School attendance: New insights from AERO

January 2025

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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Executive summary

Introduction

At the request of Education Ministers, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) investigated student attendance in Australian schools.

This report includes work undertaken from May to December 2023 and draws on 3 activities:

- analysis of Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) attendance data
- a rapid literature review on barriers to attendance
- a rapid literature review on approaches to supporting attendance/addressing absence.

The work was overseen by a National Working Group comprised of representatives of each of the 8 state and territory departments of education, Independent Schools Australia, National Catholic Education Commission, and the Australian Government. The group provided input into the design of the project and reporting.

Findings

A national picture of student attendance in Australia

Attendance declined in the years leading up to COVID-19 (2016 to 2019). For students in Years 1 to 6 across all sectors, attendance rates declined from 93.5% in 2016 to 92.4% in 2019, and for students in Years 7 to 10 across all sectors, from 91.1% to 89.9%.[1]

Attendance in 2023 nationally improved from 2022 but was still below the levels prior to COVID-19. For example, in Semester 1, 2023, the attendance rate for students in Years 1 to 10 (all sectors) was 88.6%, 2.1 percentage points higher than 2022, but still 2.8 percentage points lower than 2019.

Students in remote locations and First Nations students had consistently lower attendance rates than the overall government-school student population.

The impact of COVID-19 on student attendance

Attempting to account for data collection challenges in 2020 and 2021, our analysis found that student attendance in 2021 and 2022 reduced further than the existing declining trend. For example, over the period of 2021 and 2022, the attendance rate of primary school students fell a further 0.9 percentage points than expected by the declining trend, and a further 1.8 percentage points for secondary school students. Additionally, in 2019, 73.1% of students across Year 1 to Year 10 attended school 90% or more of the time (known as the attendance level), while in 2022 less than 50% of students did so.

It is likely that these changes were due to the disruptions to schooling caused by COVID-19 and other factors in those years. For example, 2022 attendance was significantly impacted by flooding in certain regions, and seasonal influenza outbreaks.

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1   The attendance rates of senior secondary school students are not collected nationally due to the complexity of the enrolment and attendance options at this stage of schooling.

COVID-19 and other factors during 2021 and 2022 seemed to have had a greater impact on students from priority equity groups. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, school attendance for priority equity groups decreased more than for the overall student population.

Reasons for student absence

The reasons for student absence from school are complex, interrelated and often specific to the student, family, school and community involved. The rapid literature review captured studies that found a statistical association between attendance and a range of school, student and family/community/ broader factors. Student absence was shown to be related to lower academic achievement, decreased academic engagement, and requiring additional learning supports or disability adjustments. There was strong evidence that unsupportive teacher–student relationships and school climates perceived as unsafe by students, including bullying, are related to student absence. Broader factors perceived to be outside the direct influence of the school related to increased absence from school were shown to be poor student general health, mental health conditions, and adverse childhood experiences. Economic disadvantage and lower levels of parental education were also related to student absence across the literature.

Broader literature related to First Nations students specifically indicates that First Nations student attendance and engagement in schooling is related to the extent to which the Australian education system meets their needs, and whether cultural values and ways of being that underpin their community life are acknowledged and shared by the school. Racism and racist bullying and the extent of culturally responsive teaching practices that respond to the diversity of the student population are school-based factors that may also impact attendance. Whether Standard Australian English is the student's first language, having complex health profiles, access to the school service and, more broadly, parents' and community's experiences of education, household stress, housing issues and family crises are all factors that can influence First Nations students' ability to attend school.

Evidence-based approaches to supporting student attendance

Our rapid review of the literature captured a wide range of approaches that have evidence of supporting attendance and addressing absence.

In this report we have highlighted the most promising approaches for Australian systems and sectors surfaced by the literature review. The interventions captured in the rapid literature review were organised using the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework. The MTSS model applied to student attendance offers a range of benefits for schools, including assisting with the judicious allocation of a school's resources, orienting schools towards the use of evidence-based interventions relevant to each level of support, and encouraging data-driven decision-making about the type and intensity of support that is needed (Kearney & Graczyk, 2022).

A promising universal, or Tier 1, approach which, when implemented with fidelity, can support a safe and positive school environment, is positive behaviour interventions and supports ([PBIS], also known as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support [SWPBS], and Positive Behaviour for Learning [PBL]). Complementary to PBIS are AERO's recent evidence-based classroom management resources which provide explicit guidance to teachers in effectively managing classroom environments to create safe and supportive learning environments.

Approaches at Tiers 2 and 3, for groups or individual students who are at risk of (Tier 2) or already in (Tier 3) patterns of chronic absenteeism, identify and respond in targeted ways to individual student barriers to attendance. These approaches, in collaboration with other services, can address more complex issues impacting student attendance. Promising approaches include mentoring, particularly the Check & Connect program; multicomponent interventions; meal provision, including breakfast programs; and parental communication interventions.

Few studies have been undertaken in Australia, meaning that the relevance of the evidence base to Australian schools may be limited by contextual differences. As such, further work is needed to understand how Australia is situated in relation to the contexts within which the studies were conducted. This work will inform what knowledge can and cannot be transferred to the Australian context and the planning of rigorous evaluations of attendance interventions implemented within Australia.

The evidence base of what works for First Nations students does not necessarily appear in peer-reviewed journals. First Nations research suggests that to achieve educational success for First Nations students in Australia, the educational aspirations and academic needs of First Nations students must be the focus and that attendance at school would be expected to increase when these are addressed. High expectations, strong student and community relationships, high-quality teaching and teachers, embedded First Nations perspectives and values, First Nations spaces and targeted support for First Nations students may all contribute to strong outcomes for First Nations students, if not all students.

1. Introduction

This section introduces the work, including the context, project aims and approach.

1.1. Context

On 27 February 2023, the Education Ministers Meeting agreed to task the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) with investigating student attendance and evidence-based approaches to support it. AERO undertook research and analytical work from May to December 2023.

1.2. Project aims

Ministers requested AERO provide information in response to 2 overarching questions:

Q1. What is causing the long-term trend of declining student attendance across different groups of students?

Q2. What evidence-based approaches may assist in reversing this trend?

1.3. Project approach

This section provides an overview of the approach taken to achieve the aims of the project.

1.3.1. Project design

The approach used in this project was informed by the request from Ministers and the constraints of the project. Figure 1 shows the relationship between the project questions and the project activities in this report.

Figure 1: Project questions and activities
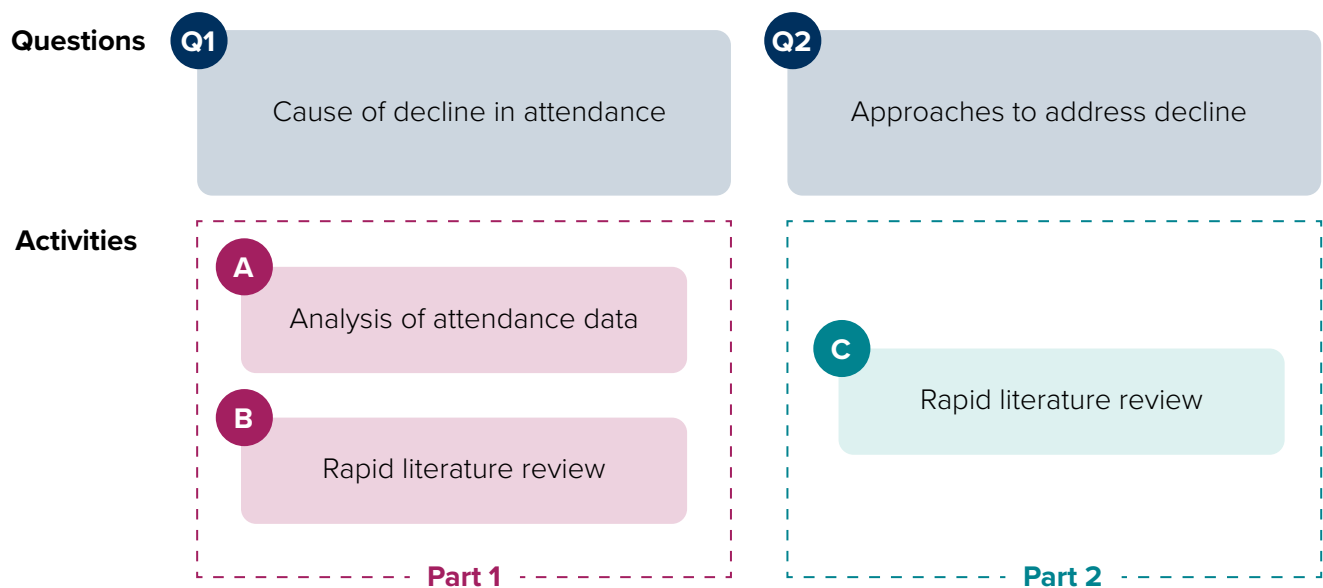
This project involved 2 parts:

Part 1 (Figure 1) responded to Q1 and provided insights into:

- patterns of student attendance nationally
- the impact of COVID-19 on attendance
- barriers to attendance.

Part 1 sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of the trends and patterns of attendance for all students and for priority equity groups. Part 1 explored the reasons for student absence and barriers to attendance, including those that existed before COVID-19 and since. The work in Part 1 aimed to provide information to clarify the nature and size of the problem, particularly regarding which student groups and stages of learning require the most attention and support.

Part 1 comprised 2 project activities:

- analysis of attendance data (Activity A)
- a rapid literature review on barriers to attendance/reasons for absence (Activity B).

The methods used to carry out these 2 activities are explained in 3. Methodology.

Part 2 of the project (Figure 1) responded to Q2 and provided insights into successful approaches used to improve attendance from the literature.

Part 2 included a rapid literature review on evidence-based approaches to supporting attendance (Activity C).

1.3.2. Collaboration and expert advice

Collaboration and expert advice were critical to the success of this project and the rigour of its findings. Table 1 provides a summary of the expertise and expert advice woven into the project approach.

Table 1: Number of project experts and collaborators by role

Group	No. of people
AERO project team	7
National working group (system/sector)	19
Commissioned research team	4
Commissioned advisory group	4
First Nations advisors	1
Disability reference group	3
Total	**41**

In summary, at least 41 experts, including content experts, data analysts and system/sector officials contributed to the insights provided in this report. Further details about collaboration and expert advice, including the system/sector national working group, can be found in 3. Methodology.

1.4. Project contribution

This project makes important contributions to understanding trends in student attendance, particularly for priority equity groups and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Systems and sectors collect and analyse their own attendance data, but after a common disrupter like COVID-19, there is value in examining changes in attendance across Australia, as well as the impact overseas.

Finally, this project makes a significant contribution through a rapid literature review of evidence-based approaches to supporting attendance (Activity C). Although reviews have recently been conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States, this review, conducted by Australian researchers, includes international and Australian literature and considers how it is applicable in Australian contexts.

2. Background

This section provides background to the project in 2 areas:

- the benefits of school attendance
- the collection and reporting of attendance data in Australia.

2.1. Benefits of school attendance

While children and young people's experiences of schooling can vary significantly, when school environments are conducive to student learning and personal development, school attendance can benefit students, families and communities in many ways.

Figure 2 presents the key benefits of school attendance identified in the literature.

Figure 2: Key benefits of student attendance

Benefits of school attendance

Student	Family	School	Community
Achievement	Cultivates routines and responsibilities	Reduces load on teachers and school administration	Readiness for social and economic participation in society
School completion	Avoids parental challenges of absenteeism		
Social, mental health and other benefits			
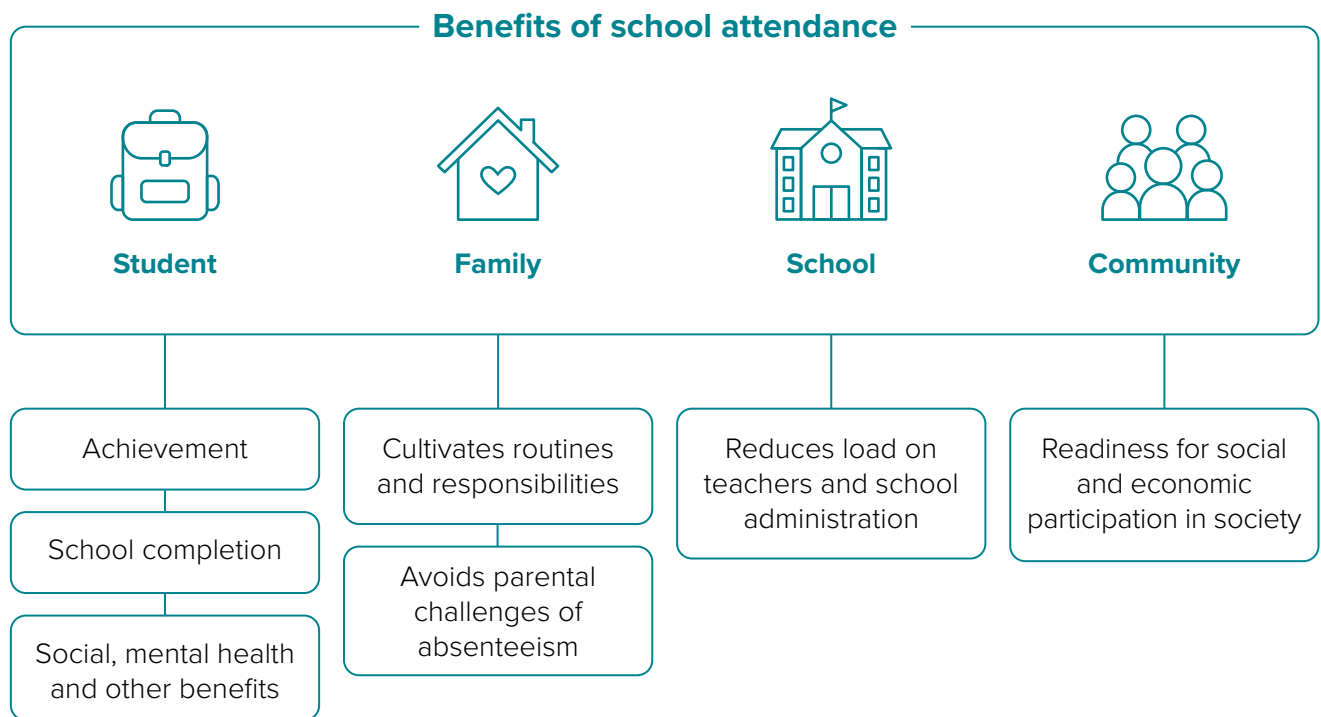
School attendance increases student exposure to instructional time, and as such, is often central to promoting educational outcomes (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2019; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). International literature has linked higher attendance to higher school completion and achievement (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2011, 2014; Smerillo et al., 2018; UK Government, 2022).

There are social benefits associated with children attending a school that provides a positive experience. Being at school can benefit students by providing time with friends, exploration of interesting topics, and support from teachers (Heyne & Brouwer-Borghuis, 2022). Over time, school can provide an environment where students' competencies can flourish, including relationship skills and decision-making abilities (Collie, 2019). Children's regular attendance at school can work to cultivate the ability to implement routines and take on responsibilities (Heyne et al., 2020). The curriculum can help to shape identity, passions, morals and ethics (Eccles & Roeser, 2011), and attendance can buffer against mental health problems (Bonell et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2019).

