

# Student absenteeism is a symptom of a possible problem, not the problem itself.

Western Australian Department of Communities  
Churchill Fellowship to research factors and contexts linked with  
successful and failing student absenteeism strategies

**Report by Kirsten Hancock,  
2019 Churchill Fellow**



**Winston  
Churchill Trust**

*Learn globally, inspire locally.*

**Indemnity clause:**

I understand that the Churchill Trust may publish this Report, either in hard copy or on the internet or both, and consent to such publication. I indemnify the Churchill Trust against any loss, costs or damages it may suffer arising out of any claim or proceedings made against the Trust in respect of or arising out of the publication of any Report submitted to the Trust and which the Trust places on a website for access over the internet. I also warrant that my Final Report is original and does not infringe the copyright of any person, or contain anything which is, or the incorporation of which into the Final Report is, actionable for defamation, a breach of any privacy law or obligation, breach of confidence, contempt of court, passing-off or contravention of any other private right or of any law.

Signed: Kirsten Hancock

Dated: 18/10/2023

**Acknowledgements:**

This project would not have been possible without the support of The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, its staff, and sponsorship by the Western Australian Department of Communities.

I am indebted to the many individuals and teams who gave up their time to share their expertise on school attendance problems. I am particularly grateful to those contacts who introduced me to their wider networks and added to the richness of information I received.

Thanks to Stephen Zubrick and Alan Dodson for supporting my Fellowship application and helping me to get over the line.

Thanks, Anne Hampshire and the Research & Advocacy team at The Smith Family, for creating the space that allowed me the time to do this work and who will be so integral in supporting me to disseminate the findings widely and effectively.

Finally, thank you Patrick Dunlop and Tony Hancock, who kept everything running smoothly at home while I pursued this rare and valuable opportunity. I could not have done this without you.

## About the author and motivation for this Churchill Fellowship

### Why I'm interested in the problem of declining student attendance

I was introduced to the world of student attendance research in 2012. The (then) Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations commissioned our team at the Telethon Kids Institute to examine the relationship between attendance rates and student achievement outcomes, using student population data from the Western Australia Department of Education. We released the Every Day Counts report (Hancock et al., 2013) the following year, then I spent the next seven years developing a more detailed research program to further understand student attendance problems. This work included completing a PhD (Hancock, 2019), where I investigated how different reasons for missing school had varying impacts on student achievement outcomes. I also provided research advice to a cross-agency steering group tasked with addressing student attendance problems in Western Australia.

### Student attendance before COVID

While I developed a comprehensive understanding of the research identifying causes and consequences of student attendance problems, I found it far more challenging to address the inevitable (and far more important) question that followed, "What do we do about it?". I never had a clear answer for policymakers or school leaders about what they could or should do. Several issues made it challenging to address those questions.

First, it was clear that most schools were trying many different things in response to attendance issues. However, these efforts were rarely

captured or evaluated, and there were limited opportunities for sharing what was (and was not) effective, for which students, or in what circumstances. Schools were trying hard but often guessed how they should respond, throwing darts at a board in the dark. I couldn't offer helpful *practice-informed* advice on what to do.

Second, the research literature at the time primarily focused on describing the problem as a first step, and the evidence base supporting particular responses was limited. Consequently, I couldn't offer any *evidence-based* advice on what to do.

Third, my response was typically, 'It depends on why your students are not attending school'. The reasons why students miss school vary from student to student, classroom to classroom, and school to school, and the levels of knowledge schools or education departments had about those reasons were limited. As such, there could be no single answer about what to do. Schools needed (1) better information about the issues and (2) a range of strategies to help them respond to different problems.

A fourth and more general problem was the limited research funding available to Australian researchers to improve the evidence base or evaluate the work schools were already doing in the space.

This Churchill Fellowship aimed to gather insights about research, policy, and practice in other countries and help develop a structured approach or high-quality resource to help Australian schools address these issues.

## Student attendance during COVID

I was due to commence this Churchill Fellowship in March 2020; however, the emerging pandemic saw me cancel those plans one week before my scheduled departure. Schools and education departments worldwide focused on switching to online learning, and student attendance was just one issue that schools had to respond to. These challenges dissipated my momentum. I also decided to change careers – departing from a senior academic role and moving to a research role with *The Smith Family*, a non-profit organisation providing long-term support to over 61,000 Australian students experiencing disadvantage to remain engaged with their education. I'm now responsible for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of students on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* scholarship program. One of the key outcomes we monitor is student attendance, and I'm still asked, 'How do we improve attendance for the students we support?'. Thus, the same question persists, albeit in a new context.

## Emerging opportunities post-COVID

Australian attendance rates were declining before the pandemic arrived, and the downward trend has only worsened since (see Figure 1). Similarly, the proportion of young people leaving school before starting Year 12 has increased steadily between 2017 (15.2%) and 2022 (19.5%), reflecting increasing disengagement through the secondary years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). In response to apparent increases in school refusal, the Australian Senate commenced an inquiry in 2022 investigating the trends and impacts of school refusal. The inquiry attracted 170 submissions, with the final report published in August 2023 (Senate Education and Employment References Committee, 2023).

Australian education ministers also noted these falling attendance rates earlier this year and commissioned the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) to investigate the causes of declining attendance and identify evidence-based approaches that support attendance. The 2019–2023 National Schools Reform Agreement review identified declining attendance rates as a significant barrier to improving student achievement outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2022). The 2025–2028 NSRA development is now underway, providing a timely opportunity to identify and implement significant structural and systemic reforms to support improved student attendance and engagement and student achievement outcomes.

This recent history suggests we need new approaches for supporting student attendance and that the approaches adopted in the past (with uncertain efficacy) are no longer sufficient to address the issue. The delayed timing of this Churchill Fellowship, therefore, provides several advantages. The international research literature—rapidly building before 2020—continues to grow exponentially.

The International Network for School Attendance was established in 2019 and continues to grow its reach. Education departments, regions/districts, schools, and educators are now recognising attendance problems where they previously were not, and the experience of school closures and lockdowns offers new perspectives of what students and their families value about their education. Globally, more schools are trying different approaches to address student attendance problems, and these attempts provide an opportunity to learn more about how to respond most effectively.

Perhaps most helpfully, the pandemic disruptions provided the impetus and opportunity for Future Ed and Attendance Works to develop their third edition of their Attendance

Playbook (Jordan, 2023). Released as my travel commenced, this resource provides a comprehensive synthesis of up-to-date, evidence-based strategies for addressing student attendance problems. It includes clear assessments of research quality and provides essential caveats and considerations for implementing particular intervention strategies, along with examples of where those strategies have been successful. It also has a companion implementation guide that helps schools select the right approach for the right problem and encourages schools to evaluate their impact.

The Attendance Playbook formed the basis of many discussions I had throughout my travels. Rather than ask, 'What strategies work?', I could reframe questions to 'What is needed to ensure these strategies work in practice?' and develop a greater understanding of the contexts contributing to success and failure.

Student attendance has been, and will continue to be, a vexing problem for students, families, and schools across the globe. With a renewed focus on the value of attendance and a growing and strengthened research literature, I hope this Fellowship report will help Australian policymakers, education departments, school leaders, educators, and families better support students to attend school to the best of their ability.

### Language and definitions in this report:

This report adopts varied terminology to describe student attendance and non-attendance at school. Definitions and terminology can vary across settings and countries, though the headline measures typically refer to similar behaviours. Attendance or attendance rates refer to whether students are at school on the days they are expected to attend. For example, an attendance rate of 90% indicates a student attended school 90% of the days available in a given period (e.g. term, semester, year). The

absence rate is the complement of the attendance rate and refers to the proportion of available days that a student did not attend school. A student with a 90% attendance rate will also have an absence rate of 10%.

Terms used in this report generally relate to levels or categories of attendance or absence. For example, the United States often (though not always) uses 'chronic absenteeism' to describe students with attendance rates lower than 90%. In New Zealand, chronic absenteeism describes students with attendance rates lower than 70%. In Australia, state and national reporting provide overall attendance rates and the proportion of students attending more than 90%, which is often described as 'regular attendance'.

I use different terms in different contexts throughout the report to reflect the language used in the local context. General phrases like 'absenteeism' or 'low attendance' do not refer to specific attendance levels.

Some systems differentiate between types of absences, for example, excused and unexcused (in the US) and authorised or unauthorised (in Australia). These definitions require school leaders to make judgements about the reasons for absences and whether these absences are 'legitimate'. The application of definitions can vary from school to school and system to system. As such, I use these terms to reflect how they are used in the local context and do not intend for these descriptions to serve as value judgements on student or family behaviours.

Finally, I sometimes refer to school refusal when describing particular initiatives, particularly the recent Senate Inquiry into school refusal. This terminology is problematic for many reasons, and the students and families affected by school refusal prefer alternative language to reflect the broader challenges and reasons why students *can't* attend school.



**Contact details:**

For further information, please contact me via my Fellows page on the Churchill Trust website:

<https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/kirsten-hancock-wa-2019/>

**Keywords:**

Attendance; absenteeism; school attendance problems; multi-tiered systems of support.

## Table of Contents

About the author and motivation for this Churchill Fellowship .....	3
Executive Summary.....	8
Introduction .....	10
Scope of this report.....	10
(Why) Is student attendance a problem? .....	10
Attendance rates in Australia are low and declining. ....	11
Rationale for visiting New Zealand and the United States .....	12
Travel itinerary and focus of discussions .....	14
Data quality in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.....	17
Main findings .....	18
What has contributed to low and declining attendance? .....	18
Recent research from England.....	21
What are we getting wrong, and what can we do instead?.....	22
Legislative change in Illinois and policy change in Chicago Public Schools .....	23
How we can work more effectively.....	28
Case Studies .....	32
Case Study 1 - Chicago elementary and middle schools.....	32
Case study 2 - Chicago high school .....	35
Recommendations .....	37
Resources for educators, support staff, and policymakers .....	40
Itinerary and meeting details.....	42
Dissemination plan .....	46
References .....	47

## Executive Summary

Over the past century, extensive research has linked low attendance to a myriad of adverse outcomes, such as academic underperformance, social-emotional challenges, and higher chances of early school leaving. Consequently, this can have long-term impacts on post-secondary and career prospects, and broader life outcomes, including health, wellbeing, and social inclusion.

Australia's long-term increase in absence rates is of increasing concern for educators, researchers and policymakers nationwide. Declines were evident before 2020, and the health and education disruptions of the pandemic exacerbated those declines. In 2022, average absence rates stood at 12.2% for primary students and 15.3% for secondary students, equating to the loss of up to 6 weeks of school in a year. Significantly, around half of Australian students in Years 7–10 and 45% in Years 1–6 missed over 10% of the school year.

This report summarises discussions with professionals from various fields, including education, law, psychology, sociology, history, and social work. These interactions spanned two countries, New Zealand and the United States, and revealed diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to school attendance issues, especially in the post-COVID era. The report focuses on collating these findings and translating them into recommendations for the Australian context.

### Main Findings

#### Reasons for lower attendance

With similar declines in attendance evident in both New Zealand and the United States (and elsewhere internationally), I report multiple

contributing factors to declining attendance.

These include:

- Increased incidence of illness, and increased propensity to stay home when students have minor illness.
- More in-term holidays in 2022 following limited travel in previous years.
- Changed parent and student attitudes and behaviours.
- Concerns about student safety.
- Reduced developmental readiness among young children entering school.
- Decreased student mental health and wellbeing.
- Increased academic pressure to catch up for students who fell behind during COVID.
- Increased school refusal.
- Increased poverty and cost of living pressures.
- Increased teacher workforce pressures.

