



Seirbhís Tacaíochta
Oideachais Tusla
Tusla Education Support Service

School Attendance Data Primary and Post-Primary Schools And Student Absence Reports Primary and Post-Primary Schools 2017/18

[under Section 21(6) of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000]
Analysis and Report to the Child and Family Agency

July 2020

Sylvia Denner and Jude Cosgrove
Educational Research Centre

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Executive Summary.....	iii
List of Acronyms.....	iii
Introduction.....	6
1 Non-Attendance Data, 2013/14 to 2017/18.....	7
1.1 Response Rate.....	7
1.2 Results of the Annual Attendance Report	8
1.2.1 Non-Attendance	8
1.2.2 Twenty-Day Absences.....	10
1.2.3 Expulsions.....	10
1.2.4 Suspensions.....	11
1.3 Aspects of Non-Attendance.....	12
1.3.1 Non-Attendance in the Population and in Schools.....	12
1.3.2 Precision of Non-Attendance Figures.....	12
2 Non-Attendance in Primary Schools, 2017/18.....	13
2.1 Non-Attendance by School Type	13
2.2 Non-Attendance in Urban and Rural Schools.....	13
2.3 DEIS Categories and Non-Attendance.....	14
2.4 Non-Attendance by Province and County.....	16
2.5 Non-Attendance in Special Schools	18
3 Non-Attendance in Post-Primary Schools, 2017/18	20
3.1 Secondary, Vocational, and Community/Comprehensive Schools.....	20
3.2 DEIS and Non-Attendance	21
3.3 Non-Attendance by Province and County.....	21
4 Results of the Student Absence Report.....	23
4.1 Overall results of Student Absence Reports (SAR)	23
4.2 Student Absence Reports in Primary Schools	25
4.3 Student Absence Reports in Post-Primary Schools	32
5 Discussion.....	38
6 References.....	39

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions and advice of Tusla and in particular Brian Mooney, Noel Kelly, Rachel Good and Séamus Walsh. Thanks, are also due to staff at the Educational Research Centre for their administrative input and assistance, including Anne Comey, Imelda Pluck and John Coyle. Finally, and most importantly, we acknowledge the work by schools to provide the data to Tusla.

List of Acronyms

AAR	Annual Attendance Report
CMS	Content Management System
DEIS	Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills [Department of Education]
ERC	Educational Research Centre
ETB	Education and Training Board
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
SAR	Student Attendance Report

Executive Summary

In accordance with the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 schools are obliged to report on school attendance, and data on non-attendance in primary and post-primary schools at the aggregated level are collected by the Child and Family Agency through the *Annual Attendance Report* (AAR) and, also at the student level through the *Student Attendance Report* (SAR). The new Tusla Portal allows schools to securely submit their data and has allowed, for the first time in the present report, for additional analysis to be conducted at the student level.

This report presents data for the academic year 2017/18 and, in the case of AAR data, comparisons with previous years.

Key findings are summarised in four sections, and these summaries are followed by a set of concluding comments.

Non-Attendance from 2013/14 to 2017/18

School response rates for 2017/18, at 96.3% for primary schools and 91.5% for post-primary schools, were slightly lower than previous years, where response rates were in excess of 98-99%. In the relatively small number of schools with missing data, proxy values¹, based on previous years' returns, were used.

Total number of days lost through student absence in the entire school year: 5.8 % of pupil days were lost due to absence in primary schools in 2017/18 (an increase of 0.2% from 2016/17) and 7.4% of student days were lost in post-primary schools (a decrease of 0.5% from 2016/17). The five-year trends indicate relative stability in overall attendance rates.

Number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in the school year: at primary level, 12.1% of pupils were absent for 20 days or more. At post-primary level, this figure was higher (14.6%). Five-year trends indicate a small increase at primary level from 10.4% to 12.1% and a marginal decrease at post-primary level from 15.4% to 14.6%.

Total number of students expelled in respect of whom all appeal processes have been exhausted: Expulsion is rare, particularly at primary level. Across the five years at primary level, expulsion rates ranged from 0.004% to 0.006%, while at post-primary level the rates ranged from 0.040% to 0.057%. In 2017/2018, the expulsion rates at primary and post-primary levels were 0.006% and 0.040% respectively, i.e., the expulsion rate is approximately seven times higher at post-primary than at primary level.

Total number of students who were suspended: Rates of suspension also tend to be low, more so at primary level. Across the five years at primary level, suspension rates ranged from 0.2% to 0.3%, while at post-primary level the rates ranged from 3.6% to 4.1%. In 2017/2018, the suspension rates at primary and post-primary levels were 0.3% and 3.6% respectively, indicating that about 12 times as many students were suspended at post-primary compared to primary.

Non-Attendance in Primary Schools in 2017/18

Non-attendance patterns at primary level in 2017/18 were analysed by special school status, school location (urban / rural), SSP status of the school under DEIS, and region. The results of these analyses indicate that:

- There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of days lost between different school types, with about twice the rate of days lost in special schools compared with 'mainstream' schools.

¹Proxy values were applied as a strategy to deal with missing data. Comparisons of results both with and without the application of proxy data confirmed that the application of proxies did not have any impact on the findings, while at the same time allowing for a more complete analysis of the datasets.

- Urban schools had significantly higher rates of non-attendance, 20-day absences and expulsions than rural schools. (In line with the National Census, *urban* schools are those located in communities with a population size of 1,500 or more, while *rural* schools are in communities with a population size of less than 1,500.)
- Non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions were highest among DEIS Band 1 schools (when compared to DEIS Band 2 schools, non-DEIS urban schools, DEIS rural schools and non-DEIS rural schools). DEIS Band 2 schools generally had the second highest rates on these measures.
- Similarly, there were statistically significant differences in rates of non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions across the four regions (Leinster, Munster, Connaught and (part of) Ulster), with Leinster recording the highest rates on each of these four measures. (The full report provides, in addition, a breakdown by county.)

Non-Attendance in Post-primary Schools in 2017/18

Non-attendance patterns at post-primary level in 2017/18 were analysed by school sector/type, SSP status of the school under DEIS, and region. The results of these analyses indicate that:

- There was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of days lost between different school sectors/types, with the highest rates generally found in Education and Training Board schools, followed by community/comprehensive schools, and the lowest rates generally associated with voluntary secondary schools.
- Non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions were significantly and substantially higher among DEIS post-primary schools compared with non-DEIS post-primary schools.
- Similarly, there were statistically significant differences in rates of non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions across the four regions (Leinster, Munster, Connaught and (part of) Ulster). Higher rates of suspensions and expulsions were found for the Leinster region, while Connaught recorded the highest rate of 20-day absences, and both Connaught and Ulster (part of) had somewhat higher rates of total days lost than Leinster or Munster. (The full report provides, in addition, a breakdown by county.)

Student Absence Reports in 2017/18

Student Absence Reports are submitted by schools twice a year for those students absent from school for a cumulative total of 20 days or more, and 2017/2018 was the first occasion on which the data were submitted to the new Tusla portal. Absences are categorised into illness, urgent family reason, holiday, suspended, other, and unexplained. Only children over the age of 6 years and children who have not reached the age of 16 years or have not completed 3 years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later, are included, in accordance with the legislation which stipulates that attendance is compulsory from ages 6 to 16.

About two-thirds of schools submitted data. Despite the fact that response rates were lower than for the AARs, response propensity did not vary significantly by primary school DEIS status/urban rural location, region or school type (mainstream, mainstream with special class(es), special). However, response propensity varied significantly by school size whereby small schools (with enrolment of 80 or less) were much less likely to submit an SAR than medium (81-220 enrolled) or large (221 or more) schools. Therefore, the results may be considered representative in terms of DEIS status/urban rural location, region or school type, but under-representative of small schools.

In contrast to primary schools, response propensity at post-primary did not vary by post-primary school DEIS status, enrolment size, region or sector/gender composition. Therefore, the results may be considered representative on these four characteristics.

At primary level, 61% of these absences were explained and 39% were unexplained; 9% of the explained absences were due to holidays. At post-primary level, 51% of absences were explained and 49% were unexplained; just 1% of the explained absences were due to holidays².

Further analyses of the data at primary level showed that:

- Explained absence rates were somewhat higher in special schools than in mainstream schools and explained absences due to holidays were lower among children in special schools than in mainstream schools.
- Explained absence rates were lower in DEIS Band 1 and DEIS Band 2 schools (relative to non-DEIS urban, non-DEIS rural and DEIS rural schools), with little variation in explained absences due to holidays across these five school types.
- The percentages of children with 20 or more days' absences tended to increase from first class (12.6%) to sixth class (15.4%).
- While schools in Dublin recorded the largest number of students with 20 days absent, Offaly and Westmeath recorded the largest proportion of students with 20 or more days absent.

Further analyses of the data at post-primary level showed that:

- The percentages of explained absences are higher among students in voluntary secondary schools relative to students in community/comprehensive and Education and Training Board schools.
- There is some variation in the rates of explained and unexplained absences across DEIS and non-DEIS schools, but the differences are not large. For example, the rates of unexplained absences are 46% and 53% in DEIS and non-DEIS post-primary schools, respectively.
- The percentages of students with 20 or more days' absences varies by year level. For example, it is 8.4% and 12.6% in first and third year, respectively.
- While schools in Dublin recorded the largest number of students with 20 days absent, Laois and Longford recorded the largest proportion of students with 20 or more days absent.

