Every day matters
Improving school attendance in Australia

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GRATTAN Institute

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Overview

Too many Australian students are absent from school each day. On a typical school day this year, about 11 per cent of students who should have been at school did not make it to class.

These absences add up quickly. Missing one day of school a fortnight is the equivalent of missing four weeks a year, and a whole year between the first day of school and the end of Year 10.

It's a widespread problem – students across the board are attending less. Two in five students now miss about a day of school each fortnight on average.

That's a risk for students, families, and communities. Even a single day of absence can be connected to a decline in achievement, and the more days a student misses, the greater this decline. And it's not just the class content that's missed – students also miss out socially and emotionally.

There are no easy fixes here. But understanding why students miss school, which students are at greatest risk, and how to support them is essential to boosting attendance.

New Grattan research provides the first public, post-pandemic insight into how the distribution and types of absences have changed. With records for almost one third of Australian government school students, the data allow us to unpack individual attendance patterns from 2017 to 2024, revealing that the biggest factor driving increased absence is illness.

Education Ministers have committed to an ambitious goal of getting attendance back to its 2019 rate by the end of the decade. Our analysis shows that we have a long way to go. Australia will not achieve this by tinkering around the edges. If we want to shift the dial, we'll need to take a radically new, community-wide approach to improving attendance.

England can show us where to start. England's political and policy leaders across portfolios have spoken directly to parents, reinforcing the importance of school attendance and its role in academic achievement. At the same time, England has overhauled attendance data collection and reporting. Now, with near-to-live, consistent national data, the UK government and schools know where the problems are, and which high-performing schools can help share best practice across the system.

England's approach to attendance offers five clear steps on where Australian governments should start:

1. Launch a public campaign on why attending school is so important

2. Overhaul attendance data

3. Share practice from schools that have strong attendance

4. Give parents better health advice

5. Make school attendance a whole-of-government priority

A national focus on school attendance – starting with the steps outlined here – would put Australia on the right track, and give every child the chance to learn, every day.

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1 Too few students attend school regularly

School attendance in Australia has been falling for more than a decade, and the pandemic accelerated the decline. While attendance bounced back partially after lockdowns ended, and this year marks a small improvement, it remains well below pre-pandemic levels and behind countries such as England.

1.1 Attendance has not bounced back after the pandemic

In 2014, the national attendance rate was 93 per cent, meaning students missed about 14 days of school per year – almost three weeks – on average (see Figure 1.1 on the following page and Box 1 for an overview of how attendance is measured in Australia).[1] By 2019, attendance had fallen to 91 per cent (roughly three and a half weeks). After the pandemic disruptions to schooling, attendance hit a record low in 2022 of 87 per cent (roughly five weeks).[2]

Although there's been some recovery since then, attendance remains well below pre-pandemic levels. As of Semester 1 this year, the attendance rate was 89 per cent, meaning students missed about 22 days (about 4.5 weeks) of school on average – about 1.5 extra weeks of missed school compared to a decade ago. Only three in five

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1. For consistency, our calculations assume that the school year is 195 days long across all jurisdictions. This is calculated as a weighted average of the number of school days in government schools across all jurisdictions in 2025, using 2024 enrolment numbers as weights. Catholic schools generally have between 188 and 200 days, while term dates at independent schools vary by school. The national attendance data discussed in this and the following paragraph are from ACARA (2025).
2. Ibid.

students now attend school regularly (at least 90 per cent of the time), compared to nearly four in five in 2015.[3] That means more than 1.2 million students in Years 1 to 10 are not attending school regularly, and therefore are missing out on the full set of opportunities school provides.[4]

1.2 Attendance is down in almost all schools

Declines in attendance are widespread, affecting almost all schools and many students.

Since 2018, attendance has fallen in 96 per cent of schools. Only 3 per cent have recorded an increase (see Figure 1.2 on the following page). Declining school attendance is a challenge right across the community. This means there is work to do in almost all schools communities across Australia.

1.3 New analysis of student records shows attendance has fallen for many students

New Grattan analysis provides the first public, post-pandemic insight into how the distribution and types of absences have changed. With attendance records for almost one third of Australian government school students, the data allow us to unpack individual attendance patterns from 2017 to 2024, revealing why students are missing school (see Appendix A for further detail on this data analysis).

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3. For simplicity, we have referred to attending 90 per cent or more of school – the attendance level – as 'regular attendance', which is similar to the definition adopted by the New Zealand government: Education Counts (2025).
4. To estimate the number of students not attending regularly in 2025, we invert the national attendance level (62 per cent) to obtain the share of students below the benchmark (38 per cent) and multiply this by the number of full-time Year 1–10 enrolments in 2024: ABS (2024, Table 42B).

Figure 1.1: School attendance is lower than before the pandemic
School attendance rate and attendance level for Years 1 to 10 in Australia
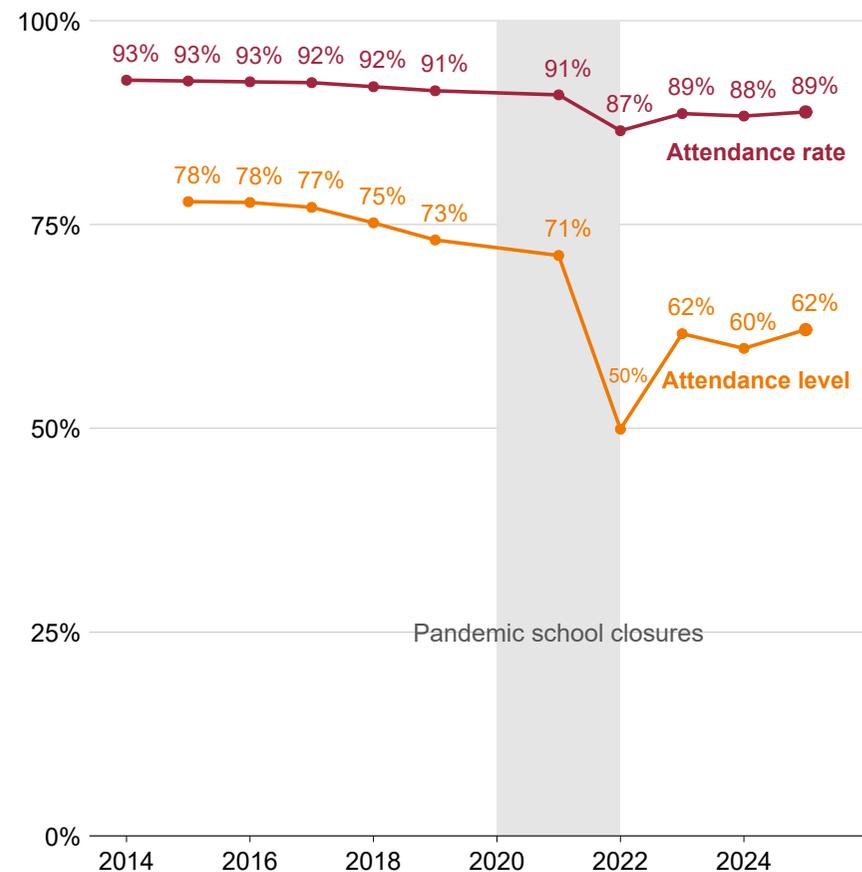
Note: Values for 2018 onward are not fully comparable to previous years due to changes in the calculation method for NSW government schools in 2018. COVID lockdowns in 2020-21 led to varying school closure policies across Australia, with total remote learning ranging from less than one week in Darwin to 36 weeks in metropolitan Melbourne. See Commonwealth Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024, Ch. 14, Fig. 4, p. 377).

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2025).

Figure 1.2: Most schools have lower attendance now than before the pandemic
Change in school attendance rate between pre- and post-pandemic periods, by school

1% of schools experienced no change in attendance rate between pre- and post-pandemic

96% of schools experienced a fall in attendance rate between pre- and post-pandemic

Only **3%** of schools experienced a growth in attendance rate between pre- and post-pandemic

Change in attendance rate (percentage points)
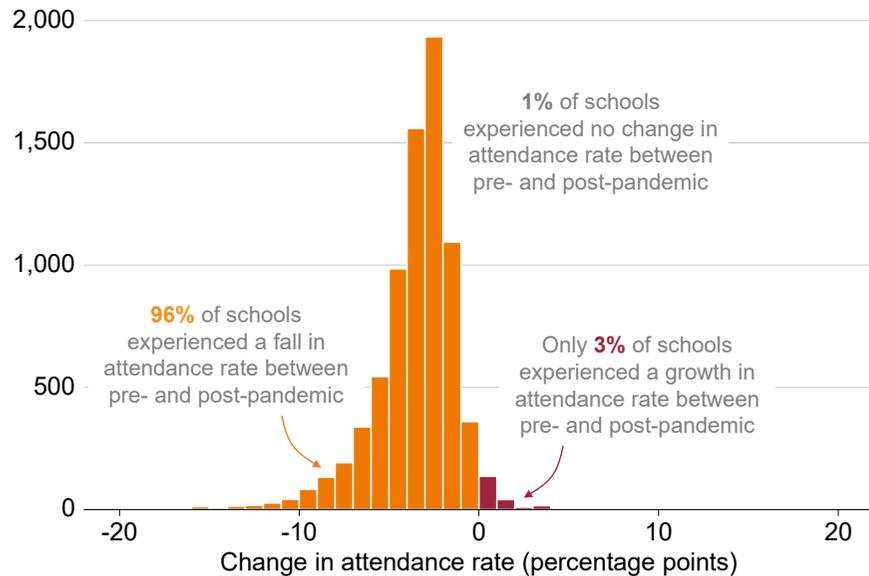
Note: Pre-pandemic value is calculated as the average of 2018 and 2019 attendance rate values, and post-pandemic value is calculated as the average of 2023 and 2024 values. Special schools and schools with fewer than 50 students are excluded, and only schools with an attendance rate value for all four years are included. For example, a school that dropped from 90 per cent attendance before the pandemic to 80 per cent after had a reduction of 10 percentage points, placing it among the 96% of schools with reduced attendance. This change was statistically significant for 98.5 per cent of schools.

