



Inquiry into school attendance

Report of the Education and Workforce
Committee

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Chairperson

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Inquiry into school attendance

Summary of recommendations

The Education and Workforce Committee has conducted an inquiry into school attendance and makes the following recommendations to the Government:

1. We recommend that the Government prioritise the development and implementation of a school attendance strategy.
2. We recommend that this strategy should target an increase in regular school attendance across all school types and demographics.
3. We recommend that this target should be to achieve a sustained average of at least 70 percent of students attending school regularly by 2024 and 75 percent by 2026.
4. We recommend that all schools are formally notified of this target, encouraged to adopt it as a goal, and advised that it will continue to be monitored by the Education Review Office (ERO).

We recognise that there are societal causes of non-attendance.

5. We recommend that the Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy School Lunches programme continue and that there is ongoing evaluation, including analysing the impact on attendance.
6. We recommend that the Government continue to provide free period products to schools and that there is ongoing evaluation, including analysing the impact on attendance.
7. We recommend that an all-of-government focus on increasing levels of regular school attendance, such as the work under way by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, continue to be developed.
8. We recommend that the Government adopt “levels of regular school attendance” as a measure of wellbeing under the Living Standards Framework.

We believe schools and the Ministry of Education are well placed to address in-school causes of non-attendance.

9. We recommend that the Government continue to emphasise and engage with schools on the importance of the National Education and Learning Priorities.
10. We recommend that the Government support Te Mahau to continue to facilitate local solutions to non-attendance.

We note the importance of family attitudes towards non-attendance.

11. We recommend that the Ministry of Education develop a communications plan about the importance of regular school attendance targeted at families, community organisations (including early childhood education providers), and B4 School Check providers.

We support Māori solutions for Māori students.

12. We recommend that the Government further support and fund Māori-medium schools, mixed-medium schools, iwi organisations, and Māori Attendance Service providers.
13. We recommend that the Government's attendance strategy develop measures to effectively link schools with other social agencies and Māori providers.

We note the rise in chronic absenteeism. We do not believe prosecutions and sanctions are an appropriate response.

14. We recommend that the Government's school attendance strategy contain early intervention policies to prevent students from becoming chronically absent, and we recommend that Te Mahau be charged with leading this work.
15. We recommend that the school attendance strategy integrate early intervention strategies, chronic non-attendance and non-enrolment case management, and any redesign of the Attendance Service.
16. We recommend that the Government consider the outcomes of the Attendance Service trials in South Auckland and Kawerau, the Regional Attendance Plans, and the Innovation Unit project (with The Southern Initiative and Auckland Co-Lab) when redesigning the Attendance Service, including the implications for resourcing.
17. We recommend that any redesign of the Attendance Service aim to improve relationships between the Attendance Service and those providing early interventions.
18. We recommend that the Government's school attendance strategy include how the Ministry of Education and schools will engage with other agencies to address chronic non-attendance.

We recognise that some students would otherwise attend school full time, but face barriers due to disability or neurodiversity.

19. We recommend that the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the new Ministry for Disabled People, establish a mechanism for monitoring the number of students who do not regularly attend school full time because of their learning support needs.

20. We recommend that the Highest Needs Review proceed with a focus on increasing student attendance.

21. We recommend that the attendance strategy contain policies specifically targeted at increasing the attendance of students with learning support needs.

We note that COVID-19 has caused the widespread adoption of online learning.

22. We recommend that the Government proactively seek more feedback from teachers, students, and parents about whether they want online learning to become more common.

Introduction

Regular school attendance is the foundation of student achievement. Research by the Ministry of Education has found a direct relationship between attendance and achievement “especially at attendance rates over about 70 percent.”¹ Every day that a student misses school predicts a similar drop in achievement. There is little evidence of a “safe” level of non-attendance. Research has also found that even a few initial absences can reduce student engagement and lead to more frequent absence. This process can start as early as Year 1. Every day counts.

Despite its importance, we have observed a troubling decline in regular school attendance in New Zealand. Regular school attendance is defined as attending school on more than 90 percent of the half days schools are open. From 2015 to 2019, the percentage of students who attended school regularly fell 11.8 percentage points, from 69.5 percent to 57.7 percent. While we acknowledge the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously affected student attendance, it is not a factor in the decline noted above.

Research has found that it is never too late to increase attendance and achievement levels. Among students with low levels of attendance in Year 10, those with higher levels of attendance in Year 11 did better in NCEA.

Purpose and terms of reference

With the above issues in mind, we initiated an inquiry into school attendance on 7 July 2021. We recognise that the causes of non-attendance are complex. We recognise that solutions will require efforts on the part of students, families, schools, and the ministry. We hope that this inquiry will play a role in highlighting this issue and prompting much-needed change.

Our terms of reference were to:

- Investigate the long-term trends and determinants of student attendance, engagement, and non-enrolment over the last twenty years.
- Gain insights into societal, system, and demographic factors, and patterns of school-level practice that have been associated with improvements and declines over time.
- Identify examples of effective practice on the part of schools, and other actors where relevant, that have led to strong attendance and engagement outcomes or a turnaround in attendance and engagement trends.
- Identify potential strategies that could be used to increase attendance.
- Gain an understanding of the 2013 changes to the ministry-funded Attendance Service and the implications of these changes for attendance and engagement outcomes, and

¹ The ministry’s research *What is the relationship between attendance and attainment?* was a February 2020 paper in the *He Whakaaro: Education Insights* series.

what they have meant for schools, including through hearing from schools and other stakeholders.

- Make international comparisons on attendance rates and strategies used to successfully increase attendance.
- Provide findings and insights from the above to inform the development of the Government's Attendance Strategy.

Our process in conducting this inquiry

When we initiated this inquiry, we wrote to the Minister of Education requesting the appointment of Ministry of Education officials as advisers to the committee. We called for public submissions for two and a half months, with a closing date of 30 September 2021. We received 133 written submissions. Submissions represented a range of perspectives, including those of students, teachers, parents, families of disabled or neurodiverse children, iwi, Attendance Service providers, and non-governmental organisations.

The ministry presented us with an initial briefing on 20 October 2021. Between 20 October and 24 November 2021 we heard oral evidence from 55 individuals and organisations. Of these 55 oral submissions, 6 were made by people who we specially invited because they represented communities with high levels of school attendance or were recommended to us as experts.

In addition to the regular submissions process, we conducted an informal survey using the New Zealand Parliament Instagram account. The aim of this survey was to reach young people who may not otherwise engage with the formal submissions process. The survey posed questions about whether the respondent attended school regularly and factors that influenced attendance. Forty-nine responses were received. These responses are available on the Parliament website.²

The ministry presented us with a final departmental report on 15 December 2021. This report summarised and responded to the written and oral submissions that we received. (The results of our Instagram survey were not analysed by the ministry. However, they have informed our consideration and allowed us to hear directly from students.)

We wish to thank all submitters for their valuable contributions. Their responses have informed our report and the work of the ministry. We especially appreciate hearing from current school students, either through the formal submissions process or through our Instagram survey. We also wish to thank the Ministry of Education for providing advice, as well as Parliamentary Engagement staff for running our Instagram survey.

² The 49 responses are listed in the document titled *Parliamentary Engagement (School attendance inquiry alternative engagement Instagram campaign)*, which is available using [this link](#).

Chapter 1: Background

How attendance data is collected in New Zealand

Education (School Attendance) Regulations 1951 require schools to keep a daily record of attendance for all students.³ These regulations require schools to record attendance “every morning and every afternoon”. This is why school attendance is officially counted in half days.

A school attendance record contains a time period (in minutes) that attendance is being recorded for. Primary schools have two time periods (morning and afternoon), while secondary schools have up to ten periods a day. For each of these time periods, a student receives an attendance code. There are four categories of attendance codes: present (p), justified absence (j), unjustified absence (u), and exam leave (x).⁴

Justified absences include those due to short-term illnesses or another reason consistent with school policy, such as adverse weather events or representing a national sports team. Unjustified absences can be explained—but still unjustified—or simply unexplained (if a student is truant).

Schools submit attendance data to the ministry on a voluntary basis. Over 90 percent of state and state-integrated schools provide data to the ministry. Some of us believe that it should be compulsory for schools to submit attendance data.

The ministry conducts quality assurance checks on each file it receives, and asks schools to resubmit any files with errors. The ministry converts this data to half days and then calculates student attendance for the term, student attendance for a school, and the national headline figure for regular attendance.⁵

From the 1990s to 2010, the Ministry of Education collected attendance data using a week-long paper-based survey. In the 2000s, this survey was conducted in 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2009. The forms used were designed to minimise the burden on schools, so they do not provide the same detail as more recent datasets. Since 2011, the Ministry of Education has collected attendance data electronically, which has improved the response rate and coverage of schools.⁶

From 2011 to 2019, the ministry collected data from Term 2 of the school year. Since 2020, the ministry asks for attendance data from every term. We welcome this change, as it will

³ The Education (School Attendance) Regulations 1951 can be accessed using [this link](#).

⁴ Under these four categories, there are 26 attendance codes. These codes can be found on pp. 23-25 of the initial briefing.

