Left behind:

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

Contents

Executive 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 (at school 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.

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.

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.

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.

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 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. Almost 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, but under half who are chronically absent (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.

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 is not delivering 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
Agencies	Government agencies prioritise education and school attendance and **take all possible action to address the largest risk factors for chronic absence,** which could include: → stabilising housing for the families of students at risk of chronic absence, including prioritising school attendance as part of social housing criteria → considering school attendance in any early intervention responses, like Whānau Ora → considering chronic absence as a care and protection issue.
Schools, and parents and whānau	Take all possible steps to support the **habit of regular attendance,** including acting early when attendance issues arise.
Schools and Ministry of Education	Schools have **planned responses** for different levels of non-attendance, with guidance provided by the Ministry of Education on what is effective for returning students to regular attendance.
Schools	Find and act on **learning needs** quickly, so that students remain engaged. Address **bullying** and social isolation, so that students are safe and connected. Provide access to school-based counselling services to address **mental health needs**.
All	**Increase understanding** of the importance of attendance, providing focused messages for parents and whānau of students most at risk of chronic absence.
Schools and agencies	**Identify earlier** 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 **acting to prevent** chronic absence.

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

Who	Action
All	Put in place **clearer roles and responsibilities** for chronic absence (for schools, Attendance Services, parents and whānau, and other agencies).
Ministry of Education and ERO	Use their roles and powers to **identify, report, and intervene in schools** with high levels of chronic absence.
Schools, Ministry of Education, and agencies	**Increase use of enforcement measures** 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 **evidence-based key practices that work,** including: → regular engagement to build strong relationships → identifying attendance barriers and keeping attendance as the main priority → working with agencies and community organisations to remove attendance barriers → working with schools to remove school-based barriers to attendance.
Schools	**Work with services** to address chronic absence, including: → active involvement in referring students to services by providing information about the student, including what the school has already tried to address attendance → 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.

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

Who	Action
Schools	Put in place a **deliberate plan to support returning students** to reintegrate, be safe, and catch up.
Schools	**Actively monitor attendance** of students who have previously been chronically absent and act early if their attendance declines.
Ministry of Education and schools	Increase the availability of **high-quality vocational and alternative education** (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
Centralise	Centralise key functions that can be more effectively and efficiently provided nationally, including: → **information sharing** agreements between agencies, and guidance on how information can be shared → **prosecutions** of parents → **interventions and support for schools** who have high levels of chronic absence → national data tracking and analysis, including **identifying students who are not enrolled** anywhere → brokering access to services to **address social barriers** → guidance on **evidence-based practice to address barriers** to chronic truancy.
Localise	Make sure schools have the resources and the support they need to carry out the functions that most effectively happen locally, including: → **prevention** of chronic absence through resolving education issues → **retention** of returned students through a good plan, monitoring, and ability to offer a tailored education.

Where	Action
Localise *(continued)*	Consider giving schools/clusters of schools the responsibility, accountability, and funding for the delivery of the key function of **working with chronically absent students** and their families, to address education barriers, while drawing on the support of the centralised function to address broader social barriers.
Funding	**Increase funding** for those responsible for finding students and returning them to school, reflecting that chronic absence rates have doubled since 2015. Reform how **funding is allocated** to ensure it matches need.

Conclusion

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.

About this report

In Term 2 this year, over 80,000 students missed more than three weeks of school. These students who are chronically absent are often struggling, at high risk of poor education outcomes, and poor lifetime outcomes.

This report looks at how good the system and supports are for chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand. It explores the reasons for chronic student absence, and the outcomes for students who miss significant portions of their schooling.

The Education Review Office (ERO) worked with the Social Investment Agency (SIA) and the Ministry of Education to produce this report. It looks at how well the education system identifies the students who are chronically absent or not enrolled, and how well it works with them and their parents and whānau to get them attending school regularly.

→ The **Education Review Office** is responsible for reviewing and reporting on the performance of early learning services, kura, and schools. As part of this role, ERO looks at how the education system supports young people's outcomes.

→ The **Social Investment Agency** is responsible for leading the implementation of social investment and providing cross-sector insights to decision makers.

→ The **Ministry of Education** is responsible for managing policy and performance for the education system, and delivering services and support locally, regionally, and nationally. It does this to 'shape an education system that delivers excellent and equitable outcomes.'[1]

We also worked closely with an Expert Advisory Group with a range of expertise, including academics, school leaders, Attendance Service staff, and staff from agencies that work to improve student attendance.

ERO's related evaluation reports

This evaluation builds on our previous work on regular attendance, and a programme of work looking at disengaged students:

→ Missing out: Why aren't our children going to school?

→ Attendance: Getting back to school

→ Te Aho o te Kura Pounamu Education Review

→ An Alternative Education? Support for our most disengaged young people

→ Learning in residential care: They knew I wanted to learn

A key finding from this work is that students who are chronically absent from school are either disengaged or at risk of disengaging from their learning.

What ERO looked at

This evaluation looks at the effectiveness and value for money of interventions aimed at getting chronically absent students back to school and keeping them there. We answer five key questions.

1) Who are the students who are chronically absent from school?

2) Why are they absent?

3) What are the outcomes for students who are chronically absent from school and what are the costs of those outcomes?

4) How effective are the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent at getting students back into school and keeping them in school? Are different models more or less effective?

5) What needs to change so that the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent from school achieve better results and are cost-effective?

> This report looks at students who are chronically absent, which means they miss three weeks or more a term (attending school for 70 percent or less of the time)

How we evaluated education provision

We have taken a robust, mixed-methods approach, using an evidence-based rubric to assess how well the system, schools and Attendance Services carry out the practices that are known to successfully return chronically absent students to school. To understand how effective the supports and interventions are at increasing attendance for students who are chronically absent, we used multiple sources of information, set out below.

Surveys of:	→ Two-thirds of Attendance Services
	→ 773 students, 256 of which chronically absent in the last week
	→ 1,131 parents and whānau, 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
	→ 28 English medium schools

Data from:	→ Integrated Data Infrastructure analysis
	→ Ministry of Education data and statistics on attendance, and administrative data from Attendance Services
	→ Findings from the Ministry of Education's internal review of the management and support of the Attendance Service
	→ International evidence on effective practice in addressing chronic absence, including models from other jurisdictions

Analysing data in the Integrated Data Infrastructure

The Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI) is a large research database of people in Aotearoa New Zealand, that brings together administrative data from Government agencies, StatsNZ surveys, and non-government organisations (NGOs). Education data including school attendance, referrals to the Attendance Service, and qualifications, are all captured in the IDI.

We worked with SIA who used the IDI to provide analyses on:

→ the characteristics and prior experiences of students who are referred to the Attendance Service, and the predictors and drivers of being referred

→ the characteristics and prior experiences of students who are chronically absent, and the predictors and drivers of being chronically absent

→ the longer-term outcomes of students who are referred to the Attendance Service

→ the longer-term outcomes of students who are chronically absent

→ the effectiveness of the Attendance Service, in terms of longer-term outcomes

→ costs to the Government of students with chronic absence, compared to other groups.

Further details of how we evaluated provision, including the work done in the IDI, can be found in our companion technical report www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-left-behind-how-do-we-get-out-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.

Who is missing?

Data from the IDI and administrative data is comprehensive. However, the voices of young people who are not enrolled in school or do not attend school regularly are difficult to access. While we have captured some of their voices, the majority of students in our sample either attend school some of the time or have been successfully returned to education.

Students and their parents and whānau from primary schools, kura Kaupapa Māori, and rural schools are under-represented in our sample. School leaders from schools that serve low socio-economic communities and primary schools are also under-represented in our surveys.

Report structure

This report has nine parts.

→ Part 1 sets out the system for attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand.

→ Part 2 describes how well attendance is going in Aotearoa New Zealand.

→ Part 3 explores what is driving chronic absence from school.

→ Part 4 shares the outcomes for students who are chronically absent.

→ Part 5 sets out what the evidence says is key to reducing chronic absence.

→ Part 6 describes how effective the Aotearoa New Zealand model is against that evidence.

→ Part 7 describes how effective Attendance Services are.

→ Part 8 describes how effective schools are at addressing chronic absence.

→ Part 9 sets out our key findings, and the areas for action to drive improvement in student attendance.

Part 1: What is the system for attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Attendance is crucial for children to learn. Students are expected to be in school learning every day. All children aged between six and 16 years old are required to be enrolled in a school in Aotearoa New Zealand. Once they are enrolled, children must attend school if it is open. If a student misses more than 30 percent of school a term, or three weeks, they are chronically absent. Schools must take all reasonable steps to make students attend school, while the Attendance Service works with the students who are chronically absent, or not enrolled. Police and statutory attendance officers can return students to school or home.

Schools, Attendance Services, parents and whānau, and students all have responsibilities for ensuring attendance.

This section sets out:

1) the expectations for going to school

2) what counts as 'going to school'

3) who is responsible for what

4) how this works in practice.

1) What are the expectations for going to school?

All students in Aotearoa New Zealand are expected to be enrolled in school and they must attend school if it is open.

Attendance is critical for learning and thriving at school.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the law requires all children aged six to 16 to be enrolled in a registered school, unless they have an exemption by the Ministry of Education.[2] The Ministry of Education may issue an exemption for reasons such as:

→ the student being homeschooled

→ the student being in Oranga Tamariki residential care

→ the student living too far away from a school.[3]

All students under the age of 16 who are *enrolled* in a school must attend the school if it is open.[4]

2) What counts as 'going to school'?

Schools must record student attendance every day, and student attendance is reported in 'half days'. Primary schools typically record attendance first thing in the morning, and again after lunch. Secondary schools typically record attendance for each class or lesson.

Students are present at school when they are in class (see Appendix 2 for a list of cases where students are counted as 'present').

There are four different categories of attendance, depending on how many half-days a student attends in a school term. This report focuses on chronically absent students, who are those that attend for 70 percent or less of the term (missing 15 days or more of a 10-week term).

All types of absence contribute to chronic absence, but some reasons for missing school are considered reasonable or 'justified'. There are guidelines for schools, but what counts as a justified absence depends on each school's policy.[5] Justified absences are for things like illness or bereavement. School policies also determine what counts as an 'unjustified absence'. Unjustified absences are when the school does not receive an explanation for an absence, or they decide an explanation is not a sufficient reason for not attending school. See Appendix 2 for more detail on the different types of absences.

3) Who is responsible for what?

a) Schools

Schools must take all reasonable steps to make sure students attend school when the school is open.

Schools are required to keep accurate records of who is enrolled and their attendance. They are expected to provide attendance data to the Ministry of Education.

If a student is expected at school and does not turn up, schools must notify the student's parent or caregiver, and take action. What action schools take, and when, depends on each school's attendance policies and procedures.[6]

School boards must take 'all reasonable steps' to make sure students attend school when the school is open.[7] These reasonable steps are expected to be set out in each school's attendance management policy. Attendance management policies should also set out the school's rules for attendance, how the school records attendance, and how the school will respond to student absences. School boards may also appoint a statutory attendance officer (see section below on statutory attendance officers).

b) Attendance Services

Attendance Services work with students who are chronically absent from school or not enrolled to return them to school.

Attendance Services are contracted by the Ministry of Education to help schools manage attendance by working with students and their parents and whānau. They work to address the root causes of absence or non-enrolment. Attendance Services are expected to:

→ work with schools, students, and their parents and whānau, to identify why students are not going to school, and work out how to get them back to regular attendance at school

→ respond to all referrals, which are made through the Attendance Services Application system (ASA)

→ tailor their approach based on what works in their community

→ work with other agencies, like Oranga Tamariki, Whānau Ora, the Ministry of Social Development or NZ Police, iwi, and services in their community, to help make sure students are able to return to school and sustain their attendance

→ get students back to school.[8]

Each year, the Ministry of Education spends $22.8 million on contracts with 78 different Attendance Service providers, covering 84 service areas, and employing around 210 full-time equivalent staff. These providers are a mix of schools, iwi providers, and NGOs.

Attendance Services are accountable through their contracts to deliver a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs, see the companion technical report for more detail). The Attendance Service managers report to, and meet regularly with, the Ministry of Education.

Attendance Officers work with schools and parents and whānau to address moderate or irregular absence.

Attendance Officers are employed by Attendance Services. They work with schools and communities to address moderate and irregular absence patterns for students in Years 1 to 12. They are expected to focus on helping schools to analyse their attendance data, identify patterns of attendance, and develop and implement processes to improve attendance for students who are not yet chronically absent, but have unsatisfactory attendance.[a]

In 2023, the Government allocated an additional $9 million per year to fund 82 full-time equivalent Attendance Officer roles. 76 FTE roles are allocated across Attendance Service providers and may be called different things in each community.

There are also Attendance Officers with statutory powers who are appointed by school boards to help them manage student attendance. School boards can appoint these Attendance Officers from Attendance Services staff or someone outside of it, and these roles are funded through school operations grants.

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a   There is flexibility in the contracts that has enabled some Attendance Service providers to use the Attendance Officer position to provide additional resources for students.

c) Parents and whānau

Parents and guardians (along with schools) are responsible for sending their children to school and making sure they are attending regularly. If they fail to do so and their child is prosecuted for chronic absence they will be charged. Parents and guardians may be charged and fined up to $30 for every day their child is absent or not enrolled in a school. For a first offence, they can be fined a maximum of $300; subsequent offenses are limited to $3,000.[9]

d) Other services

Police and statutory attendance officers can return students to school or home.

There are two roles with statutory powers to enforce school attendance: the Police and statutory attendance officers. Attendance officers with statutory powers (statutory attendance officers) are people appointed by school boards to help them manage student attendance.[b] They are, confusingly, not the same as Attendance Officers in Attendance Services, who do not have statutory powers unless the school board also appoints them as a statutory attendance officer.[10]

Statutory attendance officers are allowed to detain students who appear to be aged between five and 16, and take them home or to their school. They have to show some sort of proof they have been appointed by a school board as a statutory attendance officer.[11]

4) How does this work in practice?

Firstly, a teacher will notice, or schools will use attendance data to identify, when students have missed a lot of school. The monitoring of the attendance data may be carried out at the school, or by an Attendance Officer that works with school. Sometimes other people contact the school reporting a concern that a child is not at school.

Once schools have identified that a student has a high rate of absence, they reach out to the student, and their parents and whānau, to understand why. The school will then work directly with the student's parents or whānau to address any barriers and get them attending more frequently.

For students that do not return, one of two things can happen:

→ the school refers the student to an Attendance Service

→ the school provides more intensive support, often through school based social services like Social Workers in Schools, or school-based Attendance Officers.

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b   For clarity this report calls Attendance Officers employed by Attendance Services 'Attendance Officers' and attendance officers with statutory powers 'statutory attendance officers'.

For students referred to the Attendance Service, the service will contact their parents and whānau, and work with them and the student to address barriers to attendance and get them back to school.

Once the student is returned to school, the Attendance Service hands the case back to the school and closes the case.

If the student does not return after intervention by schools and Attendance Services, the parents or guardians may be fined or prosecuted.

In some cases, students stop attending completely. If a student misses 20 days of school in a row without communicating properly with the school, the school may remove them from their roll.

Conclusion

Attendance matters, and in Aotearoa New Zealand, all children aged six to 16 are legally required to be enrolled in a registered school, unless they have an exemption by the Ministry of Education.

Schools must take all 'reasonable steps' to make sure students attend school when the school is open, and Attendance Services work with students who are chronically absent from school or not enrolled, to return them to school.

In the next chapter, we examine the extent of the chronic absence problem in Aotearoa New Zealand, and how effective our system is for getting children back to school.

Part 2: How big is the problem of chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand?

Aotearoa New Zealand is experiencing a crisis of chronic absence. Chronic absence has doubled since 2015 and is now at 10 percent. This means one in 10 students are missing three weeks or more a term.

In this chapter we set out how much students are attending school, and how chronic absence varies for different students and schools.

What we did to understand how big the problem of chronic absence is

We used Ministry of Education administrative data to understand how big the problem of chronic absence is, and who the students are who miss more than 30 percent of school.

This section sets out what we found out about:

1) how many students are not attending school

2) how chronic absence is different for different students

3) how attendance varies by school.

What we found: an overview

Chronic absence has doubled since 2015.

One in seven students (5 percent) were chronically absent in Term 2, 2024. Over 80,000 students were attending school less than 70 percent of the term.

Senior secondary school students are most likely to be chronically absent.

One in five (18 percent) senior secondary school students (Years 11–13) were chronically absent in Term 2 of 2024.

Chronic absence rates are higher in low socio-economic areas.

Students from schools in low socio-economic areas are six times as likely to be chronically absent (18 percent compared to 3 percent).
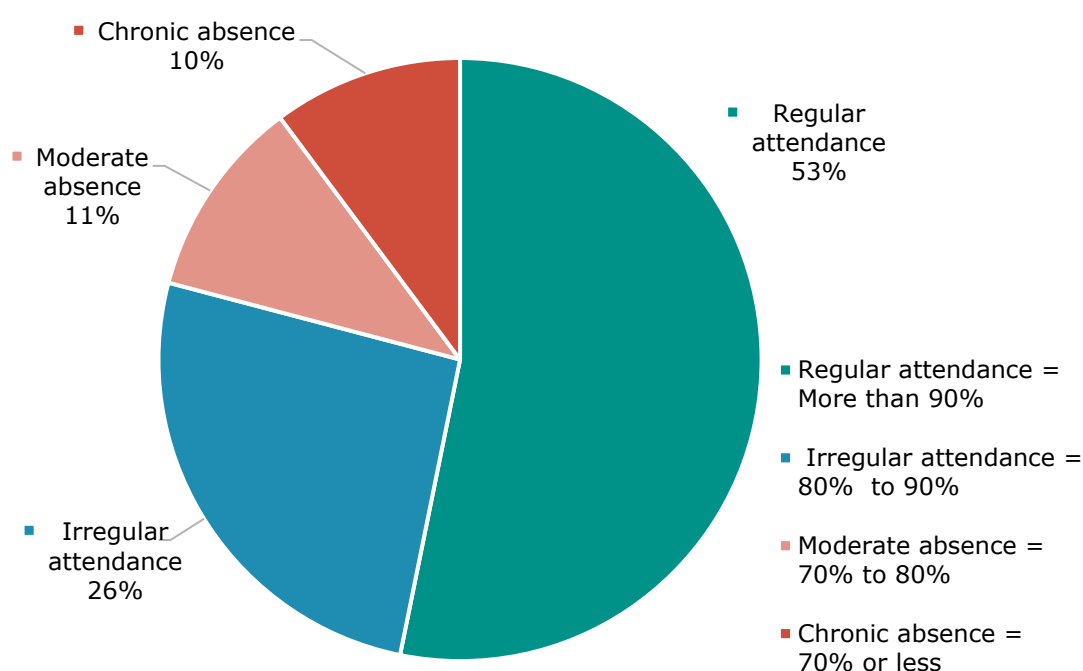
1) How many students are chronically absent from school?

Chronic absence is currently at 10 percent.

In Term 2 this year (2024), 80,569 students (10 percent of all students) were recorded as chronically absent, missing more than three weeks of a school term.

Figure 1: *Percentage of students by the proportion of absence in Term 2 2024*

- Regular attendance = More than 90%
- Irregular attendance = 80% to 90%
- Moderate absence = 70% to 80%
- Chronic absence = 70% or less

Data Source: Ministry of Education

Chronic absence is on the rise and has doubled since 2015.

