Australian Education Research Organisation

Rapid literature review

Barriers to school attendance and reasons for student absence

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The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from a rapid literature review of the barriers to school attendance and reasons for student absence. It was commissioned by the Australian Education Research Organisation as part of its work on work on school attendance for Education Ministers. Whether a child attends school or is absent is underpinned by a wide range of factors. To organise this review, the Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) framework (Melvin et al., 2019), which is based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), is used. This bioecological model portrays the child as embedded in a hierarchy of interacting systems. This model can accommodate the range of factors that explain school absence and the interaction between these factors (Melvin et al., 2019).

The review is structured into 7 sections: child factors, child educational factors, peer factors, parent and family factors, school climate factors, neighbourhood and community factors, and policy factors. This structure aligns with various systems described in the KiTeS bioecological model. While results are organised using this structure, the interaction between these factors is acknowledged (e.g., student–teacher relationships) and is critical to understanding the complexity involved in school absence. The model also highlights the numerous factors outside of the child that can contribute to difficulties with school attendance, such as school and societal factors.

The report focuses on available quantitative research that establishes a statistical association between an explanatory variable and absence from school.

The field of school attendance employs a broad range of terms and definitions to describe school absence (Heyne et al., 2019). To maintain clarity, this report uses 'absence from school' as the overarching term.

2. Methodology

Leading education and psychology databases (PsycINFO, ERIC and Education Database) were searched for articles published in English from 1 January 2000 to 27 June 2023 using keywords that focused on reasons for school absence in children and adolescents. After removing duplicates, 4,675 articles were identified. Following a screening process by 2 reviewers, 147 articles reporting factors associated with student attendance and absence in Western cultures (Australia, United Kingdom [UK], Europe, United States [US] and Canada) were included. See Table 1 for a summary of the countries and regions where studies were conducted.

Table 1: Location of studies

Country/region	N (%)
North America	87 (59%)
Europe	36 (24%)
Australia	17 (12%)
United Kingdom	7 (5%)

To assess the strength of evidence for each factor, the following classification system was used:

- **No evidence:** No significant results in any studies
- **Minimal/limited evidence:** 1 to 2 studies with scarce, inconsistent or inconclusive data
- **Moderate evidence:** 3 to 4 studies consistently indicating a relationship between variables, but there may be some discrepancies or limitations in the data
- **Strong evidence:** 5 or more studies providing consistent, robust evidence that supports a clear and well-established relationship between the variables.

3. Findings

In each of the following sections, results about the general population of students are presented first, followed by results for specific equity groups.

3.1. Child factors

Child-specific factors related to school absence are the most extensively researched factors. Research addresses the relationship between school attendance and absence and demographic factors, child physical health, child mental health, child attributes and exposure to adverse childhood experiences.

3.1.1. Demographics

The literature identifies several demographic factors associated with various equity groups, including age, gender, sexual identity, disability, cultural background and Indigenous status, and socio-economic disadvantage. The literature on student absences for each of these groups is presented here. Delineation of how other factors impact attendance within these equity groups is presented in subsequent sections.

Regarding age, strong evidence indicates that older students are generally more likely to be absent than younger students (Askeland et al., 2020; Carey et al., 2015; Escario et al., 2022; Groenewald et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2015; Hysing et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2017; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018; Vassilopoulos et al., 2021; Virtanen et al., 2014). However, 2 studies suggest the opposite (Echeverria et al., 2014; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), and one found no age-related difference (Gase et al., 2014).

The impact of gender on absence is less clear, as some studies report no difference in student absence between male and female students (Carey et al., 2015; Gase et al., 2014; Ghanem, 2021; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Karlberg et al., 2022; Strand & Granlund, 2014; Vassilopoulos et al., 2021), while others report evidence for males (Askeland et al., 2020; Echeverria et al., 2014; Escario et al., 2022; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hancock et al., 2018; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; Maynard et al., 2017) or females (Groenewald et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2015; Hysing et al., 2015; Virtanen et al., 2014) having greater absences. Studies of sexual and gender minority groups provide moderate evidence for higher absences among youth who identify as belonging to these groups (Aragon et al., 2014; Birkett et al., 2014; Burton et al., 2014; Fields & Wotipka, 2022).

