



Seirbhís Tacaíochta
Oideachais Tusla
Tusla Education Support Service

Report on Consultations with Parents and Guardians in Relation to School Attendance

The following quantitative terms are used in this report:

Percentage	Language used
More than 90%	Almost all
75% - 90%	Most
51% - 74%	Majority/more than half
50%	Half
25% - 49%	Less than half/a significant minority
16% - 24%	A small number/less than a quarter
Less than 15%	A few

The following abbreviations are used in this report:

ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
AEN	Additional Education Needs
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SCP	School Completion Programme
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

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Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present this report on the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) consultation with parents and guardians¹ on school attendance in Ireland. This report represents much more than a consultation on attendance; it is an opportunity to listen to the experiences and perceptions of parents as key partners in education. In Ireland, the Constitution enshrines parents as the primary educators of their children.

The Education Act, 1998, recognises parents as important stakeholders in their children's education and requires schools and the education system to work with parents, be accountable to them, and involve them as partners in the educational process.

Through this consultation, 80 parents from a variety of socioeconomic profiles and backgrounds from across the country have shared their lived experiences, helping to provide a greater understanding of many of the day-to-day challenges that some families experience and which can influence school attendance patterns.

While participation was open across these contexts, uptake was stronger among those who had experienced, or were experiencing, attendance challenges. The findings therefore include rich qualitative insights into the experiences, perceptions and priorities of voices often underrepresented in policy and practice discussions. Many parents offered suggestions from their own individual perspectives regarding school approaches to attendance.

Although some of these may not be achievable within current policy and resource contexts, they will help to stimulate further professional, policy and societal dialogue regarding this complex issue.

School attendance is about far more than being physically present in a classroom. It reflects a child's sense of belonging, wellbeing and connection to education. When children attend school regularly, they have opportunities to learn, build relationships, develop confidence and participate fully in their school community. School attendance, participation and retention greatly increase a young person's opportunities in life and future security. Where attendance becomes a challenge, it requires understanding, collaboration and compassionate responses. A particularly encouraging finding from this consultation is the strong appreciation expressed by parents for the dedication, care and professionalism of teachers, school leaders and wider school staff. This recognition reflects the strength of relationships within many school communities and provides an important foundation for continued progress. The findings from this consultation process recognise this but have sought to interrogate the challenges and opportunities for improving school attendance at a deeper level.

The strongest message emerging from parents was clear: children learn best when they feel safe, secure, respected and valued. Parents consistently highlighted the importance of positive relationships as the foundation for school attendance and engagement.

¹ Throughout this report, the term 'parents' refers to both parents and guardians.





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They also emphasised that every child brings unique strengths, talents and abilities. These reflections align with Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences, recognising that children's capabilities extend beyond traditional measures of academic achievement. Every child deserves to feel fully recognised and valued for who they are and for the contribution they make.

I would like to express my appreciation to all who contributed to making this report possible.

Firstly, my sincere thanks to the wonderful parents who took the time to attend the consultations, for their forthright, thoughtful and enthusiastic engagement.

Sincere thanks to the many HSCL Coordinators, schools, educational partners, organisations and services that supported this work. Their commitment to engaging with parents reflects the collective effort across the education community to enhance children's educational experiences. I also wish to express my gratitude to colleagues in the Department of Education and Youth and Tusla for their unwavering support. A special thanks to our Advisory Committee for their valuable guidance and expertise throughout the project. Membership included colleagues from the Department of Education and Youth's Inspectorate, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), and the National Parents Council. A final thanks to Dr. Karina Holton and Dr. Maryanne Lowney who compiled the report, and TESS colleagues who planned and facilitated the parent consultations across the country.

The findings of this report encourage us to view attendance through a broader lens. Improving attendance is not simply about increasing the number of days children spend in school; it is about nurturing school communities where children experience belonging, connection and purpose. When these conditions are present, attendance is supported through positive relationships, inclusive practice and meaningful partnership between schools and families.

I hope this report will make a valuable contribution to ensuring a deeper understanding of the issues that are affecting school attendance.

“

By continuing to listen to parents and working together across the education system, we can build an environment where every child feels valued, supported and enabled to flourish.

”

Maria Tobin

Maria Tobin
TESS National Manager

Executive Summary

This report draws on consultations held with eleven parent and guardian focus groups across the country during the spring of 2026. A total of eighty participants took part in these discussions, which explored their perceptions of the importance of school attendance, their views on acceptable levels of absenteeism, and their experiences and perspectives regarding their children's engagement with homework and schoolwork. (Further information on the methodology used can be found in [Section 1.2](#))

The parents who attended the focus groups expressed a strong belief in the value of regular school attendance. Their experiences also highlighted an ongoing tension between policy expectations and the realities faced by a number of families. While almost all participants agreed that attendance is important for their children's social development, they emphasised that attendance depends less on willingness and more on whether schools provide emotional and psychological safety, particularly for children who are neuro-divergent, have experienced trauma, or face hardship, such as poverty, homelessness or unstable living conditions.

