Attendance matters
in South Australian preschools and schools

Attendance for learning, success and wellbeing 2018 to 2021
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Foreword

Every child and young person has a right to an education that develops their talent and ability to reach their fullest potential.

Education is the pathway for children and young people to begin their contribution to civic life. It is the means by which we develop people who are able to participate successfully in our community.

We all have a role to ensure that children and young people get the best education available, and this starts with ensuring that children attend school all day, every school day.

Attendance at preschool lays the foundation for children’s friendships with peers and relationships with adults. It is the vehicle for children to connect with learning and establishes routines that will become lifelong behaviours.

This document outlines strategies to improve attendance, which in turn supports our commitment to higher standards of learning, achievement, health, wellbeing and safety for South Australian children.

It sets out how our educators will work across the education system to support children’s attendance and engagement at school. This strategy also recognises parents and families as our key partners in creating high expectations for student outcomes.

Every child and young person deserves to attend school feeling happy, cared for and ready to learn.

Making attendance everyone’s business means we can all contribute to ensure our children and young people have access to the quality education they deserve.

John Gardner
Minister for Education

‘By ensuring our children are in school, we will see stronger school communities and better educated children.’
We support positive learning and wellbeing for all South Australian children and young people.

Maintaining a priority focus on student attendance and engagement recognises that educational success is central to the lifelong achievement, wellbeing and success of our young people.

This attendance approach builds on the dedicated work done by staff in preschools and schools every day to involve, inform and support their communities to respond to local needs.

Their strong commitment to children and young people underpins our expectations for high attendance and achievement. We will meet these expectations by working in partnership with families and preschool and school communities.

To foster family and community understanding of the importance of attendance, we need to build relationships with children, young people and their families from their first contact with preschools and schools. This is fundamental to our approach.

The approach will be implemented through systemic and sustainable actions and initiatives proven to be beneficial by research and practice wisdom.

These steps will help preschools and schools to review and reflect on their local processes to improve student attendance. Importantly, they will also align with functions and accountabilities across the department to support better attendance.

To complement this approach, we are redeveloping policies and processes affecting children and young people’s development and wellbeing. These policies will address barriers to participation in education settings, with an added emphasis on being inclusive towards and sensitive to children and young people facing difficult life challenges.

Our commitment to all children and young people is also directed at improved attendance rates and learning growth for priority populations. This includes children and young people in care, as recommended by the Child Protection Systems Royal Commission.

I encourage everyone in your school community to engage in a whole-school approach and demonstrate that attendance matters in South Australian preschools and schools.
Context

Consistent school attendance from the early years is fundamental to ensuring children gain a strong foundation for later learning.¹

In addition to the protective factors provided by enrolment and attendance,² research indicates that students who regularly attend school achieve at higher levels than students who do not have regular attendance patterns.³

As early as preschool, regular absence can predict later attendance patterns.

While poor attendance is a strong indicator of lower levels of achievement in learning tasks, it also highlights as the potential for problematic social skills and difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships.⁴

Longitudinal studies have shown that not completing school is a strong predictor of negative economic, physical, and mental health outcomes in adulthood and involvement with the criminal justice system.⁵

Attendance at school contributes to a community that is well educated, healthier, employed, financially independent and more empowered.⁶

Children and young people who do not regularly attend school miss out on planned learning experiences, sequences of instruction and class participation. The impact of this loss is compounded with each absence.

Once established, patterns of non-attendance are very difficult to change.

By identifying patterns of non-attendance as early as preschool, we can intervene in a timely and strategic manner before children have fallen behind academically and socially, before families have disengaged from the preschool or school setting, and before family complexities interfere with their capacity to meet their children's most basic needs.

Similarly, early identification enables collaborative and holistic responses for those children and young people in our priority populations,⁷ to ensure they have every opportunity to succeed.

This approach aims to support our preschools and schools to build on the important work they do every day to engage children and young people and their families and help them to stay at school.

It establishes the framework for a range of key actions that:

• promote the importance of education from the earliest years of life and throughout the schooling years
• actively engage children, young people and their families in education and developmental opportunities
• address barriers to attendance, learning and wellbeing to support children and young people to be physically present and engaged in their learning.