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2024a).

Figure 1.3: Attendance rates are lower than before the pandemic
Distribution of students by attendance rate band, 2019 and 2024
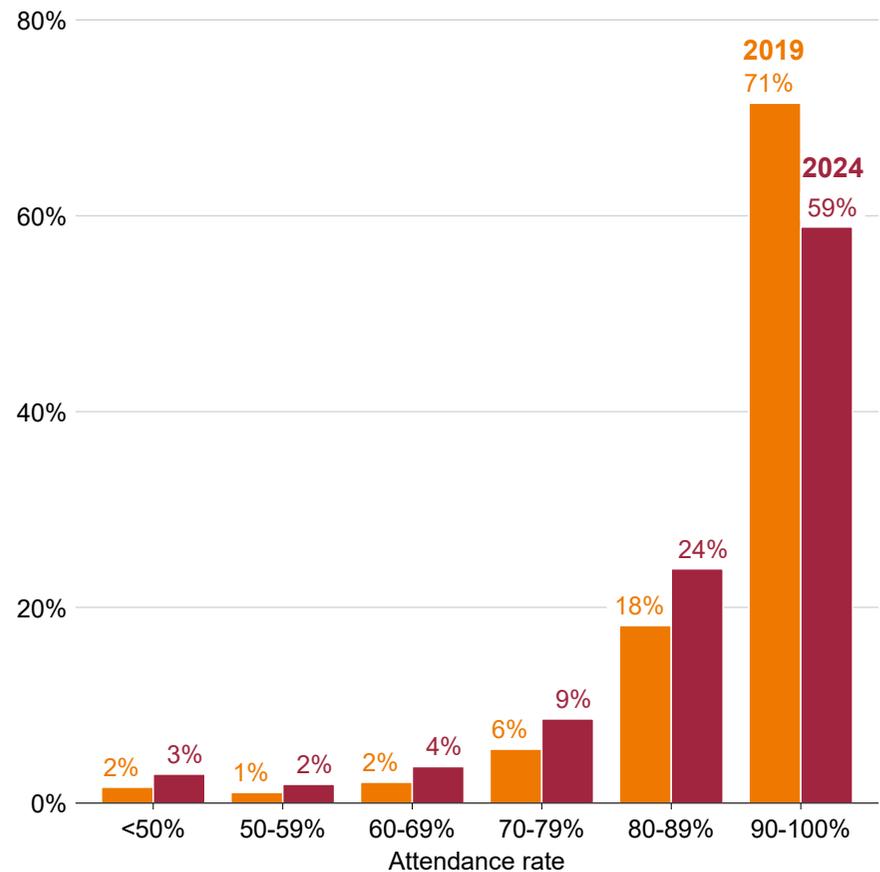
Attendance rate

Note: See Appendix A for detail on data specifications.

Source: Grattan analysis of student attendance data provided by jurisdictions.

A small but growing group of students miss months, terms, or even entire years of school (see Figure 1.3 on the previous page). This group attracts significant attention, as it should.[5] These students face huge challenges, and often need intensive, tailored support to return to the classroom.

But focusing only on these students, or schools facing particularly acute challenges, risks missing another problem hiding in plain sight – across the board, students are attending school less than they used to.

It is the highest-attending group whose numbers have fallen the most. In 2019, just before the pandemic, 71 per cent of students attended school regularly (at least 90 per cent of the time). In 2024, this had collapsed to only 59 per cent, meaning two in five students now don't attend school regularly.

Research from the UK suggests there is a tipping point when it comes to attendance: students who attend at least 85-to-90 per cent of school tend to sustain or improve their attendance in the following year, but those who don't rarely regain lost ground.[6] This suggests a large cohort of Australian students are at significant risk of further disengaging from school.

1.4   Sick days are a big factor

Schools record student absences using absence codes.[7] When we analyse these codes, the biggest factors driving increased school absences have been illness-related.[8] In 2024, students on average

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5.   See the Senate Inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters: Parliament of Australia (2023).
6.   UK Department for Education (2025a).
7.   This data relies on parents and carers accurately reporting the reason for absence, and school staff interpreting this in line with guidance and selecting the appropriate code.
8.   This is a broad category that includes short- and long-term illness – both physical and psychological – as well as medical appointments.

Figure 1.4: Most types of absence have increased since before the pandemic
Average days absent per student by absence type
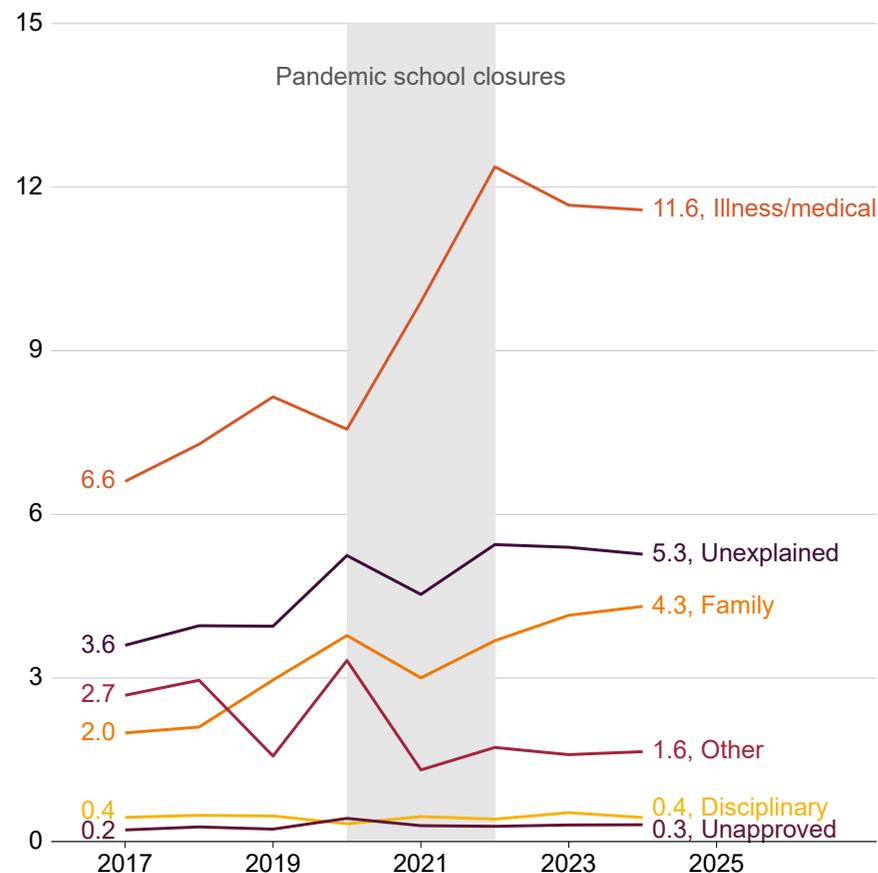
Note: See Appendix A for detail on data specifications.

Source: Grattan analysis of student attendance data provided by jurisdictions.

missed 11.6 days of school due to illness or medical appointments, up from 6.6 days in 2017 (see Figure 1.4 on the preceding page). That's an additional week of school missed per student just due to illness.

At the same time, school absences for family reasons, including holidays during term time, have more than doubled since 2017, averaging about 4 days a year in 2024.[9] And unexplained absences – where no, or no satisfactory, reason is provided – have risen to about 5 days. By contrast, the average number of disciplinary absences has remained low and stable.

The rise in illness-related absences since the pandemic is not surprising. Most parents want to keep their child home when they are seriously unwell. And limiting the spread of nasty bugs is important. But striking the right balance between minimising the impacts of missing school and preventing the spread of illness is crucial (see Chapter 4 below for detail on how England has approached this challenge).

1.5 Attendance is worse among older and disadvantaged students

While attendance across the board is declining, the latest national attendance data reveals that some groups of students miss a lot more school than others.

