

INDEPENDENT INSIGHTS JUNE 2025

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

A FLEXIBLE SOLUTION TO COMPLEX SCHOOL ATTENDANCE ISSUES

Nationally tiered attendance coding to target student support

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) presents this paper as a call to action and contribution to the national discourse on school non-attendance.

By viewing school non-attendance as a continuum and leveraging Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), we can revolutionise how we record school non-attendance and create a nuanced, national collection of non-attendance data that ensures students, families, and schools receive targeted support to increase school attendance.

ISA is calling on the Australian Government to facilitate a cross-sector school pilot to demonstrate the effectiveness and advantages of utilising MTSS as a way to identify school refusal behaviours and record non-attendance.

This article examines the complexities of school non-attendance through a school refusal lens, exploring its multifaceted causes and the resulting impact on students, families and schools. It also argues for a national cross-sectoral trial of MTSS to record non-attendance and support students who are experiencing difficulty in attending school.

The Senate Education and Employment References Committee's 2023 ***The national trend of school refusal and related matters*** report[1] notes that efforts to tackle school refusal are hindered by the absence of a nationally consistent and coordinated approach.

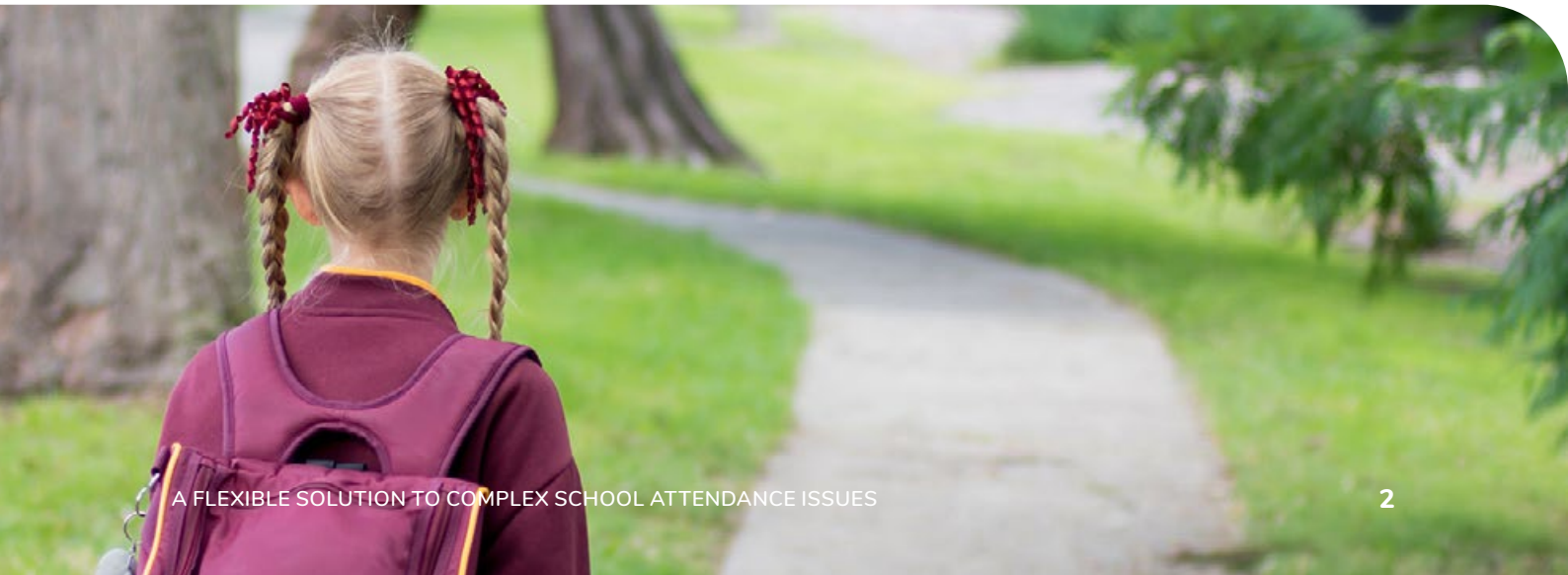
This includes the lack of an agreed national methodology for the collection, sharing and reporting of data related to school refusal, and the need for improved data and research to support a national evidence base to target effective interventions.[2]

This article discusses the importance of understanding school non-attendance as a complex continuum, proposing that a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)[3] approach could be employed to systematically categorise and collect national data on non-attendance.



ISA is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders and the wider Australian community. Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents nearly 745,000 students, 1,230 schools and a workforce of nearly 128,700 people.

