Beyond COVID-19: Evaluating Post-Pandemic Education Policies and Combatting Student Absenteeism

The COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges to education systems and students worldwide, particularly impacting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. In response, OECD education systems implemented a variety of new policies and practices to address these challenges. As the pandemic subsides, there is a pressing need to assess the effectiveness of these measures. This assessment is crucial for guiding education systems beyond the pandemic, identifying which policies are worth sustaining, and addressing remaining challenges.

In addition, increasing rates of student absenteeism and dropouts pose significant concerns for education systems across the OECD. For many, this trend has exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vital for education systems to share insights on these challenges, foster discussions about effective strategies to address them, and evaluate the efficacy of current approaches.

This Policy Brief draws on evidence from the 2023 "Survey on equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19" developed by the Education for Inclusive Societies Project to address two main questions:

- Which policies and practices have been evaluated and maintained by education systems post-pandemic?
- Are education systems seeing rises in absences and dropouts? How are they responding to these challenges?

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Survey description and webinar context

On 26 July 2023, the Education for Inclusive Societies Project (hereinafter "Project") invited OECD countries, followed by accession countries, to respond to the "Survey on equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19" (hereinafter "Survey"). This short survey had two aims: (1) to collect data on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected policies and practices surrounding equity and inclusion in education; and (2) to assess how student participation has been affected by the pandemic, in terms of both dropouts and absenteeism. No such comparable data is regularly collected from OECD countries. The first objective provided data on the diverse ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic influenced educational practices related to equity and inclusion. This included an exploration of policy responses to the pandemic and an evaluation of their effectiveness. The second objective focused on evaluating the consequences of the pandemic on student engagement, offering insights into the challenges students face in participating in education. Overall, the survey provided a unique opportunity to compare policy developments in education following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Efforts were made to ensure the data collection was concise and efficient. Findings from the survey cannot be regarded as exhaustive of the topics covered due to various limitations, such as Survey length and international comparability. The Survey was divided in two modules: post-COVID practices and student disengagement. Countries were not asked to fill out the Survey considering levels of education, but instead were provided with the opportunity to specify whether their answers concerned certain ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) levels only.

Countries in which education is a devolved responsibility were asked to fill out a separate response for each participating sub-national entity. Education systems responded to the Survey in an electronic format using LimeSurvey between July and early October 2023. In total, 24 OECD education systems and two accession countries filled out the Survey. As Spain sent separate responses for pre-tertiary and tertiary education, Canada shared responses from two Provinces and the United Kingdom sent them for two countries, the total number of responses is 28.

The systems that responded to the Survey are Australia, Austria, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia*, Czechia, England (United Kingdom), Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Korea, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Norway, Nova Scotia (Canada), Portugal, Romania*, Saskatchewan (Canada), Scotland (United Kingdom), Spain (Min. of Education and Vocational Training), Spain (Min. of Universities), Sweden, Republic of Türkiye[1].

Given that policy contexts change over time, it is important to regard this information as representative of the year 2023 in the participating education systems. In some cases, education systems provided additional information using the available free-text boxes or via email. These are used to complement and specify quantitative information.

Results of the Survey were presented during a webinar on 17 October 2023. The webinar also included presentations from member countries' representatives: Mr. Alex Turner, Attendance Team Leader, Department for Education, England, who presented on post-pandemic attendance in schools in England and their responses to the phenomena so far; Ms. Áine O'Keeffe, Director, Tusla Education Support Service, Ireland, who presented the National School Attendance Campaign; and Mr. Marc van der Steeg, Senior Advisor at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Netherlands, who presented on COVID recovery policies and evaluations.

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[1] Accession countries are marked with an "*" in this list.

1 Post-COVID-19 policies and practices for equity and inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students, particularly in education systems that went through prolonged school closures. While all students have been affected by the pandemic, both academically and emotionally, certain groups, such as students from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, students with an immigrant background, or students with special education needs (SEN), were impacted more severely by the crisis (Dvorsky et al., 2023[1]; Jakubowski, Gajderowicz and Patrinos, 2024[2]; Mete Yesil et al., 2021[3]). Access to good learning conditions at home, such as a quiet space to study, parental support and high speed internet are essential for effective learning outside of school, and are disproportionately available for advantaged students compared to disadvantaged (OECD, 2020[4]). Results from PISA 2022 found that on average across OECD countries, socio-economically advantaged students and those in upper secondary education (ISCED 3) were more confident than disadvantaged students and those in lower secondary school (ISCED 2) that they could learn well autonomously and remotely if schools have to close in the future (OECD, 2023[5]).

A large variety of policy initiatives were implemented across OECD countries during the pandemic to support the educational, social and emotional needs of students and their families (OECD, 2020[4]). The most common policies focusing on equity and inclusion included the distribution of electronic devices with an internet connection in poor or remote areas, the distribution of free meals for eligible students, financial support for students and their families (emergency or in continuity with existing aid schemes), and to a lesser extent, the creation of multi-language educational resources. Several countries also allowed some schools and other educational facilities to remain open for students with particular needs, such as students with SEN and students in Vocational Education and Training (VET), who did not have the necessary support, equipment or materials to learn at home. Regarding the emotional well-being of students, countries undertook actions such as sharing resources (e.g., guidelines, toolkits, etc.) on official websites and creating hotlines for counselling and psychological support. School leaders and teachers were very active in supporting vulnerable students, often physically distributing material to families, creating online resources and maintaining contact with families (OECD, 2020[4]).

The OECD (2020[6]) regards the pandemic as a period of change that can help governments advance new policy reform ideas as well as pending educational reforms. However, limited evidence exists on post-pandemic developments in policy making and on the effectiveness of said policies, particularly in relation to equity and inclusion goals. As the pandemic subsides (World Health Organisation, 2023[7]), there is a growing interest in understanding the lessons it provides in terms of the impact of policy measures. The Survey aimed at collecting information on whether education systems have been taking stock of the experiences from the pandemic, on the policies and practices adopted, and considered what should be maintained in their systems.

Education systems are now in the process of deciding which policies to maintain beyond the scope of the crisis. Given that limited evidence exists on the choices that countries have made during and after the pandemic, the Project has aimed at collecting such information through its Survey.

As shown in Figure 1, 24 respondents[2] reported having sustained initiatives that started or significantly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only four education systems, namely Australia, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Norway and Romania did not sustain any such initiatives.

