



Back to class:

How are attitudes to attendance changing?

SUMMARY



Going to school is critical for our children's future. The evidence is clear that every day of school matters – missing school leads to lower achievement. In New Zealand, students are expected to attend school every day the school is open. And yet many don't. The good news is that attendance is improving.

We found that attendance has improved and is now back at pre-Covid levels. Schools have put in place actions that have an impact. More students now think education is important for their future and daily attendance is important too. More parents now understand the importance of their children not missing a lot of school. But we still have further to go, as parents are not yet taking daily attendance more seriously.

What is attendance?

Attendance is when students are at school and in the class they are supposed to be in. If students miss a week or more of school in a term they have 'non-regular attendance'. Students who miss a week each term will have missed out on a year of schooling by the time they are 16.

Key findings

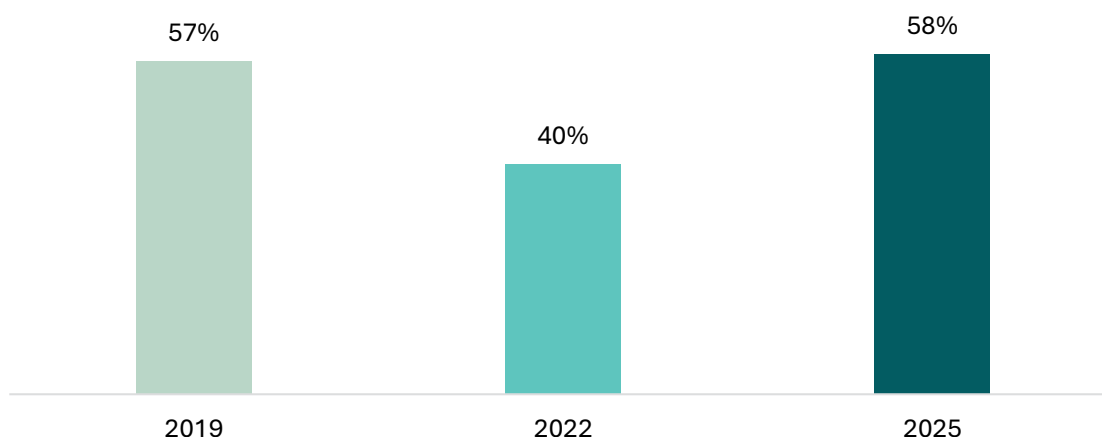
Our review led to 13 key findings across three areas.

Area 1: What has happened to attendance in New Zealand?

Finding 1: Attendance has been increasing since 2022 and is now back to pre-Covid levels.

- Now nearly six in ten students (58 percent) are attending regularly, up from four in ten (40 percent) in 2022.
- Both primary and secondary students have improved attendance to pre-Covid levels.
- Encouragingly, students of different ethnicities and in schools within high and low-socio-economic communities have seen similar improvements to their attendance.
- Some students continue to face more barriers to attendance, including bullying, illness, and challenges with transport and having the uniform and equipment they need. Māori students, Pacific students, and students in low socio-economic communities still have lower rates of attendance.

Figure 1: *Percent of students regularly attending in Term 2, across time.*



Area 2: Why are students going to school more?

ERO looked at why students are going to school more. Identifying the reasons will enable us to continue to raise attendance. ERO found three key reasons:

- Student attitudes
- Parent attitudes
- School actions

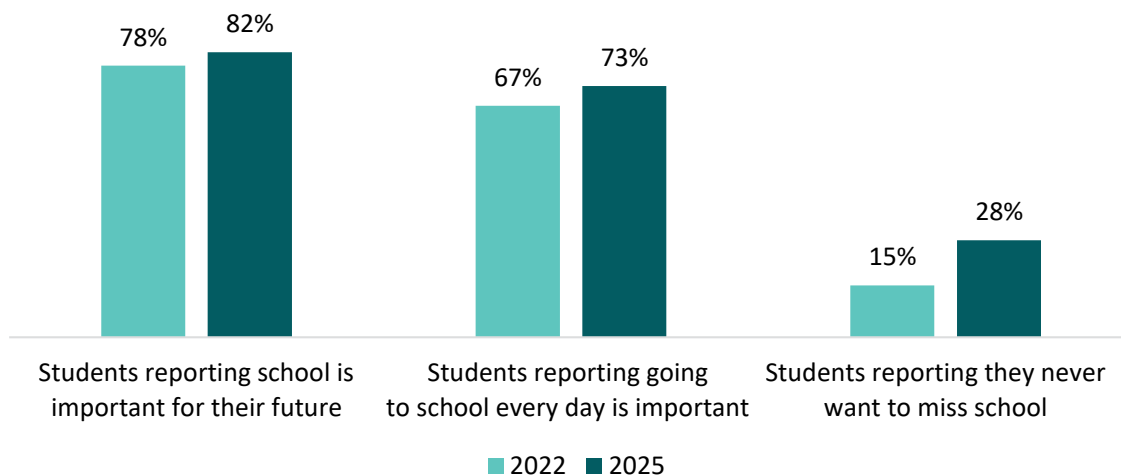
Reason 1: Students' attitudes

Finding 2: More students now think education is important for their future, think attending daily is important and never want to miss school.

- Attitudes drive attendance, students are 1.7 times more likely to attend regularly if they think daily attendance is important.

- Three-quarters of students (73 percent) now think daily attendance is important, compared to two-thirds (67 percent) in 2022. Students of all ages tell us that daily attendance is important for keeping up with their learning and to improve their career opportunities and wider life skills.
- Eight in ten students (82 percent) now think school is important for their future, an increase of 4 percentage points since 2022.
- Almost a third of students (28 percent) report they never want to miss school – up from 15 percent in 2022. Students tell us they want to go every day when they do fun and interesting things at school and because they want to see their friends, highlighting the importance of social connectedness.

Figure 2: *Percent of students reporting the following attitudes to school, 2022 and 2025.*

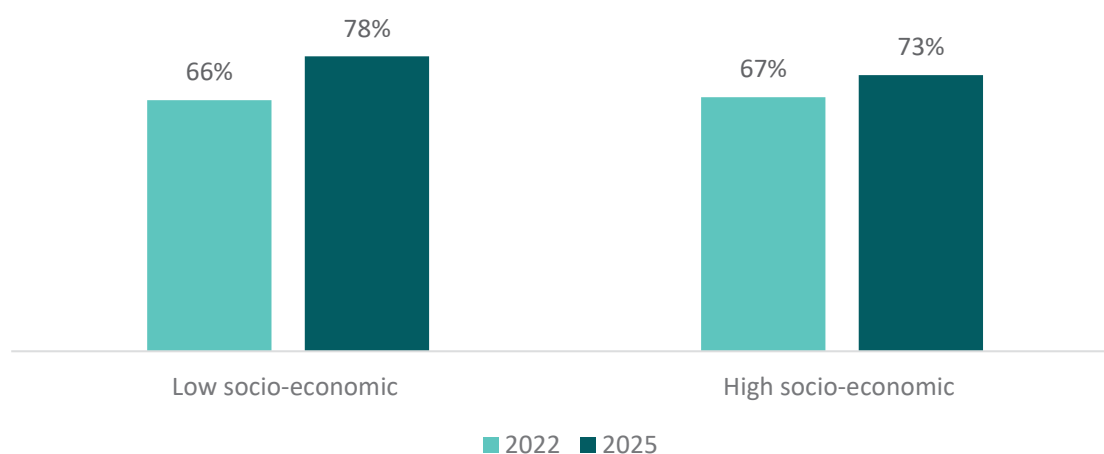


“Later on in life you might need some of the skills that you learn at school... If you want to apply for a job, and if you want to work at a shop, you might have to do subtracting and adding, and [even for] stacking the shelves at a supermarket you need to learn how to read.”

