



# Left behind:

## How do we get our chronically absent students back to school?

### SUMMARY



---

Chronic absence has doubled in the last decade. In Term 2 this year, over 80,000 students missed more than three weeks of school. These chronically absent students (70 percent or less of the time) are often struggling and are at high risk of poor education and lifetime outcomes. The Education Review Office (ERO) looked at how good the education system and supports are for chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand and found that we do not have a strong enough system or effective supports to address chronic absence.

---

ERO found that the number of students who are chronically absent from school is at crisis point, and it is affecting students' lives. Students who have a history of chronic absence are unlikely to achieve NCEA, have higher rates of offending, are more likely to be victims of crime, and are more likely to be living in social and emergency housing. By age 20, they cost the Government almost three times as much as students who go to school.

The system that is set up to get these students back to school is not effective. It needs substantial reform, and it will take parents and whānau, schools, and Government agencies all working together to fix it and get chronically absent students back to school.

## What is chronic absence?

Attendance is crucial for learning and thriving at school. Students are expected to be in school learning every day. If a student misses more than 30 percent of school a term then they are chronically absent. This means they are missing more than three days a fortnight.

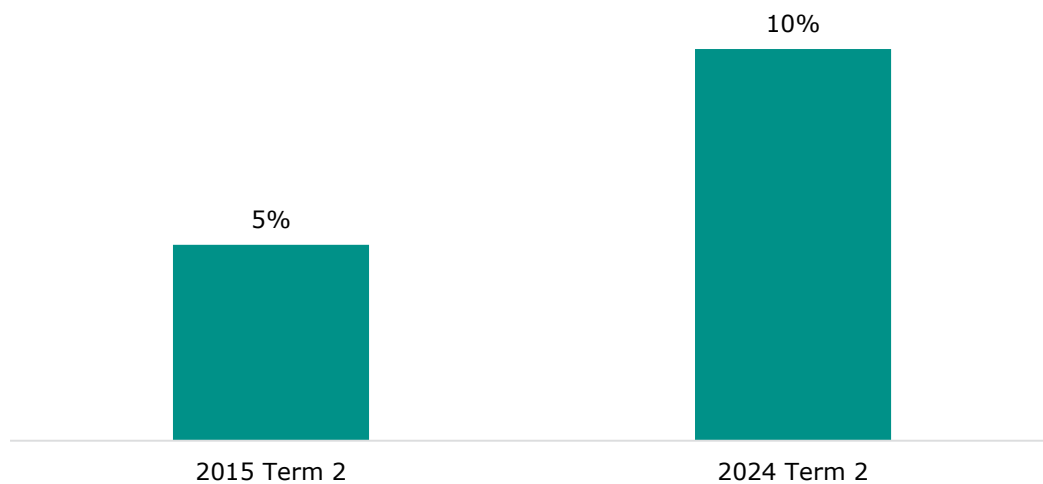
## Key findings

### What has happened to chronic absence rates in Aotearoa New Zealand?

**Finding 1:** Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing a crisis of chronic absence. Chronic absence doubled from 2015 to 2023 and is now 10 percent.

One in 10 students (10 percent) were chronically absent in Term 2, 2024. Chronic absence rates have doubled in secondary schools and nearly tripled in primary schools since 2015.

**Figure 1:** *Percentage of chronic absence in Term 2, 2015 and 2024*



## Why do students become chronically absent?

**Finding 2:** There is a range of risk factors that make it more likely a student will be chronically absent. The most predictive factors are previous poor attendance, offending, and being in social or emergency housing.

Students who are chronically absent are:

- five times more likely to be chronically absent if they were chronically absent in the previous year – 25 percent of students who are chronically absent were chronically absent a year ago
- four times as likely to have a recent history of offending – 4 percent of students who are chronically absent have a recent history of offending (compared to less than 1 percent of all students)
- four times as likely to live in social housing – just over one in 10 (12 percent) of chronically absent students live in social housing, compared to 3 percent of all students.

**Finding 3:** Students' attitudes to school and challenges they face are drivers of chronic absence. Wanting to leave school, physical health issues, finding it hard to get up in the morning, and mental health issues are key drivers.

Nearly a quarter of students who are chronically absent report wanting to leave school as a reason for being absent. Over half (55 percent) identified mental health and a quarter (27 percent) identified physical health as reasons for being chronically absent.

“When you have multiple physical and mental health issues, it’s hard for people who haven’t experienced those things to really understand.”