Five percent of students were chronically absent in Term 2 in 2015. Chronic absence started to increase in 2016, and in Term 2 2024, 10 percent of students were chronically absent.

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

[Bar chart showing chronic absence: 2015 Term 2 at 5%, and 2024 Term 2 at 10%]
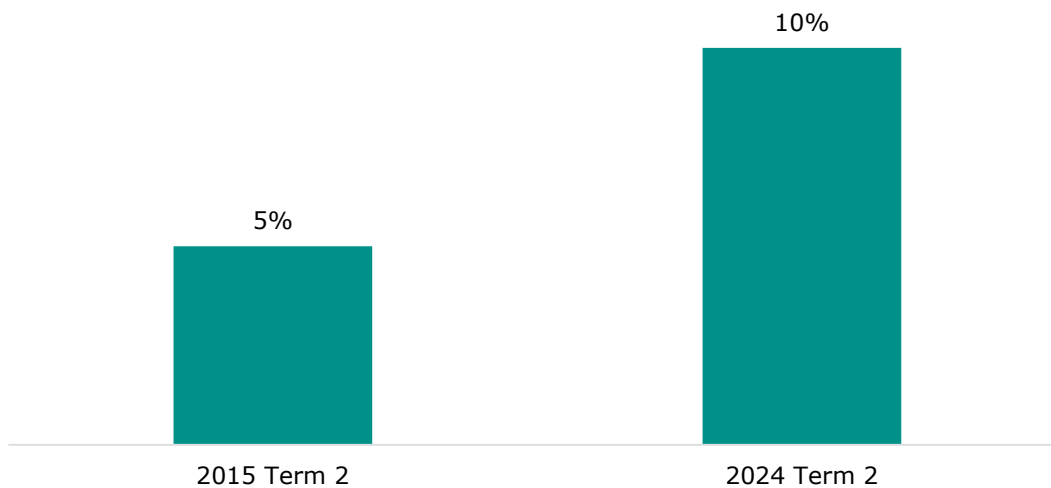
Data Source: Ministry of Education

2) How is chronic absence different for different students?

Most chronically absent students are away for three weeks in a term, but some miss a whole term.

In Term 2 of 2024, just under half of chronically absent students were away for four weeks. But there were over one percent of chronically absent students who missed the whole term (nine or more weeks).

Māori and Pacific students are more at risk of chronic absence.

In Term 2 of 2024, 18 percent of Māori students and 17 percent of Pacific students were chronically absent. This is compared to 8 percent of NZ European/Pākehā students and 6 percent of Asian students.[c] Concerningly, the gap in rate of chronic absence between NZ European/Pākehā students and Māori and Pacific students has increased from pre-Covid-19 levels. The gap for Māori students has increased from 8 percentage points in 2019 to 10 percentage points in 2024. Whereas for Pacific students, chronic absence has increased from 7 percentage points in 2019 to 9 percentage points in 2024.

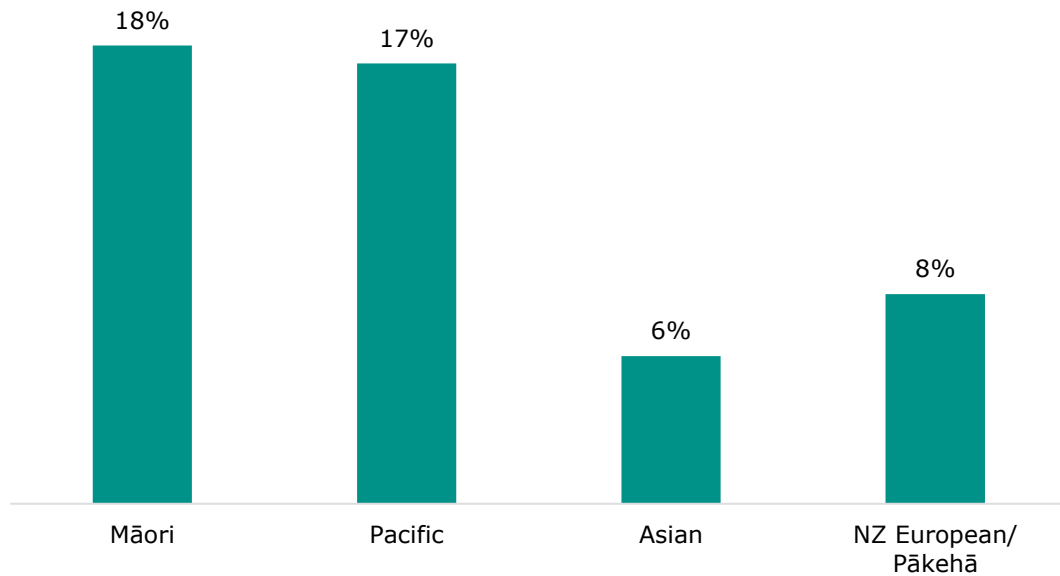---

c   Data from Ministry of Education, Education Counts.

Figure 3: *Percentage of chronically absent students by ethnicity in Term 2 2024*

Data Source: Ministry of Education

There is no difference in chronic absence for gender.

Boys and girls are equally likely to be chronically absent. In Term 2 of 2024, 10 percent of both girls and boys had chronic absence.

Chronic absence rates are higher for older students.

Chronic absence is a problem in both primary and secondary school. Senior secondary school students have higher rates of chronic absence compared to primary school students. In primary school (Years 1–8) chronic absence is 10 percent, in secondary school (Years 9–10) it is 13 percent, and in senior secondary school (Years 11–13) it is 15 percent.

Figure 4: *Chronic absence rates across different year levels in Term 2 2024*
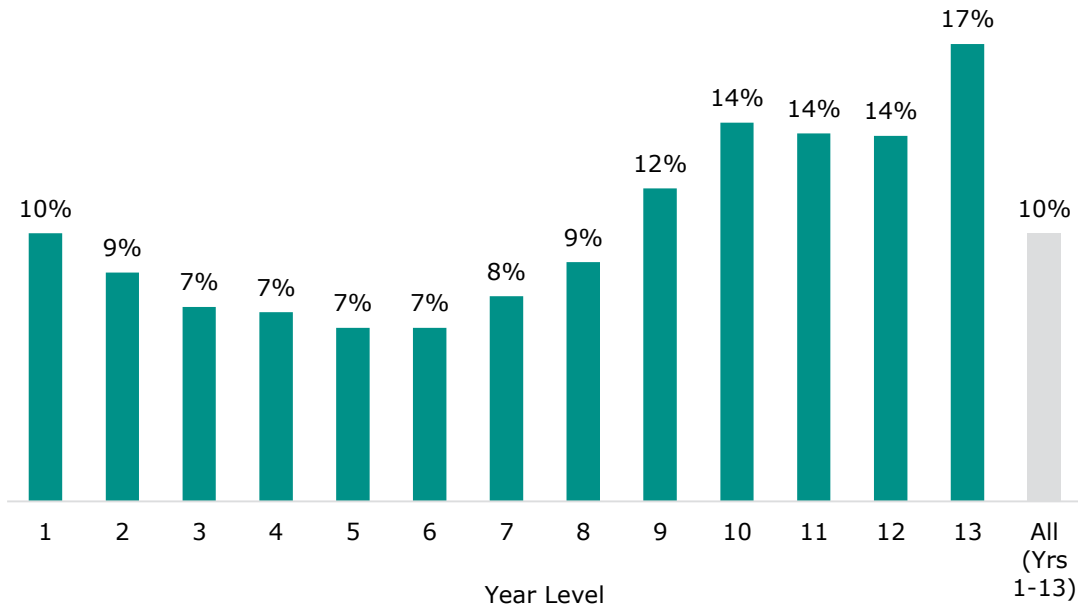
Data Source: Ministry of Education

3) How is chronic absence different for different schools?

More students are becoming chronically absent at younger ages.

Chronic absence rates have doubled in secondary schools and tripled in primary schools since 2015. Rates of chronic absence in secondary schools started to increase in 2015. In primary schools, rates of chronic absence started to increase in 2016. Chronic absence rates have improved since the peak of the pandemic (2022), but they remain higher than before the pandemic.

Figure 5: *Rates of chronic absence in primary and secondary schools*
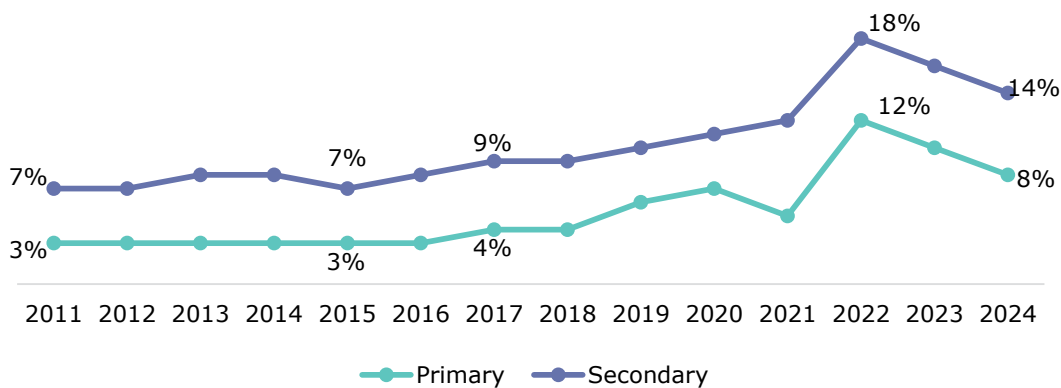
Data Source: Ministry of Education

Attendance in primary school matters. Students who do not have a history of regular attendance are more likely to continue being chronically absent.

We found from our analysis that for students who have a history of regular attendance, their likelihood of attending school regularly increases by 221 percent. ERO's previous work also tells us that there is a greater impact on learning the more days of school students missed. Having healthy attendance patterns in primary school helps students maintain attendance habits in secondary school.[12]

Chronic absence rates are higher in schools in low socio-economic communities, and in the Northland | Te Tai Tokerau region.

Students from schools in low socio-economic communities[d] are six times as likely to be chronically absent from school (18 percent) than students in schools in high socio-economic communities (3 percent).

Figure 6: *Percentage of chronic absence by schools in socio-economic areas in 2024 Term 2*
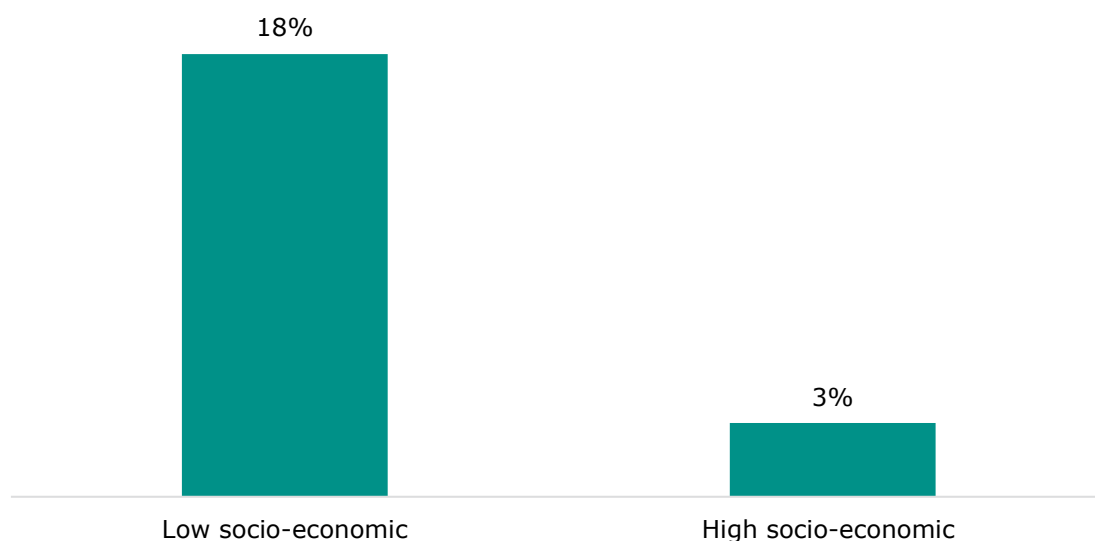
Data Source: Ministry of Education

Despite absence rates being higher in schools in low socio-economic areas, there are schools in low socio-economic communities that have low chronic absence rates and schools in high socio-economic communities that have high chronic absence rates (more about this can be found in Chapter 8).

Regionally, Northland | Te Tai Tokerau (15 percent) and Southwest Auckland | Tāmaki Herenga Waka South (15 percent) has the highest percentage of chronically absent students in Aotearoa New Zealand, followed by Hawkes Bay | Tairāwhiti, Waikato and Bay of Plenty, Waiariki (12 percent).

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d   This comparison is derived from Education Counts EQI band data.

Figure 7: *Percentage of chronic absence by regions in Term 2 2024*

Region	Percentage
Northland, Te Tai Tokerau	15%
South and southwest Auckland, Tāmaki Herenga Waka	15%
Hawke's Bay, Tairāwhiti	12%
Waikato	12%
Bay of Plenty, Waiariki	12%
Wellington	10%
Taranaki, Whanganui, Manawatū	10%
Canterbury and Chatham Islands	9%
Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast	9%
North and West Auckland, Tāmaki Herenga Tāngata	8%
Otago, Southland	8%
Central and East Auckland, Tāmaki Herenga Manawa	8%

Data Source: Ministry of Education

Conclusion

Chronic absence in Aotearoa New Zealand has reached crisis levels, doubling since 2015. Last term over 80,000 students (10 percent) were chronically absent in Term 2, 2024. This has serious impacts for students. Senior secondary school students, Māori students, Pacific students, and students in schools in low socio-economic areas are at a greater risk of chronic absence.

The next section looks at the drivers for students' absence from school, and the reasons for Aotearoa New Zealand's high rates of chronic absence.

Part 3: What is driving chronic absence?

Improving school attendance is crucial to raising educational outcomes for students across Aotearoa New Zealand. To address this, we first need to have a detailed understanding of the reasons behind chronic absence.

In this chapter, we set out the risk factors for chronic absence, then explore students' reasons for chronic absence.

What we did

Understanding the reasons behind chronic absence can help us reduce it. We wanted to understand the role student, family, and school factors, play in chronic absence. To understand the biggest predictors of chronic absence we used statistical modelling to identify the risk factors for students being chronically absent.

To understand more about reasons for chronic absence, we draw on:

→ surveys of students who are chronically absent

→ surveys of parents and whānau of students who are chronically absent

→ surveys of school leaders and Attendance Service staff

→ interviews with chronically absent students and their parents and whānau

→ interviews with school leaders and Attendance Service staff.

This section sets out:

1) the key predictive risk factors for chronic absence

2) the main reasons for chronic absence.

What we found: an overview

There are 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.

Twenty-five percent of students who are chronically absent were chronically absent a year ago. Four percent of students who are chronically absent have a recent history of offending (compared to less than 1 percent of all students). Just over one in 10 (12 percent) of chronically absent students live in social housing compared to 3 percent of all students.

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 chronically absent. Over half (55 percent) identified mental health and a quarter (27 percent) identified physical health as reasons for being chronically absent.

Our findings are set out in more detail below.

1) What are the predictive risk factors for chronic absence?

We used the IDI to identify the risk factors that are associated with chronic absence (see Appendix 1 for detail). This section sets out what predictive risk factors are associated with chronic absence. We categorise these into:

→ community factors

→ family factors

→ student factors.

The predictive risk factors for chronic absence are set out in the table below.

Community	Family	Student
→ Living in a low socio-economic community	Family is struggling: → Lower household income → Parents have mental health and addiction issues → Are in social housing, emergency housing → Have had an Oranga Tamariki investigation	Education: → Previous attendance patterns Health and disability: → Have mental health and addiction issues → Are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder → Student has visited the emergency department Crime: → Are offenders → Are a victim of crime

Community factors

Students from lower socio-economic communities are more likely to be chronically absent.

We saw in chapter 2 that students from schools in low socio-economic communities are six times as likely to be chronically absent that students from schools in high socio-economic communities. After controlling for family factors and student factors, students living in low socio-economic communities are still 1.8 times more likely to be chronically absent.

Factor	Increases likelihood of chronic absence by:
Going to school in lower socio-economic areas	1.8 times

Community factors that impact attendance are wide ranging and include geographic remoteness, access to transport, and community responsibilities. Parents of students who have a history of chronic absence told us that the availability of affordable transport was often a barrier to attendance.

We heard that getting children back to school was more difficult in areas hit by natural events such as flooding. Attendance Service staff told us about roads being washed out making getting to school difficult. Parents and students who have experienced trauma related to natural disasters are anxious about being able to contact or reach each other during an event and were reluctant to be separated in case this happened again.

Family factors

Students experiencing unstable housing and complex family lives are more likely to be chronically absent.

The family factors that are most predictive of chronic absence are living in social housing (1.4 times more likely to be chronically absent) and living in emergency housing (1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent). Other predictive family factors are linked to family dysfunction or conflict, including parental drug and alcohol addiction (1.1 times more likely to be chronically absent) and involvement of Oranga Tamariki (1.3 times more likely to be chronically absent).

Factor	Increases likelihood of chronic absence by:	Difference between chronic and regular attenders
Lower household income	9% per 1% decrease in household income	Not available
Mother accessing mental health and addiction services	1.1 times	21%, compared to 14%
Father accessing mental health and addiction services	1.1 times[e]	16%, compared to 10%
Living in social housing	1.4 times	12%, compared to 3%
Living in emergency housing	1.5 times	4%, compared to 1%
Having/had an Oranga Tamariki investigation	1.3 times	8%, compared to 2%

We heard how complex home lives, where families are struggling with drug and alcohol addiction or other mental health needs, means school attendance is not prioritised. Some parents discussed being victims of domestic violence, and how it made it difficult to prioritise their children going to school.

In many of these families there is an inter-generational disengagement from school – where parents did not go themselves, and their children do not go to school now.

> "Non-attendance at school is a symptom of complex family challenges, often including significant trauma which may be long-term and inter-generational."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE PROVIDER**

We also heard how financial hardship can cause chronic absence. Parents and students told us that students having to look after younger children while parents work and a lack of school supplies, including uniforms, contributed to chronic absence. Attendance Service staff and schools told us that transience and poor housing conditions both lead to increased absence from school.

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e   This finding is only significant in secondary school age students.

Student factors

Students with histories of offending and a history of chronic absence are most likely to be chronically absent.

The student factors that are most predictive of chronic absence are being a recent offender (4.2 times more likely to be chronically absent) and having a recent history of chronic absence (5 times more likely to be chronically absent). Accessing mental health services, and hospital emergency admissions, which are indicators of mental health and physical health issues, are also predictive of chronic non-attendance (1.8 and 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent).

Factor	Increases likelihood of chronic absence by:	Difference between chronic and regular attenders
Chronic absence a year prior	5 times	25%, compared to 2%
Accessing mental health and addiction services	1.8 times	15%, compared to 5%
Diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder	1.4 times	2%, compared to 1%
Visiting the emergency department	1.5 times	20%, compared to 10%
Being a recent offender	4.2 times	4%, compared to 0%
Being a victim of crime	1.2 times	3%, compared to 0%

Building and maintaining a habit of attendance can protect against becoming chronically absent, but periods of chronic absence can lead to further chronic absence. We heard from our interviews that the more students miss school, the harder it is for them to return – creating a cycle of increased chronic absence.

Parents and students also told us that there were mental and physical health reasons for students not regularly attending, particularly anxiety and persistent winter illnesses.

2) What are the main reasons students report for current chronic absence?

