



Insights for Attendance Service staff: 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 Attendance Service staff.

What did ERO look at?

ERO looked at how Attendance Services, schools, and the system as a whole are supporting students who are chronically absent to 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 with 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?

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

- Schools 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). Approximately half of schools do not make referrals to Attendance Services at all.

Improvements in school attendance are often short-lived as barriers remain.

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

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.

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

- Funding has not increased to match the increase in demand. Chronic absence has now doubled from 2015 to 2023 and is now 10 percent.
- Caseloads for advisers in the Attendance Services that ERO visited vary from 30 to more than 500 cases. 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.

The model does not set up Attendance Services to succeed.

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.

- 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 can get drawn away from attendance into providing other support.
- Attendance Services are not leading to sustained improvements in attendance in the long-term. Only two in five students (41 percent) agreed that Attendance Service staff helped them go to school more.

“We usually know what would work, and have the skills to carry out successful interventions, but simply don't have enough time to provide effective help to everyone on our caseloads. We also know that there are many more students we could help, but schools don't refer them because they know we are already well over our capacity to respond.”

ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF MEMBER

ERO is recommending improvements.

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

This will involve the Government, agencies, schools, parents and whānau, and Attendance Services doing things differently. You can find details of our recommendations in the [report](#) and [summary](#). These can be downloaded for free from ERO's Evidence and Insights website www.evidence.ero.govt.nz



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