⁵ For more information about how the ministry calculates these figures, refer to p. 48 of the departmental report.

⁶ For comparisons between 2002 and 2019 attendance levels, refer to p. 8 of the initial briefing.

allow for richer analysis of trends. Attendance data is published by the ministry on its *Education Counts* website.⁷

The legal requirement to enrol and attend school

The Education and Training Act 2020 is the main piece of legislation that establishes and regulates New Zealand's education system.⁸ Under this Act, school enrolment and attendance is both a right and a legal requirement.

Section 33 of the Act states that every domestic student is entitled to free enrolment and attendance at any state school "beginning on the student's fifth birthday and ending on 1 January after the student's 19th birthday."

Section 35 of the Act requires all domestic students aged between 6 and 16 years to be enrolled at a registered school (whether state, state-integrated, or private). Children aged 5 years old are not required to enrol, but once enrolled they must attend school.

Section 36 of the Act requires all students to attend school whenever it is open. Section 36 also places an obligation on school boards to take all reasonable steps to ensure all students attend school when it is open.

There are various exemptions to these obligations. They include when a student:

- is home schooled
- has been placed in residence or a programme under the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989
- participates in a secondary–tertiary programme
- has a wellbeing or transitional plan.

Section 48 of the Act allows state school boards to appoint an attendance officer to ensure the attendance of students enrolled at that school. Section 49 outlines the power of attendance officers and police constables to detain any person who appears to be absent from school.

Attendance officers are different from the Attendance Service. Attendance Service providers are contracted by the Ministry of Education, rather than by a school board. They therefore lack the powers outlined under Section 49.

Section 243 of the Act allows parents to be prosecuted and fined up to \$3,000 if they do not enrol their child at school. Similarly, Section 244 of the Act allows parents to be prosecuted if their child does not attend school regularly. The parent of a student who does not attend school is liable for a fine not exceeding \$30 for every school day that was missed. The fine may not exceed \$300 for the first offence or \$3,000 for the second offence.

⁷ Attendance data can be accessed on the *Education Counts* website.

⁸ The Education and Training Act 2020 can be accessed using [this link](#).

International comparisons of regular school attendance

One of our terms of reference is to make international comparisons of attendance rates so we know how New Zealand stacks up as a nation. Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States report attendance data using similar definitions to New Zealand, allowing us to make direct comparisons.

Australia reported 73 percent of students attending “at the attendance level” in Terms 1 and 2 of 2019, compared with 68 percent in New Zealand. Attending “at the attendance level” is comparable to New Zealand’s definition of regular attendance (more than 90 percent of half days). However, Australia’s data only reported on students in the equivalent of Years 2–11.

Canada uses the same definition of problem absence as New Zealand: 10 percent or more of school days in a year. Canada reported that 11 percent of Ontario primary school students did not attend school regularly in 2015/16, compared with 28 percent of students in New Zealand in 2016. Canada also reported that 10 percent of Newfoundland students were absent at least 10 percent of the time in 2016/17, compared with 37 percent of New Zealand students in Term 2 2017.

Ireland defines “persistent absence” as missing 20 days of school (roughly 11 percent of days available to primary school students and 12 percent for secondary school students). In Ireland, 88 percent of primary school students and 86 percent of secondary school students attended school regularly in 2017/18. In New Zealand, 67.3 percent of full primary school students and 56.9 percent of secondary students (Years 9–15) attended school regularly in 2018.

The United Kingdom defines “persistent absence” as missing 10 percent or more of school days. In the United Kingdom, 87 percent of students attended school regularly in the 2020/21 autumn school term. However, this figure excludes students who were absent due to COVID-19. In New Zealand, 51 to 64 percent of school students attended regularly in 2020, depending on the school term.

The United States defines “chronic absence” as missing 15 or more available school days in the year (roughly 8 percent of school days). In 2015/16, 84 percent of American students attended school regularly under the New Zealand definition. In 2015, 69 percent of New Zealand students attended regularly.

In these five countries, as in New Zealand, secondary school students attend school less regularly than primary school students.

Another source of attendance data is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). A 2018 PISA survey conducted in over 70 countries asked 15-year-old students how many days they had skipped school over a two-week period. In New Zealand, 29 percent of students reported skipping school on at least one day, compared with the OECD average of 21 percent.

Chapter 2: A decline in regular school attendance

Regular school attendance is defined as attending more than 90 percent of half days that a school is open. Levels of regular school attendance in New Zealand were largely steady from 2011 to 2015, before beginning to fall. They increased in 2020, which can be attributed to New Zealand ending its first COVID-19 lockdown in Term 2 of 2020. Attendance dropped again in 2021.

Figure 1: Percentage of New Zealand students who attended school regularly in Term 2 from 2011 to 2021

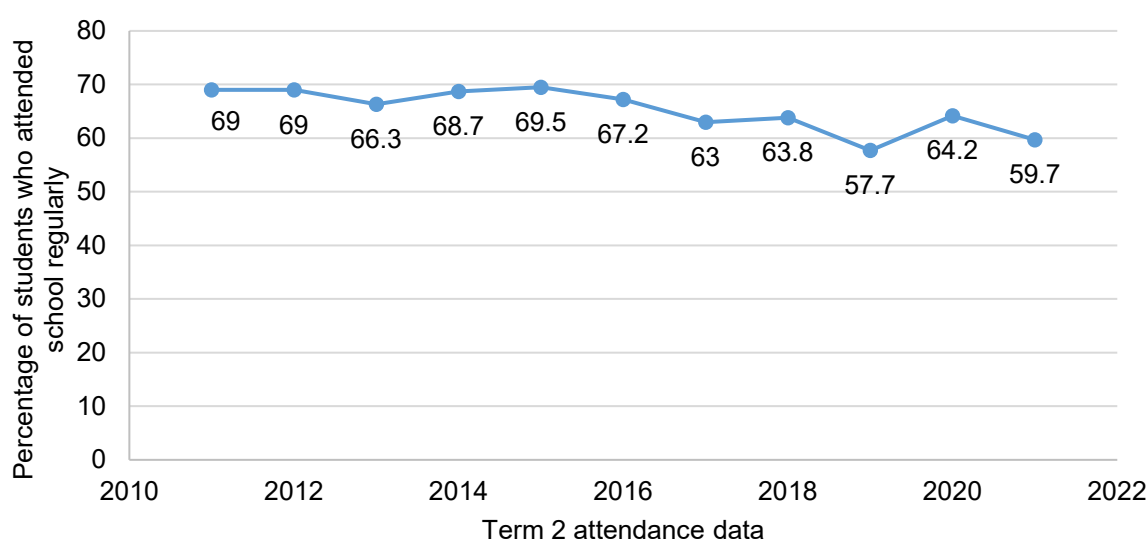


Figure 2: Percentage of New Zealand students who attended school regularly in Term 2 from 2011 to 2021 according to decile

The decline in regular attendance is most pronounced for lower decile schools.

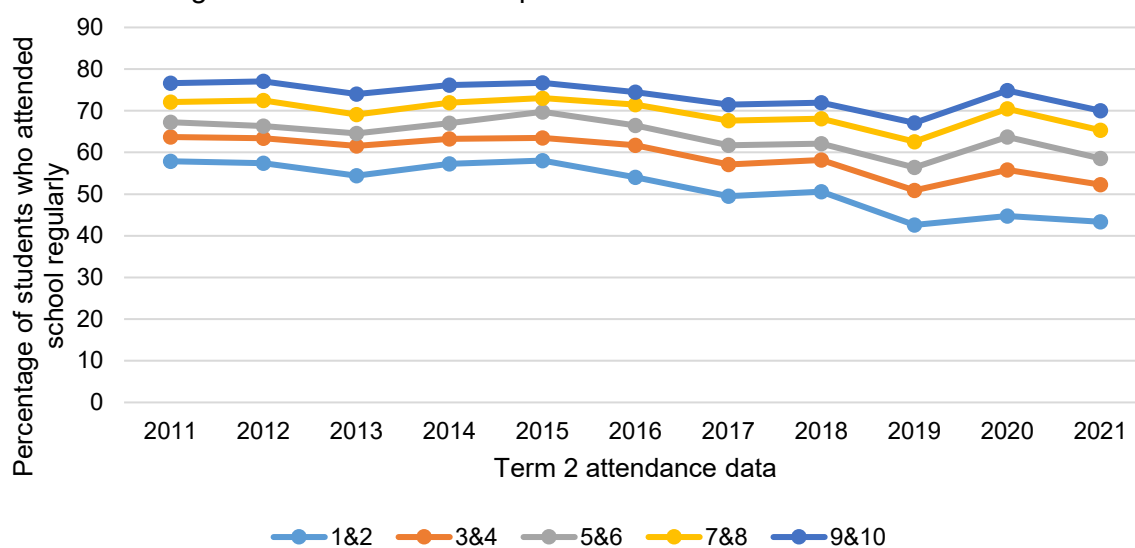


Figure 3: Percentage of New Zealand students who attended school regularly in Term 2 from 2011 to 2021 according to ethnicity

The decline in regular attendance can be seen across all ethnicities. However, the decline is greater for Māori and Pacific students (declines from 2015 to 2021 of 12.3 percent and 15.8 percent respectively, versus 10 percent for European students and 7.7 percent for Asian students).

