

Ms Sarah Redden  
A/g Committee Secretary  
Senate Education and Employment Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Our ref: DGL23/333

Dear Ms Redden

Thank you for your email of 27 June 2023 requesting responses to a number of questions by the committee overseeing the Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters. This information is attached.

Should you have any further questions, please contact Claire Todd, Manager  
Strategic Coordination, Government Business on tel: or by email at

Yours sincerely

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**SECRETARY**  
**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
27 July 2023



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

### Please provide attendance data by year level

We refer the committee to the [2022 Semester 1 students attendance fact sheet](#) published on the department's website. 2023 data will be available later this year.

This fact sheet provides an overview of NSW public school student attendance for students from Kindergarten to Year 12 in Semester 1, 2022. It contains information on different cohorts of students, including observations on student attendance by multiple education levels, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander status and geolocations.

It is important to note that 2022 attendance rates for students in Kindergarten to Year 12 were impacted by major flooding and the ongoing effects of COVID-19. While there were no COVID-19 lockdowns or learning from home periods in Semester 1, 2022, the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community was much greater than in 2021 and it continued to cause large variability in attendance data. All students, staff and visitors were encouraged to remain at home and only attend school when symptom-free. Students were advised to stay home despite a negative COVID-19 test result if COVID-19 symptoms persisted or until a medical certificate was provided to the school to confirm that symptoms were attributed to another diagnosis.

### Do you collect data on reasons for absenteeism?

Yes.

### If so, please provide the categories you collect data against

Student absences or variations of attendance are recorded by the school in the school roll using the eight approved attendance codes outlined below.

#### Absence codes

- A Absence is unexplained by the parent or explanation is unjustified by the principal.
- S Absence is due to sickness or medical/paramedical appointment and is approved by the principal.
- L Absence is due to a number of other reasons which may include misadventure, travel or family emergencies among others and is approved by the principal.
- E Absence due to the student being suspended from school.

#### Variations to attendance codes

- M Student is exempt from attending school and certificate of exemption has been issued by a delegated officer.
- F Student is participating in a flexible timetable and is not present at school because they are not required to be and includes VET courses, senior exam periods and Best Start assessments for kindergarten students among others. Also used for absences related to COVID where learning from home occurs.
- B Student is absent from school on official school business which may include work experience, sports carnivals and school excursions among others.
- H The student has a shared enrolment between a mainstream setting and an alternative setting including schools for specific purposes, schools in Youth Justice centres, hospital schools and Distance Education.

The Department of Education collects attendance data, including information on the absence reasons and variations of attendance, in the Return of Absences collections each year in June for Semester 1 data and November for Semester 2.

What is your attendance target level for students? Is this consistent across all year groups? If this varies by year level, please provide the target for each year level.

In May 2023, the NSW Premier, Chris Minns and the Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Early Learning, Prue Car launched a school attendance campaign called 'Every Day Matters'.

The aim of the Every Day Matters campaign is to help bring the number of students in classrooms back to pre-COVID levels by reinforcing the importance of attending school for students' academic success. It will be supported by school leaders using data-driven analysis and strategies to lift student attendance, with a daily attendance dashboard to identify reasons and trends for student absences.

While preliminary student attendance data for NSW public schools shows improvements to attendance rates for Term 1 this year, the figures remain below pre-pandemic levels. More work is needed and schools are committed to implementing strategies to increase attendance.

Schools across the state are implementing innovative, focused strategies to boost attendance, including reminders of the importance of regularly attending school and rewarding students who improve attendance. These strategies help students to:

- develop a sense of belonging
- develop and maintain friendships
- be more engaged at school
- progress with their learning, and
- be more aware of career and life options.

Have you done any analysis work on the linkage between student attendance and student academic performance?

Research highlights a clear correlation between student attendance and the achievement of quality academic, socio-economic and health outcomes. This research tells us that students with an attendance rate below 90% are educationally at risk.

