

Schools' Guide to Attendance

Key elements of a whole-school approach to attendance

1. Attendance is a shared priority, with documented processes and clear roles and responsibilities for all staff
2. Absences are accurately recorded, and data is regularly monitored to identify students requiring additional support
3. Clear escalation processes are in place, and additional support is provided for students who need it
4. All students feel welcome, included and engaged at school
5. Strong relationships with parents and carers are supported by regular communication and engagement

Introduction

The **Schools' Guide to Attendance** describes practical and universal actions that all schools can take to support the high attendance of every student.

The Guide builds on existing good practices in schools, drawing on examples from Victoria and broader international research.

The Guide identifies five key elements that support high attendance. Each element has sections describing:

- Why is this important?
- **Headline actions** – the most important actions for schools to take
- **Putting into practice** – the roles and responsibilities of the school staff
- **Examples** – resources, case studies and tools that schools can use.

This Guide is not intended to be prescriptive; rather, it outlines key elements that can be applied in various ways in different schools depending on their size and current attendance rates.

Schools are not working alone in this effort. Senior Education Improvement Leaders (SEILs) and Area teams will work with school leaders to identify and strengthen attendance improvement strategies. Principal Network communities of practice allow schools to share resources, successes, and challenges and establish consistent approaches. Area teams will continue to provide specialised support for at-risk students and priority cohorts such as Koorie students, students in out-of-home care, and students with disability.

Element 1: Attendance is a shared priority, with documented processes and clear roles and responsibilities for all staff

Why is this important?

- Regular attendance is essential to support every child's learning and wellbeing. Absences from school may pose a potential risk to a child's safety.
- An effective whole school approach to improving attendance requires commitment from every member of the school community.
- School leadership is essential to setting high expectations for attendance.
- All staff have important roles and responsibilities in creating an engaging and inclusive environment and supporting students to attend school every day.
- Research shows that school communities that focus on continuous improvement within a tiered system of support experience the most significant improvement in student attendance.

Headline actions

- Review and update the school's [Attendance Policy](#) to describe the school community's attendance expectations, including actions that will be taken when attendance expectations are not met.
- Document staff roles and responsibilities for recording and monitoring attendance, following up on student absences and escalating attendance concerns.
- Define and communicate the roles that all staff play in creating an environment where all students feel valued and motivated to come to school.

Putting into practice

Role of the School Improvement Team (SIT) (or other nominated staff)

- Establish and update the school Attendance Policy.
- Document staff roles and responsibilities for supporting attendance, including escalation processes for addressing absence concerns.
- Lead the implementation and monitoring of Annual Implementation Plan actions related to attendance and engagement.
- Create opportunities for staff and students to work together to improve attendance. Engage students to help analyse attendance data and student feedback and identify opportunities for change (see Element 4).

Role of School Leadership

- Set a clear vision for attendance in the school Attendance Policy, reinforcing:
 - high attendance expectations for all students
 - a core objective of supporting every child's learning and wellbeing so they can thrive.

- Ensure this vision is communicated to, and understood by, staff, students, and families.
- Assign key roles and empower all staff to take responsibility for attendance.
- Consider including attendance as a priority in the [School Strategic Plan](#) (SSP) / [Annual Implementation Plan](#) (AIP) and discuss it regularly at SIT meetings. AIP actions could include:
 - *Develop a new school attendance policy ensuring that staff, students, and families are involved in the process*
 - *Implement a whole school Action Plan detailing roles and responsibilities related to attendance for all staff.*
- Participate in network meetings to share your school's practices for improving attendance. Participating in network communities of practice allows for sharing resources, success and challenges and supports consistent practices between schools.
- Engage all staff in discussions about attendance and offer professional development in areas such as trauma-informed practice and mental health support to develop an understanding of the causes of poor attendance and available support for students and the appropriate referral pathways.

Supporting Resources

- [Framework for Improving Student Outcomes \(FISO 2.0\)](#)
- [Mental health and wellbeing toolkit](#)
- [School Mental Health Menu](#)
- Example: Documented Roles and Responsibilities table (forthcoming)
- Example of attendance Key Improvement Strategy (forthcoming)

Element 2: Absences are accurately recorded, and data is regularly monitored to identify students requiring additional support

Why is this important?

