Fixing Australia’s school absentee problem

By Jordana Hunter, Amy Haywood and Molly Chapman

On a typical school day in Australia last year, about 11 per cent of students were absent. In 2014, the figure was seven per cent.

Two in five students now miss about a day of school each fortnight on average. This makes improving school attendance an urgent, national priority.

In a new policy brief, the Grattan Institute details how student absences are changing post-pandemic. It also shows how Australia can look to England for ideas on what to do.

Every day counts

The more days of school a student attends, the better off they are academically, socially and emotionally.

Every day counts. Even a single day of absence is connected to a decline in achievement. The more days of school a student misses, the greater this decline. For example, a study of NAPLAN results in Western Australia found every day of school missed was associated with lower test scores in numeracy, reading and writing.

Poor attendance doesn’t just harm absent students. It puts more pressure on teachers to help them catch up, it disrupts the learning of their classmates and can increase the burden on parents trying to juggle work and caring responsibilities.

This is not just a small group

New Grattan analysis gives the first post-pandemic insight into how student absences are changing. We used records for almost one third of Australian government-school students from the first year of school to Year 12, from 2017 to 2024. This data reveals how and why students are missing school.

There is a small but growing group of students who miss months, terms or even entire years of school. That group attracts significant attention, as it should. These students face huge challenges to complete school and often need intensive, tailored support if they are to return to the classroom.

But Australian students across the board are also attending school less than they used to.

In fact, it's the highest-attending group whose numbers have fallen the most. In 2019, 71 per cent of students attended school regularly (defined as at least 90 per cent of the time). In 2024, this was only 59 per cent.

UK research suggests there is a tipping point: students who attend at least 85–90 per cent of school tend to sustain or improve their attendance in the following year. But the attendance of those who don't meet this threshold rarely recovers. This suggests a large cohort of Australian students are at significant risk of further disengaging from school.

Students are having more sick days

The biggest factor driving increased school absences across the community has been increased sick days.

In 2024, students on average missed about 11.6 days of school due to illness or medical appointments, up from 6.6 days in 2017. That's an additional week of school missed per student.

At the same time, school absences for family reasons, including holidays during term time, have more than doubled since 2017, averaging about four days a year in 2024. By contrast, disciplinary absences such as suspensions have remained, on average, low and fairly stable.

The rise in illness-related absences is understandable. No parent wants to send their child to school when they are seriously unwell. And limiting the spread of nasty bugs is important. But we have to get the balance right between minimising the impacts of missing school and preventing the spread of illness.

Lessons from England

Australia is not alone – many countries have struggled with school attendance, especially post-pandemic. Since 2021, England has made school attendance a system-wide priority. As of last year, their attendance rate was 94 per cent. This compares to Australia's 89 per cent.

Before the pandemic, English schools reported attendance data to the [UK] Department for Education term by term. Now, they report data daily and the department publishes this data fortnightly. In contrast, Australia has a patchwork system of reporting, which differs by school sector and state. Only high-level data is published nationally after a two-term delay.

In England, the department has given schools access to new data dashboards so school leaders can make better decisions about which groups of students to prioritise for intervention and the department can more easily identify strengths and areas for improvement.

The UK government has also gathered leaders in education, health, policing and children's services for regular meetings to tackle underlying barriers to attendance.

UK Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson has emphasised how responsibility for boosting attendance rests with parents as well as schools. As she noted earlier last year: "It's not OK just to say, 'It's only a Friday, you don't need to go to school today'."

Health professionals are also involved. The chief medical officer wrote to schools to emphasise the importance of attending school, even with mild illness. The UK's National Health System has also developed guidance to help families decide when children should stay home. The peak bodies for general practice and paediatrics have issued guidance on scheduling and delivering appointments around school hours.

What now?

Federal and state education ministers have committed to an ambitious goal of getting Australia's school attendance rate back to 91 per cent – the 2019 rate – by the end of the decade. Our analysis suggests Australia will not achieve this by tinkering around the edges.

But with better data, clear health guidance for families and coordinated action, Australia can also ensure every child has the chance to learn, every day.

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