



Insights for school leaders:

Getting chronically absent students back to school

Chronic absence has doubled in the last decade. In Term 2 this year, over 80,000 students missed more than three weeks of school. The Education Review Office (ERO) looked at how good the education system and supports are for chronically absent students (70 percent or less of the time).

This short guide highlights key insights relevant to school leaders.

What did ERO look at?

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.

ERO looked at how schools, Attendance Services, and the system as a whole are supporting students who are chronically absent get back to school, and keep them there. To do this, we drew on the Integrated Data Infrastructure from Stats NZ, administrative data from the Ministry of Education, interviews and surveys from students, school leaders, Attendance Service staff, and parents and whānau, and site visits to schools and Attendance Services throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

What did ERO find out?

Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing a crisis of chronic absence.

Chronic absence doubled from 2015 to 2023 and is now at 10 percent. The number of students who are chronically absent from school is at crisis point.

Chronically absent 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.

“Many students with chronic attendance issues have complex issues to be resolved, [such as] mental health of parents, anxiety of students, no transport by parents.”

SCHOOL LEADER



Attendance matters.

Students who were chronically absent are significantly more likely to leave school without qualifications. When they are adults, they are less likely to earn an income, and are more likely to be charged with an offence, or live in social or emergency housing.

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

This matters because when students, and parents and whānau do not understand the implications of being absent from school, chronic absence rates increase from 7 percent to 9 percent.

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. 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).
- Only 43 percent of parents and whānau with a child who is chronically absent have met with school staff about their child's attendance.

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.

“Holidays in term time are a real issue, and I wish we had more teeth through the law to deal with this.”

SCHOOL LEADER

Students are not set up to succeed on return to school.

The quality of plans for returning students to school is variable. 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.

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.

Some schools have exceptionally poor attendance. Only 22 schools make up 10 percent of the total chronic absence nationally.

We also found out students in schools in lower socio-economic areas are six times more likely to be chronically absent. However, there are 95 schools in low socio-economic communities with less than a 10 percent rate of chronic absence.

What can schools do to make a difference?

ERO analysed our data to figure out what key actions actually make a difference for reducing chronic absence. We found that even when accounting for other factors like socio-economic area and school type, there are key actions for schools that work well for reducing chronic absence. We also found clear themes in our analysis around what does *not* work well.

Schools that are successful at reducing chronic absence do three things.	When schools do not manage chronic absence well, there are key themes.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) They do not escalate early enough when students are showing signs of increased non-attendance. 2) They do not identify the same barriers to attendance that students themselves identify. 3) They do not share information with Attendance Services. 4) They do not work with Attendance Service providers to coordinate responses and stay connected.

Reflective questions

These questions may be useful for leadership, staff, or board meetings.

- Could we try new ways of communicating high expectations for attendance, and the importance of regular attendance, with students, parents and whānau?
- Do we closely and actively monitor attendance so any issues are caught as early as possible?
- Do we act on needs early? For example, noticing when problems in learning, socialising, or wellbeing are arising and having a plan of action on how to address those problems. How about checking in regularly with students who are struggling?
- How could our school collaborate better with Attendance Services in our area? This could involve:
 - sending them better information with referrals – specifically about what we have already tried to do to support students that are referred.
 - planning and communicating with them about students, and what to do when they return to set them up for success and tackle barriers to their attendance.
- We found that students' engagement is key to their attendance. Do we know whether school is meeting the needs of students and their parents and whānau? Would staff benefit from extra support around inclusive practices, including for neurodivergent learners?
- How can we better maintain contact with students (and their parents and whānau) while they are not attending/with the Attendance Service?
- Do we have individualised plans for support when students return? It's even better when these plans are done in collaboration with Attendance Service staff.

Want to know more?

To find out more about chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand and how well our education system identifies and supports chronically absent students, check out ERO's evaluation [report](#) and [summary](#). These also set out the recommendations we are making for improvement across the system and supports across Aotearoa New Zealand. These can be downloaded for free from ERO's Evidence and Insights website www.evidence.ero.govt.nz.

We appreciate the work of 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.



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