The broader community also has a dependency on schools. In many cases, children attending school provides opportunities for parents to access employment (Johnsen, 2020), which in turn is an essential piece in working to prevent poverty and disadvantage. Schools can be community hubs that facilitate access to other services in the community and can enable social connections. As children move towards adulthood, school completion often provides an important stepping stone that enhances young people's readiness for social and economic participation in society.

Of course, these optimal student experiences are not shared by all children or young people. Outcomes of school attendance vary across subsections of the student population. In these contexts, increasing school attendance would need to be partnered with significant changes in school environment and how children and young people experience the school environment before attending school could be expected to yield the benefits outlined in this section. Understanding this point is relevant for understanding some of the reasons why school attendance is currently low for some students and groups of students.

The following section looks at how information about student attendance is gathered in Australia.

2.2. Context for attendance data collection and reporting in Australia

This section provides a brief overview of the collection and reporting of data related to student attendance in Australia.

The number of students in attendance in Australian schools is a key indicator of the education system's performance, which must be reported publicly to support accountability of educational policy and practice to students, parents and the community.[2]

Student attendance data is collected at the school, sector and state/territory level and collated and reported at a national level by Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as agreed to by Education Ministers. Consistent, comparable reporting of attendance rates for students in Years 1 to 10 for government, Catholic and independent schools in Australia has been possible since 2014[3] through the implementation of the National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting (ACARA, 2020b).

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2   Attendance is a performance indicator in the National Education Agreement (2018), the National Education Reform Agreement (2013) and the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (2012). It is also a reporting requirement of the Australian Education Regulations (Cth) (2023). It is also reported in the annual Report on Government Services (Productivity Comission, n.d.) and Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators (Productivity Commission, 2020). The Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2023) provides the basis for reporting on the education goals of The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019).

3   With caveats for New South Wales for 2014 and 2015.

Attendance data is reported by ACARA using 2 measures:

- **Attendance rate:** The number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students in Years 1 to 10 in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended in Semester 1.

- **Attendance level:** The proportion of full-time students in Years 1 to 10 whose attendance rate in Semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90%.

These measures are intended to be 'disaggregated, where possible and appropriate, by state and territory, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) status, sex, language background, geographic location, socio-economic status (SES) background and disability' (ACARA, 2020a, p. 10). However, in practice, attendance is not disaggregated by disability and language background, and SES status is newly being reported by ACARA via SEA quarter, using an estimation method.[4]

The following section details the methodology of this project and how attendance data were analysed in this project.

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[4] Reporting of student attendance by SEA occurred in February 2023, following the decision by AESOC on 13 February 2023.

3. Methodology

The introduction of this report outlined the approach undertaken to achieve the project's aims. The following sections provide an account of the following project activities:

- analysis of attendance data (Activity A)
- rapid literature review of barriers to attendance (Activity B)
- rapid literature review of approaches to supporting attendance (Activity C).

3.1. Activity A: Analysis of attendance data

This project contributes insights on attendance through project Activity A – analysis of attendance data.

Data were acquired from ACARA's National Collection of Student Attendance, which forms the basis of the public reporting of student attendance via the National Reporting of Schooling in Australia. Most of the analysis performed for this project was of a descriptive nature and the approach used was straightforward, except for the methods used to estimate the historical trends of attendance. Details of the estimation methods are provided near that analysis, in 4.1.2 Attendance declined further during COVID-19.

Data cleaning, preparation and graph generation were undertaken independently, in parallel, by 2 data analysts using Excel, facilitating the double-checking of results presented in this report.

3.2. Activity B: Rapid literature review of barriers to attendance

The second activity (Activity B) that informed this report was a rapid literature review of barriers to attendance. A team of researchers in the field of student attendance (see 3.4 Collaboration and expert advice) was commissioned to carry out a rapid literature review to answer the question: What causes students to be absent from school (nuanced by priority equity group), including reasons for student absence and barriers to attendance? The review had to be conducted swiftly due to the time constraints on the project.

The commissioned team searched leading education and psychology databases (PsycINFO, ERIC, and Education Database) 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 were included.

Table 2 lists the source region/country of the included articles, including Australia, North America, the United Kingdom and Europe.

Table 2: Source country of articles in the rapid literature review

Region/country	Number of papers
Australia	**17**
North America	**87**
United States	84*
Canada	4*
United Kingdom	**7**
England	3
Scotland	1
UK broadly	3
Europe	**36**
Range of European countries	2
Norway	8
Sweden	6
Finland	5
Italy	3
Denmark	3
Netherlands	3
France	2
Belgium	1
Spain	1
Germany	1
Switzerland	1

*n = 1 study conducted across both the United States and Canada.

To assess the strength of evidence for each factor related to student attendance, the researchers used the following classification system:

- **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.

3.3. Activity C: Rapid literature review of approaches to supporting attendance

The third activity (Activity C) that informed this report was a rapid literature review of approaches to supporting attendance. The same team of researchers who undertook Activity B designed and carried out a rapid review to answer the question: What approaches, programs and interventions are there from Australia and internationally that successfully support attendance/address student absence?

Psychology and education databases (PsycINFO, Medline, ERIC, and A+ Education Informit) were searched for records published from 1 January 2000 to the date of search (21 August 2023). Searches were conducted using keywords across 3 domains (students, treatments/interventions and school attendance/absenteeism).

The initial search identified 11,549 records. After removing duplicates, 9,695 records were screened for inclusion. Of these records, 574 met the inclusion criteria. The review incorporated into this document includes 332 peer-reviewed journal articles that described studies conducted in Western countries. Due to the high volume of articles discussed in this review, we have omitted theses/dissertations (n = 192) and grey literature (n = 50).[5]

Included in the review were interventions for attendance that directly aimed to improve attendance or reduce absenteeism, as well as those that had other primary targets, such as improving mental health or academic engagement, but also measured the impact of the intervention on attendance. Due to time constraints, a meta-analysis was not conducted as part of this literature review.

Table 3 presents a summary of the countries/regions where studies were conducted. It shows that the majority (69%) were conducted in North America, with studies from Australia and New Zealand only comprising 8% or 27 articles.

Table 3: Location of studies captured in the rapid literature review (Activity C)

Country/region	N (%)
North America	228 (69%)
Australia/New Zealand	27[6] (8%)
United Kingdom	28 (8%)
Europe	49 (15%)

There has been a steady increase in the number of studies reporting on school attendance outcomes since 2000, but a decline in publications since the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected that further papers will be published after the end date of this search (21 August 2023).

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5   Theses/dissertations are generally lengthy and would add significant time to the review process, potentially jeopardising the project timeline. Findings from theses/dissertations are often published as journal articles, meaning many may have been captured in the review already. Grey literature includes information not controlled by commercial publishing — i.e., where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body.
6   New Zealand n = 2 and Australia n = 25.

Figure 3: Number of articles published each year from 2000 to 2023
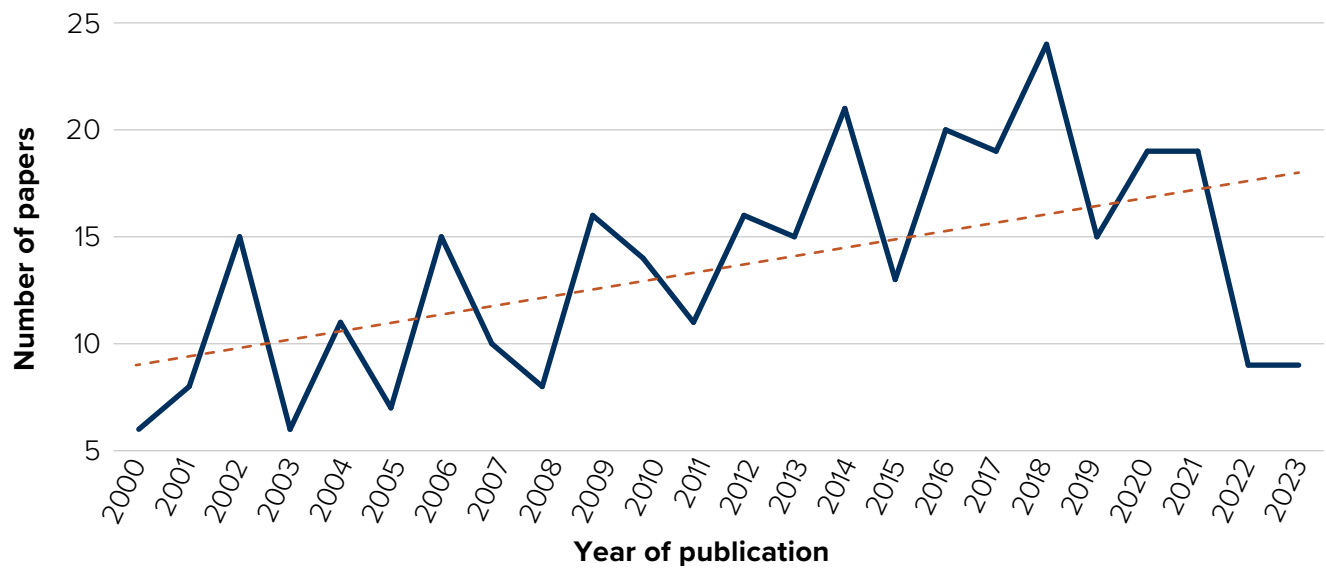
3.4. Collaboration and expert advice

This project was overseen by a national working group. This group was comprised of representatives of the Australian Government, ISA, the NCEC, and each of the 8 state and territory departments of education. The group was briefed at the start of the project and provided expert input into the project's design. The national working group also reviewed the drafts of the interim and final reports and provided feedback on the way the data were handled, the interpretation of the results and the presentation of the report.

The AERO project team was supported by a team of researchers commissioned to undertake the literature review work. The team have considerable expertise and experience in the field of student attendance. This team comprised:

- Associate Professor Glenn A. Melvin, Deakin University
- Associate Professor Lisa McKay-Brown, University of Melbourne
- Associate Professor Dr David Heyne, International Network for School Attendance
- Dr Lauren Cameron, Deakin University.

The commissioned team met regularly (often weekly) with AERO's project team and discussed the progress of the work and emerging insights.

Four researchers in the First Nations team within AERO contributed to the insights developed as part of this project. These researchers held discussions with the project team and co-wrote the sections related to First Nations students – particularly the specific issues facing First Nations students, families, schools and communities in relation to school attendance, and the approaches that can support attendance. The First Nations researchers were also a reference point for the non-First Nations researchers in reflecting on their positionality in relation to the First Nations peoples they were researching.

3.5. Project limitations

This section discusses the limitations of the project under 4 subheadings.

3.5.1. Scope

The project was scoped to deliver reports within the specified timeline: an interim report within 18 weeks of the scope of work being tabled with the School Policy Working Group (SPG), and a final report within 34 weeks. Collecting qualitative data from students, families and schools, for example, was not possible within the time frame. Such data collection would provide a richer understanding of the drivers of student absence and enable the voices of students, families, schools and communities to be heard on this matter.

Time pressure also limited the project team's ability to investigate the issue of school-aged children who might not have been captured in systems that record enrolments and/or attendance. These children are either completely disconnected from education systems or missing from education systems for periods of time due to high student mobility (Watterson & O'Connell, 2019). Watterson and O'Connell (2019) put the number of young children of compulsory school age not enrolled in formal education conservatively at 50,000 across Australia. It would be useful to conduct further studies to ascertain how many school-aged children are missing from Australian education systems, and why, as well as the best ways to re-engage them with schooling.

3.5.2. Generalisability of findings

Whether findings relate to government-only students or all students, depending on the data sources used, has been identified throughout the report. Some findings only relate to government-school students and may not be generalisable to other sectors.

3.5.3. Comparability of data over time

Caution needs to be exercised when interpreting trends of attendance in this report for the following reasons:

- 2021 and 2022 data consistency were impacted by COVID-19 because of differing health advice and policies across jurisdictions and sectors during this time.

- 2022 attendance across Australia was significantly impacted by specific events in addition to COVID-19, such as flooding in certain regions, and seasonal influenza outbreaks.

- Over time, jurisdictions have adjusted how they capture attendance data, meaning making comparisons between years is not straightforward.[7]

- Years 7 to 10 are grouped and referred to as the 'junior secondary' years in this report. Prior to 2022, South Australia classified Year 7 as primary school and, prior to 2015, Western Australia and Queensland did also.

- National trends provided in this report may not be generalisable to individual jurisdictions. In addition, national trends are more heavily influenced by the trends in more populous states. Notably, in New South Wales, there have been changes to the data collection which may have influenced the comparability of national trends.[8]

3.5.4 Findings related to literature reviews

Due to the time constraints associated with the project, the literature reviews (Activities B and C) had to be conducted rapidly. The following limitations apply to the findings from the literature reviews:

- Researchers prioritised examining the strength of the evidence for the impact of the intervention on attendance and did not conduct a meta-analysis based on effect size.[9] Studies are reported if they show an effect on attendance, but the size of the effect is not presented. Some interventions might be more impactful than others.

- Researchers prioritised reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles. Theses/dissertations and grey literature were not included in the literature reviews. Therefore, some evidence may be missing from the conclusions.

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7   Details of the jurisdictional-level attendance policy and system changes that can impact trends can be found on the National Report on Schooling Student Attendance webpage.

8   Specifically, prior to 2017, NSW government school attendance data was not collected on a comparable basis as other states and territories. Also, 2021 NSW data is not comparable with previous years due to changes to the attendance calculations. These factors may influence the comparability of national data over time.

9   Note not all studies publish effect sizes, therefore, to summarise effect sizes for one type of program, it would often require researchers to spend additional time to estimate the effect sizes.

4. Findings – Part 1

This section presents findings from Part 1 of the project: analysis of attendance data (Activity A) and a rapid literature review on the barriers to student attendance at school (Activity B). Findings from Part 2 (Activity C, a rapid literature review on evidence-based approaches to supporting student attendance) are presented in Section 5. Findings – Part 2.

This section presents insights under 3 headings:

- trends in student attendance
- attendance patterns by priority equity group
- drivers of student absence.

4.1. Trends in student attendance

This section presents analysis of Australian data (Activity A) to provide a more nuanced picture of student attendance in all systems and sectors. It is divided into in 3 sections, summarising key trends.

4.1.1. Attendance declined in the years leading up to COVID-19

In the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic (2016 to 2019), the attendance rate declined nationally and for all year levels. Figure 4 shows the decrease for each schooling year from Year 1 to Year 10 in Semester 1[10] from 2016 to 2019.

The graph also shows that Years 8, 9 and 10 consistently had the lowest attendance rates across all year levels.