STUDENT

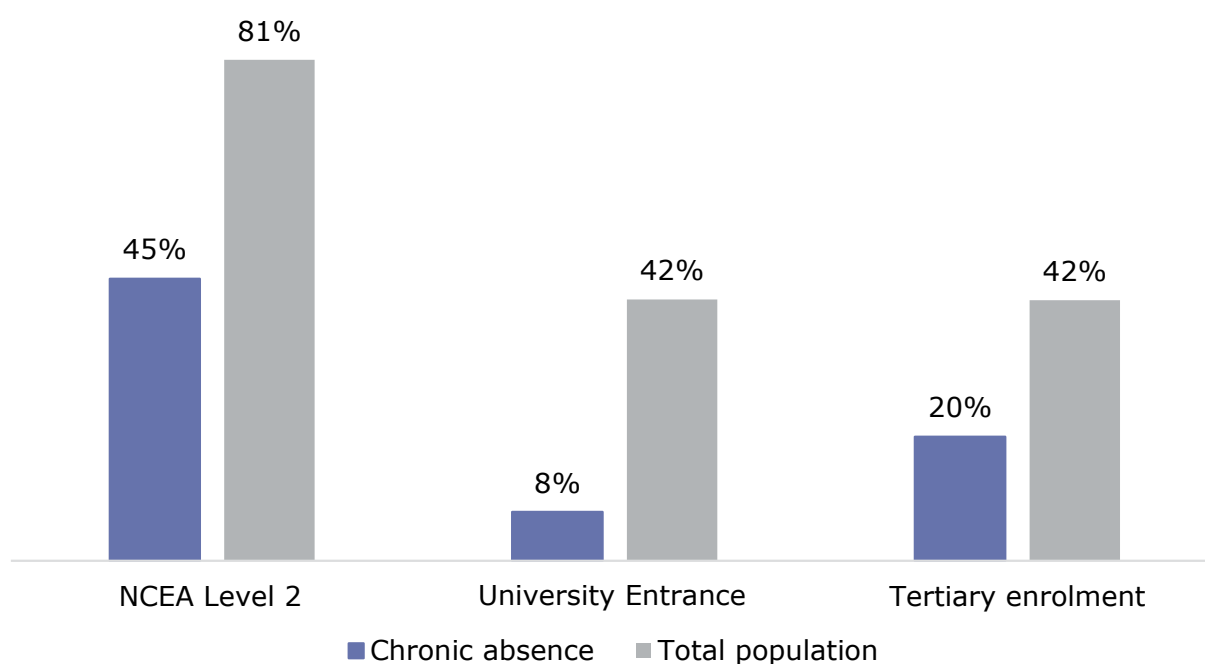


## What happens to students who have been chronically absent?

**Finding 4:** Attendance matters. Students who were chronically absent are significantly more likely to leave school without qualifications, and then when they are adults, they are more likely to be charged with an offence, or live in social or emergency housing.

Attendance is critical for life outcomes; students with chronic absence have worse outcomes. At age 20, over half (55 percent) have not achieved NCEA Level 2, and almost all (92 percent) have not achieved University Entrance. This leads to having significantly worse employment outcomes. At age 25, nearly half are not earning wages and almost half are receiving a benefit.

**Figure 2:** Chronically absent young adults' education outcomes at age 20, compared to the total population



“[Parents] don’t understand the long-term consequences for tamariki who do not attend school regularly, and how this can impact negatively on their job prospects, the type of jobs, high paying versus low paying.”

ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF



### **Finding 5:** Chronically absent young people cost the Government nearly three times as much.

We know that being chronically absent has large individual costs in terms of income, health, and social outcomes. The poor outcomes of young adults who were chronically absent from school also pose a sizeable cost to the Government. At age 23, young adults who were chronically absent cost \$4,000 more than other young people. They are particularly costly in corrections, hospital admissions, and receiving benefits.

### **What works to address chronic absence?**

#### **Finding 6:** Reducing chronic absence requires both good prevention and an effective system for addressing it.

The evidence is clear about the key components of an effective system for addressing chronic absence.