Attendance habits start early: students who miss school in the early years are more likely to continue doing so throughout their schooling.[10] Absences also tend to increase dramatically when students enter secondary school (see Figure 1.5). In 2025, students in Years 7 to 10 missed about a week and a half more school per year, on average, than

Figure 1.5: Older students attend less school
School attendance rate and attendance level for students in Australia by year level, 2025
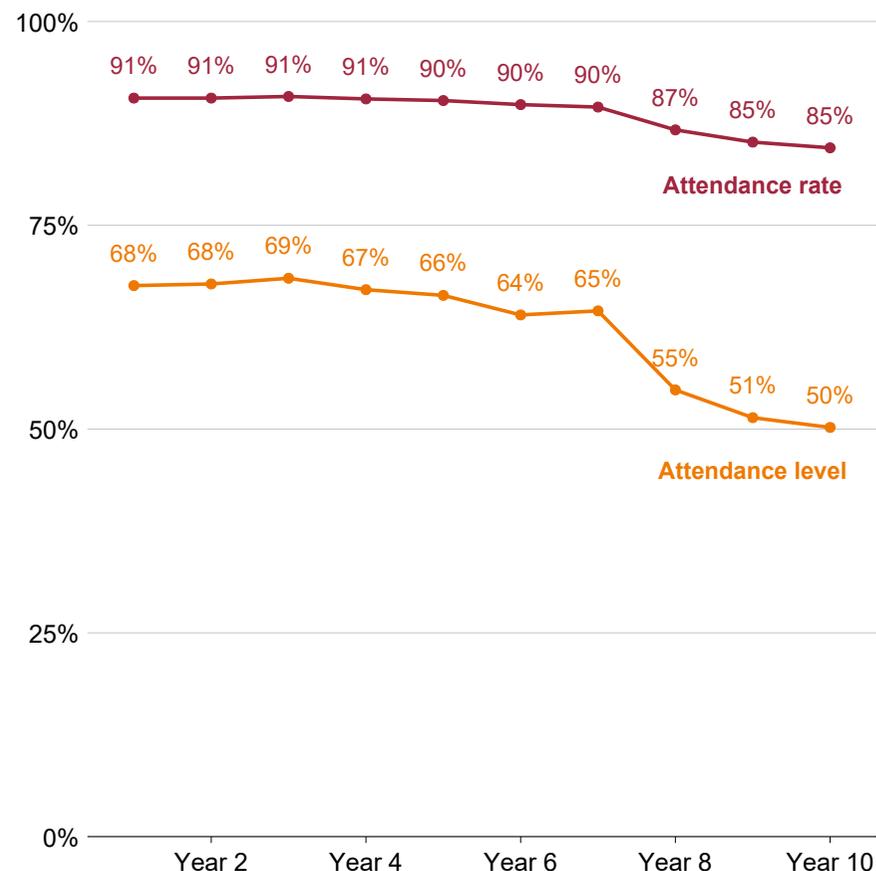
Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2025).

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9. While in-term holidays are one type of family absence, others include caring responsibilities, major family events, bereavement, and emergencies. The data do not show how these categories break down.

10. Ansari and Pianta (2019).

primary school students.[11] The attendance level also drops sharply during secondary school – only 50 per cent of Year 10 students attend school regularly (at least 90 per cent of the time).

Some groups of students have consistently lower attendance (see Figure 1.6).[12] Students in government schools, for example, miss more school than their peers in Catholic or independent schools — on average over a week more per year.[13] Indigenous students and those in remote areas attend much less school. They miss more than twice as many days as non-Indigenous students and those in non-remote areas. In total, these students miss about a quarter of the school year on average, which adds up to a shocking 2.5 years from the first day of school and to the end of Year 10.[14]

Schools with less-advantaged students tend to have fewer regular attenders (see Figure 1.7 on the next page). But there's considerable variation: schools with similar levels of advantage can differ dramatically in attendance. For example, at the 50th percentile, there are schools that have almost 100 per cent of students attending regularly, and others than have less than 25 per cent.

This suggests that individual schools can make a real difference.

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11. ACARA (2025).
12. All figures in this paragraph have been calculated from ACARA (ibid).
13. Students at government schools are more disadvantaged, on average, according to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). ICSEA scores measure the level of educational advantage that students bring to learning. An ICSEA percentile of 40 means that the school's community is more educationally advantaged than 40 per cent of all schools in Australia. The average ICSEA percentile of government schools in 2024 was 43, compared to 64 in Catholic schools and 67 in Independent schools: ACARA (2024b). See ACARA (2024c) for further detail on how ICSEA scores are calculated.
14. This is estimated by first calculating how many days a student would miss in a single year based on the 2025 attendance rate, and then multiplying this by 11, assuming the same attendance rate from Foundation to Year 10.

Figure 1.6: Some students miss a lot of school
Number of days absent from school by subgroup, 2025

Remote and Indigenous students are absent for about a **quarter** off the school year, on average.
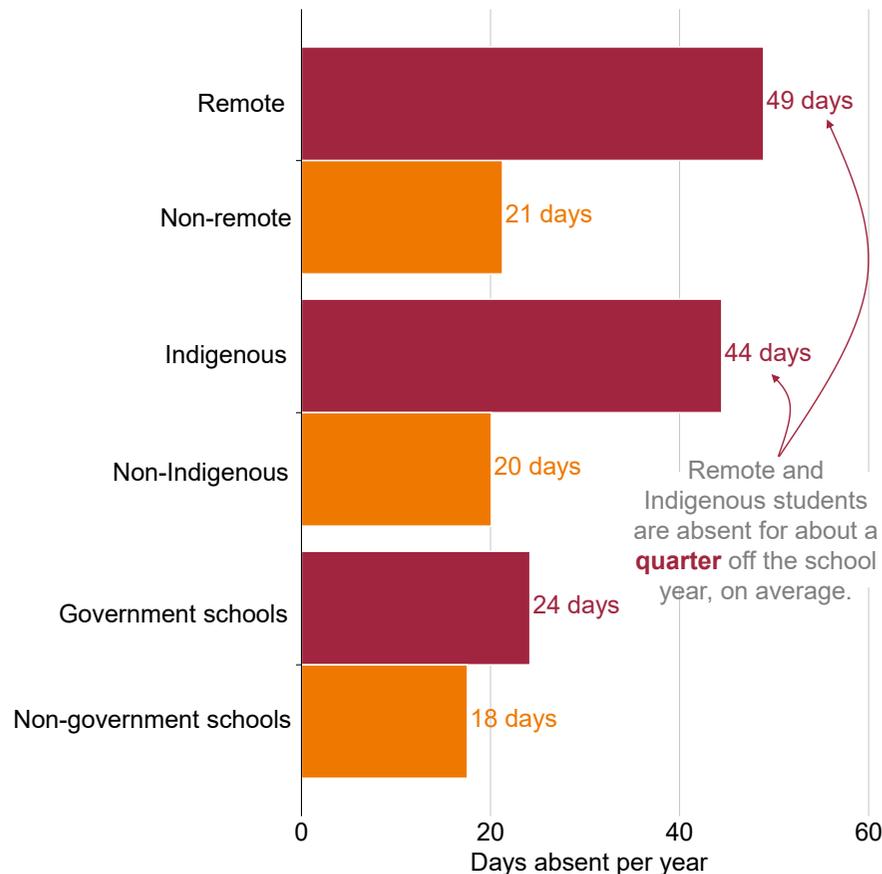
Notes: 'Remote' includes students attending schools in Remote and Very Remote areas, while 'not remote' includes Major Cities, Inner Regional, and Outer Regional areas. Attendance rates for these groups were calculated as weighted averages of their component subcategories, using total enrolments from 2024 as weights. The attendance rate for each group was used to calculate the absence rate (e.g. for an attendance rate of 90%, the absence rate is 10%). This was then multiplied by the number of days in the school year – which is assumed to be 195 days – to calculate the number of absent days.

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2025) and ACARA (2024b).

1.6 England does better than Australia

England has had significantly more success than Australia in restoring attendance after the pandemic.[15] While its attendance trajectory looks broadly similar to Australia's – attendance dipped during the pandemic and its recovery has been incomplete – England's pre-pandemic attendance rate was much higher and the pandemic dip was less severe (see Figure 1.8 on the following page). In the autumn term (September to December) of the 2024-25 school year, England's attendance rate had rebounded to 94 per cent, compared with 89 per cent in Australia in Semester 1 of 2025.[16]

England has also consistently outperformed Australia in the proportion of students attending school regularly – at least 90 per cent of the time (see Figure 1.9 on the next page).

The UK government has focused heavily on boosting school attendance for years, taking a system-wide approach.[17] This has included raising family awareness about the importance of attendance, improving data collection and transparency, and identifying and spreading strong practice across schools. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 discuss this approach in more detail, illustrating what strong practice looks like at a school and system level.

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15. See Appendix B for a comparison of how attendance data in Australia and England is collected and reported.
16. UK Department for Education (2025b). See Appendix B for detail on England's attendance data.
17. The UK is made up of four nations: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK Department for Education has responsibility for schools in England only. Since 1998, each nation has had its own separate government and legislature with responsibility for certain policy matters, including education. This means each nation within the UK has a different education system and approach.

