

TRUANCY AND UNJUSTIFIED ABSENCES

Introduction

Student attendance, along with effective teaching, has an important positive impact on student engagement and achievement with student attendance being one of the most significant variables influencing educational achievement in senior secondary school [80]. All students must be present at school so they can participate and engage in learning [81]. In New Zealand, parents must legally make sure that their child goes to school each day and parents and carers of children between six and 16 years old can be prosecuted if their child is away from school without a good reason [82].

Irregular attendance may be an early indicator of problems with student motivation or teaching effectiveness. Students who are truant or, more precisely, are unjustifiably absent from class have an increased risk of alienation from the education system [80]. Students with high absenteeism are less likely to succeed in their learning. If a student misses five school days each term, or one day a fortnight, they will miss the equivalent of one year of school over 10 years. As the level of absenteeism grows, the difficulty of re-engaging in learning can grow exponentially [81]. Longitudinal studies in Dunedin and Christchurch also suggest that truancy is a strong predictor of substance abuse, suicidal risk, unemployment, early parenting and violence in later life [77] [83].

Interventions to reduce unauthorised absence can be enhanced by increasing the focus on primary school absence and parental attitudes, integration of attendance issues into wider, positive communications with pupils, parents and carers, effective systems to monitor attendance, and adapting curricula to better match pupils' aptitudes and aspirations [84].

The following section uses data from the Ministry of Education's School Attendance Survey to explore truancy and unjustified absences in New Zealand secondary school students.

Data Source and Methods

Indicators

1. Total unjustified absence rate

Numerator: Number of unjustified absences and intermittent unjustified absences per week

Denominator: Total number of enrolled students in participating schools

2. Frequent truancy rate

Numerator: Number of students with three or more unjustified absences during the survey week

Denominator: Total number of enrolled students in participating schools

The rates were calculated by dividing the number of absences by the total rolls of participating schools, which is then expressed as an average (mean) daily absence for the week per 100 students.

Data Source

Ministry of Education student attendance surveys (2011, 2012, and 2013)

Definitions

Absences were classified using the following definitions.

Justified absences: absences recorded in the register, and marked as having being satisfactorily explained. As the school principal has to make a judgement as to which explanations they will accept, the balance of justified and unjustified absences may vary slightly from school to school.

Unjustified absences: absences which are not explained, or not explained to the satisfaction of the school. For schools with an electronic Attendance Register (eAR), students who attended less than 120 minutes of their classes and had at least one unjustified absence were counted as an unjustified absence.

Intermittent unjustified absences: where a student is absent for part of a morning (or afternoon) or part of a period without justification (e.g. arriving 15 minutes late to school without a reason, or with a reason that is not acceptable to the principal). For schools with eAR data, students who attended classes for more than 120 minutes and had two or more unjustified absences were counted as an intermittent unjustified absence.

Total unjustified absences: the sum of unjustified and intermittent unjustified absences.

Frequent truants: where a student had three or more unjustified absences during the survey week.



Absence data were collected for each student for each day of the week. The rate for each absence type was calculated based on the total school rolls for the participating schools then related to an average (mean) daily absence for the week per 100 students. It should be noted that the rate did not indicate whether it was the same students that were absent, or whether different students were involved each day.

Notes on Interpretation

Note 1: The 2013 Ministry of Education Attendance Survey gathered data on student attendance during the week of 11–15 June 2012. Of the 2,448 schools invited to participate, completed returns were received from 1,950 schools: a response rate of 80%. The responding schools had approximately 611,500 students on their rolls, equating to 84% of the student population in all state and state integrated schools on 1 July 2013.

Note 2: Since 2009, the survey has utilised two forms of data collection. Schools that use a module in their Student Management Systems (SMS) to enter their attendance records electronically were asked to provide an extract from the eAR. Schools that do not use eAR were invited to take part in the paper version of the survey.

