This is the peer reviewed author accepted manuscript (post print) version of a published work that appeared in final form in:

te Riele, Kitty, Sullivan, Anna, Rudling, Emily, Bessell, Sharon, Higgins, Daryl, Guerzoni, Michael A 2024 'Being at school: a prerequisite for educational equity', Innovative school reforms: international perspectives on reimagining theory, policy, and practice for the future, ch. 6, pp. 89-112

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Being at school: A prerequisite for educational equity

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Abstract

Attending school is a pre-requisite not only for academic learning, but also for social connections, emotional wellbeing, and physical development. This is even more important for students experiencing disadvantage, such as those in out-of-home care. However, these students are likely to be absent from school far more often than their more privileged peers, which means school attendance is a crucial equity issue.

Importantly, absence from school is not just an educational concern but also a social concern. It is certainly not simply the fault of students, their families or carers. In this chapter, we outline three ways of reimagining school attendance. First, making school systems more inclusive to reduce system-generated absences. Second, ensuring schools are places where students want to be, to reduce unauthorised absences. Finally, strengthening links between social services and schools to enable students to be at school and reduce authorised absences. All of these require changes in practices, political will, and proper resourcing.

Enabling students experiencing disadvantage to gain the full benefits of school by being in class and in the playground alongside their peers is a key foundation for a better and more equitable future—both for these students themselves, and for our wider communities.

Keywords:

School attendance, school exclusion, out-of-home care, First Nations, equity

Setting the scene

Why school attendance matters

Education is central to securing a better future for students growing up with socio-economic disadvantage. A successful education is essential for a child's learning, development, and wellbeing in the present—and in turn for enhancing their future life chances. Our argument is that a high level of attendance (being at school and participating in formal and informal learning activities alongside relevant peers) is a prerequisite for benefitting from all that school has to offer (see AITSL 2019; Gottfried 2014; Hancock et al. 2018). It benefits not only academic learning, but also social connections at school, emotional wellbeing and physical development.

On the flipside, then, absence from school is likely to harm students. Academic performance is understandably impacted by regular absences, making school an increasingly difficult, even hostile, environment for those who are repeatedly absent – and in turn leading to feelings of alienation and exacerbating the number of absences (AITSL 2019; Gottfried 2014; Hancock et al. 2013; Lund and Stokes 2020). Socially and emotionally, friendships are central to students' experiences of education, and of life more broadly (Rose et al. 2022). Absences can undermine peer friendships, as well as relationships with teachers and school staff, further disconnecting students from school. Studies from high-income countries have indicated that school absences create a higher likelihood of early school leaving, social isolation, risky or illegal behavior, and poor employment opportunities (Cattan et al. 2017; Gottfried 2014; Wolf and Kupchik 2017). Absences from school to contribute to social exclusion both during and beyond the school years.

Importantly, each absence contributes to these negative outcomes and the effects are cumulative (Hancock et al. 2013). The duration of absences also matters, with longer absences having more significant detrimental impacts (even if the reason for the absence is valid, such as illness) unless appropriate support is made available (Hancock et al. 2018). It is no wonder, then, that the enabling importance of attendance is recognised by governments across Australia. An information flyer for parents in the state of New South Wales warns that "A day here and there doesn't seem like much" but that missing a day per fortnight adds up to four weeks missed per year, and to one whole year missed over the course of their school life (NSW DoE 2022, p. 3). Similarly, the "Every day counts" initiative in the state of Queensland emphasizes that "all children should be enrolled at school and attend on every school day" (QLD DoE 2021, n.p.).

There are some important nuances, however, that must be considered. Although such campaigns aim to reduce absences, they may have the practical effect of deepening social exclusion if families/carers feel blamed by school. Moreover, at times an absence from school may go hand-in-hand with positive opportunities for non-school learning—such as for family events, cultural practices, or travel—and not necessarily lead to a reduction in academic achievement (Hancock et al. 2018).

Attendance is an equity issue

Education is of critical importance in expanding opportunities for children and young people living in contexts of disadvantage. Although a range of structural factors create barriers to educational success for these students, school attendance is a necessary prerequisite for improving outcomes (Te Riele et al. 2022). Yet, the very students for whom school is critical are those most likely to be absent. Sosu et al.'s (2021) systematic review of 37 comparable studies from wealthy countries, found that students from low-SES [socio-economic status] backgrounds are more likely to experience school absences than their more privileged counterparts. Absences from school both reflect and recreate inequality.

In this chapter, we examine school absence and attendance particularly for students experiencing disadvantage. We focus on children and young people in out-of-home care (referred to as 'looked after' children in other national contexts) as a specific cohort experiencing deep social and educational exclusion. Students in out-of-home care are absent from school twice as many days in a school term than students with no involvement in the care system (Armfield et al. 2020), deepening already existing inequities.