We also asked students, their parents and whānau, school leaders, and Attendance Services about what kept students from attending school in the last year. This section sets out what the main drivers of chronic absence are from chronically absent students' perspectives. We categorise these drivers into:

→ school factors – challenges with the school

→ family factors – challenges with the family circumstances, or parenting

→ student factors – challenges with individual health.

Together, these challenges can create real barriers to students going to school every day. Many students who are chronically absent are struggling with other issues in their lives.

School factors

Students who feel isolated or not supported by their school are more likely to be chronically absent.
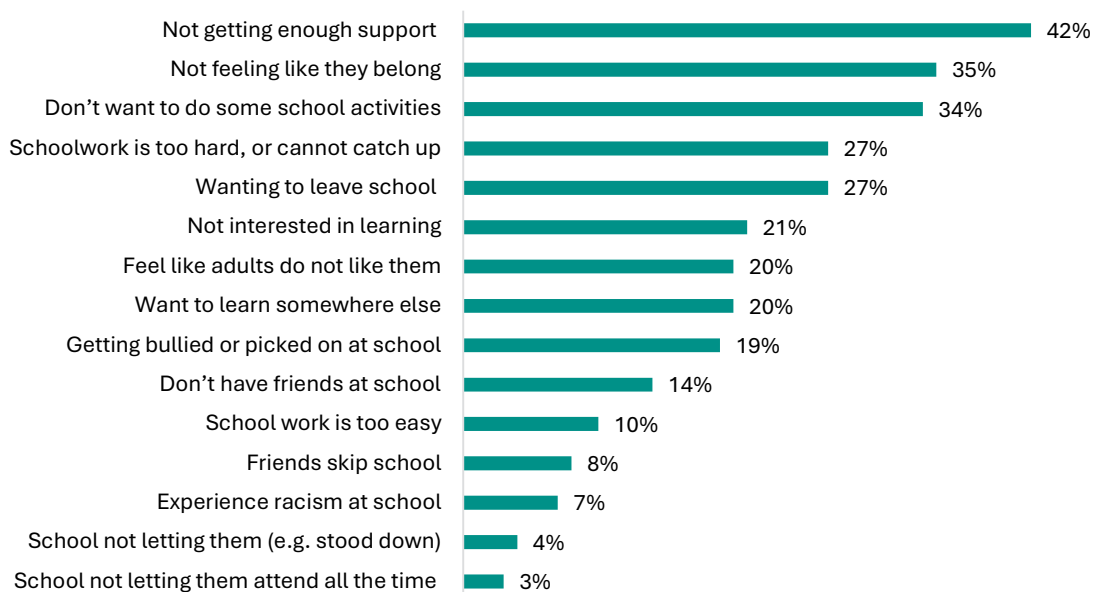
The school factors most likely to be identified by students who are chronically absent are:

→ not getting enough support for what they need at school (42 percent of students)

→ not feeling like they belong (35 percent of students)

→ not wanting to do some school activities (34 percent of students).

Students who want to leave school are 3.2 times more likely to have a recent history of chronic absence, compared to other chronically absent students.

Parents also rated students not wanting to do some school activities as one of the top three reasons students were not likely to go to school (30 percent of parents). Attendance Service staff and school leaders did not identify school factors in their top three reasons for chronic absence.

Figure 8: *School factors that students report as reasons for chronic absence*

School factor	Percentage
Not getting enough support	42%
Not feeling like they belong	35%
Don't want to do some school activities	34%
Schoolwork is too hard, or cannot catch up	27%
Wanting to leave school	27%
Not interested in learning	21%
Feel like adults do not like them	20%
Want to learn somewhere else	20%
Getting bullied or picked on at school	19%
Don't have friends at school	14%
School work is too easy	10%
Friends skip school	8%
Experience racism at school	7%
School not letting them (e.g. stood down)	4%
School not letting them attend all the time	3%

In our interviews students were most likely to identify schooling factors as a barrier to attendance. They reported:

→ feeling socially isolated and having a lack of friends or poor relationships with teachers

→ having learning needs that the school is unable to accommodate – for example, parents also report restricting attendance of neurodiverse students to manage their triggers

→ feeling physically unsafe due to schools not addressing bullying

→ schools not offering courses of study that are relevant to their career goals.

Parents also told us that bullying and poor relationships with teaching staff were factors in their child not attending school.

> "I was bullied and threatened at school the school didn't respond in a way to keep me safe so had no choice but leave school."
>
> **STUDENT**

> "I couldn't keep up or understand what they wanted me to do... But turned out I have ADHD and find it hard to focus in class."
>
> **STUDENT**

> "I'm unsettled when my friends or teacher aren't at school and I often come home during the day. I get bored. Sometimes I prefer to do what I like and am good at instead of what I don't like and struggle with."
>
> **STUDENT**

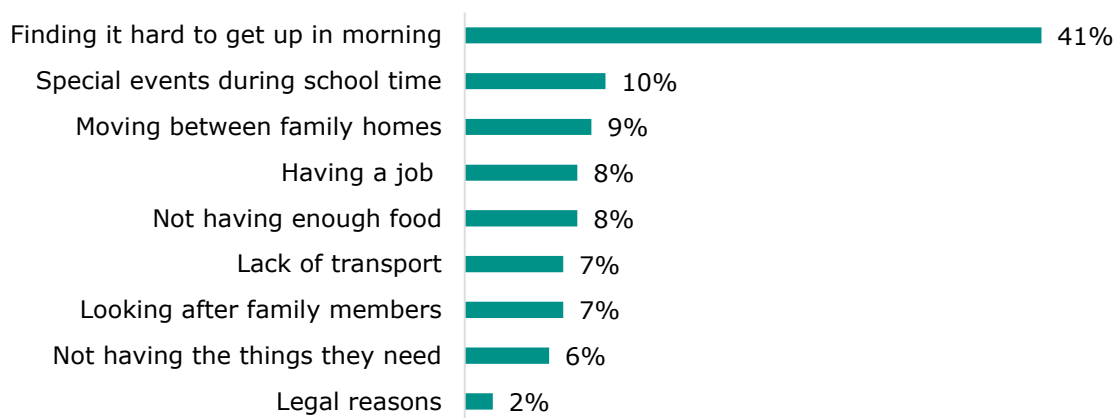> "[I want to learn] more life skills and stuff we need as adults and less irrelevant stuff."
>
> **STUDENT**

Family factors

Chronically absent students report a wide range of family factors that impacted on their attendance, staying up late was the most common issue.

Two out of five students who are chronically absent (41 percent of students) reported finding it hard to get up in the morning as a reason they do not attend, which make students 1.8 times more likely to be chronically absent. Attendance Service staff (90 percent) and school leaders (75 percent) agreed, both rating finding it hard to get up in the morning after staying up late as one of the top three reasons why students are chronically absent from school. Attendance Service staff also identified moving between family homes in their top three (85 percent).

Figure 9: *Family factors that students report as reasons for chronic absence*

Finding it hard to get up in morning	41%
Special events during school time	10%
Moving between family homes	9%
Having a job	8%
Not having enough food	8%
Lack of transport	7%
Looking after family members	7%
Not having the things they need	6%
Legal reasons	2%

We heard that students are late getting to school, or stay at home due to a:

→ lack of organisation in the household

→ lack of vigilance over bedtime routines which meant students engage in late night activities and don't have sufficient sleep.

In our interviews, students were most likely to tell us about financial barriers to school attendance, and particularly the cost of transport and uniforms. We heard that some students need to help out their family with caregiving when parents can't, or work at after-school jobs to contribute to family expenses, and are unable to attend school the next morning.

> "[I go to school more] when I don't have to help Mum look after the babies and Dad in the shearing shed."
>
> **STUDENT**

> "Sometimes we run out of uniform because it costs a lot of money, and I break it or it is in the washing machine. [The school] is now changing the uniform and [making], it cost more and my Mum says I can only have one of each clothing."
>
> **STUDENT**

Attendance Service providers and school leaders told us that family factors were often a driver of poor school attendance, including parental anxiety about sending their child to school and distrust of the education system.

> "I watch my mum struggle every week to get us to school... I watch her have less... knowing it will come at an extra cost."
>
> **STUDENT**

Student factors

Chronically absent students report their mental health as a key reason for their chronic absence.

Across all factors, mental health was the top reason students are chronically absent (55 percent of students). Students who have physical or mental health barriers are 2.4 and 1.7 times more likely to have a recent history of chronic absence. This is consistent with the finding from the IDI that students who access mental health and addiction services are 1.8 times more likely to be chronically absent.

Parents (33 percent), Attendance Service staff (94 percent), and school leaders (70 percent) agreed – all reporting mental health in the top three reasons why students did not attend school.

Figure 10: *Student factors that students report as reasons for chronic absence*
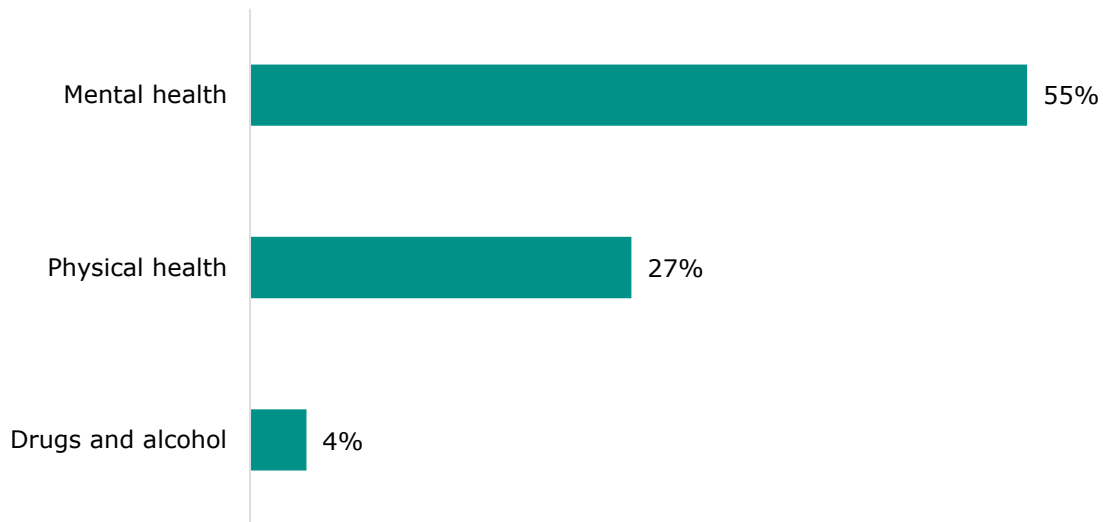
In nearly all interviews, anxiety was discussed as a crucial driver for chronic absence. Students told us about being too anxious to leave their home to go to school.

"I found it overwhelming as I have social anxiety."

STUDENT

Students and parents and whānau report that long-term health conditions, as well as winter illness, led to chronic absence. For students with chronic conditions, the students didn't have energy to sustain their attendance over a day or a week.

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

STUDENT

Conclusion

School, parent and whānau, student, and community factors, all impact on students' likelihood to be chronically absent. The most predictive risk factors are having a recent history of chronic absence, having recently offended, or living in social or emergency housing. The largest drivers of recently having been chronically absent are wanting to leave school, physical health, finding it hard to get up in the morning, and mental health. Addressing these key factors can reduce chronic absence.

In the next section, we explore the impacts of chronic absence on student outcomes.

Part 4: What are the outcomes for chronically absent students?

Attendance is critical for life outcomes. Students with chronic absence have worse outcomes. They are significantly more likely to leave school without qualifications, be charged with an offence, or live in emergency housing. Chronically absent students also cost more to the Government due to increased spending on benefits, corrections, and health services.

This chapter describes chronically absent young people's long-term outcomes, compared to the wider Aotearoa New Zealand population.

What we did to understand the outcomes of absent students

To understand what the outcomes are for students who were chronically absent, we draw on:

→ SIA's analysis of IDI data from 2019 onwards

→ interviews with chronically absent students, and their parents and whānau

→ interviews with school leaders and Attendance Service staff.

This section looks at the outcomes for students who have been chronically absent or not enrolled in any school.[f] It sets out:

1) what their education outcomes are

2) what their employment and income outcomes are

3) what their housing outcomes are

4) what their justice outcomes are

5) what the cost is of these outcomes.

The data does not control for other childhood and family factors which might be contributing to these poor outcomes.

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f   When SIA looked in the IDI, they counted a student as being chronically absent if they had been referred to the Attendance Service for chronic levels of absence. They also looked at a matched comparison group of students who had similar characteristics (including prior attendance). They counted a student as not enrolled if they had stopped attending school entirely. The cohort used was students born between 1990 and 2015. Most of the students will have been chronically absent when absence rates were still low. The characteristics of chronically absent students 10 years ago may be different to those now.

What we found: an overview

Students who were chronically absent are significantly more likely to leave school without qualifications.

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 lower rates of employment and income. At age 25, nearly half are not earning any wages or salary (42 percent).

Young adults who were chronically absent are more likely to be charged with an offence or live in social or emergency housing. They are more likely to visit the emergency department.

Reflecting their lower incomes, at age 25, 12 percent of young adults who were chronically absent are in social housing, compared to 4 percent of the total population. In the year they turned 25, 6 percent of young adults who were chronically absent had been charged with an offence, compared to 3 percent of the total population. They have 1.3 times more emergency admissions.

Chronically absent young people cost the Government nearly three times as much.

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.

Our findings are set out in more detail below.

1) What are their education outcomes?

We looked at three education outcomes:

→ NCEA Level 2

→ University Entrance

→ enrolment in tertiary education.

At age 20, students who have been chronically absent are two times less likely to achieve NCEA Level 2 and five times less likely to achieve University Entrance than the general population.

Attendance matters for education. Students who are chronically absent have consistently worse education outcomes.

→ NCEA Level 2 is the minimum pre-requisite for higher education and training, and many entry level jobs. At age 20, over half of students who have been chronically absent do not achieve NCEA Level 2 (55 percent), compared to just under one in five of the total population (19 percent).

→ Students who have been chronically absent are more than five times more likely to leave school without University Entrance. At age 20, 8 percent of students who have been chronically absent have University Entrance, compared to just over two in five of the total population (42 percent).

→ At age 20, young people who were chronically absent are less likely to be attending tertiary education (20 percent of chronically absent young people, compared to 42 percent of young people in the total population).

Figure 11: *Chronically absent young adults' education outcomes at age 20, compared to the total population*
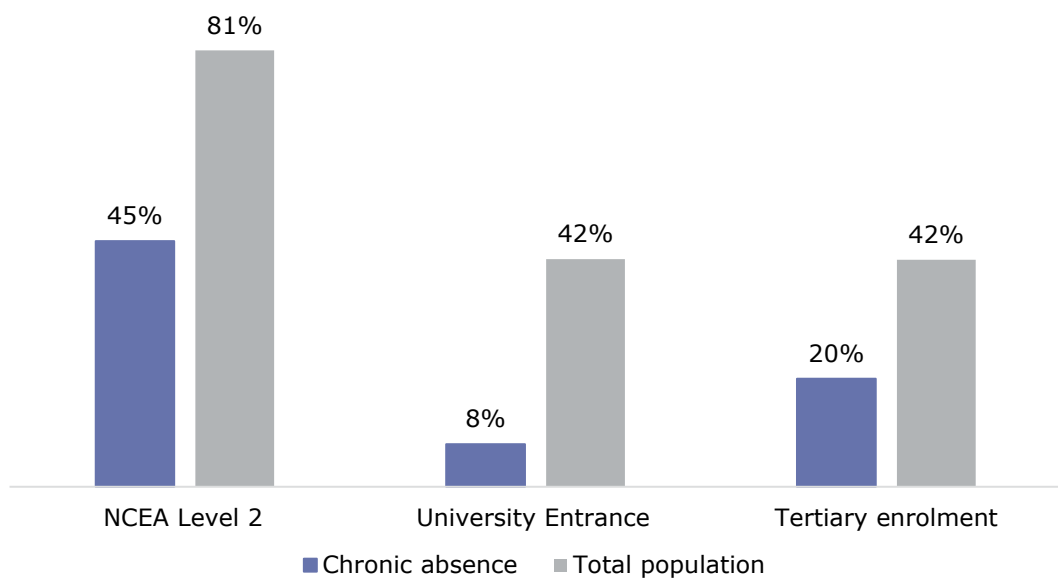
Data Source: Social Investment Agency

Concerningly, students who are chronically absent from school often experience cumulative effects on their learning. The longer the period away from school, the greater the effort required to re-engage them, which leads to increased impact on learning progress and achievement.

We heard from students and parents and whānau, as well as schools and Attendance Services, that periods of absence impacted their ability to keep track of and understand their learning and make progress in their learning.

> "They've had one or two days off and they feel like they can't catch up. They feel like they're behind already."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE**

Students know that school is important for their future, but they do not always see the potential impact of their chronic absence. Students report that what they learn will not help them for their future.

> **"**I don't see the point in learning about things that I won't use.**"**
>
> **STUDENT**

> **"**The curriculum is irrelevant and the ideology won't help me with my future and career.**"**
>
> **STUDENT**

2) What are their income outcomes?

We looked at three employment and income outcomes:

→ total income

→ income from wages

→ benefit receipt.

At age 25, young adults who were chronically absent from school earn $40,000 less than what other 25-year-olds earn.

Chronically absent young adults earn the same as the total population at 17 years old. However, over time their income becomes significantly less than the total population. At age 25, young adults who were chronically absent from school earn $16,667 compared to $59,235 for other 25-year-olds.

Figure 12: *Chronically absent young adults' wages, compared to the total population*
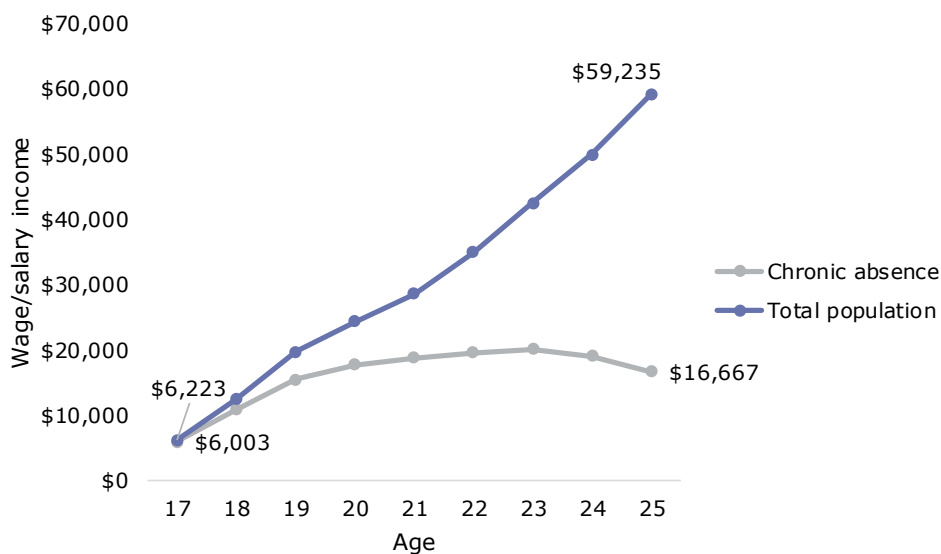
Data Source: Social Investment Agency

The lower income rates are because young people who were chronically absent are less likely to be earning wages and more likely to be receiving a benefit.

Leaving school with fewer qualifications means young adults who were chronically absent at school are less likely to be employed. At age 25, just under three in five young adults who have been chronically absent from school have a wage or salary income (58 percent), compared to more than two-thirds of the total population (69 percent).