Figure 4: National attendance rate by year level, Semester 1
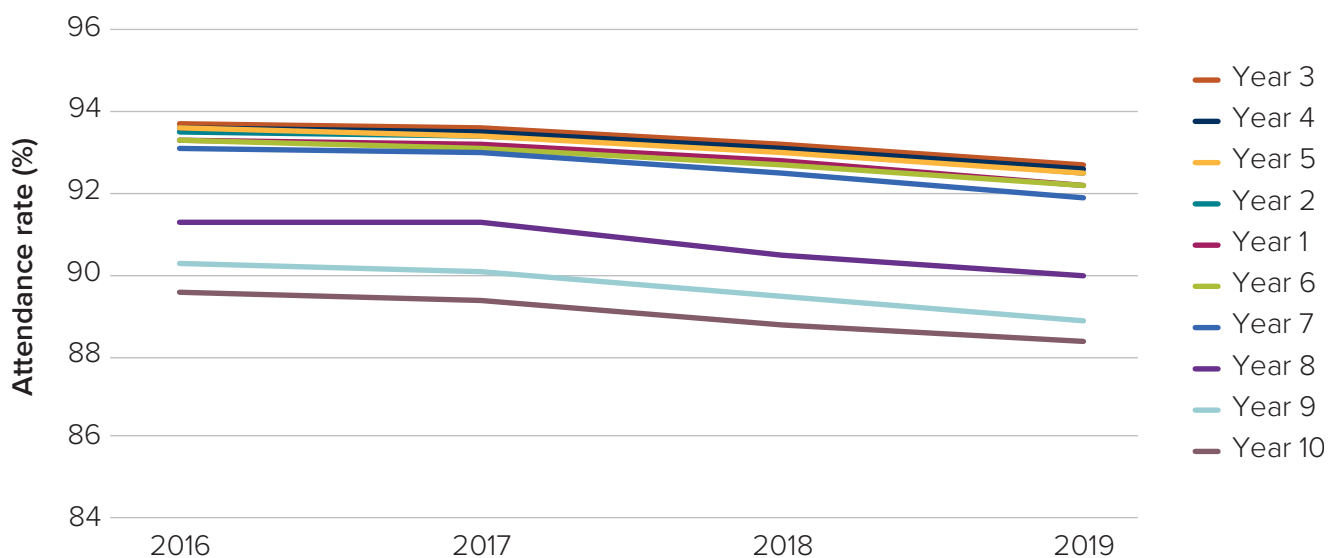
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: National attendance rates for all school sectors shown.

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10 Reporting on Semester 1 is consistent with national reporting by ACARA. Attendance is usually higher in Semester 1 than in Semester 2, therefore, the findings in this report are likely to slightly underestimate absence across the year.

4.1.2. Attendance declined further during COVID-19

Between 2019 and 2022, attendance reduced further from what was expected based on trends observed up until 2019, most likely because of disruptions to schooling caused by COVID-19 and other factors in 2022.

Figure 5 shows two-yearly attendance rates by scholastic year for 2016 to 2017, 2018 to 2019 and 2021 to 2022.[11] The previously noted pattern of attendance rates being lower for higher scholastic years is evident, as is the decline in attendance rates over time, with 2016 to 2017 seeing higher attendance than 2018 to 2019, which in turn showed higher attendance than 2021 to 2022.

Figure 5 illustrates the COVID-19 effect in that attendance rates from 2021 to 2022 (squares) were lower than expected based on the trends observed leading up to the pandemic (triangles). This suggests that factors related to COVID-19 and other factors contributed to lower attendance beyond what was occurring prior to the pandemic.

In general, the impact of COVID-19 and other factors was greater for higher year levels. For junior primary school students, the attendance rate fell a further 0.6 percentage points than the existing declining trend. For Years 3 to 7, the additional decline was between 0.9 and 1.4 percentage points. For Years 8 to 10, however, the additional decline ranged from 1.7 to 2.2 percentage points.

Figure 5: National attendance rate over time by year group (two-yearly averages)
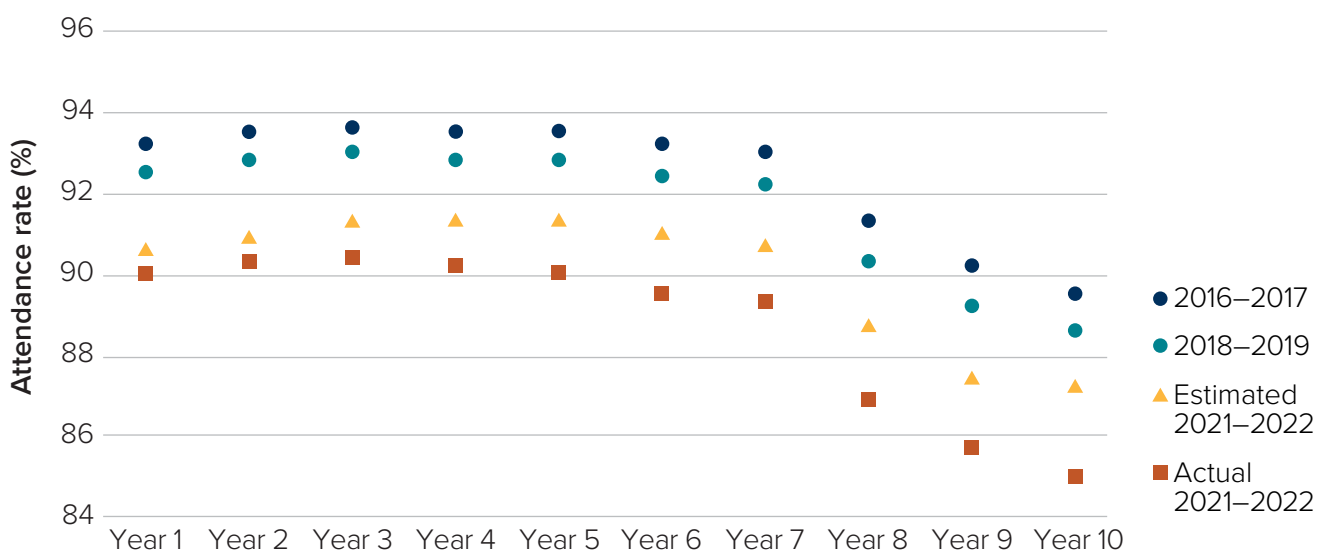
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: National attendance rates for all school sectors shown. Weighted averages were used to calculate the two-yearly averages to account for the number of possible days that varied from year to year. To obtain the estimated 2021 to 2022 average attendance rate for each year level, Holt's double exponential smoothing method (Holt, 1957) was used to fit a trend for the 2014 to 2019 attendance rates. This model was then used to forecast the attendance rates for 2021 and 2022. The simple average of the forecasted attendance rates for 2021 to 2022 is shown. Other time series models like the autoregressive integrated moving average model were considered, but the Holt-Winters method gave a smaller prediction error overall.

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11   Two-yearly averages of attendance rates were used to estimate COVID-19's effect on student attendance because additional factors (such as flooding in certain regions and high influenza season outbreaks) were implicated in a significant decline in attendance in 2022.

4.1.3. Over time, declines in student attendance are starting earlier

We looked further at changes in attendance over time by considering cohorts of students as they progressed through school. Figure 6 and Figure 7 show the attendance rates[12] of 3 consecutive Year 1 and Year 7 cohorts as they progress to the end of primary and junior secondary school, respectively.

In each of these, the most recent cohorts show a drop in attendance rates at an earlier scholastic year than prior cohorts, leading to a more noticeable separation between cohort attendance rates as they approach the upper ends of primary or junior secondary school.

Figure 6: National attendance rate by cohort (Years 1 to 6, Semester 1)
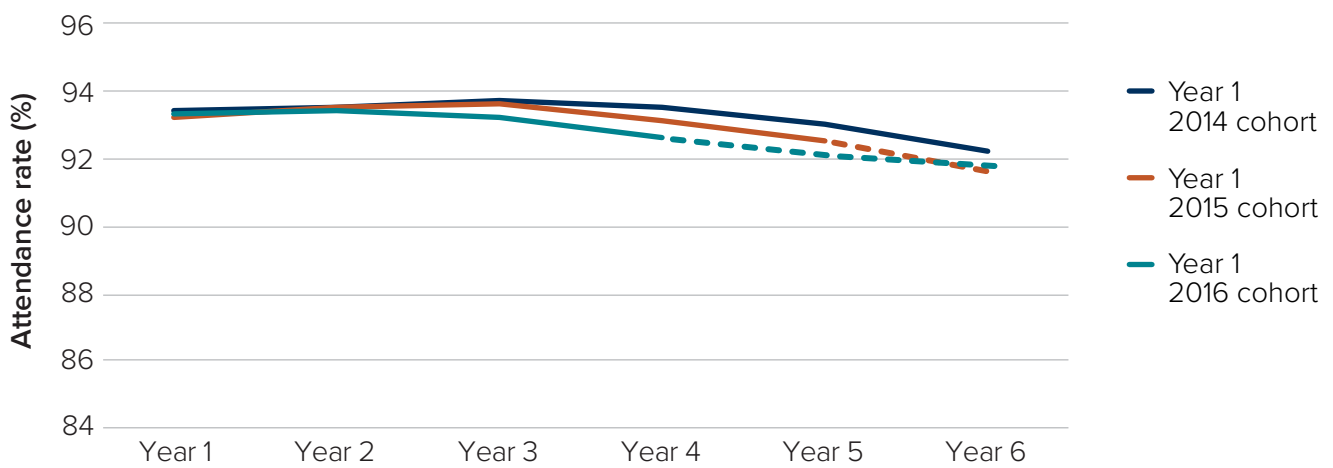
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: The attendance rates in 2020 (which coincided with Year 5 in the 2016 cohort and Year 6 in the 2015 cohort) were not available. The 2020 attendance rates were estimated by fitting a third-order polynomial to the actual attendance rates for each cohort. National attendance rates for all school sectors are shown.

Figure 7: National attendance rate by cohort (Years 7 to 10, Semester 1)
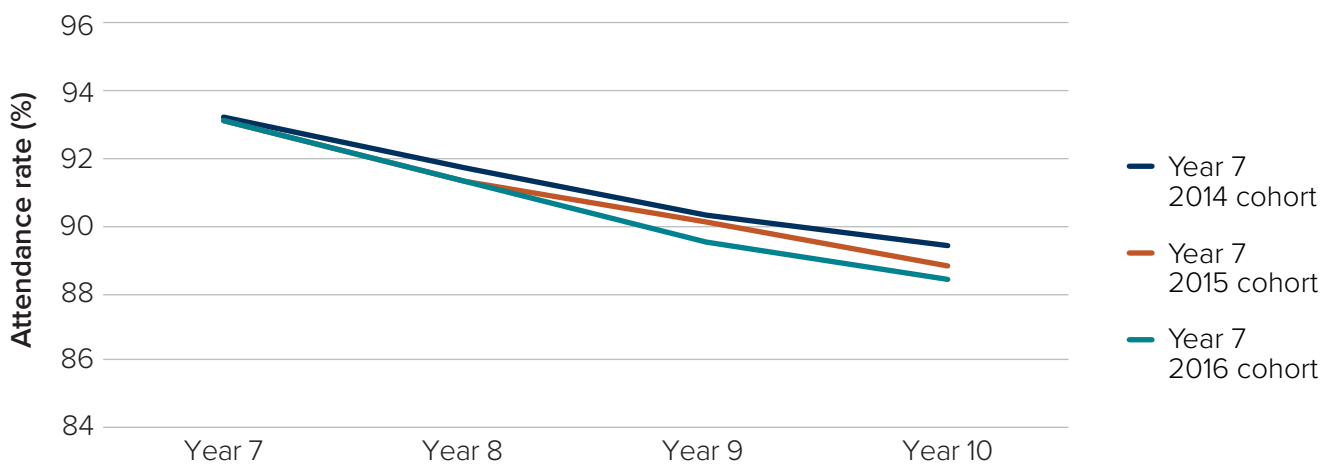
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: National attendance rates for all school sectors are shown.

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12   See official definition of attendance in 2.2 Context for attendance data collection and reporting in Australia. In short, attendance rate is the number of attended days as a percentage of possible days in Semester 1 for all students from Years 1 to 10.

4.2. Attendance patterns of priority equity groups

This section examines trends and patterns in attendance for government-school students by demographic characteristics. For the purpose of this report, priority equity groups include students living in remote communities, as well as students who identify as First Nations. We also analyse attendance by gender. **As students have demographic characteristics that can situate them in more than one subgroup, the subgroups reported here are not discrete groups of students but overlapping groupings for the purpose of analysis**.

4.2.1. Priority equity groups have attendance rates lower than the overall student population

The attendance rates of students from priority equity groups are lower than those of the overall population. This trend appears consistent over time.

Figure 8 and Figure 9 show the attendance rates of priority equity groups over time for primary and junior secondary government-school students, respectively. Between 2016 and 2019, sizeable differences in attendance rates existed between priority equity groups and the student population. For example, students enrolled in schools in very remote locations had particularly low attendance, as well as the greatest rate of decrease in attendance over time.

Figure 8: National attendance rate by priority equity group (Years 1 to 6, Semester 1)
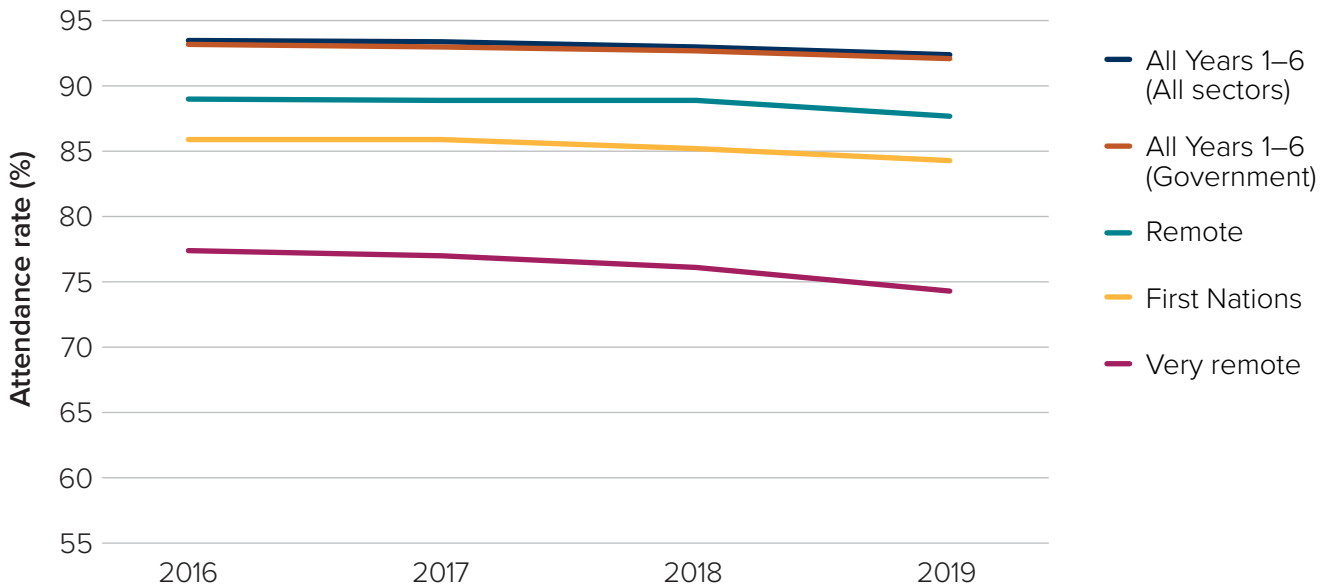
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector shown for subgroups.

