

Every Day Counts

Understanding, Preventing and Responding to School Attendance Problems



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TO SCHOOL ATTENDANCE PROBLEMS

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Foreword

This report - titled *Every Day Counts: Understanding, Preventing and Responding to School Attendance Problems* - was conducted as part of the Education for Inclusive Societies project under the programme of work of OECD's Education Policy Committee. Across countries, there is growing recognition of the importance of ensuring that all learners can participate fully in education and benefit from supportive learning environments. However, data show that not all students attend school regularly and that school attendance problems (SAP) have become a challenge affecting classrooms in nearly every country.

SAP encompass a range of difficulties or patterns of behaviour that hinder a student's regular participation in education. They can stem from a complex interplay of individual, family, school, community and structural factors. Importantly, they are associated with important consequences for students, including lower academic achievement, reduced well-being, disengagement from learning and increased risk of early leaving from education and training. SAP can also have broader social and economic implications for education systems and societies. Post-Covid, growing concerns emerged across countries that some learners were struggling to re-engage with school attendance, further increasing attention to the need for effective prevention and response strategies.

To acquire a better understanding and develop policy responses to respond to SAP, the purpose of the report is to define the different forms of SAP, analyse recent trends using internationally comparable data complemented by national data sources, examine key drivers of SAP, explore both the academic and non-academic consequences of SAP, review policies and practices across education systems, and develop policy pointers to help address these challenges. The report also presents the results of the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

The authors of this report are Lucie Cerna (co-ordinator), Samo Varsik, Cecilia Mezzanotte, Julie Pereira and Camilla Stronati of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills. The development of the report was guided by Andreas Schleicher and Paulo Santiago and was overseen by the Education Policy Committee. Valuable comments on draft chapters were provided by Paulo Santiago and members of the Education Policy Committee. Daiana Torres Lima was responsible for the production and layout of the report. Alexander Schnapka and Élisabeth Prigent-Bastien provided research support, and Eda Cabbar publication support. Many thanks also to Yuri Belfali and colleagues in the PISA team (especially Miyako Ikeda, Tue Halgreen and Francesco Avvisati) for their help. The authors are grateful to Dr. David Heyne (Excellence in Attendance Support) and Prof. Markus Klein (University of Strathclyde), two international experts who prepared substantial background notes on the drivers and consequences of SAP, respectively, which informed the report, and who also provided detailed comments on draft chapters and the policy survey.

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This report is organised into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the topic of SAP, with information on key concepts and terminology and major attendance trends across education systems. Chapter 2 analyses the drivers of SAP, while Chapter 3 examines the consequences of attendance problems. Chapter 4 reviews policies and practices to support school attendance. Finally, Chapter 5 offers key messages, proposes policy pointers and suggests avenues for future research.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AAP	American Academy of Pediatrics
ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CPL	Continuing Professional Learning
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELET	Early Leaving from Education and Training
EWIS	Early Warning Indicator System
EWS	Early Warning Systems
FPN	Fixed Penalty Notice
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
ILSA	International Large-Scale Assessments
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MAZL	Meer Aandacht voor Ziekgemelde Leerlingen or MASS - Medical Advice for Sick-reported Students
MTSS	Multi-Tiered Systems of Support
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
PBIS	Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment

PPCT	Process, Person, Context and Time
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
RTI	Response to Intervention
SAP	School Attendance Problems
SEAM	School Enrolment and Attendance Measure
SEN	Special Education Needs
SWPBIS	Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

Executive summary

Every morning, millions of children are expected to attend school. Yet many face barriers that prevent regular attendance. School attendance problems (SAP) are no longer a marginal issue; they have become a challenge affecting classrooms in nearly every country. This report synthesises evidence from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems, literature and international large-scale assessments to give an account of key concepts, terminology and international trends, drivers, and consequences of school absences. It also takes stock of policies and practices for supporting school attendance and distils key messages and policy pointers emerging from the evidence presented in the report.

Key concepts, terminology and international trends

To support a concise international analysis, this report uses “school attendance problems” as a broad umbrella term and “absence” as a concise term for all forms of non-attendance among students formally enrolled in primary or secondary education. However, international comparisons are challenged by varying terminology.

The language and classification used can shape responses to SAP and experiences of students and families. The terminology can influence how absences are measured, interpreted and addressed. Distinctions, such as authorised and unauthorised absences, often determine whether interventions are supportive, disciplinary or legal. These classifications can also contribute to disadvantages for marginalised students and families.

Despite these challenges, international large-scale assessments (e.g. PISA and TIMSS) provide an indication of patterns. SAP have worsened over time in several education systems since early 2010s. They are more prevalent among certain groups, including disadvantaged and immigrant students. However, results differ by context, time, and between educational levels. Moreover, measures based on student self-reports and school leaders’ perceptions often produce different pictures, underscoring challenges in measurement and comparison. Nevertheless, post-pandemic attendance remains a concern with many education systems reporting persistently higher absence rates following the pandemic.

Drivers of school attendance problems

Absence trajectories often begin early and tend to persist. In fact, prior absences are one of the strongest predictors of future absences. Patterns can form early and can stabilise or intensify during transitions between educational stages.

Health-related challenges, disengagement and family hardship remain critical to SAP. Physical illness, mental health difficulties, boredom, low motivation and perceived lack of relevance influence individual attendance decisions. Material deprivation, unstable housing, caregiving responsibilities, parental health problems and family conflict can disrupt routines and reduce students’ capacity to attend school.

Moreover, supportive school climates, strong school belonging, positive student-teacher relationships and stable peer networks are linked to better attendance, while bullying, weak school-family communication and fragmented support can contribute to more absences.

Changing norms and institutional co-ordination can further influence SAP. Parental tolerance of minor illness absences or term-time holidays seems to have increased, weakening shared expectations about daily attendance. At the same time, weak co-ordination between schools and external services, along with gaps in mental-health and social support, can contribute to absences.

SAP are not caused by single factors but reflect interacting drivers across multiple levels. Policy frameworks and community contexts can influence absence indirectly by shaping families' resources, school practices and access to support services. Neighbourhood safety and transport reliability can further constrain students' attendance.

Consequences of school attendance problems

Absences reduce access to instruction, feedback, assessment and peer learning, which can weaken academic performance. SAP are also linked to weaker executive functioning, lower motivation, reduced perseverance and lower educational aspirations, all of which can further undermine students' capacity to learn.

Effects can begin early and can intensify at key stages. Absences in primary education are linked to weaker development of foundation skills. During lower secondary education, absences can be harmful because they coincide with important academic and developmental transitions. In upper secondary education, absences remain damaging, particularly during key assessment periods.

SAP are also associated with weaker social and emotional skills, lower school connectedness and a reduced sense of belonging. Furthermore, they are linked to greater risks of internalising difficulties (e.g. anxiety), as well as externalising and risky behaviours.

Consequently, repeated absences are a strong predictor of early leaving from education and training. They can reduce the likelihood of completing upper secondary education, progressing to further or higher education, and obtaining qualifications, thereby reinforcing longer-term educational disadvantage. Limited research also links SAP to poorer labour market outcomes, especially higher risks of unemployment.

Policy and practice for supporting attendance

No single policy measure is sufficient to address SAP. Responses need to be cross-sectoral, with alignment across governance, resourcing, capacity building, school-level interventions, and monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, SAP are often concentrated among students facing disadvantage and structural barriers. Policies that address these underlying conditions through targeted supports and inclusive approaches can help improve attendance, while rigid or enforcement-heavy responses may risk reinforcing inequities if not carefully designed.

Education systems define attendance obligations through legal frameworks. These can aid accountability and access to education, but their effects depend on how they interact with supportive measures and implementation capacity. Many systems also use punitive or compliance-based measures (e.g. fines). These approaches may produce short-term effects but are unlikely to durably reduce absence on their own.

Instead, effective responses require co-ordination across schools, families, health services, social services and community actors. Teachers and school staff play an important role in shaping attendance through classroom practices, relationships and engagement. Effective responses rely on a combination of

instructional adaptations, targeted supports engagement and re-integration measures. Finally, positive school climate, supportive relationships among peers, between students and school staff, and strong connections between schools and families are key protective factors for attendance.

Monitoring systems are essential, but constraints hinder the full potential of data. There is variation in coverage, frequency, granularity and linkage capacity of data. Monitoring systems are most effective when they enable early identification, timely intervention and continuous improvement.

Policy pointers

Based on the analyses presented, the report proposes seven key policy pointers:

- Respond to the drivers of absence through multifaceted, supportive and integrated responses.
- Develop strong relations and engagement in schools.
- Build strong partnerships and a shared understanding and involvement with families and students.
- Respond early and effectively before absences become entrenched.
- Use enforcement carefully within a support framework.
- Strengthen system and school capacity to act on attendance.
- Improve evaluation and learning on attendance across the system.

1 Introduction

This chapter sets the analytical foundation for the report. It clarifies key concepts and terminology related to school attendance problems, including distinctions between authorised and unauthorised absences, to support international comparison. Drawing on findings from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems, international large-scale assessments and relevant research literature, the chapter provides an overview of major attendance trends across education systems. It examines disparities by student background characteristics, considers school leaders' perspectives on attendance challenges, and presents descriptive evidence on long-term absence and post-COVID-19 attendance patterns.

Key messages

School attendance problems have become a central policy issue in several jurisdictions, intensified by post-COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, widening inequalities and increased awareness of the long-term consequences of absences.

Definitions and terminology vary among education systems

To support a concise international analysis, this report uses “school attendance problems” as a broad umbrella term and “absence” as a concise term for all forms of non-attendance among students formally enrolled in primary or secondary education. However, there is no internationally agreed definition of school attendance problems, absence rates or related terms. Education systems use diverse definitions and classification frameworks. This lack of comparability complicates cross-national analysis and the transfer of effective policies.

Language and classification shape responses and experiences

Terminology is not neutral: it can influence how absences are measured, interpreted and addressed. Distinctions, such as authorised and unauthorised absences, often determine whether interventions are supportive, disciplinary or legal. These classifications can also contribute to disadvantages for marginalised students and families.

School attendance problems are unequally distributed

School attendance problems are more prevalent among certain groups, including socio-economically disadvantaged students, those with an immigrant background, students with special education needs and other groups. However, the patterns vary by context.

School attendance problems have worsened over time in several education systems

Student-reported absences in primary education and truancy among 15-year-old students have increased since the early 2010s in several countries. At the same time, school leaders have become more likely to report attendance-related problems: in primary education, school leaders more often report that student absenteeism or late arrival is a serious problem, while in secondary education, more often report that student truancy hinders learning.

Trends differ among countries, educational levels and data sources

International large-scale assessments reveal considerable variation in absence patterns over time, and between primary and secondary education. Measures based on student self-reports and school leaders’ perceptions often produce different pictures, underscoring challenges in measurement and comparison.

Post-pandemic attendance remains a concern

While trends are mixed, many education systems report persistently higher absence rates following the pandemic. Shifts in instructional practices, worsening psychological and mental health challenges, and changes in students’ behaviours and parental attitudes may contribute to these patterns.

The report provides a new international evidence base

The report combines a policy survey covering 45 education systems with international data and research literature to strengthen understanding of school attendance problems and inform policy responses.

Every morning, millions of children are expected to attend school. Yet many face barriers that prevent regular attendance. School attendance problems (SAP) are no longer a marginal issue; they have become a challenge affecting classrooms in nearly every country. SAP are not simply about skipping class or lacking motivation: absences often reflect deeper, systemic problems (see Chapter 2). Students may stay home due to negative school climate, bullying, lack of interest in education, physical or mental health struggles, family obligations, poverty-related obstacles, such as inadequate housing, unreliable transportation or food insecurity, among other factors. These barriers do not just interrupt learning; they can widen educational disparities and reinforce cycles of disadvantage (see Chapter 3). While schools are meant to be places of growth and opportunity, for many students, even getting through the door is a daily challenge.

The consequences of SAP ripple far beyond the classroom. Poor school attendance is associated with lower academic achievement, higher drop-out rates and reduced job prospects in adulthood (see Chapter 3). The long-term effects of missing school can persist throughout life, exacerbating inequality and limiting social mobility.

Moreover, attendance trends are anything but uniform. They vary widely among countries, across regions and between student groups. In many cases, it is the most vulnerable students who face the most significant barriers to consistent attendance. To tackle this issue effectively, it is essential to understand how attendance has evolved and which forces are driving these disparities.

This report brings SAP to the forefront of policy discussions. It draws on unique results from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems (Box 1.1). One of the many significant contributions of this survey is the fact that it collected information from 45 education systems in the world (mostly from EU and OECD countries), in the broader context where research on SAP is concentrated in countries with good administrative data infrastructures (e.g. Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States) (Heyne et al., 2020^[1]). This information is combined with analyses from international large-scale assessments gathering data on school truancy and absence from students and school leaders. Finally, the report utilises knowledge obtained through reviews of academic and other literature, identifying drivers, consequences, and promising policies and practices to tackle SAP.

Box 1.1. OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems

The OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems collected, for the first time, education jurisdictions' definitions, monitoring practices, drivers, consequences, policies and practices to address SAP. Countries were asked to fill out the survey considering public primary and secondary educational levels (i.e. ISCED 1-3). In total, 45 education systems from 35 OECD, EU and OECD accession countries filled out the survey.

Where education is a devolved responsibility, sub-national entities could fill out separate surveys (e.g. Communities in Belgium, countries in the United Kingdom and autonomous communities in Spain). In these instances, sub-national examples included in the report should be understood as illustrative examples of practices and approaches that may also exist, in similar forms, in other parts of the country, even where they are not explicitly mentioned.

The survey was divided into seven modules with 35 items:

- Definitions and trends in school attendance problems (four items);
- Monitoring of school attendance (ten items);
- Drivers of school attendance problems (one item);
- Consequences of school attendance problems (two items);

- Policies related to the governance of school attendance problems (nine items);
- Policies related to capacity building (three items); and
- Policies related to school-level interventions (six items).

Efforts were made to create a comprehensive data collection. However, the findings cannot be regarded as exhaustive of the topics covered due to various limitations, such as survey length, international comparability, and the balance between clarity and concision. Given that policy contexts change in time, it is important to regard this information as representative of the year 2025 in the participating education systems. Further information is provided in the report annex.

The timing of this report is deliberate. SAP have become a central policy issue in several jurisdictions, intensified by COVID-19 pandemic disruptions, widening inequalities and increased awareness of the long-term consequences of absences. Education systems seek not only to understand the scale and nature of the challenge, but also to respond effectively (Chapter 4). By consolidating new policy survey evidence with international data and research, this report provides a strategic evidence base for action.

Key concepts

A significant challenge in the field of SAP is the lack of internationally comparable definitions. Countries adopt diverse terminologies and operational frameworks to define and address issues related to attendance and absence. These variations hinder cross-country comparability and can complicate the task of transferring effective policies and practices across borders (Heyne, Keppens and Dvořák, 2024^[2]).

Consensus on definitions and terminology has not yet been reached in the academic literature either. While there is an agreement that SAP operate across and are shaped by multiple intersecting domains and systems (e.g. among youth, parents, schools, communities, organisations and legal contexts), no universally agreed classification currently exists. However, multiple lines of evidence suggest that SAP can be meaningfully differentiated by function and type (Heyne et al., 2019^[3]). To offer a foundational and comprehensive historical review of SAP and its evolving terminology, Heyne et al. (2019^[4]) highlighted definitional inconsistencies and competing conceptualisations of terms, such as school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school exclusion (Table 1.1). Some more recent approaches in the United Kingdom identify dominant terms, such as emotionally based school avoidance, and a shift toward more neutral, systemic language, such as extended school non-attendance (Hammond-Price et al., 2025^[5]). The choice of terminology is crucial, as it can have an impact on interpretation, measurement approaches and potential stigma, particularly when terms implicitly assign responsibility to a student (Kjæøy and Lysvik, 2024^[6]).

Table 1.1. Definitions of selected terms related to school attendance problems

Term	Definition
School exclusion	School exclusion is said to occur when a young person is absent from school or specific school activities, for any period of time, caused by the school: (1) employing disciplinary exclusion in an inappropriate manner (e.g. unlawful expulsion; internal suspension for the school's convenience); or (2) being unable or unwilling to accommodate the physical, socio-emotional, behavioural, or academic needs of the young person (e.g. parents of a student with a mild intellectual disability are told to pick their child up two afternoons per week because their teaching aide will not be available); or (3) discouraging a young person from attending, beyond the realm of legally acceptable school policy (e.g. a youth who is struggling academically is asked to spend the day at home on the day that national academic assessments are undertaken).
School refusal	School refusal is said to occur when: (1) a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress that is temporal and indicative of aversion to attendance (e.g. excessive fearfulness, temper tantrums, unhappiness, unexplained physical symptoms) or emotional distress that is chronic and hindering attendance (e.g. depressive affect; sleep problems), usually but not necessarily manifest in absence (e.g. late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years); and (2) the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents (e.g. they are at home and the parents are aware of this), and if they previously hid absence then they stopped doing so once the absence was discovered; and (3) the young person does not display severe antisocial behaviour, beyond resistance to parental attempts to get them to school; and (4) the parents have made reasonable efforts,

	currently or at an earlier stage in the history of the problem, to secure attendance at school, and/or the parents express their intention for their child to attend school full-time.
School withdrawal	School withdrawal is said to occur when a young person's absence from school (e.g. late arrivals; missing whole school days; missing consecutive weeks, months, or years) is: (1) not concealed from the parent(s); and (2) attributable to parental effort to keep the young person at home, or attributable to there being little or no parental effort to get the young person to school.
Truancy	Truancy is said to occur when: (1) a young person is absent from school for a whole day or part of the day, or they are at school but absent from the proper location (e.g. in the school-yard rather than in class); and (2) the absence occurs without the permission of school authorities; and (3) the young person typically tries to conceal the absence from their parents.

Note: While these definitions are based on a review of the literature, there is no broad consensus on the definitions. This list is not exhaustive and does not include all terms and definitions related to school attendance problems.

Source: Heyne et al. (2019^[4]), *Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: Why and How?*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>.

Terms adopted in this report

To support a concise international analysis, this report uses “school attendance problems” (SAP) as a broad umbrella term and “absence” as a concise term for all forms of non-attendance among students formally enrolled in primary or secondary education. This choice does not imply that these terms are preferable to jurisdiction-specific terminology. Rather, the term “school attendance problems” is widely used in international research as a broad umbrella term that covers different forms of absence (Heyne et al., 2019^[3]). “Absence” is a term that is often used in national (or sub-national) jurisdictions (see sections below).

Terminology in this field continues to evolve. For instance, while “absenteeism” is often referred to by policymakers, this report adopts the more neutral term “absence”. While “absenteeism” might capture habitual or chronic absences, its framing as an “-ism” may imply judgment or negativity, potentially stigmatising individuals who are absent due to legitimate reasons, such as illness, mental health challenges or caregiving responsibilities (Heyne, 2025^[7]). This connotation risks oversimplifying complex situations and may inadvertently alienate students and families. At the same time, there is a growing recognition of alternatives to “problems”, such as “challenges” or “difficulties”, as the word “problems” might carry a medical or clinical connotation, which may not always align with the broader, more relational and contextual nature of school attendance concerns (ibid.).

These terms allow the report to maintain analytical clarity while acknowledging the diversity of national concepts and classifications. Where relevant for interpretation, jurisdiction-specific definitions and policy nuances are discussed.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that how absences are classified, whether as authorised or unauthorised, is shaped by broader systemic and cultural dynamics. Research highlights that disciplinary practices, social capital, cultural perceptions and institutional norms can influence which absences are authorised, often to the disadvantage of marginalised families (Heyne, Verstraete and de Wit, 2025^[8]). For example, families from minority backgrounds may be more likely to have their children's absences classified as unauthorised, while those with greater social capital may more easily navigate systems to secure authorised status (McNeely et al., 2021^[9]; Rosenthal, Moro and Benoit, 2020^[10]). These categorisations not only record absences but actively shape student and family experiences, reinforcing or mitigating inequalities. A more inclusive approach would involve a critical review of how absence codes are applied, engagement in culturally responsive training, and adoption of distinctions, such as voluntary and involuntary absence, to better capture the complex, often structural, drivers of SAP (Birioukov, 2015^[11]).

This report focuses on issues related to SAP, and it is beyond its scope to examine student engagement in detail. However, engagement – whether emotional, behavioural, social or cognitive – can play a critical role in shaping attendance (Jimerson, Campos and Greif, 2003^[12]). As such, disengagement will be noted

as a potential driver of SAP (Chapter 2) as well as a focus of policies and practices aimed at improving attendance (Chapter 4).

Finally, early leaving from education and training, out-of-school rates, and educational attainment are viewed as consequences of SAP and are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Terminology and classification among education systems

The results from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems, on which the following sections are based (unless otherwise indicated), reveal that, while some conceptual categories are widely recognised – such as absence and lateness – the way these terms are defined and implemented varies among education systems. The specific meanings and implications of these terms are shaped by national or regional legislation, and local policy priorities. In some systems, the terminology is codified in law or regulation, whereas in others, it remains more loosely defined and context dependent. The terminology used by countries depends on their regulatory framework, institutional capacities and regional conditions. In some countries, the decentralised nature of the education system does not always allow for cross-regional comparisons. Unless otherwise indicated, the terms discussed below are relevant for primary to upper secondary education.

The term “absence” and its variations are commonly used concepts, but their classification varies. In Norway, for instance, the terminology has undergone a revision after the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities have adopted the term “worrying absenteeism”, which refers to absences from the social and academic community at school, documented or undocumented, which may have consequences for a student’s social and academic belonging and development. This reflects a deliberate shift from previous terms, such as “school refusal” or “involuntary school absence”. The Community of Madrid (Spain) uses the term “absenteeism” to describe non-enrolment, absence and irregular attendance. In Korea, absence covers all cases where students fail to attend on a required school day, including excused absences (e.g. legally designated infectious disease, family events, natural disasters and public obligations), illness-related absences with medical documentation, unexcused absences (e.g. truancy, disciplinary suspensions and absences due to delinquency), and other absences recognised by the school leader for exceptional circumstances. In the French Community of Belgium, “absenteeism” refers to students who are regularly enrolled but have accumulated at least nine half-days of unjustified absences.

Not all countries provide centralised or standardised terminology. In Indonesia, for example, schools categorise absences into types, such as sick leave or personal leave, but there is no national standard. In Sweden, while the system is decentralised, the terms *giltig frånvaro* (valid absence), *ogiltig frånvaro* (invalid absence) and *upprepad eller längre frånvaro* (repeated or prolonged absence) can be used, although they are not further defined. Moreover, there is considerable variation in the terms used and no national monitoring of school absences exists. Similarly, in Finland, the term *luvattomat poissaolot* (unauthorised absence) appears in the Basic Education Act without a precise definition. The Act on Vocational Education and Training instead refers to *poissaolot, joille on perusteltu syy* (absences for which there are reasonable grounds). To improve clarity, Finland has also introduced a recommended classification system under the Ministry of Education and Culture’s Engaging School Community Work initiative. It includes categories such as health-related absences, pre-requested leave, other investigated absences, unauthorised absences (investigated) and unresolved absences (Sergejeff and Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023^[13]).

Several jurisdictions also refer to dropout, i.e. early leaving from education and training. In Catalonia (Spain), for instance, *abandonament escolar* (school dropout) is defined as permanent and unjustified discontinuation of compulsory schooling. In the French Community of Belgium “school dropout” refers to students subject to compulsory education who are either enrolled but have stopped attending without a valid reason, or are not enrolled in any school and are not home-schooled. In this report, early leaving from

education and training is viewed as one of the consequences of SAP (see Chapter 3), rather than its subtype.

The following sections describe some of the most common terminology related to SAP and its typologies.

Truancy, lateness and other related terminology

Several education systems make specific references to truancy. Japan identifies truant students as those who are absent from school for a reasonable period of time and are unable to attend due to any psychological, emotional, physical or social factors or backgrounds (except for illness or economic reasons). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, truancy denotes absences without a valid reason. In Czechia, truancy is defined as the unexcused absence, usually undertaken deliberately to avoid school. It can take several forms: “true truancy”, where students skip school without parental knowledge; “covert truancy”, where absences occur with parental knowledge or even complicity; and “internal truancy” or “school escape”, where students attend school but skip specific lessons. Truancy can also be classified by decision-making patterns, ranging from “impulsive truancy”, triggered by immediate circumstances, to “planned truancy”, where students deliberately avoid particular subjects, examinations or interactions. Czechia also differentiates “late arrival”, where students arrive late without valid reasons, but the primary aim is not to avoid entire classes.

Indeed, “lateness”, often seen as a type of truancy, is tracked in several education systems, but is defined and recorded differently. In Portugal, the term *falta de atraso* denotes arriving late to class. It is treated as a specific subtype of a school attendance problem (in addition to *absentismo escolar* (school absenteeism) and *abandono escolar* (early school leaving/school dropout)). In Bulgaria, lateness is formally regulated: arriving up to 20 minutes late is counted as half an absence, while delays of more than 20 minutes constitute a complete absence. Lithuania, similarly, distinguishes between absence and lateness: absence means not being present in the school, while lateness means being present but late to class. In Korea, tardiness refers to failure to arrive by the designated start time, early leave refers to leaving before the official dismissal time, and partial attendance refers to missing part or all of a class period. In Iceland, *seinkoma* is used to denote lateness and is differentiated from other forms of categories: *skólasókn* (attendance), *fjarvist* (absence with and without permission), *fjarvist vegna veikinda* (absence due to sickness), *óskýrðar fjarvistir* (accumulated absence), *skólaforðun* (school refusal) and *undanþága* (exemption). Similarly, Malta recognises lateness as separate from absence, chronic absenteeism and truancy. Finally, England (United Kingdom) recognises “late arrival before the register is closed”, meaning that the student was absent when the register started being taken but arrives before the register is closed (Department for Education, 2024_[14]).

Severity classifications

Education systems have also developed detailed typologies of absences that are based on severity. La Rioja (Spain) identifies *absentismo leve* (mild absenteeism) referring to selective, occasional or intermittent unjustified absences or lateness; *absentismo grave* (severe absenteeism), where absences become chronic, widening the curricular gap and eroding the sense of belonging for both the student absent and their peers; and *absentismo muy grave* (very severe absenteeism), in which prolonged unjustified absences lead to social and academic isolation, rejection of education and significant barriers to reintegration.

Other education systems have specific cut-offs for determining the severity of SAP. New Zealand defines categories based on the percentage of school time missed per term. “Chronic absence” refers to students attending 70% or less of the term, while “moderate” and “irregular” absence apply to those attending between 70% and 90%. “Regular attendance” refers to students who have attended more than 90% of the term. Catalonia (Spain) also employs a frequency-based approach to classify (unauthorised) truancy as mild (5%), moderate (5%-25%) and severe (more than 25% of school time missed per month). Similar

classifications can be observed in England (United Kingdom): if students miss 10% or more of the available sessions, they are defined as “persistently absent” (6 days/term, 19 days/year). If they miss 50% or more sessions, they are defined as “severely absent”. Wales (United Kingdom) also defines persistent absence as missing over 10% of half-day school sessions (decreased from 20% in 2023). Chile distinguishes outstanding attendance (students attending 97% or more of the total number of official school days in a year), normal attendance (students attending 90%-97% of school days), repeated absence (85%-90% of school days) and serious absence (fewer than 85% of school days).

Other education systems define the thresholds based on absolute number of classes missed. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, for instance, “severe absence” refers to 30 or more half-days of absences, while “chronic” or “long-term absence” captures repeated or extended absences due to illness, maternity leave or accidents. Latvia distinguishes between justified, unjustified, and long-term unjustified absences, the latter applying when students miss more than 20 lessons in a school year without providing clear reasons.

Finally, the Netherlands distinguishes between “absolute absence”, which refers to students who are not registered at any school nor are they home-schooled, and “relative absence”, which describes those enrolled but not attending without permission. Other national categories include “luxury absence” (unauthorised absences outside of school holidays), “signal absence” (students absent more often or for longer than usual during a specific period), and “permitted absence” (e.g. for medical reasons). The Dutch system also includes concepts such as “school refusal,” often associated with emotional or psychological difficulties, and “homebound students”, who do not attend school over an extended period. Finally, “truancy” refers to those absent from a lesson without permission.

Authorised and unauthorised absences

A common distinction in student absences is that between authorised and unauthorised categories (also referred to as justified and unjustified, or excused and unexcused). In 2025, all 45 education systems that responded to this item in the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems reported using such a distinction when determining whether or how to respond to student absences (OECD, 2025^[15]). Despite variation in terminology and procedural formality, a common thread runs through these examples: unauthorised absences are treated not just as a category of behaviour, but as a risk signal warranting escalating intervention. Systems differ in how they define limits, verify documentation and involve external actors. Still, the functional role of the authorised/unauthorised distinction – as a threshold for taking action – is widely shared.

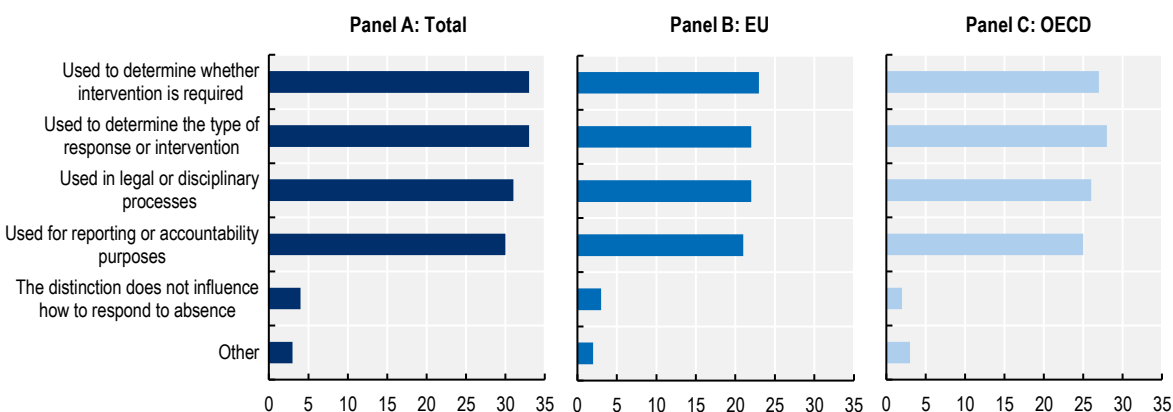
Authorised absences typically refer to time missed from school for reasons formally recognised by schools or education authorities – such as illness, medical appointments, family emergencies or participation in sanctioned events (e.g. school-organised activities, official sporting/cultural events) – and often requires timely notification and, in some cases, documentation. In England (United Kingdom), for example, authorised absences include illness and medical appointments, while unauthorised absences include truancy and term-time holidays. Special leaves of absence (authorised) can be granted by headteachers in exceptional circumstances (e.g. travel due to a bereavement). In Scotland and Wales (United Kingdom), approval for an absence may be granted by schools in advance or following an explanation, provided the school deems the reason reasonable; otherwise, the absence is recorded as unauthorised. In the Slovak Republic, excused absences are defined in regard to an illness, extremely unfavourable weather conditions, unexpected interruptions of public transport, undesired family events and students’ participation in competitions. Romania, likewise, differentiates between justified absences, based on objective reasons, such as medical issues, written parental requests within a certain limit each year, or participation in sports or academic competitions; and unjustified absences, which occur when documentation is not provided or deadlines for submitting explanations are missed.

Authorised and unauthorised distinction determining decision making

The results from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems reveal that most education systems make the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absences to determine whether an intervention is required (33), to determine the type of response or intervention (33), or use it in legal or disciplinary processes (31) (Figure 1.1). Moreover, 30 education systems also use it for reporting or accountability purposes. Finally, in four education systems, the distinction is made, but it does not influence whether or how to respond to student absences.

Figure 1.1. Authorised and unauthorised absences (2025)

Number of education systems making use of the distinction between excused and unexcused absence when determining whether or how to respond to student absence



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Does your education system make use of the distinction between excused and unexcused (authorised and unauthorised) absence when determining whether or how to respond to student absence?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025_[15]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/qsjkhe>

Use of authorised and unauthorised absences for determining whether intervention is required

Many (33 of 45) education systems have protocols in place that directly determine whether an intervention is warranted. In Lithuania, for example, a detailed regulatory procedure outlines justifiable reasons for absences, the timeframe for notification, and the evidence required. If a student violates these provisions, such as exceeding five parent-excused days per month without medical documentation, this triggers school-level follow-up. As the response progresses, the case may be referred to the school’s child welfare commission and, ultimately, to municipal child protection services, particularly when more than half of the lessons or hours allocated for education during a calendar month are missed without justification. In Croatia, a critical intervention point is reached when a student misses more than 30% of lessons in a school year; consequently, the student must undergo a mandatory commission examination. Similarly, Portugal’s legal framework defines “serious excess absences”. It mandates that parents and students are alerted, and that integration or recovery measures are applied, when limits of unjustified absences are exceeded. These measures escalate further if previous efforts prove ineffective. In Catalonia (Spain), if the student’s absences are repeatedly unexcused, they activate the absence protocol. Madrid (Spain) echoes this approach, linking the activation of absence procedures to the nature and frequency of unexcused absences. In the Slovak Republic, five consecutive school days (no more than ten per month) are normally

allowed to be excused by parents in primary and secondary education. If the limit is exceeded, the school may set up an examination commission that determines whether the student is allowed to be graded.

In Iceland, schools are expected to initiate a formal response when a student's total absences exceed one-tenth of the school year. Municipalities are responsible for setting clear criteria for progressive interventions, beginning with school-led actions in collaboration with the student and their family, and culminating in potential referral to child protection authorities. Similarly, in Berlin (Germany), schools may request medical confirmation if they have justified doubts about absences reported for health reasons (VBE Berlin, 2024^[16]). If parents fail to submit the required documentation on time, the absences are treated as unauthorised unless it is based on credible, verifiable circumstances beyond the student's control, thereby triggering the corresponding follow-up procedures (*ibid.*).

Türkiye adopts a stepped or graduated response framework. Parents are notified on the 5th, 15th and 25th day of unexcused absences. If a student exceeds 10 days of unexcused absences or 30 days of total absences in a subject, they are considered unsuccessful in that course, regardless of their academic performance.

Responses to authorised absences are less clearly defined. The French Community of Belgium, for instance, reviews these when there is a risk of dropout. Wales (United Kingdom) sets no formal limits on the number of authorised absences, even for extended illnesses or holidays, leaving decisions largely to schools' judgments.

Use of authorised and unauthorised absences for determining the type of intervention

Several (33 of 45) education systems indicated that the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absences is used to determine the type of response or intervention. In Croatia, school-level statutes, grounded in national legislation, define specific procedures for excusing absences and outline corresponding educational or disciplinary measures, including proactive strategies to encourage regular attendance. In France, they recognise *absentéisme* (absenteeism), *absence non justifiée* (unjustified absence), *absence sans motif légitime ni excuse valable* (absence without legitimate reason or valid excuse) and *persistance du défaut d'assiduité* (persistent lack of attendance). Support measures may be proposed in the country depending on the communication between schools and parents, as well as the duration of the absence. In England (United Kingdom), within a support first approach, local authorities and schools determine the scale and nature of responses, with variation in practice depending on local thresholds and policies. Similarly, in Sweden, the school leadership is required to investigate repeated or prolonged justified and unjustified absences. Schools can also be required to report these to the municipalities, although only conditionally (e.g. only in certain cases, practices vary and the responsibility lies with school organisers). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, five or more unauthorised half-day absences trigger an intervention by a guidance centre.

In Peru, the distinction plays a formal role in triggering external intervention. If a student accumulates 15 consecutive days of unjustified absences, the case is referred to the *Defensoría Municipal del Niño y del Adolescente* (Municipal Office for the Protection of Children and Adolescents), which collaborates with schools to address the underlying causes and support the student's reintegration. This typically includes: (i) daily monitoring and recording of attendance; (ii) prompt communication with the family (typically after three or more consecutive days of absences) via phone calls, messages or home visits; (iii) documentation of all outreach and internal actions taken; and (iv) activation of internal protocols, which may involve tutors, school counsellors or the school leader. The Office also monitors follow-up actions to ensure the student's sustained return and continued attendance at school. A similar principle is evident in Thailand, where the zero-dropout policy requires schools and the Ministry of Education to identify students who have left the system and offer re-entry options tailored to their circumstances. If a student misses more than five consecutive days or more than seven days in a month, the school must send a notice to the parent(s). In Indonesia and Thailand, attendance is also a condition for taking examinations and graduation. Similarly, in Norwegian upper secondary education, absences are regulated through a 10% threshold of

undocumented absences per subject. If students exceed this limit, they, as a general rule, lose the right to be assessed with a grade, which may in turn prevent them from completing the subject or progressing in their programme of study.

Use of authorised and unauthorised absences for determining legal or disciplinary processes

Multiple (31 of 45) education systems use thresholds in absences to determine legal or disciplinary processes. In Croatia, surpassing 30% of missed lessons in a school year triggers mandatory commission exams, and failure to pass can result in grade repetition. If parents repeatedly neglect their responsibilities in regard to their children's attendance, the school is obligated to inform the competent regional administrative body or the City Office, and the relevant social welfare institution.

In the Slovak Republic, unexcused absences exceeding 60 lessons may result in a financial fine for parents, while accumulating more than 100 unexcused absences can trigger a criminal complaint. England (United Kingdom) also requires the consideration of a legal intervention, such as fines or prosecution, once certain unauthorised attendance thresholds are reached. For instance, fines are typically considered in cases where support has been offered but not engaged with, or where support is not deemed necessary (for example, the majority of fines are issued for term-time holidays). In Madrid (Spain), repeated absences can lead to corrective measures involving social services and the juvenile prosecutor's office. Latvia, La Rioja (Spain), Malta, Iceland and Romania apply a similar tiered approach: schools are expected to engage with students and families early on, but when absences reach a critical point, and especially if broader child welfare concerns are present, cases may be referred to child protection/social service authorities in accordance with national legislation. In Malta, for instance, students who miss more than nine unauthorised school days might be referred to the Local Tribunal.

In Luxembourg, the legal framework differentiates between *absence non justifiée* (unjustified absence without one of three legitimate motives: illness, death of a family member, circumstances beyond one's control), and *absence non excusée* (unexcused absence, secondary education). It further sets explicit thresholds: 48 unexcused lessons per year trigger formal intervention, 5 consecutive days without a valid excuse result in a warning letter, and 15 successive days result in automatic withdrawal from school. In France, disciplinary procedures can be implemented from four half-days of unjustified absences in a month and in Denmark from 15% unauthorised absence rate. These examples reveal that the authorised/unauthorised distinction is widely used, but its thresholds, procedures and consequences differ substantially among systems.

Cross-national trends and disparities in school attendance problems

International large-scale assessments (ILSAs), such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), allow for some cross-country comparative statistics. In PISA, they cover measures of self-reported truancy at the secondary level, i.e. the percentage of 15-year-old students reporting skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the past two weeks before taking the PISA test. In TIMSS, they cover self-reported measures of absences at the primary level, i.e. the percentage of fourth-grade students reporting being absent from school once every week or every two weeks. PISA 2022 also focuses on past long-term absences, i.e. the percentage of 15-year-old students who reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months at any time in their previous educational journey.

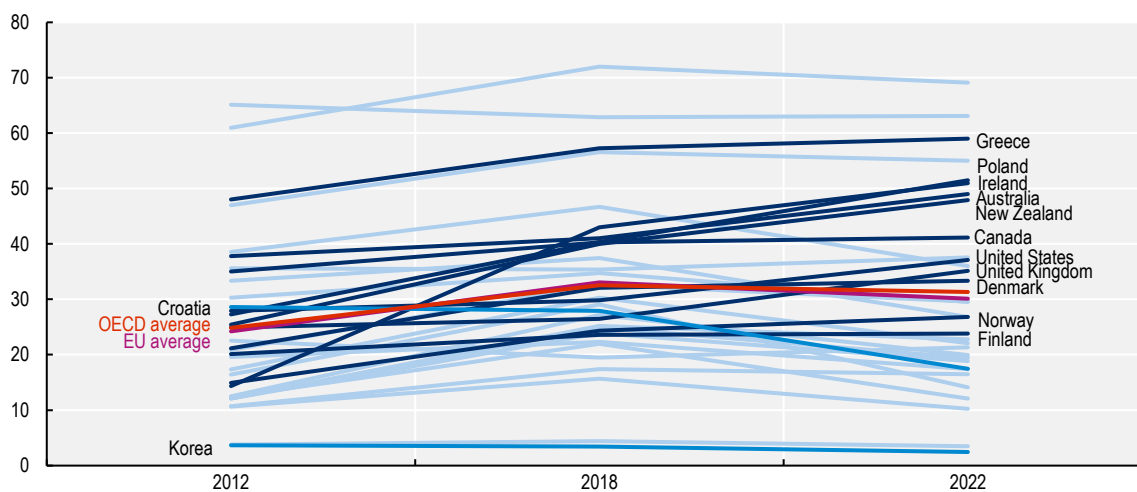
Trends in student truancy at secondary level

On average across OECD countries, self-reported truancy among 15-year-old students increased between 2012 and 2018, then decreased slightly in 2022, even though there is great variability among countries (Figure 1.2). In 2012, 24.8% of students reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the past two weeks before taking the PISA test. In 2018, the share rose to 32.5%, then decreased

slightly to 31.3% in 2022. Japan and Korea have consistently low percentages of self-reported truant students. Italy and Türkiye, in contrast, have persistently high truancy over this time period. Croatia and Korea are the only countries with a consistently decreasing trend (light blue in the figure below), while Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States are countries with consistently increasing trends (dark blue in the figure below).

Figure 1.2. Student truancy in secondary education (2012, 2018 and 2022)

Percentage of 15-year-old students reporting skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the past two weeks before taking the PISA test



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). The averages include countries with available data across all years. Dark blue lines indicate countries with an increasing trend (i.e. where each year's percentage is higher than the previous year's percentage). The light blue lines indicate the countries with a decreasing trend (i.e. where each year's rate is lower than the previous year's percentage). The OECD average is also highlighted in red and EU average in purple. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded and the 2015 cycle is not analysed (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025_[17])).

Source: OECD (2012_[18]), PISA 2012 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); OECD (2018_[19]), PISA 2018 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022_[20]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/irdobv>

Differences in truancy by background characteristics in secondary education

Student truancy differs not only across countries and over time, but also within education systems. In this analysis, differences are examined according to four background characteristics of students or the schools they attend (gender, parental education, immigrant background and school location (see Annex 1.A for more details)) that are commonly considered in PISA disaggregations (see e.g. OECD (2023_[21])).

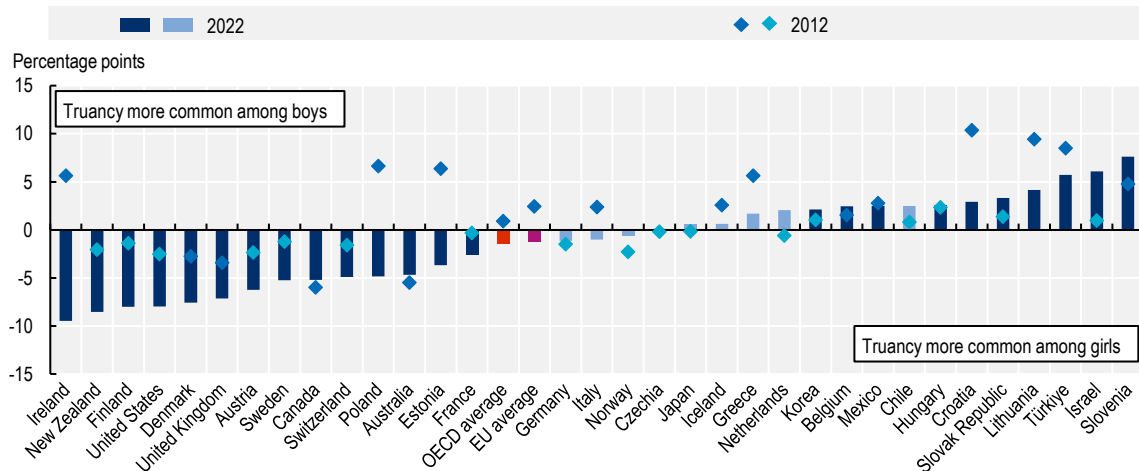
Differences by gender

In 2022, on average across OECD countries, girls reported a significantly higher rate of skipping days or classes than boys (difference of 1.4 percentage points) (Figure 1.3). This marks a reversal compared to the year 2012, when boys reported being truant more often than girls by 0.9 points. Figure 1.3 also reveals substantial variation among countries. In 2022, there was an approximately even split in the number of education systems where boys reported being truant more often than girls and vice versa (boys statistically significantly more often in 10 countries and girls more often in 14 countries). However, in 2012, in only four countries were girls more likely to be truant than boys. Among countries with significant differences in both

2012 and 2022, Estonia, Ireland and Poland experienced a reversal in the gender disparity in student truancy. In all three education systems, boys were more likely to have reported being truant in 2012, while girls were more often truant in 2022. In Denmark and the United Kingdom, the gender disparity increased more than twofold between 2012 and 2022. In contrast, it more than halved in Croatia, Greece, Iceland, Italy and Lithuania.

Figure 1.3. Gender differences in truancy among 15-year-old students (2022 and 2012)

Difference (boys minus girls) in the percentage of 15-year-old students who reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the two weeks before taking the PISA test



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025_[17])).

Source: OECD (2012_[18]), PISA 2012 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022_[20]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/62kvpd>

A wider body of evidence reinforces this picture of heterogeneity. Recent reviews describe associations between gender and absences as mixed and context-dependent, with several analyses reporting no systematic gap, while others detecting differences that vary by country, age or type of absence (Melvin et al., 2019_[22]; Melvin et al., 2025_[23]). Country reports echo this nuance. In Sweden, girls reported more frequent absences than boys in secondary education (15% vs. 8%) (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024_[24]). In Romania, boys exhibit lower participation (more unexcused absences), and in Wales (United Kingdom), female and male absence rates are nearly identical (9.6% vs 9.5% of half-day sessions) (Horga et al., 2024_[25]; Welsh Government, 2025_[26]). In Denmark, no gender differences are observed in any type of absence (total, un/authorised, due to illness) (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020_[27]).

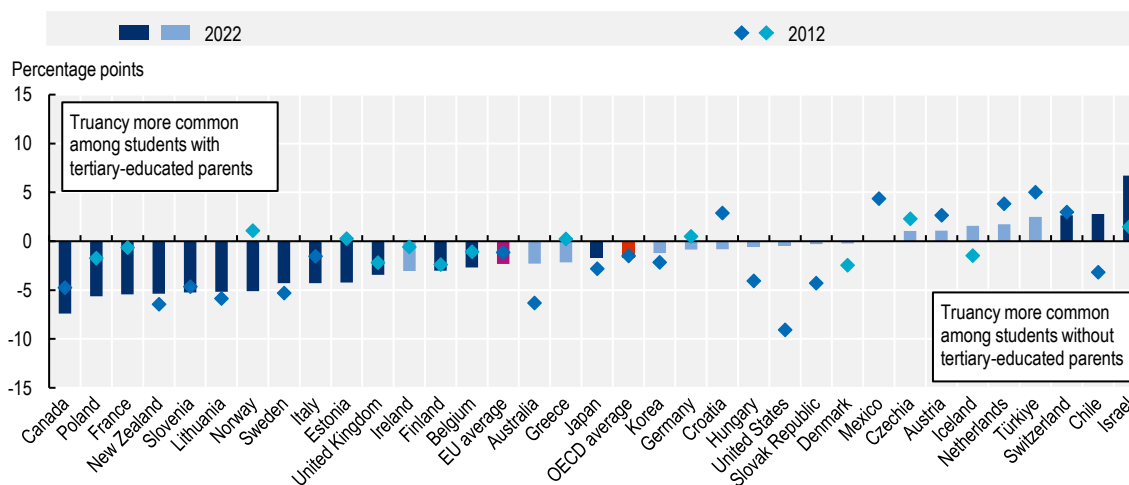
Differences by socio-economic background

Turning to socio-economic background, in most countries, 15-year-old students with parent(s) without tertiary education are more likely to have reported truancy compared to their peers with tertiary-educated parent(s) (Figure 1.4). On average across OECD countries, this gap stood at 1.7 percentage points in 2022 and 1.5 percentage points in 2012. The gap related to parental education more than doubled in Italy, from 1.6 points in 2012 to 4.3 points in 2022. In contrast, it decreased in several countries, most notably in Mexico (from 4.4 percentage points to 0.0 percentage points) and the United States (from 9.1 percentage

points to 0.4 percentage points). Chile was the only country with significant differences where the gap flipped: in 2012, students without tertiary-educated parent(s) were more likely to report missing school or classes, while in 2022, they were less likely to have reported doing so.

Figure 1.4. Socio-economic differences in truancy among 15-year-old students (2022 and 2012)

Difference (those with tertiary educated parent(s) minus those without) in the percentage of 15-year-old students who reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the two weeks before taking the PISA test



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025_[17])).

Source: OECD (2012_[18]), PISA 2012 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022_[20]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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The impact of socio-economic background (measured in various ways) is also seen in national (or sub-national) data. In England (United Kingdom) in 2024/25, for instance, 32% of primary and secondary students eligible for free school meals were persistently absent (missed 10% or more of possible sessions), compared to 12% among those not eligible for free school meals (Department of Education, 2026_[28]). In the Slovak Republic, primary and secondary disadvantaged students had 245 average excused hours compared to 129 among their non-disadvantaged peers in 2022 (OECD, 2025_[15]). In New Zealand, regular attendance rates were higher in schools where students face fewer socio-economic barriers than in schools with greater socio-economic challenges throughout the 2019-2025 period (Ministry of Education, 2025_[29]). In France, secondary schools serving the most socially disadvantaged students had a higher average share of absentee students (13%) than the most advantaged schools (4%) (Cristofoli, 2025_[30]). Scotland (United Kingdom) has seen the deprivation gap in attendance widen from 4.9 percentage points in 2018/19 to 6.3 points in 2020/21 (Education Scotland, 2023_[31]). In Denmark, students with mothers with at most primary educational level have consistently higher unauthorised absences and absences due to illness in lower secondary education (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020_[27]). Consistent patterns also appear in Korea, where surveys link attendance difficulties to the socio-economic and emotional environments of parents (OECD, 2025_[15]), and in Wales (United Kingdom), where free school meals eligible students missed 15.2% of half-day sessions in 2023/24 compared to 7.9% among their peers (Welsh Government, 2025_[26]). In Romania, multiple aspects of socio-economic background are associated

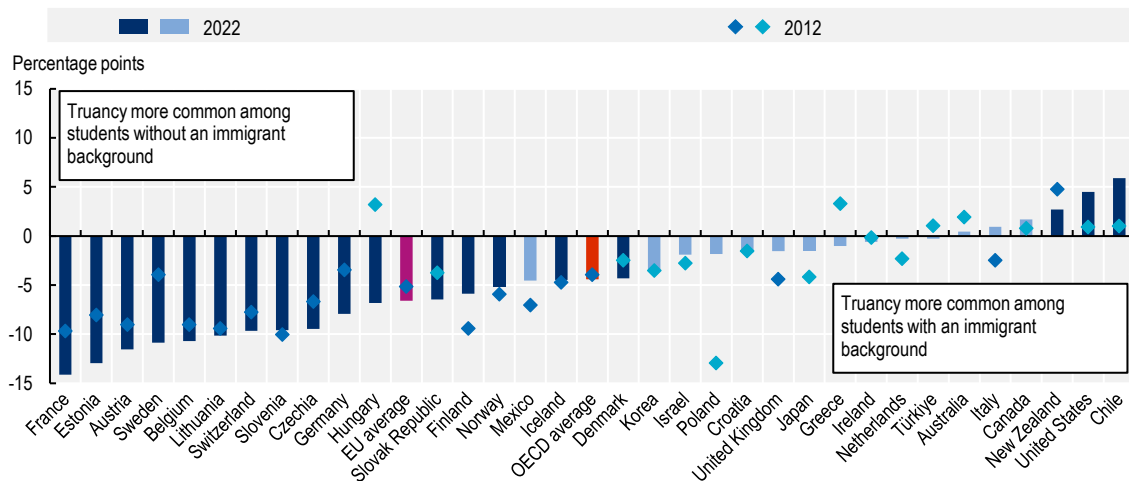
with lower absence, including higher parental education and transportation challenges (Plăeșu et al., 2024^[32]).

Differences by immigrant background

Student truancy is also more likely to be reported by students with an immigrant background than those without such background (Figure 1.5). On average across OECD countries, the immigrant gap stood at 4.4 percentage points in 2022 and 4.0 percentage points in 2012. This disparity more than doubled in Germany (from 3.4 points in 2012 to 7.9 points in 2022) and Sweden (from 3.9 points in 2012 to 10.9 points in 2022). In contrast, it more than halved in Italy (from 2.5 points to 0.9 points) and the United Kingdom (from 4.4 to 1.5 points).

Figure 1.5. Immigrant differences in truancy among 15-year-old students (2022 and 2012)

Difference (those without an immigrant background minus those with) in the percentage of 15-year-old students who reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the two weeks before taking the PISA test



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025^[17])).

Source: OECD (2012^[18]), PISA 2012 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022^[20]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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Examples from local education systems' data underscore this variability. In Germany, analyses that account for a range of other factors find that having an immigrant background is associated with a 5.1-5.5 percentage point higher probability of skipping school (Broschinski et al., 2025^[33]). In Korea, survey evidence suggests that while children of foreign families may experience fluctuating attendance due to parents' departures from the country, students from multicultural families generally show no attendance gaps relative to domestic peers (OECD, 2025^[15]). In Denmark, students with an immigrant background in lower secondary education have higher unauthorised absences, but lower absences due to illness and authorised absences (although this varies by grade) (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[27]).

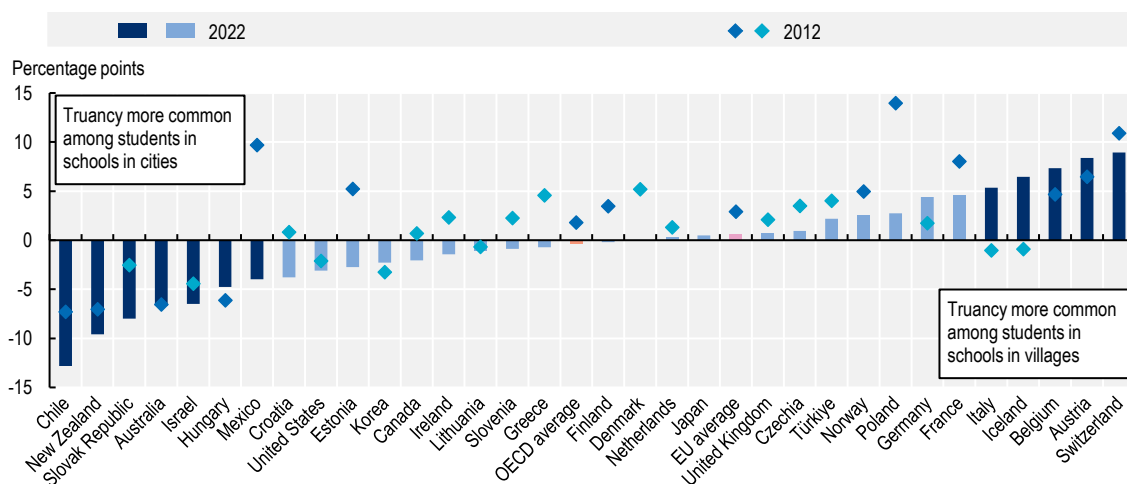
Differences by school location

Finally, there were no differences in student truancy by school location on average across OECD countries in 2022, but the average hides great variation among education systems (Figure 1.6). Self-reported truancy

was higher in villages than in cities in seven countries (Australia, Chile, Hungary, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand and the Slovak Republic) in 2022, and higher in cities than in villages in five countries (Austria, Belgium, Iceland, Italy and Switzerland). Mexico was the only country with significant results where students were more often truant in cities in 2012, but in villages in 2022. Some of the highest increases in absolute gaps between 2012 and 2022 are visible in Belgium, Chile and New Zealand. Decreases are observed in Finland, Poland and others.

Figure 1.6. School location differences in truancy among 15-year-old students (2022 and 2012)

Difference (students in schools in cities minus in villages) in the percentage of 15-year-old students who reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the two weeks before taking the PISA test



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025^[17])).

Source: OECD (2012^[18]), PISA 2012 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022^[20]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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National (or sub-national) analyses echo these location gaps. For example, in Romania, students residing in rural areas reported being absent more often than urban peers, possibly linked to transportation challenges and family work requirements (OECD, 2023^[34]; Plăeșu et al., 2024^[32]). Similarly, in New South Wales (Australia), longitudinal evidence reveals that students attending remote schools have both lower attendance and steeper year-to-year declines than those in urban and regional schools, a pattern that persisted in 2022 after the COVID-19 pandemic (CESE, 2024^[35]). These results hold when accounting for socio-economic background, well-being and engagement.

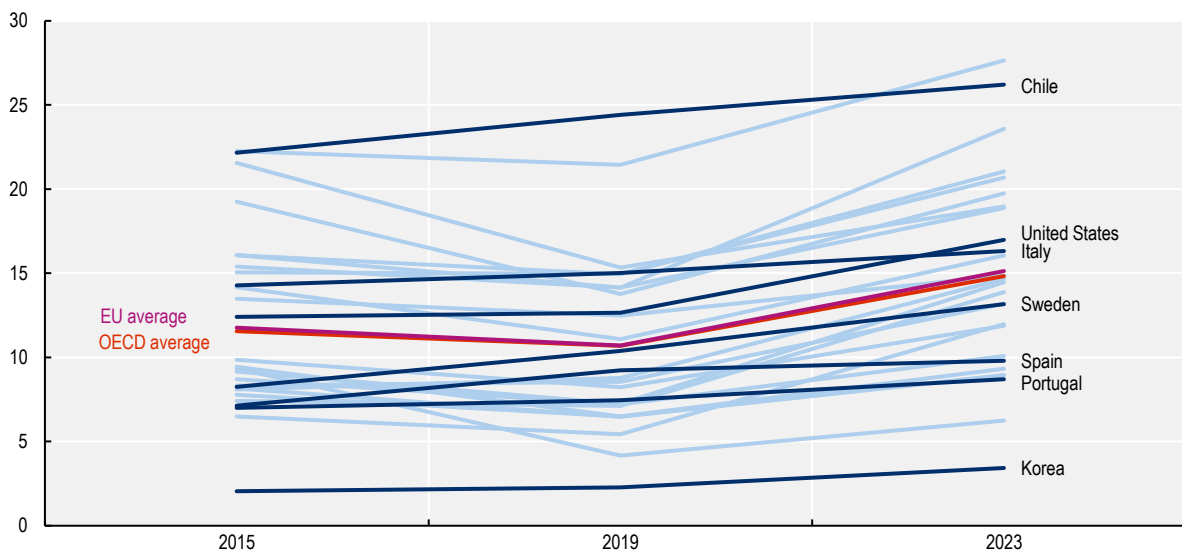
Trends in student absence at primary level

On average across OECD countries, student absence at the primary level (fourth-grade students) follows a wide V-shaped trend between 2015 and 2023 (Figure 1.7). In 2015, 11.6% of fourth-grade students reported being absent from school once a week or every other week. This share fell to 10.7% in 2019 (pre-pandemic) and rose to 14.8% in 2023 (post-pandemic). Across these three years, Chile and the Slovak Republic had the highest student absence rates, while Korea had the lowest. However, while most countries followed a similarly V-shaped curve, as observed on average across OECD countries, nine education systems also exhibited an increasing trend: Chile, Finland, Italy, Korea, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United States. Unlike in secondary education, no country saw a decreasing trend.

However, these data are not directly comparable with those for secondary education (see Annex 1.B for more details).

Figure 1.7. Student absence in primary education (2015-2023)

Percentage of fourth-grade students reporting being absent from school once every week or every two weeks



Note: Questionnaire items differ slightly across the years (see Annex 1.B for more information). The averages include countries with available data across all years. Dark blue lines indicate selected countries with an increasing trend (i.e. where each year's percentage is higher than the previous year's percentage). The OECD average is also highlighted in red and EU average in purple. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2015 and 2019, and the Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland in 2015 and 2019, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries. Source: IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; IEA (2019^[37]), *TIMSS 2019 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2019_G4; and IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

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Differences in absence by background characteristics in primary education

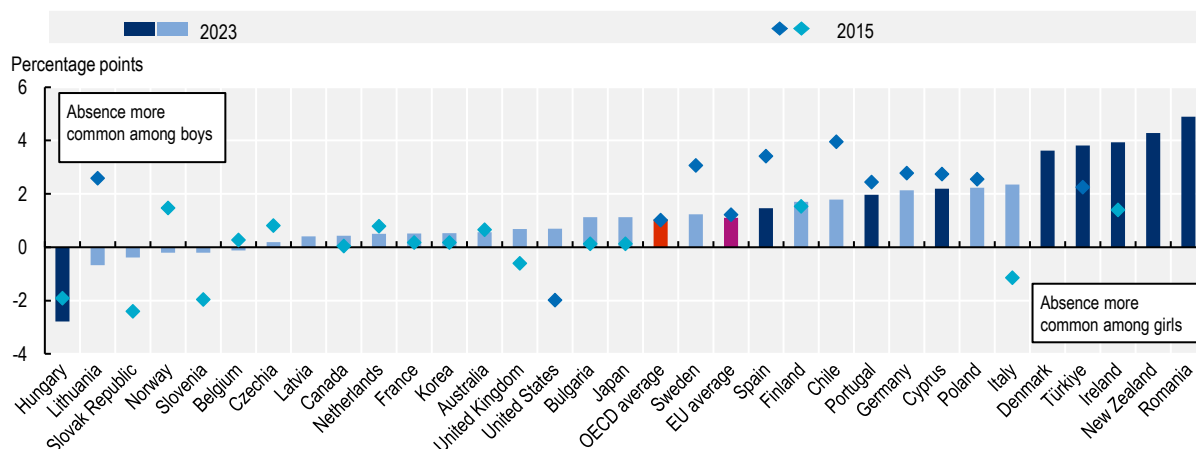
Student absence significantly varies by background characteristics already in primary education. TIMSS provides comparably defined measures of gender, socio-economic background, immigrant background and school location with those used in PISA for 15-year-old students (see Annex 1.A for more details).

Differences by gender

In primary education, boys reported a slightly higher rate of being absent from school once every week or every two weeks in both 2015 and 2023, on average across OECD countries (Figure 1.8). In around half of the education systems, gender differences were not significant. Hungary was the only education system where girls reported a significantly higher rate of absence compared to boys in 2023. In Türkiye, the gender difference increased from 2.3 percentage points to 3.8 points. Meanwhile, in Lithuania, Spain, Sweden and the United States, the gender gap in student absence more than halved.


Figure 1.8. Gender differences in absence among fourth-grade students (2023 and 2015)

Difference (boys minus girls) in the percentage of fourth-grade students who reported being absent from school once every week or every two weeks



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2015, and the Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland in 2015, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries.¹

Source: IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; and IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

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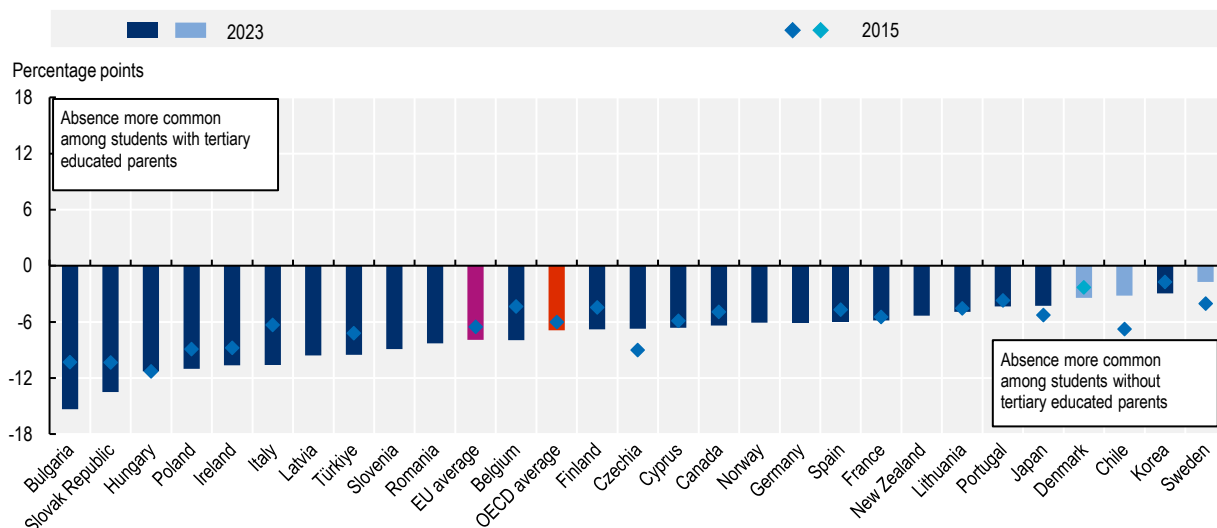
The varied cross-country results are also visible when examining national (or sub-national) data, although these are not directly comparable. For instance, in New Zealand, 63.0% and 61.9% of girls and boys, respectively, attended more than 90% of the 2025 academic year (Education Counts, 2025^[39]). Similarly, boys were more often truant in Latvia in 2019/20, while no gender-based disparities are observed in Denmark and Korea (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[27]; OECD, 2025^[15]; State Education Quality Service, 2020^[40]).

Differences by socio-economic background

In almost all countries, primary-education students whose parent(s) had attained tertiary education reported lower absence rates than their peers whose parent(s) had not, both in 2015 and 2023 (Figure 1.9). On average across OECD countries, this gap stood at 6.0 and 7.0 percentage points in 2015 and 2023, respectively. In Belgium and Korea, the difference related to parental education almost doubled between 2015 and 2023. In Chile, Czechia, Hungary, Japan and Sweden, the gap decreased between the two years.


Figure 1.9. Socio-economic differences in absence among fourth-grade students (2023 and 2015)

Difference (those with tertiary educated parent(s) minus those without) in the percentage of fourth-grade students who reported being absent from school once every week or every two weeks



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2015, and the Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland in 2015, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries.

Source: IEA (2015_[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; and IEA (2023_[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

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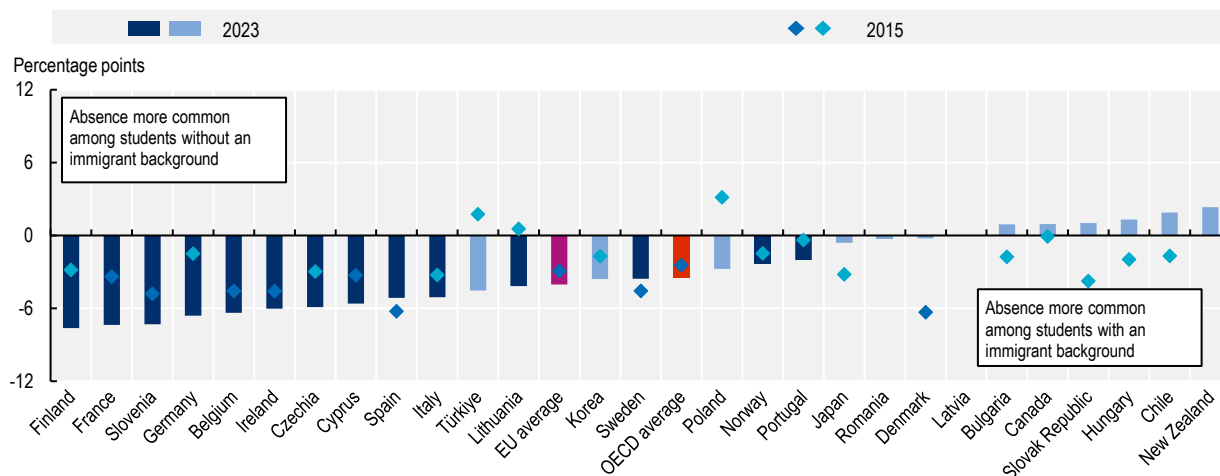
National (or sub-national) research supports these findings. In Denmark, for example, students with a disadvantaged social background and students with mothers whose highest educational level was primary education were identified as more likely to be absent (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020_[27]). In Scotland (United Kingdom), the absence rate in most deprived areas in primary schools was 10.4% in 2023/24, compared to 4.8% in the least deprived areas (Scottish Government, 2025_[41]).

Differences by immigrant background

On average across OECD countries, fourth-grade primary education students with an immigrant background reported a higher rate of absence compared to their peers without such a background (2.2 and 2.9 percentage points in 2015 and 2023, respectively) (Figure 1.10). In fact, no education system had a significantly higher rate of absence among non-immigrant students in either of the two years. Denmark, Spain and Sweden saw a decrease in immigrant gaps. In contrast, the gap more than doubled in France (from 3.4 to 7.4 percentage points). These results need to be viewed with caution given that they might be reflecting other drivers (e.g. socio-economic background, transportation etc.) that are not taken into account in the differences presented below. Chapter 2 further elaborates on this issue.

Figure 1.10. Immigrant differences in absence among fourth-grade students (2023 and 2015)

Difference (those without an immigrant background minus those with) in the percentage of fourth-grade students who reported being absent from school once every week or every two weeks



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2015, and the Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland in 2015, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries.

Source: IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; and IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

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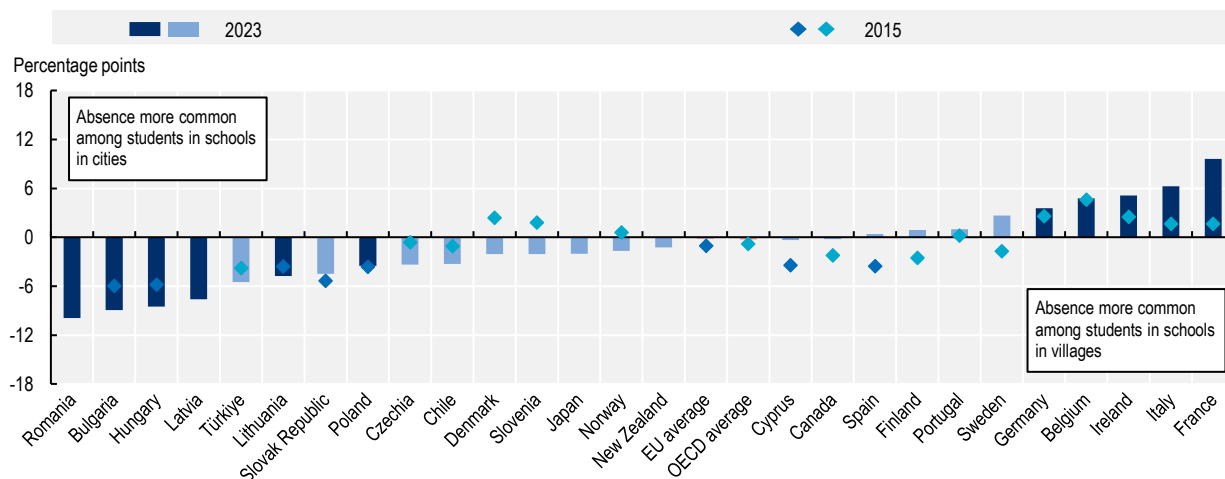
Differences by immigrant background at the primary level are not commonly reported in national data. However, one study in Denmark indicates that students of Danish origin were absent on average 11 days out of 200, while those with an immigrant background had 14 days of absences in 2016/17 (Rambøll, 2018^[42]). A more recent analysis indicates that students with an immigrant background have higher authorised and unauthorised absences, but lower absences due to illness (in the 5th and 6th grade of primary education) (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[27]). In the Slovak Republic, students with non-Slovak first language (especially Roma) and Ukrainian refugees had higher average numbers of authorised absences (OECD, 2025^[15]).

Differences by school location

Finally, differences related to school location revealed a wide range of outcomes, resulting in a non-significant difference on average across OECD countries in both years (Figure 1.11). In 2023, fourth-grade primary education students in schools in cities reported higher absences than those in villages in five countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland and Italy). The reverse was true in Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania. Among those with significant results in both years, the gap related to school location increased in Bulgaria, Hungary and Lithuania.


Figure 1.11. School location differences in absence among fourth-grade students (2023 and 2015)

Difference (students in schools in cities minus in villages) in the percentage of fourth-grade students who reported being absent from school once every week or every two weeks



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2015, and the Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland in 2015, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries.

Source: IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; and IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

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Emerging post-pandemic evidence from North Carolina (United States) provides more nuance (Swiderski, Fuller and Bastian, 2025^[43]). Students in city and rural schools accumulated an average of 39.5 days of absences over three years, compared to 38.1 in suburb/town schools. The share of chronically absent students rose to 10.0% in city schools, 9.6% in rural schools and 8.7% in suburb/town schools – up from broadly uniform pre-pandemic rates of 2.3%-2.6% across locales (ibid.).

