



Changing attitudes to attendance:

Five good practices



GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE



EDUCATION REVIEW OFFICE
Te Tari Arotake Mātauranga

October 2025



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Raising attendance!

Five good practices

ERO looked at practices that shift student attendance. This framework tool sets out five evidence-based practices that make a big difference – and the extra boost that comes from making attendance a schoolwide priority.

Key to student attendance is...

1 Student belonging

Promote student belonging by:

Assigning roles and responsibilities

→ Consider positions and duties that students need to be at school to do.

Supporting students to feel connected to their teachers

→ Show students that teachers are people they can talk to.

Supporting students to feel connected to their peers

→ Find ways to use groups, activities, and events to build social connections.

Tackling bullying

→ Use proven whole-school strategies to prevent bullying – not just respond to it.

2 Clear expectations

Set clear expectations by:

Communicating clear and consistent expectations with students

→ Explain to students why their attendance matters and how absences can impact their futures.

Communicating clear and consistent expectations with parents and whānau

→ Show parents and whānau how every day matters for their child's achievement.

Keeping parents and whānau informed of their child's attendance

→ Share ongoing attendance information so parents and whānau can support their child proactively – not only once it's a problem.

3 Practical supports

Provide effective practical supports by:

Deciding on practical supports based on school-specific data and evidence

→ Find out about specific barriers to attendance and focus on those.

Monitoring the impacts of practical supports

→ This helps school leaders understand whether their support is working.

4 Rewards

Use rewards effectively by:

Setting realistic and increasing targets

→ Reachable targets are more motivating than ones that feel too aspirational too soon.

Rewarding students collectively

→ Recognise classes or year groups to help build a collective sense of ownership.

5 Patterns of closures

Minimise the impacts of school closures on attendance by:

Selecting days and times that minimise disruption to students' routines

→ Tuesdays and Thursdays aren't best, as they lead to extended weekends. Half-day closures can also result in full-day absences.

Communicating information about closures to parents and whānau as early as possible

→ This helps ensure transport, childcare arrangements, etc., can be put in place.

Also! An end-to-end approach

We can sustain improvements to attendance by taking an end-to-end approach.

→ This is about prioritising attendance relentlessly across the school, every day. Great attendance is everybody's business!

More info:


Want more detail, including evidence-based strategies and stories? Check out our full good practice guide here at evidence.ero.govt.nz





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Introduction to this good practice guide

Regular attendance is essential for students to get the most out of school. Lifting attendance is a ‘whole of society’ challenge, but school leaders and teachers play an important and powerful role. The Education Review Office looked at the evidence base and at what leaders and teachers are doing across the country. This guide sets out the most effective actions schools can take to improve attendance – by focusing on the things that have the most impact.

What does this guide cover?

When students are in classrooms as expected, their achievement, wellbeing, and lifelong outcomes are much higher. The more students attend, the more they achieve. Irregular attendance has long-lasting effects on learning because the impact of absence builds over time.

ERO, from the report *Back to class – How are attitudes to attendance changing?* (2025)

Attendance is closely linked to academic achievement in both primary and secondary schools. The more students attend, the better they perform, including gaining more NCEA credits. Even missing just two days per term can lower their achievement. Students who are otherwise engaged still miss vital learning when absent.

Schools that do the best at lifting and maintaining attendance are aspirational and focus deliberately and relentlessly on improving attendance. ERO’s report *Back to class: How are attitudes to attendance changing?* found out what schools in New Zealand do that has the biggest impact.

This good practice guide focuses on *doing what works*. It outlines the most effective strategies in New Zealand, that are successfully raising attendance.

Who is this guide for?

The Government has set a target that 80 percent of students will be present for more of 90 percent of the term by 2030. This guide is intended to support school leaders, school boards, and classroom teachers to reach this goal.

How to use this guide

Schools are taking a range of actions to improve attendance. To support schools this guide sets out five good practice areas, which have had proven success in New Zealand schools:

- 1) student belonging
- 2) clear expectations
- 3) practical supports
- 4) rewards
- 5) patterns of closures.

It also sets out case studies of schools that have effectively put in place an end-to-end approach.

This good practice guide is supported by findings from the ERO's national review *Back to class: How are attitudes to attendance changing?* and acts as a companion resource. You can find the report here: <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/back-to-class-how-are-attitudes-to-attendance-changing-research-report>.

This guide links to the Ministry of Education's guidance to schools on attendance

Everyone has a role to play in improving attendance — schools, parents, and Government agencies — and new rules and systems are being introduced to make responsibilities clearer.

From Term 1 2026, all schools will be required to have an Attendance Management Plan. These plans aim to improve student attendance by providing clear pathways to identify and address student absences. When developing and implementing Attendance Management Plans, schools will need to align to the Stepped Attendance Response (STAR) guidance issued by the Ministry of Education. The STAR framework outlines actions at absence thresholds (see the table below), and promotes school-wide approaches to strengthen attendance culture, improve attendance data quality and use, enable timely support and escalation points, and help schools identify what works and which areas need improvement.

Green (0–4 days missed):	School follows up on absences with parents.
Yellow (5–9 days):	School meets with parents to make a plan.
Orange (10–14 days):	Support from external services may be needed.
Red (15+ days):	The Ministry may step in, including legal action if necessary.

The practice areas outlined in this guide give proven examples of strategies that can be used as part of the requirement to report on 'how we respond' to attendance.

What is regular attendance?

The current definition for regular attendance is an attendance rate of more than 90 percent. This means a student would miss fewer than five days a term. The Government has set a target of 80 percent of students attending school regularly by 2030. This guide is focused on actions schools can take to increase regular attendance. This guide does not cover actions schools can take for students who are chronically absent – advice on this is in ERO's 2024 report *Left behind: How do we get our chronically absent students back to school?*



Summary of key practices

PRACTICE 1: STUDENT BELONGING

We can promote student belonging by:

- 1) assigning roles and responsibilities
- 2) supporting students to feel connected to their teachers
- 3) supporting students to feel connected to their peers
- 4) tackling bullying.

PRACTICE 2: CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

We can set clear expectations by:

- 1) communicating clear and consistent expectations with students
- 2) communicating clear and consistent expectations with parents and whānau
- 3) keeping parents and whānau informed of their child's attendance.

PRACTICE 3: PRACTICAL SUPPORTS

We can provide effective practical supports by:

- 1) deciding on practical supports based on school-specific data and evidence
- 2) monitoring the impacts of practical supports.

PRACTICE 4: REWARDS

We can use rewards effectively by:

- 1) setting realistic and increasing targets
- 2) rewarding students collectively.

PRACTICE 5: PATTERNS OF CLOSURES

We can minimise the impacts of school closures on attendance by:

- 1) selecting days and times that minimise disruption to students' routine
- 2) communicating information about closures to parents and whānau as early as possible.

AN END-TO-END APPROACH

We can sustain improvements to attendance by taking an end-to-end approach. This is about prioritising attendance relentlessly across the school, every day.

1 *Student belonging*

The evidence is clear that supporting students to feel connected to school has the biggest impact on student attitudes to daily attendance.

Why does student belonging matter?

Students' sense of belonging and connectedness to school is critical for attendance, so promoting belonging should be a key part of any attendance plan. This connection is well documented in international research as well as ERO's national review. When students feel part of a school community, they are more likely to show up, engage, and succeed. A decreased sense of belonging is linked to lower motivation, increased anxiety, and early school dropout. For students from low socio-economic backgrounds, in particular, a sense of belonging is one of the stronger predictors of attendance.