Recent research from England points to similar issues contributing to reduced attendance.

#### What doesn't work

Throughout all conversations, and published research, it was clear that **punitive approaches to attendance problems are ineffective at best, and counterproductive at worst**. These approaches are largely based on incorrect assumptions about the reasons underpinning attendance problems, and do nothing to address those reasons.

In many settings, busy schools often follow a **'wait to fail'** approach, where attendance issues may not be identified until the end of a term, semester, or year, when it is too late to intervene. Schools require more sophisticated data systems to identify at-risk students at an earlier stage, and take a **proactive rather than reactive** approach to addressing any underlying problems.

Many may be trying their best to promote school attendance, for example, using reward systems to encourage attendance for a full week. **It is not clear that these interventions address underlying motivation issues long term**, and may be counterproductive if they alienate students who cannot attend for reasons outside of their control.

Similarly, with a lack of detailed data or personal information about students, **education systems, policy makers, and schools may rely on assumptions about the reasons that students miss school**. When these assumptions are incorrect, then the strategies implemented to address the causes of low attendance are destined to fail.

Finally, **treating all absences as the same** (i.e. equally as harmful to student outcomes) undermines the broader messages parents and students receive about the value of attending school regularly, and does not help schools to target students with a greater need for support. Instead, understanding the ‘functional impact’ of different types of absences helps to target appropriate supports to the right students.

## Recommendations

Developing a better understanding of what we’re getting wrong highlights a clear path forward. The following recommendations are underpinned by the need for a change in understanding, language and approach, and where attendance problems are reframed as a symptom of something that may require support, but not the problem itself. In practice, this could involve:

1. **Reframing attendance problems:** View attendance problems as a symptom of a larger issue(s) rather than the problem itself. **A change in legislative language** to move away from punitive language (e.g. truancy fines) and towards one of child and adolescent wellbeing, will help to shift policy,

and therefore school practice, to ensure responses to attendance problems address the actual reasons for low attendance.

2. **Taking a more proactive approach:** Implement early warning systems using accurate, actionable data to pre-emptively address absenteeism concerns.
3. **Use data-driven methods to identify students most affected by absenteeism** and employ other indicators of student outcomes (e.g. achievement and wellbeing metrics) to target student of greatest concern.
4. **Multi-tiered support systems:** Deploy differentiated evidence-based intervention strategies based on student population needs **and continuously evaluate their effectiveness**.
5. **Access to essential services:** Ensure students and their families **have affordable and timely access to health, mental health, and social services**.

This report also advocates for creating an ‘**Australian Attendance Hub**’, similar to the United States’ Attendance Works, to serve as a free resource for local schools and policymakers, providing relevant data, research, policy context, and tailored consultation services.

Finally, this report also highlights the need for a national discussion about education redesign, recognising that traditional schooling does not resonate for a minority of students and that this is likely reflected in declining attendance.

It is clear that Australia needs a new approach for supporting regular school attendance. By changing how we talk about the issue, more effective use of data, identifying appropriate and effective supports that address the root causes, and ensuring students and families have access to the services they need, Australian education systems can reverse the recent declines in attendance.

## Introduction

### Scope of this report

This Churchill Fellowship enabled discussions with educators, school leaders, district staff, judicial staff, policymakers and academic researchers across New Zealand and the United States. Their fields and disciplines represented education and education policy, law, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, history, and social work. These discussions revealed a broad—and sometimes conflicting—range of views about the causes and consequences of school attendance problems and the best ways to address these problems in the post-COVID era. This report summarises the key themes and findings of those discussions and offers several recommendations for the Australian context.

While I draw on published literature and publicly-available resources, this report does not provide a comprehensive literature review of the causes and consequences of student attendance problems, nor does it provide a comprehensive review of evidence-based programs, strategies or approaches that improve school attendance. Instead, I've provided a list of resources (see Resources). As I highlight throughout the report, the recently published Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2023) from Future Ed and Attendance Works provides a comprehensive review of evidence-based approaches, and there is no attempt to repeat that work here.

This report also does not focus on particular types of attendance problems or student characteristics, for example, school refusal or attendance issues particular to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, the strategies and recommendations throughout this report will apply to these students, for example, identifying the root cause of school refusal, improved school climate, and a culturally-relevant curriculum.

### (Why) Is student attendance a problem?

Low student attendance at school is a significant problem with far-reaching consequences for individuals and society. Over a century of research has shown that students who miss school more frequently face a greater risk of multiple adverse outcomes, including academic underachievement (Alexander et al., 1997), social-emotional problems (Gottfried, 2014), academic disengagement and behavioural issues (Graham et al., 2011; Henry et al., 2017), and early school leaving (The Smith Family, 2018). These outcomes then increase the risk of affecting post-secondary educational and career prospects and other life outcomes, such as health, wellbeing, and social inclusion.



*Visiting a forest preserve in Oak Brook, Illinois*

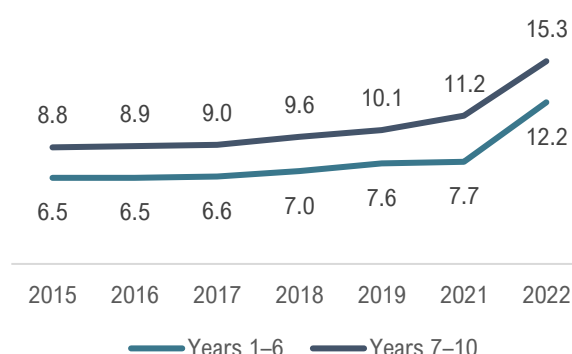
## Attendance rates in Australia are low and declining.

While all students miss school occasionally, a significant proportion of Australian students miss school at levels that affect their learning and engagement opportunities, and this proportion has increased over time. Absence rates increased incrementally between 2015 and 2019, with the disruptions of COVID producing unprecedented levels of absence in 2022 (see Figure 1). In 2022, average absence rates were 12.2% for primary and 15.3% for secondary students. These rates translate to approximately 23 days (~4.5 weeks) and 30 days (6 weeks) of school days, respectively, missed for the year. These absence levels represent significant levels of missed learning opportunities.

Average absence rates can mask the proportions of students experiencing significant levels of absence. Categories of absence (e.g. absent more than 10%) are a commonly reported measure. For example, missing more than 10% of available school days is defined as 'chronic absenteeism' in the United States. Figure 2 highlights the proportion of students with absence rates higher than 10% over time. In 2022, half of Australian students in Years 7–10 missed at least 10% of the school year, as did 45% of students in Years 1–6.

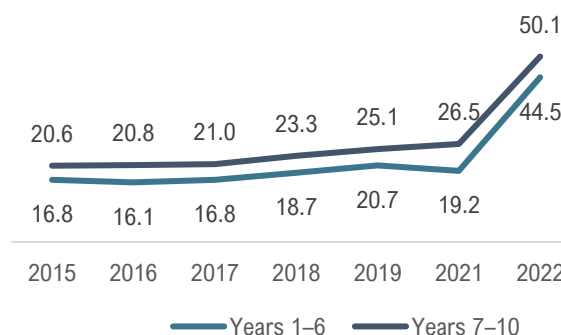
In short, the gradual increases in student absences before 2020 were already cause for concern, and the education disruptions introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues. These trends highlight the need for a renewed focus on student attendance and engagement at school and to consolidate international information about what we might do differently.

Figure 1: Australian absence rates (%) 2015–2022, by education level



Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2022 (Table 4A.18).

Figure 2: Proportion of Australian students missing more than 10% of school days 2015–2022, by education level



Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2022 (Table 4A.23).

## Rationale for visiting New Zealand and the United States

The international research literature is remarkably consistent regarding student attendance patterns, and the causes and consequences of missing school. While I could have learned more about attendance strategies in many international contexts, I focussed on New Zealand and the United States for particular reasons.

### New Zealand

As our closest neighbour, New Zealand offers several similarities and contrasts to learn from. Historically, attendance rates in New Zealand have been similar to Australian rates. New Zealand also experiences similar attendance gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. They have a single public education system operated by the Ministry of Education, with support from regional offices, and therefore have a more coordinated policy approach to supporting attendance than we do in Australia, where the states and territories set out separate policies.

In 2021 the New Zealand government Select Committee reviewed the recent declines in attendance (New Zealand Education and Workforce Committee, 2022). Subsequently, it

launched a new Attendance Strategy in June 2022 (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022). The strategy focuses on (1) clear expectations for everyone involved, (2) ambitious targets for attendance levels, and (3) bold actions. In practice, the strategy elevates attendance as a priority issue for schools, the environments they create for students, and how they work with families and communities. The strategy also aims to improve how social services and government agencies collaborate to reduce barriers to attendance. The targets set out by the government are very ambitious (see Table 1), and will require significant effort by the national government (and agencies), schools, community organisations, and families to achieve these targets.

The Attendance Strategy implementation commenced towards the end of 2022 and into 2023. Consequently, there was limited opportunity for evaluation by May 2023. However, there were examples of new initiatives that held great promise, and there will be more to learn as New Zealand schools work towards meeting those attendance targets.

**Table 1: Attendance targets set out by the New Zealand government for the Attendance and Engagement Strategy**

	Previous rates (%)			Future targets (%)	
	2015	2021	2022	2024 target	2025 target
Attending regularly: % attending school more than 90%	70	60	40	70	75
Moderately absent: % attending more than 70% up to 80%	6	9	15	6	4
Chronically absent: % attending 70% or less	5	8	14	5	3

## United States



*Texas State Capitol building, Austin*

In contrast to New Zealand and Australia, the United States offered a wider range of contexts with a longer policy history and more developed research agenda. I chose to visit the United States for several reasons.

First, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law in December 2015. ESSA represented a significant shift in the United States' approach to education policy. It replaced the No Child Left Behind Act and focuses on promoting equity, accountability, and improved educational outcomes for all students.

ESSA requires states to hold schools accountable for the following key student outcomes:

- Student proficiency on annual assessments in English/language arts and maths
- A second academic indicator, such as growth in the annual assessments
- Progress in achieving English language proficiency
- High school graduation rates (for high schools)
- At least one measure of 'school quality' or student success

This fifth accountability measure includes several options, one of which is chronic absenteeism. As of 2023, 36 states had adopted chronic absenteeism as this measure. In conjunction with the work of Hedy Chang and Attendance Works (a non-profit entity promoting attendance across the United States), this change in policy brought attendance issues to the fore and required better data collection to track the outcome, and in turn, new ways of addressing chronic absenteeism in local schools.

Second, the work undertaken by Attendance Works since 2015 has helped to drive awareness of the issue and improvements to data collection, quality, and availability. It has also provided a wealth of free, research-informed resources for schools, and helped to create communities of practice to share their learnings as they implement new strategies. The best way to learn about good practice is to understand how new practices lead to better outcomes.

Attendance Works also helped to galvanise a comprehensive research agenda among many leading scholars in the United States, which was the third reason for visiting. The attendance research community in the United States has been growing since 2010, developing a rich research base to help understand the underlying issues in more detail (e.g. the transport issues in Detroit identified by Sarah Lenhoff, or the need for better community partnerships by Joshua Childs) along with improving evidence about the best strategies to implement (and how to implement them). These academics (all listed in the Itinerary) had broad networks with other researchers, education districts, schools and policymakers that helped to build a richer itinerary, and provided the opportunity to learn about approaches in different states and different student populations.