Worryingly, from age 17 to 26, young adults who were chronically absent are more likely to be receiving a benefit. At age 25, almost half of young adults who were chronically absent are receiving a benefit (46 percent), compared to one in five of the total population (20 percent). From age 17 to 26, chronically absent young adults earn more income from benefits compared to the total population. At age 25, they receive $1,500 more in benefit than the total population.
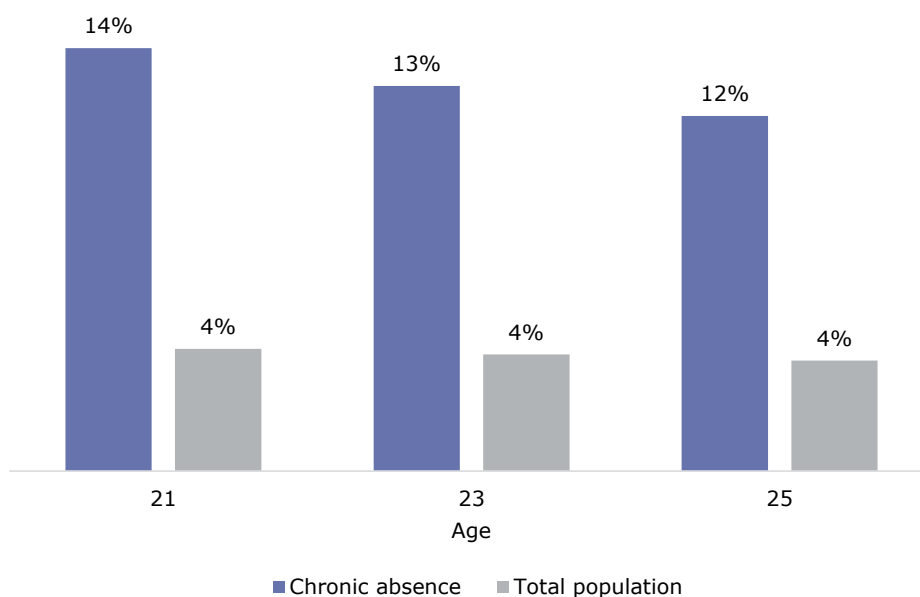
3) What are their housing outcomes?

Young adults who have been chronically absent from school are three times more likely to live in social housing compared to the total population at age 25.

From age 17 to 26, young adults who were chronically absent are more likely to be in social and emergency housing. At age 25, 12 percent of young adults who were chronically absent are in social housing, compared to 4 percent of the total population. Two percent are in emergency housing, compared to 1 percent of the total population.

The higher rates of social housing and emergency housing of young adults who were chronically absent from school reflect housing affordability issues for people with lower incomes.

Figure 13: *Chronically absent young adults in social housing across ages, compared to the total population*

Data Source: Social Investment Agency

4) What are their health outcomes?

We looked at three health outcomes:

→ enrolment with a GP

→ visits to a GP

→ emergency admissions to hospital

Young adults who have been chronically absent from school are just as likely to visit a doctor but more likely to visit the emergency department

Encouragingly, young adults who are chronically absent are just as like to be enrolled at, and visit, a GP as the total population. At age 20:

→ eighty-eight percent of young adults who were chronically absent from school were enrolled in a GP compared to 83 percent of the total population

→ young adults who were chronically absent from school had 2.6 visits a year to their GP compared to 2.8 visits for the total population.

However, young adults who have been chronically absent from school have 1.3 times more emergency admissions. In the year that they turned 20, young people who were chronically absent had 0.4 emergency admissions compared to 0.3 for the total population.

5) What are their justice outcomes?

We looked at three justice outcomes:

→ charged with an offence

→ custodial and community sentences

→ victim of an offence.

Young adults who have been chronically absent from school are two times more likely to be charged with any offence.

Young people who are chronically absent have consistently higher rates of offending, particularly violent offences. In the year they turned 25, just 6 percent of young adults who were chronically absent had been charged with an offence, compared to 3 percent of the total population. In the year they turned 25, 1 percent of young adults who were chronically absent had been charged with a violent offence, which occurs at double the rate in the total population (.6 percent).

The higher rates of offending likely reflect the higher rates of offending while still in school. It also likely reflects the higher prevalence of family dysfunction when the young people were school aged.
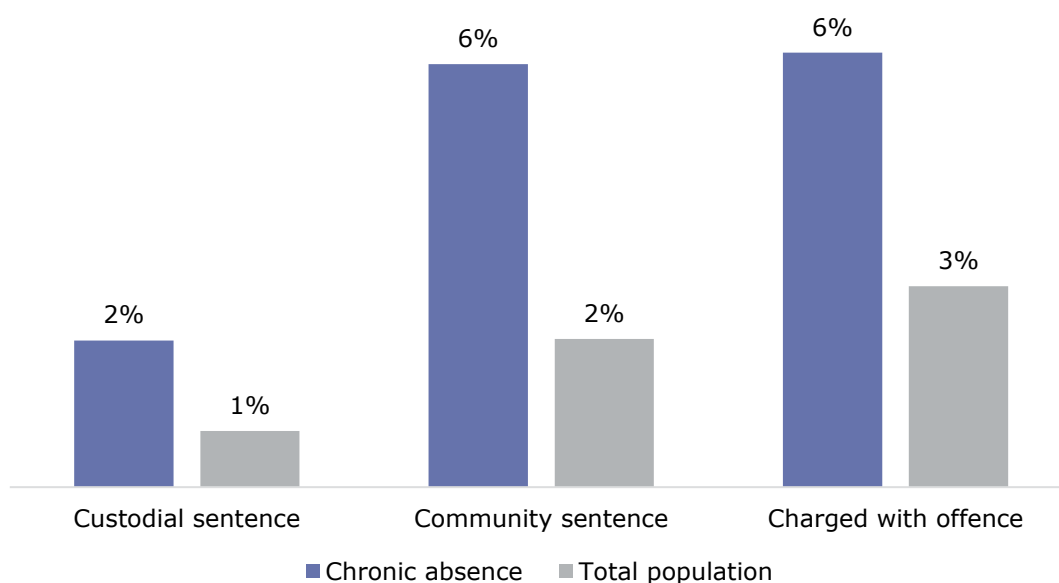
Young adults who have been chronically absent from school are three times more likely to be in the corrections system.

The increased offending rates and increased violent offending rates mean that students with a history of chronic absence have higher rates of custodial and community sentences. Young adults who were chronically absent from school are significantly more likely to have:

→ served a community sentence – in the year they turned 25, 6 percent have served a community sentence, compared to 2 percent of the total population

→ served a custodial sentence – in the year they turned 25, 2 percent have served a custodial sentence, compared to 1 percent of the total population.

Figure 14: *Chronically absent young adults in the corrections system at age 25, compared to the total population*
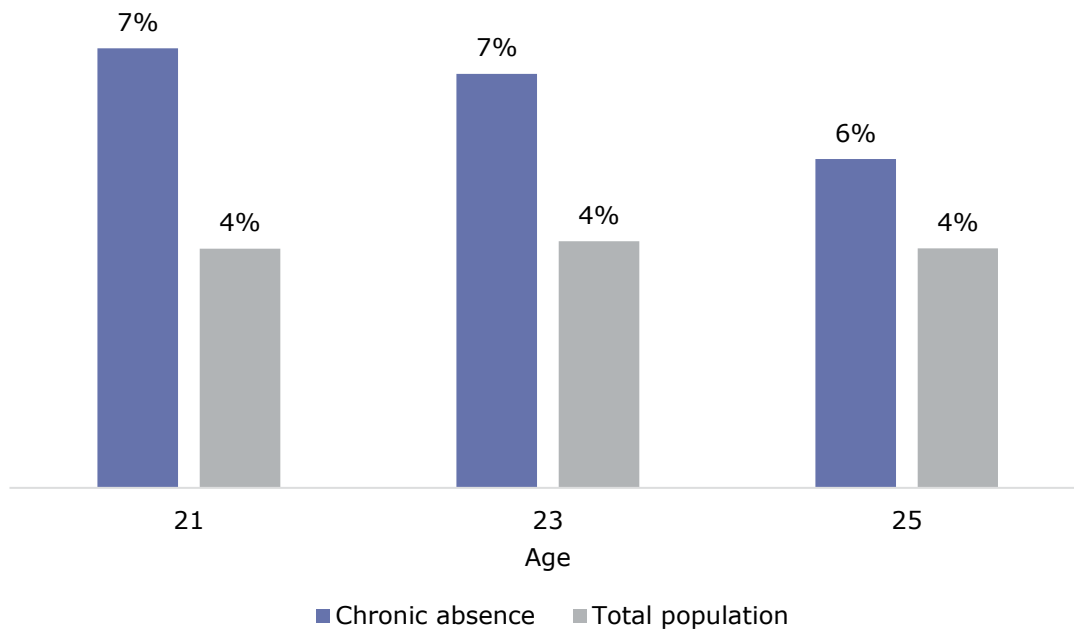

Data Source: Social Investment Agency

Young adults who have been chronically absent from school are nearly two times as likely to be a victim of any type of crime, and nearly three times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime.

Sadly, significantly more young people who are chronically absent have been a victim of a crime. At age 25, 6 percent of young people who were chronically absent had been a victim of any crime, compared to 4 percent of the total population.

Figure 15: *Chronically absent young adults who have been victims of crime across ages, compared to the total population*

Data Source: Social Investment Agency

They are also significantly more likely to be victims of violent crimes. At age 25, 4 percent of young people who were chronically absent had been a victim of a violent crime, compared to 2 percent of the total population.

6) What is the cost of these outcomes?

We know that being chronically absent has large individual costs in terms of income, health, and social outcomes. The poor social outcomes of young adults who were chronically absent from school also pose a sizeable cost to the Government.

At age 20, young adults who were chronically absent cost the Government nearly three times as much as other 20-year-olds.

The poor social outcomes of young adults who were chronically absent consistently cost more to the Government throughout their lives. At age 23, chronically absent young adults cost the Government $7,389 on average. This is $4,000 more than other young people.

Costs to the Government are much higher for chronically absent young people in corrections, hospital admissions, and benefits.

Figure 16: *Chronically absent young adults' total expenditure per person by age, compared to the total population*
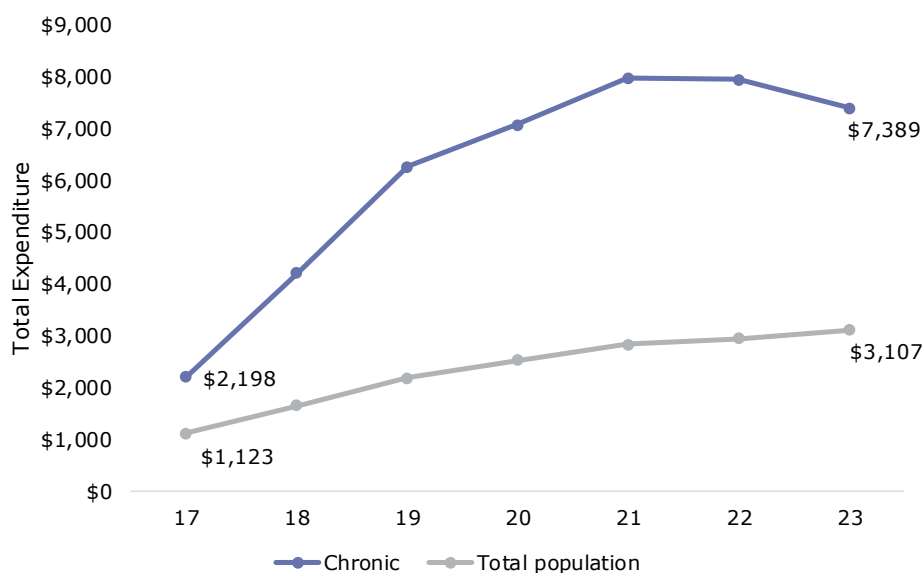
Date Source: Social Investment Agency

Table 1: *Comparison of the cost to the Government related to benefits, corrections, and hospital admissions for chronically absent students (20-year-olds)*

Factor	Difference from other 20-year-olds
Benefits	3.9 times as much
Corrections (custodial and community sentences)	3.0 times as much
Hospital admissions	1.8 times as much

Conclusion

The outcome of a lost education on students who have been chronically absent is clear. Students who were chronically absent have lower rates of educational attainment. This leads to lower incomes and higher rates of benefit receipt. Cycles of offending are not broken, and access to affordable housing is limited to what the state provides.

The cost to the Government and Aotearoa New Zealand taxpayers is also high, with young adults who have been chronically absent costing nearly three times as much as other 20-year-olds. They are particularly costly in corrections, hospital admissions, and benefits. It is critical we reverse the trend of increasing absence. In the next section, we set out what the evidence says works to address chronic absence.

Part 5: What does the evidence say is key to reducing chronic absence?

Our evaluation is informed by the best evidence about what is needed for an effective system to address chronic absence. We carried out an extensive review of literature on what effective systems look like, and brought it together to identify the key elements needed to be effective.

This chapter sets out this evidence and how it informed our evaluation.

What we did

To understand what is key to successfully addressing chronic absence, we:

→ carried out an extensive review of Aotearoa New Zealand and international literature on best practice

→ worked with an Expert Advisory Group, consisting of people with experience working with young people who are chronically absent, or unenrolled, and academics, to identify components of quality provision

→ drew from the work the Ministry of Education and other agencies have done about attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We identified eight components that need to work well to successfully return chronically absent students to school.

1)	**Expectations for attendance**	There are clear expectations for attendance, and everyone knows what these are.
2)	**Identifying students with poor attendance**	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)	**Finding and engaging students with poor attendance and their parents**	Students who are persistently absent from school are found, and they and their parents are engaged.

4)	Working with students, parents, and others to plan response	The student, parents, schools, and other services develop a plan to get the student to attend school regularly.
5)	Removing barriers to attendance and enforcing compliance	The barriers to attendance are removed, and compliance with the plan by students, parents, schools, and other parties is enforced.
6)	Returning students to school and/or increasing their attendance	The student is returned to regularly attending school, and additional supports are scaled back.
7)	Sustaining good attendance and engagement in education	The school is monitoring student attendance, the school and the parents are enforcing regular attendance, and the student is regularly attending and engaged in learning. Any indications of emerging attendance issues are immediately acted on. Students are engaged and attending education that meets their aspirations and needs.
8)	Roles, accountability, and funding	There are clear roles and responsibilities for improving attendance. Accountability across the roles is clear, and the functions are adequately resourced.

For each component, we used the evidence base to define what good looks like. We then used these indicators of good practice to guide us in making judgments about the quality of provision and support for students who are chronically absent.

What are the components of effective practice?

1) Expectations for attendance

There are clear expectations for attendance, and everyone knows what these are. Setting expectations is the only element in the expectations for attendance component.

1(a) Setting expectations

School leaders, parents and whānau, and students all have high expectations for attendance, and that expectation drives responses to attendance.

Addressing chronic attendance begins with clear and high expectations for all students' attendance. The expectations are understood by students, their parents and whānau, teachers, school leaders, and others.[13]

Good practice in addressing chronic absence is having clear expectations, meaning everyone knows when students are expected to be at school, knows why students are expected to be at school, and knows their responsibilities.[14] Research shows that addressing parent and whānau beliefs about attendance is an important factor in reducing chronic absence.[15]

2) Identifying students with chronic absence

There is a clear definition of what 'chronic absence' is, students are identified as their attendance starts to decline, and action is taken early to address their attendance.

Identifying students with chronic absence includes:

a) monitoring attendance against the expectations

b) identifying when absences are a problem

c) acting early.

2(a) Monitoring attendance against the expectations

School leaders and teachers understand how to monitor attendance, including making sense of patterns in attendance data so that they can identify when they need to intervene.

While every day at school matters, there will be times where students are justifiably absent (e.g., due to illness). The research shows that to address chronic absence, schools need to identify students whose attendance is becoming concerning. It may be useful to think about monitoring attendance by categorising patterns of chronic absence as students who a) cannot attend, b) will not attend, or c) do not attend school.[16]

Good practice includes schools monitoring and recording students' attendance every day, and reporting patterns of chronic absence. Making sure there are good systems to notice, record, investigate, and act on patterns of absence is essential. Such systems should enable schools to respond when students show the first signs that they are heading towards becoming chronically absent.[17]

2(b) Identifying when absences are a problem

Schools have a process that effectively identifies when absence is a problem, so that they can act early when attendance becomes an issue.

Schools need to have deliberate strategies to regularly review attendance data and identify when patterns of attendance are problematic. Chronic absence is often overlooked because it can be caused by sporadic absences rather than missing many consecutive days. Looking for chronic absence means teachers look at all absences and consider the impact of absences.[18]

Parents and whānau may not realise how many days their child has missed, or not recognise that missing just two days a month could cause their child to fall behind.[19] Sharing information about attendance patterns is an important foundation for beginning to address absence.

2(c) Acting early

Schools and Attendance Services have processes in place to act quickly to intervene, so that they can address barriers and get the student back to regularly attending school.

Acting early when a pattern of absence is forming prevents habits of absence becoming normalised. Chronic attendance patterns, once formed, are not likely to change by themselves. The earlier attendance problems are identified, the sooner schools can reach out to identify and address barriers to getting to school, before absences add up and before a student begins to head off track academically.[20]

If teachers identify when something may have changed in students' lives or schooling experience that could lead to absenteeism, they can then act before it becomes chronic. Investigating periods of justified or unjustified absence early in a year can help to address any barriers to attendance that have occurred or are emerging.

3) Finding and engaging students with chronic absence, and their parents and whānau

Students who are persistently absent from school are found, and they and their parents and whānau are engaged. This includes:

a) information sharing

b) acting on referrals

c) positive initial engagement.

3(a) Information sharing

Information is shared across schools, Attendance Services, and Government agencies, so that a student who is chronically absent from school can be located.

It is important that there are clear systems for identifying, locating, and recording necessary and useful information to assist in finding and engaging with students and their parents and whānau. These systems should help to gather, store, and share information to most effectively provide support for students and parents and whānau.

3(b) Acting on referrals

Referrals are responded to in a timely way, reducing the time students are absent from school.

When a pattern of chronic absence is identified, there is an immediate response to follow up and investigate. Schools may use a system of referral to an Attendance Service or agency.

3(c) Positive initial engagement

Staff work to build trust with students and their parents and whānau, which they utilise to break down barriers for attendance.

Increasing attendance and reducing chronic absence requires partnering with students and parents and whānau to understand and address the challenges that occur outside and inside school.[21] Building positive relationships enhances the possibilities for reducing misunderstandings, for addressing specific students' needs, and for ensuring that parents and whānau stay connected to the school and see staff as approachable.[22]

4) Working with students, parents and whānau, and others to plan a response

The student, parents and whānau, schools, and other services develop a plan to get the student to attend school regularly. This includes:

a) identifying the problem

b) planning a response

c) coordinating support across agencies

d) ongoing communication.

4(a) Identifying the problem

Attendance Services and schools understand what is keeping students from attending regularly, so that a response can be planned. There are procedures in place for when identifying barriers is difficult.

Acquiring a better understanding of the young person's perception of the problem can help to generate a better understanding of the interplay between the student, parents and whānau, and school, and how this contributes to absence.[23]

Good practice in gaining an understanding of the causes of an absence pattern includes considering the following questions:

→ Do parents and whānau have misconceptions about the importance of regular attendance?