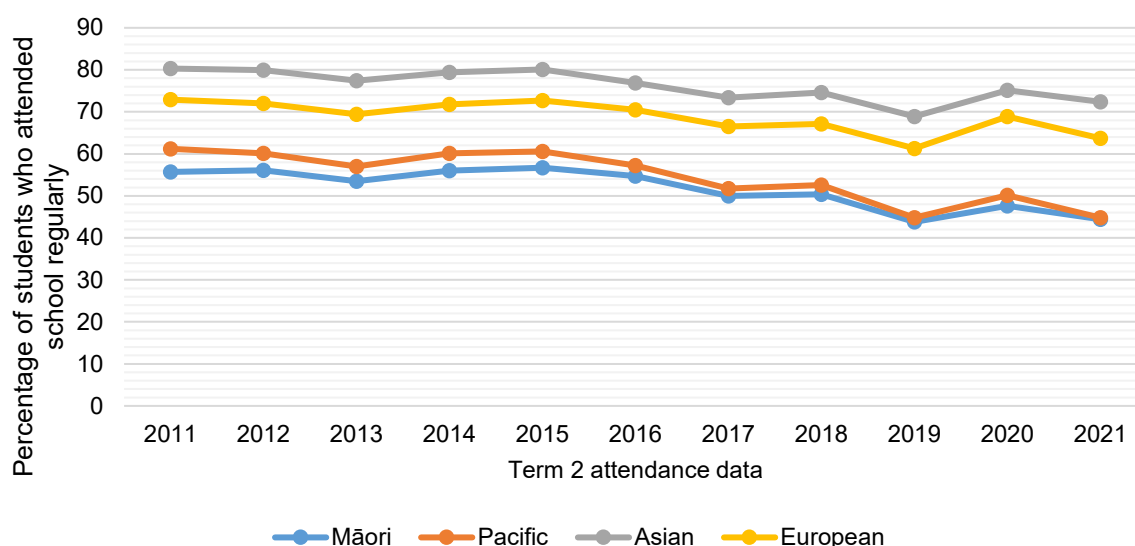
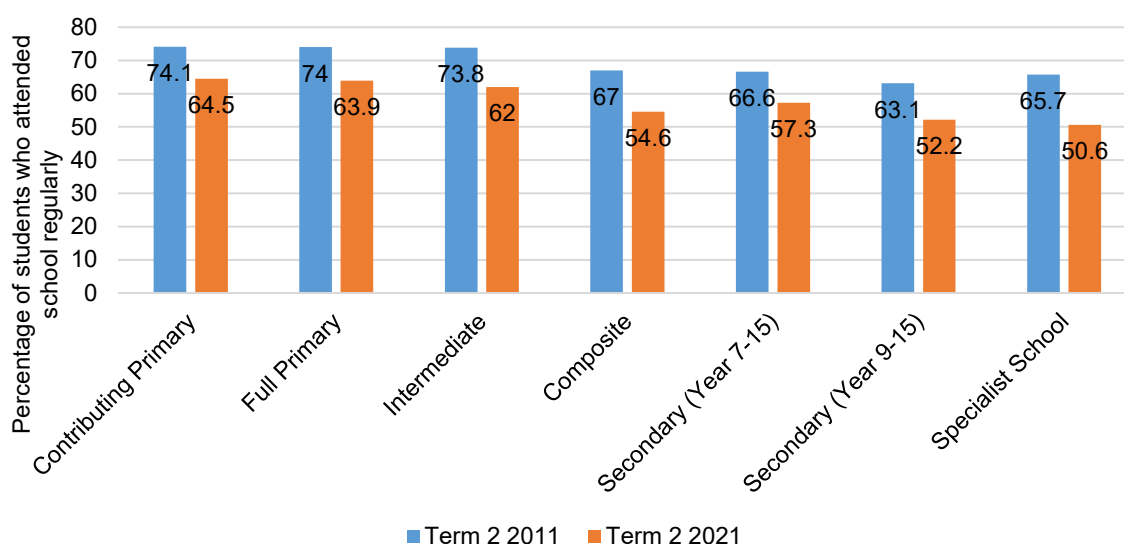


Figure 4: Percentage of New Zealand students who attended school regularly in Term 2 2011 compared with Term 2 2021 according to school type



Attendance decreases over the school term. Attendance is lowest at the end of school term, on days surrounding public holidays, and on Mondays and Fridays. In descending order, the most common forms of non-attendance are justified absences due to illness, unexplained or trivial absences, and other types of unjustified absences.

Recommendations 1–4

School attendance has fallen across the board in New Zealand. We consider this unacceptable.

1. We recommend that the Government prioritise the development and implementation of a school attendance strategy.
2. We recommend that this strategy should target an increase in regular school attendance across all school types and demographics.
3. We recommend that this target should be to achieve a sustained average of at least 70 percent of students attending school regularly by 2024 and 75 percent by 2026.
4. We recommend that all schools are formally notified of this target, encouraged to adopt it as a goal, and advised that it will continue to be monitored by the Education Review Office (ERO).

We want every single student in New Zealand to attend school every single day. However, we believe achieving a sustained average of at least 70 percent of students attending school regularly by 2024 is an appropriate goal.

To achieve this goal, there will be need to systemic change that supports improved attendance. We believe this goal is both realistic and would be a significant improvement on current attendance rates within a short two-year period.

If this goal is sustainably achieved by 2024 (or thereabouts) then a further goal of 75 percent of students attending school regularly by 2026 is also an appropriate objective. If this is achieved by 2026, then further goals to increase attendance and participation can be set at that time.

The rest of the Anglosphere (Australia, Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) has achieved—and surpassed—70 percent of students attending regularly.

We are aware that work is already under way by the Ministry of Education to develop a school attendance strategy. It will not have to begin the policy process from scratch following this report being published. The strategy can move quickly to implementation.

We want schools to be formally notified of this target. We want schools and communities to have this goal, and the reasons for it, at the forefront of their minds. It should be emphasised that this target is a minimum, and that all students should be attending regularly.

We will closely monitor the Government's progress in implementing an attendance strategy with great interest.

Chapter 3: Causes of, and solutions to, the decline in overall school attendance

The reasons for New Zealand's overall decline in regular school attendance are numerous, interrelated, and complex. They fall into two categories: societal factors that affect a student outside school, and factors that affect a student while at school.

Wider societal causes of non-attendance

Submitters identified many societal causes of non-attendance. They include housing affordability and transience, family violence, and poverty. Societal causes of non-attendance cannot be solved by the education sector alone. Nonetheless, it is important that we highlight these issues as contributing to a decline in regular school attendance and discuss what the education sector can do.

Ka Ora, Ka Ako

One way the education sector can mitigate societal causes of non-attendance is by providing free lunch to students. The Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy School Lunches programme aims to make nutritious food available to students, reduce the effects of food insecurity, and improve wellbeing. It was piloted in 2020 and expanded in 2021 to 215,000 students in response to COVID-19. The programme targets schools with students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The ministry has published its interim evaluation of the programme.⁹ The report assessed the early impact of the pilot programme against several measures: food availability, consumption, hunger reduction, wellbeing, and attendance. Evidence for the evaluation included weekly student food diaries from 38 schools, focus groups with school staff from nine schools, and attendance data from 87 schools. However, COVID-19 lockdowns limited data collection for the evaluation.

The evaluation of the programme found “large gains” for students who previously had insufficient food. These students, on average, felt 20 percent more full after lunch than they did before the programme. The most disadvantaged students also made “large gains” in their mental wellbeing. There was a statistically significant reduction in the proportion of students with low health quality of life. We are pleased that Ka Ora, Ka Ako has increased wellbeing and reduced hunger.

However, the evaluation did not detect statistically significant effects on attendance. The evaluation measured student attendance at the class level by collecting information from participating teachers. It also compared attendance data between schools that provided the programme and those that did not. We note that due to the timeframes of the evaluation,

⁹ The interim evaluation report of Ka Ora, Ka Ako can be accessed on the Ministry of Education's website.

most pilot schools only had data from the four to eight week period immediately after implementation.

We, and the ministry, have heard anecdotal feedback from schools that the programme is having a positive effect on attendance. A school submitted that the programme was a “game changer” for students with food insecurity. We understand that the ministry is commissioning a second evaluation of the expanded programme, which will examine attendance data from more schools over a longer period of time. It is intended that this evaluation will be completed by late 2022. We welcome this evaluation.

Some of us note that there were media reports in 2021 that many school lunches provided by the programme went to waste. Some of us believe that the money spent on healthy school lunches needs to be better targeted to support the children most in need and reduce unnecessary waste.

Recommendation 5

5. We recommend that the Ka Ora, Ka Ako Healthy School Lunches programme continue and that there is ongoing evaluation, including analysing the impact on attendance.

Free period products

Another societal cause of non-attendance is lack of access to period products. Research from the University of Otago found that 94,788 students aged 9 to 18 years may be unable to afford period products. They could therefore be staying home when they have their periods.