Conclusions

- An examination of total absences, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions in 2017/18 compared with the previous four years indicates stable outcomes, for the most part.
- There are, at times, substantial variations in non-attendance by various school characteristics such as DEIS status, which are also generally in line with what has been observed in previous years.
- The availability of the student attendance reports for the first time in 2017/18 permits additional analysis, such as by explained and unexplained absences and by year or class level, and it will be of interest to monitor these in future analyses of the data.
- Some comparisons with non-attendance data of Northern Ireland can be made. For example, in Northern Ireland, the overall absence rate in primary schools in 2017/18 was recorded as 5.1%, with 6.7% recorded as the overall absence rate in post-primary schools. This compares to 5.8% and 7.4% respectively for data returned to Tusla in the 2017/18 academic year.
- It is hoped that higher response rates on the student attendance reports will be achieved in the coming years. The results indicate that primary schools with smaller enrolment sizes may need to be targeted and supported specifically to encourage submission of the student attendance reports.

² When the Tusla portal was first introduced, some schools' Content Management Systems were not configured to permit separate data capture of absence due to holidays, with the likely result that those absences were entered as unexplained absences. Since then, the CMS have been updated, so it is likely that absences due to holidays may show an increase in subsequent years.

Introduction

Since the inception of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 schools are obliged to report on school attendance. Data on non-attendance in primary and post-primary schools at the aggregated level are collected by the Child and Family Agency through the *Annual Attendance Report* (AAR) and also at the student level (SAR). The new Tusla Portal allows schools to securely submit their data and has allowed for additional analysis to be conducted at the student level.

This report presents data for the academic year 2017/18 and links to the data reported previously.

The report is in four sections:

- 1 *Non-Attendance from 2013/14 to 2017/18*, integrating the 2017/18 Child and Family Agency data with summary statistics for the five-year period, and a discussion of issues relating to the data set as a whole.
- 2 *Non-Attendance in Primary Schools in 2017/18*, which provides data for non-attendance by school location (urban / rural), SSP status of the school under DEIS, county by county figures, and non-attendance in special schools.
- 3 *Non-Attendance in Post-Primary Schools in 2017/18*, which provides data for non-attendance by school type (community / comprehensive, secondary, vocational), SSP status of the school under DEIS, and county by county figures.
- 4 *Student Absence Reports in 2017/18*, which provides data on students between the ages of 6 and 16 or have not completed three years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later. Since data are not available for all schools, several caveats or guidelines for interpreting the student absence reports are provided in this section.

1 Non-Attendance Data, 2013/14 to 2017/18

1.1 Response Rate

Table 1.1 shows the number of primary and post-primary state funded schools in the State, together with the number of pupils in those schools for the years 2013/14 to 2017/18. Data for 2013/14 through 2016/17 were provided directly to the Educational Research Centre (ERC) by DES Statistics Section and for 2017/18 from the DES website and DES Statistics Section on enrolment data in special schools and enrolment in special classes in mainstream schools. Post-primary figures exclude schools that cater for post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) students only and PLC students in other post-primary schools. There has been a year-on-year increase in the numbers of pupils/students in the primary and post-primary school sectors since 2013/14. In primary schools there has been an increase of approximately 27,000 pupils over the period. In post-primary schools the number of students has increased by over 24,000.

Table 1.1 Number of primary and post-primary schools and students, 2013/14 to 2017/18

<i>Primary</i>		<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
	Schools	3,274	3,265	3,252	3,240	3,236 ³
	Students	536,051	540,559	553,102	557,998	563,141
<i>Post-Primary</i>						
	Schools	696	704	710	707	710 ⁴
	Students	332,569	338,615	344,998	351,816	356,954

Table 1.2 shows the numbers and percentages of schools responding to the Annual Attendance Report (AAR) for 2013/14 through 2017/18. Response rates for 2017/18, at 96.3% of primary schools and 91.5% for post-primary schools, were slightly lower than previous years, where response rates were in excess of 98-99%. This is due to the fact that, for 2017/18, the follow-up with non-responding schools was on-going and, due to the Covid 19 pandemic, schools were closed before this process was complete.

Table 1.2 Number of schools, number of schools responding, and response rate to the Annual Attendance Report, 2013/14 to 2017/18

<i>Primary</i>		<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
	N schools	3,274	3,265	3,252	3,240	3,236
	N schools responding	3,266	3,255	3,231	3,237	3,115
	<i>Response rate</i>	99.8%	99.7%	99.4%	99.9%	96.3%
<i>Post-Primary</i>						
	N schools	696	704	710	707	710
	N schools responding	695	697	698	705	650
	<i>Response rate</i>	99.9%	99.0%	98.3%	99.7%	91.5%

³ Ten primary schools were excluded from the population: nine hospital schools and one school catering for pupils aged between three and six years. These 10 schools accounted for 318 pupils.

⁴ Four post-primary schools were excluded from the population as they cater for adult students or students taking PLC or VTOS courses. These four schools accounted for 432 students.

1.2 Results of the Annual Attendance Report

The core of the Child and Family Agency dataset consists of four variables. It records

- (1) 'Total number of days lost through student absence in the entire school year',
- (2) 'Number of students who were absent for 20 days or more in the school year',
- (3) 'Total number of students expelled in respect of whom all appeal processes have been exhausted', and
- (4) 'Total number of students who were suspended'.

In previous years, the numbers of schools listed in the tables below sometimes differed slightly from one table to the next. This is because schools providing data for one form of non-attendance may have had missing or unusable data for another. However, as noted in Section 1.1, for the academic year 2017/18, the process of checking the data was ongoing when schools had to close down due the Covid 19 pandemic and as a result there was a higher than usual number of schools with anomalous data. To enable use of the maximum amount of available information, a proxy value was generated based on the average of the previous four years. Each table indicates the number of schools for which a proxy value has been used⁵.

1.2.1 Non-Attendance

The data provided by the first AAR question are generally referred to as 'non-attendance' in this report, in order to distinguish this from the more specific forms of non-attendance associated with 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions. In this section it is always expressed as the percentage of available student/days that are lost through absence. Non-attendance figures for 2013/14 to 2017/18 are presented in bold type in Table 1.3. Above them, are the numbers of students, student/days, days in the school year, and student/days lost, from which they are calculated, together with the number of schools providing data.

The information contained in the rows of Table 1.3 is as follows:

N schools refers to the number of schools providing usable data. The figure can therefore be slightly smaller than the figure for *Schools Responding* (to the questionnaire) in Table 1.2. Note that the latter, in turn, is smaller than the *Schools* figure reported in Table 1.1, which refers to every school in the country.

N students gives the official DES enrolment figures for the schools in question, in the year in question.

N school days per year is 183 in primary schools and 167 in post-primary schools.

N student/days is the product of *N students* and *N school days per year*. In a primary school with 100 students it would be 18,300. It gives the maximum number of daily attendances that could be recorded in the school for the year. This figure would be achieved only if every student was present on every school day.

N student/days lost is the figure requested by the first item on the *Annual Attendance Report*, 'individual student absences'.

⁵ Proxy values were applied as a strategy to deal with missing data. Comparisons of results both with and without the application of proxy data confirmed that the application of proxies did not have any impact on the findings, while at the same time allowing for a more complete analysis of the datasets.

% student/days lost is the same as *student/days lost*, except that it is now expressed as a percentage of *N student/days*, the maximum attendance that is possible. Thus *% student/days lost* is *N student/days lost* divided by *N student/days*, multiplied by 100 to convert the resulting proportion to a percentage.

The data show that 5.8 % of pupil days were lost due to absence in primary schools in 2017/18 (an increase of 0.2% from 2016/17) and that 7.4% of student days were lost in post-primary schools (a decrease of 0.5% from 2016/17). The five-year trends shown in Table 1.3 indicate relative stability in overall attendance rates.

Table 1.3 Number of schools, number of students, number of school days per year, number of student/days, number of student/days lost, and percentage of student/days lost for primary and post-primary schools 2013/14 to 2017/18

<i>Primary</i>	<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
N schools	3,264	3,254	3,229	3,237	3,115 ⁶
N students	534,940	539,707	550,351	557,815	545,185
N school days per year	183	183	183	183	183
N student/days	97,894,020	98,766,381	100,714,233	102,080,145	99,768,855
N student/days lost	5,317,857	5,540,969	5,921,963	5,748,571	5,807,744
% student/days lost	5.4%	5.6%	5.9%	5.6%	5.8%
<i>Post-Primary</i>					
N schools	690	695	684	701	650 ⁷
N students	329,516	334,665	337,511	348,257	356,954
N school days per year	167	167	167	167	167
N student/days	55,029,172	55,889,055	56,364,337	58,158,919	59,611,318
N student/days lost	4,102,713	4,328,061	4,456,355	4,603,066	4,394,256
% student/days lost	7.5%	7.7%	7.9%	7.9%	7.4%

⁶ A proxy value for 63 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for the number of student days lost.

⁷ A proxy value for 35 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for the number of student days lost.

1.2.2 Twenty-Day Absences

The number and percentage of students who were absent for 20 days or more during the 2017/18 school year are summarised in Table 1.4, along with corresponding figures from the previous four years.