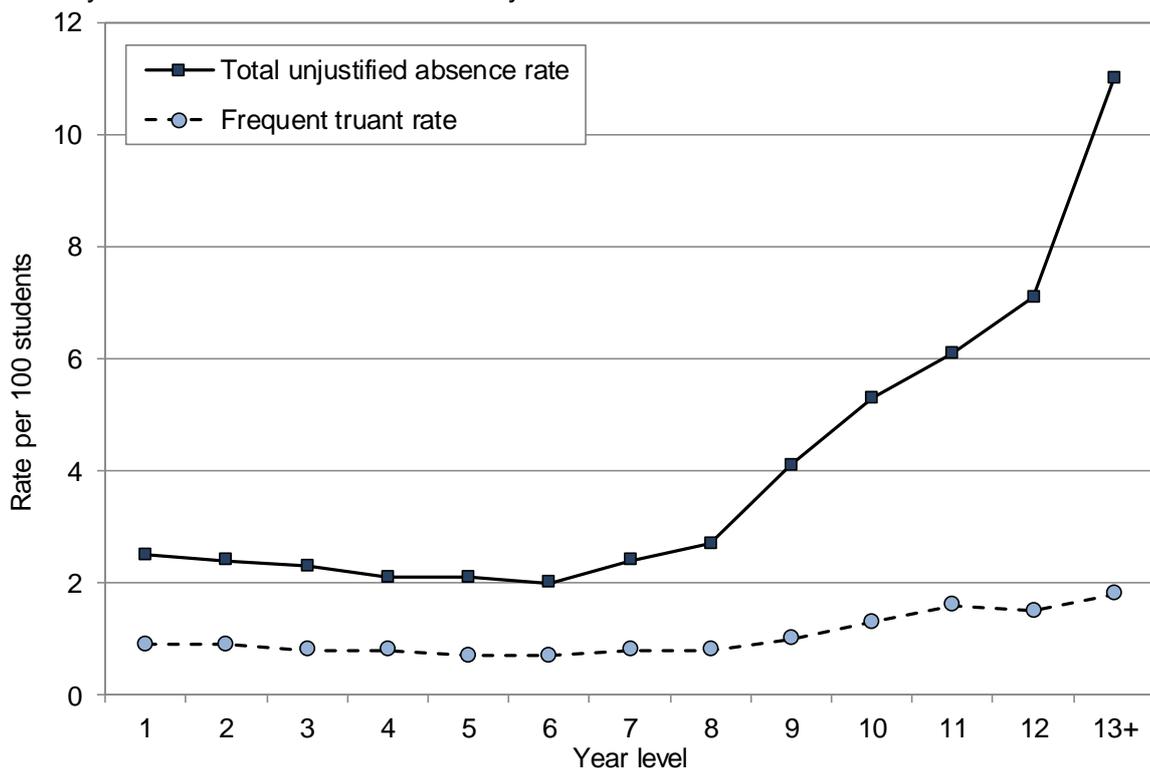
For further detail is available at <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2503/attendance-in-new-zealand-schools-in-2013>

New Zealand Distribution

Distribution by Year of Schooling

In New Zealand during 2013, total unjustified absences were relatively infrequent during the primary school years (Years 1–6), but increased progressively during secondary school (Years 9–13), with the highest rates being seen in those in Year 13+. While frequent truancy rates also increased during the secondary school years, the rate of increase was less marked than for total unjustified absences (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Total unjustified absences and frequent truancy by year level, New Zealand Ministry of Education attendance survey 2013



Source: Ministry of Education 2013 attendance survey; Note: Year 13+ includes students in Years 13–15

Distribution by Ethnicity

In New Zealand during each of the years surveyed (2011, 2012, and 2013), total unjustified absences and frequent truancy were higher for Māori and Pacific students than for European and Asian students. Total unjustified absences were lower in 2013 than they were in 2011 for Māori, and European students, while rates increased for Pacific students and were similar for Asian students. Frequent truancy rates were higher in 2013 than in