- Accurately recording and regularly monitoring attendance helps identify emerging patterns of irregular attendance early so that schools can intervene before patterns become entrenched.
- Monitoring attendance enables staff to understand and agree on attendance objectives and to target support to specific cohorts and individuals.

Headline actions

- Record student attendance twice per day in primary schools and every class in secondary schools.
- Ensure attendance and absence codes are accurately recorded, and reasons for absence are recorded in writing.
- Monitor and identify students with high absences through the [Panorama](#) Absence Dashboard, [Staying in Education Dashboard](#) (secondary school only) and the [Student View Dashboard](#).
- Discuss attendance data with all staff to identify trends and individual students at risk of chronic absence and look at implementing tier 1 and 2 supports.

Putting into practice

There is no set point at which absence becomes a concern; however, the following categories can help to identify patterns of absence:

- Regular attendees: miss less than 10 days a year (less than 5% absence)
- Risk of chronic absence: miss between 10 and 19 days a year (5-10% absence)
- Chronically absent: miss 20+ days (10%+ absence; average 1 day per fortnight)

Early in the year, the percentages can indicate an emergent problem and signal where action is required before the chronic absence threshold is met.

Role of Teachers

- Record student attendance twice per day in primary schools and every class in secondary schools.

Role of Administrative Staff (or other nominated staff)

- Ensure attendance and absence codes are accurately recorded, using correct absence coding as explained in the [Attendance and absence recording guide](#), and reasons for absence are recorded in writing.
- Use the notes function in CASES21/third-party software to record the reasons for absence and any follow-up provided to the family and student.
- Upload attendance data to CASES21 daily.

- Notify a parent/carer in writing if the school considers they have not given a reasonable explanation for the absence.

Role of the School Improvement Team (or other nominated staff)

- Monitor student attendance at a whole-school, cohort and individual level.
- Identify vulnerable students who require additional monitoring. Absences may be more of a concern when considering other vulnerabilities and the student's learning progress. Earlier absence thresholds may indicate a need for support if the student is already at greater risk of disengaging.
- Build staff awareness on how to manage students [absent for cultural reasons](#) (such as Sorry Business)
- Create innovative ways to share overall school attendance and student-level data with wider teaching staff, for example, creating data walls in the staff room.
- Secondary school teams should facilitate Year 6/7 transition meetings with feeder primary schools to share attendance and engagement information and identify students requiring monitoring and support.

Role of School Leadership

- Ensure all staff use the same codes to report attendance and absences and provide CASES21/third-party software training for all responsible staff.
- Ensure all regular leadership meetings include a review of attendance data by year level, key cohorts (such as Koorie students, students with disability or students in out-of-home care) and at the individual student level.
- Consider multiple sources of data to establish and monitor Key Improvement Strategies (KIS), for example, attendance data, wellbeing information and student connectedness measures from the Attitudes to School Survey (AtoSS).
- Review data at a network level and share strategies for improvement, resources and support services being accessed and areas for further work.

Supporting Resources

- [Panorama](#)
- [Attendance and absence recording guide](#)
- [CASES21 Administration User Guide – Attendance \(PDF\)](#)
- [CASES21 Portal](#)

Element 3: Clear escalation processes are in place, and additional support is provided for students who require it

Why is this important?

- A clear escalation process ensures that student absences are promptly followed up so that schools meet their 'duty of care' obligations to keep children safe.
- Intervening earlier to understand barriers and implement appropriate support measures can prevent students from continuing on a pathway to chronic absence or disengagement.

Headline actions

- Document staff responsibilities and processes for escalation of attendance issues, including for unknown or frequent absences or where families do not engage.
- Establish a Student Support Group (SSG) for priority cohorts and all students showing signs of disengagement and coordinate a plan to meet the student's needs.