→ Are students averse to attending school because they are struggling academically due to an unwelcoming school climate, social and/or peer challenges, or biased disciplinary practices?

→ Are there barriers that make it difficult for students to get to school, such as unreliable transportation, housing instability, lack of medical care, or lack of mental health supports for students experiencing trauma?

→ Are students disengaged due to the lack of engaging curriculum because of no meaningful relationships with school staff, or a lack of academic and behavioural support?[24]

4(b) Planning a response

Attendance Services and/or schools come up with a response to address the problem.

Tackling low attendance requires solutions that look at what is happening at school and at home, and how these impact upon young people's willingness and ability to attend school.[25] Working with parents and whānau is critical.[26]

Plans to address barriers to attendance and increase attendance should have clear, measurable, and achievable goals, be agreed by all parties, and be clear about everyone's responsibilities. To be effective, interventions should be targeted to the needs of the student.[27]

4(c) Coordinating support across agencies

Attendance Services and/or schools are working across Government agencies to get students the support they need to return to school.

Developing a plan of action may involve community or Government partners. Health, transport, sibling and eldercare, and work issues will require support in and out of school.[28] It is important that everyone is working towards the same goals and is supporting students and parents and whānau in a coherent way.

4(d) Ongoing communication

There is ongoing communication between schools, Attendance Services, agencies, and parents and whānau.

Regular communications with parents and whānau and others is key to improving attendance. Good processes for sharing information and issues are important for ensuring support is effective. Keeping parents and whānau, the school, partnering agencies, and the student all informed of progress and barriers to progress is essential.

5) Removing barriers to attendance and enforcing compliance

The barriers to attendance are removed, and compliance with the plan by students, parents and whānau, schools, and other parties is enforced by:

a) using strategies that work

b) working with others to remove barriers

c) enforcing compliance.

5(a) Using strategies that work

Everyone has good knowledge about a range of effective strategies, and when and how to implement them. They learn and share their knowledge, evidence-based approaches to reduce chronic absenteeism, and what works for their community.

Attendance Services and schools should have a suite of strategies that are proven to be effective at addressing chronic absence. This can be achieved by:

- → using known evidence-based strategies[29]
- → monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies employed by the organisation
- → sharing strategies that work across schools and Attendance Services.

Strategies that effectively address chronic absence include:[30,31]

- → working with the parents and whānau to prioritise school attendance
- → increasing student connections to school
- → working with schools to address health and safety issues, like bullying
- → using community partnerships to address social needs
- → counselling
- → working with social workers
- → rewarding student success.

5(b) Working with others to remove barriers

Attendance Services work well with schools, community, and other organisations to address students' barriers to attendance.

The literature consistently identifies that agencies working together effectively, from multiple disciplines, is key to effective educational interventions to address complex needs.[32] When addressing chronic absence, this means barriers can then be removed by the organisations or services who have the levers and skills to address them, like schools addressing bullying and social services addressing access to school supplies.[33,34]

5(c) Enforcing compliance

Compliance with a return to school plan is enacted and monitored by students, parents and whānau, schools, and other parties.

Good practice in addressing chronic absence means a plan is put in place, all parties know what they are responsible for, and the plan is monitored. Students are expected to meet their commitments in the plan, and there are options available to schools and Attendance Services to hold students and parents and whānau to account.

Actions, like prosecution or fining, can work as part of broader attendance approaches.[35]

6) Returning students to school and/or increasing their attendance, and planning for sustained attendance

The student is returned to regularly attending school, and additional supports are scaled back through:

a) clarity of roles

b) coordinated handover

c) welcoming students back.

6(a) Clarity of roles

Everyone knows what their role is in setting students up to be successful when returning to school. There is a shared understanding about goals and expectations, and who is responsible for each part of the reintegration process.

Evidence shows that tailored planning involving all aspects of the young person's learning and development needs are key to successful transitions into an education environment.[36] Expectations need to be communicated to students, parents and whānau, staff, and the school community.[37]

Good practice in addressing chronic absence means having a plan that ensures:

→ there is a shared understanding about goals and expectations, and who is responsible for each part of the reintegration process

→ schools, Attendance Services, agencies, and community organisations are clear on how they will support the student and parents and whānau

→ parents and whānau are clear about what the expectations for attendance are, what is expected of them, and how they can expect to be supported

→ students are clear about what is expected of them as well as how they can expect to be supported.

6(b) Coordinated handover

There is a deliberate approach for returning students to school, including a plan for building and sustaining improved attendance habits and a plan to re-engage with, and if appropriate, catch up on learning.

The literature highlights the importance of communication between organisations when young people are transitioning between educational environments, like between working with Attendance Services and schools.[38]

When students who have been chronically absent are returning to school, it is good practice to have a plan for transition that builds and sustains improved attendance habits. The plan needs to set out all the actions that schools, parents and whānau, and the student will take. This should be developed collaboratively across all parties who have been working with the student and parents and whānau, and should clearly align to relevant and achievable goals.

6(c) Welcoming students back

Students and their parents and whānau feel they are welcome in the school, and have a sense of belonging.

The literature emphasises the importance of students feeling like they are wanted at school and that support is available to them.[39] Students are connected to school when:

→ they believe there is an adult at school who knows and cares about them as a person

→ they have a supportive peer group

→ they are engaged in activities they find meaningful and that help others

→ they feel welcome in school for who they are.[40]

Good practice in supporting students who have been chronically absent return back to school includes a trusted teacher helping the student identify important learning tasks, developing a work plan that allows the student to catch up, and, if needed, someone advocating with teachers to adjust due dates and assessments.[41]

7) Sustaining good attendance

The school is monitoring student attendance, the school and the parents and whānau are enforcing regular attendance, and the student is regularly attending and engaged in learning. Any indications of emerging attendance issues are immediately acted on. Students are also engaged and attending education that meets their aspirations and needs. This is achieved by:

a) monitoring attendance and compliance

b) preventing problem attendance

c) having a suitable education offer.

7(a) Monitoring attendance and compliance

All schools have a nominated person responsible for attendance and they are monitoring students who have a history of chronic absence. Data gathered from monitoring and analysing attendance helps schools to respond quickly if a previously absent students' attendance is declining.

Just as schools need to review attendance data and identify when patterns of attendance are problematic, it is good practice for schools to monitor daily patterns of attendance of students who have been chronically absent – looking for ways to encourage and promote regular attendance habits, and intervening quickly if attendance starts to decline.

7(b) Preventing problem attendance

The attendance drivers of students who have previously been chronically absent are understood, and every action is taken if they reoccur.

The literature emphasises the importance of being proactive to reduce chronic absence.[42] Good practice when working with students who have a history of being chronically absent is to act early when barriers reoccur, or when new barriers arise.

7(c) Having a suitable education offer

There are various education options that cater to the needs of different students. Learning is matched to the right level for students, so they are educationally challenged but not overwhelmed.

Good practice for the most disengaged students, including students who have a history of chronic absence, is to have a range of educational pathways, including meaningful vocational and alternative educational options. Students who have had long periods of absence need relevant and engaging learning experiences where they can learn and gain qualifications.[43,44]

8) Roles, accountability and funding

There are clear roles and responsibilities for improving attendance. Accountability across the roles is clear, and the functions are adequately resourced. This achieved through:

a) resourcing and caseloads

b) accountability

c) clarity of roles.

8(a) Resourcing and caseloads

Adequate resourcing of both systems and services is key, alongside caseloads that allow services to deliver improved attendance outcomes.

Resourcing needs to match the scale of the problem and the support chronically absent students and their parents and whānau need.

The evidence is clear that caseloads can impact on the effectiveness of interventions designed to work with children and young people.[45]

8(b) Accountability

Everyone is held to account for performing their role and meeting their responsibilities to address chronic absence.

Effective systems for attendance hold everyone accountable for performing their role and meeting their responsibilities.[46]

There are many different ways to do this – through contractual measures, legal requirements, public transparency, and financial obligations.[47] Its key accountability is focused on chronic absence, returning students to school, and maintaining attendance.

8(d) Clarity of roles

Attendance is a shared responsibility and there is a coordinated approach to reducing chronic absence, so that actions by all those involved work together to get students back to school.

The research highlights that getting students back to school is a collaborative effort.[48] Attendance is not just the responsibility of Attendance Services and student support staff, but requires alignment across schools, Attendance Services, and other agencies. Good practice in addressing chronic absence is to have clarity about who is responsible for what, to bring about improvement and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

Effectively returning students to school and increasing their attendance requires attention to a range of practice components and system supports.

In the following parts of the report, we look at how effectively these components are functioning in the Aotearoa New Zealand system for addressing chronic absence.

Part 6: How effective is the Aotearoa New Zealand model?

ERO's review has found weaknesses in each element of the education system intended to address chronic absence. Identification and action are too slow, and targeted support is not working well. Improvements are not sustained and funding for support is inadequate.

This chapter sets out each of the components of an effective response to chronic absence and ERO's assessment of its effectiveness.

What we did

To understand how effective the model for attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand is, we compared the current practice against the indicators of effective practice.

We drew on:

→ on-site visits of schools and Attendance Services

→ interviews with experts

→ in-depth discussions with practitioners and experts

→ administrative data

→ surveys of students who are chronically absent

→ surveys of parents and whānau of students who are chronically absent

→ surveys of school leaders and Attendance Service staff

→ interviews with chronically absent students and their parents and whānau

→ interviews with school leaders and Attendance Service staff

→ statistical modelling.

This section sets out:

1) how effective the system is overall

2) how effective each of the components are within the system.

What we found: an overview

Schools are setting expectations for attendance, but parents 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.

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 days 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.

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. Almost half of Attendance Services (52 percent) report information is only sometimes, or never shared across agencies, schools, and Attendance Services.

Schools and Attendance Services are planning responses to attendance barriers, but are not always identifying the correct barriers.

Most school leaders and Attendance Service staff report they always plan how they work with students and parents and whānau using what they know about students and what works. However, there is a mismatch between what schools and Attendance Services identify, and what students and parents see as the barriers.

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.

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.

Improvements in school attendance are often short-lived as barriers remain. The education offered often does not meet students' interests or needs, leading to them not sustaining attendance when they return to school.

Although nearly four in five chronically absent students (79 percent) finding learning a barrier to attendance, under half (44 percent) of school leaders report they have changed schoolwork to better suit learners 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.

Accountability in the system is weak.

There is a lack of clarity around where roles and responsibilities begin and end, and the accountability in the system is weak. 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. 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 Our findings are set out in more detail below.

1) Overall, how effective is the system?

ERO's review found weakness in each element of the attendance system.

The system in Aotearoa New Zealand is not effectively tackling chronic truancy. The table summarises the ratings of each element of effectiveness.

Description	Colour
Significant improvements required	
Significant improvements required. Mixed/variable practice	
Generally good practice	
Insufficient evidence	

Table 2: *Ratings of effectiveness for each element of the attendance systems*

a) **Expectations for attendance**	
b) **Identifying students**	
c) **Finding and engaging students with poor attendance and their parents and whānau**	
d) **Working with students, parents and whānau, and others to plan a response**	
e) **Removing barriers to attendance and enforcing compliance**	
f) **Returning students to school and/or increasing their attendance**	
g) **Sustaining good attendance and engagement in education**	
h) **Roles, accountability, and funding**	

2) How effective are each of the elements of the system?

In this section, we describe each of the elements of the attendance system set out in Table 2 (above). For each, we look at what is and isn't working well.

a) Expectations for attendance

Setting expectations	Schools are prioritising attendance and are increasingly clear on expectations. Schools are focusing on whether an absence is justified or not, and less on whether the amount of absence is impacting students' education. Students and parents and whānau do not understand that reduced attendance is a key predictor of chronic non-attendance.	

What is working?

Schools are setting expectations for attendance.

Nearly all school leaders (98 percent) agree their school has clear and high expectations for attendance. Schools, parents and whānau, and students, told us that students are expected to attend school regularly. Parents and whānau receive frequent reminders from the school about the importance of attending school regularly.

What doesn't work?

Students and parents and whānau do not understand that reduced attendance is a key predictor of chronic absence.

Rates of chronic absence are higher in schools where students and parents and whānau do not understand the implications of absence (7 percent in schools where students and parents and whānau do understand, 9 percent in schools where students and parents and whānau do not understand). Over one third of school leaders (33 percent) report that parents do not understand the implications of not attending school.

> "[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**

Schools' time is spent with parents and whānau focusing on whether an absence is justified or not, and less on whether the amount of absence is impacting students' education.

Attendance related activity and discussions do not always focus on whether a student's absence is contributing to a pattern of chronic non-attendance and the impact that it is having on their education. Schools spoke to us about how much of their time is spent talking to parents and whānau about why an absence was classified as 'unjustified'.

Parents and whānau talked to us about confusion over their school's expectations for attendance or how to manage sickness, anxiety, or when there is limited teacher aide support for students with high needs. There is also a lack of clarity between schools and parents and whānau about whether students who work from home through digital portals are meeting attendance expectations.

b) Identifying students with poor attendance

Monitoring attendance against the expectations	Teachers and leaders have a clear focus on collecting and using data to monitor attendance against the expectations. The lack of clarity around which attendance codes to use under what circumstances means the quality of this data is inconsistent, and schools are not linking the codes to their responses to chronic absence.	
Identifying when absences are a problem	There is no nationally consistent policy for when to identify when absence is a problem so schools each have their own definition. Four out of five school leaders (81 percent) report they know when to refer students to additional help for their attendance, however nearly seven in 10 Attendance Services report schools do not consistently refer students at the right time. Schools find it hard to identify and act when students are not enrolled in a school.	
Acting early	Acting early is important, yet there is a lack of clear guidance about when the right time is to act. Schools do not consistently escalate their response to absence early enough. Attendance Services report schools refer students too late, and it makes it harder for them to get students back to school.	

What is working?

Schools do well at monitoring and analysing attendance, supported by a nominated person responsible for this.

Schools typically have a nominated person responsible for monitoring and analysing attendance, which helps them have oversight of what is happening.

Nearly all (97 percent) school leaders agree that teachers and leaders use data to monitor attendance patterns. In the schools we visited there is a focus on gathering and monitoring attendance data for individuals in the system.

Who monitors and analyses attendance in schools?
→ Principal: 71 percent
→ Deputy or Assistant Principal: 66 percent
→ Senior leader: 28 percent
→ Teacher: 36 percent
→ Administrative staff: 54 percent
→ School-based attendance or whānau officer: 18 percent
→ Learning support staff: 13 percent
→ Teacher aide: 3 percent

Where effective, schools have differentiated roles regarding attendance. Teachers and leaders record and track attendance of individuals and groups of students. Senior leaders analyse and report patterns of attendance.

There are expectations for schools to record and report on attendance, and most schools do report to the Ministry on attendance.

Schools are expected to record and report all absences to the Ministry of Education. Attendance is usually recorded with the use of codes through electronic attendance registers, which connect through schools' management systems. This data is published each term and trends are tracked over time.

Each school has their own policy to identify when a student is chronically absent.

Nearly all schools (97 percent) have a policy or procedure that guides the schools' response to students' non-attendance. These typically contain expectations for regular attendance, why attendance is important, and how to report absence.

What doesn't work?

The lack of clarity around which attendance codes to use under what circumstances means that quality of this data is inconsistent.

Schools told us that assigning attendance codes and monitoring attendance is time consuming. Schools are also not linking the codes to their responses to chronic absence. Attendance Officers in Attendance Services are funded to help

schools with data analysis, but only 15 percent of school leaders receive help from Attendance Services to do this.

Assigning attendance codes

Schools are expected to record attendance daily, using a Ministry supplied system and 26 codes which identify the reason for absence (both Justified and Unjustified).[49] Schools express their frustration with assigning codes, noting that it is time-consuming, complex and requires interpretation. They also talk about how they needed to spend time with parents and whānau to help them understand what these codes represent, and why an absence counts as 'Unjustified', even though an explanation had been given. Currently the Ministry of Education is reviewing the use of the Attendance Codes to simplify their use to improve the consistency of data recording and reporting.

There is no nationally consistent policy for when absence is a problem.

Although there are guidelines for recording, and expectations for how to classify, attendance patterns, it is less clear about when to identify if absence is a problem. Schools are expected to develop their own attendance policies. Schools we visited have a range of practices for when and how to address chronic absence and there is variation in how they identify when attendance becomes a problem or when to escalate an issue.

There is no clear guidance on when schools should escalate cases. According to Attendance Service Application guidance, absence referrals from schools to Attendance Services should occur when a student is unjustifiably absent, and the school has been unable to return them. A quarter of school leaders refer students after 11 to 20 days of unjustified absences (25 percent), and 35 percent do so after less than 10 days. However, one in five school leaders (18 percent) only refer students after more than 21 consecutive days absent.

Schools find it hard to identify and act when students are not enrolled in a school.

The processes to identify non-enrolled students are making it hard to act, for example:

→ the system for schools notifying non-enrolled students is not used consistently well

→ investigations are often stalled through a lack of information about location or status

→ there is no clear way to escalate cases for students who are missing or not responding to attendance support.

Schools do not escalate their response to absence early enough.

Patterns of absence may go unnoticed or are not investigated, and these patterns become normalised. Only 43 percent of parents and whānau with a child who is chronically absent have met with school staff about their child's attendance.

Students and parents and whānau report how schools did not approach them to find out why their attendance patterns had changed, when an earlier conversation would have helped them get to school.

Schools refer students too late, and it makes it harder for them to get students back to school.

The Attendance Services consistently report that schools refer students too late, making it difficult for them to fix the issue. Over two thirds of Attendance Service staff report schools never, or only sometimes, refer students at the right time (68 percent).

c) Finding and engaging students with chronic absence and their parents and whānau

Information sharing	Finding students who are not attending is inefficient and time consuming. Schools, Attendance Services, and other agencies, do not work well together to share information about students and their families, including contact information.	
Positive initial engagement	Attendance staff develop good rapport and trust with families, as a foundation to understanding the underlying challenges with student attendance.	

What is working?

Attendance staff develop good rapport and trust with parents and whānau, as a foundation to understanding the underlying challenges with student attendance.

Staff in attendance services are usually passionate and care about the parents and whānau and students they work with. Staff focus on building trust with families to develop their confidence to share their struggles. This means they can better match them to the support needed to help get their child to school. Sixty-two percent of Attendance Service staff reported that they have safe and positive relationships with students all the time, and 38 percent most of the time.

What doesn't work?

Finding students who are not attending is inefficient and time consuming and causes significant delays in engaging with them.

Over half (52 percent) of Attendance Service staff report that information is only 'sometimes' or 'never' shared across agencies, schools, and Attendance Services. Only 17 percent report it happens 'all of the time'.

In Attendance Services ERO visited, we found that there is insufficient information from schools about attendance patterns and pastoral care for individual students, including barriers to attendance or strategies that had been used previously to encourage attendance. This can lead to Attendance Services trying forms of support that schools had already attempted.

Attendance Services also told us that there were Government agencies, like Work and Income, who were in regular contact with the families but would not share contact information or help facilitate contact due to privacy concerns.

Attendance Services also reported that the ASA used for referring students to Attendance Services is difficult to use and does not retain all the information needed reliably. Many Attendance Services run a supplementary data collection system.

Safety can be a significant barrier to initial engagement.