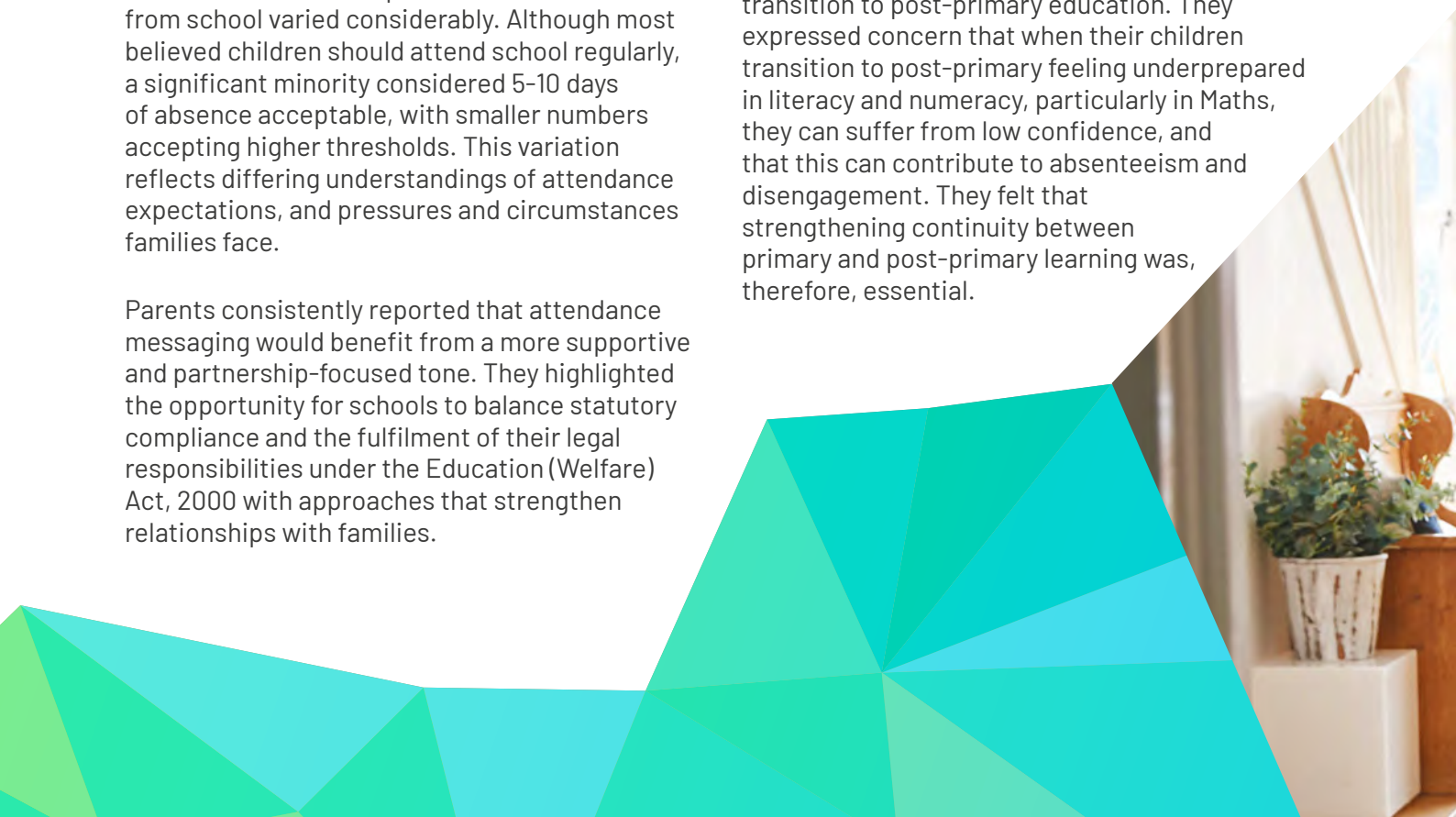
Parents' views on acceptable levels of absence from school varied considerably. Although most believed children should attend school regularly, a significant minority considered 5-10 days of absence acceptable, with smaller numbers accepting higher thresholds. This variation reflects differing understandings of attendance expectations, and pressures and circumstances families face.

Parents consistently reported that attendance messaging would benefit from a more supportive and partnership-focused tone. They highlighted the opportunity for schools to balance statutory compliance and the fulfilment of their legal responsibilities under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000 with approaches that strengthen relationships with families.

Their accounts pointed to ongoing inequities in how some schools respond to children with additional needs, underscoring the importance of ensuring that supports are both adequate and accessible. Parents' perspectives suggested that schools continue to work hard to meet diverse needs, but that further investment in equitable resources and practices would help them to do so more effectively. Some parents experiencing attendance challenges described feeling judged or isolated, indicating that more consistent reassurance and supportive communication could make a meaningful difference.

Participants also expressed mixed views on school attendance drives and reward schemes. While some regarded these initiatives as effective in encouraging regular attendance, others were concerned that they could unintentionally stigmatise children who miss school for reasons beyond their control. Parents emphasised that attendance initiatives should be designed to encourage participation without creating anxiety or placing undue pressure on children who are absent due to illness or other unavoidable circumstances.

Parents highlighted the importance of academic preparedness, particularly in relation to the transition to post-primary education. They expressed concern that when their children transition to post-primary feeling underprepared in literacy and numeracy, particularly in Maths, they can suffer from low confidence, and that this can contribute to absenteeism and disengagement. They felt that strengthening continuity between primary and post-primary learning was, therefore, essential.



Parents' perceptions on their children's engagement with schoolwork varied. Fewer than half reported that their children felt "somewhat engaged," while a similar proportion described high engagement. Homework emerged as a significant pressure point, especially at primary level, where nearly one-third of parents felt that their children found it stressful. Even at post-primary level, half of parents said that their children held negative views of homework, and parents of children in special classes reported the highest levels of stress.

Across all focus groups, attendance was described as fundamentally relational. Most parents reported that their children attended school more consistently when they felt known, understood, and supported by trusted adults, and when their identity, culture, and background were acknowledged and valued. Parents of primary school children more frequently described their children as experiencing a strong sense of belonging within their school community, often attributing this

to the greater opportunities primary school teachers have to develop sustained relationships with individual pupils. In contrast, parents perceived the post-primary environment as presenting additional challenges to fostering such connections. They suggested that the movement between classes, interactions with multiple subject teachers, and the greater demands of the post-primary curriculum and examination system may reduce opportunities for relationship-building and alter the nature of teacher-student interactions, with implications for students' sense of connection and support within the school environment.

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Parents highlighted the importance of academic preparedness, particularly in relation to the transition to post-primary education.

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Overall, the learning from parents is clear: attendance improves when schools nurture environments where children feel safe, valued, capable, and connected.

A major theme that emerged from the focus groups was the impact of anxiety, overwhelm, and emotional dysregulation on attendance. Parents described how sensory overload, fear of authority, and academic pressure, especially around exams, can lead to attendance difficulties. They called for trauma-informed therapeutic supports, more access to SNAs, and the use of consistent, supportive language across school communities. Punitive measures such as suspensions were seen as counterproductive, often deepening disengagement.