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2. The department recognises that the enrolment and attendance of a child at school is a protective factor through which we can monitor, support and promote their educational achievement and wellbeing by:
   • providing safe, respectful and engaging environments that foster belonging, curiosity, interaction and learning
   • helping children and young people to develop and expect positive relationships with others
   • helping children and young people to be resilient and resourceful in dealing with stress and adversity.
   Responding to Abuse and Neglect (RAN) training, Department for Education and Child Development
3. Shepherd, CC, Lawrence, D and Zubrick, SR, Student Attendance and Educational Outcomes: Every Day Counts, Telethon Institute for Child Health, 2013
5. Alison Giovanelli, MA, Arthur J. Reynolds, PhD, Christina F. Mondi, BA, and Suh-Ruu Ou, PhD, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Adult Well-Being in a Low-Income, Urban Cohort Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota 2016
7. Priority groups include Aboriginal children and young people, those in state care, and those with disabilities
Attendance matters in South Australian preschools and schools 2018 to 2021

Challenges

Parents and carers have an obligation to ensure their children and young people regularly attend school, however this primary responsibility is often affected by various challenges.

Many children and young people may deal with challenging circumstances, some of which may have a longer-term impact not only just on school attendance, but also on health and wellbeing.

Out-of-school factors

Children and young people’s attendance patterns vary through the ordinary course of family life. Illness, medical/dental appointments, family holidays and culturally significant occasions are all factors that may result in children being away from school.

While all families regularly experience these sorts of matters that affect their children’s attendance, some families experience more complex and significant challenges that result in their children being absent from school. These factors can include chronic illness, family responsibilities, housing instability, and complex family dynamics.

At a universal level, this strategy balances the needs of family life while providing clear public messaging to support parents to understand where they can make a difference and where they can get support to help their children develop good attendance habits.

In-school factors

There are also factors within the school context that may contribute to absences from school.

These in-school factors can affect engagement, achievement and wellbeing, such as:

- experiencing bullying or cyberbullying
- feeling isolated at school
- disliking, or not feeling connected to the school culture or environment
- falling behind on school work or feeling overwhelmed about keeping up
- disliking school subjects, not liking the choice of subjects, or not feeling challenged by the work
- not getting along with teachers or other students at school
- not feeling understood and fully accepted by peers or teachers
- lack of cultural acknowledgement and understanding.8

‘At the core of school improvement and education reform is an assumption so widely understood that it is rarely invoked: Students have to be present and engaged in order to learn.’

Chang and Romero

‘The educational experiences of children who attend school regularly can be diminished when teachers must divert their attention to meet the learning and social needs of children who miss substantial amounts of school. By working together to ensure all children attend school consistently, schools and communities make it more possible for teachers to teach and children to learn.’

Aligning School & Community-Resources to Reduce Chronic Absence, Attendance Works

Educational research confirms that the teacher is the single most important determinant of success after family background, but student absence compromises even the best teacher’s ability to provide learning opportunities.9

Non-attendance or arriving late for school not only has adverse consequences on the lives of individual young people, it can also minimise learning time for others in the classroom.10

There is strong evidence supporting the connection between student and teacher wellbeing,12 which suggests that positive, mentally healthy and well-supported staff can build better relationships and connections with our children, young people, parents and communities. It creates an environment that is more conducive to learning13 and supports our learning partnerships to extend well beyond the classroom.

Recognising that children and young people are more likely to attend and be engaged at school if they feel accepted, valued, safe and respected, this strategy will ensure that the scope of our responses reflects the needs and challenges of children, young people, families and the preschools and schools that support them.

Community factors

Research also shows that non-attendance is also an indicator of much bigger and more complex dynamic, often reflecting how communities and systems address the needs of their children.

Large numbers of chronically absent students can signpost systemic problems that not only affect the quality of the educational experience, but also the healthy functioning of an entire community.14

Some children and young people in our priority populations are particularly disadvantaged by frequent absences from school as they do not have the resources to make up for lost time. They often face multiple barriers to attending school that require complex support. There is no simple ‘one size fits all’ solution for these issues as the causes are diverse and continually changing.

Targeting a single issue is not likely to be effective. Success is more likely when the whole community shares in the task of identifying concerns and there is honest and open consideration of the systemic risk factors. The solutions in these circumstances need to be multifaceted and require behavioural changes in preschools, schools, families, communities and agencies.

This strategy recognises that to do this effectively, there must be strong partnerships developed to build a continuum of comprehensive supports that meet the needs of the individual and their community.

‘Collecting and analysing data can be both resource and time intensive, but it is a critical foundation to understanding the prevalence of absenteeism and the student characteristics associated with chronic absenteeism, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of interventions.’

John W Gardner Center – Collaborative Approaches to Reducing Absenteeism Among K-12 Students

Data snapshot

Background

Quality information and data are vital to our understanding, analysis and interventions to support attendance at preschools and schools in South Australia.

