Understanding attendance research review

What educators need to know

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

About this resource

This resource summarises key research on school attendance from the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) Understanding attendance evidence paper. It outlines evidence-based strategies that can support school leaders and teachers to understand attendance challenges and strategically plan to improve attendance in their schools.

Schools can use this resource along with the Tell Them From Me (TTFM) and student attendance Scout guide, which shows how the different elements of the new Plan for NSW Public Education that drive attendance can be seen through TTFM reports.

These evidence-based resources complement the suite of resources for schools available on the Attendance matters website. They aim to support school leaders to develop and implement attendance improvement and progress measures in their school's Strategic Improvement Plans.
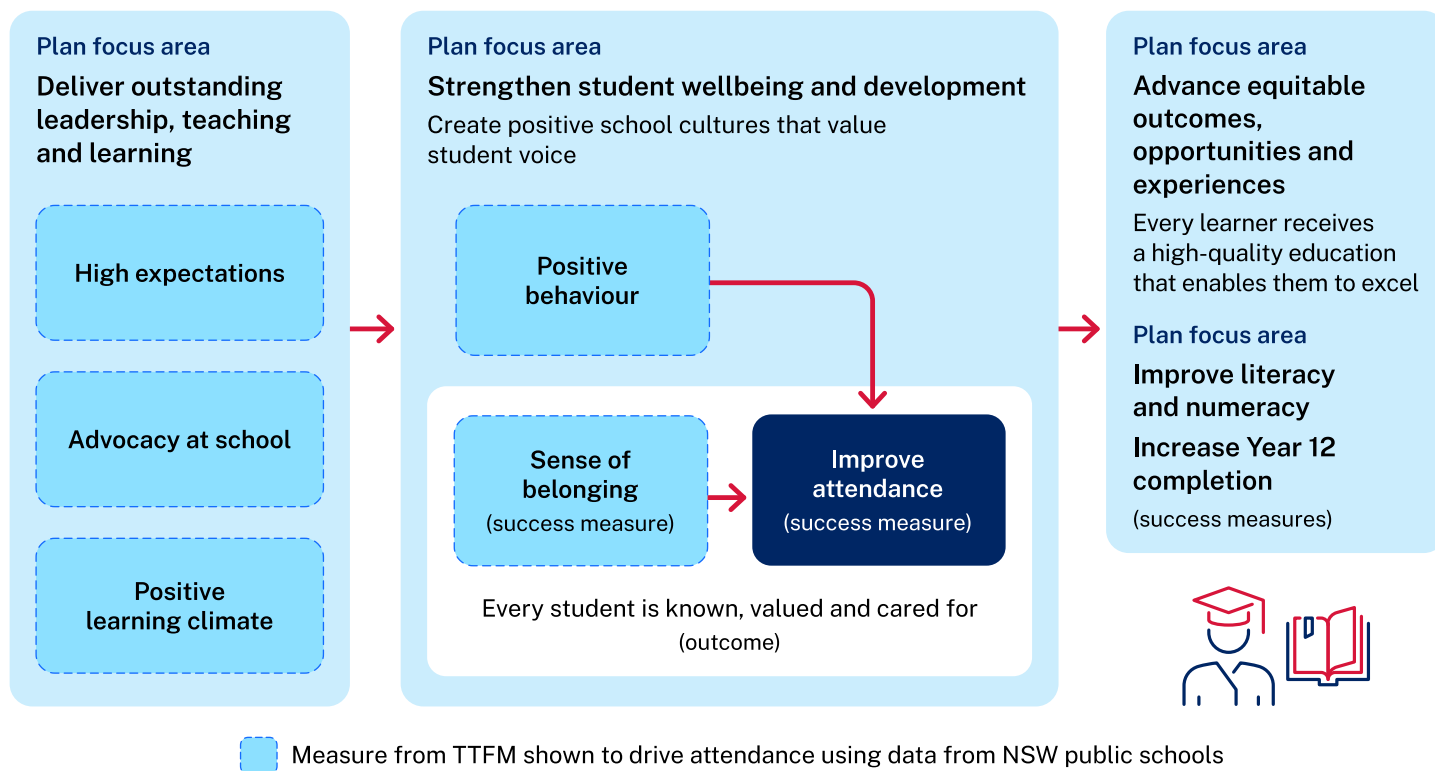

Understanding attendance – what does the research say?