Differences by other characteristics

What is presented above is not an exhaustive list of background characteristics, as several education systems also observe disparities by special education needs (SEN)². In Denmark, almost half of the municipalities (45%) reported that students with SEN have more absences than the overall student population (Rambøll, 2018^[42]). Finnish data, while limited in their size, show differences between students on general and enhanced or special support (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[44]). In Scotland (United Kingdom), national collections consistently find that students with additional support needs have lower attendance than those without (Education Scotland, 2023^[31]). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, 3.7% of students in special primary education had 30 or more unauthorised half-day absences compared to 0.8% in mainstream education in 2023/24 (Ministry of Education and Training, n.d.^[45]). Slovak sources likewise link absences with disabilities and diseases affecting children, while Korean stakeholders noted that students with SEN may miss school for health-related reasons, such as hospital visits and treatment (OECD, 2025^[15]). Indeed, evidence from New Zealand details that learners with disabilities are likely staying home more because they cannot participate in activities, lack support or equipment to participate, experience physical or mental health challenges, are bullied or face transport difficulties (ERO, 2022^[46]). In Wales (United Kingdom), attendance among learners with additional learning needs in mainstream schools

decreased after the COVID-19 pandemic (Rowlands, 2022^[47]). More specifically, some learners with autism-spectrum disorders valued aspects of distance learning (self-paced, quieter environment), though specialists caution against assuming a general preference; many valued human relationships and re-engaged well post-lockdown, and some found technology use challenging (ibid.). In 2023/24, 13.5% of half-day sessions were missed by students with additional learning needs provision, compared to 9.0% for students without (Welsh Government, 2025^[26]). Both rates have fallen since 2022/23.

SAP also vary by other background characteristics, likely tied to the drivers elaborated on in Chapter 2. In some education systems, SAP are more common among ethnic minorities and Indigenous students (Melvin et al., 2025^[23]). For instance, in New Zealand, 51% and 55% of ākonga Māori and Pacific students, respectively, are attending regularly, compared to 74% of Asian students and 69% of European/Pākehā students (Ministry of Education, 2025^[29]). Similarly, in Australia, Indigenous students miss on average 44 days of school (of 195), compared to 20 days among their non-Indigenous peers (Hunter, Haywood and Chapman, 2025^[48]). Similar gaps are also observed in Ontario (Canada). In publicly funded primary and secondary education in 2018/19, 67% students attended school at least 90% of the time, compared to 40% of First Nations students (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2023^[49]). In 2021/22, attendance declined sharply for all students, but more so for First Nations students (53% on average compared to 26% among First Nations students attending 90% or more of the time) (ibid.).

As for other dimensions of diversity, in New York City (United States), a 1% increase in the proportion of Black students is associated with a 5.9% increase in the odds of receiving an office discipline referral and a 6.6% increase in the odds of suspension, accounting for a range of factors (Welsh, Rodriguez and Joseph, 2025^[50]). While not a direct test of attendance, the study situates exclusionary discipline as a pathway to disengagement and reduced participation. In another example, survey evidence from the United States indicates that lesbian, gay and bisexual secondary education students are about 7% more likely than heterosexual peers to miss school due to feeling unsafe (Fields and Wotipka, 2020^[51]).

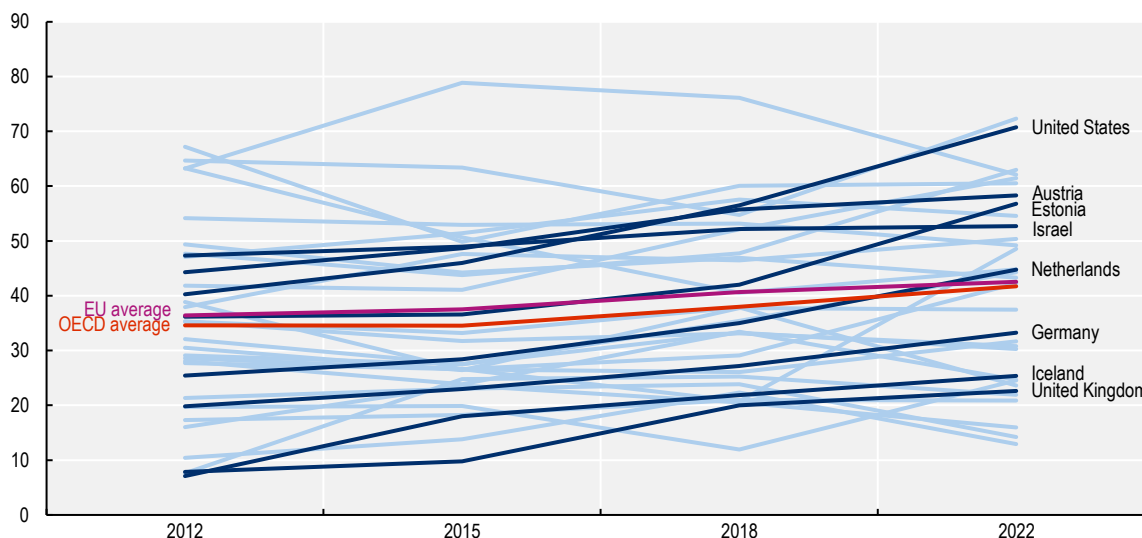
School leaders' views on school attendance problems

Students' self-reports on their absences from school can be complemented by school leaders' views on whether student truancy hinders learning in their schools (Figure 1.12). On average across OECD countries, over the past ten years, the trend in school leaders' views on whether truancy hinders learning has been increasing. In 2012, 34.6% of students were in schools where school leaders reported that student truancy hindered learning. This share rose to 41.7% in 2022.

Multiple countries saw a steadily increasing trend while no country reports a steadily decreasing trend. In Iceland and the United Kingdom, for instance, the shares more than doubled between 2012 and 2022. In Iceland, in 2012, 7.1% of students were in schools where school leaders reported that student truancy hindered learning. This share rose to 25.4% in 2022. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the percentage rose from 7.8% to 22.6% between the two years.

Figure 1.12. Truancy as a barrier to learning in secondary education (2012-2022)

Percentage of students whose school leaders reported that student truancy hinders learning in the school to some extent or a lot



Note: The averages include countries with available data across all years. Dark blue lines indicate countries with an increasing trend (i.e. where each year's percentage is higher than the previous year's percentage). The OECD average is also highlighted in red and EU average in purple. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded.

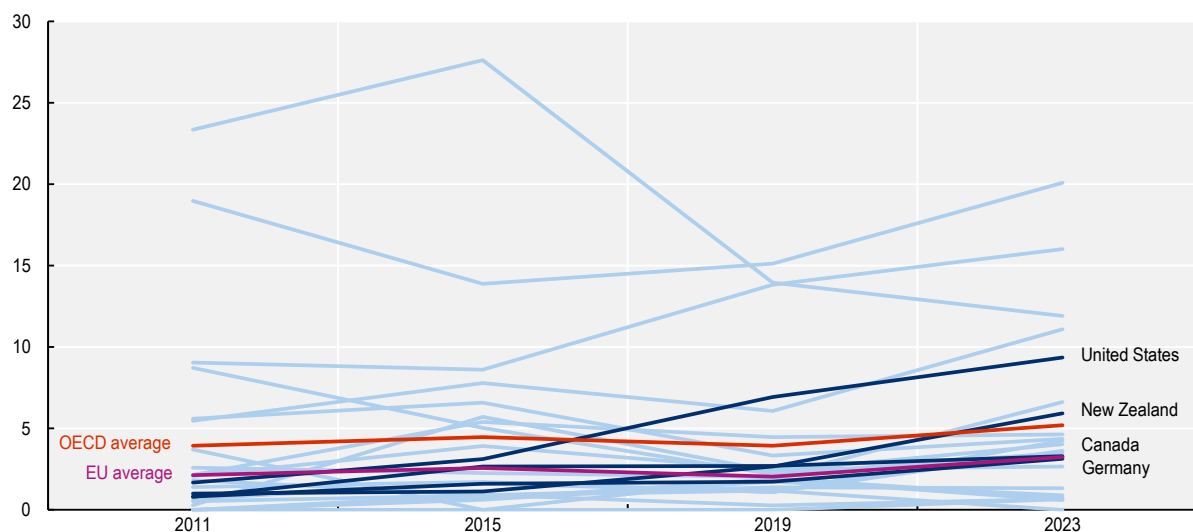
Source: OECD (2012_[18]), *PISA 2012* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); OECD (2015_[52]), *PISA 2015* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2015-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); OECD (2018_[19]), *PISA 2018* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022_[20]), *PISA 2022* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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The views of school leaders of fourth-graders on SAP are summarised since 2011. On average across OECD countries, 3.9% of fourth-grade students were in schools where school leaders reported that students arriving late at school or absenteeism are a serious problem in 2011 (Figure 1.13). The share rose to 4.5% in 2015, dropped to 3.9% in 2019, and increased again to 5.2% in 2023. Several education systems show a steadily increasing trend between 2011 and 2023. In New Zealand and the United States, for instance, the percentage of fourth-grade students in schools where school leaders reported that students arriving late to school or experiencing absenteeism are a serious problem increased steadily and rose more than fivefold between the two years. In New Zealand, the share stood at 1.0% in 2011 and increased to 5.9% in 2023. In the United States, it rose from 1.7% in 2011 to 9.4% in 2023. Two other education systems, Canada and Germany, also exhibited a steadily increasing trend. No country observed a steadily decreasing trend.


Figure 1.13. Absence or arriving late as a serious problem in primary education (2011-2023)

Percentage of fourth-grade students whose school leaders reported that students arriving late at school or absenteeism at school is a serious problem



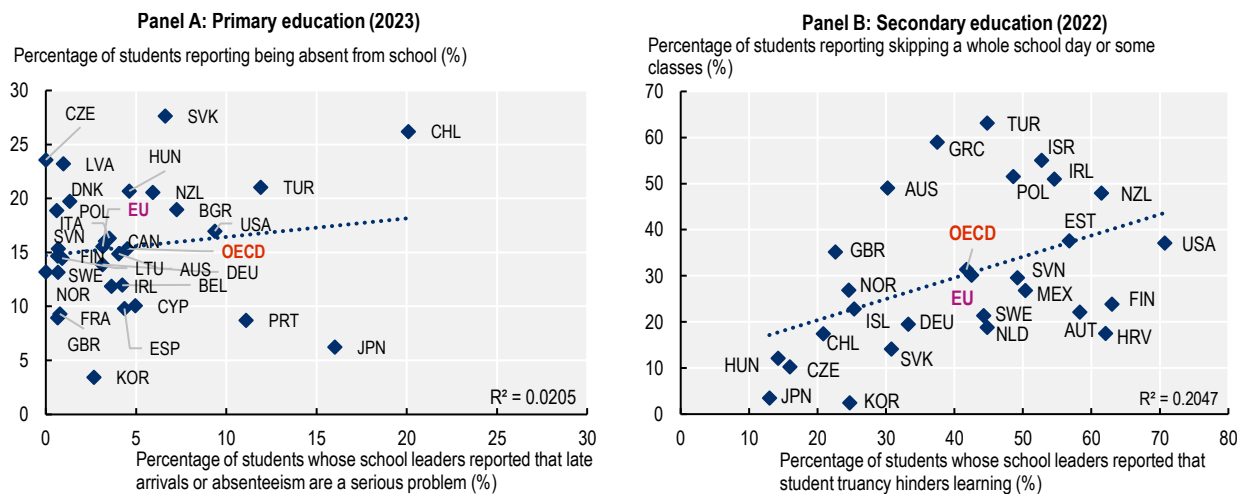
Note: The averages include countries with available data across all years. Dark blue lines indicate countries with an increasing trend (i.e. where each year's percentage is higher than the previous year's percentage). The OECD average is also highlighted in red and EU average in purple. Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community in 2003, 2011, 2015 and 2019, and Flemish and French Communities in 2023. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Scotland in 2003 and 2007, England and Northern Ireland in 2011, 2015 and 2019, and England in 2023. Data for Canada include the following provinces: Ontario and Quebec in 2003, Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec in 2007, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec in 2011, and Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec in 2015-23. Norway assessed fifth grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries.

Source: IEA (2011^[53]), *TIMSS 2011 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2011_G4; IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; IEA (2019^[37]), *TIMSS 2019 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2019_G4; and IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/ajhpwv>

At the system level, school leaders' concerns about SAP are not strongly related to self-reported students' SAP for primary education, but they are for secondary education. For instance, in primary education in several countries (e.g. in Latvia and the United Kingdom), school leaders are not greatly concerned about SAP (countries to the left in panel A in Figure 1.14). However, while 23.2% of fourth-grade students in Latvia reported being absent from school, only 9.3% reported doing so in the United Kingdom. In secondary education, the Pearson correlation coefficient equals 0.45 and the $R^2 = 0.20$, making the association weak to moderate. In general, countries where students self-reported being truant more are the same countries where school leaders largely reported that student truancy hinders learning (panel B in Figure 1.14).

Figure 1.14. Variation between school leaders' concerns about SAP and students' self-reported SAP



Note: Data for Belgium in panel A include the Flemish and French Communities. Data for the United Kingdom in panel A include England only. Data for Canada in panel A include the following provinces: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded in panel B.

Source: IEA (2023^[38]), *TIMSS 2023 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1; and OECD (2022^[20]), *PISA 2022* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

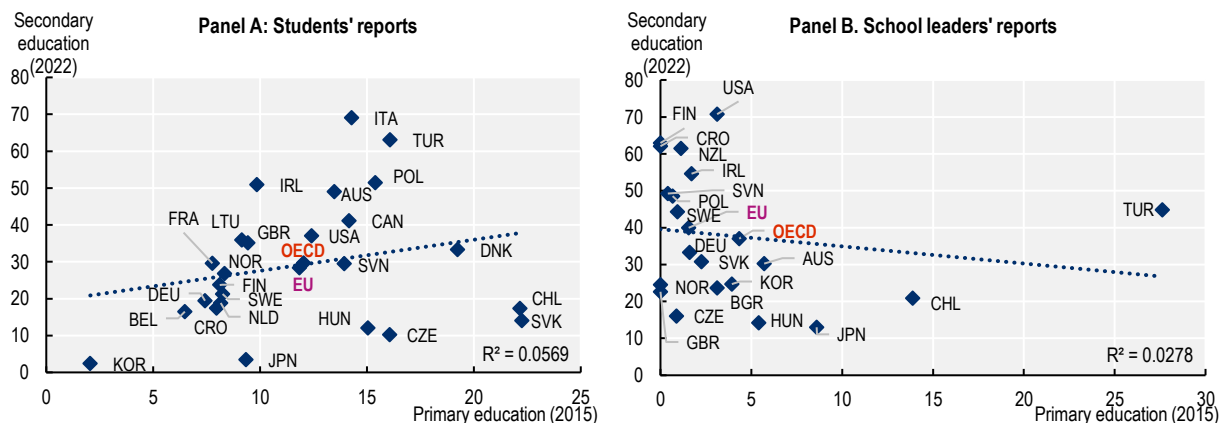
StatLink  <https://stat.link/hi3jwm>

International evidence presented below indicates that absences can look differently depending on the reporting lens. In a few education systems, administrative data were compared with students' self-reports. Evidence from the Flemish Community of Belgium, for instance, reveals that measurement choices can reshape the picture of SAP (Keppens and Spruyt, 2019^[54]). Unauthorised absences and self-reported truancy correlated only weakly, with students receiving roughly twice as many unauthorised absences as they admitted in self-reports. Depending on the source used, links with background characteristics also changed. When relying on administrative data, truancy was underestimated among girls in secondary education with relatively advantaged profiles, consistent with research suggesting girls' problems may be less visible to staff. Administrative data also missed a large share of parent-motivated truancy: about half of students who skipped school reported that their parent(s) knew, and just over a third stated they had parental permission, often covered by notes from parents. Concordance between the two measures also varies by school composition, with underestimation in administrative data more common in middle-class schools and overestimation more frequent in schools serving disadvantaged students. Depending on the reference period used, survey data can, in contrast, miss absences that vary over time, such as higher truancy rates around holiday periods (*ibid.*). Indeed, school leaders in Sweden also indicated that student reports can understate school-recorded absences (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024^[55]). Discrepancies can also be found between reports from counsellors and administrators in the United States, as well as parents and school registries in Denmark (Chu, 2021^[56]; Lomholt et al., 2020^[57]).

Cross-nationally, primary education SAP levels do not reliably predict SAP in secondary education, as indicated by either students' self-reports or school leaders' concerns. Countries with some of the highest students' self-reported SAP in primary education, such as Chile and the Slovak Republic, are among education systems where students reported some of the lowest SAP in secondary education (panel A in Figure 1.15). Similarly, education systems where school leaders were most worried about SAP in primary education, such as in Hungary and Japan, are not the same education systems where school leaders

would have been significantly more concerned about SAP in secondary education (panel B in Figure 1.15). The lack of relationship persists even when focusing on, broadly speaking, the same birth cohort of students (i.e. comparing reports from TIMSS 2015 and PISA 2022).

Figure 1.15. Persistence in SAP between primary and secondary education at the system level



Note: Students' reports in panel A show the percentage of fourth-grade students reporting being absent from school once every week or every two weeks (primary education), and the percentage of 15-year-old students reporting skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the past two weeks before taking the PISA test (secondary education). School leaders' reports in panel B show the percentage of fourth-grade students whose school leaders reported that students arriving late at school or absenteeism at school is a serious problem (primary education), and the percentage of students whose school leaders reported that student truancy hinders learning in the school to some extent or a lot (secondary education). Data for Belgium include the Flemish Community for primary education. Data for the United Kingdom include England and Northern Ireland for primary education. Data for Canada include the following provinces for primary education: Alberta, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Quebec. Norway assessed fifth-grade students to obtain better comparisons with other northern European countries. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded in estimates for secondary education.

Source: IEA (2015^[36]), *TIMSS 2015 Grade 4* (dataset), https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; and OECD (2022^[20]), *PISA 2022* (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/ncxv7h>

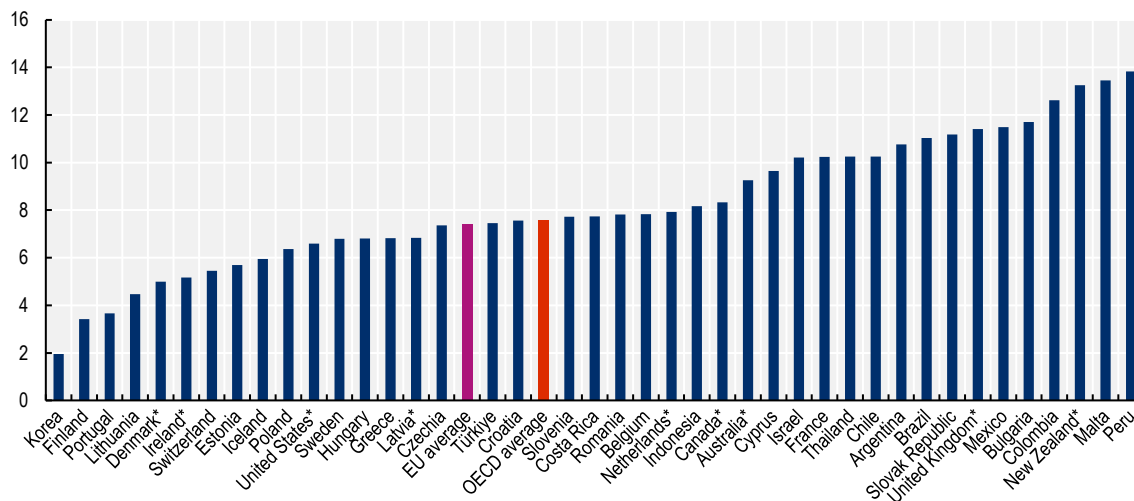
Long-term student absence

A prolonged absence can have negative consequences for students' educational journeys, affecting their progression through education, academic results and non-academic outcomes (Chapter 3). It is, therefore, worrying that on average across OECD countries, 7.6% of 15-year-old students missed three or more consecutive months of schooling during their primary and secondary education until 2022 (Figure 1.16). The questionnaire item does not distinguish whether this was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and, as such, the numbers might be somewhat inflated (see Chapter 2 for more details). This item was only covered in 2022 and, therefore, developments over time are not available.

Nevertheless, the share is worryingly high in some education systems (Figure 1.16). In Peru (13.8%), Malta (13.4%) and New Zealand (13.2%) and other countries, more than one in ten students missed three or more months of schooling. The lowest shares are observed in Korea (2.0%), Finland (3.4%) and Portugal (3.7%).


Figure 1.16. Long-term student absence from primary to upper secondary education (2022)

Percentage of 15-year-old students who reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months at any time in their previous educational journey



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023^[21])).

Source: OECD (2023^[34]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.49, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/szpvq5>

Gender disparities in long-term absence move overwhelmingly in one direction – with boys having reported being more absent than girls in all education systems with significant results (panel A in Figure 1.17). On average across OECD countries, 8.2% and 7.0% of boys and girls, respectively, missed three or more consecutive months of schooling in their previous educational journey.

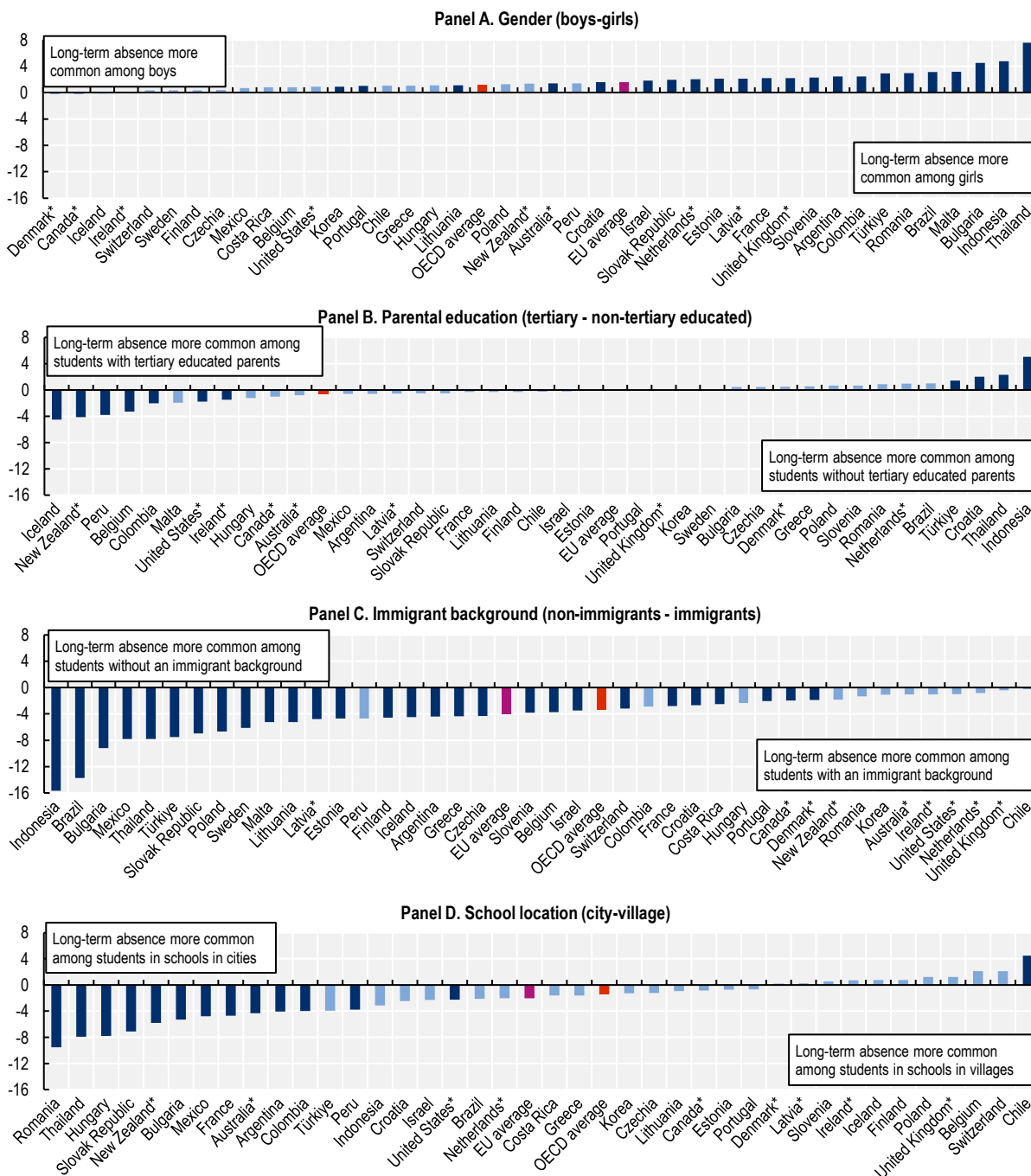
Differences by parental education are non-significant in most cases (panel B in Figure 1.17). Among countries with significant results, students from families without tertiary-educated parents reported being long-term absent more often. This contrasts with other measures of socio-economic background, e.g. the PISA index of socio-economic status reported in Chapter 2, for which differences are statistically significant in most countries as well as on average across the OECD and EU.

Significant differences can be observed by immigrant background, with immigrants being long-term absent more often than their non-immigrant peers (panel C in Figure 1.17). On average across OECD countries, 10.0% of immigrants and 6.6% of non-immigrants reported being absent for three months or more. While varying in scale and statistical significance, immigrants reported long-term absence more often in all education systems. This result differs from that for truancy, for which some education systems saw higher rates among non-immigrant students.

Finally, on average across OECD countries, students in schools in villages reported long-term absence more often than their peers in schools in cities (8.6% vs. 7.1%). This result holds for all education systems with significant results except for Chile, where students in cities reported a higher rate of long-term absence compared to students in villages (panel D in Figure 1.17). This result also differs from that for truancy, for which several countries saw significantly higher rates in schools in cities.

Figure 1.17. Disparities in long-term student absence (2022)

Differences in percentage points of 15-year-old students who reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months at any time in their previous educational journey by background characteristics



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023_[21])). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours.

Source: OECD (2022_[20]), PISA 2022 Database, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

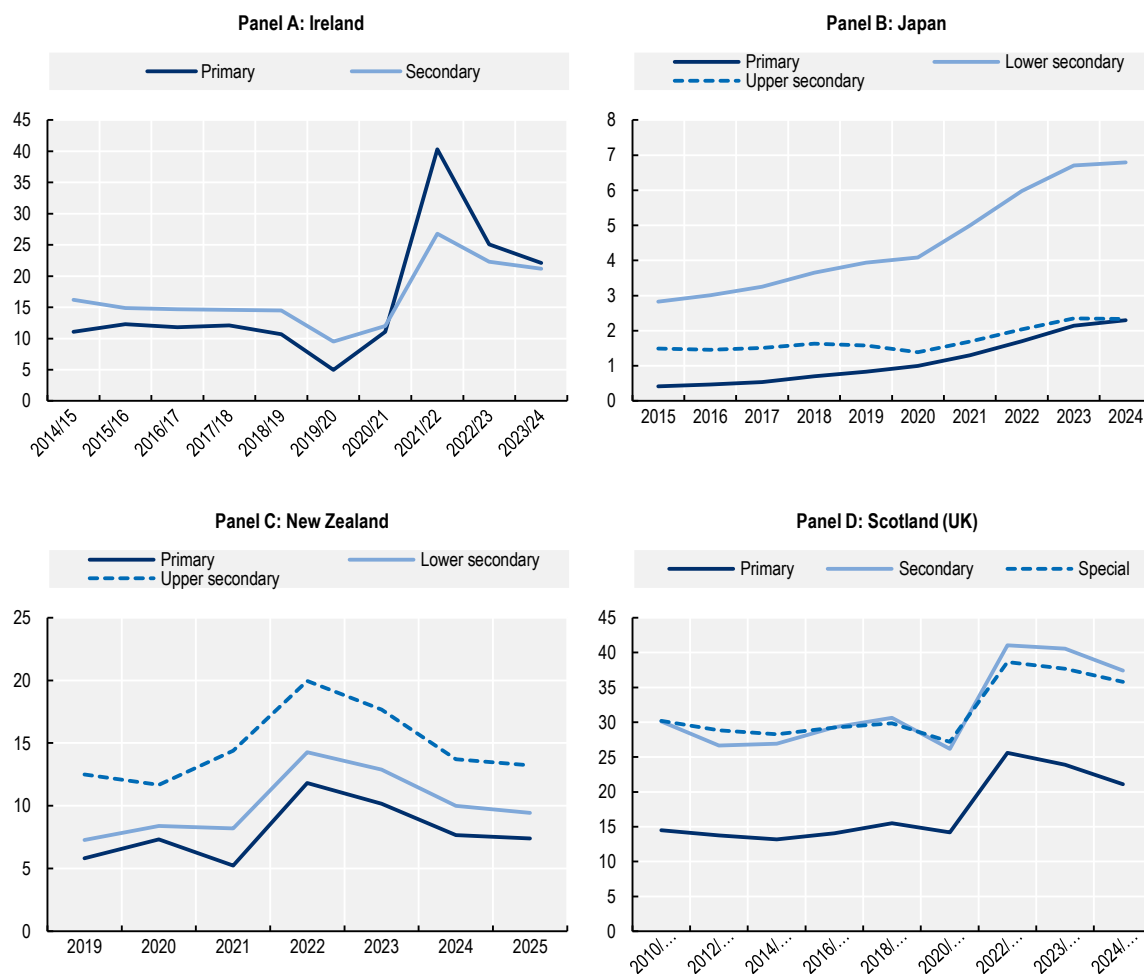
StatLink <https://stat.link/rlge52>

Persistently higher absences after the COVID-19 pandemic

Data from international large-scale surveys reported above do not indicate rapid increases in SAP after the COVID-19 pandemic (not on average across OECD countries). This differs to what many education systems have reported in the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems based on their administrative sources. In Croatia, for instance, the number of absences per student in primary and secondary education increased from 66 in 2018/19 to 90 in 2023/24 (Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, 2026^[58]). This increase was primarily driven by the rise in justified absences. In the Slovak Republic, the number of excused hours per student increased from 84 in 2018/19 to 123 in 2023/24 in primary, 118 to 148 in lower secondary and 108 to 115 in upper secondary education (OECD, 2025^[15]). The average number of unexcused hours per student has remained stable or decreased. In Finland, records indicate that the average number of absences increased from just over 20 to just under 50 lessons from 2016 to 2023 (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[44]). Comparing the last whole pre-pandemic semester in 2019 with the first full post-restriction semester in 2022, total absences and multiple sub-categories (e.g. health-related, pre-requested leave) rose, and the share of students with “problematic” absence levels increased: notably, the proportion with fewer than 5% absences fell from over 60% to under 40% while the 5%-9% band grew (*ibid.*). In Denmark, the average absence rate fell from 5.6% in 2015/16 to 5.1% in 2020/21, spiked to 8.1% in 2021/22, and then stabilised around 7% in the next two years (Ministry of Children and Education, n.d.^[59]). In Australia, the share of students who attended at least 90% of days dropped from 73% in 2019 to 50% in 2022, and remained persistently low at around 60% since then (Hunter, Haywood and Chapman, 2025^[48]). In fact, 96% of schools experienced a fall in attendance rate before and after the pandemic.

In many education systems, increased absences after the pandemic are driven by students who miss a large number of days. In Ireland, for instance, the share of students who missed 20 or more days increased from 10.7% in 2018/19 to 25.1% in 2022/23 in primary education and from 14.5% to 22.3% in secondary education (panel A in Figure 1.18). Similarly, in Norway, the proportion of students in the last year of lower secondary education who missed 20 or more days increased from 9.0% in 2018/19 to 17.0% in 2023/24 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024^[60]). At the end of upper secondary education, the shares stood at 6.3% in 2018/19 and 9.3% in 2023/24 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024^[61]). In Chile, serious absence (students attending fewer than 85% of the total number of official school days in a year) increased from 19.4% in 2018 to 37.6% in 2022, dropping to 27.1% in 2024 (yet remaining higher compared to the pre-pandemic level) (CEM, 2025^[62]). Meanwhile, the share of students with fewer than five days of absences decreased (*ibid.*). In Sweden, the share of students with more than 15% absences fell between 2020 and 2023 in secondary education but not in primary (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024^[55]). However, in secondary education, the reductions are concentrated among students in the 15%-29% and 30%-49% bands, while the share of students with more than 50% absences has increased slightly since 2020. In Japan, truancy for over 30 days has risen steadily: among primary students from 0.4% (2015) to 1.0% (2020) and 2.3% (2024), and among lower secondary students from 2.8% (2015) to 6.8% (2024) (panel B in Figure 1.18). In Wales (United Kingdom), the percentage of half-day sessions missed increased from 5.7% in 2018/19 to 9.5% in 2023/24, and persistent absence at the 10% threshold more than doubled between 2018/19 and 2022/23 before easing to 30.4% in 2023/24 (Welsh Government, 2025^[26]). New Zealand likewise reports that chronic absence (attending 70% or less of the term) has risen dramatically in 2022 and has not yet returned to pre-COVID levels (panel C in Figure 1.18). In Scotland (United Kingdom), persistent absence (missing more than 10% of sessions) has climbed since 2010/11, from 14.5% to 21.1% in primary, 30.1% to 37.4% in secondary and 30.2% to 35.8% in special settings by 2024/25 (panel D in Figure 1.18).

Figure 1.18. Chronic absence trends in Ireland, Japan, New Zealand and Scotland (United Kingdom) (%)



Note: Data are not comparable among education systems. Panel A displays the percentage of students who lost 20 or more days in Ireland. Caution should be exercised as only 64% and 60% of primary and secondary schools, respectively, responded to Annual Attendance Reports in 2019/20, 64% and 46% in 2020/21, 78% and 65% in 2021/22, and 78% and 71% in 2022/23. Panel B displays the percentage of students absent for 30 days or more in Japan, excluding absences due to illness, financial reasons, and, for 2020-2022, certain COVID-19 infection-avoidance absences. Panel C displays the percentage of students attending 70% of fewer available half-days in term 2 of the individual years in New Zealand. Panel D shows the percentage of students who missed 10% or more sessions in Scotland (United Kingdom).

Source: Education Counts (2025^[39]), 2019-2025 Attendance data, <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/attendance> (accessed on 27 August 2025); Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (2026^[63]), 令和6年度児童生徒の問題行動・不登校等生徒指導上の諸課題に関する調査結果について [Results of the 2024 Survey on Problem Behaviour, School Absenteeism, and Other Issues Related to Student Guidance], https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20260116-mxt_jidou02-100002753_1_3.pdf (accessed on 4 May 2026); Scottish Government (2025^[41]), School attendance and absence statistics, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-attendance-and-absence-statistics/> (accessed on 19 December 2025); and TESS (2025^[64]), School Attendance Data Primary and Post-Primary Schools And Student Absence Reports Primary and Post-Primary Schools: 2023-2024, https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Analysis_of_School_Attendance_Data_2023-24.pdf (accessed on 19 December 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/szcm7a>

At the same time, several jurisdictions show stability even post-pandemic. Peru's primary education attendance rate had been rising pre-pandemic (92.7% in 2017 to 97.1% in 2019), dipped in 2020 (94.4%), and in 2021 was almost back to pre-pandemic levels, although sub-national variation is notable (Reátegui,

2022^[65]). Secondary attendance has been even more stable. France also reports long-term stability in truancy. The share of public secondary education students absent without justification for at least four half-days per month has hovered between 4% and 7% for roughly two decades (Cristofoli, 2026^[66]). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, at least for unauthorised absences, no marked post-pandemic deterioration is visible (Ministry of Education and Training, n.d.^[45]). Similarly, in Latvia, the number of long-term unauthorised absentees has not changed significantly (State Service of Education Quality, 2025^[67]). In New Zealand, overall (but not chronic) attendance levels are back to pre-pandemic levels (58% attending school regularly, up from 40% in 2022) (ERO, 2025^[68]). Improved attendance is seen across primary and secondary educational levels, as well as across a range of diverse student groups.

While several education systems report improvements, concerns remain. In England (United Kingdom), for example, overall absence rose by about half, from 4.7% in 2018/19 to 7.5% in 2021/22, and persistent absence more than doubled from 10.9% to 22.5%, reversing previous stability (Department for Education of England, 2026^[69]). This increase is broad-based across the distribution and demographics, with disadvantaged students and those with SEN particularly affected due to worse pre-COVID rates and slower post-COVID improvement (even though their relative worsening during the pandemic was similar to all students) (Department for Education of England, 2025^[70]). Data from 2024/25 show that overall absence has decreased to 6.8% and persistent absence to 18.1% (Department for Education of England, 2026^[69]). On both measures, this represents the largest improvement since 2013/14, with particularly strong gains in secondary education, and larger improvements for disadvantaged students (Department for Education of England, 2025^[70]). Yet, the severe absence rate (missing 50% or more of possible sessions) continues to increase: from 0.9% in 2018/19, to 1.7% in 2021/22 and 2.4% in 2024/25 (Department for Education of England, 2026^[69]). These extreme absence rates are also persevering – for instance, over 80% of secondary students who missed more than 28 days in 2021/22 remained persistently or severely absent in 2022/23 (Department for Education of England, 2025^[71]).

Similarly, in the United States, chronic absence nearly doubled, from 14.8% in 2018/19 to 28.3% in 2021/22 (Dee, 2024^[72]). Although attendance has improved since then, the recovery has been partial and uneven, with national rates of chronic absence still significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels on average (Malkus, 2024^[73]). Notably, districts and student subgroups that had higher chronic absence rates before the pandemic (e.g. high-poverty or low-achieving districts, and Black and Hispanic students) also experience the largest post-pandemic increases, suggesting that the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities (ibid.).

Finally, in Scotland (United Kingdom), concerns about exacerbated socio-economic gaps following the pandemic are present (Sosu and Klein, 2021^[74]). The first wave of the pandemic may not only have increased socio-economic achievement gaps during lockdown but may continue to do so via school attendance disparities when schools reopened. This is due to pre-existing and widening gaps in attendance in the country (ibid.).

While research in this area is still emerging, the post-pandemic prevalence in absences can be tied to shifts in instructional practices, worsening psychological and mental health challenges, and changes in students' behaviours and parental attitudes (see also Chapter 2). Shifts in instructional practices, especially prolonged remote learning and abrupt school closures, have disrupted learning routines. While evidence in this area is indirect, in the United States, for instance, state-level increases in chronic absence are positively associated with the prevalence of school closures (Dee, 2024^[72]), although exposure to remote learning likely explains only a small part of the decline in student attendance post-pandemic, and its effects are fading over time (Singer, 2025^[75]). Qualitative studies also confirm that, already during the pandemic, students were facing challenges stemming from adapting to school routines after the return to in-school learning (McDonald, Lester and Michelson, 2022^[76]).

Psychological challenges, including emotional distress, also seem to contribute to absences. Mental health difficulties can undermine students' ability to attend school by driving anxiety-based avoidance, low mood,

internalising and externalising symptoms, sleep problems and greater use of clinical appointments (see Chapter 2 for more details). In fact, in some education systems, researchers hypothesise that the pandemic accelerated a mental health crisis that has been present for some time already before the disruptions to schooling (Hamilton, 2024^[77]). Many of these challenges are then further exacerbated by socio-economic disparities.

Finally, while evidence is still rare and qualitative, the COVID-19 pandemic might have also altered students' behaviours and parental attitudes by reducing the perceived importance of daily school attendance. In New Zealand, 41% of parents were comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school a term in 2022 and 31% in 2025 (ERO, 2025^[68]). Moreover, 59% of parents were comfortable with their child missing a couple of days in 2025 (50% in 2022). In Ireland, while the vast majority of parents believe that attending school every day is important, 65% of parents also think that occasional absences are not a serious concern (RED C, 2025^[78]). In England (United Kingdom), parents across socio-economic groups expressed frustration with schools' communication and attendance policies, citing a lack of trust and support, particularly in navigating broader systems like mental health services (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023^[79]). Fines and punitive measures were broadly rejected because they were perceived as ineffective and antagonistic (*ibid.*). At the same time, systemic challenges, such as teacher shortages, industrial actions and underfunded special education needs services were viewed by some as compounding factors (*ibid.*). As a result, some parents in England (United Kingdom) and the United States no longer perceive daily schooling as a necessity for good parenting and view it as one of several options for their children, with schooling being put on a scale with maintaining good mental and physical health, cheaper holidays, challenging logistics and others (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023^[79]; Melissa Kay Diliberti, 2024^[80]).

Norway faces similar challenges, highlighting that it is difficult to isolate the effects of the pandemic on societal and school changes. Interviews with school leaders, however, suggest that parental attitudes towards school attendance are evolving. Some school leaders reported that there is a greater tendency for parents now than before to take their children out of school to go on weekend or holiday trips (Bergene et al., 2023^[81]). A school leader at a primary school claimed that some parents misunderstand the absence rules set by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training and understand it "as if they are entitled to 10 days off in a row every time they apply" (Bergene et al., 2023, p. 78^[81]). Furthermore, they reported that it seems parents have more opportunities to stay at home with their children due to an increase in home office/flexible jobs (Bergene et al., 2023^[81]). Some school leaders also pointed to the idea that habits that developed during the pandemic, such as doing schoolwork from home and staying home for minor symptoms, have contributed to a mindset that views attendance as more flexible (*ibid.*). Similarly, other studies in Norway suggest that the pandemic lifestyle has continued after the pandemic, with various factors contributing to making it easier to stay at home (Vennerød-Diesen et al., 2024^[82]). At the same time, greater access to remote learning and increased parental ability to work from home might have, in some cases, supported students' well-being and continuity of learning. Chapter 2 further elaborates on several of these drivers.

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Annex 1.A. Questionnaire items for background characteristics

Annex Table 1.A.1 displays how surveys' participants were asked about their gender, parental education, immigrant background and school location. In this chapter, gender was operationalised as a binary variable (boys and girls), parental education as tertiary-educated (ISCED 5 or higher) or not, immigrant background as either student or parent born outside of the country of assessment, and school location as village (fewer than 15 000 people), town (15 000-100 000 people) and city (more than 100 000 people).

Annex Table 1.A.1. Questions focusing on background characteristics across surveys

Survey	Gender	Immigrant background	Parental education	School location
PISA 2012	Are you female or male? [Female/Male]	In what country were you and your parents born? [Country of assessment, other chosen countries]	<p>What is the <highest level of schooling> completed by your mother? [ISCED 3A, ISCED 3B, 3C, ISCED 2, ISCED 1, She did not complete ISCED 1]</p> <p>Does your mother have any of the following qualifications? [ISCED level 4, ISCED level 5B, ISCED level 5A, ISCED level 6]</p> <p>What is the <highest level of schooling> completed by your father? [ISCED 3A, ISCED 3B, 3C, ISCED 2, ISCED 1, He did not complete ISCED 1]</p> <p>Does your father have any of the following qualifications? [ISCED level 4, ISCED level 5B, ISCED level 5A, ISCED level 6]</p>	<p>Which of the following definitions best describes the community in which your school is located?</p> <p>[A village, hamlet or rural area (fewer than 3 000 people); A small town (3 000 to about 15 000 people); A town (15 000 to about 100 000 people); A city (100 000 to about 1 000 000 people); A large city (with over 1 000 000 people)]</p>
PISA 2022	Are you female or male? [Female/Male]	In what country were you and your parents born?	<p>What is the <highest level of schooling> completed by your mother? [ISCED level 3.4, ISCED level 3.3, ISCED 2, ISCED 1, She did not complete ISCED 1]</p> <p>Does your mother have any of the following qualifications? [ISCED level 4, ISCED level 5, ISCED level 6, ISCED level 7 ISCED level 8]</p> <p>What is the <highest level of schooling> completed by your father? [ISCED level 3.4, ISCED level 3.3, ISCED 2, ISCED 1, He did not complete ISCED 1]</p> <p>Does your father have any of the following qualifications? [ISCED level 4, ISCED level 5, ISCED level 6, ISCED level 7 ISCED level 8]</p>	<p>Which of the following definitions best describes the community in which your school is located?</p> <p>[A village, hamlet or rural area (fewer than 3 000 people); A small town (3 000 to about 15 000 people); A town (15 000 to about 100 000 people); A city (100 000 to about 1 000 000 people); A large city (with over 1 000 000 people); A megacity (with over 10 000 000 people)]</p>
TIMSS 2015	Are you a girl or a boy? [Girl/Boy]	<u>Student questionnaire</u> Was your mother (or stepmother or female guardian) born in	What is the highest level of education completed by the child's father (or stepfather or male guardian) and mother (or stepmother or female guardian)? [Did	How many people live in the city, town, or area where your school is located? [More than 500 000; 100 001 to 500 000; 50 001 to 100 000; 30 001 to 50 000;

		<p><country>? [Yes/No/I don't know]</p> <p>Was your father (or stepfather or male guardian) born in <country>? [Yes/No/I don't know]</p> <p>Were you born in <country>? [Yes/No]</p> <p><u>Home questionnaire</u> Was your child born in <country of test>? [Yes/No]</p> <p>Was the child's father (or stepfather or male guardian) born in <country>? [Yes/No]</p> <p>Was the child's mother (or stepmother or female guardian) born in <country>? [Yes/No]</p>	<p>not go to school; Some primary education or lower secondary; Lower secondary; Upper secondary; Post-secondary, non-tertiary; Short-cycle tertiary; Bachelor's or equivalent; Postgraduate degree; Not applicable]</p>	<p>15 001 to 30 000; 3 001 to 15 000; 3 000 or fewer]</p>
TIMSS 2023	Which of these describes you? [Girl/Boy/Other]	<p><u>Student questionnaire</u> Were your <parents/guardians> born in <country>? [Yes/No/I don't know/Not applicable]</p> <p>Were you born in <country>? [Yes/No]</p> <p><u>Home questionnaire</u> Was your child born in <country>? [Yes/No]</p> <p>Were the child's <parents/guardians> born in <country>? [Yes/No/Not applicable]</p>	<p>What is the highest level of education completed by the child's <parents/guardians>? [Did not go to school; Some primary education – ISCED level 1 or lower secondary education – ISCED level 2; Lower secondary education – ISCED level 2; Upper secondary education – ISCED Level 3; Post-secondary, non-tertiary education – ISCED level 4; Short-cycle tertiary education – ISCED Level 5; Bachelor's or equivalent level – ISCED level 6; Postgraduate degree: Master's – ISCED level 7 or Doctor – ISCED level 8; Not applicable]</p>	<p>How many people live in the city, town, or area where your school is located? [More than 500 000; 100 001 to 500 000; 50 001 to 100 000; 30 001 to 50 000; 15 001 to 30 000; 3 001 to 15 000; 3 000 or fewer]</p>

Source: IEA (2015^[36]), TIMSS 2015 Grade 4 Database, https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2015_G4; IEA (2023^[38]), TIMSS 2023 Grade 4 Database, https://doi.org/10.58150/IEA_TIMSS_2023_G4_data_edition_1; OECD (2012^[18])PISA 2012 Database, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2012-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2022^[20]), PISA 2022 Database, <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

Annex 1.B. Questionnaire items for truancy and absence

Annex Table 1.B.1 provides exact wording of questionnaire items measuring student truancy of 15-year-old students. Students are considered “truant” if they reported skipping a whole school day or some classes at least once in the past two weeks before taking the PISA test. International versions of the student questionnaires are identical for 2018 and 2022. In 2012, the wording changes slightly (e.g. “how many times” instead of “how often”), and the questions on skipping days and classes feature as two distinct items, rather than one item with one response table.

Annex Table 1.B.1. PISA questionnaire items measuring student truancy

PISA 2012	PISA 2018	PISA 2022
In the last two full weeks of school, how many times did you <skip> a whole school day? (None, One or two times, Three or four times, Five or more times)	In the last two full weeks of school, how often did the following things occur? I <skipped> a whole school day. I <skipped> some classes.	In the last two full weeks of school, how often did the following things occur? I <skipped> a whole school day. I <skipped> some classes.
In the last two full weeks of school, how many times did you <skip> some classes? (None, One or two times, Three or four times, Five or more times)	Response options for both: None, One or two times, Three or four times, Five or more times	Response options for both: None, One or two times, Three or four times, Five or more times

Note: Based on international versions of student questionnaires.

Source: OECD (n.d.^[83]), PISA data and methodology, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa/pisa-data.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

Annex Table 1.B.2 provides exact wording of questionnaire items measuring student absence in the fourth grade. Students are considered “absent” if they reported being absent from school once every week or every two weeks. International versions of the student questionnaires are identical for 2019 and 2023. In 2015, the response options change slightly (e.g. “once a week or more” instead of “once a week”), and the response option “once every two months” is not available.

Annex Table 1.B.2. TIMSS questionnaire items measuring student absence

TIMSS 2015	TIMSS 2019	TIMSS 2023
About how often are you absent from school?	About how often are you absent from school?	About how often are you absent from school?
Response options: Once a week or more, Once every two weeks, Once a month, Never or almost never	Response options: Once a week, Once every two weeks, Once a month, Once every two months, Never or almost never	Response options: Once a week, Once every two weeks, Once a month, Once every two months, Never or almost never

Note: Based on international versions of student questionnaires.

Source: IEA (n.d.^[84]), Data Repository, <https://www.iea.nl/data-tools/repository> (accessed on 12 June 2025).

Annex Table 1.B.1 provides exact wording of questionnaire items measuring student truancy as a barrier to learning in school, as reported by school leaders. Truancy is considered a barrier to learning if school leaders reported that student truancy hinders learning in the school to some extent or a lot. International versions of the student questionnaires are identical for the four cycles.

Annex Table 1.B.3. PISA questionnaire items measuring truancy as a barrier to learning

PISA 2012	PISA 2015	PISA 2018	PISA 2022
In your school, to what extent is the learning of students hindered by the following phenomena? Student truancy	In your school, to what extent is the learning of students hindered by the following phenomena? Student truancy	In your school, to what extent is the learning of students hindered by the following phenomena? Student truancy	In your school, to what extent is the learning of students hindered by the following phenomena? Student truancy
Response options: Not at all, Very little, To some extent, A lot	Response options: Not at all, Very little, To some extent, A lot	Response options: Not at all, Very little, To some extent, A lot	Response options: Not at all, Very little, To some extent, A lot

Note: Based on international versions of school questionnaires.

Source: OECD (n.d.^[83]), PISA data and methodology, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa/pisa-data.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

Annex Table 1.B.4 provides exact wording of questionnaire items measuring student absence or arriving late as a serious problem in school, as reported by school leaders. Student absence or arriving late is considered a serious problem if school leaders selected that option. International versions of the student questionnaires are identical for 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023.

Annex Table 1.B.4. TIMSS questionnaire items measuring absence or arriving late as a serious problem

TIMSS 2011	TIMSS 2015	TIMSS 2019	TIMSS 2023
To what degree is each of the following a problem among <fourth-grade> students in your school? Arriving late at school Absenteeism (i.e., unjustified absences)	To what degree is each of the following a problem among <fourth grade> students in your school? Arriving late at school Absenteeism (i.e., unjustified absences)	To what degree is each of the following a problem among <fourth grade> students in your school? Arriving late at school Absenteeism (i.e., unjustified absences)	To what degree is each of the following a problem among <fourth grade> students in your school? Arriving late at school Absenteeism (i.e., unjustified absences)
Response options: Not a problem, Minor problem, Moderate problem, Serious problem	Response options: Not a problem, Minor problem, Moderate problem, Serious problem	Response options: Not a problem, Minor problem, Moderate problem, Serious problem	Response options: Not a problem, Minor problem, Moderate problem, Serious problem

Note: Based on international versions of school questionnaires.

Source: IEA (n.d.^[84]), Data Repository, <https://www.iea.nl/data-tools/repository> (accessed on 12 June 2025).

Notes

1 Note by the Republic of Türkiye

The information in this document with reference to “Cyprus” relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Türkiye recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of the United Nations, Türkiye shall preserve its position concerning the “Cyprus issue”.

Note by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Union

The Republic of Cyprus is recognised by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Türkiye. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

² Although numerous national and sub-national definitions and terms for special education needs are in use, the definition adopted in this report builds on the shared elements across these frameworks. It identifies three primary categories of special education needs: learning disabilities, physical impairments and mental disorders (Brussino, 2020^[85]; OECD, 2023^[86]).

2 Drivers of school attendance problems

This chapter examines the drivers of school attendance problems using a bioecological framework that captures influences across process, person, context and time. Drawing on international research, the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems and PISA 2022, it shows that absences emerge from interacting influences rather than single causes. These influences operate across policy structures, community conditions, family-school relationships, school climate, peer dynamics, service capacity, family circumstances, health, well-being and student engagement. Some have intensified or changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Absence patterns also show persistence over time and can intensify during key educational transitions.

Key messages

Understanding the drivers of school attendance problems is essential for designing effective, preventive and context-sensitive policies. Absences are not caused by single factors but reflect interacting drivers across multiple levels over time.

Drivers of school attendance problems operate cumulatively across system levels

School attendance problems rarely result from a single cause. Instead, they emerge from the interaction of personal, relational and structural pressures across time, policy systems, communities, schools, families, peers and individual characteristics.

Absence trajectories often begin early and tend to persist

Prior absences are one of the strongest predictors of future absences across education systems. Patterns can form early and can stabilise or intensify during transitions between educational stages. These involve new academic expectations, social pressures and developmental changes, which can increase vulnerability to absences.

Structural conditions and access barriers can shape absence

Policy frameworks and community contexts can influence absences indirectly by shaping families' resources, school practices and access to support services. Factors, such as neighbourhood safety and transport reliability can further constrain students' attendance.

Changing norms and institutional co-ordination can influence absence

In some systems, parental tolerance of minor illness absences or term-time holidays seems to have increased, weakening shared expectations about daily attendance. At the same time, weak co-ordination between schools and external services, along with gaps in mental-health and social support, can delay support and contribute to sustained absences.

Relationships, school environments and support capacity are central to absence patterns

Attendance is shaped by relationships and environments across schools, families and peer groups. Supportive school climates, strong school belonging, positive student-teacher relationships and stable peer networks are linked to better attendance, while bullying, weak school-family communication and fragmented support can contribute to more absences.

Family hardship, health-related challenges and disengagement remain critical

Material deprivation, unstable housing, caregiving responsibilities, parental health problems and family conflict can disrupt routines and reduce students' capacity to attend school. Physical illness, mental-health difficulties, boredom, low motivation and perceived lack of relevance further influence individual attendance decisions.

Introduction

Understanding the drivers¹ of school attendance problems (SAP) is critical for designing effective responses. When policies and interventions are grounded in a clear understanding of what drives SAP, they are more likely to lead to meaningful improvements in attendance and, in turn, better educational and developmental outcomes. Analysing drivers enables more precise, context-sensitive strategies that move

beyond generic or reactive approaches. It also strengthens the evidence base that informs future research, policy and practice.

Although attendance and absence are often treated as opposites, the factors that promote one do not necessarily prevent the other. For instance, students may attend school regularly due to strong peer ties but still face barriers, such as housing instability, which increase their risk of absence. In contrast, some may be absent due to illness or exclusion, despite feeling positively about school. Such examples underscore the importance of studying absence in its own right, not merely as the inverse of attendance.

Focusing on drivers of SAP can shift policymakers' attention from symptom management to root cause intervention. Understanding the drivers might help move beyond responding to observable symptoms (such as repeated lateness) towards addressing the underlying causes. This is crucial for both effective policy design and supportive frontline practice. Analysing drivers can also enable cross-country comparisons by distinguishing between context-specific drivers and those that recur across national contexts, helping policymakers identify common patterns and potential system-level levers for change.

This chapter aims to provide a conceptually grounded, credible and practically useful overview of current knowledge on the drivers of SAP. It does not catalogue every driver as this is beyond the scope of this report. Indeed, absences can arise from many potential causes – 781 risk factors in one review – and are typically embedded in a web of personal and social problems (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[1]). Because the COVID-19 pandemic might have fundamentally changed the role of some drivers, the primary focus of the chapter remains on publications released during or after the pandemic. While research often examines variables across multiple levels, the placement of each study in a specific sub-section reflects its primary focus. However, when interpreting the drivers of SAP, it is important to recognise that effects may result from interactions across levels (see the Interactions among levels section). Moreover, as also elaborated in Chapter 3, SAP should not be understood as the product of isolated drivers acting in a linear way. Rather, they often emerge through reciprocal and cumulative processes, in which academic difficulties, socio-emotional challenges and disengagement both contribute to, and are reinforced by, absences over time. The final section illustrates how drivers at different levels can interact and reinforce one another.

This literature is complemented with results from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems (see report annex). The survey was completed by 45 education systems across the world (mostly OECD and EU countries) and collected results from national (or sub-national) sources on drivers of SAP.

The analysis of PISA 2022 data on long-term absence (Box 2.1) complements the overview of current knowledge on the drivers of SAP.² It enables an examination of whether certain factors identified in the literature correlate with long-term absence and whether these associations vary among countries. Differences between students who reported long-term absence and those who did not, and differences adjusted for a range of student and school characteristics are shown.

Box 2.1. Long-term absence in PISA 2022

In PISA 2022, students were asked whether they had ever missed school for more than three months in a row (OECD, 2021^[2]). For each educational level (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary), they selected “No, never”; “Yes, once” or “Yes, twice or more” (ibid.). While PISA has traditionally also included an item on arriving late, skipping classes and skipping school in the two weeks before taking the assessment, this chapter focuses on the long-term absence measure for two reasons: (1) it has not been extensively explored in OECD reports, academic or other literature; and (2) compared to the item exploring arriving late and skipping, it is more closely aligned with measures of chronic absence that are of focus in many education systems.

In this chapter, two types of results are presented. First, students are categorised into two groups: those who reported missing school for more than three consecutive months at any educational level, and those who did not. Subsequently, differences between these two groups are reported on various measures (e.g. differences in bullying, school belonging, etc.).

Second, to account for the simultaneous impact of student and school factors on long-term absence, regression models are estimated that account for a range of student characteristics and school factors. The conclusions stemming from these models are reported in the relevant sections. Full model specifications are documented in Annex 2.B.

When interpreting these results, readers are cautioned that while long-term absence is reported retrospectively, the potential drivers of SAP are reported at the time of the assessment – there is thus a temporal inconsistency. Because the data cannot align these time frames, whether the measured factors are true drivers depends, among other things, on their stability over time. Moreover, other unmeasured factors can confound the relationship between the driver and SAP. Consequently, the estimates cannot be interpreted as causal (including in the conditional models). They describe differences in students’ home and school environments between those who were and were not long-term absent, not the causal or driving effects of specific factors.

Moreover, the long-term absence measure itself is not without specific challenges. Readers are encouraged to consider at least these three:

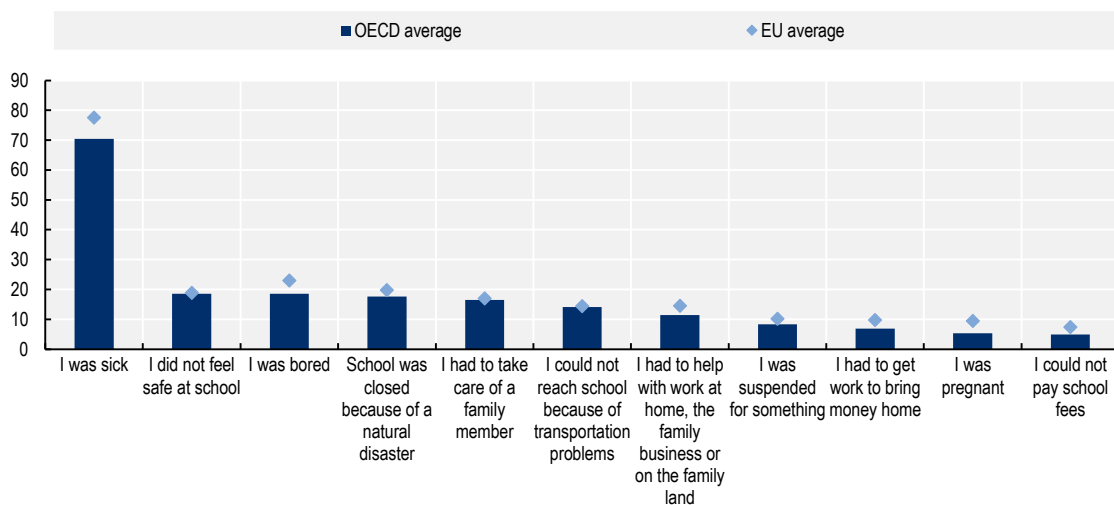
- The behaviour it captures is extreme: in most education systems, missing three or more consecutive months of school means missing more than a third of total school days in a year. National (or sub-national) measures of chronic absence are often defined below this threshold (see Chapter 1).
- The measure may be biased due to sampled students who were absent: it is possible that students who are chronically absent missed PISA. While this cannot be ruled out, the association with sampling absence rates suggests that this does not present a significant challenge (Annex 2.A).³
- COVID-related school closures may influence the measure: it is possible that some students interpreted the question of “missing school” not as missing instruction but as not being physically present in school. Typically, this would not present a problem, but the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closures in many education systems without missing instruction. While the correlation between school closures and long-term absence is moderate at the system level (Annex 2.A), including this variable in models predicting long-term absence does not alter the model coefficients or conclusions, and the variable itself is not statistically significant (Annex 2.B). Future releases of this item will shed more light on this issue.

As an initial descriptive illustration, PISA 2022 provides information on the reasons students report for long-term absence (Figure 2.1). The reasons vary, but they are led by illness, followed at some distance

by factors, such as feeling unsafe at school, boredom and closures due to natural disaster. This underlines that SAP are not associated with a single reported reason, but by a diverse set of health-related, relational, school-based and contextual factors.

Figure 2.1. Reasons for long-term absence (2022)

Percentage of students who reported the following reasons for having missed school for more than three consecutive months at any education level



Source: OECD (2023^[3]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.55, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

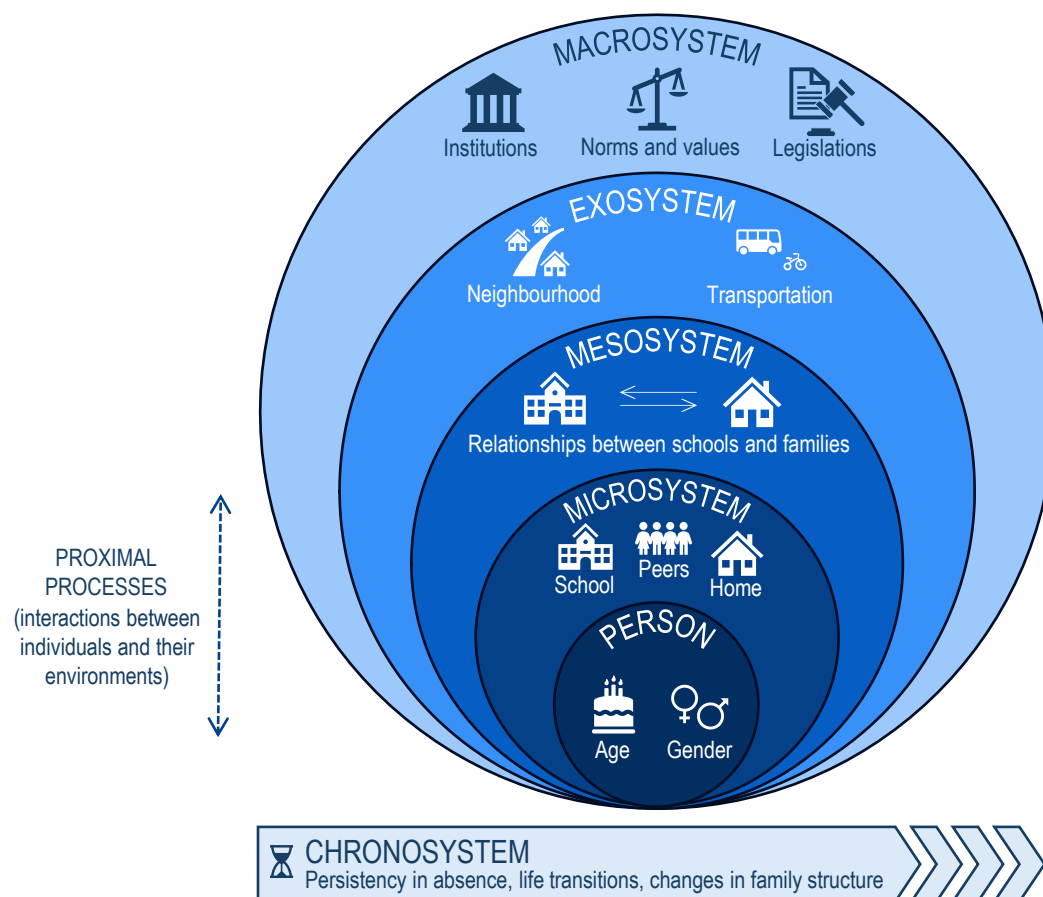
StatLink  <https://stat.link/tqdpny>

Bioecological model for understanding and working with drivers

Bronfenbrenner's theoretical work offers a well-established framework for understanding how real-life processes and conditions shape human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977^[4]; Bronfenbrenner, 1981^[5]; Bronfenbrenner, 1995^[6]; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994^[7]; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998^[8]). Originally developed to support research and theory on child development, the bioecological model has since been widely adopted in education-related research, including studies on SAP (Tong and An, 2024^[9]).

Over time, the model was reformulated and introduced four interlinked components: process, person, context and time (PPCT) (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998^[8]; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007^[10]). The PPCT model emphasises how individuals engage dynamically with their environments across time. It supports both granular attention to immediate settings and reflection on broader influences over time, making it well-suited to research and policy analysis in the field of school attendance (Heyne, 2025^[11]). In this chapter, the initial sections describe five nested environmental systems: the time (chronosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977^[4]; Bronfenbrenner, 1981^[5]) and the context components (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem). This is followed by the person characteristics of the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998^[8]; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007^[10]).⁴ An illustration of this framework is provided in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2. The process, person, context and time framework



Note: Selected aspects of each of the components are displayed.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem captures the influence of time on attendance patterns, both through life transitions and broader historical trends (Heyne, 2025^[11]). At the level of individual experience, transitions, such as school entry, adolescence or changes in family structure (e.g. divorce or separation) may alter a young person's engagement with school. At the societal level, large-scale events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in education legislation, or shifting norms around digital learning can reshape school participation more broadly. Notably, the chronosystem includes not only periods of change but also forms of continuity, such as enduring cultural expectations about school or persistent structural inequalities, which may reinforce or counteract change.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem refers to the broader cultural, economic and ideological conditions that shape the values, norms and institutional structures across all other system levels (Heyne, 2025^[11]). These include national policy frameworks for attendance, cultural expectations around school participation, societal attitudes toward disability or mental health, and economic conditions that influence inequality and educational investment. Such factors have an impact on attendance indirectly: by shaping how schools operate, how families prioritise education and what supports are made available. While macrosystem influences may resemble exosystem conditions, the distinction lies in the scale: the exosystem refers to specific external

settings that indirectly influence the young person (such as a parent's workplace or a local service), whereas the macrosystem reflects the broader societal blueprints – such as labour laws, educational ideologies or social policy priorities – that shape those settings in the first place.

Exosystem

The exosystem comprises settings or systems that the young person does not actively participate in, but which nonetheless exert indirect influence on their development and daily experiences (Heyne, 2025^[11]). These influences are typically mediated through their effects on the microsystems surrounding the young person, especially the home and school. Common exosystemic factors include parental working conditions (such as irregular hours, job insecurity or high work-related stress), and the availability or accessibility of mental health and youth support services. Similarly, choices on resource allocation, placement practices or eligibility criteria for targeted programmes may influence how flexibly schools can respond to emerging attendance concerns. These indirect but specific influences underscore the importance of considering not only the young person's immediate environment, but also the broader institutional and structural forces that shape their opportunities to attend and engage with school.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem encompasses the dynamic interactions between a young person's immediate settings, i.e. between two or more microsystems in which the young person actively participates (Heyne, 2025^[11]). This includes, for example, the relationship between home and school, as well as the connection between classroom and peer group experiences. These interconnections shape attendance by influencing how consistently expectations, values and supports are communicated and reinforced across contexts. Concrete examples of mesosystemic processes include parent participation in parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at school or maintaining regular contact with school staff. Co-ordination between school staff, such as teachers and counsellors, can also support timely responses to emerging attendance concerns. Peer relationships may function as a bridge or barrier across microsystems, depending on how they align with school norms, and how parents and educators interpret and respond to those dynamics. In some cases, neighbourhood environments, when experienced directly by the young person, interact with school or family life to influence their engagement with education. By contrast, interactions between the school and external support services (such as mental health or social work agencies) typically fall within the exosystem, unless the young person is directly engaged with both settings. Overall, when communication and co-ordination across microsystems are strong, they can help prevent SAP or facilitate re-engagement after a period of absence. Inconsistent or poorly aligned relationships, however, may contribute to misunderstandings, fragmentation of support and an increased risk of absences.

Microsystem

The microsystem refers to the settings in which the young person participates directly, i.e. through face-to-face interaction (Heyne, 2025^[11]). These include the family, school, classroom and peer group. For students, the classroom and the school are primary microsystems. The relationships with teachers – developed daily through ongoing interactions – are particularly central influences, shaping not only engagement but also attendance patterns. Other attendance-relevant factors at this level include parent-child relationships, peer dynamics, classroom climate and the quality and accessibility of both digital and physical learning environments. Neighbourhood settings may also fall within the microsystem when the young person is directly engaged in local activities, such as volunteering, holding a part-time job, participating in sports clubs or attending community events. By contrast, neighbourhoods are treated as part of the exosystem when the influence occurs without the young person's direct involvement, for example, when local crime rates, zoning regulations or neighbourhood associations shape parents' decisions about safety or access to services. Whether a neighbourhood factor is microsystemic or

exosystemic depends on the nature of the influence and the degree of the young person's active engagement.

Person characteristics

In the PPCT model, the person characteristics refer to individual attributes that both influence, and are influenced by, interactions within the individual's ecological systems (Heyne, 2025^[11]). These attributes can be categorised into three types (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998^[8]; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007^[10]):

- Demand characteristics, which invite or discourage reactions from the environment (e.g. age, gender, visible physical appearance or country of birth (through perceptions and interactions with others)).
- Resource characteristics, encompassing abilities, skills and past experiences (e.g. cognitive aptitude and social competence).
- Force characteristics, involving personality traits, motivation and temperament (e.g. curiosity, persistence, resilience and anxiety).

In the PPCT model, these characteristics are not static inputs but dynamically shape the nature and intensity of proximal processes a young person engages in, and are also transformed as outcomes. All these personal attributes interact dynamically with environmental factors to influence attendance and absence.

While demand characteristics, such as gender and country of birth, can shape how young people are perceived and responded to within their environments, they are not discussed in detail in this chapter as independent drivers of SAP. This is both to avoid duplication with the previous chapter and because these characteristics are better understood as correlates of absences rather than primary drivers. For example, gender differences in attendance patterns may be associated with higher prevalence of internalising difficulties among girls and behavioural difficulties among boys, leading to different pathways into absence. Differences by immigrant background may be associated with factors such as socio-economic status or school belonging driving SAP.

Benefits of working with the bioecological model

The bioecological model offers distinctive value for understanding school absences as a complex, dynamic phenomenon, shaped by interacting influences across system levels and evolving over time (Heyne, 2025^[11]). Rather than focusing solely on who or what influences SAP, the model encourages inquiry into how these drivers interact across various contexts and time periods. Specific benefits of applying the model include:

- Integrated, multi-level thinking: The model supports holistic analysis across individual, relational, institutional and societal levels. This helps connect perspectives across policy, research and practice, reducing the risk of siloed interpretations. It responds to calls in the field of school attendance for more integrated approaches (e.g. Kearney (2021^[12])). The model also highlights broader influences that are often overlooked, balancing the focus on person characteristics and microsystem drivers (Kearney, Childs and Burke, 2022^[13]).
- Potential for better-targeted interventions: By clarifying how different drivers operate at various levels, the model helps policymakers, researchers and practitioners identify intervention points that are appropriately aligned, thus potentially improving the fit between problem and response.
- Context-sensitive use and comparison: The model can be adapted to local contexts (e.g. education systems, cultural expectations and resource constraints), while still allowing structured comparison and policy learning across national settings and institutional systems.

- Shared conceptual language: It provides a common framework that facilitates cross-sectoral dialogue and knowledge exchange, making it easier to align efforts between policymakers, researchers, educators and practitioners.