1 The national trend of school refusal and related matters – Parliament of Australia
2 Chapter 4 - Addressing school refusal: the need for a national approach – Parliament of Australia
3 Introduction to a multi-tiered system of supports | Australian Education Research Organisation



ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COST

The Senate Education and Employment References Committee Report, *The national trend of school refusal and related matters* highlighted the significant economic impact of school refusal, including the costs associated with lost productivity, increased welfare dependency, and additional support services.[4]

Education has an intrinsic value and a wide range of benefits to both individuals and society, contributing to increased productivity and economic growth. There are ongoing economic and social benefits for improving school attendance and the academic achievement of students. By re-engaging students in education, improving academic outcomes and supporting transitions from school to work or further study, schools play an important role in improving the economic and social trajectories of their students and the community.[5]

Families of students who experience school anxiety and non-attendance patterns may experience increased stress. They may feel that the school is blaming them for their child not attending or feel helpless to support their child. They may blame the school, the teacher or their child's peers. This distress is heightened if school non-attendance affects their ability to work, leading to worries about financial stability.[6] Frequent calls from schools to pick up deregulated children can impact parents' wellbeing and employment, causing emotions like anger, frustration, and anxiety. Working with families should not be a blame game, but instead a signal for understanding, intervention, support and patience. This is not a quick fix.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

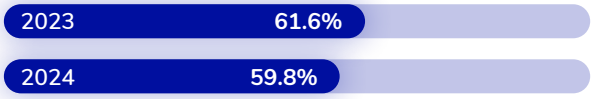
The evidence shows that a national discussion is needed if we are to improve school attendance for all students. Though there are many types of school non-attendance, the growing prevalence of school refusal is an escalating concern**.**

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's (ACARA's) latest 2024 report showed student attendance for students in Years 1-10 was 88.3%, down slightly from 88.6% in 2023. The student attendance level (the percentage of students with attendance at or above 90 per cent) was 59.8%, down from 61.6% in 2023.[7]

Year 1–10 Attendance



Student attendance level (percentage of students with attendance at or above 90 per cent)



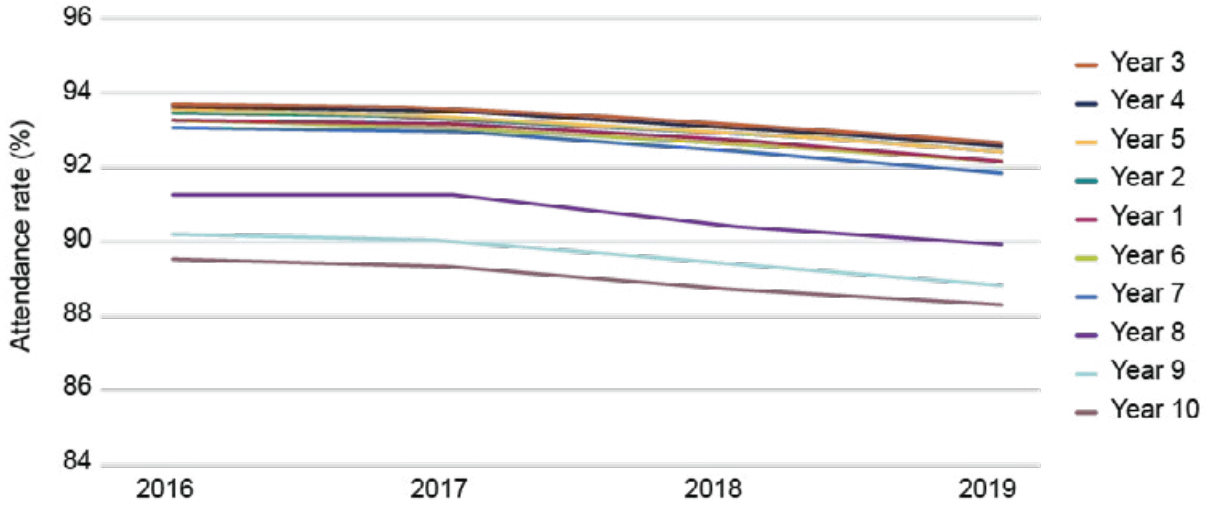
ACARA's data also showed that 2024 attendance levels:

- increased with the level of socio-educational advantage of the school
- were higher among students in major cities than in remote areas
- were lower among students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds than for non-Indigenous students.[8]

4 The national trend of school refusal and related matters
5 ISA-Special-Assistance-School-Showcase.pdf
6 School Can't Australia
7 Student attendance
8 Student attendance

The figure below is taken from AERO's school attendance report[9] using ACARA's data from 2016 to 2019, showing declining attendance rates before COVID-19, especially in years 8, 9 and 10.