- 1) There are clear expectations for attendance, and everyone knows what these are.
- 2) There is a clear definition of what ‘poor attendance’ is, students are identified as their attendance starts to decline, and action is taken early to address their attendance.
- 3) Students who are persistently absent from school are found, and they and their parents are engaged.
- 4) The students, parents and whānau, schools, and other services develop a plan to get the students to attend school regularly.
- 5) The barriers to attendance are removed, and compliance with the plan by students, parents and whānau, schools and other parties is enforced.
- 6) The student is returned to regularly attending school, and additional supports are scaled back.
- 7) Schools monitor attendance, any issues are immediately acted on, and students receive the education and support that meets their needs.
- 8) There are clear roles and responsibilities for improving attendance. Accountability across the roles is clear, and the functions are adequately resourced.

### **How good is the education system at addressing chronic absence?**

#### **Finding 7:** ERO’s review has found weaknesses in each element of the system.

To understand how effective the model for attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand is, we compared the current practice with the key components of an effective system and found weaknesses in each element.

**a) Schools are setting expectations for attendance, but parents and whānau do not understand the implications of non-attendance.**

When students, and parents and whānau do not understand the implications of absence, chronic absence rates increase from 7 percent to 9 percent.

**b) Action is too slow, and students fall through the gaps.**

Schools have tools in place to identify when students are chronically absent, but often wait too long to intervene. Only 43 percent of parents and whānau with a child who is chronically absent have met with school staff about their child's attendance. One in five school leaders (18 percent) only refer students after more than 21 consecutive days absent. Just over two-thirds of Attendance Service staff report schools never, or only sometimes, refer students at the right time (68 percent). Approximately half of schools do not make referrals to Attendance Services.

**c) Finding students who are not attending is inefficient and time consuming.**

There is inadequate information sharing between different agencies, schools, and Attendance Services. Attendance Services have to spend too much time trying to find students. Half of Attendance Services (52 percent) report information is only sometimes, or never shared across agencies, schools, and Attendance Services.

**d) Schools and Attendance Services are not well set up to enforce attendance.**

Just over half of school leaders (54 percent) and just over three in five Attendance Service staff (62 percent) do not think there are good options to enforce attendance and hold people accountable. Schools that have tried to prosecute have found the process complex and costly.

**e) Students are not set up to succeed on return to school.**

The quality of plans for returning students to school is variable, and students are not set up to succeed on return to school. While many schools welcome students back to school, there is not a sufficient focus on working with the students to help them 'catch up' and reintegrate.

**f) Improvements in school attendance are often short-lived as barriers remain. The education on offer often does not meet students' needs, so attendance is not sustained.**

Attendance rates improve over the two months after referral to the Attendance Service, but six months after referral students remain, on average, chronically absent (attending only 62 percent of the time).

Although nearly four in five students who are chronically absent (79 percent) find learning at school a barrier to their attendance, under half (44 percent) of school leaders report they have changed schoolwork to better suit students on their return. Over half of school leaders (59 percent) and Attendance Services (58 percent) report there are not opportunities for young people to learn in other settings.

“The curriculum is irrelevant, and [it] won’t help me with my future and career.”

STUDENT

“I was bullied and threatened at school and the school didn’t respond in a way to keep me safe, so I had no choice but leave school.”

STUDENT

**g) Accountability in the system is weak.**

There is a lack of clarity around where roles and responsibilities begin and end. Just over one in five school leaders (21 percent) and two in five Attendance Service providers (40 percent) want more clarity about the roles and responsibilities.

**h) Resourcing is inequitably distributed and does not match the level of need.**

Funding has not increased to match the increase in demand. Caseloads for advisers in the Attendance Services that ERO visited vary from 30 to more than 500 cases. Funding does not reflect need. Contracts vary in size (from around \$20,000 to \$1.4m) and in how much funding is allocated per eligible student – from \$61 to \$1,160 per eligible student.

**Finding 8: The model does not set up Attendance Services to succeed and it is not delivering better outcomes.**

The contracting model leads to wide variation in the delivery of services. There is no agreed operating model or consistent guidance on effective practice and the funding is inadequate for the current level of need.

- Attendance Service staff are exceptionally passionate and dedicated to improving student outcomes but this alone is not enough to achieve good outcomes.
- Attendance Services are not leading to sustained improvements in attendance in the long term. Only two in five students who were supported by an Attendance Service (41 percent) agreed that Attendance Service staff helped them go to school more.
- Attendance Services do not consistently have strong relationships with schools – only half of schools and Attendance Services meet regularly to share information about students (48 percent).
- Attendance Services are not always able to act quickly with their initial engagement in a case – only 50 percent always act quickly when they receive a referral.
- Despite being confident in their knowledge and skills, Attendance Service staff are not consistently drawing from an evidence-base to remove barriers.
- Attendance Services work with a range of agencies, but they do not fully understand others’ roles and get drawn away from attendance into providing other support.