In Australia, children are placed in out-of-home care by state or territory child protection services when the service determines that they are unable to live safely at home due to risk of abuse or neglect. Out-of-home care agencies support around 36,000 school-aged children (age 5-17) in care in Australia (AIHW 2023). Both in Australia and internationally, students in care are not well-served by education (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2021; Lund and Stokes 2020).

While school never represents the entirety of children's and young people's lives, in contemporary societies it is a dominant experience and one that sculpts the experience of childhood and youth. When children and young people are absent from school—either permanently or on a frequent basis—they are outside one of the most significant institutions of childhood. Thus, those who regularly experience absences are too often viewed as aberrant by their broader communities and as rebuffing—through choice, circumstance, or a combination of both—the key role and expectation of children and young people. The reasons for absence tend to receive less attention than deserved. Consequently, students who are already experiencing disadvantage are subjected to stigma and further marginalization.

Social exclusion and intersectionality

Understanding social exclusion and intersectionality provides help in illuminating the deep impacts of educational and social exclusion via school absences, particularly for students who experience disadvantage, including those who live in out-of-home care. Levitas et al. (2007, p. 25) offer useful insights. First, they define social exclusion:

> Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal

> relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.

Second, Levitas et al. (2007) indicate there are degrees of severity of social exclusion. They define "deep exclusion" as "exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances" (Levitas et al. 2007, p. 9).

As a group, children and young people in out-of-home care are a case in point. Children in out-of-home care tend to experience multiple placements, resulting in changes in school which is likely to create and exacerbate social exclusion (Mendes and Rogers 2020; Victorian CCYP 2023). Family dislocation and trauma, often combined with financial hardship, insecurity of placement, and lack of voice (Bessell 2011) lead to deep exclusion. In terms of the conceptualizations by Levitas et al. (2007), being in out-of-home care is a risk factor (i.e. it creates greater vulnerability to social exclusion), while absenteeism can be seen as a causal trigger for social exclusion, and likely deep social exclusion, for students in care.

Another useful concept is intersectionality, which can help in explaining how individual social categories deepen vulnerability. Intersectional analysis uncovers the layering effects of race, gender, disability, power, inequality and discrimination, identifying the reasons for the structural disadvantage experienced by categories of individuals (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016).

In Australia, a disproportionate number of children from Indigenous background and from low SES backgrounds are in the child protection system and care systems:

- 57 out of 1,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are in care, compared to 4.8 out of 1,000 for non-Indigenous children (AIHW 2023).
- 60% of 0-12 year olds with at least one substantiated claim of abuse or neglect were from the two lowest SES quintiles (AIHW, 2020).

Importantly, Indigenous identity and low socio-economic status intersect powerfully with each other—and with disability—to create risk factors for children being placed in out-of-home care. They similarly intersect to create risk factors for school absences. Graham et al. (2023, p. 19) demonstrate that not only do students in out-of-home care, Indigenous students, and students with disability get suspended more often—but this gets even worse "with increasing intersectionality, such that students who fell into all three priority equity groups (Indigenous + disability + in-care) were at the greatest risk of suspension".

Thus, intersectionality helps to reveal how the social exclusion that is created and perpetuated by school absences results from deeply entrenched, structural disadvantage and—significantly—discrimination. As a result, those students who have most to benefit from regular attendance at school too often end up missing out. Although school absences are often attributed to the behaviour or attitudes of individual students, an analysis that uses the lenses of social exclusion and intersectionality highlights the deeply structural factors at play.

Policy context

Australian national policy

Encouraging school attendance, particularly for students experiencing disadvantage, is a longstanding item of business within public policy for Australian governments. Attendance has been identified as a key indicator for achieving two major government objectives: "for school education services to be provided in an equitable manner" and "that school education services promotes student participation" (Productivity Commission 2021, s4.2, s4.3).

National documents (see Table [Chapter Number].1) represent a collective interest in improving service provision and outcomes for children and young people facing disadvantage. However, they lack specific key strategies pertinent to keeping vulnerable children at school. Under Australia's federal system of government, states and territories have primary responsibility for many sectors (including education and child protection). Commitments, principles and agreements in national documents are implemented by the six states and two territories in diverse ways, potentially undermining efforts towards achieving meaningful reform towards a more equitable future.