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.

The Australian Human Rights Commission states that over 45,000 Australian children in Out of Home Care (OOHC) in Australia face higher rates of school absenteeism due to factors such as trauma, frequent relocations, and mental health issues. [10] A University of Tasmania Study (2023) found that children in OOHC are more likely to miss school due to the instability of their living situations and the lack of adequate support.[11]

Estimates of the prevalence of school refusal in Australian and international literature typically range from 1% to 5% of all students. However, capturing data on school refusal is challenging due to the variety of behaviours associated with it (such as somatic symptoms, lateness, partial or complete absences), along with differing definitions and methods of tracking school absences.[12]



9 School attendance: New insights from AERO | Australian Education Research Organisation

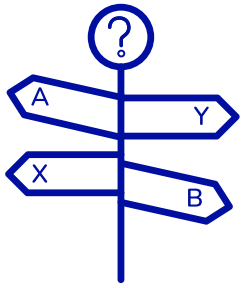
10 Statistics about Children's Rights | Australian Human Rights Commission

11 Attending school every day counts – but kids in out-of-home care are missing out | University of Tasmania

12 School refusal – Parliament of Australia

There are five National Enabling Initiatives included in the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) [13]. These initiatives represent identified national activities that necessitate government collaboration to effectively implement future reform and system-level improvements. One of these National Enabling Initiatives is focused on school attendance, its impact on learning and mechanisms to advance evidence-based approaches to addressing non-attendance, including school refusal.[14]

The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services[15] noted in February 2025 that poor attendance is related to negative student outcomes, particularly once patterns of non-attendance are established. However, attendance data alone does not provide a true picture of the drivers for non-attendance.



Chronic non-attendance has become known as 'school refusal' or 'school can't', though most educators agree these terms are not adequate and it is difficult for schools and families to pinpoint exactly when non-attendance patterns have become 'school refusal', especially without a nationally agreed definition.

HOW ARE NON-ATTENDANCE PATTERNS IDENTIFIED?

The term 'school refusal' is misleading, as it suggests a choice, whereas many students face barriers that prevent attendance. School refusal may occur when a young person is unable to attend school due to emotional distress, despite the efforts of their parents. School refusal often peaks at ages 5–6 and 10–11, usually during transitions like starting primary or high school, or moving schools.[16] For these students, the issue is not about unwillingness, but rather about their inability to attend school due to a multitude of barriers.[17]

In October 2024, ISA participated in a cross-sectoral Attendance Community of Practice meeting where it was highlighted that not having a consistent national definition of school refusal is problematic.

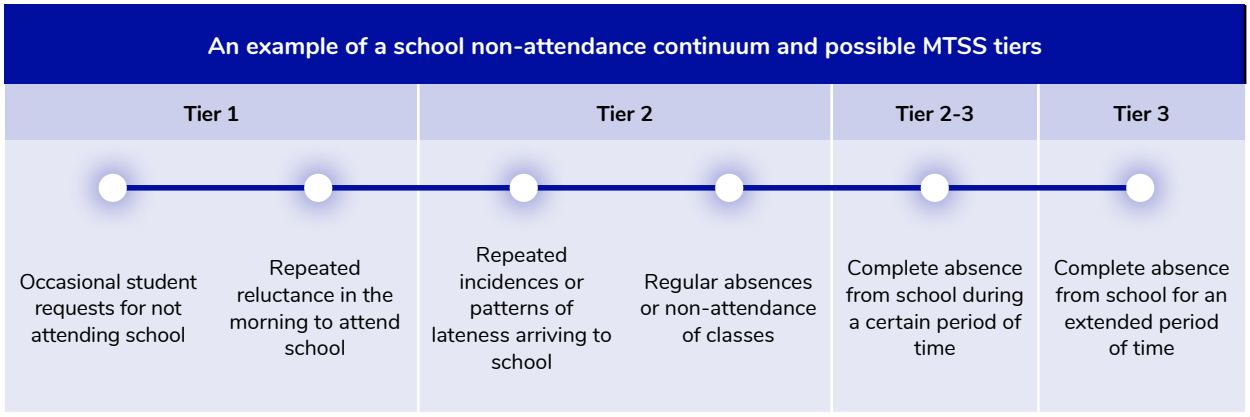
Schools need to differentiate school refusal from other forms of absenteeism, particularly for students facing trauma or anxiety-based school avoidance. Without a nationally consistent definition, and a lack of specific coding to classify school refusal, accurate data cannot be collected, and it is difficult for schools to determine when intervention strategies may be required.