Figure 1. Policy initiatives launched during the COVID-19 pandemic that were sustained or reviewed

Number of education systems having or not having sustained or reviewed initiatives launched during the pandemic
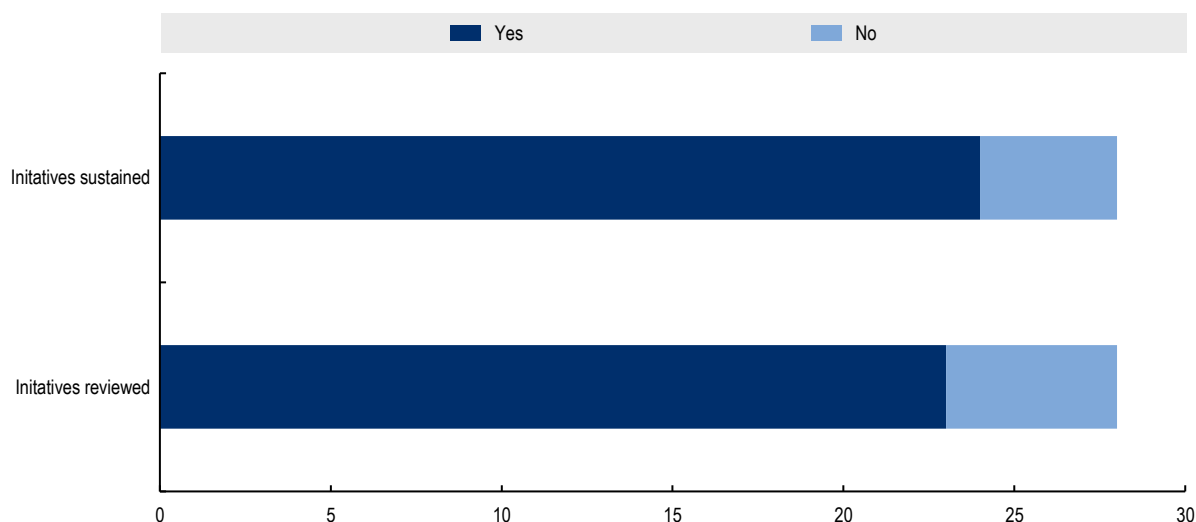
Note: 27 education systems replied to the survey, and Spain provided responses for two subsystems (pre-tertiary and tertiary), for a total of 28 respondents.
Question 1: In your country, has any initiative that was started or was significantly expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic been sustained during the last academic year (2022-23)?
Question 2: In your country, has there been a review or evaluation of policies and practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic?
Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey.

Sustained post-pandemic policies

Many policies have been sustained beyond the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the information provided by the Survey participants, sustained policies cover various areas that targeted not only the academic progress of their students, but also their well-being.

One of the most common areas of intervention **targeted students' learning recovery**. This support took different forms, such as plans for educational recovery that were implemented in countries such as Chile, Costa Rica, Korea and Portugal (OECD, 2023[8]). For example, in **Portugal**, the "21|23 Escola+ plan", aimed to recover learning losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic with consideration to its unequal effects on diverse students. The government allocated over EUR 900 million (euros) in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives included recovering affected skills, diversifying teaching strategies, investing in social and emotional well-being, building confidence in the educational system, involving the entire educational community, and monitoring the impact and efficiency of measures. Specific actions within the "Teaching and Learning" hub's "Inclusion and Well-Being" domain included tutorial support, social and emotional skills programmes, personal development plans, school sports and

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[2] Representatives from countries' educational authorities.

cultural programmes. Resources were distributed in addition to existing structures and allocated in the 2022/2023 school year. Furthermore, the number of additional support hours schools could demand was increased, and Multidisciplinary Support Teams for Inclusive Education were reinforced. A web site with all of the information regarding support for schools, as well as additional resources for teachers, was created (Directorate-General for Education, 2019[9]).

Costa Rica developed the "Pedagogical Guidelines for academic recovery" which consist of a series of strategies put into practice from 2022. The main objective of these pedagogical guidelines was to implement different actions that allow strengthening the learning process in the student, which respond to the various educational environments and contribute to the acquisition of knowledge, as well as the development of skills and competencies in the students (OECD, 2023[8]).

Summer schools

A particularly common strategy among measures targeting learning recovery was the implementation or expansion of summer schools, meant to foster the learning of the students during the summer breaks. Respondents reported that this strategy was maintained post-pandemic in Austria, England (United Kingdom), Ireland, Luxembourg and Norway (the latter, however, has discontinued the financial support for this measure). Some respondents highlighted that summer schools were particularly successful for disadvantaged students, such as **Ireland**, which increased summer school provision in the first year of the pandemic to further support learners with disadvantaged profiles, such as those with SEN (Department of Education Ireland, 2022[10]). This initiative has been continued in the years following the pandemic.

In **Austria**, a summer school initiative was successfully run in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023, during the last two weeks of the summer holidays (OECD, 2023[8]). The programme, primarily targeting students in primary and lower secondary schools, aimed to provide individualised and targeted support to students, particularly focusing on non-regular attendees, those with deficiencies in the German language, and students who needed specialised catch-up due to recent challenges, including those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The curriculum of the Summer School focused on reinforcing German language skills, mathematics, and social studies for primary school students, and German, mathematics and English for secondary students. The programme was facilitated by a variety of education professionals, trainee teachers and experienced teachers. In addition, fifth-grade students could have supported teachers and fellow students as 'buddies', allowing them to gain experience and insights into the teaching profession (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2023[11]).

The Summer School classes were conducted in small groups and included various school levels, aiming for a flexible and project-oriented teaching approach. The initiative aimed to not only help students prepare for the upcoming school year, but also to support their transition to different school types or preparation for exams and competitions. The Summer School served as a vital measure introduced by the government in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2023[11]).

Participation in the Summer School was voluntary and free of charge. However, if students fell within the specified target groups, school management and teachers strongly recommend attendance. To ensure equal access to the programme, public transport to and from the Summer School location was free of charge. Austria monitored the impact of the Summer Schools through the Boards of Education and the Education Ministry, and reported that the Summer School was expected to continue as it has shown promise as a policy (Eurydice, 2023[12]; OECD, 2023[8]).

Provision of online material, remote learning or video lessons

For many OECD countries, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transitions in the education system (OECD, 2023[13]). Several education systems that responded to the Survey, namely Australia, Croatia,

Czechia, England (United Kingdom), Korea, Spain and Türkiye, reported providing digital materials or virtual classes for students during the pandemic. Furthermore, many reported that they have sustained some of the practices. For instance, following the pandemic, the **Spanish** Education and Vocational system has been making efforts to accelerate digital progress and to reduce digital inequalities. The *Digital Spain 2025* project emerged during the pandemic as a response to the need of developing digitalisation processes and issues with access to digital opportunities. Many practices have been developed as part of the project, such as:

- The website *Aprendo en casa* [Learning at home] was created to provide materials and resources for primary, secondary and VET education during the lockdown period. It offers guidance for teachers and families on how to use the digital tools effectively. The website continues to be updated with new content and features for the classroom setting.

- The website of *INTEF* has added new sections to provide more digital resources for teachers, such as competency-based learning materials and open educational resources, as well as to reinforce teacher training on digital skills and competencies through online courses and certifications.

- The Spanish Ministry of Education and VET has also collaborated with the Regional Governments to implement Territorial Cooperation Programmes that aim to improve the connectivity of schools, the access to digital devices, and the digital competence of students and teachers. Some of the programmes include the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which includes a plan to develop the digital competencies of teachers in Spain. The Digital School Plan intends to equip more than 19 000 schools with digital devices and infrastructure (Ministry of Education and Professional Training, 2023[14]).

Teachers' continuous professional learning

The challenges raised by the pandemic highlighted the need to support teachers in developing the skills to help students in situations of crisis and rapidly adopt expertise in areas such as digital education. In **England (United Kingdom)**, several programmes were designed to support the development of the teaching staff. Most of these programmes began in 2021 and run through to summer 2024 and summer 2025. Many programmes were explicitly designed to be sustained beyond the funded period. Some of these programmes are:

- Early Years Continuous Professional Development: to address the learning gaps caused by the pandemic, the UK Government allocated up to GBP 153 million (pounds) for this programme, which offers continued professional development training to early years practitioners in England to help them support the development of disadvantaged children aged two to four. The programme is part of the Early Years Education Recovery Plan and is expected to be continued until 2025 (Early Years, 2023[15]).