Figure 9: National attendance rate by priority equity group (Years 7 to 10, Semester 1)
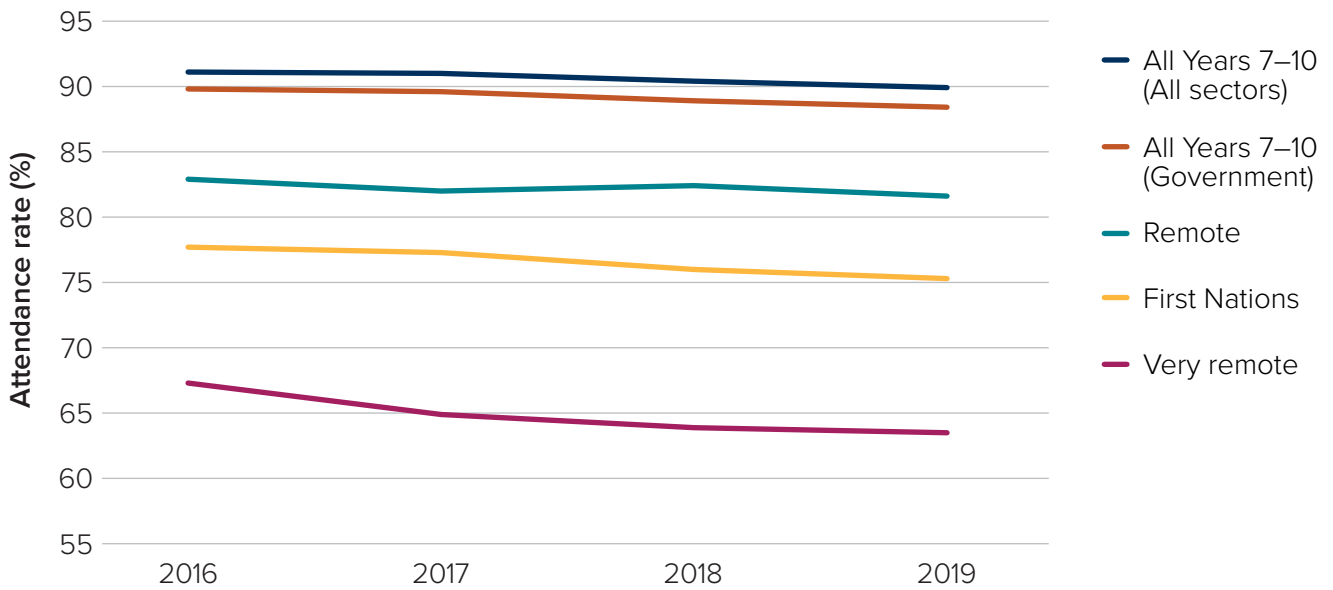
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector shown for subgroups.

4.2.2. There is a negligible difference in the attendance rates of male and female students

Attendance rates were analysed for male and female students.[13] As shown in Figure 10, the attendance rates for males and females were extremely similar between 2016 and 2022.

Figure 10: National attendance rate of male and female students in primary and junior secondary government schools
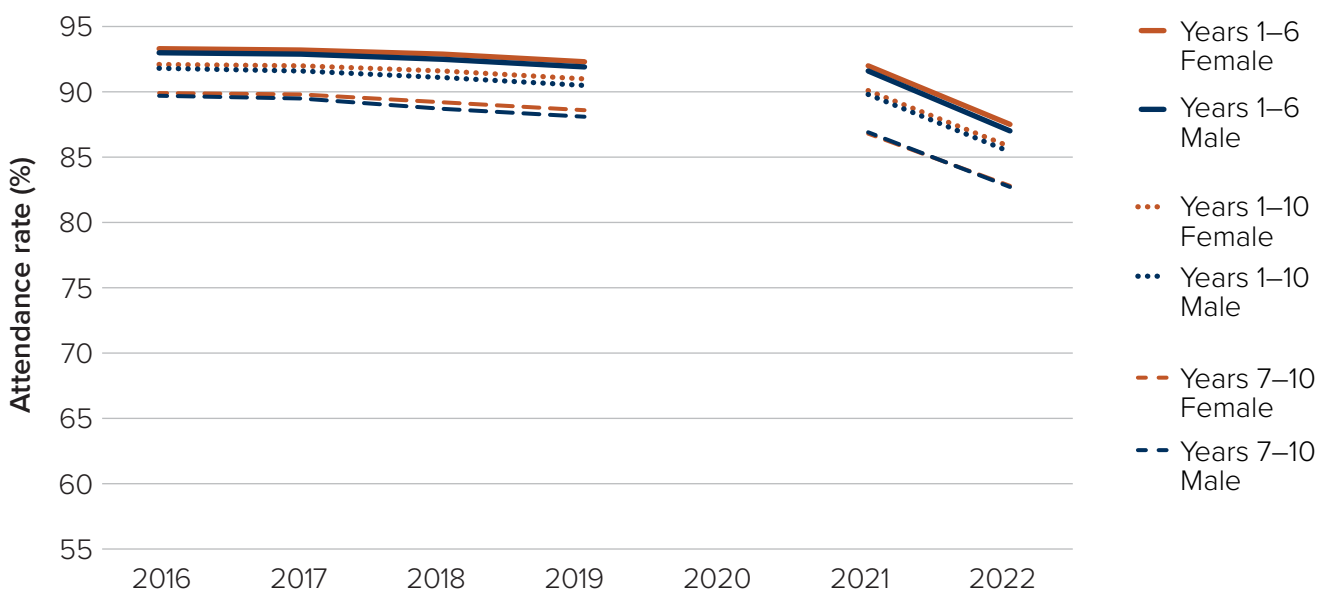
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector only.

13   Data by other gender categories were not reported during 2016 to 2022.

4.2.3. Female First Nations students attend at higher rates than males

Attendance rates for First Nations students were analysed by gender. As can be seen in Figure 11, for First Nations students, female students attended school at a higher rate than male students. The non-negligible gap (of approximately 1.3 percentage points) was stable between 2016 and 2022 for students in Year 1 to 6. The gap was smaller for students in Years 7 to 10 (0.8 percentage points in 2016), reducing to the point of there being no observable difference in attendance rates by gender in 2022.

Figure 11: National attendance rate of male and female First Nations students in primary and junior secondary government schools
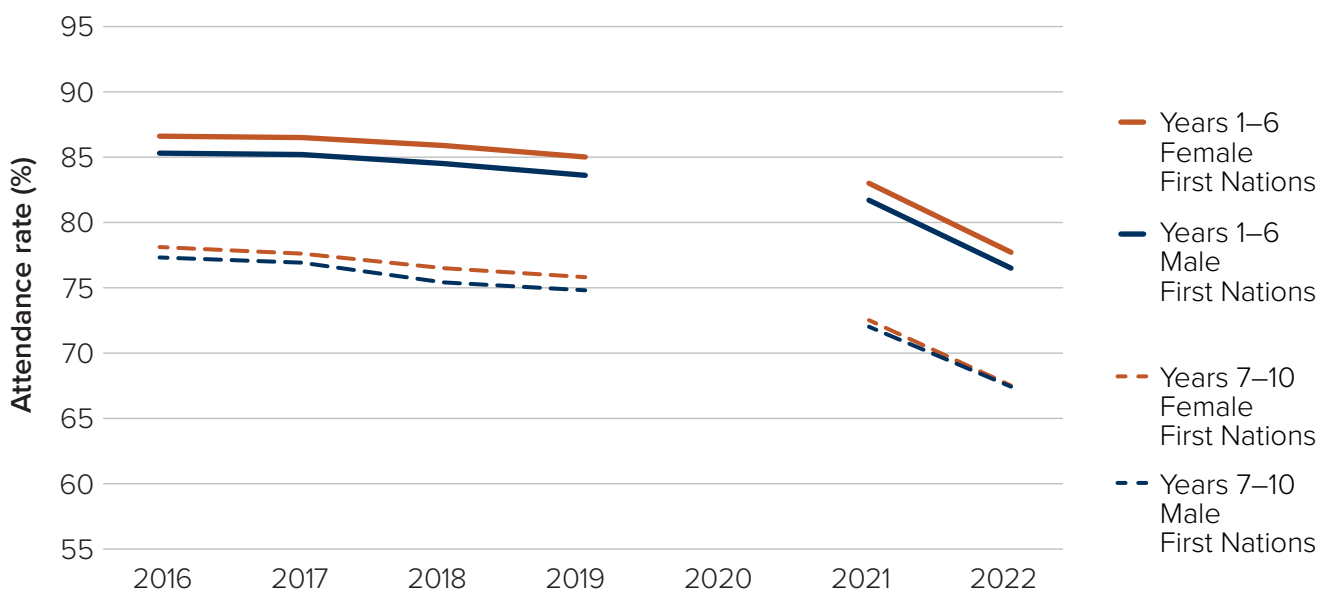
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector only.

4.2.4. Attendance rates of First Nations students increase as school locations draw closer to major cities

A further analysis was conducted focusing on differences in attendance rates for First Nations students to look at geolocation effects. Figure 12 shows the results for Year 1 to 6 and Year 7 to 10 government-school students between 2016 and 2022. The categories of very remote, remote, outer regional and major cities are shown.[14]

The analysis found that attendance rates were lower for students enrolled in schools in outer regional, remote, and very remote locations, and highest when students were enrolled in schools in major cities or inner regional locations.

This analysis also shows that primary school students had higher average attendance rates than junior secondary school students, and that this gap was wider when geolocations were remote or very remote.

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14   Attendance rates from inner regional locations were very similar to those of major cities and were omitted for clarity.

Figure 12: National attendance rate of First Nations government-school students by geolocation
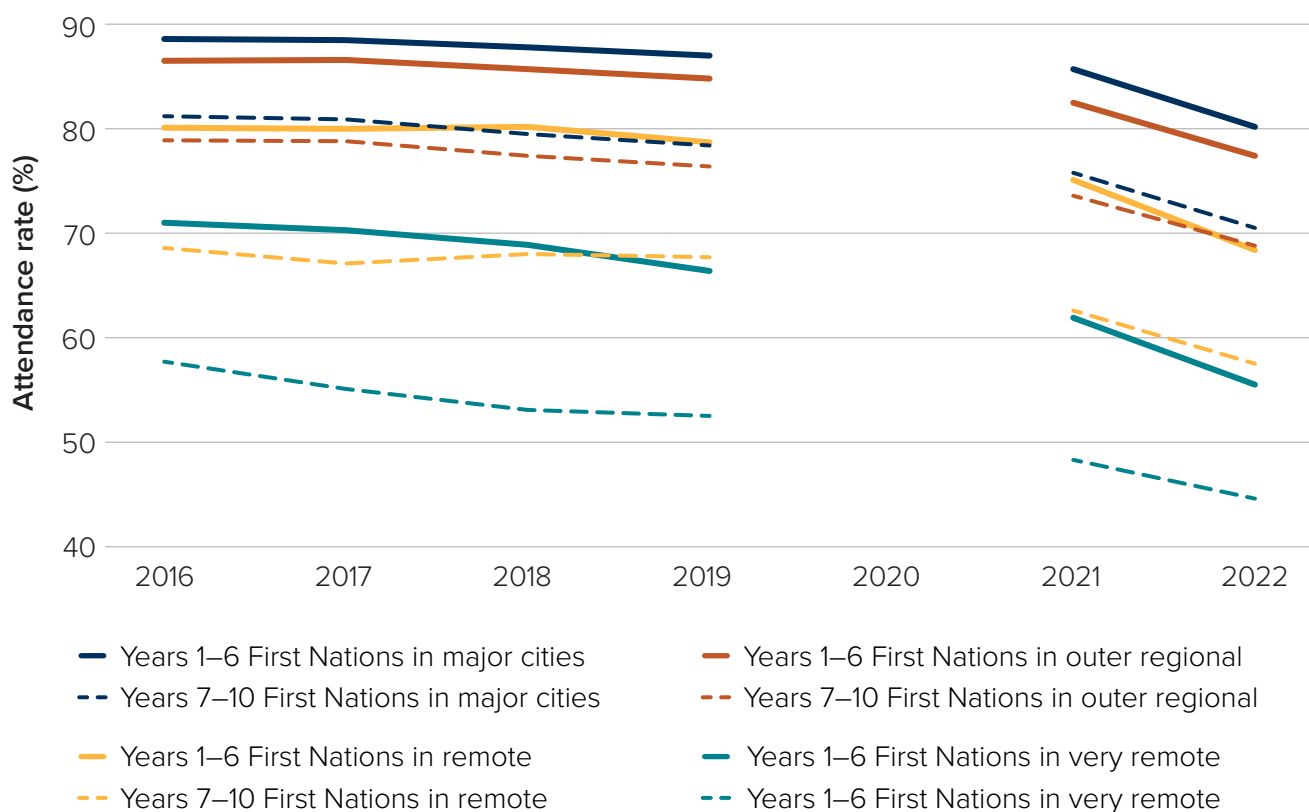
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector only. Attendance rates from inner regional locations are very similar to those of major cities and were omitted for clarity.

4.2.5. Moving through secondary schooling, attendance of some priority equity groups declines faster than for the overall population

Following on from the analysis presented in 4.1.3 Over time, declines in student attendance are starting earlier, we looked further at changes in attendance rates at a cohort level as students from priority equity groups progress through schooling. Figure 13 shows the attendance rate of Year 1 in 2014 through to 2019, when this cohort was in Year 6. Similarly, Figure 14 shows the attendance rate of Year 7 in 2016, through to when they reached Year 10 in 2019.

Overall, moving through primary years, attendance for priority equity groups in government schools declined at a similar rate to that seen in the all-sectors and government-school populations. However, attendance declined at a faster rate for some priority equity groups as they moved through secondary school than for the overall student population. This led to larger gaps in attendance rates between students in these subgroups and all students in Year 10 than what was observed when the cohort was in Year 7.

For the government students in Year 1 in 2014, slight increases in attendance were seen in early primary school, followed by a decline in later primary school. Those enrolled in schools in very remote locations had both the lowest rates of attendance and the greatest rate of decrease in attendance as they progressed through primary school.

Figure 14 shows the attendance rate for the cohort of junior secondary school students starting Year 7 in 2016. The government students enrolled in very remote schools had both the lowest rates of attendance and the sharpest decrease in attendance as they moved through secondary school.

Figure 13: National Semester 1 attendance rate by priority equity group (Year 1, 2014 cohort)
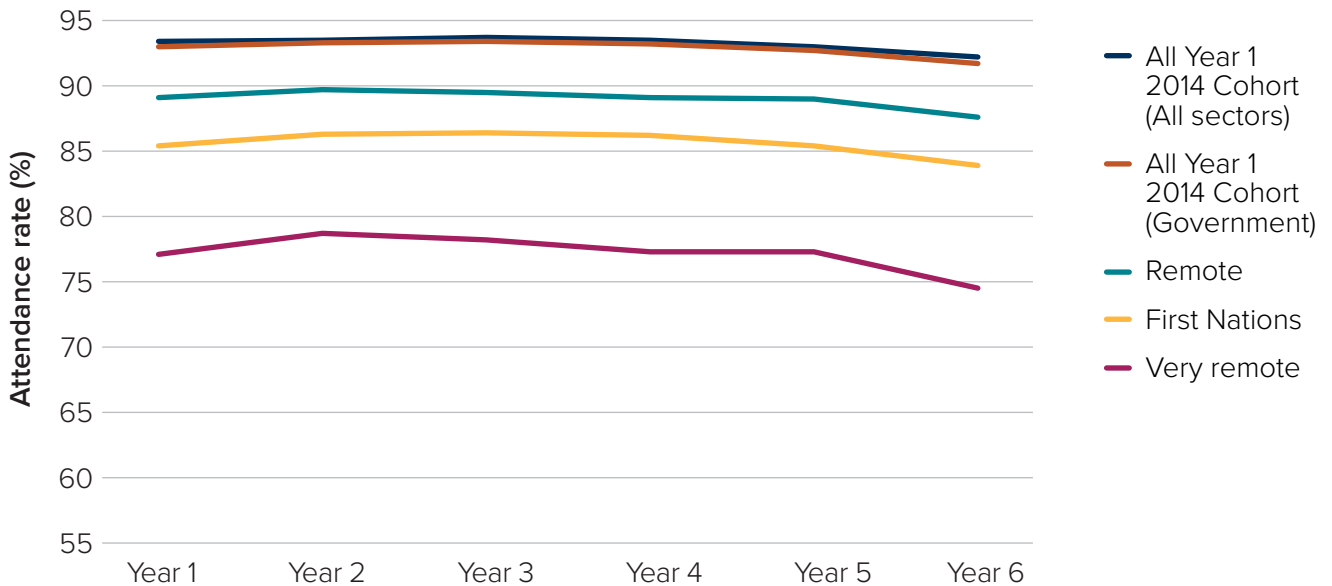
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance. Note: Government sector shown for subgroups.