The percentage of pupils who were absent for 20 days or more was 12.1%, similar to the academic year 2015/16 and a slight increase on the 2016/17 figure (0.3%). For post-primary schools the percentage of pupils who were absent for 20 days or more was 14.6%, this is similar to the 2016/17 figure (14.7%). Looking at the five-year trend in Table 1.4, there has been a small increase at primary level from 10.4% to 12.1% and a marginal decrease at post-primary level from 15.4% to 14.6%.

Table 1.4 Number of schools, number of students, number of students absent for 20 days or more, and percentage of students who were absent for 20 days or more for primary and post-primary schools 2013/14 to 2017/18

<i>Primary</i>	<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
N schools	3,266	3,255	3,229	3,237	3,115 ⁸
N students	535,095	539,760	549,978	557,815	545,185
N 20-day absences	55,445	60,002	67,902	65,790	65,906
% students with 20-day absences	10.4%	11.1%	12.3%	11.8%	12.1%
<i>Post-Primary</i>					
N schools	695	695	695	702	650 ⁹
N students	332,102	334,394	341,033	349,060	327,525
N 20-day absences	50,999	54,220	50,790	51,402	47,887
% students with 20-day absences	15.4%	16.2%	14.9%	14.7%	14.6%

1.2.3 Expulsions

The numbers of expulsions reported by primary and post-primary schools are shown in Table 1.5. Expulsions are rare, particularly in primary schools. In the academic year approximately 30 pupils were recorded as being expelled. This is an approximate figure, as between 2016/17 and 2017/18 the ordering of the questions was changed, and it appeared that some schools recorded their suspensions as their expulsions and vice versa¹⁰. In post-primary schools there was only one school given a proxy value and the number of expulsions were approximately 132 in 2017/18. Absolute numbers of expulsions are extremely low in all cases, making inferences about trends unsuitable.

⁸ A proxy value for 126 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for 20 day absences for primary schools.

⁹ Coincidentally the same as for primary schools, a proxy value for 126 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for 20 day absences for post-primary schools.

¹⁰ In generating the proxy value if the suspension value was 0 and there is a value for expulsion they were swapped and if the expulsion value was larger than the suspension value they were swapped.

Table 1.5 Number of schools, number of students, number of students expelled, and percentage of students expelled for primary and post-primary schools 2013/14 to 2017/18

<i>Primary</i>	<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
N schools	3,266	3,255	3,231	3,237	3,115 ¹¹
N students	535,095	539,760	550,675	557,815	545,185
N expulsions	23	21	19	35	30
% expulsions	0.004%	0.004%	0.003%	0.006%	0.006%
<i>Post-Primary</i>					
N schools	695	697	694	705	650 ¹²
N students	332,102	335,315	340,589	350,593	327,525
N expulsions	146	133	195	167	132
% expulsions	0.044%	0.040%	0.057%	0.048%	0.040%

1.2.4 Suspensions

The numbers of suspensions reported for 2017/18 are shown in Table 1.6, with equivalent figures for 2013/14 to 2016/17. Suspensions are rare in primary schools when compared to post-primary schools (0.3% in primary and 3.6% in post-primary). In percentage terms the figures in primary schools have remained fairly constant. The number of suspensions in post-primary schools decreased in 2017/18 by 0.2% compared to 2016/17 and has remained below 4% since 2014/15.

Table 1.6 Number of schools, number of students, number of students suspended, and percentage of students suspended for primary and post-primary schools 2012/13 to 2016/17

<i>Primary</i>	<i>2013/14</i>	<i>2014/15</i>	<i>2015/16</i>	<i>2016/17</i>	<i>2017/18</i>
N schools	3,266	3,255	3,231	3,237	3,115 ¹³
N students	535,095	539,760	550,675	557,815	545,185
N suspensions	1,287	1,264	1,438	1,550	1,456
% suspensions	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%
<i>Post-Primary</i>					
N schools	695	697	696	705	650 ¹⁴
N students	332,102	335,315	342,018	350,593	327,525
N suspensions	13,473	12,727	13,383	13,169	11,722
% suspensions	4.1%	3.8%	3.9%	3.8%	3.6%

¹¹ A proxy value for 28 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for expulsions.

¹² A proxy value for 1 school based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for expulsions.

¹³ A proxy value for 26 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for suspensions.

¹⁴ A proxy value for 19 schools based on the average of the previous four academic years was generated for 2017/2018 for suspensions.

1.3 Aspects of Non-Attendance

Non-attendance, defined as the percentage of all student/days lost through absence, needs to be discussed briefly. Twenty-day absences, expulsions and suspensions do not require any further discussion here.

1.3.1 Non-Attendance in the Population and in Schools

Firstly, non-attendance for the entire population of students, which has just been reported on, needs to be distinguished from non-attendance in a particular school. In Section 1 of the report, non-attendance has in all cases been treated as a feature of the population of students nationally, and the statistic is computed and presented accordingly, as shown above in Table 1.3. Individual schools do not enter the picture, except for their role in providing the data. Numbers of student/days lost through non-attendance are added up school by school, and only when the total number of student/days lost nationwide has been calculated is non-attendance expressed as a percentage, by dividing by the maximum student/days achievable nationwide in the year in question.

In Sections 2 and 3 of the report, on the other hand, non-attendance is calculated separately for each school. These figures are close to 0% in some schools and can be 20% or more in others. This way of examining the data provides an index that shows the extent to which schools vary on rates of non-attendance. Such school-based indices of non-attendance are essential in establishing relationships between non-attendance and other school-based measures of educational disadvantage, such as retention rates and academic achievement. They are also used for linking non-attendance to school-level measures of disadvantage described, as will be done in the following two sections of this report. In this section, however, non-attendance refers to the percentage of students absent from school each day.

1.3.2 Precision of Non-Attendance Figures

Non-attendance is rounded to one decimal place in this report. This is the usual practice in the international literature, consistent with the view that two decimal places would overstate the level of precision that is to be expected in national non-attendance data. However, as Millar (e.g. 2018) has noted in previous reports a difference of even one tenth of one percent in non-attendance nationally amounts to a very substantial number of student/days saved or lost. Annual data are now checked for year-on-year consistency within schools and, where abnormally large changes occur, Tusla contacts the school to confirm or correct the return. This process should, in time, reduce inconsistency and improve the accuracy of attendance data. However, as noted previously, the process of checking this data for the academic year 2017/18 was interrupted with schools having to close due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

2 Non-Attendance in Primary Schools, 2017/18

2.1 Non-Attendance by School Type

Pupils with special educational needs may attend special schools or special classes and 'special' classes within 'mainstream' schools. Table 2.1 shows the percentage of available student/days lost through absence for mainstream schools, mainstream schools with special classes, and special schools. The total figures are directly comparable to those shown in Table 1.3, above.

Table 2.1 Percentage of available student/days lost through absence and number of schools by school type, 2016/17 and 2017/18

	2016/17		2017/18	
	%	N schools	%	N schools
Mainstream	5.1	2,685	5.4	2,532
Mainstream & special classes	6.3	427	6.4	471
Special	12.2	125	11.8	112
<i>Total</i>	5.6	3,237	5.8	3,115

Pupils in mainstream primary schools were absent for 5.4% of the available days in 2017/2018. The percentage days lost was higher for mainstream schools with special classes (6.4 %) and highest in special schools (11.8%). A Kruskal-Wallis H test¹⁵ showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of days lost between the different school types ($\chi^2(2) = 365.6$, $p < .001$). While the figures for 2017/18 were a little higher in mainstream schools and mainstream schools with special classes compared to 2016/17, there was a small decrease in special schools. Section 2.5 provides additional analysis of non-attendance in special schools.

2.2 Non-Attendance in Urban and Rural Schools

The Tusla non-attendance data gathered from primary schools were merged with data from the DES on school urban/rural location (the most recent data available is from the academic year 2017/18). In line with the National Census, *urban* schools are those located in communities with a population size of 1,500 or more, while *rural* schools are in communities with a population size of less than 1,500. Special schools (n=112) are not included in the following analyses. Table 2.2 gives averages for non-attendance, 20-day absences, and suspensions in urban and rural primary schools. Expulsions have not been included because of the low numbers.

Similar to previous years, non-attendance in all forms is higher in urban schools with 20-day absences distinguishing urban from rural schools much more sharply than general non-attendance. Suspensions, while uncommon in either school type, are more common in urban schools.

In looking at Table 2.2 it should be remembered that data on absenteeism are reported here at the school level (see Section 1.3.1 above). For example, for the 2,999 matched schools in 2017/18, the percentage of days lost was

¹⁵ The Kruskal-Wallis H test (sometimes also called the "one-way ANOVA on ranks") is a rank-based nonparametric test that is used to determine if there are statistically significant differences between two or more groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable.

calculated for each school. Then the mean and standard deviation for all schools was calculated. Thus, for the 1,915 rural primary schools in 2017/2018, the mean percentage of student days lost (*Non-Attendance*) per school was 5.1%. The mean percentage of pupil days lost for the 1,084 urban schools was higher, 6.3 %. However, there was some variation within each school type (as measured by the standard deviation), with this spread being greater for urban schools. A Mann Whitney test¹⁶ indicated that non-attendance is significantly greater in urban schools than in rural schools ($u=617733$, $p<.001$). Much the same is true for the twenty-day absences and suspensions as indicated in the larger standard deviation. A Mann Whitney test indicated that 20-day absences ($u=526870$, $p<.001$), and suspensions ($u=844549$, $p<.001$) are significantly greater in urban schools than in rural schools. For the 2,999 schools for which there is both absence and location data, the mean school figure for the percentage of pupils missing twenty days' schooling was 10.5 %. However, there were considerable differences between schools as shown by the large standard deviation (8.51).

Table 2.2 Mean percentage and SD of student/days lost, mean percentage of students missing 20 days, and mean percentage of students suspended in urban and rural* primary schools, 2016/17 and 2017/18

	2016/17			2017/18		
<i>Non-Attendance</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>N schools</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>N schools</i>	<i>SD</i>
Rural Schools	4.8	1,984	1.58	5.1	1,915	1.68
Urban Schools	6.1	1,115	1.74	6.3	1,084	2.00
<i>Total</i>	5.3	3,099	1.75	5.6	2,999**	1.89
<i>20-Day Absences</i>						
Rural Schools	7.5	1,984	6.90	7.9	1,915	6.55
Urban Schools	14.5	1,115	8.58	15.0	1,084	9.60
<i>Total</i>	10.0	3,099	8.26	10.5	2,999	8.51
<i>Suspensions</i>						
Rural Schools	0.08	1,984	0.45	0.09	1,915	0.62
Urban Schools	0.41	1,115	1.27	0.43	1,084	1.70
<i>Total</i>	0.20	3,099	0.86	0.21	2,999	1.15

* Rural location is defined as "A village or rural community – population less than 1499"; Urban location is defined as "An urban community – population of 1500 or more".

** Although 3,003 (mainstream and mainstream with special classes) schools returned data, 4 schools are missing from the analysis as they did not have DES location data.

2.3 DEIS Categories and Non-Attendance

In addition to information on school location, the AAR data were examined with reference to the DEIS status of schools, thereby allowing comparisons by school-level socio-economic status. The DEIS categories can be equated with the amount of assistance received by schools in the School Support Programme (SSP). This yields five categories: (1) Rural not in SSP, (2) Rural in SSP, (3) Urban not in SSP, (4) Urban in SSP Band 1, and (5) Urban in SSP Band 2. SSP schools experience higher levels of disadvantage than non-SSP schools. For urban schools there are two SSP bands, with schools in Band 1 experiencing greater levels of disadvantage.

Figures for non-attendance in the DEIS classification of schools are presented in Tables 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5.

¹⁶ The Mann-Whitney U test is used to compare differences between two independent groups when the dependent variable is either ordinal or continuous.

Table 2.3 Mean percentage and SD of student/days lost by DEIS category: Primary schools

	2016/17			2017/18		
	Mean %	N schools	SD	Mean %	N schools	SD
Rural						
Not in SSP	4.7	1,672	1.21	5.0	1,566	1.64
In SSP	5.4	311	2.22	5.5	349	1.78
Urban						
Not in SSP	5.6	792	1.45	5.8	760	1.57
In SSP Band 1	7.9	189	2.63	7.9	219	2.48
In SSP Band 2	6.8	138	1.53	7.0	105	1.76
<i>Total</i>	5.3	3,102	1.75	5.6	2,999*	1.89

*4 schools are missing from the total as there was no location data available.

Table 2.4 Mean percentage and SD of students who were absent for 20 days or more by DEIS Category: Primary schools

	2016/17			2017/18		
	Mean %	N schools	SD	Mean %	N schools	SD
Rural						
Not in SSP	7.1	1,672	5.63	7.4	1,566	5.86
In SSP	9.4	311	7.79	9.9	349	8.75
Urban						
Not in SSP	12.0	792	7.09	12.2	760	7.10
In SSP Band 1	23.4	189	12.89	23.1	219	11.98
In SSP Band 2	18.4	138	7.88	18.6	105	8.88
<i>Total</i>	10.0	3,102	8.26	10.5	2,999*	8.51

*4 schools are missing from the total as there was no location data available.

Non-attendance is associated with DEIS categories in primary schools (Table 2.3) and differences in rates of 20-day absences are even more marked (Table 2.4). The two tables also show an important urban/rural dimension to non-attendance. Non-DEIS urban schools (*Urban Not in SSP*) had higher levels of non-attendance (5.8%) and twenty-day absences (12.2%) than non-DEIS rural schools (5.0% and 7.4% respectively). Further, Table 2.4 shows a substantial difference in twenty-day absences between DEIS and non-DEIS schools, with these differences more pronounced in urban schools. For example, the mean percentage of students who were absent for 20 or more days for non-DEIS urban schools was 12.2% compared to DEIS urban schools 23.1% (Band 1) and 18.6% (Band 2).

The figures for suspensions by DEIS category are given in Table 2.5. As noted above, suspensions are too infrequent in primary schools to give this variable a substantial association with other disadvantage variables. However, suspensions were more likely in DEIS schools and more likely in urban schools regardless of DEIS status. Approximately 1% of pupils were suspended in Urban SSP Band 1 and Band 2 schools in 2017/18 compared to 0.18% in non-DEIS urban schools. In rural schools there was even less suspensions reported, with 0.11% in DEIS school and 0.08% in non-DEIS schools.

The Kruskal-Wallis statistical tests indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the different DEIS categories for all levels of non-attendance; non-attendance ($\chi^2 (4) = 616.9, p < .001$); 20-day absences ($\chi^2 (4) = 784.3, p < .001$) and suspensions ($\chi^2 (4) = 494.9, p < .001$),

Table 2.5 Mean percentage and SD of students suspended by DEIS Category: Primary schools

	2016/17			2017/18		
	Mean %	N schools	SD	Mean %	N schools	SD
Rural						
Not in SSP	0.07	1,672	0.44	0.08	1,566	0.63
In SSP	0.10	311	0.52	0.11	349	0.58
Urban						
Not in SSP	0.21	792	0.61	0.18	760	0.59
In SSP Band 1	1.15	189	2.48	1.00	219	1.64
In SSP Band 2	0.55	138	1.20	1.00	105	4.52
<i>Total</i>	0.20	3,102*	0.86	0.21	2,999	1.15

*4 schools are missing from the total as there was no location data available.

2.4 Non-Attendance by Province and County

Table 2.6 shows the data for mean non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions by area for 2017/18. As elsewhere in this section, the data in Table 2.6 is calculated at the school level and then the average non-attendance is reported for all schools in a particular province or county. Absenteeism rates are directly comparable although the absolute numbers of students differ between regions. Thus, the mean percentage of school days lost was 6.1% in Leinster schools, 5.6% in Munster, 5.6% in Connaught and 5.2% in schools in Ulster (Part of). Again, from Table 2.6 we see that the mean percentage of pupils per school who were absent twenty-days or more (Abs20) was 13.1% for Leinster, 10.6% for Munster, 9.8% for Connaught and 8.2% for Ulster. The Kruskal-Wallis statistical test¹⁷ indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the different regions for non-attendance ($\chi^2 (3) = 89.1, p < .001$); 20-day absences ($\chi^2 (3) = 138.3, p < .001$) and suspensions ($\chi^2 (4) = 92.0, p < .001$) but not for expulsions ($\chi^2 (3) = 4.1, p = .248$).

From Table 2.6 it is apparent that expulsions (Exp) and suspensions (Sus) are very unlikely for any particular school. This reflects the data reported earlier which showed that the number of expulsions and suspensions in primary schools was very low.

¹⁷ Conducted following statistical tests which confirmed the non-Normality of the data, thereby making it unsuited to parametric tests (such as one-way ANOVA).

Table 2.6 Mean percentage of student/days lost, 20-day absences, expulsions, and suspensions by county for primary schools 2017/18

	Mean % Abs.	Mean % Abs20	Mean % Exp.	Mean % Sus.
LEINSTER	6.1	13.1	0.01	0.67
Carlow	6.0	13.8	0.02	0.35
Dublin	6.6	15.6	0.03	1.45
Kildare	5.8	12.1	0.00	0.20
Kilkenny	5.3	9.6	0.00	0.58
Laois	6.4	13.0	0.00	0.21
Longford	6.1	13.7	0.01	0.22
Louth	6.2	12.7	0.00	0.23
Meath	5.4	9.5	0.01	0.09
Offaly	6.1	12.2	0.00	0.16
Westmeath	5.8	12.2	0.00	0.40
Wexford	6.0	12.0	0.00	0.12
Wicklow	5.5	10.7	0.00	0.16
MUNSTER	5.6	10.6	0.00	0.33
Clare	5.6	10.4	0.01	0.62
Cork	5.7	10.8	0.01	0.40
Kerry	5.8	11.3	0.00	0.08
Limerick	5.9	11.6	0.00	0.40
Tipperary N.R.	5.2	9.6	0.00	0.16
Tipperary S.R.	5.2	8.9	0.00	0.19
Waterford	5.5	10.4	0.00	0.16
CONNACHT	5.6	9.8	0.00	0.19
Galway	5.6	10.0	0.00	0.24
Leitrim	5.1	8.1	0.00	0.08
Mayo	5.8	10.2	0.01	0.16
Roscommon	5.6	9.3	0.00	0.16
Sligo	5.4	10.0	0.01	0.20
ULSTER (part of)	5.2	8.2	0.03	0.15
Cavan	5.6	9.8	0.10	0.34
Donegal	5.1	8.0	0.00	0.09
Monaghan	4.8	6.8	0.00	0.06
STATE	5.8	11.3	0.01	0.43

2.5 Non-Attendance in Special Schools

Non-attendance in special schools was reported along with other schools in the primary school sector in Section 1 of this report. However, the pattern of non-attendance in special schools is sufficiently different to warrant a more detailed analysis. All 122 of the special schools returned AAR data¹⁸.