Beginning in 2021, all primary, intermediate, and secondary schools can opt in to access free period products.¹⁰ By June 2021, 1,619 schools had opted in to the initiative. Those schools are estimated to have almost 90 percent of the students who require period products. We are pleased that the Government is providing free period products to students. This will remove barriers for students to attend school and improve student wellbeing.

Recommendation 6

6. We recommend that the Government continue to provide free period products to schools and that there is ongoing evaluation, including analysing the impact on attendance.

Transportation

It is hard for some students to physically get to school. We recognise that, particularly for rural communities, a lack of public transport, parental work commitments, and unsafe roads can contribute to non-attendance.

¹⁰ Schools can opt in to the free period products programme by filling out [this online form](#).

Section 559 of the Education and Training Act allows the Secretary of Education to assist some caregivers with transportation. Assistance can take the form of a secured place on a bus or other vehicle, or payment to help meet transport costs. The ministry currently spends roughly \$200 million each year on school transport assistance. This assistance almost exclusively goes to rural communities.

We refer readers to our September 2021 report on the petition of Louise Clunie—Help our children reach school safely. That report closely examines the issue of transport for rural school children.¹¹

All-of-government focus on attendance

While schools can provide free lunches and free period products, they cannot solve problems such as housing transience. We recognise that an all-of-government approach is needed to meaningfully address the societal causes of non-attendance. We therefore want levels of regular school attendance to be at the forefront of the minds of policy makers and Ministers.

The Government has committed to a wellbeing approach that considers broad indicators of success, in addition to traditional measures such as gross domestic product. The Government and the New Zealand Treasury use the Living Standards Framework to guide their consideration of policy. Some of the outcomes the framework considers include disposable income, housing cost, levels of domestic violence, loneliness, and air quality.

We want the framework to also consider school attendance levels. We believe adopting this measure as part of the Living Standards Framework will prompt an all-of-government focus on attendance. Relevant budget bids and policy advice should consider school attendance levels.

We note that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet already uses “regular school attendance” as one of its five child poverty indicators. The other indicators are housing affordability, housing quality, food insecurity, and potentially avoidable hospitalisations. If the New Zealand Treasury were to also adopt “regular school attendance” as a metric, we believe it would strengthen an all-of-government focus.

Recommendations 7–8

7. We recommend that an all-of-government focus on increasing levels of regular school attendance, such as the work under way by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, continue to be developed.
8. We recommend that the Government adopt “levels of regular school attendance” as a measure of wellbeing under the Living Standards Framework.

¹¹ Our report on the petition of Louise Clunie can be accessed using [this link](#).

In-school causes of declining regular attendance

Unlike wider societal factors such as poverty and housing, the ministry and schools have direct control over in-school causes of declining regular attendance. We believe strong action can be taken to address the causes identified below.

Safe and inclusive learning environments

Many submitters pointed to a connection between safe and inclusive learning environments and levels of attendance. Nearly a quarter of submissions commented that schools are not inclusive or welcoming environments in general. Twenty percent of submissions said that schools were not inclusive for Māori and Pacific students, and 8 percent said that schools are not inclusive for LGBTQIA+ students.

Submissions spoke about how students can feel unsafe, alienated, and as if they do not belong. This can be caused by racism, bigotry, bullying, academic streaming, cultural competency, and teacher behaviours and attitudes. Submitters also pointed to inadequate school facilities, such as overcrowded classrooms, gendered bathrooms, bathrooms not being private enough, and modern learning environments.

Every part of the education system has a role to play in ensuring students feel safe and included at school. Foremost, schools are legally required to support students' wellbeing.

Section 127 of the Education and Training Act requires school boards to “ensure that the school is a physically and emotionally safe place for all students and staff; and takes all reasonable steps to eliminate racism, stigma, bullying, and any other forms of discrimination within the school”. The Statement of National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) is a statutory document under the Act that provides direction to schools. The very first priority of NELP is to “ensure places of learning are safe, inclusive and free from racism, discrimination and bullying”.

Schools have different approaches for achieving safe and inclusive environments. The ministry and the Office of the Children's Commissioner recently published a report called *Our Kind of School*, which examined the common features of healthy school environments.¹² These features were:

- knowing and meeting the needs of each student
- strong and respectful school leadership, which lays the foundation for a positive culture
- a commitment to tikanga and te reo Māori
- connecting with families and the wider community
- valuing and celebrating all staff and students
- quick and effective responses to bullying incidents.

The findings of this report echo what we heard from schools that have achieved high levels of regular attendance. We want to see all schools embody the above ideals.

¹² *Our Kind of School* can be accessed using [this link](#).

Initiatives are already under way to support safe and inclusive school environments, including the provision of mental health resources and the promotion of the Positive Behaviours for Learning suite.

We note that the ministry has recently introduced Te Mahau, formerly called the Education Service Agency. Te Mahau has regional offices organised into three frontline groups in the North, Central, and South areas. Through Te Mahau, the ministry can provide targeted regional support to develop local solutions and share good practices among schools.

For example, in Wairoa, Te Mahau has facilitated regular education forums. These have been attended by the director of education, local government, Te Kura, the Wairoa deputy mayor, local iwi, local principals, and other community representatives. These forums have resulted in the implementation of a police education programme, more effective communication between schools and Oranga Tamariki, and plans from public service leads and principals to support student attendance.

We endorse Te Mahau as a vehicle to foster healthy school environments in collaboration with local communities. We believe that solutions to non-attendance have to be embedded in the wider community, co-designed with schools, and linked up with other agencies and services. We want Te Mahau to continue to facilitate local solutions to non-attendance.

Recommendations 9–10

9. We recommend that the Government continue to emphasise and engage with schools on the importance of the National Education and Learning Priorities.
10. We recommend that the Government support Te Mahau to continue to facilitate local solutions to non-attendance.

Teacher pedagogy and practices

Some submitters told us that teacher pedagogy and practices affect students' engagement and ultimately attendance. Some submitters discussed teacher pedagogy and practices as they relate to Māori and Pacific students and students with learning support needs. Some submitters acknowledged that teachers have large workloads and large class sizes. This makes it difficult for teachers to support the individual needs of students.

Newly trained and existing teachers are currently being supported to strengthen teaching pedagogy and practice. In 2019, the Teaching Council made changes to the compulsory programmes for teaching graduates. Teaching graduates must learn content about culturally responsive teaching, inclusive teaching, local curriculum design, and how to teach students with additional learning needs.

The ministry provides professional learning and development (PLD) to the existing teaching workforce. PLD is available in the areas of cultural and inclusive capability, local curriculum design, assessment for learning, Mātauranga Māori, te reo Māori, and digital fluency. Other foundational PLD programmes include Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities and the Better Start Literacy Approach.

The ministry also supports teachers to share best practice through networks of expertise.

Student wellbeing and mental health

More than half of the submissions we received identified student wellbeing and mental health as a barrier to regular school attendance. Submitters particularly focused on how societal factors worsen mental health challenges. In-school factors such as bullying were also seen to exacerbate poor mental health. Some submitters observed that mental health challenges are particularly prevalent among disabled, LGBTQIA+, Māori, and Pacific students.

Submitters identified anxiety as a large cause of non-attendance. Some submitters believed the rise in non-attendance is in part driven by students taking mental-health days. Students may get in stuck in a cycle where they skip school due to anxiety, which only serves to worsen their anxiety. One submitter considered current funding for guidance counsellors insufficient. They cited increased school rolls, increased counselling caseloads, and the needs of students becoming increasingly complex.

Responding to moderate to severe mental health problems is an all-of-government issue that largely sits outside the education sector. Within the education sector, a range of supports exist.

Secondary schools receive funding from the ministry to hire counselling and guidance staff. This funding is part of the broader staff funding each school receives. It is up to each school to decide how it uses its overall funding to best meet the needs of its students. The ministry has published guidance about the provision of pastoral care, guidance, and counselling.

Mental health education is part of the New Zealand Curriculum. The ministry is developing guidance to support the delivery of mental health education. It expects to release this guidance in 2022.

Over 1,000 schools have implemented the Positive Behaviour for Learning system. This is a whole-of-school approach towards promoting student wellbeing by changing the systems and practices used.

The 2020 Wellbeing Budget allocated \$31.8 million over four years to increase guidance staffing entitlements for large secondary schools from the beginning of 2021. The Budget allocated \$44 million to contract local community organisations to provide counselling services for some primary, intermediate, area, and small secondary schools. The Budget also funded curriculum leads (wellbeing), who have started working in schools to help teachers plan and teach mental health and healthy relationship programmes.

The New Zealand Curriculum

Nearly a third of submitters identified the school curriculum as contributing to non-attendance. Many commented that the curriculum felt irrelevant, rigid, or crammed. Submitters wanted students to have more input in curriculum development. Submitters wanted greater emphasis on life skills such as cooking, digital safety, sewing, and budgeting. We also heard calls for civics education and greater education around sexuality, climate,

drugs, and alcohol. Finally, students wanted to see a pathway to employment from what they were learning.

Over the next five years, the Ministry of Education will be refreshing the New Zealand Curriculum. The refresh is intended to provide a greater sense of what academic progress looks like. It is intended to provide clarity about the learning that students should experience across the curriculum. As part of this refresh, the ministry will be consulting students, teachers, families, iwi, and businesses. The ministry will also be introducing curriculum leads to help teachers make sense of the national curriculum so that they can design learning that is appropriate for their students.