A significant minority of parents emphasised the need for greater flexibility within the education system to support their children to engage more successfully. They highlighted the potential value of options such as phased reintegration, flexible timetables, blended learning and alternative pathways where appropriate. Parents also noted that, for neuro-divergent students and those experiencing high levels of anxiety, engagement in learning cannot be assessed by physical attendance alone. Their perspectives point to the need for a wider conversation about how education can adapt to diverse needs while ensuring children and young people remain connected, supported and able to progress.

Parents identified a range of practical challenges that contribute significantly to school absenteeism. These included long commutes, transport difficulties, the competing demands faced by working parents, and the particular challenges experienced by families living in homeless accommodation. Parents noted that families living in temporary or overcrowded accommodation often have limited access to outdoor space or suitable areas for children to complete homework, placing additional strain on family life and making consistent school attendance more difficult. Parents stressed the need for practical supports that recognise the realities of family life.

Despite these challenges, most parents found it easy to connect with their child's school, though a minority experienced difficulty. Overall, the learning from parents is clear: attendance improves when schools nurture environments where children feel safe, valued, capable, and connected. Policies that strengthen relationships, reduce pressure, support emotional wellbeing, and address practical barriers will have the greatest impact on sustaining engagement and preventing long-term absenteeism. Ultimately, parents welcome partnership, not pressure: collaborative, empathetic approaches improve attendance far more effectively than monitoring systems or sanctions.





1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In Ireland, school attendance is a statutory requirement under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000. Parents and guardians are legally obliged to ensure that children of compulsory school age attend school regularly or otherwise receive a minimum education. Schools, in turn, are required to promote attendance, monitor absences, and notify the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) where a student accumulates 20 or more days' absence in a school year or where their attendance gives rise to concern.²

School attendance has emerged as a significant international policy concern in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with English-speaking countries experiencing particularly pronounced and persistent challenges. This issue extends beyond the education system, as prolonged absenteeism can contribute to wider social challenges, including increased risks of antisocial behaviour. Recent Irish research by Smyth, Moya and Darmody (2026) demonstrates a clear association between school attendance and academic achievement, with higher levels of absence linked to lower Leaving Certificate attainment and reduced progression to further and higher education.³

Within Ireland, the most pronounced disparities in attendance are evident in schools with DEIS status and special school classification. Schools in the DEIS programme, especially Urban Band 1 primary schools and special schools, record substantially higher levels of chronic absenteeism, and significantly more days lost per student than other school types. ESRI analysis (2026) indicates that these schools experience up to seven additional days lost per student, with DEIS post-primary schools also reporting markedly poorer attendance than their non-DEIS counterparts.⁴

Although overall attendance improved moderately between the 2022/23 and 2023/24 school years, a notable minority of schools experienced further deteriorating absence rates, particularly at post-primary level. While disadvantaged primary schools recorded larger reductions in absence, this largely reflected their initially higher baseline levels. By contrast, socio-economically advantaged schools demonstrated stronger gains over time. However, at post-primary level, schools in the DEIS programme continued to record higher rates of chronic absence and greater numbers of days lost, indicating persistent attendance inequalities.

1.2 Methodology

In order to elicit parents' and guardians' views on the barriers to school attendance, Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) facilitated a series of eleven parent/guardian consultations across its six regions during the spring of 2026 using a focus group methodology with a mixed methods design. These consultations, carried out by the TESS Integrated Services Management (ISM) team, under the direction of National Manager Maria Tobin, took place in the Dublin North-East, Dublin Mid Leinster, South East, South West, Mid West, and West/North East regions.

A total of eighty participants took part in the discussions across all the consultations. On arrival at each focus group session, participants completed a pro forma survey that captured information on gender, cultural background, household type and the type of school their children attended.⁵ This standardised data helped contextualise parents' responses, and supported the interpretation of the qualitative findings, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the sample and participants' perspectives.

² Education (Welfare) Act 2000, Government of Ireland. (2000). Dublin: Stationery Office.

³ Smyth, E., Moya, A., and Darmody, M. (2026). The long-term outcomes of school absence, ESRI Research Series 220, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs220>

⁴ Ponce, M. A., Smyth, E., Darmody, M., School-level patterns of nonattendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24, ESRI Research Series No. 219, Jan 2026, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs219>

⁵ The pro forma document is attached as appendix 2 at the end of this report.

The focus group sessions followed a mixed methods approach, commencing with a quantitative survey which explored perceptions of parents and guardians around the importance of school attendance and acceptable levels of absenteeism along with their views on their child's engagement with homework and schoolwork. The survey also captured participants' perceptions of school accessibility, and their children's attendance patterns.⁶

Participants included parents and guardians of children attending schools in the DEIS programme and schools not in the DEIS programme at primary and post-primary level, as well as respondents from rural and urban communities. Representation was also sought from Gaelscoil settings, parents and guardians of children and young people attending special classes, respondents from Traveller and Roma communities, foster parents/guardians, and migrant parents.

Eight of the eleven focus group sessions took place in person, and three were conducted online to facilitate the voice of parents/guardians from remote rural locations, for instance an islander parent. The online focus group option was also used to facilitate respondents engaged in providing foster care who were dispersed geographically.

As managers of the HSCL Scheme, the ISM team brought considerable experience in engaging with parents and guardians and in cultivating positive, trusting relationships with school communities. This positioned the team well to facilitate a robust, inclusive, and meaningful consultation process that supported the participation of a broad range of parents and guardians across the Tusla regions.

Limitations of this report

The findings in this report should be interpreted with several limitations in mind. Purposive sampling was used, and the analysis reflects only the views of those who took part in the focus groups.