Absentee recording systems can capture the level of non-attendance but are not nuanced enough to understand the reasons for it.[18]

By developing a common language and high-level principles for identifying and addressing school non-attendance that all jurisdictions and sectors can endorse, we can maintain flexibility in implementation, while accurately recording non-attendance in a consistent way.

13 Heads of Agreement (Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034) - Department of Education, Australian Government
14 The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) - Department of Education, Australian Government
15 4 School education - Report on Government Services 2025 - Productivity Commission
16 School refusal – Parliament of Australia
17 School refusal needs a national response | Pursuit by the University of Melbourne
18 Helen Nicoll – Clinical Consultant, Orygen at ISQ Parent Network workshop

We can do this by seeing school non-attendance as a spectrum or continuum[19] using Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)[20] to both respond to school non-attendance and provide schools with a consistent way of accurately recording non-attendance data. Seeing school non-attendance as a continuum and using MTSS to provide necessary interventions and support is not new; even school refusal itself as a pattern of behaviour can be seen as a continuum.



As the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) explain in their report, *Interventions to promote school attendance and address student absences,*[21] 'there is currently no consensus on a meaningful demarcation for problematic absenteeism or demarcation between tiers of support'. However, by seeing non-attendance as a continuum, it removes the need for demarcation and puts the focus back on each individual student and the support they may need.

There are different types of attendance difficulties, and strategies need to be clearly targeted for the type of non-attendance, especially for school refusal.

Families and schools often struggle to identify early drivers of school non-attendance and to create tailored support strategies for students. This process requires time, collaboration, and resources, which are often limited.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT (MTSS)

When we view school non-attendance as a continuum or a 'spectrum of school attendance challenges'[22] we can use the MTSS framework to identify when non-attendance requires a Tier 1 (whole school approach), Tier 2 (targeted individual support) or a Tier 3 (extensive individual support) response. This avoids the difficult challenge of trying to pinpoint exactly when non-attendance becomes identified as school refusal.

Although the MTSS framework is quite broad, it can be specifically adapted to support non-attendance for students experiencing school refusal behaviours.

Early identification of non-attendance patterns is essential. If left too late, non-attendance behaviours may be already entrenched, making it more difficult for a young person to return to school.

19 Ibid
20 Multi-tiered system of supports: User guide | Australian Education Research Organisation
21 AERO – Interventions to promote school attendance and address student absence
22 Toolkit-Orygen-supporting-school-attendance-guide.aspx

MTSS TIER 1 STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Tier 1 strategies typically involve whole school approaches to emphasise the importance of attendance for student learning and wellbeing, and to promote ways to improve attendance.

MTSS Tier 1 Strategies to promote school attendance	
The intent of these strategies is to promote school attendance by having students feel safe, welcomed and supported. School tracking and monitoring of attendance is vital at this level so that any patterns of lateness, skipping certain classes or increased non-attendance can be identified early.	**Some examples are:** – Wellbeing programs – Connection and belonging strategies – Anti-bullying programs and strategies – Peer support programs – Positive parent engagement – Inclusive practices and support – Support for key transition points – Learning support – Culturally safe practices – Welcoming environments – Warm, supportive staff/student relationships – Effective playground supervision – Consistent messaging on the importance of school attendance – Well-communicated behavioural expectations

TIER 2 SUPPORTS

When a pattern of non-attendance is identified, Tier 2 supports can be implemented, targeted to individual student needs. As a first step, the school and family should try and identify the drivers of non-attendance. While these may not be easy to determine, it is an important step that requires collaboration between the school, student and family to determine adjustments or strategies to support the student to attend school. It must be specifically targeted, with flexible strategies that are monitored and reviewed.

In addition to monitoring school attendance data to determine when non-attendance necessitates a Tier 2 response, it is important to collect qualitative information from students and their families. Families may report that their child exhibits excessive emotional responses on school nights and mornings, such as crying, tantrums, and heightened anxiety. Children may also display symptoms of illness that diminish as the day progresses, have threatened or engaged in self-harm, concealed themselves or locked themselves in their room, pleaded not to go to school or refused to leave the car upon arrival at school.