Putting into practice

Role of the Teacher

- Identify early warning signs of disengagement in students, which may include frequent lateness, leaving school early, missing lessons, siblings with poor attendance, unresolved issues with staff or other students, difficulties at times of transition, social or emotional issues and chronic health issues of the student and/or their family members.
- Escalate to Middle Leaders/Wellbeing Teams if:
 - parents/carers do not engage in discussions about students' attendance and absences
 - student absence concerns continue, or the student has five or more days of unexplained absence

Role of Middle Leadership/Wellbeing Teams (or other nominated staff)

- Meet with parents/carers to discuss reasons for their child's absences and agree on strategies to get the student to school. Encourage parents to seek support and communicate regularly with teachers and other school staff.
- Ensure that the trusted adult is kept informed of issues relating to the student and is involved as a student advocate if the student asks.
- Notify the School Leadership team if parents and carers refuse to engage, the student's whereabouts are unknown, or if the student has 5+ days of unexplained absence.
- Use Panorama to gather evidence/data that the student has been absent for five-plus school days and the absences remain unexplained or unapproved. In gaining a complete picture of the student, look at a range of student data, including learning outcomes.
- Ensure every disengaged student is identified, contacted, and supported to re-engage. This should be a particular focus following the return from the Term holidays and the start of a new school year

For students showing signs of disengagement (e.g., five plus days of unexplained absences or at risk of chronic absence)

- Arrange a minimum of two [Student Support Group \(SSG\)](#) meetings per term with the student, their parent/carer, the trusted adult, and relevant teaching or other staff (for example, Education Support staff, youth worker, Koorie Engagement Support Officer, or community organisation support staff).
- Develop an appropriate support plan(s); this may include:
 - Attendance Improvement Plan [Primary](#) / [Secondary](#)
 - [Absence Learning Plan](#)
 - [Individual Education Plan](#) (IEP)
 - [Behaviour Support Plan](#) (BSP)
 - [Return to School Plan](#)
- SSGs must also be established for students in out-of-home care, students involved with youth justice and students supported by the [Program for Students with Disability](#) or [Disability Inclusion](#). An SSG is strongly encouraged for any student with diverse learning needs.
- SSG members should meet regularly to continue to monitor, amend, and document all plans and strategies.

Other things to consider

- SSGs are most effective when a coordinated team-based approach brings together the student, their family and a range of staff involved with the student, including their trusted adult. Together the SSG must coordinate a plan to meet the student's needs and support them to continue to engage or re-engage in education and learning.
- A [team around the learner \(TAL\)](#) approach provides a framework for this team-based approach to support students. It can help establish effective SSG processes and implement coordinated plans that focus on the student's needs.
- In developing strategies for each student, SSGs should:
 - create time and space for the student to voice their perspective on their needs
 - prioritise classroom/school adjustments or measures to support attendance such as time-out cards, fidget spinners to manage anxiety, headphones to block out noise, reduced learning/assessment tasks, or resources to support learning such as talk to text
 - consider support services that can assist the student, such as the school's wellbeing team, [Mental health practitioner](#), [Student Support Services \(SSS\) referral](#) or secondary consultation (for example, GP in school or family's GP), external service providers such as Headspace, Orange Door, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) / Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS) complete an [Educational Needs Assessment](#) for students in [out-of-home care](#)
- Wellbeing teams and staff coordinating SSGs may wish to meet with their Health Wellbeing Key Contact (HWKC) to discuss referrals to other services or other support that may be available.
- Notify Child Protection, where welfare concerns are present; refer to [Four Critical Actions](#) for guidance
- Contact your local police station and request a Police Welfare check if you have not been able to confirm the student's whereabouts and:
 - there has been no response to phone calls, emails, or letters
 - the school has spoken with emergency contacts
 - the school has not sighted the student or has concerns for their wellbeing.

Role of School Leadership

- Contact parents/carers who have not engaged with other school staff and arrange to meet with them to discuss concerns and avenues of support.
- Send [staged response school attendance letters](#) to parents/carers who have not engaged with Wellbeing staff and school leaders.
- If the Principal feels that they have exhausted strategies for addressing absences, consult with the Health Wellbeing Key Contact or the Area Health Wellbeing Support Officer (HWSO)/Senior Wellbeing Engagement Officer (SWEO) to discuss the individual student and the next steps.
- If a student's [whereabouts are unknown](#), despite efforts made by the school to locate them, complete the whereabouts unknown form and contact the Area office HWSO or SWEO.
- Complete an Attendance [referral](#) to the Area office for support with a School Attendance Notice if advised by the Area's HWSO/SWEO.
- When a principal makes a referral to a School Attendance Officer, they must confirm:
 - that the absences have been repeated
 - what measures to improve attendance have been tried or are unsuitable.
 - that no reasonable excuse has been provided.