## Travel itinerary and focus of discussions

**Wellington.** In Wellington, I spoke to staff from the Education Review Office, who published research in 2022 and 2023 on the drivers of attendance concerns in New Zealand (Education Review Office, 2022; 2023). I also met a staff member working on improving schools' data capture on the strategies they used to address attendance problems. This discussion highlighted one of the first times I'd heard of systematic data capture of interventions and strategies; this work will provide significant learning opportunities in the future. I also met with the Ministry of Education staff to discuss historical approaches to addressing student attendance and the emerging activities introduced in the implemented Attendance Strategy. I also visited a local intermediate school (serving students in years 5 and 6) to discuss the main drivers of declining attendance and their approach to engaging the most hard-to-reach families.

**Auckland.** In Auckland I visited a primary school, and a local attendance service tasked with responding to the most severe student attendance problems.

**Las Vegas.** I visited Professor Christopher Kearney at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Professor Kearney is one of the leading scholars in student attendance problems and has written extensively on multi-tiered support systems alongside co-author Patricia Graczyk. The most valuable observations from this discussion were (1) that student attendance problems are a symptom of something else that's wrong and not always the main problem itself, (2) the need to focus more on how some school absences substantially impact student wellbeing or



*With Patricia Graczyk in Chicago*

achievement whereas others do not, and (3) the possible unintended consequences of over-relying on chronic absenteeism as a primary cutoff for attendance problems.

**Chicago.** In Chicago, I met with Dr Patricia Graczyk (Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry in the College of Medicine, University of Illinois Chicago) to discuss how she's worked with schools in Chicago to implement multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) frameworks to support student attendance. Dr Graczyk also kindly arranged a workshop with several educators in schools or school districts near Chicago to discuss how they've been addressing student attendance in their schools and how they've implemented (MTSS) approaches in their settings. These educators could describe how they harness their attendance data to target their support approaches.

This meeting was particularly valuable for understanding the implementation side of the MTSS, as there is no *published* evidence of how these frameworks work in practice. Reflecting a similar comment from Professor Kearney, one workshop attendee noted how they use attendance flags to identify students struggling in other areas – they don't identify chronic

absenteeism as the single issue to address (see Case Study 2).

I also met with Dr Stacy Ehrlich-Loewe from NORC and an experienced attendance policy manager who provided some illuminating background on recent legislative and policy changes in Illinois and the Chicago Public School system. These changes included reframing student attendance as a wellbeing issue instead of a legal compliance concern and the subsequent changes to school practice. We also discussed the recently introduced policy that students are allowed five mental health absences per year and the potential impact this may have on overall attendance patterns.



*Educators from suburbs of Chicago sharing their experience in the meeting.*

**Detroit.** I visited Associate Professor Sarah Lenhoff at Wayne State University. Dr Lenhoff has been leading several research projects in recent years, focussing on the barriers to attendance for students in Detroit, where substantial proportions of students are financially disadvantaged. In this discussion, it was evident that the MTSS frameworks may be (1) challenging to implement in these contexts and (b) have limited impact when the majority of students are in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> tier, particularly when systematic 'disinvestment' in communities entrenches problems that schools cannot resolve

alone. In these circumstances, student attendance is unlikely to improve until governments address other issues relating to transport, housing, poverty, violence, and food insecurity at a broader scale.

**Philadelphia.** I met with several researchers from the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. These researchers included my former collaborator, Michael Gottfried, who has published extensively on the impacts of chronic absenteeism and had several studies cited in the Attendance Playbook. Other academics I spoke to had research in progress and results that I cannot cite, though these are the types of research projects that will continue to build the evidence base about what does and does not help to improve student outcomes. One academic, Dr Ericka Weathers, intends to understand the variation in attendance and truancy policies across all states in the US, focusing on the punitive language in legislation and how this translates to policy and interventions, particularly for marginalised student populations. In light of the legislative change observed in Illinois, this angle of policy variation will provide exciting insights in future.



*Logan Square, Philadelphia*

**Indianapolis.** I met with Professor Carolyn Gentle-Genitty to discuss the language used in the field of student attendance problems, the need to focus on the issues underlying attendance problems, and the need for (a) improved data collection in Indiana and across the US and (b) generating better insights from the data that is collected. Professor Gentle-Genitty has also published several insightful and high-impact research articles and is one of the founding members and leaders of the *International Network for School Attendance*. She is also regularly invited to deliver online webinar sessions for *RaaWee*, a software company aiming to generate student attendance insights for schools so school staff can respond more effectively.

Professor Gentle-Genitty also initiated meetings with several of her contacts, including Director James Taylor and several school staff in the Hamilton Education District, and retired Judge Steven Nation, who was instrumental in implementing a diversion program for at-risk youth in the county. Director Taylor spoke about

his intentional focus on addressing and reducing student attendance problems and how they've been using attendance software to obtain better insights into the district's attendance issues.



*Indiana State Capitol building, Indianapolis*

**Lubbock and Austin, Texas.** I visited Lubbock to meet Jacob Kirksey at Texas Tech University and Joshua Childs at the University of Texas Austin. Drs Kirksey and Childs are examples of researchers who have worked to improve the research base of understanding attendance patterns in more detail and what needs to change in future. Their work has highlighted issues around attendance data quality and the importance of schools partnering with community organisations to address the barriers to regular attendance.

**Post-travel,** I also met online with Phyllis Jordan, the author of the *Attendance Playbook* (2023) and Hedy Chang, the Director of Attendance Works and the primary catalyst who raised chronic absenteeism as a policy focus in the United States in the past two decades.

## Data quality in Australia, New Zealand and the United States

In several interviews, I asked why absenteeism rates are so much lower in the United States than in Australia or New Zealand. Many US colleagues appeared shocked by our statistics and that 50% of Australian secondary students would be termed 'chronically absent' in 2022 by their definition. They also expressed surprise that the New Zealand definition of chronic absenteeism is attendance lower than 70%, with attendance above 90% termed regular attendance (see Table 1). While few US colleagues had insights into the Australian context and whether Australian students are absent from school for different reasons than in the United States, or more frequently, most raised data quality as a concern and suggested that absenteeism is significantly underestimated in the United States. They noted four differences.

First, in some US states (e.g. California), school funding is directly tied to attendance rates, where schools with lower attendance rates will receive less funding. While it may be challenging to find clear evidence that these funding models incentivise schools to misreport attendance—and some interviewees were sceptical this would be true—this policy setting may be a contributing reason for why reported absenteeism rates may be lower in some states than is accurate. Schools have little incentive to report absences, and the reduced funding resulting from higher absenteeism would make it harder for schools to address attendance issues.

Second, several individuals spoke about inconsistencies in how absences are defined, captured and reported. In some states or districts, a student may only have to be present for a half-day or a single period to be counted as present for a whole day. In contrast, each

Australian state and territory has agreed definitions of how attendance and absences are defined and measured, so measurements are comparable across states. Australian attendance rates for a given period (e.g. term, semester) are measured as the number of half-days that student attends as a proportion of the total number of half-days available for them to attend. A half-day absence therefore contributes to the absence rate. The accuracy with which Australian schools report attendance is a likely factor for why our attendance rates appear low by international standards.

Third, schools would commonly unenroll students if they had been absent for 15 days or intended to go on extended holidays. Therefore, these extended absences would not contribute to the total estimate of chronic absence. In most (if not all) Australian states and territories, students cannot be unenrolled until their new enrolment is confirmed.

Fourth, beyond the reasons outlined above, some were highly sceptical that the attendance rates reported in their respective states or districts were accurate. In many cases, I shared their scepticism, where highly disadvantaged communities would report attendance rates around 93%, similar to those in Australia's middle and high socioeconomic areas. Data quality appeared to be better in states that selected chronic absenteeism as one of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* accountability measures. In states where this chronic absenteeism was not an accountability measure, there were fewer reasons to capture attendance accurately.

In short, while improvement in data quality in the United States is central to the ongoing advocacy efforts for reducing chronic absenteeism, this is one area where Australia already performs relatively well.

## Main findings

Across all discussions, there were some areas of universal agreement (e.g. punitive approaches), many points of agreement (e.g. inaccurate assumptions about causes of non-attendance), some disagreement (e.g. a focus on the chronic absenteeism measure), and some contradictions about where to focus for the best outcomes. These findings are expected and reflect the complexity of the issue and the need for a considered and flexible approach across settings.

### What has contributed to low and declining attendance?

It is essential to understand the underlying cause(s) of why students do not attend to adopt appropriate interventions. The research literature identifies internationally-consistent causes of non-attendance across countries. These include, but are not limited to:

- Illness, chronic medical conditions, or mental health issues
- Family circumstances, including lack of support or unstable home environments
- Bullying and social issues at school
- Academic challenges where students feel overwhelmed by coursework or face learning difficulties
- Lack of engagement, including boredom, disinterest in the curriculum or classroom tasks
- Transportation issues
- Socioeconomic factors, including lack of access to resources or the need to work to support the family
- Cultural and community factors, including cultural attitudes towards education
- Anxiety and fear among students concerning fear of failure, social anxiety or other emotional issues
- Traumatic events, including personal, community-based events and natural disasters
- Lack of positive reinforcement for attending school

These factors also contributed to increasing absences in recent years by (1) becoming relevant for higher proportions of the student population and (2) having a more significant impact on those already affected. COVID-related disruptions to schooling also introduced new issues.

The reasons for increased absences are listed below, acknowledging that these factors arose from various discussions, and there is limited data or published evidence to support some claims (though see Recent Research from England section for recent findings supporting many of these claims). The diverse and compounding reasons underpinning absences makes clear data collection on these issues very challenging.

#### ***Increased illness in 2022.***

When publishing the 2022 attendance rates, the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2022) noted that "*the attendance rate for students in Years 1–10 declined to 86.5% from 90.9% in 2021. This decline, which was due to the impact of the COVID-19 Omicron variant, high Influenza season outbreaks and floods in certain regions across Australia, was remarkably consistent across all states/territories and school sectors*". The published attendance data in New Zealand also point to increases in illness rates in 2022, increasing from 3.1% in 2019 to 6.6% in 2022. COVID was still

circulating in early 2022, and many noted that parents had become more likely to keep students home with minor illnesses or ailments.

### ***More in-term holidays in 2022***

After lengthy border closures and lockdowns, there was a 'backlog' of families wanting to travel internationally for holidays or to visit family, and with these costs rising, it was more affordable to travel during the school term. However, the New Zealand data also indicates that in-term holidays account for a small percentage of all absences (the absence rate was 0.8% in 2023, or 7% of all absences). Several educators in New Zealand highlighted lengthy in-term holidays as a problem, and one school noted that students who went away for extended periods often returned to find their social groups had changed or moved on, and fitting in again could be difficult.

### ***Changed parent and student behaviours***

In New Zealand and the United States, discussions highlighted that student and parent attitudes towards the value of regular attendance have changed through the COVID period. After online learning, some families recognised that capable students could easily take on missed content in their own time or valued the family connections that grew through lockdowns. Some families also recognised increased wellbeing in their children outside the school environment and became more inclined to allow students to remain at home as needed when face-to-face learning resumed. Some students also found it challenging to return to pre-COVID routines.

### ***Concerns about student safety***

Student safety related to multiple factors, including the transmission of illness in school settings, social-emotional safety related to mental health concerns or bullying (including online bullying), physical violence or behavioural

issues among other students, and in the US in particular, concerns about gun violence.