There is strong evidence that students with disabilities, additional learning needs or specific learning disabilities are more likely to be absent than those without (Anderson, 2021; Ansari & Gottfried, 2018; Groenewald et al., 2019; Hancock et al., 2018; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; Martin, 2014; Stromberg et al., 2022) although some studies found no difference among students with and without disability (Gottfried & Gee, 2017) or with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Martin, 2014). Autistic students and those with ADHD show higher absence rates among older students (Adams, 2022; Reed et al., 2017; Totsika et al., 2020), with mixed findings for gender differences (McClemont et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2017).

With regard to Indigenous Australians, 2 studies reported lower attendance rates among Indigenous students (Armfield et al., 2020; Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017), with one study suggesting higher absenteeism among female Indigenous students relative to male Indigenous students (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017). A further study reported no association between the school's proportion of Indigenous students and attendance; however, the study misinterpreted the association statistic and did not report its significance value, limiting confidence in this conclusion (O'Connor, 2021). In addition, international studies suggest that students from non-white backgrounds are more likely to have higher rates of absence (Ansari & Purtell, 2018; Echeverria et al., 2014; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Hsu et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2015; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; Lamb et al., 2022; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018; Subedi et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2018), although some studies report no difference in attendance based on race (Gase et al., 2014; Vassilopoulos et al., 2021).

Students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds have higher rates of absence. This is backed by strong evidence (Child and Family Policy Center, 2016; Hong et al., 2020; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018; London et al., 2016; Morrissey et al., 2014). Nonetheless, one study found no difference in attendance for students living in and out of poverty (Ghanem, 2021).

3.1.2. Physical health and poor health behaviours

Strong evidence supports the association between poor general health and absence from school (Carey et al., 2015; Chau et al., 2016; Echeverria et al., 2014; Ghanem, 2021; Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Similarly, absence is significantly linked to chronic health problems and illness, including pain (Groenewald et al., 2020; Owiredua et al., 2023; Virtanen et al., 2014) and asthma (Hsu et al., 2016; Virtanen et al., 2014). Evidence exists to link absence and poor health behaviours; however, the strength of the evidence varies. There is moderate evidence linking absence with poor sleep (Arslan & Julies, 2017; Hysing et al., 2015; Sivertsen et al., 2015), and limited evidence for links with low fitness (Centeio et al., 2018; D'Agostino et al., 2018) and smoking (Perelman et al., 2019). The association between obesity or high body mass index (BMI) and absence is mixed, with 4 studies supporting an association (Carey et al., 2015; Echeverria et al., 2014; Hughes et al., 2015; Malika et al., 2021) and 2 not (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017).

Regarding equity groups, few studies examined the association between health outcomes and absence. Obesity and asthma were associated with absence in a low-income sample (Malika et al., 2021), and fair or poor health in Aboriginal students was linked to more absence from school. Among students with an intellectual disability, illness (Arslan & Julies, 2017; Melvin et al., 2023) and sleep disturbance (Arslan & Julies, 2017) were associated with school absence.

3.1.3. Mental health and risky behaviours

The literature clearly demonstrates the impact of poor mental health on school absence. Strong evidence shows that poor mental health, as measured by emotional difficulties (Chen et al., 2016), and poor psychological health (Chau et al., 2016; Hancock et al., 2018; Lomholt et al., 2022), including internalising and externalising symptoms (Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hagborg et al., 2018), also contribute to absence. Similarly, there is strong evidence that children with anxious and depressive symptoms (Askeland et al., 2020; Carpentieri et al., 2022; Duncan et al., 2021; Garvik et al., 2014; Gase et al., 2016; Rousseau-Salvador et al., 2014; Skedgell & Kearney, 2016) or a diagnosis of depression or anxiety (Hancock et al., 2021) have higher rates of absence compared to their peers without these conditions.

Collectively, strong evidence suggests that adolescents who engage in risky behaviours (Chau et al., 2016), including alcohol use and binge drinking (Gase et al., 2014; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Holtes et al., 2015; Wormington et al., 2016), substance use (Gase et al., 2014; Maynard et al., 2017), and delinquent behaviours (Hughes et al., 2015), are more likely to be absent from school. Disruptive behaviours are also associated with absence (Roetman et al., 2019).

