

Inquiry into school attendance

Submission to the Education and Workforce Select Committee

The New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists is a professional association that represents the interests of more than 1600 Clinical Psychologists registered in Aotearoa. Clinical Psychologists are experts in mental wellbeing, behavior and neurodiversity, working across a large range of specialties and employers- including District Health Boards, ACC, Oranga Tamariki, Corrections, NGOs, PHOs and as private practitioners.

This submission was prepared by members of the College's Executive Committee, with support from experts in the field, and is based on the feedback submitted by our individual members.

1 The impact of poor school attendance on mental health and wellbeing.

Along with educational outcomes, school attendance is a critical driver of outcomes related to young peoples' mental health. Young people with mental health difficulties are also more likely to have difficulties with attending school.

Our members wished us to clarify that there are a great many different forms and reasons for non-attendance at school, which are likely to have different causes, different impacts and require different solutions.

1.1. Distinction between types of non-attendance at school

Not all forms of non-attendance at school can be considered to be the same. We would like to draw the Inquiry's attention to the distinctions between school withdrawal, school refusal, and truancy¹.

- *Truancy* involves wilful and unjustified absence, without parental knowledge, without parental consent, and involves the student concealing their absence from school. Students tend to avoid home when they're absent.
- *School withdrawal* involves withdrawing the child from school to meet the parents' own needs – essentially the parent wishes the child to stay at home, the absence is condoned and there is covert support for non-attendance.
- *School refusal* involves a reluctance or refusal to attend school on the part of the young person, they're often at home when absent, and there are reasonable parent efforts to get them to school. Typically, there's an absence of anti-social features / conduct difficulties, and there may be co-existing emotional difficulties. This may also be referred to as 'emotionally based' school avoidance or school anxiety. School refusal occurs in approximately 1-2% of young people. This figure is significantly higher in those referred to mental health services.

As the Inquiry will understand, there are significant differences in the reasons for these forms of non-attendance, which means the interventions required will not be uniform in nature. There may also be significant overlap between the forms of school non-attendance- for instance, a young person's absence may have initially been a result of school withdrawal, because of the need to support a family member. Later, if the child has fallen behind academically and is disconnected from

their peers, the idea of re-engaging in school feels overwhelming and may result in truancy or school refusal. For this reason, any type of non-attendance can create a cycle of reinforcement that can be very hard to break.

1.2 Outcomes associated with poor attendance

There are significant short and long term consequences of poor school attendance including:

- Impaired social connections
- Poorer mental health
- Increased family stress
- Low academic achievement
- Reduced employment prospects

Research strongly suggests that the longer the duration of school non-attendance, the bigger the impact upon the child's development^{1,2}.

2 Factors linked to school non-attendance

In New Zealand, our members have reported a wide array of factors linked to school non-attendance. These factors are consistent with international research in this area and can be grouped into individual, family, school and social or cultural factors.

Individual factors include:

- Learning difficulties or neurodiversity
- Mental health difficulties, particularly anxiety
- Traumatic life experiences
- Physical health difficulties
- Emotional regulation difficulties

Family/whānau factors include:

- Parental availability
- Family hardship
- Unwitting accommodation of anxiety (being unaware of reinforcing effects of avoidance)
- Lack of family support
- Family beliefs and values about education
- Parenting challenges
- Availability of other activities like gaming at home

School factors include:

- Lack of early identification and response
- Lack of knowledge about how to respond to mental health concerns
- Unwitting accommodation of anxiety (being unaware of reinforcing effects of avoidance)
- Large class sizes/ less connection or feeling of being part of a school whānau
- Transitions
- Punitive environments
- Bullying or peer issues
- Lack of alternative options

Cultural/social factors include:

- Lack of services/ current services overwhelmed by demand
- Unmet care and protection needs
- Overall societal inequity
- Academic and social pressure
- Change in work and family structures
- Impacts of colonisation
- Covid-19 disruption to routine and connections

2 Effective interventions for school non-attendance

2.1 Evidence for effective interventions

The College believes that early intervention is extremely important in tackling these issues. Firstly, the evidence strongly suggests that intervening within days rather than weeks is likely to be much more effective. Secondly, intervening in childhood rather than adolescence clearly leads to significantly better outcomes, since intervening in adolescence tend to be less effective (particularly if non-attendance has been long-standing).