### ***Developmental readiness***

Many young children experienced lockdowns and online learning in their early formative years and missed opportunities to develop regular attendance habits. Consequently, many children struggled to attend for a whole day or week of school when they returned to school.

### ***Decreased student mental health and wellbeing***

Students with mental health concerns have higher absence rates on average (see Hancock et al., 2021, for example). However, research also indicates that mental health outcomes among young people have declined since about 2012 (Wilkins, Vera-Toscano, Botha, Wooden & Trinh, 2022). The increasing mental health concerns among children and young people, and an increased likelihood of staying home when symptoms emerge have likely contributed to increasing absences. If some schools record mental health-related absences as illness, then the significant increase in illness rates in 2022 may be a combination of health (e.g. COVID) and mental health issues. Consequently, the illness rates may not simply 'bounce back' in 2023 to pre-COVID levels.

### ***Increased academic pressure***

Some students who struggled with online learning and fell behind during COVID disruptions feel overwhelmed by what they missed and the required catch-up. In turn, they end up in a further spiral of achievement-related anxiety and further absences.

### ***Increased school refusal***

School refusal refers to a student's persistent reluctance or refusal to attend school. It is a complex issue, separate from truancy, and often

manifests in a physiological, anxiety-based response to attending school. While limited data is available to understand how the prevalence of school refusal has changed over time in Australia, schools and parents are commonly citing school refusal as an increasing problem, and membership in online support groups (e.g. the School Can't group on Facebook) has grown exponentially in recent years (see Senate Education and Employment Committee report for further information).

### ***Increased poverty and cost of living pressures***

Housing and cost-of-living pressures appear to have a two-fold effect, (1) families with financial struggles finding it harder to get by over time, and any attendance issues related to disadvantage or poverty are now compounding further, and (2) families who were tracking well financially before are now experiencing greater difficulty, and therefore, more students are experiencing absences related to financial disadvantage. These difficulties could look different from family to family, whether it be

transport issues, difficulty purchasing uniforms or stationery supplies, or health and disability concerns for parents. In 2023, the well-noted decline in available housing has increased rents and made housing less affordable. In some cases, this means families may need to move, which could have two effects (1) a discontinuity in education due to changing schools, or (2) increased distances to travel to school, resulting in increased absenteeism when coupled with unreliable transport.

### ***Teacher workforce pressures***

The teaching workforce has faced challenges on several fronts. Well-publicised teacher shortages, COVID, general illness, burnout and other related issues have also resulted in higher teacher absences (see Sparks, 2022). Ongoing absences among teachers and students mean increased difficulty in developing and maintaining relationships and teaching content to students. In turn, these challenges contribute to increasing disengagement and further student absences.

## Recent research from England

The recent attendance declines observed in Australia, New Zealand and the United States were also seen in England. In September 2023 (post-Fellowship), the policy consultancy Public First conducted a qualitative study addressing parent views about school attendance and how they had changed in recent years (Burtonshaw & Dorrell, 2023). The research included eight focus groups with 4–8 parents, and two focus groups with secondary students in Years 7–10.

The headline finding was that family attitudes towards regular attendance has shifted dramatically in recent years, as the quote included on the report's cover page highlights:

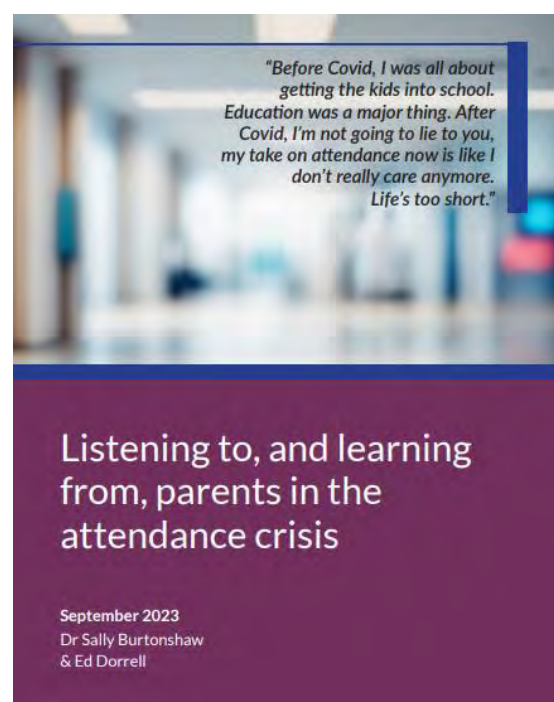
“Before COVID, I was all about getting the kids to school. Education was a major thing. After COVID, I'm not going to lie to you, my take on attendance now is like I don't really care anymore. Life's too short.”

Overall the reported findings were very similar to the changes noted above. They found that since COVID:

- Parents no longer consider that every day matters
- Relationships between schools and parents have broken down
- Parents view attendance as being a problem relating to other people's children
- A mental health crisis is compounding attendance issues
- Term-time holidays are now considered socially acceptable across all socioeconomic groups
- Cost-of-living difficulties has driven more families into poverty, and this was already an underlying driver of low attendance

- The increase in parents working from home was *not* considered as driver of declining attendance
- Parents view school level attendance-systems as draconian whilst not being robust or accurate, which undermines relationships between schools and families
- Parents view sanctions as both irrelevant and antagonistic

The focus groups were conducted in June–July 2023, indicating that the shifts in attitudes and behaviours are lasting well beyond the initial post-COVID period. This likely means that the recent declines are part of a sustained and long-term decrease, rather than a temporary attendance ‘blip’. As such, the solution to declining attendance will need to be multi-factored and long-term. The issue will not be addressed by a simple awareness campaign.



*The Public First report cover page*

## What are we getting wrong, and what can we do instead?

### Punitive approaches are ineffective at best and counter-productive at worst.

The experts I met with—along with published research—universally agree that punitive or negative approaches to student attendance problems are ineffective. Furthermore, such approaches are often counter-productive to engaging students in their education as they more commonly create barriers to communication and relationship-building and reduce the incentive to attend school.

Punitive approaches can include high-level measures such as truancy fines, sanctions, withdrawal of welfare payments, and referral to court systems. It can also refer to lower-level factors like punishment, beratement or chastisement at the school level or approaches that humiliate students. Examples may include poorly framed and impersonal form letters or school communications that refer to laws or legal obligations. They could also include classroom 'leaderboards' intended to celebrate students with high attendance but inadvertently identify and shame students with low attendance.

Negative communications from schools and education departments, or talk of 'truancy crackdowns' by politicians, do little to build trust or the positive relationships necessary to build rapport and engagement with families. Instead,

positive relationships with students and families are essential for school staff to understand the barriers to regular attendance and to partner with families to address their concerns.

Punitive approaches also assume that the cause of low attendance is parent or student motivation, and the threat of a fine or withdrawal of benefits is sufficient to motivate a student to attend school. This assumption may be valid for a minority of cases. However, in most cases, the threat of a fine does not address a mental health concern, transport issues, school safety concerns, or whatever contributes to a student's absence. For most families, a fine or court case would only add to their financial stress.

### How to shift away from punitive language and approaches?

Education systems, schools, and community organisations can make a deliberate decision about the language they use and engage with families in a supportive manner. At a higher level, legislative and policy language changes would help encourage schools to make this shift if they have not done so already. The following breakout box provides an example of how this has been achieved in practice, and identifies how the legislation in Chicago shifted from a punitive to a social-emotional approach that focuses on the cause of absenteeism.

## Legislative change in Illinois and policy change in Chicago Public Schools

Historically, Illinois state legislation relating to absenteeism and truancy was punitive with a prevailing mindset (1) that punishment gets results, (2) that truancy officers were the solution to chronic truancy. In practice, truancy officers rarely changed behaviours as families were understandably reluctant to open the door to strangers or talk about personal issues with someone they had no relationship with. The law stated a need for an adjudication process, but the people in these situations were often already burdened with other financial, social and psychological challenges. The adjudication process added further stress that families were unlikely to be able to address, and it would also create tensions for schools and their relationships with families. The starting point assumed that parents did not care about regular attendance.

Meanwhile, the Chicago Public Schools attendance policy had not changed since 2006. While there was a desire to develop an attendance policy that addressed students' social-emotional needs, the attendance policy needed to reflect the *language of adjudication*. The policy language must mimic state law, as any district would need to do. That is, to change the attendance policy to reflect knowledge about student attendance issues, the state law needed to change. After many years of collaboration with the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs, the state law changed in 2022 so that any school district in Illinois could move away from the punitive approach and instead take a social-emotional tiered responsive approach to truancy issues.

For chronic truants, the amended law now states: "The chief executive officer or designee shall implement a **socio-emotional focused attendance approach that targets the underlying causes of chronic truancy**. For each pupil identified as a chronic truant, the board may establish an individualized student attendance plan to **identify and resolve the underlying cause of the pupil's chronic truancy**". This language replaced "... the Office of Chronic Truant Adjudication, which shall be responsible for administratively adjudicating cases of chronic truancy and imposing appropriate sanctions." (Illinois General Assembly, 2021).

Notably, the legislative changes maintained high attendance expectations for students and families and clearly outlined their responsibilities. The reframed focus on socio-emotional needs was not a 'loophole' to excuse higher absence levels.

The new attendance policy provided by Chicago public schools is now 'loaded' with social-emotional language, including a direction that all schools must have a plan filed annually that "addresses attendance through a whole-child lens of equity, policy, and student supports". It also includes a make-up policy that students experiencing hardship (e.g. homelessness) must have make-up work provided.

While some schools believe these changes have limited their options in responding to severe cases of absenteeism, there is also recognition that the initial adjudication process was slow and poorly resourced, rarely achieved the intended outcomes, put students further behind, and created adversarial relationships with schools.

### Mental health days

The state law changes also enabled students to have five 'mental or behavioural health' absences a year. As a recent change, information on the prevalence of these absences is not available. Among those I met with, there were concerns about health confidentiality implications and that some cultures do not acknowledge mental health. There were also concerns about the interpretation of this data. For example, if one school reports more mental health days than another, which school appears to have a better outcome? Is it that students have better mental health in one school, or are they more informed in the other? The intention of this change is to understand better student needs in different districts and to direct funding as needed. As data becomes available, an evaluation of the overall impact – including whether absences rise due to the policy or whether these days were already happening but recorded as something else, will be particularly interesting.

## Waiting to fail

Several interviews identified the lag between a problem emerging, that problem showing up in the data, and then an intervention being applied. The delay in responding to emerging attendance problems means missed opportunities that contribute to further absences and disconnection from school. Some schools may not identify students as chronically absent until the end of a term, semester, or school year when they've already missed significant learning opportunities. Focussing on a student at the end of a semester when they have little chance of passing their classes means asking them to return and sit in a class for no benefit. Professor Kearney, for example, noted the following:

“In many cases, when schools look at attendance data it’s a wait to fail approach. You wait until they have ten or fifteen unexcused absences, maybe months have gone by and a student has accrued twice as many absences because they also have excused absences. And then you intervene, but they’re failing the grade or socially disconnected. They might get a letter home. If instead you have a lot of implementation help for school personnel, a team that reviewed attendance data frequently and then had a system where there was immediate intervention, we could ask how do we turn four days of sickness into two, or turn a budding mental health problem into a minimal one? How can we link families to resources a little quicker? Schools tend to be more reactive than proactive, and the schools I work with are trying to be proactive as they can with limited resources.”