In ERO's review, we found that relationships are one of the strongest motivators for students to go to school. Students often referred to friendships, peer interactions, and social opportunities as motivators for attending school. This is especially important for secondary students, because this is a time when they are particularly focused on their identity and social place.

“Having a strong community helps you want to be part of it. And when you want to be part of it, you're going to be there, you're going to show up, you're going to do the right things. It's just mostly what pushes me forward is the community and having small form groups where we all know each other quite well.”

STUDENT

DID YOU KNOW?

In New Zealand, of all factors tested, belonging has the biggest impact on student attitudes towards the importance of school for their future. Students are over five times more likely to report school is important for their future if they feel they belong.

How can we promote student belonging?

The evidence is clear, to help students feel like they belong, school leaders and teachers can:

- 1) assign roles and responsibilities
- 2) support students to feel connected to their teachers
- 3) support students to feel connected to their peers
- 4) tackle bullying.

Assigning roles and responsibilities

Students can feel a sense of belonging at school for a range of reasons. One way that students can feel connected to their school is by having a role or responsibility that they need to be there to do. This can include holding leadership roles like prefects, or responsibilities such as road patrol or showing visitors around the school. Students with roles and responsibilities want to attend school to fulfil their duties. Leadership roles that require attendance thresholds can be motivating for students who want them. We found that students with roles and responsibilities want to attend school because they feel pride in fulfilling their duties – they don't want to let anyone down. For example, we heard from a student with previously poor attendance, who was motivated to attend when she became a school prefect.

“I was given a lot of leadership responsibilities, people started coming up to me to ask me for help, and now I am a prefect, and I don't want to be a prefect that doesn't come to school.”

STUDENT

DID YOU KNOW?

Students in New Zealand are almost twice as likely to think daily attendance is important if they have a role or responsibility at school. Students are also more likely to report that their attitudes to daily attendance have improved in the last year if they have a role or responsibility.

Promoting students' connection to teachers

The relationship between students and someone on staff at school is another crucial part of their sense of belonging. Ensuring that students have a positive relationship with their teachers or another adult at school has a significant impact on attendance. We heard that students are more likely to attend if they feel that their teacher will notice if they are absent. Alternatively, conflict with a teacher can disrupt a student's sense of belonging and impact attendance negatively. Form classes and homeroom groups provide a good opportunity for students to form connections with teachers. Teachers can also improve students' attitudes to

attendance by showing an interest in students' attendance patterns. We heard from students that they felt more accountable when a teacher they respected followed up on their attendance and showed concern.

“The teachers will have one-on-one talks with you if they understand what’s going on... made me feel better. And that made me come to school a bit more.”

STUDENT

Promoting students' connection to their peers

ERO found that most students (80 percent) report that seeing and spending time with their friends makes them want to go to school. While these relationships occur naturally for many students, this is not always the case. There are steps that teachers and school leaders can take to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to make these connections. Encouraging students to participate in extra-curricular activities and groups is one way to help students maximise their connections. Building social learning activities into the school calendar can also help. School events such as sports days or performing arts events provide structures that help students to connect with others. Having some events or group activities that run across a range of year levels is another way that students can broaden their social connections within the school.

“Before, I wasn’t interested in coming to school. Since I’ve had this class, school wasn’t a place to be bored anymore, I got to get to know a group of students each morning, we weren’t friends before but now we all go out to dinner together. I started to want to come to school to see them.”

STUDENT

Tackling bullying

A significant barrier to belonging is bullying – this directly affects students' sense of belonging. Students who experienced bullying behaviour felt less accepted at school and reported enjoying school less. Tackling bullying is critical so that attendance is not impacted by students feeling unsafe at school.

DID YOU KNOW?

13 percent of students reported wanting to miss school because they get bullied or picked on.

Effective schools tackle bullying by taking a consistent, whole-school approach that includes several key actions. They ensure that staff, students, and the wider community share a clear understanding of what constitutes bullying, and that policies and practices are consistently applied. These schools also strengthen their

use of data – collecting, analysing, and evaluating bullying incidents and prevention strategies to understand what works and where support is needed. Students are actively involved in shaping prevention efforts through leadership roles and student-led initiatives, which helps build a positive school climate. Additionally, effective schools engage parents and whānau proactively, not just in responding to incidents, but in working together to prevent bullying and promote wellbeing.

What does this look like in practice?

Real-life example: Assigning roles and responsibilities

This medium size, urban intermediate school serving a low socio-economic community puts a strong focus on student roles and responsibilities. Students are given opportunities to lead and contribute, such as becoming cultural leaders, monitors, or house representatives. One student shared that being a leader makes them feel responsible to show up: “I’ve got to be there that day because I can’t let people down.” Another student proudly mentioned wearing their ‘Cultural Leader’ badge. Matching roles to students’ interests and strengths is especially motivating for attendance.

This small, urban area school is strengthening student belonging and improving attendance by giving students meaningful roles and responsibilities. Students are also involved in organising and participating in sports events, which are closely tied to attendance expectations.

Other roles are more age specific. In the junior school, Year 6 students become PAWS leaders – Physical Activity Leaders – who run games for younger children, helping them feel connected and valued.

“We’ve just set up PAWS leaders, which is your physical activity leaders. So that gives them something to look forward to – the Year 6 leaders supplying games for the younger kids.”

TEACHER

Senior students are given the opportunity to take part in a coffee club, where they train as baristas and serve staff, which helps build pride and their relationships with teachers.

“I like making coffee. I make coffee for teachers... Students get trained up on how to make coffee... and then teachers have coffee orders.”

STUDENT

Real-life example: Supporting students' connection to peers

This small, rural secondary school has created a morning form class for their students with chronic lateness. This class is staffed by a teacher and focused on providing a time and space for the students to connect with an adult and other students at the start of each day. The teacher takes time to understand their unique challenges and supports them to deal with these. The 14 students enrolled in this class are also supported to form connections with each other and to see themselves as part of a group. The students are also encouraged to engage more widely with the school and there is a strong focus on creating cultural connection.

The meeting space for this morning class is equipped with a small kitchen and the school reached out to a local business to provide breakfast. Students know they can arrive at school and immediately have something to eat. This first hour of every day provides students with a safe space and support to gradually transition, sometimes from a challenging home environment, into the rhythm of school. There have been significant shifts in these students' attendance patterns, which is helping to lift regular attendance at the school.

This medium size, urban primary school uses the Zones of Regulation framework to help students recognise and manage their emotions, which in turn reduces behavioural incidents and supports positive peer relationships. Teachers explained that “we’re explicitly teaching interpersonal skills, reflections on how we’re feeling and how our responses impact others and ourselves,” and that “kids are learning... they’re all using the same language, they’re all using the same terminology.” One teacher noted:

“The progression of that is first of all noticing how you’re feeling, how that might have an impact on others and yourself, and your learning and your relationships, and then what can I do about it?”

TEACHER

Students themselves described how this approach helps them “go into a quiet place” or “ask our teacher if you can just go on a walk or something, like take one of your friends,” when they need support. By equipping students with tools to regulate their emotions and resolve conflicts, the Zones of Regulation contribute to a safer, more inclusive environment – factors that encourage regular attendance and strengthen students' sense of belonging at school.

The Zones of Regulation is an internationally recognised, evidence-based framework designed to help children and adults develop self-regulation skills – meaning the ability to understand and manage their emotions, behaviours, and sensory needs.

The programme uses a simple, colour-coded system to categorise emotions and states of alertness into four zones:

- **Blue Zone** (low states like sadness or tiredness)
- **Green Zone** (calm, focused, ready to learn)
- **Yellow Zone** (heightened states like stress, frustration, or excitement)
- **Red Zone** (extreme emotions such as anger or panic).