Figure 14: National Semester 1 attendance rate by subgroup (Year 7, 2016 cohort)
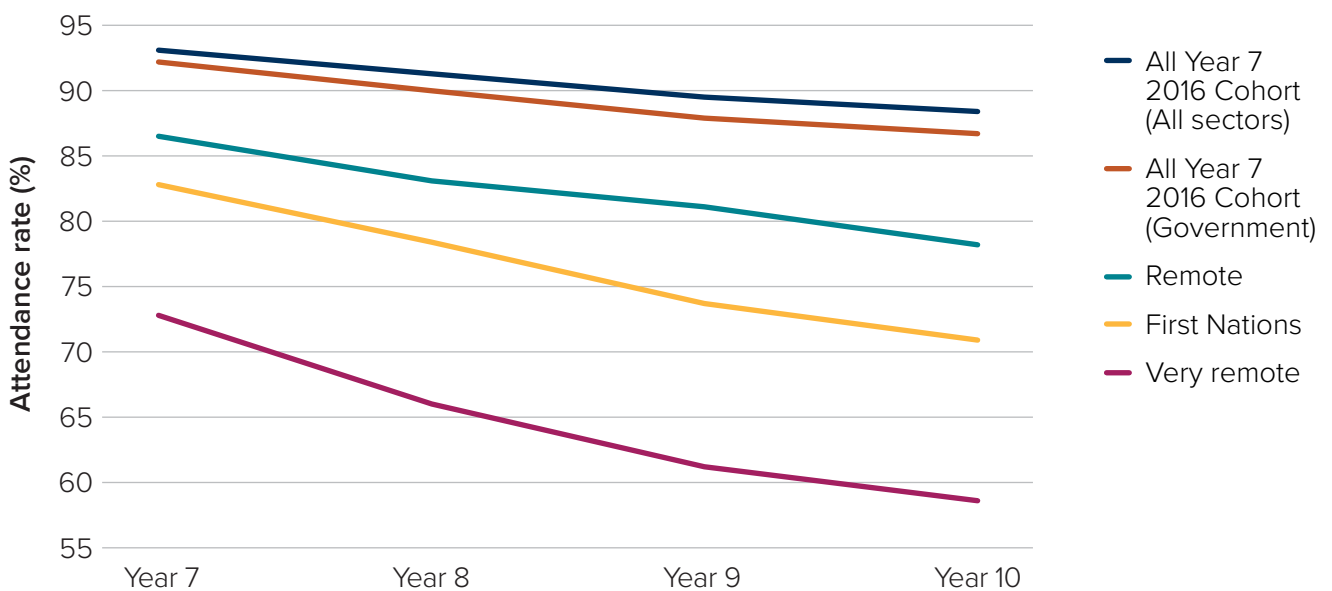
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector shown for all subgroups.

4.2.6. Attendance gaps between priority equity groups and the overall student population increased further during COVID-19

Figure 15 shows the differences (gaps) between the attendance rate of priority equity groups and the relevant populations (i.e., government-school students) from 2018 to 2019 and 2021 to 2022. The primary school years are shown on the right.Secondary school years on the left. The lighter section of each bar indicates the gaps from 2018 to 2019. The dark end of each bar shows the additional gaps evident from 2021 to 2022 (the total gap from 2021 to 2022 are shown in the full length of each bar).

For priority equity groups in both primary and secondary school, attendance gaps were larger from 2021 to 2022 than they had been from 2018 to 2019. That is, from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, school attendance for priority equity groups decreased more than for the overall student population.

Also, across priority equity groups and in all time periods, gaps in attendance have been larger in secondary school than in primary school.

Figure 15: Gaps between Semester 1 attendance rate of priority equity groups and overall student population in Australian government schools prior to COVID-19 and since
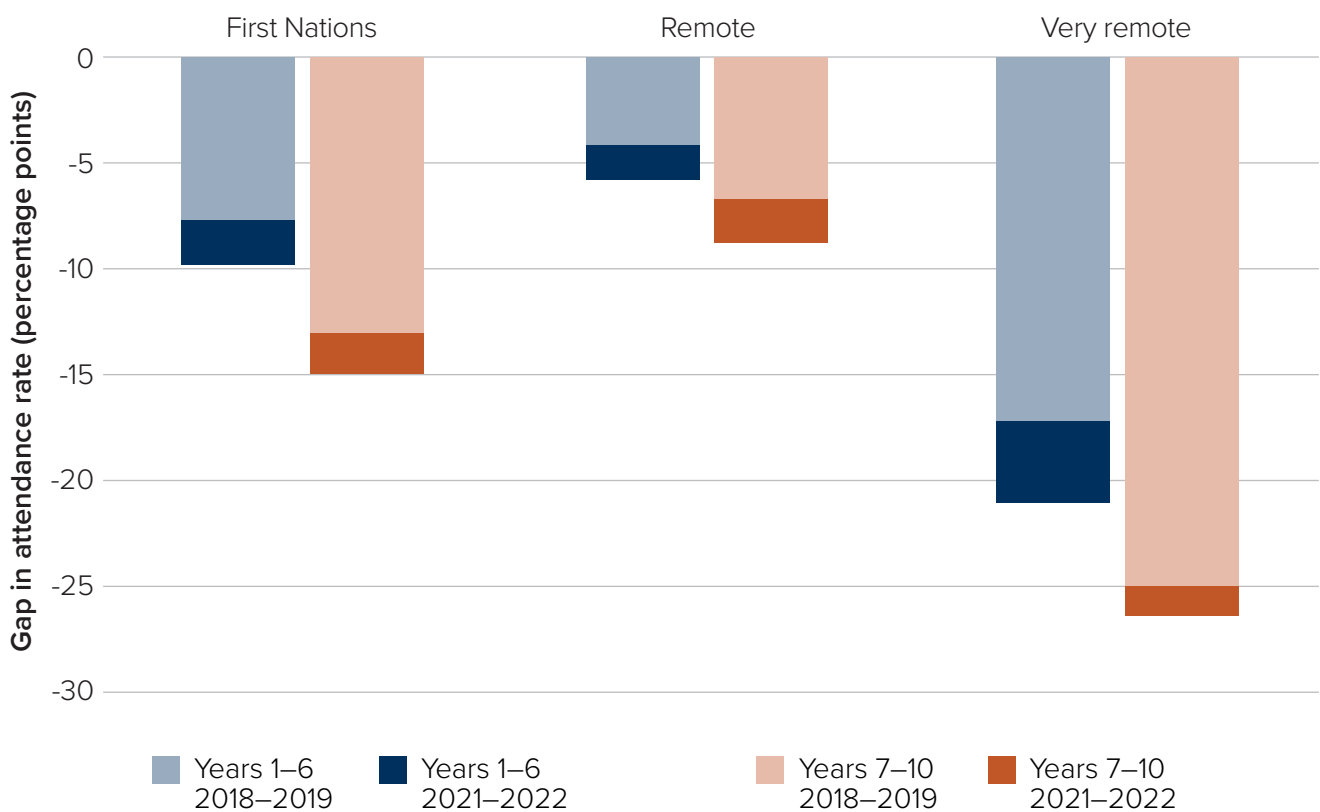
Source: ACARA National Collection of Student Attendance.
Note: Government sector shown for all subgroups. Weighted average attendance rates were obtained for 2018 to 2019 and 2021 to 2022 for each subgroup for each year group. The gap in attendance rates shown is the difference between the subgroup weighted average attendance rate and the government student weighted average attendance rate.

4.3. Drivers of student absence

This section discusses the drivers of student absence under 2 headings:

- drivers of student absence with strong peer-reviewed evidence
- barriers to attendance of First Nations students.

4.3.1. Drivers of student absence with strong peer-reviewed evidence

This section describes the causes of student absence as reported in international peer-reviewed literature. It is based upon a rapid review of the literature (Activity B) and includes available research that establishes a statistical association between an explanatory variable (causes of absence) and absence from school.[15]

Figure 16 lists the causes of student absence as indicated by strong[16] peer-reviewed evidence.

Figure 16: Causes of student absence
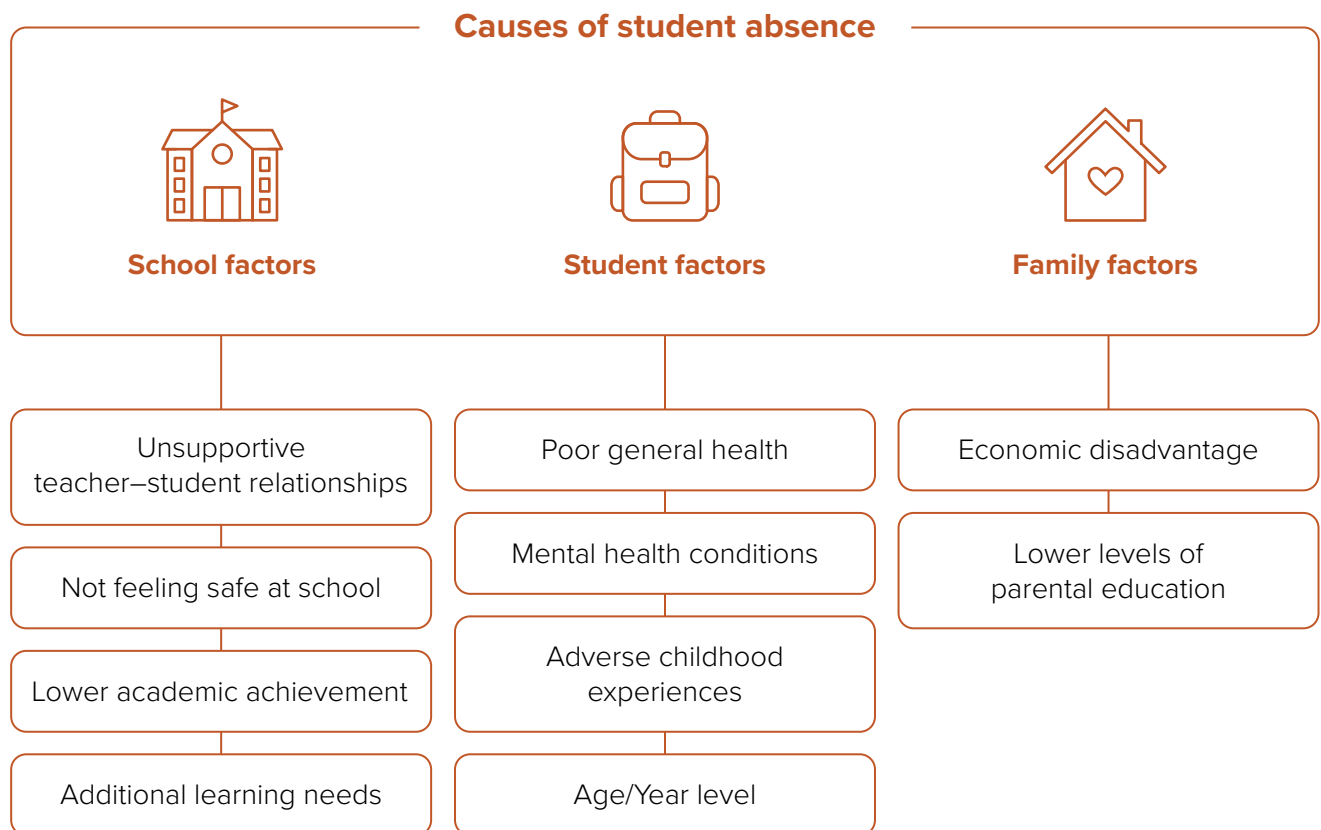
The reasons for student absence from school are varied and interrelated. They can be grouped into factors related to the school/system, student and family/community/other. This section discusses reasons for absence under 3 subheadings.

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15   This section does not include grey literature (including systems/sectors reports) and non-causal studies including qualitative studies.

16   Strong evidence is defined as 5 or more studies providing consistent, robust evidence that supports a clear and well-established relationship between the variables.

School/system factors

Absence is linked to teacher–student relationships, especially where those relationships are not supportive of the student (see, for example, Teuscher & Makarova, 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014). Peer relationships also play a role in absence, whereby students who have fewer friends in class (Kirksey & Gottfried, 2018) or who have peers who are absent (Saelzer & Lenski, 2016) or have discontinued their education (Gase et al., 2014) show increased absence.

Safety at school encompasses social-emotional, behavioural and physical aspects of safety. For First Nations students, cultural safety occurs when they have a sense of belonging and their culture is valued and visible. The evidence strongly suggests that school climates perceived as unsafe by students are linked to higher levels of absence (see, for example, S. Williams et al., 2018; Wormington et al., 2016). School climates include relationships, connectedness, respect for diversity and partnerships (Wang & Degol, 2016). Not feeling safe at school because of bullying, perceptions of not belonging and less positive teacher/faculty climate are causes of student absence (see, for example, Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017; S. Williams et al., 2018). Specifically, students who are bullied, either in-person or using technology, are more likely to be absent (see, for example, Escario et al., 2022; Grinshteyn & Yang, 2017).

Academic engagement and achievement also impact attendance. The research strongly supports the connection between decreased academic engagement (Maynard et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2023), lower academic achievement (see, for example, London et al., 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), and absenteeism. Keppens and Spruyt (2019) found that adolescents skipped more classes in schools characterised by a low willingness to respond to individual needs of students, a lack of structure, and academic challenges. Additionally, Gase et al. (2014) noted that absences increased when students perceived they received less support from classes, teachers and other students regarding preparation for higher education.

The social model of disability[17] examines the ways the environment itself can create barriers to engagement for people with disability. Schools have a responsibility to provide reasonable adjustments to support students with additional learning needs to ensure they can engage with education on the same basis as their non-disabled peers. However, there is strong evidence that students with disabilities, additional learning needs or specific learning disabilities are more likely to be absent than those without (see, for example, K. P. Anderson, 2021; Hancock et al., 2018). This includes students receiving special education services (see, for example, London et al., 2016), students eligible for Individual Education Plans (Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), students with attention problems (Strand & Granlund, 2014) and students with autism (Totsika et al., 2020).