Table [Chapter Number].1: Key Australian national policy documents

Source	Quote
Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council 2019)	For Australia's education system to promote excellence and equity, governments and the education community must improve outcomes for educationally disadvantaged young Australians. […] Targeted support can help learners such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, those from regional, rural and remote areas, migrants and refugees, learners in out of home care, homeless young people, and children with disability to reach their potential. (p. 17)
Closing the Gap report 2020. (Australian Government 2020).	Target: Close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018). […] Based on Semester 1 school attendance rates for Years 1 to 10, attendance has not improved for Indigenous students over the past five years to 2019. (p. 33-34)
Disability Standards for Education (Australian Government 2005)	The objects of these Standards are: (a) to eliminate, as far as possible, discrimination against persons on the ground of disability in the area of education and training; and (b) to ensure, as far as practicable, that persons with disabilities have the same rights to equality before the law in the area of education and training as the rest of the community […]. (p.6)

National Standards for Out-of-Home Care (DFCSAF 2011)	Standard 6: Children and young people in care access and participate in education and early childhood services to maximise their educational outcomes. (p. 7)

Policy tensions

Although Australian policy statements, on the whole, are supportive of improving educational outcomes for students experiencing disadvantage, there are tensions between high level policy commitments (See Table [Chapter Number].1) and how they are enacted (Ball et al. 2012). The presence of policy or legislation does not guarantee implementation, nor success, at the meso and micro levels. Moreover, tensions may exist between various national and state policies.

In Australia, as in other countries, schools together with education systems usually have responsibility for monitoring and addressing absences. However, legislation and/or regulation also puts the onus on parents/carers to ensure that children attend school (ACARA 2020). Education departments use materials such as fact sheets and social media to advise parents/carers about their obligations, to explain why attendance matters, and to provide tips for getting children to school. Parents (and students) may be subject to compulsory mediation, court orders or even prosecution to enforce the requirement to attend school (e.g. NSW DoE 2022). This locates responsibility for attendance on parents/carers and largely ignores the role of schools, services and systems, which is unhelpful for equitable access to being at school. Many reasons for absences are outside the capacity of students, parents/carers and even schools to address (Kearney 2008; Te Riele et al. 2022).

Moreover, legislative and policy frameworks are, at times, contradictory. On the one hand they frame expectations about compulsory attendance at school, but on the other hand they direct schools to use exclusionary discipline practices (removing students from class or from the whole school) to manage what are considered undesirable student behaviours (Sullivan et al. 2020a). Of additional concern is the application of discipline procedures to exclude students (including through time-outs and detentions, Sullivan 2016) for behaviours that are related to a disability and to consequences of trauma – contravening obligations to make reasonable accommodations to provide support at the national (Australian Government 2005) and international level (UNESCO 1994).

These discipline practices are commonly taken-for-granted and relied on in schools. However, we know that "little evidence supports punitive and exclusionary approaches" (Osher et al. 2010, p. 48) and they are disproportionately applied to particular groups of students experiencing vulnerability (Graham et al. 2023; Sullivan et al. 2020b). For students in care exclusion can commence early: the Victorian CCYP (2023, p. 217) shows that in the very first ('Foundation') year of primary school: "Foundation students in care were 12 times more likely to be suspended than other foundation students".

Children's rights

Children not only have a legal obligation to attend school—they also have a right to education. Rights-based perspectives draw attention to the responsibility of governments and agencies for ensuring the right to education is met for all children and young people, including those experiencing disadvantage. At a statutory level, Australia is signatory to a wide range of agreements that are relevant to this project, most centrally the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1990).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has urged the Australian government to do more to reach school attendance targets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and to improve early childhood, primary and secondary education for particular groups, including "children living in remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities, children in marginalised and disadvantaged situations, children in alternative care and children from refugee and migrant backgrounds" (United Nations 2019, p. 12).

It is important to note, however, that ratification of United Nations Conventions that entitle children to an education is only the first step (Tomasevski, 2004). To achieve full implementation all agencies with the ability to make a positive difference and to reduce social exclusion have a duty to act and need to be held to account. Moreover, focusing on potential actions by agencies with responsibility for students experiencing disadvantage helps to avoid deficit approaches that place the onus for attendance (and blame for absences) on students, and instead to generate strengths-based and productive solutions.

Social policy levers

Government itself is, of course, a key agency with both responsibility and power to make a difference, at both federal and state/territory levels. The core of this chapter focuses on actions specifically for promoting student attendance at school. However, there are also broader structural and systemic factors that require specific policy levers need to be enacted.

The dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia after colonisation has ongoing negative impacts, as evidenced through the "stubborn continuation of Indigenous poverty and disadvantage" (Westbury and Dillon 2019, p. 2). The over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care (AIHW 2023) is of particular concern given the history of removing children from Indigenous families, known as the "stolen generations" (Douglas and Walsh 2013). Although Indigenous children are more likely to come to the attention of child protection authorities—and be removed from their families—it is not their identity per se but rather the structural factors associated with their cultural group that are contributing to this, such as racism, economic and social disadvantage, and cultural bias in practices of welfare authorities (Higgins and Hunt 2024). The deeply structural nature of Indigenous social exclusion means sustained, systemic reform is needed, with genuine opportunities for leadership by and collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander peoples (Westbury and Dillon 2019).

