



# Attendance: Getting Back to School

## Guide for primary school teachers

Regular school attendance makes a big difference. Every day counts, and we know that missing too many days leads to lower achievement, poorer wellbeing, and other worrying outcomes. Attendance patterns start early and carry through for a learner's time at school. Aotearoa New Zealand attendance rates are falling and are worse than in other comparable countries.

We wanted to find out what the biggest drivers for primary learners not attending are, and what works well to motivate them to turn up to class. In this guide, we share findings from our research, as well as some key actions that primary school teachers and leaders can take to support better attendance.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, learners are expected to attend school every day the school is open – yet many don't. Our attendance rates are falling and are worse than other comparable countries. In 2022 primary school regular attendance fell to 42 percent. This is concerning, because the evidence is clear that regular attendance is really important for learning, wellbeing, and life outcomes. This is not an issue that schools can tackle alone, but schools can make a difference.

The Education Review Office (ERO) talked to learners, parents and whānau, teachers, and school leaders from diverse schools and communities across Aotearoa New Zealand. This helped us to understand the range of reasons learners do not attend – and what *does* work well to encourage regular attendance.

In this guide for primary school teachers and leaders, we outline the key things to know about regarding why attendance matters, what is getting in the way of regular attendance, and what works.

### What do we mean by 'attendance'?

Attendance is when learners are at school and in the class they are supposed to be in.

'Regular attendance' is when a learner misses less than a week of school in a term.

'Non-regular attendance' is when learners miss a week or more of school in a term.

### A day here and there adds up to a lot

Learners who miss **a week** of school each term will have missed out on **a year** of schooling by the time they are 16.

## Attendance matters

ERO did a deep dive into the national and international research about the impact of attendance. The evidence is very clear that attendance is a key driver of learners' achievement, their wellbeing, and their lifelong outcomes.

### Attendance affects achievement

The evidence shows that attendance is directly related to how well learners achieve, in both primary and secondary school. The more learners attend, the higher their achievement. There is no safe level of non-attendance – even missing just two days a term is linked to lower achievement. Missing school leads to lost opportunities to learn, which impacts on achievement, even if learners have good engagement.

The impact of missing school continues to build over time as learners fall further behind their peers. This means that non-regular attendance has lasting negative impacts.

### Attendance affects wellbeing

Going to school is important for learners' wellbeing. The research shows that more frequent non-attendance is associated with worse wellbeing outcomes, including schoolwork-related anxiety, decreased sense of belonging, fewer friendships with peers, exposure to bullying, and feeling like teachers are being unfair. The relationship between attendance and wellbeing works both ways: poor wellbeing leads to poor attendance, and poor attendance leads to poor wellbeing.

### Attendance matters at primary school

Establishing regular attendance routines early in children's schooling is important. How often learners go to school in early primary school predicts how much they will attend in secondary school. Primary school also lays the foundations for future learning as learners develop the skills that are important for being successful in secondary school. Missing school in primary school can create gaps in learning that set learners back in secondary school and contribute to increasing disengagement from school and learning.

### Why do primary school learners miss school?

For **parents** the most important attitudes are:

- how comfortable they are with their child missing school
- how likely they are to keep their child home:
  - if their child is being bullied
  - if their child is unable to participate in school activities
  - for a family or special event
  - for mental health reasons.

For **primary learners** the biggest factors impacting on attendance are:

- if they think going to school every day is important
- how hard they find their schoolwork.

Other factors that are associated with missing school are:

- prioritising other activities
- barriers like sickness or disengagement.

## Parent attitudes

We know that four in 10 parents (41 percent) of both primary and secondary learners are comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school a term. This really matters for attendance. Parents who are comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school per term are **more than twice as likely** to have a child who doesn't regularly attend school (61 percent) compared to those parents who are not comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school (27 percent).

**If their child is being bullied** – Parents who would keep their child out of school because their child was being bullied are **23 percentage points more likely** to have a child that doesn't attend school regularly (51 percent compared to 28 percent).

**If their child is unable to participate in school activities** – Parents who would keep their child out of school because a child wasn't able to participate in certain activities are **22 percentage points more likely** to have a child that doesn't attend school regularly (57 percent compared to 35 percent).

**For a family or special event** – Parents who would keep their child out of school because there was a family/whānau/special event on are **21 percentage points more likely** to have a child that doesn't attend school regularly (46 percent compared to 25 percent).

**Mental health reasons** – Parents who would keep their child out of school because of mental health challenges are **11 percentage points more likely** to have a child that doesn't attend school regularly (49 percent compared to 38 percent).