Many Attendance Service staff have to work in pairs when making initial engagements with students and their parents and whānau, as safety cannot always be guaranteed. Some staff discussed negative experiences, where they did not feel safe to enter properties and engage with parents or whānau.

d) Working with students, parents and whānau, and others to plan a response

Identifying the problem	While most school leaders and Attendance Service staff are confident identifying drivers of non-attendance, schools and Attendance Services identify different drivers to students and parents and whānau. Students most commonly report school factors, but school leaders most commonly report family factors as the reasons behind student absence.	
Planning a response	The quality of plans for returning students to school is variable. While most providers school leaders have plans to ensure students can maintain attendance, they also told us there was inadequate capacity or ability to plan.	
Ongoing communication	There is a lack of coordination between schools and Attendance Services. Approximately half of schools do not make referrals to Attendance Services and nearly one in five school leaders do not work with Attendance Service staff at all. Each Attendance Service we visited talked about a significant number of schools in their area who they were not working with or were not referring students.	

What is working?

Schools and Attendance Services are planning responses to address students' barriers to attendance.

Sixty-seven percent of Attendance Service staff plan how they work with students and parents and whānau using what they know about students and what works all of the time. Eighty-seven percent of school leaders do the same – in schools, support is planned and managed to ensure students can maintain attendance all (39 percent), or most (47 percent) of the time.

What doesn't work?

Schools and Attendance Services identify different drivers to students and parents and whānau.

Fifty-six percent of Attendance Service staff report they always identify the causes of students missing school. School leaders also think they can identify drivers of absence. Ninety-three percent of school leaders are confident that their school knows students' current barriers to attendance.

However, there is a mismatch between what schools and Attendance Services identify, and what students and parents see as the barriers.

→ Students report school drivers as the main drivers of absence.

→ School leaders report family factors as the main drivers of absence.

→ Parents and whānau report student factors as the main drivers of absence.

→ Attendance Service staff report family, student and school factors equally.

This mismatch matters as it can mean support is not effective and improving attendance.

> "Behind every attendance issue lies a larger issue, so [it works well to] do a needs assessment about what the whole whānau need, to be able to get the end result of the young person returning back to regular schooling."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF**

Whilst planning happens, Attendance Service staff and school leaders do not always have the ability to develop a good plan.

In Attendance Services, staff come from a variety of backgrounds, including youth or social work, but do not receive any specific training for their roles. This means plans and strategies are often based on individual personal experience, and rarely on evidence-based practice. There is a lack of guidance on what effective plans look like.

School leaders are not well supported to make effective plans. Less than half of school leaders receive help from Attendance Services to developing plans and strategies (39 percent).

e) Removing barriers to attendance and enforcing compliance

Working together to remove barriers	While most Attendance Service staff have worked with a variety of agencies, school and Attendance Service staff often struggle to access the community and social supports needed to effectively remove barriers.	
Enforcing compliance	Attendance Services and schools find it difficult and are reluctant to use legislative levers for fear of damaging the relationship with students and parents and whānau.	

What doesn't work?

School and Attendance Service staff often struggle to access the community and social supports needed to effectively remove barriers – especially when the young person is not currently enrolled in a school.

Community and social supports are not working effectively with schools or Attendance Services to remove barriers to student attendance – especially when the young person is not currently enrolled in a school. Nearly half of Attendance Services (52 percent) and over half of schools (67 percent) are only sometimes, or never able to access appropriate community supports in a timely way.

Often, Attendance Services found that other agencies and support organisations did not have school attendance as a priority, and were reluctant to promote this in their work, or assist attendance services. There is often a time lag and waitlist of available services and agency support. Access depends on established relationships.

Attendance Services and schools are reluctant to use legislative levers for fear of damaging their relationship with students and parents and whānau.

Sixty-two percent of Attendance Services and 54 percent of schools report that they do not have good options to enforce attendance, holding students, parents and whānau, schools and Attendance Services accountable.

There are some options for schools to enforce attendance expectations through messaging and excluding student privileges or detentions. Although there are options for fining parents, this is rarely used. We heard that some schools have tried to use legislation to prosecute parents and found the process overly complex and costly. Others talked about the lack of a positive outcome – it did not increase the student's attendance and the process damaged any positive relationships that had been built, meaning parents and whānau became more alienated and antagonistic towards schools and services.

f) Returning students to school and/or increasing their attendance

Clarity of roles	There is a lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and what is allowed or expected when returning students to school.	
Coordinated handover	The quality of handover as students are returned to school and their attendance support is phased out is highly variable, leading to many students returning to their previous attendance patterns.	
Welcoming students back	While most school leaders (67 percent) report they always welcome students back to school, students do not always feel welcome. There are challenges accessing the additional support some students need, or the student's history with the school is a barrier.	

What doesn't work?

There is a lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities, and what is allowed or expected when returning students to school.

It is not clear when Attendance Services stop having responsibility for a student who has returned to school, and what the role is of the schools in ensuring students' transition is positive and sets them up well for ongoing improved attendance. While some Attendance Services collaborate regularly with schools and share information about the students they are working with, others do not. Two in five Attendance Service staff (40 percent) identify clarity in roles and responsibilities as something that would help increase attendance in schools.

The quality of handover as students are returned to school and their attendance support is phased out, is highly variable.

Almost half of Attendance Services staff (48 percent) report they do not always wait to close a case until a student is able to sustain attendance. Most Attendance Services have little engagement with students once their cases were closed, unless they were re-referred.

We heard that Attendance Service staff were not always confident that students were attending school regularly when they closed a case, and that sometimes they continued to check up on the progress of students on an informal basis. Other staff talked about the expectation that they close a case as soon as they could so that they could move on to other cases. Attendance Services are expected to meet KPIs that can lead to cases being closed before there is sufficient evidence of increased attendance and engagement. This means Attendance Services are not able to know if their interventions are effective in the longer term.

School leaders report that sometimes case closures are not discussed with the school, and some are closed by Attendance Services as soon as children come back to school.

> "High caseloads prevent us from being able to monitor ongoing attendance. In the case of non-enrolled students, once they are enrolled, case is closed straight away. There are more new cases to replace them."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF**

Schools do not welcome all students back to school.

Two-thirds of schools (67 percent) report absent students are welcomed back to school all of the time but Attendance Service staff talked to us about schools who did not welcome some students back who had been stood down before, or had behavioural incidents or a negative history at the school.

Students discussed the way in which teachers or senior leaders in the school did not make them feel welcome and they felt they didn't belong at the school. In some cases, their return to school made them feel more disconnected and isolated from others, and catching up was an impossible task.

Schools cannot always access the additional support some students need on their return to school.

Schools report being unable to access enough or specialised support to help students reintegrate into school, especially for traumatised or high needs students. Not getting this support means students may be unable to navigate school systems, and they may feel confused and unable to connect with learning. Schools also talked about how they did not always have the capacity to spend a prolonged period of time with returning students to ensure they continued to improve their attendance.

> "If I could somehow find some other students like me and get the teachers to help me do this – I can't do it by myself."
>
> **STUDENT**

> "In our area, we have a high number of students with anxiety and mental health and there aren't enough health providers to support. These students won't, or most likely won't, return to mainstream school and we need to be getting in earlier with these students to help the problem."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF**

g) Sustaining good attendance and engagement in education

Preventing return of problem attendance	Schools are trying to support attendance, but more support is needed to prevent problem attendance returning.	
Suitable education offer	There are not enough options for students to learn things that matter to them, in ways that work for them. Students do not attend when they do not see the point in what they are learning as it is not relevant to their aspirations, or it is not at the right level for them. Most schools and Attendance services report there are not opportunities for young people to learn in other settings.	

What is working?

Schools are trying different approaches to support students to sustain their attendance.

Schools are committed to improving attendance and trying approaches, including:

→ reward systems for attendance goals to help motivate some students and develop a sense of agency and belonging

→ adapting timetables in consultation with individual students to help them reintegrate successfully, and to fit around their learning interests or home circumstances

→ offering alternative programmes or courses within the school that interest the student, including connecting students to their local environment or their cultural identity.

In some cases, these programmes are helping to attract students to the school environment and bridge the gap in learning caused by their absence from school.

What doesn't work?

More support is needed to prevent problem attendance reoccurring.

Seventy-six percent of Attendance Services report that support is not always put in place so students continue to attend once they have re-engaged.

Although nearly four in five chronically absent students (79 percent) identify learning at school as a driver for their attendance issues, under half (44 percent) of school leaders report they have changed schoolwork to better suit learners on their return.

There are a lack of tailored, alternative, and vocational education offers that keep students engaged and motivated.

Students do not attend when they do not see the point in what they are learning as it is not relevant to their aspirations, or it is not at the right level for them. Seventy-nine percent of students identify their learning as a barrier to attendance.

We found that for many students, the courses offered did not fit their interests or learning abilities, which meant they were less interested in attending school. For some there was a mismatch in the level of learning offered (too easy or too hard) which meant they were reluctant to attend class.

There are not enough options for students to learn things that matter to them, in ways that work for them.

There are limited options available for re-engaging students in learning that fits them. Access to alternative pathways or vocational courses is limited through wait lists, and in some cases only accessible to students with a positive attendance record. Vocational courses are sometimes available through exemptions at 15.5 years old. Over half of schools (59 percent) and Attendance Services (58 percent) report there are not opportunities for young people to learn in other settings.

Secondary school teachers told us about the frustration in trying to enroll students in Alternative Education or exempted courses due to isolation, travel costs, or wait lists.

> "[We need to] provide quality education options to students for whom mainstream school is not the best option, and different education options for neurodiverse and disabled learners where appropriate."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE PROVIDER**

h) Roles, accountability and funding

Resourcing and caseloads	There is inequitable distribution of attendance caseloads, and resourcing does not match need. Schools are not able to access the attendance support they need, and many Attendance Services lack the capacity to respond effectively. There are services with a typical caseload of over 500 and others with a caseload of less than 40.	
Accountability and contract model	The recent change in requirements for monitoring and reporting attendance has led to an increased focus on attendance rates. There is, however, little or no accountability for improving these.	
Clarity of roles	It is not clear in the system who is responsible for what. There are different interpretations of roles, leading to variability in practice and understanding of responsibilities.	

What doesn't work?

Resourcing does not match the level of need.

There is variation in the size of contracts and funding (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.

Funding allocation has not increased to match the increase in chronic absence, which has doubled since 2015.

There is inequitable distribution of attendance caseloads. There are services we visited with a typical caseload of over 500 and others with a caseload of less than 40.

Most Attendance Services are facing high and increasing caseloads, and often do not have the capacity to work effectively to resolve attendance issues. Many Attendance Services work with a high number of schools. From our survey, Attendance Services work with an average of 37 schools. This ranges from two to more than 200.

The volumes of cases managed by providers varies from four cases to 1,743 (providers supporting all types of referrals) and 4,397 cases for one provider supporting non-enrolled cases only.

> "My colleagues and I would be much more effective if our team was doubled or tripled – 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**

Schools are not able to access the attendance support they need.

Over half of school leaders (60 percent) report that there are not enough Attendance Services in their area.

Schools are finding it difficult to give sufficient time and resources to attendance matters – monitoring and analysing, engaging with families, planning and implementing strategies and support for students, and ensuring re-engagement is appropriately supported.

Who is responsible for what is unclear. School leaders and Attendance Services say they know their roles and what they are responsible for, but interpret their roles differently and make up their own roles and systems.

Most school leaders (86 percent) and Attendance Service staff (84 percent) say they know what their roles are when resolving attendance issues, but what they told us they were expected to do did not match. Two in five Attendance Service staff (40 percent) and a fifth of school leaders (21 percent) report the need for more clarity about the roles and responsibilities.

There is variation between schools on what they consider meets the legislatively required 'reasonable steps' they take to address barriers to attendance and get students to school. There is also variation in understanding when it was appropriate to refer a student to Attendance Services. We found there was confusion about the role and responsibilities of support services (such as Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour, Social Workers in Schools, Learning Support Co-ordinators) to support attendance.

People are not sure who is supposed to do what if they are unable to get a chronically absent student back to school.

Both Attendance Services and schools were unsure what to do if they are unable to get students back to school. This was particularly so if they couldn't contact a family or access a property to investigate the causes of absence.

Schools and Attendance Services are both unsure about who took responsibility to work with students who become unenrolled or disappear from the system.

Accountability is weak.

Schools are legally responsible for making sure students attend school, and they must keep daily records and submit their attendance data to the Ministry of Education each term. There is not an agreed operating model, how schools choose to improve attendance is up to them and while ERO can identify that schools need to improve attendance, there are limited mechanisms in place to hold schools to account if they fail to do so.

Attendance Services have contractual obligations to the Ministry of Education, including reporting against key performance indicators (KPIs). The only levers to address non-performance are contractual.

3) What models and provisions do other countries have to manage attendance?

The expectations for enrolment and attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand are comparable to the expectations in England, New South Wales (NSW, Australia), and Singapore. However, the way these expectations are managed in those countries is different in several critical areas like:

→ what counts as 'chronic absence'

→ autonomy

→ guidance

→ accountability

→ escalation pathways.

What counts as 'chronic absence'?

Aotearoa New Zealand has a focus on chronic absence. Out of the countries we looked at, Aotearoa New Zealand is the only one with a distinct category to capture chronic absence (<70 percent attendance). England capture 'severe absence', but this is classified as under 50 percent attendance.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a high level of autonomy.

Aotearoa New Zealand was unique in the level of autonomy held at the school level. Expectations allow boards and Attendance Services to design their own solutions to poor attendance. This is different from Australia, where there is a tiered framework of support and intervention and tailored to the school community. It is also different from Singapore and England who have a more centralised education system.

Aotearoa New Zealand has limited guidance.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, there is limited guidance for schools on what reasonable steps they should take in practice to lift attendance before referrals to attendance services are made. This is different from England, where schools must follow detailed statutory guidance on improving attendance. There are also a range of additional guidance and resources available, including specific support for schools through 'attendance hubs'.

Aotearoa New Zealand has weaker accountability.

Aotearoa New Zealand schools face fewer ramifications for poor attendance than schools in England and New South Wales, Australia (NSW). ERO looks at school attendance at a system level, or when schools see it as a priority, but there are no clear ramifications for poor attendance in Aotearoa New Zealand schools. This is different from England, where attendance is considered as part of Ofsted inspections, and schools may face serious consequences if attendance is unacceptably low. In NSW, attendance rates are a performance indicator within the National Education Agreement and a key performance measure in the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia.

Aotearoa New Zealand has weaker enforcement.

Escalation pathways in Aotearoa New Zealand are less clear and not as consistently applied as other countries. Parents and whānau can be fined, and schools or Attendance Services can request a Family Group Conference, but these are not regularly used in practice. In England, there are a variety of options and steps available. Fines are regularly issued, and councils can apply for an Education Supervision or School Attendance Order, before prosecuting parents as a last resort.

Conclusion

Effectively returning students to school and increasing their attendance requires a coherent approach with eight key components. We found most of these are not working effectively across the system for supporting attendance.

The system in Aotearoa New Zealand does not perform well across the components of good practice. In particular, the system does not perform well at removing barriers to attendance and enforcing compliance, returning students to school, and/or increasing their attendance, and planning for sustained attendance and sustaining good attendance. There are some enabling conditions that also require improvement.

The next chapter of this report looks at the impact of the Attendance Services and other initiatives to support attendance.

Part 7: How effective are Attendance Services?

The current Attendance Service model is not delivering sustained improvements in attendance. Attendance Services are not set up to succeed. The outcomes for students referred to Attendance Services are worse than the outcomes for chronically absent students who were never referred.

This chapter describes what we know about the effectiveness of Attendance Services, and how they impact the outcomes of the students they support.

Earlier sections of this report have shown that the system for chronic absence is not working. To understand the effectiveness of Attendance Services, this section draws together information from previous sections, and outlines the impact of Attendance Services on outcomes.

To understand how effective Attendance Services are at returning students to sustained attendance at school, we drew on:

→ IDI analysis of historic data from Attendance Services, and how it links to outcomes

→ on-site visits of schools and Attendance Services

→ surveys of school leaders and Attendance Service staff

→ interviews with school leaders and Attendance Service staff.

What we found: an overview

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. The funding is inadequate for the current level of need.

Attendance Service staff are exceptionally passionate and dedicated to improving student outcomes.

Despite inefficiencies in the system, Attendance Services ERO visited had dedicated themselves to improving student attendance and providing options to improve chronically absent students' life-time outcomes.

Attendance Services are not leading to sustained improvements in attendance in the long-term.

Attendance rates six months after receiving support from an Attendance Service (62 percent) are similar to rates from one month prior to referral (59 percent).

Attendance Services do not consistently have strong relationships with schools.

Nearly one in five schools do not work with Attendance Services at all (16 percent). Only half of schools and Attendance Services meet regularly to share information about students (48 percent). Only a third of Attendance Service staff report they always work effectively with schools as a team (34 percent).

Attendance Services are not always able to act quickly with their initial engagement in a case.

Only half (50 percent) always act quickly when they receive a referral. Once they do, they are not always confident at identifying barriers.

Despite being confident in their knowledge and skills Attendance Service staff are not drawing from an evidence-base in order to remove barriers.

Most Attendance Services we visited relied on their experience with young people instead of an understanding of the evidence base.

Attendance Services work with a range of agencies, but they do not fully understand other's roles and get drawn into providing other support.

Nearly a third of Attendance Service staff (31 percent) report that they do not understand each other's roles when resolving attendance issues, and over a third (38 percent) report that there are not systems for collaboration.

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.

Our findings are set out in more detail below.

1) How effective are Attendance Services?

In Part 6, we showed how the system for supporting chronically absent students is inadequate. In this section, we review each of the following elements around Attendance Services. For each, we look at what is and isn't working well.

a) **Improving attendance**	
b) **Working with schools**	
c) **Responding quickly**	
d) **Using evidence-based practice**	

| e) | **Working with other agencies** | |
| f) | **Improving lifetime outcomes** | |

a) Improving attendance

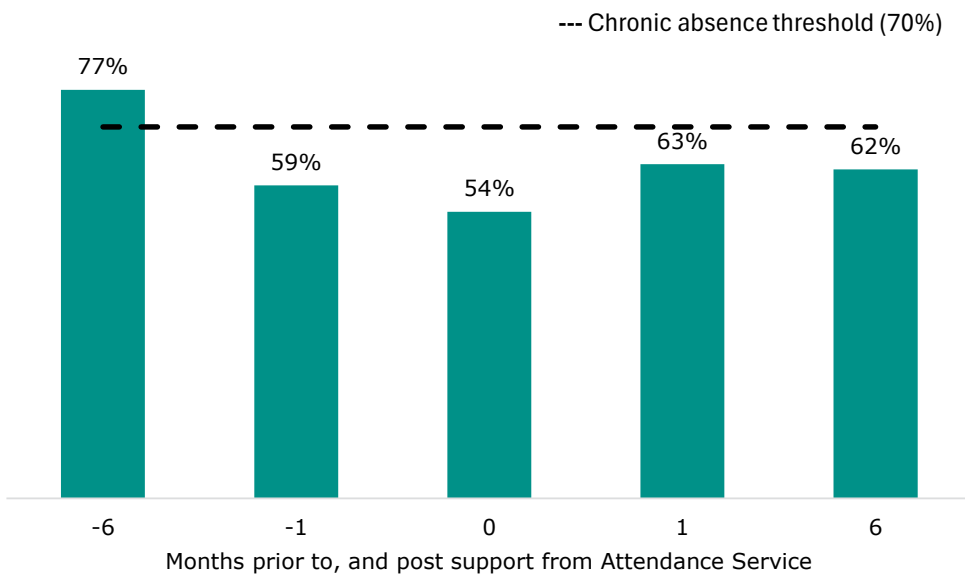| **Improving attendance** | Attendance rates for chronically absent students increase slightly after referral to an Attendance Service. However, six months after referral, attendance rates remain below 70 percent, and are only slightly higher than attendance rates one month prior to referral. | |

What doesn't work?