A **proactive rather than reactive** approach to student attendance is essential for intervening *before* patterns become entrenched. Some ways of being proactive include:

- Identifying students with attendance problems early in their school career before patterns become entrenched long-term.
- Implementing the whole-of-school Tier 1 approaches set out in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, for example, promoting school connectedness (see page 31).
- Dedicated attendance teams comprising school leadership and support staff that frequently analyse attendance data and lead responses to early attendance signals.
- Advanced data systems that enable these attendance teams to streamline their work (e.g. see Case Study 2 for example).
- Undertake community asset mapping and build relationships with community resources and organisations. This process means attendance teams can rapidly refer students and families for appropriate support instead of waiting for problems to emerge and then being unsure where to refer. Partnerships between schools and community organisations can help to set up expectations, systems and processes to streamline support to students and families.
- Adequate (i.e. improved) resources for schools to implement these approaches, in addition to the reactive suite of strategies already employed.

### Single approaches or interventions that do not address the underlying issue(s)

Schools use many approaches to promote positive engagement at school and encourage attendance. Popular approaches include events like pizza parties or 'ice-cream Fridays' that reward students for attending all week or reaching a particular attendance milestone. These events are primarily targeted towards elementary or primary-level students and are popular among school staff and students. However, there is limited *published* evidence that this approach is effective, or to what extent. These reward systems assume that students are not attending school because of low motivation and that a simple reward with classmates improves motivation to attend. This assumption may be accurate for *some* students. However, poor motivation may only contribute to a small number of student absences. If so, the approach may have a negligible or short-term impacts on attendance rates.

These interventions do not address the underlying motivation issues but apply a temporary solution. Finally, if not implemented thoughtfully, these approaches may also alienate students who cannot attend for other reasons outside their control or drive some students to continue their absences if they fail to meet a target. For example, if a student needs to attend all five days to receive a reward that week and misses school on a Monday, there is little incentive to come to school on the remaining days that week.

When implemented thoughtfully, celebrating being at school with students and using a pizza

party can build positive associations with the school. However, school staff need to be very clear about the specific attendance problems that need to be solved, the type of incentives that should be used, how they will best be implemented (e.g. short term vs. long term), and how they will be evaluated (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018).

### Better support for mental health and wellbeing

Increased prevalence of mental health concerns was identified as a cause for declining attendance, but schools were often poorly resourced to deal with the increased demand and complexity of circumstances. As one interviewee noted, students rarely accessed support outside of the school, meaning schools needed to support students on multiple fronts:

“Over the last 30 years, the school system has become a de facto mental health system for children and adolescents. And for two-thirds to three-quarters of kids who have a mental health issue, the only person they’re going to see is somebody in their school. They’re going to see their school counsellor, school-based social worker, or school psychologist. So schools are pretty overloaded with not just the academic piece, but the mental health piece too. It needs substantial in-house support.”

### Incorrect assumptions about reasons for missing school

Through my own experience and conversations held across New Zealand and the United States, it is clear that many people have deeply-held beliefs and assumptions about which students attend school less regularly and why. In many cases, these assumptions are incorrect or do not consider all of the issues confronting students. When these beliefs and assumptions are incorrect, the strategies adopted to address attendance concerns for an individual or population of students will fail because they do not address the actual causes.

In one conversation, a school staff member noted the value of using data to become more informed about which students in their school were more likely to be chronically absent, challenging some assumptions along the way:

"We presented the attendance data back to staff and asked them to guess what the data would show them about which students were having problems. Most thought about affluent and non-affluent students, and guessed that the [minority] students weren't going as well. Well, when we looked at the data it was not even close, it was actually really balanced. So this showed it was so important to get the facts right."

### Treating all absences at the same

Previous research—my own included—has focused messages on 'every day counts' or that all absences contribute to achievement outcomes in the same way. The rationale for this message is that it's about missed content and learning

opportunities that affect learning. However, subsequent research clearly shows that some absences matter more than others, particularly that unexcused or unauthorised absences have stronger associations with lower achievement outcomes (e.g. Gottfried, 2011; Hancock, 2019). My PhD work highlighted that even among authorised absence codes (illness, reasonable, and in-term holidays), illness and reasonable absences were still associated with lower achievement outcomes (though less strongly than unexplained absences), but that in-term holidays had no association with lower achievement on NAPLAN assessments. The reason matters for the impact, and these patterns reflect long-held beliefs from families that these absences do little harm to their child's progress.

Rather than focus on attendance or chronic absenteeism rates alone, several people I met spoke about the need to understand the functional impact of different types of absences. Professor Kearney, for example, noted:

"We need to look at functional impairment because absences are not all the same. You can have one kid miss ten days of school, but they do just fine because they have other support systems. You can have another kid miss five days of school and that will be devastating. Has the absence interfered with their academic competence or social competence? Does it trigger administrative responses that are exclusionary in nature? Treating all absences the same isn't helpful."

### Limited knowledge of tried and tested approaches

As noted earlier, Australian schools already implement multiple approaches to support student attendance, as do those in New Zealand and the United States. However, there is limited knowledge about which schools implement which strategies for which reasons, and where they see success. Resourcing systems and schools to participate in more rigorous data collection and evaluation would help address the evidence gap. I encountered two promising practices that will help fill these gaps in future.

In **New Zealand**, The Commission reviewing student attendance recommended that the Education Review Office (ERO) provide ongoing student attendance monitoring. ERO then developed a reporting framework to monitor what schools are doing to address attendance issues in their school, where they are seeing success, and where they continue to have challenges. This process moves from a compliance focus of reporting to an evaluative one. First tested in Term 4 2022, the reporting framework was rolled out in 2023. While some schools see the reporting requirement as an additional task without seeing the bigger

evaluation picture, others view it as an opportunity to open a line of enquiry that will lead to improved student outcomes. These schools often had not realised that attendance was an issue as they only looked at high-level data, for example, the overall attendance rate. Now, attendance is now promoted as a strategic goal for schools, and some schools are enthusiastic about engaging with the reporting framework because of the evaluation approach. The learnings from this process will be synthesised and shared back with schools, ideally contributing to the broader evidence base.

The second practice emerged from a high school district in suburban **Chicago**. The school has recently adopted a new attendance monitoring system with high-level functionality. Part of this functionality tracks which students have experienced different interventions and strategies (see Case Study 2). This systematic data capture allows the school to evaluate which interventions have been more successful, for which students, and to improve or modify the ones that have not.

## How we can work more effectively - Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

MTSS or response-to-intervention frameworks are commonly used in education settings to support students who are not achieving. They are also helpful in structuring the multiple responses that schools may need to adopt to support improved attendance.

The model identifies three tiers of support. At Tier 1, the focus is on the prevention of attendance problems through whole-of-school initiatives and policies that promote student wellbeing, broad attendance cultures, and a positive school climate. Tier 1 targets approximately 80% of students expected to respond to these settings.

Tier 2 focuses on early intervention for students initially struggling with attendance by providing student-specific, school-based interventions that address the cause of increasing absence, and this tier is targeted towards 15% of students who may need more targeted intervention.

Tier 3 identifies intensive interventions for the 5% of students needing significant support, most often provided by community or other government organisations. Figure 4 provides an overview of the MTSS model for student attendance problems, and the types of interventions applied at each tier.

Table 2 lists the evidence-based interventions identified in the Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2023). Noting that some approaches to addressing attendance may not have been adequately evaluated, schools implementing this framework may identify other go-to strategies within this tiered structure.

### Implementing MTSS frameworks

The use of MTSS frameworks for addressing student attendance problems have not been evaluated as yet. However, the research literature

and my Fellowship conversations identified the following 'success factors':

- Dedicated attendance teams with responsibility for developing and implementing the strategies in their MTSS model
- High-quality and timely data
- Early warning flags, both in a student's school career and in a term/semester/year to identify critical tipping points for longer-term problems
- Engagement and commitment from all school staff, i.e. 'everyone is on the same page'
- Understanding the reasons why students are absent, not making assumptions
- Opportunities for schools to build relationships with students, families, and community organisations
- Community engagement to identify the community-level aspects that impede regular attendance, for example, limited transport or community safety
- Partnerships with external organisations and community groups to reduce barriers
- Community asset mapping to identify available supports (and gaps in available support), and where possible, to integrate these supports into the school setting
- Mechanisms to draw Tier 3 cases into a central catchment process with sufficient resources to coordinate intricate and prolonged interventions
- Expand the use of existing mechanisms to provide alternative, creative, and viable pathways to school participation and completion
- Consider more contemporary learning formats for students requiring more flexibility
- Sustainable school funding to implement attendance strategies long-term

### Limitations of the MTSS frameworks

Beyond these factors, several people I spoke to commented that the MTSS framework is acceptable 'in theory', but the implementation is a challenge when schools have the *majority* of their students in Tiers 2 and 3. In many schools, students move into Tier 2 when they fall below 90% attendance. Based on Australian figures, nearly half of secondary students would have required Tier 2 or 3 interventions in 2022, which is not sustainable. In communities with entrenched levels of poverty, these models may be more difficult to implement without adequate support through other government agencies responsible for social welfare, housing, health, and transport.

In some cases, some supports available to school districts may not be sufficient to effectively address the issue at hand. Some districts I visited in the United States had access to programs providing provided short-term accommodation to students experiencing homelessness (e.g. five nights in a hotel). Such short-term supports, while necessary in a crisis, do not provide families with sufficient time to address their circumstances, and therefore, had limited effects on long-term student outcomes.

Figure 4: Multi-tiered system of supports, adapted from Kearney &amp; Graczyk, 2020.