- Early Career Framework: a development programme for early career teachers in primary and secondary schools designed to help them further develop their practice, knowledge and working habits in five core areas: behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and professional behaviours (Department for Education, 2019[16]). In a review, the training was rated highly by teachers, particularly in regard to access to digital resources, opportunities to practise skills, quality and content of the training and resources, monitoring of progress, and knowledge and expertise of the trainers (Department for Education England, 2023[17]).

- National professional qualifications: fully-funded professional courses for teachers who wish to gain additional skills or progress to leadership roles. Further funding of GBP 184 million was made available for the National professional qualifications in 2020.

Well-being and mental health support

In response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, several education systems implemented comprehensive well-being policies to address the social, emotional and educational needs of students, particularly focusing on specific groups of students. These initiatives encompassed a range of measures, including financial support, mental health services, educational interventions and community outreach programmes. These policies aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic, emphasising the well-being and mental health of learners while fostering a supportive and resilient school environment. Many of these programmes have been extended and are to be sustained in the years following the pandemic.

After the periods of isolation associated with the pandemic in **Spain**, mental disorders increased from 1.1% to 4% in children between 4 and 14 years, according to data from the National Health Survey (Ministry of Health, 2022[18]). In alignment with Spain's National Mental Health Strategy 2022-2026, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training launched the *Emotional Wellbeing in the Educational Field Programme* in 2023 (Ministry of Health, 2022[18]). The objective of the programme is to address students' well-being and mental health needs through educational interventions. The programme supports specified training for teachers, management teams and educational inspection teams on well-being and mental health indicators; creating referral protocols for school staff, aiming to help students who at risk of lack of access to mental health care services; sharing practices that promote emotional well-being with students; and promoting community intervention by establishing connections between professionals in schools, health centres and local support groups for children and young people. The programme has been positively reviewed and was extended to the academic year 2023/2024 (OECD, 2023[8]).

The 21/23 Escola + plan by the Ministry of Education in **Portugal** included a specific domain for Inclusion and Well-Being (1.6). It supported schools in Portugal to take additional actions such as tutorial support, programmes for social and emotional needs, community development plans, and sports, cultural and artistic programmes. In **the Netherlands**, the *Nationaal Programma Onderwijs* (NP Onderwijs) was established to address COVID-19 related educational delays and mental health problems (see more in Box 1). The core of the programme consisted of providing schools with additional budget, which they could spend on evidence-based interventions of their choice until the end of school year 2024/2025. The Ministry of Education developed a "menu card" of interventions for schools, which focused primarily on overcoming educational delays through measures such as additional teaching assistants, additional classes and small group instruction. Many of the activities also focused on well-being, with a dedicated Well-Being and Social-Emotional Development section. A review of the policy found that the majority of schools chose initiatives related to well-being (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2023[19]).

Lithuania developed a well-being programme for schools in 2021 that has been maintained. In this programme, children choose from different activities such as art, physical activity and lessons about nature, which promote students' emotional well-being, strengthen team activities, and develop social and emotional skills. Furthermore, in co-operation with municipalities, educational centres and the Ministry of Health, education staff are encouraged to take care of their emotional health by participating in teacher supervisions and e-learning aimed at increasing mental health literacy for school staff (Minister Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021[20]).

Financial resources, often focused on closing gaps for disadvantaged students

In many countries, funding was increased for educational programmes that aimed to support disadvantaged students following the pandemic. For example, children living in **Scotland**'s (United Kingdom) most deprived communities received targeted funding of GBP 215 million from 2021/2022 to support education recovery after the pandemic, and to help close the poverty-related attainment gap (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, 2023[21]). The funding runs until 2025/2026 (ibid.). Certain aspects of the funding, such as the removal of fees for children and young people accessing music lessons, were provided in 2023/2024 (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, 2023[22]). In

Ireland, the Delivery of Equal Opportunities in Schools programme (DEIS) (Department of Education
Ireland, 2023[23]) has been significantly expanded since the pandemic, including additional funding of EUR
32 million, allowing an additional 322 schools to benefit from the programme (Department of Education,
2022[24]).

In **Spain**, the Programme for Guidance, Advancement and Educational Enrichment (PROA+) aimed at
improving school success in schools where more than 30% of students are facing difficulties. Students
facing difficulties can refer to a broad range of factors such as children with assistance needs (food,
housing and basic supplies), SEN, high abilities, specific learning difficulties and late access into the
education system. The programme was co-financed by the European Union with EUR 360 million for 2021–
2024 (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training - Government of Spain, 2021[25]). In **Lithuania**, part 1
of the *Compensation plan for learning losses due to the covid-19 pandemic for 2021* was to "ensure the
necessary educational conditions for socially vulnerable groups" (Minister Education, Science and Sport
of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021[20]). This included supplementing schools in areas of high levels of
deprivation with additional support and funding, through actions such as providing digital equipment
needed for hybrid lessons and employing counsellors to speak with students in need.

Evaluating policies and practices adopted during the pandemic: what we know so far

Evaluation is important in determining whether policies are having the intended effects and in informing
necessary adjustments (OECD, 2023[26]). The evaluation process can help policy makers decide, for
instance, whether policies are having inadvertent effects and should be discontinued, or whether they
warrant further support. In the case of smaller programmes, this can entail their upscaling or
institutionalisation.

The Survey asked education systems whether they conducted a review or evaluation of policies and
practices adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown above in Figure 1, 23 respondents reported
having reviewed or evaluated such policies, while five reported not having done so: Chile, Costa Rica,
Ireland, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) and Scotland (United Kingdom).

On the basis of the additional information provided by the education systems, it appears that most of the
information collected by countries is still preliminary and that various evaluations focused on the effects of
the pandemic on students, rather than on the effects of the policies implemented so far. These evaluations
have shown widening gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, effects on mental health
and well-being, and reduced academic outcomes for some groups in particular (OECD, 2023[8]).

Concerning specifically reviews of policies, information provided by the education systems highlighted
some effective interventions and some ineffective ones, along with some inconclusive results. Summer
schools, for example, were often appreciated by learners and staff and deemed effective (Austria, England
(United Kingdom), Lithuania). Online classes were found as supportive of participation and bridging
knowledge gaps, particularly in higher education (Lithuania, Romania, Saskatchewan (Canada), Spain
(higher education)).

More systematic evaluations of policies and practices are needed to fully grasp the effects of interventions
set in place during the pandemic. One example of policy evaluation that can be of reference for education
systems is that of the Netherlands, as outlined in greater detail in Box 1. The country recently reviewed
the *NP Onderwijs Programme* and has a structured system of built-in evaluations in its policy design.

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Box 1. A systematic evaluation of educational policies: the case of the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a long-standing tradition of policy evaluation throughout their system. The National Education Programme (*Nationaal Programma Onderwijs (NP Onderwijs)*) aims to restore learning delays as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while addressing the impact of the pandemic on inequality in education and student well-being. As part of the programme, schools develop a recovery plan and choose from a menu of initiatives that were shown to be effective (e.g., tutoring, summer schools, small group assistants).

Extensive monitoring and evaluation have been built into the programme, with studies emerging on the learning losses in literacy and numeracy, changes in school pathways, and well-being of learners since the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent results suggest that learning growth developed more favourably for socio-economically disadvantaged than advantaged learners in primary education. The country has also implemented a 15% salary supplement for teachers in schools in both primary and secondary education with the highest share of disadvantaged students, given the considerable teacher shortages and higher mobility in schools with the highest shares of disadvantaged students.