Real-life example: Supporting students' connection to teachers

This medium size, urban secondary school, serving a low socio-economic community uses 'whānau rooms' (homerooms) for Year 9 students. Each student is placed in a small group with a dedicated teacher who remains a consistent point of contact throughout the year. This structure is designed to ensure that every student has at least one trusted adult at school – someone who knows them, notices when they're absent, and can check in when issues arise.

“Having a teacher who gets you helps you feel safer and more willing to come to school, even when things are hard.”

STUDENT

Both staff and students report that these relationships make a difference, especially for those who might otherwise feel lost in the transition to secondary school. Students say having “a teacher who gets you” helps them feel safer and more willing to attend, even when other challenges make school difficult. Parents also remark on the value of these connections for their child's attendance.

“It's definitely about connection for students, but also teachers. That's my biggest thing. That's building connection with students... that's what keeps us coming.”

PARENT

Reflective questions:

- How do we know whether individual students are feeling like they belong and are connected to our school community? Who is responsible for monitoring this?
- How might we take action to support isolated students to connect with their peers?
- How might we better use roles and responsibilities more purposefully to maximise students' motivation to be at school?
- How can we support teachers and other staff to grow relationships with students that enable students to feel a sense of belonging?
- Can we identify where bullying is a barrier to attendance and address it?

2 Clear expectations

Setting and communicating clear expectations about attendance targets has a significant impact on improving attendance patterns.

Why do clear expectations matter?

Establishing clear expectations supports student engagement and attendance. Messaging from school leaders and teachers set the scene for how students, parents and whānau think about attendance. We found that students who feel like their school expects them to attend regularly are also more likely to view daily attendance as important for their future. This is true for both primary and secondary school students and parents.

DID YOU KNOW?

When schools set clear expectations about regular attendance, **parents** are twice as likely to view daily attendance as important for their child's future.

How can we set clear expectations?

To lift regular attendance through setting clear expectations, school leaders and teachers need to:

- 1) communicate clear and consistent expectations with students
- 2) communicate clear and consistent expectations with parents and whānau
- 3) keep parents informed of their child's attendance.

Communicating clear and consistent expectations with students

Students respond well to explicit teaching about the impacts of absence over time. It's important to make sure students understand the reason for attendance monitoring and why the school takes it so seriously. This could include clearly explaining to students how one-off absences build up over time, which helps them to understand the importance of daily attendance. Schools can also motivate students by showing how absenteeism has lifelong impacts, like earning lower income. We heard students clearly articulate why they need to attend school and how they are making an effort to attend more regularly.

DID YOU KNOW?

When schools set clear expectations about regular attendance, **students** are more than twice as likely to view daily attendance as important, and to see school as important for their future.

“If you miss one week of school each year it adds up to significant numbers... I didn’t think it would be that many days... [It makes me think] there’s not really a point to take a day off school just because I’m tired.”

STUDENT

Students also respond well to seeing their own attendance data in relation to a set target. Once they understand what the goal is and why, they are motivated by seeing exactly where they are in relation to that goal. Schools that perform well on attendance are communicating this information to students at every level, at every opportunity. Teachers reinforce messaging in their classrooms, and school leaders reinforce messaging through events like school assemblies.

Communicating clear and consistent expectations with parents and whānau

Parents and whānau need to know about the impacts of absences so that they don’t write off occasional absences as unimportant. Expectations are most effective when they are explained as part of a broader purpose, such as preparing students for work, or contributing to a team or whole school attendance goal. Providing evidence about the impact of absences on lifelong outcomes is also valuable for students, parents and whānau to understand *why* attendance is important.

ERO also found that parents report increased belief in the importance of daily attendance when school messaging clearly explains the legal obligations of parents to ensure their child attends school. Some parents report that they would like clearer guidance on what warrants a ‘sick day’ – they sometimes report conflicting messages from school leadership and classroom teachers.

Schools can reinforce attendance expectations through messaging on school websites, newsletters, and social media. Another way schools do this is through direct, targeted engagement with parents themselves. This happens at parent information evenings, at school drop-offs and pick-ups, and through follow-up phone calls about recent student absences.

“Family could see the impact that it had... 80 percent means missing (nearly) a quarter of classes.”

SCHOOL LEADER

“There is relatively good communication with us about attendance, achievement, learning success, and strong links between attending school and achievement success are regularly reinforced, through newsletters and social media. I believe that the school is doing everything possible to encourage positive attendance patterns.”

PARENT

DID YOU KNOW?

In New Zealand, parents report feeling less comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school due to school messaging around the importance of attendance. Since 2022, the proportion of parents who are comfortable for their child to miss a week or more of school has decreased by 10 percentage points.

Clear expectations

Keep parents informed of their child's attendance

Parents appreciate early and proactive communication when attendance issues arise. Parents of secondary students might not know when their child has missed classes. Information from the school reduces guesswork and helps parents have informed conversations with their child. Some parents respond best to formal letters from the school, while others said the regular attendance reports, regardless of concerns, helps them understand patterns and avoid surprises.

Detailed weekly reports create a sense of accountability and help parents be proactive. Seeing a drop in their child's attendance *before* a formal letter arrives, gives them a chance to address it early. Attendance apps can also provide daily updates, which some parents will check while they are at work. However, inaccurate attendance data can have negative impacts – parents can become frustrated and lose faith in the school's messaging.

“My daughter, this year has been inclined to miss a class or two. That's why we're cracking down quite hard, and why I'm pleased that the school is so proactive in letting us know if she is late for anything or not attending.”

PARENT

Following up on every absence by contacting parents to find out why their child is not at school has a significant positive impact on attendance. It reinforces the expectation that students need to be at school every day.

Administrative staff, rather than teachers, often play a valued central role in tracking and following up on absences after student rolls have been taken. This makes sense as administrative staff usually receive the calls from parents when their child is going to be absent for sickness or other reasons. If the school doesn't know why a student is absent, they call home to find out.

Primary parents told us how the anticipation of a call from school staff can make them think twice about absences, especially if they have a good relationship with the school. We also heard that following up on absences highlights to parents that the school cares about their child, especially if the conversations are focused on what the student or family needs to help them improve attendance.

DID YOU KNOW?

Primary school parents are twice as likely to report their child attends school regularly if the school contacts them on any day their child is absent, when the school doesn't know why.

What does this look like in practice?

Real-life examples: Communicate clear and consistent expectations with students

One urban primary school in a low socio-economic community has improved attendance through consistent and explicit messaging around the impacts of absenteeism on achievement and life outcomes. They have attendance as a standing item on their school assembly agenda. Every week at assembly they revisit the importance of daily attendance, share how the attendance data is tracking within the school, and then move on to awarding points to the groups that have high attendance. (See part 4 of this guide for more about collective rewards).

We heard about students receiving direct messaging about attendance through classroom lessons, notices, and weekly emails. Attendance is embedded into the schools' PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) frameworks, with themes like punctuality and participation are reinforced through curriculum content and class culture practices.

Real-life example: Communicate clear and consistent expectations with parents and whānau

This medium sized, urban intermediate school makes expectations about attendance clear to parents through a range of channels, including social media. One parent noted seeing messaging on the school's Facebook page about a new attendance initiative tied to house points and tokens. Parents learning about the school's use of thresholds and rewards can support wider messages and reinforce what their child is telling them: "I've got to be at school before 8:30, Mum, because I need to get my token," so everyone is working together to improve attendance.