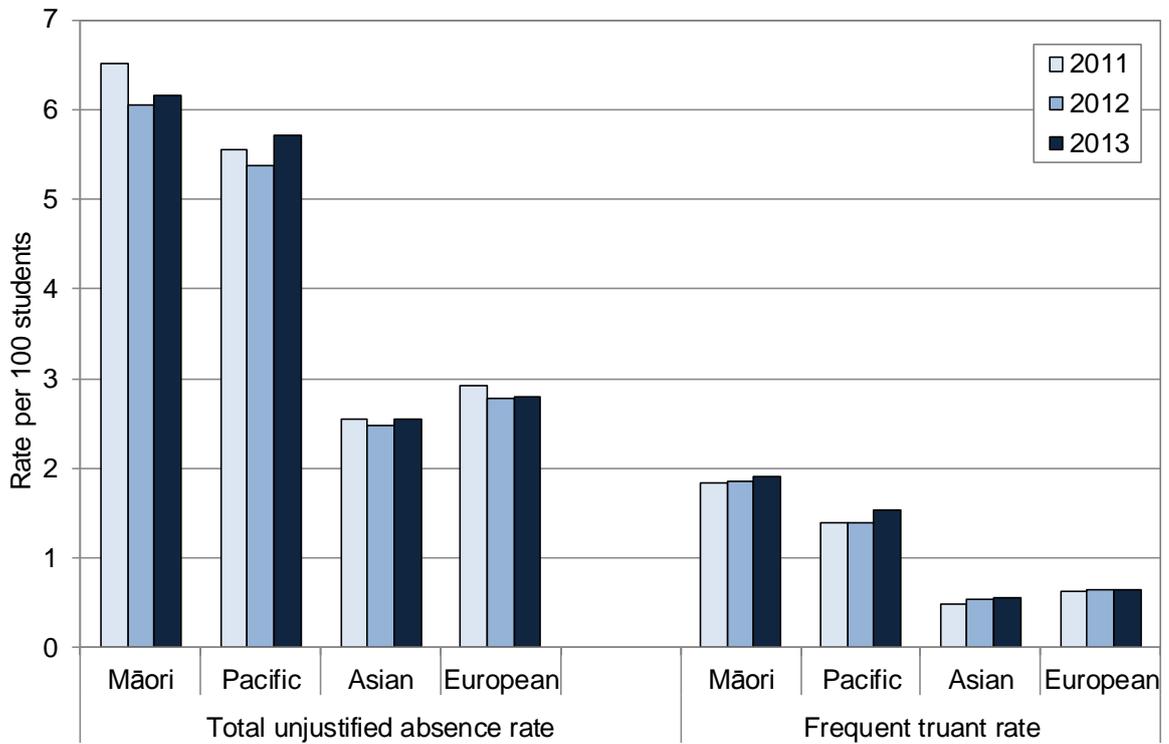


2011 for Māori, Pacific, and Asian students, although rates for European students were similar during the two periods (**Figure 2**).

Distribution by School Socioeconomic Decile

In New Zealand during 2013, total unjustified absences and frequent truancy decreased as the degree of deprivation of the school catchment decreased, with the lowest rates for both outcomes being seen in those in the least deprived areas (deciles 9–10) (**Figure 3**).