Some of the research that highlights the impact of school attendance on academic, socio-economic and health outcomes that the department has used to support it's Every Day Matters campaign is summarised below:

Summary statement	Source
Lower scores and poorer academic outcomes	AITSL (2019). Attendance matters. Spotlight. Melbourne: Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
Increased likelihood of dropping out of school earlier	Smerillo et al., 2018; Featherston, 2010; Lamb et al., 2004; Suh & Suh, 2007
Decreased likelihood of engaging in vocational education	Hancock, K. J., Gottfried, M. A., & Zubrick, S. R. (2018). Does the reason matter? How student-reported reasons for school absence contribute to differences in achievement outcomes among 14–15 year olds. <i>British Educational Research Journal</i> , 44 (1), 141-174.
Poorer long-term mental health and social outcomes	Kearney, C. A., Graczyk, P. A. (2014). A Response to Intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school

	absenteeism. Child and Youth Care Forum, 43(1), 1-25
Increased likelihood of involvement with criminal activity	Tanner-Smith & Wilson, 2013 as cited in Kearney, C. A., Graczyk, P. A. (2014). A Response to Intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school absenteeism. Child and Youth Care Forum, 43(1), 1-25.
Increased likelihood of requiring social assistance	Christenson & Thurlow, 2004 as cited in Kearney, C. A., Graczyk, P. A. (2014). A Response to Intervention model to promote school attendance and decrease school absenteeism. Child and Youth Care Forum, 43(1), 1-25.

In addition to this research, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation has published '[Understanding attendance – a review of the drivers of school attendance and best practice approaches](#)'. This review identifies key factors that influence attendance. It explains why attendance is important, and outlines evidence-based strategies to improve attendance.

The report highlights research that shows:

- Non-attendance is linked with poorer academic achievement and long-term student outcomes.
- Higher rates of absences have been associated with lower NAPLAN scores (Hancock et al. 2013; Daraganova et al. 2014).
- The association between absences and achievement is stronger among students in disadvantaged schools (Hancock et al. 2013).
- Unauthorised absences have a greater impact on achievement than authorised absences (Hancock et al. 2013; Gershenson et al. 2017).
- In NSW, students who report positive attendance behaviours in Year 7 are on average 3 months ahead in their learning by Year 9, compared with students who have poor attendance behaviours (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) 2017).

It also highlights evidence-based strategies for improving school attendance including:

- using effective classroom management and motivating learning goals
- setting clear standards and high expectations for attendance
- increasing family engagement with the school
- promoting positive relationships between teachers and students
- promoting connectedness and belonging
- implementing an anti-bullying plan
- ensuring cultural safety.

**How much of a gap are we seeing between the academic outcomes of children engaged in school refusal, and other students?**

The department has not published any analysis that specifically responds to this question.

How many children are enrolled in a form of education, other than mainstream school, including:

- Home School
- Virtual School
- Distance Education
- Other (please define categories).
- Please provide student data against each category.

The figures in the table below contain the number of student enrolments that are enrolled in a form of NSW government school education, other than mainstream school.

Setting	Enrolments	Data source
Home Schooling	12,359 (as at 31 December 2022)	<a href="#">NESA, 2022</a>
Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs)	6,029*	<a href="#">NSW Department of Education Annual Report, 2022</a>
Distance Education	2,575	NSW DoE, 2022 data (unpublished)
Intensive English Centre	1,896	NSW DoE, 2022 data (unpublished)

**Notes:** NSW DoE Student enrolment numbers (headcount) are based on the census of government school students undertaken on the first Friday of August each year.

\* 44 of these students were also enrolled in a School for Specific Purposes Distance Education Unit. These students were only included under the SSPs count.

Is data collected on the reason a student is not attending mainstream school and why an exemption has been provided?