Evaluation of the teacher salary supplementation intervention are underway. In addition, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science invested EUR 15 million to use randomised controlled trials to learn more about the effectiveness of the interventions. The first pilot study focuses on high-dosage tutoring in lower secondary education. The Ministry also monitors how schools spend the additional funds received, and how COVID-19 related educational delays are developing.

Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey 2023.

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While online teaching has been shown to be effective for participation, capacity issues have been a challenge to the overall effectiveness of the policy. Sweden, for instance, collected survey data which show that distance learning has led to limitations, with students perceiving less learning online than in a physical classroom setting, and teachers reporting lower quality of teaching and ability to support students (OECD, 2023[8]). Research from Australia also found that while the market is saturated with mathematics teaching resources and tools, teachers struggle to find those that are quality-assured, based on best practice and are aligned to curriculum needs (OECD, 2023[8]).

Moreover, various analyses had inconclusive results or evidence was just anecdotal. For instance, Norway flagged that while they do not have sufficient data to confirm the effectiveness of summer schools, municipalities have given positive feedback for this policy (OECD, 2023[8]).

Key takeaways

The Survey helped gain an understanding of the diverse ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic shaped education policies and practices across the OECD. The policies and practices implemented were largely holistic in nature, aimed at supporting the educational, social and emotional needs of students and their families. In regard to equity and inclusion, the most common policies implemented included the distribution of digital materials, such as laptops, as well as targeted financial aid.

As the pandemic subsided and countries were tasked with deciding which policies to continue, education systems need to turn to evaluations to understand which initiatives had been effective. Although the majority of countries reported that they have carried out evaluations of policies implemented during the pandemic, in many cases, this research is still in the preliminary stages. So

far, evaluations have revealed that summer schools and the provision of online learning materials were successful for enhancing equity and inclusion in education, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Continuing to monitor and evaluate policies, as well as share the results, is fundamental in ensuring a resilient and adaptive education system.

2 Challenges to student engagement and success: from absenteeism to dropouts

The presence, participation and achievement of all students is a core element of inclusion in education (Ainscow, 2005[27]). Student presence is concerned with where students are educated, and how reliably and punctually they attend school. Absenteeism and dropouts are common concerns for education systems, due to the impact that they have on students learning experiences.

The impact of absenteeism and dropouts on students

Formal definitions of school drop-out vary across education systems (Estêvão and Álvares, 2014[28]). Often, the core of the definition is stated in terms of the age or the number of years that individuals spent in schooling. More functional definitions of school drop-out, instead, aim to take into consideration the context in which the drop-out occurs and its consequences. This means that functional definitions can be seen as related to the idea "minimum schooling", i.e., a basic level of qualification necessary for an individual's successful social and professional integration (ibid.). A common functional measure of school drop-out is early leaving from education and training (ELET), which is the standard for establishing and measure progress on school drop-out combat in European policies. The ELET indicator refers to the proportion of individuals aged 18-24 years that have completed at most lower secondary education and did not attend any educational or training four weeks preceding the Labour Force Survey (Eurostat, 2023[29]).

For students to thrive academically, their attendance and active participation in school are crucial. Absenteeism, or being absent from school, can be attributed to motivational factors such as difficulties in forming relationships with peers or academic struggles, as well as structural reasons like having work commitments during school hours or caring for an ill family member (Birioukov, 2016[30]). While during and after the pandemic structurally based absences increased due to illness, a common concern for countries are unjustified absences, which are generally motivationally based. For this reason, the Survey focused on unjustified absences (or truancy), which can be defined as any intentional, unjustified, unauthorised or illegal absence from compulsory education.

Both school absenteeism and drop-out are associated with various negative life-long outcomes (Gubbels, van der Put and Assink, 2019[31]). School absenteeism is generally associated with lower academic outcomes. Research from the United States, for instance, found that students who are chronically absent are at a risk of falling behind in school, having lower grades, having behavioural issues, and, ultimately, dropping out (US Department of Education, 2016[32]; Economic Policy Institure, 2018[33]). This research also found that the more frequently children missed school, the worse their performance. Furthermore, absenteeism is associated with risky behaviours (such as substance abuse, risky sexual behaviours., etc.) (Nik Jaafar et al., 2013[34]; Chou et al., 2006[35]). Chronic absenteeism is correlated with school drop-out (Kearney, 2008[36]), which in turn increases the likelihood of individuals to experience higher rates of

unemployment, of incarceration, lower earnings, and decreased health and life expectancy (Bowers, Sprott and Taff, 2013[37]; Bowers and Sprott, 2012[38]).

### *What are the drivers of absenteeism and dropouts?*

Given that absenteeism and dropout are associated with many different life-course problems, it is important to reduce the risk of students incurring in these issues. To do so, it is key to gain insight into the risk factors for school absenteeism and school drop-out.

PISA 2022 data show that students stay out of school for longer periods for different reasons. The most common cause reported by students who missed school for more than three consecutive months at any education level was sickness (70.5%) (Figure 2). The second most common cited reason was a lack of safety at school (18.5%) and the third boredom (18.5%).

While schools can do little to prevent sickness, they can address a lack of motivation among students and safety at school (OECD, 2023[5]). PISA results show that boys and students in lower secondary schools are more likely to suffer from a lack of motivation. These two groups cited boredom as a reason for long-term absenteeism more often than girls and students in upper secondary schools, on average across OECD countries (ibid.).

Figure 2. Reasons for long-term absenteeism

Percentage of students who reported the following reasons for having missed school for more than three consecutive months at any education level (OECD average, 2022)
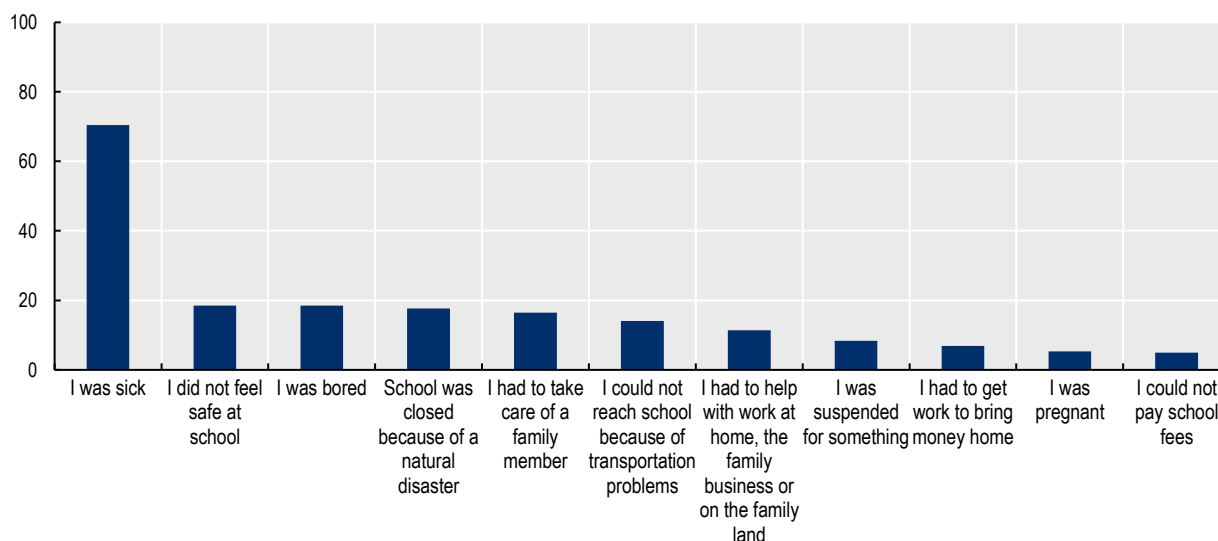
Source: OECD (2023[5]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, Table II.B1.3.55, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

Furthermore, Gubbels, van der Put and Assink (2019[31]) developed a meta-analytic review aimed at synthesising the available evidence on risk factors for school absenteeism and drop-out. The authors found that for school absenteeism, significant and substantial effects were found around risks such as the physical and mental problems of the child, substance abuse, antisocial or risky behaviour, problems at or with school, characteristics of the school, parenting problems and difficulties, and family problems. In

regard to school dropouts, similar risks were identified, along with risks related to peer group characteristics and social status within a peer group.