Figure 1.7: Attendance is associated with advantage
The relationship between school ICSEA percentile and school attendance level, 2025
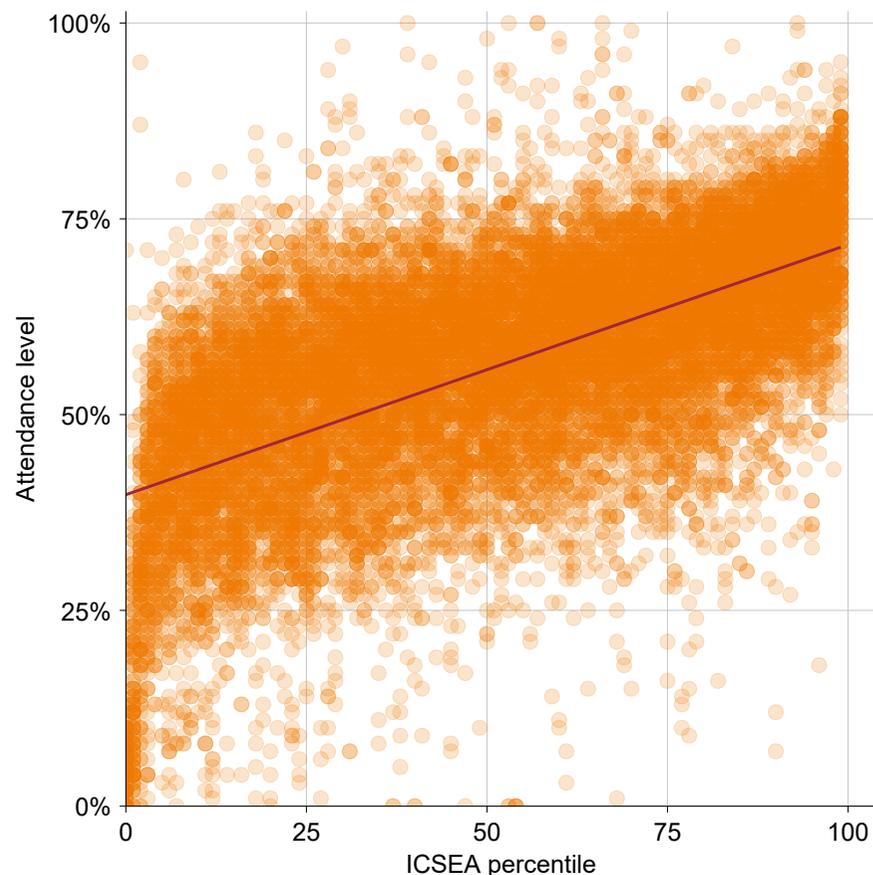
Notes: The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) measures the level of educational advantage that students bring to learning. An ICSEA percentile of 40 means that the school's community is more educationally advantaged than 40 per cent of all schools in Australia. See ACARA (2024c) for details. Schools with fewer than 50 students have been excluded from this analysis.

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2024a).

Figure 1.8: Australia isn't keeping up with England
School attendance rate for students in England and Australia

Figure 1.9: Fewer Australian students attend school regularly
School attendance level for students in England and Australia
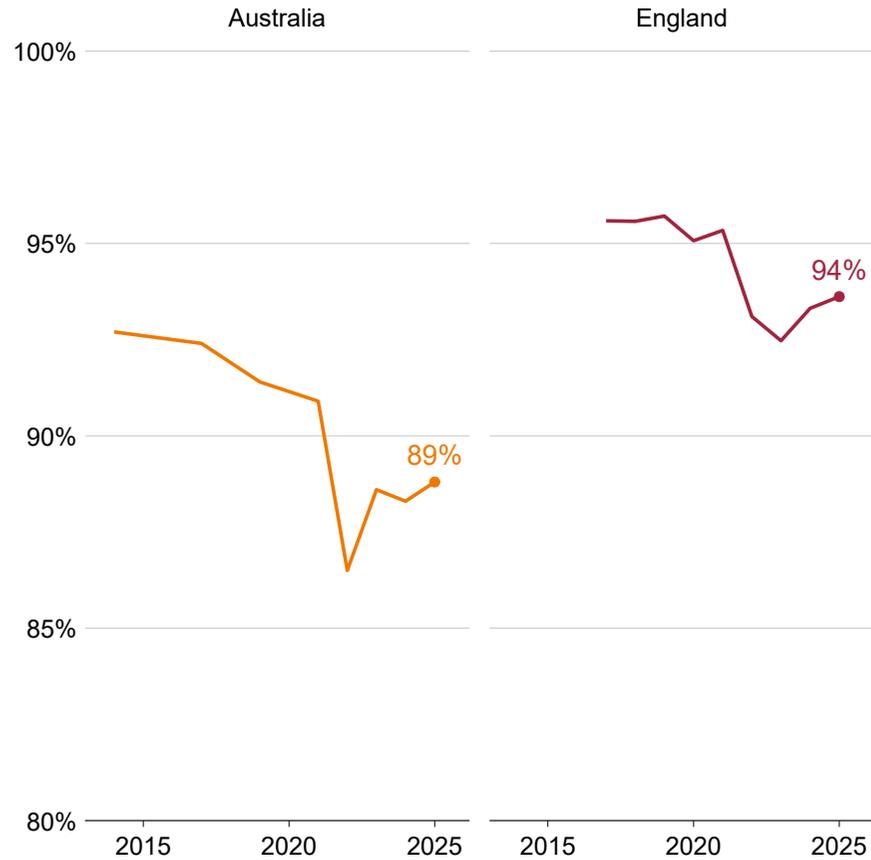
Notes: See Appendix B for detail on data specifications.

Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2025) and UK Department for Education (2025b).

1.7 Australia needs a rethink

As part of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments have committed to three goals for attendance:[18]

- By 2030:
  - Lift the national attendance rate back to where it was in 2019 for all students
  - Lift the attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from regional and remote locations, and students from low socio-educational advantage (SEA) schools back to where they were in 2019.[19]

- By 2035:
  - Lift the attendance rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from regional and remote locations, and students from low SEA schools up, so that they match the national average attendance rate.

These are worthy goals, but we need to recognise the enormous scale of the challenge. To reach the first goal by 2030, the national attendance rate will need to lift by 2.6 percentage points, or half a percentage point each year on average (see Figure 1.10). And

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18. As part of this agreement, governments are working together to investigate evidence-based approaches to addressing absence. Individual state and territory governments have also committed to taking individual actions, such as providing resources to schools, and investing in mentoring and re-engagement programs. For the full agreement and state and territory bilateral agreements see Commonwealth Department of Education (2024).
19. Low SEA schools are defined as those in the lowest ICSEA quartile.

Figure 1.10: Australian governments have made ambitious commitments to improve attendance
Required improvement in school attendance rate for all students and key priority populations to achieve BFSA targets
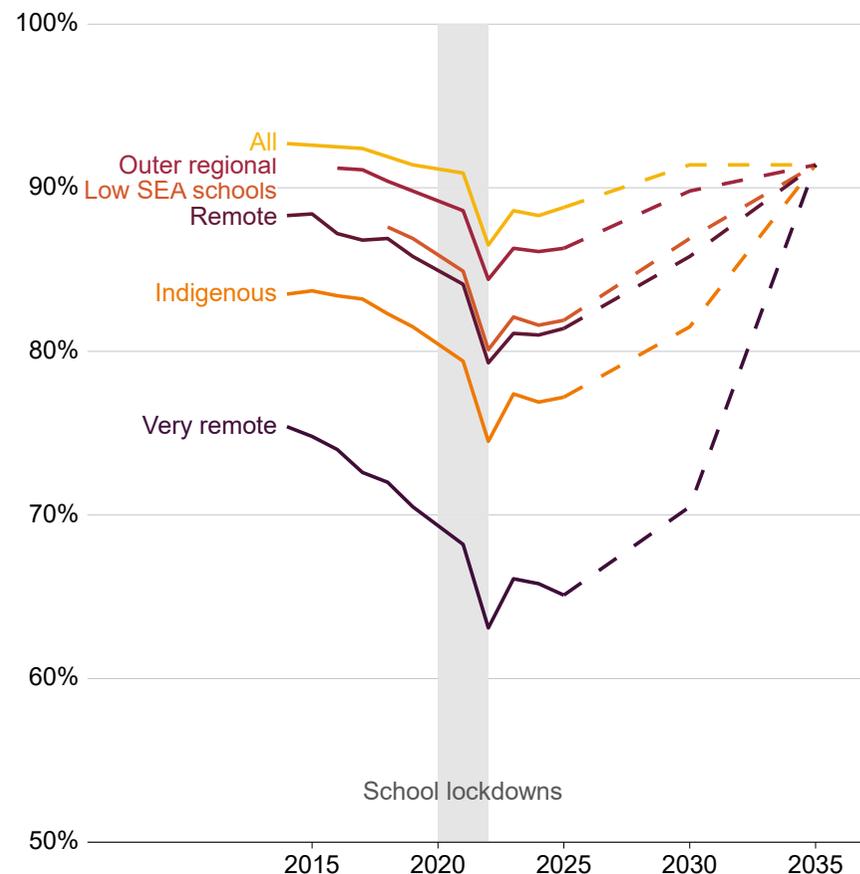
Notes: Values for 2018 onward are not fully comparable to previous years due to changes in the calculation method for NSW government schools in 2018. Between 2025 and 2030, and 2030 and 2035, projected attendance rates are assumed to grow linearly. The overall national level is assumed to not change between 2030 and 2035.
Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2025).

reaching the 2035 goal will be even harder. For Indigenous students, the attendance rate would need to increase by 14.2 percentage points, or 1.4 percentage points per year.

For context, since national attendance data collection began in 2014, the overall attendance rate has improved only twice. The first occurred in 2023, immediately after the pandemic dip, and was a rebound rather than the start of a sustained upward trend. Since then, results have stagnated, with this year's uptick only making up for last year's decline.

Achieving these targets will require a substantial rethink of how Australian school systems operate and how they work with families, the broader community, and government agencies to overcome barriers to school attendance.[20]

1.8 What this policy brief is not about

This policy brief focuses on boosting attendance in mainstream schools, given the large majority of students attend these schools.[21]

It focuses on how to boost regular school attendance, given this is where the largest declines have been post-pandemic. It considers universal strategies that can have an impact across the Australian student population.