Real-life example: Keep parents informed of their child's attendance

Some schools are providing more regular reporting about attendance and with increasing detail. Providing these reports alongside academic reports sends a message to parents that attendance and learning progress are both important.

“We receive on Friday after school, an attendance and academic report. I've never received them at other schools... So interesting and new. And they have attendance down to lateness, and they break that up with absences from home class and home groups... even to each subject.”

SECONDARY PARENT

We heard that a range of communication tools, such as school apps (e.g. Hero, School Loop) help keep attendance front of mind. These allow parents to monitor attendance in real time and receive immediate alerts for unexplained absences. These systems have created a feedback loop that reinforces parental responsibility and encourages prompt action. Parents described how seeing their child's attendance percentage made it a measurable priority.

“It's made me think like, ‘Oh, I don't want their number to drop down below where it should be.’”

PRIMARY PARENT

Example from overseas: communication with parents

One school in Queensland has been using a traffic light system to show when attendance is within a certain range. The colour-coding makes it easy for parents and students to see when attendance levels are on track or concerning.

Reflective questions:

- How consistently are expectations around attendance communicated across all levels of our school – from leadership to classroom teachers?
- Do our students and parents understand not just what the attendance expectations are, but why they matter for their learning and future? How do we know?
- In what ways are we making attendance data visible and meaningful to students, parents and whānau to help them track attendance and progress toward attendance goals?

3 *Practical supports*

Students' attendance and attitudes towards attendance are better when schools take action to reduce barriers.

Why does providing practical supports matter?

Providing practical supports can build and reinforce a sense of belonging, which we already know is an important factor for attendance and attitudes. When teachers and school leaders work alongside parents and whānau to support their needs, it makes students feel cared for. In our review, we heard that parents deeply appreciate practical support, especially in lower socio-economic contexts.

The evidence base shows that there are no 'one-size-fits-all' practical supports that will be impactful at all schools. Instead, it is key for each school to consider supports that respond directly to the attendance barriers of their students and their families. Practical supports are often critical enablers of attendance, especially for families facing hardship. ERO's research also found that secondary students are most impacted by the 'shame' of practical barriers to attendance, because of peer pressure for adolescents. This may explain why practical supports have the most positive impacts for secondary students.

DID YOU KNOW?

Students are more than twice as likely to think daily attendance is important if the school is providing practical supports. Parents are nearly one and a half times more likely to report their attitudes to daily attendance have improved in the last year if the school is providing practical supports.

How can we use practical supports to improve daily attendance?

To improve attendance through the provision of practical supports, school leaders and teachers need to:

- 1) decide on practical supports based on school-specific data and evidence
- 2) monitor the impacts of practical supports.

Decide on practical supports based on evidence

The provision of practical supports needs to be targeted and tailored for individual needs. It is vital that school leaders or teachers take the time to understand what the specific barriers are for their students. Many schools make a point of asking parents and whānau, "How can we support you to improve your child's attendance?" This is their first point of conversation about attendance. This removes the sense

of blame and provides an opportunity to hear about that child's unique barriers. Providing supports that don't draw attention to this hardship works best for students.

Support with uniforms helps students feel included, and can reduce stress or embarrassment. Providing food can motivate students to attend, especially when the food is enjoyable. We heard a lot about 'hot chip lunches' and 'pizza day' being incentives to attend. Providing food can also make school feel more welcoming – food is perceived to be nurturing as part of a wider system of care. Transport to help students get to school – either with the help of a school van or school bus – is especially important for secondary students who typically have to make their own way there. As with food, transport isn't only a 'practical' support – it makes students feel cared for.

DID YOU KNOW?

When schools provide practical supports, students are more than twice as likely to think that school is important for their future. Secondary school parents are nearly twice as likely to view daily attendance as important when a school provides practical supports.

“I think the difference [that improved attendance at my child's school] is that they're so whānau centred, so community centred. Not everyone's equipped with what they need to get to school or to do well at school, so bringing it back to how we can help within the family system makes a real change.”

PARENT

Monitor the impacts of practical supports

It is important to track the impact that a practical intervention has on a students' attendance and not just assume that attendance improves. The wider evidence on providing practical supports, such as transport, food, or clothing, affirms that they are not instant solutions – they are most effective when part of a wider approach. Teachers and school leaders need to monitor attendance data to see if a shift in attendance patterns has occurred. If there is little or no shift, then it is important to follow up with students, parents and whānau to discuss if additional or different supports.

What does this look like in practice?

Real-life example: Providing practical supports based on school-specific data and evidence

At one small area school, we heard that the neighbourhood buses make a big difference for this school's families. The provision of transport is especially important for students who live further away, who struggle with routine, or whose parents are unable to provide transport due to work commitments.

“I go on the bus on Fridays... my mum goes to work at the same time”

STUDENT

We also spoke to some primary schools which have arranged walking buses, which can be especially helpful for working parents and families with siblings at different schools.

In one urban secondary school, uniforms are subsidised by a trust board. Students also support each other by sharing spare uniform items. For example, one student regularly brought extra uniform pieces just in case, to help peers avoid consequences.

As well as uniform support, transport costs are covered for students who live far away, and food is provided daily. Staff and parents note that students who might otherwise struggle to attend are enabled through these practical supports.

Some schools are working with local charities to help with practical supports to help students to attend. Schools told us that the KidsCan programme helps them provide coats and shoes. Some schools also have fundraising events. We heard that lack of warm and protective clothing is a particular challenge for attendance in winter. One small primary school in an urban area told us that food is sourced from local supermarket donations, such as bread rolls nearing expiry, and that these are distributed to families or used to prepare meals for students. The school keeps food in the freezer and staff will make toasties or sandwiches as needed.

“We can always find some sandwich. We can always make someone something.”

TEACHER

Reflective questions

- How well do we understand the specific, practical barriers to attendance faced by students and families in our school community?
- What processes do we have in place to engage with parents and whānau in a way that invites open conversation about attendance challenges without blame, or shame?
- How do we use attendance data to inform decisions, and to monitor and adapt if those supports don't lead to improved attendance?
- How can we access resources and support from our community, for example, charities or community groups, to help families overcome practical barriers?

4 Rewards

Rewarding students for improving or maintaining high attendance can motivate students and positively impact their attitudes towards attendance.

Why does using rewards matter?

Students value rewards because they recognise and affirm their efforts. Rewards also reinforce expectations, as students track their progress against attendance targets in pursuit of these incentives. How rewards work can vary, with some being targeted at individual students and others being more broadly targeted, with things like celebrations, house points, or prizes. Collective rewards strengthen belonging and motivate students to attend so they can contribute to something larger than themselves.

DID YOU KNOW?

When their school uses rewards, students are about one-and-a-half times more likely to think daily attendance is important and one-and-a-half times more likely to think school is important for their future. These impacts are more pronounced for primary students than secondary students.

Parents value rewards because they provide tangible recognition of the student's and family's efforts to achieve and maintain regular attendance. Parents told us that rewards can provide a meaningful nudge for children who might otherwise struggle with attendance.

Parents think rewards are especially motivating for younger children because they make attendance feel like a fun challenge and align well with how younger children respond to playful, goal-oriented systems. We heard from some secondary parents that their child could be embarrassed receiving individual rewards in front of their peers, but 'secretly' likes the recognition. Collective rewards can minimise individual pressure and incentivise students encouraging each other to attend.

DID YOU KNOW?

Parents are nearly twice as likely to view daily attendance as important if the school rewards good attendance. This is more pronounced for primary parents who are more than twice as likely to view daily attendance as important if the school is providing rewards.