Lifetime outcomes for students who are referred to Attendance Services are poor. Students who are referred to Attendance Services have consistently worse life-time outcomes than students with the same characteristics who were never referred to an Attendance Service. This may be due to unobserved factors (e.g., attitudes to education or bullying), but it does show that Attendance Services are not overcoming these barriers.

**Finding 9:** Schools play a critical role and need to be supported to do more to prevent chronic absence, coordinate with Attendance Services, and then support students' return to sustained attendance.

**a) Some schools have exceptionally poor attendance.**

Only 22 schools make up 10 percent of the total chronic absence nationally.

**b) Schools in lower socio-economic areas and secondary schools have greater challenges and higher levels of chronic absence.**

Students in schools in lower socio-economic areas are six times more likely to be chronically absent.

**c) Not all schools in low socio-economic communities have high rates of chronic absence.**

There are 95 schools in low socio-economic communities with less than a 10 percent rate of chronic absence.

**d) Schools that are successful at reducing chronic absence do three things.**

- 1) They work in close coordination with Attendance Services.
- 2) They do what they are responsible for.
- 3) They hold students, parents and whānau, and Attendance Service staff accountable.

**e) When schools do not manage chronic absence well, there are key themes.**

- They do not escalate early enough when students are showing signs of increased non-attendance and do not share information with Attendance Services.
- They do not identify the same barriers to attendance that students themselves identify, or work with the Attendance Service providers to coordinate responses and stay connected.

## Recommendations

To reduce chronic absence, we need an end-to-end effective system and supports. Our current system for addressing chronic absence does not deliver this. We need to transform the system by building stronger functions (what happens) and reforming the model (how it happens).

## 1) We need to strengthen how we prevent students becoming chronically absent

Strengthening how we prevent students becoming chronically absent will require social agencies to address the barriers to attendance that sit outside of the education sector.

Who	Action
<b>Agencies</b>	Government agencies prioritise education and school attendance and <b>take all possible action to address the largest risk factors for chronic absence</b> , which could include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ stabilising housing for the families of students at risk of chronic absence, including prioritising school attendance as part of social housing criteria</li> <li>→ considering school attendance in any early intervention responses, like Whānau Ora</li> <li>→ considering chronic absence as a care and protection issue.</li> </ul>
<b>Schools and parents and whānau</b>	Take all possible steps to support the <b>habit of regular attendance</b> , including acting early when attendance issues arise.
<b>Schools and Ministry of Education</b>	Schools have <b>planned responses</b> for different levels of non-attendance, with guidance provided by the Ministry of Education on what is effective for returning students to regular attendance.
<b>Schools</b>	Find and act on <b>learning needs</b> quickly, so that students remain engaged. Address <b>bullying</b> and social isolation, so that students are safe and connected. Provide access to school-based counselling services to address <b>mental health needs</b> .
<b>All</b>	<b>Increase understanding</b> of the importance of attendance, providing focused messages for parents and whānau of students most at risk of chronic absence.
<b>Schools and agencies</b>	<b>Identify earlier</b> students with attendance issues, through higher-quality recording of attendance, data-sharing between agencies who come in contact with them/their parents and whānau, and <b>acting to prevent</b> chronic absence.



## 2) We need to have effective targeted supports in place to address chronic absence

Who	Action
All	Put in place <b>clearer roles and responsibilities</b> for chronic absence (for schools, Attendance Services, parents and whānau, and other agencies).
Ministry of Education and ERO	Use their roles and powers to <b>identify, report, and intervene in schools</b> with high levels of chronic absence.
Schools, Ministry of Education, and agencies	<b>Increase use of enforcement measures</b> with parents and whānau, including more consistent prosecutions, wider agencies more actively using attendance obligations, and learning from other countries' models (including those who tie qualification attainment to minimum attendance).
Services	Ensure that there are expert, dedicated people working with the chronically absent students and their parents and whānau, using the <b>key evidence-based practices that work</b> , including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ regular engagement to build strong relationships</li> <li>→ identifying attendance barriers and keeping attendance as the main priority</li> <li>→ working with agencies and community organisations to remove attendance barriers</li> <li>→ working with schools to remove school-based barriers to attendance.</li> </ul>
Schools	<b>Work with services</b> to address chronic absence, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ active involvement in referring students to services by providing information about the student, including what the school has already tried to address attendance</li> <li>→ maintaining contact with the students and their parents and whānau while the student is working with the service, to address barriers and to help plan the student's return to school.</li> </ul>