Continuity and change in school attendance problems (chronosystem)

The persistence of absences over time

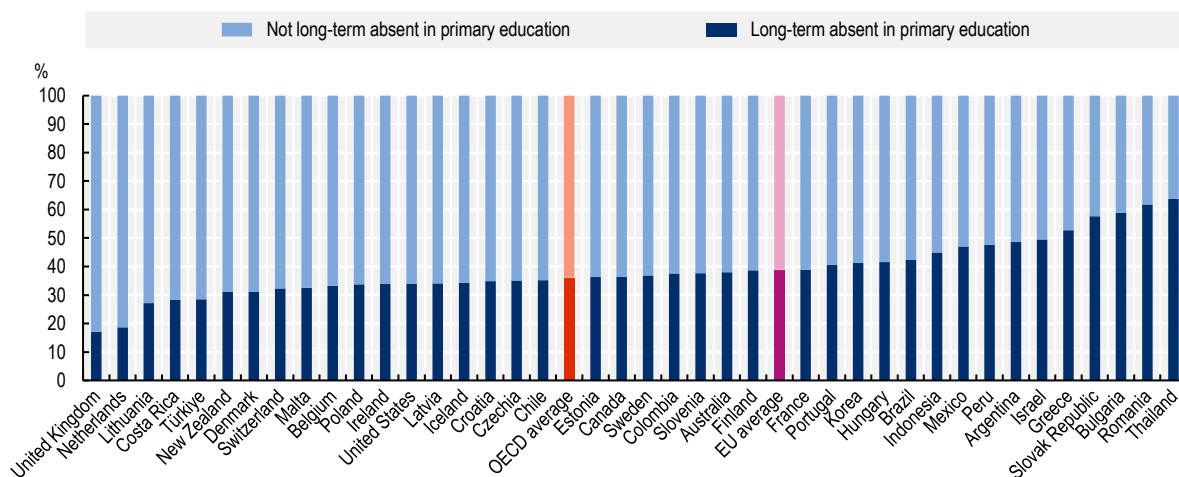
Prior absences are a powerful predictor of subsequent absences across countries. Daily decisions and routines can form habits, those habits can settle into term-by-term patterns, and they can harden into trajectories across key developmental transitions. In New Zealand, chronically absent students are five times more likely to miss school again the following year, underlining the strength of year-over-year persistence (ERO, 2024^[14]). Administrative data in England (United Kingdom) point to a similar pattern: over 80% of secondary students who missed more than 28 days in 2021/22 remained persistently or severely absent in 2022/23 (Department for Education, 2025^[15]). Finnish registry evidence reveals that missing more than 20% of classes in grade 6 (the last year of primary education) strongly predicts remaining above this threshold throughout lower-secondary education (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]).

Indeed, absence patterns consolidate early in schooling and then can become “sticky” across grades. In the United States, absence rates tend to stabilise after the third grade of primary education in a nationally representative cohort (Simon et al., 2020^[17]). English (UK) longitudinal trajectory analyses from year 1 to year 11 in primary and secondary education indicate that absence patterns often stabilise or intensify over subsequent years; students in the moderate or increasing trajectory groups typically show sustained patterns across multiple stages of schooling rather than isolated fluctuations (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[18]). Finnish latent-class models similarly distinguish a majority with consistently few absences, a sizeable group whose absences rise at lower-secondary education, and a smaller group with abundant absences already visible in primary school (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]). Evidence from Denmark and the Netherlands also reveals that extended absences visible in secondary education often have origins in primary years (Binsbergen et al., 2019^[19]; Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[20]).

In line with this evidence, PISA 2022 reveals that long-term absence is persistent, as self-reported by 15-year-old students (Figure 2.3). On average across OECD countries, 36.1% of students who were long-term absent in secondary education were also absent in primary education. In some countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, the Slovak Republic and Thailand), more than half of students who were long-term absent in secondary education were also absent in primary education. The association between long-term absence in primary and secondary education remains strong even after accounting for a range of other factors, such as socio-economic background (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.3. Persistent long-term absence between primary and secondary education

Percentage of students who were long-term absent in secondary education, depending on whether they reported to have been long-term absent in primary education



Sorted in ascending order by long-term absent students in primary education.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/u26bnf>

Although attendance patterns are often persistent, they can change – usually gradually rather than through sudden, dramatic shifts. US analyses indicate that early non-attendance explains a meaningful, but far from total, share of later absences (Ansari and Pianta, 2019^[22]). For example, absences in early childhood education and care (ECEC) explain 10%-20% of the variation in absences between first and third grade of primary education, and only 3%-4% of the variation between fifth and eighth grade. Similar patterns were observed across other grade levels (*ibid.*). This leaves a substantial portion of the variance to other influences, such as peer networks, bullying experiences and school climate (see below). Finnish transition mapping across seven years finds that students most often remain in the same absence category or move to a neighbouring one, with larger trajectory-jumps occurring but rarely (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]). Moreover, truancy in grade 6 (the last year of primary education) predicts truancy in grades 7 and 9, but not uniformly so (*ibid.*).

Finally, although this report focuses on primary and secondary education, SAP can begin as early as in ECEC. In Chicago, Illinois (United States), for instance, nearly half of three-year-olds and one-third of four-year-olds missed 10% of their pre-school years (Ehrlich et al., 2014^[23]). Across the country, in any given year, 10% of children in ECEC and in grade 1 of primary education miss at least 10% of the school year (Attendance Works and Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015^[24]). Moreover, 14% of children in ECEC are classified as “at-risk absentees”, missing one to six fewer days than the threshold for chronic absence, meaning that a substantial portion of children at the very start of primary education are chronically absent or close to it, at least in the United States (Romero and Lee, 2007^[25]). In California (United States), being chronically absent (missing 10% or more days) in ECEC has a 0.5 probability of being chronically absent in primary education (Hough, 2019^[26]).

Rising absences across years and transition pressures between educational levels

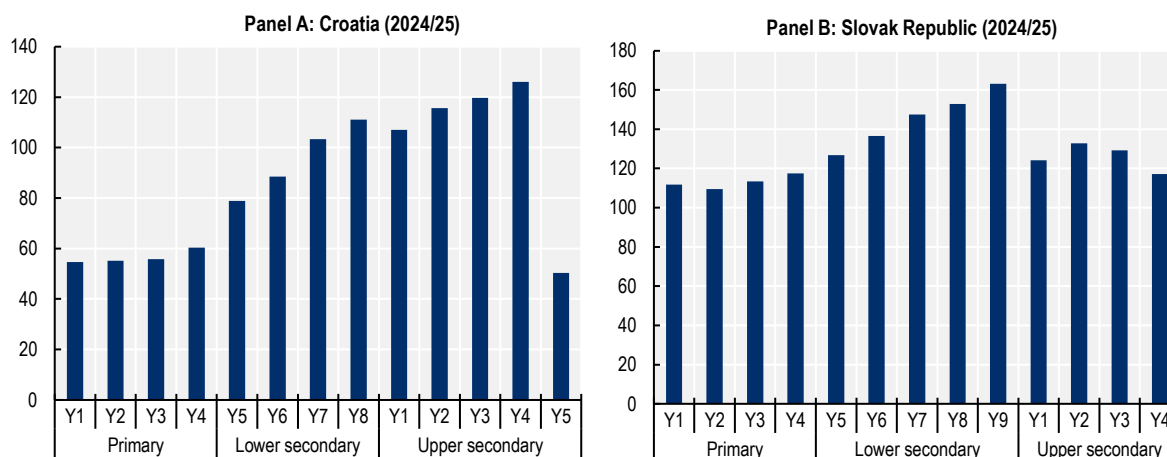
Student in New Zealand: Don't like school. It is too repetitive across the years. You are learning the same thing year after year. Not learning new things. (ERO, 2022, p. 45^[27])⁵

Absences typically rise as students progress through schooling, reflecting a pattern in which attendance behaviours intensify over time (Melvin et al., 2025^[28]). Early transitions, especially the move into lower-secondary education, often mark inflexion points where absences accelerate.

Absences, particularly unauthorised, generally increase with age, grade and year. In France in 2012, only 6% of students aged 12 or younger were absent compared to 36% among those aged 16 or older (Cristofoli, 2015^[29]). In Sweden, 5% of primary-education students reported being absent every day or several times a week, compared to over 12% of secondary-education students (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024^[30]). In Chile, serious absence (students attending fewer than 85% of the total number of official school days in a year) stood at 23.7% in primary and lower-secondary education in 2025 and between 26.1% and 29.7% in upper secondary education (depending on the programme) (Government of Chile, 2025^[31]). In Japan, the non-attendance rate rises steadily from 0.9% among first-grade primary school students to 3.7% among sixth graders (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2026^[32]). It then increases to 5.6% at the beginning of lower-secondary education and continues to rise throughout this educational level (ibid.). Figure 2.4 illustrates increases by grade in Croatia and the Slovak Republic. Similar patterns can be observed in Australia, Finland and Latvia (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]; Hunter, Haywood and Chapman, 2025^[33]; State Service of Education Quality, 2020^[34]).

Figure 2.4. Absence rates over grades (%)

Average absence hours per student in Croatia (panel A) and the Slovak Republic (panel B)



Note: Measures in the two panels are not comparable. The panels display average absence (authorised and unauthorised) per student per grade. Data in panel B exclude special classes, special schools and second chance education study programmes.

Source: Ministry of Science, Education and Youth (n.d.^[35]), Izostanci po razredima [Absences by grade], <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrJoiM2Q1NjVmZDEtMGUyMy00MDEtLkZkZWItYjBhMTA3MDFiOWUxliwidCI6IjJMTFJmNjLWI3NjEtNDVhYi1hOWY1LTRhYzY3ZTtkOZTFkNCIsImMiOjI9> (accessed on 17 February 2026); and OECD (2025^[36]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

Attendance pressures can intensify in the final year of primary education and through the move into secondary education (Ehrlich and Johnson, 2019^[37]). Transitions between educational levels can be a challenging time for many students, particularly if it also involves changing schools and classmates (Varsik, 2025^[38]). Between the primary and lower-secondary levels, the curriculum often undergoes significant changes, with the lower-secondary level dominated by more specialised subjects in larger schools and classes, and students are required to take on more responsibility (Beatson et al., 2023^[39]; Howe, 2011^[40]). In addition to challenges related to higher requirements of secondary schools, it occurs during the time of early adolescence and coincides with puberty, adding physical, intellectual, emotional and social changes (Bagnall, Fox and Skipper, 2021^[41]; Patton and Viner, 2007^[42]; Richards, 2011^[43]; Short and Rosenthal, 2008^[44]). Therefore, the transition from primary to lower-secondary education presents challenges for school systems, given that there can be a mismatch between the needs of early adolescents and the structure of lower-secondary education (OECD, 2018^[45]).

Indeed, several education systems observe a marked increase in SAP at the beginning of lower-secondary education. Significant increases in absences between primary and secondary education are visible in Figure 2.4 above in Croatia and the Slovak Republic. Similarly, evidence from Denmark suggests that absences rise especially in the last year of primary education and often continues to climb thereafter (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[20]). This pattern is particularly visible for students with more than 10% of missed schooling and for unauthorised absences (*ibid.*). The Australian pattern of an “attendance cliff” at entry to secondary education is consistent with this dynamic, with the drop particularly pronounced for Indigenous students in remote areas and interpreted as arising from interacting emotional, cultural, structural and historical factors, including intergenerational trauma, racism and strained community-school relationships (Potia et al., 2025^[46]). Some of this increase could also be explained by the fact that students change schools. In Finland, for instance, transitions to lower-secondary education are associated with an increase in SAP, possibly due to changes in classmates, familiar teachers and so on (Sergejeff, 2023^[47]). Complementing this, research in the Netherlands indicates that students value the transparent social structure and mutual familiarity typical of primary schools as protective against disengagement, implying that the loss of these features at the transition may remove supports that help prevent SAP (Binsbergen et al., 2019^[19]).

While the lower-secondary level seems to be where most absences are concentrated, SAP seem to decrease in upper secondary education in some education systems (Figure 2.4 above). This may be due to the self-selection mechanism, whereby students who are disengaged do not enter this educational level, as it may not be compulsory.

However, other education systems continue to observe increasing trends in absence at the upper secondary level. In Romania, for instance, the school participation indicator decreases from grade 9 to grade 12 (upper secondary education), reflecting increasing numbers of absences with each successive grade (Andrei, 2023^[48]; Horga et al., 2024^[49]). This trend may partly reflect students’ disengagement from programmes that were not their preferred option, alongside a growing focus on preparation for the upper secondary examination in a limited set of subjects (*ibid.*). In the United States, a chronically absent student in the last year of lower-secondary education has a 0.7 probability of being chronically absent the next year (Hough, 2019^[26]).

International synthesis further suggests that less typical or repeated transitions, particularly in contexts of poverty or community violence, can undermine engagement and contribute to so-called “school refusal” (Leduc et al., 2022^[50]). However, the direction of the relationship remains unclear: repeated transitions may contribute to the onset of “school refusal”, “school refusal” may lead to more frequent changes, or both may stem from shared underlying factors such as anxiety, exclusion or unmet needs. Difficulty adapting to less typical transitions, particularly in contexts of poverty or community violence, may undermine school engagement and heighten emotional distress. Leduc et al. (2022^[50]) link this interpretation to the ecological principle of adaptation, defined as a young person’s capacity to evolve

within changing environmental conditions. In this view, repeated school transitions may challenge that adaptive capacity and, in doing so, contribute to absences over time, particularly in the context of “school refusal” (ibid.). This point is related to another driver – peer consistency (see Peer and social influence).

Absence patterns are also heterogeneous. Research from England (United Kingdom), for instance, points out that while absences among students with special education needs (SEN) increase with age overall, this rise is steeper for some SEN groups. In particular, students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties show the sharpest increases, becoming the highest-absence group by year 11 despite not starting with the highest rates in year 7 (Tanya Lereya et al., 2022^[51]).

Central level policies, natural shocks and absence trajectories (macrosystem)

Policy design in absence patterns

School leader in Sweden: In nine cases out of ten, problematic absences are due to social factors outside the school. It then becomes a very strange situation when the responsibility is placed on the school... (Öhman, 2016, p. 27^[52])

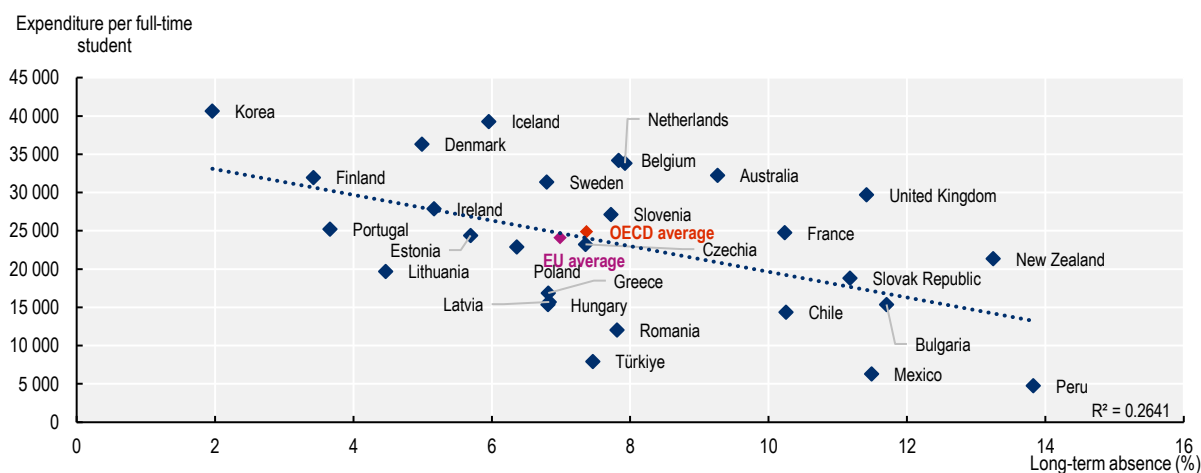
Macrosystem-level structures, such as policy frameworks, have a clear potential to shape absences. Legal attendance frameworks, legal provisions (e.g. punitive measures, incentives and rewards for attendance) and others can shape parents’ and students’ behaviours around absences, as well as school stakeholders’ responses to them. However, as is further elaborated in Chapters 4 and 5, such policies are rarely evaluated, and if they are, they often indicate insignificant results (Melvin et al., 2025^[53]). Moreover, evidence from Texas (United States) suggests that attendance is driven far more by observed and unobserved student characteristics than by regional effects (Knight and Olofson, 2026^[54]). This section focuses on policies that are not directly related to SAP (e.g. expenditure and early selection), while Chapter 4 discusses those that specifically aim to address absences.

Association between expenditure on educational institutions and absences

Lower levels of expenditure on educational institutions may contribute to higher rates of SAP by limiting the availability of academic support, student well-being services and inclusive learning environments that help students remain engaged in school. Under-resourced education systems may also face greater challenges in addressing barriers to attendance, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, increasing the risk of absences.

Per-student expenditure is correlated with long-term absence (Figure 2.5). Broadly speaking, countries with lower per-student expenditure report higher absence rates. Nevertheless, it is essential not to overemphasise the significance of this relationship. Outcomes do not only depend on the amount of expenditure, but also on the allocation and use of resources. This statistic can thus obscure other important factors that contribute to this association. Other macro-level influences that are correlated with per-student expenditure and long-term absence contribute to the association. Further research is needed to fully disentangle the role of macrosystem factors, including expenditure, in SAP.

Figure 2.5. Long-term absence and expenditure per student



Note: Long-term absence is measured as the percentage of students who reported missing school for more than three consecutive months at any educational level. Expenditure per full-time student refers to expenditure on primary and lower-secondary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student (in 2022 USD PPP).

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2026^[55]), OECD Data Explorer: Expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student, <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/2np> (accessed on 9 March 2026).

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Potential effects of early selection on school attendance problems

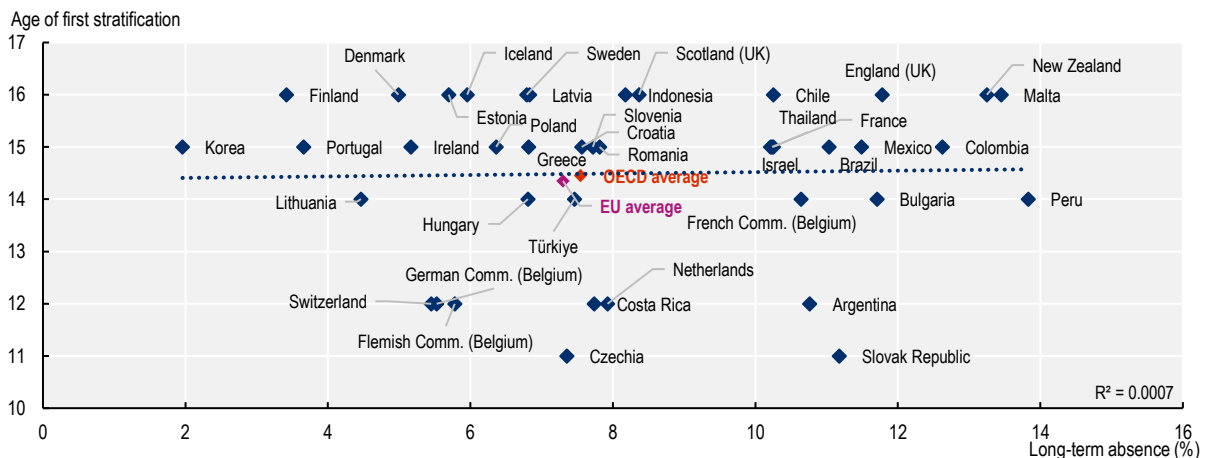
One policy that has long been a focus among OECD countries is early selection into educational tracks. Students in different education systems select programmes at various points in their academic path. On average across OECD countries, the first age of selection is 14.3 years, although in some education systems, students can select as early as at the age of 10 (OECD, 2023^[3]). Earlier selection can create more space for specialisation. For instance, it can help students build a specialised set of skills that is in high demand and enter the labour market earlier (Stronati, 2023^[56]). However, in many cases, early selection happens based on academic achievement, which can be problematic. Early student selection policies, which determine the grouping and separation of students based on their abilities, can exacerbate learning differences and educational inequities (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Public Policy and Management Institute, Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaité, 2017^[57]). Evidence linking early selection policies to SAP is, however, limited, so this section focuses mainly on engagement-related pathways that may precede or accompany absences.

In Germany, one study examines the national practice of early selection through students' "stereotype awareness" (i.e. how they believe others perceive their track) (Bardach et al., 2023^[58]). Stereotype awareness in grade 5 (first year of lower-secondary education) is significantly associated with lower school engagement at the same time point, across all tracks, with no significant differences in effect size between tracks. This supports the "stereotype awareness as harmful for all" hypothesis rather than the view that such awareness disproportionately harms students in specific tracks. No significant longitudinal associations are found between stereotype awareness and changes in engagement over time. The study accounts for socio-economic status, gender and immigrant background (ibid.). However, the results need to be interpreted with caution, given the reliance on engagement rather than SAP and the absence of *Gymnasium* students (the most academically oriented study programme), which limits generalisability to comprehensive systems or systems with later tracking.

Anticipatory effects of early selection can be observed before the transition itself. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, students who were expected to enter non-academic tracks reported lower behavioural and cognitive engagement and higher “sense of futility” while still in primary school (Boone and Demanet, 2020^[59]). These differences persist, accounting for factors including gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, grade retention and test scores, and are mediated by teachers’ subjective assessments of students’ competence rather than by students’ actual performance (ibid.). Although the study does not include attendance outcomes, the pattern suggests that a tracked secondary structure, operationalised via prospective track choice, can shape engagement precursors to absences before the formal transition occurs.

At the international level, evidence remains rare and mixed. One study finds that education systems that track students at a later age have higher levels of truancy based on PISA 2012, accounting for a range of student and country characteristics (Keppens and Spruyt, 2018^[60]). Analysis based on more recent data that does not account for other factors suggests that the age of first stratification has a positive but small effect size on long-term absence (Figure 2.6).⁶ Education systems with similar levels of long-term absence exhibit a wide range of ages at which first stratification occurs. For instance, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Sweden and Türkiye have a long-term absence rate of around 7%, but their ages of first stratification range from 11 in Czechia to 16 in Latvia and Sweden.

Figure 2.6. Long-term absence and age of first selection



Note: Long-term absence is measured as the percentage of students who reported missing school for more than three consecutive months at any educational level.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2023^[61]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, Table B3.1.4, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

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Other policies and practices potentially linked to absences

A further macrosystem lever with some evidence of relevance is class-size policy, though the causal literature is limited. Evidence from Tennessee’s (United States) randomised Project STAR experiment indicates that smaller classes in ECEC and primary education can improve attendance: experimental estimates suggest that a 10-student increase in class size raises the probability of chronic absence by around 3 percentage points and also increases total annual absence (Tran and Gershenson, 2021^[62]). However, evidence is not uniformly positive across all forms of absences: using the same experimental

setting, another study finds little evidence that smaller classes reduce infection-related absences specifically (von Hippel, 2024^[63]).

Evidence also suggests that immigration enforcement practices can affect school attendance. An analysis in California's Central Valley (United States) exploits day-level variation in immigration enforcement actions ("Operation Return to Sender") and finds a 22% increase in daily student absences coinciding with these operations, with effects over three times larger for primary-education students than for secondary-education students (Dee, 2025^[64]). The authors attribute these patterns to heightened parental fear of separation (ibid.). Evidence from a school district in Florida (United States) similarly finds that heightened immigration enforcement leads to substantial and persistent increases in absences among foreign-born students (Camp et al., 2026^[65]). The effects were particularly pronounced among older students, suggesting that attendance decisions may partly reflect students' own responses to perceived enforcement risks (ibid.). In an earlier analysis that similarly focuses on immigration enforcement actions, school absences are the only outcome measure (from among academic and socio-emotional outcomes) that are significantly related to these practices (Sattin-Bajaj and Kirksey, 2019^[66]).

Finally, two studies examining anti-discrimination laws for sexual and gender minority students report mixed results: one finds no significant association with attendance (Fields and Wotipka, 2020^[67]), while another identifies a slight reduction in fear-based absences among gender and sexual minority students (Seelman and Walker, 2018^[68]).

Climate-related and natural shocks disrupt schooling through closures and access barriers

Climate-related hazards are documented as a direct source of schooling disruption. UNICEF (2025^[69]) estimates that at least 242 million students (from ECEC to upper secondary education) in 85 countries or territories experienced school disruptions in 2024 due to heatwaves, tropical cyclones, storms, floods and droughts. More specifically, evidence from Jakarta (Indonesia) indicates that floods disrupted children's access to education during the 2013 flood emergency and early recovery period, with surveyed schools reporting disruption to education services, damage to school facilities (Lassa, Petal and Surjan, 2022^[70]). Other barriers included blocked roads, flooded homes and classrooms, which prevented students or teachers from going to school (ibid.). However, these events are not limited to the Global South. For instance, hot days in England (United Kingdom) can increase absences, with effects particularly observed for illness-related absences and authorised holidays (Conte Keivabu, 2024^[71]). Cold exposure had no substantive overall effect, except for illness-related absences in energy-poor neighbourhoods (ibid.).

Natural disasters can also affect schooling through longer-term enrolment, dropout and attainment pathways, rather than only through short-term absences or school closures. For example, volcanic eruptions in Java (Indonesia) reduced the likelihood that children were enrolled in school, with effects worsening over time and operating partly through household spending reallocation, earlier transitions to work, school infrastructure, pupil-teacher ratios and telecommunications networks (Bimardhika and Moorena, 2024^[72]).

Place and access shaping attendance trajectories (exosystem)

Neighbourhood and school environments associated with absence

Student in the Netherlands: Our neighbours argue almost every day. Today, they were throwing bricks. They also ... play hardcore music almost every day, so I can't study very well because of that. (Children's Ombudsman, 2017, p. 31^[73])

Neighbourhood conditions surrounding schools operate as exosystem influences on attendance, primarily through safety, stress and access-related mechanisms, with evidence from the United States linking both safety exposures and the built environment to daily participation. In New York City, day-to-day variation in arrests and reported violent crimes within 1 000 metres of a school is associated with higher absences, with a one-standard-deviation increase in nearby arrests predicting a 0.7% rise in absences, and a comparable increase in violent crime predicting a 0.4% rise in absences (Vachuska, 2025^[74]). Once interactions are included, the arrest effect becomes contingent on school composition, rising to a statistically significant 2.4% increase in schools where 80% of students were Black, but remaining insignificant in schools with an average Black enrolment. Thus, conditions around the school can potentially have an impact on absences, likely operating through heightened fear, reduced institutional trust or disrupted routines (ibid.). In Flint, Michigan (United States), systematic field assessments of neighbourhood physical disorder (e.g. vacant lots, boarded buildings, broken windows) reveal a curvilinear association in which both low and high levels of disorder are linked to higher attendance, while moderate levels correspond to lower attendance (Smart et al., 2020^[75]). This pattern suggests complex dynamics, possibly linked to the targeting of interventions in the most and least distressed areas (ibid.). The models account for grade level but lack individual-level covariates, and generalisability beyond Flint's specific context of economic decline and racial segregation might be limited. Similarly, in Baltimore (United States), students whose estimated routes to school require walking along streets with higher violent-crime rates have higher rates of absence (Burdick-Will, Stein and Grigg, 2019^[76]). In general, however, evidence on neighbourhood and community factors is limited (Melvin et al., 2025^[28]).

Schools serving concentrated disadvantage often experience systematically higher SAP, reflecting both intake composition and compounding resource pressures. In Ireland, DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) schools, which receive extra resources because they have the highest concentrations of students at risk of educational disadvantage, have consistently higher absence rates across urban and rural settings in both primary and secondary schools (TESS, 2022^[77]; TESS, 2023^[78]; TESS, 2024^[79]; TESS, 2025^[80]). For instance, in 2023/24, 28% of students in DEIS secondary schools lost 20 or more days of schooling, while only 19% of students in non-DEIS schools did so (TESS, 2025^[80]). In New Zealand, attendance declines are sharpest in low-decile schools, mirroring socio-economic stratification (ERO, 2022^[27]; ERO, 2025^[81]). In France, a similar pattern is visible in lower-secondary education. In 2023/24, 9.6% of students in lower-secondary schools addressing areas facing the greatest social difficulties (in the priority education network (*réseau d'éducation prioritaire*)) were absent without authorisation for four half-days or more during a month, compared to 3.7% in schools outside of the network (Cristofoli, 2026^[82]). The rate was highest in the most intensive priority-education category, at 12.8%. Absences were also strongly patterned by school social composition: the quarter of lower-secondary schools with the lowest social-position index had an average absence rate of around 13%, compared with 4% among the most socially advantaged quarter (ibid.).

Travel time, cost and reliability

Secondary-education student in Romania: I live 40km from the city... It was terrible: I wouldn't make it to the first class and had to leave about half an hour before the penultimate lesson. I wouldn't make it to the last class at all, so I could get home. (Horga et al., 2024, p. 58^[49])

As mentioned in Chapter 1, patterns of absence vary by school location in several education systems. One potential driver of these location-based differences is transportation availability, affordability and reliability, which can translate distance and infrastructure gaps into daily attendance barriers by shaping families' capacity to get students to school. In New Zealand, 10% of parents reported being likely or very likely to keep a child home when transport is challenging, and 5% kept their child at home due to transport issues, with weather-related disruptions and difficulties getting children to school cited in surveys and focus groups as the main challenges (ERO, 2022^[27]). In Romania, distance and transport problems are associated with lateness and absences: nearly one quarter of secondary students are often late or absent due to transport

difficulties, almost 40% reported this sometimes, and over 20% miss classes due to transport costs (Plăeșu et al., 2024^[83]). Qualitative accounts highlight congested traffic, poor infrastructure, timetable misalignment and adverse weather as salient mechanisms (Horga et al., 2024^[49]). Similarly, in Baltimore (United States), more difficult commutes, either in the form of increased travel time or complexity, leads to students missing more days of school (Stein and Grigg, 2019^[84]).

Transport barriers can constrain attendance particularly for marginalised and remote communities. In the Slovak Republic, transport barriers are identified among the challenges faced by marginalised Roma communities that can undermine regular participation in schooling (OECD, 2025^[36]). Consistent with these patterns, analysis from New South Wales (Australia) indicates that students attending remote schools have lower attendance levels and larger year-to-year declines than students in urban and regional schools – even accounting for socio-economic status, well-being and engagement – situating transport, service access and local resource constraints as structural pressures on daily attendance (CESE, 2024^[85]).

Family-school links, parental beliefs and institutional collaboration shaping attendance (mesosystem)

Links between home and school shaping absences

Parent in Australia: They were putting [it] back onto the parents, it's our fault ... instead of 'school attendance is tanking, so is numeracy and literacy' and the department isn't prepared to go, 'Maybe it's a problem with the system'. (Amin and Ettinger-Epstein, 2024^[86])

Stronger school-home relationships have the potential to improve absence patterns, indicating the importance of co-ordinated expectations and communication across school and home. In a meta-analytic review conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, low parental school involvement has a large effect on school absences (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[11]). Furthermore, in Illinois (United States), schools with stronger pre-pandemic family-school connections recorded better-than-expected attendance in 2021/22 even after accounting for prior attendance, school characteristics and community variables (Learning Heroes and TNT, 2023^[87]). In the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Dutch-speaking part of Brussels, lower parental school involvement – captured by student-reported participation in school activities, informal contact with teachers and involvement in school councils – is associated with both passive school withdrawal (parent aware but not supportive of an absence) and active school withdrawal (parental consent to an absence) (Kruithof and Keppens, 2024^[88]).

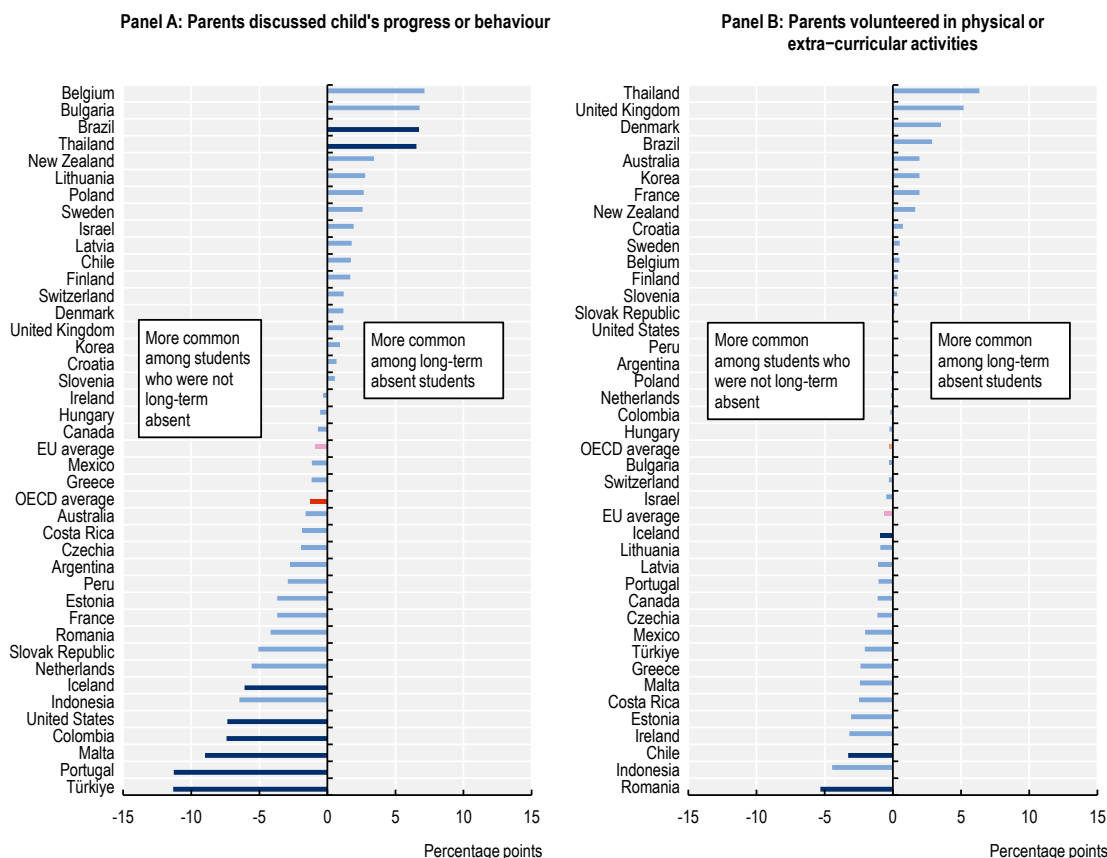
Breakdowns in school-home relationships can also precipitate disengagement pathways that ultimately lead to withdrawal from education. In the United Kingdom, qualitative research explores how unmet needs, failed support meetings and deteriorating home-school relationships contribute to students' withdrawal from education (Gillie, 2025^[89]). Families described anxiety-related school avoidance, sanctions for lateness and escalating distress as culminating in deregistration. A central insight is that despite sustained parental attempts to collaborate with schools, communication frequently breaks down, leaving families without viable in-school support (ibid.). Echoing this pattern, New Zealand's reports indicate that action is often too slow (ERO, 2024^[14]). Only 43% of parents of chronically absent students meet with school staff, 18% of school leaders refer only after more than 21 consecutive days absent, 68% of attendance service staff say referrals are never or only sometimes made at the right time, and approximately half of schools make no referrals to attendance services (ibid.). Similarly, in Ireland, only 13% of parents speak to school about attendance, and 6% look for guidance or support on school attendance (RED C, 2025^[90]).

While internationally comparable data on school-home relationships are scarce, the available evidence suggests that, in most countries, parental engagement does not differ significantly between students who were long-term absent and those who were not. Two measures are selected for this chapter: school leaders' reports on whether parents initiated discussion about their child's progress or behaviour (panel A

in Figure 2.7), and school leaders' reports on parents' volunteering in physical or extra-curricular activities at school (panel B in Figure 2.7). In both cases, among students whose school leaders reported that such parental activities took place, differences between long-term absent students and those who were not long-term absent are not statistically significant. This finding should be interpreted with caution, as parental involvement may increase in response to children's difficulties at school, which can blur the direction of the relationship. More complex models that account for a range of other factors suggest that parental participation in such school-related activities is not significantly predictive of long-term absence (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.7. Parents' participation in school-related activities

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Panel A of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not long-term absent in the share of students attending schools where the school leader reported that at least half of parents discussed their child's progress or behaviour with a teacher on their own initiative. Positive values mean a higher prevalence of parent-initiated discussions among long-term absent students. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not long-term absent in the share of students attending schools where the school leader reported that at least half of the parents volunteered in physical or extra-curricular activities. Positive values mean a higher prevalence of parental volunteering among long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

Every day at school does not count the same anymore

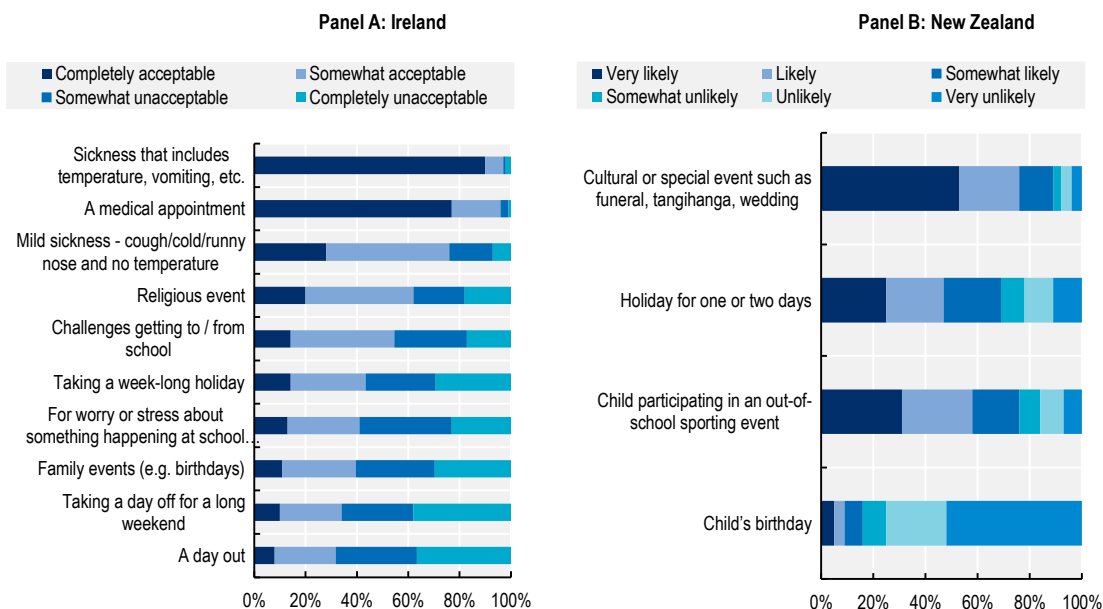
Parent in Wales (United Kingdom): Children who have overall good attendance should be allowed to take term time holidays without a fine. Holidays and trips are educational. Persistent poor attendance should be fined, not one-off holidays. (Parentkind, 2024, p. 57^[91])

As mentioned in Chapter 1, there are indications that some parents altered their attitudes towards (compulsory) schooling after the COVID-19 pandemic. These shifts can have an impact on how families and schools align expectations about everyday attendance. They also shape the threshold for keeping children at home. While evidence is still scarce and mostly qualitative in nature, it likely presents a new challenge for policymakers.

Parental tolerance for non-essential term-time absences seems to have increased in several education systems. In Norway, school leaders reported that an increasing number of parents are taking their children out for extended weekends or holidays (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). In Wales (United Kingdom), 71% of surveyed parents said it is acceptable to miss at least a day for a holiday (Parentkind, 2024^[91]). In England (United Kingdom), more than half of surveyed parents across socio-economic groups reported it is acceptable for a child not to attend school for a day to go on a holiday when it is more affordable (Carr et al., 2026^[93]). In New Zealand, 76% of parents are very likely or likely to keep their child out of school for a cultural or special event, 47% for a holiday of one or two days, 58% for their child to participate in an out-of-school sporting event, and 9% for their child's birthday (panel B in Figure 2.8). In Ireland, a market research poll found that 98% of parents believe that attending school every day is important, but 65% of parents also think that occasional absences are not a serious concern (RED C, 2025^[90]). Indeed, 63% of adults think that religious events are an acceptable reason for missing school, and 39% think that family events are an acceptable reason (panel A in Figure 2.8). In addition, 44% agree that taking a week-long holiday is acceptable, 34% agree that taking a day off for a long weekend is acceptable, and 32% agree that taking a day out is acceptable. Early research from England (United Kingdom) suggests that many of these opinions are consistently shared across educational levels, gender and socio-economic groups (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025^[94]).

Likewise, in England and Scotland (United Kingdom), several local authorities and schools cited changing parental attitudes and term-time holidays as emerging post-pandemic issues, possibly reflecting increased financial pressures felt by families and the related lower costs of taking holidays during the school year (Education Scotland, 2023^[95]; Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]). Some education systems, where granular data collection is available (e.g. France and the Slovak Republic), observe higher rates of absence around school vacation times (Cristofoli, 2026^[82]; OECD, 2025^[36]). Signals of this tolerance towards absences also predate the pandemic: in Iceland, most administrators already observed a rise in requests for holiday leave during school hours, and nearly half judged the impact on learning to be substantial (Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, 2019^[97]). In Sweden, some school leaders observed more tolerant parental attitudes towards their children's absences already in 2016 (Öhman, 2016^[98]).

Figure 2.8. Acceptable reasons for not going to school in Ireland and likelihood of parents to keep child out of school in New Zealand (%)



Note: Panel A displays adult (18+) answers to the following item: “Below are a number of circumstances that parents/guardians/caregivers might experience in any given day. For each of these, can you please indicate the degree to which it is acceptable or not to take a full day off school?”. Data were collected in September 2025 from a nationally representative sample of 1 267 adults aged 18 and over in Ireland, supplemented by an oversample of 500 parents of school-going children aged 5-18. The oversample was weighted down in the analysis to reflect parents’ correct population share. Panel B reports responses to the question: “How likely would you be to keep your child out of school for the following reasons?” Source: ERO (2025^[99]), [Back to class: How are attitudes to attendance changing? Technical appendix](https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/back-to-class-how-are-attitudes-to-attendance-changing-technical-appendix), <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/back-to-class-how-are-attitudes-to-attendance-changing-technical-appendix> (accessed on 19 December 2025); and RED C (2025^[90]), Unpublished market research poll provided to the OECD by Tusla Education Support Service (TESS).

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Expectations for attending school during a minor illness seem to have also softened. In Norway, school leaders reported that students are more often kept home for mild symptoms than before, though views differ on whether this persists (Vennerød-Diesen et al., 2024^[100]). School leaders also observe this pattern across social groups, suggesting a broader cultural shift rather than a narrow socio-economic effect (ibid.). School staff in England (United Kingdom) and Sweden describe similar notions of staying home with mild illness (Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]; Swedish National Agency for Education, 2023^[101]). In Ireland, 75% of parents agree that mild sickness (cough, cold, runny nose and no temperature) is an acceptable reason for missing a school day (panel A in Figure 2.8 above). Some English (UK) and Norwegian school staff also link lower thresholds to more flexible parental work, noting that home-office arrangements make supervision at home easier (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]; Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]). These health-related and work-related shifts can interact to normalise short, discretionary absences.

Confusion about rules can weaken compliance with attendance expectations. In Norway, some parents misunderstand national absence regulations (e.g. on the maximum number of absences for parents to authorise) as automatic entitlements (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). In England (United Kingdom), there are indications that pandemic-era messaging about preventing the spread of illness continues to shape parents’ and students’ attitudes toward attendance (Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]). Similarly, the Children’s Commissioner for Wales (United Kingdom) highlights that families may nowadays feel they should keep children home with mild symptoms even when the child is well enough to attend school, echoing pandemic messaging (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2022^[102]). Such non-attendance patterns

have been complex to reverse (Rowlands, 2022^[103]). Where information is unclear, parents may underestimate the cumulative impact of absences. In New Zealand, for instance, when parents and students do not understand the implications of non-attendance, predicted chronic absence rises from 7% to 9% (ERO, 2024^[14]).

Co-ordinated support between schools and other institutions

Teacher in Germany: We are not trained to handle very serious personal problems, and it would be nice to have someone nearby in situations like that. (Enderle et al., 2025, p. 11^[104])

When support for addressing students' needs does not transfer smoothly between institutions, students are more likely to miss school. Yet, co-ordinated support across schools and external services is often weak, with consequences for attendance. In the United Kingdom, for instance, schools' delayed responses to mental-health needs can slow access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and erode belonging, which can, in turn, contribute to extended non-attendance (Corcoran and Kelly, 2022^[105]; Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]). More specifically, in England (United Kingdom), a lack of information-sharing among education, health and social care (e.g. due to different information management systems) can be a barrier to timely support (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2025^[106]).

Evidence from New Zealand echoes these co-ordination challenges. Information is sometimes or never shared across agencies, schools and attendance services (ERO, 2024^[14]). Attendance Services also reported spending excessive time locating students, with weak enforcement levers and unclear accountability compounding delays (ibid.). As a result, many school leaders seek more explicit role definitions. Resourcing constraints exacerbate these systemic frictions – adviser caseloads range from approximately 30 to over 500 cases, and per-student funding varies significantly – so capacity does not always align with need (ibid.). In Denmark, some parents step in as *de facto* case managers to ensure coherence and progress, proactively co-ordinating meetings and action plans amid reported discontinuity in processes and turnover among case handlers and professional staff (Børns Vilkår and the Egmont Foundation, n.d.^[107]). In Sweden, some school leaders complained of lack of guidelines, active leadership and co-operation between their schools and municipalities (Öhman, 2016^[98]).

School, peers and family dynamics linked to school attendance problems (microsystem)

School

School climate, belonging and student-teacher relationships

Student in New Zealand: Teachers; some don't connect with learners; some seem like they hate kids; they target you; makes you ditch or want to ditch certain periods. (ERO, 2022, p. 45^[27])

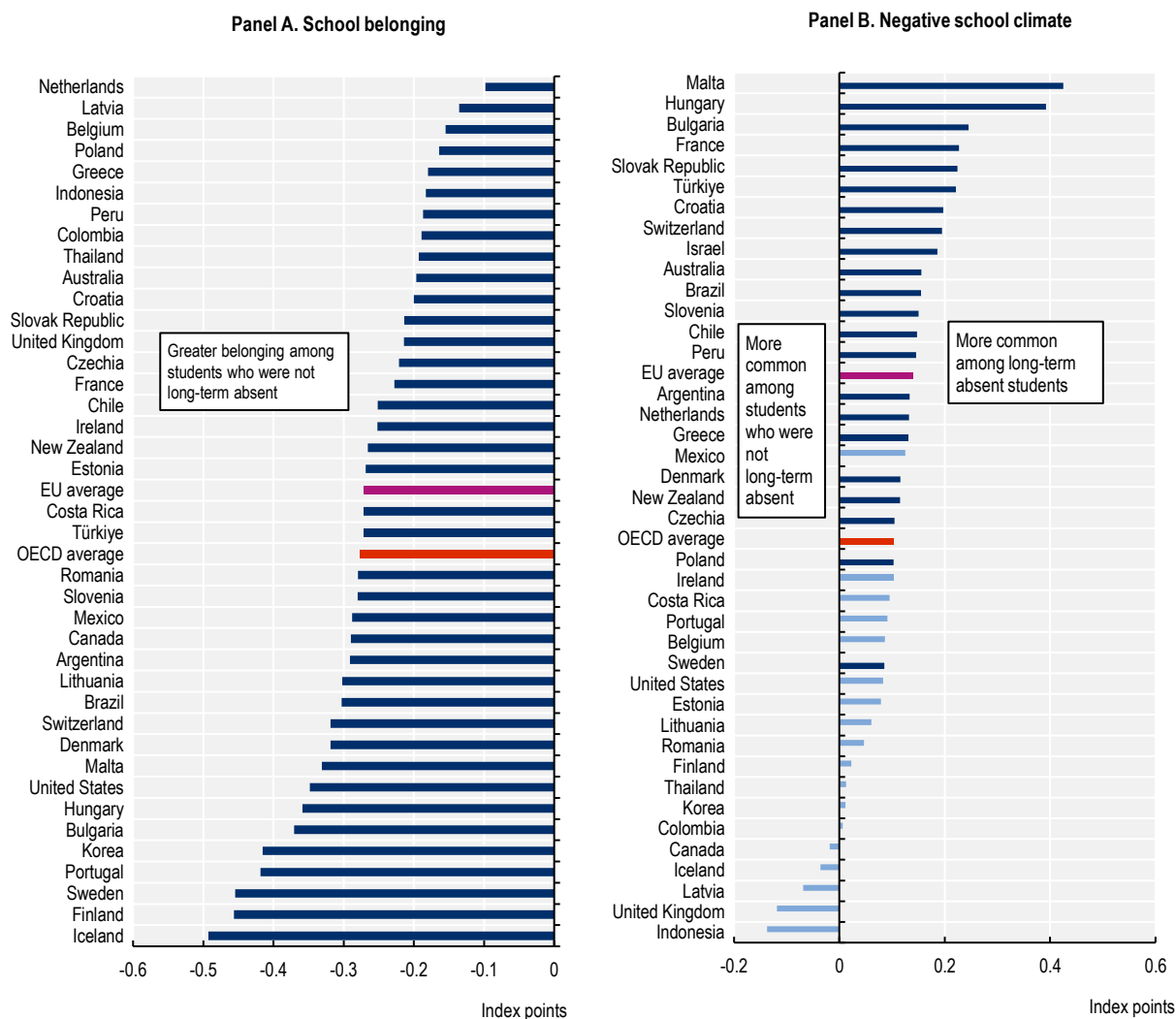
Student-teacher relationships, school climate and belonging are central features of the microsystem. Evidence from several sources suggests a link between these factors and SAP. While most studies are observational or cross-sectional, lacking the ability to estimate causal relationships, the direction of associations remains consistent across settings. In a meta-analytic review conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic as well as a more recent rapid literature review, having a negative school attitude, poor student-teacher relationships and negative school or class climates are significantly associated with absences (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[1]; Melvin et al., 2025^[28]).

National (sub-national) research confirms that more positive climates and relationships are associated with lower levels of SAP. In Ohio (United States), students with higher starting levels of school belonging and gains during the year miss about three fewer days and are seven percentage points less likely to be

chronically absent, accounting for demographic and school factors (Ansari et al., 2025^[108]). German evidence supports these results by looking at PISA and accounting for a range of other background characteristics (Feldhaus et al., 2025^[109]). In Sweden, positive school climate (as reported by students in lower-secondary education) is associated with lower absences, and the “protective” effect of a favourable school climate is larger for students with tertiary-educated parents, illustrating how family resources can amplify microsystem supports (Karlberg et al., 2020^[110]). In Denmark, accounting for a range of other factors, poorer teacher-student relationships are predictive of absences (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[20]). In the Slovak Republic, teachers in classrooms with a friendly climate reported roughly 5% fewer student hours missed, though the data are not representative (OECD, 2025^[36]). Student voices in the Netherlands underscore what a favourable climate looks like in practice: a safe school culture, adults not looking away from problems, fair treatment, and avoiding practices that over-examine or “question” students (Binsbergen et al., 2019^[19]). Indeed, in England (United Kingdom), many children with SEN reported that they are no longer in education because they feel that school staff does not care about them, want them or understand their needs (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2025^[106]).

At an internationally comparable level, students who reported being long-term absent feel a lower sense of belonging at school in all countries (panel A in Figure 2.9). The predictive power of school belonging remains significant even in models that account for a range of other factors (Annex Table 2.B.1). The index of school belonging is created by combining responses to statements such as “I feel like I belong at school” or “I feel lonely at school”. Moreover, in most countries, students who reported they were long-term absent attended schools whose school leaders indicated more negative school climates (panel B in Figure 2.9). School climate is estimated based on school leaders’ accounts of, e.g. profanity and vandalism.

Figure 2.9. School belonging and school climate



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Panel A of the figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of sense of belonging. The index scales students' ratings of their agreement with six statements (e.g. "I feel like I belong at school.", "I feel lonely at school."). Positive values mean a greater sense of belonging at school among long-term absent students. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of negative school climate. The index scales school leaders' answers about the extent of problem behaviours that contribute to a negative school climate in their school (e.g. "Profanity", "Vandalism"). Positive values mean a more negative school climate among long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022_[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

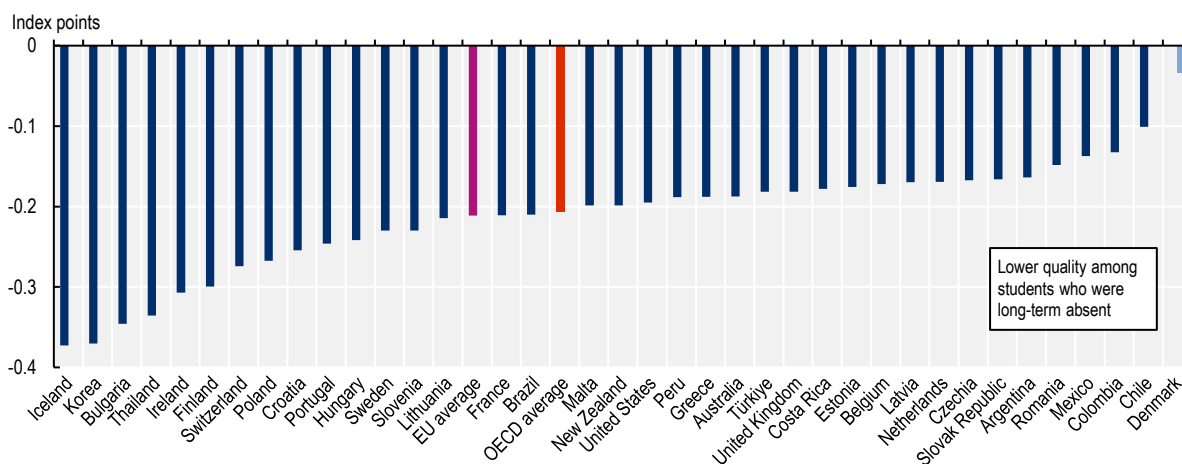
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Relationships with teachers can also shape attendance. In the United States, teacher-reported closeness is linked to lower absences, with modest effects that grow when supportive relationships persist across years (Ansari et al., 2024_[111]). Moreover, foster-involved youth in the United States who perceived a caring school adult have significantly lower odds of chronic absence, accounting for a range of demographic factors (Lamb et al., 2022_[112]). In Ireland, students' feelings toward their teacher predicts disaffection, and supportive expectations are associated with lower truancy (Darmody and Thornton, 2014_[113]; Darmody, Smyth and McCoy, 2008_[114]; McCoy et al., 2007_[115]). In New Zealand, not liking at least one teacher is a

commonly cited barrier to attendance and is associated with a 19-point drop in regular attendance among secondary learners (ERO, 2022^[27]; ERO, 2023^[116]). In Italy, weaker student-teacher relationships are significantly associated with “school refusal”, particularly through feelings of alienation from teachers and classmates (Sorrenti et al., 2025^[117]). Finnish evidence likewise highlights that warm, caring and proactive outreach by teachers to students who are absent or returning from a period of absence can prevent and reduce absences (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]). Finally, personal connections between students and teachers, the importance of personalised attention and positive school climate were also highlighted by stakeholders in Chile (Education Quality Agency, 2019^[118]). Internationally comparative evidence supports these results: in all but one country (Denmark), long-term absent students reported lower-quality student-teacher relationships (Figure 2.10). Student-teacher relationships are estimated based on students’ responses to statements such as: “The teachers at my school are respectful towards me”, “When my teachers ask how I am doing, they are really interested in my answer”. The association between long-term absence and the quality of student-teacher relationships disappears, however, once other factors are accounted for (e.g. socio-economic background, see Annex Table 2.B.1), except for the model that only includes EU countries. While further investigation is needed, this variable is likely related to factors (e.g. school belonging) that mediate or confound the uncontrolled relationships.

Figure 2.10. Quality of student-teacher relationships and long-term absence

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. The figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of quality of student-teacher relationships. The index scales students’ ratings of their agreement with eight statements (e.g. “The teachers at my school are respectful towards me.”, “When my teachers ask how I am doing, they are really interested in my answer.”). Positive values mean a higher quality of student-teacher relationships among long-term absent students. Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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Proximal processes within the school environment, such as daily opportunities for engagement and relationship-building, also play an important role in shaping attendance. In England (United Kingdom), students, teachers and other stakeholders reported that enrichment activities build confidence, friendships and better student-teacher relationships; and these benefits may be strongest for children in poverty (Centre for Young Lives, Leeds Beckett University and YMCA George Williams College, 2025^[119]). Several case studies also indicate that teachers’ involvement in enrichment activities (including volunteering off-site) improves relationships and supports attendance (ibid.). Reports from New Zealand point in the same direction: secondary learners who could not have taken part in certain school activities are

33 percentage points less likely to attend regularly (ERO, 2023^[116]). The importance of engaging extra-curricular activities driving attendance is also highlighted by students in Chile (Education Quality Agency, 2019^[118]).

Teacher absences

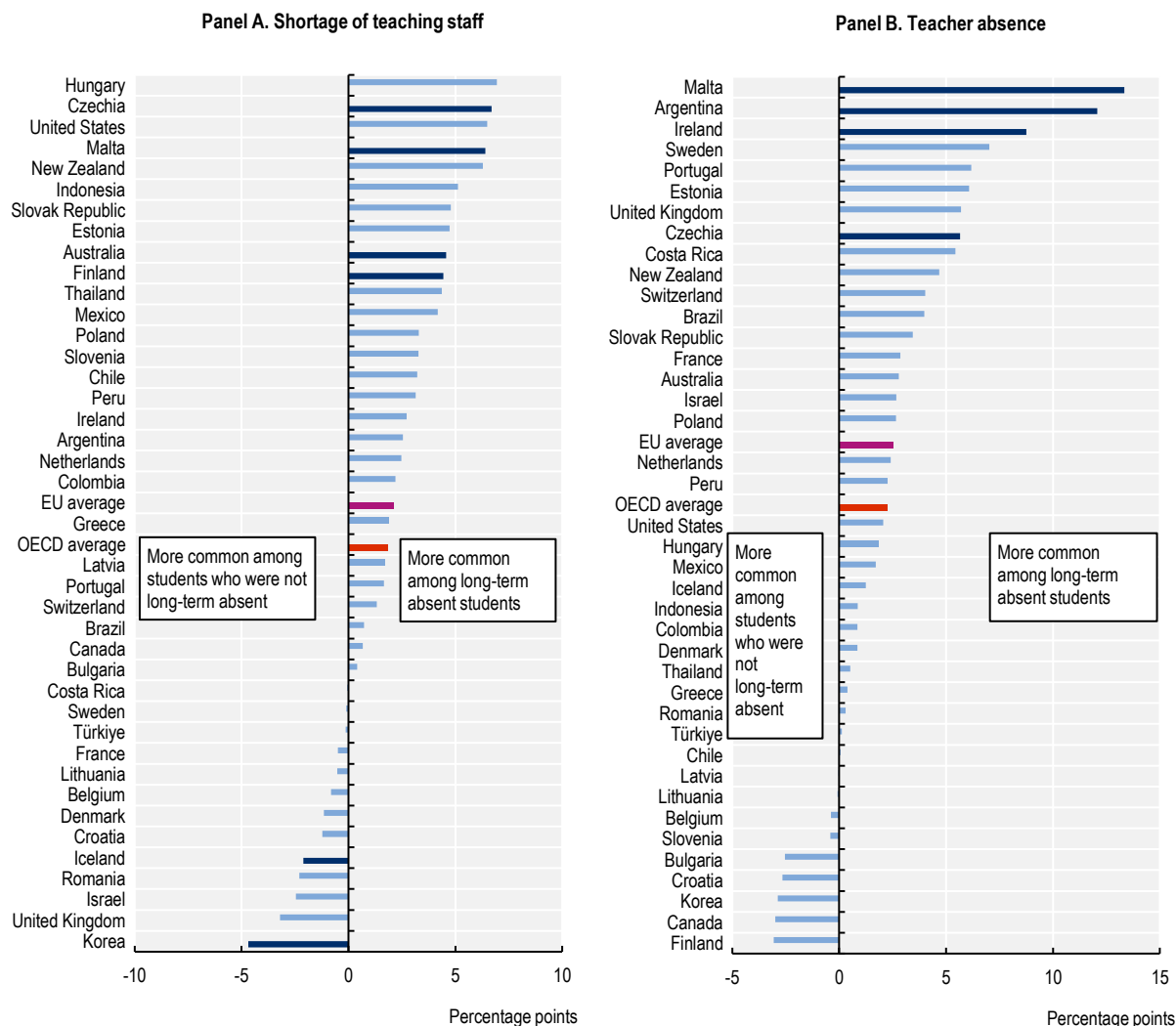
*Parent in France: Then it was the substitute [teacher] for the substitute [teacher] who did not show up...
(Battaglia, 2021^[120])*

Teacher and student absences appear linked, although causal evidence is missing. When regular teachers are absent, schools often restrict attendance, merge classes or rely on short notice substitutes, signalling that the school day will offer fewer routines, weaker relationships and lower instructional value, which can encourage families (and older students) to keep their children at home. In France in 2023/24, 8% of teaching hours in lower-secondary education was not covered due to teachers being absent and not replaced (Court of Auditors, 2025^[121]). In England (United Kingdom), during the national teacher strike in 2023, 43% of students attended school (58% in primary schools and 24% in secondary schools), indicating that mass teacher absences can coincide with drops in student attendance (Department for Education, 2023^[122]). Most of the missed sessions during this time were “planned”: knowing staff absences would be high, some schools restricted attendance. In Chile, stability of the teaching staff is highlighted as a key factor driving attendance (Education Quality Agency, 2019^[118]).

Internationally comparable evidence related to teacher absences and shortage is inconclusive. In most countries, there do not seem to be significant differences in shortages of teaching staff between students who were long-term absent and those who were not (panel A in Figure 2.11). While on average across OECD countries long-term absent students seem to be in schools where school leaders more often reported teacher shortages, this difference is significant in only six countries (in two, the difference points in the opposite direction). Similarly, teacher absences are not significantly related to students’ long-term absence (panel B in Figure 2.11). However, these findings should be interpreted with caution, as the country totals may mask important variation, given that teacher shortages and absences may be unevenly distributed across regions and schools within countries. However, the association between long-term absence and these two variables remains insignificant even in more complex models that account for a range of other factors (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.11. Teacher shortage and teacher absence

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Panel A of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not, in the share of students attending schools where the school leader reported that instruction was hindered by a lack of teaching staff to some extent or a lot. Positive values mean a lack of teaching staff acting as a hindrance to learning (according to school leaders) more among long-term absent students. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not, in the share of students attending schools where the school leader reported that instruction was hindered by teacher absenteeism to some extent or a lot. Positive values mean teacher absenteeism acts as a hindrance to learning (according to school leaders) more among long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022_[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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Non-instructional service gaps driving absences

School professional in Germany: I think schools often have to find their own ways and look for or even start projects themselves. But it's probably not really their job; it would be actually better if external organizations took care of that (...) if there were more opportunities and points of contact. But out of necessity, schools are probably just tinkering and putting projects together on their own. (Enderle et al., 2025, p. 12_[104])

In some cases, the needs underlying school attendance cases have become more complex since the COVID-19 pandemic, while non-instructional support services have not expanded accordingly. Families sometimes struggle to access specialist guidance, counselling is misunderstood or underused, and school health capacity is limited. Evidence from New Jersey (United States), for instance, indicates that higher student-to-nurse ratios are associated with higher chronic absence, with the strongest effects for Black students, socio-economically disadvantaged students and those in foster care (Markus-Rodden et al., 2025^[123]). In Norway, some practitioners reported that the complexity of attendance cases has increased, especially since the pandemic (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). As needs have multiplied and overlapped – physical health, mental health, stress, etc. – frontline staff often lack the non-instructional supports to respond. These capacity limits mean that complex cases often receive generalist responses, which can prolong absences.

Bottlenecks and weak service design, particularly around identifying students' needs, deepen the problem. Already before the pandemic, Danish families and schools described long waits for assessments and external help, with most teachers (77%) reporting delays for services like social workers, leading to fragmented, stop-start support (Børns Vilkår and the Egmont Foundation, n.d.^[107]). Some Norwegian school leaders likewise noted that many mental-health symptoms remain undiagnosed (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). In France, mental-health-related “school refusal” requires specific mental-health care, but among students with transcultural backgrounds, staff reported cultural taboos and uncertainty that complicate identification and referral (Martin et al., 2020^[124]). In England (United Kingdom), some school leaders reported that their schools lack the required capacity and resources to meet the needs (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2025^[106]).

Echoing this from the family perspective, roughly one in five parents in Wales (United Kingdom) cited unmet needs as barriers to attendance, underscoring the importance of timely assessment and co-ordinated support (Parentkind, 2024^[91]). In England (United Kingdom), some parents agree, linking attendance difficulties to wider system pressures, including child mental health and SEN backlogs, and express low confidence that schools can secure timely support (Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023^[125]). Moreover, parents can find the support systems too complicated to navigate, particularly for those who are new to the country (Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2025^[106]). Similarly, in Denmark, parents said already pre-pandemic that they struggle to find competent guidance on options and on evidence-based responses to anxiety and developmental disorders; teachers echoed this gap, with nearly half (49%) feeling they have little or no opportunity to provide sufficient help to students with worrying absences (Børns Vilkår and the Egmont Foundation, n.d.^[107]). As a result, in England (United Kingdom), over half of surveyed children with SEN who are out of school reported that they did not get the required support from practitioners to help them to attend school (ibid.).

Peers

Peer and social influence

Student in the United States: I was with other people. I guess it was kind of like if I'm in class and they're out there, I'm missing out on something more important with my friends. I was never by myself when I ditched – ever. I think that's how I thought about it then. I was like, 'Well, what are they doing when I'm sitting here doing nothing?' (Dahl, 2015, p. 130^[126])

Attendance decisions are often social: many students watch who shows up, absorb the norm and the disruptions in peer presence can nudge them to stay home. In Texas (United States), higher levels of in-person classmate absence increases the likelihood of individual student absences the following day: a ten percentage point rise in peer absences is associated with a 2.6 point increase in the probability of being absent, even after accounting for student, classroom and date fixed effects (Kirksey et al., 2024^[127]). These spill-over effects extend up to two days later but diminish beyond that window (ibid.). Similarly, in Spain,

higher peer truancy is associated with both the likelihood of an adolescent engaging in truancy and the number of days they were truant (Escario, Giménez-Nadal and Wilkinson, 2022^[128]). In Germany, research based on PISA 2012 finds that students report more truancy when they perceive more classmates in their class as truant, accounting for a range of background characteristics and school factors (Saelzer and Lenski, 2016^[129]). New Zealand data reveal that secondary learners who dislike the people in their class are 20 percentage points less likely to attend regularly (30% vs. 50%), and a national literature review identifies “relationships”, including peer relationships, as the most critical theme underpinning absences (ERO, 2023^[116]; Richards and Clark-Howard, 2023^[130]). Qualitative results from Chile highlight that respect and camaraderie among students are linked to good attendance rates (Education Quality Agency, 2019^[118]). These findings support the idea that truancy may be socially contagious. When skipping school becomes normative among peers, it increases both the likelihood that others will follow suit and the frequency of their absences.

More broadly, reports in several education systems indicate that problems with school friendships or peer integration (or, in contrast, alienation) can be triggers for SAP: highlighted in Finland (friendship problems as a recurring cause), Ontario (Canada) (feeling lost and invisible in large schools), Scotland (United Kingdom) (poor peer relationships cited by multiple schools in one sample), and Romania (low attendance linked to difficulties integrating socially and low sense of belonging) (Brown and Birioukov-Brant, 2021^[131]; Education Scotland, 2023^[95]; Horga et al., 2024^[49]; Määttä et al., 2020^[132]). These can also be connected to other drivers, e.g. school belonging and bullying.

Peers can also buffer risks inasmuch as classroom composition fosters stability and connection. In California (United States), for instance, familiar faces – a higher share of classmates from the prior year – are linked to lower absences (Jacob Kirksey and Elefante, 2022^[133]). A 25-percentage-point increase in peer familiarity is associated with a roughly 1-percentage-point decrease in overall absence, even after accounting for a range of background factors (ibid.).

Bullying, cyberbullying and safety

Student in Australia: It wasn't safe for me. I got bullied every day. Made me feel... like I was locked up in a cage. (Amin and Ettinger-Epstein, 2024^[86])

Bullying is a strong, cross-national predictor of SAP. It can undermine students' sense of safety and belonging, trigger distress and psychosomatic complaints, and drive avoidance of hostile peer groups. Because bullying can be hidden from school staff and can follow students outside school hours, students may respond by staying home and families may reclassify emotionally driven absences as “illness”, producing increases in both authorised and unauthorised absences. In a recent rapid literature review, being bullied is significantly associated with school absences (Melvin et al., 2025^[28]).

Other research confirms that bullying is related to SAP (OECD, 2026^[134]). In Ireland, bullying is found to have a negative impact on school attendance, with disaffection often linked to peer relationships (Darmody and Thornton, 2014^[113]; Thornton, Darmody and McCoy, 2013^[135]). In Finland, adolescents who reported experiencing bullying several times a week had 45% higher odds of illness-related absences and truancy (Alanko et al., 2023^[136]). Similarly, being bullied at school is identified as an important factor related to SAP in Germany, New Zealand and Norway (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]; ERO, 2022^[27]; ERO, 2025^[81]; Feldhaus et al., 2025^[109]). From the perspective of parents in Finland, factors related to the safety of the school day and bullying emerge as drivers behind absences (Markkanen et al., 2022^[137]). In New Zealand, non-causal evidence suggests that parents who would keep a child home because of bullying are 23 percentage points more likely to have a child who does not attend regularly (ERO, 2023^[116]).

Victimisation happening online also increases the risk of SAP. In Spain, the experience of cyberbullying is associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in truancy (Escario, Giménez-Nadal and Wilkinson, 2022^[128]). For instance, students who reported being cyberbullied very frequently are nearly three times

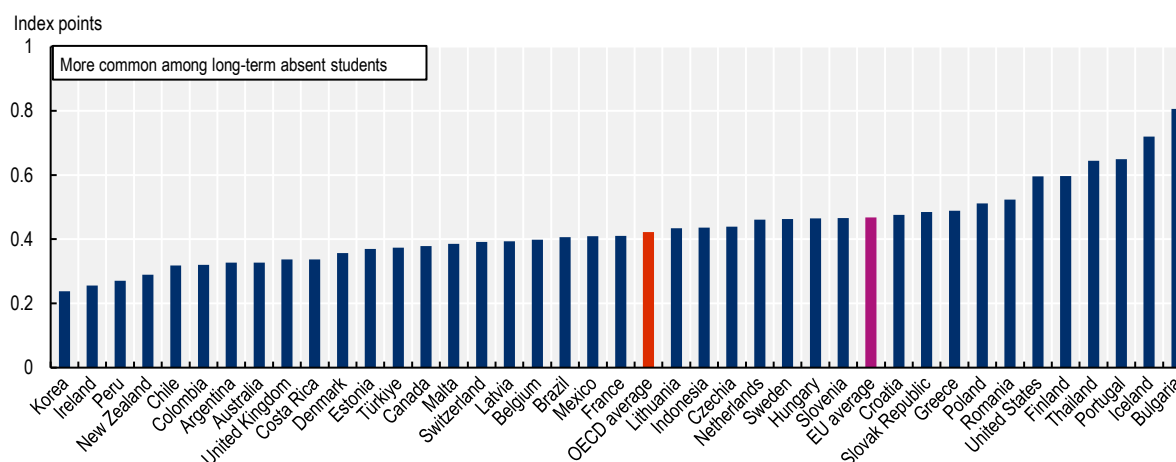
more likely to be truant than those who did not report so (ibid.). In the United States, accounting for a range of factors, relational victimisation is consistently associated with increased absences (Williford et al., 2020^[138]). Cyber victimisation is not directly associated with absences but shows complex interactions when considered alongside perceived teacher attachment, a result possibly shaped by out-of-school dynamics (ibid.).

Limited evidence also suggests that it is not only bullied students who are more likely to be absent, but also those who perpetrate such behaviours (or are both victims and perpetrators). Research from Finland reveals that the odds of truancy increase 1.5 times with frequent bullying victimisation, 8.8 times with frequent bullying perpetration, and 4.5 times with bullying victimisation and perpetration (Alanko et al., 2023^[136]).

Internationally comparative data reveal that in all countries, students who reported that they were long-term absent are more likely to be bullied (Figure 2.12). Being bullied is estimated based on students' accounts of, e.g. "Other students left me out of things on purpose" or "Other students made fun of me". This index remains predictive of long-term absence in models that account for a range of other factors (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.12. Being bullied

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. The figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of being bullied. The index scales students' ratings of how often they had a range of experiences at school that are indicative of being bullied during the past 12 months (e.g. "Other students left me out of things on purpose.", "Other students made fun of me."). Positive values mean a greater likelihood of being bullied among long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

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Safety concerns extend beyond bullying to gendered harassment, sexual harassment and broader feelings of unsafety, which can also translate into missed school. In the United Kingdom, the 2025 Girlguiding Girls' Attitudes Survey found that one in ten girls aged 11-16 said they had missed school to reduce the risk of sexual harassment, with higher shares among disabled girls, neurodivergent girls and LGBTQ+ girls (Sinmaz, 2025^[139]). Evidence from Sweden also links gendered victimisation to absences: in a study of grade-nine lower-secondary students, cyber sexual harassment was associated with unauthorised repeated absences among both boys and girls, while both cyber and in-person sexual harassment were significantly associated with unauthorised repeated absences among girls in adjusted models (Dahlqvist,

2026_[140]). This suggests that SAP can be driven not only by bullying in the narrow sense, but also by wider safety concerns, such as sexualised forms of victimisation that disproportionately affect girls' attendance.

Home and family

Socio-economic conditions at home

Student in the United States: My motivation for ditching was, uh, working at Burger King and making money and, uh, you know, having a job and, uh, helping my mom basically, uh, pay bills, putting food on the table. I'd help her pay, you know, different bills, water bills, whatever I could find to help her with. (Dahl, 2015, p. 129_[126])

Socio-economic conditions at home can influence absences through distinct but interrelated pathways. On the one hand, financial strain within the home environment can constrain families' capacity to support regular attendance. For instance, material hardship can affect access to transport, school uniforms, learning materials and digital tools. On the other hand, broader economic conditions, such as labour market opportunities, can incentivise students to be absent from school in favour of immediate earnings. Taken together, these mechanisms help explain why socio-economic background is consistently associated with absences across countries, even though its effect is not necessarily large (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[1]; Melvin et al., 2025_[28]).