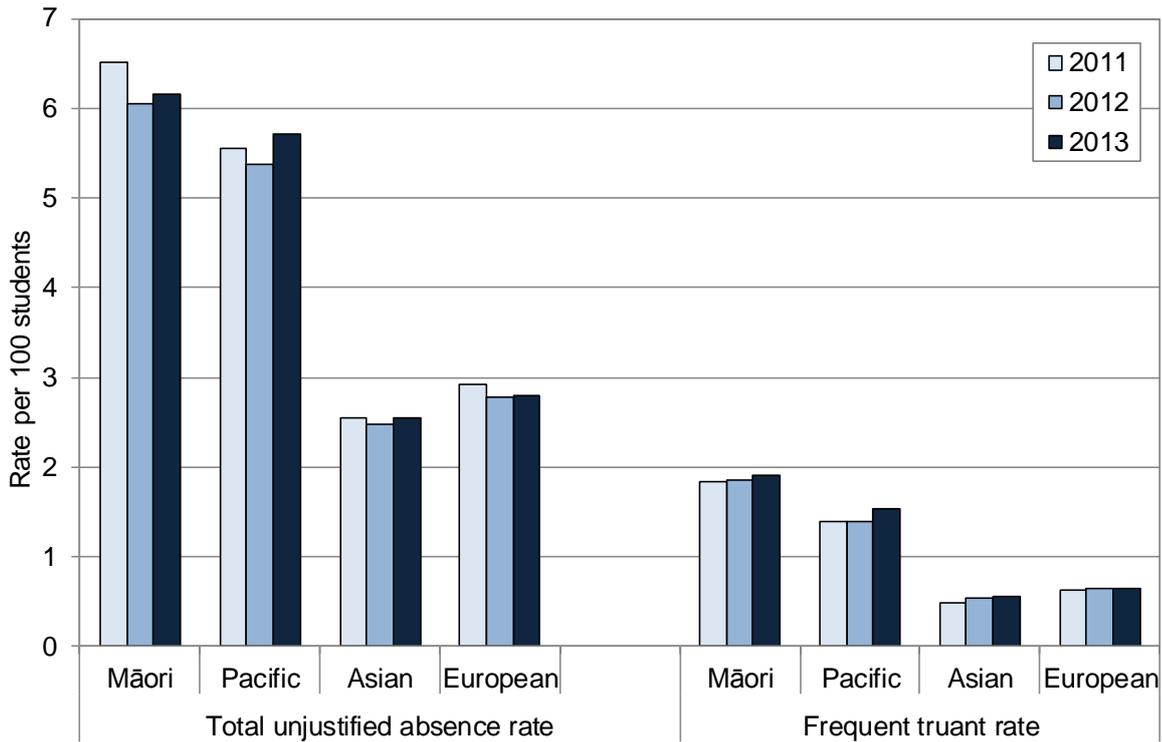
Figure 2. Total unjustified absences and frequent truancy by ethnicity, New Zealand 2011–2013



Source: Ministry of Education attendance surveys; Note: Ethnicity is Level 1 prioritised



Figure 3. Total unjustified absences and frequent truancy by school socioeconomic decile, New Zealand 2013



Source: Ministry of Education 2013 attendance survey

South Island DHBs Distribution

South Island DHBs vs. New Zealand

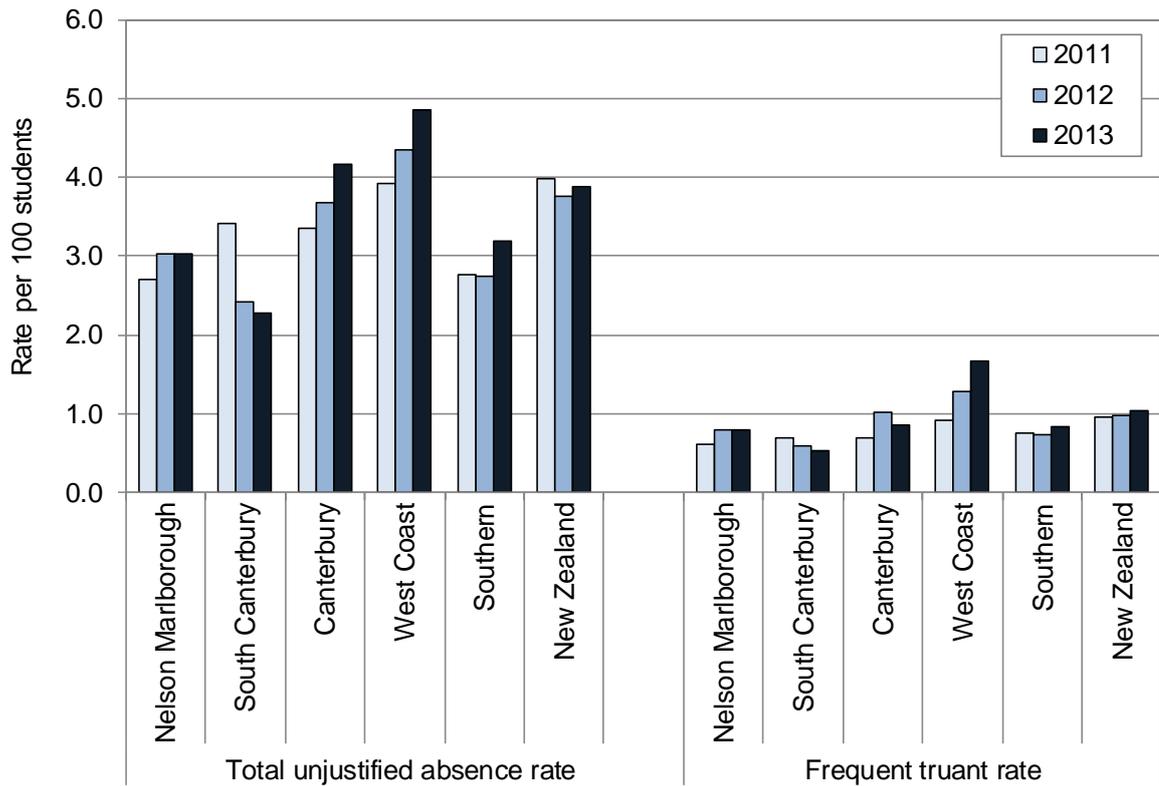
During 2011–2013, total unjustified absences and frequent truancy were higher in the West Coast than in the remaining South Island DHBs (**Figure 4**).