> “Some days we couldn’t even get out of the house. Some days we would get as far as the footpath and then she couldn’t go in … then sometimes [she’d] just run away.[23]”
>
> A parent on ABC’s Four Corner’s story on school refusal, aired April 2024

23 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-30/school-refusal-cant-what-to-do-four-corners-explained/103779990

It is important to remember that in most cases, the student is not choosing to be absent. They may not be able to attend school without extreme fear and/or anxiety and need increased support to navigate this. It is important to implement Tier 2 responses as soon as possible as school refusal may be expressed verbally and/or physically and impact a student's personal, social, academic and vocational development.[24]

MTSS Tier 2 Strategies to improve school attendance	
Once a non-attendance pattern is identified as requiring a Tier 2 response, there are a range of positive and practical strategies that a school can implement, based on individual student needs. This requires flexible school leadership, education policy and staff time. Support must also be provided for teachers, as when students routinely miss lessons it becomes increasingly difficult to help them catch up. Learning support and positive parent engagement is essential.	**Some strategically targeted examples to support individual students are:** – Offer hybrid attendance models – attending school part time and learning at home with school support – Offer short part-time VET courses that interest and engage the student – Reduce time/days at school – Review sensory environment and reduce triggers as much as possible – Create windows of tolerance for each student – Create predictability such as rituals and routines combined with flexible structures, attitudes and opportunities – Create safe spaces a student can retreat to when feeling overwhelmed – Implement brain breaks – Implement staggered assessments to reduce anxiety – Investigate possible bullying incidences or peer relationship issues.

School attendance is seen as essential for students to learn – the belief is that if they are not at school they are not learning. While this is true for most students, it is also true that some students attend school but are not engaged and not learning and may also need Tier 2 support. School attendance is an indicator of engagement and learning, but it is not the only factor.

TIER 3 RESPONSES

Tier 3 responses may be required when school non-attendance has not improved following Tier 2 support implementation, monitoring and review. At this point, the student may have withdrawn from school altogether or have experienced multiple weeks of absenteeism.

MTSS Tier 3 intensive interventions	
A Tier 3 intervention response is highly individual and often signals that external professional support is needed. If Tier 3 interventions are not successful, students might opt for home schooling, enrol in distance education or may attend an Independent special assistance school which can offer Tier 2 and 3 support. These students often require specialist support that a mainstream school is not resourced to provide. Some students may disengage from education altogether, highlighting the importance of implementing Tier 1 and 2 supports as early as possible to support students continuing their education and decreasing the number of students requiring intensive Tier 3 supports.	**Tier 3 responses involve multiple stakeholders to provide wrap-around support and may include:** – Direct targeted support 1:1 – Intensive intervention using a specialised school support team which may include teachers, school leadership, learning support staff, youth workers, school counsellors strongly engaged with student's family/care givers – External professional allied health services – Frequent monitoring and review

24 Mcshane G, Walter G, Rey JM. Characteristics of Adolescents with School Refusal. Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry. 2001;35(6):822-826.

SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS

The industrial model of schooling persists today, yet many agree it is not fit for purpose for an increasing number of young people. Considering the factors affecting school attendance and non-attendance helps us create better theories, improve intervention responses, and reduce stigma for learners and families.[25] For example, should we stop equating school attendance, e.g. being physically in the classroom, with student learning and engagement?

This may be why we have seen such an increase in Independent special assistance schools that can provide more flexible and individualised schooling, offering high levels of student support for those that have not been able to flourish in mainstream education. These schools are smaller than most, with less risk of sensory overload. Staff are trained to teach in a trauma-informed school setting, using a variety of approaches to help students feel they belong, re-engage in learning and have hope for their future.[26]

In a conversation with ISA, Tenille Abell, Therapeutic Practice Specialist at the Mackillop Institute[27] explored a range of factors that can cause school non-attendance. Tenille questioned the function of schooling today and asked, 'how can we redefine school success?'. Many schools, educators, families and students prioritise achievement in NAPLAN and ATAR results. Is it time to ask why? Standardised assessment results are not what future employers or even many universities are looking for. Do we need to restructure school so that it is more flexible to meet student needs, such as part-time enrolment or half-days? Do we need to dismiss the idea that one year of schooling equals one year of learning? Tenille posed the question, 'What if a student took 18 months to finish a year level, alleviating school stress and taking into account individual needs?' While this could be every school leader's timetabling nightmare and would require greater resources than schools can currently provide, there is clear need to support the increasing number of students that cannot cope with full time schooling.

25 Frontiers | Embracing change: from recalibration to radical overhaul for the field of school attendance
26 SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS - Independent Schools Australia
27 Home | MacKillop Institute



HESTER HORNBROOK ACADEMY – WHAT STUDENTS SAY

Hester Hornbrook Academy is an Independent special assistance school in Victoria, currently with four campuses and a fifth in development. They enrol students aged 15 to 24 who have been disengaged from mainstream education for ten weeks or more. The school's flexible approach aims to increase school attendance by reducing barriers to education for young people, providing positive education experiences. Students are supported by a strong team approach, with a youth worker in every class so there is always someone to listen to and support each student.