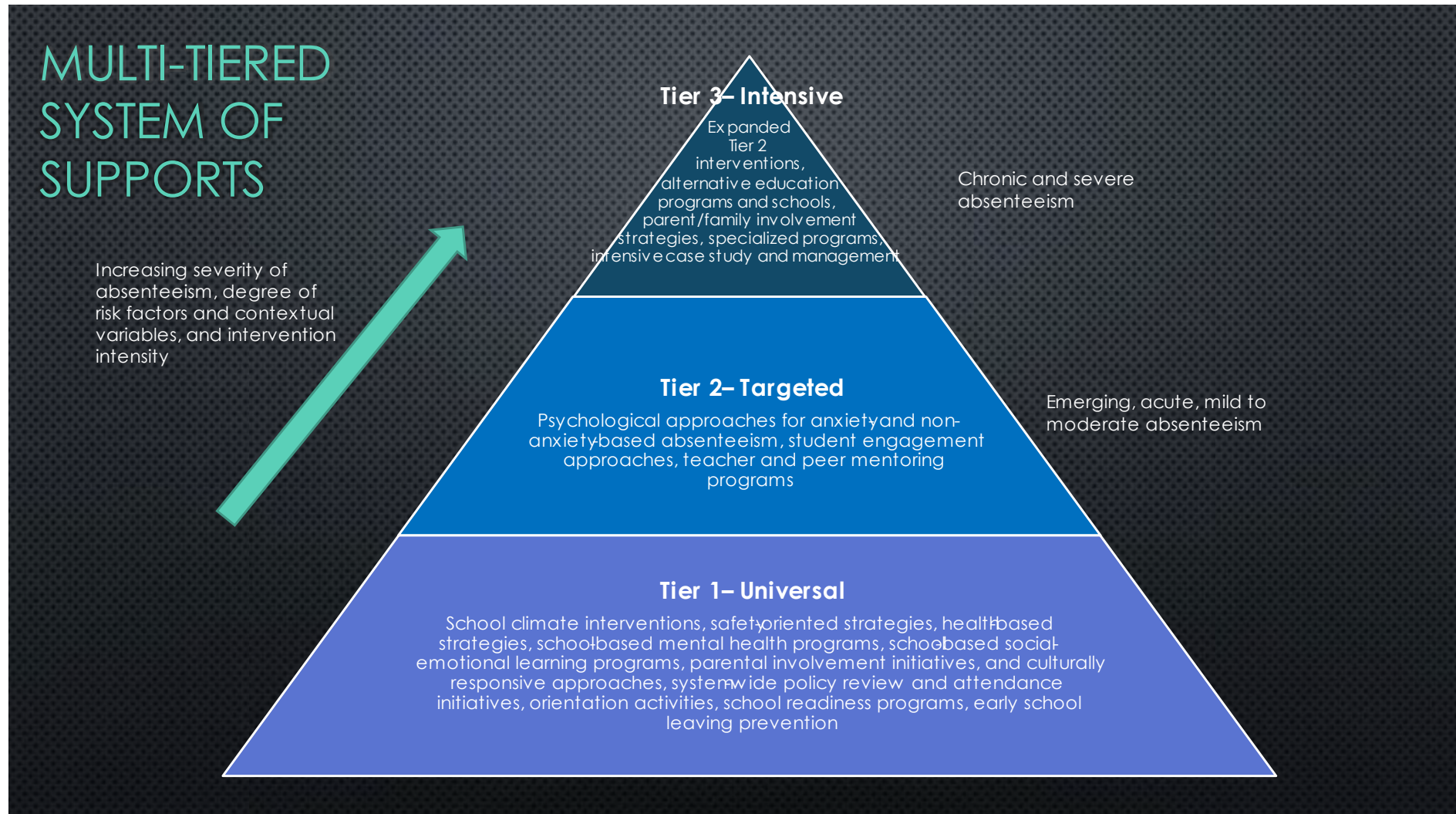


Table 2: Evidence-based strategies identified in the Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2023).

<b>Tier 1 Interventions for all students (and preventive strategies)</b>		
Schools as community hubs with effective data sharing	Positive and consistent engagement with families	Improved student-teacher relationships
Relevant, and culturally relevant, instruction	Restorative discipline practices	Incentives <i>can</i> work when schools are clear about whom they hope to reach and what behaviour they seek to change, but can also backfire.
Positive greetings when students arrive in class can create a welcoming school climate.	Engaging after-school programs (and sport) can help motivate students to attend	Supervised lunch and recess breaks with structured play to reduce incidents of bullying and exclusion
Healthy, clean school buildings that students want to be in, with adequate ventilation and heating/cooling.	School-based care, where providing health services at school can prevent and treat illness but also spare time for medical appointments during school hours.	Telehealth – video conferencing to deliver healthcare services can increase access to primary care and specialty services while reducing lost work time for parents.
Universal free or reduced-price meals. Universal free meals, and breakfast programs improve attendance to levels that persist over time.	Improved transportation services so students have safe, reliable and affordable ways of getting to school.	Laundry at schools to help families who have limited access to washing machines or laundromats and where students are embarrassed to wear unwashed uniforms.
<b>Tier 2 Interventions for students with elevated risks</b>		
Detailed data to support early warning systems, with dedicated teams to assess data and develop a course of action	Targeted home visits focusing on students missing the most days, that aim to build relationships and not explicitly address attendance in the first visit.	Mentors and tutors to develop positive relationships, improve engagement, and achievement outcomes.
Targeted youth engagement programs that promote problem-solving, self-control, emotional regulation and stronger self-identification	Addressing asthma (and other health concerns) by providing qualified health professionals at school to help students manage chronic disease.	Address mental health and school refusal by identifying the cause and responding appropriately, seeking help from a qualified practitioner.
Support inclusive education of students with disabilities and health conditions, discuss attendance expectations for individual students.		
<b>Tier 3 Interventions for students requiring intensive support</b>		
Interagency case management that coordinates case management with agencies beyond the school yard.	Address housing insecurity through interagency collaboration by connecting families to supports that help them avoid eviction and find stable housing	Rethinking truancy by shifting away from punitive response to one that supports disengaged students needs.

## Case Studies

The following section provides two case studies highlighting the wide range of attendance strategies employed in Chicago schools.

### Case Study 1 – Suburban Chicago elementary school district

A coordinator working across multiple schools talked about the wide range of strategies employed at just two elementary and middle schools. She talked about the need for dedicated and coordinated school leadership to implement interventions across all three tiers of support. The schools had a dedicated team to identify and implement appropriate solutions at each tier. They purposefully held weekly meetings to generate momentum and identify who led the universal Tier 1 strategies and the others who would need to be involved in those strategies (e.g. the Dean, a school psychologist, or a social worker). They also ensured they had appropriate data systems to support their work and to identify which areas to target.

Their **Tier 1** approaches included:

- **Building a school-wide attendance culture** by setting up bulletin boards and competitions for all students. In one competition, students who attended the school that day could put a petal on a flower, and the first class to bloom a whole flower would get a pizza party the following week. This approach did not focus on individual students but gave everyone a cause to contribute and celebrate.
- **School culture activities** included a student group called the 'Assistant Principal Advisory Committee'. These students worked with the Assistant Principal to look at the school's data to see how many students were missing how many days. They would

help make promotional videos and flyers about the importance of attendance, interview their peers about what they did and didn't like about coming to school, and then present the findings to the school board. These students were actively helping build an attendance culture at school with their friends.

- **Improving the 'pull factors'** to ensure students had a reason to come to school by ensuring students had connections to staff and peers. For example, a school connection check-in survey ensured all students had multiple social engagement points:

“Our middle school students completed a 3-2-1 survey to make sure students have at least **three trusted adults** at school, **two positive peer relationships**, and **one extracurricular activity**, (which could be outside the school). The student services team examined the data and if anyone was missing a three, two, or one, they followed-up with those students to build those relationships. Other schools followed in her footsteps and implemented that as well. That was really cool to see.”

- Sending 'nudge letters' for students with 5-9% absence rates to prevent the students from slipping into the chronically absent category. The data system would automatically generate these letters, which the attendance team would print out for teachers to send to parents personally. The attendance team or teachers could then remove the letters for those who'd been hospitalised, had mental health concerns or other excused absences to ensure parents weren't bombarded with nudge letters for unavoidable absences.
- Their family liaison officer also developed a 'vacation letter' to send home before every big break:

“A big thing in our culture for our families is going to Mexico to visit family over the winter break. But their two weeks turn into 5 weeks, or they'll come back two weeks into January. It's very difficult to get them back to Tier 1 when they've spent so long on holidays. Now, we're starting to hold families accountable for these extended vacation times. There's someone checking in and making it a little bit more uncomfortable to make that decision to not come back for so long.

At the same time, we're trying to be a little more accommodating and understanding. We used to have a policy that if a student misses ten consecutive days without any notification they would be dropped from the roll and they'd have to re-register. We don't do that anymore, but it does mean our chronic absenteeism rate has gone up as a result.”

### Tier 2 & 3 approaches

- The school's attendance teams would discuss Tier 2 students at least every two weeks and **create a plan for every Tier 2 student**. They ensured teachers would send 'we miss you' messages to parents, noting that communication from teachers was essential.
- A representative from the Attendance Committee completes an **attendance plan** for every Tier 2 student **with the family**.
- They would also conduct **home visits** with the social worker to talk to families at a time that suits their schedule. These conversations would not focus on attendance but on any issues the family might have been experiencing and where they might need help.
- Some **competitions** would focus on students in Tiers 2 and 3 by providing raffle tickets to all students for being present and on time, up to two raffle tickets a day. This approach also helped students struggling to arrive on time because they wanted to give their parents a little extra motivation to get them there on time. The raffle would get drawn at the end of the month, and five of the students would get to have a McDonald's breakfast with the Principal and Assistant Principal, and students would be genuinely excited to win. As she noted:
 

“When I stopped by to see the Principal breakfast one day, one of the kids said it was the best day of their life!”
- The middle school would also host **targeted parent attendance workshops** for the families of students in Tiers 2 and 3. The

school invited families to come to the school on weekends or evenings, providing childcare to reduce barriers to attending. They would provide breakfast or dinner and ask parents to register beforehand to have each student's attendance information printed out. The workshop would discuss the importance of learning and social connection, how easily absences can build up, and tips for getting children to school:

“A lot of people said “you guys are trying to get them here on a Saturday morning, who will come? “ But we actually had pretty good attendance, we had 20 families show up to a breakfast, we made it fun and people wanted to come. We have childcare in the gym with movies and activities while the parents have a workshop on the importance of attendance. Sometimes we'll also do a raffle to entice more families in. Just giving the Assistant Principals the chance to lead this work has taught them a lot and they're having more two-way communication with families, and a better, well-rounded picture of our families.”

- Schools would refer students with 10-15% absence rates without explanation to the Regional Education Office for additional assistance. However, if a student had excused absences, they'd provide some buffer before doing referrals.
- For Tier 3 students, the schools would do a '**check-in check-out**' process for them to check in with a trusted adult when they get to school and check out at the end of the day to help build trusted relationships with school staff.
- The attendance team would then connect students and families to the **family liaison**, who would conduct a detailed intake, determine why students were missing school, help families with those reasons and provide help with housing, transportation, financial assistance, food security, and safety concerns.
- The middle school also intends to implement **in-school attendance focus groups** using the AIMS model (Rizzo et al., 2016). The groups would be run by counsellors, social workers, or psychologists with small groups of students during the school day to understand their students' attendance barriers better.
- **Unannounced home** visits were the 'last ditch effort'. The school resource officer, an employee of the police department, will pair up with the family liaison and knock on doors. The resource officer would do the 'hard' talk about the mandatory part of school, while the family liaison has a friendlier approach of aiming to help families where needed.

## Case study 2 – Suburban Chicago high school district

### Attendance is the trigger for action, but not viewed as the problem

One Chicago high school leader talked about combining attendance data with other indicators to help focus their approach, which supports buy-in from school staff.

“We're a high school district, and with the MTSS structure I might as well say all students are in Tier 2 and 3, it's too many students to get anyone interested.

We wanted to bring down our chronic absenteeism rate, but our goal was not to focus on attendance. Instead, attendance is just an **early warning**. If we see any trends in attendance, that makes us look at what is happening elsewhere with other student success metrics. In my system (Panorama) I'll first identify the kids who are chronically absent. That's 8% of our students, or 280 students, it's too many. But of that 8%, I can see that 40% are struggling academically and 26% are struggling on the social-emotional learning measure, so we'll target those students. This refinement process gets us immediate buy-in from faculty because it makes it a much more manageable number of students and a targeted focus. **It's not just attendance that triggers something, it's attendance plus something else.**”

The combination of attendance and social-emotional learning data, in particular, helped staff at this school to understand students' experiences and where to focus their efforts.

They made an intentional effort to understand their students better, making students feel like they'd been heard and strengthening relationships between school staff and students.

“When we look at the SEL (social-emotional learning) side of things, we'd look at students in Tier 2 or 3 who also had a rough sense of belonging and relationships. We took 300 kids offsite to a day-long retreat and they told us about why they weren't coming to school... it was because they were struggling in other areas, or with their relationships with adults or other students. We then presented that data back to faculty about what it meant to feel like you weren't connected. Those are the kids we want to target. Our attendance went up significantly. And when we met back with the students just to validate that work, they told us “no one has ever listened to us, no one has ever really engaged us, but now teachers are using our names in the hallway”. It's been very powerful.”