Distribution by Ethnicity

In the five South Island DHBs during 2011–2013, total unjustified absences and frequent truancy were generally higher for Māori and Pacific students than for European and Asian students (with the exception of the West Coast) (**Figure 5, Figure 6**).



Figure 4. Total unjustified absences and frequent truancy, South Island DHBs vs. New Zealand 2011–2013



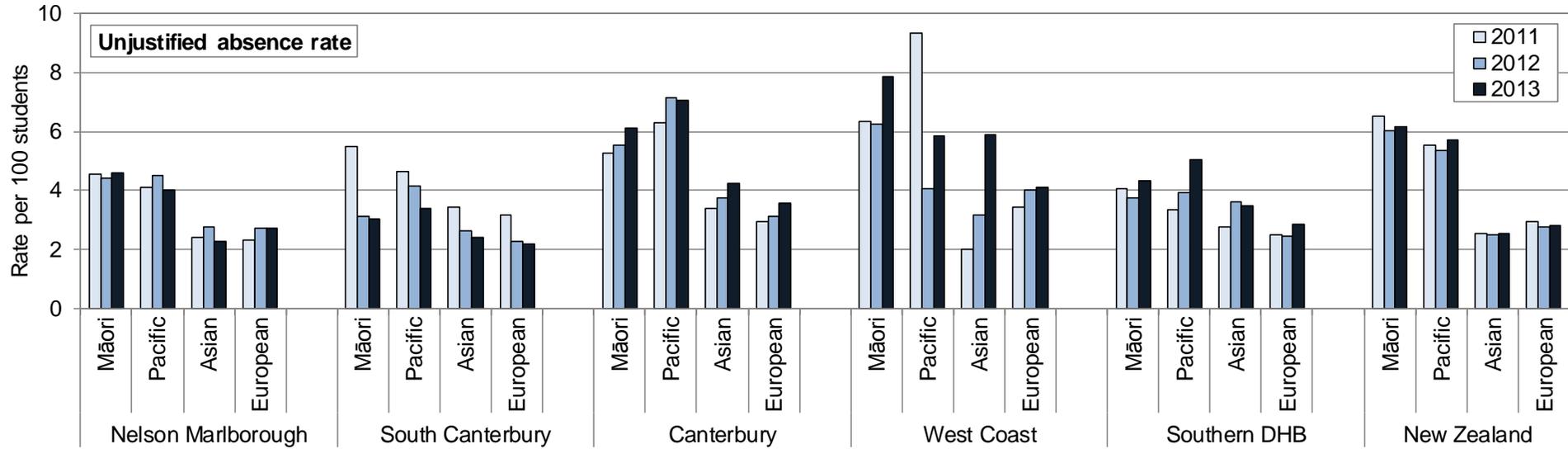
Source: Ministry of Education attendance surveys

Local Policy Documents and Evidence-based Reviews which Consider Interventions to Improve School Attendance

Table 1 (on page 158) provides additional local policy documents and evidence-based reviews specific to interventions to improve school attendance. There is considerable interaction between and overlap among education-related indicators, and this information should therefore be read alongside the other tables in this section: Early childhood education, Māori-medium education, Highest educational attainment and Stand-downs, suspensions exclusions and expulsions.