This brief does not provide community or geographically-specific suggestions. Nor does it address the specific attendance challenges faced by the small minority of students who experience acute absences, for example due to highly complex factors such as significant family dysfunction or serious physical or mental illness. We recognise

that such cases deeply impact students, families and schools, however they tend to require tailored, specialised responses, drawing on a range of agencies, community services and specialists. A thorough consideration of these issues is outside the scope of this brief.

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20. See Chapter 4 for the five steps Australian governments should take first.
21. It appears that enrolments in non-mainstream schools (including alternative schools, distance education, and home schooling) are increasing, but data is limited. See Independent Schools Australia (n.d.), Couper and Harding (2024), and Buckingham (2017).

2   Students who attend school regularly are better off

The more days of school that students attend, the better off they are academically, socially, and emotionally. And the benefits are long-lasting – students who attend more earn more later in life.

2.1   School attendance is key for student learning

Students who attend more school do better academically.[22] Even a single day of absence can be connected to a decline in achievement, and the more days a student misses, the greater this decline. For each day of absence, it's not just that day's learning that is lost. In schools with effective teaching, lessons build on one another. So the more lessons missed, the harder it is for students to understand what comes next. For example, a study of NAPLAN results in Western Australia found that every day of school missed was associated with lower test scores in numeracy, reading, and writing.[23]

Some types of absences are worse than others. A follow up to the Western Australian study found that unexplained absences are particularly strongly linked to academic declines.[24] For example, an average Year 5 student who missed eight days of school in the previous

year due to illness was, on average, almost one month behind in numeracy compared to their classmates with no illnesses the previous year. But an average Year 5 student who missed the same number of days due to unexplained absences was almost two months behind.[25]

The harms associated with absenteeism accumulate over time. Each additional day of absence is linked to a growing learning gap. And this can persist beyond the year of absence too.[26]

2.2   Attendance is also critical for students' social and emotional development

School isn't just about lessons and tests – school also helps children learn how to engage and connect with others. Students build social and emotional skills through everyday interactions with their teachers and peers in the classroom and the schoolyard. These skills are essential to learning how to build positive relationships, manage emotions, regulate behaviour, and get along with others. When students miss school, they may miss the opportunity to build these skills in a supportive environment.[27]

Attending school also helps protect students' wellbeing and safety, particularly for those students who are most vulnerable. When students

22. See Klein et al (2022), Ansari and Gottfried (2021), Liu et al (2021), Gershenson et al (2017), Aucejo and Romano (2016), Goodman (2014), Hancock et al (2013), and Gottfried (2011). These studies show correlational effects, not causation. Relationships can be two-way. For example, students with lower academic outcomes are more likely to be disengaged from and absent from school. Broken down by sub-group, some studies suggest absence has a greater impact on high-achieving students while others suggest lower-achieving students suffer the most. Results are also mixed by level of socioeconomic advantage.
23. Hancock et al (2013).
24. See Hancock (2019). This study found that absence due to illness, other reasonable absences, unexplained absences, and unapproved absences were associated with lower test scores, but in-term holidays were not. Other research on the link between academic outcomes and different types of absence is limited.

More research is needed to understand how this may have changed after the pandemic.
25. Ibid (Table 23, p. 191).
26. Hancock et al (2013) found that for some year levels and test domains, absences up to four years earlier were associated with lower NAPLAN scores.
27. Ansari and Gottfried (2021), Santibañez and Guarino (2021), and Ansari and Pianta (2019).

are at school, teachers and staff can monitor them and identify if they need support or are at risk of harm outside of school.[28]

2.3 Poor attendance affects students' lives as adults too

Students with worse attendance are more likely to drop out of school and less likely go on to attend and complete university.[29]

This has big flow on consequences. High school graduates, and especially those who complete a university degree, tend to earn more than students who don't finish school.[30] Researchers in the UK estimate that between Years 7 and 11, each additional day of absence above the average is associated with a reduction in lifetime earnings of over A$1,500.[31]

2.4 Poor attendance affects teachers, classmates, and parents

Student absences create a tricky juggling act for teachers. Effective teaching requires teachers to have a carefully sequenced plan for how instruction will occur, lesson-by-lesson and term-by-term.[32] Frequent absences interrupt this plan. When students are absent, teachers have to spend time helping them to catch them up during the next lesson, or assigning catch-up work for them to complete outside of class. Students who miss a lot of school may require catch-up tutoring with

another staff member. All of this takes precious time that teachers have in short supply, and it can be tricky to do while still keeping the rest of the class moving forward.

This also means that students who do attend school regularly may experience slower-paced and disjointed classes. When more students in a class are frequently absent, everyone's learning suffers – even the students who attend school every day.[33]

Student absences also affect parents who may have to miss work while caring for children at home. Regular school attendance allows parents to focus on paid work or other responsibilities, supporting family income and overall economic productivity. While working from home has become more common post-pandemic, juggling paid work with parental supervision and caregiving can be difficult.

2.5 For some students, getting to school is very challenging

Understanding why students miss school, which students are at greatest risk, and how to support them is essential to boost attendance.[34]

Figure 2.1 summarises some of the factors associated with poorer attendance. Some are relatively straightforward, such as families taking holidays during term time. But others are more complex, such as mental ill-health and family dysfunction. And some students face multiple challenges.[35]

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28. School teachers are mandatory reporters in all Australian jurisdictions, meaning they are required to report all known or suspected cases of child abuse and neglect to government authorities: AIFS (2023).
29. Dräger et al (2024), Ansari et al (2020), and Schoeneberger (2012).
30. Tertiary qualifications are linked with higher earnings across all OECD countries, including Australia: OECD (n.d.).
31. See UK Department for Education (2025c).This UK figure has been converted using a December 2025 exchange rate and inflated from the 2024 amount.
32. This is known as a whole-school curriculum approach and is described in detail in previous Grattan Institute reports on curriculum planning, reading, and primary maths instruction: Hunter et al (2022a), Hunter et al (2024b), and Hunter et al (2025).

33. Gottfried and Ansari (2022), and Gottfried (2019).
34. For a summary of evidence on the factors associated with school absence, see Melvin et al (2025a).
35. These factors can also interact in unexpected ways. For example, a study of US kindergarten students found that, although disability and disadvantage are both independently associated with lower attendance, students with both a disability and from disadvantaged families had higher attendance than students from disadvantaged families without a disability. The authors theorise that this may be because these students rely on additional supports and services provided at

Understanding why students are missing school is critical to put in place effective supports, at the individual, family, school and community level.

Figure 2.1: Factors associated with lower school attendance

Student factors
Year level
Health and wellbeing challenges
Academic difficulties
Adverse childhood experiences

Family factors
Socioeconomic disadvantage
Family instability and dysfunction
Lack of parental engagement in education
Competing family responsibilities
In-term travel

School factors
Supportive school climate
Poor quality teaching and curriculum
Inadequate staffing and resources
Absence of peers or other students

Community factors
Cultural practices (e.g., religious observance)
Geographic and transport challenges
Economic and housing instability

Note: This figure was informed by the findings of Melvin et al (2025a) and CESE (2022). It is an illustrative, not exhaustive, list of factors associated with school attendance.

school that their families may not be able to access otherwise: Gottfried and Gee (2017).

3   What schools can do to improve attendance

Boosting attendance is a tough challenge, but schools can make a big difference. The most effective schools don't rely on one-off interventions – they take a consistent, whole-school approach.

3.1   Schools should take a whole-school approach

Schools can achieve significant improvements in attendance by adopting a whole-school approach.

As a baseline, schools should have:

- **High-quality teaching.** Class time should be valuable for students. This is more likely to be the case when students experience engaging and effective teaching, receive the support they need to stay on track, and see themselves making progress. For this reason, a strategy to improve attendance should include ensuring every classroom delivers high-quality instruction.[36]

- **Safe and calm classrooms.** Schools also need to provide safe, predictable environments where students feel secure and supported to attend.[37] This requires coordination, consistency, and commitment across all staff.

- **Cultivate a culture of belonging and inclusion.** A sense of belonging at school is linked to increased school attendance.[38]

When students feel accepted, valued, and connected to their peers and teachers, they are more likely to want to be at school.

Beyond these foundational requirements, schools should:

- **Foster strong norms with families about regular student attendance.** Parents and families play a huge part in whether students attend school. It's essential that families understand the importance of regular school attendance. Clear and consistent messaging about attendance expectations and the consequences of absence can make a measurable difference in how families understand and engage with school attendance.[39]

- **Have robust systems for recording, monitoring, and following up on absences.** This ensures that students who are absent are identified quickly, the reasons for their absence are understood, and persistent absences are addressed with appropriate support.

- **Provide targeted support for students with high numbers of absences.** This typically involves a case management approach, drawing on a multi-disciplinary team to provide tailored assistance. The support offered may include providing information and resources, counselling, parent training, or referral to clinical professionals and social services.

Schools should carefully consider which strategies to implement at their school.[40] This will require problem diagnosis – using data, staff

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36. Our previous reports provide further detail on what high-quality teaching looks like. See Hunter et al (2025), Hunter et al (2024b), Hunter et al (2022a), and Hunter et al (2022b).
37. See Melvin et al (2025b) for a summary of evidence on the impact of whole-school behaviour supports on school attendance.
38. See, for example ImpactEd (2024), CESE (2022), and New Zealand Education Evaluation Centre (2025).

39. Melvin et al (2025b, pp. 22-23, 42), and Patel et al (2022, pp. 15-21).
40. Two recent reviews by AERO and the EEF summarise the key literature on attendance interventions: Melvin et al (2025a) and Patel et al (2022). Several other smaller literature reviews, often focusing on specific aspects of school attendance, have also been conducted: Pérez-Marco et al (2025), Boaler and Bond (2023), Maynard et al (2018), and Maynard et al (2012)

insights, and engagement with families and students – to understand why absences are occurring.

3.2 Case study: Charles Dickens Primary School in London

Some schools in Australia are embedding a coherent, intensive, whole-school approach to attendance. But most Australian schools still lag well behind schools in England.

The Grattan research team had the opportunity to investigate Charles Dickens Primary School in London, which is recognised nationally for its effective approach to attendance. Our investigation shows what a coherent whole-school approach can look like in practice.

Charles Dickens Primary is a state-funded school in central London with almost 500 students. It is part of the Charter Schools multi-academy trust, which has nine schools in its family.[41] It is very high-performing and serves a disadvantaged community – 44 per cent of its students have been eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years, compared to 26 per cent nationally.[42]

The school has had consistently high attendance. In the 2024-25 school year, 96.4 per cent of its students attended school regularly (i.e. at least 90 per cent of the time), higher even than pre-pandemic levels, and higher than 99.8 per cent of Australian primary schools in 2024.[43]

Making sure class time is valuable is key. Charles Dickens Primary delivers a highly sequenced, knowledge-rich curriculum, meaning students build a strong foundation of the essential concepts and facts in each subject over several years.[44] Learning is carefully sequenced so each lesson builds on what came before, and teaching draws on evidence from cognitive science, such as explicitly teaching key vocabulary and frequently reviewing learning. Teachers use shared, prepared classroom materials, such as student booklets, ensuring every child is taught the same high-quality content. This also frees up time for teachers to prepare for class and adapt their lessons for students with higher needs – including through adjusting materials, providing clear step-by-step instruction, or working in small groups – to ensure every child can succeed.

As the principal told us: *'We put a lot of time, care, and even expense into these [curriculum materials] to ensure they are engaging and purposeful. We know that if we care for and value them, our children will do the same.'*

The school's consistent approach to behaviour creates a calm, safe, and predictable learning environment. The school sets high expectations for behaviour and works closely with families to uphold them. Clear routines – such as seating plans, order for lining up, and punctual lesson starts – help keep classrooms focused. Staff respond to disruptive behaviour calmly and consistently, quickly redirecting attention back to learning.

Charles Dickens Primary also has a school-wide approach to supporting students' mental health. All students participate in short, sequenced daily lessons that teach them to be able to recognise and express their emotional needs, and help them build strategies for

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41. Charles Dickens Primary School is named after the author, who once lived in the local area. For more detail on the role of multi-academy trusts in England, see Grattan Institute's 2024 report on multi-school organisations: Hunter et al (2024a).

42. This national figure refers to mainstream primary schools: UK Department for Education (2024a). Eligibility for free school meals is a commonly used measure of disadvantage in England: UK Department for Education (n.d.[a]).

43. In the 2019-20 school year, 96.1 per cent of students at Charles Dickens Primary attended school regularly. Data for the Autumn term of each school year provided by Charles Dickens Primary School.

44. For an overview of knowledge-rich curriculum design, see Lonsdale et al (2024).

emotional self-regulation.[45] Opportunities to practise these skills are then embedded throughout the day. For instance, at the beginning of each class, students are guided through a quick check-in to identify how they are feeling.

Beyond this universal approach, the leadership team meets weekly to decide what extra support specific students need. That might mean assigning an adult mentor to greet a child at the school gate each morning, offering weekly art therapy, providing small-group or one-on-one emotional-literacy sessions with trained staff, or making a referral to a psychologist.

Students also have lots of out-of-class enrichment opportunities to look forward to. The school runs about 50 lunchtime and after-school clubs – many initiated and run by students – which provide fun, social opportunities beyond the classroom. These include a craft club, chess club, football skills club, and a Harry Potter club. Participation in clubs counts towards Charles Dickens Primary's 'Greatness Award', with students earning gold, silver, or bronze badges each term for engagement. As the principal said, *'They're looking forward, not only to school, but fun, social, non-academic learning opportunities as well.'*

School leaders have built very strong norms around attendance. Expectations are high – student attendance below 95 per cent is considered unsatisfactory and a catalyst for action. Attendance is viewed as a shared responsibility between the school and families. The importance of regular attendance is consistently reinforced with students and clearly communicated to parents – during school tours, throughout the enrolment process, and in regular newsletters. The principal told us:

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45. This approach is adapted from the RULER program by The Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence: Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (n.d.). To see the curriculum materials developed by Charles Dickens Primary School, go to Wellbeing School (n.d.).

'We're clear from the second that a child joins the school that we're ambitious and our expectations are high. All parents know our attendance policy and they know there's no way around it. All they need to do is bring their child to school every day, and we do the rest.'

Strong systems and clear responsibilities underpin this approach. While attendance is a shared responsibility across the school, a dedicated team – made up of the school principal, an attendance officer, and a family support officer – follow up absences each day and meet at least weekly to discuss appropriate interventions. The principal closely oversees the school's approach to attendance. The attendance officer, an administrative staff member, manages attendance day-to-day. They spend several hours each morning collating the attendance registers, contacting families of students who are not at school, and escalating concerns as needed. The family support officer can offer more hands-on support to students and families, such as assistance with housing, referrals to external services, access to the school food bank, or practical parenting support.

Having this team on-hand each day means no student falls through the cracks. If a student is absent without explanation, the attendance officer calls the student's home. If a family member cannot be contacted, the attendance officer and principal may visit the home to confirm the child is safe. The principal explained:

'We give them until 10am, then we'll be emailing and phoning, and the attendance officer will be making a nuisance of herself [following them up]. Then at midday, we'll go to visit the family.'

If the student is in class the following day, their teacher checks in informally and shares what the class covered while the student was away.

If absences persist or a student's attendance drops below 91 per cent, the family receives a letter from the school outlining the attendance

concern and is given six weeks to improve. Continued issues result in a meeting with the attendance officer – and, when needed, the principal or family support officer at the school – to discuss the underlying causes and develop a plan to overcome the barriers to attendance.

The principal told us: *'Ninety per cent of the conversation is nurture, support, and asking how we can help. Normally, no further escalation is required, but having a strong and supportive relationship with families is crucial'*.

As the attendance officer explained: *'It's about knowing your families and building that foundation – some need more support than others. All sorts of things come out – there are a wide range of reasons as to why their children are not in school and we always offer support where we can so the child can come in. Because we've taken the trouble to get parents in, they know that we care and are very gently on their case.'*

Charles Dickens Primary's approach has been very successful – attendance is exceptionally high, and almost no absences go unexplained. This success has been recognised across England. The approaches taken at Charles Dickens Primary are being replicated across the five other primary and three secondary schools in the multi-academy trust. The school has also been named by the UK Department for Education (DfE) as an Attendance and Behaviour Hub, receiving funding to support other schools to strengthen their attendance practices.[46]

3.3 Schools can't do it alone

Implementing a whole-school approach to attendance is hard work. Some schools can get there on their own steam, but many need more support.

There's a lot that schools can do to support their students. In some cases, though, the reasons for school absence extend well beyond the scope of what schools can address. Governments, other service providers and the wider community also need to step up. The next chapter explains some key steps governments can take to better support schools and families to boost attendance.

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46. Lucas (2025).

4 What governments should do now

Australia is not alone – many countries have struggled with school attendance, especially post-pandemic. We should look to England for guidance on how to tackle this problem, and translate lessons into approaches that work in the Australian context.

4.1 England shows the way

Improving school attendance has been a national priority in England for both Conservative and Labour governments since at least 2021. Recent reforms have been extensive and wide-ranging, focusing on improving understanding of student absences, enabling better-informed system-level decision making, strengthening practice in schools, and raising public awareness of the importance of regular attendance.

Improved quality and transparency of school attendance data

Before the pandemic, English schools manually reported aggregate attendance data to the DfE once a term. Use of standardised absence codes wasn't mandatory so some inconsistency remained, and data was published with a lag of two terms. While this data provided a general picture of attendance trends, it didn't allow for a detailed or timely understanding of absences or for the identification of students, cohorts or schools in need of support.

This created challenges for England's Local Authorities, who are responsible for tracking student attendance, providing support when a student's attendance is poor, and imposing legal interventions if attendance does not improve.[47] The lack of timely and detailed attendance data made it particularly hard for them to keep track of vulnerable students.

Data limitations became even clearer during the pandemic, when attendance dropped sharply, causing significant concern.

In response, the DfE rolled out an attendance data platform that automatically collects detailed, student-level attendance data from schools. Since the start of the 2024-25 school year, attendance data has been collected daily, using mandatory, standardised absence codes. As a result, England's school attendance data is now far more timely, detailed, and reliable, enabling real-time monitoring of student absences for earlier identification of at-risk students.

The data reforms have also created much greater public transparency. School attendance data is published in two formats. First, the DfE provides public access to daily school attendance data aggregated into fortnightly releases.[48] Second, the DfE publishes official attendance data once a term.[49] Both formats include breakdowns by school, location, student and school characteristics, and reason for absence.