Financial strain is consistently associated with higher levels of absences, although its strength varies across contexts. Multiple systematic/meta-analytic reviews of studies, predominantly from the United States, suggest that family-level measures, such as disadvantaged socio-economic background (e.g. financial hardship, parental education and family structure (e.g. single-parent families)), are reliably associated with higher rates of absence (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[1]; Sosu et al., 2021_[141]). Similarly, comparative PISA analyses indicate that socio-economic background is the most consistent correlate of skipping school in Sweden and the United Kingdom, with directionally similar but weaker effects in Germany and Japan (Fredriksson et al., 2024_[142]). Other national evidence aligns. In Scotland (United Kingdom), all measures of socio-economic background (eligibility for free school meals, parental education, parental class, housing tenure and neighbourhood deprivation) are independently associated with absences (Klein, Sosu and Dare, 2020_[143]). In Wales (United Kingdom), persistent absence is framed in the context of the cost of schooling (e.g. school uniforms, supplies, trips, after-school clubs, transport) (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2022_[102]). In the Netherlands, qualitative work with students who were long-term absent highlights serious home problems (e.g. housing and financial stress) as one of the prominent drivers (Binsbergen et al., 2019_[19]). Indeed, the effects of neighbourhood conditions and financial strain often compound. For instance, families in poverty are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with multiple social problems (see section Neighbourhood and school environments associated with absence).

More recent trends from some countries reveal a changing pattern. In Germany, analyses of PISA 2012-22 indicate the expected relationship between socio-economic background and skipping school up to 2018 (Broschinski et al., 2025_[144]). However, this pattern reversed in 2022, when students from advantaged families reported higher levels of skipping school alongside a general increase in truancy, even after accounting for gender, age, school type, prior achievement and school belonging (ibid.). In Chile, average annual attendance as well as serious absence rates vary little by socio-economic background of students (Ministry of Education and Centre for Studies, 2025_[145]). This suggests that, while socio-economic disadvantage remains a major risk factor for SAP, the strength and pattern of its association can vary across countries and over time, reflecting wider cultural and institutional contexts and broader societal changes.

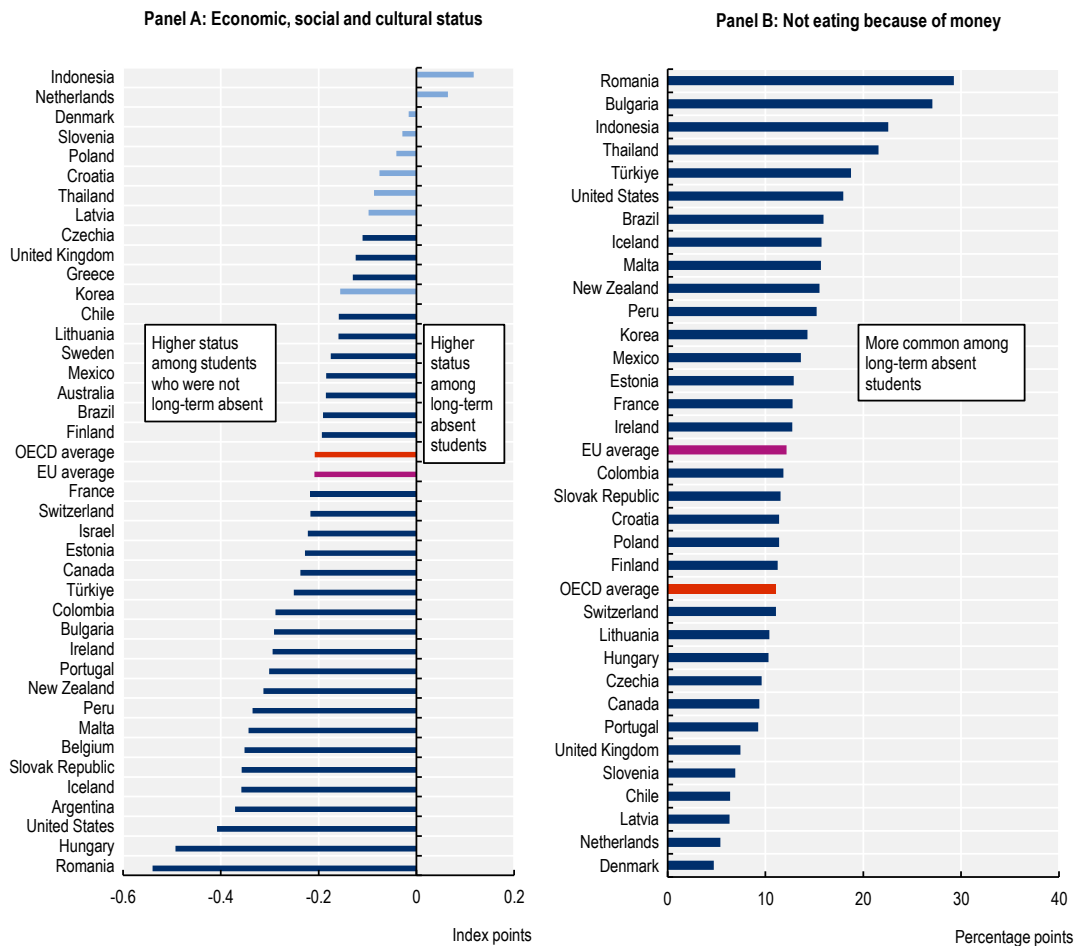
In addition to these home-based pressures, labour market opportunities can act as a distinct "pull" factor by encouraging students to prioritise short-term earnings over school attendance. Evidence from several countries suggests that students may take on paid work alongside or instead of schooling, particularly in

contexts of financial pressure. For example, reports from Romania highlight the need for students to engage in paid work alongside other responsibilities, such as sibling care and support needed from children for family work (Andrei, 2023^[48]; Horga et al., 2024^[49]; Bȃlȃoianu et al., 2024^[146]; National Center for Education Policy and Evaluation, 2023^[147]). Education Scotland (2023^[95]) similarly notes cases of students working regular hours (e.g. holding Friday jobs). Evidence from Extremadura (Spain) suggests higher absences among students in families with unstable or demanding work patterns (General Inspectorate of Education and Evaluation, n.d.^[148]). Many students can be attracted to opportunities (whether legitimate or not) presented online for earning money, e.g. through gaming, content creation and social media, often without the need for formal qualifications (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025^[94]). In Argentina, adolescents conducting productive activities have more absences, late arrivals, repetition and vulnerability to dropout (UNICEF and Argentine Society of Pediatrics, n.d.^[149]). While these dynamics often overlap with financial strain at home, they point to a separate mechanism whereby the availability of income-earning opportunities can directly compete with school attendance.

Internationally comparative evidence in this regard is presented in Chapter 1 and below. Chapter 1 suggests that students with tertiary-educated parents have lower rates of truancy in most education systems at the primary and secondary levels. For long-term absences, however, the differences are not significant in most countries. Additional angles on the socio-economic conditions of students who reported being long-term absent are provided in Figure 2.13. Panel A reports differences in the index of economic, social and cultural status that accounts for parents' occupation and home possessions, in addition to parental educational level. Based on this measure, long-term absent students are more likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged in most countries. The index is also a significant predictor of long-term absence in models that account for a range of other factors, though not in the model that only includes EU countries (Annex Table 2.B.1). Panel B displays a statistic that is more closely related to poverty: not eating at least once a week in the past month. On average across OECD countries, 18.4% long-term absent students reported they had not eaten at least once a week in the past 30 days because there had not been enough money to buy food. This share stands at 7.3% among students who were not long-term absent, yielding a difference of 11.1 percentage points shown in the figure.

Figure 2.13. Socio-economic background and not eating because of money

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Panel A of the figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of economic, social and cultural status. This is a composite index that accounts for parents' occupation, educational level and home possessions. Positive values mean that a more advantaged socio-economic background was more prevalent among long-term absent students. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not, in terms of whether they had not eaten at least once a week in the past 30 days because there was not enough money to buy food. Positive values mean that not eating was more common among long-term absent students. Source: OECD (2022_[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink <https://stat.link/ph5msr>

Parental health and family functioning

Family circumstances can be a core driver of SAP. Parental mental and physical health difficulties, ineffective family systems, weak parental control and child abuse victimisation can all elevate absence risk (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[11]; Melvin et al., 2025_[28]). These factors can heighten stress and conflict, disrupt routines, and dilute supervision and expectations, pathways that can lead to more absences. In contrast, positive parent-child interactions are associated with fewer absences (Melvin et al., 2025_[28]).

Parental health problems and emotional dysregulation are linked with higher absences and “school refusal”. South Australian data identify parental emotion dysregulation as being associated with “school refusal” (Chen et al., 2024_[150]). Echoing these patterns, some Scottish (United Kingdom) local authorities and schools cited parental mental health and anxiety as drivers of non-attendance, with several noting increases since the COVID-19 pandemic (Education Scotland, 2023_[95]).

Where parents are unwell, students may also assume caregiving roles that directly pull them from school, as reported by 8% of students in New Zealand (ERO, 2022_[27]). In Norway, SAP are more common in families where one or both parents stayed at home due to long-term sick-leave or unemployment (Hysing et al., 2017_[151]). Reports from Romania similarly point to a parent’s health as a reason for absences (Horga et al., 2024_[49]). In the United States, children with a parent with a history of cancer are more likely to miss school even after accounting for extensive child, parent and family covariates, underscoring how chronic parental illness can constrain caregiving and destabilise routines (Zheng et al., 2022_[152]). Another US study reveals that having a sibling with chronic absence is a predictor of experiencing SAP in the following school year (Chu et al., 2019_[153]).

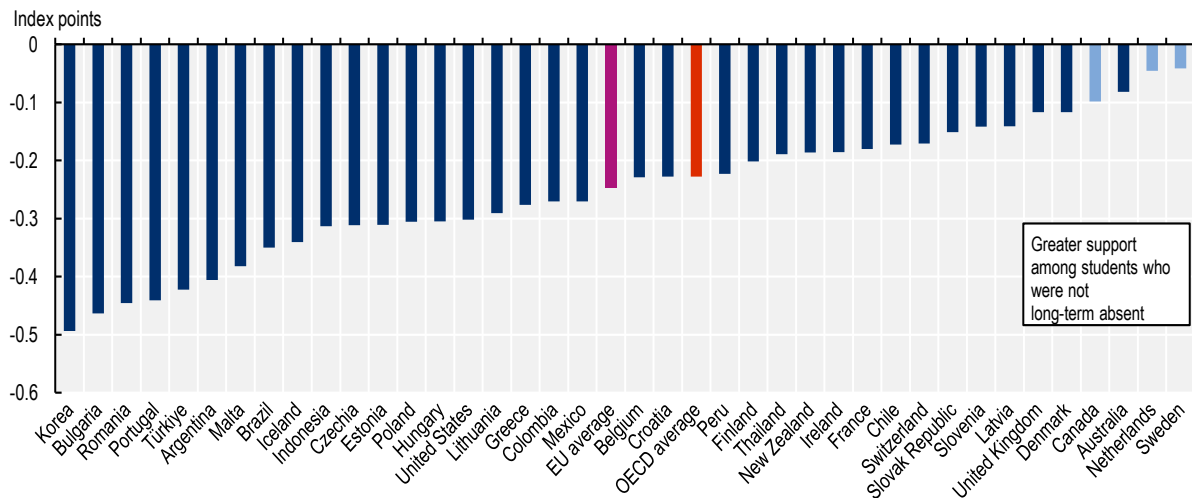
Moreover, adverse or unsafe home environments, especially exposure to violence and abuse, can be strong predictors of SAP. In Scotland (United Kingdom), some schools flagged domestic violence as an attendance barrier (Education Scotland, 2023_[95]). A Minnesota (United States) study places adverse childhood experiences (e.g. household violence, abuse and substance use) among the top predictors of unauthorised absences, highlighting the disruptive role of instability and threat in the home (Lee et al., 2023_[154]). In Iceland, school leaders reported that difficult home circumstances are a reason for school avoidance among 29% of primary-education students (Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, 2019_[97]). Reports from Denmark also identify complex social problems at home as primary causes of SAP and document more absences for children in vulnerable positions (Ilsvard et al., 2024_[155]; Rambøll, 2018_[156]). Research from Finland similarly notes recurring home-condition problems as reasons for absences (Määttä et al., 2020_[132]). Evidence from a meta-analysis further indicates that a history of child abuse victimisation elevates absence risk (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[11]).

Family functioning and engagement also matter. A meta-analytic review links low parental support/acceptance, ineffective family systems and low parental control with more absences. German and Scottish (UK) reports similarly cite low parental interest/support as reasons for SAP (Education Scotland, 2023_[95]; Feldhaus et al., 2025_[109]; Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[11]). Romanian responses additionally point to family relationship problems as a contributor to absences (Horga et al., 2024_[49]). Similarly, in Extremadura (Spain), constant conflict in families and disruption within the family, as well as family neglect, are identified as drivers of SAP (General Inspectorate of Education and Evaluation, n.d._[148]).

At an internationally comparable level, students who reported they had been long-term absent are more likely to live in less supportive families (Figure 2.14). The index of family support scales students’ ratings of how often their parents or someone else in their family engaged in behaviours indicative of family support (e.g. “Discuss how well you are doing at school”, “Spend time just talking with you”). Higher family support is significantly predictive of lower long-term absence also in models that account for a range of other factors (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.14. Family support

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. The figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of family support. The index scales students' ratings of how often their parents or someone else in their family engaged in a range of behaviours indicative of family support (e.g. "Discuss how well you are doing at school", "Spend time just talking with you"). Positive values mean greater family support among long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/argpes>

Health, well-being and disengagement from school (person characteristics)

Physical health

Parent in Finland: She is under such extreme stress and strain that it paralyses her. It may also show up as physical symptoms, such as stomach pain. (Kaipainen, 2023^[157])

Physical health affects whether students can attend school in multiple ways, through illness, pain and fatigue, as well as through sleep and nutrition that shape daily readiness. When sickness is common, poorly managed, or perceived by families as a reason to keep children home, absences can rise and learning time can be lost. Poor physical health was identified as a significant absence risk factor in a meta-analysis and rapid literature review (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[1]; Melvin et al., 2025^[28]). Students who experience ill health, both in terms of physical impairments and mental disorders, are often considered as having SEN. This contributes to the fact that, as elaborated in Chapter 1, students with SEN often experience more SAP.

Across several education systems, data indicate that illness is a major driver of missed days. In Finland, illness is the most common reason for absences, with over 70% of primary and lower-secondary students in the (limited) sample reporting at least 1-2 days off for illness in the three months before the data collection (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]). Ireland sees illness-related absences climb post-pandemic, from 26.9% in 2020/21 to 39.9% in 2023/24 in primary schools, and from 18.4% to 28.1% in secondary schools (TESS, 2024^[79]; TESS, 2025^[80]). Almost all parents in Ireland also believe that sickness that includes temperature and medical appointments are acceptable reasons for missing school (RED C, 2025^[90]). In Australia, while almost all types of absences have increased, illness-related SAP have almost doubled, from 6.6 days

absent per student in 2017 to 11.6 in 2024 (Hunter, Haywood and Chapman, 2025^[33]). Similarly, school leaders in Norway reported more severe cases of students being bedridden after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). In New Zealand, health is the most frequently named barrier to attendance by parents: two-thirds said they are likely to keep a child home for a minor or chronic condition, 76% actually did so for a minor illness in 2022, and 27% of chronically absent students themselves cited physical health as a reason for absences (ERO, 2022^[27]; ERO, 2024^[14]). Some Romanian secondary-level voices echo these realities: students cited illness and medical appointments during school hours, while teachers reported frequent medical exemptions to justify accumulated absences (Horga et al., 2024^[49]). Finally, evidence from Denmark provides a more nuanced picture. While most physical impairments and learning disabilities do not correlate with absences, students with autism spectrum disorders and behavioural disorders experience more periods of high absence, longer periods of absences and higher total absence (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[20]).

Health-related absences can reinforce educational disadvantage, particularly when recurrent sickness absences cluster with other risks and gender-specific health needs, such as menstrual problems. In a regional study of primary education in the Netherlands, for instance, most students are absent at least once during the school year (85% in mainstream and 79% in special schools), with sickness absences the most common form of absence, affecting 75% and 71% of students, respectively (Pijl et al., 2021^[158]). Extensive sickness absences affect 13% of students in mainstream education and 23% in special education, and cluster with other markers of vulnerability, including low parental education, more doctor visits, tardiness and unauthorised absences (*ibid.*). Menstrual problems may similarly contribute to absences. In one systematic review, 20% of women are absent from educational institutions due to dysmenorrhea⁷, with an estimated 12% in high-income countries (Armour et al., 2019^[159]). Qualitative syntheses further indicate that menstrual pain, heavy bleeding, fear of leakage, stigma, inadequate toilet access and limited school support can shape girls' attendance, concentration and participation at school (Barrington et al., 2021^[160]; Thomas and Melendez-Torres, 2024^[161]).

Chronic and complex health needs can increase the risk of absences throughout adolescence and contribute to exclusion from learning. In England (United Kingdom), adolescents with diagnosed chronic health conditions – covering physical illnesses (e.g. asthma, epilepsy and diabetes) – are at substantially greater risk of persistent absence (Jay et al., 2025^[162]). Elevated risks of exclusion and non-enrolment are also observed, underscoring that absences are a key mechanism by which health-related disadvantage becomes educational disadvantage, notably when schools cannot adequately support complex needs (*ibid.*). Similarly, children with special health care needs due to a chronic health condition in Germany have higher absence rates (Schlecht et al., 2023^[163]). They are particularly elevated among those with functional limitations, treatment or counselling for emotional, behavioural or developmental problems, and those who experience two or more special health care consequences (*ibid.*).

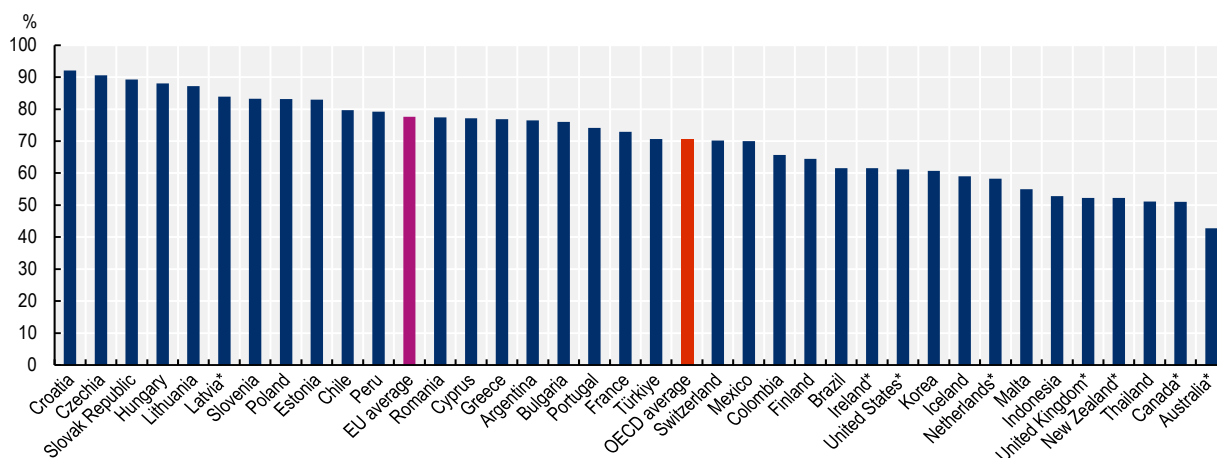
A separate strand of research also looks at the connections between sleep (or the lack of) and SAP. Sleep difficulties are rising. For instance, in 2014, 17% of 15-year-old boys across multiple OECD and EU countries reported experiencing difficulties getting to sleep more than once a week (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, 2023^[164]). In 2022, the share rose to 23%. For girls, the shares stood at 27% in 2014 and 37% in 2022 (*ibid.*). A meta-analysis synthesises that most sleep parameters (bedtime, duration, efficiency, insomnia symptoms, fatigue and sleepiness) are associated with absences (Kjæøy and Lysvik, 2023^[165]). Among primary and secondary education students in Japan, irregular sleep patterns are associated with school non-attendance, with students experiencing sleep rhythm problems (e.g. difficulty waking or falling asleep) having substantially higher odds of absences (the relationship likely being bidirectional) (Hirata et al., 2026^[166]). This is echoed in interviews with Romanian students experiencing SAP, who cited difficulties in adapting to the school schedule, including waking up in the morning (Horga et al., 2024^[49]). Finally, qualitative research from students in England (United Kingdom) indicates that exhaustion, which can be driven by spending time on digital devices, is a key reason for missing school (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025^[94]).

Nutritional diseases have also been linked to SAP, even though the evidence is older and scarcer. In several primary and secondary education schools in rural Colombia, stunted growth and overweight students have significantly more absence days compared to students with adequate nutritional status (Vargas cruz et al., 2016_[167]). Similarly, research among 12-19-year-olds in Mexico indicates that anemia can be a significant determinant of school attendance (Mosiño, Villagómez-Estrada and Prieto-Patrón, 2017_[168]). In the Netherlands, evidence links being overweight with a higher risk of long-term absence and staying at home (Binsbergen et al., 2019_[19]).

Evidence from PISA confirms that sickness is a key reason for students' long-term absence. Figure 2.1 above demonstrates that it is by far the most commonly cited factor. Figure 2.15 displays that, on average across OECD countries, 70.5% of 15-year-old students cited this reason, with shares rising to above 80% of students in many countries.

Figure 2.15. Sickness as a reason for long-term absence

Percentage of students who reported sickness as a reason for having missed school for more than three consecutive months



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023_[61])).

Source: OECD (2023_[3]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.55, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/d1bvr2>

Substance use also intersects with absences. A meta-analytic review finds that smoking, drug abuse and alcohol abuse are significant risk factors for absences (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019_[1]). Country evidence echoes this: in Finland, substance use in the sixth grade (the last year of primary education) is most typical among surveyed students with early-onset SAP (Hotulainen et al., 2024_[16]). In the Netherlands, among students missing three or more months, problematic cannabis use is linked to a greater risk of long-term absence and staying at home (Binsbergen et al., 2019_[19]). However, these associations likely reflect, at least in part, simultaneity and reverse causality, whereby absences may also increase the risk of substance use, and both may stem from shared underlying factors, such as mental-health difficulties and adverse environments (see also Chapter 3). As a result, substance use is best understood as part of a broader constellation of interrelated risks (e.g. sleep disruption, mental-health strain) that can compound and sustain patterns of missed learning.

Mental health and well-being

Parent in Wales (United Kingdom): COVID completely ruined her. Locked in, she couldn't continue with her sports ... She became depressed and self harmed. She could not face school. She did not attend ... Loss of peers through lack of contact. Loss of muscle tone and fitness because of loss of sports. Made a major impact. (Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2022, p. 17^[102])

Mental-health difficulties can undermine students' ability to attend school by driving anxiety-based avoidance, low mood and greater use of clinical appointments. They also interact with school conditions (e.g. peer dynamics, academic stress and transitions) to turn short spells of absences into patterns of persistent non-attendance. A meta-analytic review identifies psychiatric symptoms and disorders, especially depression and anxiety, as significant risk factors for absences (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[11]). Indeed, across numerous studies, poor mental health – including emotional difficulties, internalising and externalising symptoms, and diagnosed anxiety or depression – is consistently linked with higher rates of SAP (Melvin et al., 2025^[28]).

Mental health challenges as a driver of absences are not a new factor. In Iceland, for instance, reports from 2019 estimate that around 2.2% of primary-education students struggled with school avoidance, with anxiety and depression cited by roughly three-quarters of school leaders as the main reasons (Ministry of Social Affairs and Housing, 2019^[97]). More recent causal analyses using pre-pandemic longitudinal data from England (United Kingdom) suggest that poorer mental health contributes to absences (especially authorised absences) (Arnot, 2025^[169]). HeadStart's⁸ findings align: as mental health difficulties increase, absences increase, with COVID-19 exacerbating absences among young people who already have anxiety (Lereya and Deighton, 2019^[170]; McDonald, Lester and Michelson, 2022^[171]). Mental disorders also appear to play a significant role in Australian secondary schools (Lawrence et al., 2019^[172]). New Zealand brings the family lens into focus. Nearly half of parents reported they would keep a child home for mental health reasons, and over half of chronically absent students cited mental health as a driver of their absences (ERO, 2024^[14]; ERO, 2025^[81]).

Evidence from other education systems suggests that the situation is more nuanced and not uniformly worsening. In Norway, interviews with school leaders describe an increase in worrying absences linked to mental-health problems (anxiety and restlessness) and concerns about rising autism-spectrum diagnoses outpacing capacities in mainstream education (Bergene et al., 2023^[92]). Yet, national survey data indicate no continuing rise in self-reported mental-health problems in recent years and a decline among secondary-education girls, even as contact with psychologists has grown (Bakken, 2024^[173]). Portugal's report indicates that psychological vulnerability is easing, from about one-third of students in 2022 to about one-quarter in 2024 (Matos et al., 2024^[174]). Another slightly contrasting view comes from some school leaders in England (United Kingdom) who observe a growing tendency for students (or their parents) to label everyday challenges as mental-health problems, raising concerns that this shift in language may blur the line between typical stressors and clinically significant conditions (Moore and Walker, 2025^[96]).

Nevertheless, risk profiles for SAP consistently point to internalising problems and co-occurring conditions. Research in the Netherlands (pre-COVID) associates long-term absence and staying at home with internalising difficulties and excessive stress across life domains (Binsbergen et al., 2019^[19]). Reports in Denmark similarly link psychological challenges, such as anxiety, with more absences (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[20]; National Agency for Education and Quality, 2024^[175]; Rambøll, 2018^[156]). In Wales (United Kingdom), studies indicate that students with neurodevelopmental or mental-health disorders, or with a record of self-harm, are more likely to miss school than peers, even after accounting for age, sex and deprivation (John, 2021^[176]). Policy reviews echo that anxiety and well-being issues, both pre-existing and COVID-19 amplified, are central to understanding recent shifts in attendance (Rowlands, 2022^[103]). Notably, anxiety and anxiety-related symptoms are the most prominent drivers of "school refusal" (Leduc et al., 2022^[50]). England's (United Kingdom) pre-COVID longitudinal research adds that children with long-term physical conditions have poorer mental health and more absences (including persistent absence),

with strong associations for neurodevelopmental conditions, migraines and atopic conditions, reinforcing the need for routine mental-health and attendance enquiry in clinical and school settings (Finning et al., 2021_[177]). More recently, anxiety, overwhelm, burnout and emotional exhaustion were cited by some students as reasons for their absence (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025_[94]). Researchers in Finland underline how shocks in a student's immediate circle or school (e.g. trauma or serious illness/death of a loved one) can heighten susceptibility to SAP (Sergejeff, 2023_[47]). In the Slovak Republic, unpublished research indicates adolescents indifferent to schooling are more likely than satisfied peers to feel hopeless, report multiple weekly health complaints, engage in fighting, and skip school, suggesting a clustering of disengagement, distress and absences (OECD, 2025_[36]).

Worries about schoolwork and examinations, as well as the reaction of other students and school staff upon return after a period of absence, are cited as pressures that make coming back to school more difficult for some students in England (United Kingdom) (Moore and Walker, 2025_[96]). This is particularly true if the reasons for absences are personal or sensitive to discuss with others (ibid.). Similarly, some Welsh (United Kingdom) learners develop anxieties about returning to large, busy schools or have preferences for studying digitally from home (Rowlands, 2022_[103]).

Disengagement, boredom and motivation

Student in Romania: I don't do anything at certain times, so I prefer to rest for my after-school activities. Because it's frustrating to sit in a classroom for 6-7 hours without learning anything that really helps you in real life or at least that is something interesting. (Horga et al., 2024, p. 57_[49])

Disengagement – whether emotional, behavioural, social or cognitive – helps explain why SAP rarely have a single cause, as school experiences, relationships, perceived relevance and individual motivation can reinforce one another over time. One way to understand this web of relationships is through the lens of attachment theory. In this view, SAP arise when the bonds between students and their schools weaken. Small pressures (feeling unsafe, low belonging, strained relationships, etc.) first erode emotional and cognitive engagement, then show up as lateness, selective absences and ultimately truancy (Keppens and Spruyt, 2019_[178]). In England (United Kingdom), for instance, students in the top quarter for engagement are ten percentage points less likely to be persistently absent than those in the bottom quarter of engagement (Jerrim, 2025_[179]). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, students' emotional engagement has dropped in many countries, with secondary-education students reporting big falls in feeling safe and proud of their school, and girls' engagement often falling more than boys' (Jerrim and Kaye, 2025_[180]).

Digital pull factors can also weaken students' engagement with schooling by competing for attention, reducing motivation to learn and increasing the risk of SAP, particularly when digital leisure use becomes excessive (OECD, 2025_[181]). Digital technologies may also affect attendance more indirectly through their effects on well-being. Higher screen time is associated with anxiety and depression and may displace sleep, exercise and in-person social interaction, all of which can make sustained engagement with school more difficult (OECD, 2024_[182]). In parallel, research on digital distraction indicates that social networking, messages and alerts can interrupt concentration, reduce attention and leave students less engaged in learning (Martin et al., 2025_[183]). Indeed, Norwegian stakeholders connect disengagement to digital pull factors (e.g. social media and gaming), which can compete with school for time and interest, especially among students already ambivalent about the classroom (Bergene et al., 2023_[92]).

Disinterest and the lack of motivation are also linked to school attendance. In Norway, from 2018 to 2023, fewer students reported being motivated, interested in learning or looking forward to school (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024_[184]). In Denmark, Extremadura (Spain) and Scotland (United Kingdom) stakeholders linked a lack of interest or motivation to more SAP (Education Scotland, 2023_[95]; General Inspectorate of Education and Evaluation, n.d._[148]; Rambøll, 2018_[156]). Related evidence from the Slovak Republic associates indifference to schooling with higher risk skipping school (OECD, 2025_[36]). In Finland, based on a limited sample, low-absence students reported lower amounts of cynicism,

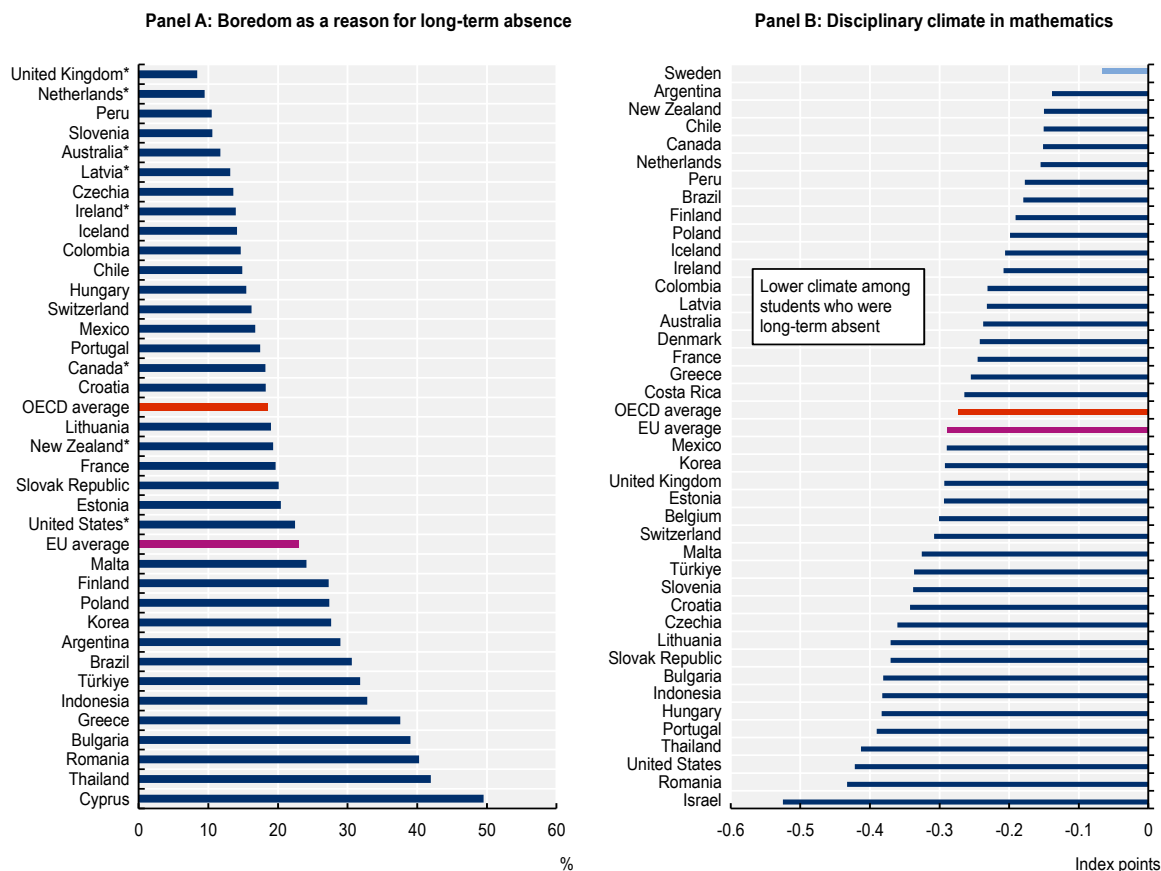
whereas early-absence students showed the highest rates of questioning of the value of studying (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[16]). New Zealand's findings about participation barriers and perceived relevance reinforce how these attitudes translate directly into day-to-day attendance decisions (ERO, 2023^[116]). Secondary students who are interested in lessons are 18 percentage points more likely to attend them (57% vs. 39%), and seeing school as important for the future adds 26 points (52% vs. 26%). Learners who think going to school every day matters are 23 points more likely to attend regularly (60% vs 37%) (ibid.). Some students' accounts from England (United Kingdom) suggest that the motivation for attending is closely linked to obtaining qualifications (and, by extension, improved outcomes in life), but school is not viewed as a formative experience itself (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025^[94]).

Finally, disengagement can be triggered by boredom in school, particularly if boredom is chronic. While definitions are difficult to pin down, and the relationship between disengagement and boredom is likely bidirectional, the two concepts are linked (Macklem, 2015^[185]). It is, therefore, worrying that boredom is increasingly widespread in some countries (Bakken, 2024^[173]). Internationally comparable evidence confirms that boredom is one of the key reasons for long-term absence (Figure 2.1 above). Panel A in Figure 2.16 further displays that in some countries, such as in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Thailand, more than a third of students cited boredom as a factor.

Even though conceptually more related to the school microsystem, evidence from PISA suggests that students who reported being long-term absent are more likely to be in classroom environments that are noisy, where students do not listen to the teacher, or where students are distracted by digital resources (panel B in Figure 2.16). These behaviours may contribute to, reflect or result from student disengagement, demotivation or boredom. These and other aspects of classroom behaviour are captured in the index of disciplinary climate, which is based only on mathematics lessons. In all countries, disciplinary climate was reported to be less positive among long-term absent students. Disciplinary climate remains a significant predictor of long-term absence even in models that account for a range of other factors (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Figure 2.16. Boredom as a reason for long-term absence and differences in disciplinary climate

Percentage of students who reported boredom as a reason for long-term absence (panel A) and difference in disciplinary climate between students who reported being long-term absent and those who did not (panel B)



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023_[61])). Panel A of the figure displays the percentage of students who reported boredom as a reason for having missed school for more than three consecutive months. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in index points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not in the index of disciplinary climate in mathematics. The index scales a range of situations that students reported occurring in their mathematics lessons (e.g. "Students do not listen to what the teacher said.", "Students get distracted by using digital resources"). Positive values mean a more positive disciplinary climate among long-term absent students. Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours.

Source: OECD (2022_[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink <https://stat.link/kgsv87>

In some education systems, concerns about the relevance of the curriculum and the nature of classroom instruction have emerged as important factors in understanding student disengagement and SAP. In Illinois (United States), higher academic rigour observed in classrooms is associated with higher attendance over the school year. The association points to the role of well-structured, challenging instruction and day-to-day teacher-student interaction in supporting regular presence (Basileo, Lyons and Toth, 2024_[186]). Stakeholders' accounts in Romania suggest that low student motivation, weak alignment between interests and school pathways, and limited applied learning are all being linked to absences (Horga et al., 2024_[49]; National Center for Education Policy and Evaluation, 2023_[147]). In Wales (United Kingdom), many parents question curriculum relevance and demand more life skills to be taught, greater diversity of vocational options and stronger preparation for the future (Parentkind, 2024_[91]). While not necessarily related to the

curriculum, many students in England (United Kingdom) complained of limited space for autonomy, self-expression and too much rigidity (Carr, Whitehead and Burtonshaw, 2025^[94]).

Interactions among levels

As noted in previous sections, SAP drivers rarely act alone. This section provides a few examples of how chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem and person characteristics can interact. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview of such interactions, it aims to convey the message that the different levels do not act in isolation – a consideration that policymakers might make when designing policies and practices to tackle SAP (see also Chapter 4) (Heyne, 2025^[111]).

Based on quantitative analyses of linguistically diverse caregivers and their children's attendance patterns in a school district in the United States, Jones et al. (2024^[187]) reveal that Spanish-speaking caregivers are significantly more likely than English-speaking caregivers to report limited or no access to computers, the Internet and printers as barriers to participation. They are also more likely to endorse the need for school-based supports, such as academic help, healthcare access, transportation and meals. These patterns suggest that systemic inequities (macrosystem) can interact with linguistic background to generate unequal access to key learning resources (exosystem). Qualitative responses deepened this picture, highlighting how inflexible caregiver work schedules – more common among linguistically diverse families – limits their capacity to support remote learning, further straining home-school communication (mesosystem). At the microsystem level, students' daily learning environments are shaped by disrupted routines and limited academic feedback, while personal experiences, such as anxiety, stress and diminished motivation, further impede engagement. Several language groups, particularly Spanish- and Russian-speaking, are more likely than English-speaking caregivers to report that falling behind in schoolwork is a reason for their child's absences before the COVID-19 pandemic. Spanish-speaking caregivers are also more likely to cite factors such as suspension or not feeling safe at school. The pandemic intensified these challenges by disrupting established structures and amplifying pre-existing vulnerabilities. Although the study does not formally test cross-level interactions, its integration of comparative statistical results and caregiver narratives illustrates how absences and disengagement may stem from converging pressures across multiple ecological layers.

Another example comes from Detroit, Michigan (United States). Singer et al. (2021^[188]) analyse how person characteristics and factors at different ecological levels simultaneously influence absences: person (including economic disadvantage, special education status and ethnicity), microsystem (school-level conditions, such as student stability, school sector, discipline rate and the concentration of disadvantaged students), exosystem (neighbourhood-level violent crime and residential vacancy), and chronosystem (prior-year absences and mobility across schools or residences). The study reveals, for instance, that even independent of individual disadvantage, the composition of the school matters: a one standard deviation increase in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students at a school is associated with 46% higher odds of chronic absence, and this association remains statistically significant, though reduced to 26%, after accounting for prior-year absences. Indeed, when prior absences are included, the predictive strength of several socio-economic indicators declines, including student-level economic disadvantage, school-level disadvantage and neighbourhood-level residential vacancy. This attenuation suggests that persistent absence may reflect entrenched disadvantage rather than additive or escalating effects over time. Although the models do not include formal statistical interaction terms, the simultaneous modelling of variables across multiple ecological levels illustrates that factors at the individual, school and neighbourhood levels are each associated with absences. In particular, the findings show that school composition matters, in addition to individual disadvantage.

Finally, Enderle et al. (2025^[104]) conducted a qualitative study in Germany that provides a conceptually grounded account of how young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties describe the

factors they perceived as helpful in preventing or addressing SAP. They identify a range of interacting influences across system levels that students associated with both the onset and resolution of attendance difficulties. Students described how a lack of co-ordinated communication between school staff, families and external services left them feeling unsupported and confused about expectations – particularly during key transition points – which intensified their disengagement from school. Some also recounted being excluded from decisions about their own reintegration plans, which undermined their sense of agency and trust, especially when family-school co-ordination occurred without their input. In other cases, legal or disciplinary responses were perceived as punitive and emotionally disconnected, making students more reluctant to return to school. While students did not explicitly name broader systems, the authors interpret these accounts as reflecting the compounding influence of macrosystem-level pressures and emotionally distant microsystem relationships. The absence of consistent peer belonging and tailored teaching practices further amplified these challenges, particularly when students felt that their needs were not understood or their progress was not recognised. Together, these accounts illustrate how fragmented or poorly aligned actions across systems can function as drivers of absences, either by escalating distress or by weakening students' confidence in the value and accessibility of education. While the sample is small and locally specific, the study offers valuable insights into how students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties experience the intersection of personal, relational and structural influences on both their challenges with attendance and their efforts to return to school.

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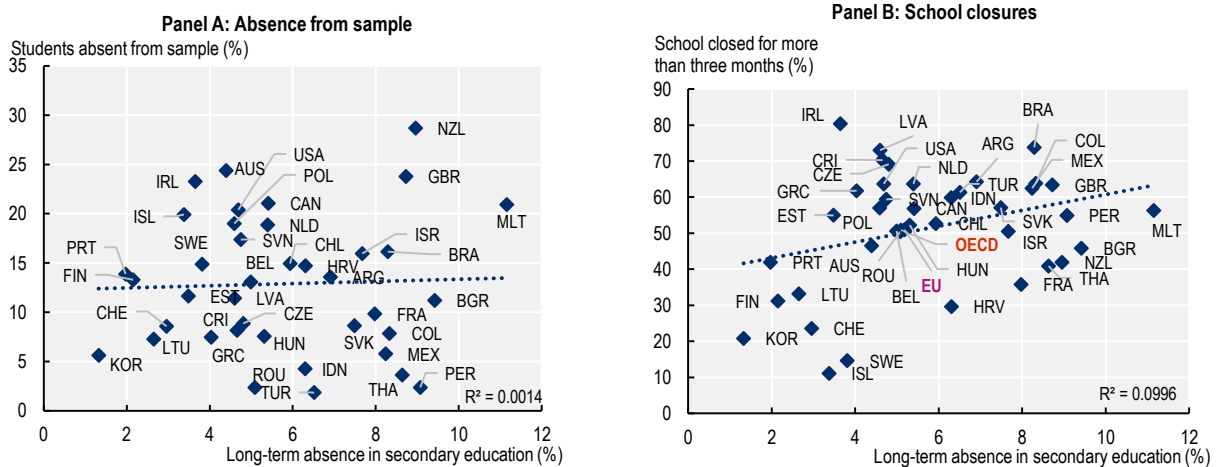
Annex 2.A. Associations between long-term absence, sampled absent students and school closures

As mentioned in Box 2.1, the long-term absence rates used in this chapter may be biased due to sampled students who were absent during the assessment, and due to students misinterpreting the questions as referring to school closures.

Panel A in Annex Figure 2.A.1 displays the association between long-term absence (percentage of students who reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months at the secondary level) and the share of students who had been sampled but did not participate in PISA. Based on the R^2 , the association is small (Cohen, 1988^[189]). Pearson correlation coefficient equals 0.04, also considered small (ibid.). However, if long-term absent students were to miss PISA across countries systematically, we would expect to see a negative correlation coefficient: the absence rate would increase due to the non-participation of long-term absent students, but the long-term absence rate would decrease. The evidence presented here does not align with this expectation.

Panel B in Annex Figure 2.A.1 displays the association between long-term absence at the secondary level and the percentage of students who reported that the school building had been closed for three or more months because of COVID-19 in the three years before PISA 2022. Based on the $R^2 = 0.1$ the association is small to medium (Cohen, 1988^[189]). Pearson correlation coefficient equals 0.32, which is considered medium (ibid.). These associations are estimated at the system level, but the correlation between long-term absence and school closures can also be modelled at the student level (Annex Table 2.B.1). Broadly speaking, the model coefficients maintain their values and the conclusions from the models do not change regardless of whether the school closure variable is included. Moreover, the variable itself is not significant.

Annex Figure 2.A.1. Long-term absence, sampled absent students and school closures



Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025); and OECD (2023^[61]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education, Table I.A2.6, <https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en>.

Annex 2.B. Models

Logistic models are commonly applied to estimate relationships between a binary dependent variable and independent variable(s). In this chapter, the binary dependent variable is whether students reported missing school for more than three consecutive months at the secondary educational level. Independent variables include a range of student-level characteristics and school-level factors (Annex Table 2.B.1).

Parameters that are estimated using a logistic regression are not easily interpretable (log-odds). Therefore, it is suggested that they are transformed into coefficients with a more straightforward interpretation. Various approaches can be applied (most commonly odds ratios). In line with recommendations in the literature, the parameters are transformed into marginal effects, specifically, average marginal effects (Niu, 2018^[190]). In the models presented in this chapter, average marginal effects report the predicted change in the probability of long-term absence at the secondary educational level for a one-unit change in an independent variable, while holding other variables constant.

PISA applies a two-stage sampling (first selects schools, then students within schools). Thus, students attending the same school cannot be considered as independent observations (violating an assumption of logistic regression). This is because students within a school usually share more common characteristics than students from different schools (e.g. access to the same teachers and resources). To consider this, standard errors are computed with a balanced repeated replication methodology, in line with recommendations by the OECD (2024^[191]). Observations are also weighted by the final student weights.

Annex Table 2.B.1. Predicted changes in the probability of long-term absence in secondary education (2022)

Coefficients display average marginal effects in percentage points on the probability of long-term absence in secondary education

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
Chronosystem						
Long-term absent in primary education	37.16	1.61	36.93	1.65	34.60	1.88
Mesosystem						
Proportion of parents participating in school-related activities	0.09	0.23	0.09	0.24	-0.30	0.29
Microsystem: school						
Instruction hindered by a lack of teaching staff to some extent or a lot	0.37	0.39	0.38	0.40	0.11	0.36
Instruction hindered by teacher absenteeism to some extent or a lot	0.42	0.29	0.52	0.29	0.46	0.43
Index of sense of belonging	-0.47	0.14	-0.46	0.15	-0.38	0.15
Index of negative school climate	0.05	0.13	0.04	0.13	0.03	0.15
Index of quality of student-teacher relationships	-0.13	0.11	-0.10	0.11	-0.31	0.14
Index of disciplinary climate	-0.75	0.13	-0.75	0.14	-0.36	0.15
Microsystem: peers						
Index of being bullied	0.76	0.12	0.81	0.13	0.88	0.12
Microsystem: home and family						
Index of economic, social and cultural status	-0.54	0.12	-0.51	0.12	-0.26	0.17
Index of family support	-0.42	0.10	-0.37	0.11	-0.31	0.15
Person characteristics						
Boy (ref. girl)	0.68	0.18	0.69	0.19	0.68	0.30

Immigrant background	0.26	0.37	0.28	0.38	0.49	0.36
Controls						
Public school	-0.60	0.28	-0.60	0.30	-1.63	0.59
Town (ref. village)	-0.62	0.35	-0.54	0.36	0.04	0.38
City (ref. village)	-1.14	0.40	-1.00	0.40	-0.76	0.38
ISCED 2 (ref. ISCED 3 general)	2.14	0.46	2.20	0.49	0.86	0.51
ISCED 3 vocational (ref. ISCED 3 general)	1.36	0.28	1.31	0.28	1.64	0.46
School closed for three or more months because of COVID-19			-0.45	0.26	0.33	0.28
Number of observations	159 659		147 528		76 393	

Note: SE = standard error. Coefficients in bold are statistically significant at 5% level. See the main text for a description of the variables used. The models display average marginal effects, which report the predicted change in the probability of long-term absence at the secondary educational level for a one-unit change in an independent variable, while holding other variables constant. The models account for country fixed effects. Model 1 includes the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Switzerland, Thailand, Türkiye, the United Kingdom and the United States. Model 2 excludes Denmark and accounts for school closures because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Model 3 excludes non-EU countries from Model 2.

Source: OECD (2022^[21]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

Notes

¹ The term “drivers” is used throughout the chapter as an umbrella label for factors empirically associated with SAP and, where supported by longitudinal evidence, plausibly contributing to their onset, persistence or escalation. Related terms such as “risk factors” or “influencing factors” are treated as largely overlapping but are only retained when reflecting the terminology used in the original sources.

² Caution is required when interpreting estimates using PISA 2022 because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met in the following countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. See Reader’s Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023^[61]).

³ Additional checks were performed to explore how the variable is clustered in schools. The majority of schools have very low shares of long-term absent students. On average across OECD (EU) countries, 45% (47%) of schools have fewer than 5% of long-term absent students. 21% (20%) of schools have 5%-10% of long-term absent students, and 12% of schools have 10%-15% of long-term absent students. Only 2% of schools have 50% or more of long-term absent students.

⁴ Additional conceptual grounding for the explanation of the model comes from broader developmental work by Tudge et al. (2016^[194]), Navarro et al. (2022^[193]), and Navarro and Tudge (2022^[195]), alongside sources that apply or extend Bronfenbrenner’s ideas in the school attendance field, including Gottfried and Gee (2017^[196]), Melvin et al. (2019^[197]), Childs and Scanlon (2022^[200]), Enderle et al. (2025^[104]), Bond et al. (2024^[198]), Enderle (2025^[199]) and Heyne (2025^[11]).

⁵ Quotations from students, teachers, parents and other education stakeholders are used throughout this chapter as illustrative examples of lived experiences related to the topics discussed. They should not be interpreted as representative of the country or jurisdiction in which they were collected, nor as an assessment of that education system as a whole.

⁶ Whether the coefficient of determination is small, medium or large follows Cohen’s proposed magnitudes for R^2 , i.e. 0.02, 0.13 and 0.26 for very weak, weak and moderate fits, respectively (Cohen, 1988^[189]).

⁷ Pain during menstruation.

⁸ HeadStart aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and well-being of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing (National Lottery Community Fund, n.d.^[192]).

3

Consequences of school attendance problems

This chapter reviews international evidence on the academic and non-academic consequences of school attendance problems. Absences reduce exposure to instruction and peer interaction, undermining academic performance, attainment, motivation and executive functioning. Their effects extend beyond academics, being associated with poorer social and emotional skills, higher risks of anxiety and depression, externalising behaviours and engagement in risky activities. Academic and non-academic consequences interact in self-reinforcing cycles, contributing to cumulative disadvantage and disengagement. School attendance problems can also have substantial consequences beyond education: in the labour market, health and welfare, justice involvement, civic engagement and housing stability.

Key messages

School attendance problems have consequences that extend beyond missed instructional time. They are linked to students' academic progress, non-academic outcomes and longer-term life chances, while also creating wider costs for public systems. At the same time, absences are part of a cycle in which they both result from and contribute to outcomes in and through education. However, research in many of these areas remains limited.

Absences are consistently linked to poorer academic outcomes

Absences reduce access to instruction, feedback, assessment and peer learning, which can weaken academic performance. Across education systems, school attendance problems are associated with lower academic performance and poorer learning progress.

Absences can weaken the foundations for learning

The consequences are not limited to missed content and performance. School attendance problems are also linked to weaker executive functioning, lower motivation, reduced perseverance and lower educational aspirations, all of which can further undermine students' capacity to learn.

Effects can begin early and can intensify at key stages

Absences in early childhood education and care, and primary education are linked to weaker development of foundation skills. During lower secondary education, absences can be especially harmful because they coincide with important academic and developmental transitions. In upper secondary education, absences remain damaging, particularly during key assessment periods.

Non-academic consequences can be substantial

School attendance problems are associated with weaker social and emotional skills, lower school connectedness and a reduced sense of belonging. They are also linked to greater risks of internalising difficulties, such as anxiety, depression and self-harm, as well as externalising and risky behaviours.

Absences increase the risk of early leaving from education and training, and lower attainment

Repeated absences are a strong predictor of early leaving from education and training. Over time, they can reduce the likelihood of completing upper secondary education, progressing to further or higher education, and obtaining qualifications, thereby reinforcing longer-term educational disadvantage.

Later labour market and life outcomes can be poorer, though research is limited

Limited research links school attendance problems to poorer transitions into adulthood, especially higher risks of unemployment and, in some contexts, lower earnings. It also associates sustained absences with poorer health and well-being later in life, greater involvement with the justice system, lower civic participation and reduced housing stability.

School attendance problems can also create wider public costs

The consequences are not only individual. School attendance problems are associated with pressures on education, welfare, health and justice systems, although estimates are limited and should not be interpreted as causal effects of absences alone.

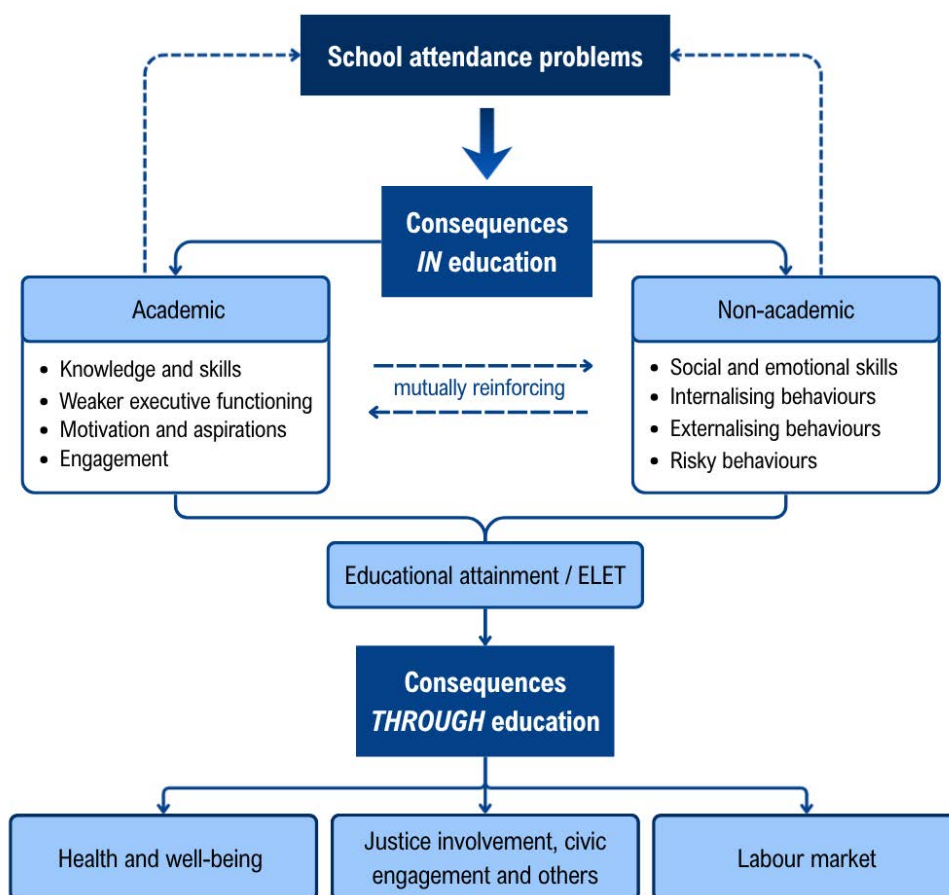
Introduction

School attendance problems (SAP) are not only a matter of missed instructional time. They represent a multidimensional disruption to students' academic trajectories, social and emotional development, and long-term life chances. This chapter synthesises the current evidence on the consequences of SAP across educational stages and domains, drawing on international research and country examples, and situates these consequences within a broader systemic perspective.

At their core, SAP interrupt learning processes. Absences reduce exposure to instruction, feedback, peer interaction and assessment, thereby undermining academic performance in the short term and attainment in the longer term. However, the consequences extend beyond grades and qualifications. SAP are associated with weaker executive functioning, lower motivation and educational aspirations, diminished social and emotional skills, higher risks of internalising and externalising behaviours, greater engagement in risky activities, and poorer transitions into further education and employment. In adulthood, they are associated with weaker labour market attachment, lower earnings, higher benefit receipt, adverse health and well-being outcomes, and even increased justice involvement, lowered civic engagement and reduced housing stability. However, as will be elaborated below, much of this evidence is correlational. Moreover, the potential direction of causality is unclear: SAP may contribute to these adverse outcomes, but these same difficulties and disadvantages may also increase the likelihood of absences. This risk of reverse causality, alongside the influence of other underlying factors, needs to be kept in mind when interpreting the evidence.

Indeed, the consequences of SAP are best understood not as isolated effects but as part of a dynamic, often self-reinforcing cycle. Drivers of SAP, elaborated in Chapter 2, are multifaceted and can be structured around a chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, microsystem and personal characteristics. Academic and non-academic outcomes are tightly intertwined, with feedback loops that make it difficult to disentangle SAP from their causes (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Consequences of school attendance problems



Note: Not all consequences are displayed. ELET = early leaving from education and training.

In this structure, SAP both result from and contribute to academic underperformance, socio-emotional challenges and disengagement. For example, early learning difficulties can increase frustration and reduce school engagement, leading to further absences. In turn, absences exacerbate learning gaps and weaken motivation, reinforcing academic vulnerability. Similarly, anxiety or depression may contribute to non-attendance, while prolonged absences can intensify social isolation and emotional distress. These reciprocal pathways, documented throughout this chapter, underline the cumulative nature of SAP.

Because of these feedback loops and cross-domain effects, SAP (chronic absences, more specifically) have been described as a “wicked problem” (Childs and Lofton, 2021^[1]). Wicked problems are unstructured in that their causes and effects are extremely difficult to identify, disentangle and model, and are further complicated by limited consensus on how the problem should be defined or addressed (Crowley and Head, 2017^[2]; Weber and Khademian, 2008^[3]). In the case of SAP, cyclicity lies at the heart of this complexity: the same factors that drive SAP, such as low achievement, mental health difficulties or weak school connectedness, are also shaped and intensified by absences themselves. Each of the multiple causes of SAP can independently and jointly undermine students’ academic and non-academic outcomes. At the same time, the resulting learning loss, weakened motivation, internalising and externalising behaviours, and other outcomes further increase the likelihood of continued absences. Academic and non-academic consequences, therefore, interact in reinforcing feedback loops, blurring the boundary between drivers and outcomes.

Beyond individual consequences, SAP are associated with substantial and measurable fiscal implications for public systems. In New Zealand, for instance, administrative data indicate that by age 20, young adults who were chronically absent are linked to public expenditures nearly three times higher than those of their peers (ERO, 2024^[4]). By age 23, average annual public spending on corrections, hospital admissions and benefits associated with chronically absent young adults reaches NZD 7 389 (EUR 4 132)¹ per person, which is around NZD 4 000 (EUR 2 237) per person more than for other young people. These differences are largely explained by higher benefit receipt, greater involvement with the justice system and increased hospital admissions (ibid.). In California (United States), system-level financial implications are also visible within education budgets. Student absences were associated with approximately USD 1 billion (EUR 0.9 billion) in lost school funding in the 2014/15 school year alone, and an estimated USD 4.5 billion (EUR 4.1 billion) over four years (Gottfried and Hutt, 2019^[5]). These estimates should not be interpreted as causal effects of absences alone. They capture associations at the system level and may partly reflect the broader disadvantages and needs of the students who are more likely to be absent. Yet, the examples reveal that SAP can be linked to significant pressures on education, health, welfare and justice systems over time.

Taken together, the evidence on outcomes in education reveals that SAP are consistently linked to poorer academic outcomes, with larger impacts when absences are long-term, repeated or occur around transitions and assessments. Studies also point to plausible mechanisms, which include lost instructional time, weaker executive functioning and reduced motivation/aspirations, as well as spillover effects in high-absence classrooms. These relationships are presented in the first section that follows. Beyond academics, SAP are associated with weaker social and emotional skills, lower school connectedness, and higher internalising (e.g. anxiety/depression and self-harm risk) and externalising/risky behaviours, which can partly mediate academic impacts. These effects are presented in the second section.

Beyond education, evidence introduced in the third section links SAP to higher risks of early leaving from education and training (ELET), lower attainment, and to weaker labour market outcomes (greater unemployment and in some contexts lower earnings). The literature, which is synthesised in the final two sections, also suggests associations with poorer later health and well-being, greater justice involvement, lower civic engagement (e.g. voting), and reduced housing stability, though pathways often reflect broader disadvantage and mediation through attainment rather than simple direct effects.

Given the breadth of the literature, choices had to be made in regard to study selection. Mediation effects are discussed only when explicitly modelled in research examining the relationship between SAP and outcomes through education. For example, studies that analyse educational attainment or ELET as mediating pathways between SAP and later outcomes are included. By contrast, studies that investigate links between attainment (or early leaving) and later life outcomes without incorporating SAP into the analytical framework fall outside the scope of this chapter.

A substantial body of causal and quasi-causal research also examined the effects of instructional time on student outcomes. While this evidence does not provide a direct estimate of absence effects and it is beyond the scope of this report to elaborate at length on it, it offers insight into one important mechanism through which SAP may affect outcomes (Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. Effects of instructional time on outcomes

Increases in instructional time tend to improve academic outcomes, though average effects are generally modest (Kidron and Lindsay, 2014^[6]; Scheerens, 2014^[7]). For instance, evidence from PISA, as well as other sources, indicates that additional instructional time is associated with an increase of 0.05-0.10 standard deviations in achievement per additional weekly hour (Kraft and Novicoff, 2024^[8]; Lavy, 2015^[9]; Rivkin and Schiman, 2015^[10]). These relationships are observed across a range of countries, including Canada, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Italy, Korea, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and the United States (Kraft and Novicoff, 2024^[8]).

Additional time does not benefit all students equally and returns depend on student needs as well as learning environments. For instance, the benefits can be higher for disadvantaged students, students performing below standards, or those in higher-quality instructional settings (Kidron and Lindsay, 2014^[6]; Kraft and Novicoff, 2024^[8]; Leuven et al., 2010^[11]; Scheerens, 2014^[7]). This is particularly important, because SAP disproportionately affect disadvantaged students, implying that reductions in instructional time may compound existing inequalities. Studies also indicate that additional instructional time may be most beneficial where baseline instructional time is relatively low (Kraft and Novicoff, 2024^[8]; Lavy, 2015^[9]; Rivkin and Schiman, 2015^[10]). Where school days or school years are already long, further extensions tend to generate smaller gains.

How time is used matters at least as much as how much time is added. Research distinguishes between nominal time allocated to schooling and the share of that time that becomes active learning time (Kraft and Novicoff, 2024^[8]). Instructional time may be diminished by interruptions, disengagement or ineffective pedagogies, while high-quality instruction can increase the productivity of each hour spent in school. This suggests that the educational implications of absences cannot be understood only as lost “seat time”, but as potentially reduced access to cumulative and productive learning opportunities. From this perspective, absences may disrupt not only the quantity but also the continuity and quality of students’ learning experiences. Evidence from Germany, for example, highlights that cumulative instructional exposure, rather than instructional time measured at a single point in time, may be especially relevant for learning, consistent with the idea that absences can disrupt cumulative skill formation (Mandel and Süssmuth, 2011^[12]).

Consequences for academic outcomes in education

School absences and academic performance

Academic performance usually results from continuous engagement in formal education, including exposure to instructional content, feedback and assessment within structured learning environments (Klein, 2025^[13]). Intuitively, regular school attendance ensures continuous exposure to these learning processes, whereas absences disrupt them, increasing the risk of compounding learning gaps. Conceptually, this aligns with the Faucet Theory, which defines learning as a continuous process similar to water flowing from a faucet. Regular attendance ensures steady knowledge acquisition, whereas absences disrupt this flow, resulting in cumulative learning deficits (Entwisle, Alexander and Olson, 2001^[14]). When students are absent, they miss not only curricular content but also teacher explanations, interactions with other students and opportunities for peer learning and collaborative problem solving, all of which are central to cognitive and academic development (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012^[15]; Vygotsky and Cole, 1978^[16]). At the same time, advances in digital learning environments and wider access to online resources may, in principle, make it easier for students to catch up on missed content. However, these

tools may not fully compensate for the loss of in-class instruction, interaction and feedback, particularly for younger or less self-directed learners.

The timing of absences also plays an important role in shaping their academic consequences. Evidence using administrative data indicates that the relationship between absences and achievement varies depending on when absences occur within the school year. For example, evidence from the Flemish Community of Belgium indicates that absences at the beginning and end of the school year are associated with larger negative effects on academic performance (Keppens, 2023^[17]). Similarly, analyses from an urban school district in California (United States) indicate that missing school within 30 days of key assessment was the largest significant predictor of lower test scores, while absences occurring after the assessment have little or no measurable effects (Gottfried and Kirksey, 2017^[18]). Taken together, these findings suggest that the impact of absences is not determined solely by the total number of days missed, but also by when these absences occur within the learning process.

Building on these mechanisms, the evidence refers to a range of related but distinct academic consequences of SAP. Across a range of contexts, these include short-term measures, such as grades, test scores and learning progress (Aucejo and Romano, 2016^[19]; Gershenson, Jackowitz and Brannegan, 2017^[20]; Kirksey, 2019^[21]; Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[22]), as well as longer-term indicators of attainment, such as passing key examinations, obtaining qualifications, and successfully progressing through education or into post-school pathways (see Consequences for early leaving from education and training, and attainment) (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[23]; ERO, 2022^[24]; ERO, 2024^[4]; Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]). While different studies emphasise different outcomes, they reach the same conclusion: SAP undermine students' opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills, and their abilities to demonstrate learning through assessments and qualifications.

Recent changes in schooling conditions further underline the importance of examining the relationship between absences and academic performance. While, following the COVID-19 pandemic, absences have increased in many education systems (Chapter 1) and average academic achievement has declined (OECD, 2023^[26]), there are several reasons to believe that the strength of the relationship between attendance and achievement may have decreased in the post-pandemic period. One contributing factor is the decline in instructional quality – due to school closures and distance learning – during and immediately after the pandemic, which may have eroded the academic value of attendance (Klein, 2025^[13]). Furthermore, grading and assessment changes, such as looser grading standards, altered testing protocols and more accommodating assignment due dates, may have lessened the impact of absences on academic performance (ibid.). Indeed, the negative link between attendance and achievement weakened slightly after the pandemic, which may be partly explained by increased use of remote learning and more flexible instructional practices, as well as changes in the patterns and severity of absences (Swiderski, Fuller and Bastian, 2025^[27]). These developments highlight both the continued relevance of attendance for learning and the need for caution in interpreting this evidence. Despite a rich body of literature covering different aspects of absences, important gaps remain. These include limited evidence outside of the United States, relatively little research on the effects of absences during early childhood education and care (ECEC), its consequences during post-compulsory education, and an incomplete understanding of the mechanisms through which absences affect performance. Addressing these is essential for interpreting cross-country evidence.

School absences may undermine cognitive processes that support learning

SAP may hinder the development of foundation cognitive processes that support learning. In particular, the term “executive functioning” describes a set of mental abilities that support goal-directed behaviour, including working memory, attention regulation and cognitive flexibility. Reduced exposure to structured learning environments may limit opportunities to practise and strengthen these skills. Indeed, chronic absence in early schooling is linked to long-term declines in executive functioning, with persistent effects

on working memory and cognitive flexibility observed several years later (Gottfried and Ansari, 2021^[28]). Results do not change even after accounting for student background characteristics.

Higher overall classroom absence rates are associated with weaker executive functioning among students – including working memory and cognitive flexibility – even after accounting for individual absences, suggesting that these effects extend to all students, not only those who are frequently absent (Gottfried and Ansari, 2022^[29]).

Additional evidence from different profiles of “school refusal” behaviour among Spanish adolescents indicates that certain absence profiles – specifically “mixed school refusal” and “school refusal by negative reinforcement”² – are associated with difficulties in concentration, selection of main ideas and test-taking strategies (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2021^[30]). This reflects underlying challenges in executive functioning that are closely tied to academic performance (ibid.). Overall, evidence suggests that chronic or repeated absence may hamper the development of executive functioning, although some “school refusal” profiles indicate associations without clear directionality.

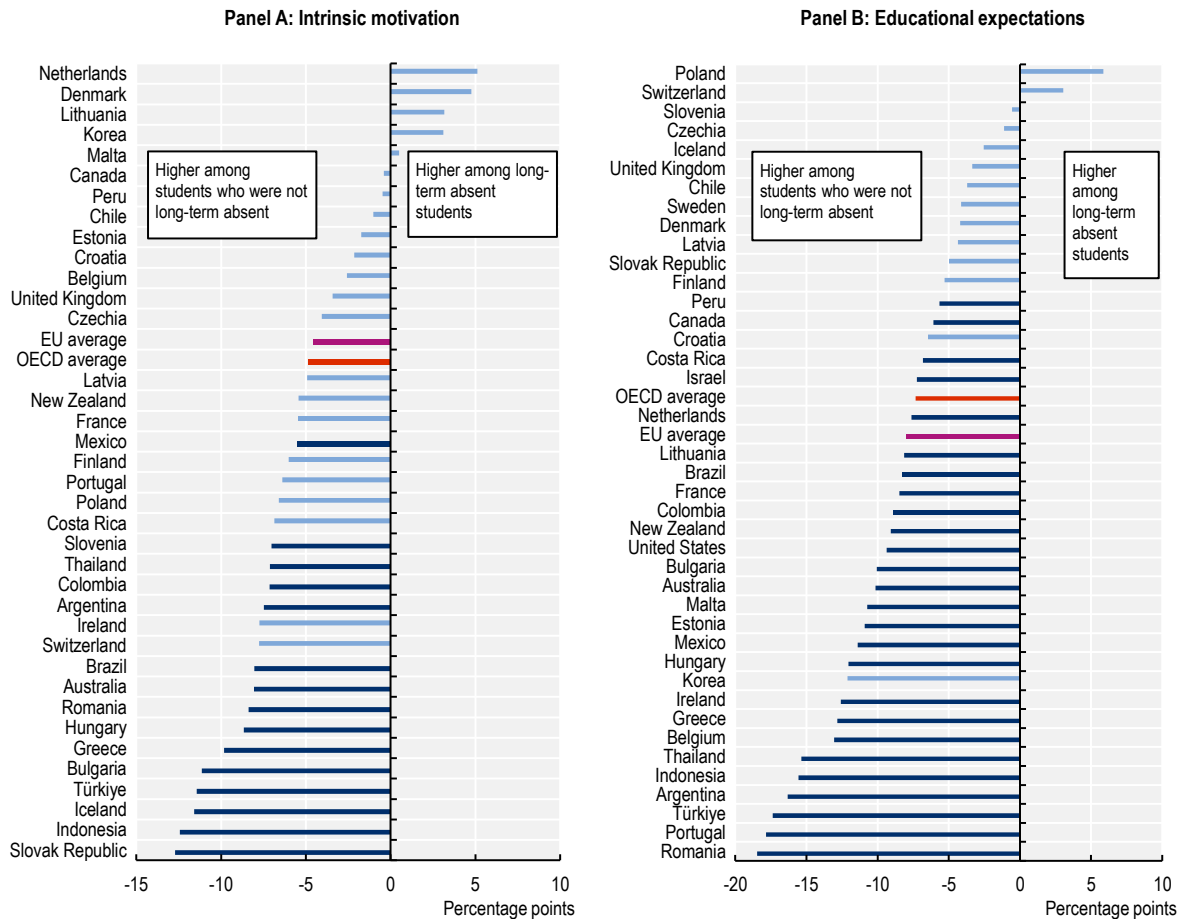
Absences are linked to weaker motivation, academic engagement, educational expectations and performance

SAP can also weaken students’ engagement with learning by affecting motivation, educational aspirations and academic self-concept. Absences are associated with reduced eagerness to learn, lower perseverance and diminished confidence in academic ability (Finn, 1989^[31]; Gottfried, 2014^[32]; Ansari and Gottfried, 2021^[33]). Frequent absences can disrupt the learning process, making it harder for students to experience mastery and success, which can lead to frustration, lower self-efficacy, and declining motivation to attend and engage in school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris, 2004^[34]). Over time, repeated absences can undermine students’ routines and study habits, making re-engagement increasingly difficult. In this sense, absences are not only a cause of learning loss but also a signal of underlying academic, social or emotional challenges that can undermine motivation and aspirations, reinforcing poor academic performance over time if left unaddressed.

Lower intrinsic motivation and educational expectations among students with SAP are also observed using internationally comparable data. In several countries, 15-year-old students who reported having missed three or more months of schooling in their previous educational journey have lower intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is measured as the share of students who agree with the statement “I love learning new things in school”. On average across OECD countries, 46.6% of long-term absent students reported loving learning new things in school, compared to 51.5% among those who were not absent, yielding a modest difference of 4.9 percentage points (panel A in Figure 3.2). Long-term absent students are also less likely to expect to achieve a tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, 56.6% of long-term absent students expect to complete at least a bachelor’s or equivalent degree, compared to 64.0% among their peers, a gap of 7.3 points (panel B in Figure 3.2).


Figure 3.2. Long-term absent students have lower intrinsic motivation and educational expectations

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who were not in agreement with “I love learning new things in school” (panel A) and the expectation that they will attain tertiary education (panel B)



Note: Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours. Panel A of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between 15-year-old students who were long-term absent and those who were not long-term absent in the share who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I love learning new things in school”. Positive values mean a higher intrinsic motivation among long-term absent students. Panel B of the figure displays the difference, in percentage points, between students who were long-term absent and those who were not long-term absent in the share of students who expect to attain tertiary education (ISCED 6 or above). Positive values mean a higher expectation among long-term absent students. Long-term absent students are those who missed school for three or more consecutive months at any point in their educational journey.