Attendance Services do not lead to sustained attendance.

After working with Attendance Service staff, only 41 percent of chronically absent students agreed that it helped them go to school more.

Students' attendance improves during the first month that Attendance Services work with them (to 63 percent), but six months after referral on average students are still chronically absent. This often reflects that school, student and family issues that were barriers to attendance still remain.

Figure 17: *Attendance rates prior to, and post, Attendance Service referral*

Data Source: Social Investment Agency

b) Working with schools

| Working with schools | Attendance Services do not regularly collaborate with schools. Only a quarter of schools receive help from Attendance Services with referrals, and only just over a third receive help developing plans and strategies for students. Nearly three in 10 Attendance Service staff sometimes, or never, work effectively with schools to support young people. | |

What doesn't work?

Attendance Services do not have strong relationships with schools.

Nearly three in 10 Attendance Service staff (28 percent) report that they do not always work effectively with schools to support young people, and 16 percent of schools do not work with Attendance Services at all. Less than half of school leaders are supported by their Attendance Service in the following ways:

→ meeting regularly to share information about students and families with poor attendance: 48 percent

→ receiving help using attendance codes and making referrals: 25 percent

→ receiving help analysing attendance data and patterns: 15 percent

→ receiving help developing plans and strategies: 39 percent

→ receiving help setting up or attending meetings with family: 49 percent.

> "I find the schools and other providers often do not understand what our role is and often expect a lot more from us than we can realistically do. The whānau also have unrealistic expectations. Many of them believe we are trained professionals (have studied etc.) and that we will have a magic fix and/or will turn up every day to force their kid to go to school for them."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF**

c) Responding quickly

| Responding quickly | While some Attendance Services have developed clear systems in order to respond quickly, half of Attendance Service staff are not always acting quickly when responding to referrals. | |

What works?

Some Attendance Services have clear systems for responding quickly.

We heard from some Attendance Services that they have clear processes for responding to referrals. For example, some allocate the case, contact the school and the family all within three days.

What doesn't work?

Attendance Services are not always acting quickly or effectively when they receive a referral.

Attendance Service staff are not always confident identifying the causes of students missing school. Once they identify the cause of absence, only half of Attendance Service staff (50 percent) report they always act quickly to support students. Referral volumes vary considerably according to school term times and seasonal patterns of absence, so an Attendance Service can receive many referrals in bulk and not have sufficient capacity to process all cases quickly.

d) Using evidence-based practice

| Using evidence-based practice | Despite agreeing they have the knowledge and skills needed to do their job well, Attendance Service staff are reliant on their own experience with young people. This means that plans and support for chronically absent young people are often reliant on personal experience, instead of evidence-based insights. | |

What works?

Attendance service staff are confident they have the knowledge and support needed to succeed.

Nearly all Attendance Service staff agree that they have the knowledge and skills needed to do their job well (95 percent). Nearly nine in 10 report they are supported to do their work effectively (88 percent).

Attendance Service staff are often passionate and dedicated to improving student attendance. They have a strong focus on bettering chronically absent students' life-time outcomes.

What doesn't work?

Few Attendance Services staff have good processes for knowing which strategies are effective in addressing barriers and increasing attendance.

Most of the Attendance Services we visited talked about a lack of professional development and information about effective strategies. Many relied on their experience with young people and whether or not they received re-referrals

for a student. Few cases gathered comprehensive data about the work they undertook with students and parents and whānau, and were able to identify the types and frequency of barriers.

e) Working with other agencies

Working with other agencies	Most Attendance Services work with a variety of support agencies. However, there is not always a clear understanding of the role other agencies play, and systems in place do not allow for effective collaboration.	

What works?

Attendance Service staff work with a range of agencies.

Most Attendance Services work with at least one other agency:

→ Health or mental health agencies: 70 percent

→ NZ Police: 58 percent

→ Oranga Tamariki: 69 percent

→ Marae or Iwi-based services: 57 percent

→ Ministry of Social Development: 50 percent

→ Kāinga Ora: 24 percent

→ Community-based support services: 70 percent.

When Attendance Service staff are working with other support agency staff to resolve attendance issues, the majority are confident that everyone understands their roles (84 percent agree).

What doesn't work?

Attendance Service staff do not always understand the role other agencies play, and systems in place do not allow for effective collaboration.

Attendance Service staff are less confident that they understand the roles staff in other support agencies play. Nearly a third of Attendance Service staff (31 percent) report that school, Attendance Services and other support agency staff do not understand each other's roles when resolving attendance issues and do not use systems that work to collaborate with them (38 percent).

Attendance Services are often drawn into supporting wider family/whānau needs, beyond student attendance.

Attendance Service staff spoke to us about how they need to first attend to immediate needs of the family or whānau to help to gain trust and build their relationship sufficiently to begin to understand any barriers to attendance.

Many families are fatigued or unable to navigate support services to get the help they need. The Attendance Services ERO visited had helped parents and whānau:

→ get a job

→ access transport or a bus pass

→ write a CV

→ receive food parcels

→ clean out a house

→ access health services.

Attendance Services often worked directly with parents and whānau in order to later break down barriers to their child's attendance.

Whilst these are important actions to forge relationships and support families and whānau to function and engage, this can divert attention away from addressing attendance issues directly.

> "We have access to the services, but capacity is limited… We have become people that [do] everything for everybody."
>
> **ATTENDANCE SERVICE STAFF**

f) Improving lifetime outcomes

Chapter 4 sets out the lifetime outcomes of students' who are chronically absent. To understand the effectiveness of the Attendance Service model, we look here at the outcomes of students who are chronically absent and referred to an Attendance Service, compared to those are chronically absent but not referred to an Attendance Service.

The following analysis, completed by the SIA, shows life-time outcomes of students who were referred to Attendance Services, compared to a matched comparison group of students who were absent but not referred to an Attendance Service. See Appendix 1 for further details.

| Improving lifetime outcomes | Life outcomes for students who are referred to Attendance Services are poor. These young adults are less likely to achieve NCEA Level 2 and earn a wage. They are more likely to live in social or emergency housing, offend, and be a victim of crime. | |

Education

Students who are referred to Attendance Services are half as likely to achieve NCEA Level 2.

By age 20, just under three in 10 students who were referred to Attendance Services achieve NCEA Level 2 (29 percent), compared to just over three in five of the comparison group (62 percent), and 81 percent of the total population.

Figure 18: *Education outcomes at age 20 for young adults who were referred to an Attendance Service, compared to the comparison group*
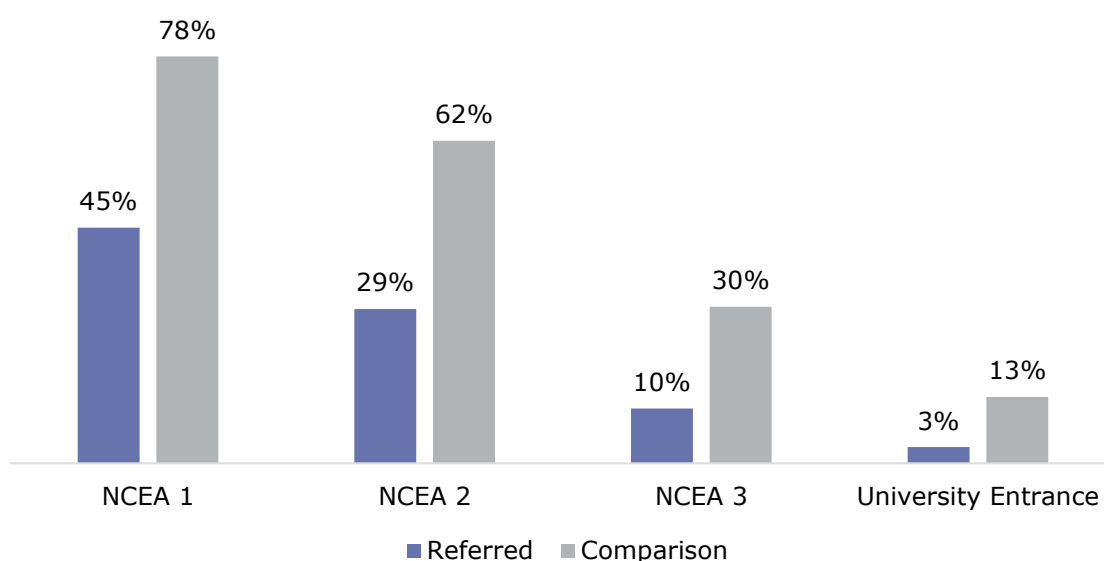
Data Source: Social Investment Agency

Employment and income

Students who are referred to Attendance Services are less likely to earn a wage, by age 25 they earn more than $5,000 less than a comparison group.

At age 20, two thirds of young adults who were referred to an Attendance Service have a wage or salary income (64 percent), compared to just over three in four of the comparison group (76 percent), and 54 percent of the total population.

By the time they are 25, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services earn $15,464, compared to $22,263 in the comparison group.

At age 20, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are nearly four times more likely to receive benefits, and by age 25, they draw $2,400 more a year from benefits than a comparison group.

At every age, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are more likely to be on the benefit. By age 25, 53 percent of young adults who were referred to Attendance Services receive benefits, compared to 39 percent of the comparison group.

Young people who had been referred to Attendance Services also draw significantly more from the benefit; at age 25, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services earn $8,671 from the benefit, compared to $6,337 in the comparison group.

Housing

Young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are more likely to be in emergency housing.

At most ages, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are also more likely to reside in social or emergency housing. At age 25, 13 percent of young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are in social housing, compared to 11 percent of the comparison group.

Crime

Young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are almost twice as likely to be charged with an offence and are more likely to be charged with a violent offence.

From 17 to 24 young adults who were referred to Attendance Services have consistently higher rates of offending. In the year they turned 24[g], 8 percent of young adults who were referred to Attendance Services had been charged with an offence, compared to 5 percent of the comparison group.

Young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are more likely to be in the corrections system.

Young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are significantly more likely to have served a community sentence. In the year they turned 25, 7 percent have served a community sentence compared to five percent of the comparison group, and 2 percent of the total population. In the year they turned 20, 2 percent have served a custodial sentence compared to 1 percent of the comparison group.

At every age, young adults who were referred to Attendance Services are more likely to be a victim of any type of crime.

At age 25, six percent of young people who were referred to Attendance Services had been a victim of any crime, compared to 5 percent of the comparison group.

Conclusion

The Attendance Service model is not successfully improving attendance. They are not set up to succeed, and they receive inadequate funding. This leads to ineffective collaboration with schools, inefficient use of evidence, inconsistencies in initial engagement and closing of cases, and outcomes for students who are referred to Attendance Services remaining poor. Students who are referred to Attendance Services have worse education, housing and crime outcomes, compared to a matched comparison group.

Attendance services are only part of the system (as set up in Part 6). The next chapter of the report sets out how effective schools are at keeping students engaged and attending.

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g   Differences in offending are not significant at age 25.

Part 8: How effective are schools in addressing chronic absence?

Schools play a significant role in keeping students engaged and attending. Secondary schools, and those in low socio-economic communities, have higher rates of chronic absence. However, not all schools with these characteristics have high rates of chronic absence. Schools who effectively involve Attendance Service staff, and make sure they and other agencies do what they are responsible for and are held accountable, have significantly lower rates of chronic absence. But not all schools do this.

In this chapter, we set out which schools are doing better and what is their key to success.

What we did

Schools are an important part of the system for managing chronic absence. Schools play a vital role in the journey of a student, starting with the identification of their attendance patterns, to their re-engagement.

To evaluate the effectiveness of schools in addressing chronic absence, we drew on:

→ Ministry of Education admin data

→ ERO's School Improvement Framework data

→ surveys of school leaders

→ statistical modelling of school leader responses.

This section sets out:

1) how schools are doing

2) what their keys to success in reducing chronic absence are.

What we found: an overview

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 sustain attendance.

Some schools have exceptionally poor attendance.

There are five schools that have chronic absence rates of 50 percent or above. Only 22 schools make up 10 percent of total chronic absence nationally.

Schools in lower socio-economic areas and secondary schools have greater levels of chronic absence.

Students in schools in lower socio-economic areas are six times more likely to be chronically absent. Secondary schools' (Year 9 and above) chronic absence rate is 14 percent compared to 8 percent of full primary schools.

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 10 percent rate of chronic absence.

Schools that are successful at reducing chronic absence do three key things.

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

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, share information with Attendance Services, identify the same barriers to attendance that students themselves identify, or work with the Attendance Service providers to coordinate responses and stay connected.

Our findings are set out in more detail below.

1) Summary of how effectively schools are supporting chronically absent students

In Part 6, we showed how the system for supporting chronically absent students is inadequate. In this section, we highlight the key findings for schools set out under the key areas of:

→ preventing

→ responding

→ returning.

Preventing

Schools are prioritising attendance and setting clear expectations around attendance and are also monitoring, analysing and reporting on patterns of attendance.

Students, and parents and whānau know students are expected to attend school and that they receive frequent reminders from their school about the importance of attendance. Eighty-six percent of parents and whānau with chronically absent children recognise that attending school is important. The rate of chronic absence is lower in schools where parents and whānau understand the implications of non-attendance (7 percent compared to 9 percent).

Schools are not responding quickly to prevent students from becoming chronically absent or acting quickly when a student becomes chronically absent.

Patterns of absence too often go unnoticed or are not investigated, and these patterns become normalised. Only 43 percent of parents and whānau with a child who is chronically absent have met with school staff about their child's attendance, and one in five school leaders (18 percent) only refer students after more than 21 consecutive days absent. Seven in 10 Attendance Service staff (68 percent) report schools never, or only sometimes, refer students at the right time.

Responding

Schools are not identifying the right barriers to attendance – what they identify does not reflect what students report.

Students who have attendance challenges most commonly report school factors as barriers to attendance, but school leaders most commonly report family factors as the reasons behind student absence. Parents and whānau and students told us that schools do not address school barriers to attendance adequately.

Returning

Schools do not always work closely with the Attendance Services or stay connected to students who are chronically absent.

Only half (48 percent) of school leaders meet regularly with Attendance Services, and 16 percent do not work with Attendance Services at all. Information is not shared well with Attendance Services, and there is not always a good handover on return to school.

While many schools welcome students back to school, more needs to be done to help them 'catch up', reintegrate, and maintain attendance.

Just under four in five chronically absent students (79 percent) find learning at school a barrier to their attendance, but under half of school leaders (44 percent) report they have changed schoolwork to better suit learners on their return. Seventy-six percent of Attendance Service staff report that support for students is not always put in place to ensure students continue to attend once they have re-engaged. Schools find it hard to access tailored programmes or alternative education offers. For example, 58 percent of school leaders report that there are not opportunities for young people to learn in other settings.

2) Which schools are doing better?

There is variability in chronic absence across schools.

Chronically absent students are not evenly spread across schools. In Term 2 of 2024, there were:

→ forty-three schools who have chronic absence rates between 30 and 40 percent

→ fourteen schools who have chronic absence rates between 40 and 50 percent

→ five schools who have chronic absence rates of more than 50 percent.

Figure 19: *Number of schools by the rates of chronic absence*
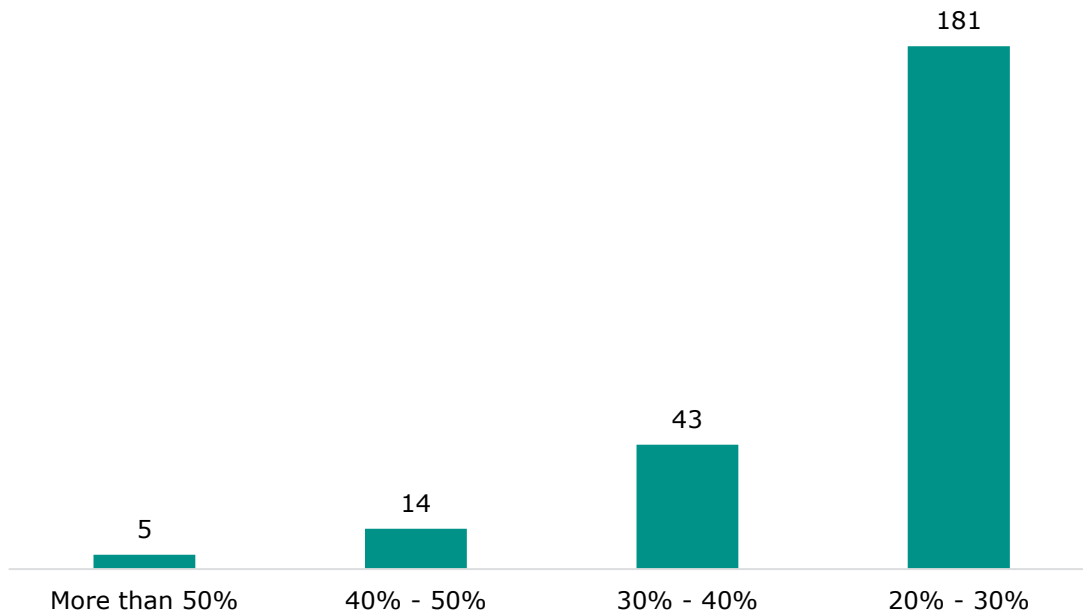
A large proportion of chronically absent students are concentrated in few schools – only 22 schools make up 10 percent of total chronic absence.

**Figure 20:** *Cumulative count of students who are chronically absent (Term 2, 2024)*
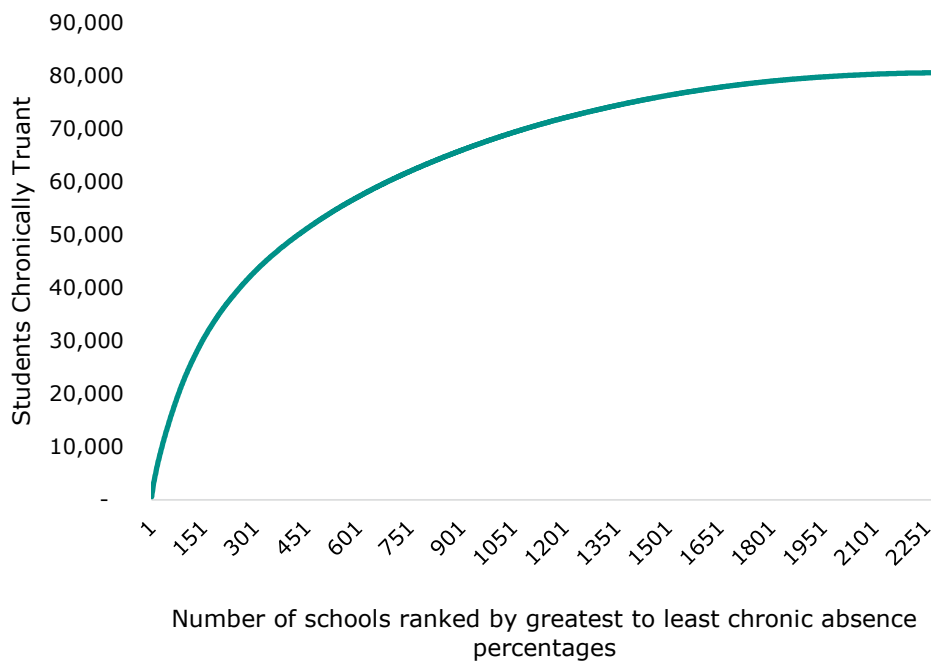
Source: Ministry of Education

Schools in lower socio-economic areas, and secondary schools have greater levels of chronic absence.