While individual school communities have different local challenges and starting points for improvement, there is a need for consistent definitions and thresholds so we can build a shared understanding about the patterns and prevalence of non-attendance. This allows us to develop effective strategies for improving attendance at a local and a state level.

Average attendance rates are routinely used to determine whether or not there has been improvement. This measure however does not provide student-level data. Instead, it provides information to schools and education partnerships about the school-wide resources required for each day.15

Average daily attendance measures do not indicate whether absences are spread across many students or specific individuals. They do not illustrate patterns of absence, such as specific classrooms, seasonal variations, or broader societal factors that might give an indication of why students are chronically absent.16

For these reasons, average rate measures alone do not provide the full picture of the range of issues that need to be addressed.

Making sure our staff have improved access to data to better inform them about general patterns of attendance as well as individuals is a priority for this approach.

Technological improvements to data systems will enable high-quality reporting. This will help schools and preschools to understand the pattern and nature of the non-attendance which will allow them to better assess children’s circumstances and tailor support and intervention services for responding to the circumstances.

Current data trends in South Australian government schools

Since 2011, there has been an upward trend with attendance, which increased from 89.9% in 2011 to 90.6% in 2017 across SA government schools.

The corresponding absence rate in 2017 of 9.4% represents a mix of authorised absences (6.6%) and unauthorised absences (2.8%).

Illness is the main reason for authorised absences, followed by family/social reasons.

Most unauthorised absences were unexplained. These absences are often a combination of students away due to truancy and those absent for genuine reasons, but where a parent has not yet notified the school.

It is clear that timely communication from families is critical.

In 2017 the data also indicated that:

- the country school absence rate (10.6%) was higher than the metropolitan school absence rate (8.9%)
- males (9.6%) had a slightly higher absence rate than females (9.3%)
- the absence rate for Aboriginal children was 20%, an increase from 19.2% in 2015
- primary year levels had a lower absence rate (8.3%) than secondary year levels (11.6%).

Attendance rates for students in SA government schools, 2011 to 2017

Source: Student Census System

17. Authorised absences are where an explanation for the absence has been received by the school/department. Unauthorised absences are where a student absence is unexplained, without parental approval or where the school is following up after a period of unexplained absences. NB Unexplained absences are likely to be a mix of students absent due to truancy and those absent for genuine reasons but where a school has not received an explanation from the parent.
Building on good practice

A whole-school approach

A whole-school approach to attendance and wellbeing not only considers the importance of children and young people being present at preschool and school, but also whether they have safe and supportive home environments, meaningful community networks and are engaged in their learning.

Increased attendance provides better learning outcomes and assists in connecting and engaging with children and young people and their families.

Schools that have successfully improved attendance and student wellbeing have developed and implemented various strategies within a whole-school approach, including the following key elements.

Curriculum: teaching and learning

Quality teaching is one of the strongest determinants of student engagement and success in preschool and school. Learning design, content and student identity all affect student attendance.

School ethos and environment

Positive school cultures, structures and strong policies and procedures all contribute to creating a welcoming and engaging environment that emphasises the importance of attendance.

Internal and external partnerships

Building strong and respectful relationships with children, young people, their families, other government agencies and community organisations enhances understanding about circumstances contributing to attendance.

An effective whole-school approach supports all students to consistently attend preschool and school and leads to positive learning and wellbeing outcomes. A whole-school approach can also support students who are at risk of disengaging from school or where other risk factors needing tailored interventions are present.

A systemic approach

Consistent with international research that indicates high attendance levels are better achieved through a combination of supportive intervention strategies and sanctions for non-compliance, this approach will also be supported by strengthening statutory options to emphasise to parents their legal responsibility for their child's attendance at school through:

- increasing fines for parents who do not get their children to school
- a family group conferencing model for use in cases of chronic non-attendance
- a review of interagency agreements to ensure there is a clear response if a child who does not attend school may be at risk of harm.

These options will provide a further pathway for responding if parent behaviour is impeding services supporting a child's attendance at school.

Categories of non-attendance

International research has identified that chronic absence is a vital early warning sign of significantly lower outcomes for students.\(^{19, 20}\)

The department has adopted the following definitions consistent with best practice to identify students at risk through non-attendance:

- **Habitual non-attendance** where a student has 5 to 9 absences for any reason in a term (average of 1 day per fortnight).
- **Chronic non-attendance** where a student is absent for 10 days or more in a term for any reason (average of 1 day per week).

These measures are different from other methods of student absences as they count the number of school days missed for any reason. They focus on individual students and the levels of schooling missed rather than the average measures used for general reporting.\(^{21}\)

This acknowledges that children can be absent for many reasons, and there can be a varying degree of risk for students in relation to their learning and wellbeing within the parameters of these definitions.