School hours

Some submitters identified early school hours as a barrier to regular school attendance. They expressed concern that traditional school start times for secondary schools do not reflect research on teenage sleep patterns. Some submitters said that as students they were tired in the morning and preferred to start school later in the day. Some research shows that flexible school hours are believed to accommodate learning needs for neurodiverse students and students who are employed.

Under the Education and Training Act, schools have some flexibility to determine the start time of half days (subject to some procedural requirements). We are aware of several secondary schools that have start times of 9am or later on certain days. The Act also allows a school to run multiple timetables concurrently. This allows for different approaches for junior and senior students, for example. We welcome the flexibility the Act allows and recommend that schools consider whether they should have later starting times.

Family and societal attitudes towards regular attendance

Families play a key role in their children's attendance. Some submitters raised the problem of parentally sanctioned absences. This includes parents organising holidays during the school term. One submitter believed that some parents think it is fine to skip school "to go snowboarding on a Friday", for birthdays, because the child played video games all night, or because there are cheaper flights in the school term. Submitters suggested that there needs to be a proactive approach that promotes regular school attendance, similar to public health messaging.

We are heartened by submissions from communities that have achieved high levels of regular school attendance, often because they work closely with families. We believe that success stories should be promoted. The ministry currently facilitates conversations between schools around best practice and shares success stories online and through the *Education Gazette*. We believe that it could produce communications aimed at families.

We encourage families to treat regular school attendance as an utmost goal and refrain from scheduling holidays during the school term.

Recommendation 11

11. We recommend that the Ministry of Education develop a communications plan about the importance of regular school attendance targeted at families, community organisations (including early childhood education providers), and B4 School Check providers.
-

Māori students

In Term 2 2019, 43.8 percent of Māori students attended school regularly, compared with 61.3 percent of European students and 68.9 percent of Asian students. The factors that we have identified as contributing to non-attendance disproportionately affect Māori students and whānau. From societal causes such as poverty and housing, through to in-school causes like bullying and racism, Māori suffer disproportionately. This is unacceptable.

Submissions from iwi social services and Māori organisations discussed the importance of tino rangatiratanga and Māori–Crown partnerships. They also emphasised the importance of supporting Māori students within the context of their whānau, hapū, and iwi. We heard requests for more resources and support for iwi-led solutions in local communities. Finally, these submissions talked about the wider education system shifts that are needed, including strengthening the Māori and Pacific education workforce and supporting a localised curriculum that reflects the identity of Māori students.

We believe that our recommendations in this report will go some way towards increasing Māori levels of school attendance. Nonetheless, as a Treaty partner, the Crown has a duty to actively promote and protect Treaty rights and develop education settings that reflect Māori–Crown relations. We support uniquely Māori solutions for Māori students. These include iwi service providers and Māori-medium schools.¹³

Recommendations 12–13

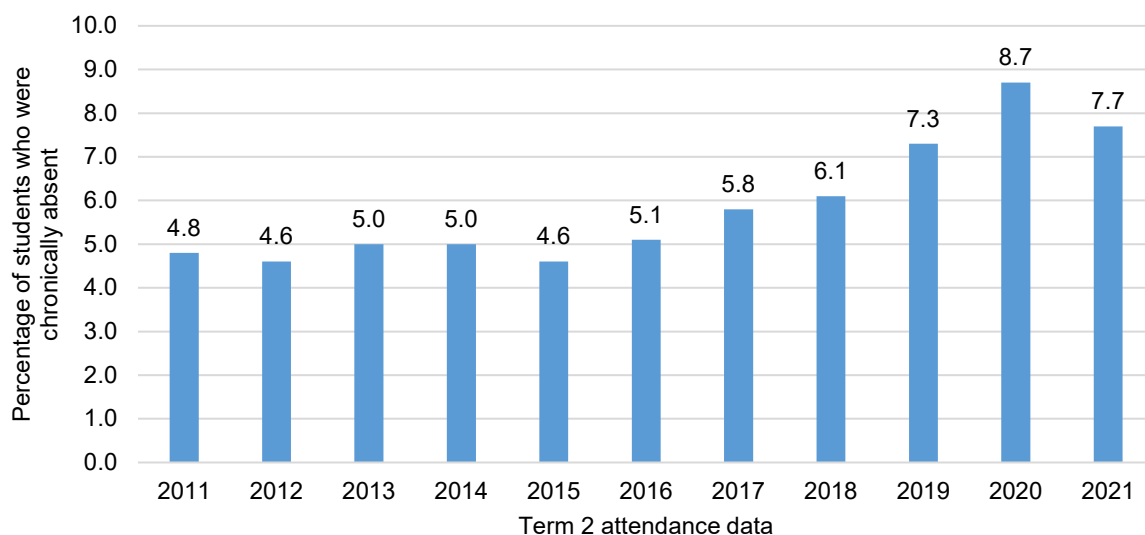
12. We recommend that the Government further support and fund Māori-medium schools, mixed-medium schools, iwi organisations, and Māori Attendance Service providers.
 13. We recommend that the Government's attendance strategy develop measures to effectively link schools with other social agencies and Māori providers.
-

¹³ A history of Māori medium schools was published by ERO in July 2021, and can be accessed using [this link](#).

Chapter 4: More students are chronically absent

An increasing number of students are chronically absent, which is defined as attending less than 70 percent of half days that a school is open. This is the equivalent of missing more than three full days of school every fortnight. From 2015 to 2020, the percentage of students who were chronically absent nearly doubled to 8.7 percent. In absolute terms, 64,877 out of 742,000 enrolled students were chronically absent in Term 2 2020.

Figure 5. Percentage of New Zealand students who were chronically absent (attending 70 percent or less of available school days) from 2011 to 2021



Students who are chronically absent usually have unexplained or unjustified absences. Frequent absences can emerge early in a student's life and begin with occasional absences. These students are more likely to become educationally disengaged, not achieve qualifications, and experience poor long-term social and economic outcomes.

What we heard from submitters

We recognise that reasons for chronic non-attendance can be highly individualised. However, many submissions identified common societal causes. These included lack of transport, family violence, material deprivation, poor housing or homelessness, and mental health issues in the home. We heard that some students are often absent to care for siblings or to work part-time jobs to provide for their families. The ministry also identified parents' own experiences of school and parentally sanctioned absences as contributing factors.

We acknowledge and empathise with the economic hardship many students and families face. We understand the difficulty of achieving regular school attendance when struggling to meet other basic needs.

Some submitters identified the need to rectify poor attendance early, before it becomes entrenched. Some submitters said that students who are chronically absent in high school never attended primary school regularly. The Attendance Service was seen as coming into the picture too late, when the focus should be on early prevention and establishing the foundations for regular attendance.

Some submitters discussed the importance of strong links between schools, social and health services, and other supports for students who are chronically absent. Services need to provide coordinated, wrap-around support. Some submitters noted that where wrap-around services exist, they are often ad hoc.

Finally, submitters requested better in-school counselling and mentoring programmes, stronger alternative education programmes, and better support for students moving to other government agencies (such as the Ministry of Social Development when a student turns 16 and is unlikely to return to school).

The role of prosecution and school absences

As outlined in Chapter 1 of this report, parents can be prosecuted and fined if they do not enrol their child at school or ensure the child's regular attendance. However, prosecutions are currently the last resort in New Zealand. They are used only when all previous interventions have failed and when unexplained absences are persistent and appear to be condoned by a parent.

Charges against a parent can be filed by an attendance officer, a principal, the Secretary for Education, or any other person appointed by the school board or the Secretary. Generally, schools conduct prosecutions for non-attendance and the ministry reimburses costs. The ministry itself prosecutes for non-enrolment.

Prosecutions are extremely rare and have been for some time: from October 1989 to 1993, there were only three. The rarity of prosecution is most commonly attributed to the cost involved and doubts about the effectiveness of a punitive approach.

Of the three prosecutions for non-enrolment since 2016, two were withdrawn after the child was enrolled. The other resulted in a conviction and fines of \$50 per parent plus court costs. In a 2017 case, a mother of two children was convicted for their persistent absence but discharged without penalty. The judge who decided the case said that a monetary penalty would be counterproductive.

Figure 6: Number of prosecutions for non-attendance and non-enrolment 2016-2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Number of prosecutions for non-attendance	2	1	1	1	0	5
Number of prosecutions for non-enrolment	0	2	0	1	0	3
Total	2	3	1	2	0	8

What we heard from submitters

Prosecution was recommended as a strategy to combat non-attendance by five submitters (4 percent of total submissions). These submitters believed that prosecution is necessary in some cases where all other attempts to increase attendance had been exhausted. Some submitters recommended that the ministry should be responsible for prosecutions, as opposed to individual schools. One submitter recommended fines for absences due to holidays during a school term (similar to the United Kingdom).

We also heard from submitters who were opposed to prosecution as a strategy to increase school attendance. These submitters believe that a punitive approach would not engage hard-to-reach families and is unlikely to address the underlying causes of non-attendance. Some submitted that prosecution could compound the causes of non-attendance and undermine the relationships between parents and schools.