Student factors

The literature clearly demonstrates the impact of poor mental health on school absence. Emotional difficulties (Chen et al., 2016) and poor psychological health (see, for example, Chau et al., 2016), including behaviour and emotional symptoms (see, for example, Fornander & Kearney, 2020; Gottfried & Gee, 2017), also contribute to absence. Strong evidence shows that children with anxious and depressive symptoms (see, for example Askeland et al., 2020; Duncan et al., 2021) or a diagnosis of depression or anxiety (Hancock et al., 2021) have higher rates of absence compared to their peers without these conditions.

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17   The social model of disability sees that people are disabled by barriers in society – for example classrooms not having ramps or accessible toilets. This is in contrast to the medical model which says people are disabled by their impairments or differences (*Australian Federation of Disability Organisations*, n.d.).

Strong evidence supports the association between poor general health and absence from school (see, for example, Carey et al., 2015; Echeverria et al., 2014). Similarly, absence is significantly linked to chronic health problems and illness, including pain and asthma (Groenewald et al., 2019; Hsu et al., 2016).

Evidence exists to link absence and poor health indicators, including poor sleep, fitness levels, smoking and obesity or high body mass index. Additionally, adolescents engaging in risky behaviours (Chau et al., 2016), including alcohol use and binge drinking (see, for example, Ghanem, 2021; Holtes et al., 2015), and substance use (Gase et al., 2014; Maynard et al., 2017).

Disruptive behaviours and delinquent behaviours (Hughes et al., 2015) have also been associated with absence (Roetman et al., 2019).

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 (see, for example, Hughes et al., 2015), childhood maltreatment and harassment (Hagborg et al., 2018), and involvement of child protective services (Palmer et al., 2023). Adverse child experiences and child maltreatment are a barrier to attendance with the consequence of school failure which, in turn, contributes to their lower rates of attendance (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Hagborg et al., 2018).

Regarding age, strong evidence indicates that older students are generally more likely to be absent than younger students (see, for example, Maynard et al., 2017). Multiple studies found that certain stages of schooling had a higher risk of absence, including commencement of schooling, middle years and upper years of schooling (London et al., 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018). Research found that students who were absent in the early years of schooling were more likely to have continuing patterns of non-attendance (Child & Family Policy Center, 2016; London et al., 2016).

Family, community and other factors

There was strong evidence for an association between absence and economic disadvantage, including poverty, lower SES and lower income (see, for example, Armfield et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2017).

There was strong evidence that lower parent education levels are associated with their children's absence (see, for example, Karlberg et al., 2022; Maynard et al., 2017).

4.3.2. Barriers to attendance of First Nations students

As noted in 3. Methodology, the rapid literature review of international studies captured 147 articles. However, only 17 of these were from Australia, and only 3 were focused specifically on First Nations students. Owing to this limitation of the rapid literature review, the project team collaborated with AERO's First Nations research team to develop an additional section for this report which draws on a broader body of literature about the barriers to attendance of Australian First Nations students.

School/system factors

Firstly, it is important to recognise that, despite the barriers to attendance experienced by First Nations students, approximately half of First Nations students attend school regularly.[18] However, an overarching issue which impacts First Nations student attendance and engagement with schooling is the extent to which the Australian education system meets the specific needs of First Nations students. A child or young person's ability and commitment to attend school is impacted by whether traditional cultural values and ways of being that underpin their community life are acknowledged and shared with the school or its system (Guenther et al., 2022). In the past, it has been suggested that the education and policy goals of the education systems may not adequately reflect the reality of First Nations students (Altman & Fogarty, 2010), and therefore, may be a contributor to student non-attendance and disengagement.

Racism is a barrier to the attendance and engagement of First Nations students in schooling. First Nations students report experiencing racism and racist bullying as part of their school life (Moodie et al., 2019; Whitau et al., 2022; K. Williams et al., forthcoming). A recent case study in Western Australia identified racism as one of 3 main barriers to attendance of First Nations students and the root cause of other barriers as well (Whitau et al., 2022).

There is evidence that schools are not adequately prepared to engage First Nations students effectively, particularly in secondary schools and in remote and very remote locations (P. J. Anderson et al., 2022). Indeed, a high proportion of teachers (84%) say they would benefit from additional training that better equipped them to teach in culturally responsive ways (K. Williams et al., forthcoming). Culturally responsive teaching sees teachers engage reflexively with their personal dispositions, beliefs, assumptions and skills, and be accountable for them. The development of cultural responsiveness would assist teachers in better meeting the needs of First Nations students through curriculum and pedagogy.

Furthermore, First Nations students are not a homogenous or discrete group. Rather, they are a part of the superdiversity of Australian classrooms which feature learners who fit multiple categories of diversity at once, including diversity related to language, ethnicity, religiosity, gender identity, disability and more (Rigney, 2023). Approaches to curriculum and pedagogy that do not adequately respond to student diversity may contribute to disengagement and non-attendance.

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18   Prior to COVID in 2019, 46.9% of First Nations students (Year 1 to 10, all sectors) attended school 90% or more of the time (ACARA, 2022).

Student factors

Other factors that may impact a First Nations student's ability and commitment to attend school include whether Standard Australian English is the student's first language and whether the history of schooling is relatively recent in the community of the child or young person (Guenther et al., 2022). The complex health profiles of some First Nations children and young people can also contribute to higher absences (Biddle, 2014).

Non-attendance can also be triggered by school-based confrontation. Gray (2000) found evidence to support the correlation between suspension and continued non-attendance, pointing to systemic issues, including racism and a culture of social exclusion. The same study noted that 25% of students who were attending less than 80% of the time in Year 8, and who eventually dropped out of school before the end of Year 9, were also suspended for 10 or more days. One parent who had tried to convince her son to continue schooling said, 'The teacher picked on him for not wearing a white shirt to school. He didn't have a white shirt. And they suspended him from school. And, em, he just didn't go back' (Gray & Partington, 2012, p. 269).

Family, community and other factors

School attendance is impacted when the school service is challenging to access, due to factors such as distance, transport or other interruptions (Guenther et al., 2022). Household stress, housing issues and family crises are likely to affect First Nations students and their ability to attend school disproportionately (Biddle, 2014; Guenther et al., 2022).

Parents' and communities' experiences can influence the relationship children and young people have with the school or schooling more generally, both positively and negatively. Baxter and Meyers (2019) note some parents provide extra encouragement and support to their children so that they can make the most of educational experiences and opportunities, to avoid missing the educational pathways their parent wasn't able to take. Conversely, past failures of the education system (Dodson, 2010) and negative school experiences can create subsequent generations of students and parents who are apprehensive, fearful or blatantly mistrustful of mainstream schools (Prout Quicke & Biddle, 2017). In fact, one study by Munns and McFadden (2000, cited in Gray & Partington, 2012, pp. 265–266), found that 'Aboriginal parents in the Koori community saw their children's rejection of education as a natural progression, and less shameful than staying at school', and there was 'cultural support for their opposition and resistance' to schooling in the community.

This section has provided a summary of the barriers to student attendance at school, with a spotlight on the unique barriers for First Nations students. The following section presents the findings from the project related to approaches to supporting attendance.

5.   Findings – Part 2

This section presents findings from Part 2 of the project, including a rapid literature review on evidence-based approaches to supporting student attendance (Activity C).

This section of findings presents insights under the headings:

- evidence-based approaches to supporting student attendance
- approaches to supporting First Nations students.

5.1.   Evidence-based approaches to supporting student attendance

A rapid literature review (hereafter, 'our review') was carried out to contribute insights into the approaches, programs and interventions that successfully address student absence and support attendance. Included in our review were interventions for attendance that directly aimed to improve attendance or reduce absenteeism, as well as those that had other primary targets, such as improving mental health or academic engagement, but also measured the impact of the intervention on attendance.

Due to its length, the full review is contained in a separate document. This section provides a summary of the key findings considered to be most useful to Education Ministers and systems/sectors, including evidence from Australia. The first piece we present is the overarching organising framework: the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework (Kearney & Graczyk, 2022).

5.1.1.   The multi-tiered system of supports model

The interventions found in our review have been organised using the MTSS framework (Kearney & Graczyk, 2022). AERO has previously published on the use of an MTSS framework to support students entering secondary school who lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills. In the context of student attendance, the concept of tiered interventions is the same, but with a focus on school attendance as the outcome for which students are provided additional, targeted support.

The MTSS model applied to student attendance offers a range of benefits for schools. First, it provides a framework for identifying students in need of support, and then for planning interventions that best meet the needs of those students (Harrison, 2023). Second, it helps with judicious allocation of a school's resources (Goodman & Bohanon, 2018). In theory, when schools invest adequate resources in Tier 1 interventions, fewer students will need the extra resources associated with Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Research indicates student outcomes increase when MTSS models are implemented in the realm of academics (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Similar research is needed into MTSS models applied to school attendance. Third, it orients schools towards the use of evidence-based interventions relevant to each level of support (Kearney, 2016), and encourages data-driven decision-making about the type and intensity of support needed (Kearney & Graczyk, 2022).

By presenting our review's findings according to the MTSS model's tiers, it is hoped that school professionals can select the most relevant interventions to students' needs in their context.

There is currently no consensus on a meaningful demarcation between tiers for student attendance. Our review defines the tiers as follows:

- **Tier 1** approaches to supporting attendance apply universally to all students within a system or sector.
- **Tier 2** interventions are programs directed at selected students or schools who are deemed to be vulnerable or at-risk of chronic absence.
- **Tier 3** interventions are used to re-engage and support students with chronic or persistent absence.

The following section provides a summary of the most promising interventions identified through our review with reference to the MTSS tier where each intervention might best be used.

5.1.2. Promising approaches and interventions to support attendance

This section provides a summary of the interventions and approaches that are most promising for further investigation by Australian systems/sectors. Appendix B: Evidence for interventions that support attendance includes summary tables of all the interventions captured in our review (Activity C).

In determining what constitutes a 'promising' approach, the project team drew on our review, and the recent rapid evidence assessment on attendance interventions conducted by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), United Kingdom (EEF, 2022) (hereafter EEF's review). EEF's review, unlike our review, provided estimates of the size of impact of interventions (where possible), although the scope was limited to approaches with a primary goal of increasing school attendance. EEF's review was considered in conjunction with our review to provide a more robust picture of the most promising approaches and initiatives worthy of further investigation by Australian systems/sectors.

The promising approaches are presented under the following 5 headings:

- positive behavioural interventions and supports
- parent communication interventions
- mentoring including Check & Connect
- meal provision
- multi-component attendance programs.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (Tier 1)

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), also known as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support and Positive Behaviour for Learning, is a tiered prevention framework that uses evidence-based practices to develop positive behaviours and create a safe and predictable school climate (Leif et al., 2023). Behaviour interventions aim to reduce absenteeism through solving school behaviour issues, and might occur through improving a student's experience at school, as well as the experience of other students (EEF, 2022).

Our review captured 7 studies that addressed attendance outcomes for schools implementing PBIS. Six studies used quasi-experimental designs (Caldarella et al., 2011; Freeman et al., 2016, 2019; McDaniel & Bloomfield, 2020; Pas et al., 2019; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012) and one was a randomised controlled trial (RCT) (Smolkowski et al., 2016). All studies showed improvements in attendance, reductions in absence or reduction in the number of late arrivals.

The extent of the impact of positive behavioural interventions and supports on attendance is reported differently in each of the studies, and it is not possible to calculate an average impact. EEF's review found the same limitation and advised caution in interpreting results from the disparate studies in this category (EEF, 2022).

Furthermore, none of the studies were undertaken in Australia. Some contextual differences in system settings, school policies and socio-cultural norms regarding attendance may limit the relevance of these studies to the Australian context. As such, further research is needed to understand the similarities in contexts in which these studies were conducted and what can and cannot be transferred to the Australian context. This analysis should inform the development of further rigorous evaluations on the effectiveness of positive behavioural interventions and supports on attendance as implemented within Australia.

Across 4 of the studies reviewed (Freeman et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2016; McDaniel & Bloomfield, 2020; Pas & Bradshaw, 2012), a notable common finding was the importance of the fidelity of PBIS implementation. Schools that scored at or above the fidelity measure threshold were more likely to have improved attendance and reduced absences and late arrivals.

Parent communication interventions (Tier 1 or 2)

Parents play an instrumental role in supporting their child's school attendance (Chockalingam et al., 2023). Interventions that inform and support parents (e.g., 'nudge letters') aim to have an impact on their child's attendance. Moreover, interventions that foster strong relationships between parents and schools may aid attempts to improve school attendance and support efforts to address non-attendance.

Parent communication interventions aim to increase awareness of the consequences of absenteeism or target commonly held parental misbeliefs undervaluing the importance of regular attendance (EEF, 2022). The EEF Review (2022, p. 15) highlights that 'communication can occur in a range of ways including email, phone-calls, text messages and post, varying in quantity and time of day. Typically, these messages state information about the importance of attendance and add in specific information about the child's attendance history.'

Our review found that 3 randomised controlled trials (RCTs) have evaluated communication with parents as a method of improving attendance (Himmelsbach et al., 2022; Lasky-Fink et al., 2021; Rogers & Feller, 2018). All 3 studies showed a positive impact on attendance. The fourth study (Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018) was a quasi-experimental design and also showed a positive impact on attendance. EEF's review found a very small positive impact for parental engagement communications and was judged a promising area for building the evidence base in England (EEF, 2022).

There is also some evidence that other parent engagement activities are supportive of attendance. EEF's review found a small positive impact of targeted parental engagement interventions, which often involved conversations with parents and collaboratively planning support.

As none of these studies were undertaken in Australia, further work is required to understand what we can learn from the implementation of parental interventions overseas so that they can be implemented with fidelity in Australia.

Mentoring including Check & Connect (Tier 2 or 3)

Mentoring interventions involve pairing young people with an older peer or adult, who acts as a positive role model (EEF, 2022). The general aim of mentoring is to build confidence and relationships, to develop resilience and character or to raise aspirations (EEF, 2022).

Our review captured 15 articles that focused on mentoring. Of the 10 articles with rigorous methodologies, 8 reported a positive impact of mentoring on attendance. EEF's review found the reported effects of mentoring programs were variable, from a large negative impact to a large positive impact.

Six articles in our review focused on a specific program called 'Check & Connect'. Check & Connect has a strong evidence base, as in our review, it showed a positive impact on attendance in 4 RCTs and another 2 studies with less robust designs. Since 1990, the program has been implemented across 48 states of the United States and 5 international locations, including Australia, and is supported by a strong body of evidence (see the Check & Connect research page).

Check & Connect is an intervention for supporting students from K to 12 who show warning signs of disengagement with school. In the program, 'check' refers to the monitoring of student performance variables by a mentor and 'connect' refers to 'personalized, timely interventions to help students solve problems, build skills, and enhance competence' (Guryan et al., 2021). Mentors work with caseloads of students and families for at least 2 years, acting as liaisons between home and school, building constructive family–school relationships.

Implementing Check & Connect in Australia requires funding, infrastructure and training. Research evaluating the impact of the program in Australian settings would also assist with understanding the conditions under which this program could work best for us.

Meal provision (Tier 1 or 2)

Provision of free meals (breakfast and lunch) to students, particularly in schools with a high proportion of low-SES families, has been demonstrated to have a positive effect on school attendance. In our review, 13 studies reported on the impact of meal provision on school attendance – 10 studies with robust designs and 3 studies with less robust designs. All of these studies were conducted in the United States, except for one study conducted in New Zealand.