The research evidence, as well as our members' clinical experience, suggests that intervention should take place as soon as a reduced pattern of attendance is observed (typically, when the child falls below 80% attendance). In the current system, difficulties are often not identified or addressed until attendance has fallen *significantly*.

The goal of any intervention is to address factors contributing to non-attendance and support the young person to return to school. Often this is done in a gradual way, particularly if there has been an extended period of non-attendance.

Schools are the critical agency for effective intervention. Additional services or supports may also be needed depending on underlying drivers and the severity of the issue. For example, practical help for families with material needs or learning assessment and support for a young person.

For those where mental health difficulties are an underlying driver and/or result of non-attendance, professional mental health support may also be needed. Treatment of school refusal from a psychological perspective might involve enhancing coping skills, problem-solving, social skills training, and other features of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as well as parent of family/whānau work.

2.2. Local examples of effective interventions

Several examples of effective local practice were shared by members across NZ. Having agencies effectively working together and with families was highlighted as key to success, with schools seen as central to this process. Other examples of effective practice included:

- Providing parent education on factors related to mental health and school attendance e.g. role of avoidance in maintaining anxiety.
- Offering a step-wise, supported approach to school return.
- Addressing parental mental health needs and providing general parent support.
- Employing family liaison and cultural support workers at school.
- Employing local attendance officers who have good relationships in the community.

- Creating individual Education Plans (IEP) with collaboration between home, school and other agencies.
- Improving assessment and intervention for learning or mental health needs in schools.
- Offering alternative education programmes such as Central Regional Health School.
- Offering a group programme for young people not attending school.
- Collaborative working/a collaborative programme between the Ministry of Education and DHB services.

3 Clinical Psychologists' Suggestions to Improve School Attendance

NZCCP members have also suggested a number of factors/approaches that be important in improving school attendance in a New Zealand context:

- The need to develop clear systems to identify and respond to attendance issues early, with consistent guidance provided across the education system.
- The need to avoid a punitive approach to individuals and families. While clear pathways and expectations from schools and communities are essential, a punitive approach would be unlikely to address the underlying causes of non-attendance and, at worst, could compound those factors (e.g. the use of monetary fines, where socio-economic factors are causing non-attendance).
- Developing a 'pathway' (back) into school that does not involve the student having to simply re-join a class with other pupils (i.e. the student being supported in their re-entry to the classroom).
- Having a pathway that is 'removed' or distanced from those staff within the school who are tasked with monitoring achievement (e.g. Deans) and aligned with those staff within the school who are tasked with facilitating wellbeing (e.g. Counsellors).
- Holding discretion, dignity and cultural responsiveness as central to the process of working with the young person and their family or whānau.
- Providing education for schools and parents on managing mental health difficulties (e.g. understanding the role of avoidance as a key maintaining factor in anxiety).
- Increasing the capability and capacity of schools to respond to different learning and health needs (e.g. trauma-informed schools, increased learning support, early identification of learning needs, smaller class sizes).
- For those needing more intensive intervention, building the capacity for cross-agency approaches- including education, health, cultural supports and others. Locally developed partnerships and solutions may have the best results as different communities have different needs.
- General approaches to improve population mental health are also likely to have a positive impact on school attendance (e.g. increased resourcing for mental health services and school systems, increasing parent/whānau support, addressing social and cultural inequities).

4 Summary

School non-attendance is a widespread challenge internationally and in Aotearoa New Zealand. Poor school attendance has a significant impact not just on educational outcomes, but on mental health and overall wellbeing. It is important to differentiate the different types and underlying causes on school non-attendance, since this will inform type of support needed. Discretion, dignity and cultural responsiveness are central to work with the young person and their whānau.

Regardless of the factors driving non-attendance, returning to school after a period of absence presents a significant challenge to young people – both socially and academically. Supporting those

around them, schools, family, whānau, community and social services is key to success. Given the emotional and social development that happens through school has lifelong impact we strongly support this issue being given significantly increased attention and resource.

1 Heyne, D., & Melvin, G. (2018). *Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: Why and How?* www.elsevier.com/locate/cabp

2 Ingul, J. M., Havik, T., & Heyne, D. (2019). Emerging School Refusal: A School-Based Framework for Identifying Early Signs and Risk Factors. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26*(1), 46–62.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.005>