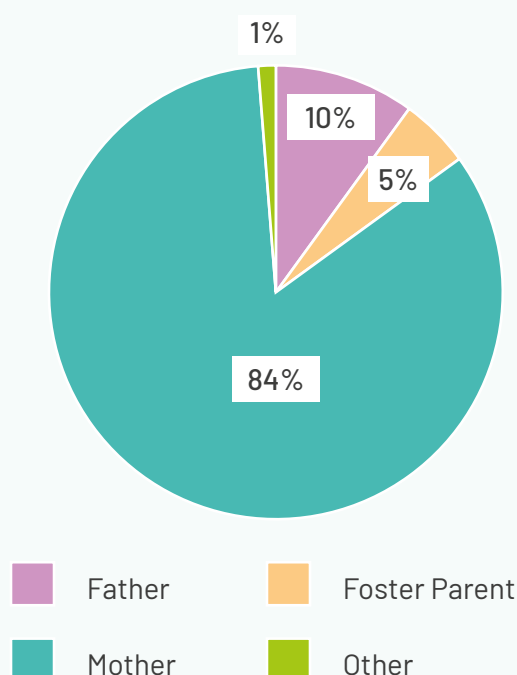
Even so, the issues parents raised align closely with challenges commonly reported by many parents more broadly. Their insights therefore offer a valuable window into experiences that extend beyond the participants themselves.

1.3 The participants in the focus groups

The pro forma survey data are presented graphically below to illustrate the characteristics of the parent sample and to contextualise the subsequent findings.

Within the eleven focus groups, most (84%) of the participants were mothers.⁷ One-tenth (10%) were fathers. A few (5%) were foster parents, and some (1%) preferred not to state their relationship to the children in their care.

Fig 1. Relationship of participants in focus groups to school-going child(ren) in their care



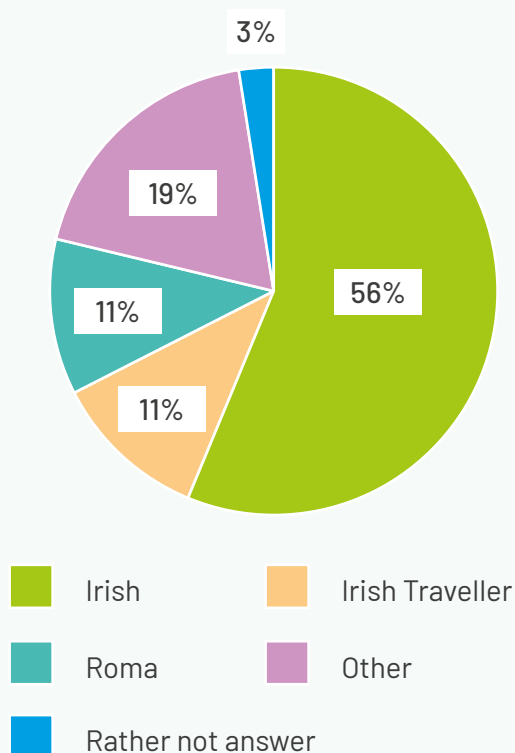
⁶ The survey is attached as appendix 3 at the end of this report.

⁷ Research suggests that mothers are more likely than fathers to assume primary responsibility for engagement with their children's education, including communication with schools and participation in school-related activities. Consequently, mothers are often overrepresented in studies of parental perspectives on education and home-school relationships. See O'Toole, L., Kiely, J., McGillacuddy, D., O'Brien, E. Z., & O'Keeffe, C. (2019). *Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years*. National Parents Council.

Which best describes your ethnic or cultural background?

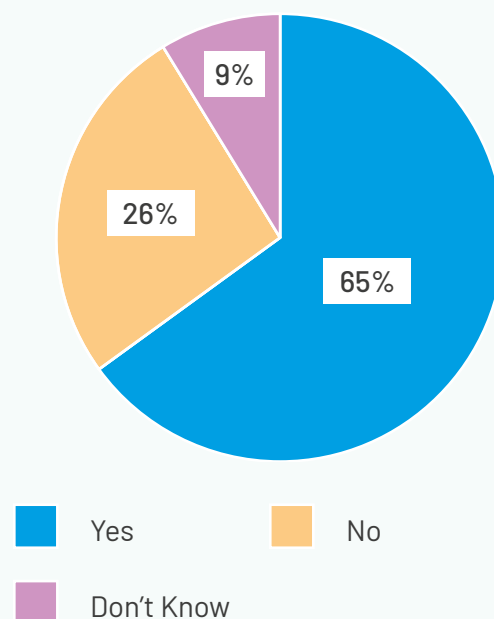
More than half (56%) of the participants identified as Irish. More than one-tenth (11%) identified as Irish Traveller, and a further 11% identified as Roma. Almost one-fifth (19%) identified as other. A few (3%) preferred not to describe their ethnic or cultural background.

Fig 2. Ethnic or cultural background of participants



The majority (65%) of participants' children attended schools with designated DEIS status. More than one-quarter (26%) did not attend a school with designated DEIS status. A small number of parents (9%) did not know if their children's school had designated DEIS status.

Fig 3. Is your child's school a DEIS school?



For the purposes of the consultations, parents who had children attending both primary and post-primary schools were asked to base their responses on one of their children. More than half the parents (55%) who attended the focus groups based their responses on their child in primary school. A significant minority (35%) based their responses on their child in post-primary school. While the majority of responses related to children attending mainstream schools, including those enrolled in special classes within mainstream settings (8%), a small proportion of respondents referred to children attending special schools (1%) or alternative education settings (1%). These latter responses are not considered representative of the wider sample due to their limited frequency; however, they have been retained to acknowledge the experiences of families across different educational contexts and to provide a more inclusive account of the range of settings represented in the data.

Fig 4. What type of school does your child attend?

