



Seirbhís Tacaíochta  
Oideachais Tusla  
Tusla Education Support Service

Tusla Education  
Support Service

# Five Year Plan for School Attendance

2023-2028



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## Glossary of Terms

CIC	Children in Care
CYPSC	Children and Young People Services Committee
DE	Department of Education
DEIS	Delivery of Equality of Opportunity in Schools
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
EWS	Educational Welfare Service
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Scheme
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Services
MD-MTSS	Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEN	Special Education Needs
STAR	Supporting Travellers and Roma
TESS	Tusla Education Support Service
TRES	Traveller and Roma Education Strategy

## Context

Over 224 million students worldwide were impacted by school closures during Covid-19 (UNESCO, 2022). Absenteeism post Covid continues to rise, with rates of chronic absenteeism remaining high in primary and post primary schools in Ireland compared to pre-pandemic levels. In the school year 2021/22 for example, 40.3% of Irish primary and 26.8% of post primary students were chronically absent from school, defined as missing over 20 days of the school year, compared to an average of 11% and 15% respectively between 2014/15 and 2018/19 (Tusla Education Support Service, 2023). Attendance data from 2022-23 shows some correction post pandemic. However, there are significant and ongoing issues for school attendance as demonstrated in the table below.

Students with 20 or more days absent	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Primary	19, 067 (5%)	39,879 (11.1%)	173,072 (40.3%)	110,151 (25.1%)
Post Primary	20,977 (9.5%)	21,867 (12%)	69,097 (26.8%)	65,883 (22.3%)

It is crucial at this juncture that Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and education partners focus on improving attendance at school for all students.

## The Importance of School Attendance

School absenteeism can lead to a range of negative outcomes that include academic, social and emotional challenges, substance abuse, crime, poverty and unemployment (Egger et al., 2003; Gottfried, 2014; Niemi et al., 2022) with the long-term effects of Covid yet to be determined (Gee et al., 2023; Graczyk & Kearney et al., 2023). Given the negative relationship between absenteeism and these outcomes, it is important that TESS works together with other stakeholders to combat barriers to school attendance.

## The Drivers of Absenteeism Post Covid

In 2019, a meta-analysis on school absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019) identified illness, poor mental health, substance abuse, risky behaviour, problems with school, school environment, parenting and family problems, certain peer group characteristics and social status as risk factors for school absenteeism. There is now rising concern that the pandemic has impacted these drivers (OECD, 2024). Illness for example has become a significant driver of absenteeism since the pandemic with PISA (2022) recording illness as a the most common causal factors for students who were absent from school for more than three consecutive months (70.5%) (OECD, 2023). These findings also coincide with an upward trend in anxiety and emotional difficulties in non-attenders (Lester & Mitchelson, 2024).

Moreover, according to the OECD (2024) report on 'Combating Absenteeism Post Covid', there is also some initial evidence that points to a shift in parental attitudes that is negatively impacting their children's attendance. According to the OECD (2024), the pandemic has affected vulnerable children in particular, emphasising the importance of support for students with Special Education Needs and mental health difficulties.

## TESS Five Year Plan for School Attendance

Given the context as set out above, TESS is undertaking a five year plan to improve school attendance. The plan is targeted and collaborative. The plan will focus on policy, practice, implementation of the Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MD-MTSS) and the expansion of TESS services<sup>1</sup> to schools and families, employing innovative ways to meet the needs of vulnerable learners.

The plan is structured on five distinct themes of work where actions are outlined to improve attendance. The themes are:

**Theme One:**  
Data

**Theme Two:**  
Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports

**Theme Three:**  
Policy, Practice and Publications

**Theme Four:**  
Attendance Initiatives

**Theme Five:**  
TESS strands EWS, SCP and HSCL

## Oversight

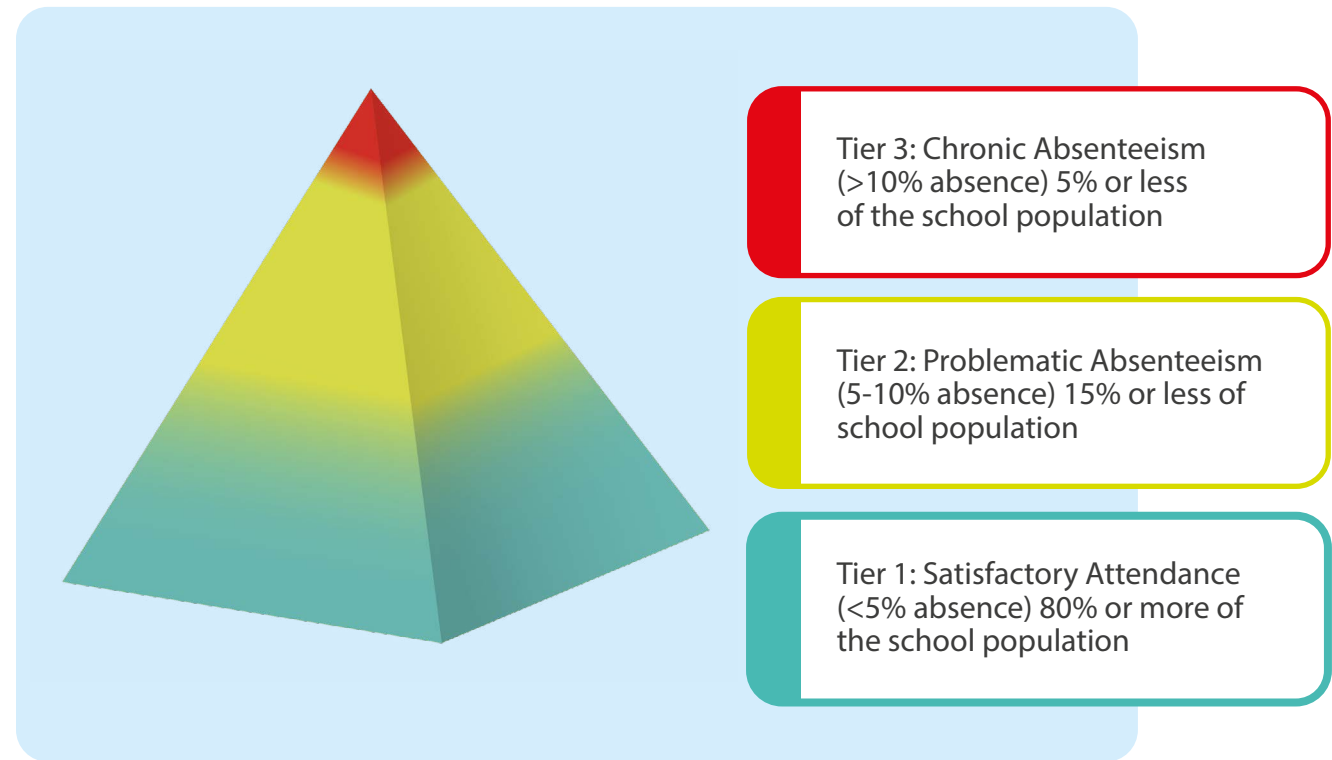
The Tusla Director of Services and Integration and the Director of TESS will have oversight of the plan, in conjunction with the Social Inclusion Unit of the Department of Education. The plan will be incorporated into future TESS annual business plans and tracked accordingly. The plan will be operationalised and reviewed annually as part of the Tusla Corporate Plan and TESS business plan actions.

## The Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports

The Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MD-MTSS) model is an evidence-based approach to improving attendance. The use of the three-tiered MD-MTSS model allows schools and support services to identify patterns of absenteeism at a whole school and student level and to develop nuanced and timely responses to drivers of school absenteeism within each tier (Kearney and Graczyk, 2020). The model can be used by schools to ensure that all students receive universal attendance supports (Tier 1), followed by increasing tiered or additional support as needed for those students with problematic or chronic absenteeism (Tier 2 and 3).

Tier 1 interventions (for all) involve a core set of school-wide attendance strategies (e.g. school readiness and transfer programmes). Tier 2 (for some) interventions can be used to identify and support students who require more targeted supports (e.g. emotional and social skills). Tier 3 (for few) interventions are directed toward students with complex needs who require a more intensive and concentrated approach (e.g. one-on-one support) (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

## Applying the MD-MTSS Model



## The Benefits of using the MD-MTSS Model

The MD-MTSS model allows schools to collect attendance data using a tiered approach. Tier 1 (for all) focuses on promoting school attendance and reducing school absenteeism, stemming the flow of students with school attendance problems into the upper tiers. Tier 2 (for some) focuses on emerging problematic absenteeism with Tier 3 (for few) centred around chronic absenteeism, a strong predictor of school drop-out and long-term negative outcomes (Kearney 2008).

Using this framework, schools aim to have 80% of the school population in Tier 1 (absent 5% or less of the Irish school year), 15% of the school population in Tier 2 (absent 5% to 10% of the school year) and 5% of the school population in Tier 3 (absent 10% of the Irish school year) (Graczyk, 2016; 2023). As well as using cut off points for days absent, the domain structure allows for the identification of other dimensions such as school avoidance, academic, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Assessment, early warning systems and interventions can then be developed for each domain, allowing for different school systems to develop and implement unique responses.