These thresholds provide a way for schools to be alerted to the need to assess a child’s circumstances and the degree of risk posed by student non-attendance.

To support the early identification of students in these categories, existing technology will be expanded. This will provide schools with the opportunity to develop and implement a comprehensive, tiered approach with the education department and other agencies to reduce the barriers to attendance at school.

School and departmental resources will also be targeted towards supporting children and young people whose chronic non-attendance compounds existing disadvantages and puts them at risk of lifelong adverse outcomes.

This includes children and young people in priority groups and where there have been referrals to support services and/or multiple agency involvement.

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‘The reality is an absence, excused or not, means that a child is not in their classroom benefitting from the instruction on that day. We have to work in our community, with our schools and our families to build a culture of attendance.’
Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President, Annie E. Casey Foundation

Identifying appropriate interventions

Whole-school approach to attendance
A whole-school approach to attendance and engagement frames the habitual and chronic definitions against a level of risk. This allows us to identify the students early and prioritise the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people who require more targeted, intensive and coordinated interventions.

Habitual and chronic non-attenders (all absences)
For some students, the absences may take place in a single term for reasons such as a severe bout of illness or a special family holiday. Many of these situations can be addressed locally through clear public messaging or by working directly with parents, and do not pose a significant risk to the child for long-term adverse outcomes.

Chronic non-attenders (all unexplained absences)
Where there has been no reason provided for absences, encouraging regular communication with parents about why children and young people are away from school is critical. It helps parents understand the positive impact of regular school attendance or assist with the early identification of barriers to engagement with school.

Chronic non-attenders (with additional risk factors)
Where the nature, frequency or length of absences and the presence of other risk factors may indicate the need for more intensive interventions. Many of these children and young people and their families may benefit from a coordinated case management approach to develop solutions and provide support.
‘While a strong school-wide culture of attendance is essential, it may not always be sufficient. Some students, especially those who are chronically absent, may need a higher level of intervention... The good news is chronic absence can be turned around if data is used to identify and connect them as early as possible to positive, engaging supports that help motivate them to attend school and address challenging barriers.’

Attendance Works, Baltimore USA

Non-attendance intervention matrix

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<tr>
<th>Habitual and chronic non-attenders (all absences)</th>
<th>Chronic non-attenders (unexplained absences)</th>
<th>Chronic non-attenders (with additional risk factors)</th>
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<td>5+ days absent per term</td>
<td>10+ days absent per term</td>
<td>10+ days absent per term</td>
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**Assess**

- Monitor and identify patterns
  - Assess circumstances and possible interventions

**Engage**

- Share concerns with parents
  - Engage school staff in consultation

- Formally contact parents and students
  - Identify other stakeholders / family supports and agencies
  - Consider a home visit

**Support**

- Identify and discuss specific issues and supports needed to address any learning or wellbeing needs
- Identify and address barriers to attendance
  - Develop individual attendance plan/health plan
  - Develop a case management team-around-the-child approach
  - Give individual and intensive support

**Monitor**

- Monitor progress and give parents regular feedback
  - Recognise improved attendance
- Review student supports regularly
  - Conduct documented case reviews with stakeholders

**Evaluate**

- Evaluate progress including need for any further interventions
- Consider a referral to support services and mandatory reports via discussion with leader

- Assess statutory options
  - Enact high-risk chronic non-attenders protocol if appropriate

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22. The High-Risk Chronic Non-Attenders (HRCNA) protocol is for children who are absent from school, may be at high risk of harm and where there is no current knowledge of the child’s wellbeing. The criteria are: the child(ren) have been absent from school for 6 weeks; they have not been sighted for 4 weeks; there has been no credible assessment of their health and wellbeing. Note this protocol can only be enacted by team managers, support services as part of support services intervention or referral.
‘Children do better in school when their parents get involved in their learning.’
William J Bennett

Key actions

1. Promote the importance of education from the early years and throughout the school years

Parents and families as partners

In early 2019, key messages about the importance of attendance at preschool and school will be communicated via social media as a pilot model with a selected local education partnership to:

- increase awareness in parents and the wider community about the value of education and the importance of attendance at school
- improve parents’ understanding of their legal responsibilities to ensure their child attends school
- promote the importance of regular participation in early childhood education and care to set up future patterns for attendance and learning.

In late 2019, the pilot will be evaluated to develop further key messages about the importance of attendance. The approach will then be implemented statewide.

In 2019, an online resource will be developed to increase parents’ understanding and capacity to effectively communicate with their children’s schools and teachers about potential school issues, including attendance.