PRIMARY STUDENT

- Encouragingly, students in schools in low socio-economic communities show double the improvement in attitudes to daily attendance (12 percentage point increase compared to 6 percentage points for students in high socio-economic communities) and now have better attitudes to daily attendance than other students.
- Students in low socio-economic communities now think school is just as important for their future as students in high socio-economic communities (82 percent and 84 percent respectively). Low socio-economic students’ attitudes were previously 10 percentage points lower than high socio-economic students.
- Pacific students continue to have better attitudes to daily attendance than other students (78 percent compared to 71 percent).
- Concerningly, Māori students are the only group of students whose attitudes to daily attendance have not improved (only two thirds, 67 percent, see daily attendance as important).

Figure 3: *Percent of students reporting daily attendance is important, by socio-economic level 2022 and 2025.*

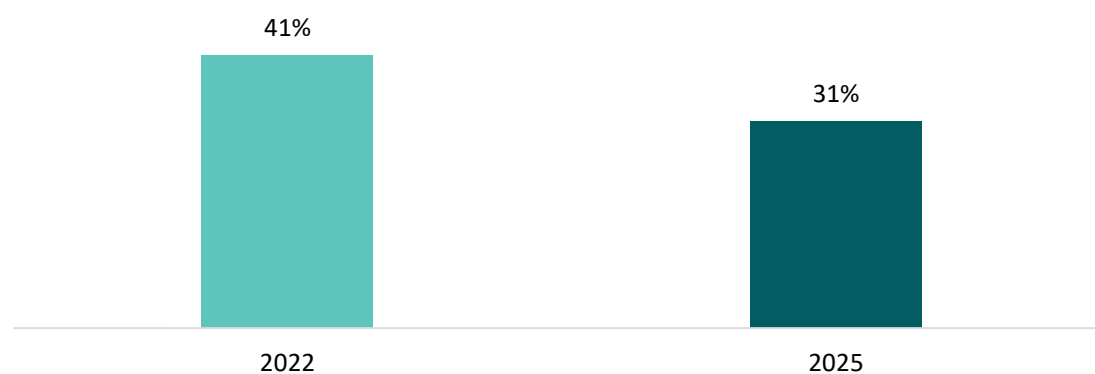


Reason 2: Parents' attitudes

Finding 3: More parents now understand the importance of their child not missing a lot of school.

- Parents' attitudes matter – parents who are comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school are over four times more likely to have a child not attending regularly.
- Fewer parents are comfortable keeping their child off school for a week or more. Now only three in ten parents (31 percent) are comfortable with keeping their child off school for a week or more in a term compared to four in ten (41 percent) in 2022.
- Parents tell us they are less comfortable with extended absences due to school messaging around the importance of attendance, through newsletters and direct communications with teachers. This messaging is especially impactful when schools refer to the impacts on their child's achievement and lifelong outcomes.

Figure 4: *Percent of parents comfortable with their child missing a week or more of school in a single term, 2022 and 2025.*



- Parents are being firmer on their children going to school rather than staying at home for mental health reasons. Parents willing to keep their child off school for mental health reasons have reduced from almost half (46 percent) in 2022 to around a quarter (28 percent) in 2025. Parents tell us that knowing their child will receive the right supports at school makes a difference.

“My parents encouraged me to come to school ... They understood when I took time off, why I was doing it, because of my mental health, but then they would always be like, ‘What if you go just for part of the day’. They would still try to get me to go even if I didn’t stay the whole day.”

SECONDARY STUDENT

- More parents see the law as a reason to attend school, especially Pacific parents. Around two-thirds of all parents (65 percent) now see the law as a reason to attend school (up from 58 percent in 2022). Seven in ten Pacific parents (70 percent) report the same.

“I don’t let her just have days off because she wants them off... you have a day off when you need to have a day off.”