How can we use rewards to improve daily attendance?

To improve daily attendance using rewards, school leaders and teachers need to:

- 1) set realistic and increasing targets
- 2) reward collectively.

Set realistic and increasing targets

Rewards only have a positive impact on attendance when the targets are realistic and valued by students. If targets are perceived by students and parents as being too far out of their reach, then rewards can have the opposite effect and become de-motivating. Rewards are motivating when they are framed as a fun challenge. This is especially true for younger students who respond to playful, goal-oriented reward systems.

We heard from older students that when the targets are high, they can miss out on attaining them with just a few absences. This makes them feel like the reward system is actually a punishment system. Setting students an individualised target and then gradually increasing this over time works well. This means students can close the gap between their current attendance and the aspirational target. It also stops rewards from becoming de-motivating.

Reward collectively

Collective rewards can further strengthen belonging, motivating students to attend so they can contribute to something larger than themselves. Group-based recognition, like rewarding top attendance by class or year group, is particularly powerful. Students are driven by not wanting to let their peers down, and the team aspect adds a sense of fun. In schools using collective rewards, students described messaging their 'teammates' in the morning to check they will attend and said this makes them think twice about staying home.

Using consequences

Consequences need to be used carefully. We found they have a positive impact on *parents'* attitudes towards attendance, but a negative impact on *students'* attitudes.

We heard that consequences such as missing out on extra-curricular activities like the school ball or sport's events can lead students to skip more school. These consequences are perceived as unfair have a de-motivating effect. It's important to remember that involvement in these activities is sometimes a student's main motivation to attend school.

“[Extra-curricular activities] used to be the only reason I came to school, but once my attendance slipped, I couldn’t access them anymore so therefore I would just stop coming to school because they weren’t here for me, I guess.”

STUDENT

Secondary parents value consequences the most as they feel they support them to get their child to school. Whilst there are some schools using consequences as part of their approach to managing attendance, these must be used with caution.

What does this look like in practice?

Real-life examples: Set realistic and increasing targets

In one primary school, students who have met the target go in the draw to receive a prize at the end of a term. The threshold for this draw is not 100 percent attendance, as the school acknowledges that sickness is unavoidable. The target is 96 percent attendance. Students are highly motivated to be included in the draw. They know what their attendance rate is, because it is shared by the school, and actively try to keep it above the 96 percent threshold.

Real-life examples: Reward collectively

This medium-sized urban primary school drives good attendance with a system of group-based and individual rewards and celebrations. The school has introduced a system where students earn points for their house. As well as recognition in assemblies, winning teams are rewarded with “a fun day or something,” which students look forward to. The school also has certificates for individuals, which are awarded at mid-term and end-of-term assemblies. These celebrations are designed to make attendance visible and valued across the whole school, with students saying they feel “quite proud of themselves” when they receive recognition.

Reflective questions:

- How do we ensure our attendance targets are realistic and tailored to individual or group starting points, allowing for gradual improvement over time?
- How do we design reward systems that celebrate collective effort and teamwork, rather than individual achievement alone?
- How do we know which rewards are valued and motivate improved attendance?

5 Patterns of closures

School patterns of being closed can impact students' habits of attendance, so the way they are timed and communicated matters.

Why do patterns of closures matter?

Schools occasionally need to close to students – for example so that teachers can do extra professional development or hold in-depth goal-setting conferences with parents and whānau. However, it is important to do this in a way that minimises disruption to students' attendance routines. Frequent or poorly timed closures can reinforce a more casual attitude towards attendance and can undermine the message that everyday attendance matters.

Students have reported that school closures disrupt their routine of attendance. Parents shared that while they understand the importance of school closures for teacher professional development, they worry that the disruption to student routines can break the habit and expectation of daily school attendance. Some parents are worried there are too many closures, which limits learning time.

“The cherry on top was the professional development, students didn't have to be in until 9.30, it broke her routine, and it was her first absence... if it wasn't for that she probably would have actually gone to school.”

SECONDARY PARENT

DID YOU KNOW?

While school size, location, and socio-economic levels are stronger predictors of attendance, the number of days a school is open for instruction is linked to attendance for primary schools.

How can we minimise the impact of school closures on daily attendance?

When schools need to close for essential reasons, school leaders can minimise the impacts of closures on attendance by:

- 1) selecting days and times that minimise disruption
- 2) communicating information about closures as early as possible.

Select days and times that minimise disruption

Closure on particular days of the week can prompt absenteeism. For example, closures on Thursdays or Tuesdays can lead to students taking extended weekends. Similarly, half-day closures can result in full-day absences due to practical incentives, such as saving on transport costs and easier household arrangements. In selecting days for closure, teachers should aim to balance the need to support critical work such as teachers' professional development, with the need to maintain students' habits of attendance.

“We had this teacher-only day on a Thursday, and I wasn't there on the Friday. [Because] flights [to Auckland] were like \$20.”

STUDENT

“A lot of students stay home on half days... driving to school and back home, it's not really worth it for them because it's not a full day... it would only be a couple hours being there, and then it would take two hours longer getting there and back.”

STUDENT

Communicate information about school closures as early as possible

Parents are most concerned about short notice closures. More notice about school closures can help families plan around them. Weather events are an obvious reason for short notice closure and are unavoidable, but parents are concerned about other reasons for closures that could be better planned and communicated, like parent-teacher interviews and end of term half days.

Communicating early closures or late starts to parents well in advance supports them to make necessary transport or childcare arrangements. This prevents partial closures from becoming full-day absences for their child. It is also important that parents fully understand the purpose of school closures so that they do not undermine the messaging and expectations that attendance at school every day is important.

DID YOU KNOW?

Nearly half of parents report that their school gives them too short notice about closures sometimes or often.

What does this look like in practice?

Real-life example: What parents and whānau told ERO, that they want school leaders to consider when closing

- 1) **Provide sufficient notice of closures** so that students and families can plan for them. Parents want more notice, especially working parents who have to arrange last minute childcare or take time off work.
- 2) **Time closures to avoid Thursdays or Tuesdays** as these days can lead to extended weekends. We heard that it makes sense to tag them onto the start or end of the week, which allows families to plan for a long weekend.
- 3) **Tag closures onto the existing term breaks** because this is less disruptive to routines and provides extra holiday time.
- 4) **Avoid half days** as these can provide practical incentives for students missing school, such as saving on transport costs and easier household arrangements.

“Our daughter’s school does seem to schedule them strategically up against other holidays... Like Easter, I think they took the Thursday as a teacher-only day...”

SECONDARY PARENT

Reflective questions:

- Do we know how much our current school closure patterns – both planned and unplanned – impact student routines and attitudes toward daily attendance?
- Do we communicate changes to school opening times or closures clearly to parents and whānau and early?
- How can we reinforce the message that ‘every day matters’ in the context of necessary closures, such as for teacher professional development or events?

An end-to-end approach

Schools that have successfully lifted their attendance data are not implementing different practices in isolation. They are taking an end-to-end approach, this is about prioritising attendance relentlessly across the school, every day.

Why does taking an end-to-end approach matter?

Schools can and do improve attendance, even in challenging circumstances. These schools improve attendance by taking a whole-school approach that is underpinned by good leadership, aspiration, clarity, consistency, and the provision of a safe environment for students.

How can we take an end-to-end approach?

Relentless, aspirational leadership drives a culture of attendance

Schools that perform well are aspirational in their approach and maintain a deliberate, relentless focus on improving attendance. Leadership sets the tone by prioritising attendance as a core part of the school culture. This includes establishing visible, schoolwide targets, consistently reinforcing the value of regular attendance, and celebrating progress to maintain momentum.