Hester Hornbrook's vision doesn't stop at graduation. Post-school, youth workers continue to provide graduates with support for mental health, housing and employment for seven years. This year, Hester Hornbrook spoke to students to gain their insights on how the school is supporting their needs. Some of their responses are shared below:

> "I can have whatever makes me comfortable here. There is no pressure on what work you need to do. There is no time limit. You don't have to rush out of here in a year, and even if you are still 25, they won't just kick you out. They will help form a plan to help you graduate, and they help you with pathways as well. The supportive pathway is good because I found leaving school really scary, and there was never any support after leaving school, but here they continue to check in with the students and I think that is incredible. They will continue to check in and make sure your life is not falling apart."



When students are given a chance to talk about their school, they express feeling a strong sense of support and engagement in their learning environment. They appreciate the flexibility and understanding provided by their teachers, allowing them to learn at their own pace without feeling judged or pressured. The supportive atmosphere, including the presence of youth workers and the ability to access support when needed, contributes significantly to their positive experience.

> "I love coming because I get support. If I am having a bad day, it is safe. This is a safe place. If I am having a bad day I can come here and cry or get upset or use my sensory items or whatever I need to do to regulate myself, and that is ok. It is completely safe."

Hester Hornbrook students highlight the importance of the school's inclusive and healing oriented approach[28]. They feel safe and supported, knowing that their mental health and personal challenges are understood and respected. The absence of stigma around mental health issues and the emphasis on creating a positive and non-judgmental environment are crucial aspects of their educational experience.

Additionally, the students value the various activities and events organised by the school, such as community dinners, excursions, and clubs. These activities not only provide opportunities for social interaction and community building but also enhance their overall educational experience. The supportive and interactive nature of these events helps students feel more connected and engaged with their peers and the school community.

> "I don't want to leave, but I know I have to leave, eventually. This school literally saved me. I don't think I would be here today without this school. Without the support I received, I wouldn't be here."

DRIVERS OF NON-ATTENDANCE ARE OFTEN MULTI-FACETED AND COMPLEX

Current ideas and methods represent our best intentions for learners, but they may be out of touch with our changing world. They may be based on outdated assumptions or practices; insufficiently driven by data; not fully aligned with the current needs of learners, families, and communities because they are insufficiently flexible; overly focused on cure relative to prevention; or not supported by available research.[29]

As indicated by Hester Hornbrook students and above quote from Heyne et al, preventative factors and flexible solutions to increase school non-attendance should be examined and implemented as much as possible. There are multiple reasons for student non-attendance and many national and international research papers which describe non-attendance factors in detail.

A description of a range of factors for non-attendance can be found in AERO's rapid literature review, Barriers to school attendance and reasons for student absence. [30]

When a student has experienced prolonged school non-attendance, the distress that may be caused at the thought of returning to school, such as peer challenges, increased school workload expectations and school routine, may seem insurmountable. While factors such as home or school stress may not solely cause non-attendance, they can certainly contribute. Each student's non-attendance pattern is unique, often involving a stress trigger that elicits an intense emotional response; pre-existing anxiety or depression may be amplified when combined with these stressors.

28 The HOPE Model
29 Frontiers | Embracing change: from recalibration to radical overhaul for the field of school attendance
30 AERO – Barriers to school attendance and reasons for student absence



IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Students experiencing social anxiety may have an intense fear of social interactions and/or performance situations. They can exhibit avoidance behaviours, including refusing to attend school or particular classes, resulting in academic difficulties, social isolation, and increased family distress or even conflict. Research indicates that social anxiety is a common underlying cause of school refusal, as students may fear negative evaluation from peers and teachers, leading to chronic absenteeism. Addressing social anxiety through early intervention and support is crucial to prevent long-term negative outcomes for affected students.[31]

> “There are many strategies that can be tried to support students who are finding it difficult to come to school, but at the end of the day, the one factor that is absolutely essential is kindness. When we act with kindness and compassion, when we approach the child and family with understanding and patience, we find success. That moment when a child can return to school is a victory built on kindness.”
>
> Nerrida Johnson, Principal
> Castlemaine Steiner School,
> rural Victoria

Experts say school refusal can impact any student, but certain groups are more at risk and neurodivergent students are increasingly being recognised as having greater risk factors for school refusal.[32] Lisa McKay-Brown, an education researcher at the University of Melbourne said students exhibiting school refusal ‘...may be autistic, they may have learning difficulties or ADHD. They may have anxiety or some other mood disorder’.[33] In a qualitative study of several autistic young people attending mainstream educational settings, they described themselves as being socially, emotionally and physically isolated from peers, with some experiencing loneliness and bullying. Participants described feeling unsupported and misunderstood by teachers within a social and sensory environment that did not meet their needs. Some mentioned feeling apprehensive before and during school and the negative impact their experiences in mainstream education had on their wellbeing.[34] Students with sensory processing difficulties may also experience great anxiety resulting in school distress and increased non-attendance behaviours.

