



Briefing 2: Supporting Attendance

Purpose

1. This briefing provides you with an overview of attendance issues, the current system of supports and opportunities for improvements.

Attendance issues

Regular attendance has been declining since 2015

2. Attending school regularly is fundamental to achieving positive educational and life outcomes. There is a well-established relationship between attendance and attainment, particularly attendance above 70% of the time. Unjustified absences are a strong predictor of lower attainment and the level of engagement in a child's first year of school is a predictor of life outcomes in their 20s. The effects of frequent absences are cumulative and more pronounced for students in low decile schools.
3. The 2019 attendance report (Ministry of Education, 2020) shows that, between 2015 and 2019, school attendance dropped substantially. In 2019, only 58% of students attended school regularly¹ during Term 2 (that is, 42% of students were absent from school for the equivalent of one or more days per fortnight).
4. The large drop since 2015 has shown up across all regions, all ethnicities, all deciles, and all year levels. Data from previous years also shows large inequities in school attendance: students in lower decile schools are much less likely to attend school regularly (42% of students in decile 1-2 schools attended regularly in 2019, compared with 67% in decile 9-10 schools). The largest declines have been seen across:
 - a. primary and intermediate schools (Years 1-8) which have experienced a decline in regular attendance of 14 percentage points since 2015. Half of this decline was seen in 2019
 - b. Māori and Pacific students, for whom there has been a decline averaging 14 percentage points since 2015.
5. The percentage of students attending school/kura regularly increases from Year 1 to Year 6 and then tends to fall through the intermediate and secondary years.
6. Students who do not meet the Ministry's benchmark for regular attendance are not a single, homogenous, group. Recognising this, the Ministry divides students who attend less than 90% of the time into three subgroups: *irregular absence* (80-90%), *moderate absence* (70-80%) or *chronic absence* (less than 70%). In 2019, 25% of students

¹ "Regular" attendance is defined as attending for 90% of the half days a school is open.

experienced irregular absence, 9% moderate absence, and 7% chronic absence (the equivalent of missing at least 3 days of learning every fortnight).

COVID-19 impacted on the attendance of already disadvantaged students

7. In term 2 2020 regular attendance rates increased compared to 2019 and most students responded to the end of the national lockdown by attending at higher rates than over the same time in 2019. However, for Auckland students it has taken longer to get back to 2019 levels after the August lockdown and COVID-19 appears to be worsening existing inequities in school attendance.
8. More detail on these issues, including the 2020 Term 2 attendance survey results will be provided to you shortly.

The current system of supports

9. Responsibility for ensuring students are enrolled in and attending school is shared between students, parents, schools, communities, contracted Attendance Services, and the Ministry.
10. With a few exceptions, all children and young people are legally required to be enrolled in and attending school between their 6th and 16th birthdays. These longstanding legal obligations were complemented through the Education and Training Act 2020 provisions that explicitly created a right to free enrolment and free education at State schools, including for students with special educational needs, and that strengthened and extended the development of plans to help the transition of a student to school.
11. The underlying personal or family factors that drive non-attendance vary considerably. Consistent with the tiered model of learning support, universal approaches delivered in and through schools encourage regular attendance and address periods of irregular non-attendance happens. Some students will require targeted assistance from school, working collaboratively with parents and community. A small number of the most disengaged students, including those who have become non-enrolled, will require individualised plans and support through the Attendance Service (AS), other learning support services, and from services outside the education system such as social workers, child and adolescent mental health and primary health services if they are to re-engage in school and learning.

Schools play the lead role in improving the attendance of the vast majority of students

12. Improving the attendance of students with a pattern of irregular or moderate absence is largely the responsibility of schools, working with parents and caregivers, whānau and the wider community. Schools resource the management of day to attendance through operational funding and staffing.
13. The Ministry supports schools with the day to day management of attendance through the provision of support and guidance and provides attendance data and analysis to schools that sign up to Every Day Matters. Schools that submit data every term receive a summary report of their data to support discussions and identify opportunities to improve attendance. These schools also receive a supplemental report providing comparisons of their data to national and similar schools. These reports help school leaders and their boards maintain and refresh the school's attendance strategies.
14. More recently, the Ministry has developed a National Attendance and Engagement plan (discussed below) to bring a greater focus to attendance management and engagement in light of the impact of COVID-19.

The Attendance Service works to re-engage chronically absent and non-enrolled students

15. Where schools judge they have exhausted their ability to effectively re-engage a student in school they are able to refer that student to the Attendance Service (AS). Students referred are most likely to be those with chronic absences although not all students at high risk of disengagement are referred to the AS by schools. Some may be identified and referred by the Ministry after becoming non-enrolled, others may be referred directly to other services such as Alternative Education, and some are lost to the education system.
16. Students with complex non-attendance are more likely than others to access other learning supports, be stood-down, suspended or excluded, change school more frequently, and be involved with other agencies such as Police and Oranga Tamariki. They more often experience lower educational achievement as well as other negative educational, social and economic outcomes. Improving school engagement and attendance for this group requires action across the education sector and work with other agencies.
17. The AS works with students with the aim of achieving a sustainable return to school. The service has been in operation since 2013. It is a national service and the Ministry contracts 21 providers including nine schools throughout New Zealand. Some providers also subcontract delivery for parts of their service area including sub-contracting to local schools.
18. Providers work with students and their families to address the root causes of non-attendance, which are often complex. Many of the students being referred to the service have already received interventions from other community and government services.
19. Funding for the AS is \$9.676m. In Budget 2019 an additional \$1.4m was provided over three years for AS providers This additional funding ends in June 2022.