Students in schools in low socio-economic communities are six times more likely to be chronically absent. Chronic absence rates in low socio-economic communities' schools is 18 percent compared to 3 percent in high socio-economic communities' schools.

Figure 21: *Percentage of chronic absence by schools in socio-economic areas in 2024 Term 2*
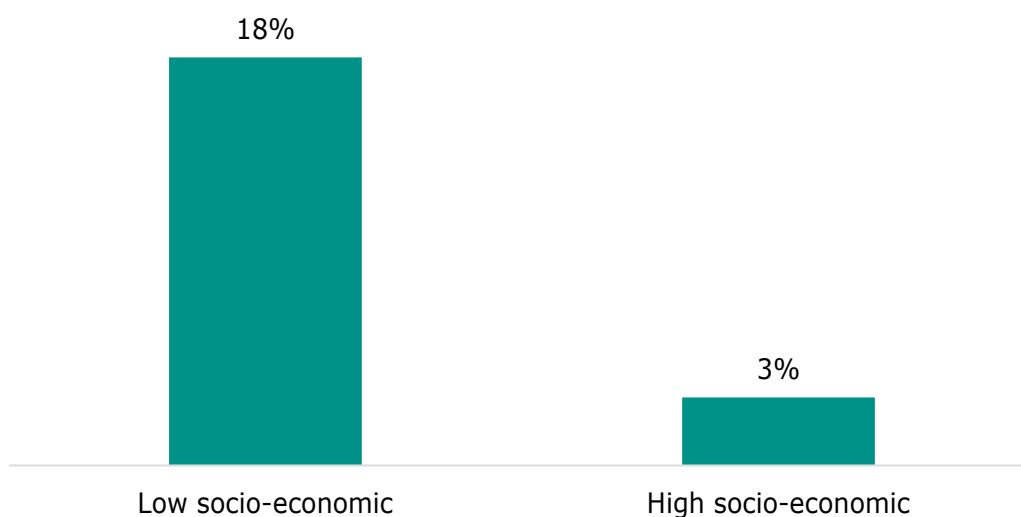
As discussed in Part 2, we found that secondary schools have high rates of chronic absence (14 percent) compared to primary schools (8 percent).

Schools in low socio-economic areas do not always have high rates of chronic absence.

There are 95 schools in low socio-economic areas that have a rate of chronic absence at less than 10 percent. Regardless of being faced with challenges arising from low socio-economic conditions, these schools are successful at keeping students engaged and attending.

Schools that are successful in reducing chronic absence do the following key things:

a) **Work in close coordination with Attendance Services.** They invite attendance staff to their whole staff school meetings. These schools are nearly five times more likely to have low rates of chronic absence.

b) **Act on their responsibilities in managing chronic absence.** Schools that report they do what they are responsible for are nearly four times more likely to have low rates of chronic absence.

c) **Enforce attendance, and hold students, parents and whānau, and attendance staff accountable.** These schools are over three times more likely to have low rates of chronic absence.

Action	Impact
Attendance service staff come to whole staff school meetings	Nearly five times more likely to have low chronic absence
School, attendance and other support agency staff do what they are responsible for	Nearly four times more likely to have low chronic absence
Good options to enforce attendance, and hold students, parents and whānau, and attendance staff accountable	Over three times more likely to have low chronic absence

ERO's review of schools shows that the top three school factors that contribute to improved attendance are effective teaching, stewardship, and leadership.

1) **Effective teaching.** Effective teachers deliver student achievement in a way that engages students. They help leading by using proven teaching approaches, understanding of where students are at, and encourage them to success. Students attend because they can see they can succeed and feel welcome in the class.

2) **Stewardship.** Stewardship is the responsibilities, practices, and activities undertaken by a board to ensure there is effective and responsible management of the school that meets statutory responsibilities. When school boards do this well, they ensure accountability for school performance, including ensuring attendance.

3) **Leadership.** Effective leaders enhance teacher quality and student engagement and attendance. They use data, evaluation, and knowledge to understand student outcomes to inform future action, including promoting attendance and addressing chronic absence.

Schools who are not acting early enough, sharing relevant information, correctly identifying barriers, and collaborating with Attendance Service staff are ineffectively managing chronic absence.

Schools who do not manage chronic absence well have certain key characteristics.

a) **Not escalating early enough when students are showing signs of an increase in non-attendance.** Just under one in five school leaders (18 percent) wait until 21 consecutive days absent before referring students to an Attendance Service. For these schools, students' barriers to attendance have become more entrenched and harder to fix.

b) **Not sharing information with Attendance Services to help find and support students**. Fifteen percent of Attendance Service staff report schools never include good information about students in referrals. For these schools, Attendance Services' lack of information can lead them to try strategies that schools have already tried and found ineffective.

c) **Not identifying the same barriers to attendance that students themselves identify.** Four in five chronically absent students (82 percent) identify school factors as what is keeping them from regular attendance, but school leaders focus more on family factors (91 percent). For these schools, not understanding school barriers to attendance can mean they fail to make the changes needed to turn around attendance.

d) **Not working with the Attendance Service to coordinate responses to chronic absence.** Sixteen percent of school leaders do not work with Attendance Service staff at all. Connection with students is lost making the chances of successfully returning students to good attendance even more limited.

Conclusion

Schools play a significant role in keeping students engaged and attending. However, some schools, such as those in low socio-economic communities, have significantly greater challenges. Schools who effectively involve Attendance Service staff, and make sure they and other agencies do what they are responsible for and hold students and parents and whānau to account, have significantly lower rates of chronic absence. But too many schools struggle to do these things.

The next chapter of the report sets out our key findings, alongside our recommendations for change towards an improved system that effectively reduces chronic absence.

Part 9: Findings and areas for action

The five key questions we asked in this evaluation have led to nine findings. Based on these findings, we have identified four areas for action, which together have the potential to reduce chronic absence, and improve education achievement and change students' lives. This chapter sets out our findings, areas for action, and our recommendations for improvement.

This evaluation has answered five key questions about students who are chronically absent.

1) Who are the students who are chronically absent from school?

2) Why are they absent?

3) What are the outcomes for students who are chronically absent from school and what are the costs of those outcomes?

4) How effective are the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent, at getting students back into school and keeping them in school? Are different models more or less effective?

5) What needs to change so that the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent from school achieve better results and are cost-effective?

Our evaluation led to nine key findings, across five areas.

→ Area 1: What has happened to chronic absence rates in Aotearoa New Zealand?

→ Area 2: Why do students become chronically absent?

→ Area 3: What happens to students who have been chronically absent?

→ Area 4: What works to address chronic absence?

→ Area 5: How good is the education system at addressing chronic absence?

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. This is double the chronic absence in Term 2, 2015, where 5 percent of students were chronically absent.

Why do students become chronically absent?

Finding 2: There are 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.

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.

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 student, parents, schools, and other services develop a plan to get the student to attend school regularly.

5) The barriers to attendance are removed, and compliance with the plan by students, parents, 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 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 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 chronically absent students (79 percent) report issues related to school as a driver for their absence, under half (44 percent) of school leaders report they have changed schoolwork to better suit learners 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.

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.

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 other's 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 key 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 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).

We are recommending action in four areas:

1) preventing students becoming chronically absent

2) putting in place effective supports to address chronic absence

3) retaining students on their return to school

4) putting in place a more efficient and effective model.

Area 1: Prevention

We need to strengthen how we prevent students becoming chronically absent

ERO has found that there are there are a range of risk factors that lead to chronic absence, including previous poor attendance, offending, and being in social or emergency housing. We have also found that physical health and mental health issues are key drivers. To prevent students becoming chronically absent will require social agencies to address the barriers to attendance that sit outside of the education sector.

Who	Action
Agencies	Government agencies prioritise education and school attendance and **take all possible action to address the largest risk factors for chronic absence,** which could include: → stabilising housing for the families of students at risk of chronic absence, including prioritising school attendance as part of social housing criteria → considering school attendance in any early intervention responses, like Whānau Ora → considering chronic absence as a care and protection issue.
Schools, and parents and whānau	Take all possible steps to support the **habit of regular attendance**, including acting early when attendance issues arise.
Schools and Ministry of Education	Schools have **planned responses** for different levels of non-attendance, with guidance provided by the Ministry of Education on what is effective for returning students to regular attendance.

Who	Action
Schools	Find and act on **learning needs** quickly, so that students remain engaged. Address **bullying** and social isolation, so that students are safe and connected. Provide access to school-based counselling services to address **mental health needs**.
All	**Increase understanding** of the importance of attendance, providing focused messages for parents and whānau of students most at risk of chronic absence.
Schools and agencies	**Identify earlier** 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 **acting to prevent** chronic absence.

Area 2: Effective supports

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

ERO has found that more effective targeted support is needed to turn around the increasing levels of chronic absence.

Who	Action
All	Put in place **clearer roles and responsibilities** for chronic absence (for schools, Attendance Services, parents and whānau, and other agencies).
Ministry of Education and ERO	Use their roles and powers to **identify, report, and intervene in schools** with high levels of chronic absence.
Schools, Ministry of Education, and agencies	**Increase use of enforcement measures** 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).

Who	Action
Services	Ensure that there are expert, dedicated people working with the chronically absent students and their parents and whānau, **using the evidence-based key practices** that work, including: → regular engagement to build strong relationships → identifying attendance barriers and keeping attendance as the main priority → working with agencies and community organisations to remove attendance barriers → working with schools to remove school-based barriers to attendance.
Schools	**Work with services** to address chronic absence, including: → active involvement in referring students to services by providing information about the student, including what the school has already tried to address attendance → 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.

Area 3: Retaining students

We need to increase the focus on retaining students on their return

Returning students to school is not enough. ERO has found that schools need to be supported to do more to support students to sustain attendance.

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

Area 4: The model

We need to put in place an efficient and effective model

The evidence is clear about what works to address chronic absence, but the current model is not setting schools and Attendance Services up to succeed.

Where	Action
Centralise	Centralise key functions that can be more effectively and efficiently provided nationally, including: → **information sharing agreements** between agencies, and guidance on how information can be shared → **prosecutions** of parents → **interventions and support for schools** who have high levels of chronic absence → national data tracking and analysis, including **identifying students who are not enrolled** anywhere → brokering access to services to **address social barrier**s → guidance on **evidence-based practice to address barriers** related to chronic absence.
Localise	Make sure schools have the resources and the support they need to carry out the functions that most effectively happen locally, including: → **prevention** of chronic absence through resolving education issues → **retention** of returned students through a good plan, monitoring, and ability to offer a tailored education. Consider giving schools/clusters of schools the responsibility, accountability, and funding for the delivery of the key function of **working with chronically absent students** and their families, to address education barriers, while drawing on the support of the centralised function to address broader social barriers.
Funding	**Increase funding** for those responsible for finding students and returning them to school, reflecting that chronic absence rates have doubled since 2015. Reform how **funding is allocated** to ensure it matches need.

Conclusion

Chronic absence has reached crisis levels and have impacts on these students that can last a lifetime. The current system set up to address barriers and get them back to school is ineffective. If changes are not made, the cost to students and the Government will be high. ERO has made recommendations to fix the system and get students back to attending school.

Appendix 1: Methods

This section summarises the methods used in this report. Further information can be found in the technical report www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-left-behind-how-do-we-get-out-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.

Our evaluation questions

This evaluation looks at the effectiveness and value for money of interventions aimed at getting chronically absent students back to school and keeping them there. We answer five key questions.

1) Who are the students who are chronically absent from school?

2) Why are they absent?

3) What are the outcomes for students who are chronically absent from school and what are the costs of those outcomes?

4) How effective are the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent, at getting students back into school and keeping them in school? Are different models more or less effective?

5) What needs to change so that the supports and interventions for students who are chronically absent from school achieve better results and are cost-effective?

Mixed-methods approach to data collection

ERO used a mixed-methods approach, drawing on a wide range of admin data, site visits, surveys and interviews. This report draws on the voices of students, school leaders, Attendance Services, parents and whānau, and experts to understand chronic absence and its implications on the students in long term.

Our mixed-methods approach integrates quantitative data (administrative data and surveys) and qualitative data (surveys, focus groups, and interviews) - triangulating the evidence across these different data sources. We used the triangulation process to test and refine our findings statements, allowing the weight of this collective data to form the conclusions. The rigour of the data and validity of these findings were further tested through iterative sense-making sessions with key stakeholders.

To ensure **breadth** in providing judgement on the key evaluation questions we used:

Surveys of:	→ Two-thirds of Attendance Services
	→ 773 students, 256 of which were chronically absent in the last week
	→ 1,131 parents and whānau, 311 of which were parents and whānau of students who were chronically absent in the last week
	→ Nearly 300 school leaders

Data from:	→ Integrated Data Infrastructure analysis
	→ 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.
	→ ERO's evaluations of schools.
	→ International evidence on effective practice in addressing chronic absence, including models from other jurisdictions.

To ensure **depth** in understanding of what works and what needs to improve we used:

Interviews and focus groups with:	→ Attendance Service staff
	→ Students
	→ Parents
	→ School leaders
Site-visits at:	→ One-quarter of Attendance Services
	→ 28 English medium schools
Sense-making through:	→ Expert group discussions

IDI analysis

The SIA undertook a comprehensive statistical analysis of the lives of young people who had a history of chronic absence. This included a focus on their characteristics, past experiences, and future outcomes based on administrative data collected by government agencies over the course of their lives.

When SIA looked in the IDI, they counted a student as being chronically absent if they had been referred to the attendance service for chronic levels of absence as well as a matched comparison group of students who had similar characteristics (including prior attendance). They counted a student as not enrolled if they had stopped attending school entirely. The cohort used was students born from 1990 to 2015. Most of the students will have been chronically absent when absence rates were still low. The characteristics of chronically absent students 10 years ago may be different to those now.

For more details on the method of this statistical analysis, see the technical report: www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-left-behind-how-do-we-get-out-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.

These results are not official statistics. They have been created for research purposes from the IDI and/or Longitudinal Business Database (LBD)] which are carefully managed by Stats NZ. For more information about the IDI and/or LBD please visit 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.

Surveys

ERO surveyed students who were chronically absent recently or who have a history of chronic absence. We also surveyed school leaders, staff of Attendance Services, and parents and whānau to better understand the causes of chronic absence.

Statistical significant tests were carried out using chi-squared tests. We used a binary logistic regression model. Surveys and response rates are included in the technical report www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/technical-report-left-behind-how-do-we-get-out-chronically-absent-students-back-to-school.

Administrative data

The Ministry of Education provided data on attendance rates in schools, and attendance rates by different demographics and subgroups. We drew on ERO data from the school improvement framework.

The SIA provided analysis on the outcomes of students who were chronically absent, and those who were referred to Attendance Services. The SIA also provided data on the monetary cost associated with chronically absent students.

Interviews and site visits

A sample of 19 Attendance Services, and 28 schools across the country were invited to participate in the case study component of this evaluation.

The interviews were conducted by ERO's team, which included those with specialist experience in reviewing quality practice.

The interviews were guided by semi-structured questions that were developed from domains and indicators on good practice in schools and Attendance Services. Based on analysis of key documents and interviews with key staff, the evaluation team assessed the quality of provision against the domains set out in Chapter 5. This assessment led to a description of how the Attendance Service and school was performing on each domain and indicator. This helped the evaluation team identify examples of good practice and to understand what the key contributing factors were. Similarly, the team was able to identify examples of issues and challenges that Attendance Services and schools were facing and understand the main contributing factors.

All interviews were carried out by members of the project team, which included evaluation partners who work directly with schools. Most interviews had two project team members. We conducted interviews with:

→ 21 chronically absent young people, who were nominated by schools and Attendance Services

→ 26 parents and whānau who were nominated by schools and Attendance Services.

→ 77 Attendance Service staff.

Quality assurance

The data in this report was subjected to a rigorous internal review process for both quantitative and qualitative data and was carried out at multiple stages across the evaluation process. External data provided by the Ministry of Education and SIA was reviewed by them.

Ethics

Informed consent

All participants were informed of the purpose of the evaluation before they agreed to participate in an interview. Participants were informed that:

→ participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time

→ their words may be included in reporting, but no identifying details would be shared

→ permission to use their information could be withdrawn at any time

→ interviews were not an evaluation of their school, and their school or provider would not be identified in the resulting national report

→ their information was confidential and would be kept securely, subject to the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982, Privacy Act 1993, and the Public Records Act 2005 on the release and retention of information.

Interviewees consented to take part in an interview via email, or by submitting a written consent form to ERO. Their verbal consent was also sought to record their online interviews. Participants were given opportunities to query the evaluation team if they needed further information about the consent process.

Data security

Data collected from interviews, surveys, and administrative data will be stored digitally for a period of six months after the full completion of the evaluation. During this time, all data will be password-protected and have limited accessibility.

The caveats for this report

Administrative data

The administrative data contains information on attendance of students who are enrolled at schools. This means students who are not enrolled at schools are missing from the analysis.

Surveys

The survey was focused on students who have been chronically absent. Responses are representative of chronically absent Māori and Pacific students but are over representative of chronically absent NZ European / Pākehā students (respondents were able to select multiple ethnicities). To ensure robustness, the survey results are complemented with administrative data, including IDI analysis, to draw conclusions.

Appendix 2: Definition of attendance

What is chronic absence?

There are four different categories of attendance, depending on how many half-days a student attends in a school term. These are set out below.

→ **Regular attendance**: attend 90 percent or more of a term (missing up to five days of a 10-week term).

→ **Irregular absence**: attend 80 to 90 percent of a term (missing five to 10 days of a 10-week term).

→ **Moderate absence**: attend 70 to 80 percent of a term (missing 10 to 15 days of a 10-week term).

→ **Chronic absence**: attend less than 70 percent of a term (missing 15 days or more of a 10-week term). This report focuses on this group of students.

What counts as 'going to school'?

Students are present at school when they are in class. They are also considered present when they are:

→ late to class (but within school policy for lateness)

→ on the school site, doing things like:

— unsupervised study

— sitting an exam

— having an appointment at school (e.g., with a dean, sports coach, or nurse)

— waiting in the sickbay

— in-school isolation (e.g., removed to a different class or in the administration corridor)

→ away from school, but doing a school-based activity, like:

— a sports trip or cultural presentation

— camp

→ learning somewhere else, as agreed with the school, like:

— Alternative Education, Secondary Tertiary Programme (including Trades Academies), or Activity Centre

— Teen Parent Unit, Health Camp, or Regional Health School

— a course or work experience

→ at a medical or dental appointment or attending to Justice Court proceedings.

Different types of absences

Table 3: *Justified and unjustified absences*

Justified absence	Unjustified absence

Students are marked as having a 'justified absence' if they are away from school for:
 	
→ short-term illness (the length is decided by each school's policy)
 	
→ a reason within the school's policy, like:
 	
  — representing at a local or national level in a sporting or cultural event
 	
  — bereavement
 	
  — unplanned absences like extreme weather
 	
→ being stood down or suspended
 	
→ unsupervised study.
 	
Students are marked as being 'overseas (justified)' if they are accompanying or visiting a family member on an overseas posting, for up to 15 weeks. If it is longer than 15 weeks, their absence becomes unjustified.
	Students are marked as having an 'unjustified absence' if they:
	
	→ do not give a reason for their absence
	
	→ are away from school and the reason is outside the school's policy
	
	→ are on a holiday during term time.

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