<sup>1</sup> The three service strands of TESS are: Educational Welfare Service, Home School Community Liaison Scheme and the School Completion Programme.



## Theme One

## Data

To make informed practice and business decisions, TESS will improve data collection, analysis and management. Over the five years of the plan, TESS actions and services will be informed by evidence and data.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
1.1	Improve return rates for Annual Attendance Report and Student Absence Report.	2023-2028	TESS	Improved school attendance data informs policy and practice development. Improved systems enable schools to analyse their school attendance data.
1.2	Analyse school attendance data and establish baseline data to support policy and practice development to meet changing needs.	2023-2028	TESS	Practice and policy development is based on accurate data and responding to identified needs.
1.3	Improve internal and external TESS data management.	2025-2028	TESS	Accurate and contemporary data sets are available on rates of school attendance, suspension, expulsion and use of Reduced School Day.
1.4	Extend the Tusla Portal to enable schools to notify TESS of expulsions and suspensions online.	2025-2026	TESS	Accurate and real time data is available on expulsions and suspensions.
1.5	Undertake a research project on school attendance, to include data collection.	2024-2028	TESS ESRI	A review of current TESS data sets is undertaken, in the context of the obligations under the Education Welfare Act (2000), to enable effective service planning. Research papers on school attendance problems in Ireland are developed and published. A TESS data strategy is developed.

## Theme Two

## Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Promoting and supporting the implementation of the MD-MTSS model will enable schools to develop effective and appropriate strategies to respond to the drivers of school absenteeism.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
2.1	Launch of the MD-MTSS model.	2023-2024	TESS DE	A webinar and resources are developed to support the incorporation of the MD-MTSS model into the Irish school system to improve school attendance.
2.2	Develop a TESS team to support the implementation of the MD-MTSS model.	2024-2025	TESS	The TESS team supports schools on the implementation of the MD-MTSS model to ensure sustainability and fidelity.
2.3	<b>Testing the Model</b> Trial of the MD-MTSS model with four schools nationally.	2024	TESS Schools	The MD-MTSS model is trialled for usability in an Irish context. Challenges are identified and addressed prior to phase 1.
2.4	<b>Phase 1:</b> Phased rolled out of the MD-MTSS model for implementation to 60 schools nationally.	2025-2026	TESS DE	The MD-MTSS model is implemented in 60 schools on a phased basis. Key learnings are identified to support implementation in phase 2.
2.5	<b>Phase 2:</b> The MD-MTSS model is embedded in schools.	2026-2028	TESS DE	The MD-MTSS model is available to all schools with TESS support to implement. Data is used by schools to identify school attendance problems and appropriate school level responses. Data is available to regional and national attendance teams to identify emerging trends and practice and/or policy responses.

## Theme Two

## Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Promoting and supporting the implementation of the MD-MTSS model will enable schools to develop effective and appropriate strategies to respond to the drivers of school absenteeism.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
2.6	Establish compatibility between school information management systems and the MD-MTSS model.	2024-2028	TESS DE Schools	School information management systems are compatible with data management for MD-MTSS ensuring usability and sustainability.  Schools have improved data and data systems that are effective and efficient.
2.7	Develop structures to support the implementation of the MD-MTSS model and the use of the data generated.	2025-2028	TESS DE	Active regional and national attendance teams are established with membership comprising of key regional and national education stakeholders.  Data generated informs policy and practice responses to school attendance problems.
2.8	Develop school avoidance supports for schools.	2024-2028	TESS DE Schools	Schools utilise Tier 2 and 3 initiatives of the MD-MTSS model to address school avoidant behaviours.  Schools utilise a range of resources developed by TESS and DE to respond to school avoidant behaviours.
2.9	Develop a TESS three strand approach to support the implementation of the MD-MTSS model in schools within the DEIS programme.	2024-2028	TESS DE Schools	The three strands of TESS support schools to utilise the MD-MTSS model, providing guidance, support and intervention as appropriate.