Why parents let their children miss school also matters. Letting children miss school for a particular reason can change their attitudes to attendance and increase the chance of irregular attendance.

## Learner attitudes

### Valuing school attendance

The most important driver of attendance at primary school is how important learners think going to school every day is. Learners who feel that going to school every day is important are **15 percentage points more likely** to attend regularly than those who don't (62 percent compared to 47 percent).

## School matters

### Schoolwork

The second most important driver of non-attendance for primary learners is the difficulty of schoolwork. Learners who want to miss school because their schoolwork is too hard are **11 percentage points less likely** to attend school regularly (48 percent compared to 59 percent).

### Other factors

Some other key factors that are associated with attendance are learners prioritising other things over school and facing barriers.

Primary learners identified the following things that they would want to prioritise over school:

- Having preferable things to do at home
- Family or special events
- Looking after or visiting relatives

Primary learners identified the following barriers to attendance:

- Sickness
- Bullying and other friend related issues
- Wanting to avoid certain activities
- Not being engaged in what is taught
- Being too tired
- Difficulty with transport
- Hardship

## Differences for Māori, Pacific, and disabled learners

### Māori learners

Māori learners' attendance has fallen faster than other groups but most Māori parents and learners value school and attendance. Māori learners can face additional barriers to attendance. For Māori parents, bullying and not being able to participate in school activities were identified as key barriers to their children's attendance. Some Māori learners are less motivated to attend as they found school less interesting or less relevant to them. Māori parents and learners place greater priority on whānau and community commitments than other learners.

### Pacific learners

Pacific learners' attendance is lower and has fallen at a faster rate than other groups. This is despite a high proportion of Pacific parents and learners valuing school and school attendance. Pacific parents and learners experience sickness, bullying, and tiredness as greater barriers to attendance than other groups. Pacific parents and learners are more likely to prioritise family activities such as family and cultural events and looking after family members over school. Pacific parents are less likely to keep their kids out of school for things like sports or holidays.

### Disabled learners

Disabled learners face additional challenges around attendance. Parents of disabled learners are more likely to keep their child out of school due to resource barriers and are also more likely to keep their child out of school for health and wellbeing concerns. Disabled learners face more barriers to participating at school, such as not being able to participate in some activities at school, not wanting to participate in certain activities at school, and school work being too hard. They were less likely to be motivated to attend by doing activities such as sports and clubs and less often had everything they needed to go to school. Disabled learners are more likely to experience bullying and missed school because of it. They also have lower engagement and connection to school.

## What can primary teachers and leaders do to help?

Attendance is complicated, and parent and learner attitudes and circumstances matter. Not all of these issues are in a school's control, but schools have a crucial impact. Schools can act to improve attendance.

School responses need to differ according to the level of non-attendance. Schools need strategies that help all children attend regularly, need early identification and action for those learners who are starting to not attend, and more intensive targeted interventions for those who are chronic non-attenders.

This report looks at how schools can help these students who do attend but not regularly enough. Given what we know about the most important drivers of attendance and what international evidence suggests is most effective, the three key areas that can help are:

1. increasing parents' awareness and expectations
2. making learning engaging and school a great place to be
3. identifying and tackling specific barriers.

### Increasing parents' awareness and expectations

- Make sure parents know that attendance is important.
- Make sure parents know how much their child is attending.
- Deliver these messages early and often.

We know that parent attitudes are a really important driver of school attendance, particularly at primary school. International evidence suggests that parents may not recognise the importance of regular school attendance and the consequences of their child not attending. Parents can also underestimate the amount of school their children are missing. Schools can help to address this by sharing attendance patterns proactively and making the ongoing impact of non-attendance on students' learning vivid for parents. Attendance habits that begin at primary school follow through into later education, so it is important to deliver these messages early and often. Schools should also immediately contact parents when learners are absent and escalate early in the face of persistent non-attendance.

#### Ideas on how to change attitudes and increase awareness

Suggested actions for teachers and school leaders:

- Continue to explain the importance of attendance and the impact of cumulative non-attendance to learners, parents, and whānau.
- Set clear expectations about attendance and communicate them.
- For individual learners who have had short periods of absence, set the expectation that they catch up on what they have missed and have material available that enables them to catch up.
- Understand the attendance of every learner, know when learners' attendance is becoming concerning, and act early.
- Help parents understand their child's attendance and how this is tracking every time they are absent, for example through nudge text messages that set out how often a child has missed school that term.
- Help learners understand their attendance, how it is tracking, and why it matters.