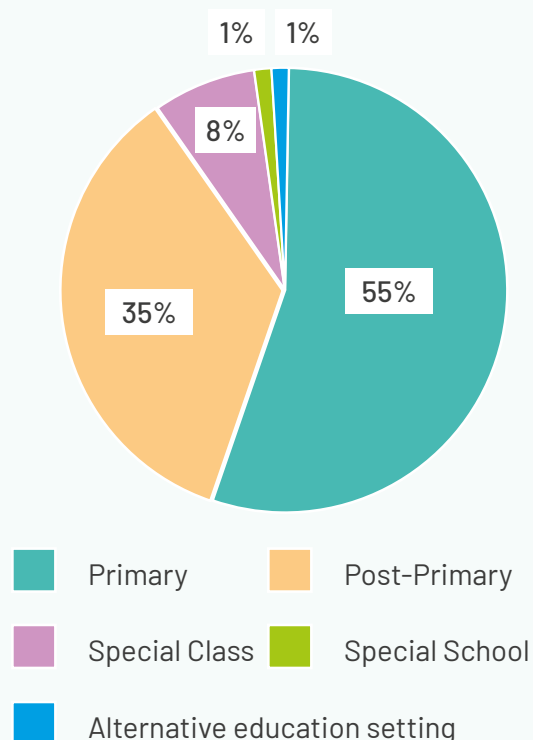
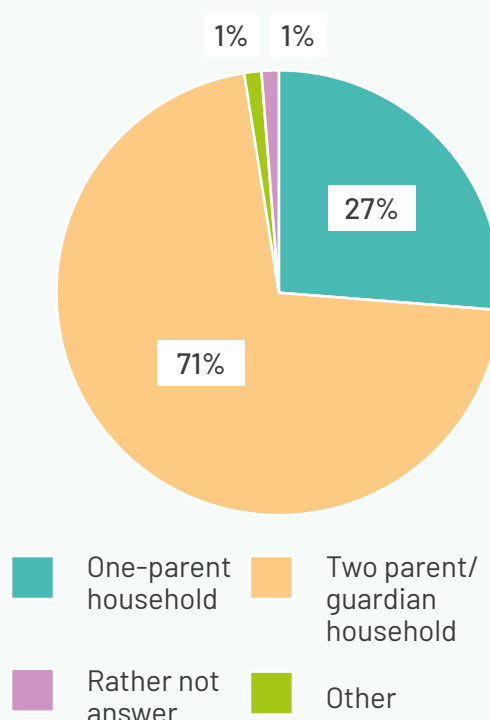


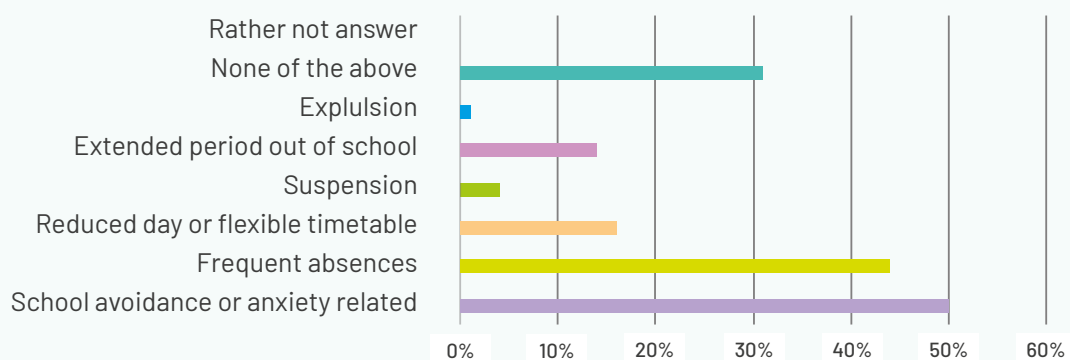
Fig 5. Which best describes your household?



The majority (71%) of participants in the focus groups came from two-parent or guardian households. More than one-quarter (27%) of participants came from one-parent households. A small percentage (1%) preferred not to answer this question, while a further small percentage (1%) selected the 'other' option.

Half of all participants (50%) stated that their child experienced school avoidance or anxiety-related school absence within the last two years. (It is important to note that parents in the focus groups sometimes used the terms "reduced school day" and "flexible timetable" interchangeably).⁸

Fig 6. Has your child experienced any of the following in the past two years?



⁸ However, these terms refer to distinct concepts. A Reduced School Day (RSD) is a formally recognised arrangement, defined by Department of Education and Youth Circular 0047/2021, and is subject to specific reporting and oversight requirements. In contrast, a "flexible timetable" is not a formally recognised provision within the Irish education system and does not have an equivalent status or definition within Department of Education and Youth policy. The term may be used by families, schools, or those working alongside the education system to describe informal practices intended to support a student's engagement, participation or behaviour, but such arrangements are not equivalent to a formally recorded RSD, and may reflect variation in understanding or terminology across contexts.

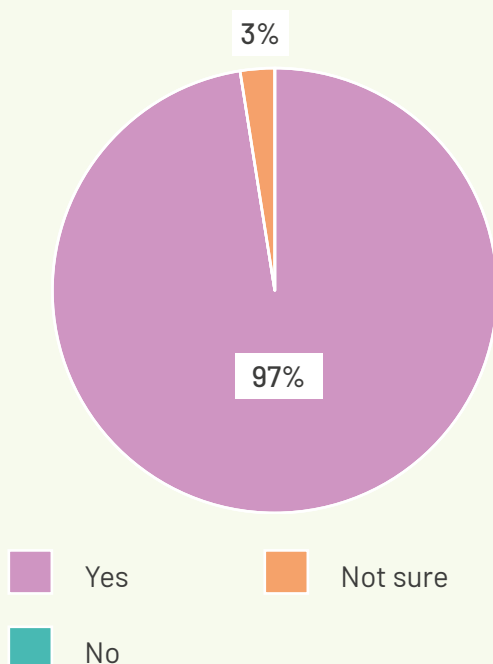
2. Quantitative data

The survey data are presented graphically below to illustrate the outcomes of the parent sample and to contextualise the subsequent findings.

1. Is regular school attendance important for your child's development?

Almost all parents (97%) agreed that regular school attendance is important for their child's development. A few (3%) were unsure whether regular school attendance is important for their child's development.

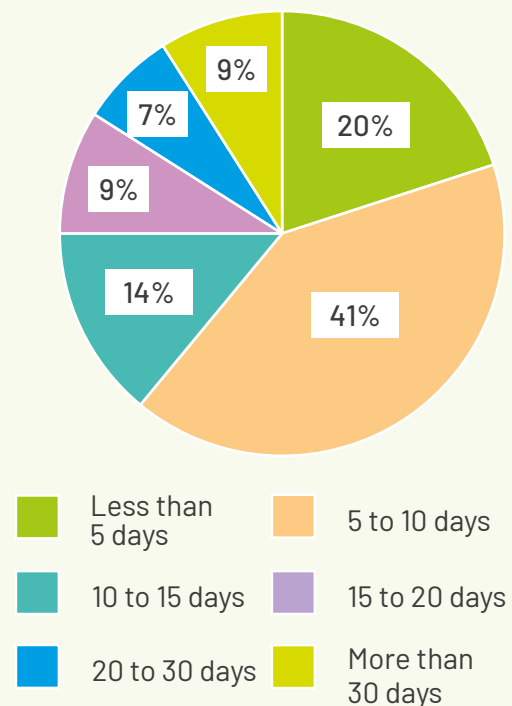
Fig 7. Is regular school attendance important for your child's development?