In schools facing significant attendance challenges, leaders foster belief and aspiration among staff, parents and whānau, setting realistic yet ambitious thresholds that grow with progress and avoid demotivating expectations.

“It’s not just about coming to school [for the sake of it]. We want our kids to be amazing adults and actually letting them get away with poor attendance is limiting their ability to have a good life.”

SCHOOL LEADER

Collective ownership and clarity of roles make attendance everyone’s business

Teachers and leaders in out-performing schools collectively own the challenge. Attendance isn’t left solely to a dedicated role, although having a champion who is accountable for progress can help ensure attendance remains a priority. Teachers and leaders operate with clearly defined responsibilities and a shared commitment to improving attendance. The approach is embedded across the school, creating a culture where attendance is everyone’s business and not just an administrative task.

Evidence-informed practice and messaging sets schools up for success

Out-performing schools use data not just to monitor thresholds but to identify early patterns of concern and act swiftly. They track individual and group trends to prevent persistent absence from taking hold. Messaging to parents and whānau is informed by credible evidence, including ERO's reports, and highlights the links between attendance, achievement, and lifelong outcomes. An evidence-based approach strengthens the rationale for regular attendance and supports targeted interventions.

Trusting relationships with parents and whānau unlock solutions and sustain engagement

We found that strong relationships with parents and whānau are central to improving attendance. In the out-performing schools, staff go beyond simply following up absences – they build trust through proactive, solution-focused conversations that acknowledge real-life barriers such as mental health, transport, or uniform needs. This approach is especially important in communities where families may fear authority or hold negative views of school.

“‘What can we do to get your children to school?’ That is always the question that I’d get asked if I had troubles... having the teachers on board and the children knowing that and having you both work together then making a game plan, like ‘You’ve got it! We’re here!’”

PRIMARY SCHOOL PARENT

Attendance within a culture of safety and connection

We found that attendance initiatives are most effective when embedded in a culture of safety and connection. Schools that actively foster emotional literacy – through programmes like Zones of Regulation – help students recognise and manage their emotions, which in turn reduces behavioural incidents and supports positive peer relationships. These factors contribute to improved attendance. We also saw schools using structures such as vertical form groups and buddy classes to build supportive relationships between older and younger students, further strengthening a sense of belonging.

We set out below four case studies of schools that have embedded an end-to-end approach.

Case study 1: Attendance grounded in connection and accountability

A small, urban secondary school serving a moderate socio-economic community.

This school demonstrates a comprehensive and intentional approach to lifting and sustaining high attendance. Its success lies in combining clear expectations and accountability with a deeply embedded culture of connection, safety, and support. Attendance is not treated as a standalone issue – it is woven into the fabric of the school's philosophy, systems, and relationships.

Building connection and belonging

A strong sense of connection underpins the school's approach to attendance. Students described feeling welcomed and included from day one, with small, mixed-year form groups fostering strong peer relationships and daily routines. These groups create a sense of belonging, trust, and accountability, where students check in on each other and encourage attendance.

“I've got kids in my [form group] ... I'm in a chat with all of them so that I can get them notices and stuff as needed. Or like reminders: 'bring this for tomorrow.' And every night, it's like a routine — 'make sure you set your alarm, make sure your uniform is ironed and ready to go. Send me a photo so I know it's ready.'”

STUDENT

Students also spoke about how the school's culture helped them feel part of something bigger. Students noted that the school's structure and routines helped them feel more confident and motivated.

“You just feel tidy. You just feel like you're part of something”

STUDENT

“I used to be really shy, but this school has pushed me to be more confident.”

STUDENT

Creating a safe environment

Safety is a critical enabler of attendance. Students that have been poor attenders at previous schools due to bullying now feel secure and supported. One student reflected:

“I used to get bullied and all that, so I just didn’t want to go to school. And then coming here – no, there’s no bullying, no nothing. So, I’m all happy that I actually come to school.”

STUDENT

The school’s clear policy against bullying, combined with strong pastoral care and peer accountability, creates an environment where students feel safe to learn and belong.

Setting clear expectations with parents and students

Expectations around attendance are established before students even enrol. The school holds a structured orientation evening followed by a one-hour enrolment interview involving students, parents, and senior leaders. During this meeting, the school’s values, expectations, and systems – including attendance requirements – are explained in detail. Students and parents sign a contract that outlines their responsibilities, reinforcing that attendance is a shared commitment. As one leader noted, “It’s not just a piece of paper – it’s a full conversation about what it means to be part of this school.”

Using attendance data and following up on absences

Attendance is tracked rigorously and reviewed daily. Staff know where every student is by 9:30 am, and absences are followed up immediately. Teachers, form group leaders, and office staff work together to monitor attendance, share information, and intervene early. If a student is absent for more than two consecutive days, a medical certificate is required – mirroring real-world expectations and reducing casual absenteeism. Students are aware that their attendance is visible and valued.

Using rewards with students

The school celebrates attendance through regular recognition and tangible rewards. Students with perfect attendance receive praise, certificates, and sometimes prizes. These acknowledgements are made publicly, reinforcing the message that attendance is an achievement worth celebrating. One teacher shared:

“At the end of the year, students with 100 percent attendance get a certificate – and the whole school sees it. It makes them feel seen.”

STUDENT

Consequences for poor attendance or lateness are clearly defined and consistently applied. Students understand the impact of their absence not just on themselves, but on their form group. Attendance contributes to form group points, and missing school can affect the team's standing. This creates a sense of peer accountability. As one student put it:

“I don't want to miss school – not just for me, but for my form group.”

STUDENT

Students who breach expectations may be placed on a contract, with clear steps for improvement. These consequences are framed within a culture of support, not punishment.

Providing supports to overcome practical barriers

The school actively removes barriers to attendance. Uniforms are subsidised or provided through a trust board, and students often support each other by sharing spare items. One student regularly brought extra uniform pieces to help peers avoid consequences. Transport costs are covered for students who live far away, and food is provided daily. Staff and parents noted that students who might otherwise struggle to attend are enabled through these practical supports.

Providing roles and responsibilities

Students are given meaningful roles and responsibilities that depend on their presence. Form groups operate like teams, with older students mentoring younger ones and everyone contributing to the group's success. Leadership roles, peer support, and participation in competitions all require consistent attendance. These responsibilities give students a sense of purpose and reinforce the importance of showing up.

Case study 2: Aspirational leadership driving attendance

A medium-sized, urban primary school, serving a low socio-economic community.

Faced with persistent challenges around attendance, this school undertook a deliberate and strategic culture shift, led by a reflective and proactive leadership team. Their approach demonstrates how strong leadership, clear systems, and relational practices can transform attendance patterns and build a thriving school culture.

Aspirational leadership

The leadership team began change by encouraging staff to raise their expectations for students, asking, “Are we putting that lid on our kids?” which is a reference to a video showing fleas trained not to jump higher than a jar lid, even after it was removed. This metaphor sparked a school-wide shift known as “lifting the lid,”

which led to more proactive attendance strategies and a noticeable improvement in student engagement and regularity.

Leadership also uses national research to inform practice. Staff were introduced to findings from ERO's report on chronic absence, which helped them to act early to tackle patterns of absence, and shift their thinking from 'school rules' to 'life outcomes.' This evidence has been shared with families to reinforce the long-term impact of attendance.