There are rising concerns, however, that the pandemic has impacted these drivers. Illness became a significant driver of absenteeism, with the pandemic affecting, in particular, vulnerable children. Moreover, some initial evidence indicates a shift in parental attitudes, which impact their children's attendance.

Given these changes driven by the pandemic, the need for further scrutiny of drivers of these phenomena is evident, across all systems facing these challenges.

Increasing concerns after the COVID-19 pandemic

After the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns started to rise in regard to students' ability to engage and succeed in education. Therefore, the Survey asked education systems if there has been an increase in student drop-out and/or in unjustified absences/truancy in their systems, following the pandemic at any educational level. Figure 3 provides an overview of the number of systems that reported an increase in either phenomenon. Twelve respondents reported witnessing an increase in dropouts, while an equal number indicated they did not observe such an increase.

Reported increases in truancy or unjustified absences are of similar magnitude, with 12 respondents flagging an increase, and 11 referring no increase. While the overall numbers can give the impression that the two phenomena are of a similar scale, there is an underlying different distribution.

Figure 3. Number of education systems reporting an increase in dropouts and truancy (across educational levels)
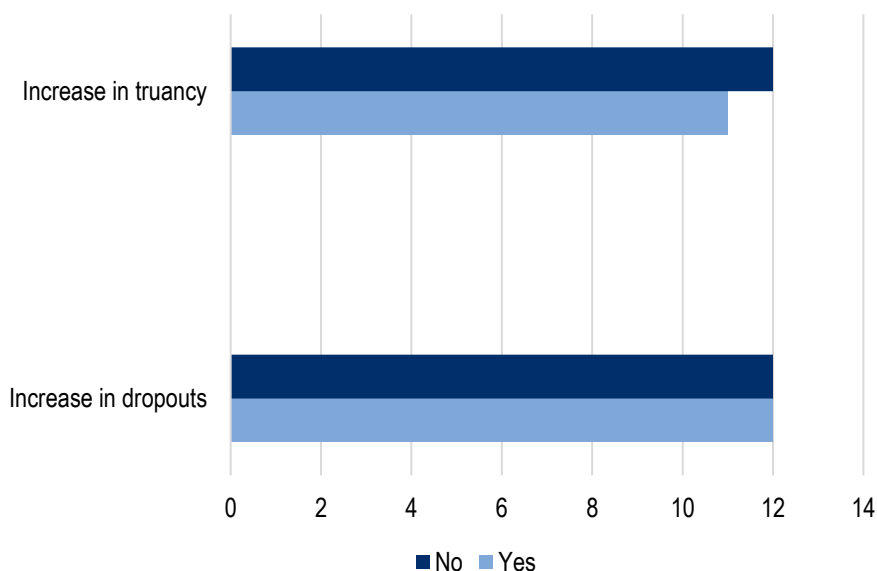
Note: 27 education systems replied to the survey, and Spain provided responses for two subsystems (pre-tertiary and tertiary), for a total of 28 respondents. The survey asked systems to respond yes/no to the following two questions: "Has there been an increase in student drop-out in your education system following the COVID-19 pandemic at any of the following educational levels: (ISCED 1 (primary education), ISCED 2 (lower secondary education), ISCED 3 (upper secondary education)?" and "Has there been an increase of unjustified absences/truancy in your education system following the COVID-19 pandemic?" 24 and 23 systems provided valid responses on dropouts and truancy, respectively. Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey 2023.

As shown in Table 1, the increase in dropouts appears to be concentrated in upper secondary education (seven respondents) and in other levels (eight respondents). According to additional information provided by education systems, other levels include:

- Higher education (e.g., in Romania and Saskatchewan (Canada));
- Vocational education (e.g., Costa Rica);
- Special education (e.g., Costa Rica);
- Adult education (e.g., in Sweden, in particular for adult immigrants).

In contrast, education systems reported observing increases in truancy/unjustified absences to a similar extent across all education levels. Indeed, six respondents reported an increase in truancy/unjustified absences for primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education.

Table 1. Distribution of truancy/unjustified absences and dropouts across educational levels

Number of respondents (education systems) reporting an increase in dropouts and truancy

	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Other
Dropouts	1	0	7	8
Truancy	6	6	6	5

Note: 27 education systems replied to the survey, and Spain provided responses for two subsystems (pre-tertiary and tertiary), for a total of 28 respondents; 24 and 23 systems provided valid responses on dropouts and truancy, respectively.
Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey 2023.

As can be seen from Table 2, the majority of affected systems are experiencing the issue across multiple educational levels. This is the case for Australia, England (United Kingdom), Ireland, Norway, Saskatchewan (Canada), Scotland (United Kingdom) and Türkiye. However, not all systems experienced increases in unjustified absences, and some, like Sweden, even saw an improvement in the data after the pandemic.[3] Statistics from CSN (the authority that manages Swedish student finances), show that unjustified absences decreased the year after the pandemic (CSN, 2021[39]). There is, however, a general perception in several education systems that many students and parents have a more laxed attitude towards absenteeism (OECD, 2023[8]).

However, several respondents mentioned limitations in data collections. In certain countries, such as the Netherlands, data on unjustified absences (*leerplichttelling*) are reported on an annual basis and therefore always lag one year behind. Other respondents noted that in their systems, data on unjustified absences are not collected, particularly at the level of tertiary education.

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[3] Sweden did not close schools during the pandemic.

Table 2. Increases in truancy across educational levels, by education system

Respondent breakdown for the question "In your country, has there been an increase of unjustified absences/truancy in your education system following the COVID-19 pandemic, at any of the following educational levels? Please select all that apply. You can specify any relevant detail (e.g., differences in tracks within an ISCED level) in the space provided."

Country	Primary	Lower secondary	Upper secondary	Other	No at any level
Australia	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Austria					Yes
Chile	No	Yes	No	No	No
Colombia	m	m	m	m	m
Costa Rica					Yes
Croatia					Yes
Czechia	m	m	m	m	m
England (UK)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Estonia					Yes
Finland	m	m	m	m	m
Iceland	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Yes
Ireland	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Korea					Yes
Lithuania					Yes
Luxembourg					Yes
Netherlands	No	No	No	Yes	No
New Zealand	No	No	No	Yes	No
Northern Ireland (UK)					Yes
Norway	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Nova Scotia (Canada)	m	m	m	m	m
Portugal					Yes
Romania	m	m	m	m	m
Saskatchewan (Canada)	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Scotland (UK)	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Spain (Education and Vocational)					Yes
Spain (Higher Education)	No	No	No	Yes	No
Sweden					Yes
Türkiye	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No

Note: Missing data is marked as "m". Note: 27 education systems replied to the survey, and Spain provided responses for two subsystems (pre-tertiary and tertiary), for a total of 28 respondent; 23 systems provided valid responses on truancy.
Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey 2023.