Large schools can overwhelm some students with sensory overload, triggering a fight-or-flight response. Students may use survival behaviours such as verbal or physical abuse and develop escalated behaviours when unable to cope with a classroom or school environment. This may inevitably result in school suspension, expulsion or exclusion if the triggers are not identified and appropriate supports are not provided.

When Tenille Abell was asked about school refusal, she replied, ‘Why go to a place where you don’t feel you belong?’. She affirmed that school attendance does not mean you are learning. When students exhibit escalated behaviours, it disrupts the learning environment for other students and hinders the teacher’s ability to teach effectively.

31 A systematic review of school refusal | Current Psychology

32 Types and correlates of school non-attendance in students with autism spectrum disorders - Vasiliki Totsika, Richard P Hastings, Yoko Dutton, Alison Worsley, Glenn Melvin, Kylie Gray, Bruce Tonge, David Heyne, 2020

33 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-30/school-refusal-cant-what-to-do-four-corners-explained/103779990

34 ‘I felt closed in and like I couldn’t breathe’: A qualitative study exploring the mainstream educational experiences of autistic young people - Craig Goodall, 2018

IMPACT ON SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND TEACHERS

Increasingly, teachers and school leaders are implementing strategies out of scope of their professional expertise and training. Educators are not trained social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, or police. Without increased wellbeing and mental health expertise in schools, it is necessary to consider further strategies which schools can proactively implement to address non-attendance issues relating to school refusal.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)[35] focusses on eliminating barriers through initial designs that consider the needs of diverse people, rather than overcoming barriers later through individual adaptation. Applying UDL principles can decrease student stress by reducing sensory overload and improving flexibility to meet a wider range of student needs. However, UDL implementation often requires a proactive response rather than reactive, increased funding, time, expertise and innovative thinking.

It also raises the question as to what extent schools can provide Tier 3 interventions if appropriate support or adaptive environments are not available? Tier 3 strategies typically need professional advice, consultation, and external guidance when school non-attendance becomes critical and needs specialised support.

Many schools find it increasingly difficult to access external advice for Tier 2 or 3 interventions to address school non-attendance. As every school principal knows, waiting lists for allied health assessments are long. Dr Matt O'Connor, Clinical Psychologist[36] stated at the March 2025 Independent Schools Queensland Parent Network workshop on school refusal, 'identifying interventions is the most complex and effortful phase for a school to manage'. Yet we keep expecting school leaders, teachers, students and families to cope.



35 Universal design for learning (UDL) | Principles of inclusionED
36 Home | ConnectEd Counselling and Consultancy

2023 SENATE INQUIRY

The Senate Education and Employment References Committee released its ***The national trend of school refusal and related matters*** report in August 2023, making 14 recommendations to the federal, state and territory governments.[37] The Australian Federal Government responded 11 April 2024, supporting in principle two key recommendations, with the remaining 12 being noted.[38]

Recommendations 4, 5 and 6 are of particular relevance to this article.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The committee recommended that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector identify opportunities for earlier identification of students at risk of school withdrawal, particularly at key school transition points. This may include, but should not be limited to, analysis of school absence data and the use of screening tools.

This article suggests that school non-attendance data can be collected by coding absences as Tier 1, 2 or 3. If a Tier 1 absence, then the usual school non-attendance codes can apply such as family reasons, medical reason, unexplained, suspension etc. When monitoring their attendance data, when a school identifies a pattern of lateness or school non-attendance, they can register the student's absence as a Tier 2 absence, triggering a school-based investigation and implementation of Tier 2 strategies to support the student, in collaboration with the teacher/s, school support team, student and family.

If these strategies do not improve school attendance within the agreed-upon time frame for each individual student, the situation is collaboratively reviewed and if it is determined that a Tier 3 response is required, then a Tier 3 code for absenteeism can be introduced.

This designation alerts relevant staff that the student is requiring significant support and necessitates immediate wrap-around support, which may include external professional advice and support as available.