The United Kingdom as a case study

The United Kingdom has a wider range of sanctions related to non-attendance than New Zealand does. This range of sanctions includes parenting orders (a civil procedure), infringement or penalty notices (instant fines), and criminal prosecution.

In 2003, fixed penalty notices (instant fines for certain offences) were introduced in England and Wales to make it easier for local authorities to sanction parents. Parents are ordered to pay a fixed penalty of £60. If not paid within 21 days, the fine increases to £120. If the fine is not paid after 28 days, prosecution can follow.

In 2013, absence for holidays was classified as an unauthorised absence. This dramatically increased the number of penalty notices issued. In 2018, it was reported that 400,000 penalties had been issued in England over the previous three years.

The use of sanctions for non-attendance has been criticised in the United Kingdom. Richer parents are able to pay the fines, while poorer parents end up being prosecuted because they lack the money to pay the initial £60. Further, the number of parents taking their children on holiday during the school term increased despite it being unlawful. Richer parents were not deterred by the £60 fine—they were able to offset the cost since travel is cheaper during the school term.

Our view of prosecution

We view prosecution and sanctions as ineffective tools to address non-attendance. We do not want to see their widespread use. We do not want more parents drawn into the criminal justice system. Increasing the use of sanctions would especially hurt parents of disadvantaged children. We share the Government's concern about the scale of debt of low-income families. We do not want to add to this debt and exacerbate hardship. We view the Attendance Service as a better mechanism through which to address chronic absences.

Some of us believe that prosecution for persistent non-attendance is appropriate for the most egregious cases. We believe that the possibility of prosecution is one way of emphasising to parents their legal responsibility to ensure that their child attends school.

The Attendance Service

The Attendance Service is a national service that works with schools to manage attendance. Schools refer students to the Attendance Service for a variety of reasons. They include consecutive days of unjustified absence, intermittent absence (such as skipping every Friday), or absences at certain times of the day. Schools refer students to the Service using the Attendance Service Application (ASA).

The aim of the Service is to achieve a sustainable return to school for students who are chronically absent. Students referred to the Attendance Service face complex problems. They are more likely to be transient between schools, require learning support, or be stood down, suspended, or excluded. Other agencies such as the Police and Oranga Tamariki are likely to be involved.

It can be time consuming to resolve the issues these students face. Often, they have already had interventions from other government services. Many live rurally where social services are limited and inaccessible. The Attendance Service works closely with schools, families, and other social services to address the root causes of non-attendance. Each Attendance Service tailors its approach based on local knowledge of the community. The Service can refer students to iwi and other government services to address underlying issues that are identified.

A history of the Attendance Service

In the early 1990s, schools were concerned about non-attendance and a lack of resources to follow up on serious cases. The Government responded by funding community and school truancy programmes. In 1996, the Non-Enrolled Truancy Service (NETS) was established to return non-enrolled students to school. In the same year, the District Truancy Services (DTS) were established to support schools with student non-attendance.

These services were evaluated in 2009. This evaluation was prompted by increasing non-attendance, non-attendance emerging earlier (in Year 9 and 10 rather than 11), and the prevalence of mental health issues in students. In 2010, it was agreed that DTS and NETS would be combined to address what was seen as a fragmentation of truancy and non-enrolment management. In 2013, the new Attendance Service was introduced nationwide. The establishment of the Attendance Service was accompanied by a significant reduction in the number of contracted providers.

Referrals to the Attendance Service have increased since 2014. As shown in Figure 7, more students are referred to the Service for unjustifiable absence and for non-enrolment:

Figure 7: Number of students referred to the Service for unjustifiable absence and non-enrolment, 2014-2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Students referred to the Service for unjustifiable absence	9,742	9,915	10,854	10,276	10,815	10,591	9,357

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Students referred to the Service for non-enrolment	7,738	7,223	7,504	9,076	10,276	10,105	10,960

The 2020 decline in referrals for unjustifiable absence was due to COVID-19.

The majority of students that are referred to the Attendance Service for unjustified absence end up back at school. In 2020, 57 percent of students returned to school with active involvement from the Service and 12 percent of students returned to school with minimal or no contact with the Service. However, 16.5 percent of unjustified absences ended up unresolved.¹⁴

The students whose absences go unresolved become non-enrolled referrals to the Service. It was expected that the integration of NETS and DTS into one service would allow for early intervention and reduce the number of students who are non-enrolled. This has not been achieved.

The increase in referrals, the complex nature of issues faced by students, and a capped budget have placed pressure on the Attendance Service. The Service did not receive any ongoing funding increases from 2013 to 2019, except for a one-off cost pressure adjustment. Budget 2019 provided additional funding of \$1.4 million over three years. Budget 2021 provided \$4.68 million over 2021/22 and \$5.353 million in out years. For 2021/22, the Attendance Service budget is \$15,010,000.

In 2021, the Attendance Service was provided through 22 contracts with nine schools, six iwi/Māori organisations, and seven non-government organisations (NGOs). In 2022, the Attendance Service will be provided through 46 contracts with 25 schools, 11 iwi/Māori organisations, nine NGOs, and one to be finalised.

What we heard from submitters

Submitters held a range of views about the Attendance Service.

Some submitters favoured moving the Service closer to schools, while others were concerned that if one school controlled the Service it could reduce others' access. There were different views about who should be funded or contracted to deliver the service (schools, community providers, iwi, or other organisations).

Some submitters criticised the effectiveness of the Service, noting that it was difficult to form relationships between schools and the Service. This affected whether a school would make referrals. Frequent repeat referrals were also identified as a problem.

Similarly, some submitters believe that the current structure of the Service makes it difficult for relationships to be formed with chronically absent students. People who work for the

¹⁴ These percentages have been largely the same since 2015. For exact breakdowns of the outcomes of unjustified absence referrals, refer to p. 27 of the initial briefing.

Service are previously unknown to the students and their family. They do not stay in contact once the case is closed.

One of the key performance indicators in the Attendance Service contract is that 65 percent of referrals are closed within four weeks. Some submitters felt that clashed with the aim of achieving a sustainable return for students.

The Service was seen as underfunded and under-resourced. At current funding levels, the Service was seen by submitters as being subsidised by the contract holder, schools, and communities.

Some submitters said that there is a lack of cohesion between local interventions and the Attendance Service. Achieving coherency between the two can require a lot of additional work from the local community. We heard from submitters that in instances where the Service has succeeded, there is close collaboration between providers, government agencies, schools, and the local community.

The Attendance Service is being redesigned

In 2019, the Associate Minister of Education requested that the ministry explore new ways of delivering the Attendance Service. The ministry is currently redesigning the Attendance Service with a focus on managing and resourcing it closer to schools.

Part of this redesign is a trial in Kawerau and South Auckland. The ministry worked with schools in these areas to co-design approaches to delivering the Attendance Service based on local knowledge. In the South Auckland trial, the Service has been split into two work streams. The first is for students who are unjustifiably absent and the second is for students who are not enrolled at school. We note that this is a similar structure to what existed prior to 2013, where NETS focused on non-enrolled students and DTS focused on unjustified absence.

Phase one of the redesign was completed in December 2021. Phase two will be completed in December 2022. This phase will determine how the Service will be delivered in the long term. It will consider the trials in Kawerau and South Auckland, consultation with schools in other geographic regions, and recommendations from this report.

Early intervention

Chapters 2 and 3 of this report have made recommendations aimed at achieving an overall increase in school attendance. Those recommendations are aimed at all students. We hope those recommendations will go some way towards preventing chronic non-attendance. However, we recognise that they are unlikely to be enough. Chronically absent students require targeted, intensive interventions. We view the Attendance Service as the primary vehicle to achieve these interventions.

There needs to be early intervention for students who have the potential to become chronically absent. These students need a level of support above what schools can provide on their own, but they do not yet need to be involved with the Attendance Service.

We would like to see Te Mahau fill the gap between what schools are doing to boost regular attendance and what the Attendance Service is doing to address chronic non-attendance.

Our response and recommendation

We endorse the redesign of the Attendance Service. We believe that the Service works best when it is embedded in the community and responsibility is devolved to the lowest levels. Individual communities know best how to reach students. In this respect, most of us see the 2013 reforms as having been a backwards step. It is now being reversed. We want localised solutions and service providers. We believe that the Service redesign needs to connect with other interventions in the school attendance strategy in order to meaningfully address chronic non-attendance. The implications for resourcing need to be considered.

Recommendations 14–18

14. We recommend that the Government's school attendance strategy contain early intervention policies to prevent students from becoming chronically absent, and we recommend that Te Mahau be charged with leading this work.
 15. We recommend that the school attendance strategy integrate early intervention strategies, chronic non-attendance and non-enrolment case management, and any redesign of the Attendance Service.
 16. We recommend that the Government consider the outcomes of the Attendance Service trials in South Auckland and Kawerau, the Regional Attendance Plans, and the Innovation Unit project (with The Southern Initiative and Auckland Co-Lab) when redesigning the Attendance Service, including the implications for resourcing.
 17. We recommend that any redesign of the Attendance Service aim to improve relationships between the Attendance Service and those providing early interventions.
 18. We recommend that the Government's school attendance strategy include how the Ministry of Education and schools will engage with other agencies to address chronic non-attendance.
-

Chapter 5: Disability, neurodiversity, and learning support needs

Some students who are disabled or neurodivergent face barriers to attending school for all hours that the school is open. This is despite Section 34 of the Education and Training Act 2020, which states that “students who have special educational needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol, attend, and receive education at State schools as students who do not”. Similarly, under the Human Rights Act 1993 it is illegal for schools to exclude due to disability, unless the student requires special services or facilities that cannot reasonably be made available.