Early engagement in learning

In 2019, online training will be developed to build the capacity of teachers to effectively engage with parents and assist in promoting the importance of school attendance.

The Families as First Teachers framework is embedded in training for educators in children and family centres through supported playgroups in the Anangu Lands partnerships. Throughout 2018 training and development of the key principles will be delivered to families in the local communities.

Support families to understand the importance of education in the early years and the value of preschool education

Recognise parents as their children’s primary educators as well as a key influence on attendance at school
Strong connections between schools and families provide an opportunity for school staff to better understand the particular challenges parents face in getting their children to school.

Ehrlich, Stacy B et al, University of Chicago May 2014

2 Actively engage children, young people and their families in education and developmental opportunities

Inclusive practices

From 2019, preschools and schools will have access to updated policies, resources and training to support the development of an inclusive school culture that embraces values and celebrates diversity.

In 2018, work will commence on standards for engaging with young people, in conjunction with the Youth Affairs Council of South Australia.

From 2018, schools with an Aboriginal attendance rate of lower than 80% will receive targeted support to increase student attendance.

In 2018, schools documenting goals and solutions for attendance concerns has begun in the one child one plan online module (referred to as One Plan).

Engaged learning

From 2019, student-led forums addressing a range of issues including attendance will be held to increase children and young people’s genuine contributions to policies and initiatives that affect their learning, lives and aspirations.

From 2019, preschool and school leaders and teachers will have access to policy implementation tools and online resources to support attendance improvement initiatives.

In 2018, case studies of successful engagement practices will be documented for all preschool and school staff to use to promote local attendance initiatives and policies.

Maintain a focus not only on children and young people’s physical attendance at preschool or school but also on their active engagement in their educational outcomes
Key actions

‘We need to monitor any reason for a student’s absence from school in order to intervene effectively and early ... Understanding where, when and for whom chronic absence is a problem is essential. Knowing who is affected allows educators and community partners to target interventions to those most in need...’

Attendance Works, Baltimore USA

3. Address barriers to attendance, learning and wellbeing to support children and young people being physically present and involved in their learning

Active monitoring

From 2018, the Education Dashboard will be updated to ensure education and school staff have easy access to detailed student achievement information, attendance data and alerts. In 2018, building on the record of prosecutions for non-attendance, further cases will be assessed for potential prosecution suitability where it is in the best interest of the child, all avenues have been exhausted, and fair warning has been provided. In 2018, work will begin to develop a family group conferencing model for managing chronic non-attendance in preparation for the proposed changes in the new Education and Children Service’s Bill.

By 2019, reporting systems will be enhanced to track attendance against a range of outcome measures. This information will be available to school leaders to support planning for individual students with their families, and systemic responses across schools and partnerships. From 2018, collaborative work with families and communities will be strengthened based on local strategies to address barriers to school attendance to accelerate outcomes for Aboriginal children and young people.

Shared responsibility

In 2018, there will be a review of policies and procedures relating to attendance to provide preschools and schools with a clear framework to promote and improve attendance. From 2019, there will be training for identified staff to help build capacity and consistent approaches to policy implementation for addressing wellbeing issues such as attendance, bullying and behaviour management.

From 2018, the number of support staff dealing with truancy and non-attendance issues will be increased to strengthen responses and follow up for chronic non-attenders. From 2018, a multi-agency shared responsibility agreement will be strengthened, through a review of interagency protocols and groups that respond to families with children identified as high-risk chronic non-attenders.

Monitor and understand attendance patterns and take early action to address attendance concerns

Recognise that children and young people’s attendance and engagement in education is affected by complex factors across society and the family environment

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23. The Education Dashboard is a system used by SA government schools that gives a snapshot of individual student and whole-school levels of attendance, literacy and achievement.
Measuring success

Attendance matters in South Australian preschools and schools

This approach builds on the important work done in preschools and schools every day. Supporting student attendance complements ongoing initiatives to strengthen behaviour, wellbeing and learning.

Several initiatives across 3 key areas cover various issues that affect student attendance. These will be implemented progressively over the next 4 years.

These initiatives will be monitored regularly and census data will provide the basis for a detailed annual analysis. This will assess progress against these goals:

Increase measures
- An increase in the number of students with no unexplained absences
- An increase in the number of students receiving a coordinated inter-agency response

Reduction measures
- A reduction in the number of students identified as chronic non-attenders
- A reduction in the number of schools identified with an Aboriginal attendance rate of lower than 80%
- A reduction of absences due to suspensions for children and young people in state care

Regular attendance at school is important to a child’s learning and development so they get the most from their education.

Attendance and absenteeism, sa.gov.au