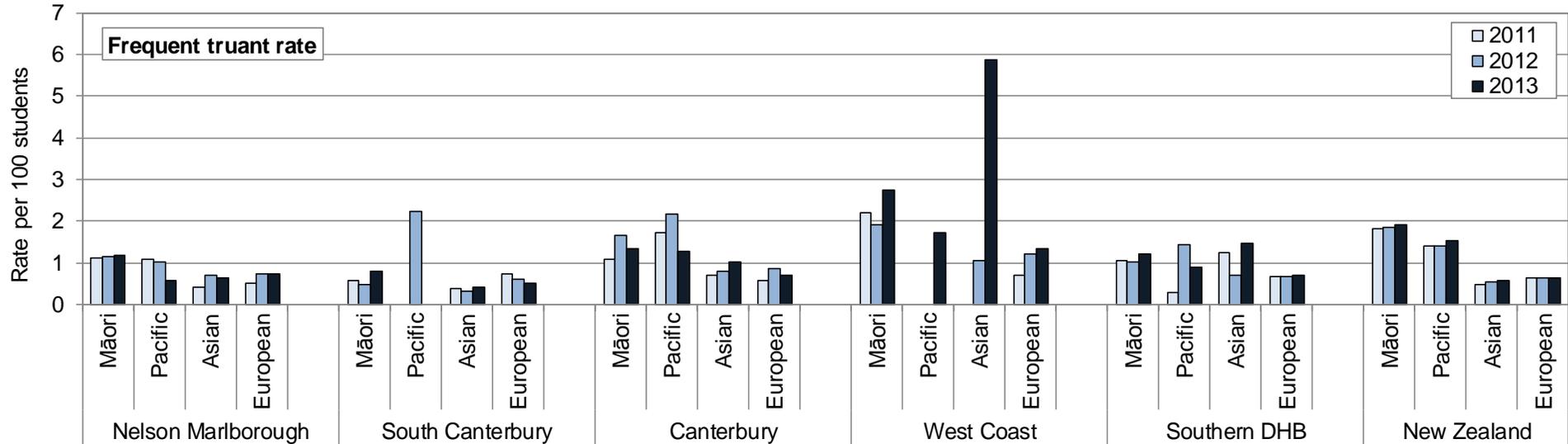


Figure 5. Total unjustified absences by ethnicity, South Island DHBs vs. New Zealand 2011–2013



Source: Ministry of Education attendance surveys

Figure 6. Frequent truancy by ethnicity, South Island DHBs vs. New Zealand 2011–2013