PRIMARY PARENT

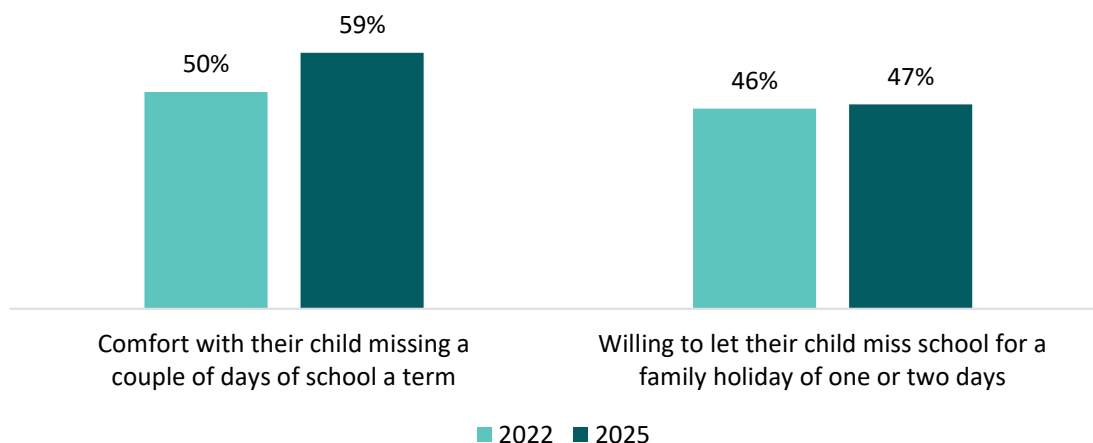
Figure 5: *Percent of parents reporting the law is a reason for sending their child to school, 2022 and 2025.*



Finding 4: However, parents are not yet taking daily attendance more seriously.

- While fewer parents are comfortable with their child missing a week or more, more parents are comfortable with their child missing a couple of days in a school term – up 9 percentage points from half of parents (50 percent) in 2022 to six in ten parents (59 percent) in 2025.
- Nearly half of parents (47 percent) are still willing to let their child miss school for family holidays of one or two days (the same as 46 percent in 2022).
- Concerningly, Māori parents’ attitudes to daily attendance have declined the most, only 86 percent see daily attendance as important, down 5 percentage points since 2022.

Figure 6: *Percent of parents comfortable with their child missing a couple of days of school a term and willing to let their child miss school for a family holiday of one or two days, 2022 and 2025.*



Finding 5: Parents are increasingly content for children to miss school for some ‘justified’ reasons.

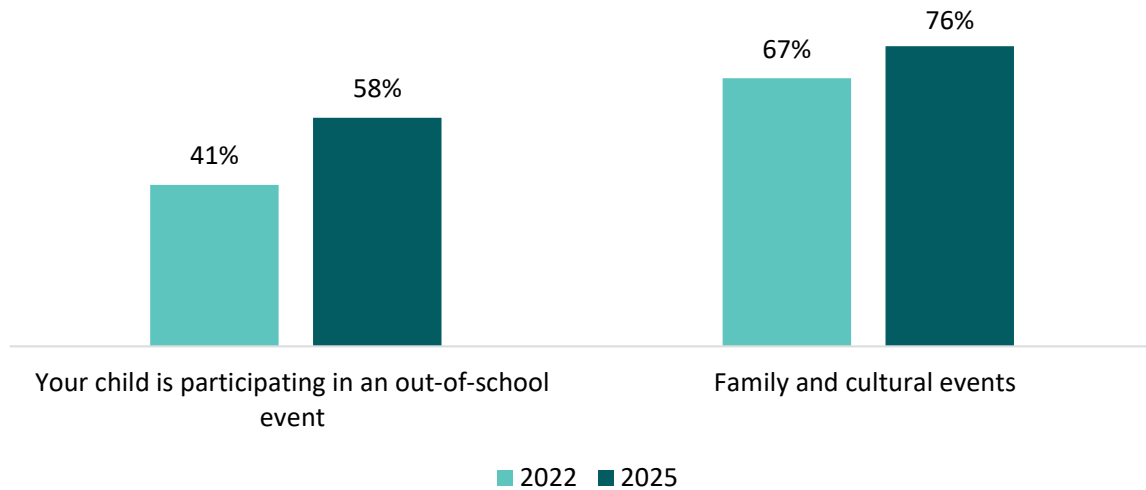
- Concerningly, more parents are now willing to let their child miss school for family and cultural events (76 percent compared to 67 percent in 2022). Parents are especially likely to prioritise family events over school when relatives live far away.
- Worryingly, more parents are also willing to let their child miss school for out-of-school events (e.g. sports) (58 percent compared to 41 percent in 2022).
- We heard from parents across diverse communities that when they prioritise out-of-school events such as sporting tournaments and cultural celebrations— including kapa haka competitions, Polyfest, and regional sports fixtures — this is because they view them as vital for identity and their child’s personal development. Parents do not always understand how missing school can disrupt the habit of attendance and how missing learning can accumulate.

“We need... a full-time job where they check attendance and work through individual cases. Each student’s poor attendance is for a different reason and requires individual support.”

TEACHER



Figure 7: *Percent of parents willing to let their child miss school for out-of-school events and family or cultural events, 2022 and 2025.*



Reason 3: Schools' actions

Finding 6: Schools are making students feel connected to school, and this has the biggest impact on attendance and student attitudes to attendance. Roles and responsibilities can help with this.

- Students are five times more likely to think daily attendance is important if they feel they belong at school. Three-quarters of students (73 percent) feel they belong. ERO found that schools increase belonging by strengthening students' relationships with each other and between teachers and students.
- Students are twice as likely to think daily attendance is important if they have a role or responsibility at school. Half of students (52 percent) report they have one. ERO found that roles and responsibilities build pride and purpose to attend, and leadership positions can help create peer influence that further supports attendance.

“His attendance is linked to responsibility [being lunch monitor] ... when you're responsible for lunches you're responsible for a whole lot of other kids that you take care of, make sure they eat... He'll ask someone to do karakia, he will do the dietary requirements first and call out the name... he's real into it.”

TEACHER

Finding 7: Schools are setting clearer expectations which helps students see daily attendance as important and helps parents see the value of school.

- Students are twice as likely to think daily attendance is important if the school is setting clear expectations. Around nine in ten teachers and leaders (93 percent) report setting clear expectations with students and just under three in five (57 percent) report setting clear expectations more than last year.

- Students report being influenced by positive messaging that emphasises the impact of absences on achievement and life outcomes.
 - ERO found that schools are doing this in various ways, through weekly assemblies and in-class messaging, and some are using student and parent ‘contracts.’ They are also sharing attendance data with students to help them see how they are tracking against targets.
 - More schools are now using attendance data and keeping parents informed.
- Schools setting clear expectations about attendance is the most important factor for parents reporting that school is important for their child’s future – parents are twice as likely to report school is important if the school is setting clear expectations.

“Our contract is like gold for us... if a parent isn’t [ensuring their child attends] we call the meeting... bring them in, sit them down and go, ‘Hey remember this is what you signed.’”

SCHOOL LEADER



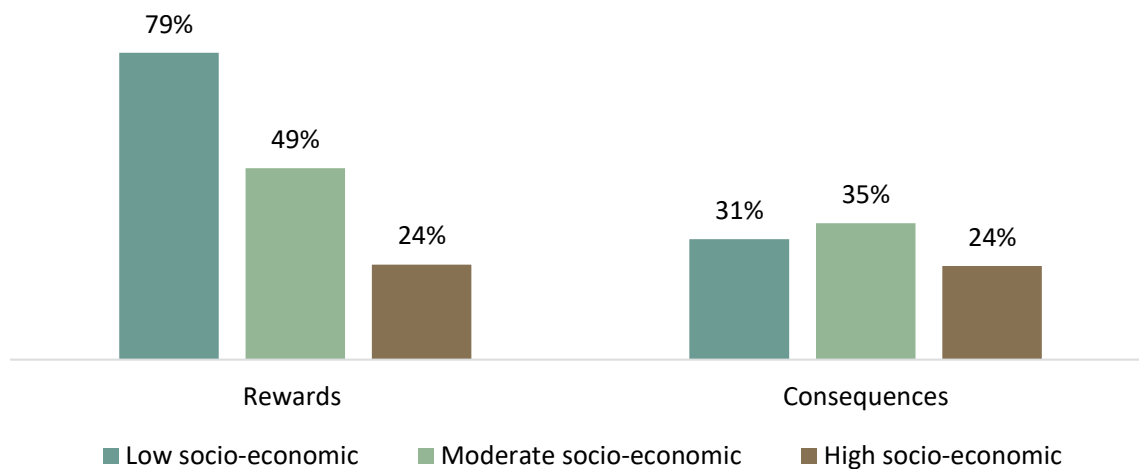
Finding 8: Schools are providing practical supports, and this has a positive impact on both attendance and parent and student attitudes to daily attendance. Schools in low socio-economic communities use practical supports a lot more.

- Students are twice as likely to think daily attendance is important if the school is providing practical supports, and parents are 1.4 times more likely to report their attitudes to daily attendance have improved in the last year if the school is providing practical supports.
- Schools in low socio-economic communities are more likely to provide practical supports – over nine in ten teachers and leaders (93 percent) report they provide these compared to six in ten of teachers and leaders (60 percent) in high socio-economic schools. ERO found practical supports commonly used include providing clothing, transport and meals.

Finding 9: Schools are providing rewards that help both parents and students see daily attendance as important. Most schools in low socio-economic communities use rewards, while most schools in high socio-economic areas don’t.

- Parents are 1.8 times more likely to think daily attendance is important if the school is using rewards. Students are 1.4 times more likely to think daily attendance is important if the school is using rewards.
- Schools in low socio-economic communities are three times more likely to use rewards than schools in high socio-economic communities (79 percent compared to 24 percent).
- ERO found that rewards can be individual or collective, celebrations, house points, or prizes. Rewards are motivating if students see them as valuable and achievable. Collective rewards can be especially motivating because students like the ‘team’ element and don’t want to let their peers down.
- Consequences are used least and much less by primary schools. ERO found that consequences have a positive influence on parents’ attitudes, but a negative impact on students’ attitudes to daily attendance. Students who report their school uses consequences are a third less likely to report they attend school regularly; they report being demotivated by consequences they think are unfair.

Figure 8: *Percent of teachers and leaders using rewards and consequences, by socio-economic level.*



“[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.”

SENIOR STUDENT

Finding 10: Schools that are successful in raising and maintaining attendance (even in challenging circumstances) have an “end-to-end” approach. They are aspirational, with leadership that drives a strong culture of attendance. They stay relentlessly focused on improvement, work in clearly defined roles, apply practices consistently, and partner with parents and whānau.

- High expectations are maintained even in the face of challenges. Out-performing schools have a strong commitment to and belief in improving attendance rates for all students.
- Leaders make raising attendance a priority by establishing targets and plans for improvement that they monitor for effectiveness. Staff have specific roles in improving attendance and do them well. Having a lead for attendance can help drive things forward.
- Out-performing schools develop solutions with parents, setting out clear roles and responsibilities for the school, the parents, and the student.

Finding 11: Schools’ patterns of closures also matter, as they can impact parent and student attitudes to attendance.

- Although school size, location, and socio-economic levels are stronger predictors of attendance, there is a link between how often schools are closed and regular attendance for primary schools.
- The timing of school closures can encourage absenteeism – closures on Thursdays or Tuesdays can lead to extended weekends and half-day closures can result in full-day absences.
- ERO found that frequent and short notice closures reinforce a more casual attitude toward attendance, undermining the message that every day matters.

“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.”

SECONDARY STUDENT



Area 3: What are the challenges schools still face?

Finding 12: Schools report term-time holidays remain their main challenge for attendance. Term-time holidays are more of a challenge for schools in high socio-economic communities.

- Almost nine in ten teachers and leaders (88 percent) in schools in high socio-economic communities report holidays as a main challenge compared to 49 percent of teachers and leaders in low socio-economic communities.
- ERO found that families often go in term-time because it’s cheaper, weighing attendance against broader experiences and family connection.

“We go to every effort to make sure our kids attend school. However, we also see the importance of family holidays/attendance at family events. There’s tension that occurs when the only time a family can afford to go on holiday is during school time.”

PARENT



Finding 13: Schools with significant attendance challenges can be overwhelmed and need support.

- Teachers can feel overwhelmed by the responsibility (particularly if the school is facing other issues) and want additional roles to help with attendance and help with educating parents about the importance of regular attendance.
- Some attendance challenges facing families are beyond what school can address and require broader responses.

How can we continue to increase attendance?

Based on these findings, ERO makes 10 recommendations across three areas to raise attendance.

- **Area 1:** Continue to do what works
- **Area 2:** Strengthen systems and accountability for attendance
- **Area 3:** Look more broadly

Area 1: Continue to do what works

The Ministry of Education and schools should continue to:

Recommendation 1: Provide parents with visibility of their child’s absences and total attendance through school reports and regular updates.



Recommendation 2: Target parents with both centralised and localised messaging to reinforce why every day matters – communicating the impact of absences on achievement and how missing bits of learning can lead to gaps in students’ knowledge.

Recommendation 3: Provide practical support and data for school leaders to:

- understand what the evidence shows are the most effective things schools can do to support attendance – building students’ connection to the school, setting clear expectations, providing practical supports, and using rewards.
- track the school’s performance and learn from schools ‘like them’ about which methods and approaches are most effective.

Area 2: Strengthen accountability for attendance

The Ministry of Education and schools should continue to:

Recommendation 4: Remove the distinction between justified and unjustified absences so that schools and parents focus on what matters the most – the number of days students are in school learning.

Recommendation 5: Increase parents’ awareness of the legal consequences already in place for parents that won’t (not can’t) support their child’s attendance.

Recommendation 6: Make attendance a ‘whole of society’ issue, with increased expectations for other agencies engaging with parents and students (such as medical professionals, social services and others) to reinforce expectations of attendance.

Recommendation 7: Consider whether an attendance requirement or a visible record of attendance can be included for the new senior school qualifications so that it incentivises students to attend while also avoiding disadvantaging students who face significant barriers to attendance.

Recommendation 8: Monitor school closures and their impact on attendance and look carefully at which days schools are open for instruction and how this is communicated to parents to support attendance.

Area 3: Look more broadly

Recommendation 9: Consider innovative solutions that reduce the main drivers for students to miss schools – for example, consider international models of regional school holidays to reduce the cost of travelling in the school holidays and how extra-curricula providers can schedule activities for outside school time.

Recommendation 10: Reduce the impact of absence on attainment – for example, recognise that New Zealand’s remote location and high proportion of foreign-born residents create unique drivers for school absences and invest in supporting schools to ‘catch up’ students when they return.

Together these actions can help schools maintain the upward trend of increasing numbers of students attending regularly.

Want to know more?

To find out more about improving attendance in New Zealand, check out the full report and good practice for schools. These are free for download from ERO’s Evidence and Insights website, www.evidence.ero.govt.nz.

What ERO did

Action	Who
Over 14,600 survey responses from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 890 school leaders → 1,967 teachers → 5,082 students → 6,683 parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 300 participants including:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → 42 school leaders → 43 teachers → 134 students → 59 parents and whānau → 30 experts
Site visits to:	→ 16 schools - 10 'out-performing' schools and six 'under-performing' schools (outliers on the correlational trendline for school Equity Index and attendance)
Data from:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → analysis of administrative data from ERO and the Ministry of Education → a review of the international and New Zealand literature

We appreciate the work of those who supported this research, particularly the students, parents and whānau, teachers and school leaders. We also thank colleagues in the Ministry of Education who provided us with data and analysis, and the national and international experts who advised us.



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