Table 2.7 shows the mean percentage of student days lost and the mean percentage of 20-day absences in primary schools, primary schools with special classes, and special schools. It is apparent that general non-attendance is more than twice as high in special schools when compared to mainstream primary schools (both with and without special classes), and the rate of 20-day absences is more than three times higher in special schools than in primary schools without special classes, and a little over twice as high as primary schools with special classes. Unfortunately, the data do not give us any information as to why this might be the case. However, we can assume that multiple factors, including the nature of the special needs, are involved. A report cited by Millar (2018) by Banks, Maître and McCoy found that 9% of young people with intellectual or learning disabilities were absent from school for at least three months over a school year compared to 25% of young people with Emotional, Psychological and Mental Health (EPMH) disabilities.

General non-attendance and 20-day absences were just marginally higher in primary schools and primary schools with special classes in 2017/18 when compared to the previous year. In special schools there was a very small decline in both of these measures of non-attendance.

Table 2.7 Mean percentage of student/days lost and mean percentage of 20-Day Absences in primary schools, primary schools with special classes, and special schools 2015/16 and 2016/17

	2016/17		2017/18	
	Non Attendance	20-Day Absences	Non Attendance	20-Day Absences
Primary	5.1	9.2	5.4	9.5
Primary with special class(es)	6.3	15.7	6.4	15.5
Special	12.2	32.8	11.8	32.5

While the total number of expulsions in the primary sector is very small, Table 2.8 shows that expulsions are disproportionately high in special schools. Pupils in special schools make up a very small percentage of the primary school population (3.7% of all primary schools) but account for 30.0% of the total number of pupils expelled from primary school in 2017/18. This pattern is very similar to 2016/17 (Millar, 2018).

¹⁸ As noted previously, 10 primary schools (all special schools) were excluded from the population: nine hospital schools and one school catering for pupils aged between three and six years. These 10 schools accounted for 318 pupils. All other DES-listed special schools were retained in the analysis. This category includes schools for pupils with educational and physical special needs, High Support Units and segregated schools for children from the Traveller community.

Table 2.8 Number and percentage of expulsions, pupils, and schools for primary schools, primary schools with special classes, and special schools 2017/18

	Expulsions		Pupils		Schools	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Primary	10	33.3	397,499	72.9	2,532	81.3
Primary with special class(es)	11	36.7	140,386	25.8	471	15.1
Special	9	30.0	7,300	1.3	112	3.6
Total	30	100	545,185	100	3,115	100

The total number of suspensions in the primary school sector is small, but more numerous than expulsions. Again, suspensions in special schools are disproportionately high. Pupils in special schools account of 19.6 % of the 1,456 suspensions in 2017/18. Again, this pattern is very similar to previous years.

Table 2.9 Number and percentage of suspensions, pupils, and schools for primary schools, primary schools with special classes, and special schools 2017/18

	Suspensions		Pupils		Schools	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Primary	676	46.4	397,499	72.9	2,532	81.3
Primary with special class(es)	495	34.0	140,386	25.8	471	15.1
Special	285	19.6	7,300	1.3	112	3.6
Total	1,456	100	545,185	100	3,115	100

3 Non-Attendance in Post-Primary Schools, 2017/18

3.1 Secondary, ETB and Community/Comprehensive Schools

Non-Attendance data for secondary, Education and Training Board, and community/comprehensive schools are shown in Table 3.1. All forms of non-attendance are generally lowest in voluntary secondary schools and higher in community/comprehensive schools and ETB schools. A Kruskal-Wallis H test¹⁹ showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the percentage of days lost between the different school types ($\chi^2(2) = 56.3$, $p < .001$), also significant differences in the 20-day absences ($\chi^2(2) = 43.7$, $p < .001$), suspensions ($\chi^2(2) = 32.1$, $p < .001$) and expulsions ($\chi^2(2) = 7.8$, $p = .020$) between the different school types. The pattern of results is mixed between 2015/16 and 2016/17. There is a slight drop in the suspensions in ETB schools from 2016/17 to 2017/18 (6.17% and 5.36% respectively) and also a marginal decrease in these schools with regard to 20-day absences (20.0% and 19.7% respectively)

Table 3.1 Mean percentage and SD of student/days lost, mean percentage of students missing 20 days, and mean percentage of students suspended, 2016/17 and 2017/18: Post-primary schools, by school type/sector

	2016/17			2017/18		
Type of school	Mean %	N schools	SD	Mean %	N schools	SD
Student/days lost						
Secondary	7.2	372	3.13	7.3	346	2.76
Comm. / Comp.	8.6	95	3.39	8.7	89	3.23
ETB	9.6	234	3.54	9.7	215	3.80
Total	8.2	701	3.47	8.3	650	3.38
20-day absences						
Secondary	12.6	371	9.64	12.7	346	8.24
Comm. / Comp.	17.8	95	9.64	18.7	89	9.85
ETB	20.0	236	12.67	19.7	215	11.62
Total	15.8	702	11.29	15.8	650	10.25
Expulsions						
Secondary	0.03	373	0.12	0.04	346	0.18
Comm. / Comp.	0.08	95	0.22	0.04	89	0.13
ETB	0.09	237	0.33	0.06	215	0.18
Total	0.05	705	0.22	0.05	650	0.18
Suspensions						
Secondary	3.04	373	3.78	2.96	346	3.81
Comm. / Comp.	4.59	95	5.47	4.60	89	4.69
ETB	6.17	237	6.49	5.36	215	5.60
Total	4.30	705	5.26	3.98	650	4.72

¹⁹ A non-parametric test was used due to the fact that the data are statistically significantly non-Normal.

DEIS and Non-Attendance

Non-attendance data in DEIS schools and all other schools are summarised in Table 3.2. DEIS schools show higher figures on all measures of non-attendance, and in particular for 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions, although the absolute rate of expulsions is very low in DEIS schools. A Mann Whitney test²⁰ indicated that days lost is significantly greater in DEIS schools than in Non-DEIS schools ($u=17643$, $p<.001$). There was a slight increase in student/days lost and in 20-day absences in DEIS schools between 2016/17 and 2017/18, while the rate of expulsions and suspensions decreased marginally. There was a slight reduction in non-DEIS schools for the number of 20-days absences (13.3% in 2016/17 compared to 12.9% in 2017/18).

Table 3.2 Mean percentage of student/days lost, mean percentage of students missing 20 days, mean percentage of students expelled, mean percentage of students suspended, and number of schools, 2016/17 and 2017/18: Post-primary schools, by DEIS /Other

	2016/17				2017/18			
	<i>DEIS</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>DEIS</i>		<i>Other</i>	
	Mean %	N	Mean %	N	Mean %	N	Mean %	N
Student/days lost	10.2	183	7.5	518	10.6	180	7.4	470
20-Day absences	22.8	183	13.3	519	23.6	180	12.9	470
Expulsions	0.11	184	0.04	521	0.10	180	0.02	470
Suspensions	9.01	184	2.64	521	7.71	180	2.55	470

3.2 Non-Attendance by Province and County

Table 3.3 shows the data for mean non-attendance, 20-day absences, expulsions and suspensions across post-primary schools by province and county. Absenteeism rates are directly comparable although the absolute numbers of students differ between regions.

As with the other tables in this section, the data in Tables 3.3 are calculated at the school level and then the average non-attendance is reported for all schools in a particular category. Thus, in Table 3.3 the mean percentage of school days lost was 8.2% in Leinster schools, 7.8% in Munster, 9.1% in Connaught and 9.0% in schools in Ulster (Part of). Again, from Table 3.3 we see that the mean percentage of pupils per school who were absent twenty-days or more (Abs20) was 15.7% for Leinster, 14.1% in Munster, 18.6% in Connaught and 18.9% for schools in Ulster (Part of). A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the percentage of days lost between the different regions ($\chi^2(2) = 4.7$, $p = .194$) or expulsions ($\chi^2(2) = 6.7$, $p = .081$) but there was significant differences in the 20-day absences ($\chi^2(2) = 8.6$, $p = .034$) and suspensions ($\chi^2(2) = 19.9$, $p < .001$).

²⁰ Again, a non-parametric test was applied due to the data being non-Normal.

Table 3.3 Mean percentage of student/days lost, 20-day absences, expulsions, and suspensions, 2017/18:
Post-primary schools, by county

	Mean % Abs.	Mean % Abs20	Mean % Exp.	Mean % Sus.
LEINSTER	8.2	15.9	0.06	4.8
Carlow	8.9	15.6	0.05	6.1
Dublin	8.2	15.4	0.07	5.3
Kildare	7.8	15.4	0.05	4.0
Kilkenny	8.1	14.4	0.08	2.7
Laois	8.5	17.7	0.05	5.4
Longford	11.9	21.2	0.00	5.0
Louth	7.6	12.1	0.06	4.1
Meath	7.0	13.8	0.08	4.4
Offaly	8.0	17.7	0.00	2.0
Westmeath	8.5	17.2	0.02	4.4
Wexford	9.2	20.6	0.07	5.5
Wicklow	8.5	17.3	0.06	4.6
MUNSTER	7.8	14.1	0.04	3.4
Clare	7.2	12.5	0.01	2.8
Cork	7.8	13.9	0.03	3.3
Kerry	8.3	16.2	0.07	2.9
Limerick	8.2	14.3	0.08	4.4
Tipperary N.R.	7.5	14.3	0.04	4.6
Tipperary S.R.	7.6	12.8	0.00	2.6
Waterford	7.1	14.9	0.01	3.3
CONNACHT	9.0	18.6	0.03	2.6
Galway	8.6	18.1	0.06	2.7
Leitrim	9.6	17.5	0.00	1.2
Mayo	9.7	19.8	0.01	2.6
Roscommon	8.3	17.6	0.03	1.9
Sligo	9.4	19.1	0.00	3.8
ULSTER (part of)	9.1	16.8	0.01	3.3
Cavan	8.7	12.4	0.04	2.8
Donegal	9.4	18.2	0.01	3.5
Monaghan	8.8	18.0	0.00	3.1
STATE	8.3	15.8	0.05	4.0

4 Results of the Student Absence Report

Schools are obliged by law under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 to submit reports on overall school attendance figures to the Educational Welfare Services of the Child and Family Agency and also reports on individual students. Data provided for the academic year 2017/18 on Student Absence Reports are presented in this section of the report.

Student Absence Reports are submitted by schools twice each year on those students with serious attendance issues that have been identified during the academic year. Students that have been absent from school for a cumulative total of twenty days or more are reported and categorised into: illness, urgent family reason, holiday, suspended, other, and unexplained. Only children over the age of 6 years and children who have not reached the age of 16 years or have not completed 3 years of post-primary education, whichever occurs later are reported.

The academic year 2017/18 is the first year that the student level data has been submitted onto Tusla's portal and because of this, Tusla had many challenges with the uploading of data from schools, checking data and validating it. The ERC received the data from Tusla in anonymised format, with each student receiving a sequentially generated numeric identifier.

4.1 Overall results of Student Absence Reports (SAR)

In the academic year 2017/18, 68.9% of primary schools and 62.8% of post-primary schools submitted reports. As noted, this was the first-year schools were asked to provide this data through the Tusla portal which was a challenge not only for Tusla but also for schools to manage their data electronically. This low response rate compared to that of the Annual Attendance Reports (AAR) is reflective of the challenges and of schools' preparedness to submit the data electronically.

Response propensity²¹ did not vary significantly by primary school DEIS status/urban rural location, region or school type (mainstream, mainstream with special class(es), special. However, it varied significantly by school size ($\chi^2(2) = 104.872$, $p < .001$). Small schools (with enrolment of 80 or less) were much less likely to submit a SAR than medium (81-220 enrolled) or large (221 or more) schools. Therefore, the results may be considered reasonably representative in terms of DEIS status/urban rural location, region or school type but under-representative of small schools. It is not possible to determine representativeness in other respects.

In contrast to primary schools, response propensity at post-primary did not vary by post-primary school DEIS status, enrolment size, region or sector/gender composition. Therefore, the results may be considered unbiased on these four characteristics. As with primary, it is not possible to determine representativeness in other respects because there is no population data available. Table 4.1 presents the response rate to the Student Attendance Report in 2017/18.

²¹ Response propensity was analysed via a series of logistic regressions with SAR return/no SAR return as the outcome variable and the school characteristics as described in the main text above as explanatory variables. Initially, each school characteristic was tested for significance on its own, then characteristics that were significant were assessed jointly using the chi-square (χ^2) statistic to assess the significance of each school characteristic in the joint model. In the end, the only school characteristic that was significant was school enrolment size in primary schools, as discussed above.

Table 4.1 Number of schools, number of schools responding, and response rate to the Student Attendance Report, 2017/18

	2017/18
Primary	
N schools	3,236
N schools responding	2,231 ²²
Response rate	68.9%
Post-Primary	
N schools	710
N schools responding	446 ²³
Response rate	62.8%

Table 4.2 presents the overall breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent in the academic year 2017/18. In primary schools 41,195 students were reported with 20 or more days absent from the 2,231 schools who submitted data. This totalled to 1,185,735 days absent. Of these days 60.7% were explained absences, with 8.9% of these been categorised as 'holiday'. In interpreting the results associated with holiday absences, it should be noted that when the Tusla portal was first introduced, some schools' Content Management Systems were not configured to permit separate data capture of absence due to holidays, with the likely result that those absences were entered as unexplained absences. Since then, the CMS have been updated, so it is probable that absences due to holidays may show an increase in subsequent years.

²² A further 172 schools in the AAR recorded no students with 20 or more days absent. 4 Primary schools that responded with SAR data recorded 0 students on the AAR data - this would have been clarified with the schools but school closures due to Covid 19 prevented this.

²³ No further schools were in the AAR which recorded no students with 20 or more days absent.

Table 4.2 Overall breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent 2017/18

	2017/18	
Primary		
N schools responding	2,231	
Total number of students in responding schools	418,318*	
Total number of students with 20 or more days absent	41,195	
Total number of days	1,185,735	
Explained	719,800	60.7%
Unexplained	465,935	39.3%
Holiday	64,328	
% of the explained days	8.9%	
Post-Primary		
N schools responding	446	
Total number of students in responding schools	226,905**	
Total number of students with 20 or more days absent	16,605	
Total number of days	568,629	
Explained	288,419	50.7%
Unexplained	280,210	49.3%
Holiday	3,127	
% of the explained days	1.1%	

* This includes all students i.e. students less than 6 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary

**This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary

In post-primary schools 16,605 students were reported with 20 or more days absent from the 446 schools who submitted data. This totalled to 568,629 days absent. Of these days 50.7% were explained absences, with 1.1% of these been categorised as 'holiday'.

4.2 Student Absence Reports in Primary Schools

This section examines the Student Absence Reports in primary schools. Table 4.3 presents the breakdown of student with 20 or more days absent by primary school type. Of the total number of days for students with 20 or more days absent, 63.3% have been given an explanation in mainstream schools excluding special classes, 54.4% explained absences in mainstream schools with special classes and 70.4% of the absences in special schools have been explained. There are similar percentages of the explained absences being reported as holidays in both types of mainstream schools (9.7% for mainstream excluding special classes and 8.2% for mainstream with special classes). The percentage for special schools is much lower, with only 2.8% of the explained absence reported as holidays.

Table 4.3 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by School Type, Primary Schools 2017/18

	Mainstream excluding special classes		Mainstream with special classes		Special schools	
Number of students in responding schools	308,143		105,477		4,698	
Number of students 20 days or more absent	27,092		12,980		1,123	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Explained Absences	479,759	63.3	207,155	54.4	32,886	70.4
Unexplained Absences	278,525	36.7	173,600	45.6	13,810	29.6
Total days	758,284	100.0	380,755	100.0	46,696	100.0
Holidays	46,478		16,927		923	
% of explained	9.7		8.2		2.8	

Table 4.4 presents the breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by DEIS status and location. The largest percentage of reported explained absences is in rural non-DEIS schools 68.7%, followed by 63.3% in rural DEIS. Overall, urban schools report less explained absences than rural. Urban schools in SSP band 1 reported 51.7% explained absences with schools in band 2 having a slightly larger percentage reporting explained absences (53.9%). There are similar percentages of the explained absences being reported as holidays in both rural and urban Non-DEIS schools (9.3% and 9.1% respectively). The percentage in rural DEIS schools is much lower, with only 6.6% of the explained absence reported as holidays.

Table 4.4 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by DEIS status and location, Primary Schools 2017/18

	Rural not in SSP		Rural in SSP		Urban not in SSP		Urban in SSP Band 1		Urban in SSP Band 2	
Number of students in responding schools*	142,338		19,067		197,633		36,096		22,197	
Number of students 20 days or more absent	10,325		1,719		19,836		6,172		3,021	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Explained Absences	197,773	68.7	30,935	63.3	347,509	60.6	94,831	51.7	47,447	53.9
Unexplained Absences	90,298	31.3	17,913	36.7	226,196	39.4	88,758	48.3	40,512	46.1
Total days	288,071	100.0	48,848	100.0	573,705	100.0	183,589	100.0	87,959	100.0
Holidays	18,300		2,028		31,753		7,616		4,083	
% of explained	9.3		6.6		9.1		8.0		8.6	

* 4 schools (accounting for 987 students) do not have a school location classification.

This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary

Examining the percentage of students with 20 or more days absent across school years, Table 4.5 shows that as the student progresses through school there are slightly more students with 20 or more days absent in Sixth Class compared to First Class. It needs to be noted when examining students by school year some of Junior and Senior Infant students will not have reached six years of age and so will not be reported as part of the Student Attendance Reports. There is very little difference between classes on the percentages of reported explained absences, ranging from 58.7% to 62.9%. A closer look at the explained absences reveal that Senior Infants (10.5%), First Class (11.5%) and Third Class (10.0%) reported the largest percentage of explained absences as holidays, with Sixth Class recording the lowest (6.7%).

Table 4.5 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by year in school, Primary Schools 2017/18 - Mainstream schools only

School Year	N students in responding Mainstream schools*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of students with 20 or more days absent across school years	N Explained	% of all absences	N Unexplained	% of all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
Junior Infants	50,409	1,644	4.1	31,022	62.9	18,335	37.1	49,357	2,635	8.5
Senior Infants	51,305	5,063	12.6	84,418	59.0	58,650	41.0	143,068	8,878	10.5
First Class	53,141	5,178	12.9	85,787	59.1	59,464	40.9	145,251	9,876	11.5
Second Class	52,894	5,108	12.7	83,101	58.7	58,454	41.3	141,555	8,100	9.7
Third Class	52,868	5,254	13.1	89,956	61.3	56,810	38.7	146,766	8,962	10.0
Fourth Class	51,978	5,514	13.8	95,217	61.3	60,126	38.7	155,343	8,805	9.2
Fifth Class	49,919	5,609	14.0	99,393	62.3	60,116	37.7	159,509	8,505	8.6
Sixth Class	47,060	6,160	15.4	106,711	59.2	73,471	40.8	180,182	7,126	6.7
Other - Primary		542	1.4	11,309	62.8	6,699	37.2	18,008	518	4.6
		40,072	100.0	686,914	60.3	452,125	39.7	1,139,039	63,405	9.2

*Only Mainstream schools used in the analysis

This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary

The breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by region and county, is presented in Table 4.6. While schools in Dublin recorded the largest number of students with 20 days absent, Offaly and Westmeath recorded the largest proportion of students with 20 or more days absent. Note that the number of students recorded in the school's returns includes all enrolled students, the SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or who have not yet completed three year of post-primary education.

Students in schools in county Longford recorded the lowest percentage of explained absences (52.8%) compared to students in county Donegal (71.8%). The region with the highest percentage of explained absences is Connacht (66.3%) with Leinster recording the lowest percentage of explained absences (58.5%).

Examining the explained absences, approximately 15% of the explained absences were reported as holidays by students in Roscommon, which is the highest level in the country, with 5.0% of the explained absences reported as holidays by students in Longford.

Table 4.6 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by Region and County, Primary Schools 2017/18

	N students*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of all students within county	% of students with 20 or more days absent within the region	% of all students with 20 or more days absent in the country	N Explained	% of all absences	N Unexplained	% of all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
Leinster	234,739	23,775		10.1		401,487	58.5	284,299	41.5	685,786	35,114	8.7
Carlow	6,419	763	11.9	3.2	1.9	14,581	67.3	7,073	32.7	21,654	1,202	8.2
Dublin	106,774	10,699	10.0	45.0	26.0	178,699	57.4	132,386	42.6	311,085	16,282	9.1
Kildare	23,609	2,236	9.5	9.4	5.4	37,361	58.8	26,184	41.2	63,545	2,976	8.0
Kilkenny	8,440	679	8.0	2.9	1.6	11,208	60.3	7,386	39.7	18,594	809	7.2
Laois	7,128	731	10.3	3.1	1.8	14,254	66.3	7,239	33.7	21,493	1,578	11.1
Longford	2,581	197	7.6	0.8	0.5	2,993	52.8	2,679	47.2	5,672	151	5.0
Louth	14,169	1,445	10.2	6.1	3.5	22,376	53.6	19,384	46.4	41,760	1,939	8.7
Meath	21,179	1,910	9.0	8.0	4.6	30,325	59.2	20,893	40.8	51,218	2,549	8.4
Offaly	8,382	1,115	13.3	4.7	2.7	17,846	55.6	14,257	44.4	32,103	1,350	7.6
Westmeath	7,519	1,015	13.5	4.3	2.5	18,241	59.4	12,489	40.6	30,730	1,682	9.2
Wexford	14,796	1,755	11.9	7.4	4.3	30,712	58.6	21,697	41.4	52,409	2,508	8.2
Wicklow	13,743	1,230	9.0	5.2	3.0	22,891	64.4	12,632	35.6	35,523	2,088	9.1
Cont. next page												

	N students*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of all students within county	% of students with 20 or more days absent within the region	% of all students with 20 or more days absent in the country	N Explained	% of all absences	N Unexplained	% of all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
Munster	112,559	10,766				193,232	62.6	115,250	37.4	308,482	17,661	9.1
Clare	9,901	904	9.1	8.4	2.2	16,165	65.0	8,717	35.0	24,882	1,559	9.6
Cork	46,416	4,029	8.7	37.4	9.8	72,808	63.6	41,725	36.4	114,533	7,281	10.0
Kerry	11,930	1,459	12.2	13.6	3.5	25,679	57.4	19,057	42.6	44,736	1,975	7.7
Limerick	18,029	1,891	10.5	17.6	4.6	34,154	62.6	20,405	37.4	54,559	3,073	9.0
Tipperary N.R.	5,749	571	9.9	5.3	1.4	10,174	60.9	6,523	39.1	16,697	1,058	10.4
Tipperary S.R.	8,771	708	8.1	6.6	1.7	12,242	62.2	7,439	37.8	19,681	806	6.6
Waterford	11,763	1,204	10.2	11.2	2.9	22,010	65.9	11,384	34.1	33,394	1,909	8.7
Connacht	43,639	3,980				76,010	66.3	38,714	33.7	114,724	7,559	9.9
Galway	22,207	1,842	8.3	46.3	4.5	35,715	68.1	16,693	31.9	52,408	3,356	9.4
Leitrim	2,795	263	9.4	6.6	0.6	4,847	63.4	2,795	36.6	7,642	468	9.7
Mayo	8,348	808	9.7	20.3	2.0	16,507	70.0	7,064	30.0	23,571	1,403	8.5
Roscommon	5,222	558	10.7	14.0	1.4	9,736	61.3	6,135	38.7	15,871	1,477	15.2
Sligo	5,067	509	10.0	12.8	1.2	9,205	60.4	6,027	39.6	15,232	855	9.3
Ulster	27,381	2,674				49,071	63.9	27,672	36.1	76,743	3,994	8.1
Cavan	7,418	927	12.5	34.7	2.3	15,184	54.8	12,538	45.2	27,722	1,166	7.7
Donegal	14,284	1,261	8.8	47.2	3.1	25,268	71.8	9,915	28.2	35,183	2,035	8.1
Monaghan	5,679	486	8.6	18.2	1.2	8,619	62.3	5,219	37.7	13,838	793	9.2
Total	418,318	41,195				719,800	60.7	465,935	39.3	1,185,735	64,328	8.9

*This includes all students- not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary.

4.3 Student Absence Reports in Post-Primary Schools

This section examines the Student Absence Reports in post-primary schools. Table 4.7 presents the breakdown of student with 20 or more days absent by school type. While caution needs to be taken when examining the proportion of students with 20 days or more absent, there is a larger proportion of students in ETB schools reported with students having 20 or more days absent. Students in secondary schools recorded a larger proportion of explained absences (54.6%) than students in comprehensive/ community (45.5%) schools and vocational schools (48.5%). The percentage of explained absences recorded as holidays is similar across all school types.

Table 4.7 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by School Type, Post-Primary Schools 2017/18

	Secondary		Comprehensive /Community		ETB	
Number of students in responding schools*	129,489		35,496		61,920	
Number of students 20 days or more absent	7,629		2,672		6304	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Explained Absences	139,059	54.6	43,597	45.5	105,763	48.5
Unexplained Absences	115,757	45.4	52,143	54.5	112,310	51.5
Total days	254,816	100.0	95,740	100.0	218,073	100.0
Holidays	1,667		601		859	
% of explained	1.2		1.4		0.8	

* This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary.

Table 4.8 presents the breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by DEIS status. Students in Non-DEIS schools reported a larger proportion of explained absences (53.3%) compared to DEIS schools (46.3%). Examining the percentage of explained absences the percentage of explained absences recorded as holidays is similar in both DEIS (1.2%) and Non-DEIS schools (1.0%).

Table 4.8 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by DEIS status, Post-Primary Schools 2017/18

	DEIS Schools		Non-DEIS Schools	
Number of students in responding schools*	48,988		177,917	
Number of students 20 days or more absent	6,010		10,595	
	N	%	N	%
Explained Absences	97,766	46.3	190,653	53.3
Unexplained Absences	113,443	53.7	166,767	46.7
Total days	211,209	100.0	357,420	100.0
Holidays	1,148		1,979	
% of explained	1.2		1.0	

*This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are 6 to 16 or first three years in Post-Primary

The breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by year in school is presented in Table 4.9. Examining the first three years of post-primary schooling, the percentage of students with 20 or more days absent is higher for student in Second Year (11.4%) and Third Year (12.6%) than for students in First Year (8.4%). (These percentages are much lower in Senior Cycle (1-5.6%), but it should be recalled that, as per national legislation, the data covers only students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 years of age). There is also a steady decrease in the percentage of explained absences from First Year (55.4%) to Third Year (50.4%). Examining the explained absences, a very small percentage of students (0.8%-1.5%) were holidays.

Table 4.9 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by year in school, Post-Primary Schools 2017/18

School Year	N students*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of all students	% of students with 20 or more days absent	N Explained	% of explained absences within all absences	N Unexplained	% of unexplained absences with all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
First Year	41,337	3,491	8.4	21.0	63,534	55.4	51,246	44.6	114,780	694	1.1
Second Year	41,831	4,774	11.4	28.8	84,511	53.1	74,755	46.9	159,266	1,275	1.5
Third Year	40,315	5,077	12.6	30.6	91,366	50.4	90,093	49.6	181,459	687	0.8
Fourth Year	28,170	1,572	5.6	9.5	22,755	44.7	28,136	55.3	50,891	244	1.1
Fifth Year	39,170	1,320	3.4	7.9	20,814	42.5	28,171	57.5	48,985	166	0.8
Sixth Year	36,071	353	1.0	2.1	5,161	41.0	7,413	59.0	12,574	61	1.2
Other-Secondary		18		0.1	278	41.2	396	58.8	674	0	0.0
		16,605		100.0	288,419		280,210		568,629	3,127	1.1

*This includes all students i.e. students who are over 16 years of age - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary. Readers are reminded to interpret results for Fourth, Fifth and Sixth year cautiously since the data includes students up to age 16 only.

The breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by region and county is presented in Table 4.10. While schools in Dublin recorded the largest number of students with 20 days absent, Laois and Longford recorded the largest proportion of students with 20 or more days absent. Again, it should be recalled that the number of students recorded in schools includes all students, while the SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary.

Students in schools in county Cavan recorded the lowest percentage of explained absences (31.6%) compared to students in county Louth having the largest percentage of explained absences (74.3%). The region with the highest percentage of explained absences is Connacht (55.7%) with the three counties in Ulster recording the lowest percentage of explained absences (47.7%).

Examining the explained absences, approximately 2.5% of the explained absences were recorded as holidays by students in Sligo, which is the highest level in the country, with very few students recording their absence as holidays by students in South Tipperary and Westmeath.

Table 4.10 Breakdown of students with 20 or more days absent by Region and County, Post-Primary Schools 2017/18

	N students*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of all students within county*	% of students with 20 or more days absent across the region	% of all students with 20 or more days absent in the country	N Explained	% of explained absences across all absences	N Unexplained	% of unexplained absences across all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
Leinster	1,22,276	9,198		7.5		156,837	49.2	162,037	50.8	318,874	1,589	1.0
Carlow	3,892	262	6.7	2.8	1.6	2,766	33.7	5,447	66.3	8,213	7	0.3
Dublin	58,321	4,145	7.1	45.1	25.0	69,853	48.2	75,016	51.8	144,869	1,082	1.5
Kildare	12,911	962	7.5	10.5	5.8	16,857	51.9	15,641	48.1	32,498	82	0.5
Kilkenny	4,741	289	6.1	3.1	1.7	6,397	68.9	2,889	31.1	9,286	41	0.6
Laois	3,927	445	11.3	4.8	2.7	4,484	31.8	9,620	68.2	14,104	28	0.6
Longford	2,737	300	11.0	3.3	1.8	4,354	40.4	6,416	59.6	10,770	19	0.4
Louth	6,408	499	7.8	5.4	3.0	13,068	74.3	4,509	25.7	17,577	35	0.3
Meath	5,881	420	7.1	4.6	2.5	7,835	56.5	6,027	43.5	13,862	101	1.3
Offaly	2,405	218	9.1	2.4	1.3	3,567	45.9	4,210	54.1	7,777	10	0.3
Westmeath	4,915	377	7.7	4.1	2.3	7,363	55.6	5,886	44.4	13,249	14	0.2
Wexford	8,197	642	7.8	7.0	3.9	8,504	37.3	14,270	62.7	22,774	83	1.0
Wicklow	7,941	639	8.0	6.9	3.8	11,789	49.3	12,106	50.7	23,895	87	0.7
Cont. next page												

	N students*	N students 20 days or more absent	% of all students within county*	% of students with 20 or more days absent across the region	% of all students with 20 or more days absent in the country	N Explained	% of explained absences across all absences	N Unexplained	% of unexplained absences across all absences	Total N absences	N Holiday	Holidays as a % of explained absences
Munster	62,051	4,152				72,745	52.7	65,365	47.3	138,110	937	1.3
Clare	4,327	244	5.6	5.9	1.5	4,366	53.6	3,780	46.4	8,146	105	2.4
Cork	24,583	1,611	6.6	38.8	9.7	31,117	59.4	21,256	40.6	52,373	338	1.1
Kerry	8,246	623	7.6	15.0	3.8	12,841	53.0	11,409	47.0	24,250	170	1.3
Limerick	11,512	899	7.8	21.7	5.4	12,119	43.9	15,457	56.1	27,576	238	2.0
Tipperary N.R.	4,162	167	4.0	4.0	1.0	2,782	49.8	2,800	50.2	5,582	41	1.5
Tipperary S.R.	3,706	224	6.0	5.4	1.3	2,738	36.6	4,748	63.4	7,486	0	0.0
Waterford	5,515	384	7.0	9.2	2.3	6,782	53.4	5,915	46.6	12,697	45	0.7
Connacht	26,999	2,035				38,984	55.7	30,997	44.3	69,981	332	0.9
Galway	10,757	692	6.4	34.0	4.2	14,680	61.9	9,035	38.1	23,715	52	0.4
Leitrim	2,524	188	7.4	9.2	1.1	3,381	51.8	3,140	48.2	6,521	35	1.0
Mayo	6,556	537	8.2	26.4	3.2	9,573	48.7	10,096	51.3	19,669	29	0.3
Roscommon	2,519	190	7.5	9.3	1.1	3,799	59.6	2,577	40.4	6,376	26	0.7
Sligo	4,643	428	9.2	21.0	2.6	7,551	55.1	6,149	44.9	13,700	190	2.5
Ulster	15,579	1,220				19,853	47.7	21,811	52.3	41,664	269	1.4
Cavan	3,934	242	6.2	19.8	1.5	2,867	31.6	6,196	68.4	9,063	8	0.3
Donegal	8,379	853	10.2	69.9	5.1	14,228	50.2	14,093	49.8	28,321	197	1.4
Monaghan	3,266	125	3.8	10.2	0.8	2,758	64.4	1,522	35.6	4,280	64	2.3
Total	226,905	16,605				288,419	50.7	280,210	49.3	568,629	3,127	1.1

*This includes all students - not quite comparable with SAR as SAR only collects data on students who are over 6 and have not reached 16 or first three years in Post-Primary.

5 Discussion

In an attempt to discuss the attendance/absence rate reported by schools to Tusla comparison with the education system of our nearest neighbour i.e., Northern Ireland, is helpful. In Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2019) attendance or absence is measured for every pupil in half day sessions (am and pm), so while it would not be feasible to compare numbers, the overall absence rate can be examined. In Northern Ireland the overall absence rate in primary schools in 2017/18 was recorded as 5.1%, with 6.7% recorded as the overall absence rate in post-primary schools. This compares to 5.8% and 7.4% respectively for data returned to Tusla in the 2017/18 academic year. The proportion of absent half days for which no reason was provided represented 14.6% of absent half days in primary schools in Northern Ireland and 20.6% in post-primary schools. With the 2017/18 being the first year this data was provided by schools online and the Student Attendance Reports only records students with 20 or more days absent, the numbers are not directly comparable. However, 39.3% of the absent days were unexplained in primary schools and 49.3% of absent days were unexplained in post-primary schools. Similar to Northern Ireland data, there are more explained absences by students in primary schools than in post-primary schools in the data for the Republic of Ireland. Examining the reasons given for the absences, 11.9% of students in primary schools in Northern Ireland recorded holidays for their absence (1.6% family holiday agreed, 10.3% family holiday not agreed) which compares to 8.9% of the explained absences reported to Tusla in primary schools. A very small proportion of students in post-primary schools in both jurisdictions reported holidays as their reason for absence. Holidays represented 3.7% of absent half days in Northern Ireland and approximately 1.3% of students reported to Tusla had holidays as their reason for absence.

The main limitations to the analysis for the data in the 2017/18 academic year was the abrupt closure of schools due to Covid-19 which prevented the checking and verification of all the data and the decline in the response rate. About two-thirds of schools returned a SAR. At primary level, the response rates were the same across DEIS and non-DEIS schools, schools of varying sector/gender composition, across regions and across varying enrolment sizes. This indicates that efforts to encourage and support more schools to submit a SAR in future years could be targeted at the system generally. In contrast, at primary level, schools with a small enrolment size (80 pupils or less) were significantly less likely to return a SAR. There were no differences in the likelihood of SAR return by DEIS status/urban rural location, school type (mainstream, special, mainstream with special class(es) or region. Therefore, efforts to encourage return of student attendance data could be usefully targeted to smaller schools as well as more generally. As schools become more familiar with the reporting procedure and the use of the online portal for both the Annual Attendance Reports and the Student Attendance Reports, data in future years should reduce inconsistencies and improve the accuracy of the data. However, the introduction of the Student Attendance Reports allows for additional information about the nature of the absences such as the explained and unexplained absences and the reasons given for the absences.

6 References

Millar, D. (2018) *School Attendance Data from Primary and Post-Primary Schools, 2016/17*, Analysis and Report to the Child and Family Agency. Dublin: Educational Research Centre.

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. (2019). *Attendance at grant-aided primary, post-primary and special schools in Northern Ireland 2017/18*. Retrieved at:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/attendance-grant-aided-primary-post-primary-and-special-schools-201718>