Within equity groups, some studies explore the additional effects of mental health concerns on school absence. For autistic children or those with ADHD, moderate evidence indicates that the presence of co-occurring anxiety and depression increases the risk of absence (Adams, 2022; Bitsika et al., 2021; Bitsika et al., 2022; Sciberras et al., 2014). Conversely, one study suggests that the presence of additional behavioural or mental health conditions does not affect absence among youth with special healthcare needs (Lindly et al., 2020). Limited evidence from one study shows that the effect of co-occurring anxious and depressive symptoms on absence was greater in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth compared to heterosexual youth (Burton et al., 2014).

In 2 additional studies, there is minimal evidence of associations between behavioural problems and school attendance. The first study, involving juvenile-justice-involved youth, suggests that mental health problems are associated with increased absence, but alcohol use is not (Hong et al., 2020). In the second study, young people from low-SES families who engage in aggressive behaviour were more likely to be absent from school (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2021).

Finally, anxiety among youth with chronic pain is associated with increased absence (Khan et al., 2015). However, there is minimal evidence of this association.

3.1.4. Disability

There is strong evidence indicating that students with disability and learning difficulties are at higher risk of school non-attendance. This includes students receiving special education services (Child and Family Policy Center, 2016; London et al., 2016; Singer et al., 2021), students eligible for Individual Education Plans (Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), students with attention problems (Strand & Granlund, 2014) and autistic students (Totsika et al., 2020). However, one study found that ADHD is not a significant predictor of school non-attendance. That said, school suspension, expulsion and changing schools are (Martin, 2014).

3.1.5. Child attributes

Limited literature offers emerging evidence on the association between absence and child capacities and behaviours.

Limited evidence supports a link between school absence and low levels of childhood intrinsic attributes, such as academic motivation (Bacon & Kearney, 2020; Vecchione et al., 2014), self-determination (Herron & Martin, 2014) and flourishing (Duncan et al., 2021), although one study did not find self-control was associated with absence (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). In terms of equity groups, low self-efficacy in children from low-SES backgrounds is associated with absence (Bianchi et al., 2022).

The evidence for social behaviours is mixed, providing only limited evidence of an association. Low social-emotional strengths (Wroblewski et al., 2019) and social withdrawal among children from low-SES backgrounds are associated with absence (Kennedy-Turner et al., 2021), but social skills are not (Gottfried & Gee, 2017).

3.1.6. Adverse childhood experiences

Adverse childhood experiences are associated with poorer school attendance (Turney, 2020). The evidence supporting this relationship is strong, with studies reporting associations between absence and exposure to community or school violence (Ghanem, 2021; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015; Renner et al., 2023), childhood maltreatment (Hagborg et al., 2018), and harassment (Hagborg et al., 2018), and involvement of child protective services (Palmer et al., 2023). Students exposed to adverse child experiences and child maltreatment are more likely to experience school failure, which, in turn, contributes to lower rates of attendance (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Hagborg et al., 2018).

Examining the impact of adverse childhood experiences on absence in equity groups, Lowry et al. (2022) found that gender and sexual minority groups experience more violence at school. This is associated with greater school absence due to safety concerns.

3.2. Child educational factors

3.2.1. Safety, belonging, school climate and engagement

There is strong evidence that students who feel unsafe at school experience higher levels of absence (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hagborg et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018; Wormington et al., 2016). Significant predictors of absence include less positive teacher/faculty climate, lower enforcement of rules or norms, perceptions of not belonging to school (Williams et al., 2018), peer victimisation (Hagborg et al., 2018; Wormington et al., 2016) and cyberbullying (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017).

Decreases in positive perceptions of school climate and lower levels of behavioural and affective engagement are also associated with higher levels of absence (Virtanen et al., 2023; Virtanen, Raikkonen, Engels, et al., 2021; Virtanen, Raikkonen, Lerkkanen, et al., 2021). Students who have close friends who drop out of school (Gase et al., 2014) and those who report lower levels of teacher emotional support (Hagborg et al., 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014) are less engaged with schooling, leading to higher levels of non-attendance. Singer et al. (2021) also note that absences increase if students are required to transition to a different educational setting due to negative relationships.