Supporting Resources

- [Attendance policy](#)
- [Child and Family Violence Information Sharing Schemes](#)
- [PROTECT: Responding to other concerns about the wellbeing of a child](#)
- [Navigator](#)
- [Youth Justice – Additional Support for Young People policy](#)
- [Students with a Disability](#)
- [Supporting Students in Out of Home Care](#)
- [Headspace Counselling](#)
- Example: completed School Attendance Officer Referral form (forthcoming)
- Example: school escalation process diagram (forthcoming)
- [Map of key mental health and wellbeing supports](#)

Element 4: All students feel welcome, included and engaged at school

Why is this important?

- Students are more likely to come to school and be more engaged in their learning if there is an environment of equity and inclusion, where all students feel valued and respected.
- There is strong evidence that students become more engaged in school when they have opportunities to exercise agency in their learning and contribute to their school community.
- Teachers play an important role in motivating students to attend by providing an engaging learning environment and establishing strong relationships with their students.
- Respectful relationships with trusted adults who show empathy, encouragement, and genuine care are central to building a student's positive self-image and confidence. Research shows such relationships can significantly impact attendance, learning and wellbeing outcomes.

Headline actions

- Recognise and support the role that every staff member plays in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment.
- Create opportunities to regularly check in with students around their attendance and engagement and involve them in developing the school's attendance expectations and policies.
- Ensure every student has at least one trusted adult who regularly engages with them, and there is a shared understanding of their role.
- Acknowledge and celebrate students with high levels or improving rates of attendance

Putting into practice

Role of Teachers

- Build respectful relationships with students to secure their trust and engagement.
- Treat students with dignity, establish relationships based on mutual respect and maintain appropriate boundaries.
- Engage students in their learning and development.
- Contribute to the development and consistent delivery of the school's teaching and learning program.
- Create safe, supportive learning environments where all students experience success through active participation and engagement in purposeful learning. This includes creating a learning environment that respects and values Koorie cultures and identities.

Role of Middle Leaders/Wellbeing Team (or other nominated staff)

- Identify students who require a trusted adult in addition to their classroom/homeroom teacher and support the student to establish this relationship.
- Ensure that the trusted adult has the capacity and skills to support the student. They should be aware of mental health, wellbeing and learning resources as well as policies and procedures regarding student safety and confidentiality.
- Ensure the trusted adult is kept informed of issues relating to the student and involved as a student advocate when the student requests.

Role of School Leadership

- Actively support and celebrate diversity and inclusion to encourage respectful and inclusive attitudes, behaviours and practices. This includes leading efforts to strengthen cultural awareness and safety and addressing any risks or instances of discrimination or racism.
- Develop class and home group structures and environments that foster increased connectedness with teachers and peers.
- Lead the development of a culture where teachers and students work together, and students' views, priorities and feedback are heard and responded to by leaders, drawing on resources like [Amplify](#).
- Create opportunities to regularly check in with students on their attendance and engagement (for example, a pulse check to see how students are feeling, conversations in homerooms/class, or encouraging participation in the Attitudes to School Survey).
- Establish rewards, incentives, and acknowledgement of students with improved attendance
- Establish ways to ensure students can influence school strategies for improving attendance and engagement. This could include the Student Representative Council (SRC) or regular meetings between student leaders and the School Improvement Team (SIT).

Who should be the trusted adult?

- For students who regularly attend and engage with peers and their learning – the trusted adult will typically be their classroom or homeroom teacher or another adult with whom they have a pre-existing relationship (may include education support staff or specialist teacher).
- Students with additional support needs (such as low attendance, behavioural concerns, health concerns, disability, multiple school enrolments or are new to the school) may require more support to identify and actively engage with a trusted adult.
- For students in out-of-home care or with youth justice involvement, schools are required to appoint a [Learning Mentor](#) who may fulfil the role of a trusted adult.
- Work with the student to identify a trusted adult at school, particularly for students with additional support needs.