Building connection and belonging

Connectedness is at the heart of the school's approach. Leadership has rebuilt a sense of belonging after the disruptions of Covid-19 and leadership changes. Initiatives include house sports, whole-school kapa haka, termly pōwhiri and cultural celebrations, stay-and-play sessions for whānau, and daily greetings at the school gate. The school has also fostered cross-age relationships through its buddy class programme, which helps build connection and belonging across year levels.

“Buddy class has also really helped... some of the juniors were [previously] quite intimidated by seniors.”

SCHOOL LEADER

Staff have worked hard to ensure that relationships are strong – not just within the school, but with families and the wider community. Parents describe the school as “like a family,” where every child is known and valued. They praise the buddy class programme, noting that it gives “the older kids ... chance to step up and hang out with the younger guys,” especially when younger students are struggling to feel included. Students talk about feeling safe, supported, and excited to come to school.

Setting clear expectations with parents and students

Leadership has led a deliberate shift in mindset across the school, challenging assumptions and raising expectations. Attendance is framed not as a rule, but as a life skill. Staff explicitly communicate that regular attendance is essential for success – not just in school, but in life. This message is reinforced through conversations with students and families, prizegiving speeches, and everyday interactions.

Teachers now contact families early in the term to introduce themselves and emphasise the importance of starting strong. Students are told that fun days, sports, and trips are not optional extras but part of building connection and achievement. These practices have resulted in increased rates of attendance at the start and end of each term. Parents report that the school is “staunch” about attendance – but in a way that feels fair, consistent, and supportive.

Using attendance data and following up on absences

The school uses real-time data to identify patterns has developed a clear, staged system for monitoring and responding to attendance. Data is reviewed weekly, and students under 90 percent receive targeted follow-up. Teachers contact families by week four of each term, and those with persistent absence are escalated to leadership or the attendance officer. A flowchart guides staff actions, ensuring consistency and clarity.

“We’ve shifted our phone calls to Week Four, not Week Seven... the longer you let it go, the more it becomes a pattern.”

SCHOOL LEADER



Using rewards with students

Positive reinforcement is a key part of the school’s strategy. Students are motivated by house competitions, prize draws, and recognition for high attendance. The school moved away from 100 percent attendance awards (to avoid penalising students who are genuinely sick) and now include students with more than 96 percent in termly draws for vouchers and other prizes. Students are well aware of their personal attendance rates and actively work to improve them. These incentives are part of a broader culture of celebration and belonging.

Using consequences with students

While the school prioritises relational and supportive approaches, it also sets clear boundaries. Students are expected to attend unless genuinely unwell, and leadership challenges parents who keep children home for birthdays or minor reasons. One parent shared how a conversation with the deputy principal helped her realise the message she was sending her child – that it’s okay to skip work after doing well for a few days.

The school uses formal letters and meetings when attendance does not improve, and works closely with the attendance service to escalate cases appropriately. These actions are framed as part of a shared responsibility to support children’s futures.

Providing supports to overcome practical barriers

Leadership has ensured that practical barriers to attendance are addressed wherever possible. The school provides food through the iwi lunch model – students receive fresh, locally made meals. As a KidsCan school, they supply shoes and jackets for students who need them. Staff report that these items make a tangible difference in helping students to attend and participate. The school also provides broader support to families, driving them to urgent appointments and connecting them to crisis services.

Providing roles and responsibilities

Students are given meaningful roles that helped foster a sense of ownership and belonging. These include responsibilities such as road patrol, gardening, librarian

duties, and leadership in buddy classes. Students describe feeling proud of their contributions to support their school community.

School leaders ensure that these opportunities are inclusive and aligned with students' interests and other staff go out of their way to find activities that engage reluctant attenders, helping them see school as a place where they belong and can succeed. One parent observed that "every child gets a turn at being who they want to be," noting the school's deliberate effort to align responsibilities with students' interests and strengths.

Case study 3: A relational approach to attendance

A large, urban intermediate school, serving a diverse student population from a moderate socio-economic community.

The school offers a compelling example of how actions rooted in care, community, and connection can make a meaningful difference. The school is lifting regular attendance through a multi-layered strategy that includes clear expectations, dedicated roles focused on attendance and family liaison, data-informed follow-up, incentives, practical supports, and a strong sense of belonging. Staff understand that attendance is not simply about being present – it's about students feeling connected, supported, and valued.

Building connection and belonging

Relational practice is at the heart of the school's approach. Teachers invest heavily in building connections with students and families, especially in the first weeks of the year.

Staff work to ensure students feel safe and included. Students spoke about feeling cared for, listened to, and supported – with some describing school as their "constant" in otherwise unstable lives. For example, students who are anxious about assemblies or trips are given tailored support, such as opting out of public recognition or having a buddy system. Youth workers are brought in to mentor students and run breakfast groups, which have been particularly successful in engaging boys with low attendance.

The school's pastoral lead plays a critical role in building trust with families, especially those who have had negative experiences with education. His long-term relationships and community presence allow him to act as a bridge between home and school, helping to resolve attendance issues and encourage re-engagement.

Setting clear expectations with parents and students

Attendance is positioned as a shared responsibility from the outset. At the beginning of each year, teachers hold interviews with parents and students where attendance expectations are explicitly discussed. These conversations are framed positively, using Ministry-provided data visuals to show the cumulative impact of absences. Teachers report that this early engagement helps surface potential barriers (e.g. anxiety, transport issues, family dynamics) before they become entrenched problems.

“We’ve also pre-empted the fact that it is going to be a focus... when we ring them, it’s like, ‘Hey, remember how we talked about attendance?’”

TEACHER

Students also receive direct messaging about attendance through classroom lessons, notices, and weekly emails. Attendance is embedded into the school’s PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) framework, with themes like punctuality and participation reinforced through curriculum and class culture.

Using attendance data and following up on absences

The school has developed robust systems for tracking attendance. Teachers receive fortnightly reports showing individual student attendance percentages, colour-coded for easy interpretation. These reports allow teachers to identify emerging patterns and initiate early, informal conversations with students and families.

“It’s not a shock to the parents – we’ve done all the things before that to support them.”

TEACHER

Where patterns persist, teachers escalate concerns to a designated attendance lead, who follows up with phone calls, meetings, and – if necessary – formal letters including visual calendars of absences. Staff are careful to maintain trust, ensuring that classroom teachers remain the first point of contact and that follow-up is framed around support rather than blame.

Using rewards with students

Rewards are used strategically to motivate students and reinforce positive attendance habits. Students with 100 percent attendance are entered into a termly ‘spin-the-wheel’ draw for prizes such as movie or Kmart vouchers. For students in the moderate-risk band (e.g. 40–70 percent attendance), there are tailored reward systems – such as daily report cards and \$5 canteen vouchers for attending five consecutive days.

Teachers report that these incentives have a tangible impact, especially for students who previously struggled to attend school regularly. Students themselves spoke about setting personal goals and feeling proud of their attendance improvements.

“Last year we had our bottom 10 percent students [with poor attendance]... if they came every day, they got a \$5 canteen voucher. Attendance dropped when it stopped – so it clearly worked!”

TEACHER

Using consequences with students

While the school prioritises positive reinforcement, it also uses consequences where appropriate. Students are made aware that poor attendance can affect their eligibility for leadership roles, participation in extracurricular activities, and access to certain privileges. These consequences are framed as part of the school's expectations and values, rather than punitive measures.

Teachers also note that students begin to experience internal consequences – such as embarrassment or disengagement – when they miss learning and fall behind. Staff work to mitigate this by helping students re-engage quickly and positively after absences.