ERO has seen schools demonstrating promising practices in this area:

- Using achievement data linked with attendance data to show the impact of attendance on achievement. Sharing this with family, learners, and teachers.
- Doing a breakdown on the impact of attendance to really highlight how attendance and achievement are connected.
- Including this type of information in newsletters to ensure the best reach possible.
- Proactively sharing attendance information and patterns so that parents have a good sense of how much school their children are missing.

## Making learning engaging and school a great place to be

- Create a welcoming environment.
- Promote positive relationships between teachers and learners.
- Get learners interested in what they are learning.

Not being interested in what is taught is a big driver of non-attendance, along with not liking at least one teacher and not liking the people in class.

The international evidence is clear that creating a great, welcoming environment at school promotes attendance. Evidence suggests promoting positive relationships between teachers and learners, and promoting connectedness and belonging are two key ways to improve attendance. This can go alongside implementing an anti-bullying plan and ensuring cultural safety.

Engagement with school is also important. Learners who are interested in schoolwork and activities at school are more likely to attend. In addition, learners having strong motivation and goals for achieving, and positive beliefs about their own academic abilities promotes attendance.

### Ideas on how to make learning more engaging and school a great place to be

Suggested actions for teachers and school leaders:

- Understand learners' interests and what they find engaging or disengaging at school.
- Understand how learners find the school environment, listen to learners' perspectives, and identify areas of concern early.
- Review the way in which teaching and learning is organised, drawing on learner perspectives.
- Help learners to see how subjects are relevant and valuable to them, and that they are capable of achieving in those subjects.
- Take early action when learners are disengaging from learning and provide support to re-engage and catch up.
- Use proven tools to tackle bullying, racism, and discrimination.
- Provide access to targeted mental health support for those who need it.

ERO has seen schools demonstrating promising practices in this area such as:

- having days at school such as 'Ice block Friday' that encourage school attendance and make school a fun place to be
- hosting special events such as grandparents' day to increase learners feeling of connection between home and school and provide variety to their days
- ensuring that each learner has an adult at school who will notice and care if they are there or not.

## Identifying and tackling specific barriers

- Find out exactly what is making attendance more difficult.
- Develop responsive strategies for specific barriers.
- Work together with families/whānau.

We know there are a wide range of reasons that learners miss school. Many of these are due to learners, or their parents, facing barriers. The specific barriers that learners and their parents face differ significantly between families. With such a diverse set of reasons for learners not going to school, the most effective way to improve attendance for these learners is to tackle the specific barriers that they are facing.

Evidence shows that broad approaches aren't sufficient to improve attendance for learners with more complex barriers to attendance. Context and specific needs of learners matter. Matching and delivering the appropriate response to learners' needs relies on many different parties.

Schools and families can identify any support the learner and family need, which could require multiple services, which the school can help to co-ordinate. Evidence shows the three most common elements of successful strategies are:

- individualised training in personal and social capabilities
- family support
- offering some incentives for attendance.

### Ideas on how to tackle barriers to attendance

Suggested actions for teachers and school leaders:

- Build strong relationships with whānau to identify any key barriers and any action schools can take to overcome them.
- For individual learners, identify early issues that emerge and find quick-fix solutions to deal with barriers to attendance while longer-term more sustainable solutions are found.

ERO has seen schools demonstrating promising practices in this area, such as:

- monitoring at-risk learners closely by having their initials on a whiteboard in the principal's office so they are always top of mind for the principal to monitor their attendance
- organising home visits or hui between school staff and parents to discuss learners with low attendance and come up with targeted support and solutions
- come up with personalised plans alongside parents for learners with low attendance which sometimes involved accessing community aid programs and any agencies that are available to provide support to the family and learner
- providing resources for teachers and parents to help them have discussions with learners about why the learner didn't want to attend. This can open up and destigmatise the conversation about attendance with learners so school staff and parents can figure out the underlying reasons. The resource can include contact details for different people in the school who can help support learners with the range of reasons for not attending.

## Conclusion

Attendance is really important, not only for achievement but for wellbeing and lifelong outcomes. Attendance at primary schools is particularly important as it sets up good attendance that carries through to the later years of schooling. Aotearoa New Zealand has worrying levels of attendance and attendance rates continue to drop. This guide highlights some of the things that primary school teachers and leaders can do to support attendance through increasing parental understanding and awareness of attendance, making school more engaging and a good place to be, and identifying and removing specific barriers.

## Resources

- *Missing out: Why Aren't Our Children Going to School* provides a greater level of detail about what we did and what we found.  
<https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/missing-out-why-arent-our-children-going-to-school>
- Want more ideas? Check out the Ministry of Education's school resources.  
<https://temahau.govt.nz/school-resources>



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