Source: OECD (2022^[35]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/6pgtfa>

Absences and performance interact through cumulative and self-reinforcing processes

SAP and academic performance are closely linked, with repeated absences associated with progressively weaker learning outcomes over time. Longitudinal evidence from England and Wales (United Kingdom) indicates that students who experience moderate or increasing absence trajectories across compulsory schooling tend to show weaker academic achievement later on, even after accounting for background characteristics (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[36]; Klein et al., 2024^[37]). This suggests that repeated absences can have cumulative effects on learning outcomes (ibid.). Evidence from Finland similarly reveals that students with repeated absences between grades 6 and 9 follow distinct developmental pathways associated with weaker school grades, lower learning motivation and poorer academic progress

in later stages of education, pointing to the longer-term implications of sustained SAP (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[38]). Complementary evidence from the Flemish Community of Belgium highlights that absences are embedded in broader trajectories of academic difficulty and disengagement (Keppens and Spruyt, 2019^[39]). Notably, risk factors for school failure, truancy and ELET largely overlap, and academic difficulties often precede truancy, while truancy itself is a strong predictor of ELET (ibid.).

While much of the empirical evidence identifies a directional relationship from absence to poorer outcomes, this relationship is better understood as cumulative and potentially self-reinforcing (Klein, Sosu and Dare, 2022^[40]; Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[36]). Students experiencing early learning difficulties may be more likely to disengage and miss school. At the same time, absences further exacerbate these challenges by limiting instructional exposure, weakening executive functioning and reducing motivation.

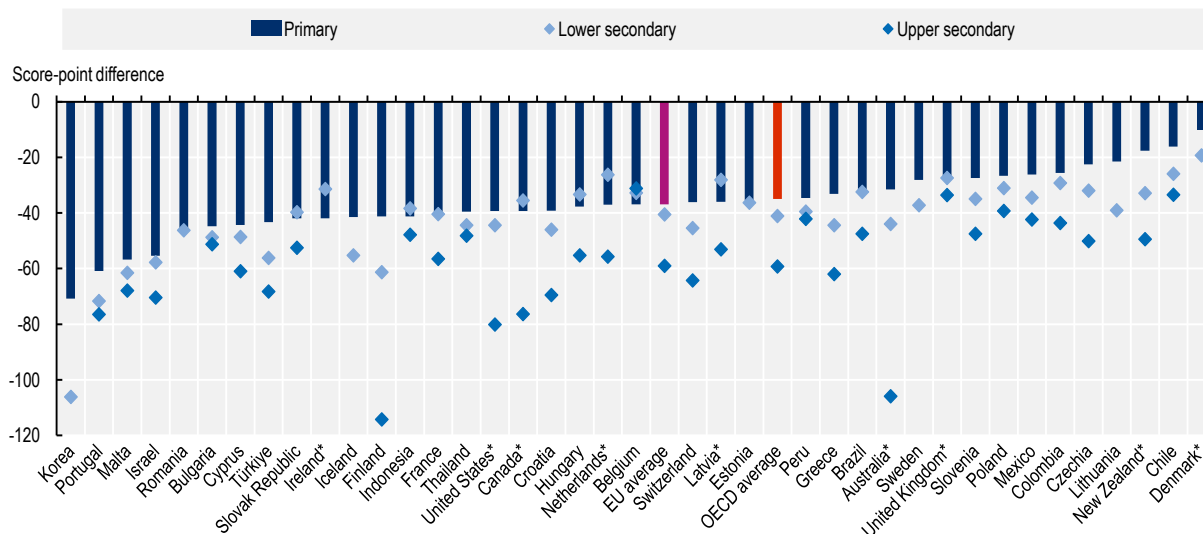
Taken together, these findings point to a dynamic relationship in which absences both contribute to and result from academic difficulties. This highlights the importance of interpreting absence patterns within a broader developmental context and of designing interventions that address not only attendance itself but also the academic and contextual factors that contribute to and result from SAP (see also Chapter 2).

How academic consequences of absences vary across educational stages

The effect of long-term absence on scores can be substantial. On average across OECD countries, 15-year-old students who missed school for three or more consecutive months scored 35.0, 41.2 and 59.2 points lower in mathematics if absent in primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education, respectively (Figure 3.3). These differences already account for students' and schools' socio-economic profiles. Only one country, Denmark, exhibits a non-significant difference, and only for primary education. The following sections present academic evidence across a range of education systems on how the academic consequences of absences vary across educational stages.

Figure 3.3. The effect of long-term absence on scores can be substantial


Change in mathematics performance when students reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023^[26])). All differences are statistically significant, except for Denmark in primary education. The differences account for students' and schools' socio-economic profile, measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.

Sorted in ascending order by the change in primary education.

Source: OECD (2023^[41]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.52, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/uemloq>

Absences in early childhood and primary education can put basic skills at risk and contribute to long-term learning difficulties

Evidence from ECEC and primary education consistently indicates that frequent, chronic or sustained absences are associated with weaker academic performance, particularly in foundation skills, such as literacy and numeracy. Evidence from the United States reveals that absences in ECEC among 3- and 4-year-old children are linked to smaller gains in early mathematics and reading scores, lower academic readiness at school entry, and persistent learning difficulties in later primary grades, especially among children with lower initial skill levels (Ansari and Purtell, 2018^[42]; Ehrlich, Gwynne and Allensworth, 2018^[43]). Chronic absence is also associated with lower classroom engagement and weaker performance in reading and mathematics by the end of ECEC (Gottfried, 2014^[32]).

Evidence from primary education further indicates that frequent absences are associated with lower grades and test scores in reading and mathematics (Morrissey, Hutchison and Winsler, 2014^[44]; Gershenson, Jackowitz and Brannegan, 2017^[20]). These results hold even after accounting for unobserved individual differences, and shared family and school factors (Aucejo and Romano, 2016^[19]; Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[22]). Other analyses indicate that chronic absence between ECEC and the end of primary education predicts weaker academic performance in later years, even after accounting for socio-economic background and prior achievement, underscoring the cumulative nature of missed learning during this stage (Smerillo et al., 2018^[45]; Ansari and Gottfried, 2021^[33]).

At the same time, students who are more frequently absent in any given year of primary education show lower academic achievement in both mathematics and literacy already at the end of each school year (Ansari and Gottfried, 2021^[33]). This suggests that while the effects of absences are long-term, they also have immediate consequences for students' achievement. Beyond test scores, evidence suggests that primary teachers view chronically absent students as less socially skilled and academically capable, even in the absence of behavioural issues (Gottfried, Kim and Fletcher, 2024^[46]). This indicates that SAP may weaken teacher-student relationships and further hinder academic progress (ibid.).

Missing school in lower secondary education is also linked to academic performance, especially at transition points

Absences during lower secondary education are associated with pronounced declines in academic performance, a pattern that may be explained by increased curricular complexity and the challenges students face during transitions between educational stages. Studies using sibling fixed effects and instrumental variable approaches indicate that increased absences between grades 3 and 8 are associated with lower standardised test scores and grade point averages, even after accounting for shared family and school characteristics (Gottfried, 2010^[47]; Gottfried, 2011^[48]).

Transitions in education, such as the move from primary to lower secondary education, are characterised by changes in curricula, teaching practices, organisational structures and assessment regimes. Repeated absences during these periods can hinder students' ability to adapt to new academic expectations and establish learning routines that support continued progress. Evidence from England (United Kingdom) indicates that absences during grade 6 (the final year of primary education) and during the early years of secondary education are more strongly associated with poorer outcomes at the end of compulsory schooling than absences in other years (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[36]). Similar patterns are observed in the United States, where absences have particularly detrimental effects on achievement during lower secondary education, a phase marked by increasing curricular complexity and higher academic expectations (Santibañez and Guarino, 2021^[49]).

Importantly, these transition periods are not only times when absences have more severe consequences on performance, but also moments when students are more likely to disengage and miss school. As discussed in Chapter 2, transitions, especially between primary and lower secondary education, are

associated with increased risks of disengagement and adjustment difficulties, which, in turn, can increase the likelihood of SAP. This combination of higher absence rates and greater performance consequences means that missed instruction during transitions may weaken foundation skills and learning trajectories in ways that are difficult to reverse later.

Absences in upper secondary education have a more nuanced effect on performance, except during key instructional and assessment periods

At later stages of schooling, the academic consequences of absences are closely shaped by assessment practices and the organisation of instruction. In upper secondary education, the effects of individual absences on short-term performance outcomes tend to be more heterogeneous and closely shaped by assessment practices, instructional timing and course organisation (Goodman, 2014^[50]; Gottfried and Kirksey, 2017^[18]; Liu, Lee and Gershenson, 2021^[51]). This may partly reflect greater student autonomy, subject specialisation and selection into courses and programmes. However, when absences are repeated or clustered during periods of intensive instruction and assessment, they remain strongly associated with weaker academic performance. Indeed, absences occurring during periods leading up to assessments are associated with larger declines in test and course performance than absences occurring earlier in the school year, while absences after assessment windows tend to have weaker or no measurable effects (Goodman, 2014^[50]; Gottfried and Kirksey, 2017^[18]; Liu, Lee and Gershenson, 2021^[51]). Analyses from the United States that account for differences between students and subjects further indicate that even relatively modest levels of absence in upper secondary education can be associated with lower grades and test performance in mathematics and language subjects, particularly in contexts where assessment is closely tied to ongoing coursework and classroom participation (Kirksey, 2019^[21]; Liu, Lee and Gershenson, 2021^[51]). Similar concerns have also been raised in evidence from Wales (United Kingdom), which highlights the potential impact of absence on coursework completion, assessment participation and learning continuity in upper secondary education (Welsh Parliament, 2022^[52]).

This evidence on the more context-dependent and heterogeneous effects of absences in upper secondary education might seem at odds with the results presented in Figure 3.3 above, which indicates that missing school in upper secondary has a greater effect on mathematics performance than missing school at lower educational levels. However, the data underlying this figure (PISA 2022) are collected from 15-year-old students, many of whom have not yet fully entered upper secondary education and may still be experiencing key educational transitions. In addition, PISA assesses broader competencies rather than mastery of specific curricular content, meaning that students may be better able to compensate for missed classroom instruction through self-study or learning outside of school. As such, the results presented for this educational level in the figure should be interpreted with caution. Overall, while performance effects at this stage are more heterogeneous, sustained absences during assessment-intensive periods can undermine students' ability to demonstrate learning.

Types and reasons of absences and spillover effects on academic performance

Academic performance is strongly related to the amount of instructional time missed, although some studies find differences by type of absence

Early evidence from the United States suggests that unauthorised absences are more strongly associated with poorer academic performance, particularly in primary education. For example, analyses of primary school students found that, conditional on total absences, unauthorised absences are more strongly associated with lower achievement in mathematics and reading than authorised absences (Gottfried, 2009^[53]; Gershenson, Jackowitz and Brannegan, 2017^[20]).

Other evidence indicates that once the total volume of missed instruction is taken into account, the distinction between authorised and unauthorised absences adds limited explanatory power for academic

performance. Analyses from England (United Kingdom) reveal that while authorised and unauthorised absences are negatively associated with achievement at the end of primary and secondary education, the total number of days missed is, in fact, a stronger predictor of performance (Department for Education, 2016^[54]). Similar conclusions emerge from linked administrative analyses for England and Wales (United Kingdom), which find that authorised and unauthorised absences in any given school year are associated with comparable reductions in performance at the end of compulsory schooling (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2025^[55]).

Further evidence from the United States indicates that unauthorised absences during primary and the beginning of lower secondary education correlate with lower achievement in reading and mathematics, even after accounting for missed instructional time. However, these associations weaken substantially after accounting for background factors, such as socio-economic status, suggesting that unauthorised absences may be more indicative of broader structural disadvantages than direct causes of academic decline (Pyne et al., 2021^[56]). Overall, while unauthorised absences may be more closely associated with disengagement and behavioural difficulties (Welsh Parliament, 2022^[52]), the evidence suggests that missed instructional time is an important mechanism linking absences to academic performance. However, findings differ across contexts: some studies find stronger associations for unauthorised absences, while others indicate that the total volume of missed instruction is the more consistent predictor of performance.

The reason for absence may signal different underlying issues, but it does not always correspond to the magnitude of learning loss. Several studies have moved beyond the administrative distinction between authorised and unauthorised absences – typically based on school- or system-level rules – to explore the influence of specific reasons for absence. Longitudinal data from Australia, for instance, indicate that absences due to personal or family issues (stress, anxiety or family responsibilities) among 14- and 15-year-olds are more strongly linked to reduced academic achievement than absences attributed to illness or parental approval (which are typically recorded as authorised absences) (Hancock, Gottfried and Zubrick, 2018^[57]). However, a similar analysis from Scotland (United Kingdom) that accounted for unobserved, time-invariant individual traits reveals that various types of absences, including truancy, sickness and exceptional domestic circumstances, are all associated with similar negative impacts on academic outcomes (Klein, Sosu and Dare, 2022^[40]).

Overall, while unauthorised absences are often linked to lower achievement due to their associations with behavioural and social challenges, the broader evidence suggests that all types of absences reduce learning opportunities and can hinder academic progress. In many cases, the specific reason for absence appears secondary to the total instructional time missed. Nonetheless, unauthorised absences may signal underlying vulnerabilities, such as disengagement or socio-emotional issues, which warrant targeted support to prevent longer-term academic disadvantage.

Truancy can be an indicator of disengagement linked to weaker performance

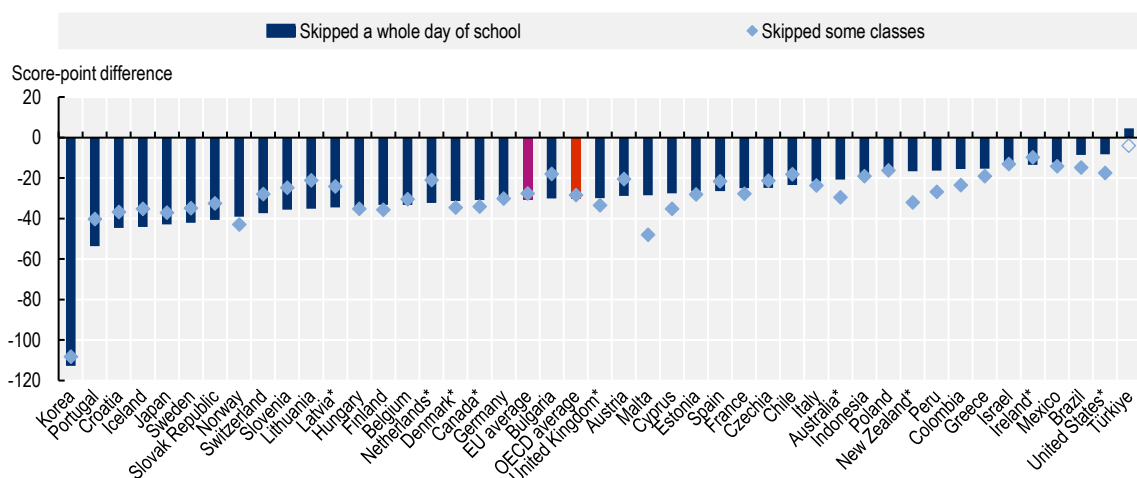
Truancy, typically defined as deliberate unauthorised absence without parental approval (Chapter 1), has been consistently associated with poorer academic performance, particularly in secondary education. Evidence from the United Kingdom indicates that students who reported truancy are significantly less likely to achieve strong examination results at the end of compulsory schooling (at age 16) (Bosworth, 1994^[58]; Buscha and Conte, 2013^[59]). Similar associations are observed using household panel data, where students reporting truancy also demonstrated weaker academic outcomes (Buscha and Conte, 2013^[59]). In Scotland (United Kingdom), truancy is also associated with lower academic performance at the end of compulsory and post-compulsory schooling, accounting for a range of individual factors (Klein, Sosu and Dare, 2022^[40]).

Internationally comparable data support the picture of substantial effects of student truancy on performance (Figure 3.4). On average across OECD countries, 15-year-old students who reported skipping a whole day of school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test score 30 points lower

in mathematics, even after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profiles. Similarly, students who reported skipping some classes score, on average, 28 points lower in mathematics. These results hold across more than 40 countries.

Figure 3.4. Substantial effects of truancy on performance


Change in mathematics performance when students reported that the following happened at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023_[26])). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours (all countries) and full diamonds. The differences account for students' and schools' socio-economic profile, measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status. To support comparability across cycles, some countries are excluded (see e.g. Jerrim et al. (2025_[60])).

Sorted in ascending order by skipping a whole day of school.

Source: OECD (2023_[41]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.44, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

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Importantly, the literature suggests that truancy often reflects broader patterns of academic disengagement rather than acting as an isolated cause of poor performance. Evidence from the Flemish Community of Belgium indicates that learning difficulties and weaker school performance frequently precede the onset of unauthorised absences, and that absences are embedded in broader trajectories of disengagement in which SAP and academic difficulties reinforce each other over time (Keppens and Spruyt, 2019_[39]). This aligns with broader findings, which reveal that truancy is often part of self-reinforcing cycles in which academic difficulties both contribute to and are exacerbated by SAP.

Absences can affect other students' attendance through spillover effects

Beyond its impact on individual students, absences can also affect academic performance at the classroom level. Early evidence from the United States, although using a small sample, suggests that student absences not only negatively affect their own academic achievement, but also disrupt classroom routines and lower peer performance by affecting instructional pacing and classroom dynamics (Monk and Ibrahim, 1984_[61]). More recently, analyses from a large urban school district in the United States indicate that primary school classrooms with higher shares of unauthorised absences have lower average achievement in reading and mathematics, even after accounting for student background, teacher characteristics and neighbourhood factors (Gottfried, 2011_[62]). Subsequent work demonstrates that as the proportion of

chronically absent students in a classroom increases, overall academic performance declines (Gottfried, 2015^[63]). While these studies account for a range of student, teacher and contextual factors, the findings remain correlational and may partly reflect underlying characteristics that jointly influence both absences and achievement.

Furthermore, models using classroom and student fixed effects reveal that these spillover effects persist even after accounting for a student's own attendance. Students who attend regularly perform worse academically when they are taught in classrooms with higher overall absence rates, suggesting that absences generate collective learning losses that extend beyond individual behaviour (Gottfried and Ansari, 2022^[29]; Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]). These findings highlight the importance of addressing SAP not only at the individual level but also reinforce the need for classroom-level strategies.

Differences in the academic consequences of absences across student groups

The academic consequences of absences are not evenly distributed across student groups. A growing body of evidence examines whether certain groups of students are more vulnerable to the effects of missed schooling, either because they are more likely to experience SAP or because absences have more severe academic consequences for them. Overall, the literature suggests that while absences are detrimental to academic performance across all groups, the magnitude and mechanisms of these effects may vary by students' characteristics, such as socio-economic background, prior achievement and special education needs (SEN).

Effects of socio-economic status are often heterogeneous

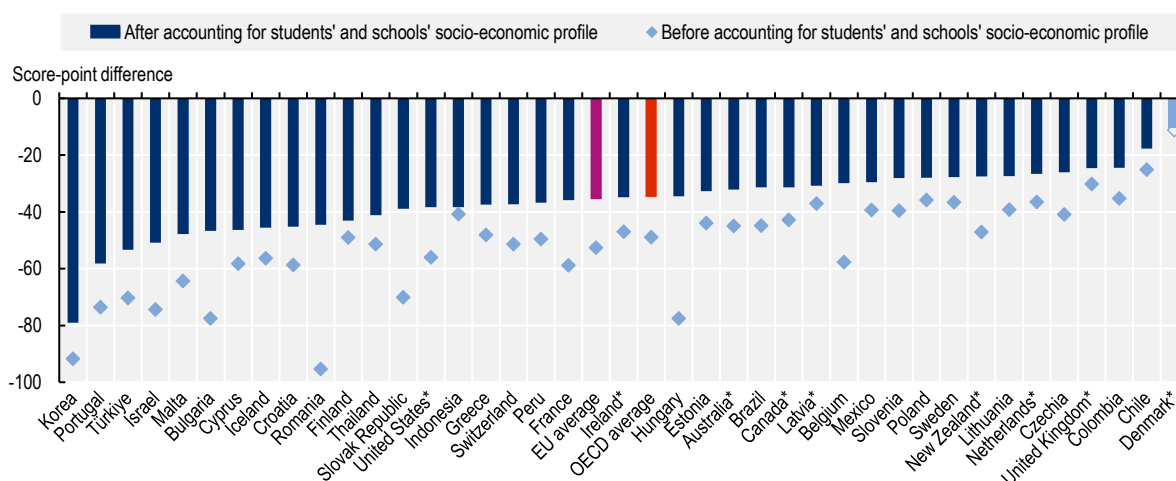
Several studies examine whether an advantaged socio-economic background can act as a buffer against the impact of SAP and compensate for learning losses. Evidence from the United States indicates that attendance in early schooling improves early cognitive development, particularly literacy and for socio-economically disadvantaged students (Ready, 2010^[64]). While the disadvantaged students started with lower literacy scores than their advantaged peers, those with regular attendance made greater gains. Similarly, an analysis from North Carolina (United States) indicates that student absences during primary and early lower secondary education have a larger negative impact on reading achievement among low-income students and English language learners (Gershenson, Jackowitz and Brannegan, 2017^[20]). This reinforces the idea that disadvantaged groups are more vulnerable to the effects of missed schooling.

However, studies from other contexts complicate this picture. Early evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that the relationship between attendance at age 15 and attainment at age 16 does not differ across social groups, indicating that these social factors do not strongly moderate the attendance-achievement link (Fogelman, 1978^[65]). Studies from Australia find limited moderation effects by socio-economic background once prior achievement and background characteristics are accounted for (Hancock et al., 2017^[66]; Mooney, Redmond and Kaambwa, 2022^[67]). In Scotland (United Kingdom), linked administrative data reveal that absences affect attainment in high-stakes examinations across all socio-economic groups, with little evidence of a "double disadvantage" (where disadvantaged students would be disproportionately harmed by additional absences) (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[23]; Klein and Sosu, 2024^[68]). The findings of no moderation by socio-economic background were confirmed in analyses of the impact of absences on achievement by household income for England (United Kingdom) (Klein et al., 2024^[37]). Similarly, in Ireland, evidence indicates that advantaged socio-economic background cannot successfully buffer the negative effects of absences (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]). However, an exception concerns sickness-related absences in Scotland (United Kingdom), which appear to have more adverse academic consequences for disadvantaged students, potentially reflecting unequal access to compensatory support (Klein and Sosu, 2024^[68]).

Internationally, socio-economic background accounts for part of the observed differences between long-term absence and mathematics performance. On average across OECD countries, students who reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months score 48.9 points lower in mathematics (Figure 3.5). This difference decreases to 34.7 points once students' and schools' socio-economic profiles are accounted for. While this pattern is observable in all analysed countries, only in seven countries is the reduction large enough (and the standard errors small enough) to be significant. These findings suggest that part of the association between long-term absence and performance reflects underlying socio-economic differences between students. Further research is needed to shed more light on this topic, including by considering additional factors, such as those presented in the models in Chapter 2.

Figure 3.5. Association between long-term absence and mathematics performance before and after accounting for socio-economic background


Change in mathematics performance when students reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months



Note: * Caution is required when interpreting estimates because one or more PISA sampling standards were not met (see Reader's Guide, Annexes A2 and A4 in OECD (2023^[26])). Statistically significant differences are marked in darker colours and full diamonds. Students' and schools' socio-economic profiles are measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.

Sorted in ascending order by the difference after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile.

Source: OECD (2023^[41]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.52, <https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en>.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/gvo0d1>

Strong foundation skills and good prior performance play a key role in mitigating the effect of absences

Prior academic performance consistently emerges as a key moderator of the relationship between absences and later achievement. Evidence from the United States, for instance, indicates that low-performing students experience substantially larger learning losses from missing school than their higher-achieving peers, although absences are associated with negative effects on learning across all performance levels (Aucejo and Romano, 2016^[19]). This suggests that SAP exacerbate existing achievement gaps. Specifically, each day of absence leads to substantially larger reductions in test scores for students who were already struggling academically. Weaker students find it especially difficult to make up for lost instructional time, while higher-performing students are better able to compensate (ibid.). This is confirmed by more recent panel analyses from Denmark. Higher-intensity absence (10% or more

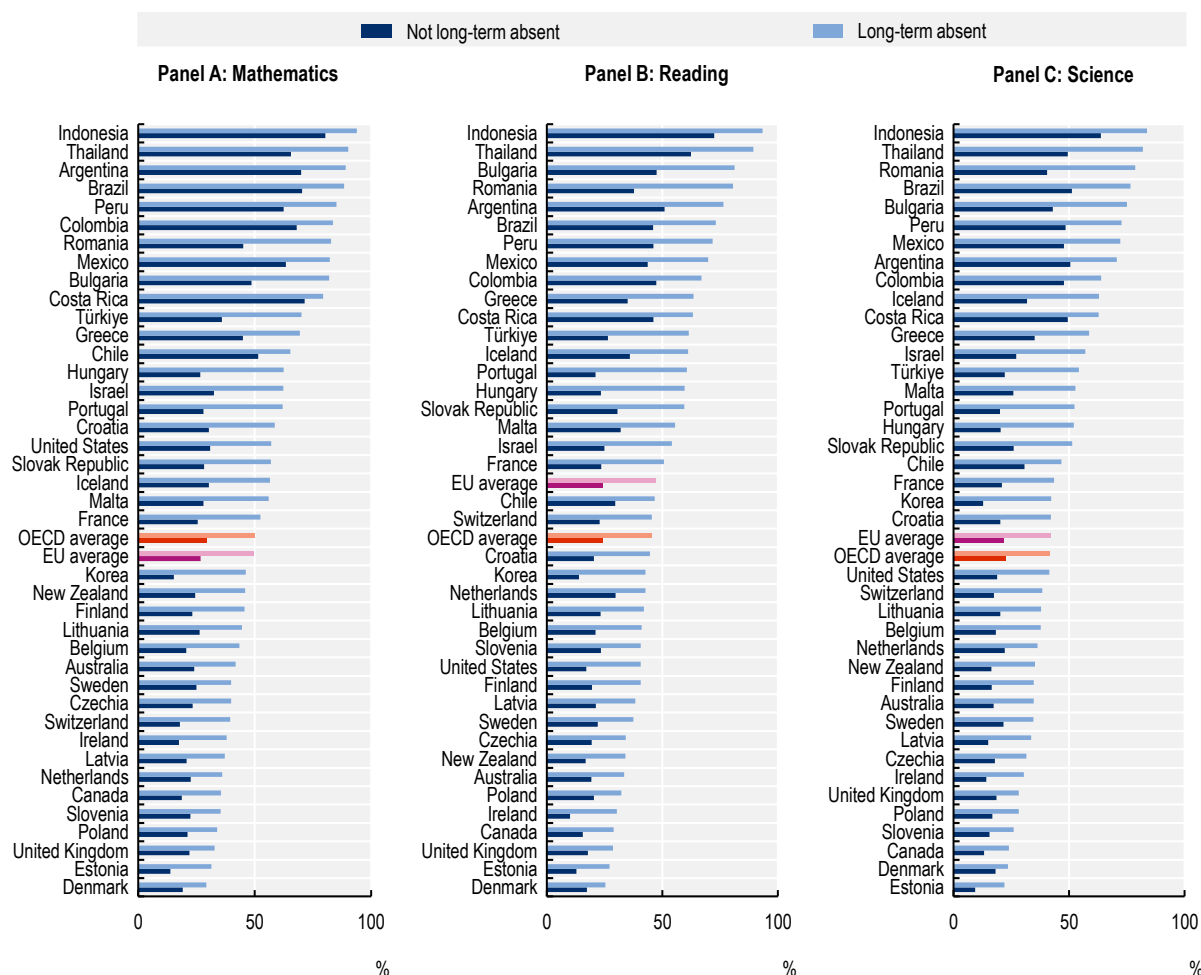
sustained over three months) has a negative effect on primary school examinations across the performance distribution, but especially at its lower end (Kristensen, Jensen and Krassel, 2020^[22]). Shorter absence (5%-10% of missed schooling per month) only has a significant effect at the lower end of the distribution. A simulation study further suggests that eliminating absences altogether would have little effect on top-performing students, but could substantially improve outcomes among lower-performing students (ibid.).

Similarly, longitudinal evidence from England and Wales (United Kingdom) reveals that students following moderate or increasing absence trajectories tend to have weaker academic outcomes later on, even when accounting for background characteristics (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[36]). Together, these findings suggest that absences interact with prior academic vulnerability, amplifying existing learning difficulties.

Internationally comparable evidence further illustrates this pattern. In PISA, 15-year-old students who reported missing school for more than three consecutive months are more likely to score below baseline proficiency Level 2 in mathematics, reading and science. On average across OECD countries, around 25% of students who were not long-term absent score below baseline proficiency Level 2 (Figure 3.6). However, among long-term absent students, this share increases to 50.2%, 45.2% and 41.9% for mathematics, reading and science, respectively. In PISA, proficiency Level 2 is considered the baseline level of proficiency that students need to participate fully in society (OECD, 2023^[26]). Students performing below this level have not demonstrated these skills and can complete only the most basic PISA items.


Figure 3.6. Long-term absent students are more likely to score below baseline proficiency Level 2

Percentage of 15-year-old students below baseline proficiency Level 2 by whether they reported that they had missed school for more than three consecutive months



Sorted in descending order by long-term absent students.

Source: OECD (2022^[35]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/bvhrso>

Other student characteristics can exacerbate the impact of absences on performance

Only a few studies have explored how individual characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and SEN, influence the relationship between SAP and academic outcomes. Evidence from England (United Kingdom) using linked administrative and survey data, for instance, reveals that the negative impact of absences on English and mathematics is broadly consistent across different groups (Klein et al., 2024^[37]). Overall, the findings suggest that absences are detrimental to academic progress for students across all backgrounds. Boys' and girls' performance is affected to a similar degree by absence, with only a modest indication that boys' progress in mathematics is somewhat more sensitive to absences. For ethnicity, absences are negatively associated with achievement across all groups, but differences in the size of this association among ethnic groups are generally small and often not significant. The analysis also indicates that absences reduce attainment among students with and without SEN, with only modest differences in effect sizes across groups. In some cases, the estimated effects of absences are slightly

weaker for students with SEN, particularly those with an Education, Health and Care plan, possibly reflecting more flexible assessment arrangements or targeted support (ibid.).

Consequences for non-academic outcomes in education

SAP represent far more than lost instructional time: they are a significant developmental risk factor that disrupts students' social, emotional and behavioural growth (Klein, 2025^[13]). Social and emotional skills normally strengthen through sustained participation in school, yet SAP can consistently hinder this progression and can even affect peers in high-absence environments. SAP are closely intertwined with mental health: internalising difficulties (e.g. anxiety and depression) can both contribute to and worsen with absences, eroding school connectedness, weakening peer relationships and amplifying risks such as self-harm and clinical disorders. Absences can also heighten the likelihood of externalising behaviours, including aggression and conduct problems, and increase exposure to risky activities, such as substance use and unsafe sexual behaviour, which can extend to later contact with the justice system.

Non-academic consequences of SAP are closely tied to the academic ones. In England and Wales (United Kingdom), for instance, student absences at age 12 increase the likelihood of externalising and risky behaviours, and reduce educational motivation by age 14, controlling for a rich set of background characteristics and prior measures of these psychosocial constructs (Klein et al., 2024^[37]). Higher externalising and risky behaviours, in turn, reduce academic achievement. Together, externalising and risky behaviours, and educational motivation mediate about 14% of the adverse effect of absences on academic achievement in England (16% in Wales) (ibid.). This indicates that the negative impact of SAP on academic outcomes is not solely due to learning loss, but also partly driven by changes in students' psychosocial development.

The potential impact of missing school on social and emotional skills

Social and emotional skills are a subset of an individual's abilities, attributes and characteristics that are important for individual success and social functioning. They encompass behavioural dispositions, internal states, approaches to tasks, and management and control of behaviour and feelings. Beliefs about the self and the world that characterise an individual's relationships to others are also components of social and emotional skills. Social and emotional skills play an important role in the development of children and adolescents and, when combined with academic achievement and cognitive skills, form a holistic set of skills essential for success at school and in later life. Social and emotional skills are more than simply enablers of cognitive and academic growth; they are an important developmental outcome in their own right (OECD, 2021^[69]). An important aspect of social and emotional skills is that they are malleable, i.e. susceptible to interventions and policy measures (Kankaraš and Suarez-Alvarez, 2019^[70]). Children are not born with a fixed set of social and emotional skills, but instead have considerable potential to develop them throughout life (Helson et al., 2002^[71]; Srivastava et al., 2003^[72]). For example, levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness and emotional stability generally increase with age (Roberts, Walton and Viechtbauer, 2006^[73]).

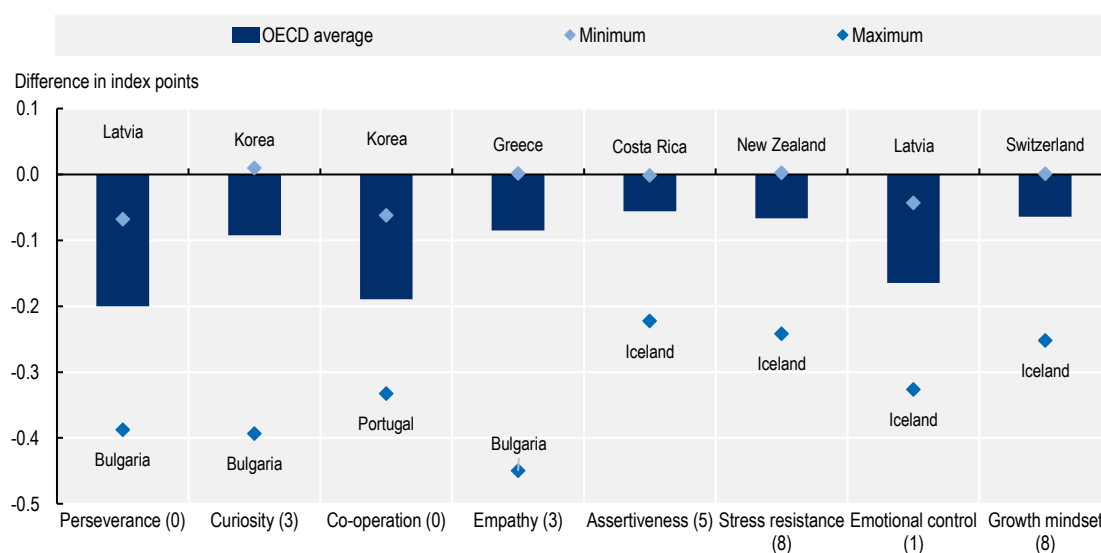
Emerging evidence underscores that absences pose a direct and cumulative risk to the development of social and emotional skills, with effects that extend beyond lost instructional time. Absences can limit children's opportunities to develop prosocial skills in structured ECEC settings (Goble and Pianta, 2017^[74]). In the United States, children who were absent more frequently in ECEC show lower levels of co-operation, assertiveness and self-control by the age of 15 (Ansari and Pianta, 2019^[75]; Ansari and Gottfried, 2021^[33]). Increased absences in lower secondary education (6th to 8th grade) in California (United States) are similarly associated with declines in growth mindset, social awareness, self-efficacy and self-management (Santibañez and Guarino, 2021^[49]). In Italy, certain student groups, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds, appear particularly susceptible, showing reduced confidence in resisting negative peer

pressure and in managing emotions (Bianchi et al., 2022^[76]). Evidence from Spain reveals that certain patterns of “school refusal”, such as those driven by combined anxiety, social pressures and reward-seeking, are further associated with diminished academic self-efficacy (Pérez-Marco et al., 2024^[77]). Importantly, the consequences can extend to peers: some evidence suggests that higher classroom absences are associated with lower individual self-control (Gottfried and Ansari, 2022^[29]).

Internationally comparable data suggest that, on average across OECD countries, students who reported they had been long-term absent display behaviours consistent with being less perseverant, curious, co-operative, empathetic, assertive, stress resistant, emotionally stable and with having a weaker growth mindset (Figure 3.7). While this pattern varies across countries, these conclusions are consistent across most education systems.

Figure 3.7. Socio-emotional skills and growth mindset

Difference between students who reported being long-term absent and those who were not



Note: See OECD (2024^[78]) for more details about the indices. Positive values indicate behaviours consistent with greater perseverance, curiosity, co-operation, empathy, assertiveness, stress resistance, emotional control or a growth mindset among long-term absent students. Minima are not statistically significant, maxima are. Values in parentheses display the number of countries with a positive index-point difference.

Source: OECD (2022^[35]), PISA 2022 (dataset), <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/pisa-2022-database.html> (accessed on 19 May 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/kdx4wc>

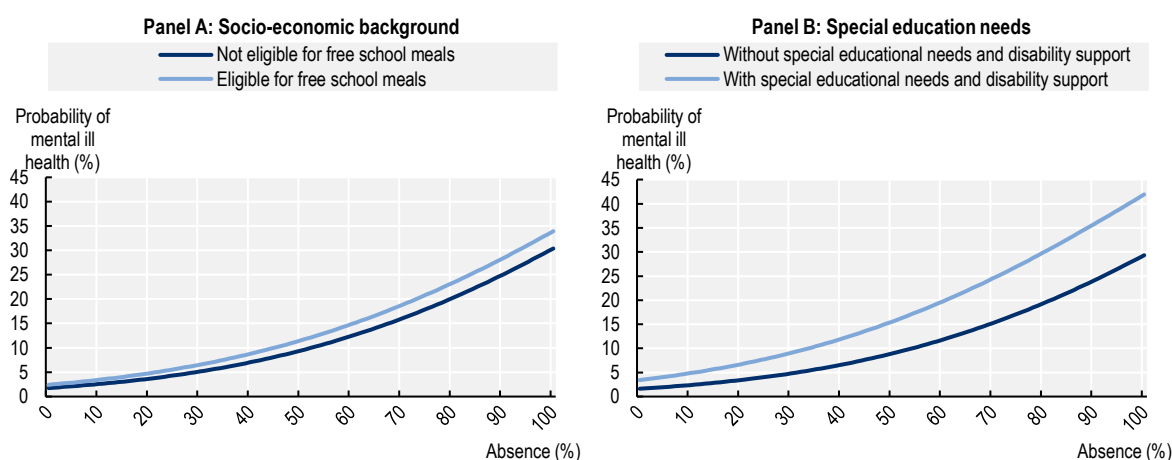
The reciprocal links between internalising behaviours and school attendance problems

SAP and internalising behaviours (e.g. anxiety, depression, social withdrawal and somatic complaints) strongly influence each other. The evidence indicates a complex, often reciprocal relationship: internalising behaviours can lead to more absences, but absences can also exacerbate internalising difficulties. The most robust studies point to a bidirectional cycle of influence. Higher rates of absence are linked to increased risks of self-harm and suicidal thoughts, with estimates suggesting a 37% higher likelihood of self-harm and a 20% increased likelihood of suicidal ideation among students with elevated absences (Epstein et al., 2019^[79]). In Finland, anxiety is common among students with an early onset of SAP (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[38]). Administrative data in Wales (United Kingdom) reveal that students with frequent absences have markedly higher rates of diagnosed neurodevelopmental conditions, mental health disorders and self-harm, signalling that absences can act as an early warning indicator of serious difficulties

(John et al., 2022^[80]). Longitudinal evidence in the United Kingdom further indicates that poor mental health is associated with increased absences, and higher levels of absence predict later emotional and psychiatric difficulties, reinforcing a cycle between SAP and internalising symptoms (Finning et al., 2021^[81]). Moreover, students who miss school are more likely to report poor mental well-being, including feeling under strain, unhappy and depressed, losing sleep over worry, or thinking of oneself as worthless (Attwood and Croll, 2014^[82]). The probability of attending hospital with mental health issues more than doubles (increases from 1.82% to 3.77%) when absences increase from 0% to 20%, and nearly triples (increases to 5.27%) at an absence rate of 30% (Office for National Statistics, 2025^[83]).

Absences and child mental health are closely associated, and this relationship appears stronger among students facing additional vulnerabilities. In England (United Kingdom), the probability of mental ill health increases with more absences, but more steeply among socio-economically disadvantaged students and students with SEN (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Absences and mental health difficulties in England (United Kingdom)



Note: Absence measures the percentage of absence from school. Individuals were recorded as having experienced mental ill health if they had attended hospital between 1 April and 31 March, and were recorded as having a diagnosis of one of the following conditions: alcohol use disorder, substance use disorder, schizophrenia, schizotypal and delusional disorder, personality disorders, other mood disorders, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, dementia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, conduct disorders, self-harm, and behavioural/development problems. Children were also recorded as having experienced mental ill health if they met the criteria for a stress-related presentation. These are hospital attendances for, or where they exhibited, emotional, behavioural or physiological manifestations of stress. Special education needs refer to special educational needs and disability (SEND). Students have SEND if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision. They may also have a disability, which is a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term (a year or more) and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. SEND needs can be broadly categorised into four areas: communication and interacting; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health difficulties; and sensory and/or physical needs.

Source: Office for National Statistics (2025^[83]). The relationship between child mental ill health and absence from school, England: 2021 to 2022, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/childhealth/articles/childmentalillhealthandabsencefromschoolengland/2021to2022> (accessed on 12 December 2025).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/0rxn4t>

Additional findings indicate that emotional and mental health difficulties and absences are reciprocally linked over time, with emotional symptoms and mental health difficulties contributing to missed school and missed school contributing to worsening emotional and mental health problems (Office for National Statistics, 2025^[83]; Panayiotou et al., 2021^[84]). Early and persistent absences also appear to have lasting emotional impacts, being associated with higher levels of anxiety, withdrawal and depression by adolescence, based on evidence from the United States (Ansari and Pianta, 2019^[75]).

Multiple reasons can explain how SAP can contribute to internalising behaviours. Students' feelings of being seen, heard and welcome in school, beliefs that there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them, students with supportive peer groups at school, and students participating/engaging in school activities ("school connectedness"), can all serve as preventative factors of mental health difficulties (Balfanz et al., 2024^[85]; Raniti et al., 2022^[86]). School connectedness, in turn, is closely tied to attendance. A stronger sense of school belonging is associated with lower rates of SAP, and students who feel more connected to their school are less likely to miss classes or drop out (Chapter 2).

Conversely, frequent absences can undermine these social bonds by limiting opportunities for peer interaction and participation in group activities. The lack of school connectedness, combined with non-attendance, can, over time, lead to social isolation and loneliness. In the United Kingdom, primary-education students with SAP have fewer friendships and weaker peer connections than their regularly attending peers (Carroll, 2011^[87]). Similarly, in the United States, chronic absence from ECEC through lower secondary education reduces students' social engagement by restricting peer interaction and contributing to social withdrawal (Gottfried, 2014^[32]). Evidence from Australia also indicates that SAP are linked to weakened bonds: absences among adolescents aged 12-15 are associated with a diminished sense of school belonging (Mooney, Redmond and Kaambwa, 2022^[67]). In Finland, loneliness and ostracism are linked to more absences, but internalising symptoms mediate this association, highlighting how disrupted peer relations, absences and internalising behaviours become tightly intertwined (Alanko et al., 2025^[88]).

Research also indicates a feedback loop between SAP and school satisfaction: lower school satisfaction at ages 7 and 11 can predict higher truancy at age 14, and truancy at age 14, in turn, can predict a further decline in school satisfaction (Cameron et al., 2025^[89]). Schools are often the first places where mental health difficulties are noticed and possibly also assessed and addressed (or the students are referred to other services). SAP, particularly chronic absence, means students are not physically present to receive supports to address mental health difficulties, further reinforcing the cycle of weakened social ties, disengagement and risk for internalising difficulties.

Links between externalising behaviours and school attendance problems

Absences have been linked to higher levels of externalising behaviours. Externalising behaviours are outward-directed actions, such as aggression, defiance or disruptive conduct. Precise reasons driving this relationship are not established. However, one explanation suggests that missing school might amplify exposure to negative peer influences or unsupervised time, such as watching television, playing video games, spending time with friends, or engaging in day parties or substance use. Some of these activities may increase opportunities for family conflict or aggressive behaviours (Heyne et al., 2019^[90]; Kearney, 2008^[91]).

Regardless of the precise mechanisms, higher levels of absence are associated with increased externalising behaviours. Although some studies suggest a bidirectional relationship (Krause et al., 2025^[92]; Wood et al., 2011^[93]), US researchers argue for clearer and stronger effects from absences to behaviour rather than the reverse (Ansari and Gottfried, 2021^[33]; Ansari and Pianta, 2019^[75]). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Villadsen et al. (2023^[94]) suggest that truancy leads to conduct problems, but not the reverse. This pattern indicates that SAP play an active role in the development of behavioural difficulties rather than being solely their consequence.

A related strand of research focuses on "school refusal", a specific type of SAP that involves a student's marked emotional distress, such as anxiety or mood disturbance, when faced with attending or remaining in school, typically with parental awareness and in the absence of overt antisocial behaviours (Heyne et al., 2001^[95]). In some cases, such as among Spanish youth, high levels of "school refusal" motivated by escape from aversive social or evaluative situations are associated with increased overt and relational aggression,

highlighting that “school refusal” can co-occur with other behavioural difficulties that may further impact attendance (González et al., 2023^[96]).

Connections between school attendance problems and risky behaviours

In the absence of a structured and supportive environment often found at schools, some students may turn to high-risk activities as a means of coping with stress, boredom or a sense of disconnection (John et al., 2022^[80]). Students with SAP may have more opportunities for risky behaviours and encounter other adolescents or adults who are also prone to such behaviours (Rose, 1999^[97]). While research on causal mechanisms is rare, it has long been indicated that truancy is the strongest and most reliable predictor of youth substance use, outperforming, for instance, low grade point average and recent sexual activity (Hallfors et al., 2002^[98]). In the United States, students who missed at least one school day are more likely to engage in various health risk behaviours, such as smoking, drinking alcohol or using marijuana, compared to those with perfect attendance (Eaton, Brener and Kann, 2008^[99]). Similarly, in multiple cities in the Netherlands, truancy is strongly associated with adolescent alcohol use, although it is unclear whether truancy leads to increased drinking or if alcohol use contributes to SAP (Holtes et al., 2015^[100]).

More recent evidence comes from longitudinal studies that can establish a stronger unidirectional link between SAP and risky behaviours. In the United States, frequent absences in secondary education are associated with more risky behaviours (e.g. drinking and smoking) and higher sexual risk-taking (e.g. being diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection) at age 15, accounting for a rich set of background characteristics (Ansari and Pianta, 2019^[75]). Similarly, using linked New York City birth and school enrolment records from 2005 to 2013, Yunzal-Butler, Sackoff and Korenman (2020^[101]) analysed a cohort of teenage mothers to examine patterns of school disengagement before conception. The findings reveal that many mothers exhibited school disengagement, marked by frequent absences, indicating that SAP are a risk factor for teenage pregnancy.

Some of these risky behaviours can then lead to involvement with the juvenile justice system. In two metropolitan areas in the United States, for instance, truancy increased the likelihood of juvenile arrest, explained mainly by lower parental monitoring and weaker school commitment among truant youth (Monahan et al., 2014^[102]). While these findings may not generalise to broader populations, further research on the associations between SAP and involvement with the justice system in adulthood broadly supports this link (see section Associations with justice involvement, civic engagement and other outcomes).

Consequences for early leaving from education and training, and attainment

SAP affect educational attainment not only through their impact on short-term academic and non-academic outcomes, but also by shaping longer-term engagement, progression and completion pathways (Klein, 2025^[13]). As discussed before, repeated absences undermine learning, motivation and academic confidence. These effects accumulate over time, increasing the likelihood that students fall off track, fail to meet completion requirements or leave education early. The literature, therefore, conceptualises absences as part of a broader process of disengagement in which academic difficulties, weak attachment to school and SAP reinforce one another (Allensworth and Easton, 2007^[103]; Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012^[15]).

Evidence also indicates that absences at early ages can have lasting consequences beyond compulsory schooling. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that absences during primary and lower secondary education are associated with weaker academic outcomes in later years, lower educational progression and reduced attainment in adulthood (Gottfried and Ansari, 2022^[29]; Liu, Lee and Gershenson, 2021^[51]; Simon et al., 2020^[104]). These findings underline that absences are not only a risk factor for performance but also an early marker of longer-term educational disadvantage.

The post-pandemic increase in SAP observed in many education systems also raises concerns about future attainment and completion, as larger cohorts of students may accumulate learning gaps and disengagement risks that affect progression trajectories in the coming years.

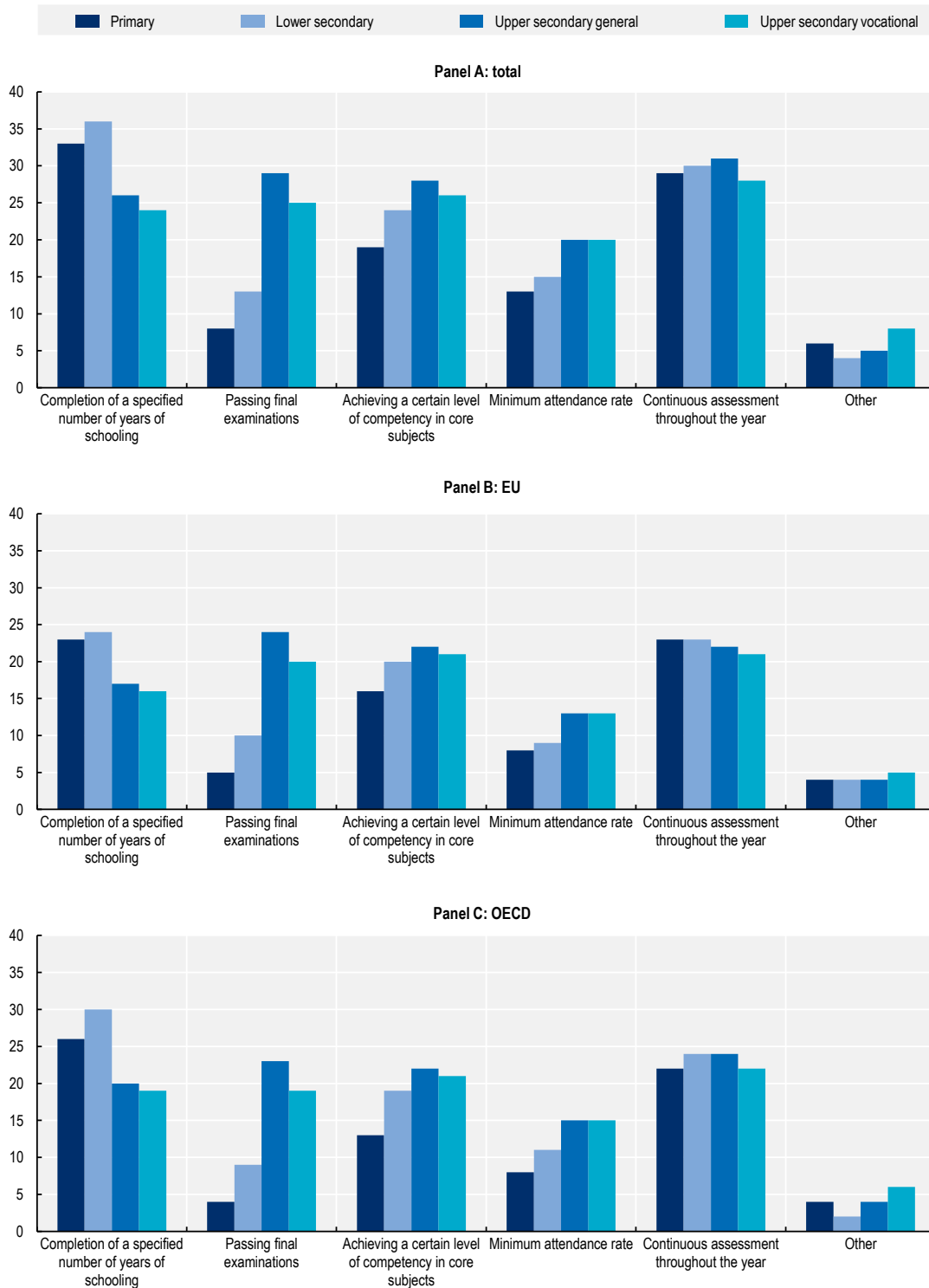
There are different completion requirements across education levels and systems

Educational attainment depends not only on students' learning and engagement, but also on the formal requirements used to certify progression and award qualifications. These requirements differ across educational levels and countries and may include completing a specified number of years of schooling, passing final examinations, demonstrating competencies in core subjects, meeting minimum attendance thresholds, or fulfilling continuous assessment requirements.

Figure 3.9 displays that completion in primary and lower secondary education is most often linked to progression and years of schooling, while completion in upper secondary education more frequently depends on passing examinations, demonstrating competencies and meeting assessment requirements. In some education systems, minimum attendance requirements also form part of the completion criteria, meaning that sustained absences may directly affect students' ability to obtain qualifications. This variation helps explain why absences can affect attainment by reducing performance, by preventing students from meeting assessment requirements, or, in some systems, by preventing them from meeting attendance thresholds for certification. For example, in education systems such as Romania, where progression and completion at upper secondary level depend heavily on participation in national examinations, evidence indicates that absences are closely linked to non-participation in these key assessment milestones (Dalu et al., 2023^[105]). School stakeholders reported that students who are frequently absent are more likely to skip examination simulations and preparation activities and, subsequently, to be absent from the final examination, reducing their chances of completing upper secondary education (ibid.).

Figure 3.9. Criteria for completing educational levels vary among education systems

Number of education systems setting the specific criteria for completing educational levels



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Please indicate the relevant criteria for each level of education (ISCED). Please tick at least one box in each table.”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025_[106]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

School absences are a strong predictor of early leaving from education and training

A substantial body of longitudinal evidence links absences to ELET. Early evidence from the United States finds that poor attendance consistently emerges as one of the strongest behavioural predictors of non-completion, even after accounting for prior achievement and socio-economic background (Barrington and Hendricks, 1989^[107]; Rumberger, 1995^[108]). Missing school contributes to falling behind academically, but also weakens students' attachment to school routines, relationships and expectations, increasing the likelihood of disengagement and dropout over time (Allensworth and Easton, 2007^[103]).

Evidence from the United States across multiple stages of schooling highlights how absences contribute to progressively increasing risks of dropout over time. Absences during primary education predict later dropout even after accounting for early achievement and family background (Alexander, Entwisle and Horsey, 1997^[109]). Chronic absence during the transition to lower secondary education is a particularly strong early warning signal, since students missing a substantial amount of school in the first year of lower secondary education are less likely to complete upper secondary education without targeted support (Balfanz, Herzog and Mac Iver, 2007^[110]; Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012^[15]). Similarly, longitudinal analyses indicate that absences during early secondary education substantially increase dropout risk, often more strongly than earlier test scores (Allensworth and Easton, 2007^[103]).

Additional longitudinal evidence confirms that absences during lower secondary education and early upper secondary education are strongly associated with later non-completion. Longitudinal analyses from the United States reveal that each additional day of absence in early adolescence reduces the likelihood of graduating from upper secondary education, even after accounting for family background and prior achievement (Ou and Reynolds, 2008^[111]). Similarly, disengagement indicators, including poor attendance in grades 8 and 9, increase the probability of dropout (Henry, Knight and Thornberry, 2011^[112]).

Research emphasises that ELET is a process rather than a single event. Absences interact with academic underachievement, behavioural difficulties and low expectations, forming self-reinforcing trajectories of disengagement that unfold over several years (Henry, Knight and Thornberry, 2011^[112]; Rumberger and Lim, 2008^[113]; Schoeneberger, 2011^[114]). Patterns of increasing or persistent absences over time are particularly predictive of dropout compared to isolated or short-term SAP (Schoeneberger, 2011^[114]). Dropout reflects a gradual process of disengagement, rather than a single decision point, with SAP interacting with academic and behavioural difficulties over time.

Evidence from other countries supports these conclusions. In the Netherlands, unauthorised absences accelerate the timing of dropout, increasing the risk that students leave education before completing compulsory schooling (Cabus and De Witte, 2014^[115]). In the United Kingdom, truancy during lower secondary education is strongly associated with a reduced likelihood of remaining in education after the age of 16 (Attwood and Croll, 2006^[116]; Attwood and Croll, 2014^[82]). Similarly, in New Zealand, persistent absence is associated with disengagement, lower achievement and increased risks of leaving education without qualifications, particularly among students experiencing multiple barriers to engagement (ERO, 2024^[4]). Findings from Norway also indicate that attendance patterns in lower secondary education are among the strongest predictors of later dropout (Lillejord et al., 2015^[117]).

Absences are linked to lower educational attainment and progression

Beyond ELET, absences are closely linked to lower levels of educational attainment and progression among those who remain in the education system. Longitudinal studies reveal that students who are frequently absent are less likely to complete upper secondary education on time, less likely to enrol in post-secondary education and more likely to leave education with no formal qualifications (Smerillo et al., 2018^[45]; Kirksey, 2019^[21]; Liu, Lee and Gershenson, 2021^[51]; Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]).

Moreover, the consequences of SAP extend far into adulthood. Missing even small amounts of school in childhood can have measurable effects on lifetime attainment. For example, in the United Kingdom, missing five days of school at age 10 is associated with a 0.66 percentage point higher likelihood of having no qualifications by age 42, even after accounting for early cognitive ability, family and socio-economic background, although the relationship may still partly reflect unobserved factors influencing both attendance and later outcomes (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[23]). Similar long-term patterns are observed in Sweden, where sustained or repeated SAP in primary education are associated with lower educational attainment in adulthood, indicating that early absences can have persistent consequences across the life course (Cattan et al., 2022^[118]). Similarly, in Ireland, absences at age 9 are predictive of lower entry into higher education, accounting for a range of background characteristics (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]).

Recent longitudinal studies also reveal that absences predict lower educational attainment independently of academic performance. Truancy in adolescence in the United States is associated with lower educational attainment in adulthood, even after accounting for grades, authorised absences and socio-demographic characteristics (Cardwell and Tillyer, 2024^[119]). Broader behavioural risk indicators, which include absences, also predict lower rates of upper secondary completion, and tertiary education enrolment and completion, underlining the role of attendance as part of wider disengagement processes (Cleveland and Scherer, 2025^[120]).

Other evidence reinforces these patterns. In Scotland (United Kingdom), school absences in upper secondary education reduce the likelihood of progressing to further or higher education, with truancy, sickness and total days missed all associated with lower continuation rates (Klein and Sosu, 2024^[121]). Evidence from Finland and New Zealand similarly links sustained SAP in secondary education to weaker completion outcomes and disrupted educational trajectories (ERO, 2022^[24]; ERO, 2024^[4]; Hotulainen et al., 2024^[38]).

Possible differences in attainment, and early leaving from education and training across student groups

The attainment consequences of absences may differ across student populations, although the available evidence remains limited. Some studies suggest that unauthorised absences are particularly consequential for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, potentially accelerating dropout decisions and amplifying existing inequalities (Cabus and De Witte, 2014^[115]; Keppens and Spruyt, 2019^[39]). Longitudinal analyses also indicate that students who combine weak prior achievement with repeated absences face especially high risks of non-completion and low attainment (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[23]; Smerillo et al., 2018^[45]).

Moreover, evidence from the Flemish Community of Belgium indicates that learning difficulties and weaker school performance often precede unauthorised absences, while each additional unauthorised absence further reduces the likelihood of academic success and increases the risk of later school failure and dropout (Keppens and Spruyt, 2019^[39]). This suggests that SAP may contribute to widening educational inequalities by compounding existing academic difficulties among disadvantaged students.

Associations with labour market outcomes

Evidence linking SAP to labour market outcomes is relatively limited, though research from Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States has shed light on these long-term associations (Klein, 2025^[13]). As such, the transferability of these findings to contexts with different institutional structures may be constrained. Moreover, while these associations are documented, less is known about what drives them, particularly the roles of non-cognitive skills, mental health and social factors.

Research linking SAP and employment from England (United Kingdom) suggests that the likelihood of being in sustained employment for 12 months at age 28 decreases by approximately 60% for persistently absent students (missing more than 10% of potential sessions), and by approximately 75% for those who were severely absent (missing more than 50% of potential sessions) (Department for Education, 2025^[122]). The analysis accounts for a limited set of controls, including prior attainment, gender, SEN and socio-economic background.

Other researchers focused on earnings, but the evidence on the relationship with SAP remains mixed. Administrative data from England (United Kingdom) indicate a non-causal relationship between absences and academic performance, which is then monetised (Department for Education, 2025^[122]). Using this method, the results reveal that one day of additional absence between grades 7 and 11 is associated with an approximate GBP 750 (EUR 886) (2024 prices) loss in future earnings. One day of absence for a persistently absent student (who misses more than 10% of their possible sessions) is associated with a GBP 650 (EUR 768) future earnings loss. Panel A in Figure 3.10 shows how average earnings decrease with absences in the country. In another model specification, the authors estimate that a one-day increase in absence in grades 10 and 11 is associated with a 0.8% decrease in earnings at age 28 (ibid.). The analyses account for a limited set of controls, including prior attainment, gender, SEN and socio-economic background. Evidence from New Zealand further highlights the long-term income consequences of chronic school absences (panel B in Figure 3.10). Administrative data linking school attendance to labour market outcomes show that by age 25, young adults who were chronically absent (missing at least 30% of sessions) earn substantially less than their peers, with total annual incomes of approximately NZD 16 700 (EUR 9 338) compared to NZD 59 200 (EUR 33 102) for other 25 year-olds. These income gaps widen over time and are driven both by lower employment rates and higher benefit receipt: at age 25, only 58% of those who were chronically absent have wage or salary income, compared to 69% of the total population (ERO, 2024^[41]). Finally, sibling fixed-effects models using administrative data from Sweden indicate that absences during primary and lower secondary education reduce earnings over the life course, suggesting that even early disruptions to schooling can impair skill development in ways that accumulate and compound over time (Cattan et al., 2022^[118]).

Figure 3.10. Decreasing earnings with absences



Note: Average earnings at age 28 in panel A are in 2024 prices. Wage/salary income in panel B includes total income, income from wages and benefit receipt. Chronically absent students are those at school 70% or less of the time.

Source: Department for Education (2025^[122]), [The Impact of School Absence on Lifetime Earnings](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-school-absence-on-lifetime-earnings), Table 8, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-impact-of-school-absence-on-lifetime-earnings> (accessed on 9 February 2026); and ERO (2024^[41]), [Left behind: How do we get our chronically absent students back to school?](https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/media/notdbxih/left-behind-how-do-we-get-our-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school/), Figure 12, [https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/media/notdbxih/left-behind-how-do-we-get-our-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.pdf](https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/media/notdbxih/left-behind-how-do-we-get-our-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school/) (accessed on 11 August 2025).

However, other evidence from Ireland, the United Kingdom and United States yields different conclusions. Early research from the United Kingdom shows no association between truancy and income at age 23, accounting for social background, educational ability, poor attendance and end-of-school qualifications (Hibbett, Fogelman and Manor, 1990_[123]). More recently, no significant association is found between truancy and income once school achievement, authorised absences and demographic variables are accounted for in the United States either (Cardwell and Tillyer, 2024_[119]). The same study, however, finds a significant effect of truancy on educational attainment, pointing to the need for mediation analyses between SAP and labour market outcomes (or outcomes through education more broadly). Similarly, longitudinal analyses from the United Kingdom do not find an impact of absences on earnings at age 42 after accounting for a wide range of background characteristics (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024_[23]). In Ireland, 25-year-olds who missed 7-10 days of schooling at age 13 earned EUR 241 per week less and those who missed 11 or more days earned EUR 348 per week less compared to those who did not miss school (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026_[25]). However, the differences disappear once background characteristics, including socio-economic background, are taken into account.

However, higher levels of absences during the first decade of schooling are associated with higher unemployment rates in early adulthood. In the United Kingdom, truancy is associated with an increased risk of unemployment after the age of 20 (Attwood and Croll, 2006_[116]; Attwood and Croll, 2014_[82]; Hibbett, Fogelman and Manor, 1990_[123]). However, only one of those studies (Hibbett, Fogelman and Manor (1990_[123])) uses multivariate statistical controls to account for other factors. In the United States, students who missed more school are more likely to experience unemployment and to rely on government assistance at the age of 22-23 (Ansari, Hofkens and Pianta, 2020_[124]). This association holds for all children regardless of their family background or whether they live in urban or rural areas. Similarly, longitudinal data from the United Kingdom link absences at age 10 with an increased likelihood of being predominantly non-employed (unemployment and inactivity) between the ages of 30 and 42, even after accounting for a set of background factors (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024_[23]). About one-fifth of the association between absences and the likelihood of being predominantly non-employed in adulthood can be mediated by differences in educational attainment. Finally, in Ireland, adults aged 25 who missed 11 or more days at age 13 are more likely to have spent time unemployed (on average by two months longer), accounting for a range of background characteristics (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026_[25]).

In regard to other labour market outcomes, administrative data from the United Kingdom reveal that persistent school absence in secondary education is strongly associated with being Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) three years after the end of compulsory schooling (Department for Education, 2018_[125]). Similarly, mediation analyses from England and Wales (United Kingdom) indicate that higher truancy can lead to lower academic achievement, which in turn increases the likelihood of unemployment and NEET status (Bradley and Crouchley, 2019_[126]). Truancy also has a direct effect on unemployment and NEET, but it is relatively modest. In particular, better examination results can mitigate the adverse effects of truancy: even with high levels of truancy, individuals with strong academic performance are less likely to experience unemployment and NEET status (*ibid.*). Moreover, in Scotland (United Kingdom), higher levels of absence can increase the likelihood of young people becoming NEET (Klein and Sosu, 2024_[121]). Sickness absences, in particular, are strongly associated with a greater risk of NEET status. In one model specification, a percentage point increase in sickness-related absences increases the likelihood of being NEET by 0.4 points. While academic achievement partially explains the relationship between absences and NEET, much of the effect, especially for sickness absences, remains unexplained, suggesting that other factors, such as health or well-being, play a role (*ibid.*).

Finally, SAP are also linked to the receipt of benefits. In England (United Kingdom), the likelihood of receiving benefits increases 2.7 times for persistently absent students (missing more than 10% of potential sessions) (Department for Education, 2025_[122]). This rises to 4.2 times for severely absent students (missing more than 50% of potential sessions), even after accounting for a range of background characteristics. Nevertheless, the results cannot be interpreted as causal. Similarly, in New Zealand, 46%

of adults aged 25 who were chronically absent (missing at least 30% of sessions) receive a benefit, compared to 20% of peers in the total population (ERO, 2024^[4]). Between 17 and 25, young adults who were chronically absent receive NZD 1 500 (EUR 839) more in benefits than the total population (*ibid.*). Evidence from Norway further underscores the relevance of absences for early labour market transitions. Studies of apprenticeship recruitment indicate that employers place weight on applicants' attendance records, prioritising low absence over academic grades (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018^[127]). Applicants who secured an apprenticeship contract have an average absence rate of approximately 4%, compared to approximately 8% among those who did not secure a contract. This suggests that SAP serve as a negative signal to employers, directly affecting young people's access to training positions and, by extension, their subsequent employment prospects.

Potentially negative consequences for health and well-being in later life

SAP have been linked to a range of adverse health and well-being outcomes after formal education, although the evidence remains limited. Research links SAP with long-term health consequences. Drawing from administrative data in Sweden, absences at age 16, particularly due to sickness, can be a significant predictor of long-term sickness in adulthood, especially among women (Mittendorfer-Rutz et al., 2013^[128]). Even occasional sickness absences are associated with an increased risk of later medically certified sickness leave, independent of baseline health, socio-economic background and educational factors. Similarly, data from Los Angeles, California (United States) reveal that students with fewer absences in secondary education reported better physical and mental health in young adulthood (Dudovitz et al., 2016^[129]). This relationship holds even after accounting for baseline health, socio-economic background and demographic factors to isolate the effect of absences on subsequent health outcomes. In Ireland, self-reported physical health at 20 and 25 years declines with increasing absences at age 13, accounting for earlier health status, disability and social background (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]). In contrast, findings from Aberdeen, Scotland (United Kingdom), do not reveal a clear link between absences and the likelihood of being permanently sick or disabled in midlife (age 50) (Henderson, Hotopf and Leon, 2009^[130]). However, in this study, absences are not comprehensively and reliably measured, relying solely on teachers' perceptions of unauthorised absences.

Evidence from New Zealand further highlights increased interactions with the health care system among individuals with histories of chronic absence. By age 20, young adults who were chronically absent are more likely to be registered with a general practitioner than the overall population, and they experience higher rates of emergency hospital admissions, suggesting greater acute health needs despite similar levels of routine primary care use (ERO, 2024^[4]).

Moreover, SAP have been associated with poorer mental health. Already in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, truancy was linked to an increased likelihood of depression, even after accounting for social background, prior educational attainment, attendance and qualifications (Hibbett and Fogelman, 1990^[131]). More recently in Wales (United Kingdom), administrative data were used to measure persistent absence (more than 10% missed sessions) among students aged 7-16 during 2012-16, with suicide risk tracked through death records up to 2019 (Diogu et al., 2025^[132]). Findings reveal that persistent absence is associated with a significantly higher risk of suicide during adolescence and early young adulthood. More broadly, in the Netherlands, higher rates of sickness-related absences are associated with lower mental health-related quality of life among individuals aged 16-26 attending vocational education and training (van den Toren et al., 2019^[133]). No significant associations are observed between absences and happiness. However, the Dutch study is cross-sectional and does not account for students' prior health status, which limits the ability to determine whether absences contributed to health-related quality of life or reflected pre-existing health differences. Finally, in Ireland, chronic absence (missing 20 or more days of school) at ages 9 and 13 is predictive of depressive symptoms and higher stress levels at 20 and 25 years, accounting for early socio-emotional difficulties and background characteristics (Smyth, Moya and

Darmody, 2026^[25]). Life satisfaction at 20 and 25 years of age is also lower among those who were chronically absent at age 13 (ibid.).

Evidence also suggests that SAP and broader forms of school disengagement are associated with increased health-related risk behaviours. Early evidence from the United Kingdom draws a link between truancy and heavy smoking (Hibbett and Fogelman, 1990^[131]). These differences remain significant even after accounting for social background, prior educational attainment, attendance and qualifications. Evidence from the United States provides further insights into health-related risky behaviours. Higher levels of school disengagement, which include frequent absences, are strongly predictive of increased problem substance use during adolescence and into early adulthood, even after accounting for prior substance use and other risk factors (Henry, Knight and Thornberry, 2011^[112]). Dropout from secondary education partially mediated this relationship, suggesting that disengagement contributes to substance use both directly and through its impact on educational attainment.

Associations with justice involvement, civic engagement and other outcomes

Other long-term impacts of SAP focus on involvement in risky or criminal behaviours. In South Carolina (United States), youth officially referred for truancy were at elevated risk of subsequent justice system involvement, including repeated referrals and a progression toward more serious offences (Zhang et al., 2010^[134]). Compared to other juvenile offenders, truant youth tended to receive lighter penalties and shorter periods of incarceration. Further findings from Rochester, New York (United States) confirm that school disengagement, including absences, predicts serious delinquency (e.g. violent and property crimes) as well as police contact during adolescence and early adulthood (Henry, Knight and Thornberry, 2011^[112]). This association persists from middle adolescence through early adulthood, highlighting the long-term impact of early school disengagement on criminal behaviour. A more recent study from Bristol (United Kingdom) reveals that students aged 14-16 who were absent for 20% or more of the time are more likely to engage in violent behaviour and criminal activities later on (Rollings et al., 2025^[135]). These associations persist even after accounting for individual, family and school-related factors.

Evidence from other countries further strengthens this pattern by documenting elevated levels of offending and justice system contact among young adults with histories of chronic absence. In New Zealand, young people who were chronically absent are around twice as likely to be charged with any offence by age 25, with particularly pronounced differences for violent offences (ERO, 2024^[4]). They are also substantially more likely to be involved in the corrections system, including higher rates of community and custodial sentences in early adulthood. These elevated risks likely reflect higher levels of offending during the school years and greater exposure to family dysfunction (ibid.). Complementary evidence from Finland indicates that young people aged 18-21, following a trajectory of increasing school absences, are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour during secondary school (Hotulainen et al., 2024^[38]).

However, the relationship between SAP and delinquency might be explained by other factors. Evidence from England (United Kingdom) highlights substantial heterogeneity in the link between SAP and later criminal justice outcomes (Jerrim, 2025^[136]). Socio-economic gaps in attendance and exclusions emerge early in secondary education among initially high-achieving students and peak around the age of 14-15. These patterns vary by gender and ethnicity, with exclusions and criminal cautions particularly elevated among Black and mixed-race boys. While differences in attendance and exclusions partially explain socio-economic gaps in adult cautions and sentences, a substantial proportion remains unexplained, pointing to the role of additional structural and contextual factors (ibid.). Similarly, findings from Peterborough (United Kingdom) indicate that the relationship between truancy and delinquency depends on an individual's predisposition to offend and their exposure to criminogenic settings (Gerth, 2020^[137]). The study identified only weak direct effects of truancy on delinquency, suggesting that truancy alone is unlikely to cause offending. Instead, its influence appears to operate through the interaction between

personal characteristics and environmental contexts (ibid.). Moreover, Ansari, Hofkens and Pianta (2020^[124]) do not find a significant association between absences and criminal behaviour in young adulthood, suggesting that SAP may be more closely tied to educational and economic disadvantage than to deviant conduct.

Another factor that can contribute to the association between SAP and delinquency is, as mentioned earlier, ELET. Among adolescents who dropped out of school in Korea, higher levels of school disengagement are associated with increased delinquent behaviour after education (Bae, 2020^[138]). School disengagement also partially explains how adverse childhood experiences contributed to delinquency (ibid.). However, these findings are specific to dropouts and may not be generalisable to all youth or those who remain in school.

Evidence also relates SAP with less serious risky behaviours and with being victims of crime. In London (United Kingdom), truancy during adolescence (ages 12-14) is associated with non-violent crime and problem drinking in later adulthood, even after accounting for a comprehensive set of environmental and individual childhood risk factors (Rocque et al., 2016^[139]). In New Zealand, young adults who were chronically absent are nearly two times as likely to be a victim of any crime, and nearly three times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime (ERO, 2024^[4]).

Evidence on other outcomes is even more limited. In the United States, more absences in the first decade of schooling is associated with lower levels of civic engagement in young adulthood, particularly a reduced likelihood of voting in elections (Ansari, Hofkens and Pianta, 2020^[124]). This has been confirmed more recently in Indiana (United States), where attendance strongly predicts adult voting (Slungaard Mumma, 2025^[140]). In contrast, evidence from Ireland does not reveal a significant association between measures of political engagement (self-reported interest in politics, level of involvement in political activities and whether the respondent is registered to vote) at age 20 or 25, and absences at age 13 (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]).

However, longitudinal evidence from Ireland reveals a significant relationship between absences at age 13 and trust in other people at age 20 and 25, accounting for a range of background characteristics (Smyth, Moya and Darmody, 2026^[25]). It appears, that SAP can weaken social ties and lead to a lack of trust in others, but further research is needed in this area.

Finally, evidence suggests that SAP can be intertwined with broader patterns of social and economic vulnerability in early adulthood. In New Zealand, young adults who were chronically absent from school are substantially more likely to experience housing insecurity (ERO, 2024^[4]). By age 25, around 12% lived in social housing, compared with 4% of the total population, and 2% in emergency housing, compared with 1%, with elevated risks observed consistently from ages 17 to 26. These higher rates of social and emergency housing are likely to reflect broader housing affordability constraints linked to lower incomes among those with histories of chronic absence.

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Notes

¹ Currency conversions in this chapter are based on OECD (2026_[141]).

² Negative reinforcement group is characterised by behaviours consistent with escaping from aversive social and/or evaluative situations, and pursuing of attention from significant others (Giménez-Miralles et al., 2021_[30]). Mixed group is characterised by behaviours consistent with avoiding of stimuli that provoke negative affectivity, escaping from aversive social and/or evaluative situations, and pursuing of attention from significant others.

4 Policy and practice for supporting school attendance

This chapter examines policy responses to school attendance problems (SAP) across education systems, drawing on the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems and related evidence. It analyses policies through key levers – governance, school-level interventions, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation – to capture how systems design and implement responses to a complex, multi-dimensional challenge. The chapter shows that countries adopt a wide range of approaches, with considerable variation in how policies are designed, combined and implemented across these levers. While legal frameworks and enforcement measures are common, they are often complemented by supports aimed at addressing underlying barriers to attendance. Many systems also emphasise the engagement of non-teaching staff, targeted resources and school-level practices such as engagement and re-integration strategies. Data systems are widely used to monitor attendance and inform responses, although their scope and use differ substantially across contexts.

Key messages

School attendance problems are shaped by a mix of personal and structural factors that often extend beyond the education system. As such, no single policy measure is sufficient to address them. Effective responses need to be cross-sectoral, with alignment across governance, school-level interventions, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation.

Legal and governance frameworks set expectations, but vary widely

Most education systems define attendance obligations through legal frameworks, including compulsory schooling requirements, thresholds, and exemptions. These can support accountability and access to education, but their effects depend on how they interact with supportive measures and implementation capacity.

Enforcement measures are common, but their effects are limited and uneven

Many systems use punitive or compliance-based measures, such as fines, legal proceedings or grade repetition, especially following unauthorised absence. Evidence suggests that these approaches may produce short-term effects in some cases but are unlikely to durably reduce persistent absences on their own. Incentives and rewards also show mixed and context-dependent results.

The engagement of non-teaching staff and external professionals is essential

Because attendance problems often reflect overlapping educational, social and health challenges, effective responses require co-ordination across schools, families, health services, social services and community actors. Many systems involve counsellors, social workers and psychologists, but the extent to which systems task them with responsibility around SAP varies considerably.

Capacity building is important but often underdeveloped

Teachers and school staff play a key role in shaping attendance through classroom practices, relationships and engagement. Their effects on attendance are distinct from their effects on academic achievement, although the two are interrelated. Many systems still lack training requirements that focus specifically on attendance.

School-level interventions are key for effective policy implementation

Effective responses rely on a combination of instructional adaptations, targeted supports engagement and re-integration measures. These interventions are more likely to work when they are co-ordinated, sustained and responsive to students' needs. For instance, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and similar approaches can provide a coherent structure for combining universal, targeted and intensive interventions.

Engagement, relationships and school climate matter

Positive school climate, supportive relationships among peers, between students and school staff, and strong connections between schools and families, together with a sense of belonging, are key protective factors for attendance. Engaging students through flexible, stimulating and relevant curriculum can also be important, although research on effectiveness of these measures is still in its early stages. Parental engagement can also support attendance, particularly when communication with parents is respectful, personalised and paired with practical support.

Monitoring systems are essential, but constraints hinder the full potential of data

Most systems collect attendance data, but there is substantial variation in coverage, frequency, granularity and linkage capacity. Categorisations of reasons for absences vary (possibly limiting both national analyses and international comparisons), while legal and technical constraints often restrict the ability to link data across domains or use them fully for analysis.

The challenge is turning data into action

Monitoring systems are most effective when they enable early identification, timely intervention and continuous improvement. Early warning systems are becoming more common, but their use and evaluation remain uneven, and their impact depends on schools', teachers' and systems' capacity to interpret and act on data. Moreover, many systems do not systematically record reasons for absences, limiting their own ability to target responses effectively.

Equity is central across all policy responses

Attendance problems are often concentrated among students facing disadvantage and structural barriers. Policies that address these underlying conditions through targeted supports and inclusive approaches can help improve attendance, while rigid or enforcement-heavy responses may risk reinforcing inequities if not carefully designed. Evidence points, for instance, to the provision of free school meals – particularly breakfast – as an important measure to support attendance of disadvantaged students.

Introduction

School attendance problems (SAP) represent a complex and multi-dimensional policy challenge. As discussed in previous chapters, absences are not only a behavioural outcome but the result of interacting academic, social, health-related and structural factors. They reflect both individual circumstances and broader system conditions, including the quality of learning environments, family resources, service provision and policy design. At the same time, absences contribute to a range of negative outcomes, reinforcing cycles of disengagement and disadvantage. This dual nature, both as a symptom and a driver, positions SAP as a problem that resists simple or single-dimensional policy solutions.

In response, education systems have developed a wide range of policies to prevent, monitor and address student absence. These policies span legal frameworks, school practices, support services, and data systems, and are often embedded within broader agendas related to equity, inclusion and student well-being. These are rarely implemented in isolation, as their effectiveness depends on how different elements of the system interact, the extent to which they are coherent and aligned, and whether they address both the symptoms and underlying causes of absence.

To capture this complexity, this chapter analyses policy responses to SAP through the lens of the OECD's *Education for Inclusive Societies' project framework* (OECD, 2023^[1]). This framework provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how education systems design, implement and evaluate policies to address complex and multi-dimensional challenges such as student absence. In line with this approach, the chapter organises policies across interrelated levers: governance, school-level interventions, capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation.

Governance refers to the formal rules, institutional arrangements and co-ordination mechanisms that shape how attendance is defined, prioritised and enforced within education systems. This includes legal frameworks on compulsory schooling, accountability structures, incentive and enforcement mechanisms, as well as arrangements for collaboration across sectors such as health and social services. **School-level interventions** refer to the concrete practices implemented within schools to prevent and respond to absence. These include instructional adaptations, targeted supports, engagement and re-integration strategies, and the use of tiered frameworks to organise responses according to students' needs. **Capacity building** focuses on strengthening the knowledge, skills and practices of educators and other professionals, including initial teacher education, continuing professional learning, and the development of expertise to identify and respond to attendance problems effectively. Finally, **monitoring and evaluation** encompass the systems and processes used to collect, analyse and use data on attendance, assess the effectiveness of policies and interventions, and inform continuous improvement at different levels of the system.

Analysing SAP through these levers allows for a more holistic understanding of policy responses. It highlights how different components of the system can reinforce – or undermine – each other. For example, governance frameworks that emphasise compliance without adequate support may fail to address underlying barriers; school-level interventions may remain fragmented without sufficient capacity or resources; and data systems may have limited impact if they are not linked to clear action pathways. Conversely, when these levers are aligned, they can support coherent and sustained strategies that combine prevention, early identification and targeted intervention.

This conceptual approach is particularly relevant in the context of SAP, where effective responses require both breadth and integration. By examining policies across these four levers, the chapter aims to identify common patterns, promising practices and areas of tension across education systems, providing a foundation for understanding how comprehensive policy approaches can support improved attendance and student engagement.

For ease of reference, the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems is referred to throughout this chapter as “the Survey” (OECD, 2025^[2]). Unless otherwise specified, examples from education systems are drawn from Survey responses. Where relevant, additional references are provided to offer further context, discuss available evidence on the effectiveness of policies, and to support readers who wish to explore specific policies or findings in greater detail.

Policy responses to SAP

Governance

Governance responses to attendance problems can be differentiated between regulatory mechanisms and co-ordination-oriented arrangements that structure collaboration among actors.

Regulatory and enforcement mechanisms

Education systems generally have governance policies that define obligations, thresholds, and eventual sanctions related to attendance at the system level. These instruments establish formal rules and consequences and rely on legal or administrative authority.

Among a number of questions on governance, the Survey (OECD, 2025^[2]) asked systems which actions or steps schools or other stakeholders are required to undertake following a period of a student's absence. The response options covered consultation with, or notice to, the student, parents or guardians, a social worker and the police, as well as fines to parents or guardians, grade retention, legal proceedings against parents or guardians, and other actions. To identify broader patterns across systems, the analysis below

groups these options into three broad categories: communication with students and/or families, welfare or external agency involvement, and punitive or formal measures.

The largest group, comprising 24 of the 45 systems, reports what can be described as **comprehensive approaches**. These include actions across all three broad categories: **communication** with the student and/or parents or guardians, **welfare or external agency involvement**, such as consultation with a social worker and/or the police, and **punitive or formal measures**, such as fines, grade retention or legal proceedings. The exact composition varies across systems: some combine student and parent consultation with social worker involvement and legal proceedings, while others also include police involvement, fines or grade retention. These combinations suggest relatively broad response frameworks, although the information from the Survey does not indicate whether these actions occur simultaneously or at different stages of escalation.

A second group of eight systems reports **communication-only approaches**. These systems require consultation with the student and/or parents or guardians, without also requiring consultation with social workers or the police, or punitive measures such as fines, grade retention or legal proceedings. A further six systems report more limited mixed approaches. Within this group, two systems combine communication with welfare-related involvement, such as consultation with or notice to a social worker, but do not report punitive measures. These can be described as **communication plus welfare** approaches. The remaining four systems combine communication with one or more punitive or formal measures, such as fines, grade retention or legal proceedings, but without the broader combination of welfare and enforcement actors seen in the comprehensive group. These can be described as **communication plus punitive measures**. A smaller group of three systems reports **punitive-only combinations**, where fines, grade retention or legal proceedings are required with no accompanying consultation requirement among the listed options. Finally, four systems report **no formal requirement** across the listed actions. This does not necessarily mean that no follow-up occurs after absence, but it may indicate that follow-up is not prescribed through the specific actions listed in the survey, or that responsibility is left to local authorities, schools or other procedures not captured by the item.

Yet, these patterns should be interpreted with caution. The data show only whether each listed action is required following a period of absence; they do not capture actions that may be recommended, discretionary, locally determined, or commonly used in practice without being formally required. The data also do not show sequencing: where several actions are required, they may not occur at the same time or at the same stage of escalation (e.g., consultations before punitive measures).

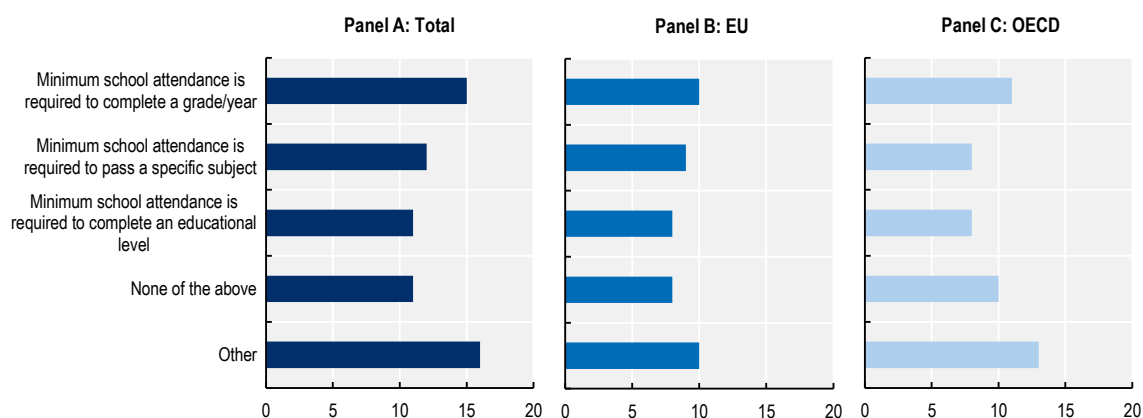
The following section examines the categories described above in greater detail, in addition to legal attendance frameworks and supportive and incentive-based instruments.

Legal attendance frameworks

Legal frameworks on school attendance are important for many reasons, including to promote access to education, protect children's rights, support child development and establish accountability (Heyne, 2025^[3]). Legislation generally covers provisions concerning minimum levels of school attendance to fulfill specific educational requirements, takes into account possible exemptions to mandatory attendance, as well as policies that enforce absences on students under given circumstances.

Legal provisions in regard to compulsory school attendance are not universal in use and vary across education systems, as shown in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1. Legal provisions regarding compulsory school attendance



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “What are the legal provisions in your education system in regard to compulsory school attendance?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

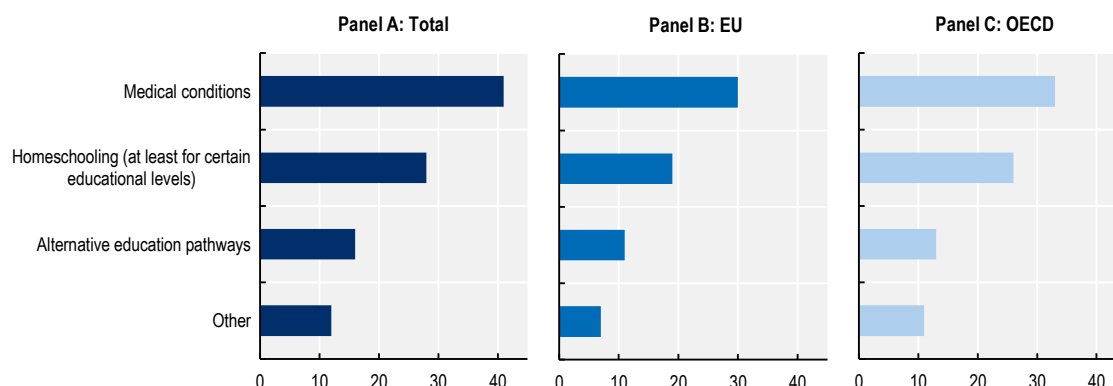
StatLink  <https://stat.link/3vh79z>

Several systems have set **requirements of attendance** in regard to different forms of fulfilling specific educational standards. In 11 of 45 education systems, students must meet a minimum attendance threshold to complete an education level. In 15 systems, a minimum level of attendance is required to complete a grade, and in 12 systems it is required to pass a specific subject. For instance, in Norway, students in upper secondary education can only pass a subject if they have no more than 10% absences in that subject, unless the absences are medically certified, a rule introduced in the 2016/17 school year (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2025^[4]). An evaluation of this policy estimates that it reduces overall absences by 21-28%, and chronic absences by 29-39% (Baker, Drange and Gjefsen, 2022^[5]). In Korea, students are eligible for grade promotion only if they attend at least two-thirds of the academic calendar. By contrast, in 11 of 45 education systems, minimum attendance is not required for the completion of any of these: subject, grade, or education level.

Sixteen education systems report other legal provisions regarding compulsory school attendance. For instance, in Türkiye, minimum attendance is a condition for participating in certain examinations and for receiving formal student status documentation. In Croatia, while legislation does not set a formal absence threshold, an established practice is that students who miss more than around 30% of lessons are required to sit an examination before a commission; if they do not pass, they may be required to repeat the grade. In Sweden, there are no minimum attendance thresholds that automatically bar students from completing a grade or a subject. However, if a student’s absences mean there is no basis for assessment, the teacher cannot award a passing grade.

Legal systems also often foresee **exemptions for certain students to attend school** (Figure 4.2). Generally, most countries identify specific circumstances in which students might be exempted from compulsory school attendance: 45 education systems surveyed have indeed identified some exemptions or circumstances under which students are not required to attend school (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Figure 4.2. Exemptions to mandatory school attendance



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Are there any exemptions or circumstances under which students are not required to attend school?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/lxpkzu>

Medical conditions are the most frequently reported exemptions, mentioned by 41 education systems. For example, in Luxembourg, like in many other OECD countries, illness is recognised as a legitimate exemption to school attendance, but absences lasting more than three consecutive school days must be supported by medical documentation (Ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse du Luxembourg, 2023^[6]). Other education systems' approaches consider absences due to medical conditions as authorised absences, aiming to balance the importance of attendance with appropriate recovery and public health considerations.

Across OECD countries, rules on illness and school attendance generally converge around a common principle: attendance is generally required unless a student is either too unwell to participate or presents a meaningful risk of transmitting infection. While the legal framing may differ, the practical thresholds used by ministries and public health authorities are generally similar. In most systems, students are expected to attend school with mild symptoms (such as a runny nose or mild cough) if they feel well enough, reflecting a policy concern with avoiding unnecessary absence. For example, guidance from Ireland's Health Service Executive advises that children should attend school where possible, including when experiencing mild symptoms such as coughs, colds or a runny nose, provided they are otherwise well enough to participate (Ireland Health Service Executive, 2025^[7]). Absence is recommended primarily in cases of more significant symptoms, such as fever or when a child is generally unwell.

The clearest and most consistent boundary across countries concerns fever and acute gastrointestinal illness, which are almost universally treated as conditions requiring absence. Overall, the evidence points to a shared policy framework across systems: attendance is required in normal conditions, allowed when illness is mild and does not significantly impair participation or increase transmission risk, and not required when symptoms indicate either substantial illness or a higher likelihood of contagion.

Across systems, the dominant pattern is that doctor's notes are not required for ordinary short-term sickness absence. In most systems, parents are expected to notify the school and provide a simple justification, while medical documentation is typically required when absences extend beyond a certain number of days, although thresholds vary. In Denmark, for instance, schools may request a doctor's note if illness lasts more than two weeks (Danish Agency for Digital Government, 2024^[8]), while in Portugal a medical certificate is required when the absence exceeds three working days (Public Ministry of Portugal, 2012^[9]). A distinct category concerns contagious diseases and formal exemptions, where medical certification is more systematically required. In France, for instance, a medical certificate is required for certain legally defined contagious diseases before a student can return to school (French Republic,

2024^[10]). Moreover, for chronic or long-term illness, education systems generally require specific certifications.

The evidence base on the effect of medical documentation requirements on attendance is quite limited. One study from a rural district in the United States finds an association between a policy mandating medical notes after three days of health-related absence and a reduction in recorded absences (from 12.3 to 7.97 days on average) (Kiriakidis and Kiriakidis, 2024^[11]). However, the study's design, which includes a single district and no control group, requires the findings to be interpreted cautiously, particularly given potential confounding factors and unequal access to healthcare.

Interesting evidence on the effectiveness of structured approaches that do not focus exclusively on compliance comes from the Dutch MAZL (Meer Aandacht voor Ziek gemelde Leerlingen or MASS – Medical Advice for Sick-reported Students) programme. MAZL is a structured, school-based intervention that treats repeated sickness absences as a signal for early identification and support rather than a compliance issue (Cedefop, 2017^[12]). It uses defined thresholds (typically four sickness reports within 12 weeks or seven consecutive school days of absence) to trigger a stepwise process starting with dialogue between school, student and parents, and, where needed, referral to youth health-care professionals for a biopsychosocial assessment and tailored plan. The approach is explicitly framed as one of “concern rather than control”, aiming to identify underlying issues early, prevent escalation, and coordinate support across education and health systems, with ongoing monitoring and potential escalation if absences persist (Netherlands Centre for Youth Health, 2023^[13]). Evidence from quasi-experimental evaluations suggests that such structured, support-oriented models can lead to meaningful reductions in sickness absences, though through different mechanisms than compliance-based systems. A study of this programme finds that absences decreased from 8.5 days in 12 school weeks to 5.7 after three months and 4.9 after twelve months, with smaller and less sustained reductions in the comparison group (Vanneste et al., 2016^[14]). According to the author, the effect is driven mainly by a reduction in the frequency of absence episodes rather than their duration, indicating improved management of recurrent absences rather than resolution of underlying conditions (ibid). The authors attribute these changes to earlier school-family engagement and coordinated follow-up through health services, rather than verification alone, while noting limitations such as the inability to isolate individual components and possible regression to the mean or scrutiny effects.

For students with chronic or long-term health conditions, the evidence points in a different direction from compliance-based approaches. Qualitative research with secondary students shows that illness and medical appointments often lead to unavoidable absences, and that pressure to maintain high attendance can have negative educational and emotional consequences when appropriate support is not in place (Hopwood et al., 2024^[15]). Moreover, a large cohort study using England's (United Kingdom) ECHILD database finds that students with chronic health conditions (especially those with mental health presentations) are significantly more likely to experience persistent absences, exclusion and non-enrolment, and highlights that policies focused on reducing absences can place additional burdens on these students (Jay et al., 2025^[16]).

More evidence on the effectiveness of different supports and interventions around mental and physical health is discussed under School-level interventions.

Not all exemptions are medical in nature, as various education systems also allow parents to choose different educational approaches for their children. Homeschooling (at least for certain educational levels) is permitted as an exemption in 28 systems. For instance, in Czechia, parents may request authorisation from the school principal for a student to be educated at home; the student must then sit regular examinations at their local school to ensure learning outcomes are being met (Czech Government, 2026^[17]). In the education systems that do not consider homeschooling an exemption, this is either due to the fact that homeschooling is not generally allowed in the country (often unless very limited and specific

circumstances apply), or that students that are regularly registered as homeschooled are considered to be attending education is an accepted format.

Alternative education pathways are also recognised as valid exemptions in 16 systems. For instance, in the French Community of Belgium, compulsory instruction can be fulfilled outside mainstream public schooling through several recognised routes, such as accredited private schools, schooling in neighbouring countries, recognised work-study pathways, or targeted support arrangements such as school outreach services for young people who have disengaged from education (Wallonie-Bruxelles Enseignement, 2019^[18]).

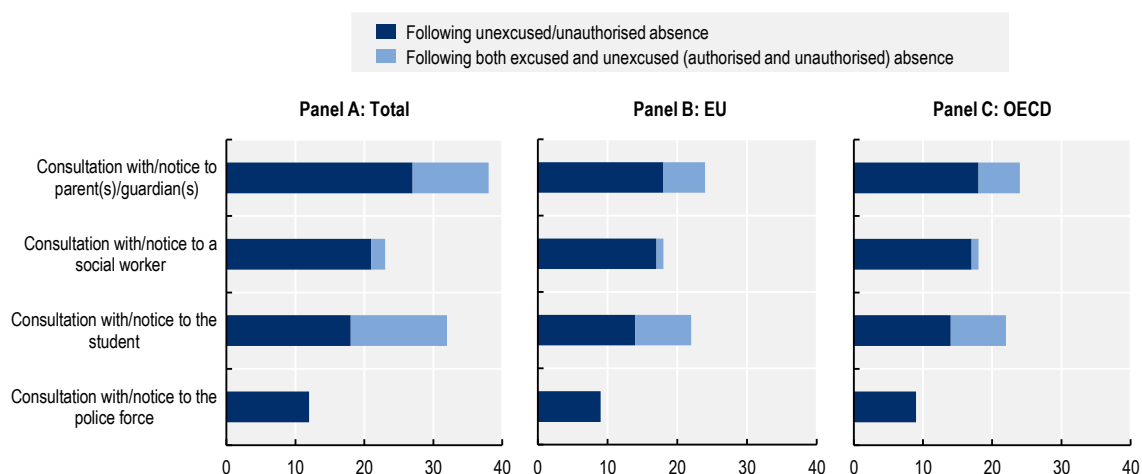
Finally, twelve systems reported other types of exemptions or circumstances under which students are not required to attend school. For instance, in Finland, parental and childcare leave, military service, or on-the-job learning can constitute circumstances under which students are not required to attend upper secondary schools and institutions. In Portugal, special conditions of school assiduity are recognised for students from itinerant families and distant learning is organised for them through the Mobile School project, which is a nationwide educational institution that operates through a learning platform organised in a virtual environment, using synchronous and asynchronous modalities (Ministry of Education of Portugal, 2009^[19]). In Luxembourg, the law provides temporary dispensations for family events, cultural/sporting activities, as well as charitable or civic activities (Ministre de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse du Luxembourg, 2023^[6]).

Legal provisions: consultations with key stakeholders

Many education systems have developed legal provisions that require schools to respond in specific ways to absences, authorised or not. These comprise measures that are meant to be supportive and others that are meant to be punitive, in order to seek compliance with compulsory schooling requirements through formal rules, monitoring, and sanctions applied to students and/or families.

Some education systems have instituted a system of consultations with students, parents, social workers and police forces as a follow-up to students' absences. These consultations can be required in various circumstances, such as in the case of unauthorised or authorised absences (e.g. in the case of long illnesses), or both (Figure 4.3), and can target the student, their family, or concern the involvement of specific professionals (e.g. social workers or the police).

Figure 4.3. Required consultations after absences



Note: Responses are based on the following question: "Following a period of a student's absence, which actions/steps are schools (or other stakeholders, e.g. social services) required to undertake?". 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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A large share of systems requires **consulting with or notifying parents** after a period of absence. This occurs in 27 education systems following unexcused/unauthorised absence. In several systems, such as Luxembourg, New Zealand and Sweden, the school must notify parents the same day when a student is absent without a valid explanation. In 11 systems, notifying or consulting with parents is required following both excused/authorised and unexcused/unauthorised absences, while this is not a requirement in 7 education systems. Evidence regarding the impact of such measures is presented in the Awareness-raising communication section.

Consultation with or notice to the student, instead, is required in 18 education systems following unexcused/unauthorised absences, and in 14 following excused and unexcused absence. For instance, in Portugal, when a student exceeds the permitted number¹ of unjustified absences, schools may require them to participate in learning recovery or integration activities, which are decided by the school and can involve both the student and their parents. By contrast, 13 systems do not require consultation with or notification to students after a period of absence.

When looking at the requirement to inform or consult specific professionals, a large share of systems focus on social workers. Indeed, **consultation with a social worker** occurs in 21 systems following unexcused/unauthorised absences, and in Catalonia (Spain) and England (United Kingdom) following both excused and unexcused absence. This is generally initiated after the student reaches a certain number of days of absence. For instance, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, when a student accumulates five unauthorised absences during the school year, schools must contact the Student Guidance Centre, which is then responsible for providing guidance and support to help restore regular attendance. Consulting with a social worker is not required, however, in about half of the survey respondent systems (22). In various systems, however, these consultations are an option that schools have at their disposal and discretion to respond to students' SAP. In Wales (United Kingdom), for instance, all these forms of consultations are set out as options for schools to adopt in the Government's guidance (Welsh Government, 2023^[20]). Similarly, in Italy, this sort of actions is decided at school level, within the sphere of school autonomy.

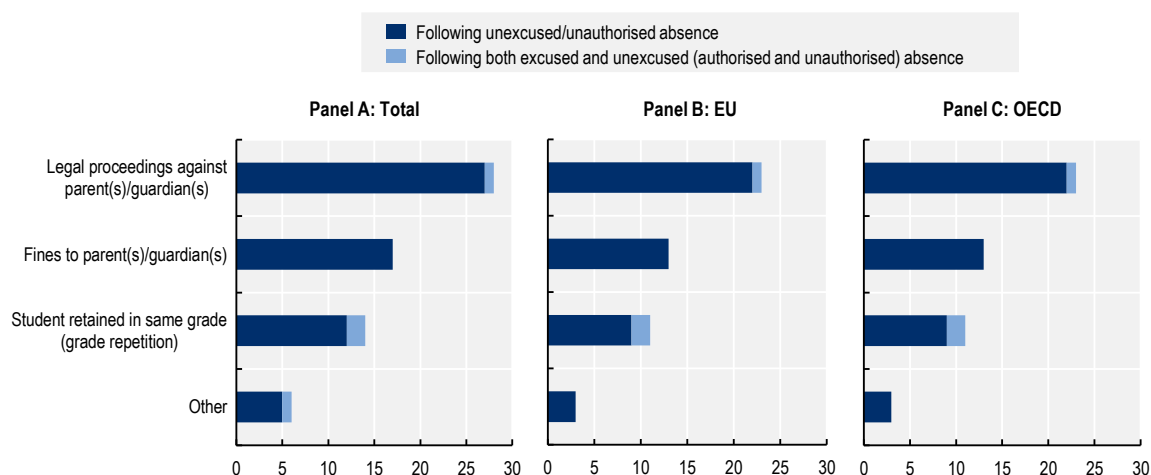
Stokes et al. (2024^[21]) highlight the underutilised role of school social workers in this area. Building on earlier research (Bye et al., 2009^[22]; Reid, 2006^[23]), they argue that social workers are uniquely positioned to bridge schools and families, assess psychosocial stressors, and connect caregivers to community-based services. Districts in Minnesota (United States) that integrate licensed social workers into attendance teams report improvements in attendance, partly because social workers reframe attendance problems as manifestations of unmet needs rather than motivation deficits (Bye et al., 2009^[22]).

Another public service that can be involved in these cases is the police force, even though it is not common practice among education systems. Indeed, **consulting with the police** is required in only 12 education systems in the case of unexcused/unauthorised absences, while it is not in 32 education systems.

Legal provisions: punitive measures

Punitive measures following school absences can include a range of legally framed responses such as fines or penalty notices issued to parents, prosecutions or court proceedings, grade repetition, and truancy court or truancy court diversion programmes. These measures are typically justified as mechanisms to enforce compulsory schooling requirements, deter persistent non-attendance, and signal the seriousness of attendance obligations (Wright, 2009^[24]; Zhang, 2007^[25]). As shown in Figure 4.4, education systems generally adopt a number of punitive measures, largely following unexcused/unauthorised absence. Several systems, however, do not adopt any punitive measures.

Figure 4.4. Punitive measures following absence



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Following a period of a student’s absence, which actions/steps are schools (or other stakeholders, e.g. social services) required to undertake?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025_[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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Legal proceedings against parents are the most commonly adopted measure across countries surveyed (OECD, 2025_[2]). These are required in 27 systems following unexcused/unauthorised absences. In many systems, however, these measures are not considered a first line response but are meant to be undertaken in cases of persistent absences and unsuccessful alternative measures.

For example, if earlier measures to restore attendance do not succeed, local education authorities in France are expected to refer the case to public prosecutors for potential proceedings related to non-compliance with compulsory school attendance (French Republic, 2012_[26]). Ceuta (Spain) requires schools to implement legal proceedings following both excused and unexcused absences. By contrast, 17 systems do not require any legal proceedings against parents.

A second common approach is **fining parents** or **suspensions of existing social benefits**. According to the Survey, these are required following unexcused/unauthorised absences in 17 education systems (OECD, 2025_[2]). For instance, in Japan, if a student does not attend school without a justifiable reason and their parents fail to comply after being formally reminded to ensure attendance, the parents may be punished by a fine of up to JPY 100 000 (EUR 591)² (Government of Japan, 2018_[27]). In the Flemish Community of Belgium, low-income families can lose their school allowance if their child is unduly absent for more than 29 half days during two consecutive school years (Flemish Government, 2021_[28]). These financial sanctions are not required in 28 systems.

Overall, while not all systems adopt financial sanctions, these remain fairly common practices across education systems, as shown by the Survey data (OECD, 2025_[2]). However, the enforcement of sanctions varies substantially across education systems. In some systems, such as England (United Kingdom), fines are enforced but heavily concentrated on term-time holidays (Department for Education of the United Kingdom, 2026_[29]); in other systems, such as France or Ireland, sanctions are explicitly placed at the end of a tagged support process (Directorate for Legal and Administrative Information of the French Government, 2025_[30]; Citizens Information, 2023_[31]). Yet, the evidence on their effectiveness in increasing attendance is limited, as discussed in Box 4.1.

Box 4.1. To fine or not to fine: evidence on the impact of financial sanctions on attendance

Financial sanctions on families – such as fines or the suspension of existing social benefits – are designed to deter unauthorised school absences by increasing the immediate cost of non-attendance and signalling that parents are responsible for ensuring their children attend school regularly.

Imposing fines to improve students' attendance

Evidence on the effectiveness of fines in improving students' attendance is limited and insufficiently robust to draw firm causal conclusions. In England (United Kingdom), a correlational analysis finds no association between local authorities' propensity to issue penalty notices and subsequent change in absence rates (Zhang, 2007^[25]). By contrast, an observational evaluation of England's Fast Track to Prosecution – a framework intended to accelerate escalation in response to persistent school non-attendance, potentially resulting in fines – reports short-term improvements in average attendance and reductions in unauthorised absence. However, the evaluation finds that gains often diminish after cases are withdrawn from the process. Qualitative evidence further suggests this framework works best in cases of less severe, newly emerging non-attendance that were not characterised by complex social issues (Halsey et al., 2004^[32]). A quasi-experimental study in England similarly finds that a stringent penalty policy introduced in 2013 slightly reduced overall holiday absences, with authorised absences increasing and unauthorised absences declining. It also shows that disadvantaged socio-economic groups were disproportionately affected, and that the policy's marginal impact weakened two years after implementation, despite a continued rise in penalties (Yu and Leni, 2021^[33]).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the attendance system in England has been reformed through the introduction of a national framework emphasising a “support first” approach, with fines intended as a last resort when support is not engaged with or is deemed inappropriate (for example, in cases of term-time holidays). Recent administrative data indicate that 93% of fines issued in England relate to unauthorised term-time holidays (Department for Education of the United Kingdom, 2026^[29]).

Similarly, in Wales (United Kingdom), one local authority reports that following warning letters, attendance improved enough that a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) was not issued in 87% of 326 cases (ICF Consulting Limited; Arad Research, 2018^[34]). However, the same report also highlights potential unintended consequences, with parents reportedly recording absences as illness rather than requesting holiday authorisation or keeping unauthorised absences just below the trigger point to avoid an FPN (ibid.).

Suspending existing social benefits to improving students' attendance

Evidence on suspending existing social benefits is also mixed and context dependent. In the United States, the Wisconsin's Learnfare initiative was a conditional cash penalty programme that could reduce families' welfare grants when adolescents did not meet school attendance targets. A random-assignment evaluation of this mechanism suggests that Learnfare increased school enrolment by 3.5% and attendance by 4.5% between 1993 and 1995 (Dee, 2011^[35]). A comparable dynamic is reported in Australia's School Enrolment and Attendance Measure, which threatened to remove welfare benefits from families if their children failed to attend school regularly. This measure was trialled between 2009 and 2012 in remote communities with mainly Indigenous populations. A difference-in-difference analysis of this trial finds a small increase in attendance following the programme's implementation. However, administrators rarely carried out the threatened sanctions, and these initial gains largely dissipated in subsequent years (Justman and Peyton, 2018^[36]). The absence of any measurable impact is even clearer in France, where a Senate review of a 2010 law that provided gradual suspension of social benefits for families with children with low school attendance concludes that nothing in available

statistics suggest the mechanism was effective (Assouline, 2012^[37]). The law was thus abrogated in 2013.

Across contexts, the evidence suggests that financial sanctions on parents can prompt short-term attendance gains, especially where absence is newly emerging, relatively marginal, and the sanction threat is swift and credible. However, impacts are heterogeneous and often fade once enforcement pressure eases. Sanctions alone are therefore unlikely to reduce persistent absences rooted in structural barriers and are most plausibly effective only as a backstop within a graduated approach that prioritises early identification and tailored support.

Grade repetition is another option that some systems adopted, and that is required in 12 systems following unexcused/unauthorised absences and in 2 systems following both excused and unexcused absences (Ceuta (Spain) and Lithuania). For example, in Portugal, if a student does not comply with recovery and integration measures that were set up after an excessive number of absences, or if these measures prove ineffective, the student will repeat the school year. Grade repetition is instead not required in 30 education systems.

Grade repetition is generally considered a costly, as it entails significant costs for both education systems and individuals experiencing it, and inequitable, as it tends to affect disadvantaged students, measure (OECD, 2022^[38]). Moreover, the causal evidence on the effect of grade repetition on attendance is null or even negative: several quasi-experimental studies find no significant effect, while newer work even finds increases in school absence. Using a regression discontinuity design, a long-run study on retention in grades 3 through 8 (ISCED 1-2) in New-York City (United States), finds no evidence of systematic effects on attendance and suspensions. However, retained lower secondary-school students were more likely to drop out very late in upper secondary school and less likely to meet graduation requirements (Mariano, Martorell and Tsai, 2018^[39]). Using a similar design, an evaluation of third-grade retention in Indiana (United States) also finds no effect on student attendance into lower secondary education (Hwang and Koedel, 2023^[40]). A fuzzy regression discontinuity analysis of Texas public-school administrative records (1994–2023) even estimates that third-grade retention increases absences in the following two years by about 23% and 25%, respectively (Zhong, Forthcoming^[41]).

Using administrative data on primary-education students in Philadelphia (United States) from 1995–2001, a quasi-experimental study also identifies potential spillover effects: having a higher share of retained classmates increases other students' unexcused absences (Gottfried, 2013^[42]).

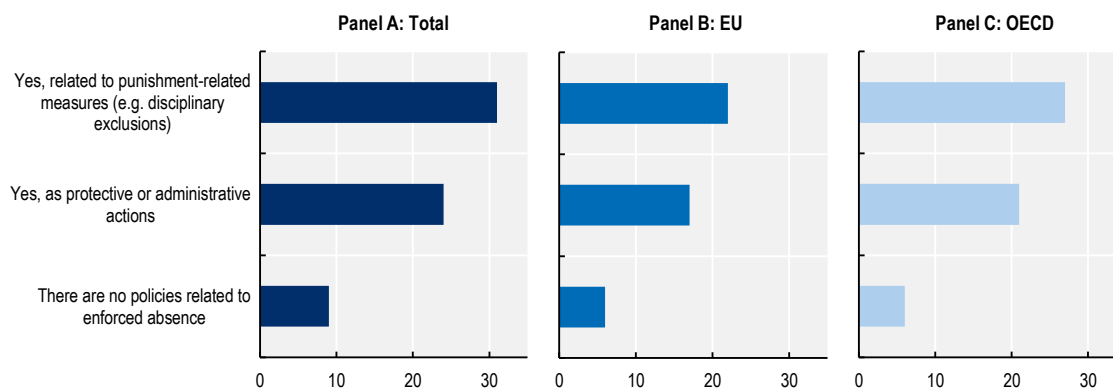
Moreover, grade repetition is generally associated with lower educational completion, particularly for later-grade retention. For example, in Italy, an analysis using propensity score matching of longitudinal administrative data from northern regions estimates that grade retention in upper secondary education makes students about 5.6 times more likely to drop out (Contini and Salza, 2024^[43]).

Six education systems also reported adopting **other mandatory measures** following a student's absence (OECD, 2025^[2]). For example, in Luxembourg, students in secondary education that are absent for 15 consecutive days without a valid excuse are considered to have definitely left school. In Peru, an absence of 15 consecutive calendar days without justification must be formally reported to the Municipal Office for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, which then contacts the family and provides legal, psychological, and social support to address underlying causes of absences such as economic hardship, health issues, or family problems.

Policies that relate to **enforced absences**, while not meant to reduce SAP, are at times used as punitive measures within education systems. Indeed, while most policies aim at reducing or avoiding absences, there are instances in which education systems enforce absences on students as a punitive measure or as a protective/administrative action. This practice can be referred to in different ways across education systems but is often known as suspension. The Survey asked countries whether they adopted policies


aimed at enforcing absences (see Figure 4.5) and found that 36 education systems have a policy enforcing absences on students for different reasons (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Figure 4.5. Policies related to enforced absence



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Does your education system have policies related to enforced absence?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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Despite the relatively widespread prevalence of enforced absences, there is a strong consensus in the literature that suspensions are associated with various negative outcomes. Apart from the obvious fact that suspensions immediately increase absences (by definition), research also indicates that they are not effective in reducing SAP in the longer term (Singer, 2023^[44]). Furthermore, meta-analyses show that suspensions are associated with increased delinquency (Gerlinger et al., 2021^[45]) and decreased academic achievement (Noltemeyer, Ward and Mcloughlin, 2015^[46]). Moreover, enforced school absences are also linked to higher dropout rates and lower college attendance (Jabbari and Johnson, 2020^[47]; Noltemeyer, Ward and Mcloughlin, 2015^[46]). A quasi-experimental study suggests that suspensions contribute to these adverse outcomes through degraded perceptions of school climate and lower sense of belonging, suggesting that they could exacerbate disengagement (Liu, 2024^[48]).

At the same time, schools must balance these risks against the need to maintain safe and supportive learning environments. Disruptive and aggressive behaviour can damage classmates’ learning and, in some cases, create genuine safety risks (Carrell, Hoekstra and Kuka, 2018^[49]). However, evidence that suspension use benefits other students is mixed. Some studies find short-term benefits from stricter discipline, but others show that high suspension environments are associated with poorer school climate and weaker outcomes even for non-suspended peers (Craig and Martin, 2025^[50]; Hwang and Domina, 2021^[51]; Lacoë and Steinberg, 2018^[52]; Perry and Morris, 2014^[53]; Pope and Zuo, 2023^[54]; Wang et al., 2024^[55]). The evidence therefore supports a balanced approach focusing on prevention and early interventions. Enforced absences could be reserved for serious violence or immediate safety threats to balance the risks and potential negative effects of these measures.

A range of alternatives have been proposed to address misconduct while keeping students connected to education. A systematic review finds that alternative school-based interventions produce a small short-term reduction in suspensions but that effects are not clearly sustained over time. On the contrary, it finds desirable effects for academic skills enhancement, counselling, mentoring or monitoring, and teacher skills training, although the number of studies for each intervention type is small and the findings should therefore be treated cautiously (Valdebenito et al., 2018^[56]). Other approaches include restorative practice

(emphasising responsibility and harm-repair), Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), social and emotional learning, targeted behaviour support, and school based mental health or counselling, but the strength of evidence varies across interventions and contexts (Chin et al., 2012^[57]; LiCalsi, Osher and Bailey, 2021^[58]; Noltemeyer, Ward and Mcloughlin, 2015^[46]).

Where suspension is unavoidable, schools could safeguard continuity of education through a comprehensive response that maintains student engagement, for example through structured learning activities, collaboration with external providers (e.g. non-governmental, community or youth organisations), and continued access to support services. Schools could also prioritise in-school over out-of-school suspension and plan reintegration carefully, rather than allowing disciplinary absence to become the start of longer-term educational exclusion (LiCalsi, Osher and Bailey, 2021^[58]). More research is still needed on which alternatives work best in different contexts.

Among respondents, 31 of the 45 education systems reported having policies that allow enforced absences from school as a punishment-related measure. Among these, some systems establish a cap concerning the duration of disciplinary suspensions. For instance, in Finland, a student who disrupts instruction or otherwise violates school order or behaves dishonestly may be suspended for a maximum of three months if the violation is serious or if the student continues the inappropriate behaviour after receiving a detention session or a written warning. In such cases, the education provider must ensure that the suspended student is able to continue receiving instruction and/or complete compulsory education (Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland, 1998^[59]). In other systems, disciplinary measures can include permanent expulsion. For example, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, a student may be definitively expelled from a school in cases of serious offences, requiring them to enrol in another school.

Twenty-four systems also have policies in regard to enforced absences as protective or administrative actions. For instance, in Latvia, when an under-age student continues to endanger their own safety, health or life or that of other persons at school – despite previous warnings and interventions – they may have to follow an individual learning plan in a different room or time in the presence of a teacher or pursue distance learning for a maximum of one month. In Sweden, students in compulsory schooling may be suspended by the school leader if they behave in such a way that the safety of other students or staff is deemed to be threatened. Such suspensions are time-limited: they may last no longer than one week and may be imposed no more than twice per semester. The student who has been suspended must also be offered compensation for the teaching they missed during the suspension period (i.e. receive remedial instructions). In Luxembourg, regulations also provide for mandatory exclusion from school in cases of contagious disease, with the length of the exclusion period determined by public health rules (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Luxembourg, 2025^[60]).

In addition to formal enforced absences captured through suspension, exclusion or protective removal policies, some systems have raised concerns about less visible forms of de facto enforced absences, particularly for students whose support needs exceed available school capacity (read more in Box 4.2).

Box 4.2. Hidden forms of enforced absences

While enforced absences are generally regulated as disciplinary, protective or administrative measures, evidence from several systems suggests that students with special education needs (SEN) or complex health, behavioural and social needs may also lose access to full-time education through less visible mechanisms. These are not always recorded as formal suspension or exclusion. Instead, students may be asked to stay home, placed on reduced timetables, moved into alternative provision, remain without a school place after exclusion, or have their absences “medicalised” through certificates.

This concern has been raised in several systems. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Children's

Rights Commissioner of Belgium-Flanders (Kinderrechtencommissariaat) has highlighted the issue of *thuiszitters* – students who are at home rather than in school – including students who remain at home part- or full-time with a medical certificate, sometimes despite not being “really ill”, and students who do not find a new school place after permanent exclusion. Because such absences may be formally justified, they can remain under the radar of regular attendance monitoring (Children’s Rights Commissioner of the Flemish Community of Belgium, 2024^[61]; 2025^[62]). In Ireland, the Ombudsman for Children warned that reduced timetables were being used as an informal suspension to manage behaviour that schools found difficult to address, with children with disabilities and emotional or behavioural difficulties disproportionately affected (Ombudsman for Children, 2019^[63]); subsequent Department of Education guidance clarified that reduced school days should be used only in limited circumstances and with oversight (Department of Education of Ireland, 2021^[64]). Similar concerns have been documented in New Zealand, where the Education Review Office (2022^[65]) found that disabled learners were sometimes asked to stay home because of resourcing issues, often when a teacher aide was unavailable; 27% of parents and whānau (extended family) surveyed reported being asked to keep their disabled child at home at least once. In Scotland (United Kingdom), Audit Scotland (2025^[66]) has warned that additional support for learning requires a fundamental rethink of planning, funding and staffing, noting that students receiving additional support are more likely to be absent or excluded. In Victoria (Australis), the Ombudsman reported that students with disabilities were disproportionately represented among expulsions, while informal exclusions were not systematically captured (Victorian Ombudsman, 2017^[67])

These examples point to a common policy risk: when support needs exceed school capacity, students may be displaced from full-time schooling through routes that are formally justified or administratively fragmented, rather than recorded as suspension or exclusion. Attendance monitoring that focuses only on formal absence codes or disciplinary exclusions may therefore miss students whose entitlement to education is interrupted through reduced provision, informal exclusion or delayed placement. This suggests that systems may need to monitor not only whether students are enrolled or formally absent, but also whether they are receiving full-time, meaningful access to education, and whether reduced attendance reflects unmet support needs rather than genuine parental choice, unavoidable illness or formal disciplinary action.

In Japan, the municipal board of education may order parents to suspend their child’s attendance if their behaviour interferes with other students’ learning. Before issuing such an order, the board is required to hear the parents’ views in advance and to take measures to support the student’s learning during the suspension period. Japan reports that this mechanism is framed not as a disciplinary sanction against the student, but as a way of maintaining order in school and safeguarding other students’ right to education. By contrast, for students who are older than the compulsory schooling age (over 15), expulsion may be used as a disciplinary measure.

Finally, among the 45 respondents, only nine education systems have not adopted any policy enforcing absences on students: Brazil, Ceuta (Spain), Chile, Croatia, Czechia, Indonesia, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

Legal provisions: Incentives and rewards

A widely used strategy involves attendance-related incentives, defined broadly as financial, social or other inducements designed to influence behaviour (Balu and Ehrlich, 2018^[68]). These can be implemented both at the level of the educational authority (national or local) or at the school level, but this section focuses on the central requirements towards schools, in line with the questions of the Survey (OECD, 2025^[2]).

According to the Survey, eight of the responding education systems require schools to provide incentive programmes for students or families to promote regular school attendance (OECD, 2025^[2]). For instance,

in Poland, attendance counts toward students' annual conduct grade. Another example comes from Romania, where a 2015 law established a nationwide programme for low-income families, conditional on their children's daily attendance in pre-school, through which families receive vouchers for food, hygiene products, clothing and/or school supplies (Gheorghiu et al., 2021^[69]; Parliament of Romania, 2015^[70]).

Thus, schools can implement a range of incentives, from public recognition and small rewards to more substantial prizes or financial incentives, though rigorous evidence on their effectiveness remains limited (Balu and Ehrlich, 2018^[68]; Fryer, 2011^[71]). Evaluations of larger-scale programmes providing financial incentives at the educational authority level show mixed effects. For instance, New York City's Family Rewards conditional cash transfer programme improved ninth-grade attendance modestly but had no significant impact in earlier grades, with effects concentrated among students already on track for graduation (Riccio et al., 2010^[72]). Moreover, a large randomised control trial (RCT) in the United States finds that neither prospective awards (i.e. rewards for future attendance) nor retrospective awards (i.e. rewards for past attendance) improve attendance (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]; Robinson et al., 2021^[74]).

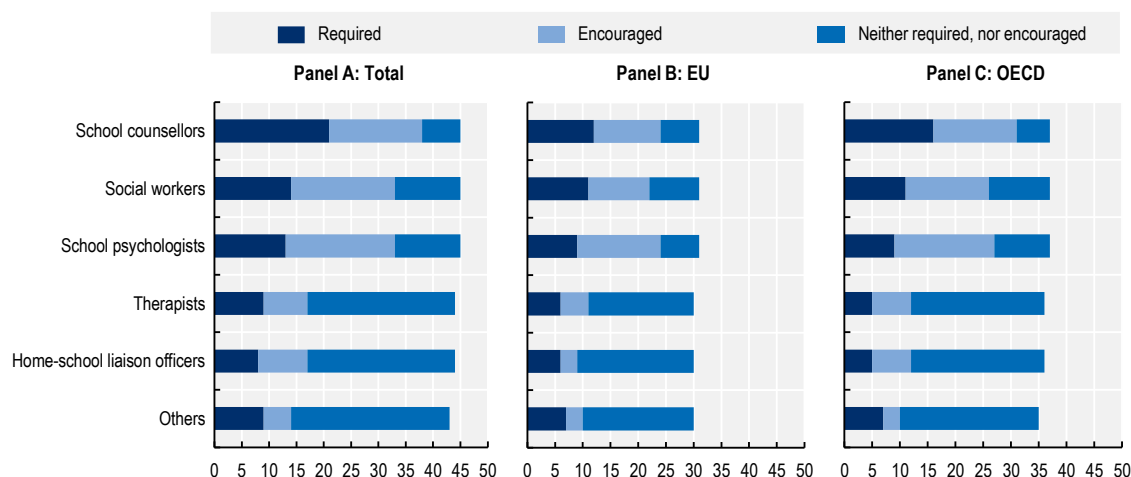
Overall, the evidence on attendance incentives remains mixed and limited, with few studies showing consistent or sustained improvements in attendance. While some programmes report modest positive effects for specific groups of students, others find little or no impact, particularly when incentives are implemented in isolation from broader supports. The literature points less to a single "effective" incentive model and evidence remains weak regarding optimal design, targeting or duration (Balu and Ehrlich, 2018^[68]). More broadly, incentives alone are unlikely to address the complex structural, relational and school-level drivers underpinning many school attendance problems, suggesting they are best considered as part of wider support strategies rather than as stand-alone solutions. Finally, attendance rewards, particularly those based on perfect or near-perfect attendance, are also contested from an equity and public-health perspective. While intended to promote regular participation, such rewards may penalise students whose absences are legitimate or unavoidable, including those with chronic illness, disability, mental health needs, medical appointments, caring responsibilities or unstable family circumstances. They may also create perverse incentives for students to attend school while unwell, potentially undermining public-health guidance and increasing risks for other students.

Engagement of non-teaching staff

Both engagement of non-teaching staff within schools and partnerships with external professionals are central components of governance arrangements to address SAP. Given that SAP often stem from complex and interrelated academic, social, health and family factors, it is unlikely that a single professional group can address them alone. Effective responses may therefore require coherent and sustained collaboration across school staff, specialised services, government departments and community organisations. Partnerships with health and social services, as well as local community actors, can help create a more holistic support system for students and their families. Across education systems, teachers are frequently supported by other professionals, such as school leaders, counsellors, social workers, school psychologists and home-school liaison co-ordinators (Reid, 2013^[75]). Evidence suggests that multi-professional teams can help address different dimensions of students' and families' situations and may have beneficial effects on attendance outcomes (Boaler and Bond, 2023^[76]; Kearney and Graczyk, 2020^[77]; Keppens and Spruyt, 2020^[78]; Mossberg, 2025^[79]). In addition, multi-agency working can provide a "collaborative advantage" in supporting school attendance, by allowing knowledge and resources pooling, while reducing the impact on individual workloads (Corcoran et al., 2023^[80]; Zerden, Lombardi and Richman, 2019^[81]). However, effective teamwork depends on clear role definition, mutual understanding of responsibilities and shared accountability (Jahans-Baynton and Grealish, 2021^[82]; Zerden, Lombardi and Richman, 2019^[81]). Further evidence is discussed below in the section Incorporating health services into schools.

Results from the Survey show that system-level policies related to the engagement of non-teaching staff in addressing SAP vary considerably across education systems (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Education systems requiring or encouraging schools to engage non-teaching staff



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to engage one or more non-teaching staff member(s)?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries. Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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The most common profile that education systems require schools to involve are **school counsellors**, in 21 out of 45 systems, which are also encouraged to be involved in a further 17 systems. Moreover, 14 education systems require schools to involve **social workers** in addressing students’ absences, 19 encourage it, while 12 neither require nor encourage such involvement. Similarly, 20 systems encourage schools to involve **school psychologists** in tackling SAP, and 13 even require it, while 12 education systems do not.

Home-school liaison officers and **therapists** are less frequently involved in addressing students’ absences: 27 education systems neither require nor encourage their engagement. Nevertheless, nine systems require schools to involve therapists and eight encourage them to do so. For home-school liaison officers, eight systems require their engagement and nine encourage it. In Ireland, for instance, designated disadvantaged schools (under the DEIS programme) have access to both the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Co-ordinator (see Box 4.4) and the School Completion Programme staff who provide supports directly to children, young people and parents to improve school attendance, participation and retention. This can involve one-to-one work as well as group work.

The engagement of **other non-teaching staff** is mandatory in nine education systems and encouraged in five. For example, in Portugal, schools – particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged or multicultural contexts – are encouraged to recruit linguistic and cultural mediators to better support students and families from migrant, Roma or minority backgrounds by facilitating communication with the school, promoting belonging and trust, and preventing school absences and dropout (Government of Portugal, 2025^[83]). Another example comes from the Netherlands, where internal support workers (*interne begeleiders*) are required to contact and co-ordinate the different professionals involved in addressing SAP.

Overall, while many education systems recognise the importance of multi-professional collaboration in addressing SAP, policy approaches differ in the extent to which the engagement of specific non-teaching

roles is required or encouraged. These differences reflect variations in governance structures, resource allocation and service availability, and may shape the degree to which schools can implement comprehensive, integrated responses to student absence.

School-level interventions

Education systems may set out a framework for addressing SAP, but it is at the school level that these policies are translated into practice. Generally, schools operationalise attendance strategies through three broad areas of action: instructional adaptations, supports, and engagement and re-integration measures.

First, **instructional adaptations** aim to reduce the academic consequences of absence and prevent further disengagement. These may include adapting instruction and assessments, using digital technologies to ensure continuity of learning, and providing remedial or catch-up support when students return.

Second, schools mobilise a range of **supports** to address the underlying barriers to attendance. This can involve consultation with students and parents after absences, counselling and psycho-social support, collaboration with social workers and health services, family support programmes, and targeted assistance for disadvantaged students.

Third, **engagement measures** focus on restoring students' connection to school. These include attendance improvement plans, structured re-integration pathways, attention to transition points, peer-support initiatives, parent engagement, and broader efforts to strengthen school climate and student engagement. Together, these areas illustrate how school-level capacity shapes the prevention of and response to SAP.

These school-level responses are codified in different ways among education systems. In some countries, they are embedded within a comprehensive national attendance strategy that provides a structured, tiered response framework. In others, they are organised through specific programmes (e.g. mentoring, counselling, community school models) or formalised through required documents that are triggered when certain absence thresholds are reached. Frequently, schools are required to document their actions in written plans once a student is identified as persistently or severely absent. These documents – referred to as attendance improvement plans or individual attendance plans – serve both as intervention tools and accountability mechanisms. Ten education systems report using these individual re-integration plans with step-by-step guidance (OECD, 2025^[2]).

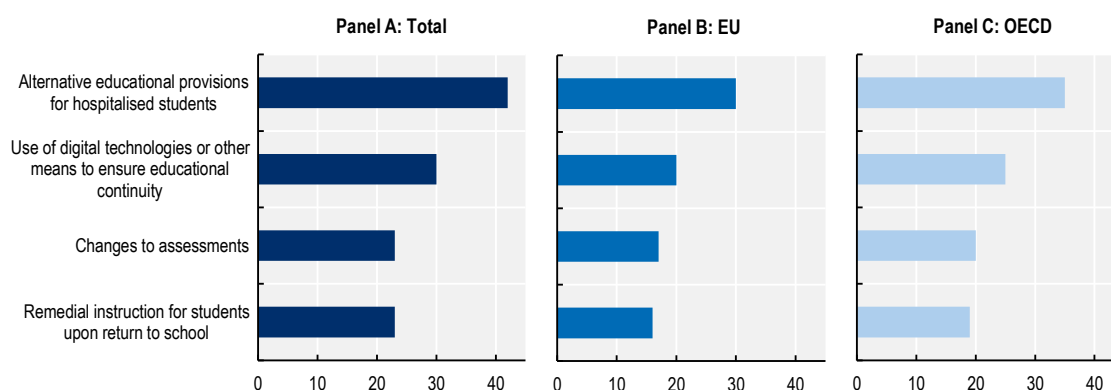
Instructional adaptations

One of the key supports for students facing barriers to their attendance is the adaptation of instruction to their needs to facilitate their participation in education. For some students, this can mean alternative provisions in the case of hospitalisation or impossibility to attend regular school hours due to illnesses. As shown in Figure 4.7, the vast majority of education systems surveyed (42 out of 45) have policies that require or encourage schools to provide **alternative educational arrangements for hospitalised students** (OECD, 2025^[2]).

While research is not extensive in this area, a central conclusion that comes from academia and policy documents is that alternative arrangements should be understood as temporary, flexible, health-sensitive educational continuity, not as a substitute for normal school participation unless that is clearly necessary. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that education should remain in the least restrictive setting and that home or hospital instruction should support a return to school at the earliest appropriate point (2000^[84]). More recently, their guidance on school attendance likewise says that out-of-school instruction should be clearly medically justified, time-limited, and paired with a re-entry plan (Allison et al., 2019^[85]). Guidance from the United Kingdom similarly requires local authorities to arrange education for children

whose illness prevents school attendance and says it should be full-time where possible, unless part-time is in the child's best interests because of health needs (United Kingdom Department of Health and Social Care, 2015^[86]). In addition to the proven therapeutic value of in-hospital pedagogical practices, the implemented activities should be thought out individually and planned according to defined learning objectives (Ludgério et al., 2023^[87]; Magalhães et al., 2018^[88]). In this process, it is essential that the hospital teacher is sensitive and considers the hospitalised child's age group, educational needs, and clinical condition (Barbosa and Gimenes, 2017^[89]; Gomes dos Santos, Da Conceição and Ferro Cavalcante, 2019^[90]; Ludgério et al., 2023^[87]; Montanari, Silva and Maciel, 2019^[91]).

Figure 4.7. System-level policies on instruction adaptation for students with attendance problems



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to provide any of the following supports for students with school attendance problems?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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In Iceland, primary-education students who are unable to attend school due to an accident or long-term illness, as certified by a doctor, are entitled to alternative education either at home or in a medical institution (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture of Iceland, 2010^[92]). This support can include distance or distributed learning, delivered under teacher guidance and co-ordinated with parents, medical staff and the student's school. The school leader, in consultation with doctors and parents, determines the scope and organisation of provision and is responsible for developing an individualised curriculum tailored to the student's health condition and endurance. The aim is to ensure that students miss as little instruction as possible and are not disadvantaged educationally due to illness. The use of digital tools is encouraged to maintain learning continuity and to help students stay connected with their school and peer group where feasible.

Similarly, in France, around 11 000 students each year receive schooling in hospitals or healthcare institutions, supported by nearly 800 specialist teachers assigned to hospitals or children's homes. Additional teachers provide instruction at home for students who must remain there for several weeks due to health reasons, often on a voluntary, paid-overtime basis, with priority given to teachers from the student's original school. Beyond delivering lessons, teachers are responsible for maintaining links with the student's regular school and class, using digital tools to ensure continuity of learning and social connection.

France also makes extensive use of distance learning and telepresence solutions. Through the APADHE scheme, the Ministry of Education deploys TED-i telepresence robots, which allow students to participate remotely in classroom activities from hospital or home. Around 4 000 robots had been deployed by the end

of 2022. Students may also access courses from the National Centre for Distance Learning (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de la France, 2019^[93]). Local education services co-ordinate provision depending on circumstances, assigning teachers to paediatric hospitals or other care settings as needed, while designated co-ordinators ensure both educational and medical links are maintained.

As shown by the previous examples, educational continuity often relies on the use of **digital technologies**. According to the Survey, policies promoting educational continuity through digital technologies or other means are in place in 30 systems (OECD, 2025^[2]). In Norway, for instance, distance learning may be used for parts of education when there are sound reasons and when it is safe and pedagogically justified, meaning that the benefits for students outweigh the disadvantages (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024^[94]). Decisions must consider students' learning, development, well-being and social cohesion. Students are generally expected to receive distance learning at school, although exceptions may be made in special cases, and upper secondary students may receive exemptions by agreement with the school leader. Distance learning must enable effective communication between teachers and students, using technical solutions that allow real-time or near real-time interaction. Municipal or county authorities must confirm that the legal conditions are met, and the ministry may issue further regulations.

In a similar way, in Portugal, distance learning is regulated as an exceptional measure, used when students are unable to attend school for justified reasons, such as prolonged illness or other impediments (Ministry of Education of Portugal, 2019^[95]). It is framed as a temporary solution to ensure continuity of learning and prevent educational disruption, rather than as a substitute for in-person schooling. The responsibility for organising distance learning lies with the school, which must ensure that the pedagogical conditions are equivalent, as far as possible, to face-to-face education. Schools are required to define an appropriate teaching and assessment plan, maintain regular interaction between teachers and students, and monitor student participation and progress. Digital platforms and synchronous communication tools are typically used to facilitate real-time or near real-time interaction. Notably, the implementation of distance learning must take into account students' individual circumstances, including access to digital equipment and connectivity. Schools are expected to adopt measures to mitigate inequalities in access and ensure that students remain integrated within their class group.

Instructional adaptation can also consist of more intensive or **remedial instruction** after a period of absence. Indeed, 23 education systems require or encourage schools to offer remedial instruction to students who have been absent upon their return to school. This is the case, for instance, in Romania, where remedial and inclusive instruction for at-risk students were introduced under the "school after school" pilot programme in 2021. The programme provides remedial instruction, structured support, and inclusive teaching to ensure learning continuity and prevent dropout. Included in Romania's National Programme to Reduce School Drop-Out, remedial education was generalised in 2023 as part of the "Remedial Learning" programme, designed to support students with learning difficulties or who are falling behind in their studies (Parliament of Romania, 2023^[96]). Similarly, both the French and the Flemish Communities of Belgium adopted strategies to ensure remediation. In the former, the school can request additional resources to ensure support to a student that re-enters education after a period of absence. In the latter, the content of assessment can also be adapted, and programmes can be made flexible, notably for students that are at risk of early school leaving. This **flexibility on the content of assessment** is fairly common across education systems, as half of the systems surveyed (23 out of 45) reports having policies requiring or encouraging schools to adapt assessments to support students with attendance problems (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Remedial instruction, or academic interventions in general, can also be used to improve attendance. For example, in Washington D.C. (United States), the High-Impact Tutoring initiative is designed to mitigate learning loss among "at-risk" upper-secondary students, including those enrolled in social benefit programmes, in foster care or who were retained. Evidence suggests that this programme reduces students' likelihood of being absent by about 7% on days when tutoring is scheduled (Lee, Loeb and Robinson, 2024^[97]). As for students who are chronically ill or returning from hospitalisation, robust evidence

on the impacts of re-integration programmes remains scarce. The literature suggests that these plans – which typically include tailored academic support – may help improve school attendance (Canter and Roberts, 2012^[98]; Tougas et al., 2022^[99]; Wikel and Markelz, 2023^[100]).

Yet, research shows that the effectiveness of academic interventions to improve attendance patterns depends on the programmes or initiatives that are actually implemented in schools. As discussed in Box 4.3, these academic efforts can contribute to improvements in attendance, although effects are generally modest and not consistent across all interventions. Overall, improvements in attendance seem more likely when academic reforms strengthen students' connection to learning and to school, rather than when they focus solely on discrete skill development.

Box 4.3. Effectiveness of academic interventions in addressing SAP

Melvin et al. (2025^[73]) identify and review eight quasi-experimental studies from the United States examining universal academic interventions and their impact on school attendance. Overall, the evidence reviewed suggests that academic approaches can contribute to improvements in attendance, although effects are generally modest and not consistent across all interventions.

Main findings

Several interventions are associated with positive attendance outcomes. For instance, looping, a practice in which a teacher remains with the same group of students for two consecutive years, is linked to significant reductions in absent days compared to matched peers, with attendance improving over time in the looping group while declining in the comparison group (Cistone and Shneyderman, 2004^[101]). Project-based learning, implemented in economically disadvantaged secondary schools, is also associated with significantly higher attendance over a three-year period compared to traditional instructional approaches, for socio-economically disadvantaged students (Creghan and Adair-Creghan, 2015^[102]). Similarly, schools implementing the Different Ways of Knowing model – a comprehensive school reform approach that promotes more personalised and holistic teaching – demonstrate a modest but statistically significant increase in attendance during the second year of implementation, although this effect is not sustained in the third year (Muñoz, Ross and McDonald, 2007^[103]).

Studies of school-wide or programmatic reforms also find positive associations. Students attending charter schools³ with strong behavioural expectations around attendance have slightly higher attendance rates than matched peers in traditional public schools, with effects particularly evident in the 7th grade (ISCED 2) (Johnson et al., 2017^[104]). Participation in the Influence of a School District's Advancement via Individual Determination, a preparatory programme for tertiary education (intensive course of study to prepare students for tertiary education entry), is positively associated with attendance overall, with longer exposure linked to better outcomes. The association is stronger for Hispanic students and less pronounced for African American students (Pugh and Tschannen-Moran, 2016^[105]).

By contrast, several interventions indicate limited or no overall impact on attendance. A school-based youth participatory research programme did not produce significant differences compared to control groups, although high baseline attendance rates (around 95%) suggest a possible ceiling effect (Voight and Velez, 2018^[106]). A short-term Student Skills Success programme focusing on academic, social and self-management skills did not generate measurable change in attendance in primary school students in the 5th grade (ISCED 1) (Bettis, 2018^[107]). A paired reading mentoring programme did not affect average attendance overall, although students were more likely to attend on days when mentoring sessions were scheduled, indicating possible short-term motivational effects (Volkman and Bye, 2006^[108]).

While results from these studies cannot be generalised, the findings suggest that academic

interventions may influence SAP when they enhance sustained teacher-student relationships, increase engagement through authentic and student-centred learning, or operate as coherent, longer-term or whole-school approaches. Short-duration or narrowly focused interventions appear less likely to have an impact on attendance.

Provision of supports

Addressing SAP can also depend on the timely provision of co-ordinated supports that respond to the underlying reasons for non-attendance, which are diverse, as discussed in Chapter 2. Schools therefore play a central role not only in identifying emerging concerns, but also in mobilising appropriate forms of support around students in need.

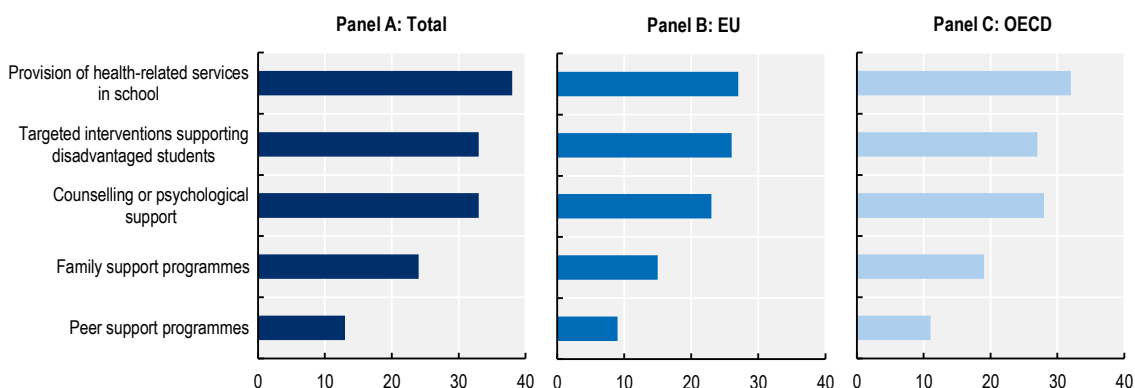
Support provisions span over interconnected areas. First, schools are often the providers of practical and relational supports, such as peer-support programmes for students that are struggling or targeted measures for disadvantaged students (e.g. meals, transport or access to extracurricular activities), which can reduce structural barriers and strengthen students' sense of belonging, supporting attendance. Second, schools can be the providers of well-being and health-oriented supports, including counselling, psycho-social services, school-based health provision and family support programmes, which can help address emotional distress, mental health needs or medical conditions that may hinder regular participation.

These measures, when implemented in a co-ordinated way, can help ensure that students experiencing difficulties are not only expected to return to school, but are actively enabled to do so in a sustainable and supportive manner.

Providing targeted supports


Schools often provide services beyond academics to their communities or co-ordinate the provision of such services from other providers. Indeed, the Survey (see Figure 4.8) shows that education systems often offer a variety of services in schools as a means to support students' attendance (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Figure 4.8. System-level policies requiring or encouraging support measures



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following questions: “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to provide any of the following preventative support measures – whether specifically designed to address school attendance problems or as part of broader initiatives that may positively influence attendance?”; “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to provide any of the following supports for students with school attendance problems?”; “Does your education system have system-level policies in place that promote regular school attendance?” 45 education systems responded to these items, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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Generally, education systems provide targeted supports for disadvantaged groups of students not only through financing but also through in-kind services (OECD, 2023^[1]). The Survey shows that 33 out of 45 systems encourage or require schools to implement **targeted interventions supporting disadvantaged students** – either to prevent SAP or as part of broader initiatives (OECD, 2025^[2]). Indeed, previous OECD work (2023^[1]) found that as of 2022, 17 out of 32 education systems surveyed reported providing free or reduced-price school meals to students identified as being socio-economically disadvantaged, while another 12 stated that they provide free or reduced-price meals to all students, irrespective of their groups.

Supports, such as school meals and transportation services, can have a specific role in supporting attendance, particularly for disadvantaged students, as they target some of the barriers that often influence their ability to attend school or provide an incentive to attend. Providing **free meals** (breakfast and lunch) to students, particularly in schools with a high proportion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, has a positive effect on school attendance (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). Evidence further suggests that breakfast provision in particular is associated with improved attendance among participating students and is identified as a promising preventative strategy (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]; Kesztyüs et al., 2016^[109]; Jose et al., 2020^[110]). In New Zealand, students who attend the universal breakfast programme at least 50% of the time experience improved attendance outcomes compared to non-participants (Mhurchu et al., 2012^[111]). As illness and unmet basic needs are common contributors to absences, food provision may operate not only as an incentive but also as a mechanism to address nutritional deficits that can affect students' capacity to attend and engage in school (Allison et al., 2019^[85]; Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). While the magnitude of effects varies across contexts, the overall pattern indicates that school meal provision, especially when targeted to disadvantaged students, can reduce absences related to poverty-related barriers.

Several countries mentioned providing free or subsidised school meals and transportation in the Survey (OECD, 2025^[2]). For instance, in Lithuania, socio-economically disadvantaged students are entitled to free breakfast, lunch and school supplies (Government of Lithuania, 2006^[112]). Similarly, in England (United Kingdom), schools provide breakfast clubs for all primary schools, and free school meals for eligible students. In Thailand, as of 2024, the Cabinet approved a resolution to address food insecurity among students, particularly those in disadvantaged and remote areas. Following this decision, the Ministry of Education issued formal guidelines to ensure the expansion of the national school lunch programme to lower secondary students (grades 7-9) in “extended opportunity schools”. These schools, often small and located in provincial or remote areas, provide lower secondary education where access to full secondary schools is limited.

Other education systems provide **transportation** to students, such in the case of New Zealand, the Slovak Republic and Madrid (Spain) or means tested coverage of the costs of transportation in England (United Kingdom). There is some, albeit limited, research linking transportation to academic outcomes, including attendance (OECD, 2023^[1]). A systematic review by Hopson et al. (2022^[113]) synthesises research linking school transportation with academic outcomes. They find that longer travel times, and transportation challenges, are associated with adverse academic outcomes (except when the travel provided access to higher-quality schools). Longer distances and travel times are associated with more absences, especially when the routes have safety concerns (but not with grades or test scores) (Hopson et al., 2022^[113]). Moreover, in urban contexts, longer distances may place students at greater risk of increased absences, but this risk may be outweighed by the benefit of being able to choose to attend a higher-performing school.

Family and peer support programmes

Involving parents through **family support programmes** can play an important role in addressing SAP, as they are often linked to family-level factors, such as parenting practices, home-school communication and daily routines, which shape children's engagement with school and their ability to attend consistently. There

is some evidence that family support programmes, such as family therapy, home visits or parenting skills trainings, can sometimes improve school attendance. A meta-analysis of attendance interventions finds an overall moderate positive effect of family focused interventions on attendance (Maynard et al., 2015^[114]). In a more recent review, eight out of 29 effective attendance interventions directed their strategies both at the youth as well as their family, suggesting that including a family component in attendance strategies can be effective (Pérez-Marco et al., 2025^[115]).

According to the Survey, 24 education systems encourage or require schools to develop family support programmes (OECD, 2025^[2]). For example, in Wales (United Kingdom), government-funded Family Engagement Officers are specifically tasked with fostering positive and trusting home-school relationships. They work to improve attendance by identifying underlying barriers and providing tailored support and guidance to families. In Luxembourg, the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, launched “Parent forums” in 2023 to enable families to access information, professional advice and support services relating to their children's education.

Peer-support programmes – which are based on a support between individuals with similar experiences – are often used to help students experiencing school-related difficulties, including SAP. The Survey shows that 13 out of 45 systems encourage or require schools to implement peer-support programmes (OECD, 2025^[2]).

While research on such programmes has examined their impact on attendance, the evidence remains mixed (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). It indicates that some peer-support programmes improve attendance habits and increase participation in school activities. A quasi-experimental study conducted in Chile evaluated the educational outcomes of a peer-mentoring programme targeting underrepresented students. The results reveal that students who participated in the programme attained attendance levels 6.2% higher than their non-participating peers (Venegas-Muggli, Barrientos and Álvarez, 2021^[116]). A similar programme in the United Kingdom, in which mentees were supported by peer-mentors in a summer programme during periods of transition between primary and secondary education, also showed positive outcomes: absences decreased among students previously identified by teachers as at risk (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]; Akister, Guest and Burch, 2016^[117]).

However, other programmes show no impact on attendance. For instance, a cross-age peer mentoring programme in the United States improved disciplinary behaviours and perceived school engagement, but not student absences (Jenner et al., 2022^[118]). Similarly, mixed findings emerge from a study conducted in the United States among students exhibiting ADHD symptoms across three different secondary schools. While peer-support helped prevent a decline in attendance in one of the three participating secondary schools, no comparable effects are observed in the other two (Sibley et al., 2020^[119]).

In addition to their possible effects on mentees, research on peer-programmes also points to consistent positive outcomes on mentors' attendance. Evidence relates this to a stronger sense of belonging, importance, responsibility and efficacy derived from taking part in peer-programmes (Nazzal, A., 2012^[120]). The relational dimension of these programmes also appears to play a critical role: mentors who develop friendships through these programmes mention increased motivation to attend school while others do not (ibid.).

Incorporating health services

As discussed in Chapter 2, SAP are rarely driven by a single cause and can encompass a spectrum of behaviours including school refusal, school phobia, truancy and lesson-level absence. These patterns can be rooted in emotional distress, anxiety, poor mental health, fear, family stressors, unsafe environments or unmet health needs.

According to the Survey, 38 education systems out of the 45 require or encourage to **provide health-related services in schools** (OECD, 2025^[2]). Besides, 33 systems require or encourage schools to

provide counselling or psychological support to students who were absent. For instance, in Iceland, every primary and lower secondary education school must have a school healthcare. In England (United Kingdom), Mental Health Support Teams provide early intervention for students with mild to moderate mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, low mood or behavioural problems. These teams currently work with more than half of students and are being rolled out with the aim of reaching all students. In New Zealand, among other services, secondary schools have nurse-led primary care health services that provide a range of health services and focus on populations that are not currently well served by the system (Health New Zealand, n.d.^[121]). These services are provided to secondary students across New Zealand, mainly in schools selected by the Ministry of Education, in teen parent units⁴, activity centres and alternative education sites.

Mental health and psycho-social supports in schools and beyond are not peripheral services but important mechanisms for identifying, preventing and addressing attendance barriers. Mental health challenges – including anxiety, depression, trauma responses and stress-related disorders – are strongly associated with absences, disengagement and dropout risk (Lindblad et al., 2024^[122]). Students experiencing untreated psychological distress may avoid school environments that trigger anxiety, feel socially isolated or lack the coping skills required to manage academic pressures.

Various studies examining expanded school-based mental health services (e.g. counselling centres, play therapy, motivational interviewing, school therapeutic services) show mixed findings but suggest conditional promise (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). For instance, Jennings et al. (2000^[123]) document a 32% decrease in absences over a two-year period among students receiving services through a school-based mental health centre in Dallas, Texas (United States). Similarly, Cooper et al. (2020^[124]) find improved attendance following a 10-week school-based play therapy programme implemented in rural primary schools serving predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in New South Wales (Australia). Lambie et al. (2019^[125]) also report significant reductions in missed school days when parents of referred primary students received a brief motivational interviewing-based counselling intervention. In contrast, other robust evaluations find limited or no attendance effects. Daly et al. (2013^[126]), Ballard et al. (2013^[127]), and Newsome (2004^[128]) report no significant improvements in attendance following expanded mental health or solution-focused brief therapy services. Melvin and colleagues (2025^[73]) suggest that interventions primarily targeting well-being, bullying or general social-emotional competencies may not reliably translate into attendance gains, likely because their effects on attendance are indirect.

Notably, psychosocial programmes explicitly targeting non-attendance demonstrate more consistent benefits. Indeed, attendance-focused school-based psychosocial interventions across targeted and intensive levels show positive impacts in all included studies (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). For instance, McCluskey et al. (2004^[129]) report a reduction in students with 30 or more absences from 20% to 7% following a staged attendance intervention involving letters, meetings, caseworker referral and community police engagement. Munoz (2022^[130]) finds significantly higher attendance (90.2% vs 78.6%) among students participating in a drop-out prevention programme that included attendance workers and family engagement. An RCT in an alternative school setting (Marvul, 2011^[131]) reports substantial reductions in absent days (7 days vs 22 days in the control group) following a five-month intervention combining daily contact and structured support.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), the most extensively studied psychosocial approach for persistent school refusal, shows positive attendance effects in some studies (Heyne et al., 2011^[132]; Heyne et al., 2002^[133]). This suggests that while CBT can be effective for some students, its impact varies and may depend on student characteristics and contextual factors (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). The authors emphasise the need to better understand for whom CBT is most effective and whether integrating it with attendance-specific supports improves outcomes.

Beyond mental health, other **health and illness** related reasons can drive SAP. In many contexts, schools serve as access points for preventative care, referrals and health promotion. Such services can be

particularly important for students from diverse backgrounds that have more challenges accessing healthcare services.

Research shows that preventative health measures show fairly consistent evidence of reducing absences. Firstly, hygiene-related practices are widely supported as effective in reducing illness-driven absences, particularly through increased hand hygiene (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]; Azor-Martínez et al., 2014^[134]; Guinan, McGuckin and Ali, 2002^[135]; Lau et al., 2012^[136]; Tousman et al., 2007^[137]). Secondly, immunisation programmes have also shown promise, with influenza vaccination both at the community (Davis et al., 2008^[138]) and school-level (Keck et al., 2013^[139]; Kjos et al., 2013^[140]; Pannaraj et al., 2014^[141]) being associated with lower illness-related absences compared to unvaccinated students.

While evidence on school nurse programmes is mixed (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]; Leach et al., 2022^[142]; Rodriguez et al., 2013^[143]), schools implementing programmes to promote healthy behaviours has been associated with improvements in school attendance, particularly illness-related absences (Kesztyüs et al., 2016^[109]; Shore et al., 2013^[144]).

Evidence also exists on students with chronic health conditions, who often face repeated, medically necessary absences and disrupted learning routines. A systematic review of 28 school-based behavioural and psychosocial interventions, including nurse-led care, teacher training, peer education, executive-function coaching and re-entry support, finds heterogeneous evidence across health, attendance, academic and psychosocial outcomes, suggesting that attendance may improve when interventions address health-related barriers to participation rather than relying on attendance pressure alone (Efthymiou et al., 2025^[145]).

The strongest attendance-specific evidence comes from condition-specific programmes. A Canadian RCT on asthma, based on a public-health-nurse-delivered school programme in primary schools combined student education, family engagement and asthma-friendly school practices, reducing asthma-related school absences from 60% to 50% (Cicutto, To and Murphy, 2013^[146]). For sickle cell anaemia, a randomised pilot study by Koontz et al. (2004^[147]) implemented an educational curriculum for students and teachers, improving disease knowledge and reducing school absences, although the sample included only 24 children. Evidence is more mixed for broader school-health and care-coordination approaches. A randomised trial on asthma in the United States, combining school-based preventative therapy with telemedicine, increased symptom-free days per two weeks and reduced emergency department visits, while effects on school absenteeism were not significant (Halterman et al., 2018^[148]). Similarly, several studies report no significant improvements in attendance following broader care-coordination or school-health interventions (Frakking et al., 2022^[149]; Halterman et al., 2018^[148]; Martin et al., 2021^[150]) and school-based asthma self-management programmes (Harris et al., 2019^[151]).

Evidence on educational continuity and reintegration is less robust. A hospital-based multidisciplinary school programme for youth with chronic and complex health conditions was associated with improved school attendance and gains in health-related quality of life, suggesting that integrated academic–medical approaches may help address SAP, although the results of the evaluation are not causal in nature (Colbert et al., 2019^[152]). Reviews of school re-entry programmes for chronically ill students similarly suggest benefits for attendance and social connectedness, but evidence base is small and poorly standardised (Wikel and Markelz, 2023^[100]). More broadly, Jay et al.'s (2023^[153]) umbrella review finds that although absences are often assumed to explain the relationship between chronic health conditions and lower attainment, only seven of 441 studies tested this pathway empirically. More evidence is therefore needed on which forms of support improve attendance, educational continuity and attainment for different groups of students with chronic health conditions.

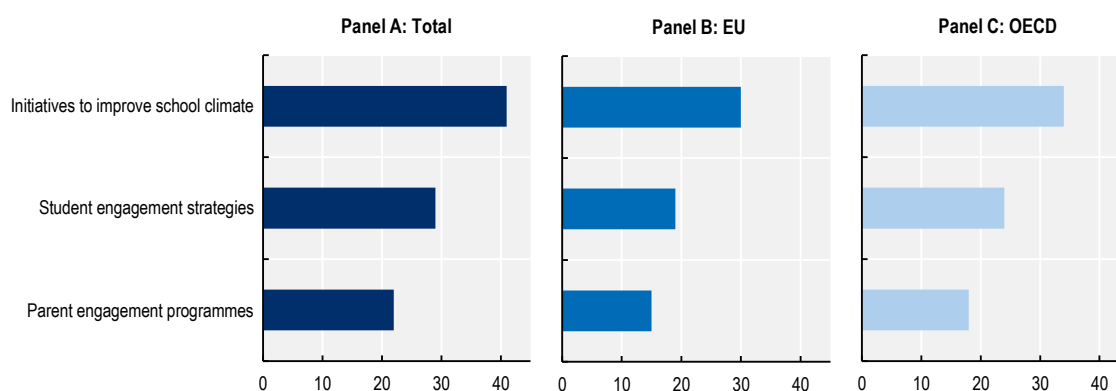
Engagement and re-integration

Beyond enforcement and provision of support that target specific barriers to attendance that students face, education systems increasingly recognise that sustainable improvements in attendance depend on fostering students' connection to learning and to school communities. There is consistent evidence linking student engagement, academic performance and attendance (Büchele, 2020^[154]; Henry, Knight and Thornberry, 2011^[155]; Lam et al., 2023^[156]; Miranda-Zapata et al., 2018^[157]).

Education systems have different strategies to strengthen engagement in education, which span from improving the overall environment of the schools, to ensuring that the content of education programmes is interesting and stimulating for students, and involving parents with the school and their children's learning. Some systems also design re-integration strategies to support students after extended absence. Finally, certain systems are starting to move towards tiered or multi-level frameworks, such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), to organise supports.

Based on the Survey, Figure 4.9 shows which different system-level policies requiring or encouraging measures to promote engagement are adopted by education systems (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Figure 4.9. System-level policies requiring or encouraging measures to promote engagement



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to provide any of the following preventative support measures – whether specifically designed to address school attendance problems or as part of broader initiatives that may positively influence attendance?” 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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An interesting example of re-integration services come from Norway: Statped⁵ supports municipalities in reintegrating students with complex and long-term school absenteeism, particularly neurodivergent students and students with complex SEN (David, 2025^[158]). Its experience-based “RIM model” (relationships, inclusion and mastery) provides a gradual and flexible pathway back into education, beginning with learning activities in safe environments such as the student's home and progressively reintroducing participation in alternative educational settings, smaller or separate school spaces, selected classroom activities and eventually ordinary education. The approach is based on highly individualised interventions, close co-ordination between schools, families and support services, and a strong emphasis on structure, predictability and assessment of students' executive functioning, sensory needs, adaptive skills, strengths and interests. The model aims to rebuild trust, mastery and engagement while adapting the pace of reintegration to the student's readiness and stress levels.

School climate

Initiatives to foster a positive school climate are a key policy to strengthen student engagement in school, by strengthening their well-being and sense of belonging. School climate can be described as the overall atmosphere of a school, which can include the social, educational and physical school environment (SPSM, 2025^[159]). Elements that can contribute to a positive school climate include safety, strong relationships between students and teachers, and a calm study environment (Kearney, 2016^[160]). Some of these elements, such as relationships with adults at school (Crouch et al., 2021^[161]) and secure relationships between students (Jiang, Chen and Jiang, 2024^[162]), can be considered protective factors for school attendance (Karlberg et al., 2020^[163]; Thapa et al., 2013^[164]). Literature suggests that key aspects of school climate, including student connectedness with school, engagement in school activities, and perceptions of school safety, may be important determinants of attendance (Van Eck et al., 2017^[165]).

Evidence suggests that school climate interventions can play a role in supporting attendance, but their effects are generally modest, indirect, and mediated by students' experiences and perceptions, rather than operating as strong standalone levers (Hamlin, 2020^[166]; Daily et al., 2020^[167]). In a study of over 800 000 students in New York City (United States), Hamlin (2020^[166]) finds that improvements in student-reported school climate, across dimensions such as safety, relationships, connectedness and engagement, are only weakly associated with reductions in absences. Moreover, the evidence highlights the importance of specific dimensions of school climate, particularly relationships and sense of belonging. Daily et al. (2020^[167]) show that positive student–teacher relationships, perceptions of safety and order, and opportunities for engagement are all associated with lower likelihood of skipping school. These relational aspects appear especially important for discretionary absences (e.g. truancy), while more structural absences (e.g. illness-related) are less consistently influenced by broader engagement measures.

As shown in Figure 4.9, the vast majority of education systems (41 out of 45) requires or encourages schools to implement initiatives to improve **school climate**. For example, Spain has developed a comprehensive, system-level approach to strengthening school climate, coexistence and student well-being, embedded in both legislation and targeted programmes. National education law establishes well-being, inclusion and positive coexistence as core principles of the education system, explicitly promoting values such as respect, non-violence, social cohesion and prevention of bullying and discrimination. It requires regional authorities to implement protocols to prevent and address violence and mandates schools to develop their own coexistence plans, supported by a designated Well-being and Protection Coordinator. Another example comes from Chile, where the National Policy for Educational Coexistence, accompanied by an action plan, aims to cultivate inclusive and respectful school climates and to foster coexistence skills from early childhood (Ministry of Education of Chile, 2024^[168]).

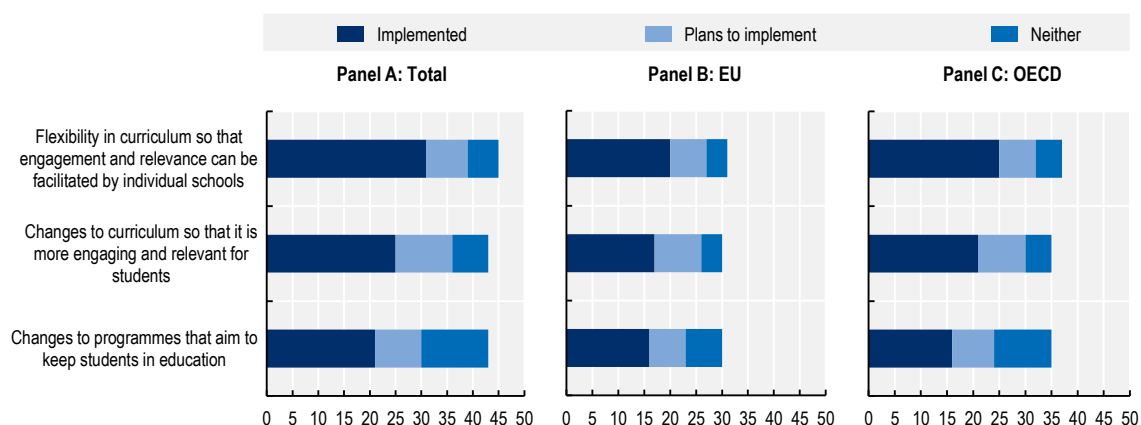
Curriculum strategies

Across education systems, efforts to strengthen student engagement through curriculum, particularly in the context of SAP, tend to converge around a number of core approaches. While these differ in design and emphasis, they broadly reflect attempts to make learning more **relevant, flexible, personalised and supportive**, thereby addressing some of the underlying drivers of disengagement and absence. Figure 4.10 shows the number of education systems that reported having changed the curriculum or made it more flexible to improve student engagement.

While there is limited research directly isolating the impact of specific curriculum reforms on student engagement and attendance, there is some evidence that career-relevant instruction – i.e. when teachers illustrate the value of the content they teach through examples drawn from the labour market – improves lower secondary student engagement (Orthner et al., 2013^[169]). Research also suggests that active pedagogical approaches, such as problem-based learning, peer instruction, flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, and game-based learning, can increase student engagement and academic performance (Sahito, Khoso and Phulpoto, 2025^[170]). Evidence from Singapore also shows that learning-


focused and supportive instructional approaches are positively associated with student engagement, while more controlling or performance-oriented teaching practices are associated with lower engagement (Luo, 2017_[171]).

Figure 4.10. System-level policies changing the curriculum or making it more flexible



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Have you implemented, or are you planning to implement, changes to your curriculum or programmes to make education more engaging or relevant for students? Alternatively, has your education system enabled flexibility in curriculum so that this can be facilitated by individual schools?” 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025_[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/n0ub71>

A first and very prominent approach consists of **increasing curriculum flexibility and school autonomy** to better adapt learning to students’ needs, interests and contexts. Thirty-one out of 45 education systems reported in the Survey having already implemented policies to increase curriculum flexibility and an additional eight planned to do so (OECD, 2025_[2]). For example, in Portugal, schools have been granted up to 25% curriculum autonomy since 2018, allowing them to address their own contexts and needs, namely by fostering collaborative work, project-based learning or creating new subjects fostering relevant learning for students (Portuguese Government, 2018_[172]). Another example comes from New Zealand, where a flexible national framework within a self-governing school system, enabling schools to tailor curricula so that they reflect their context. Schools can, for instance, pick specific strands in the arts and technology in grades 9 and 10 (ISCED 2), and are allocated additional time to implement their choice of sports, creative arts or cultural activities (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2026_[173]).

Increasing curriculum flexibility can also involve adjusting the organisation of learning time, through measures such as flexible timetables or alternative delivery modes (including online or blended learning), to accommodate students facing barriers related to health, caregiving responsibilities or other personal circumstances. For instance, in England (United Kingdom), schools may implement temporary part-time timetables for pupils who are unable to attend full-time due to medical, behavioural, or re-integration needs (Department of Education of England, 2024_[174]). In 2024–2025, eleven European education systems reported offering such forms of flexible scheduling (European Commission, 2025_[175]). However, evidence on the effects of increased curriculum flexibility and school autonomy on educational outcomes remains relatively scarce, particularly with regard to SAP. Moreover, the effects of these highly context-dependent measures vary considerably depending on the purpose, degree, and implementation of autonomy, as well as on broader ecosystem conditions such as teacher capacity, stakeholder buy-in, accountability structures, and institutional support (OECD, 2024_[176]).

A second key approach focuses on **changing curricula** so that they are more engaging and relevant for students. In the Survey, 25 systems reported having implemented such changes and 11 planning to do so (OECD, 2025^[2]). For example, Chile is undergoing a curriculum update process that explicitly aims to promote pedagogical innovation et to make learning more relevant, contextualised, and engaging (Ministry of Education of Chile, n.d.^[177]). In its 2022 curricular reform, Korea integrated elective subjects about various topics such as media, AI and big data to help students find future career in line with their aptitudes (Ministry of Education of Korea, 2022^[178]). Similarly, Indonesia implemented a curriculum-integrated project-based learning on themes such as well-being, culture and sustainability (Ministry of Education of Indonesia, 2025^[179]).

Finally, 21 out of 45 education systems **changed elements of their programmes** to keep students in education and nine others reported planning to do so (OECD, 2025^[2]). Türkiye provides a clear example of these programme changes through the expansion of its vocational and work-based pathways. Apprenticeship schemes and open vocational upper secondary schools enable students – particularly those disengaged from traditional academic tracks and at risk of dropping out – to combine education with paid, practical work experience, thereby increasing both relevance and retention.

Student and parent engagement

Beyond curriculum strategies, 29 systems reported requiring or encouraging **student engagement** strategies (see Figure 4.9 above). A common strategy to this end is to offer **extracurricular activities**. For example, in the Netherlands, the *School en Omgeving* (School and Environment) programme offers an enriched school day to students who, due to their home situation or the place where they live, have less access to activities, such as sports, culture and additional academic support. Similarly, in Indonesia, student engagement is promoted through school-run extracurriculars.

Generally, after-school and extracurricular programmes and activities are conducted on school grounds or in the community and involve content outside of the education curriculum. Evidence on their impact on attendance in mixed (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). In one RCT, Gottfredson and colleagues (2010^[180]) find no significant difference in school attendance between students who attended the after-school programme and those who did not. However, evidence on after-school programmes conducted within a community appear to have a stronger impact on school attendance (Melvin et al., 2025^[73]). Jenson et al. (2018^[181]) evaluated a community-based after-school programme targeting youth living in public housing, which combined academic support and tutoring with social-emotional skills development. Students who participated demonstrated significantly higher school attendance than comparable non-participants. Similarly, Furrer et al. (2012^[182]) find that students engaged in community-based after-school programmes have significantly better attendance than those who did not take part. These findings suggest that extracurricular provision may support attendance particularly when it strengthens students' connection to school, builds relationships with adults and peers, and addresses broader socio-emotional or contextual barriers faced by disadvantaged students (Centre for Young Lives, Leeds Beckett University and YMCA George Williams College, 2025^[183]).

Interventions aimed at increasing **parent engagement** can also have a meaningful impact on reducing SAP. By strengthening communication between schools and families, these programmes can help parents better understand attendance expectations, identify early warning signs of disengagement and feel more empowered to support their children's schooling. Mechanisms often include regular check-ins, personalised outreach, and workshops that build parents' capacity to monitor and encourage attendance. Such approaches can improve attendance outcomes, especially when they combine information provision with relationship-building strategies (Robinson et al., 2018^[184]; Sheldon and Epstein, 2004^[185]). However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on their ability to address structural barriers (such as work

constraints, language differences or mistrust of institutions) that may limit parental participation in the first place.

According to the Survey, twenty-two education systems require or encourage initiatives to promote parent engagement. For instance, in Ireland, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme seeks to promote partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services. Within this programme, a teacher can be temporarily released from their teaching duties to work intensively with and support parents, notably through home visits and parent classes (Box 4.4).

Box 4.4. Home School Community Liaison Officers

The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme aims to improve student attendance, participation and retention, particularly among students at risk of educational disadvantage. At the heart of the scheme are the HSCL Co-ordinators, teachers released from their duties (typically for up to five years) to work full-time on strengthening relationships between schools, families and communities. Co-ordinators are primarily deployed in DEIS Urban primary and secondary schools, although recent extensions include pilot provision in selected non-DEIS schools serving Traveller and Roma communities.

The HSCL Scheme is built on a partnership-based approach, with a strong emphasis on engaging parents and caregivers as active participants in their children's education. Co-ordinators conduct home visits, organise parent-focused activities and courses, and facilitate communication between families and schools. They also work closely with school staff and community services to identify needs, support transitions across education stages, and ensure that families are connected to relevant supports. A key feature of the model is its combination of universal engagement with targeted support for students most at risk of poor attendance and early leaving.

In relation to attendance, the HSCL Scheme addresses one of the central drivers of school absence: the relationship between families and the education system. By building trust, improving communication, and strengthening parental capacity to support learning, the scheme helps to identify and address barriers to attendance early.

An evaluation from the Irish Inspectorate (2024^[186]) finds that promoting attendance is central to the HSCL role: attendance is identified as one of the main DEIS themes, and the HSCL co-ordinator's focus is explicitly described as improving attendance, participation and retention. The evaluation also finds that attendance was a major area addressed through home visits, including work on school refusal, punctuality and partial attendance, which the report notes can be precursors to more serious attendance difficulties (Irish Department of Education Inspectorate, 2024^[186]).

Source: OECD (2024^[187]), *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland*, Reviews of National Policies, for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3433784c-en>.

Transitions

Interventions to avoid disengagement and absences are particularly relevant during educational transitions. The move from primary to secondary education often involves changes in school size, peer context, teacher relationships, daily structure and expectations, which can lead to anxiety, reduced belonging, lower motivation and rise in disengagement or dropout (Department of Education of New South Wales, 2017^[188]). In England (United Kingdom), to address these increased risks, the Department for Education provides secondary schools with attendance data for pupils completing primary school ahead of their transition to secondary education. The system aims to ensure continuity in attendance monitoring,

help schools identify students at risk of persistent absence, and support earlier preventative interventions for vulnerable pupils (Department for Education of England, 2026_[189]).

The transition phase is therefore a key window where interventions may have high leverage. While only a limited number of studies have examined the effects of transition programmes on SAP, findings generally suggest a positive relationship between such interventions and attendance outcomes. For example, an experimental study conducted in a culturally heterogeneous community in the United States evaluated a brief intervention centred on students' sense of belonging during the transition to lower secondary school. Through short classroom exercises normalising academic and social difficulties and encouraging help-seeking, the intervention improved students' sense of belonging within the school environment and led to reductions in absences (Borman et al., 2019_[190]). Another paper, based on a case study in Spain, finds that "successful educational actions"⁶ – such as homework clubs or interactive dialogue groups – during the transition between primary and lower secondary school could ease adjustment, strengthen students' sense of belonging, which correlates with better retention and possibly lower absence risk (Roca et al., 2024_[191]). Evidence from a qualitative study on secondary education transition programmes in rural North Carolina (United States) similarly suggests that dedicated transition structures – such as freshman academies, mentoring, smaller learning communities, and sustained monitoring of attendance and engagement – may support students' adjustment and attendance during the vulnerable first year of upper secondary education (Bethea-Hampton and Wilson-Jones, 2018_[192]). Overall, the available evidence suggests that transition programmes can play an important role in reducing risks of disengagement during key educational transitions. Interventions that combine academic, social and relational support, while ensuring continuity in monitoring and early identification of attendance difficulties, may be particularly valuable in helping vulnerable students maintain engagement and establish positive attendance patterns in their new school environment.

Structuring supports based on levels of need: multi-tiered systems of support

Multi-tiered approaches, and in particular their most recent development of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), provide a structured framework for organising how schools deliver support to students with varying levels of need (OECD, 2026_[193]). MTSS is not a specific programme or intervention, but rather an overarching framework that integrates academic, behavioural and socio-emotional supports within a coherent, data-informed system. Its core purpose is to ensure that all students receive appropriate levels of support through a continuum of increasingly intensive interventions, while promoting early identification and prevention.

MTSS is typically organised into three Tiers. Tier 1 comprises universal, school-wide practices delivered to all students, such as high-quality instruction, positive school climate initiatives and preventative strategies. Tier 2 involves targeted interventions for students who require additional support beyond the universal level, often delivered in small groups and based on identified needs. Tier 3 consists of intensive, individualised interventions for students with persistent or complex difficulties, often involving specialised staff and co-ordinated support plans. Movement between Tiers is intended to be fluid and responsive, guided by ongoing monitoring of student progress.

In this context, MTSS and other tiered approaches can be applied directly to address school attendance problems through graduated responses of increasing intensity (see Box 4.5). Looking at Response to Intervention (RTI), a type of tiered approach, and absence literature over the past 25 years, Kearney and Graczyk (2013_[194]) emphasise the need for early identification and intervention, progress monitoring, functional behavioural assessment, empirically supported procedures and protocols, and a team-based approach.

Box 4.5. The adoption of MTSS for attendance

An RTI framework promotes regular attendance for all students at Tier 1, targeted interventions for at-risk students at Tier 2, and intense and individualised interventions for students with chronic absences at Tier 3. Using a literature review and adopting an evidence-based approach, Kearney and Graczyk (2013_[194]) develop an RTI model for problematic school absences, which incorporates a range of evidence-based approaches to reduce school attendance problems into an MTSS model.

How are MTSS tiers applied to attendance?

As proposed by Kearney and Graczyk (2013_[194]), Tier 1 encompasses universal, school- and classroom-wide practices aimed at promoting regular attendance and preventing emerging risks. This includes setting and consistently communicating clear attendance expectations, monitoring attendance data frequently to detect early patterns of concern, and fostering a positive school climate through engaging instruction, supportive teacher-student relationships, proactive classroom management and socio-emotional learning. Tier 2 provides targeted support for students showing early signs of SAP, through closer monitoring, structured check-ins with a trusted adult, small-group interventions addressing issues such as anxiety, motivation or organisation, and strengthened communication with parents to clarify expectations and identify barriers. Tier 3 involves intensive, individualised interventions for students with chronic or severe absences, typically informed by functional assessment. These may include tailored cognitive-behavioural approaches, family-focused strategies, and co-ordination with external services such as mental health or social services. Individualised attendance plans, step-by-step re-integration pathways and adjustments to the school environment (e.g. modified schedules) are often used, reflecting the need for multi-component, collaborative responses to persistent absence.

Source: OECD (2026_[193]), Tiered systems of support in education: a focus on MTSS, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/158128c5-en>.

Studies show associations between MTSS (and other tiered models) and improvements in attendance and behaviours linked to absences, especially when implementation fidelity is higher. For instance, large multi-state analyses report positive relationships between Schoolwide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBIS) – a type of tiered model – implementation fidelity and attendance in secondary schools. Freeman et al. (2015_[195]) find that higher fidelity in SWPBIS predicts better attendance outcomes, and follow-up work reports similar attendance improvements and lower dropout rates in schools sustaining such tiered implementation over time (Freeman et al., 2015_[196]). MTSS behavioural approaches incorporating skills training, family support and incentive-based strategies are common features of effective secondary-education attendance interventions (ibid.). Lane et al. (2007_[197]) observe decreases in unauthorised tardiness among students participating in schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), although effects on broader disciplinary indicators are mixed: typically developing students experienced slight reductions in discipline contacts, while students with externalising behaviours showed moderate increases. Scott et al. (2019_[198]) find that schools with higher behaviour-domain MTSS fidelity have significantly fewer suspension events than comparison schools, demonstrating predictive validity of fidelity for disciplinary outcomes. A preliminary study (nine schools) further links higher levels of implementation of MTSS and school-improvement to better student outcomes related to drop-out predictors, though generalisability is limited (Bohanon et al., 2023_[199]). Finally, RTI/absence models emphasise early identification, progress monitoring, functional behavioural assessment, evidence-based practices and a team-based approach as core MTSS principles for addressing SAP (Kearney and Graczyk, 2013_[194]).

There are a few systems that have adopted tiered models in education, and, among them, some focus on attendance-specific ones (OECD, 2026^[193]). Ireland, for instance, has been developing an MTSS model targeting attendance specifically (Tusla Education Support Service (TESS), 2023^[200]), aligned with the structure described in Box 4.5. Other systems, instead, adopt wider models that act on aspects of schooling that can have an impact on attendance. For example, New Zealand designed a Positive Behaviour for Learning School-Wide framework to help schools develop a positive and inclusive social culture that supports learning. This framework follows a tiered model of support: at Tier 1, expected behaviours are explicitly taught, modelled and reinforced for all students, while Tiers 2 and 3 progressively add more targeted and intensive supports based on need.

Capacity building

Capacity-building interventions encompass general awareness-raising campaigns targeting schools, students and families, as well as professional learning on SAP including both initial training and continuing professional learning. The literature also points to the broader capacity of non-teaching staff as a relevant factor. SAP are often linked to social, emotional or structural barriers that extend beyond instruction alone. This highlights the potential importance of the skills, experience and co-ordination of teachers, school leaders, counsellors, social workers and other non-teaching staff.

Capacity-building efforts related to SAP may also need to address the broader institutional and human resource capacity of education systems, as staff shortages, high workloads and limited access to specialised personnel can constrain schools' ability to identify, monitor and respond to attendance problems effectively.

Awareness-raising communication

Awareness-raising communication can improve understanding of the consequences of absences and help address commonly held misperceptions about attendance. Such communication can take multiple forms, including large-scale public campaigns, direct communication with families, school-based outreach, and community engagement. In the Survey, 15 education systems reported having implemented awareness-raising campaigns to curb student absences in primary and secondary education (OECD, 2025^[2]). These campaigns range from mass media initiatives to school-based and community outreach programmes. Awareness-raising campaigns aim to improve school attendance by informing schools, students and families about the importance of regular attendance and equipping them with strategies to address absence. For example, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) changed the messaging to parents: instead of reporting on attendance (e.g. 90%), the system is reporting on absences (10%) (OECD, Unpublished^[201]). In another example, Ireland launched a new multimedia campaign in 2025 which seeks to encourage all those involved in the lives of children and young people, including parents, teachers and communities, to support and prioritise regular school attendance. By targeting different actors through different media outlets, the campaign emphasises the key message that attending school matters (OECD, Forthcoming^[202]). It also includes guidance for parents that summarises their children's likely reasons for feelings of reluctance to go to school, how parents can support children in attending school in such cases, and what parents can expect schools to do to support their children (Department of Education and Youth of Ireland, 2025^[203]).

Although evaluations establishing a causal link are generally lacking, the implementation of these campaigns has been associated with reduced absence rates. For instance, an early study involving 39 primary and secondary schools participating in a range of attendance-focused activities during 2001 in the United States finds that efforts focused on family and community engagement coincide with a significant decrease in the percentage of students missing 20 or more days (Sheldon and Epstein, 2004^[185]). Strategies such as communicating with families, celebrating good attendance, and connecting chronically absent students with community mentors, contributed to a year-over-year reduction in chronic absences

(ibid.). In another study from Ohio (United States), school-wide outreach is associated with a 0.5% attendance improvement (Sheldon, 2007^[204]).

Beyond campaigns, communication strategies such as personalised messages to parents, regular attendance reporting, or school-family engagement initiatives can also play an important role in raising awareness and shaping attendance behaviours. Evidence suggests that low-cost messages to parents – such as texts, e-mails or letters – that deliver personalised messages containing information about cumulative absences can lead to small but meaningful reductions in school absences, notably by increasing the salience of attendance and correcting families' tendency to underestimate their children's absences (Berger et al., 2025^[205]; Himmelsbach et al., 2021^[206]; Rogers and Feller, 2018^[207]). However, evidence indicates that information alone is sometimes insufficient: for instance, frequent absence notifications do not consistently improve attendance (Balu, Porter and Gunton, 2016^[208]; Rogers and Feller, 2018^[207]). The most effective strategies combine clear personalised information with practical guidance and supportive engagement.

Professional learning

While, as discussed, multi-professional approaches to attendance are key, the capacity of teachers and school staff plays a critical role in itself in shaping student attendance: teachers have measurable and meaningful effects on student attendance (Liu and Loeb, 2019^[209]). Emerging evidence suggests that efforts to strengthen teacher capacity may represent a meaningful, though underexplored, lever for improving student attendance. Absences are increasingly understood as shaped by classroom processes and school-based factors alongside child- and family-level influences (see Chapter 2) (Ansari and Purtell, 2018^[210]; Chang and Romero, 2008^[211]).

Studies examining teacher “value-added” to non-academic outcomes show that teachers influence students' behavioural and social engagement in ways that are distinct from their effects on test scores (Backes and Hansen, 2015^[212]; Blazar and Kraft, 2016^[213]; Jackson, 2016^[214]; Liu and Loeb, 2019^[209]). Notably, Gershenson (2016^[215]) finds that teachers have statistically significant effects on student absences of a magnitude comparable to their effects on reading achievement, and that these effects are not simply explained by student sorting.

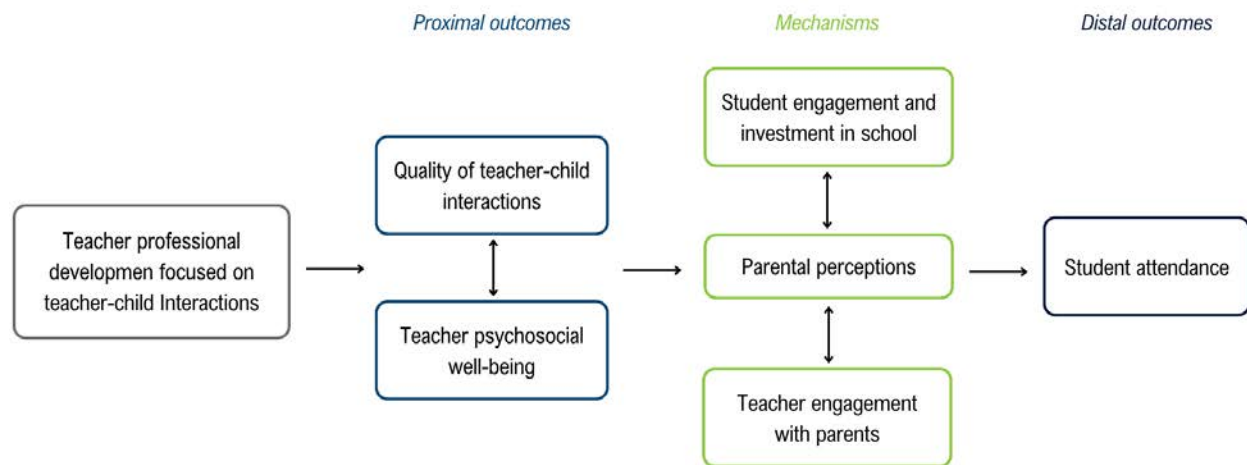
Recent studies further underscore the importance of attendance-related teaching practices. Liu and Loeb (2019^[209]) show that secondary students taught by teachers who are particularly effective at improving attendance⁷ have substantially fewer unexcused absences (around 44% fewer in mathematics and 54% fewer in English) compared to students taught by an average teacher. Importantly, teachers' impact on attendance is only weakly correlated with impact on achievement, suggesting that effective attendance-promoting teaching constitutes a distinct dimension of professional practice. Moreover, research in primary schools finds that teacher effects on attendance are stable over time and persist into subsequent academic years (Gershenson, 2016^[215]), indicating that teachers may shape students' longer-term attitudes, engagement and behavioural norms rather than merely influencing short-term compliance. Evidence at the secondary level also supports these findings: Jackson (2016^[214]) shows that teachers' effects on non-cognitive outcomes (including attendance) are stronger predictors of upper secondary graduation, participation in standardised assessments (SAT) and postsecondary aspirations than their effects on test scores.

Conceptually, teacher professional learning may influence attendance through multiple pathways (Hanno and Gonzalez, 2019^[216]) (see Figure 4.11). Improvements in emotional support and instructional quality could enhance children's engagement and sense of belonging, which are associated with stronger attendance patterns (Chang and Romero, 2008^[211]; Hamre, 2014^[217]). Enhanced instructional practices may also shape parents' perceptions of classroom quality and the value of consistent attendance. In addition, professional learning may affect teacher psychosocial well-being, reduce stress, strengthen

teachers' capacity to communicate with families and emphasise the importance of regular attendance (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009^[218]; Sandilos et al., 2018^[219]).

Notably, in preschool settings, Hanno and Gonzales (2019^[216]) find that professional learning which targets the quality of teacher-child interactions and not children's SAP, still reduces student absence rates by 1.0 percentage points (equivalent to approximately an additional 1.9 days). Such professional learning also reduces the likelihood of students becoming chronically absent – defined in this study as missing 10% or more days of school throughout the year – by 6.0 percentage points. Moreover, the authors also find suggestive evidence that impacts are larger for children from more socio-economically disadvantaged households.

Figure 4.11. Conceptual model of the consequences of educator professional development for student absences.



Source: Hanno and Gonzales (2019^[216]), The Effects of Teacher Professional Development on Children's Attendance in Preschool, [10.1080/19345747.2019.1634170](https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2019.1634170).

Overall, professional learning initiatives can therefore provide a useful lens for examining how investments in educator capacity might influence attendance-related behaviours and outcomes. Teacher professional learning can be divided according to when it takes place within their careers: initial teacher education and continuing professional learning.

Initial teacher education

In 15 out of 42 education systems surveyed, the policy framework requires that school attendance be addressed as part of initial teacher education (ITE) (OECD, 2025^[2]). In Ireland, for instance, all ITE programmes must be accredited by the Teaching Council, which assesses whether programmes address seven core elements, including inclusive education. Within this framework, inclusive education is defined in terms of teachers' capacity to respond to learner diversity, enable participation in learning, and remove barriers to education so that each learner can derive the maximum benefit from their attendance at school. This constitutes an explicit reference to attendance within the national ITE standards, even though it is framed through an inclusion lens rather than as a standalone module on attendance.

Inclusive practices are not the only area of development that can include a focus on attendance. In Korea, pre-service teachers in universities of education receive instruction on the importance of school attendance, typically embedded within courses such as child development, classroom management and child psychology. In addition, newly appointed teachers who have passed the Teacher Recruitment

Examination receive induction training that covers attendance alongside related responsibilities such as school violence prevention and core teacher duties.

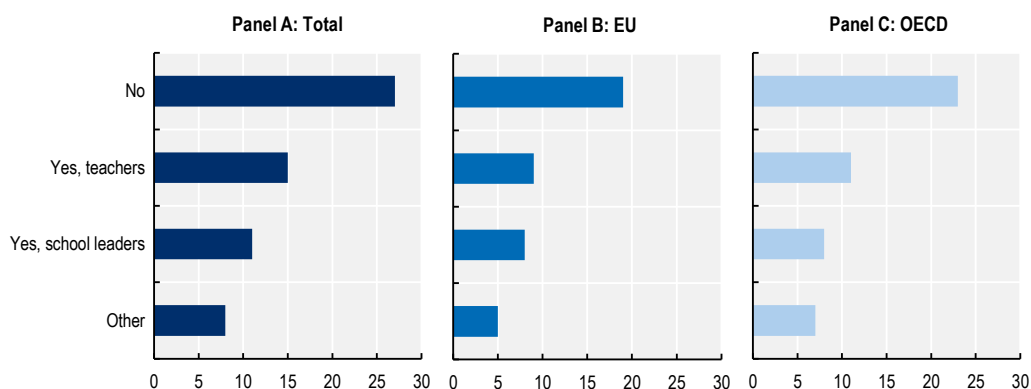
In most of the 15 systems that address attendance as part of ITE, the topic is covered indirectly through mandatory content on inclusion, well-being, classroom management, student engagement, and collaboration with families and services. In Denmark, for example, core ITE subjects (e.g. Educational Psychology, Inclusion and Special Education and Pedagogy and General Didactics) develop competencies relevant to preventing and responding to SAP, but the national executive order governing teacher education does not explicitly mention attendance. Moreover, Denmark does not have a single detailed national ITE curriculum, as higher education institutions have autonomy over programme content.

Continuing professional learning

Beyond initial training, continuing professional learning (CPL) can enable teachers, school leaders and other staff to update their knowledge, align with evolving policies and tools, and develop more effective practices to support student attendance. In particular, sustained and collaborative forms of CPL – including professional learning communities, mentoring, and peer support – may contribute to improved attendance indirectly through enhanced student engagement, better school climate, and earlier identification of attendance risks, although evidence directly assessing their impact on student absenteeism and SAP is lacking.


The extent to which such learning is formalised varies among education systems. Figure 4.12 shows whether education systems required CPL related to student absence.

Figure 4.12. Required continuing professional learning related to student absence



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Does the policy framework require teachers, school leaders or other staff members to take continuing professional learning programmes related to addressing student absence?”. 44 education systems responded to this item, including 30 from EU countries and 36 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/sjq2wd>

In 15 out of 44 education systems, teachers are required to undertake CPL programmes that covers how to address student absences (OECD, 2025^[2]). For example, in Korea, schools provide annual mandatory training on the attendance recording system, offering guidance on attendance status, absence records and related reporting procedures.

Some systems do not only focus on teachers but involve other professionals in CPL on attendance. In some systems (11), school leaders are required to follow CPL programmes related to student absence. Moreover, in 8 systems, this requirement applies to other education staff who are neither teachers nor school leaders. In England (United Kingdom), for instance, the Department for Education issued in 2024

statutory guidance on improving school attendance, which explicitly recommends that all teaching and non-teaching staff receive adequate continuous training on attendance (Department for Education of England, 2024^[220]).

Yet, CPL on attendance is far from a universal practice across education systems. In 27 education systems, there is no obligation for education staff to undertake CPL specifically related to addressing student absence. However, the absence of a formal requirement does not necessarily mean that no training is available on SAP. For example, in the French Community of Belgium, while there is no specific requirement for CPL, school staff can participate in training programmes focused on school retention and the prevention of dropout. These programmes cover topics such as identifying at-risk students, clarifying the roles of different stakeholders, developing partnerships with different professionals, and implementing preventative and follow-up measures.

Monitoring and evaluation

Effective monitoring of SAP can enable early identification of emerging patterns of absence, support understanding of underlying drivers, and facilitate timely intervention before absences become entrenched (Sälzer, Ricking and Feldhaus, 2024^[221]). Monitoring systems that capture not only the frequency but also the timing, duration and type of absences allow schools to detect potential academic, social or well-being-related factors that have an impact on students' engagement (Kearney et al., 2023^[222]). When consistently applied, monitoring also strengthens transparency and fairness in intervention, and enables evaluation of whether strategies are improving attendance over time. Strong monitoring systems therefore function as early warning mechanisms, supporting proactive responses and sustained student engagement (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2024^[223]). However, recording, reporting and using attendance data vary considerably across countries, with differences in definitions, thresholds and data collection practices limiting cross-system comparability and complicating consistent policy responses (Kreitz-Sandberg et al., 2023^[224]; Heyne, Keppens and Dvořák, 2024^[225]). There is limited consensus on what constitute “problematic” or “persistent” absences (Kreitz-Sandberg et al., 2023^[224]). Thresholds vary considerably across systems, and there are critiques that highlight that they are generally based on experts' opinions and not on specific evidence (Heyne et al., 2019^[226]). For example, Kreitz-Sandberg et al. (2023^[224]) document differences between England (United Kingdom), Germany, Japan and Sweden, with lower thresholds applied in England and in Thuringia (Germany) compared to Sweden, Japan and Berlin (Germany). Such variation has important implications for identification, monitoring, and intervention practices.

Data collections across education systems

The Survey highlights substantial variation across education systems in how attendance data are collected, reported and used (OECD, 2025^[2]). These differences span multiple dimensions, including data availability across education levels, the frequency and granularity of data collection, the extent to which reasons for absences are categorised, and the technical and legal constraints affecting data linkage and use. Such variation reflects differences in governance arrangements, data infrastructures and policy priorities, but also shapes the capacity of systems to monitor and respond effectively to SAP.

Data availability and technical considerations

Accurate and reliable data collection is essential for addressing SAP effectively. Data availability can help system identify issues early, see progress over time and develop policy responses that reflect actual issues or challenges within their system.

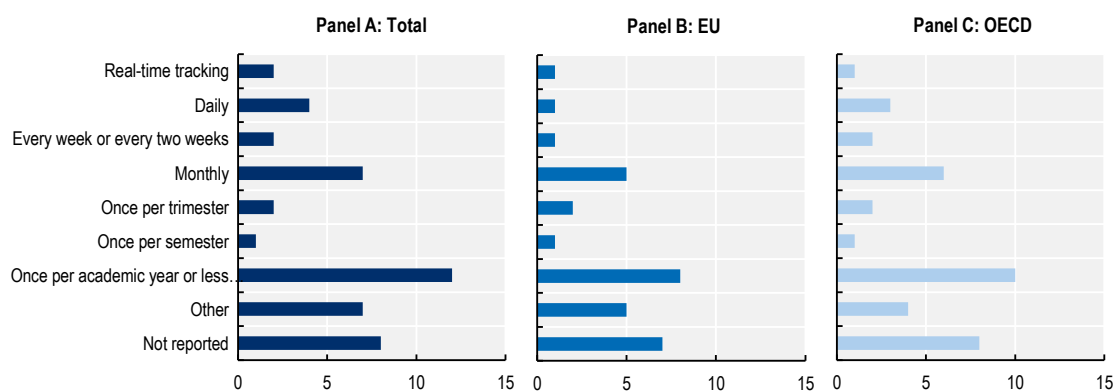
Survey evidence shows that, while attendance data collection is widespread, it is not universal (OECD, 2025^[2]). Seven education systems (Austria, Czechia, Iceland, Poland, Slovenia, Spain at the federal level and Sweden) do not currently collect attendance data at the national or sub-national level. The remaining 37 systems collect attendance data for at least one level of education, with coverage strongest in

compulsory schooling. Thirty-six collect data for lower secondary education, and 34 also do so for primary and general upper secondary education. By contrast, only 15 systems collect attendance data for early childhood education and care, and 25 for vocational upper secondary education. Eleven systems collect attendance data across all levels, while 16 collect data for all levels except ECEC, and four omit vocational upper secondary education (see Annex Figure 4.A.1).

Attendance data collection is also generally well established (see more in Annex Figure 4.A.2). Of 45 systems surveyed, 32 report collecting centralised attendance data since before 2020. Three systems introduced national (or sub-national) collections more recently – one in 2020 (Indonesia), one in 2021 (Aragon (Spain)) and one in 2023 (Lithuania). In addition, as of 2025, two of the systems that lacked centralised data (Czechia and Iceland) were planning to introduce such systems; Czechia did so in spring 2026. In several countries, recent developments have not marked the start of data collection but rather an intensification or technological upgrading of existing systems. For example, England (United Kingdom), which has collected termly attendance data since 2006, introduced reporting at session level (i.e. twice-daily) in 2021 and made it mandatory for all schools as of 2024. In Portugal, the systematic use of attendance data has become a more explicit policy priority in recent years.

Reporting of these data also varies across systems. Figure 4.13 shows the frequency at which attendance data is reported at the national (or sub-national) level. The most common practice is to do so once per academic year or less often, which happens in twelve education systems.

Figure 4.13. Frequency at which attendance data is reported to the national (sub-national) level



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “How often are the data reported to the national (sub-national) level (Ministry/Department of Education)?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/tbospc>

Yet, there are several other timelines that systems follow. Latvia, for instance, reports data once per semester, while Galicia (Spain) and Portugal do so once per quarter. In seven systems, schools report data monthly. Schools in Greece report weekly and in Scotland (United Kingdom) every fortnight. In four systems, data is reported daily (Flemish Community of Belgium, Greece, Indonesia, New Zealand and England (United Kingdom)), while Malta and Türkiye track attendance in real time. Across 45 education systems, 8 do not report attendance data to the national (sub-national) level.

Among the seven education systems that selected “Other”, there are four cases. First, some have no system-level requirement for the frequency at which attendance data is reported (France and Peru). Second, two systems only partially report absences to the national (sub-national) level: in Bulgaria,

absences are only reported if necessary and in La Rioja (Spain), only unjustified absences above ten days must be reported. Third, Ireland uses two instruments on different cycles: the Student Absence Report is collected twice yearly, while the Annual Attendance Report is collected once a year. Finally, two systems report attendance data at case-dependent frequencies: Romania reports monthly for scholarship recipients and annually for other students; Wales (United Kingdom) reports weekly or annually depending on the data source.

Beyond the monitoring of contemporaneous attendance, the ability to track individual student's attendance over time enables the construction of longitudinal attendance records that offer a dynamic view of students' engagement with schooling. Such data infrastructures can facilitate the early identification of SAP, support the design of targeted interventions, and allow policymakers to monitor trends and disparities across regions and student groups. Beyond their operational value, these longitudinal data can also play a critical role in evaluation, enabling the assessment of attendance policies' effectiveness and a better understanding of the trajectories that lead to chronic absences or, conversely, to re-engagement.

In 25 of 45 education systems, it is possible to track individual student's attendance over time at the national (sub-national) level. For example, in Indonesia, individual attendance data are accessible via the national Out-of-School Students dashboard, which enables relevant stakeholders – including local governments – to identify, track and intervene for students who are not yet fully engaged in formal education. Similarly, in Romania, students' attendance, as well as their academic performance and behaviours incidents, are recorded by teachers in an early warning system called MATE, which then enables the Ministry of Education, inspectorates and schools to identify students at risk of dropping out and provide them with targeted support.

Among the remaining 20 systems, 10 collect individual-level records data but cannot follow students longitudinally. Several countries mention that attendance data are anonymised for privacy reasons (Denmark, Lithuania and the Netherlands). The other 10 education systems do not centralise these student-level data. Thailand reports that it is developing a national tracking system to follow students from early childhood through graduation.

Some countries, such as Croatia, also make the data available online for public use (Box 4.6). This can support research and knowledge development in the area.

Box 4.6. Croatia's dashboard: Students, overall achievement and absences

The [dashboard](#) developed by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Youth, provides a comprehensive system-level overview of student achievement and absences in primary and secondary education from the 2013/14 to 2024/25 school years. It brings together administrative data on student numbers, average grades, distributions of achievement (including excellence and failure), and detailed indicators of attendance, disaggregated primarily by county and further filterable by school type, programme, grade level and school founder. The dashboard enables side-by-side regional comparisons and offers both absolute figures and relative shares of attendance indicators, supporting nuanced interpretation of absence patterns across the country.

The dashboard also has an explicit integration of academic outcomes with attendance, including a clear distinction between excused and unexcused absences. This allows users to explore potential relationships between absences and achievement and to identify regions where high absence rates coexist with strong or weak performance. By combining scale, granularity and interactivity, the tool can function as a monitoring and diagnostic instrument supporting evidence-informed discussions on student absence.

Source: Ministry of Science, Education and Youth of the Republic of Croatia (2025^[227]), Students, overall achievement and absences, <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrjoiM2Q1NjVmZDEtMGUyMy00MDBiLTkzYWItYjBhMTA3MDFiOWUxliwidCI6IjJiMTFjYmNjLWl3NiEtNDVhYi1hOWY1LTRhYzZk0ZTFkNCiIsImMiOi98&disablecdnExpiration=1760025973>, accessed on 2 April 2026.

Granularity in student data can be leveraged by education systems to evaluate whether some groups of students are more at risk of SAP based on their background. Yet, there are often legal and/or technical constraints to linking attendance data with students' characteristics at the national (sub-national) level (Annex Figure 4.A.3).

Across 44 education systems, the feasibility of linking attendance data to student characteristics varies considerably. Gender is most commonly linkable (34 systems report no constraints), although seven systems cannot link any characteristics due to the absence of centralised individual-level data. For socio-economic status, 17 systems report no constraints, while others face legal, technical or combined barriers; 16 cannot currently make this linkage. On a technical level, several systems rely on administrative proxies rather than a direct socio-economic status variable. For example, Wales (United Kingdom) uses free-school-meal entitlement and Portugal uses access to social support – along with parents' educational attainment. Korea, similarly, approximates socio-economic status using welfare-recipient lists, but notes that these data are classified as sensitive personal information under privacy regulations and that any secondary use requires explicit consent and legal review.

Linkages are more uneven for other characteristics. Attendance can be linked to special education needs in 23 systems, while 8 report that this is not possible. For immigrant background, feasibility is split (14 without constraints, 15 not possible, 15 with constraints). For ethnic or Indigenous background, 25 systems report that linkage is not possible. Constraints are even more pronounced for gender identity or sexual orientation (30 not possible) and for giftedness (28 not possible), often because these data are not collected or are considered highly sensitive.

The feasibility of linking attendance data and student outcomes varies not only by student characteristic, but also by the type of outcome considered. In general, linkages within education datasets (for example, school characteristics or grade within educational level) are more common than linkages to external administrative data (see Annex Figure 4.A.4). Most education systems can link attendance to core educational variables such as school characteristics (28 of 43 systems), grade (29 of 43) and programmes within educational levels (27 of 41), although eight systems cannot link attendance to any of these outcomes, and some report legal or technical constraints. Almost half can also link attendance to academic outcomes (20 of 42), fields of study (24 of 39) and educational level completion (23 of 42) without constraints. Where such linkages are not feasible, this is typically because attendance data are not centrally collected or are anonymised; several systems also report legal or technical barriers, such as difficulties distinguishing drop-out from programme change (Austria). By contrast, linking attendance to non-academic outcomes is relatively uncommon. Only 8 of 43 systems can connect attendance to non-academic outcomes within education (e.g. socio-emotional skills), and 9 of 42 can do so for outcomes beyond education (e.g. employment or health), while many report that this is not possible. Constraints frequently stem from the non-collection of relevant data, fragmented data governance across ministries, or legal and privacy restrictions, including data privacy compliance and strict regulations around sensitive health or socio-emotional data. New Zealand provides an interesting example of covering a range of outcomes beyond education in its datasets (see Box 4.7).

Box 4.7. Linking attendance data with outcomes beyond education in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the Integrated Data Infrastructure is a large research database of people in Aotearoa New Zealand, that brings together administrative data from Government agencies, StatsNZ surveys, and non-governmental organisations. Education data including school attendance, referrals to the Attendance Service and qualifications are all captured in the Integrated Data Infrastructure. It links administrative and survey data across agencies (education, health, justice, income, housing etc.) at the individual level under strict privacy controls.

Thanks to this linkage, several studies have explicitly modelled how chronic absences (i.e. a student

missing more than 30% of school a term) relate to non-educational outcomes. For example, the 2024 Education Review Office report, “Left behind: How do we get our chronically absent students back to school?”, uses Integrated Data Infrastructure to build longitudinal cohorts and identify students who were referred to Attendance Services for chronic absence. It links their school attendance and qualifications to:

- Police offending data;
- Social housing records;
- Benefit and income data;
- Health and disability service use;
- Corrections data (sentences, daily management costs).

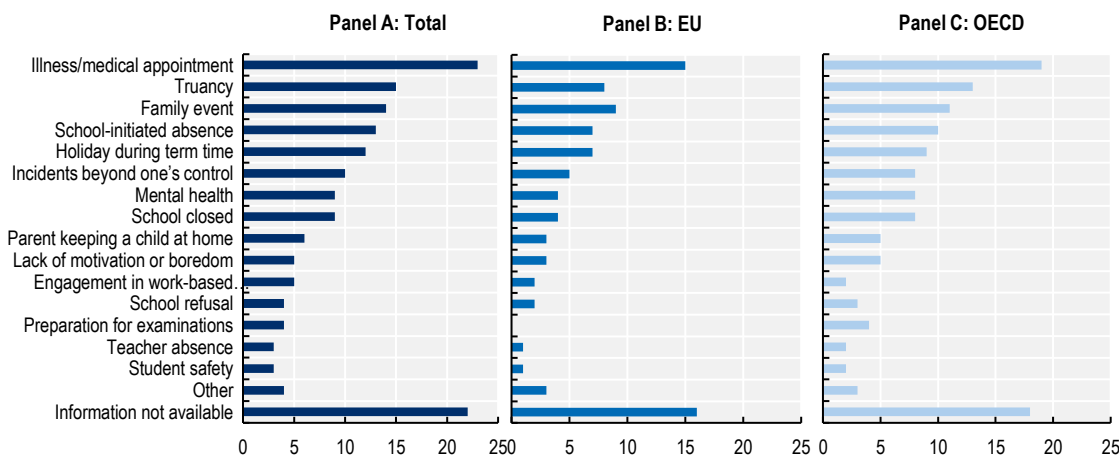
The study reports risk ratios for offending, social housing, qualifications and employment, in addition to fiscal cost estimates.

Source: New Zealand Education Review Office (2024^[228]), <https://evidence.ero.govt.nz/media/notdbxih/left-behind-how-do-we-get-our-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.pdf>, accessed on 5 December 2025.

Categorising reasons for absences

Understanding why students are absent is important for designing effective attendance policies and support strategies. In this context, many education systems record reasons for absence to identify the underlying drivers in their student population and provide targeted support to ensure attendance, regardless of whether the absences are authorised or not. Figure 4.14 shows which reasons for absence are recorded or categorised in national (sub-national) attendance datasets by different education systems.

Figure 4.14. Reasons recorded or categorised in national (sub-national) attendance datasets



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “If your education system collects data on reasons for student absences/non-attendance, which of the following reasons are recorded or categorised in national (or sub-national) datasets?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink <https://stat.link/rze0km>

In half of the education systems that participated in the survey (22 out of 45), reasons for student absences are not recorded or categorised nationally or sub-nationally. The remaining 23 systems all record absences

due to illnesses or medical appointments. The following most commonly recorded reason for student absences is truancy, as 15 systems use this categorisation. Then, 14 systems distinguish family events, 13 school-initiated absences, 12 holidays during term time and 10 incidents beyond one's control.

Fewer systems record lack of motivation or boredom (five); school refusal (four); engagement in work-based learning (five) and preparation for examination (four). Student safety and teachers' absences are only recorded as a cause of absence in three systems. Thailand records the widest range of reasons for absence (12 out of the survey's 15), followed by Korea and Scotland (United Kingdom) with 11 reasons each. A couple systems mention participation in extracurricular activities as another reason for absence being registered (Croatia and Latvia).

Box 4.8 provides an example on attendance codes in England (United Kingdom), highlighting the granularity of the data collected, through the statutory register distinguishing between multiple forms of participation, authorised absences, unauthorised absences and situations where attendance is deemed not possible.

Box 4.8. Attendance codes in England (United Kingdom)

England's attendance codes illustrate a granular approach to recording why students are not in school. Rather than treating attendance as a simple present/absent binary, the statutory register distinguishes between multiple forms of participation, authorised absences, unauthorised absences and situations where attendance is deemed not possible. This design reflects an explicit recognition that absences can arise from very different circumstances, ranging from illness or religious observance to participation in alternative provision, work experience, or systemic failures, such as transport disruption or school closures. Students engaged in approved educational activities off site (e.g. alternative provision, college courses, work experience or supervised sports activities) are statistically counted as attending, underscoring a broad conception of learning that extends beyond the school building.

A key feature is the fine-grained differentiation within authorised absence. England's framework separates routine and expected reasons (such as illness or medical appointments) from tightly regulated and exceptional cases, including part-time timetables for compulsory school-age children and adolescents, regulated performances or employment abroad, and leave granted under exceptional circumstances. The emphasis on prior approval, documentation and school-level discretion reflects a deliberate policy stance: authorised absences are not assumed to be benign, and even justified absences are expected to be minimised and carefully managed. At the same time, the system embeds safeguards for equity and inclusion, for example by explicitly recognising religious observance, maternity-related absences, mobility linked to parental occupation, and temporary reductions in timetable where this is judged to be in a pupil's best interests.

The framework also makes visible the boundary between individual responsibility and systemic constraint. A distinct set of codes captures situations where students are unable to attend due to factors outside their control, such as failures in home-to-school transport, public health restrictions, emergency travel disruption or closure of school premises. These absences are classified as "not a possible attendance" and are excluded from accountability calculations, signalling an effort to avoid attributing responsibility to students or families for structural barriers. This distinction is analytically important, as it separates disengagement-related absences from absences driven by system-level conditions.

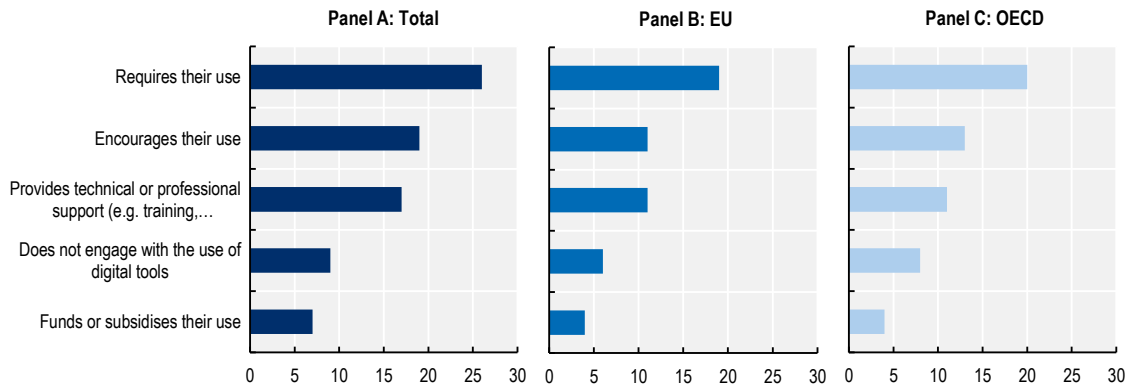
Finally, England's treatment of unauthorised absences is narrow and explicit, largely confined to holidays not approved by schools, late arrival after registration closes and cases where no acceptable reason is established.

Source: (Department of Education of England, 2024_[174]), Working together to improve school attendance, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_-_August_2024.pdf, accessed on 2 February 2026.

Data collection practices: the use of digital tools

In various education systems, schools log absences in class registers analogically, while others have adopted software for digital documentation. The latter can facilitate easier aggregation and use of data (Sälzer, Ricking and Feldhaus, 2024^[221]). Digital technologies can be helpful in monitoring attendance in education systems (see Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15. How education systems engage with digital tools to monitor attendance



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “In which ways does your education system engage with digital tools for monitoring attendance (e.g. school dashboards or student information systems)?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/dw3chy>

Most education systems – 26 out of 45 – mandate the use of digital tools to monitor attendance, while an additional eight encourage their use without making it compulsory (OECD, 2025^[2]). Some adopt a centralised tool for public schools, whereas others leave the choice to schools or district. For example, in the Flemish Community of Belgium, all primary and secondary schools are required to track attendance and report it to the Agency for Education Services through Discimus (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2025^[229]) (see also Box 4.9). In New Zealand, absence data are not only mandatorily collected and centralised, but are also published on an interactive dashboard updated daily. The dashboard displays both absence rates and reasons for absences, and allows users to break down the information by region, school type and Schooling Equity Index⁸ group. For deeper insights, these statistics are complemented with the lived experiences captured in large-scale surveys and interviews with students, parents and school staff. Bullying, mental-health challenges, family stress and alienation from schooling all emerge as root causes. Moreover, attendance data are combined with the Integrated Data Infrastructure, which is a secure databank that links de-identified person-level information from education, health, justice, welfare, tax, housing and other state agencies (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2025^[230]; New Zealand Education Review Office, 2024^[228]) (as mentioned in greater detail in Box 4.7).

Box 4.9. Discimus in the Flemish Community of Belgium

In the Flemish Community of Belgium, all primary and secondary schools are required to track attendance and report it to the Agency for Education Services through Discimus, which is a central tool that facilitates the exchange of student data between schools and the agency. The system also allows schools to access relevant information, such as a student's past attendance at another school. While schools may use different software to manage attendance locally, these must be connected to Discimus. Schools collect attendance twice a day and can record different options – both authorised and unauthorised absences.

In Discimus, each student has a unique identification number. This data collection enables the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training to link the collected data to other student characteristics. At any time, schools can request the absences they have registered. As a result, the registration data on school absences in the Flemish Community is not only used to intervene at the level of the students, but also to gain insight into the distribution of all absences across different classes and school years.

Source: Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2025^[229]), DISCIMUS – Uitwisseling van leerlinggegevens [DISCIMUS – Exchange of student data], <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14347#1> (accessed on 30 September 2025); Keppens et al. (2019^[231]), Measuring School Absenteeism: Administrative Attendance Data Collected by Schools Differ From Self-Reports in Systematic Ways, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02623>.

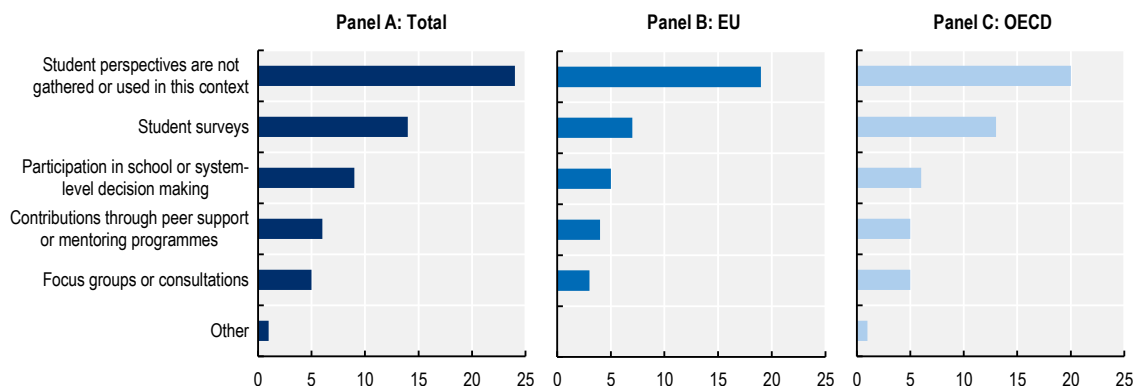
In addition to mandating or encouraging the use of digital tools to track attendance, many education systems also provide technical, professional and financial support to ensure their effective use (OECD, 2025^[2]). To facilitate the use of these digital tools, 17 education systems provide support, in the form of training, infrastructure or guidance for instance, and seven also fund or subsidise their use. For example, in England (United Kingdom), the Department for Education organises webinars and in-person conferences to help schools analyse absence data using the national tool. In Türkiye, the Ministry also provides technical support to school staff for the effective use of *e-Okul*, the central education data system it developed, including training on the system functionalities and its updates.

Only 9 of the 44 education systems do not currently use digital tools to monitor attendance at the national (sub-national) level (OECD, 2025^[2]). Among them, the French Community of Belgium plans to introduce such tools in 2026/27, while in Sweden and Wales (United Kingdom), decisions on their use are taken at the local level.

Including student voice and parents in data collections


Listening to the voices of students and parents is crucial in shaping effective policies to SAP. Active family involvement, especially through regular and meaningful communication with schools, can improve student attendance (Heyne, 2025^[3]; McConnel, 2014^[232]). When parents are engaged as partners, they might be motivated to help identify attendance barriers early and contribute to more sustainable solutions. Full-service community school models further highlight the value of incorporating stakeholder perspectives – particularly those of families and communities – into school culture and decision-making structures. These models blend academic, emotional and social supports within the school environment, reducing access barriers while amplifying collaboration among educators, families and service providers (Hunter, Elswick and Casey, 2017^[233]; McKinney de Royston and Madkins, 2019^[234]; Valli, Stefanski and Jacobson, 2016^[235]). Figure 4.16 shows how student perspectives are collected to inform policies or practices related to SAP.

Figure 4.16. How student perspectives are collected to inform policies or practices related to school attendance problems



Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Does the policy framework in your education system require the collection of data on student perspectives to inform policies or practices related to school attendance problems?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/pcq7b1>

Across the 45 education systems that answered the policy survey, 24 do not centrally collect student perspectives to inform policies or practices on SAP. This does not mean, however, that students' voices are not taken into account. For example, in England (United Kingdom) while there is no expectation at the central level about collecting students' perspectives on SAP, many schools do so through their own processes.