During COVID-19, the Ministry has changed the way we support schools

20. In response to the attendance challenge caused by COVID-19, the Ministry launched a National Attendance and Engagement plan. This plan was developed based on feedback from the school sector. Through it, we committed to working in partnership with schools through regional offices to co-design plans and provide tailored supports.
21. An Urgent Response Fund (URF) was established as part of the Budget 2020 Wellbeing Budget package for students needing extra support as a result of the additional difficulties that COVID-19 had created for their attendance and engagement in learning. The fund provides immediate assistance for any learning, social and emotional, mental, behavioural, or other wellbeing issues that children and young people have that are impacting on their attendance or engagement. It provides \$50m in 2020/21 and was allocated to regions based on levels of disadvantage.
22. Responsibility for the allocation of funding in regions was delegated to Directors of Education and regional groups established to work with Directors to bring local knowledge and priorities into the determinations of how funding is best used. This approach has allowed fast and flexible decision-making specific to local needs. The sector has asked the Ministry to work with them in this way, reflecting experiences about what worked well in responding during lockdown.
23. Applications to the URF show how COVID-19 has created a range of serious challenges to children and young people's attendance, engagement and wellbeing. The applications reflect a high degree of anxiety amongst children of all ages driven by concerns about the virus, the experience of returning to learning, anxiety associated with impacts on

their families and anxiety for the future. These anxieties manifest themselves in different ways including increases in the frequency and intensity of challenging behaviours.

24. Budget 2020 also provided \$2.575m for the AS for one year to increase the number of attendance advisers working with students at risk of disengaging, or who have become non-enrolled, as a result of the response to COVID-19.

Opportunities for improvements

25. Regular attendance has been declining since 2015 and, while attendance has improved in the period after lockdown for most students, for some the experience of COVID-19 has had a negative impact on already poor attendance. For others COVID-19 has triggered poorer post-lockdown attendance and engagement. The immediate priority is addressing the impact of COVID-19 on engagement and attendance through the URF, the National Attendance and Engagement Plan, and the provision of additional resources for the AS.
26. However, efforts to address the longstanding and underlying issues of poor attendance amongst too many students remains important. To have an impact on this long-term negative trend, we need to do two things:
 - a. Continue to improve our supports for schools to manage most non-attendance
27. Improve the AS to tackle the most severe cases of non-attendance and disengagement and enhance the responsiveness of the AS to local circumstances.

Continue to improve our supports for schools to manage most non-attendance

28. Poor school attendance is associated with many of the same issues that sit behind other learning support needs including:
 - a. individual factors such as behavioural issues, peer relationships, and anxiety about school or more general anxiety and mental health needs
 - b. family factors including residential and school transience, unemployment, family violence, poverty, and housing insecurity
 - c. school factors such as school culture, curriculum, and relationships with individual teachers.
29. Regular school attendance and engagement can be enhanced through wider efforts to improve educational outcomes including encouraging educationally powerful relationships between schools and parents/whānau and between teachers and students, an engaging curriculum, by addressing unconscious bias and racism in the education system, and through the improvements in Ministry support to schools through the development of the Education Support Agency.
30. Giving effect to the National Attendance and Engagement Plan and building on the experiences and lessons provided by the response to COVID-19) will also offer opportunities to improve universal and targeted assistance in schools and communities. There is specific opportunity to consider how we could strengthen the middle tier of support for schools through the Attendance and Engagement plan.

Improve the attendance service

31. The sector had already raised concerns about the distance between schools and the current Attendance Service that arose in some areas after the Attendance Service replaced the more localised District Truancy Service in 2013. These concerns prompted the previous Associate Minister to request work to redesign the Service.
32. The Ministry has started a co-design process with schools in Kawerau and South Auckland to explore options and new ways of delivering the AS that focussed on:
 - a. how frequent absences could be managed and resourced closer to schools
 - b. the integration of responses to absences and non-enrolment.
33. The next steps in redesigning the service is to engage with stakeholders, including schools, current AS providers and Iwi nationally, and undertake a co-design process to determine the shape of Attendance Services beyond 2021. Consultation with stakeholders will begin in December 2020 and continue into term one 2021. Following this initial consultation, a more in-depth co-design process will be undertaken regionally with the intention to have a new model for the Attendance Service in place by term one 2022 in all regions.
34. The \$9.676m. allocated annually to Attendance Services reaches only around 12,000 frequently absent students and another 10,000 students not enrolled in any school, the majority in Years 8-11. Based on Attendance Survey data we estimate that there are more than 30,000 ākonga in Years 1-11 attending less than 70%. Current funding provides for, on average, 4 hours per case for an Attendance Adviser to follow up a student, develop a plan, and support a return to school. These funding settings will place limitations on progressing this work as schools will need to try and work differently within the same level of funding.
35. This work aligns with Priority 6 of the Learning Support Action Plan to improve education for children and young people at risk of disengaging. Priority 6 provides the broad umbrella for work to better support children and young people to stay engaged in their learning including through the redesign of the AS.
36. As already noted, students with poor attendance are often the same students that are seen in other services for at-risk students, including Alternative Education and are more likely to be lost early from the education system. Poor attendance or non-enrolment can result in enrolment in AE or Te Kura. It is important to note that not all students with poor attendance are subsequently seen in these services.
37. In exploring improvements in the AS, we will develop a better understanding of the links between services, including how students move between them, the similar barriers that each service faces in improving educational engagement, and similarities in what a successful delivery model looks like.