Source: Ministry of Education attendance surveys

Table 1. Policy documents relevant to the improvement of school attendance

Ministry of Education publications
<p>Ministry of Education. 2011. Attendance matters: Guidelines for implementing an effective attendance management plan. Wellington: Ministry of Education. http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/Attendance/ForBoardsAndPrincipals/~media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/PrimarySecondary/Attendance/AttendanceMatters.pdf</p> <p>These guidelines for boards of trustees, principals and teachers will help schools to focus on student attendance as a foundation for student engagement and achievement, develop and implement robust attendance management plans and effective processes and improve student attendance. The guidelines apply to all schools, even those with high levels of attendance, and especially schools with high absence rates. The guidelines include examples of effective attendance management strategies, templates and checklists to help schools undertake self-review, develop and evaluate an individually tailored attendance management plan. Relevant legislation and regulations are included in an appendix.</p>
Ministry of Social Development documents
<p>Centre for Social Research and Evaluation. 2013. Final Evaluation Report: Social Sector Trials Trialling New Approaches to Social Sector Change. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development. http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/initiatives/social-sector-trials/msd-social-sector-trials-evaluation-report-may-2013.pdf</p> <p>Reducing truancy was one of the high-level outcomes of the first Social Sector Trials (the Trials) implemented in March 2011 in six communities throughout Aotearoa New Zealand with a focus on 12–18 year old children. The Trials are a partnership between the Ministries of Social Development, Justice, Health, Education and the NZ Police and were set up to test a new approach to improving service delivery by reorganising funding and decision making processes across the social sector, and shifting control to local levels. This final evaluation outlines key findings from March 2011–February 2013. There are promising, although not verified, figures at the individual and population levels that truancy has reduced in some Trials locations. The common approach to reducing truancy in Trials locations was to work closely with schools, including primary schools as truancy is often perceived to start early. The Tokoroa campaign “It’s not okay to miss a day” Truancy Awareness Week was both highly targeted (inviting 35 families of truant children to the Community Education Expo where they were linked into support services) and aimed at the wider community (encouraging local businesses to adopt a truancy free zone). Tokoroa reported anecdotal evidence of individual successes (“one 14 year old student has gone from [zero] per cent attendance at the start of the process in 2011, to 54 per cent at the beginning 2012 [to] 71 per cent reported in June 2012”). Gore monitored their success in relation to school attendance using population level data. They reported a reduction in truancy rates following implementation of the Trials: unjustified absences dropped from 12% down to four per cent and intermittent unjustified absences dropped from 10.1 per cent to 3.1 per cent. These data came from monthly reports and have not yet been independently verified.</p>
Other relevant publications
<p>Taylor C. 2012. Improving attendance at school. London: Department for Education. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180772/DFE-00036-2012_improving_attendance_at_school.pdf</p> <p>This report from the UK Government’s expert adviser on behaviour summarises UK attendance data in 2009/2010 and highlights some of the issues. One interesting observation is that improving attendance by one percentage point in an ‘average sized secondary school’ will mean an additional 1,300 pupil-days in school. Patterns of non-attendance are often developed in primary school, and one of the recommendations is for primary schools to identify students who are developing a pattern of absence. The Adviser observed the following characteristics in three schools in socio-economically deprived areas that have attendance rates above the national average and very low persistent absence levels: determination to improve and sustain attendance rates, looking out for patterns of poor attendance in the earliest years and addressing them, supporting parents with walking buses, home visits or transport provision if required, refusal of parental requests for holidays unless there are exceptional circumstances. His recommendation to focus on improving attendance in primary school is justified thus: “where patterns of irregular attendance are picked up in nursery and reception, parents will be supported to get their children into school. Children with the worst attendance in the early years tend to come from the lowest socio-economic groups where attainment on entry to primary schools is often already notably lower than that of their peers. By ensuring that the parents of these children get into good attendance habits, schools will be able to do the work required to narrow this gap...Children will feel more included in the life of their school and will experience academic and social success. This will mean fewer children become disillusioned with education and they will be less inclined to misbehave or to truant when they are older.”</p>

National Audit Office. 2005. **Improving School Attendance in England**. London: National Audit Office.
<http://www.nao.org.uk/report/improving-school-attendance-in-england/>

The Department for Education and Skills has overall responsibility for school attendance in England and also sets national policy and funds local authorities and schools. Reducing total absence and unauthorised absence from school are among the Department's highest priorities. This report examines attendance in state schools in England for children of compulsory school age. It examines the factors associated with absence from school, and considers whether initiatives undertaken by the Department, local authorities and schools to reduce absence have been successful. In order to achieve this aim, the authors carried out statistical analysis of school absence in 2002–03, visited 17 schools, and through surveys and discussions obtained the views of head teachers, local authority staff, school inspectors and policymakers.

Websites

Ministry of Education. 2014. **Attendance services**.

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/Schools/Attendance/ForBoardsAndPrincipals/AttendanceServices.aspx> accessed 14 November 2014

Ministry of Education. 2013. **Attendance**.

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/AllAges/EducationInNZ/SchoolsInNewZealand/SchoolAttendance.aspx> accessed 14 November 2014

Note: The publications listed were identified using the search methodology outlined in Appendix 1.