What we heard from submitters

We are troubled that 37 percent of submitters mentioned that schools are not inclusive for disabled students, neurodiverse students, and students with learning support needs (including gifted students).¹⁵ Bullying has contributed to some disabled students not feeling safe in school. Submitters also noted that teachers’ behaviour and attitudes affected student engagement and their sense of inclusion.

One submitter noted that modern learning environments can be exclusionary for disabled students. Many neurodiverse students find these spaces overwhelming and do not attend school as a result.

Many submitters believe that disabled students are inadequately resourced. Submitters told us that mainstream schools are often unable to support the full time attendance of disabled students. Some submitters told us that due to constraints, schools resort to the use of stand-downs, suspensions, exclusions, and expulsion. These mechanisms harm student attendance and wellbeing.

The Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS), which provides specialist support for students with the highest ongoing needs, was seen as limited. Submitters said that parents often fill the resourcing gap. We heard that parents are being expected to support toileting, respond to behavioural issues or incidents, act as teacher aides, and medicate students.

Submitters called for more equitable distribution of resources based on actual costings. Submitters wanted better data collection about disabled students and their academic achievement. Some submitters wanted a mechanism to review decisions made about support for disabled children. There were calls to make professional learning and development non-voluntary, as some teachers decline training for disability skills. Finally, submitters noted their preference to include disabled students in mainstream schooling, as opposed to sending them to specialist schools.

¹⁵ Some of the disabilities that were identified by submitters include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dysgraphia, autism spectrum disorder, auditory disabilities, and visual disabilities.

Current support for students with learning support needs

The Education and Training Act 2020 states that students with “special education needs (whether because of disability or otherwise) have the same rights to enrol, attend, and receive education at State schools as students who do not”. The ministry can require schools to enrol students under certain conditions.

There is currently \$1.1 billion in yearly funding to provide learning support services. Learning support is available at different levels according to need. Universal learning support includes practices and systems for all students, educators, and families, in all learning environments. An example is the Positive Behaviour for Learning school-wide framework. Targeted learning support offers more focused approaches for students, educators, and families, such as the provision of braille materials for blind learners. Individual learning support is intensive support for individual learners with the most significant needs.

In early 2017, the learning support delivery model was piloted. It is now in place across New Zealand. The model provides a structure for schools, early learning services, service providers, and other agencies to work together. They are able to share information and resources and decide who is best placed to provide support to students.

The Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025 was published in 2019.¹⁶ This plan examined all aspects of the learning support system and committed to a range of actions. One of the plan’s priorities is to improve education for children and young people at risk of disengaging. The plan builds on the learning support delivery model.

As part of the plan, the ministry is undertaking a review of the support available to students with the highest needs (roughly 50,000 to 80,000 students). It expects to make recommendations to the Government by the end of 2022. The goal of the review is to achieve wrap-around services for high-needs students.

Our response and recommendation

We hear the voices of submitters who said that they face unfair barriers due to disability and neurodiversity. And, despite existing laws and policies aimed at ensuring all students can attend school, we believe more needs to be done.

We are disappointed that attendance data does not currently capture instances where students do not attend full time because of their high needs. We need to establish the full extent to which students with learning support needs are being excluded.

We welcome the ministry conducting a review into students with the highest levels of learning support needs. However, we also believe there needs to be a focus on students with milder levels of learning support needs. We want to move away from limited, specialist learning support services and towards a more universal, inclusive offering that recognises that every child has some form of learning need.

¹⁶ The Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025 can be accessed using [this link](#).

Recommendations 19–21

19. We recommend that the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with the new Ministry for Disabled People, establish a mechanism for monitoring the number of students who do not regularly attend school full time because of their learning support needs.
 20. We recommend that the Highest Needs Review proceed with a focus on increasing student attendance.
 21. We recommend that the attendance strategy contain policies specifically targeted at increasing the attendance of students with learning support needs.
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Chapter 6: COVID-19 and online learning

We heard from submitters that COVID-19 has exacerbated factors that contribute to non-attendance and added new factors. Students' wellbeing is suffering due to heightened anxiety and stress. Families are wary of sending children to school. Sadly, some children are being forced out of school and into work to support their families.

Data from the ministry shows that primary school attendance has suffered most due to COVID-19, particularly for students in Years 1 and 2. COVID-19 appears to have also worsened existing inequities in school attendance, particularly in Auckland and for Māori and Pacific students.

In October 2021, the Government announced a package of immediate support for Auckland students totalling \$15 million. This package included targeted support for a range of schools, the Attendance Service, and other providers to facilitate the return of students to learning.

Two-thirds of schools have told the Education Review Office that they intend to retain some elements of online learning and increase the use of digital technology in their curriculum and delivery. This will be important because there will likely be an ongoing need to support students who cannot attend school in person, including those who may have mild symptoms of COVID-19 and those required to self-isolate.

Some submitters viewed online learning as a positive experience that they wanted to continue. Submitters enjoyed the flexibility online learning offered, including the ability to control how the day was structured, when they did school work, and what school work they focused on.

The advent of widespread online learning provides an opportunity to reconceptualise what is meant by attendance. While we believe most students should be attending school in person, we recognise that some schools may wish to offer some online learning in the future. We welcome further consultation with schools, students, and families about how they view online learning.

However, we are mindful of a digital divide, where students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds cannot access digital technology and miss out on their full education. Any move towards more regular online learning must be coupled with adequate provision of devices, stable internet connections, and alternative learning environments for students whose homes do not provide such a space.

The ministry is currently assessing the role of online learning and blended education in the schooling system and is developing guidance.

Recommendation 22

22. We recommend that the Government proactively seek more feedback from teachers, students, and parents about whether they want online learning to become more common.
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Concluding remarks and summary

Attendance and achievement are directly related. The current levels of regular school attendance across all demographics are unacceptable. They have been trending in the wrong direction for many years. We have recommended that the Government aim to achieve a sustained average at least 70 percent of students attending school regularly by 2024.

The causes of non-attendance are complex and diverse. We have recommended that the Government develop and implement a school attendance strategy that reflects this complexity and the varied responses required for intervention to be effective. Many causes are wider societal issues that cannot be addressed solely by the education system. We recognise the need to lower child poverty levels and improve housing affordability in order to improve school attendance levels.

We consider that the Ministry of Education is well placed to address causes of non-attendance. We believe that solutions to non-attendance must be embedded in the wider community, co-designed with schools, and linked up with other agencies and services. We have recommended Te Mahau as an appropriate vehicle to facilitate local solutions to non-attendance.

We have also observed the disturbing increase in the proportion of students who are chronically absent. We do not believe that sanctions and prosecutions are appropriate tools to deal with this problem. Instead, we view the Attendance Service as best placed to provide the intensive wrap-around support that chronically absent students need. We have recommended that the redesign of the Attendance Service is integrated into the school attendance strategy.

We note that there is a role for accountability and high expectations, but an approach that focuses overwhelmingly on punitive measures, and blaming rather than supporting schools, is unlikely to succeed. We note that one of the themes of this report is that there are a wide variety of circumstances grouped together in the area of attendance, which may require a range of solutions.

Separate from the overall decline in regular school attendance and the increase in chronic absences, students with disability and neurodiversity face unique barriers to school attendance. We have recommended that the Government's attendance strategy contain specific measures to increase regular attendance of students with learning support needs.

COVID-19 has forced near universal adoption of online learning. Some submitters viewed online learning as a positive experience that they wanted to continue. We have recommended that the Government seek more feedback from teachers, students, and parents about whether they want online learning to become more common.

We will be closely monitoring levels of regular school attendance. At future annual review hearings with the Ministry of Education we will be asking for updates on the attendance

strategy. We await the Government's response to our report with great interest and a sense of urgency.

National Party differing view

The National Party has high expectations around school attendance. We want every child to attend school regularly. As this report notes, there is no “safe” level of non-attendance.

The direct link between achievement and attendance is thoroughly documented by international and domestic evidence. Our steady decline in both over recent years should have alarm bells ringing.

Given regular attendance is a child poverty indicator in the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, the Government should monitor attendance closely. Where attendance levels are concerning, there must be greater accountability and follow up action to support improved attendance levels.

The significant widening of the gap between attendance at decile 1 and 10 schools over the past decade is concerning. In 2011 the difference was 21 percent. By 2021 this widened to 31 percent, with decile 10 schools averaging 71.7 percent regular attendance and decile 1 schools 40.9 percent. National believes the education system should deliver for all children regardless of their family circumstances. It is deeply troubling poor attendance is exacerbating educational inequalities. Education is one powerful tool we have to provide all children equal opportunities. Our attendance crisis, however, is robbing children of the powerful academic and social benefits an education provides.