## Theme Three

## Policy, Practice and Publications

TESS will develop policy and practice informed by national and international research and data. Key information, recommendations and guidance will be shared with schools, the Department of Education and education stakeholders.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
3.1	Collaborate with DE and international and national research partners to develop school attendance policy and practice.	2024-2028	TESS DE International research partners	Policy and practice responses are developed to meet identified needs and to respond to drivers of absenteeism in Ireland.
3.2	Publish 'Guidelines for Schools on The Code of Behaviour'.	2024-2025	TESS DE Schools Education partners	The publication of the 'Guidelines for Schools on the Code of Behaviour' supports schools to review and revise their Code of Behaviour.  Schools develop their Code of Behaviour policies in line with the guidance provided.
3.3	Publish periodic thematic reports on school attendance and emerging trends.	2025-2028	TESS	TESS publishes regular reports on school attendance in Ireland.
3.4	Provide school attendance supports to children in all transitory settings, including children living in homeless accommodation, IPAS accommodation, Children in Care and Traveller and Roma children.	2024-2028	TESS	Targeted school attendance supports are delivered to children who require additional assistance.  Supports are reviewed annually to ensure the effectiveness of the measures employed.
3.5	Provide an integrated response with NCSE to support school attendance for students with SEN.	2024-2028	TESS DE NCSE	Students with SEN are supported through NCSE and/or TESS with their school attendance.  This integrated response is underpinned by a joint working protocol.
3.6	Undertake international and national reviews relating to school attendance.	2024-2028	TESS DE International and national research partners	Research projects and reviews are undertaken to inform the TESS response to school attendance problems.  Policy and practice recommendations are identified.

## Theme Four

## Attendance Initiatives

TESS and the Department of Education have prioritised improved school attendance for all. TESS will lead on initiatives to target schools and parents to raise awareness of the importance of regular attendance.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
4.1	Provide School Attendance webinars	2023-2025	TESS DE Schools	Schools are informed of best practice in promoting regular school attendance. Resources are provided to schools to support them to implement effective attendance strategies.
4.2	Develop school attendance promotion resources	2024-2026	TESS DE	Schools and other stakeholders have access to resources to promote regular school attendance. These resources are developed in consultation with parents, students and education stakeholders.
4.3	Develop a school attendance promotion campaign	2025-2026	TESS DE	A national campaign promoting regular school attendance is delivered.
4.4	Deliver a School Attendance Conference	2026	TESS DE	A school attendance conference is delivered. Schools and education stakeholders learn of best practice in promoting regular school attendance and tackling school attendance problems.
4.5	Collaborate with Tusla services to identify and respond to school attendance issues across local networks and promote attendance.	2023-2028	TESS Tusla	School attendance issues are identified and responded to through collaboration and partnership with Tusla services. TESS and Tusla services promote and support regular school attendance.

## Theme Five

## TESS Strands EWS, HSCL and SCP

The three strands of TESS are a vital cog in the success of the five year plan. The services will be developed and further integrated to deliver high quality services to schools, students and families.

Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
5.1	Provide additional educational welfare supports to Children in Care.	2024-2028	TESS Tusla	Children in residential care settings are supported to secure a school place and to minimise education placement disruption.
5.2	Develop an early intervention response for students with school attendance problems referred by schools to EWS.	2023-2028	TESS Schools	Students with school attendance problems, referred to EWS, receive an early intervention response as appropriate. Students and their families are supported to improve their school attendance rate. There is a decrease in EWS waiting lists.
5.3	Develop supports and structures to ensure quality service delivery.	2023-2028	TESS Tusla	Standard operating procedures are developed, which standardise service delivery. Additional structures are identified to further strengthen service delivery and ensure quality.
5.4	Expand the EWS to address increase demand for the service.	2024-2028	TESS DE	The appointment of additional EWS staff ensures a more timely response to students referred with school attendance problems and contributes to improved service delivery.

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Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
5.5	Provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to support staff to address school attendance problems.	2023-2028	TESS	Staff are upskilled to provide a quality school attendance service to children, families and schools.
5.6	Develop a SCP School Avoidance practice model.	2023-2026	TESS DE	<p>The SCP school avoidance practice model supports students with school avoidant behaviours to return to school or identify other education pathways.</p> <p>Wrap around supports are provided by the HSCL scheme and EWS as required.</p> <p>Referral pathways between SCP and EWS are improved.</p> <p>A SCP school avoidance practice resource is developed.</p>
5.7	Provide additional supports to Traveller and Roma students and families attending schools not in the DEIS programme through the HSCL scheme.	2024-2026	TESS DE	<p>Traveller and Roma students evidence improved attendance, participation, retention and progression.</p> <p>Traveller and Roma parents and families are supported to enable their child to attend school regularly.</p>

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Action for implementation		Timeline	Lead Stakeholder(s)	Indicators of success
5.8	Further develop parent supports and local community initiatives	2023-2028	TESS DE Schools	<p>Parents are supported to ensure their child regularly attends school.</p> <p>Local parenting needs in relation to attendance are identified through the HSCL scheme and responses are developed.</p> <p>Interagency partnership and collaboration underpin local responses.</p>
5.9	Implement TESS led actions under Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.	2024-2028	TESS DE Schools Traveller and Roma representative groups	The effective implementation of TRES actions supports Traveller and Roma students to regularly attend school, to participate in school and to progress within education.



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