3.2.2. Year level

A student's grade or year level also has some links to attendance. Multiple studies have found that certain stages of schooling have a higher risk of absence, including commencement of schooling, middle years and upper years of schooling (London et al., 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018; Totsika et al., 2020). Feldman et al. (2014) notes that girls are more likely to be impacted by the transition from middle to high school, while others (Child and Family Policy Center, 2016; London et al., 2016) found that students who are absent in the early years of schooling are more likely to have continuing patterns of non-attendance.

3.3. Peer factors

3.3.1. Peer behaviours

Limited research explores the impact of peer behaviours on student absence. One study provides limited evidence that the truant behaviours of peers are associated with increased absence (Escario et al., 2022). Another study identifies that students who are absent from school are more likely to perceive a negative peer climate when compared to students who attend school (Hagborg et al., 2018).

3.3.2. Victims and perpetrators of bullying

There is strong evidence that students who are victims of bullying, either in-person or cyberbullying, are more likely to be absent (Escario et al., 2022; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hughes et al., 2015; Steiner & Rasberry, 2015; Wormington et al., 2016). One study reports bullying perpetration as a reason for absence, but it was not the primary reason reported by students (Attwood & Croll, 2015). Two studies found no association between perpetration of bullying and absence (Feldman et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2018).

Regarding specific equity groups, being bullied is associated with increased absence among LGBTQ youth (Aragon et al., 2014), autistic youth (Ashburner et al., 2019; McClemont et al., 2021) and those with ADHD (McClemont et al., 2021). For autistic youth or those with ADHD, the presence of a one-to-one aide is a protective factor against absence due to bullying (McClemont et al., 2021).

3.4. Parent and family factors

3.4.1. Family demographics

Family demographic variables are associated with absence in the general population. There is strong evidence for a link between absence and economic disadvantage, including poverty, lower SES and lower income (Armfield et al., 2020; Carey et al., 2015; Echeverria et al., 2014; Groenewald et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2017). There is limited evidence that unstable living arrangements are associated with absence, particularly concerning unstable housing and doubled-up living (i.e., living in shared accommodation often with friends or another family due to homelessness or other adversity) (Low et al., 2017; Palmer et al., 2023). There are incidental associations related to the presence of siblings in the home (Ansari & Purtell, 2018), young age of mothers and mothers smoking during pregnancy (Armfield et al., 2020). Variables that are not associated with absence are mothers marrying upon the birth of the child (Gottfried & Gee, 2017), insurance status and neighbourhood quality (Gase et al., 2014; Groenewald et al., 2019).

Concerning specific equity groups, absence among autistic individuals is associated with not living in a 2-parent household and living in families where someone has an illness (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Totsika et al., 2020). Among individuals with asthma, lower family income is associated with absence (Hsu et al., 2016). Regarding ethnicity, absence is associated with at least one parent being born outside the country of interest (Karlberg et al., 2022). Among low-income families, family risk factors for absence include contact with an adult who is involved with drugs, gangs or the police (Malika et al., 2021).

3.4.2. Parents' education and employment

There is strong evidence from studies of the general population that lower parent education levels are associated with their children's absence (Carey et al., 2015; Karlberg et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2020; London et al., 2016; Vermeiren et al., 2018). Regarding parent employment, one study indicates that parents not being in paid employment is linked to children's absence (Armfield et al., 2020).

Concerning equity groups, 2 studies of autistic individuals indicate that parents not being in paid employment is linked to absence (Adams, 2022; Totsika et al., 2020). Further, one study indicates that lower parent education is associated with absence among youths with behavioural and mental health conditions (Lindly et al., 2020).

3.4.3. Parents' physical and mental health

In the general population, absence is associated with parent mental health disorders and maternal depression (Claessens et al., 2015; Roetman et al., 2019), poor parent physical health and parent asthma (Echeverria et al., 2014; Everhart et al., 2018).

Regarding equity groups, a study with autistic individuals yielded mixed findings; there is a tentative link between increased parent depression and risk of absence, but there is also a decrease in the risk of absence as parent stress and anxiety increases (Adams, 2022). For individuals in special schools, parent anxiety related to child illness is associated with absence (Arslan & Julies, 2017).

3.4.4. Parent–child interactions and the broader family environment

Positive parent–child interactions associated with less absence in the general population include parent–child discussions about school (McNeal, 2014), parent monitoring that includes checking on homework and limiting television watching (McNeal, 2014), adaptive parent control in the sense that parents set clear rules about behaviour and know about their child's whereabouts at night (Escario et al., 2022), and parental affection (Escario et al., 2022). Negative parent–child interactions associated with more absence include having a parent who is neglectful or indulgent (Gase et al., 2014) or perceived by the child to be less supportive (Virtanen et al., 2022). Further, lower levels of familial expressiveness, cohesion, achievement orientation and active-recreational orientation are associated with higher absence (Fornander & Kearney, 2019). Together, these 4 studies provide moderate evidence for the role of positive parent–child interactions and an adaptive family environment in school attendance. At the same time, parental involvement has no significant effect on absence among kindergarten children (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Interestingly, when parents in higher-SES families engage kindergarten children in learning outside of school, such as tutoring or music lessons, children are more likely to be absent (Gottfried & Gee, 2017).

It is important to note that no studies were identified with equity groups that investigated the relationship between absence and parent–child interactions.

3.4.5. Parents' engagement in school-related activities

A study of kindergarten children from the general population revealed that children whose parents attend Parent Teacher Association meetings and back-to-school nights have a reduced risk of absence, but there is no significant effect for parents attending a parent-teacher conference or volunteering at school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017).

Once again, there were no studies on parent engagement and school absence among equity groups.

3.5. School climate factors

School climate includes aspects of schooling in the 4 domains identified by Wang and Degol (2016): community, safety, academic and institutional.

3.5.1. Community

The community domain in the school climate includes relationships, connectedness, respect for diversity and partnerships (Wang & Degol, 2016). Strong evidence indicates that unsupportive teacher–student relationships, characterised by a lack of emotional support, contribute to higher absences (Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Sugrue et al., 2016; Teuscher & Makarova, 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2018). Peer relationships also play a role; for example, having fewer friends in class (Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018), having peers who are absent (Saelzer & Lenski, 2016) or peers who discontinue their education (Gase et al., 2014) lead to increases in absence.

3.5.2. Safety

Safety at school encompasses social-emotional, behavioural and physical aspects of safety. The evidence strongly suggests that school climates perceived as unsafe by students are linked to higher absences (Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; Hagborg et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018; Wormington et al., 2016).

3.5.3. Academic

Academic factors primarily relate to school preparation and performance. The research strongly supports the connection between lower academic achievement (Feldman et al., 2014; London et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2017; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018; Subedi et al., 2015) and decreased academic engagement (Maynard et al., 2017; Virtanen, Raikkonen, Lerkkanen, et al., 2021) and absenteeism. Keppens and Spruyt (2019) found that adolescents skip more classes in schools characterised by a low willingness to respond to individual needs of students and a lack of structure and academic challenges. Additionally, Gase et al. (2014) note that absences increase when students perceive that they receive less support from classes, teachers and other students regarding college preparation.

3.5.4. Institutional

Institutional factors have a notable impact on absence, based on moderate evidence in the literature. Two studies found there is higher attendance at charter or independent schools than public schools (Karlberg et al., 2022; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Keppens and Spruyt (2018) found that students who are streamed into different tracks based on educational achievement at a young age attend school more than students in other models studied. In contrast, they also found that students enrolled in technical/vocational tracks have lower rates of attendance than students in general education classes (Keppens & Spruyt, 2019).

Equity groups also have higher levels of non-attendance, which, in some instances, depend upon school type and mode of attendance. Strong evidence indicates that students with disability or those on special education programs, no matter the school type, are more likely to be absent than non-disabled peers (Anderson, 2021; Child and Family Policy Center, 2016; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; London et al., 2016; Melvin et al., 2023; Singer et al., 2021). Consistent with this finding, schools with a higher percentage of disadvantaged students are likely to have higher odds of student absence (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018; Singer et al., 2021). In contrast, Melvin et al. (2023) found that students with intellectual disability in mainstream settings are absent for a greater percentage of time than students attending special schools. For children with disabilities in early childhood settings, those who attend full-day programs are absent more often than those in part-day programs (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Gottfried & Kirksey, 2022). Students who change schools during the year and those in schools that have higher levels of student mobility are more likely to be absent (Singer et al., 2021; Van Eck et al., 2017).