In NSW public education, students not attending mainstream who are enrolled in an alternative setting (including Schools for Specific Purposes or Distance Education) do not require an exemption. Most of these enrolments are managed through the department's access request process. NSW Distance Education is available for students who are unable to regularly attend their local school and is governed by the Distance Education Enrolment Procedures.

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Please provide data by category of exemption for how many students are enrolled in alternative methods of schooling.

Not applicable (refer to response above).

Is data collected on student academic performance for students enrolled in alternative forms of schooling (as above)

Data on student academic performance is generally held at the school level.

Do schools with higher rates of school refusal also have poorer academic performance among the rest of the student body?

The department does not hold central data on school refusal.

What is the academic performance like of schools that are specifically geared towards reaching students who engage in school refusal? (e.g. Virtual Schools Victoria is one such school the committee is aware of)

NSW does not have schools that are “specifically geared towards reaching students who engage in school refusal”. All NSW public schools are committed to re-engaging these students.

What academic outcomes do we see among students who have previously engaged in school refusal, but have since returned to school?

This information is not centrally collected.

What data is there on the effect of school refusal on students’ employment opportunities later in life?

This information is not centrally collected.

What work has been done to understand the complex factors that influence student absenteeism?

We refer the committee to the department’s Attendance Matters resources - <https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/attendance-matters-resources-for-schools>.

What policies do you have that support students and their families re-engage in school when experiencing school refusal?

We work with parents and carers to ensure they understand that when their child attends school every day, learning becomes easier and their child will build and maintain friendships with other children.

Parents and carers can help foster positive attendance habits by:

- helping their child learn the importance of punctuality and routine
- ensuring their child arrives on time from the start of the school day, ready to participate in learning
- reducing disruption to learning where possible, by planning any necessary appointments outside of school time
- promptly communicating any absence to the school (within 7 days of the first day of any absence)
- working with the school to encourage and support regular attendance.

Information for parents provides further information about [compulsory school attendance](#).

Further information about [learning from home](#), if schools are closed for extended periods of time, is also available for parents and carers.

In addition, the School Attendance Policy and its implementation documents apply to all enrolled students and public schools and outline the requirements for school attendance in NSW.

Referral to the Home School Liaison Program, access to support from the school counsellor and liaising with external agencies are provided as strategies to assist students and families to re-engage with school.

## Has any work been done to identify students who may be at risk of school refusal?

The department has identified five key elements to support schools to improve attendance, including responding to cases of school refusal.

1. **High expectations** – that are understood within the school and that are communicated to parents/carers and students.
2. **Quality systems and processes** – ensuring that every school has high quality systems and practices that are compliant with the School Attendance Policy and procedures and ensure consistency of action.
3. **Data systems** – Effective use of data systems that provide transparency around individual student attendance and inform actions to deliver effective improvement.
4. **Interventions** – tailored early intervention strategies and supports for students at different attendance levels to provide the support needed.
5. **Communication** - Effective communication with students, parents and carers used to establish expectations and build productive partnerships that enhance student achievement.

A school refusal module is currently being finalised for teachers as part of the ongoing collaboration between NSW Health and the department and is anticipated to be available during Term 3, 2023. The module will help teachers identify the issue early and make sure the appropriate support is put in place.

## What intervention strategies are in place to support these students and families?

If a student is absent without an explanation, school leaders will undertake all reasonable measures to contact parents promptly. This may include using interpreters for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Most often principals and school staff, in consultation with students and parents, will be able to resolve attendance issues using strategies such as a school-based attendance improvement plan, referral to the Learning and Support team or school counsellor and collaboration with any outside agencies or medical professionals involved with the family.

If a range of school-based strategies have been unsuccessful in resolving attendance concerns, the principal can request support from the Home School Liaison Program.

Where attendance concerns remain unresolved, matters may be referred for legal advice. Strategies including Compulsory Schooling Conferences (where parents agree to commitments as formal Undertakings), seeking Compulsory Schooling Orders in Children's Court and prosecution in the Local Court may be considered.