

- Understanding attendance – a review of the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches (2022)
- Understanding attendance research review – what educators need to know
- Tell Them From Me and student attendance – a guide for using Scout as a tool to identify themes that support student attendance

Other CESE resources

- Supporting school completion – the importance of engagement and effective teaching
- Full list of What Works Best resources for teachers, school leaders and school communities

Attendance data for NSW public schools

- Annual attendance fact sheet for NSW public schools
- NSW Education Data Hub attendance and retention datasets

Other NSW Department of Education resources

- Attendance matters – resources for schools
- School Attendance Policy

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