Finally, school-level policies can also play a role in attendance and absence. Saelzer and colleagues report that schools with passive policy action, such as not following up on absences, have higher levels of absence than those with active policy that includes assertive follow-up of absences (Saelzer & Lenski, 2016).

3.6. Neighbourhood and community factors

There is limited evidence about the impact of living in areas with greater socio-economic disadvantage on school attendance. While one study found there was no impact of living in a low-socio-economic area on school attendance (O'Connor, 2021), others report that living in areas with higher crime rates, greater residential vacancy, high levels of physical disorder and poor neighbourhood quality is associated with increased school absence (Gase et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2021; Smart et al., 2021). Additionally, students living in urban areas have higher levels of absence than those living in rural areas (Klein et al., 2020), and difficult commutes to school are linked to higher absences (Stein & Grigg, 2019). Furthermore, schools report a peak in student absences during the winter months (Zerbini et al., 2019).

Regarding equity groups, Melvin et al. (2023) conducted the only study examining the impact of neighbourhood socio-economic status or living in an urban versus rural neighbourhood on school absence for youth with intellectual disability, and no significant effect was found.

3.7. Policy factors at state or national level

There were 4 studies examining the impact of statewide policies on school attendance identified, all conducted in the US. Of these, 2 studies focused on attendance-specific policies, one related to enforcing interventions for truant youth (Conry & Richards, 2018), and the other on the implementation of a 4-day school week (Morton, 2023). However, neither of these studies found a significant association with attendance.

The remaining 2 studies investigated anti-discrimination laws targeting the protection of sexual and gender minority students, thus pertaining to equity groups of interest. One study found no significant association with attendance (Fields & Wotipka, 2022), while the other reported a small impact in reducing fear-based absence among gender and sexual minority students (Seelman & Walker, 2018).

3.8. COVID-19, reasons for absence and barriers to attendance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schooling was dramatically affected, including reduced student attendance (Kikkenborg Berg et al., 2022). The pandemic also affected student engagement and presented challenges for parents and teachers seeking to support students and facilitate their attendance when schools re-opened. Early research on attendance during the pandemic focused on parents' attitudes towards school attendance when schools were re-opening in the third quarter of 2020 (before vaccine availability).

One study in the US found that lower income, unemployment and having a flexible job were associated with parents' plans to keep their child home from school (Kroshus et al., 2020). In the same study, it was found that fear of COVID-19 and multisystemic inflammatory syndrome, low confidence in schools and reduced challenges with homeschooling were linked to plans for keeping children home from school, while race and ethnicity were not.

Similarly, based on a study in Italy, Pierantoni et al. (2021) found that higher levels of maternal education and income are associated with parents' decisions to return their children to school. Lower levels of fear of another outbreak and the belief that changes to education were not necessary were also linked to returning children to school, while views about the pandemic and safety measures were not significant factors.

In a third study, a lower probability that parents were planning to return their children to school was associated with parent perceptions that their child had a high-risk health condition, being a stay-at-home parent, being older, having the belief that a household member would contract COVID-19 soon and being concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on family finances (Chua et al., 2021). Urban/rural residence, household income, parent education, and experience with severe COVID-19 were unrelated to plans to return their child to school.

4. Conclusion

This report presents the findings from a rapid literature review of the barriers to school attendance and reasons for student absence. The authors conducted the review on behalf of the Australian Education Research Organisation as a key part of the organisation's work on school attendance for Education Ministers. The review focused on peer-reviewed literature published between January 2020 and June 2023 to ensure the analysis was grounded in high-quality and current evidence. The review did not include grey literature, which may limit its coverage of some of the more diverse factors contributing to absence from school.

Organised according to the Kids and Teens at School framework (Melvin et al., 2019), this report discusses the strength of evidence related to barriers and reasons for absence across the different systems influencing young people's development. The findings highlight strong evidence that unsupportive teacher–student relationships, feeling unsafe at school (including being a victim of bullying), lower academic achievement and additional learning needs are key school-based barriers to attendance. Furthermore, poor general health, mental health conditions, adverse childhood experiences and student age are identified as factors affecting attendance. The review also underscores robust evidence linking economic disadvantage and lower levels of parent education to higher rates of absence. This suggests that students facing these challenges have specific needs that influence their school attendance.

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