The availability of advanced data systems (in this example, Panorama) enabled this school to capture multiple data points on student outcomes and streamline their approaches to managing their root cause analyses, identifying and implementing intervention strategies, and then evaluating their outcomes. This educator—and others in the workshop—demonstrated a sincere excitement at the insights generated by this particular data platform and how it would make their work significantly easier.

“Our system has a pull down menu of all of our interventions. When we do a root cause analysis, all those causes will pop up. Then we have a menu for the interventions at each tier. We just fill in the information and that data is automatically tracked. No one has to go into another system, it's all there.

We ask how many kids have we done the root cause for, and we can see if there's been any improvement. For example, we used peer mentoring, and it will tell us essentially, how effective that thing has been. Is it causal? Probably not, because we're always running multiple interventions, but the correlation is better than anything we had before.”

When asked about the value of the MTSS framework, this educator said that while it took some effort to convince others of its value, it streamlined the work and allowed them to focus on the most important areas.

“MTSS, being what it is, it's organising us. It's not adding more to our plates, it's making our lives a bit more efficient. A lot of times we're troubleshooting for one kid. And then a month later, we're troubleshooting for another kid, but it feels like it could be the same kid. Now, we're looking at systemic issues, and being able to address those, and then really putting our energy into kids that need us.”

Finally, this educator also noted that sometimes there are straightforward solutions that can help to drive improvement. By directly addressing a common cause of lateness, the school could implement an effortless way to improve on-time attendance for his students:

“We discovered something fascinating recently. Our students can go off-campus for lunch, but we noticed that a lot would come back late or not at all. They would think that if they were already ten minutes late for class, then they might as well miss class, and their parents would call them off.

So we went to the two most popular lunch places to see what was going on. The store managers asked for our class schedules and agreed to send our students to the front of the queue for faster service. The other adults in the line were fine with it because they knew the kids had to get back to class. The stores also loved it because they can track their stock levels better and have food and staff ready to go at the right times, and they've got this great customer base so it's win-win...

It's been one of those huge jumps for us, with significant support from the business these 'lates' back to class dropped drastically. It's been one of our best Tier 1 responses.”

## Recommendations

Student absenteeism is a complex and multi-faceted issue with many underlying causes and contributing factors. While the same issues have affected student attendance for many years, new post-COVID perceptions about the value of education add further challenges. The data clearly indicates that we need to do something different to shift the trend of declining attendance.

The growing evidence base and changes in school practices are a welcome start. However, the changes need to be greater than just providing schools with better information and more effective strategies – these strategies need to be scaffolded by a shift in our national conversation about the value of education, and the value of showing up. Part of this response may require a change in education delivery to ensure better alignment between system requirements and student and family needs (see *A national discussion of education design* section), so that more students want to be at school every day.

The following recommendations represent a first step towards achieving better alignment between system and student needs by reframing different aspects of attendance and ‘attendance problems’. The common theme underpinning these recommendations is a change in understanding, language and approach, and where attendance problems are reframed as a symptom of something that may require support, but not the problem itself. In practice, this could involve:

1. **Reviewing state laws and legislation for punitive language and amending those laws to reflect modern understandings of the causes of absenteeism and effective responses.** The relevant laws and legislative frameworks in Australia consider non-attendance at school to be, predominantly, a parental responsibility issue to be addressed with truancy fines and badged attendance officers. These frameworks do not acknowledge the myriad reasons for non-attendance or the harm that punitive approaches cause. A change in state and territory legislation, with consistency across all jurisdictions, would help to modernise the approach to attendance issues in Australia. This work should be discussed at the quarterly Education Ministers Meeting, and form part of the National School Reform Agreement.
2. **Taking a more proactive approach to prevent student attendance problems from emerging, rather than a reactive approach that may arrive too late.** While education departments can develop and enact attendance policies that effectively support students, the change in legislative language would move the political response to absenteeism away from traditional notions of fines, punishments, and poor parenting. This approach requires early warning systems using high-quality and accurate data systems that present information in easily-actionable ways. This work is the responsibility of education departments, and collaboration across states and territories could ensure that all jurisdictions have access to examples of effective use of data.
3. **More effective use of data to identify absentee students with ‘functional impairment’.** Some students will be more affected by being absent. Using other academic or social-emotional learning

indicators in conjunction with attendance data will help schools to target their response.

This change is in the domain of schools, however, they need support from their education departments to ensure the right information is collected and made available for this use. For example, student wellbeing measures are used in most locations, however, the information is typically not available at the student level.

4. **Tiered support systems (i.e. the MTSS)** that identify the student populations requiring interventions at varying intensity, the interventions required at each level, and ongoing evaluation of if/how those interventions are working.
5. Ensuring that students and families have **timely and affordable access to appropriate health, mental health and social services.** This work is beyond the influence of schools, however, funding staff within schools to build connections with external services and non-profit organisations would assist families to identify local services. For example, a school-community liaison could undertake community asset mapping to identify appropriate supports for issues commonly experienced by families in a school community. Liaison staff should be trusted community members who can manage relationships between families, schools, and community services.

Assisting families to identify appropriate services means those services need to be affordable and accessible. Ensuring appropriate support requires improved funding across multiple government portfolios (e.g. access to mental health services).

### Australian attendance hub

Many of my discussions in the United States credited the work and persistence of Hedy Chang in driving significant change throughout the US. First describing chronic absenteeism as a 'problem hidden in plain sight' (Chang & Romero, 2008), she drove the baseline research to show that there was a problem, galvanised researchers to conduct further research, established the concept of chronic absenteeism, garnered enough attention for chronic absenteeism for its inclusion in the *ESSA* accountability measures, and was integral in improving attendance data collection in several states.

Alongside these efforts, Chang also established Attendance Works, a non-profit hub for schools, families, education districts, and policymakers to find information about how to support student attendance problems. Through her work, the non-profit Attendance Works has grown from approximately 600 users in 2010 to 400,000 in 2023, and the organisation has connections to thirty states at any one time. They promote an attendance awareness month every year in September. There is a strong demand for the information that Attendance Works provides.



Similarly, there is also demand for a similar service in Australia. One of my US contacts had been approached by Australian schools and invited to provide workshops, but the cost and logistics were prohibitive. An attendance hub with local expertise for Australian users and a network of experts would help to meet these needs and benefit schools, families, and

students. This hub could draw upon the materials already assembled by Attendance Works<sup>1</sup> and update them with Australian data, research, and policy contexts. The hub would be a free resource for Australian schools and policymakers. It could also offer consulting services to help individual schools or regions via personalised workshops, presentations and tailored support.

This attendance hub could come under the auspices of one of the national education bodies, for example, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). AERO is jointly funded by the Commonwealth and state/territory education departments, and is tasked with generating, disseminating and implementing high-quality education evidence in practice and policy. AERO has the infrastructure and governance to host an attendance hub, and they've already been asked to investigate causes of attendance and evidence-based responses.

However, there are some limitations to this suggestion. AERO's practical focus is within the school gate. The multi-faceted causes of low attendance require multi-faceted responses and lobbying across several Commonwealth and State/Territory portfolios, such as social services, housing, community services, health, and transport. Moreover, my outside perspective on

the success factors of Attendance Works is that the work is driven by an experienced person who is passionate about the topic and who works hard to get it—and keep it—on the policy radar. An attendance hub that is subsumed into an organisation with multiple priorities may limit any long-term impact.

### A national discussion of education redesign

For some students, the approaches listed above are unlikely to work if students cannot connect a purpose to being in school. Some students feel that traditional schooling does not suit their needs, but they are still expected to attend contexts that are harmful to their wellbeing. While children and young people must be encouraged to strive and to encounter some difficulties and challenges in school in preparation for similar challenges throughout adulthood, we need an education system that better balances the needs of these students. What this redesign looks like is beyond the scope of this report. However, other researchers and advocates are promoting schools that support the wellbeing, health, and learning of Australian students (Sahlberg et al., 2023). Similarly, the development of the next National School Reform Agreement is considering the inclusion of student wellbeing measures.

---

<sup>1</sup> Attendance Works makes all their content free with appropriate attribution, however drawing on such a large volume of work may require a licencing agreement.

## Resources for educators, support staff, and policymakers

### Practical resources

- Attendance Works hosts many useful resources on their website at [www.attendanceworks.org](http://www.attendanceworks.org)
- The Attendance Playbook (2023) can be found at the Future Ed website: [Attendance-Playbook.5.23.pdf \(future-ed.org\)](#)
- The implementation guide accompanying the playbook is available here: [Guide to Using the Attendance Playbook: Smart Solutions for Reducing Student Absenteeism Post-Pandemic - Attendance Works](#)
- The Education Endowment Fund in the United Kingdom published a rapid evidence review in 2022: [Attendance interventions rapid evidence assessment | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](#)
- RaaWee, an attendance software company, have several free recorded webinars here: [Every Day Matters Collaborative - Summit Archives \(everydaymatterssummit.org\)](#)

### Screening tools

Several screening tools are available to educators and support staff that help identify students with different types of school attendance problems. A suite of screening questionnaires and checklists are available on the International Network for School Attendance website here: [Questionnaires \(insa.network\)](#) and include:

- The Inventory of School Attendance Problems (ISAP)
- The School Refusal Evaluation (SCREEN)
- The School Non-Attendance Checklist (SNACK)
- The School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS)
- The Self-Efficacy Questionnaire for School Situations (SEQ-SS)

A review of screening questionnaires by González et al (2021) is also available here: [Assessing school attendance problems: A critical systematic review of questionnaires - ScienceDirect](#)

### Research

The research literature on school attendance problems is diverse. Some helpful journal volumes, articles and books that may help to summarise the current directions of research, policy and practice, include:

- The Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), edited by Michael Gottfried and Stacy Ehrlich, published a special issue in 2018: Combating Chronic Absence: Bridging Research and Policy. This issue is available here: [Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk \(JESPAR\): Vol 23, No 1-2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)
- A book co-edited by Michael Gottfried and Ethan Hutt (2019), *Absent from School: Understanding and Addressing Absenteeism*.