Role of the trusted adult

- Listen to the student, understand their challenges and aspirations, and provide non-judgmental support.
- Show empathy and genuine care, respect and value the student's culture and identity and work with the student to build their positive self-image.
- Check in with the student to monitor their well-being and help them to feel safe, supported, and connected to school and learning.
- Be involved as a student advocate in Student Support Group meetings (if relevant) and support the student to contribute to these discussions and input into their Individual Education Plan / Attendance Improvement Plan / Return to school plan (see Element 3).

Supporting Resources

- [School-Wide Positive Behaviour](#)
- [Respectful Relationships](#)
- [Cultural Inclusion](#)
- [Amplify](#)
- [Inclusive Student Voice Toolkit](#)
- [Schools - culturally safe environments guidance](#)
- [Schools - child and student empowerment guidance](#)

Element 5: Strong relationships with parents and carers supported by communication and engagement

Why is this important?

- Building an inclusive school culture and respectful relationships with parents and carers will help them feel like valued members of the school community.
- Recognising that some parents and carers may have had negative experiences of education themselves, strong relationships can help them trust that their children are welcome and safe.
- It is important to communicate with parents and carers regularly and consistently about attendance as parents/carers may underestimate the number of absences their child has had over a school year and the cumulative impact of these absences.

Headline actions

- Communicate attendance expectations to the school community clearly and regularly.
- Ensure all absences are followed up as soon as practicable on the same day.
- Engage students and parents/carers as partners.

Putting into practice

Role of Teachers

- Encourage parents/carers to use the school portal (for example, COMPASS or Sentral) to monitor their child's attendance, notify the school of absences, access student timetable, reports, and school newsletters and track their child's success at school.
- Contact parents/carers to discuss the reasons and context for student absences. Consider each student and family's circumstances. Involve interpreters/multi-cultural aides as required.
- Tell parents/carers about the student's successes and positive moments. Invite parents/carers to school assemblies and awards nights, exhibitions, or celebrations of learning once a term.
- When absences are of concern due to their nature or frequency (even for parent-approved absences), involve the parents/carers and the student in developing strategies to improve attendance.
- Actively acknowledge and welcome back students who have been absent.

Role of Administrative Staff (or other nominated staff)

- Take a lead role in creating a welcoming environment for parents/carers and students that reinforces that all students and parents/carers are valued community members.
- Contact the parents/carers as soon as practicable on the same day of the absence and record all attempts to make contact. Follow-up via phone is recommended to build a stronger relationship with the family.
- Notify parents/carers in writing if the school has been unsuccessful in phone contact and considers that a reasonable reason for the absence has not been provided.
- Document parent's/carers communication preferences on CASES21/third-party software so all staff are aware.

Role of Trusted Adult (see element 4 for further detail)

- Trusted adults may be assigned responsibility for calling a student or their parents/carers when the student is absent to understand the reasons for the absence and offer any support required.
- To facilitate communication, attend meetings (where possible) with the parents/carers and the student to build a relationship with the family.

Role of the School Improvement Team (or other nominated staff)

- Involve parents/carers in developing the school Attendance Policy. This could be through informal discussions, involvement of existing committees, surveys, focus groups, face-to-face small group discussions, online surveys/emails, social media etc.
- Coordinate and promote relevant community resources and services for families, students, and the school (for example, flyers in the admin area and local government youth council programs mentioned in the school newsletter).

Role of School Leadership

- Encourage school staff to contact parents to celebrate the student's successes and positive moments, not just when there is an issue or concern.
- Engage parents/carers in the school community through information nights, newsletters/website/social media/parent communication channels, exhibitions and face-to-face conversations.
- Make communications and school events inclusive and reflective of the characteristics of your school community.
- Help parents/carers fully participate in meetings by ensuring they can access school facilities and that appropriate accessibility measures are in place (for example, wheelchair accessibility, interpreters).
- Set up regular opportunities for parents/carers to connect with other families, the school and available school staff. For example, informal meetups/coffee catchups.
- Provide volunteer opportunities to enable parents/carers and students to contribute to the school environment – for example, working bees and reading helpers.
- Connect with community organisations, cultural groups, and the allied health workforces in the local community to address barriers to attendance.

Supporting Resources

- [Family engagement in learning resource](#)
- [Schools - family engagement guidance](#)
- [Effective communication with parents and carers \(education.vic.gov.au\)](http://education.vic.gov.au)
- Example of family engagement to support attendance Key Improvement Strategy (forthcoming)