2. What, in your opinion, is an acceptable level of absenteeism per school year?

A significant minority of parents (41%) felt that an absence of five to ten days is acceptable. One-fifth of parents (20%) felt that less than five days' absence is acceptable. A few (14%) felt that an absence of between ten and fifteen days is acceptable. Equal percentages of parents (9%) felt that absences of fifteen to twenty days, and absences of more than thirty days are acceptable, while a small percentage (7%) felt that an absence of twenty to thirty days is acceptable.

Fig 8. What in your opinion is an acceptable level of absenteeism per school year?

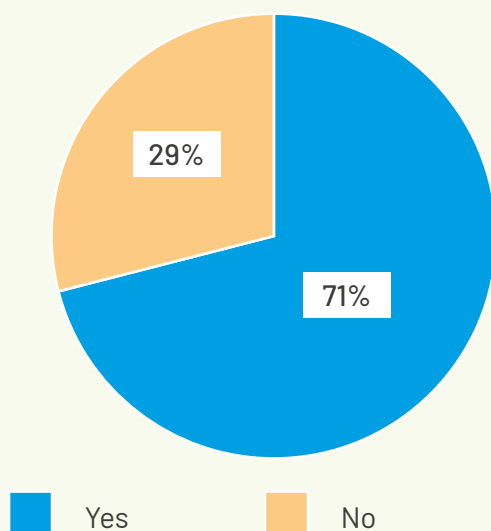


3. Have there been times when your child has struggled to attend school regularly?

The majority of parents (71%) agreed that there have been times when their child struggled to attend school. Half of all participants (50%) stated that their child experienced school avoidance or anxiety-related school absence within the last two years (See Fig. 6 above).

A significant minority (29%) disagreed that their child struggled to attend school regularly.

Fig 9. **Have there been times when your child has struggled to attend school regularly?**

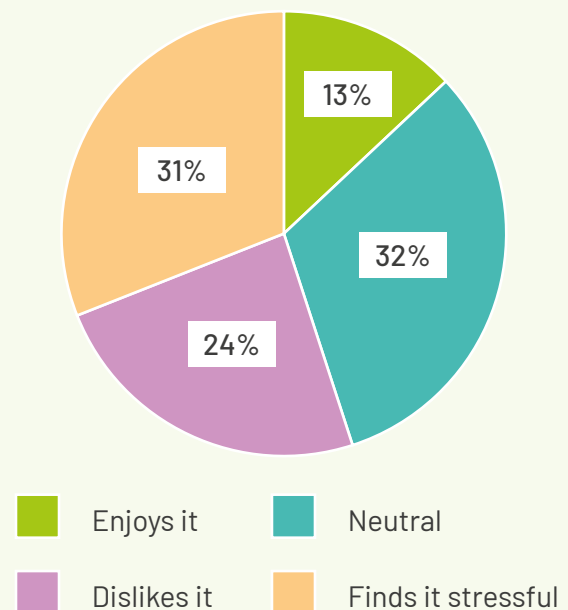


4. How does your child feel about homework?

Homework represents one of the most visible forms of parental involvement in children's education⁹. The survey sought to capture parents' views on their children's attitudes and experiences of homework.

When asked how their children felt about homework, almost one-third (31%) of parents stated that their child finds it stressful. Almost one quarter (24%) said that their child dislikes it, while just over one-eighth (13%) said that their child likes homework. Almost one-third of parents (32%) stated that their child neither likes nor dislikes homework.

Fig 10. **How does your child feel about homework?**

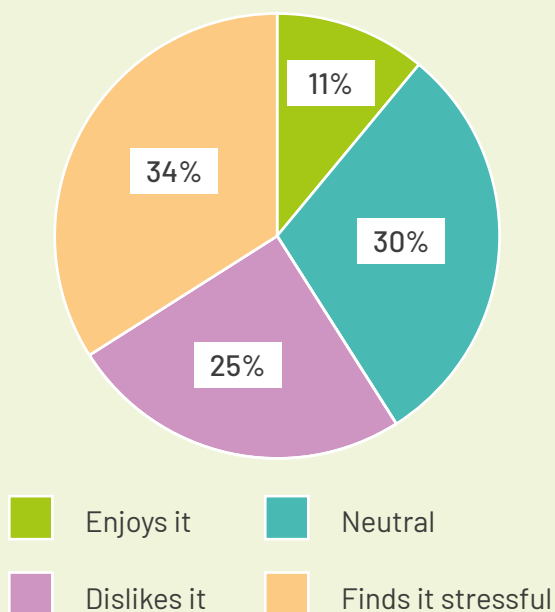


⁹ However, despite its prominence within Irish primary schooling, O'Toole et al. (2019), in a review commissioned by the National Parents Council (NPC-Primary) and the NCCA, noted a relative lack of Irish research examining homework practices and parental engagement with homework.

These responses were further analysed, for the various school sectors.