Policy responses to absences and dropouts

Although not all respondents indicated increases in absences and dropouts, most confirmed that they adopted policies to reduce drop-out or truancy rates. Specifically, 21 respondents confirmed having such policies, and only 7 did not: Austria, Croatia, Korea, Lithuania, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Nova Scotia (Canada) and Scotland (United Kingdom).

The variety of policies that have been adopted by education systems spans over several areas. Survey respondents mentioned the elements listed below. Some of these measures may be part of a longer strategy to combat absenteeism and dropouts, as some countries have been concerned with these issues from before the pandemic.

Provision of services such as mental health support and well-being initiatives

Some education systems have been providing mental health services and fostering well-being initiatives as a way to strengthen student engagement and participation in school. Indeed, mental health issues correlate with lower school attendance and higher dropouts from education (Lawrence et al., 2019[40]; Hjorth et al., 2016[41]). Improving prevention, early intervention, treatment and management of mental disorders may lead to significant improvements in school attendance and participation (Lawrence et al., 2019[40]).

For these reasons, for instance, the **Australian** Government is providing funding to support several measures related to students' mental health and well-being:

- student mental health and well-being initiatives, including student engagement initiatives;
- a new voluntary mental health check tool to enable schools to ensure students get the support they need; and
- delivery of the National Student Wellbeing Programme which funds Student Wellbeing Officers and Chaplains in schools to support the well-being of their students.

In **Iceland**, "putting well-being first" is one of the five priority pillars of the National Education Policy 2030, a ten-year strategy that outlines an overall vision for Iceland's education system based on the values of resilience, courage, knowledge, happiness and sustainability. The well-being pillar adopts a holistic approach to student well-being, focusing on health promotion, mental health, prevention of bullying and violent behaviour, school counselling, enhancing student voice practices, and providing equal opportunities for sports and youth activities (OECD, 2021[42]). Implementation is due to take place in three phases over ten years, with an implementation plan and performance indicators for each of the phases (OECD, 2021[43]).

Strengthening data collection and early warning systems

Ensuring that students graduate from upper secondary school is a high priority across education systems, and this goal often entails predicting early on which students are most likely to experience challenge in the schooling process that may lead to dropping out (OECD, 2021[44]). Accurate prediction and early warning systems (EWS) can ensure that students be provided with additional resources that can help promote their persistence and success (Bowers, 2021[45]).

The field of education early warning systems and early warning indicators (EWS/EWI) is an emerging domain (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2019[46]; McMahon and Sembiante, 2019[47]; OECD, 2021[44]) that is focused on providing actionable predictors of students failing to graduate from upper secondary school. It is still a developing field, as much remains to be learned about exactly which indicators are the most accurate and predictive for which systems, how to provide that information for action and evidence-based practice in schools, and then what those schools can do with that information (OECD, 2021[44]).

Given the potential of these tools, various education systems have adopted early warning systems and worked on strengthening their data collections on absences and dropouts. In the Survey, for instance Chile, Finland, Norway and Romania all mentioned having adopted such measures.

Chile, for example, reported a focus on strengthening and articulating its EWS. Its goal was to improve the criteria considered for the EWS and to extend it so that it would cover all educational levels and schools (OECD, 2023[8]). The Chilean EWS incorporates a monitoring system for follow-up, re-engagement and support actions for the students at risk, while also providing technical guidelines at the regional, community and educational unit levels for the use of alert and follow-up systems (Ministerio de Educación, 2020[48]).

Both **Finland** and **Norway** engaged in legislative changes aimed at strengthening the data collection around absences. Finland, for instance, aimed at developing practices that would harmonise the monitoring of absences and the relative compilation of statistics. To allow for this, the Basic Education Act was amended so that the education providers must, from when the amended Act entered into force on 1 August 2023, systematically monitor absences as to respond to them and work towards their prevention.

Similarly, the Norwegian Parliament recently passed a new Education Act that will come into force in 2024. In the new Act, the municipalities' and schools' indirect duty to follow up any student absence, regardless of length, has been set into law and clarified (Ministry of Education, 2023[49]).

Romania has implemented an EWS called MATE, approved in December 2022, as part of the National Programme for Reducing Dropout in Pre-university education (Ministry of Education, Romania, 2022[50]). The mechanism has been developed and piloted with funding from the European Commission. MATE promotes a comprehensive and multi-level approach to reduce the rate of absences, truancy and dropouts in schools. It installs a three-tiered approach starting with preventative measures, such as promoting a positive and inclusive learning environment in schools; followed by interventive measures, such as the implementation of personalised educational service plans and identifying those at risk; and concluding with compensation measures such as the identification and registration of children and young people out of school. One of the key components of MATE is the establishment of new mandatory data collection procedures on groups at risk in schools, in coordination with the national system for data collection on schools run by the Ministry of Education. All staff involved in the MATE data collection receive specific training on the processes (Ministry of Education, Romania, 2022[50]).

Funding to schools or local entities for targeted approaches

Allowing schools or local entities to develop their own targeted approaches has also been a strategy that education systems have adopted, by providing targeted funding at different levels. England (United Kingdom), New Zealand and Romania, for instance, supported targeted approaches in their efforts to combat absenteeism. For example, **Romania** established a *National Programme for Reducing Dropout* in December 2021. The programme is funded through their National Recovery and Resilience Plan, providing EUR 500 million to selected schools for tailored measures designed to target drop-out factors specific to the school environment (Ministry of Education, Romania, 2021[51]).

In the context of its broader "All for Learning Strategy" – discussed more in Box 2 – **New Zealand** introduced the Regional Response Fund in 2022 (Ministry of Education, 2023[52]). This is a government fund of NZD 10 million per year (New Zealand dollars) to develop local and regional responses to attendance and engagement barriers for their students (*ākonga*). Funds can be provided to schools (*kura*), families, community groups, service providers and community leaders. The fund prioritises supporting Māori students, Pacific learners and students requiring learning support. This approach allows solutions to be tailored to the unique strengths of a local community and enables education funding to be used flexibly to support this partnership approach. The Fund is available for targeted one-off proposals as well as investment into initiatives addressing systemic issues which may require a multi-year approach.

Box 2. New Zealand: All In For Learning Strategy

All in for learning I Kia kotahi te ū ki te ako

Aotearoa New Zealand introduced a strategy for tackling the decade-long decline in regular attendance and engagement in schools. The strategy has three key parts: clear expectations for everyone involved, ambitious targets for attendance levels and bold actions.

First, the strategy sets **expectations** meant to increase attendance and engagement, focusing on *ākonga* (students) being present, participating and progressing. The strategy sets expectations in these three areas not only for students, but also for families, caregivers, communities and schools.

Targets were then set, as shown in Table 3, for 2024 and 2026, and were articulated around regular school attendance, moderate absences and chronical absences. The data related to these attendance measures show a progressive decline in absenteeism from Term 2 2022 to Term 1 2023. Yet, the latter part of 2023 has shown a drop in regular attendance. Continuous monitoring will be necessary to ensure the stability of the effectiveness of the strategies.