- Research reliably shows that positive school attendance benefits students' academic achievement, engagement and wellbeing. Students who attend school regularly are also more likely to experience positive health, social and economic outcomes after leaving school.

- There are many reasons why students do not attend school regularly. Absences from school are driven by a range of factors inside and outside school. Students may experience multiple challenges to attending school, and these may (or may not) be interrelated. Types of attendance challenges can also vary in different school contexts.

- Attendance is a shared responsibility. Building positive relationships with parents helps schools to identify and respond to students' attendance challenges. Positive relationships with parents also make it easier for schools to clarify misconceptions about attendance in ways that reinforce the parent's engagement with school and their child's learning.

- COVID-19, influenza cases and natural disasters have impacted attendance rates in Australia and overseas, and added to the complexity of supporting positive attendance. As well as directly impacting attendance at school, these disruptions have intensified the challenges in some students' lives that contribute to school disengagement and absence.

- Despite the complexity of factors driving attendance, NSW public schools work hard to address school factors and support positive attendance. Research shows that when schools take a purposeful, evidence-based approach, they can influence attendance in ways that create meaningful positive impacts on student learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Figure 1

Relationship between TTFM measures that drive attendance and elements of teaching, learning, student wellbeing and equity under Our Plan for NSW Public Education

Plan focus area
Deliver outstanding leadership, teaching and learning

- High expectations
- Advocacy at school
- Positive learning climate

Plan focus area
Strengthen student wellbeing and development
Create positive school cultures that value student voice

- Positive behaviour
- Sense of belonging (success measure)
- **Improve attendance** (success measure)

Every student is known, valued and cared for (outcome)

Plan focus area
Advance equitable outcomes, opportunities and experiences
Every learner receives a high-quality education that enables them to excel

Plan focus area
Improve literacy and numeracy
Increase Year 12 completion (success measures)

Measure from TTFM shown to drive attendance using data from NSW public schools

Evidence-based strategies to support attendance

Evidence from Tell Them From Me data highlights how good teaching practices, coupled with positive student engagement and wellbeing, drive attendance in NSW public schools. Figure 1 shows the Tell Them From Me measures that are particularly important for driving positive attendance, based on NSW research. It sets out how focussing on these areas acts on different elements of Our Plan for NSW Public Education to improve attendance to help every student learn, grow and belong at school (refer to 'Further resources').

The research literature identifies 2 overarching approaches to strategies that can improve positive attendance in schools: whole-school strategies and targeted strategies. Whole-school strategies aim to support all students by laying the key foundations of positive attendance at school, while targeted strategies work to provide additional targeted support for students who need it.

Table 1 (page 3) provides a summary of evidence-based, whole-school strategies. Focussing on the strategies in these 3 areas supports positive attendance for all students:

- nurture a positive attendance culture
- strengthen attendance data systems and processes
- enhance engagement with students, parents and the community.

While these strategies apply to all students and their families, some students will need additional support to address their specific challenges to attending school. School leaders can refer to the department's Planning to improve attendance resource for guidance on improving attendance in their school context to best meet the needs of their students.

Further resources

Want to know more? Read CESE's review of the research on school attendance.

For resources to help schools plan and implement attendance strategies, refer to Attendance matters – resources for schools.

Universal resources to support student attendance are on the Universal Resources Hub.

The following CESE publications may also support schools in enacting the strategies:

- What works best – 2020 update and What works best in practice – high expectations, classroom management and wellbeing themes
- Supporting advocacy at school
- Supporting high academic expectations
- Supporting students' sense of belonging
- Growth goal setting – what works best in practice
- TTFM Scout data reports and guide.