- A forthcoming book by Kearney, González, & Bacon. School attendance problems. In L.A. Theodore, B.A. Bracken, & M.A. Bray (Eds.), *Desk reference in school psychology*. New York: Oxford.
- A change in the frame: From absenteeism to attendance, by Carolyn Gentle-Genitty, James Taylor and Corinne Renguette. [Frontiers | A Change in the Frame: From Absenteeism to Attendance \(frontiersin.org\)](https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1044608)
- School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future, by Kearney et al (2022). <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1044608>
- Improving school attendance data and defining problematic and chronic school absenteeism: The next stage for educational policies and health-based practices, by Kearney & Childs (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2022.2124222>
- Unlearning school attendance and its problems: Moving from historical categories to postmodern dimensions, by Kearney & González (2022). Unlearning school attendance and its problems: Moving from historical categories to postmodern dimensions. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.977672>

## Itinerary and meeting details

Dates	Location	Contacts and Affiliations	Reason for Visit
1 <sup>st</sup> May	Wellington	Jacinta Dalgety ( <i>Director, Te Ihuwaka</i> ) & colleagues Education Review Office (ERO)  Ministry of Education representatives	To discuss recent attendance research and the development of the NZ Attendance and Engagement Strategy.  To discuss the development and implementation of the NZ Attendance and Engagement Strategy, and plans for future monitoring.
2 <sup>nd</sup> May	Wellington	Angela Lowe (Principal), Newlands Intermediate School  Joanne Thom, Professional Practice Leader Education Review Office Methodology & Professional Practice Team	To discuss recent attendance trends in the local NZ context, drivers of non-attendance, and current strategies to address different drivers of absenteeism.  To discuss the recent practice-related work her team have established to help schools identify, address, and monitor student attendance.
3 <sup>rd</sup> May	Auckland	Karyl Puklowski & Irma Oberholzer, Auckland Central Engagement Service (ACES) & Julie Spedding, Ministry of Education  Peter Kaiser (Principal) & Dale Hammond (Deputy Principal), Tirimoana Primary School	To discuss the ACES model of support for students with very low attendance.  To discuss recent attendance trends in the local NZ context, drivers of non-attendance, and current strategies to address different drivers of absenteeism.
8 <sup>th</sup> May	Las Vegas	Professor Christopher Kearney Psychology School, University of Nevada Las Vegas	To discuss broad concepts in the student attendance research space; experiences of working with schools and education districts; greatest challenges and opportunities to addressing student attendance problems

9 <sup>th</sup> May	Chicago, IL	<p>Dr Patricia Graczyk. Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology, Department of Psychiatry in the College of Medicine at the University of Illinois Chicago</p> <p>Workshop with Chicago educators and support leaders:  Sarah Norton, Partnerships Coordinator, West Chicago School District 33, West Chicago, Illinois.  Ryan Bretag, Director of Teaching and Learning, Glenbrook High School District 225, Glenview, Illinois.  Lisa Allen &amp; Dena Hasselberg. Valley View Community School District 365-U, Romeoville, Illinois.  Dena Hasselberg, Valley View School District  Annie Jones &amp; Kathy Ekstrand. DuPage Regional Office of Education, Wheaton, Illinois.  Juli Mahorney, Principal Maya Angelou Elementary School, Harvey School District 153, Harvey, Illinois.</p>	<p>To discuss broad concepts in the student attendance research space; experiences of working with schools and education districts; greatest challenges and opportunities to addressing student attendance problems</p> <p>To discuss experiences of implementing multi-tiered support systems, best practice use of data, supporting students at tier 3, focusing on low attendance in conjunction with academic and social-emotional learning factors to understand the functional impairment at a student level.</p>
10 <sup>th</sup> May	Chicago, IL	<p>Dr Patricia Graczyk  Dr Stacy Ehrlich, NORC @ The University of Chicago</p> <p>Dr Zakieh Mohammed (Senior Manager, Attendance &amp; Truancy), Office of Student Support and Engagement, Chicago Public Schools</p>	<p>To discuss broad concepts in the student attendance research space; experiences of working with schools and education districts; greatest challenges and opportunities to addressing student attendance problems</p> <p>To discuss recent changes in attendance policy in Illinois and Chicago schools.</p>
12 <sup>th</sup> May	Detroit, MI	Associate Professor Sarah Lenhoff Wayne State University	To discuss research on attendance policy and strategies in Detroit and other areas with historic experience of high poverty rates.

16 <sup>th</sup> May	Philadelphia	Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania Professor Michael Gottfried Professor A. Brooks Bowden Associate Professor Ericka Weathers Professor Wendy Chan Kat Wilson (PhD Candidate) Colby Woods(PhD Candidate) Phil Kim (PhD Candidate)	To discuss forthcoming attendance research and the insights these findings may drive.
17 <sup>th</sup> May	Indianapolis	Professor Carolyn Gentle-Genitty	Professor Gentle-Genitty has published widely on attendance issues, and is the founder of Pivot Attendance Solutions, and a founding member of the International Network for School Attendance. We met to discuss broad concepts in the student attendance research space; experiences of working with schools and education districts; greatest challenges and opportunities to addressing student attendance problems; the language of student attendance problems.
18 <sup>th</sup> May	Indianapolis	Director James Taylor  Judge Steven Nation, retired Hamilton County Judge.	To discuss approaches to attendance in local Indianapolis schools; excitement for new ways of using data to drive local solutions.  To discuss Judge Nation's work on diverting at-risk youth away from the juvenile justice system. Judge Nation was a co-founder of the Hamilton County Youth Assistance Program, designed to bring together schools, businesses, faith-based organisations and the community to help at-risk students stay in school and out of the juvenile justice system through volunteers who provide tutoring, mentoring, and a coordination of services to at-risk children and their families.
21 <sup>st</sup> May	Lubbock, TX	Assistant Professor Jacob Kirksey & colleagues	To discuss broad-ranging education policy in Texas; attendance-related research; to participate in a research-practice forum (RECESS) hosted by Texas Tech University; attendance data quality in the US

24 <sup>th</sup> May	Austin, TX	Professor Joshua Childs, University of Texas, Austin. Plus an impromptu visit to the Holdsworth Centre, a non-profit public education leadership centre.	To discuss research on school-community partnerships; directions of attendance research; attendance data quality in the US
Post-travel	Video conference	Phyllis Jordan, Director, Future Ed (author of the Attendance Playbook 2023)  Hedy Chang, founder and Executive Director of Attendance Works.	To discuss the Attendance Playbook, how it's been received and used, other general discussion regarding student attendance problems.  To discuss the main gaps in knowledge, research, and practice concerning student attendance problems, likely future work, exacerbation of issues caused by COVID, and the history, establishment, and growth of Attendance Works over time.

## Dissemination plan

Initial plans are to share a copy of the Fellowship report with:

- All those who supported the Fellowship, including referees, Fellowship contacts, colleagues at The Smith Family, and the Western Australian Department for Communities
- Contacts within education departments across Australia and those who have already reached out to express interest in the key findings
- Drawing upon the network of relationships that my Smith Family colleagues have with state and commonwealth government departments, schools, and other organisations
- Colleagues at the Australian Education Research Organisation, who are working through similar questions and issues for the Federal Education Minister.

- Contacts at Teacher Magazine, who have reached out in the past for interviews on attendance trends in Australia
- Contacts on LinkedIn and other social media

After the initial share, I will write a shorter summary piece and submit as a commentary to the *Australian Journal of Social Issues* and circulate to interested parties.

Through sharing the Fellowship report (and the commentary article if/when published) I will also offer to provide presentations and/or webinars to interested groups. The key findings will also be presented at an online seminar for research, policy, and operations teams at The Smith Family, including those who work directly with schools, families, and students.

Finally, I will consider appropriate conferences to share the Fellowship findings within the next year.

## References

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Horsey, C. S. (1997). From first grade forward: Early foundations of high school dropout. *Sociology of Education*, *70*(2), 87-107.

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Schools*. ABS.  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/2022>.

Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (2022). National Report on Schooling in Australia 2022 (Chapter 4). Available at: [https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/ANR2022/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia\\_2022\\_Chapter4.pdf#page=3](https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/ANR2022/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022_Chapter4.pdf#page=3)

Balu, R., & Ehrlich, S. B. (2018). Making sense out of incentives: A framework for considering the design, use, and implementation of incentives to improve attendance. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, *23*, 93-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10804669.2018.1438898>

Burtonshaw, S., & Dorrell, E. (2023). *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis*. Public First, available at: <ATTENDANCE-REPORT-V02.pdf> ([publicfirst.co.uk](http://publicfirst.co.uk))

Chang, H., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty.  
[http://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text\\_837.pdf](http://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf)

Eklund, K., Burns, M. K., Oyen, K., DeMarchena, S., & McCollom, E. M. (2020). Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Schools: A meta-analysis of evidence-based interventions. *School Psychology Review*, *95*-111. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1789436>

Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, *19*(2), 53-75.

Gottfried, M. A., & Hutt, E. (2019). *Absent from School: Understanding and Addressing Student Absenteeism*. Harvard Education Press.

Graham, T. N., Beasley, J., & Guterman, E. (2011). Exploring absenteeism and its relationship to delinquency engagement in school-based services. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *40*(1), 23-28.

Hancock, K. (2019). Does the reason make a difference? Assessing school absence codes and their associations with student achievement outcomes. PhD thesis, The University of Western Australia. Available at: [https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/45675442/THESIS\\_DOCTOR\\_OF\\_PHILOSOPHY\\_HANCOCK\\_Kirsten\\_Jane\\_2019.pdf](https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/45675442/THESIS_DOCTOR_OF_PHILOSOPHY_HANCOCK_Kirsten_Jane_2019.pdf)

Hancock, K. J., Cave, L., Christensen, D., Mitrou, F. & Zubrick, S. R. (2021). Associations between developmental risk profiles, mental disorders, and student absences among primary and secondary students in Australia. *School Mental Health*, *13*(4). 756-771. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-021-09443-9>

Hancock, K. J., Shepherd, C. C. J., Lawrence, D., & Zubrick, S. R. (2013). *Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts*. Canberra: Australian Department of Education. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254863068\\_Student\\_Attendance\\_and\\_Educational\\_Outcomes\\_Every\\_Day\\_Counts](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254863068_Student_Attendance_and_Educational_Outcomes_Every_Day_Counts)

Henry, K. L., Knight, K. E., & Thornberry, T. P. (2017). School disengagement as a predictor of dropout, delinquency, and problem substance use during adolescence and early adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 46(1), 40-54.

Illinois General Assembly, 2021. Amendment to House Bill 3099, available at [Illinois General Assembly - Full Text of HB3099 \(ilga.gov\)](https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/101/bills/0300/03099.htm).

Kearney, C. A., & Graczyk, P. A. (2020). A multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports to promote school attendance and address school absenteeism. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 23, 316-337. DOI: [10.1007/s10567-020-00317-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-020-00317-1)

New Zealand Government Education and Workforce Committee (2022). *Inquiry into school attendance. Report of the Education and Workforce Committee presented to the House of Representatives*. Available at: <https://selectcommittees.parliament.nz/v/2/5e1472a2-cfbc-4e15-9f8d-9787cb26f357>

New Zealand Ministry of Education (2022). *Attendance and Engagement Strategy*. Available at: <https://assets.education.govt.nz/public/Documents/our-work/strategies-and-policies/Attendance-and-Engagement-Strategy-Document.pdf>

Productivity Commission (2022). *Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report*, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement-overview.pdf>

Rizzo, V. M., Rowe, V. M., Shier Kricke, G., Krajci, K., & Golden, R. (2016). AIMS: A care coordination model to improve patient health outcomes. *Health and Social Work*, 41(3). 191-195. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlw029>

Sahlberg, P., Goldfeld, S., Quack, J., Senior, C., & Sinclair, C. (2023). Reinventing Australian schools for the better wellbeing, health and learning of every child (Version 2). Murdoch Childrens Research Institute. <http://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.22766825.v2>

Senate Education and Employment References Committee (2023). *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*. Available at: <https://apo.org.au/node/323847>

Sparks, S. (2022). *Teacher and student absenteeism is getting worse*. Education Week, July 7 2022 [Teacher and Student Absenteeism Is Getting Worse \(edweek.org\)](https://www.edweek.org/teacher-and-student-absenteeism-is-getting-worse).

The Smith Family, (2018). *Attendance lifts achievement: Building the evidence base to improve student outcomes*. Sydney: The Smith Family. [Lifting School Achievement through Attendance \(thesmithfamily.com.au\)](https://thesmithfamily.com.au/lifting-school-achievement-through-attendance)

Wilkins, R., Vera-Toscano, E., Botha, F., Wooden, M., & Trinh, T. A. (2022). *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected findings from Waves 1 to 20*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne. [HILDA Statistical Report 2022.pdf \(unimelb.edu.au\)](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/research/melbourne-institute/publications/hilda-statistical-report-2022)