It is clear from the submissions that significant change is required to how multi-agency wrap-around support for families of chronically truant children is delivered. While we welcome an all-of-government approach, we also believe one Minister should be accountable to the Parliament for school attendance. However this report makes no mention of which Minister this is.

We do not believe the 70 percent regular attendance target by 2024, as this report recommends, is ambitious enough when children’s futures are at stake. In recent times New Zealand’s regular attendance has been nearly 70 percent and we note 70 percent is already the current budget target. In the short term, a 75 percent target is more realistic and achievable. If we set our targets too low, we are accepting a level of educational inequality that will mean too many children are unable to reach their full potential.

National’s firm view is we should aspire for every child to attend school regularly in the long-term. Regular attendance is the only way we, as policy makers, can assure ourselves children can make the most of the full opportunities a great education can provide.

Rather than another strategy, National wants to see actual resourcing, actions and policies that drive a relentless focus on attendance throughout the education system. Ultimately turning around the current attendance crisis is the first step to turning around the deterioration in our students’ achievement that has been well document and threatens the future prospects of our children.

To this end, National would:

- require schools to submit attendance data to the Ministry of Education every term, and publish each school's overall attendance rate for each term online
- ensure the Ministry of Education is properly enforcing schools' legal obligations to record and monitor attendance and work to improve it
- set all schools a target in the longer term for every student to attend at least 90 percent of available school time each term after 2024
- require any school where fewer than 80 percent of students meet the 90 percent attendance target over two consecutive terms to develop and implement a truancy plan, to be signed off by the Ministry of Education
- require any school where fewer than 50 percent of students meet the 90 percent attendance target over two consecutive terms to hire a specialist truancy advisor who will be tasked with lifting attendance
- prioritise the youngest students to break the cycle of non-attendance.

Appendix A: Procedure

Committee procedure

We met between 7 July 2021 and 16 March 2022 to consider this inquiry. We called for public submissions with a closing date of 30 September 2021. We received 133 written submissions from the organisations and individuals listed in Appendix B. We heard oral evidence from 55 submitters.

Committee members

Marja Lubeck (Chairperson)
Chris Baillie
Camilla Belich
Hon Paul Goldsmith (until 8 December 2021)
Jan Logie
Jo Luxton
Ibrahim Omer
Angela Roberts
Penny Simmonds (from 8 December 2021)
Erica Stanford

Advice and evidence received

The advice and evidence we received for this inquiry is available on the [Parliament website](#).

Recordings of our hearings

Our hearings for this inquiry can be viewed on the Parliament Vimeo website using the following links:

[20 October 2021](#)

[27 October 2021](#)

[10 November 2021](#)

[17 November 2021](#)

[24 November 2021](#)

Appendix B: Submitters

List of submitters

The following individuals and organisations made a written submission on this inquiry.

Adolescent Health Research Group	DT
Alanna Bruce	E P
Alison Leversha	Enua Rule
Annabelle Fawcett	Erin Palmer
Annie Wu	Fay Brorens
Anonymous 1	FPW
Anonymous 2	Freemans Bay School
Anonymous 3	Gary Wills
Anonymous 4	Gerardine Matafeo-Solia
Ashleigh Putt-Fallows	Giarna O'Hagan
Ayla Standley	Hapai te Hauora
Bays In Action	Heather Bramwell
Benjamin Beamsley	Helen Kinsey-Wightman
Bernardine Vester	Hilary Stace
Boyd Swinburn	Howick Attendance Cluster
Carolyn Stewart	Identify Survey
Catherine Murupaenga-Ikenn	IHC
Centre for Longitudinal Research - He Ara ki Mua	Inclusive Education Action Group Incorporated
Charlize Camerino	InsideOUT Koaro
Cheryl Vallance	Invercargill District Attendance Advisory Group (IDAAG)
Child Advocacy NZ Main	Iszak Tuala
Child Poverty Action Group	Izzy Horrocks
Co-Design Lab, The Southern Initiative	Jim Matheson
COMET Auckland	Jim McTamney
Craig Atkinson	Joanne Dacombe
David Butler	Joanne Taylor
Debbie Hamer	John Barker
Dr Delia Baskerville	

John Kirkland	Otago Youth Wellness Trust
Josh Harford	Otahuhu College
Josiah Tualamali'i	Parents of Vision Impaired NZ
Justine Vandenberg	Pat Harrison
K M	Patricia Boston
Kaeo School	Patricia Gill
Kaipatiki Community Facilities Trust	Peter Wolf
Kevin O'Carroll	Piper Mejia
Kirsten Mackay	Porirua College
Law for Change Otago	Porirua East Kahui Ako
Learning Differences Aotearoa Trust	Public Health Nurses, Hawkes Bay
Learning Disabilities Association of New Zealand	Rachel McCarten
Leonard Restall	Rebecca Liddell
Leroy Brown	Rebekah Corlett
Lewis Sawyer	Richard Thornton
Libelle Group Ltd	Rudi Easthouse
Lifting Literacy Aotearoa	S George
Michaela Pinkerton	Sam Denley
New Zealand Association for Gifted Children	Samuel Tuala
New Zealand Blue Light	Sandra Jennins
New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists	Sarah Aska
Nga Roera Kaitiaki O Te Ture Kooti	Sarah-Kay Coulter
Ngapuhi Iwi Social Services	Sean Brownlow
Nicholas Bowden	Shannon Hennig
Nicola Standley	Shelley Curreen
Nivara Johnston	Shirin Brown
NZ Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) Te Wehengarua	Silas Zhang
NZEI Te Riu Roa	Social Hazards Committee, Justice and Peace Committee, Catholic Diocese of Auckland
NZSTA	Sue Johnson
Office of the Children's Commissioner	Sue Peacock
Otago Primary Principals Association	Talking Trouble Aotearoa NZ
	Te Ora Hou Otautahi Inc

Te Runanga o Ngati Whatua	Toby Lambert
Te Waiariki Pūrea Trust	Tui Williams
Te Rata Boldy	Vaughan Sarah
Terry Gentle	Villa Education Trust
Thalia Rutherford	VIPS Equity in Education
The Opportunities Party	Will Flavell
The Otara Papatoetoe Youth Council (TOP Squad)	Will Mark
	Zoe Musgrove

The following individuals and organisations only made an oral submission:

Henry Hill School	Rangikura School
Missy Morton	Te Kura o Te Hau Karetū
Newtown Primary School	

Appendix C: Attendance levels raw data

	Percentage of students who attended school regularly in Term 2										
Decile	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
1	57.2	57.7	53.5	55.8	57.3	52.8	46.9	47.6	40.7	41.1	40.9
2	58.5	57.1	55.3	58.7	58.8	55.3	52.1	53.5	44.5	48.4	45.8
3	62.6	61.7	60.0	62.4	61.2	60.1	55.4	56.1	48.8	53.3	49.9
4	64.8	65.2	63.1	64.1	65.8	63.4	58.9	60.2	53	58.3	54.6
5	66.3	66.3	64.7	66.3	70.5	68.2	62.5	62.4	56.8	63.5	59.1
6	68.2	66.3	64.4	67.7	69.0	64.8	61	61.8	56	64	58.1
7	70.3	71.9	67.8	71.8	72.4	70.3	66.6	66.5	61.2	69.1	63.7
8	73.9	73.0	70.4	72.1	73.7	72.6	68.6	69.7	64	71.8	66.9
9	75.2	76.0	73.1	75.2	76.3	74.5	70.4	71.4	66.3	74	68.3
10	78.0	78.1	74.9	77.1	77.1	74.5	72.5	72.5	67.9	75.7	71.7
Ethnicity	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Māori	55.7	56.1	53.5	56	56.7	54.7	50	50.4	43.8	47.6	44.4
Pacific	61.2	60.1	57	60.1	60.6	57.2	51.7	52.6	44.8	50.1	44.8
Asian	80.3	79.9	77.4	79.4	80.1	76.9	73.4	74.6	68.9	75.1	72.4
European	72.9	72	69.4	71.8	72.7	70.5	66.5	67.1	61.3	68.9	63.7
School type	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Contributing Primary	74.1	73.9	70.8	73.2	74.4	71.7	67.2	67.7	60.1	67	64.5
Full Primary	74	73.7	71.5	73.4	74.1	71.6	67	67.3	60.6	67.7	63.9
Intermediate	73.8	73	70.8	73	73.6	71.2	66.3	67.5	60	65.7	62
Composite	67	65.7	58.6	61.3	64.8	60.2	58.4	57.5	54.9	59.8	54.6
Secondary (Year 7-15)	66.6	67.8	63.5	66.7	66.7	64.6	60.7	62.2	57.3	64.7	57.3
Secondary (Year 9-15)	63.1	62	59.3	60.9	61.1	59.3	55.4	56.9	52.4	58.5	52.2
Specialist School	65.7	64.6	58.6	63	64.6	60.1	56.1	55	50.8	56.7	50.6
All schools	69	69	66.3	68.7	69.5	67.2	63	63.8	57.7	64.2	59.7