By using this type of absentee coding, instead of trying to determine when school non-attendance becomes 'school refusal' or without having to find a national definition or better term for increased patterns of school non-attendance, schools and families are relieved of the challenge of determining when a student is considered to be 'school refusing' and can instead focus on the identified tiered level of support as individually appropriate for each student.

By recording and coding non-attendance data according to the identified tiered support, governments can collect and identify more nuanced levels of non-attendance data and provide targeted support to schools with increased Tier 2 and 3 absentee data.

37 https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Report
38 Aus Gov Response - The national trend of school refusal and related matters.pdf



RECOMMENDATION 5

The committee recommends that state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery, including by:

- identifying ways to enhance flexibility in mainstream school settings for children going through school refusal;
- facilitating easier access to distance education and home schooling for students experiencing school refusal; and
- facilitating the provision of more alternative and specialist school settings that cater for students experiencing school refusal.

What do we do when whole school approaches, being proactive, responsive and providing targeted support is not enough? Can we rethink mainstream schooling, or do we keep trying to fit all students into the same schooling model?

Some Independent schools have long recognised the need for specialised supportive school environments for students where they have not been able to thrive in a mainstream school setting. Growth in student enrolments in Independent special assistance schools over the eight years between 2016 and 2024 was an extraordinary 276 per cent (13,919 students), compared to a 23 per cent enrolment growth in mainstream Independent schools.

Growth in student enrolment between 2016 and 2024

Mainstream Independent schools

23%

Independent special assistance schools

276%

During this eight-year period, the highest growth rate of Independent special assistance schools was 25 per cent between 2016 and 2017. These growth rates demonstrate the great need for young people to have more flexible schooling opportunities to continue their education. Some of the strategies used in Independent special assistance schools[39] can be implemented in current mainstream settings, and some cannot, due to their specialised nature and environment.

Do we keep growing special assistance schools or do we change mainstream settings to fit the student? Work has started in this area with many schools adapting their environments to increase students' wellbeing and sense of belonging, and to reduce triggers and stressors. More action is needed, but limited funding for school improvements, student support, and collaboration between education and health sectors creates a barrier to progress.

39 ISA-Special-Assistance-School-Showcase.pdf

RECOMMENDATION 6

Develop a national action plan on school refusal, including a consistent definition and approach.

Although individualised, a national approach could be for school absentee data to be recorded as Tier 1, 2 or 3 and support provided as soon as patterns emerge. If all schools reported non-attendance in this way, we could collect consistent national attendance data that clearly showed the level and impact of non-attendance, allowing for the identification of targeted support for schools.

CONCLUSION

Independent Schools Australia believes that the Australian Government can take action by initiating a cross-sectoral pilot program in schools currently implementing MTSS for recording non-attendance. By treating school non-attendance as a continuum and utilising MTSS, we can transform the recording of school non-attendance that is more nuanced, creating a national dataset that will provide targeted support to students, families, and schools to improve school attendance.

The need for flexibility and innovation in education has never been more urgent. The extraordinary growth of Independent special assistance schools underscores the importance of providing tailored support to students who struggle in mainstream settings. However, to truly cater to the diverse needs of all students, a transformative approach is required that involves flexibility, adapting existing school environments and fostering greater collaboration between sectors to find new solutions that prioritise student well-being and engagement and increase school attendance.

An inclusive education system that values and supports every learner recognises that one size does not fit all. Building more flexibility into the traditional school model requires continued innovation, investment and collaboration. Not every school can be or should be the same, and to find the best fit for their students, each school needs the resources, time and support to find the balance between attendance requirements, student academic results and wellbeing.

These structural changes cannot be implemented overnight. However, we can change the focus from narrow definitions and one size fits all approaches, to definitional flexibility which provides governments with more nuanced national attendance data that can influence policy implementation and provide strategic targeted support to those students and schools who need it the most.

A national discourse on school refusal and factors contributing to non-attendance is crucial. The time to act is now, and with coordinated efforts, we can make a significant impact on the lives of countless young people.

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- **Dr Rebecca English** – Queensland University of Technology, Senior Lecturer Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
- **Lisa McKay-Brown** – University of Melbourne - Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, Faculty of Education
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- **Amanda Watt** - Executive Director - Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network
- **Dr Matt O'Connor** – Clinical Psychologist - ConnectEd
- **Helen Nicoll** – Clinical Consultant – Orygen Centre for Youth Mental Health
- **Sally Lasslett**, School Principal - Hester Hornbrook Academy
- **Alyssa McNeilly** – Head of Research and Innovation - Hester Hornbrook Academy
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