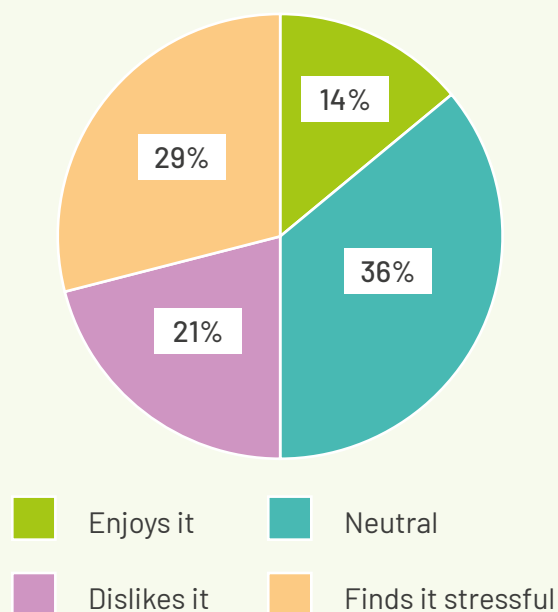
At primary level, more than one-third (34%) of parents stated that their child finds homework stressful. One quarter of parents (25%) stated that their child dislikes homework. A significant minority (30%) stated that their child neither likes nor dislikes homework, while a few (11%) stated that their child likes homework.

Fig 11. **How does your child feel about homework (Primary parents, n=44)?**



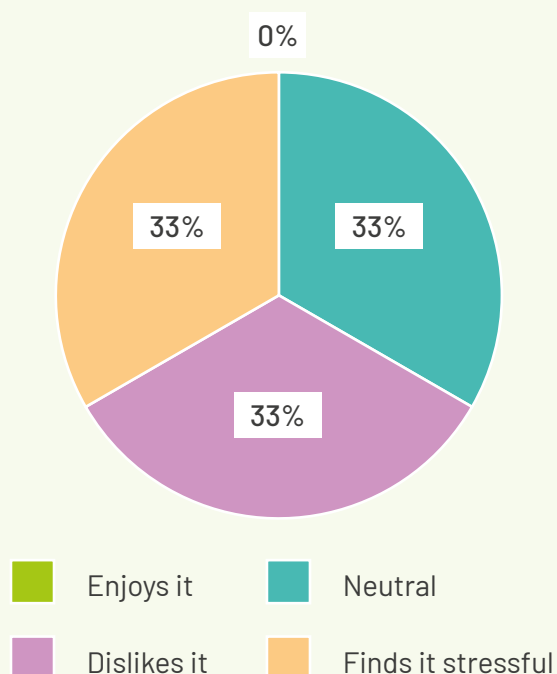
At post-primary level, a significant minority (36%) of parents stated that their child neither likes nor dislikes homework, while more than one-quarter (29%) find it stressful. More than one-fifth of parents (21%) stated that their child dislikes homework. A few (14%) said that their child likes homework.

Fig 12. **How does your child feel about homework? (Post-primary parents, n=28)**



In special classes in mainstream schools, the responses were evenly divided. One-third of parents (33%) stated that their child finds homework stressful, one-third of parents (33%) stated that their child dislikes homework, and one-third of parents (34%) stated that their child neither likes nor dislikes homework.

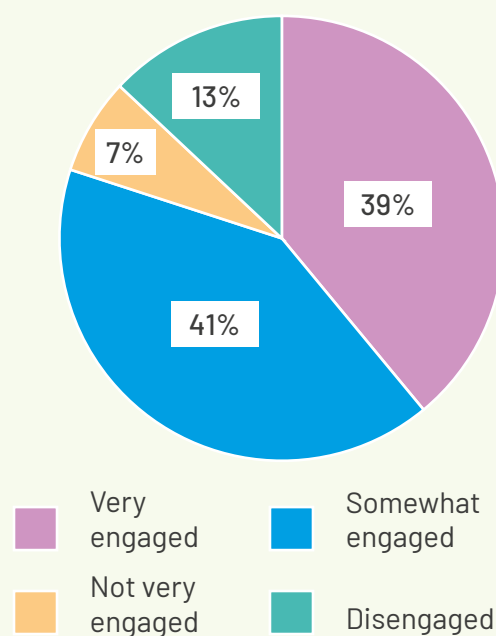
Fig 13. **How does your child feel about homework? (Parents of children in special classes in mainstream schools, n=6)**



5. Do you feel that your child is engaged in his/her schoolwork/activities?

Less than half (41%) of parents stated that their child is somewhat engaged in their schoolwork and activities, while almost the same number (39%) stated that their child is very engaged. More than one-eighth (13%) of parents stated that their child is disengaged in his/her schoolwork. A few (7%) stated that their child is not very engaged in their schoolwork.

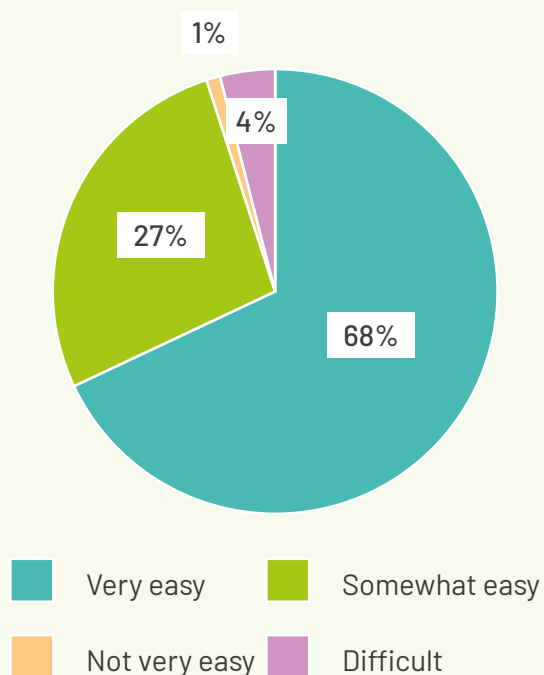
Fig 14. **Do you feel that your child is engaged in his/her schoolwork and activities?**



Is it easy for you to connect with your child's school?

More than two-thirds (68%) of parents agreed that it is very easy for them to connect with their child's school. More than one-quarter (27%) agreed that it is somewhat easy to connect with their child's school. The remaining few parents (5%) find it not very easy or difficult to connect with their child's school. This question was not structured to elicit separate responses from parents of primary and post-primary students, and the findings were therefore analysed collectively.

Fig 15. Is it easy for you to connect with your child's school?



2.1 Analysis of parents' responses to questions about attitudes to homework

An important finding is that attitudes towards homework were often mixed, although negative views were reported more frequently than positive ones. Across all respondents:

- 31% of parents reported that their child finds homework stressful.
- 24% said their child dislikes homework.
- 13% reported that their child likes homework.
- 32% indicated that their child neither likes nor dislikes homework.