Our review found that the effectiveness of meal provision was generally small or mixed in nature. EEF's review also found null or small positive effects of meal provision on attendance but highlighted the potential of these programs to incentivise students to attend and stay on school grounds. These programs can also improve students' experience of school and provide nutritional benefits, which in turn can reduce sickness and absence due to sickness, and remove barriers to attendance for low-income families.

An RCT was conducted in New Zealand, whereby schools were randomly allocated to implement a universal free breakfast program available to all students (Mhurchu et al., 2013). While no overall impact on attendance was noted, students who attended the program at least 50% of the time increased their attendance rates significantly (from 92.3% to 93.9%).

Evidence from Australia (not captured in our review due to being a report) is a 2016 to 2018 evaluation of Victoria's School Breakfast Clubs Program undertaken by Foodbank and Victoria University (MacDonald, 2019). The School Breakfast Clubs Program provides breakfast to students in Victorian schools with high proportions of students from low-SES backgrounds. The 2019 evaluation did not employ a robust design to test the impact of the program on student attendance, only reporting the observations of teachers about student attendance. Another evaluation was conducted from 2021 to 2022 by ACIL Allen (Victorian Department of Education, n.d.), however, the results have not been published.

Given the mixed evidence, it is possible that meal provision works in some contexts and for some groups of students but not others. Robust evaluation of the role of meal provision in supporting student attendance needs to be undertaken in Australia to clarify its effectiveness and impact.

Multi-component attendance programs (Tier 2 or 3)

Our review captured 7 studies on multi-component programs that specifically target attendance. EEF's review called these 'responsive and targeted' approaches, which work by addressing the drivers of low attendance by an individual student. 'These approaches are often multi-component and may involve one to one support for the student' (EEF, 2022, p. 22). EEF's review found an average small positive impact in the 9 studies included in their review. Common characteristics of those approaches include staff monitoring of pupil absences, identification of causes of absences and then responsive, individualised interventions that tackle those causes.

Our review captured 2 multi-component programs implemented as Tier 2 approaches and 5 as Tier 3 approaches. Of these 7 studies, 5 used a robust design and showed a positive impact on attendance, while 2 with less robust designs also showed positive impacts. Making comparisons between these interventions is difficult as programs included different combinations of quite different types of components, spanning awareness raising, communication, incentives, mentors, home visits, online resources, and support from health or wellbeing professionals.

5.2. Approaches to supporting the attendance of First Nations students

When exploring the specific question of what works to support First Nations children and young people at school, it became evident that our team needed to incorporate more information than was available via the rapid literature review. The evidence base of what works for First Nations students is limited, and not all of the relevant pieces appear in peer-reviewed journals. Given this, First Nations researchers within AERO conducted an additional piece of work in reviewing a broader body of literature, which has been summarised into a brief overview of what works for First Nations students.

First Nations research suggests that to achieve educational success for First Nations students in Australia, the educational aspirations and academic needs of First Nations students must be the focus, and that attendance at school will increase when these are addressed. Munns et al. (2013) investigated the conditions of success for Aboriginal school students and identified practices shared by 4 schools that were identified as successful for Aboriginal students socially and academically. This work aligns with other similar work by Sarra et al. (2020), Sarra (2011), the What Works Program (Price & Hughes, 2009), Purdie and Buckley (2010), Whitau et al. (2022) and Baxter and Meyers (2021).

The findings of these researchers regarding school practices that achieve positive social and academic outcomes for First Nations students include:

- **Establishing high expectations relationships.** This is important as both a process and an outcome, with the aim of building a relational space of trust for First Nations students that is encouraging and engaging.

- **Developing community relationships.** This should be treated as a long-term project requiring strong commitment from school staff and leadership as they develop trusting and supportive relationships with parents and carers.

- **Creating purposeful First Nations spaces.** Some examples of this include dedicated learning spaces, community projects or environmental regeneration.

- **Actively engaging First Nations people.** Local First Nations people should be specifically invited into all change and improvement processes and supported to be actively part of them.

- **Prioritising and embedding First Nations perspectives and values.** Teachers need to be able to deliver a genuinely integrated curriculum.

- **Delivering quality, contextualised teaching.** Teaching must be considered from a First Nations perspective and take into account teachers' own positionalities, while also embedding teaching practices that have strong and relevant evidence bases.

- **Providing targeted support for First Nations students.** This type of support is best delivered when students' aspirations and needs are deeply understood.

- **Recruiting and supporting high-quality teachers.** High-quality teachers recognise the importance of their relationships with students, families and communities, as well as with their colleagues. They take responsibility for developing their reflexive capacity and, through reflexive practice, develop their responsiveness to create culturally safe learning environments that students want to be a part of.

6. Discussion

This section draws together the findings of this project and discusses the broader implications of the work.

6.1. A national picture of student attendance in Australia

Nationally, student attendance has been in decline. Our analysis found that in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic (2016 to 2019), there was a reduction in attendance rates for all year levels. This is consistent with national reporting by ACARA (2022) showing a downward trend in attendance since 2014.[19] In similar international education systems, school attendance has also been in decline. New Zealand saw a 12-percentage point decrease in students going to school regularly between 2015 and 2019 (Education Review Office, 2022).

The latest data reported by ACARA indicates that attendance in 2023 improved nationally from 2022 but was still below the levels prior to COVID-19. In Semester 1 2023, the attendance rate for students in Years 1 to 10 (all sectors) was 88.6%, 2.1 percentage points higher than 2022, but still 2.8 percentage points lower than 2019. In Semester 1 2023, the proportion of students in Years 1 to 10 (all sectors) attending over 90% of school days was 61.6%, 11.7 percentage points higher than 2022, and 11.5 percentage points lower than 2019.

To look at changes in attendance over time from a different perspective, we examined cohorts of students as they progressed through school. We found that recent cohorts of students dropped attendance rates at an earlier scholastic year than prior cohorts in all sectors. This trend is concerning as there is evidence that students who are absent in the early years of schooling are more likely to have continuing patterns of non-attendance (Child & Family Policy Center, 2016; London et al., 2016).

To better understand attendance for different groups of students, we looked at attendance for students in different year levels. Our analysis of national data shows that in general, secondary school students have lower rates of attendance than primary school students in all sectors. This is similar to other research locally and overseas (Education Review Office, 2022; Hancock et al., 2013; London et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2017; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018).

Our research particularly examined attendance for subgroups of students. While there are negligible differences in the attendance of male and female students, the attendance rates of students from priority equity groups[20] are lower than those in the national government-school population. Additionally, moving through secondary school, attendance declines faster for priority equity groups than for all government-school students. The following section examines attendance with respect to the impact of COVID-19.

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19 A declining national trend comes from analysis of aggregated national data and may not represent the trend of individual systems and sectors.

20 In this report, priority equity groups are students in remote and very remote locations and First Nations students.

6.2. Impact of COVID-19 on attendance

The impact of COVID-19 on student attendance is still being assessed. Analysing attendance data through COVID-19 must be done with caution given the inconsistencies in data as a result of varying health advice and schooling arrangements across the country in response to COVID-19 (ACARA, 2023).

ACARA's analysis of national data found that the lower attendance rates in 2022 were 'consistent with a long-term trend' (ACARA, 2022, p. 4). However, we employed a technique to account for the declining trend prior to COVID-19 and found that since COVID-19, student attendance reduced further than the existing declining trend.

We used two-year averages to smooth variations in 2021 and 2022 data to gain a more accurate picture of the impact of COVID-19 in relation to the historic declining trend. This analysis found that COVID-19 and other factors may have reduced the attendance rate of primary school students by a further 0.9 percentage points than expected by the declining trend, and a further 1.8 percentage points for secondary school students. Clearly, both primary and secondary school students were impacted by COVID-19, but more so those in Years 7 to 10.

COVID-19 has impacted attendance overseas, too, with the United Kingdom reporting a 'tide of rising absences' (Eyles et al., 2023) and the United States experiencing 'high levels of absenteeism' (Jordan, 2023).

Reporting by ACARA shows that since COVID-19, fewer students are attending school at high levels (90%+ of days). In 2019, 73.1% of students across Year 1 to Year 10 attended school 90% or more of the time, while in 2022, less than 50% of students did so. Last year, New Zealand noted that the biggest change in their student attendance was the increase in students who no longer went to school regularly but went to school often (80 to 90% of the time) (Education Review Office, 2022).

Our analysis revealed that COVID-19 had a greater impact on students from priority equity groups than the overall student population. The gaps between the attendance rates of priority equity groups in government schools and all government-school students widened through the pandemic. That is, the gaps were larger from 2021 to 2022 than they had been from 2018 to 2019. It appears the attendance of priority equity groups was impacted by new factors or existing factors exacerbated by the pandemic at levels and in ways not experienced by other students.

The following section examines the reasons for student absence from school.

6.3. Reasons for absence

It is likely that more students were absent from school for medical reasons during the spread of COVID-19 than before the pandemic. Analysis published by the New South Wales Department of Education identified illness as being a significant reason for increased absence from 2021 to 2022 (New South Wales Department of Education, 2023).

This finding is unsurprising for 2 reasons. Firstly, the largest wave of cases of COVID-19 in Australia occurred in the first half of 2022 (infection numbers rose to around 230,000 cases per million people – up from a cumulative number of infections of around 10,000 cases per million people in late 2021), caused by the Omicron variant (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022).

Secondly, public health strategy centred on asking people, including school students, with any symptoms of illness to stay at home as well as if they were a 'close contact' of someone with COVID-19.

In 2022, attendance across Australia was also significantly impacted by specific events such as flooding in certain regions and seasonal influenza outbreaks (ACARA, 2022).

The following section looks more carefully at the attendance of priority equity groups including trends and reasons for absence.

6.4. Attendance of priority equity groups

This section discusses the attendance of priority equity groups. **It is important to note that none of the groups are discrete, meaning some students may be captured in more than one analysis category.** There are multiple overlapping factors relevant to attendance. By drawing out results for priority equity groups, we were able to highlight different pieces of a complex set of interacting factors.

Also, although the focus is on the priority equity group students for whom we have national data, there are other subsections of the student population whose school attendance might require specific support strategies – e.g., students with disability, from low-SES backgrounds, in out-of-home care, and migrant and refugee students. Future research might look at their attendance patterns and how they might be best supported.

6.4.1. Students in remote and very remote locations

This project provides insights on attendance based on geolocation, including major cities, inner regional and outer regional, but with a focus on students in remote and very remote schools. Attendance data by geolocation is reported by ACARA. This project contributes new insights into the impact of geolocation on student attendance at different levels and according to different reasons for absence.

Our analysis found that students enrolled in schools in remote and very remote locations had markedly lower attendance rates than the overall population (see 4.2.1 Priority equity groups have attendance rates lower than the overall student population). This is consistent with evidence in the literature of a trend towards school attendance declining as geographical remoteness increases (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2019).

The rapid literature review (Activity B) found indications that parents in rural areas experience more barriers in transporting their children to school. One study based in New Zealand found that parents in rural areas kept their child out of school in the last term at double the rate of urban parents because transporting them to school was challenging (Education Review Office, 2022). This is not surprising considering the large distances between homes and towns in remote areas, and the lack of transportation options available compared with urban settings.

The study from New Zealand also noted that families in rural areas were more likely to take holidays in term time (Education Review Office, 2022). Again, this finding is not surprising – while a family living in a major city could visit relatives for a milestone event on a weekend with minimal travel time involved, a family living in a very remote setting might need to travel for several days to attend a similar event.

6.4.2. First Nations students

This project was designed to shed light on school attendance for First Nations children and young people by collecting data disaggregated by First Nations status. As acknowledged previously, despite the barriers to attendance experienced by First Nations students, approximately half regularly attend school. However, we found that school attendance was lower for First Nations students at both primary and junior secondary levels.

The issue of school attendance among First Nations children and young people is complex and has been the focus of other pieces of research. A recent paper on this subject recommended these complexities be viewed holistically, 'firstly by recognising the multifaceted nature of the challenge; and secondly by embracing a suite of responses to meet the many interdependencies involved' (Dreise et al., 2016, p. 2).

We know that racism is a key factor impacting First Nations students (Moodie et al., 2019; Whitau et al., 2022; K. Williams et al., forthcoming). We also know that schools (P. J. Anderson et al., 2022; K. Williams et al., forthcoming) require more support to build culturally responsive teaching practices and cultural competence to adequately meet the needs of First Nations students. Overlaid on all of these factors is the reality that First Nations students form a diverse group, meaning that overly simplistic strategies that cannot show responsiveness and flexibility to different needs are at risk of further disengaging students.

Future research should incorporate both the empowerment of communities in collaborative, context-sensitive ways, and the targeting of resources to schools to meet the holistic needs that are identified (Dreise et al., 2016). Schools and systems must support teachers and leaders with developing strategies to enhance student engagement in meaningful learning through quality, localised and contextualised curriculum and appropriate pedagogies. Learning for First Nations students needs to happen within a positive, responsive and safe school environment, supported by genuine and purposeful relationships with students, their families and their communities.

6.5. Supporting student attendance

The reasons for student absences from school are numerous and interrelated. 'Improving attendance requires a deep appreciation of the complex and myriad factors that influence student, family and community engagement' (AITSL, 2019). When barriers to attendance and drivers of absence are understood, appropriate supports and interventions can be designed and implemented. This section examines the factors that influence attendance and how this may align with attendance interventions and supports with an evidence base.

The results from our rapid literature review reveal strong evidence of the role the school environment plays in student absence. Student absence is related to having lower academic achievement (see, for example, London et al., 2016; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), and decreased academic engagement (Maynard et al., 2017; Virtanen et al., 2023), and needing additional learning supports or disability adjustments (see, for example, K. P. Anderson, 2021; Hancock et al., 2018). This finding points to the importance of quality teaching in supporting students to attend school. Quality teaching engages students in their learning, assesses for learning, and provides learning at the level of the individual student, especially when that student needs learning supports or disability adjustments (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021; see for example, Karaman, 2021; Stockard et al., 2018).

There is also strong evidence that unsupportive teacher–student relationships (see, for example, Teuscher & Makarova, 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014) and school climates perceived as unsafe by students, including bullying (see, for example, S. Williams et al., 2018; Wormington et al., 2016) are related to student absence. Longitudinal data from the New South Wales Department of Education (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2022) identified 'sense of belonging' as one of the strongest 3 predictors of attendance. Recent mixed methods research by New Zealand's Education Review Office (2022), drawing on student, parent and school voices to understand student absence, also highlights the important relationship between school climate and attendance. Nearly one in five of their student respondents (17%) said that not liking at least one of their teachers was a barrier for them attending school, and that being bullied or picked on at school (10%) and not liking people in their class (15%) are also barriers for students to attend school.

To ensure that schools are safe and feature strong student–teacher and student–student relationships, Tier 1 system- and school-wide approaches such as PBIS (discussed in 5.1.2 Promising approaches and interventions to support attendance) are promising. Of course, implementation is key, and although many systems/sectors identify using PBIS approaches, evidence about their effectiveness and support for their effective implementation in Australian settings are needed.

Building positive relationships with students can be supported by AERO's recent classroom management resources. These resources describe how creating connections with students over time can help build trust and form positive relationships to support learning and student attendance at school.

The rapid literature review also revealed strong evidence of the impact of broader factors often perceived to be outside the direct influence of the school on attendance. These are poor student general health (see, for example, Carey et al., 2015; Echeverria et al., 2014), mental health conditions (see, for example, Chau et al., 2016), and adverse childhood experiences (Turney, 2020). Economic disadvantage and lower levels of parental education are also related to student absence.