In Australia, about one in six children live in poverty (Davidson et al. 2023). This is an indictment on such a wealthy country. Children often are very aware of financial hardship and try to buffer their parents/carers from unaffordable expenses, including expenses associated with school (Bessell 2022; Skattebol et al. 2011). A key lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that governments can address the issue of children living in poverty. In Australia, social welfare payments were temporarily increased through the 'JobSeeker' initiative, lifting many children out of poverty (Bessell 2022; Davidson et al. 2023). Cruelly, these increases were wound back a year later—but they demonstrate that governments have the ability to significantly reduce poverty.

Ultimately, systemic policy changes to reduce poverty and structural exclusion will also reduce barriers to being at school for children who, as a society, we have not served well.

Types of school absences

When education departments emphasise that "every day counts" (see above), they tend to be particularly concerned about unauthorised absences. These refer to instances when a student is absent from school without a reason provided to the school—or the school did not accept the reason provided was valid. Once such absences become frequent or persistent, they are referred to as 'truancy'. Although students and/or their families tend to be blamed for unauthorised absences the reasons are likely to be complex (Hancock et al. 2013; Kearney 2008), including students' school experiences and life circumstances.

Authorised absences are sometimes considered less problematic, since in these cases the student has a valid and accepted reason to be away from school, for example due to illness or to attend appointments that cannot be scheduled outside school time. However, Hancock et al. (2013) found that any absence (even if authorised, and even if only small) has a negative impact; and that the effects are cumulative. Schools and other agencies therefore also need to provide support to students and families for reducing authorised absences.

In addition, some absences are system-generated through active school and system actions as well as system neglect. First, disciplinary absences include time-out, suspension, exclusion, and expulsion imposed by schools and governed by education system policies (Johnson and Sullivan 2016a). When students are removed from their class or from the whole school, not only do they miss out for that period of absence, but they also are less likely to feel connected and engaged when they return.

Second, another system-endorsed practice that keeps students out of class is part-time (or 'managed') enrolment at school—also referred to euphemistically as a 'modified timetable'. Under education system policies and procedures part-time enrolment is allowed if there is a sound reason why this is in the best interest of the child, for example due to ill-health. However, there are indications that part-time enrolment is used unofficially to manage children's behaviour. For example

Indigenous students in care are placed on "reduced hours of schooling in response to their trauma-related behaviours and the inability of schools to work with them" (Victorian CCYP 2016, p. 87).

Third, some students are entirely missing from school for months or years, falling through the cracks. For example, this may happen when school systems do not keep track of students who leave one school without enrolling in a new one. Watterston and O'Connell (2019, p. 7) estimate, across Australia, the size of the group of 'missing' compulsory school age students is about 50,000 students. This reflects what Bessell and Tennant (2023) refer to as state neglect, with government departments failing in their duty to ensure all children can access their right to education.

Not all of these various ways in which students miss out on being at school (unauthorised, authorised and system-generated absences) are captured in official attendance statistics. In Australia, attendance rates are calculated and reported publicly through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2020).

Counted as absences are:

- Authorised and unauthorised absences as recorded by schools, for either a whole day or as a part-day (0.5) if more than two hours but less than a full day.
- Absences by students who are enrolled but not attending at all (school refusal);
- Disciplinary actions that require students not to be on school grounds.

However not counted as absences are:

- Authorised and unauthorised absences for less than two hours. In such cases schools must record the student as having attended all day;
- Disciplinary actions where students remain on school grounds but are removed from their classes. These students are counted as attending, even though they are missing out on instructional time;
- Missing school due to being on a part-time enrolment;
- Students who are enrolled but have not attended for six consecutive weeks and the school cannot confirm whether their enrolment is ongoing.

Clearly many absences—some of them very substantial—are less visible even though students do miss out on the academic, social, and personal benefits of being at school. The remainder of this chapter proposes ways of reimagining the future so that all students are enabled to be at school as a foundation for equitable education and life outcomes. We have separated these into sections addressing system-generated absences, unauthorized absences, and authorized absences. In practice, of course, there is overlap between what is needed for each of these.

Inclusive education systems: reducing system-generated absences

Governments have an obligation to uphold children's right to education. Moreover, education systems have a major responsibility for ensuring students are not prevented or discouraged from regularly attending school. Yet there are clear

tensions between the legal obligation that children and young people attend school and disciplinary policies based on exclusion. Therefore changes to legislative and system policies are required which could, in themselves, make a significant difference to enabling children and young people to actually be at school. Rather than blaming students or their families/carers, school systems should start by taking responsibility for reducing absences created by their own policies and practices.

Excluding exclusions

All school systems in Australia (as in many other countries) endorse punitive disciplinary measures that mean students are excluded from attending class or school, usually because their behaviour is considered unacceptable. Children in care commonly have experienced significant trauma and many of them have diagnosed or undiagnosed learning, emotional and/or cognitive disabilities that mean they need support for learning to regulate their behaviours (Brunzell et al. 2015; Garcia-Molsosa et al. 2021; Berger et al. 2023). The reduction or cessation of exclusionary school discipline practices is essential to improving student attendance. Exclusionary practices are those that remove the student from the classroom as a form of punishment and are associated with both student absenteeism and poor educational outcomes (Kearney et al. 2023).

So how can countries like Australia reimagine their education systems to reduce such imposed absences and stop relying on school exclusions – whether through time-out, suspension, or expulsion? Emerging research is showing that more inclusive education policies lead to less students being actively refrained from attending school. For example, a UK study examined contemporary policies and practices to examine why Scotland has much lower rates of school exclusion than England, Wales and Northern Ireland (McCluskey et al. 2019). The research found that Scotland's success in reducing exclusions was due to a policy focus on prevention and attending to deep levels of disadvantage. There was "a national, long-term strategy on prevention and early intervention aimed at helping school staff to build positive relationships with children and young people at risk of exclusion" (McCluskey et al. 2019, p. 8). There was an "emphasis on 'inclusion' and 'engagement' ahead of exclusion, and on 'preventing' ahead of 'managing' exclusions" (p. 8-9).

Reframing education policy and practice in ways that build schools as places where children and young people want to be, where they feel well connected, respected, and wanted is key. This requires something more radical, something that is legislated, supported by policy, and resourced so schools can enact it successfully. It requires rethinking current views, revising practices and collaboration. In essence it requires political commitment because it takes time to turn education systems around.

A notable example is Portugal, which over the last 20 years has reformed its education system around inclusion (OECD 2022). Inclusion for all and by all. Ainscow (2022) explains:

> Portuguese policy makers have used inclusion as a guiding principle for educational reform. Crucially, this is not seen as a discrete policy—a task to be allocated to certain individuals or groups. Rather, inclusion is regarded as a principle that must inform all educational policies, not least those concerned with the curriculum, accountability, funding and teacher education. In this sense, it is seen as being everybody's responsibility. (n.p.)

Such a significant reform requires leadership from government to support education systems and schools rather than demanding continual change and involves an ongoing commitment to inclusion.

Full participation

System wide inclusive approaches to schooling would require abolishing legislation, policies and practices that stop students attending. Slee et al. (2019, p. 1) argue that inclusive education involves "building of strategies to intervene and dismantle exclusion as a social phenomenon in general and educational tradition in particular". Thus, reimagining education systems to promote school attendance should involve a shift in focus to humane and inclusive approaches to all students and involve fair (not equal) treatment of students by responding to individual needs. Fair treatment may well include part-time enrolment as a short-term support measure for some students. However, the right to education is not a part-time right.

> Modified timetables, if misused, were identified as damaging the educational engagement of children and young people in care, particularly when returning them to full-time hours is not prioritised. In these instances, children and young people in care fall further behind their peers academically and lose their sense of belonging and connection to school. (Victorian CCYP 2023, p. 211)

Education systems need to provide the scaffolding required—not just for students and their families, but also for teachers and school support staff—to enable a return to full participation in education.

Repairing the cracks

Education systems do not have foolproof tracking processes, which means some students may go 'missing' entirely. They may fall through the cracks after moving house and leaving one school without enrolling in a new school (Watterston and O'Connell 2019); or they may find schools resist their enrolment after they leave a youth custodial setting (MacDonald et al. 2020; Mitchell 2016). Their very significant absences are invisible if no school has responsibility for reporting on their attendance.

This is a particular concern for children in out-of-home care, who often are moved between placements. A change in their placement may lead to a change in where they live, which also may change what school they go to, disrupting their connection with school and the school community (Victorian CCYP 2023). Up to one third of Australian children in care experience "five or more case workers during their time in care, be placed in different geographical areas than their birth families and experience multiple school changes disrupting support networks and peer relationships" (Roche et al. 2023, p. 2). As Watterston and O'Connell (2019, p. 13) argue: "school movement provides an opportunity for the 'relay baton' to be dropped if schools are unable to confirm that students have enrolled and are attending in their new location".

It is up to education systems to keep track of students, to ensure not only that they are enrolled in a new school—but actually welcomed and included. This needs to be done whether the new school is in the same system or not, for example moving from the independent to the government education sector, or from one state or territory to another. This should not be about putting a safety net in place—education systems need to repair any cracks to prevent students from falling through them in the first place.

Schools as places where students want to be: reducing unauthorised absences

System-wide changes outlined above only help if they are enacted in schools. Those changes are especially crucial for reducing absences that are due to education system policies and practices. In addition, there is much schools can do to make students want to be at school. As Gardner and Crockwell (2006) compellingly argue:

> It is not youths' responsibility to adapt, either within school or within the community, to structures that place them at a disadvantage for educational and community success; rather it is the responsibility of the community and educators to create learning environments and structures which demonstrate partnership with youth. (p. 9)

Absences are reduced when students feel safe and supported at school. This applies to students in every grade and at any age. For students in care for example, reduced attendance in primary school has extensive effects on academic performance and outcomes (Kearney et al. 2023); and students who have their first care experience during their teenage years are more likely to have poorer attendance and educational outcomes (Kääriäläa et al. 2018). Effective supports for students in care need to occur across the students' learning life course, from early childhood to the upper secondary years.

Strong relations with teachers

Student connectedness with school is enhanced by supportive relationships, and this is arguably especially important for students who have experienced marginalisation in school and society (McGregor et al. 2017). However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often feel teachers do not care. This does not necessarily mean teachers actually do not care, but circumstances may conspire against them being able to demonstrate their care—for example as the result of large class sizes; teachers not knowing about the difficulties these students face; pressure on teachers to move through the curriculum quickly, leaving some students behind; or having to apply punitive school or system disciplinary practices. Many of these reasons are outside teachers' control. Nevertheless, the effect on students can be profound, as Johnson and Sullivan (2016b, p. 182) explain:

> Students' perceptions of this lack of care begin within the first few years of school and develop into mutually negative relationships, which are difficult to reconcile.

It need not be like this. Research with 'second chance' schools (or 'flexible learning programs') demonstrates that positive relationships can be developed, even when students' previous experiences have been dire. This should involve genuine listening, flexibility, an ethos of critical care and a whole-school approach to respond to difficulties with support (McGregor et al. 2017; Te Riele 2006; Te Riele et al. 2017). The success of these schools in establishing strong relationships stems partly from a different approach but is also aided by much smaller student-teacher ratios than in most conventional schools. Additionally, actions should provide nuance to the tracking of school attendance and absence data by paying attention to students' contexts to understand what barriers are in place and then addressing them, rather than admonishing students or their parents/carers for absences (Kearney and Childs 2023).

Students in out-of-home care, who tend to experience much instability in their lives, benefit from educator consistency within their school. Being taught by one trusted teacher over multiple years contributes to students' sense of safety and belonging (Kearney and Childs 2023). Teacher shortages and staff turnover (especially in schools in communities facing poverty and disadvantage) make it less likely that students have the same teacher in their school over multiple years (Rice, Richardson and Watt 2017). This is not something that individual schools can fix—it requires sector / system wide action. Students in care value a mutually trusting and respectful relationship with a teacher who can provide them with academic and emotional support (Townsend et al. 2023). Connecting students in care with the same teachers for two or more years has "been found to improve student achievement, attachment, attendance, attitudes toward school, behaviour, motivation, and graduation rates" (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey 2018, p. 16).

Schools have a responsibility to support students to develop positive relationships with trusted adults at school, as this contributes to both student resilience and

belonging which (in turn) enables attendance and engagement (Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey 2018; Townsend et al. 2023).

Feeling safe at school

Life is, too often, stressful for students already experiencing disadvantage, due to poverty, discrimination, and instability. When students also find school stressful their learning capacity is further reduced (Berger et al. 2023). Strong relationships with at least one teacher are part of making students feel safe at school, but there is more that schools and school systems can do. For example, there are many practices that support students to feel safe at school.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Australian Government 2020) to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples includes a commitment to embedding and practicing meaningful cultural safety in government mainstream institutions and agencies. It is defined in terms of "overcoming the power imbalances of places, people and policies" between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people majority non-Indigenous positions" (Australian Government 2020 p. 52). Providing cultural safety for Indigenous students and families is essential in educational settings (HRSCIA 2017; Morrison et al. 2019). Schools make it more inviting for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attend when they provide culturally safe environments and students feel welcomed and valued (Ockenden 2014).

Keeping school life calm, with stable routines, can help students feel safe – especially if they are affected by trauma (Brunzell et al. 2015). This is also vital for students who chronically refuse to attend "due to a severe negative emotional reaction to school" (SEERC 2023, p.12). Specific strategies to create a safe environment include developing positive peer relations and effectively addressing bullying (OECD 2013); reducing punitive approaches to discipline (McGregor et al. 2017; also see above); and sheltering students from short-term and ad hoc interventions (Roche et al. 2023).

Embedding trauma informed practices can cultivate a sense of safety through consistency (Roche et al. 2023). In turn, this supports attendance and improved academic outcomes for students who have experienced adversity (Berger et al. 2023; Brunzell et al. 2015; Roseby and Gascoigne 2021). The report by the Victorian CCYP (2023) on education for students in care notes that:

> Throughout consultations for the inquiry, both children and young people and stakeholders commonly raised the role of trauma, and the system's failure to understand it, as contributing to educational disengagement. The Commission heard that inappropriate responses from principals and teachers often led to either an escalation in challenging behaviours or students pulling away from activities and ultimately from school. (p. 167).

Trauma-informed school approaches encompass school design, leadership, teacher capacity, and disciplinary practices (Brunzell et al. 2015). Moreover, teachers themselves need to be supported to prevent vicarious trauma (McGregor et al. 2017; Te Riele et al. 2017). Supporting marginalized students can place a high emotional burden on teachers—but such emotional labour can also be empowering and inspiring for teachers (McGregor et al. 2017; Te Riele et al. 2017).

Welcoming input and participation

Finally, students are likely to want to be at school when the focus is on their strengths and interest, and not just on their needs—and when they have opportunities to have input. Students and their families in disadvantaged communities hold valuable funds of knowledge (Moll et al. 2006) that complement the expertise of educators. When teachers draw on students' funds of knowledge, students benefit in terms of their wellbeing in the classroom and engagement with school (Volman and 't Gilde 2021). Similarly, treating students as "responsible, reliable and important individuals" has been shown to strengthen their school engagement (Mitsoni 2006, p. 167).

Importantly, children and young people themselves need to be at the centre of efforts to support them to be at school. This is not just about tailoring support to each individual student (e.g. see WA DoE 2020, p.7) but also actively inviting input from students. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1990), children have the right to have a say on issues that affect them. When students are genuinely heard and enabled to actively participate in their schooling this facilitates a stronger sense of belonging and greater enjoyment of learning (OECD 2013; McGregor et al. 2017) which in turn support attendance. This is particularly important for students who traditionally have relatively had little opportunity for input—including students in out-of-home care (Bessell 2011) and Indigenous students (Morrison et al. 2019; Ockenden 2014). Facilitating genuine input and participation, especially in a way that is inclusive of students who do not usually get this chance, necessitates significant resourcing—especially staff time. Since schools in communities facing disadvantage tend to be stretched for resources, this cannot be left to schools but requires targeted support from school systems and governments.

Collaboration to enable attendance: reducing authorised absences

Researchers, policy makers and advocates increasingly call for a public health approach to prevention of problems that require a complex intersection of social change and active interventions (Higgins 2020). There is interest in applying this approach not just to physical health issues but into wellbeing domains—which have multi-faceted and complex risk factors, drivers, and causal pathways. Improving school attendance is an appropriate candidate for applying a public health approach, because it is not just an education issue but a wider social issue. This is captured

well in the "10-point plan to improve attendance" in the state of Western Australia (WA DoE 2020, p. 2).

> The causes of student absence are multi-dimensional, complex and numerous. They are often considered in isolation when, in reality, students may face a range of compounding issues.

The multiplicity and complexity of influences on absence from school enfold the whole ecosystem around a student (Childs and Scanlon 2022).

Interagency collaboration

The WA plan mentioned above recognises that "complex factors both inside and outside the school gate" (WA DoE 2020, p. 1) need to be addressed to enhance attendance, such as the student's mental and physical health; family's financial security and stable housing; and community's safe environment and sound play areas. Therefore, it requires "a cross-agency commitment to a new way of doing things that is community-led and strengths based" (p. 1).

This is especially important for students in out-of-home care, as they are likely to be connected with agencies including the school, the care provider, the child protection authority, various providers of health services, and family court or other legal agencies (Victorian CCYP 2023; Wright et al. 2017). Action in one agency in isolation from others is unlikely to be effective (Gill and Oakley 2018). Responsibility for the education of children in care is often caught between siloed departments and systems (Montserrat and Casas 2018). The workload of Child Protection case workers means they commonly have "limited capacity to prioritise the education of children and young people in care" (Victorian CCYP 2023, p. 110). Moreover, the plethora of social services as well as the turnover of service providers (which are often reliant on short-term government and philanthropic funding) makes navigation challenging—especially for children, young people, and families already facing disadvantage. Interagency collaboration, therefore, is vital for enabling students to be at school (Childs and Grooms 2018).

Students in care are likely to have more reasons for "authorised absences" than their peers—for example for medical and legal appointments and managing contact with their parents, siblings (who may or may not also be in care) and extended family. Although approved by the school, these absences can add up to significant disruptions to schooling attendance for students in care (Working Group 2010). Interagency collaboration is essential for supporting these students to be at school as much as possible, by fostering shared responsibility between schools and other agencies for scheduling appointments so they have the least negative impact on engagement with school.

A wellbeing framework

To enable interagency collaboration—which is notoriously challenging—it is useful to have a shared language as well as shared perspective on issues and priorities (Wright et al. 2017). A productive example is 'the Nest'—a wellbeing framework for children and young people developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY 2023). It brings together the different elements that a child or young person needs to thrive. Although "learning" is one of the six domains, the Nest recognises that success in one domain like this is dependent on wellbeing in all the other domains. For example, if a young person doesn't have access to material basics (nutritious food; clothes), isn't loved and cared for by family; or doesn't have a positive sense of themselves and their culture—then their wellbeing in the learning domain is likely compromised. Hence, enabling students to be at school – especially students experiencing social marginalization—requires attention beyond schools and education systems.

Connected to 'Welcoming input and participation' discussed above, participation is also one of the domains in the Nest (ARACY 2023, p. 7). Actively involving children and young people makes for more successful interagency collaboration. Students themselves are experts about their own lives (Gardner and Crockwell 2006) and have a right to have input (UN 1990). For example, they can contribute to the development of their individual education plan since they know best what works well for them to reduce their authorized absences. For students in care, this may include flexible study times to enable them to attend medical or legal appointments, like court or reunification processes (Childs and Scanlon 2022).

Schools as hubs for wraparound support

Schools are identified as an ideal location for multi-disciplinary, multi-agency community hubs because they are non-stigmatizing places (Higgins et al. 2022) and intended to be universal provision for all children and young people. Hubs are designed to be "welcoming, informal, non-threatening and universally acceptable" (Soriano et al. 2008, p. 43). They are a way of breaking down or overcoming structural and practical barriers to accessing services (MCRI, 2023). Using schools as 'community hubs' (Teo et al. 2022) means that—instead of a child or family having to find out about and attend all the individual services from which they may benefit—the services are brought together in a location where children young people already are. This can have the added benefit of making families feel welcome on school grounds, which, in turn, can improve attendance.

Hubs fit with an ecological approach to addressing absenteeism as proposed by Childs and Scanlon (2022). They recommend schools, community services, and families develop a "meso-system" intervention plan for students in care where students in care, schools, community health services, and families to work together (also see Montserrat and Casas 2018). When schools partner with organisations like allied health and the justice system in ways that are tailored to individual student circumstances, it can lead to intentional and interconnected community

collaboration that builds networks of support around the student in care and reduces the reasons why a student might be absent from school (Childs and Grooms 2018).

Many services in hubs are focused on the broader needs of children and their families that support wellbeing more generally. A good example is the Communities for Children (CfC) initiative in Australia (see Edwards et al. 2014). The key focus was on early intervention/prevention programs, designed to strengthen family functioning and targeting the whole family. Meetings with family members were usually held onsite at school, which provided families with positive interactional experiences facilitated by a collaborative leadership team comprising a parent partner, a school partner, a community-based agency partner and a community-based partner. This helps to overcome barriers to attending school, to normalise engagement with school premises, and to maximise the value when students are at school.

Wrapping up

The changes in practices and policies outlined in this chapter to reduce system-generated, unauthorised, and authorised absences won't happen by themselves, or overnight. They require political will and persistence beyond election cycles. They require professional learning, not just for educators but for the range of professionals inside and beyond schools who support students and families. They require setting up mechanisms that facilitate collaboration, not just between agencies but also (and vitally) with children and young people. At a broader level, they require systemic approaches to reducing poverty and deep exclusion in our society. And all of this requires adequate and secure resourcing.

Even if all these requirements were met and changes implemented, there will always be good reasons why students occasionally are not in class or at school. A goal of 100% attendance for every student is unrealistic and possibly counterproductive. There will always be a need for strategies to support students who have missed out on class to help them catch up academically and remain connected socially. But acting on everything outlined in this chapter would go a long way towards maximising attendance and learning opportunities by enabling students experiencing disadvantage to be in class and in the playground alongside their peers. It would also make for a strong foundation for a better and more equitable future – both for these students themselves, and for our wider communities.

Acknowledgement

The research informing this chapter was partially supported by the Australian Government through the ARC's Linkage Projects funding scheme (project LP220100130) and by partner organizations. These organizations are: Life Without Barriers; Berry Street Victoria; Stronger Smarter Institute; Commissioner for Children and Young People (Tasmania); Allambi Care; Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT; Key Assets Australia; and Mackillop Family Services. The views

expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the ARC; nor of the project partner organizations. For information about the project please see: https://www.utas.edu.au/community-and-partners/peter-underwood-centre/fostering-school-attendance-for-students-in-out-of-home-care

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List of Abbreviations [to be included in the book]

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority	ACARA
Australian Institute of Health and Welfare	AIHW
Australian Institute of Teaching and Learning	AITSL
Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth	ARACY
Commissioner for Children and Young People	CCYP
Closing the Gap	CtG
Department of Education	DoE
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	OECD
United Nations	UN
Western Australia	WA