Combining the categories of "stressful" and "dislikes" suggests that 55% of parents reported that their children had a negative experience of homework, compared with just 13% who viewed it positively. The largest single category is neutrality (32%), indicating that many children regard homework as a routine aspect of school rather than something they strongly enjoy or dislike.

Primary level

Parents of primary school pupils reported the highest levels of homework-related stress:

- 34% find homework stressful.
- 25% dislike homework.
- 30% neither like nor dislike it.
- 11% like homework.

These findings suggest that homework is a source of pressure for a substantial proportion of younger children. More than half (59%) are perceived as experiencing homework negatively (stressful or disliked), while only a small minority (11%) enjoy it. This may reflect the challenges of developing study habits and managing homework routines at a younger age.

Post-primary level

Attitudes appear somewhat more balanced at post-primary level:

- 36% neither like nor dislike homework.
- 29% find it stressful.
- 21% dislike it.
- 14% like it.

Compared with primary pupils, parents described post-primary students as being less likely to find homework stressful (29% versus 34%) and slightly more likely to like homework (14% versus 11%). The largest group expressed neutral views, which may suggest that older students have become more accustomed to homework expectations. It may also reflect the greater choice of subjects available at post-primary level, the nature of homework assignments, and the use of classroom-based assessments (CBA) as part of the Junior Cycle Programme, all of which may make learning activities more engaging and relevant for students. Nevertheless, exactly half (50%) are still perceived as having a negative view of homework.

Parents highlighted the importance of homework being proportionate and manageable, with consideration given to its potential impact on children's wellbeing and overall engagement with education.

This reflects a wider theme identified across the consultations regarding the need for school practices to be mindful and responsive to children's individual circumstances.

Special classes in mainstream schools

Responses from parents of children in special classes show a unique pattern:

- 33% find homework stressful.
- 33% dislike homework.
- 34% neither like nor dislike homework.

No parents reported that their child likes homework. While the equal distribution across the three categories is notable, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, as the pattern reflects a relatively small number of responses. Nonetheless, the absence of any positive responses suggests that homework presents particular challenges for children attending special classes in mainstream schools.

Overall Findings:

- Parents report that homework-induced stress is more pronounced at primary level.
- Neutral attitudes to homework increase with age.
- Both groups included students who liked homework, with 11% and 14% reporting positive attitudes toward it.
- Children in special classes appear least likely to experience homework positively.

2.1.1 Why do you think your child feels this way about homework?

What parents said

Fatigue and overwhelm after school

- Tired after a full day.
- Overwhelmed after school.
- Needs time to decompress.
- Day already long enough.
- Struggles to pace work.
- Homework seen as extension of school.

Stress, anxiety, and emotional pressure

- Homework is stressful.
- Fear of being wrong.
- Stress when not understanding the concepts.
- Pressure from teacher expectations.
- Stress from work not posted online on time or when instructions arrive late.
- Stress when sharing answers in class.

Learning needs, neuro-diversity, and difficulty with tasks

- ADHD and organisational challenges.
- May be neuro-divergent with possible ADHD or autism – struggles with writing, concentration and delays with assistive technology.
- Hard to learn at home.
- Learning too rote-based.

Homework load and workload management

- Too much homework given.
- Helpful when time given in class.
- Revisions can still be stressful.
- Completing homework in school reduces pressure.

Motivation, attitude, and engagement

- Sees homework as a task, not enjoyment.
- Enjoys some subjects.
- Not a keen learner.
- Doesn't link homework to school enjoyment.

Family and home environment challenges

- Pressures of large families.
- Parents struggle to help with homework.
- Homework causes stress at home.
- Post-primary life stage pressure – more responsibilities and emotional demands.

Beliefs about homework

- Feel enough learning happens in school.
- Understands homework helps results.
- Would prefer none or very little.



3. Focus Groups with Parents: Analysis of Parental Responses

3.1 Do you think that children and young people should attend school each weekday?

Overview

Parents expressed broad support for the principle of daily school attendance, citing routine, socialisation, and discipline as core benefits. A small number of parents expressed concerns about their ability to support their children to achieve the level of school attendance expected under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, particularly where children had additional needs or were experiencing anxiety. Parents highlighted the need for attendance expectations and supports to take account of individual circumstances, recognising that some children may require additional flexibility and tailored supports to enable their full participation in education.

1. Support for daily attendance

Parents acknowledged that schools promote the importance of daily attendance effectively, and all parents agreed that children should ideally attend school every day. They associated regular attendance with:

- Routine and the development of predictable daily structures.
- Socialisation, including peer interaction and community belonging.
- Discipline, understood as the cultivation of habits, responsibility, and engagement.
- Sense of normality and safety, especially for children with trauma backgrounds.

Parents unanimously viewed regular school attendance as fundamental to children's overall development, wellbeing, and successful engagement with school life.

2. Constraints on regular attendance

Parents recognised schools' efforts to promote and support regular attendance. While all parents supported regular attendance, many emphasised that daily attendance was not always achievable. They highlighted:

- Family circumstances that may disrupt attendance e.g. one-parent homes, working parents, lack of childcare, etc.
- Individual needs, particularly for children with anxiety or neurodiversity.
- Situational factors such as health, trauma, or school-based stressors.
- The need for the right supports for their children to enable them to attend school.
- Local circumstances such as opportunities for seasonal labour.
- Demands on students to provide financial support for their families by engaging in paid work.
- Key cultural practices which impact on attendance e.g. weddings, funerals.
- Limited access to support services to help children attend school.
- Absence patterns becoming entrenched and difficult to reverse.

Parents stressed that irregular attendance often reflects structural or emotional barriers rather than parental disengagement.

3. Concerns about wellbeing, inclusion and suitability of supports within school environments

Some parents reported concerns regarding:

- The compatibility between the school environment and the child's needs and identity, especially for children with ASD, ADHD, or anxiety.
- Children struggling with their sexual orientation.
- Children who are acting as carers to parents or siblings at home.
- