

Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and other related matters

AERO's response to Questions on notice

July 2023

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's independent education evidence body. Our vision is to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence.

- 1. Has any research been undertaken on the growing trend of 'School Refusal' and how this impacts a student's academic achievement/attainment?**
 - **Please provide any research undertaken.**
 - **What were the key findings of this research?**

In response to these questions on notice, AERO conducted a high-level desktop review of published literature on 'School Refusal' and academic achievement/attainment. 'School Refusal' is defined in the Terms of Reference for the inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters as 'primary and secondary school aged children, who are unable to attend school regularly or on a consistent basis.'

AERO has found that there is limited research on the link between school refusal and academic achievement. Most of the research on school refusal focuses on understanding the causes and exploring strategies to support students to re-engage with school, for example by creating supportive school environments (Filippello et al. 2019). Research in Australia is also constrained by the current national standards and administrative systems for attendance reporting, which enable examination of existing absence reasons or codes (e.g., sickness, leave, school business, unjustified), but not school refusal per se.¹

The limited research on school refusal and academic achievement suggests that:

- Increases in absence due to school refusal have an impact on learning (Heyne et al. 2019, Ingul et al. 2019)
- School refusal and number of absences negatively predict school achievement in adolescents (Filippello et al. 2019)
- The short and long-term consequences of school refusal include incomplete schoolwork, poor academic performance, and potential school drop-out (Kearney & Bensaheb 2006).

¹ AERO's scope of work (unpublished) for a project on student attendance for the Education Ministers Meeting considers the current national standards and systems for attendance reporting in Australia.

References

Filippello, P., et al. (2019). School refusal and absenteeism: Perception of teacher behaviors, psychological basic needs, and academic achievement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

Heyne, D., et al. (2019). Differentiation between school attendance problems: why and how? *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26, 8–34.

Ingul, J. M., et al. (2019). Emerging school refusal: a school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 26(1), 46–62.

Kearney, C. A., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). School absenteeism and school refusal behavior: a review and suggestions for school-based health professionals. *The Journal of School Health*, 76(1), 3–7.

2. Has any research been undertaken on the linkage between absenteeism and student performance?

- **Please provide any research you have undertaken.**
- **What were the key findings of this research?**

AERO is currently investigating the decline in student attendance and evidence-based approaches that may assist in reversing this decline. This analysis is in response to a request from the Education Ministers Meeting and AERO will deliver this work to Ministers later this year. This work will provide further insights into absenteeism in Australia.

AERO's high-level desktop review of existing research, undertaken for the purposes of these questions on notice, suggests that:

- Lower attendance is linked to poorer academic achievement across all stages of schooling (Education Endowment Foundation 2022, London et al. 2016)
- There is a consistent negative correlation between absence and achievement, with any level of absence linked to declines in achievement and the impact increasing with the number of absences (AITSL 2019, Hancock et al. 2013)
- The effects of absenteeism on performance are cumulative and can affect academic achievement in future school years (AITSL 2019, Gottfried 2014, Hancock et al. 2013, Zubrik 2014)
- There are greater declines in achievement for 'unauthorised' or 'unexplained' absences (AITSL 2019, Gottfried 2009, Hancock et al. 2013, Hancock et al. 2018)
- Poor attendance is linked to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school before Year 12 (AITSL 2019, Keppens & Spruyt 2017, London et al. 2016).

References

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2019). Spotlight: Attendance matters. Victoria: AITSL.

Education Endowment Foundation (2022). Attendance Interventions, Rapid Evidence Assessment, London: Education Endowment Foundation.

Gottfried, M. A. (2009). Excused versus unexcused: How student absences in elementary school affect academic achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 31(4), 392–415.

Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2), 53–75.

Hancock, K. J., et al. (2013). Student attendance and educational outcomes: Every day counts. Report for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Canberra.

Hancock, K. J., et al. (2018). Does the reason matter? How student-reported reasons for school absence contribute to differences in achievement outcomes among 14–15 year olds. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(1), 141–174.

Keppens, G., & Spruyt, B. (2017). The development of persistent truant behaviour: an exploratory analysis of adolescents' perspectives. *Educational Research*, 59(3), 353–370.

London, R. A., et al. (2016). The dynamics of chronic absence and student achievement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(112).

Zubrick, S. (2014). School attendance: Equities and inequities in growth trajectories of academic performance. In ACER Research Conference, *Quality and Equality: What does research tell us*. Adelaide.

3. Has any research been undertaken on the linkage between student disengagement from schooling/education and student performance?

- **Please provide any research you have undertaken.**
- **What were the key findings of this research?**

AERO has conducted an analysis² of national assessment program datasets to better understand the trends and drivers of student performance in Australia. The analysis looked at participation in Year 9 National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests as an indication of student engagement. The analysis found that students who did not participate in the NAPLAN numeracy test in Year 9 (either by being absent on the day or withdrawn) were more likely to leave school before Year 12. In AERO's analysis, not participating in the Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy test was a stronger predictor of leaving school before Year 12 than other measures of engagement, including absences from school.

² AERO's analysis (unpublished) draws on national assessment program datasets, including Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to explore the trends and drivers of student performance.

AERO has published a report [NAPLAN participation: Who is missing the tests and why it matters](#), which explores declining participation trends for NAPLAN in more detail (Lu et al. 2023). Relevant findings from the report include:

- Some equity groups, such as First Nations students and very remote students, have much lower and faster declining rates of NAPLAN participation compared to average. Fewer than 1 in 2 students based in a very remote location and fewer than 2 in 3 First Nations students participated in the 2022 NAPLAN tests.
- Low performing students are less likely to participate in NAPLAN compared to high performing students. For secondary students, the lower the student's result on the Year 7 NAPLAN test, the lower the probability of them participating in the Year 9 NAPLAN test.

Together these analyses indicate that prior performance in NAPLAN is important in predicting participation in Year 9 NAPLAN tests and students who do not participate in the Year 9 NAPLAN numeracy test are more likely to leave school before Year 12.

References

Lu, L., et al. (2023). [NAPLAN participation: Who is missing the tests and why it matters](#). Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO).

4. What policy setting changes have you identified or can you suggest to ensure students who may be impacted by school refusal to maintain or correct their academic achievement/attainment?

As identified earlier, there is limited research on school refusal and academic attainment. Much of the research focuses on understanding school refusal and strategies to support students to engage with school. Research in Australia is limited by the existing absence reasons or codes for attendance reporting.

Existing research suggests some broad strategies to address school refusal and absenteeism, including:

- Monitoring individual absences and reasons for absence to identify students who are at risk of disengaging from school (AITSL 2019, Hancock et al. 2018, The Smith Family 2018)
- Early identification and intervention, including support for students at risk of disengaging from school (AITSL 2019, Filippello et al. 2019, Hancock 2019, The Smith Family 2018).

AERO's work for the Education Ministers Meeting is anticipated to provide further insights into evidence-based approaches that may assist in reversing the decline in student attendance. AERO will deliver this work to Ministers later this year.

References

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2019). Spotlight: Attendance matters. Victoria: AITSL.

Filippello, P., et al. (2019). School refusal and absenteeism: Perception of teacher behaviors, psychological basic needs, and academic achievement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

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Hancock, K. J. (2019). Does the reason make a difference? Assessing school absence codes and their associations with student achievement outcomes. Telethon Kids Institute.

The Smith Family. (2018). Attendance lifts achievement: Building the evidence base to improve student outcomes, Research Report. The Smith Family.