Significantly increased data transparency has increased political and media attention on the challenge of school attendance, which has in turn incentivised increased commitment to finding solutions, with children the ultimate beneficiaries. It has also supported stronger research into the complex drivers of poor attendance and evaluation of different responses.

This data also help English schools make better decisions. Previously, a school's ability to analyse their attendance data depended heavily on

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47. Local Authorities are local government bodies responsible for overseeing education provision in their local area. There are 317 in England: UK Government (2023).

48. See UK Department for Education (2025d) for the weekly data feed. This data is provisional and is updated for accuracy as necessary.
49. See UK Department for Education (2025b) for the termly data feed.

the software they happened to use and the technical ability of individual staff members. Now, schools are provided with a dedicated tool that provides access to real-time attendance data at the whole-school level, by pupil group, or for individual students, and identifies students with emerging or persistent problems.[50] Schools can also benchmark their attendance data against local and similar schools, helping them understand strengths and areas for improvement.[51]

New features are regularly added to the platform to reflect the latest evidence, and the DfE hosts regular webinars for school and trust leaders on how to use them.[52]

Clearer roles and responsibilities

The DfE also clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of schools and Local Authorities. This clarity enables schools to understand exactly which attendance issues fall within their remit and when a case must be escalated to the Local Authority. For example, schools are required to alert their Local Authority of any students who are absent for 15 or more days in a school year due to health reasons. At that point, the Local Authority is expected to step in to help arrange suitable alternative education provision, such as remote learning, specialised support, or attendance at alternative educational or therapeutic facilities.[53] Schools can also request that Local Authorities help support students experiencing other attendance challenges. Where attendance has not improved despite supports, that might involve legal

interventions, including fines of up to £160 per parent.[54] The DfE sets out clear thresholds and criteria for the use of such interventions to ensure consistency across the country.

Clearer guidance and support for schools

The DfE has also developed concrete guidance for schools on building and maintaining high levels of attendance. This includes clear, step-by-step advice on diagnosing attendance problems, designing policies, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and implementing effective strategies.[55] Schools also receive a wide range of ready-to-use resources, such as template text messages, letters, and emails for communicating with parents and carers about attendance.[56] This guidance is grounded in research, including through internal analysis of the practises of high performing schools.

In 2025, the DfE established 57 Attendance and Behaviour Hubs, with plans to expand the number to 90.[57] These Hubs are designed to provide tailored peer-to-peer support for schools. Each Hub is based in a high-performing school that serves as a demonstration site, working with about 30 nearby schools to showcase effective practice, and providing more intensive, targeted support to about 6 of them.

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50. This tool is called Monitor Your School Attendance. The user guide, which includes detail of the data it provides and its various functions, can be found at UK Department for Education (2025e).
51. As of November 2025, the tool provides the names of higher-performing similar schools, allowing schools to contact them to seek advice and support: UK Department for Education (ibid).
52. These can be seen on the DfE's YouTube channel: UK Department for Education (n.d.[b]).
53. UK Department for Education (2023a).

54. In the first instance, Local Authorities can issue each parent a fine of £80, rising to £160 if not paid within 21 days. See UK Department for Education (n.d.[c]). In the 2023/24 school year, 91 per cent of fines were issued due to unapproved family holidays: UK Department for Education (2025f).
55. Guidance can be found at UK Department for Education (2024b).
56. Specific guidance on communicating with parents, including examples, is available at UK Department for Education (n.d.[d]).
57. Previously Behaviour Hubs and Attendance Hubs were separate. See UK Department for Education (2025g) for the announcement of the new program.

Increased public awareness

The UK government has built public awareness among parents of the importance of their children attending school, with political and policy leaders continuing to reinforce this message over several years.[58] The current UK Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, has emphasised that responsibility for boosting attendance rests with parents as well as schools.[59] She has said:

'It's not OK just to say, "It's only a Friday, you don't need to go to school today." Every day at school matters and parents have responsibilities, too... It's not just about your responsibility to your own child, but about the responsibility you have to the whole school community and wider society... The decisions you take as an individual parent not to send your children to school impact the education of all children in the class.'

To promote the importance of school attendance to parents after the pandemic, the DfE also launched a national attendance campaign with the slogan 'Moments Matter, Attendance Counts'.[60]

Whole-of-community efforts

Another key element of the English approach has been to broaden responsibility for school attendance by making it a whole-of-government priority. In 2021, the Attendance Action Alliance was established. Chaired by the Minister for Schools, it brought together leaders in education, health, policing, and children's services.[61] This collaboration

has led to practical measures. For example, in 2023, the Chief Medical Officer, alongside leaders from nursing, general practice, child health, and psychiatry, sent a letter to schools highlighting the importance of children attending school.[62] And the peak bodies for general practice and paediatrics have issued guidance on scheduling appointments around school hours.[63]

The UK government has also provided practical guidance to families on what constitutes an acceptable reason for absence.[64] In addition, the National Health System has developed detailed guidance on when children should stay home from school due to illness and when it is appropriate for them to attend. Advice is provided for a range of specific symptoms – from a high temperature, to a cold sore and conjunctivitis – making the decision as easy as possible for parents.[65]

The strong focus on school attendance has helped raised public awareness about its importance. Since the pandemic, illness-related absence in the UK has fallen by 24 per cent, from 4.7 per cent to 3.6 per cent of all school days between 2022-23 and 2024–25.[66]

Increased school accountability

Schools in England are held accountable for the work they do to support attendance. This year, England's school inspectorate updated its inspection framework to place greater emphasis on attendance. A new evaluation area for 'attendance and behaviour' was added, with schools assessed on their culture and leadership around attendance,

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58. Current and former Education Secretaries, alongside other leaders like the Children's Commissioner and the Chief Social Worker, have spoken publicly about the importance of school attendance. See UK Department for Education (2025h), Quadri (2024), UK Department for Education (2021), and UK Department for Education (2021).
59. Weale (2025).
60. See UK Department for Education (2024c) for resources provided to schools as part of this campaign.
61. UK Department for Education (n.d.[e]).

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62. UK Department for Education (2023b).
63. RCGP (2023), and RCPCH (2025).
64. UK Department for Education (2022).
65. See Appendix C or NHS (2024) for a copy of this health advice.
66. This figure includes absences due to both illness and medical appointments. See UK Department for Education (2025b).

their processes for addressing absences, and their overall absence rate.[67] The results of these inspections are published online.[68]

England still has work to do – absences remain higher than they were pre-pandemic. But England is doing much better than Australia. Our attendance rate on a typical school day is 89 per cent; theirs is 94 per cent.[69]

4.2 Five steps Australian governments should take now

Drawing on the lessons learnt in England, Australian governments, and the Catholic and independent school sectors, should take five steps towards a stronger community-wide approach to boosting school attendance.

1. Launch a public campaign on why attending school is so important

Australian governments should lead a national public campaign to raise awareness – especially among parents – about the importance of regular school attendance. This needs to start from the top, with political and policy leaders consistently reinforcing the message, as has been done effectively in England. Clear and repeated signals from system leaders will help set the tone and direction for schools, whose principals and teachers need to echo this message every day in their interactions with families.

2. Overhaul attendance data

Australia should look to how England has overhauled its school attendance data collection and reporting processes, so we can reap the same benefits. The following principles should be central to any updated system.

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67. Ofsted (2025).
68. Reports can be found at Ofsted (n.d.).
69. UK Department for Education (2025b).

Consistency

Australia does not have a single, nationally consistent set of absence codes and guidance on how they should be applied. Some states and territories provide schools with a list of absence codes to use, but these may only be mandatory for government schools.[70] And Catholic and independent schools often develop their own codes, leading to variation in how absences are categorised within each state and territory, let alone across the country.

State and territory governments with consistent codes and guidance can track why students in the government sector are away, identify patterns over time, and use these insights to target supports.[71] But at the moment there is no consistency across the jurisdictions or across Catholic systems or independent schools. As a result, there is no clear state-level or national picture on what is driving student absences.

Completeness

While all schools currently report high-level attendance data to ACARA, these data are limited. They don't include part-time students, students in Foundation or in Years 11 and 12, or data for Term 4.

And no student-level data is reported to ACARA, so we do not know which students are absent and how often. This means we cannot make data-informed decisions about how to best help these students and their families.

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70. See NSW Department of Education and Communities (2015), Queensland Department of Education (2024), ACT Education Directorate (n.d.), Victorian Department of Education (2025), WA Department of Education (2023), and NT Department of Education (2024).
71. NSW's Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, for instance, has published analysis of the link between attendance and NAPLAN reading scores, trends in types of student absences in 2021 and 2022, and the impact of school environmental factors on attendance: see CESE (2017) and CESE (2022).

Australian governments have committed to implementing a national Unique Student Identifier (USI).[72] This would provide a single source of information on each student's lifelong education enrolment and achievement data. Implementing a USI for school students – which would include attendance data – will build a clearer picture of each student's pathway through school.

Timeliness and transparency

Australia's national attendance data are only published each year in December for Semester 1 of that year. No student-level data is reported to ACARA, so the insights published are limited and lack detail. This means it is extremely difficult for researchers or education stakeholders to get a detailed, timely picture on how different groups of students or school systems across Australia are faring when it comes to attendance.

