

# An Analysis of the Recording, Reporting, and Use of School Attendance Data in Australia

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**Abstract:** Despite the growing body of literature on school attendance, there is relatively little known about the different approaches that are used to define, record, and report school attendance across countries. This paper seeks to fill this literature gap by providing a policy analysis of how attendance and absenteeism are defined, measured and reported in Australia. This paper explores how school attendance is conceptualised in Australia, with a specific focus on New South Wales where the author resides. The analysis examines what indicators of absence are recorded and how schools along with education authorities make use of this data. The national setting of goals to improve the educational outcomes of all Australian young people has been a driver behind the collection and public reporting of attendance data. This policy analysis highlights the multilateral achievement of the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in Australia to nationally align the collecting and reporting of school attendance data. This has elevated the importance of attendance beyond an administrative task to its current position as a key performance indicator of school effectiveness.

**Keywords:** attendance, measurement, reporting, Australia

It is well supported that the recording and reporting of attendance data is but one piece of the puzzle towards universal engagement of young people in education (Heyne et al., 2020; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). The importance of recording and reporting student attendance is multifaceted. Schools recording daily attendance safeguards young people by ensuring schools are aware of the whereabouts of the students that they are accountable for each day. Attendance issues are not exclusively owned by schools. Whilst schools do have a role in fostering safe and supportive environments for young people, risk factors associated with attendance problems pervade families, communities and society as a whole (Childs & Grooms, 2018). Therefore, government, education jurisdictions, schools, inter-community agencies (e.g., allied health, social services & police) and families all have important roles to play in supporting attendance (Cobb-Clark et al., 2021). Furthermore, researchers and policy makers require accurate data to make informed policy decisions regarding initiatives to support the health, wellbeing and academic engagement of young people (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). Therefore, to actively engage in a collective responsibility, it is essential that attendance data is available in a clear and consistent manner.

Despite the growing literature base on school attendance, there is relatively little known about the different approaches that are used to define, record, and report

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28 school attendance across countries. This research gap is a major limiting factor for research collaboration across countries, for policy alignment, and for identifying best practices. This paper explores how school attendance is conceptualised in Australia, with a specific focus on practice in New South Wales where the author resides. To support this conceptualisation, a brief policy narrative is provided to situate the collection, reporting and ways jurisdictions make use of the attendance data. The intent of this paper is that stakeholders can draw upon this analysis when making decisions regarding the collection, reporting and use of attendance data.

## 1 Setting the Scene

There have been considerable developments in Australian school attendance data collection and reporting over the past ten years. Prior to 2014, it was very difficult for Australian policy makers and researchers to make use of attendance data. The differences in collection methodologies between states and territories and also school sectors prohibited making comparisons. It also made reporting of a national attendance rate impossible. The multilateral push for the national consistent reporting of attendance data has shifted the paradigm of attendance in Australia. Attendance, previously seen as an administrative function in schools, is now an integral key performance indicator of curriculum engagement and wellbeing (Gonski et al., 2018). This paradigm change did not come about overnight. It emerged as Australia sought to pursue a set of national goals towards advancing the educational outcomes of all students.

As Australia has developed its national goals towards education, attendance has increasingly been recognised as a key performance measurement for student engagement. In 1989, Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers agreed on the first set of National Goals for Education in Australia (the *Hobart Declaration*, MCEETYA, 1989). The inclusion of student attendance as an indicator of student engagement represented a significant shift in educational thinking. The importance of attendance moved beyond schools and became a national priority. According to Hancock et al. (2013) the shift in value placed on attendance was based on the tenet that the more often students attend school, the more learning opportunities they experience, which in turn, increases the potential for improved educational and social outcomes (Baxter & Meyers, 2019). This shift in perspective towards the importance of attendance on student outcomes played a critical role in establishing demand for the national consistent collection of attendance data in Australia.

The *Adelaide Declaration* (MCEETYA, 1999) was the first update of the National Goals for Education. A significant outcome of the *Adelaide Declaration* was the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) endorsement of *The Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures* (MCEETYA, 2008; ACARA, 2020a). The Framework set out agreed definitions of

key schooling performance measures (including attendance) and provided a schedule for reporting progress.

It was not until 2007 that state, territory and non-government schools began to report attendance against the National Measurement Framework definition for attendance (i.e. attendance rate) (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 13). However, the variance of technology systems, processes and periods in which attendance was collected meant that a national attendance rate could not be calculated, nor could comparisons between education jurisdictions be made with fidelity (ACARA, 2020b, p. 2). Instead, from 2007 to 2018 each jurisdiction reported attendance with explanatory notes detailing the methods used to collect and report attendance data (see MCEETYA, 2009, pp. 131–135).

In part, to meet the demands created by the new national requirement to collect and report on education goals, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established. ACARA took carriage of coordinating and reporting attendance data from 2009 onwards. Perhaps most significant for ACARA in achieving greater transparency of attendance data, was the launch of the MySchool website in 2010 (ACARA, 2014). The MySchool website publicly reports attendance (along with a range of school data) annually for each individual school in Australia. In addition, the MySchool website makes use of an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scale so that attendance, socio-economic and academic comparisons can be made between schools (ACARA, 2020d).

To counter the differing methods and periods in which attendance data was collected across jurisdictions, in 2012 all Australian State and Territory Education Ministers agreed on a set of *National Standards for Student Attendance Data Reporting* (National Standards for Student Attendance) (ACARA, 2020b). The National Standards for Student Attendance have been progressively revised to disaggregate data and further improve collection processes. In 2013, the National Standards for Student Attendance were updated to include a consistent reference period of semester one in each school year for the collection of attendance data. To further improve transparency, it was agreed in 2014 that attendance data would be disaggregated to include the attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In 2015, a new national key performance measure was added to the National Standards for Student Attendance to record the *attendance level* (the proportion of students attending more than 90% of the time). It was also agreed to add an additional reference period so that attendance data is updated twice yearly, for semester one and for Term 3 on the My School Website (ACARA, 2020b, p.3).

### 1.1 The Australian Education System

In 2020, there were 9,542 schools in Australia (6,249 primary, 1,433 secondary, 1,363 combined and 497 special schools). The nine and a half thousand schools provided education for just over four million seven thousand young people. The majority of schools in Australia are operated by state and territory governments (70%,

**30** 6,675 schools). New South Wales has the greatest proportion of schools followed by Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

All schools in Australia come under the shared responsibility of the Australian Commonwealth Government and their individual state and territory governments. Each state and territory have their own legislation governing the attendance of students at school. Across all states and territories, it is compulsory for all children to start school by the time they have turned six years of age unless an exemption is granted. Most children undertake a foundation year and then attend primary school until they are 11 or 12 years of age (i.e. Kindergarten to Year 6). Adolescents from the age of 13 to 18 attend a Secondary school (Year 7 to 12). In January 2010, the National Youth Participation Requirement came into effect across all states and territories. This made mandatory a requirement for all young people to participate in schooling until they complete Year 10 and to participate full time in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until the age of 17 (ACARA, 2012, p. 36). Grade retention does occur across Australian schools. Most students progress to the next grade irrespective of their academic performance or attendance rate. Grade retention generally takes place on the request of parents for academic or social reasons (Romanes & Hunter, 2015). Whilst state and territory legislation require the collection and reporting of attendance from Kindergarten to Year 12, the national reporting of attendance only requires data from Years 1 to 10.

All education jurisdictions both government and non-government offer alternative education provisions for students with disability. Across NSW many of the alternate education provisions are specific purpose classes situated in schools. In 2021 there were 509 special schools across Australia (336 government and 173 non-government) (ABS, 2021). Special schools and specific purpose classes are required to collect and maintain attendance in accordance with their state or territories legislation. For national data collection purposes students in special schools may be classified as ungraded.

## 2 Methodology and Data Collection

An exploratory case study methodology was employed to investigate the approaches used to define, record, and report school attendance in NSW Australia. Rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore phenomenon in context using a wide variety of data sources (de Vries, 2020). To facilitate the formation of a case study the author undertook an extensive public document analysis. The search and catalogue of public documents was initiated through the ACARA and NSW Department of Education websites using the search terms ‘attendance’, ‘attendance data’ ‘reporting attendance’, ‘absence’, ‘roll marking’, ‘attendance procedures’.

Throughout the review, documents were catalogued in an Excel spreadsheet and downloaded for further analysis. A total of 138 public documents were analysed.

An ethnographic approach was adopted to gather data that could not be collected through documentary analysis. Within ethnography the researcher seeks to understand the phenomena through immersion and close relationship within the setting and the participants (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). The researcher gathered data through participant observation, working in a role that required the development and maintenance of procedure for attendance data collection and reporting for a system of non-government schools in NSW Australia. The researcher was also able to draw insight from previous employment in NSW government education public policy.

### 3 Recording and Reporting of School Attendance and Absenteeism

For national data reporting purposes all education jurisdictions in Australia follow a dichotomous conceptualisation of attendance as either a student being present (i.e. in-attendance) or absent. There is not one clear definition of attendance (i.e. what it means to be present) in the National Standards for Student Attendance or within most jurisdictions policies. However, it can be inferred from the guidance on treatment of absences and the jurisdictions variations to attendance/absence codes that – a student is considered to be in attendance at school in Australia when they: (a) attend the school site while the school is open for instruction, (b) participate in a school approved activity or (c) participate in an offsite flexible learning pathway/program approved by the principal.

The National Standards for Student Attendance outline that any absence less than or equal to two hours should be marked as a whole day attending. Any student day where the absence recorded is greater than two hours is to be reported as a part day attended (0.5). However, some jurisdictions and schools record and report the proportion of the school day absent (ACARA, 2020b, p. 12). This does present some statistical challenges when data from a jurisdiction is aggregated. For example, in NSW many schools using an electronic student registration system will record the exact arrival time or departure of a student whereby a partial or whole day absence from school will then be calculated.

For statistical reporting purposes, attendance or absence are recorded across *possible school days* (ACARA, 2020b, p. 5). Possible school days are defined as the number of days that a student is expected to attend school over the reference period. Should the school be closed due to a school decision, industrial action, natural disaster or health orders (e.g., temporary COVID-19 closure) then these days are not included as possible days in attendance rate or level calculations (see section below on reporting issues) (ACARA, 2020b, pp. 15–18). A student attending school on a possible day is defined as *an actual day*. Actual days (or part-days) in attendance

32 are defined as the number of days that a student actually attends school over the reference period, on a possible school day (ACARA, 2020b, p. 5).

Within the dichotomy of attendance, each state and territory provide attendance register codes to record variations to in-attendance or absence. In 2010, the NSW Minister for Education approved a common set of attendance register codes, to be used for all NSW schools from 2012 onwards (NSW DEC, 2015b) (Table 1). The common attendance register codes were updated in 2015 to reflect the changes implemented through the National Standards for Student Attendance. A notable change to the attendance codes was the revision of principal's leave. Prior to 2015 the principal could provide a student with a certificate of exemption for 15 days of leave to attend a family holiday outside of school vacation dates. This was removed and all leave irrespective of its length is now counted as an absence. Whilst the attendance codes drive the instances of attendance or absence they are not reported nationally. Instead, they are generally used for internal attendance data monitoring (e.g. examining reasons for absence).

Table 1 NSW Attendance Register Codes

Variations to Absence		Variation to Attendance	
The student's absence is unexplained or unjustified.	A	The student was exempted from attending school.	M
The student's absence is due to sickness or as the result of a medical or paramedical appointment.	S	The student is participating in a flexible timetable and not present because they are not required to be at school.	F
An explanation of the absence is provided which has been accepted by the principal.	L	The student is absent from the school on official school business.	B
The student was suspended from school.	E	The student is enrolled in a school and is required or approved to be attending an alternative educational setting on a sessional or full-time basis.	H

Note: For a full description of each NSW Register Codes see NSW DEC, 2015b

In NSW, there are four codes to record a variation to attendance (i.e., student absent from school site yet still counted as present or exempt) and four codes to record variations to absence (i.e., student is counted as absent irrespective if it is explained, unexplained or unjustified) (See NSW DEC, 2020a, pp. 1–2) (Table 1). The *NSW Department of Education Student Attendance Procedures 2015* require schools to follow up all absences on the same day of the absence (NSW DEC, 2015a, p. 4). Many schools have automated this process with electronic SMS services that send a text to parents informing them that their son/daughter was absent, and an explanation is required. Within the author's setting many schools are adding parent portals to their electronic attendance registers. In the case of an absence the parent is sent a notification and can provide an explanation via the parent portal.

The NSW Department of Education attendance procedures outline that if a parent does not provide an explanation of absence within 7 days the absence is marked as unexplained (NSW, DEC, 2015b, p. 1). Should an explanation for absence not be accepted by the principal it is marked as unjustified. Students who have been suspended are marked with a code E are also counted as absent from school.

Technology systems have made the collection and analysis of attendance data much easier. However, the complex configuration of these systems has the potential to create disparities in the reporting of data. To provide one illustration, there are some time-based electronic registers that record accumulated time late and calculate an absence rate based on the proportion of time the student was present at school over the reference period. The author has observed errors in systems where a student may not have missed a day, but an accumulation of late arrivals could impact upon his/her attendance rate.

The recent school closures, due to the global pandemic, have made salient the challenge of recording attendance beyond the physical presence of a student at school (ACARA, 2020c). In 2020, national attendance data was not reported due to inconsistencies as a result of the varying schooling arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (ACARA, 2020e). To illustrate, in NSW advice was provided to schools on how to record attendance during the period of remote learning. However, many schools found it hard to adapt. The issue for many schools was the variation in measures used to determine student engagement in learning and thus attendance. Some schools required students to attend each class remotely whilst others only required students to submit set work at the end of the week. Data gathered showed great discrepancy between schools. In addition, attendance levels plateaued or increased during the pandemic when the prevailing trend was a decline (CESE, 2021).

### 3.1 Reporting Attendance Data

The reporting of student attendance data for Years 1–10 is a requirement of all schools under the Australian Education Regulation 2013 (Commonwealth). All jurisdictions are required to report attendance data over two prescribed time periods. The first time period is semester 1 (usually, Term 1 and 2). This is defined as the period between the first school day of the year and the last school day of Semester 1. The second time period is Term 3. Term 3 is the period between the first day of Term 3 and the last day of Term 3. There is clear evidence that the time period that attendance is collected impacts upon the reported rates and levels. For example, Semester 1 rates and levels are generally higher than Term 3 (Australian Government, 2021, pp. 4–5).

All schools in Australia report their data against their school identification code, the Australian Government Education Client Identifier number (AGEID). Schools are required to provide disaggregated cohort data against each Year level. Each Year level is split across six possible cohorts of students (Australian Government, 2021, p. 6):

- 34
- All male students (including Indigenous students)
  - All female students (including Indigenous students)
  - All gender X students (including Indigenous students)
  - Indigenous male students only
  - Indigenous female students only
  - Indigenous gender X students only

Each school must determine and provide the number of possible school days in the reference period for each Year level. It is possible for Year groups to have differing numbers of possible school days where there has been staggered starts or ends to the reference period for a Year group. The school also must calculate actual school days for each full-time student enrolled during the reference period for the cohort. This number can be different for each student depending on how many days they were enrolled during the reference period. The attendance record for each student is used to calculate the actual attendance days for all full-time students in each cohort during the reference period. As detailed previously, where a student is recorded absent for more than two hours it is deemed a partial attendance. Lastly, the combined number of actual attendance days for all full-time students in each cohort must be provided.

With the data, the school must calculate each full-time student's attendance rate. The student attendance rate is calculated as the number of actual full-time days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible school days over the prescribed reporting period (Table 2). The school attendance rate measures how many students are present at school on any given day for all students enrolled. It is calculated as the number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days.

This attendance rate for each student is used to determine an attendance level for each cohort. The attendance level measures how many students come to school

**Table 2** The Attendance Rate Measures

Rate	Definition	Formula
Student Attendance Rate	The number of actual full-time days attended as a percentage of the total number of possible school days attended over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Actual days in attendance}}{\text{Possible school days}}$
School Attendance Rate	The number of actual full-time equivalent student-days attended by full-time students as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Actual student days in attendance}}{\text{Total possible student days for all students}}$
School Attendance Level	The proportion of students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90% over a period	$100 * \frac{\text{Sum of school days for students attending } > \text{ or } = 90\%}{\text{Total possible student days for all students}}$



regularly (i.e. the proportion of full-time students whose attendance rate is greater than or equal to 90%) (see Table 2).

The inclusion of a requirement to report a school attendance level increases transparency and reveals variations in individual student attendance (i.e. the proportion of students at school who attend school regularly). According to the National Standards for Attendance, the reporting of attendance levels also solves two problems. Firstly, it addresses the issue of discrepancy of possible days for students enrolled at multiple schools during the reference period (i.e. possible days counted twice). Secondly, it overcomes the issue of students enrolled at a school for only part of the reference period who will report a lower attendance rate, in turn adversely impacting on the school's attendance level (ACARA, 2020b, p. 7).

The national reporting of attendance only includes full-time students enrolled at a school in Year 1 through to Year 10. A full-time student can include a student who attends part time across two different schools (e.g. attendance in specialist setting and regular school). The collection also includes all students who are not assigned a grade (e.g. ungraded generally in a specialist setting) who are in the age group for students in Years 1 to 10. Students enrolling or leaving partway through the reference period must be included. If a student attends multiple schools during the reference period, then the school where they are enrolled and attend the most is responsible for reporting their attendance. Thus, their possible days and attendance are counted from the first day of enrolment to the last day of enrolment in the reference period.

There are a number of instances where the attendance of students is not included in the national data collection. These include any enrolled student who did not attend at all during the reference period; students who have been expelled; students who have been provided an exemption (e.g. apprenticeship, elite sport or arts) (see NSW DEC, 2015c) or any students no longer enrolled in the school. All schools in Australia are legally bound to record the attendance of all students who are enrolled. However, kindergarten and senior students (Year 11 and 12) are not included in the national data collection. It is speculated that the decision not to include these cohorts of students was made due to the focus on the national compulsory years of schooling.

A major challenge faced by the Australian Government in collecting attendance data has been the many different data collection systems employed across each jurisdiction. To address some of these issues, in 2020 the collection of school attendance data moved to using the National Schools Interoperability Program (NSIP) Systems Interoperability Framework (SIF). The purpose of SIF is to provide a consistent data technical standard across jurisdictions for the sharing of data. For example, data is submitted electronically using standard fields within the XML file format (Australian Government, 2021, p. 2). In NSW, Department schools may use a range of electronic student information systems (e.g. Sentral Education, Compass Education, Millennium Schools, Momentum Cloud). All data is transferred to the NSW Department of Education or for non-government systems of schools one central data repository. Across most school systems the collection and reporting of

**36** attendance data has been almost entirely automated. The electronic register will be programmed to determine possible school days. The students' attendance will be recorded, and actual school days will be calculated. Most electronic attendance registers will allow the school or system to generate a report following the specification required for national reporting.

### **3.2 How Schools, Systems and the Australian Government Make Use of Attendance Data**

Many schools and systems make use of business data analytics software to aggregate and display attendance data for analysis (e.g. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/educational-data/scout/scout-overview/apps-and-reports/attendance-and-engagement/cohort-attendance-summary>). Teachers and school leaders have access to system, school and student level dashboards that display attendance rates, levels, absences and also growth. They are able to compare students' and schools' attendance levels over time and across cohorts. This enables schools to be agile in identifying patterns and providing supports to particular cohorts or sub-groups of students when attendance issues present themselves. The data also facilitates rich discussion enabling data-based decision making within multi-tiered systems of support frameworks.

It must be noted that there is a dearth of research in Australia on how schools make use of their attendance data. From the authors perspective, schools make use of their data to identify and provide support for students who present with attendance concerns. In secondary schools, a member of the wellbeing team or a Year Coordinator may be tasked with attendance data monitoring. Work has begun in the author's system to embed multi-tiered systems of support in school (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Within this data driven framework, schools make use of attendance data to screen for developing attendance problems. Those students who are identified as at risk are afforded supports that are applied in gradual increasing of intensity (e.g. social work, counselling, educational and psycho-assessments, intensive case management, agreement on compulsory school undertakings).

In NSW, where supportive approaches have not been successful a compulsory schooling order can be obtained through the Children's Court. The Children's Court may require a parent and/or a child to attend a conference to determine issues leading to the attendance problem, identify services to support and/or propose recommendations to the Children's Court for compulsory undertakings or orders. A breach of compulsory schooling orders made by the Children's Court can be taken to the Local Court where penalties of up to A\$11,000 can apply (Judicial Commission of New South Wales, 2018).

At a system level (i.e. across multiple schools) attendance data is reported and analysed across schools. When attendance data dashboards were first developed for the author's context, a framework of attendance targets was established for schools based on school attendance levels. A target of 90% was set as the benchmark. The setting of a benchmark enabled a guide for the resourcing of schools with significant

attendance need. For example, an attendance family liaison officer program was established in identified schools. The program, now in its third year, proved highly successful in some schools in establishing systems of support and extending the reach of the school. However, the detrimental effect of setting one attendance target across a broad range of school community contexts was that some schools, despite their growth, were always classified as languishing. This has prompted a focus on schools developing annual attendance action plans so that they may set goals specific to their schools' context.

At a national level, student attendance data is reported each year at a state, territory and sector level (e.g. independent & Catholic schools). The data is reported across a range of operational, strategic and accountability reports. Whilst each report draws from the national data collection, the perspective on attendance of each report does slightly differ as detailed below in Table 3. National attendance data is used to influence and track governments' education policies and practices. For example, the Remote Schools Attendance Strategy operating in 84 schools across New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory draws on attendance data annually (Australian Government, 2018; O'Brien Rich Research Group, 2016).

**Table 3** National Reporting on Attendance

Report	Details
<b>National Report on Schooling in Australia (NRSA)</b>	The NRSA publicly reports progress made towards the most current national goals for education – i.e. <i>Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration</i> . It reports against <i>The Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures</i> for student participation, achievement, and attainment.
<b>National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) progress reporting</b>	The <i>National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)</i> (2019) replaced the <i>National Education Agreement</i> (2009) and the <i>National Education Reform Agreement</i> (2013). In relation to attendance, the NSRA seeks to achieve the outcome that “all students are engaged in their schooling”. Therefore, the NRSA reports annually the national attendance level.
<b>National Agreement on Closing the Gap (2020)</b>	The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020</i> replaced the <i>National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA)</i> . The NIRA reported on progress towards the goal “close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance within five years (by 2018). The <i>National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020</i> does not specifically include a target to close the attendance gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Instead, the outcome Socio Economic Outcome Area 5 “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential”, is measured by the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (age 20–24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification.

Report	Details
<b>Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators</b>	The <i>Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Report</i> measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Attendance rates and levels are included within the report under the Council of Australian Government high level social and economic outcomes.
<b>Report on Government Services (ROGS)</b>	The annual <i>Report on Government Services</i> provides information on the equity, effectiveness and efficiency of Commonwealth Government services in Australia. Attendance reporting is included in Part B – Child care, education and training. Student attendance is reported as a measure of equity and effectiveness of education services provided across Australia.
<b>MySchool website</b>	In 2010, ACARA launched the <i>MySchool website</i> . The website reports data on every school in Australia. Data reported on the My School website including school demographic and financial profiles, school attendance data, National Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) performance and senior secondary outcomes. To support the comparison of schools the website uses the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), developed specifically for the purpose of identifying schools serving similar student populations. Thus, any member of the public can access the My school website and make comparisons between similar schools on attendance rates and levels.

## 4 Discussion

Despite the growing body of literature on attendance and attendance problems there is still relatively limited literature discussing approaches used to define, record and report school attendance. This current analysis was undertaken through study of Australian education policy documents, government guides, progress reports and attendance reporting guidelines. It was also necessary to draw on the author's own participant observation supporting attendance in a non-government Catholic systemic school system.

The availability of student attendance data in Australian has enabled researchers to explore with increasing accuracy policy and research questions. The focus of much research on attendance has been on linkages between school attendance and the academic, health and social outcomes of young people (Hancock et al., 2013, 2018). Hancock et al. (2013) found a clear link between attendance and the performance of Western Australian students in standardised testing. In other studies, attendance problems have become the 'litmus-test' for broader social and community issues. For example, Australian researchers have examined areas such as the prevalence and impact of mental health on student attendance (Lawrence et al., 2019). Orr et al. (2022) found that lower attendance and suspension was more prevalent among young people who had been exposure to family and domestic violence. Hafekost et al.'s

(2017) study found that maternal alcohol use disorder was associated with a significantly increased chance of poor school attendance for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. The linkage of attendance data with social and health outcomes of young people highlight that attendance problems extend beyond schools and pervade families, communities and society as a whole.

Australian researchers have been able to challenge attendance policy assumptions of Aboriginal students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clarke & Wildy, 2011; Guenther, 2013; Hancock et al., 2017; Purdie & Buckley, 2010). To illustrate, both Ladwig and Luke (2014) and Baxter and Meyers (2019) analysed attendance and achievement data to challenge assumptions regarding attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their achievement on standardised tests. The attendance-achievement assumption for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has in the past driven withholding payments from those parents whose children reportedly are not attending school (Ladwig & Luke, 2014). Hancock et al. (2017) were able to draw on attendance data of students from low socioeconomic background in Western Australia to challenge the assumption that poor attendance had a greater impact on the achievement of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It is evident that the availability of consistent national attendance data will only strengthen investigations that dispel potentially damaging assumptions.

There is limited research on how schools use their daily attendance data to identify and respond to attendance concerns. It is clear that schools are responsible for collecting attendance data and following up on attendance concerns (ACARA, 2020b; NSW DEC, 2015a). All government schools in NSW and many non-government schools have access to data analytic dashboards that highlight students who present with attendance concerns. The concept and use of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support to make data-based decisions regarding wellbeing supports in schools is gaining traction (Marsh & Mathur, 2020). However, further research is needed to investigate how schools in Australia make use of daily attendance data to respond to attendance concerns.

Australia's education goals, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Australian Government, 2019), makes repeated reference to *all* students. Attendance data is collected to determine equity of access and performance across the education system. However, there is a large collective cohort of students who are not included in the data due to the collection specifications. These include mobile populations of students who are not enrolled full time at a school (Prout et al., 2017), students in small cohorts (e.g. special schools, behaviour schools), students who are home schooled (7,808 students 2020–21) (NESA, 2021) or students have been expelled from school (NSW DEC, 2021b, p. 11). In many cases these are the students who are most at risk of marginalisation. It is valid that their attendance data is excluded from national reporting at a cohort level due to privacy reasons. However, excluding them from the national data hides the attendance of this group of students from public attention.

40 The exclusion of kindergarten from the national data collection means there is no national report on student attendance in the first year of compulsory schooling. There is overwhelming evidence pointing to the importance of children's experience in early years in education (Cash et al., 2019; Jordan et al., 2009; Nelson, 2005). Research has shown that attendance problems generally appear when children start school and progressively become chronic as they enter into secondary school (Cook et al., 2017; Ehrlich et al., 2018; Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). All education jurisdictions have a legislated mandatory starting age. This starting age begins a year before students enter into Year 1. It is reasonable to speculate that the staggered starts of some kindergarten students and classes may make the comparison of this data difficult. However, kindergarten attendance levels could potentially be a valuable tool for policy makers and service providers.

## 5 Conclusion

This analysis highlights the monumental policy achievement by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in Australia to nationally align the collecting and reporting of attendance data. The considerable effort invested towards defining, collecting, and reporting attendance points to the value that Australia places on attendance. The use of attendance data by Australian researchers and policy makers points to attendance being the litmus test for much broader health, social and wellbeing challenges faced by young people. The national collection and public reporting of the data has also driven its value as an indicator of school effectiveness. Attendance is no longer just an administrative task. However, the public reporting of attendance data make it clear that attendance is no longer the sole responsibility of schools. It is clear that the ever-changing landscape and complexity of recording attendance creates challenges. As we move into a post-COVID-19 education landscape, attendance has already adopted broader definitions beyond the physical presence of a student at school. Thus, attendance data collection and reporting work now must focus on systems that are agile enough to ensure fidelity with the ever-present change.

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