Providing supports to overcome practical barriers

The school actively removes barriers to attendance by providing practical supports. Teachers and pastoral staff source items for students who lack appropriate uniform and other clothing, including hard-to-find sizes. They also provide stationery so that students can participate fully, and sandwich cards and fruit are available for students who arrive without lunch, with systems designed to be discreet and inclusive. To help students get to school, staff have arranged pickups and sometimes offer petrol vouchers. These supports are offered proactively and without stigma, reinforcing the school's commitment to equity and inclusion.

“We just get it. If a kid needs a P.E. top, it turns up on my desk. No fuss.”

TEACHER

Providing roles and responsibilities

Students are encouraged to take on leadership roles, join clubs, and participate in extracurricular activities – all of which require regular attendance. Teachers note that students who are involved in these roles are more motivated to attend. This is because these roles give students a sense of purpose and belonging, reinforcing the value of being at school.

Staff actively shoulder-tap students to join activities that align with their interests. Examples include Dungeons & Dragons clubs for students who feel socially isolated, robotics for those interested in tech and design, sports teams, and cultural groups, which are particularly effective in engaging Māori and Pacific students.

Case study 4: Strengthening attendance through curriculum and connection

A small, rural area school serving a low socio-economic community.

The school has taken a strategic and relational approach to improving student attendance, focused on strengthening its curriculum and expanding vocational pathways, while implementing a wide range of actions to lift and sustain regular attendance.

Strengthening curriculum and expanding vocational pathways

A key driver of improved attendance at this school has been its commitment to making learning relevant and engaging. Driven by the leadership, students now have access to a broader curriculum, specialist subjects, hands-on learning, and flexible timetables. Senior students spoke positively about small class sizes and the quality of teaching, noting that teachers “help us catch up” and “support us to get good grades.”

Vocational options have expanded significantly, including courses in hospitality, mechanics, and other trades. These opportunities are often subsidised or free, removing financial barriers. One student described how attending their vocational course every Friday gives them purpose and motivation to attend school.

Building connection and belonging

The school places a strong emphasis on relationships and belonging. Students across age groups spoke of feeling known, supported, and connected – not just to peers, but to teachers and the wider school community. The school structure and its curriculum design play a key role in fostering connection.

Small class sizes, specialist teachers, and personalised learning approaches ensure that students feel seen and supported. Senior students described how teachers tailor instruction for them, help them catch up when absent, and will accommodate requests to work in different spaces or with preferred staff.

Students mix across year levels, support each other, and take pride in their school. Bullying, while present in the past, has decreased, and students feel safer and more included. One student shared:

“We have a mutual respect for each other, even if we don’t like each other.”

STUDENT

Parents, similarly, describe the school as caring. They appreciate the daily contact, the attention to wellbeing, and the school’s efforts to build habits of attendance from a young age.

Setting clear expectations with parents and students

The school has made a deliberate shift in messaging, placing responsibility for attendance back onto families. Through newsletters, texts, Facebook posts, and direct conversations, leaders communicate that regular attendance is expected, for example, with the messaging:

“We’re a normal school now... we expect you as a parent to bring your child to school.”

SCHOOL LEADER

Students also understand these expectations. Senior students we spoke to rated the importance of daily attendance as “four or five out of five”, citing academic progress, vocational access, and social connection as key reasons.

Using attendance data and following up on absences

Attendance is monitored daily. Teachers check attendance each day and follow up on patterns of absence. Form room teachers and office staff make regular phone calls to families, and students confirmed that their parents are contacted promptly if they are absent. There is increased vigilance by staff to monitor students who may be at school but not attending class.

Teachers use attendance data to identify students needing support and to inform conversations with families. One teacher noted: “I check attendance every day... if there’s a pattern, we follow up.”

Using rewards with students

Students receive certificates for achieving 90 percent, 95 percent, and 100 percent attendance, making the reward system inclusive and motivating for more students. These are awarded publicly at assemblies or end-of-term events, creating a sense of achievement and visibility. Students described this as motivating: “It lets you know – next time, you could be one of those students.”

Students also described leadership roles, like prefect duties, as an earned responsibility. These leadership roles require good attendance and come with recognition and status.

Using consequences with students

While the school maintains a pastoral approach, it does use consequences to reinforce attendance expectations. Students report that teachers follow up on absences and there is accountability for skipping periods. In some cases, students are told they may be excluded from events or courses if their attendance falls below a certain threshold.

Access to valued experiences – such as camps, sports tournaments, and vocational courses – is often contingent on attendance. While exclusions can be viewed as a ‘consequence’, they were most often reported as motivating, especially for students who may not be academically driven. One student shared:

“I switched up when I realised I’d miss out on sports.”

STUDENT

Providing supports to overcome practical barriers

The school actively removes practical barriers to attendance. The school provides free lunches, subsidised or free access to camps and courses, and flexible uniform expectations. Staff are aware of the financial pressures many families face and respond with empathy and pragmatism. As one teacher noted:

“No one’s pulling the kids up on not having the right kit... we turn a blind eye because we know things are hard.”

TEACHER



Transport is another area of support. In the past, staff have picked up students from home. While this is now less common, the school still maintains two vans and will assist when needed.

Providing roles and responsibilities

Students are given meaningful roles that require their presence at school. In addition to prefect and head student roles, senior students can take on duties during breaktimes, including helping to monitor younger students. These responsibilities foster a sense of ownership and belonging.



Conclusion

Schools that do the best at lifting and maintaining attendance are aspirational and focus deliberately and relentlessly on improving attendance. Attendance is framed as a life skill that underpins future success—rather than a rule to follow. Some schools in New Zealand do this exceptionally well. This guide provides insight into five key practices that make the biggest difference.



Resources

What is it?	Link
ERO's full national review report on attendance	Back to class – How are attitudes to attendance changing?
An accessible summary of international education evidence from the Education Endowment Fund on the effectiveness of attendance interventions.	Summary of evidence
The Ministry of Education's revised stepped attendance response (STAR) framework with a suite of resources for supporting implementation.	Stepped attendance response – STAR – Ministry of Education
The Ministry of Education's support materials for implementing an attendance management plan (AMP) .	Attendance Management Plans – Ministry of Education
Guidance from The Ministry of Education on open and closing for instruction .	Open and closing for instruction – public guidance.pdf
Guidance from The Ministry of Education on daily attendance reporting .	Daily attendance reporting – Ministry of Education
<p>The Ministry of Education's updated attendance codes. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Attendance code decision tree → Attendance guidance → Attendance code frequently asked questions → Attendance code webinar session summary → Attendance code webinar questions and answers 	Attendance codes – Ministry of Education

What is it?	Link
The Regulation Experts site outlining a comprehensive zones of regulation framework , specifically designed to foster student well-being.	Zones of regulation – A framework
A spotlight from the Queensland Government outlining how Robina State High School, implemented an effective attendance intervention and used a traffic light system to set clear attendance targets.	Robina State High School – attendance intervention
The Attendance Toolkit for Schools by the Department for Education in the United Kingdom is designed as a practical resource for school leaders and staff. It includes tools like templates, checklists, and case studies to help schools understand why students are missing school and how to help them come back.	Attendance toolkit for schools Department for Education
The Bullying-Free NZ website offers evidence-based information, resources and tools to help schools plan, implement and review bullying prevention and response approaches. The site also offers information for parents, whānau and students.	Schools Bullying Free NZ
Netsafe's website provides useful tools and resources that support students experiencing cyber bullying.	Netsafe New Zealand

For references, please refer to the full report *Back to class – How are attitudes to attendance changing?*



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o Aotearoa**
New Zealand Government

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Published 2025

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Digital: 978-1-991421-07-4

Print: 978-1-991421-04-3



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