Among the 21 remaining education systems that gather student perspectives to address SAP, the most common method is through student surveys, used by 14 systems. For example, in Wales (United Kingdom), a multi-cohort study led by the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research explores secondary-school students' views on the rise in absences after the COVID-19 pandemic and finds that 19% of students reported they had missed school due to anxiety or mental health issues (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data, 2023^[236]). Meanwhile, in 2025, Japan administered targeted questionnaires to more than 18 000 learners who had experienced school refusal to better understand their situations and needs (Ministry of Education of Japan, 2025^[237]). In 2020, the government of New South Wales (Australia) surveyed 700 students about their reasons for attending or missing school, as well as their suggestions for improving attendance. Schools are also encouraged to incorporate student voice into attendance-related initiatives through activities such as co-developing attendance improvement plans, conducting school surveys, and organising classroom debates (Government of New South Wales, 2026^[238]).

Nine systems directly involve young people in school- or system-level decision making through youth councils or advisory groups for instance. For example, from 2026, Czechia allows secondary-school students to vote for and be elected to school boards. In Peru, the legal framework mandates student participation through various elected groups such as Student Participation Councils, Institutional Educational Councils and School Municipalities. Six systems channel student input on SAP through peer support or mentoring programmes. Finally, five education systems do so through focus groups or consultations.

Early warning systems

Early identification of students at greater risk of absences can allow for timely and preventative intervention, but this depends on the use of robust administrative attendance data, school staff training in data interpretation, and support systems that can translate early warning indicators into effective action

(SchoolStatus, 2025^[239]; Germain et al., 2024^[240]). While attendance monitoring systems record and report student absences, early warning systems (EWS) use attendance data proactively – often in combination with other indicators such as behaviour or academic performance – to identify students at risk and trigger targeted interventions before patterns of chronic absence become entrenched. The development of EWS has been shown to help schools recognise emerging attendance problems and deploy appropriate and timely supports (Kearney et al., 2023^[222]; Pérez-Marco et al., 2025^[115]). One example of an EWS stems from Massachusetts (United States) (see Box 4.10).

Box 4.10. Early Warning Indicator System, Massachusetts (United States)

Created by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) was established in 2011 to help identify students at risk of not meeting certain academic milestones from first to 12th grade.

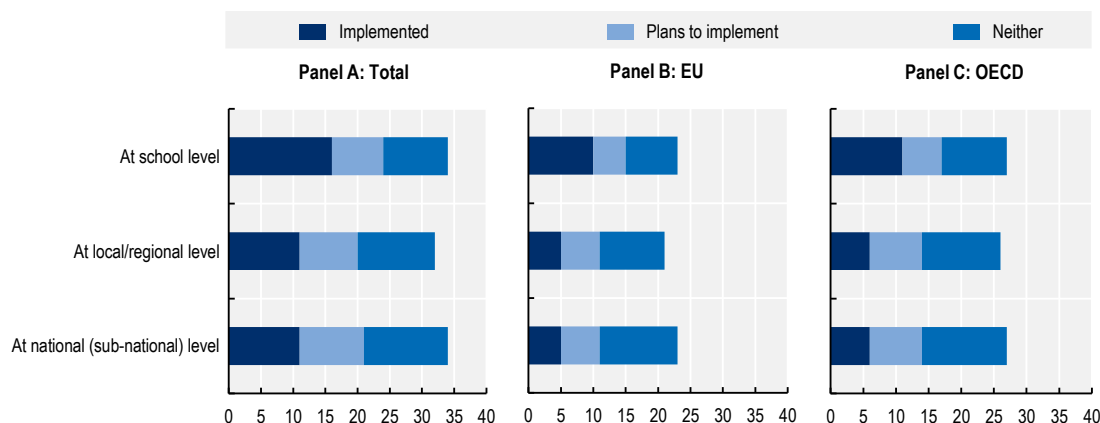
Its predictive analytics tool uses existing student data to assess the risk of students not reaching academic milestones, such as reading proficiency by the end of lower secondary and upper secondary school. It assigns students to high, moderate or low risk categories based on factors, such as attendance, suspensions and academic performance. EWIS organises student risk by four grade level groupings: early primary (grade levels 1-3), late primary (grade levels 4-6), lower secondary (grade levels 7-9) and upper secondary (grade levels 10-12). The grade levels come with different academic milestones.

EWIS is designed to help schools target interventions more effectively but is not mandatory and is not intended to label students. It is also not designed to function as an accountability measure. The system is re-evaluated annually to ensure it remains responsive to changes in the data. While EWIS is widely used, an impact analysis has not yet been conducted due to challenges with data accuracy and usage.

Source: OECD (2020^[241]), Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries, *OECD Skills Studies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.17f87/3a4bb6ea-en>; OECD (Unpublished^[242]), Monitoring of school attendance problems and early leaving from education and training, Summary of peer-learning discussion on school absence.

As mentioned before, SAP play an important role as a predictor in EWS models. Figure 4.17 highlights the number of education systems using or planning to use EWS.

Figure 4.17. Systems use of early warning systems



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Does your education system utilise, or plan to implement, an early warning system to identify students at risk of dropping out/early leaving from education and training?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/5d1yfw>

Eight education systems have already implemented early warning systems across the system, local and school levels (Bulgaria, Chile, Extremadura (Spain), Korea, Malta, Thailand, Türkiye, and Wales (United Kingdom)), whereas seven neither use such systems nor plan to do so at any of these levels (Austria, Czechia, Japan, Poland, Slovenia, Spain at the federal level and Sweden).

Early warning systems are most widespread at the school level, where 16 education systems currently use them, and 8 plan to introduce them, while 10 neither use nor plan to implement them. For instance, in France, early identification of students at risk of dropping out relies on the vigilance of the entire educational team, supported by school dropout reference teachers and by a school dropout prevention group established in every lower and upper secondary school.

At the national (sub-national) level, 11 education systems have already implemented early warning systems, while 10 plan to do so (e.g. Iceland, Indonesia and New Zealand). By contrast, 13 education systems neither use early warning systems at the national level nor plan to introduce them. For example, in Luxembourg, a recent law created an automated national monitoring system that flags students who accumulate 48 hours of unexcused absences in a school year (Government of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, 2023^[243]). The system triggers a formal notification to parents and, in case of continued non-compliance, a referral to the Youth Court.

At the local or regional level, 11 education systems reported already using early warning systems, and a further 9 plan to implement them. However, 12 education systems neither use early warning systems at this level nor have plans to do so. For example, in Bulgaria, the Ministry of Education and Science has set up a national mechanism under which regional education departments and municipalities co-ordinate multidisciplinary outreach teams to ensure that all children and young people of compulsory school age are enrolled in, and remain in, education. Drawing on a national electronic information system, these teams identify children who are out of school or at risk of dropping out and follow up through systematic home visits and direct work with families.

Among education systems that implement early warning systems, most use attendance data to identify students at risk of dropping out (see Annex Figure 4.A.5).

Among 44 education systems, 33 report not using specific methods at the national (sub-national) level to identify students at risk of leaving education and training early. Among the remaining 11 that do use such methods, 10 use attendance data to identify those students, while Wales (United Kingdom) does not. In Wales (United Kingdom), Local Education Welfare Officers identify students at risk of dropping out, notably through attendance data. However, it would not be lawful for the Welsh Government to use such data to make decisions about individuals, for example profiling risks of dropping out.

Attendance and absence focus in school evaluations

Internal school evaluations are processes through which schools review their own policies and practices and monitor their performance to encourage reflection, goal setting and inform school development plans (OECD, 2013^[244]). In 2015, they were required annually in public schools in 15 OECD countries (OECD, 2015^[245]). In many systems, the results of schools' self-evaluations are also shared with external audiences, such as higher-level authorities, school inspectors or the general public (OECD, 2015^[245]).

While attendance has not traditionally been one of the most common areas covered by school self-evaluations, its inclusion is increasingly recognised as an important component of school improvement and accountability systems: in the Survey, 31 out of 44 education systems reported requiring or encouraging schools to integrate SAP into their internal evaluations (Annex Figure 4.A.6) (OECD, 2025^[2]).

Provided that adequate data systems and school-level capacities are in place – not only to conduct internal evaluations but also to act on their results – integrating SAP into self-evaluation processes may constitute an effective lever for detecting emerging patterns of disengagement and implementing targeted responses.

Evidence suggests that effective self-evaluation practices depend on strong leadership, a shared understanding of school goals, the engagement of key stakeholders, and the existence of robust monitoring and evaluation processes supported by national or local infrastructures (OECD, 2013^[244]).

In 13 of 44 education systems, schools are required to evaluate SAP as part of their internal evaluation processes. For instance, in Greece, the national school self-evaluation framework requires schools' Teaching Staff Councils to assess school performance across defined operational axes, including one explicitly dedicated to school dropout and attendance (Government of the Hellenic Republic, 2020^[246]). In England (United Kingdom), the school inspectorate recently updated its inspection framework to place greater emphasis on attendance and published a toolkit specifying that school leaders are expected to "attendance information closely, at whole-school level and for different groups to identify patterns and trends", as well as "use this analysis well to identify the causes of poor attendance, intervene early and remove barriers" (Ofsted, 2025, p. 41^[247]). England (United Kingdom) has also developed attendance reports that provide comparison between similar schools, to support diagnosis, target-setting and the sharing of effective practices (Department for Education of England, 2025^[248]).

In 18 systems, integrating school attendance problems into schools' self-evaluations is encouraged. For example, in Norway, the Directorate of Education provides schools with a structured tool to support self-assessment and improvement planning (Directorate of Education of Norway, 2023^[249]). This tool helps schools identify their strengths and challenges, set goals and monitor progress; and explicitly includes questions about school absences.

In 13 education systems, there are no system-level policies that require or encourage schools to conduct evaluations of SAP as part of their internal evaluation.

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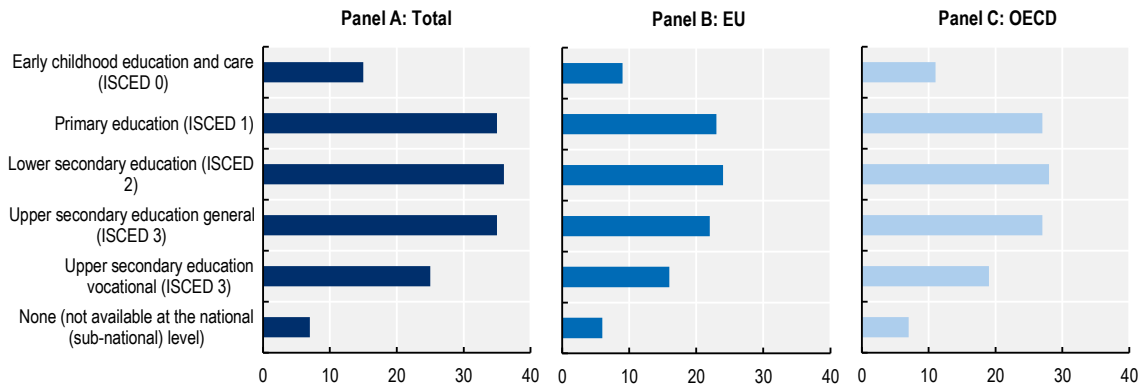
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Annex 4.A. Monitoring systems for SAP

Annex Figure 4.A.1. Number of education systems in which attendance data is collected and available, per educational level

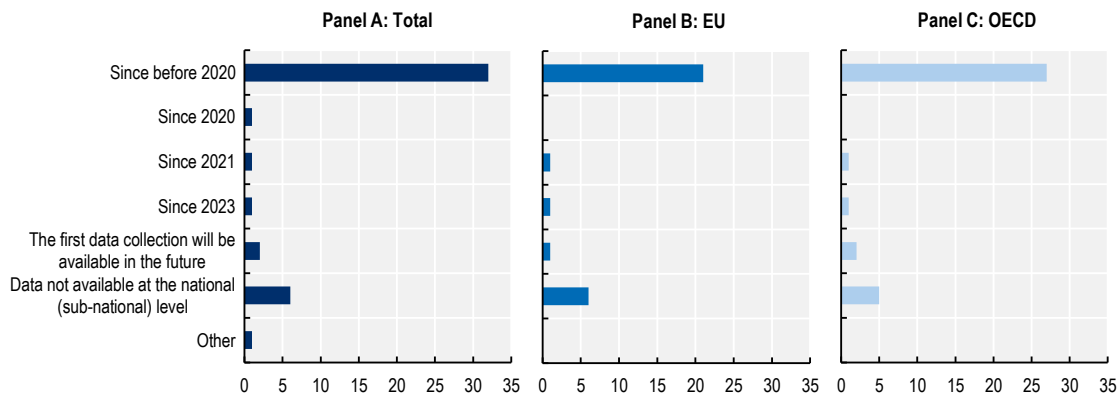


Note: Responses are not mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “For which educational levels are school attendance/absence data collected and available at the national (sub-national level) level?”. 44 education systems responded to this item, including 30 from EU countries and 36 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/4drq0w>

Annex Figure 4.A.2. Onset of student attendance data collection at the national (sub-national) level

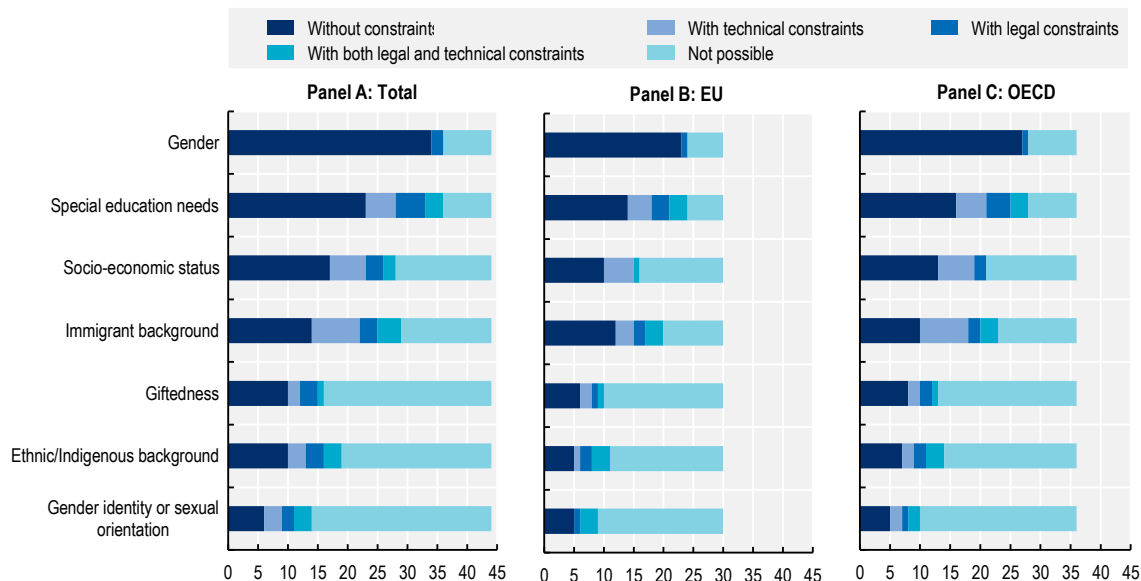


Note: Responses are mutually exclusive. They are based on the following question: “Since when have data on student attendance been collected at the national (sub-national) level?”. 45 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 37 from OECD countries.

Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

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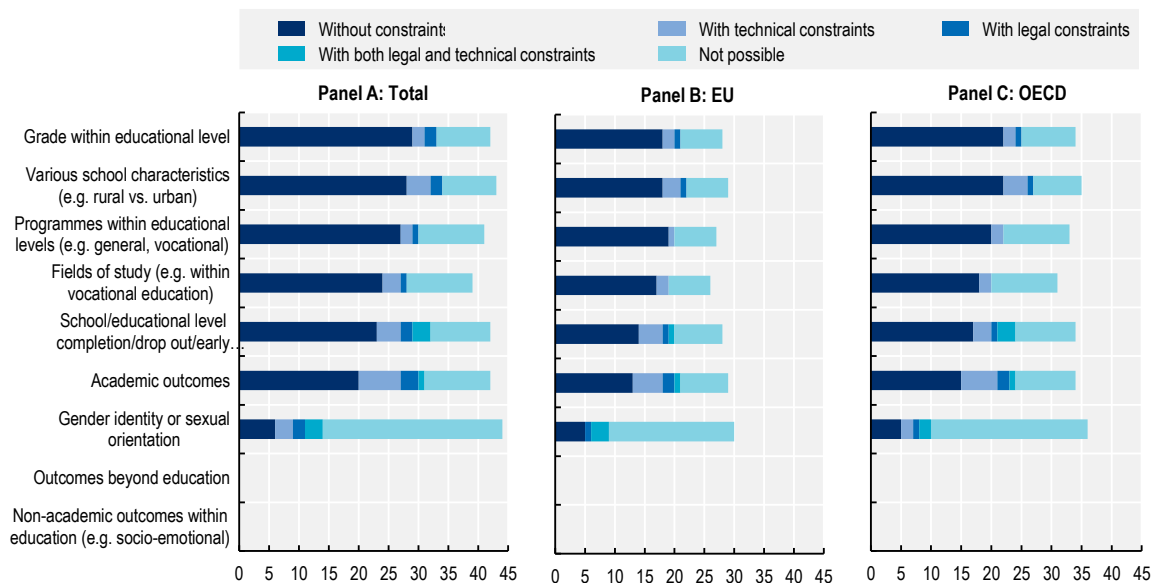
Annex Figure 4.A.3. Legal or technical constraints to linking attendance data with student characteristics at the national (sub-national) level



Note: Responses are mutually exclusive for each student characteristics. They are based on the following question: “For each of the following, please indicate whether there are legal or technical constraints to linking attendance data with student characteristics at the national (sub-national) level”. 44 education systems responded to this item, including 30 from EU countries and 36 from OECD countries. Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink <https://stat.link/psebqz>

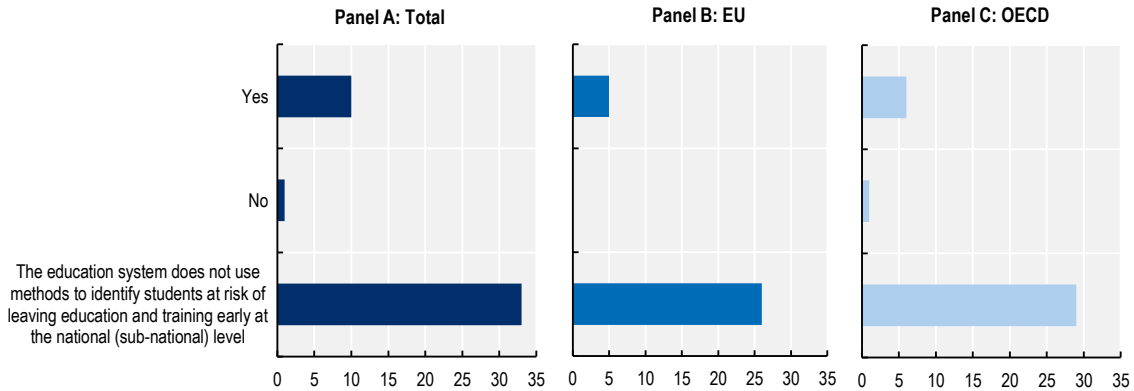
Annex Figure 4.A.4. Legal or technical constraints to linking attendance data with students’ outcomes and other characteristics at the national (sub-national) level



Note: Responses are mutually exclusive for each student outcome. They are based on the following question: “For each of the following, please indicate whether there are legal or technical constraints to linking attendance data with students’ outcomes and other characteristics at the national (sub-national) level.”. 43 education systems responded to this item, including 29 from EU countries and 35 from OECD countries. Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink <https://stat.link/5jvmeu>

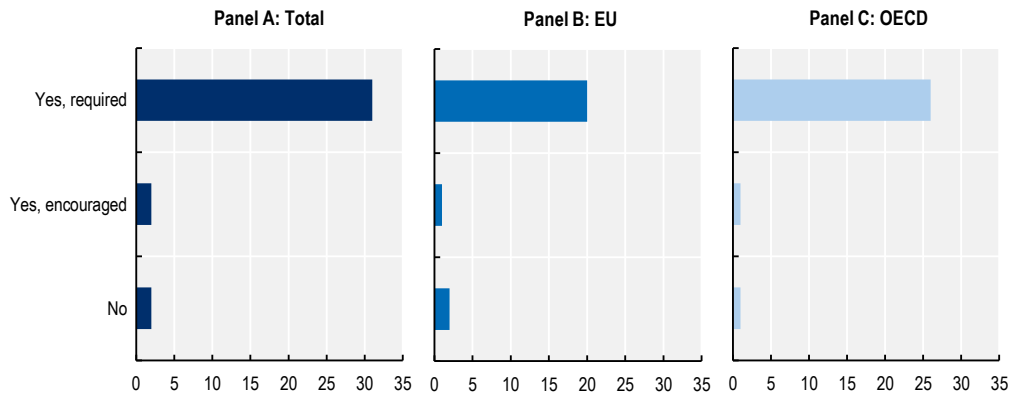
Annex Figure 4.A.5. Use of attendance data within system-level methods to identify students at risk of dropping out



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “If your system uses methods to identify students at risk of leaving education and training early (dropping out) at the national (sub-national) level, does it use data on attendance or absence/non-attendance to identify those students (i.e. is attendance or absence/non-attendance used to predict whether students drop out from education)?”. 44 education systems responded to this item, including 31 from EU countries and 36 from OECD countries.
 Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/r4s8cx>

Annex Figure 4.A.6. Integration of SAP evaluations as part of internal school evaluations



Note: Responses are based on the following question: “Do system-level policies exist that require or encourage schools to conduct (regular) evaluations of school attendance problems as part of their internal evaluation (self-evaluation)?”. 44 education systems responded to this item, including 30 from EU countries and 36 from OECD countries.
 Source: OECD (2025^[2]), OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems.

StatLink  <https://stat.link/gryhtm>

Notes

¹ Unjustified absences cannot exceed: a) 10 days, consecutive or intermittent, in the 1st cycle of primary education, b) Twice the number of weekly teaching hours per subject in other cycles or levels of education, without prejudice to the provisions of the following paragraph (Portuguese Assembly, 2012^[250]).

² Currency conversions in this chapter are based on OECD (2026^[251]).

³ Charter schools are publicly funded but privately managed schools that are granted additional flexibility and autonomy. They cannot charge tuition and must offer open access to students, using a lottery for admission when oversubscribed.

⁴ Teen parent unit a specialised part of a secondary school that provides education and wraparound support for students who are pregnant or parenting, with nearby early childhood services for their children (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2025^[230]).

⁵ Norwegian national service for special needs education, operating under the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.

⁶ Successful educational actions are evidence-based practices grounded in dialogic learning that can advance educational success for all students, including improved attainment, better school co-existence, greater participation of families and communities, and enhanced inclusive learning environments (Roca et al., 2024^[191]).

⁷ The paper estimates teachers' value-added to attendance and value-added to achievement.

⁸ The Schooling Equity Index is an indicator that estimates the extent to which young people face socio-economic barriers to educational achievement. Based on this indicator, schools in New Zealand are then divided into three groups by the number of socio-economic barriers to achievement: fewer, moderate and more (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2024^[252]).

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5 Key messages, policy pointers and future research

This chapter provides seven key messages emerging from the report and offers 29 policy pointers on school attendance problems. These can be grouped under the following broad points: address the underlying drivers of absence through supportive and integrated responses; develop strong relations and engagement in schools; build strong partnerships with families and students; start early and respond timely before absence becomes entrenched; use enforcement carefully within a broader legislative framework that focuses on a proactive approach to supporting attendance; strengthen system and school capacity to act on attendance; and improve evaluation and shared learning on attendance across the education system. The chapter also discusses a number of research gaps and future avenues for research.

Key messages

Based on the evidence presented in the previous chapters, the report on school attendance problems proposes seven key messages with main policy pointers.

Absence is shaped by multiple, interrelated and self-reinforcing drivers

Understanding the drivers of school attendance problems is essential for effective responses, but these problems arise from a complex interplay of individual, family, school and broader factors, often linked to cumulative disadvantage. These factors influence each other in two-way relationships, for example absence can both result from and contribute to difficulties at home or school. Since causes and effects are closely connected and change over time, they are hard to separate, making these problems difficult to define and address, and leaving limited agreement on the best response. Therefore, it is important to respond to the underlying drivers of absence through multifaceted, supportive and integrated responses.

Positive students' experiences in school are central to their attendance

Growing evidence points towards the importance of students' experiences within schools as key factors that can affect their attendance. This concerns elements such as the school's climate, the relationships with peers and staff, supportive and flexible learning environments and engagement with the learning experiences. Hence, it is crucial to develop strong relations and engagement in schools.

Parental beliefs and information gaps are changing and shaping absence

Parents are not always aware of the consequences and the cumulative amount of school their child has missed. Parental attitudes towards compulsory schooling have shifted after the COVID-19 pandemic, jeopardising alignment between families and schools. At the same time, parental support remains important for reducing risks linked to school attendance problems. Hence, it is essential to build strong partnerships and a shared understanding and involvement with families and students.

Absence matters at every stage: early, cumulative and persistent effects

School attendance problems have cumulative and lasting effects, with early absence strongly predicting later absence if not addressed. Absences in primary education can also hinder the development of foundation skills and are associated with poorer educational outcomes, including in later schooling. Starting early and responding effectively before absence becomes entrenched is thus key.

Legislative frameworks shape attendance, but punitive approaches have limited impact

Legal frameworks on school attendance promote access to education and define responsibilities of families, schools and public authorities but vary widely across education systems. Many rely on punitive measures, which may bring short-term improvements but have inconsistent and fading effects. Therefore, using enforcement carefully within a broader support framework is important.

Strong system capacity is essential to effectively monitor and respond to school absence

Strong system and school capacity is essential for monitoring and responding to attendance problems. This requires not only robust data systems and clear accountability, but also the capacity to act on information quickly and in a coordinated way. Schools play a key role, and their effectiveness depends on staff skills, resources and supportive organisational conditions. Strengthening system and school capacity to act on attendance is thus crucial.

Evaluation of policies and practices targeting absence is limited

The evidence on school attendance problems is uneven. Even though absence rates are widely collected, differences in definitions and reporting limit comparability across schools, regions and countries, making it difficult to assess trends or evaluate policy impacts consistently. In addition, evidence on effective interventions remains limited. Therefore, improving evaluation and learning on attendance across the system is important.

Introduction

This chapter synthesises the main findings on school attendance problems (SAP) from the report and translates them into forward-looking policy pointers. It identifies seven key messages that capture the overarching patterns observed across education systems from the data analyses, OECD Policy Survey (2025^[1]) results and findings from the literature review, highlighting both shared challenges and important differences in how SAP are understood, measured and addressed.

The chapter also outlines 29 policy pointers aimed at supporting more effective and coherent responses to SAP. These pointers are not intended as prescriptive recommendations, but rather as strategic orientations that can inform policy design and implementation across diverse contexts. They emphasise the need for balanced approaches that combine prevention, timely intervention and targeted support, while recognising the role of schools, families and wider systems. Equity should also remain a constant consideration across these policy pointers: students facing disadvantage and structural barriers are disproportionately exposed to SAP and may require differentiated and targeted forms of support.

Finally, the chapter identifies several research gaps and avenues for future investigation. Despite growing attention to SAP, important questions remain in regard to the drivers, measurement and long-term consequences, as well as the effectiveness of different policy responses. Addressing these gaps will be important for strengthening the evidence base and supporting more informed decision making in the coming years.

Key messages and policy pointers

The following sections present key messages emerging from the report's findings, followed by policy pointers.

Absence is shaped by multiple, interrelated and self-reinforcing drivers

Understanding the drivers of SAP is critical for designing effective responses. Absence can arise from many potential causes – up to 781 risk factors of SAP identified in one review – and is typically embedded in a web of personal and social problems (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019^[2]). In this context, poverty and socio-economic circumstances may deserve greater consideration among the individual and family-level drivers of absence. Indeed, SAP can stem from a complex interplay of individual, family, school, community and structural factors, which suggests that absence may both reflect and reinforce cumulative disadvantage (Chapter 2).

SAP are also characterised by self-reinforcing dynamics (Chapter 3). Absence both results from and contributes to academic difficulties, socio-emotional challenges and disengagement. For example, early learning difficulties can increase frustration and reduce school engagement, leading to absence. In turn, absence exacerbates learning gaps and weakens motivation, reinforcing academic vulnerability. Similarly,

anxiety or depression may contribute to non-attendance, while prolonged absence can intensify social isolation and emotional distress.

These cross-domain effects and feedback loops make SAP difficult to define and address. SAP (chronic absence, more specifically) have been described as a “wicked problem” (Childs and Lofton, 2021^[3]). They are difficult to define and address, as their causes and effects are complex, interdependent and hard to disentangle (Crowley and Head, 2017^[4]; Weber and Khademian, 2008^[5]). These messages imply the need to **address the underlying drivers of absence through supportive and integrated responses**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Respond to health barriers to improve attendance

Physical and mental health strongly shape students’ ability to attend school. Illness, fatigue, sleep and nutrition affect daily engagement, while chronic conditions and unmet health needs increase the risk of persistent absence and compound disadvantage. PISA evidence shows that sickness is the most commonly cited reason for absence across OECD and EU countries.

Mental health challenges, particularly anxiety and depression, are consistently linked to school avoidance and ongoing non-attendance, often interacting with school-related stressors. Schools play a key role in providing or connecting students with health and well-being supports, including counselling and school-based health services. The OECD Policy Survey data indicate that most education systems require or encourage schools to provide health-related and psychological supports, highlighting their central role in addressing attendance barriers. While evidence on general mental health interventions on school attendance is mixed, targeted, attendance-focused interventions on psychosocial support show more consistent benefits.

Preventive health measures, such as hygiene practices and immunisation, demonstrate relatively strong evidence in reducing illness-related absence. Overall, integrating accessible health supports with attendance strategies is critical to addressing underlying barriers and improving participation.

Address structural barriers through co-ordinated and school-based supports

SAP are often rooted in structural barriers that extend beyond the school environment, including transport constraints, food insecurity, housing instability, limited access to healthcare, and broader family circumstances such as parental health and family functioning (Chapter 2). Addressing these barriers requires an approach that combines co-ordinated, cross-sector support, sufficient coverage and capacity, and targeted measures delivered within schools. Since these structural barriers are unequally distributed, effective responses may also require targeted allocation of resources and supports towards the students, schools and communities facing the highest levels of disadvantage and SAP. At the system level, effective responses depend on strong co-ordination between education, health and social services to ensure that students and families can access appropriate supports in a timely and coherent way, with sufficient coverage and capacity across services to ensure accessibility and responsiveness. Such approaches include facilitating referrals, integrating physical and mental health services into attendance strategies and enabling schools to connect families with external services that address underlying needs.

At the same time, schools play a critical role in mitigating the impact of these barriers through targeted, school-based supports. These can include providing access to school meals, offering flexible arrangements (such as flexible timetables or alternative delivery modes including online or blended learning), and flexible assessments where appropriate, and ensuring that students experiencing disadvantage receive timely academic support. Evidence suggests that in particular school meal provision can have a positive effect on attendance (Chapter 4). For instance, in countries such as Lithuania, England (United Kingdom) and Thailand, socio-economically disadvantaged students are entitled to free breakfast, lunch and, in some cases, school supplies. Importantly, recognising and addressing structural barriers

helps shift the framing of SAP away from individual or parental responsibility alone, and towards a more holistic understanding of the conditions that shape participation. This approach may also strengthen trust between schools and families and support more sustainable improvements in attendance.

Provide a legal basis for co-ordinated support services

Attendance problems often require responses that go beyond the education sector. Legislative frameworks can facilitate collaboration by enabling information-sharing (within appropriate safeguards), and by establishing dedicated structures for co-operation and joint action between schools, social services, health providers and regional authorities. Providing a clear legal basis for such co-ordination can help ensure that students and families facing barriers to attendance can access timely and appropriate support, and that responsibilities across services are aligned. It can also strengthen accountability, clarify roles and referral pathways and support more consistent implementation of multi-agency responses across regions and local contexts. Clear communication, transparency and a supportive, respectful approach are also important to maintain trust and engagement with families in the context of multi-agency work.

Share data responsibly across institutions

Collaborative data-sharing across institutions can support more integrated responses to attendance issues, provided it is secure, lawful and used in ways that benefit students. Linking absence and attendance data with information from health, social services or other areas can enable more targeted support, while appropriate safeguards are essential to prevent stigma and protect families. Strengthening data infrastructure through the linked administrative datasets and longitudinal data infrastructures could further enhance data analysis and inform policy making. Several systems, such as England (United Kingdom) and New Zealand, have developed such integrated data systems, offering promising examples for further exploration.

Create collective responsibility

A coherent response to SAP requires a shared commitment across all levels of the education system and beyond. This involves defining clear expectations and responsibilities at central, regional and school levels, while ensuring alignment between policy and practice. Embedding attendance as a shared priority within school communities, including among staff, students and families, can help foster a culture that values regular participation and supports those at risk. Framing attendance as a collective responsibility, rather than solely an individual obligation, can also encourage more supportive and co-ordinated approaches to intervention.

Positive students' experiences in school are central to their attendance and engagement

Within a broader set of drivers of absence, school-related factors play a particularly important role. Growing evidence points towards the importance of students' experiences within schools as key factors that can affect their attendance. This concerns elements such as the school's climate, the relationships with peers and staff, supportive and flexible learning environments and the engagement with the learning experiences, which all play a key role in whether students feel motivated and willing to attend regularly (Chapter 2).

In particular, negative school climate and a lack of school belonging are associated with higher levels of absence (Chapter 2). Students also frequently report avoiding school because they feel unsafe or experience discrimination. Health-related issues, including physical and mental health challenges, also contribute to SAP by influencing students' day-to-day experiences at school, including attendance, engagement and well-being.

These messages imply the need to **develop strong supportive relations and engagement in schools**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Create a positive and safe school climate and a strong sense of belonging

Fostering key aspects of school climate, including student connectedness with school and with peers, and engagement in school activities may be important in driving attendance. Students' perceptions of safety are also an important precondition for regular attendance. Experiences of bullying, for instance, can significantly undermine students' willingness to attend school (Chapter 2). Almost all (41) of 45 education systems require or encourage schools to implement initiatives to improve school climate (Chapter 4). Spain, for example, has developed a comprehensive, system-level approach to strengthening school climate, coexistence and student well-being, embedded in both legislation and targeted programmes. National education law in Spain establishes well-being, inclusion and positive coexistence as core principles of the education system, explicitly promoting values such as respect, non-violence, social cohesion and prevention of bullying and discrimination.

Policies to improve school climate could prioritise building strong relationships, enhancing students' sense of belonging, and fostering safe, inclusive and engaging school environments. Evidence indicates that these factors can contribute to improved attendance, especially by reducing authorised absences, though their impact is generally moderate and mediated through students' perceptions and experiences.

Build positive adult-student and student-student relationships

The lack of strong, trusting relationships with adults and peers are an important driver of absence. Evidence, while limited, indicates that positive student-teacher relationships are associated with lower likelihood of SAP (Chapter 2). Peer relationships also play an important role, and initiatives that foster positive peer interaction and inclusion can deter absence (Chapter 2). Recognising relational capacity as a core lever for attendance implies investing in the time, skills and organisational conditions that allow staff and students to build and sustain these relationships. Across surveyed education systems, 13 out of 45 systems encourage or require schools to implement peer-support programmes (Chapter 4).

Use academic approaches and targeted support to help students catch up after absence and to strengthen their connection to learning

Instructional adaptation can include more intensive or remedial instruction after a period of absence. Indeed, 22 education systems require or encourage schools to provide remedial instruction to students returning after absence in order to help them catch up academically and re-engage with learning.

Academic approaches can also contribute to improving attendance more broadly when they strengthen students' sense of connection to learning and school, rather than focusing solely on narrow skill acquisition. While effects are generally modest and variable, stronger impacts are observed in approaches that promote engagement through authentic and student-centred learning, or that are implemented as coherent, longer-term or whole-school strategies. Targeted academic supports, such as high-impact tutoring, can also help reduce SAP, while more personalised and relational approaches (e.g. project-based learning) show promising, though sometimes time-limited, effects. At the same time, the effectiveness of these approaches depends on schools having the resources and capacity to provide inclusive education and respond to the diverse needs of students, whereas short-term or narrowly targeted interventions tend to be less effective.

Shift attendance policies towards support and engagement, limiting exclusion to a last resort

In some instances, education systems enforce absences on students (“suspensions”) as a punishment measure or as a protective/administrative action. Indeed, 36 of 45 education systems have a policy enforcing absences on students (Chapter 4). However, the evidence indicates that suspensions are associated with various negative outcomes, such as increased absence, higher delinquency, decreased academic achievement, lower university attendance and lower sense of belonging (Chapter 4). Therefore, it is important that such exclusionary practices are only used as a last resort and within a broader, supportive framework.

When exclusion is avoided, schools require effective alternatives to maintain a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, including those affected by disruptive behaviours. Evidence points to the value of in-school approaches such as restorative practices, behavioural support, and targeted interventions that address underlying needs while protecting classroom climate. In cases where temporary exclusion is deemed necessary, it needs to be time-limited and embedded within a comprehensive response that maintains student engagement, for example through structured learning activities, collaboration with external providers (e.g. non-governmental organisations, community or youth organisations), and continued access to support services.

Importantly, reintegration planning needs to be prioritised from the outset, with clear pathways to support students’ return to school, rebuild relationships and prevent recurrence. As mentioned before, strong coordination with social, health and community services can help ensure continuity of support and reduce the risk of long-term disengagement.

Develop relevant, inclusive and flexible learning environments

Students are more likely to attend when instruction is career-relevant, i.e. when teachers illustrate the value of the content they teach through examples drawn from the labour market (Orthner et al., 2013^[6]). Active pedagogical approaches, such as problem-based learning, peer instruction, flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, and game-based learning, can increase student engagement and academic performance (Sahito, Khoso and Phulpoto, 2025^[7]). This highlights the importance of curricula and teaching approaches that are practical, inclusive and connected to students’ experiences. Viewing engagement as a core lever for attendance, rather than only academic attainment, can help reframe attendance policies from compliance towards participation and motivation. Around half to two thirds of 45 education systems have curriculum strategies in place that aim to make education more engaging or relevant for students (Chapter 4). Examples include the 25% curriculum autonomy in Portuguese schools since 2018, or the expansion of vocational and work-based pathways in Türkiye (Chapter 4).

Greater flexibility in how learning is organised can also support attendance for students facing health, caregiving or other barriers. Flexible timetables, blended learning or temporary part-time arrangements may help students remain connected to education while addressing individual circumstances. For example, schools in Scotland and England (United Kingdom) may use temporary part-time timetables for students unable to attend full-time due to medical, behavioural or reintegration needs, although evidence on long-term impacts remains limited. Furthermore, in 2024–2025, eleven European education systems reported offering such forms of flexible scheduling (European Commission, 2025^[8]).

Expand access to extracurricular activities

Beyond curriculum strategies, 28 of 45 education systems reported requiring or encouraging student engagement strategies. A common strategy to this end is to offer extracurricular activities. Extracurricular provision may support attendance particularly when it strengthens students’ connection to school, builds relationships with adults and peers, and addresses broader socio-emotional or contextual barriers faced

by disadvantaged students (Chapter 4). For example, in the Netherlands, the *School en Omgeving* (School and Environment) programme offers an enriched school day to students who, due to their home situation or the place where they live, have less access to activities, such as sports, culture and additional academic support.

Parental beliefs and information gaps are changing and shaping absence

Parents are often unaware of the numerous consequences of missing school (Gottfried and Hutt, 2019^[9]) and may underestimate the cumulative impact of absence (Rogers and Feller, 2018^[10]). Furthermore, there are indications that some parents altered their attitudes towards (compulsory) schooling after the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 2). Parental tolerance for non-essential term-time absence (such as for holidays, events unrelated to school) seems to have increased in several education systems. Moreover, expectations for attending school while experiencing a minor illness seem to have also softened across countries and parents seem to be more likely, in some instances, to keep their children at home. These health-related shifts, combined with work-related (home-office) shifts, can interact to normalise short, discretionary absences. This can then have an impact on how families and schools align expectations about everyday attendance.

At the same time, parental support plays an important protective role towards risk factors associated with SAP. Indeed, stronger school-home relationships have the potential to improve attendance patterns, while breakdowns in school-home relationships can also precipitate absence.

These messages imply the need to **build strong partnerships with families and students**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Rebuild shared norms post-pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted established expectations around school attendance in many contexts. Rebuilding shared norms among students, families and schools around the importance of regular attendance is hence a key priority. This involves promoting attendance positively, as part of a supportive and engaging school experience, rather than relying primarily on deterrence or sanctions. Clear, consistent messaging across the system can help re-establish attendance as a collective expectation. In England (United Kingdom), the government has emphasised the need to connect system-level reforms with the everyday practices of schools, which are expected to embed a whole-school culture of high attendance and ensure that attendance work is everyone's responsibility. The statutory guidance requires every school to have a written attendance policy that is understood by leaders, staff, students and parents, setting out expectations for punctuality, communication procedures and internal responsibilities, among others.

Include the voices of parents and students in the design and implementation of legislation, policies and practices

Strengthening partnerships also requires actively involving families and students in the design and implementation of attendance legislation, policies and practices. Parents and students offer important perspectives on barriers such as transportation, caregiving responsibilities, school climate and mental health, as well as what motivates engagement. Creating structured opportunities for dialogue (e.g. through surveys, focus groups, parent councils and student advisory groups) can help ensure that these insights are not only heard but meaningfully reflected in decisions. This deeper understanding allows legislative frameworks and policies to be more responsive to lived experiences and local contexts. However, the OECD Policy Survey shows that 24 (out of 45 education systems) do not centrally collect student perspectives to inform policies or practices on SAP though they may collect them at school level. Those that do collect student perspectives usually do so through student surveys.

Importantly, this involvement should be ongoing rather than one-off. Engaging families and students in co-designing solutions, reviewing attendance data and refining approaches over time fosters a sense of shared ownership. When stakeholders see their input lead to visible changes, it builds trust, strengthens the legitimacy of policies and increases their uptake. Moving towards these participatory approaches reinforces the idea of attendance as a shared responsibility, positioning families and students as active partners rather than passive recipients. In turn, attendance efforts become more relational, context-sensitive and sustainable, grounded in collaboration rather than compliance. For example, New South Wales (Australia) provides examples of strategies to include student voice on attendance, including co-developing attendance improvement plans, conducting school surveys, helping analyse attendance data and organising classroom debates (New South Wales Government, 2026^[11]).

Use personalised and actionable communication

Research suggests that many parents systematically underestimate their child's absences, while individualised attendance summaries can help reduce SAP (Rogers and Feller, 2018^[10]). Clear, timely and tailored communication is hence important to reinforce the importance of regular attendance and to correct misperceptions. Providing parents with regular, individualised updates on their child's attendance can prompt more effective engagement. However, evidence indicates that information alone is sometimes insufficient (Chapter 4). More one-dimensional approaches, such as frequent absence notifications, have not consistently improved attendance (Balu, Porter and Gunton, 2016^[12]; Rogers and Feller, 2018^[10]; Bergman and Chan, 2021^[13]). The most effective strategies combine clear information with practical guidance and supportive engagement, rather than relying on generic or purely punitive messaging. For example, in Wales (United Kingdom), government-funded Family Engagement Officers are specifically tasked with fostering positive and trusting home-school relationships. Similarly, in Ireland, Home School Community Liaison officers are responsible for strengthening relationships between schools, families and communities to improve student attendance, participation and retention, particularly among students at risk of educational disadvantage. Moreover, the use of modern communication tools can further improve reach, timeliness and responsiveness (Gottfried and Hutt, 2019^[9]).

Absence matters at every stage: early, cumulative and persistent effects

SAP matter across all stages of education, with effects that are both cumulative and persistent over time. Prior absence is a strong predictor of subsequent absence, with SAP often persisting if not addressed. PISA evidence shows that children who are absent in primary education are more likely to experience absence in later stages (Chapter 2).

Moreover, absences in primary education (and emerging evidence showing the same for early childhood education and care) can disrupt the development of foundational cognitive, language and socio-emotional skills that underpin later learning and engagement. Evidence indicates that absences in early age are associated with poorer educational outcomes, including in later stages of schooling (Chapter 3).

Transitions between levels of education (such as the move from primary to lower secondary education) represent periods of heightened risk and can be particularly harmful to later student achievement (Dräger, Klein and Sosu, 2025^[14]). Changes in curricula, expectations and school environments can challenge students' adjustment and the establishment of effective learning routines. Absences during these periods can make it more difficult for students to adapt to new expectations and establish effective learning routines (Chapter 2) and may therefore have particularly pronounced consequences and increase the risk of longer-term disengagement (Chapter 3).

Besides the need to address these drivers, improve student engagement and engage with parents (mentioned in earlier policy pointers), these messages also imply the need to **start early and respond timely before absence becomes entrenched**. This could be achieved through several approaches:

Engage in continuous monitoring of attendance or absence

Real-time monitoring of attendance, particularly if tracked at the student level, enables the construction of longitudinal attendance records that offer a dynamic view of students' attendance. Such data infrastructures can facilitate the early identification of SAP, support the design of targeted interventions, and allow policymakers, schools and teachers to monitor trends. Beyond their operational value, these longitudinal data can also play a critical role in evaluation, enabling the assessment of attendance policies' effectiveness and a better understanding of the trajectories that lead to chronic absence or, conversely, return to attendance. However, only 25 of 45 education systems track individual student's attendance (Chapter 4).

At the same time, it is important to monitor attendance across the educational journey (though only 12 of 45 education systems track attendance from ECEC to upper secondary education (including vocational)) and also during transition points. Doing so enables the observation of cumulative days missed and short-term fluctuations, as these can reveal different types of risk. For example, intermittent absences may indicate emerging disengagement or instability, even if overall attendance remains above formal thresholds (Chapter 4). These might be particularly consequential during transition points between educational levels, when the risks of absence are sometimes higher.

Strengthen support at key transition points

Transitions between education levels are critical periods of heightened attendance risk and require close monitoring and targeted support. Policies can mitigate these risks by strengthening peer support (e.g. buddy systems or peer-mentoring, for example in the United Kingdom) to foster belonging, alongside robust tracking and early warning systems to identify and respond to emerging attendance issues early. Partnership-based approaches that engage families and coordinate support across schools and community services can further ease transitions, particularly for students at greater risk of disengagement. For instance, the previously mentioned Home School Community Liaison Scheme in Ireland supports home visits, parent-focused activities and courses, and by facilitating communication between families and schools. The coordinators also work closely with school staff and community services to identify needs, support transitions across education stages and ensure that families are connected to relevant supports.

Enable timely and continuous intervention to address emerging absence patterns and underlying risks

A key function of legislative frameworks is to provide a basis for timely intervention that addresses both emerging absence patterns and the underlying risk factors associated with SAP. This involves enabling schools and relevant services to identify and respond early to issues such as mental health challenges, family circumstances, disengagement, bullying or socio-economic barriers before absences become entrenched. Legal provisions that support early identification, combined with clear guidance on appropriate responses, can help shift systems from reactive to preventive approaches, ensuring that support is provided at the right time and tailored to students' needs.

Use timely and granular data

Effective intervention depends on access to timely, detailed and reliable data. Attendance or absence could be tracked daily, or as frequently as feasible, allowing schools and systems to respond quickly when issues arise. Beyond simple attendance rates, it is important to monitor both cumulative days missed and short-term fluctuations, as these can reveal different types of risk. Systems that make such data visible and actionable are better positioned to support early responses. Disaggregated attendance data can also help identify inequities in attendance patterns across student groups and support more targeted responses and resource allocation. It could be helpful to leverage digital tools to collect granular data and simplify the

process. For example, Croatia has developed a public dashboard that brings together data on student achievement and attendance in primary and secondary education, enabling nuanced analysis of absence patterns across regions and by school characteristics. Another example comes from the Flemish Community of Belgium, where schools are required to record attendance twice daily and report it through a centralised student-level data system that links attendance to other student information, thereby supporting both individual follow-up and system-level analysis of absence patterns. However, it is important that teachers, school leaders or relevant non-teaching staff have the capacity to collect, analyse and respond to data (see also Strong system capacity is essential to effectively monitor and respond to school absence).

Reassess the role of thresholds and absence categories

Even small amounts of absences can have negative consequences on outcomes. As such, absence thresholds (e.g. 10% absence), while useful for clear communication in triggering interventions, might misdirect the efforts of policymakers and practitioners to reactive policies that are implemented too late. Moreover, evidence presented in Chapter 3 suggests that both authorised and unauthorised absences are negatively associated with student achievement. As such, using solely unauthorised absences as a trigger for intervention might be too late. Unauthorised absences can be viewed as the tip of the iceberg: serious unauthorised absences can follow a large number of authorised absences. Even authorised absences (such as those related to illness) can negatively affect learning and engagement, highlighting the importance of health-related interventions (see Respond to health barriers to improve attendance).

Legislative frameworks shape attendance, but punitive approaches have limited impact

Legal frameworks on school attendance play an important role in promoting access to education, protecting children's rights and clarifying the responsibilities of families, schools and public authorities (Heyne, 2025^[15]), but they vary considerably among education systems, as highlighted in Chapter 4. For example, in some education systems, students are required to meet minimum attendance thresholds to complete a grade, subject or level of education, whereas this is not the case in others.

Legislative frameworks can support early intervention by enabling timely and targeted response to absence, proactively preventing disengagement. However, many legislative frameworks around attendance rely on punitive measures to secure compliance with compulsory schooling requirements. Punitive responses to absence can include fines to parents, legal proceedings against parents, grade repetition, and notice to the police. Such measures are generally intended to enforce compulsory schooling laws, deter persistent non-attendance, and signal the seriousness of attendance obligations (Wright, 2009^[16]; Zhang, 2007^[17]). Indeed, many education systems use some form of punitive response, largely following unauthorised absences (Chapter 4).

While these sanctions can produce short-term improvements in attendance, particularly when absence is newly emerging and enforcement is swift and credible, the effects tend to vary across contexts and often diminish once the enforcement pressure eases. Particular caution is also needed to ensure that punitive measures do not disproportionately penalise students and families already facing structural disadvantage or limited access to support services (Chapter 4). These messages imply the need to **use enforcement carefully within a broader support framework**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Clearly define responsibilities for families, schools and authorities

Regular school attendance should be supported by collaborative frameworks including parents and learners' representatives that specify the roles and responsibilities of families, schools and public authorities. This includes clarifying expectations for parental engagement, school-level monitoring and

follow-up, and the responsibilities of central and regional authorities in oversight and support. Clearly defined responsibilities could help reduce ambiguity, promote consistency in responses to SAP and strengthen a shared vision in the system.

Reassess the role of punitive measures

In many education systems, school attendance is enforced through financial penalties or legal measures. Legal procedures are adopted in 27 of 45 systems and 17 impose fines (Chapter 4). While these approaches may signal the importance of attendance, their effectiveness in improving it is mixed and highly context-dependent. Policymakers should critically evaluate their effectiveness within their national contexts, rather than assuming they will act as reliable deterrents. Particular attention could be paid to the potential for fines and prosecutions to disproportionately affect disadvantaged families or to undermine trust between schools and parents. If used, it is important that these measures are carefully targeted, transparently applied and accompanied by appropriate safeguards.

If sanctions are employed, embed them within graduated frameworks

Where sanctions are part of the policy measures, they should be embedded within a graduated framework of responses that prioritises timely support and escalation only when necessary. This involves, for example, determining targeted graduated responses that increase in intensity according to the persistence of SAP, while remaining sensitive to students' individual circumstances. Such frameworks should also monitor the potential unintended effects of punitive measures, including impacts on student well-being and equity as fines can impact lower income families to a greater extent. It is important that enforcement does not operate in isolation but is combined with tailored supports that address the underlying drivers of absence.

Multi-tiered approaches, particularly the more recent development of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), provide schools with a structured framework for delivering graduated levels of support (OECD, 2026^[18]). MTSS is designed to ensure that all students receive appropriate levels of support through a continuum of increasingly intensive interventions, while promoting early identification and prevention. Applied to SAP, MTSS can help schools integrate supportive measures within a coherent framework, ensuring that responses escalate proportionately and only after less intensive interventions have been attempted.

Limit grade repetition as an attendance response

Grade repetition is used as a response to poor attendance in 14 of 45 education systems (Chapter 4). However, evidence suggests that it may reinforce disengagement rather than resolve underlying issues and may disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable students. Students who repeat a grade may experience stigma, reduced motivation and weaker attachment to school, all of which can further exacerbate SAP. Overall, grade repetition is generally associated with lower educational completion, particularly when repetition occurs during the later grades. It is important that policies limit using grade repetition as a tool to address SAP and consider alternative strategies that focus on re-engagement and support, such as targeted academic support through tutoring, personalised learning pathways, mentoring, and coordinated interventions that address the underlying causes of absence.

Strong system capacity is essential to effectively monitor and respond to school absence

Strong system capacity is essential to effectively monitor and respond to SAP. This includes not only the availability of robust data systems and clear responsibility structures at the system level, but also the capacity to translate information into action, for example by enabling schools to identify at-risk students early, trigger timely follow-up and provide targeted support. This requires sufficient staffing, clear protocols

and coordination across services. Without such capacity, even well-designed policies may not be effectively understood or implemented in practice.

Capacity at the school level is equally important. Schools are at the front line of identifying attendance issues and responding to them, and their ability to do so depends on the skills, resources and organisational conditions available to staff. In particular, the capacity of teachers and school personnel plays a central role in shaping student attendance (Chapter 4). By having a clear understanding of possible triggers and protective factors and adopting practices that build positive relationships with parents and students, they can prevent and address absence. However, they need appropriate capacity-building programmes to implement those.

Beyond teachers, the literature points to the broader capacity of non-teaching staff as a key component of effective responses to SAP. Attendance problems are often rooted in social, emotional or structural barriers that extend beyond the scope of instruction alone. Addressing these challenges requires the coordinated efforts of a wider set of professionals, including school leaders, counsellors, psychologists, social workers and administrative staff. Their ability to collaborate, share information and engage with families and external services is particularly important in supporting students at risk of persistent absence. However, it is also crucial that sufficient staff (both teachers and non-teaching staff) are available.

Finally, capacity to understand and analyse attendance data is a crucial enabler of effective response. Schools and systems need to be able to move from simple reporting to proactive use of data, ensuring that attendance information supports early intervention, continuous and timely follow-up and evaluation of responses. Therefore, strengthening these monitoring capacities is central to building more preventive, responsive and equitable approaches to SAP.

These messages imply the need to **strengthen system and school capacity to monitor and act on attendance**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Provide training on attendance to teachers and other school professionals

The capacity of teachers and school staff plays a critical role in shaping student attendance as teachers have measurable and meaningful effects on student attendance. However, across surveyed education systems, only 15 require school attendance to be included in initial teacher education and only 15 mandate continuing professional learning on addressing student absence for teachers. Some systems also extend these requirements to other staff, including school leaders (11 systems) and additional education personnel (8 systems) (Chapter 4).

Therefore, strengthening professional capacity is crucial not only for responding to SAP, but also for building a whole-school culture that promotes attendance, belonging and engagement. Offering specific training on attendance, including possible drivers for absences, protective factors and effective prevention and intervention approaches, in both initial teacher education and continuing professional learning can help teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff to develop the knowledge and skills needed to support regular attendance. Such training could also encourage schools to adopt whole-school attendance strategies that embed attendance promotion into everyday school practices, student support systems and relationships with families and communities. Nonetheless, education systems also need to ensure that schools have sufficient staff and dedicated capacity to monitor attendance, engage with students and families and co-ordinate timely interventions, particularly in schools facing higher levels of SAP.

In addition, capacity building needs to strengthen data literacy and the effective use of early warning systems. Schools require support to analyse patterns of absence, identify early warning signs and design timely, appropriate responses. Training could hence cover the interpretation of attendance data, the use of monitoring tools and the actions required following early warning signals, including co-ordinated responses with families and external services where needed. Strengthening these skills across the school

workforce can help schools move from reactive approaches to more preventive and strategic attendance practices.

For example, pre-service and newly appointed teachers in Korea receive training on the importance of school attendance as part of their preparation and induction, while schools provide mandatory annual training on attendance recording and reporting procedures. In Massachusetts (United States), the Early Warning Indicator System, introduced in 2011, uses existing student data to identify students at risk of not reaching key academic milestones, supporting earlier and more targeted interventions.

Engage with non-teaching staff, protect staff time and clarify roles

Systematically engaging with non-teaching staff such as social workers, psychologists and counsellors can provide targeted support to students with SAP. Ensuring that there is a sufficient number of appropriately qualified staff across these categories is essential to meet students' needs effectively. In addition, as attendance work requires dedicated time and clear responsibilities, it could be helpful for schools to designate specific and adequately trained staff members, such as attendance leads or teams responsible for monitoring, analysing, outreach and responding to SAP. This helps ensure continuity, timeliness and co-ordination of efforts.

School staff involved in attendance work need the time and mandate to engage with students and families, coordinate with external services and implement targeted interventions. Protecting time for these activities is critical to their effectiveness and helps ensure that attendance responsibilities are carried out consistently and to a high standard.

Develop capacity in the system through external and internal school evaluations

External inspections and internal school evaluations can play an important role in strengthening capacity. Embedding attendance as a focus area within these processes can help signal its importance and encourage schools to reflect on their practices. For instance, in Greece, the national school self-evaluation framework requires schools' Teaching Staff Councils to assess school performance across defined operational axes, including one explicitly dedicated to school dropout and attendance. Evaluations should be used not only for accountability, but also as tools for continuous improvement, supporting schools in identifying strengths, diagnosing challenges and refining their strategies. For example, in Norway, the Directorate of Education and Training provides schools with a structured tool to support self-assessment and improvement planning. This tool helps schools identify their strengths and challenges, set goals and monitor progress; and explicitly includes questions about school absences. At the system level, aggregated evaluation findings can inform broader policy development and capacity-building efforts.

Evaluation of policies and practices targeting absence is limited

The evidence base on SAP remains uneven (see also Research gaps and future research). While absence or attendance rates are widely collected, comparing them is more complex than it appears. Systems vary in how they define and record different forms of absence (e.g. authorised vs. unauthorised, lateness or chronic absenteeism). These differences limit comparability across education systems, making it difficult to assess trends or evaluate the external validity of policy impacts.

Furthermore, the evidence on which interventions work best remains limited. Reviews of attendance policies and practices in the literature find wide variation in strategies and relatively few rigorous evaluations, with many studies providing inconclusive or context-specific findings. Despite a growing policy attention to SAP, important gaps remain in the evidence base in regard to the effectiveness of different interventions and policy approaches (see Gaps in policy evaluation). Many commonly used measures, particularly punitive responses, have limited or mixed empirical support. Others, such as public awareness campaigns, lack evaluations altogether.

These messages imply the need to **improve evaluation and learning on attendance across the education system**. This could be achieved through the following approaches:

Prioritise rigorous evaluation

Policymakers, practitioners and researchers could place greater emphasis on generating robust evidence on what works to improve attendance. This includes testing in controlled or quasi-experimental settings before wider implementation. Strengthening causal research is particularly important for widely used measures whose effectiveness remains uncertain. Building partnerships between researchers, governments and schools can support the design and implementation of high-quality evaluations.

Pilot and evaluate before scaling

Considering the complexity and context-specific nature of SAP, it is important to test and refine interventions before they are scaled up. Rigorous piloting allows systems to assess effectiveness, identify unintended consequences and adapt interventions to local conditions. Particular attention could be paid to evaluating commonly used but weakly evidenced approaches, ensuring that resources are directed towards approaches that demonstrate impact. This iterative approach can help reduce reliance on assumptions or tradition and support more evidence-informed policy making.

Facilitate peer learning

Strengthening the evidence base also involves improving how knowledge is shared across schools, regions and countries. Systems could create mechanisms for peer learning that enable practitioners and policymakers to exchange implementation experiences, challenges and lessons learned. Importantly, this could go beyond comparing outcomes alone and include analysis of policy design features, implementation processes and contextual factors. Such exchanges can help identify transferable practices while recognising the importance of local adaptation.

Research gaps and future research

This report has aimed to provide a broad overview of international data analyses, relevant literature and policy responses related to SAP. However, despite the growing interest and increased research in the field, several important research gaps remain. The main gaps encountered are summarised below, together with suggestions for future research.

Conceptual fragmentation and definitional inconsistency

Despite extensive research, the field of SAP remains conceptually fragmented. Terms such as “truancy”, “school refusal”, and “chronic absenteeism” are often used inconsistently across countries and studies, reflecting differing legal, cultural and institutional interpretations of absence.

This lack of definitional coherence limits the comparability of international data and constrains the development of cumulative knowledge. It also complicates the design of targeted policy responses, as different forms of absence may require different interventions.

Future work could prioritise integrated conceptual frameworks that position SAP along a continuum, enabling more consistent cross-national measurement and stronger alignment between research and policy.

Limited geographic coverage

Despite growing international attention to SAP, the evidence base remains heavily concentrated in a small number of countries, particularly the United Kingdom and the United States. Recent literature reviews noted that more than half of the eligible studies were from North America (Määttä et al., 2020^[19]; Melvin et al., 2025^[20]).

This imbalance limits the field in two ways. First, it constrains the understanding of how the national context, including education system design, welfare structures, cultural expectations and policy regimes, shapes the drivers of SAP. Attendance patterns emerge through interactions between students and their environments. Without broader geographic representation, the generalisability of findings remains uncertain. Second, it reduces the relevance of the evidence base for policymakers in underrepresented contexts, who have to rely often on findings from systems that differ considerably from their own. This weakens the contextual fit and precision of policy responses.

Expanding research to countries with diverse institutional arrangements (such as decentralised attendance monitoring, limited integrated of services or recent governance reforms) would strengthen explanatory power and policy relevance.

Lack of equity and intersectionality focus

Another key limitation is the inconsistent disaggregation of findings by equity-relevant factors. While many studies include these variables descriptively, few examine how (a) drivers and consequences of absence, and (b) policy/practice impacts vary across or within groups, or how they interact in intersecting ways. Moderation and interaction analyses are rare, and multilevel or explicitly intersectional designs remain uncommon.

In addition, many analyses, particularly on drivers and consequences of SAP, rely on cross-sectional data and include multiple predictors without explicitly considering the temporal ordering or causal pathways linking them to SAP. This can hide how some factors operate through others. Longitudinal research remains relatively limited across the wider evidence base. Together, these constraints hinder the identification of heterogenous effects and risks, thereby masking inequities that are crucial for interpretation and policy design.

Future research could prioritise systematic disaggregation across key equity dimensions (such as gender, socio-economic status, immigrant background, minority background, special education needs etc) and adopt designs that can capture variation both within and between groups. This includes greater use of longitudinal, multilevel and intersectional approaches, as well as analytical strategies that explicitly model causal pathways and interactions between factors. Strengthening the evidence base in this way would enable a more nuanced understanding of how risks accumulate and differ across populations, supporting the design of more targeted, equitable and effective policy responses.

Gaps in the system model

The evidence is still uneven across the different layers of the system described in Chapter 2. For example, protective factors, such as peer belonging, have been studied much less than negative experiences such as bullying. Connections between different parts of the system, such as how schools, families and services work together, are often discussed but rarely tested, especially during key transitions. Larger structural factors such as policy settings, enforcement capacity, accessibility and local service environments) are not consistently included in research. Instead, studies tend to focus more on individuals or schools, which make it harder to understand how different levels of the system interact. These gaps are partly due to the lack of studies that look at multiple levels at once, as well as limited collaboration across different fields and methods. Therefore, the bioecological framework is not used to its full potential.

Future research could focus more on positive peer factors, such as belonging and supportive relationships, alongside risks. It could also test how co-ordination between schools, families and services actually works, particularly during key transitions. In addition, studies could better integrate structural factors such as policy settings and access to services by using approaches that look at multiple levels and combine different disciplines, helping to better understand how all parts of the system connect.

Narrow focus on unauthorised absence

Some strands of the literature on SAP, particularly policy-oriented work, continue to focus on unauthorised absences. This reflects both a historical emphasis on behavioural non-compliance and an implicit assumption that authorised absence is less problematic or policy relevant. However, this distinction is not strongly supported by research. A narrow focus on unauthorised absence risks obscuring variation in both causal pathways and policy levers. For example, authorised absence may reflect not only health conditions but also parental employment patterns, housing instability or school-level flexibility: factors that span across the multiple ecological systems.

Future research could move beyond a narrow focus on unauthorised absence and adopt more comprehensive approaches that consider the full spectrum of attendance patterns. This includes systematically examining the drivers and consequences of authorised absence, as well as how different types of absence interact and accumulate over time. Greater attention could also be given to how institutional practices, such as recording and classification systems, shape observed patterns.

Drivers vary depending on the perspectives prioritised

Perceived drivers of SAP often vary depending on whose perspectives are prioritised. Studies centred on school staff tend to attribute causes to students and families, while those incorporating parents' and students' voices highlight school conditions and experiences (Ekstrand, 2015^[21]; Gren-Landell et al., 2015^[22]; Havik, Bru and Ertesvåg, 2013^[23]; Heyne et al., 2019^[24]). These differences suggest that SAP is a multi-layered phenomenon shaped by perspective, not only by context.

Future research could prioritise multi-informant and mixed-method approaches that integrate the views of students, families, teachers and health practitioners. Comparative and longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable to better understand how these perspectives interact over time and how school, family and system-level factors jointly influence attendance trajectories.

Underrepresentation of school staff's views

Few quantitative studies have examined how staff beliefs, everyday school practices or perceived levers for change relate to SAP. Existing research tends to focus on fixed characteristics (e.g. teaching experience), overlooking how professional reasoning, leadership culture or institutional values may influence attendance. There is limited understanding of how school leaders or regional officials interpret the multi-causal nature of absence, or how those interpretations shape school- and system-level responses. Participatory and co-designed approaches, while increasingly used in intervention development, are rarely used to shape research questions, constructs or measurement strategies.

Greater inclusion of these perspectives could improve ecological validity by grounding research in the contexts where absence actually occurs. In many cases, exploratory and co-designed research will be needed to identify meaningful constructs and language before standardised instruments can be developed.

Underrepresentation of student views

Student perspectives on the drivers of SAP remain underrepresented. The evidence base often relies on crude binary data on attendance or non-attendance, whether it is collected from administrative sources,

adult-reported perspectives or student surveys. While these sources provide valuable insights into patterns and correlates of SAP, they offer limited understanding of students' own motivations, experiences and decision-making processes. As a result, the field lacks a sufficiently nuanced understanding of why students disengage from school, particularly in cases that are not easily explained by structural barriers. The limited inclusion of student perspectives on these issues can have several consequences, such as reduced effectiveness of policies and practices due to lack of relevance, reinforcement of existing inequalities as diverse student experiences are not captured and policies might fail to address the actual drivers of SAP if student experiences are not considered.

Future research could expand the use of qualitative and participatory methods for students - those attending school and those not currently attending school. It could integrate their voice in large-scale datasets, focus on lived experiences across heterogeneous student populations, and involve students in the co-design of policies and practices.

Limited evidence on consequences, particularly beyond education

Even though SAP are consistently associated with adverse long-term outcomes, including lower educational attainment and worsened labour market outcomes (Chapter 3), the pathways linking absence to later life outcomes remain insufficiently understood. Existing research provides evidence of correlation, but far less clarity on how, when and through which mechanisms SAP translate into longer-term disadvantage.

A key limitation of the current evidence base is its short temporal scope. Many studies focus on attendance within a single academic year or educational phase, limiting insight into how attendance patterns evolve over time and accumulate across developmental stages. A further limitation is the lack of integrated data systems that connect school attendance records with outcomes in employment, health and social services, among others. This fragmentation restricts the ability to conduct life-course analyses and to quantify the long-term societal costs of SAP.

Longitudinal studies are needed to examine life-course trajectories of attendance, identifying early warning signs and opportunities for timely intervention. Future research could also link administrative datasets across sectors and develop longitudinal data infrastructures to enable analysis across domains.

Gaps in policy evaluation

Policy plays a central role in shaping the conditions under which SAP emerge, yet there is limited evidence on how absence patterns evolve in response to reforms, system-level interventions or broader socio-cultural shifts. Few studies examine the long-term effects of legislation, funding models or structural changes, limiting understanding of cumulative impacts and unintended consequences, particularly in the context of major system shocks (e.g. pandemics and funding reductions), structural shifts (e.g. decentralisation of attendance monitoring or mental health provision) or national and sub-national reforms on school attendance. More broadly, there is limited evidence on system-level policies, including how different measures interact when implemented together or in sequence, and how interventions that show promising results at small scale can be effectively scaled and sustained across diverse contexts.

Looking beyond system level policies, there is still a limited evidence base on some specific interventions or supports. Existing evidence is often short-term, context-specific or focused on individual components rather than comprehensive strategies. For instance, while punitive measures are widely used, the available evidence on them – particularly fines and grade retention – suggests mixed or even negative effects. Overall, however, these approaches are still insufficiently evaluated in terms of their longer-term effectiveness and potential unintended consequences. This area would warrant further investigation as countries continue to rely on punitive measures. For instance, it might be relevant to explore the value of punitive measures as a last resort, after an appropriate amount of support is provided.

There is even more limited evidence on the effectiveness of supportive measures beyond a few well-documented examples such as school meal provision, despite their prominence in policy frameworks. Similarly, curriculum reforms and pedagogical approaches aimed at increasing student engagement, now becoming more common across education systems, have not yet been widely evaluated in relation to attendance outcomes. As evidence accumulates, there is an opportunity to better understand how teaching and learning can be leveraged to support student outcomes.

Future research could prioritise rigorous, comparative and longitudinal evaluations that examine not only the effectiveness of individual interventions, but also policy interactions, implementation processes, scalability and cost-effectiveness. Greater attention should also be paid to potentially differential effects, both within populations (e.g. variation between student subgroups, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds) and across contexts. Strengthening the evidence base in these areas would support more informed and context-sensitive policy design and help systems move beyond fragmented approaches towards more coherent and effective strategies to address school attendance problems.

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Annex A. OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems

On 30 April 2025, the Education for Inclusive Societies Project asked OECD countries, EU Member States and OECD accession countries to respond to the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems. The survey aimed to collect comparative information on education systems' policies and practices to address school attendance problems (SAP). The information collected provides a unique opportunity to compare education jurisdictions' definitions, monitoring practices, drivers, consequences and policies to address SAP. No such comparable data is regularly collected from OECD countries, EU Member States and OECD accession countries.

There are important differences between countries with respect to the formulation of policies and practices to tackle SAP. However, detailed information is limited. Responses gathered through the survey contribute to an OECD/EU-wide effort to better understand how education systems are responding to SAP. By identifying common patterns and promising practices, the survey findings help shape future policy dialogue and, ultimately, support efforts to ensure all young people can participate meaningfully in education – benefiting not only students themselves, but also the schools, communities and countries they are part of.

Efforts were made to create a comprehensive data collection. However, the findings cannot be regarded as exhaustive of the topics covered due to various limitations, such as survey length, international comparability, and the balance between clarity and concision.

The survey was divided into seven modules with 35 items:

- Definitions and trends in school attendance problems (four items);
- Monitoring of school attendance (ten items);
- Drivers of school attendance problems (one item);
- Consequences of school attendance problems (two items);
- Policies related to the governance of school attendance problems (nine items);
- Policies related to capacity building (three items); and
- Policies related to school-level interventions (six items).

Countries were asked to fill out the survey considering public primary and secondary educational levels (i.e. ISCED 1-3). Vocational programmes that target adult learners were not the focus of the survey. Countries in which education is a devolved responsibility were asked to fill out a separate response for each sub-national entity. In these cases, sub-national examples included in the report should be understood as illustrative examples of practices and approaches that may also exist, in similar forms, in other parts of the country, even where they are not explicitly mentioned. Given the combination of national and sub-national entities in the survey responses, we refer to the responding participants as “education systems”. Education systems were responding to the survey in an electronic format using LimeSurvey throughout May, June, July and August 2025. In total, 45 education systems from 35 countries submitted their responses: Austria, Belgium (Flemish and French Communities separately), Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea,

Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain (one submission on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sports, and separate submissions for Aragon, Catalonia, Ceuta, Extremadura, Galicia, La Rioja and Madrid), Sweden, Thailand, Türkiye and the United Kingdom (separate submissions for England, Scotland and Wales).

Given that policy contexts change in time, it is important to regard this information as representative of the year 2025 in the participating education systems. In some cases, education systems provided additional information using the available text boxes or via email. These are used to complement and specify quantitative information.

Every Day Counts

Understanding, Preventing and Responding to School Attendance Problems

Every morning, millions of children are expected to attend school. Yet many face barriers that prevent regular attendance. School attendance problems are no longer a marginal issue; they have become a challenge affecting classrooms in nearly every country.

This report *Every Day Counts: Understanding, Preventing and Responding to School Attendance Problems* synthesises evidence from the OECD Policy Survey on School Attendance Problems, literature and international large-scale assessments to give an account of key concepts, terminology and international trends, drivers, and consequences of school absences. It also takes stock of policies and practices for supporting school attendance and distils key messages and policy pointers emerging from the evidence presented in the report.

The report will be of interest to policy-makers, practitioners and researchers seeking to promote regular school attendance and strengthen support for students experiencing school attendance problems within their education systems.



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