We should not keep timely, de-identified, and granular attendance data out of the public realm. Greater data transparency would support a more nuanced understanding of the complex drivers of absence and what steps can be taken to reduce absence. It would also attract more attention to the issue, which would elevate the urgency of finding solutions.

3. Share practice from schools that have strong attendance

Australian governments, and the Catholic and independent school sectors, should identify and closely examine what's already working in Australian schools to boost attendance.

Understanding what high-attendance schools are doing is crucial to providing stronger guidance to all schools. Systems need to identify or develop Australian schools with strong attendance practices, like Charles Dickens Primary in England (see Chapter 3 for further detail). Once systems have identified or established these schools, they should consider setting up Attendance Hubs. Similar to the English model, this would involve tasking schools with very strong attendance practices to become demonstration schools, showcasing exemplary practice to others, delivering hands-on training, and working closely with nearby schools that need additional support.

4. Give parents better health advice

Governments should provide clear and detailed health guidance to help families decide when children are too ill to go to school. Education Ministers and departments should work with Health Ministers and health officials to develop and disseminate this advice to parents. This would help curb rising illness-related absences and help renormalise regular attendance.

5. Make school attendance a whole-of-government priority

Education ministers should make attendance a whole-of-government priority. Like England's Attendance Action Alliance, Education ministers in Australia should establish alliances between leaders in education, health, justice, and children's services to help remove barriers to students attending school.

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72. States and territories are currently in the process of implementing a national USI for school students. This was included as an enabling initiative in the BFSA, scheduled to be completed by the end of 2027. See Commonwealth Department of Education (2024).

Appendix A: Student-level attendance data

Grattan analysed a novel dataset of student-level attendance records, provided by jurisdictions. This dataset covers almost one-third of students enrolled in Australian government schools between 2017 and 2024. It includes full-time students only, from Foundation to Year 12. See Table A.1 for a comparison of this student-level dataset with national demographics, attendance rate, and attendance level.

The dataset reveals the number of days that each student attended school each year, as well as the reason for each recorded absence.

The data covers Semester 1 only. Where absences have been reported in days, the values have been multiplied by two to approximate a full school year.

Because specific absence codes vary between jurisdictions – and sometimes even between schools – the codes have been grouped into broad, comparable categories for analysis. The following absence type categories have been reported on in this brief:

- **Illness/medical:** Absences due to either illness – when a child is too unwell to attend school – or medical appointments.

- **Family:** Absences due to family-related commitments, such as in-term holidays, caring responsibilities, major family events, bereavement, or emergencies.

- **Disciplinary:** Absences resulting from suspensions or other school-based disciplinary measures.

- **Unexplained:** Absences where no reason – or no satisfactory reason – has been provided by the parent or carer.

- **Unapproved:** Absences where the principal deems the reason provided to not be a valid justification for missing school. This may vary somewhat across schools, but a common example is truancy.

- **Other:** A catch-all category that captures all remaining absence codes that do not fit in the above groups.

When interpreting these absence types, it's important to remember that they rely on parents and carers reporting the reasons for absence accurately, and on school staff interpreting and applying codes in line with guidance.

Table A.1: Student-level attendance data demographics and attendance compared to national data, 2024

	Student-level dataset (%)	National data (%)
Sex		
Male	52%	51%
Female	48%	49%
School level		
Primary school	58%	55%
Secondary school	42%	45%
Geolocation		
Major cities	67%	73%
Inner regional	17%	17%
Outer regional	13%	8%
Remote	2%	1%
Very remote	1%	1%
Indigenous		
Indigenous	11%	7%
Non-Indigenous	89%	93%
Attendance		
Attendance rate	88%	88%
Attendance level	59%	60%

Source: ACARA (2024b), ABS (2024) and Grattan analysis of student attendance data provided by jurisdictions.

Appendix B: International attendance data comparisons

Table B.1: Notes on international attendance data

Category	Australia	England
Students	• Students in Years 1-10	• Ages 5-15
	• *Note, compulsory school ages vary by jurisdiction, but this range aligns with them all*	• *Note, this aligns with compulsory school ages*
Enrolments	• Full-time students only	• Part-time students are included, with non-school time recorded as absence
		• *Note, part-time students make up less than 0.5 per cent of all enrolments*
Schools	• All school sectors (government, independent and catholic schools)	• State-funded primary, secondary, and special schools
	• All school types (primary, secondary, combined and special)	• *Note, 93 per cent of students were in state-funded primary, secondary and special schools in 2025*
Time frame	• Semester 1 of each school year	• Autumn term of each school year (September to December)
Definitions	• Attendance rate is defined as the proportion of all possible school days attended	• Absence rate is defined as the proportion of all possible school days not attended (i.e., the inverse of attendance rate)
	• Attendance level is defined as an attendance rate 'at or above 90 per cent'	• 'Persistent absence' is defined as an absence rate 'above 10 per cent' (i.e., the inverse of attendance level)
Collection practices	• Absence codes, interpretations, and data collection vary by jurisdiction and school	• Generally consistent practices, reported in half-day sessions
		• Consistent mandatory codes (for all schools)

Sources: ACARA (2025), UK Department for Education (2025i), and Thomson (2025).

Appendix C: England's health guidance

C.1 Is my child too ill for school?

It can be tricky deciding whether or not to keep your child off school, nursery or playgroup when they're unwell.[73]

There are government guidelines for schools and nurseries about health protection and managing specific infectious diseases at GOV.UK. These say when children should be kept off school and when they shouldn't.

If you do keep your child at home, it's important to phone the school or nursery on the first day. Let them know that your child won't be in and give them the reason.

If your child is well enough to go to school but has an infection that could be passed on, such as a cold sore or head lice, let their teacher know.

C.1.1 What to do about other conditions

High temperature

If your child has a high temperature, keep them off school until it goes away.

Feeling anxious or worried

It's normal for children to feel a little anxious sometimes. They may get a tummy ache or headache, or have problems eating or sleeping.

Avoiding school can make a child's anxiety about going to school worse. It's good to talk about any worries they may have such as

bullying, friendship problems, school work or sensory problems. You can also work with the school to find ways to help them.

If your child is still struggling and it's affecting their everyday life, it might be good to talk to your GP or school nurse.

Coughs and colds

It's fine to send your child to school with slight cough or common cold symptoms, such as a runny nose, sore throat or headache, as long as they're otherwise well and do not have a high temperature. But if they have a high temperature, keep them off school until the temperature has gone. Encourage your child to throw away any used tissues and to wash their hands regularly.

Chickenpox

If your child has chickenpox, keep them off school until all the spots have crusted over. This is usually about 5 days after the spots first appeared.

Cold sores

There's no need to keep your child off school if they have a cold sore. Encourage them not to touch the blister or kiss anyone while they have the cold sore, or to share things like cups and towels.

Conjunctivitis

You don't need to keep your child away from school if they have conjunctivitis, unless they are feeling very unwell. Do get advice from your pharmacist. Encourage your child not to rub their eyes and to wash their hands regularly.

COVID-19

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73. See NHS (2024) for the full guidance, including links to further information on each symptom/ condition.

If your child has mild symptoms, such as a runny nose, sore throat, or slight cough, and feels well enough, they can go to school.

Your child should try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people if they have symptoms of COVID-19 and they either:

- have a high temperature
- do not feel well enough to go to school or do their normal activities

What to do if your child has tested positive

Your child is no longer required to do a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test if they have symptoms. But if your child has tested positive for COVID-19, they should try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people for 3 days after the day they took the test.

Ear infection

If your child has an ear infection and a high temperature or severe earache, keep them off school until they're feeling better or their high temperature goes away.

Hand, foot and mouth disease

If your child has hand, foot and mouth disease but seems well enough to go to school, there's no need to keep them off. Encourage your child to throw away any used tissues straight away and to wash their hands regularly.

Head lice and nits

There's no need to keep your child off school if they have head lice. You can treat head lice and nits without seeing a GP.

Impetigo

If your child has impetigo, they'll need treatment from a pharmacist or GP, often with antibiotics. Keep them off school until all the sores have crusted over and healed, or for 48 hours after they start antibiotic treatment. Encourage your child to wash their hands regularly and not to share things like towels and cups with other children at school.

Measles

If your child has measles, they'll need to see a GP. Call the GP surgery before you go in, as measles can spread to others easily. Keep your child off school for at least 4 days from when the rash first appears. They should also avoid close contact with babies and anyone who is pregnant or has a weakened immune system.

Ringworm

If your child has ringworm, see your pharmacist unless it's on their scalp, in which case you should see a GP. It's fine for your child to go to school once they have started treatment.

Scarlet fever

If your child has scarlet fever, they'll need treatment with antibiotics from a GP. Otherwise they'll be infectious for 2 to 3 weeks. Your child can go back to school 24 hours after starting antibiotics.

Slapped cheek syndrome (fifth disease)

You don't need to keep your child off school if they have slapped cheek syndrome because, once the rash appears, they're no longer infectious. But let the school or teacher know if you think your child has slapped cheek syndrome.

Sore throat

You can still send your child to school if they have a sore throat. But if they also have a high temperature, they should stay at home until it goes away. A sore throat and a high temperature can be symptoms of tonsillitis.

Threadworms

You don't need to keep your child off school if they have threadworms.
Speak to your pharmacist, who can recommend a treatment.

Vomiting and diarrhoea

Children with diarrhoea or vomiting should stay away from school until
they have not been sick or had diarrhoea for at least 2 days (48 hours).

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