The **actions** that were set out were also divided into being present, participating and progressing. Around "being present", for instance, some of the actions have been to support schools to use their attendance data to identify and respond to issues, and to review the regulatory settings for responding to chronic non-attendance. In terms of "participating", the Ministry set out to provide targeted support to schools and communities to promote re-engagement in learning as they transitioned out of the COVID-19 Protection Framework, to progressively re-design the Alternative Education service model to better meet individual needs, and to support schools to implement the Learning Support Delivery Model. Progressing entails strengthening the national curriculum and its implementation at the local level so that all students belong, progress and achieve in different key skills.

Table 3. Targets and tracking of attendance and absence data

Measure	Term 2 2022*	Term 3 2022	Term 4 2022	Term 1 2023	Term 2 2023	Term 3 2023	2024 Targets	2026 Targets
% of *akonga* attending school regularly (attending more than 90%, missing less than one week a term)	39.9%	46.0%	50.6%	59.5%	47%	45.9%	70%	75%
% of *akonga* who are moderately absent (attending 70% - 80%, missing two to three weeks a term)	15%	12.5%	11.4%	8.9%	12.7%	12.7%	6%	4%
% of *akonga* who are chronically absent (attending 70% or less, missing three or more weeks a term)	13.8%	12.8%	12.4%	8.3%	12.5%	12.2%	5%	3%

Note: *Term 2 2022 attendance was impacted by short-term illness absences related to COVID-19 and higher than usual rates of typical winter illness.
Source: Education Counts (2023[53]), National Data Collections: Attendance, https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/attendance (accessed on 4 March 2024).

Changing the compulsory schooling age

In the pursuit of mitigating premature disengagement from the educational system without attaining an upper secondary qualification, a pragmatic strategy involves extending the compulsory education age. This approach posits that prolonging the duration of schooling heightens the probability of eventual attainment of a higher secondary diploma. Empirical evidence underscores the impact of compulsory education policies on students' educational attainment. Notably, research conducted by Brunello, Fort and Weber (2009[54]) suggests that reforms mandating prolonged school attendance exert a discernible influence, particularly benefiting academically underperforming students. Additionally, although to a lesser extent, these reforms demonstrate positive effects among higher-achieving students, with a more conspicuous impact observed among female students.

Along this rationale, the **Luxembourgish** parliament approved a bill in July 2023 to extend compulsory schooling from 16 to 18 years of age. The new provision will come into force at the start of the 2026/2027 school year. This timeframe will enable the education sector to expand the range of additional and alternative services available to meet the individual needs of young people who have dropped out of school, such as socio-professional integration centres. Minors aged 16 or over wishing to enter the world of work will be able to apply for exemption from compulsory schooling for the duration of their work contract. This law is an important part of the strategy to fight early school leaving and youth unemployment (Ministry of National Education, Children and Youth, 2023[55]).

Compulsory schooling age also changed in **Romania** during the 2021/2022 school year as part of a gradual increase of compulsory education. Compulsory school education now includes the last two years of upper secondary education and the last year of preschool education. From 2024/2025, it will also include the second year of pre-school education (Ministry of Education, Romania, 2023[56]).

Conducting positive messaging campaigns and building capacity

Positive messaging campaigns are another popular strategy with the aim to strengthen student participation in school and reduce absences and dropouts. For example, **Ireland** developed an extensive and multi-agency campaign to support attendance through various projects. The programme is detailed in Box 3.

Box 3. Building a National School Attendance Campaign in Ireland: A Collaborative Approach

In Ireland, the Education Support Service (TESS), which is part of the Tusla Child and Family Agency, is the national organisation responsible for school attendance. TESS collaborates with schools and other stakeholders to support school attendance through various projects, targeting, for instance, schools with high shares of socio-economically disadvantaged students. The role of TESS is to assist parents in their children's education or offer targeted support to children at risk of early leaving from education and training.

This programme is based on three components:

- The School Completion Programme (SCP): based in designated disadvantaged schools provides additional targeted supports to students at risk of early school leaving;
- The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme: in designated disadvantaged schools supports parents to engage in their child's education;
- The Educational Welfare Service (EWS): is the statutory arm of TESS charged with ensuring that all children aged 6 to 16 are in school and through a welfare approach supports parents to ensure their children attend school. Where parents fail to ensure their child attends school, as a last resort, a parent may be prosecuted under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000.

To strengthen these measures and combat the dropping rates of school attendance after the COVID-19 pandemic, TESS launched a **national communications campaign**, which is underpinned by a webinar series including six sessions focused on school attendance, such as evidence-based strategies for improving school attendance and creating a culture of school attendance.

TESS emphasises the importance of including all stakeholders in the process by collaborating with students, parents and guardians, school leaders, international experts, and other governmental organisations, such as the National Educational Psychological Service. To ensure effectiveness of the campaign, TESS aims to encourage parents to engage in their children's education, develop a three-tiered support system for students, and set realistic goals for school attendance, bearing in mind

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that public health requirements might require school closures again in the future. While the communications campaign is still being developed, some prerequisites for successful campaigning were already identified. These include coordination with public health messaging and targeting all relevant groups. To this end, collaborations with national education experts as well as the national psychological service have started.

Source: OECD (2023[8]), Equity and inclusion in education post COVID-19 Survey 2023; Department of Education (2023[57]), National School Attendance Campaign 2023, https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/69a49-national-school-attendance-campaign-2023/ (accessed on 12 December 2023); TESS (TESS, 2023[58]), Reporting Absenteeism, https://www.tusla.ie/tess/tess-ews/reporting-absenteeism/ (accessed on 10 February 2024).

Developing research activities or setting up working groups on absences and dropouts

Research on the specific effects that the pandemic had on trends around absences and dropouts is limited. The collection of information on how incentives changed for students and families is in its early stages and more research is needed all around to better frame the issue.

Nevertheless, some education systems have been investigating specifics related to their education systems. **England** (United Kingdom) has been developing research on the drivers of school absences, as mentioned in Box 5. **Sweden** has charged the National Agency for Education to investigate the specific reasons for the increases in drop-out rates for adults with an immigrant background. **Spain** is developing a national definition of truancy through the creation of a working group, under the Guidance, Advancement and Educational Enrichment Programme (*Programa De Orientación, Avance Y Enriquecimiento Educativo*) (OECD, 2023[8]).

Higher education specific measures

Higher education systems across the OECD have faced many challenges and opportunities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the actions they have taken include shifting to online or hybrid modes of instruction and learning and providing additional financial, academic and psychological support to students and staff (OECD, 2021[59]). These measures were essential for ensuring the continued learning of students and reducing absence rates. An example from Saskatchewan, Canada, is highlighted in Box 4.

Box 4. Higher education responses in Saskatchewan, Canada

While practices varied among colleges and universities in Saskatchewan, Canada, some institutions opted to retain or adopt measures to adapt to the evolving educational landscape (OECD, 2023[8]). One such example is the University of Regina, which introduced new modalities of course delivery, including synchronous virtual and hybrid formats, aimed at providing students with increased flexibility and broader access to educational resources. Additionally, the university expanded its online provision of student support services, such as counselling, academic advising and tutoring, to accommodate the transition to remote learning. Furthermore, the University of Regina increased its emergency funding available to students facing financial hardship, recognising the heightened economic challenges caused by the pandemic.

Looking beyond the immediate impacts of the pandemic, the University of Regina has implemented post-pandemic measures, including the introduction of remote or flexible working options for certain categories of university employees. These initiatives reflect a commitment to adapting to the changing educational landscape and ensuring continued access to quality education in a rapidly evolving

environment (OECD, 2023[8]).

Similarly, Dumont Technical Institute (DTI) responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic by adopting Brightspace Learning Management, which facilitates remote learning by enabling students to access assignments, submit work and view grades from any location. DTI continues to utilise Brightspace as a key tool for communication and content delivery. The Institute's partnerships with programme brokers further enhance accessibility to educational content through Brightspace, illustrating a concerted effort to leverage technology to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic and ensure continuity in education delivery (OECD, 2023[8]).

Comprehensive approaches

As shown throughout the previous sections, countries are adopting several different strategies to face both absenteeism and dropouts, which are generally interlinked. Due to the multifactorial nature of the challenges of student absenteeism and truancy, effective policy responses require a layered approach. As discussed more in Box 5, England (United Kingdom) developed a comprehensive strategy to fight school absences, which covers several of the areas mentioned above.

Box 5. A comprehensive strategy: England's approach in fighting school absences

The context of the strategy

In England (United Kingdom), student absences started becoming a major concern around September 2021. Data on school attendance showed that absence rates increased significantly, particularly in secondary schools, special education settings and among vulnerable students (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023[60]; Department for Education England, 2023[61]). If a student misses 10% or more of the available sessions, England defines them as **persistently absent** (6 days/term, 19 days/year). If they miss 50% or more sessions, then they are defined as **severely absent.** Between 2013/2014 and 2018/2019, the percentage of primary school students recorded as persistently absent remained consistently at around 8%. In 2021/2022, it rose to 17.7% and was at 16.2% in 2022/2023 (Department for Education, 2024[62]). For secondary school students, the rate of persistent absence remained between 13% and 14% from 2013/2014 to 2019/2020, then jumping to 27.7% in 2021/2022 and 26.5% in 2022/2023 (ibid.). Data from 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 were impacted by COVID policy, where schools were asterisked from daily attendance data and is therefore not comparable with other years.

England identified that illness drove most of the increase, accounting for 4.4% of the reasons for absence in 2021/2022 and 3.7% in 2022/2023, compared with 2.5% in 2018/2019 (Department for Education, 2024[62]). Additional data show that vulnerable children were especially affected. Certain groups of students, such as those with SEN, those who were eligible for free school meals, and those belonging to Travellers of Irish descent or Gypsy/Roma[4] ethnic groups, had higher absence rates on average than their peers (Department for Education England, 2023[61]). For example, 36.5% of students who were eligible for free school meals were persistently absent in 2021/2022, compared to 15.6% of students who were not eligible (Department for Education, 2024[62]).

The causes for this increase that were identified by England can be attributed to a range of elements. On the one hand, whole-system factors like rising illness rates and shifting parental attitudes on school attendance played a role. On the other hand, social drivers affecting vulnerable students, such as

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[4] Gypsy/Roma is the official terminology used in England to collect data on ethnicity.

physical and mental health, behavioural, economic and family-related issues, can impede regular school attendance.

The Working Together to Improve Attendance guidance

England's response to these challenges is structured under the Working Together to Improve Attendance guidance that renewed several attendance policies (Department for Education, England, 2024[63]). The guidance sets clear, strong expectations of schools and Local Authorities to ensure that they all adopt the best practices to respond to these issues. This includes, among others, the setting of expectations around attendance for students and parents, having a clear attendance policy that all parties understand, building relationships with the families, the implementation of analysis of data, collaborating with other schools, and the provision of targeted support for those with highest absence levels.

Other measures are:

- Attendance advisors in schools and local authorities: All local authorities have either been offered, are receiving or will received attendance advisor support.

- A tool which allows schools and local authorities access to richer, near real-time attendance data, so that issues are identified quickly: the attendance data tool is being continuously improved, so that, in addition to helping schools to identify issues quickly, schools can use it to compare their attendance statistics both locally and nationally. 90% of schools are voluntarily participating in this, and it will become mandatory from 24 September 2024.

- Attendance hubs: rolled out a model to cover schools through expert peer support hubs led by schools with the best attendance, so they can share their experience of what works. There are now 14 attendance hubs and throughout 2024, this number will increase to 32, reaching 2 000 schools.

- Attendance Mentors: a three-year pilot of 1:1 attendance mentoring for those with the highest absence. The Attendance Mentors programme has been recently expanded, and its aim is to help 10 000 children struggling to attend school over the next three years.

- Attendance Action Alliance: a cross sector Alliance of system leaders to work to remove barriers to attendance and reduce absence. A national attendance ambassador was appointed champion attendance, with the task of sharing effective practices and support the on-going development of the Attendance Hubs programme.

- A national communications campaign: a campaign is under way, aiming to highlight the benefits of attendance and target preventable odd days of absence linked to mild illness, mild anxiety and term-time holidays.

These initiatives complement wider Department for Education and Government support to improve provision for children with SEN, support those facing mental health related challenges, post-pandemic recovery funding in education and funding for schools to support children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Since the adoption of this strategy, the country is seeing improvements in overall absence and persistent absence, especially on a term-by-term basis, although much of this progress is attributed to reduced illnesses after the pandemic. However, unauthorised and persistent absences are still more frequent than before the pandemic.

Key Takeaways

Moving beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, there is growing concern about students' ability to engage and succeed in education. The Survey found that just over half (12) of education systems indicated a post-pandemic increase in dropouts and truancy in education. Increases in dropouts appear concentrated in upper secondary education and other levels, including higher education, vocational education and adult education. Increases in truancy, however, were reportedly equally likely across all educational levels.

While not all systems reported increases in absences and dropouts, most acknowledged the adoption of policies to address these challenges, reflecting the worldwide concern for this issue. Among the respondents, 21 confirmed having policies in place, while seven did not. The policy responses to tackle absenteeism and dropouts varied, including the provision of mental health support and well-being initiatives, strengthening data collection and early warning systems, funding for targeted approaches, changing the compulsory school age, and conducting positive messaging campaigns. These policies reflect the multifactorial nature of addressing absenteeism and student drop-out. In recognising the complexity of these challenges, education systems have embraced a range of strategic initiatives, highlighting the need for a nuanced and holistic approach to effectively combat student absenteeism and drop-out.

The bottom line: new challenges are emerging post-pandemic

Amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems globally faced unprecedented disruptions, leading to a surge in policy initiatives aimed at supporting students and educators, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds. From providing online learning resources, supporting well-being initiatives, to providing additional financial and academic support and teacher training, efforts were made to mitigate the pandemic's impact on education. Now, as countries consider which policies to maintain post-pandemic, rigorous evaluation becomes crucial. While initial assessments suggest that measures such as summer schools and online learning support have been effective in promoting equity, on-going evaluation and knowledge-sharing are vital for shaping resilient education systems for the future.

Furthermore, increasing rates of absenteeism, drop-out and truancy have become of growing concern for countries over recent years, and have become particularly challenging since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of education systems have implemented new policies and practices to address these changes, covering a wide range of areas such as mental health and well-being supports, raising the compulsory schooling age, and positive messaging campaigns. As education systems adapt post-pandemic, evaluating the effectiveness of implemented policies and addressing challenges like absenteeism and drop-out rates remain critical priorities.

Education for Inclusive Societies

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The OECD Education for Inclusive Societies Project provides analysis and policy advice on how to achieve more equitable and inclusive education systems as a pillar to create more inclusive societies.

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See: OECD Education for Inclusive Societies

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