EVIDENCE BRIEF

School Absenteeism and Mental Health

This evidence brief synthesizes current research on the relationship between school absenteeism and mental health, with a focus on **children and youth in Ontario**. It is intended for **school staff** who work with students from kindergarten to grade 12.

This brief summarizes what the evidence tells us about absenteeism, emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), and the role of schools in supporting attendance and mental health. It also highlights system-level implications and evidence-informed approaches that can guide practice.

Main messages

- **Chronic absenteeism**, defined as missing 10% or more days in one school year, has increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic (1).
- Students with mental health conditions and students from **marginalized groups** who experience systemic inequities are more likely to experience absenteeism (2,3).
- **Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA)**, previously referred to as school refusal, reflects unmet mental health needs and benefits from supportive, non-blaming approaches (4).
- **Multi-tiered systems of support**, inclusive school environments and strong connections between schools and community services show promise in improving attendance (3–5).
- **Early identification and coordinated multi-tiered interventions** are important for addressing absenteeism and mitigating associated academic and mental health challenges (6).

Overview

School absenteeism continues to be a growing concern across Ontario, with students attending school less consistently than they did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (1).

> Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing 10% or more of the school year and is commonly used as a quantitative indicator of elevated risk for negative student outcomes related to learning and well-being.

Problematic absenteeism includes patterns of attendance behaviour, like frequent absences, partial attendance (e.g., late arrivals or early departures) or avoidance linked to emotional or environmental factors (7).

Absenteeism, whether excused or unexcused (as stipulated under the Ontario Education Act), may be associated with negative academic and well-being outcomes. Students with higher rates of absence often have lower grades than students with fewer absences (1) and chronic absenteeism has been identified as a key early risk factor for school disengagement, school dropout and longer-term mental health, financial and academic difficulties.

> From a school perspective, absenteeism often functions as a warning sign. Students who struggle with attendance are frequently navigating additional challenges, either within the school environment or in their broader social and family contexts (1). Identifying and responding to attendance concerns early can support prevention and timely intervention.

Understanding absenteeism trends remains complex. Definitions and reporting practices vary across schools, boards, provinces and countries, and attendance data are not always consistently collected or publicly available. In many cases, data are not disaggregated by identity, which limits the ability to identify inequities and respond with targeted, identity-affirming approaches.

The many stories and circumstances behind absenteeism

> Absenteeism does not occur for a single reason, nor does it affect all students in the same way.

Students who miss school represent a heterogeneous group with diverse experiences, identities and needs (6). A student's identity, social context and a range of in-school and out-of-school structural factors all influence their ability to regularly attend school (6).

Research indicates that a significant proportion of students who experience school absenteeism meet criteria for mental health conditions, compared to a much smaller proportion of students who attend regularly (8). In addition, students from marginalized groups often experience higher rates of school absenteeism, reflecting broader systemic and structural barriers within education, health and social systems (8).

Although Ontario school boards may disaggregate data locally, current literature in this area is limited in illustrating these inequities. Studies in the United States show higher rates of absenteeism among

racialized students and those with intersecting identities (8). Similarly, 2S/LGBTQIA+ youth report higher levels of school absenteeism, with mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression emerging as strong predictors of unexcused absences (8).

These findings underscore the importance of identity-affirming approaches. Attendance interventions that fail to consider a student's lived experiences and systemic barriers may be less effective and risk further disengagement. Effective approaches to absenteeism are responsive, inclusive and grounded in an understanding of equity and belonging.

Emotionally based school avoidance

> Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) is "a broad term used to describe children and young people who frequently do not attend school due to emotional and mental health needs (4)".

EBSA represents one of the most common ways that absenteeism manifests among students experiencing anxiety and depression or other internalizing difficulties.

> Research suggests that EBSA is influenced by a combination of both 'push' and 'pull' factors.

'Push' factors increase distress and make attendance difficult, such as academic pressure, bullying or overwhelming school environments. At the same time, 'pull' factors draw students away from school, including relief from anxiety when staying at home, increased access to family, avoidance of feared situations or engaging in preferred alternatives such as screen use, sleep or unstructured time (9). These interacting dynamics are closely linked to unmet emotional needs and student perceptions of safety, belonging and competence within the school environment.

An important shift in the literature has been moving away from language focused on refusal or defiance. Reframing attendance difficulties as avoidance emphasizes understanding, compassion, collaboration and systemic inequities, rather than blame directed toward students or families (4). This shift supports stronger partnerships between schools and families and creates space for addressing the underlying causes of absenteeism.

Supporting students experiencing EBSA requires coordinated efforts across schools, families and community partners.

> Effective responses prioritize rebuilding a student's sense of safety and connection to school, addressing mental health needs in a supportive manner and bolstering the surrounding social and structural environment.

How school can address attendance challenges

Research supports the use of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) as an effective approach to promoting school attendance across Ontario school systems (3). Within an MTSS framework, ongoing attendance monitoring is essential for identifying emerging concerns early, tracking patterns over time and determining the level of support required. Attendance data can help schools recognize changes in engagement that may otherwise go unnoticed, such as sporadic absences, repeated late arrivals or patterns linked to specific days, classes or circumstances, allowing for timely and responsive intervention (3).

Tier One

At the universal level (Tier One), schools focus on strategies that support all students in an identity-affirming, culturally aware manner. These include fostering a positive school climate, promoting a sense of belonging, engagement and social-emotional learning, providing accessible and responsive classroom instruction that supports diverse learning needs, and building strong, supportive relationships between students, staff and families (3,4,6).

> Connecting with students and maintaining daily check-ins with trusted adults, supporting peer relationships, fostering positive family-school partnerships and offering meaningful roles and responsibilities further enhance a sense of belonging and engagement for students (4,6). helping to establish conditions that encourage regular attendance and strengthen early connections to school (3,4,6).

Tier Two

At the Tier Two level, targeted support emphasizes early and timely intervention. This may involve small-group or brief individualized supports that address emerging academic, social or emotional concerns before patterns of absenteeism become established.

> Educators play a key role at this stage by noticing early changes in engagement, reviewing attendance patterns and other relevant information, identifying and responding to barriers related to learning and achievement, implementing responsive classroom strategies and engaging with students and their parents/caregivers to problem-solve and offer academic and/or help-seeking support (3,6).

School mental health professionals can provide consultation, targeted interventions and skill building supports. Early action at this level, grounded in collaboration between educators, mental health professionals and families, can reduce the likelihood that attendance challenges escalate (3,4,6).

Tier Three

At the Tier Three level, schools implement individualized, intensive interventions tailored to specific needs. These supports often involve coordination with mental health and community services, as well as the development of personalized reintegration plans that support sustained school engagement over time (3).

Under Ontario's Education Act, every school board is required to employ at least one attendance counsellor. Attendance counsellors are responsible for investigating the factors contributing to a student's absenteeism and make recommendations to address attendance concerns. These recommendations may include referrals to school-based or community mental health services or other relevant supports that may help remove barriers to regular attendance.

While attendance counsellors play a key role in identifying causes and recommending appropriate interventions, regulated school mental health professionals provide specialized expertise in assessment, consultation and therapeutic intervention. Educators continue to support students through relationship building, consistent engagement and ongoing monitoring of attendance and well-being. Effective support requires close collaboration among school staff, families and community partners, with each contributing distinct but complementary roles.

> A coordinated, team-based approach helps ensure that support is responsive, aligned and sustainable, reinforcing that supporting student attendance and well-being is a shared responsibility.

Wraparound approaches in which schools, families and community partners work together to address student academic, social and mental health needs are particularly effective for students with complex and ongoing attendance concerns (5). Strengthening pathways between schools and community-based services, alongside building staff capacity through training and implementation supports, further improves a school's ability to respond effectively to attendance challenges (4,5).

Gaps in the evidence base

While research on school absenteeism has expanded in recent years, several important gaps remain. Definitions related to absenteeism and reporting practices vary across jurisdictions, making it difficult to compare findings or establish consistent benchmarks. Access to comprehensive and comparable attendance data is limited, and existing data are often not disaggregated by key identity factors such as race, gender or other social identities, such as socioeconomic, disability, Indigenous or newcomer status. In addition, much of the available research is not specific to Canadian or Ontarian contexts, limiting its applicability to local systems and populations (1). Addressing these gaps would strengthen understanding of absenteeism and support the development of more targeted and effective interventions.

Implications and recommendations

Taken together, the evidence suggests that supporting student attendance and addressing absenteeism are educational *and* mental health priorities that require coordinated, identity-affirming and system-level responses. Effective approaches to absenteeism that reach every student are proactive, inclusive/individualized and identity-affirming.

> Key implications from the evidence include the importance of adopting a multi-tiered system of support to guide prevention and intervention efforts (3), implementing whole-school approaches that strengthen belonging and engagement (4), prioritizing early identification and intervention to prevent attendance difficulties from becoming chronic (6) and fostering strong, collaborative partnerships with families.

Family engagement is particularly important for reducing stigma, addressing barriers to attendance, supporting help-seeking and ensuring that responses to absenteeism are compassionate, coordinated and responsive to student needs (4,6). Strengthening pathways to care through partnerships with mental health and community services remains essential, particularly for students with complex needs (5).

In practice, these findings highlight the value of embedding attendance monitoring systems within broader well-being strategies, investing in staff capacity and ensuring that interventions are responsive to individual student identities and experiences.

Conclusion

Schools play an important role in supporting student mental health and well-being beyond academic instruction. As accessible and trusted environments, they are well-positioned to identify early concerns, foster meaningful connections and link students to appropriate supports.

Addressing absenteeism requires coordinated, identity-affirming and system-wide approaches that prioritize student well-being alongside attendance. By strengthening school environments, building partnerships and responding to diverse student needs, schools can support more consistent attendance and improved outcomes for all learners.

References

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