## 3) We need to increase the focus on retaining students on their return

Who	Action
Schools	Put in place a <b>deliberate plan to support returning students</b> to reintegrate, be safe, and catch up.
Schools	<b>Actively monitor attendance</b> of students who have previously been chronically absent and act early if their attendance declines.
Ministry of Education and schools	Increase the availability of <b>high-quality vocational and alternative education</b> (either in schools or through secondary-tertiary pathways), building on effective examples of flexible learning and tailored programmes from here and abroad.

#### 4) We need to put in place an efficient and effective model

Where	Action
<b>Centralise</b>	<p>Centralise key functions that can be more effectively and efficiently provided nationally, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <b>information sharing</b> agreements between agencies, and guidance on how information can be shared</li> <li>→ <b>prosecutions</b> of parents</li> <li>→ <b>interventions and support for schools</b> who have high levels of chronic absence</li> <li>→ national data tracking and analysis, including <b>identifying students who are not enrolled</b> anywhere</li> <li>→ brokering access to services to <b>address social barriers</b></li> <li>→ guidance on <b>evidence-based practice to address barriers</b> to chronic truancy.</li> </ul>
<b>Localise</b>	<p>Make sure schools have the resources and the support they need to carry out the functions that most effectively happen locally, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ <b>prevention</b> of chronic absence through resolving education issues</li> <li>→ <b>retention</b> of returned students through a good plan, monitoring, and ability to offer a tailored education.</li> </ul> <p>Consider giving schools/clusters of schools the responsibility, accountability, and funding for the delivery of the key function of <b>working with chronically absent students</b> and their families, to address education barriers, while drawing on the support of the centralised function to address broader social barriers.</p>
<b>Funding</b>	<p><b>Increase funding</b> for those responsible for finding students and returning them to school, reflecting that chronic absence rates have doubled since 2015.</p> <p>Reform how <b>funding is allocated</b> to ensure it matches need.</p>

## What's next?

To find out more about chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand and how well the education system identifies and supports chronically absent students, check out our [main evaluation report](#) and technical report. These can be downloaded for free from ERO's Evidence and Insights website [www.evidence.ero.govt.nz](http://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz).

### What ERO did

Data collected for this report includes:

#### Surveys of:

- Two-thirds of Attendance Services
- 773 students with a history of chronic absence, 256 of which were chronically absent in the past week
- 1,131 parents and whānau of students with attendance issues, 311 of which were parents of students who were chronically absent in the last week
- Nearly 300 school leaders

#### Interviews and focus groups with:

- Attendance Service staff
- Students
- Parents and whānau
- School leaders

#### Site-visits at:

- One-quarter of Attendance Services
- Twenty-eight English medium schools

#### Data from:

- Integrated Data Infrastructure analysis<sup>a</sup>
- Ministry of Education data and statistics on attendance, and administrative data from Attendance Services
- Findings from the Ministry's internal review of the Attendance Service
- International evidence on effective practice in addressing chronic absence, including models from other jurisdictions.

We appreciate the contribution of all those who supported this research, particularly the students, parents and whānau, school staff, Attendance Service staff, and experts who shared with us. Their experience and insights are at the heart of what we learnt.

<sup>a</sup> Integrated Data Infrastructure data is provided by the Social Investment Agency. These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) which is carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI please visit [www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/](http://www.stats.govt.nz/integrated-data/). The results are based in part on tax data supplied by Inland Revenue to Stats NZ under the Tax Administration Act 1994 for statistical purposes. Any discussion of data limitations or weaknesses is in the context of using the IDI for statistical purposes and is not related to the data's ability to support Inland Revenue's core operational requirements.



EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE  
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

[www.ero.govt.nz](http://www.ero.govt.nz)



Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa  
New Zealand Government

Left behind: How do we get our chronically absent students back to school? – Summary

Published 2024

© Crown Copyright

Digital: 978-1-991126-65-8

Print: 978-1-991126-64-1



Except for the Education Review Office's logo used throughout this report, this copyright work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 New Zealand licence. In essence, you are free to copy, distribute and adapt the work, as long as you attribute the work to the Education Review Office and abide by the other licence terms. In your attribution, use the wording 'Education Review Office', not the Education Review Office logo or the New Zealand Government logo.