Table 1

Evidence-based strategies to support positive attendance

	Nurture a positive attendance culture	Strengthen attendance data systems and processes	Enhance engagement with students, parents and community

Evidence-based strategies	• Strengthen positive relationships between students, teachers and students, and teachers and families
	• Develop and sustain cultural safety capabilities of staff, including understanding of cultural events and days of significance that can impact attendance
	• Promote anti-racism education aligned to the department's Anti-Racism Policy
	• Implement an anti-bullying plan
	• Develop a school behaviour support and management plan in line with the department's Student Behaviour Policy
	• Sustain high expectations for regular school attendance
	• Help families understand school attendance policies, their children's attendance and absences and the importance of regular attendance through regular contact and communication
	• Help students and families feel welcome at school (for example, by ensuring 'first contact is positive' – all staff greet all students positively the first time they see them)
	• Deliver teaching practices that strengthen engagement and promote high expectations, motivating learning goals, and effective classroom management
		• Develop clear school guidelines for classifying, collecting, reporting and following up on absences (aligned to the department's School Attendance Policy)
		• Through the school's attendance team / learning support team, check and review Scout attendance data regularly at an individual, class, year and school level including:
		  ◦ characteristics of absent students
		  ◦ prevalence of different absence types
		  ◦ timing and patterns of absences
		• Provide staff with professional learning opportunities so they can identify students who need more support
		• Examine Tell Them From Me Scout reports to explore measures of effective teaching, engagement and wellbeing that drive attendance (refer to TTFM and attendance guide)
		• Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all staff, revisiting daily roll marking and other school attendance procedures with all staff
			• Seek student and family perspectives on their challenges and attitudes to attendance (for example, through student focus groups, and parents and citizens associations)
			• Ask for feedback from students and families about the school's attendance culture, including sense of belonging, student engagement, safety and teaching practices
			• Communicate clear, positive messages to parents about the expectations, value and impact of attendance (refer to the Attendance communication toolkit for posters, charts and other resources)
			• Ensure communication is accessible and inclusive to all members of the school community
			• Consider appointing a school attendance contact who is known and valued within the school context (for example, a school executive member, year advisor, school learning and support staff or another staff member)
			• Identify and partner with broader community members, organisations and services who have expert knowledge and skills to support specific attendance challenges (for example, specialist allied health and behaviour providers or health and wellbeing hubs)

	Nurture a positive attendance culture	Strengthen attendance data systems and processes	Enhance engagement with students, parents and community
How these strategies can support attendance	• Makes schools a welcoming place to be, where all students and families feel safe, included and like they belong at the school • Builds a shared understanding among the school community of attendance expectations and everyone's role in supporting regular attendance • Fosters academic engagement and a positive learning environment in the classroom	• Provides quality data to identify and track attendance concerns and measure success • Helps school leaders to decide what actions to take and where to allocate resources strategically to achieve their school's improvement measures • Supports staff to act on attendance concerns before they escalate	• Builds connections between school and home, and encourages families to be active partners in improving attendance • Supports staff to develop a holistic understanding of concerns that impact attendance and address students' specific needs • Provides pathways for schools to access external advice and support for addressing complex attendance challenges
Example attendance progress measures	• The proportion of unexplained absences is reduced • Attendance during higher periods of absence is improved. This could include specific days of the week or weeks of the year • A whole-school approach is developed for communicating with the school community about the importance of school attendance • The school community celebrates regular and improved attendance	• 100% data completeness for attendance is achieved every day, so the school knows which students are not attending and why • A whole-school approach to attendance data analysis is implemented to identify attendance trends over time and areas for growth • Staff have knowledge and skills to implement the school's attendance monitoring systems and processes • Staff consistently implement the school's attendance monitoring systems and processes	• An increased proportion of students report a sense of wellbeing at school • An increased proportion of students report positive engagement with learning • Student and/or parent/carer voice is engaged to inform improvements in student attendance

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Refer to Every day counts: Student attendance guide [PDF 4.9MB] for guidance for school leadership teams to help with planning and implementing evidence-based attendance strategies.

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