Approaches at Tiers 2 and 3 that identify and respond in targeted ways to individual student barriers to attendance in collaboration with other services can address these more complex issues impacting student attendance. Mentoring, multi-component interventions, meal provision, and parental communication interventions may also work to address absence resulting from health, mental health, trauma and other issues.

7. Conclusion

In 2019, AITSL reported that 'the overall school attendance picture in Australia is good' (AITSL, 2019, p. 4). Clearly, COVID-19 had a significant impact on student attendance and the impacts were still being felt in 2023. Many students are no longer attending at the strong levels that they were previously, barriers to attendance have been exacerbated and there are deep inequities in access to education. Declining attendance puts Australia's ability to achieve the goals for its education system outlined in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019) at risk. This report has shone light on areas of policy, practice and analysis/research that may be leveraged to support the attendance of all Australian students.

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Appendix A: Data tables for graphs in the report

Table 4: Data table for Figure 4: National attendance rate by year level, Semester 1

Year level	2016	2017	2018	2019
Year 1	93.3	93.2	92.8	92.2
Year 2	93.5	93.4	93.1	92.5
Year 3	93.7	93.6	93.2	92.7
Year 4	93.6	93.5	93.1	92.6
Year 5	93.6	93.4	93	92.5
Year 6	93.3	93.1	92.7	92.2
Year 7	93.1	93	92.5	91.9
Year 8	91.3	91.3	90.5	90
Year 9	90.3	90.1	89.5	88.9
Year 10	89.6	89.4	88.8	88.4

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 5: Data table for Figure 5: National attendance rate over time by year group (two yearly averages)

Date range	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
2016–2017	93.2	93.5	93.6	93.5	93.5	93.2	93.0	91.3	90.2	89.5
2018–2019	92.5	92.8	93.0	92.8	92.8	92.4	92.2	90.3	89.2	88.6
Estimated 2021–2022	90.6	90.9	91.3	91.3	91.3	91.0	90.7	88.7	87.4	87.2
Actual 2021–2022	90.0	90.3	90.4	90.2	90.0	89.5	89.3	86.9	85.7	85.0

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 6: Data table for Figure 6: National attendance rate by cohort (Years 1 to 6, Semester 1)

Year level	Year 1 2014 cohort	Year 1 2015 cohort	Year 1 2016 cohort
Year 1	93.4	93.2	93.3
Year 2	93.5	93.5	93.4
Year 3	93.7	93.6	93.2
Year 4	93.5	93.1	92.6
Year 5	93	92.5	92.1
Year 6	92.2	91.6	91.8

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 7: Data table for Figure 7: National attendance rate by cohort (Years 7 to 10, Semester 1)

Year level	Year 7 2014 cohort	Year 7 2015 cohort	Year 7 2016 cohort
Year 7	93.2	93.1	93.1
Year 8	91.7	91.3	91.3
Year 9	90.3	90.1	89.5
Year 10	89.4	88.8	88.4

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 8: Data table for Figure 8: National attendance rate by priority equity group (Years 1 to 6, Semester 1)

Student group	2016	2017	2018	2019
All Years 1–6 (All sectors)	93.5	93.4	93	92.4
All Years 1–6 (Government)	93.2	93.0	92.7	92.1
Remote	89.0	88.9	88.9	87.7
First Nations	85.9	85.9	85.2	84.3
Very remote	77.4	77.0	76.1	74.3

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 9: Data table for Figure 9: National attendance rate by priority equity group (Years 7 to 10, Semester 1)

Student group	2016	2017	2018	2019
All Years 7–10 (All sectors)	91.1	91.0	90.4	89.9
All Years 7–10 (Government)	89.8	89.6	88.9	88.4
Remote	82.9	82.0	82.4	81.6
First Nations	77.7	77.3	76.0	75.3
Very remote	67.3	64.9	63.9	63.5

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 10: Data table for Figure 10: National attendance rate of male and female students in primary and junior secondary school

Year level	Gender	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Years 1–6	Female	93.3	93.2	92.9	92.3	NA	92.0	87.5
	Male	93.0	92.9	92.5	91.9	NA	91.6	87.0
Years 7–10	Female	89.9	89.8	89.2	88.6	NA	86.8	82.8
	Male	89.7	89.5	88.7	88.1	NA	86.9	82.7
Years 1–10	Female	92.1	92.0	91.6	91.0	NA	90.1	85.8
	Male	91.8	91.6	91.1	90.5	NA	89.8	85.4

Table 11: Data table for Figure 11: National attendance rate of male and female First Nations students in primary and junior secondary school

Year level	Student group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Years 1–6	Female First Nations	86.6	86.5	85.9	85.0	NA	83.0	77.7
	Male First Nations	85.3	85.2	84.5	83.6	NA	81.7	76.5
Years 7–10	Female First Nations	78.1	77.6	76.5	75.8	NA	72.5	67.5
	Male First Nations	77.3	76.9	75.4	74.8	NA	72.0	67.4

Table 12: Data table for Figure 12: National attendance rate of First Nations students by geolocation

Year level	Student group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Years 1–6	First Nations in major cities	88.6	88.5	87.8	87	NA	85.7	80.2
	First Nations in inner regional	89.7	89.5	88.7	88.1	NA	86	81.1
	First Nations in outer regional	86.5	86.6	85.7	84.8	NA	82.5	77.4
	First Nations in remote	80.1	80	80.2	78.7	NA	75.1	68.4
	First Nations in very remote	71	70.3	68.9	66.4	NA	61.9	55.5
Years 7–10	First Nations in major cities	81.2	80.9	79.5	78.4	NA	75.8	70.5
	First Nations in inner regional	81.2	81	79.5	78.9	NA	74.7	70
	First Nations in outer regional	78.9	78.8	77.4	76.4	NA	73.6	68.8
	First Nations in remote	68.6	67.1	68	67.7	NA	62.6	57.5
	First Nations in very remote	57.7	55.1	53.1	52.5	NA	48.3	44.6

Table 13: Data table for Figure 13: National Semester 1 attendance rate by priority equity group (Year 1, 2014 cohort)

Student group	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
All Year 1 2014 Cohort (All sectors)	93.4	93.5	93.7	93.5	93.0	92.2
All Year 1 2014 Cohort (Government)	93.0	93.3	93.4	93.2	92.7	91.7
Remote	89.1	89.7	89.5	89.1	89.0	87.6
First Nations	85.4	86.3	86.4	86.2	85.4	83.9
Very remote	77.1	78.7	78.2	77.3	77.3	74.5

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 14: Data table for Figure 14: National Semester 1 attendance rate by subgroup (Year 7, 2016 cohort)

Student group	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10
All Year 7 2016 cohort (all sectors)	93.1	91.3	89.5	88.4
All Year 7 2016 cohort (Government)	92.2	90	87.9	86.7
Remote	86.5	83.1	81.1	78.2
First Nations	82.8	78.4	73.7	70.9
Very remote	72.8	66.0	61.2	58.6

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Table 15: Data table for Figure 15: Gaps between Semester 1 attendance rate of priority equity groups and student population in Australian government schools prior to COVID-19 and since

Date range	Year level	First Nations	Remote	Very remote
2018–2019	Years 1–6	-7.7	-4.1	-17.2
2018–2019	Years 7–10	-13.0	-6.7	-25.0
2021–2022	Years 1–6	-9.8	-5.8	-21.0
2021–2022	Years 7–10	-15.0	-8.8	-26.4

Note: Please see data sources and notes in the body of the report under the relevant figure.

Appendix B: Evidence for interventions that support attendance

This section includes summary tables of all the interventions captured in the project literature review (Activity C) organised by MTSS tier.

Table 16: Tier 1 interventions

Category of approach	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
School-based education and support				
Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports*	Also known as School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support or Positive Behaviour for Learning. A tiered prevention framework that uses evidence-based practices to develop positive behaviours and create a safe and predictable school climate.	7	7	7
Academic interventions	Includes looping, project-based learning, charter schools and advancement via individual determination program	4	4	4
Wellbeing and health-related interventions	Includes the Positive Behaviour Skills program and 2 programs focused on Alcohol and Drug prevention (Drug Abuse Resistance Education [DARE] and Climate Schools: Alcohol and Cannabis).	9	3	2
School-based psychosocial interventions				
Transition programs	Includes the Freshman Success program and a social- and emotional-based transition program	2	2	2
Anti-bullying	Includes KiVa, a Finnish anti-bullying program	1	1	0
Social and emotional interventions	Includes a social, emotional and character development program; a transition-type intervention to middle school program; the 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect and Resolution); the Prevention in School program	6	5	2

Category of approach	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
Psychosocial interventions				
Psychosocial interventions	Includes transcendental meditation for stress reduction; universal violence prevention program for children	2	1	1
Mentoring				
Mentoring	Includes a work-based mentoring program	1	0	0
Parent programs				
Parent letter interventions*	Researchers contend that if parents are better informed about the extent of their child's absence from school and are aware of the work they are missing, it will motivate actions that support attendance.	4	3	3
Family–school partnerships	Includes implementation of guidelines to school about creating school, family and community partnerships	2	0	0
Meal provision				
Meal provision*	Includes a universal free breakfast program, universal free meal provision under Community Eligibility Provision, and Breakfast in Classroom programs	13	10	7
Health and preventative health				
Hand hygiene	Includes targeted handwashing education programs, as well as teachers encouraging students to regularly wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitisers	12	12	9
Influenza immunisations	Includes community-wide and school-based immunisation	11	8	7
School nurse programs	School nurse intervention focused predominantly on supporting the physical health of students	4	3	1

Category of approach	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
School-based health and mental health centres				
School-based health and mental health centres		2	0	0
Health education and promotion	Includes the Join the Healthy Boat health promotion program, the Helping Youth Purse Physical Activity and Exercise program, and the Healthier Options for Public Schoolchildren program	4	4	2
After-school and extracurricular activities				
After-school and extracurricular activities	Programs conducted outside the education curriculum but that involved students attending the school grounds after hours to participate, or programs that take place within the community.	4	3	2
School policy and structure				
School policy and structure	Includes: • Smaller school and class sizes • Magnet schools • Mandatory uniforms • School start times • SOS Programme • Mixed-gender classes • 4-day school week.	9	7	4
Statewide policy				
Statewide policy	Includes laws banning the use of out of school suspension as a response to truancy, a mandatory school attendance policy, a district-level change in policy to reduce out of school suspensions	4	0	0

*Categories discussed in 5.1.2 Promising approaches and interventions to support attendance.

Table 17: Tier 2 interventions

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
School-based education and support				
Academic interventions	Includes SPARK literacy program, use of ICT, academic skills, HeadStart	4	2	2
Outdoor ed	Includes Forst School model, and the Outdoor Learning Program (OLP)	2	0	0
School-based psychosocial interventions				
Enhanced school-based mental health services	Expanding school-based mental health or therapeutic services within schools	4	4	2
Multi-tiered attendance programs*	A multi-tier, multi-component attendance program involving awareness raising, incentives for attendance (Tier 1) and success mentors	3	2	1
Multi-component programs not specific to attendance	Mentoring, tutoring, counselling and support (Gear Up program)	1	1	0
Transition	Support transition during late primary and early secondary school (Rock Up program and Happy Kids program)	2	0	0
Substance abuse	Includes recovery high schools and the Project SUCCESS program	2	2	2
Family	Includes a parent consultant staffed family resource centre, a school-based family support program and the Positive Family Support program	3	2	1
Arts programs	DRUMBEAT program	1	0	0
Social skills for neurodivergent students		1	0	0

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
Psychosocial interventions				
Psychosocial interventions	Includes the School Attendance Demonstration Project (SADP), the Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC), a group diversion project, group-based habit reversal training, the Aim High program, the Mind My Mind transdiagnostic, the Attendance Matters program, the Kickstart program and family-centered care.	9	7	6
Mentoring				
Check & Connect*	A mentoring intervention	5	3	3
Other mentoring programs*	Includes an academic goal-focused brief mentoring program, the Students Taking Responsibility and Initiative through Peer Enhanced Support (STRIPES) program, the Project Arrive program, the Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program (CAMP) program, the Louisville Education and Employment Partnership (LEEP) program and the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program	8	5	3
Health and preventative health				
Community programs in Indigenous communities	Includes a community-driven preventative youth initiative	1	0	0
Treatment of chronic health problems		-	-	-
After-school and extracurricular activities				
After-school and extracurricular activities	Includes a summer youth employment program, the School-to-Jobs Program, a 5-week summer robotics program, a summer holiday transition program, and community learning centre programs	5	3	3

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
School policy and structure				
School policy and structure	Community school structure	1	0	0
Statewide policy				
Statewide policy	Statewide mandate in US	1	0	0
Other				
Other	Initiative of building local public swimming pools	1	0	0

*Categories discussed in 5.1.2 Promising approaches and interventions to support attendance.

Table 18: Tier 3 interventions

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
School-based education and support				
Alternative education	Includes the Solution-Focused Alternative School (SFAS) program, the Discipline Alternative Education Program (DAEP), the Link program, the Extended New Directions (END) program, and The Centre	5	2	1
School-based psychosocial interventions				
Enhanced school-based mental health services	Includes interventions ranging from general services to specific therapies such as motivational interviewing-based approaches	3	1	1
Attendance-specific programs*	Includes a multimodal program, a dropout prevention program, a 5-month intervention, a multi-disciplinary therapeutic and educational intervention, and a group counselling program	5	3	3

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
Pregnant/young mother students	Includes Taking Charge curriculum, and a school-based prenatal care program	3	3	3
Psychosocial interventions				
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy	Includes 3 types of CBT interventions, the @school program, multimodal CBT, group-based CBT training, the Cool Kids CBT program, the Back2School program, the Mind My Mind program, behaviour therapy	6	6 (3 studies with N<20)	4
Family therapy	Includes multi-systemic therapy, systemic family therapy	2	1	1
Dialectical Behaviour Therapy	Includes Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)	1	0	0
Other types of psychosocial interventions	Includes the Community Intervention Project, the Truancy Assessment and Service Centers Program, the Evolve Interagency Services program, Intensive Contextual Treatment, hypnosis and exposure with response prevention	7	5	5
Psychiatric medication				
Psychiatric medication	Includes imipramine plus CBT, CBT plus fluoxetine and divalproex	3	2	1
Mentoring programs				
Check & Connect	Includes Check & Connect	1	1	0
Other mentoring programs	Includes a truancy intervention pilot project	1	1	1
Parent programs				
Parent programs	Includes family group conferences	1	1	0

Category	Intervention	No. of studies in this category	No. of studies with robust methods	No. of studies with robust methods and positive effect
Health and preventative				
Health and preventative	Includes an offer of medical support in the home or the nurse's office at school, and youth health care physicians integrated into the school and public health setting	2	2	2
Legal responses				
Penalty notices and fines	Punitive responses to school non-attendance	2	0	0
Truancy and court diversion programs	Includes Project START (Stop Truancy and Recommend Treatment), a truancy court diversion program, a truancy intervention program	6	3	1
Community programs	Includes the Ability School Engagement Program (ASEP) and juvenile structured day programs	3	2	1 (Australian study)

*Categories discussed in 5.1.2 Promising approaches and interventions to support attendance.

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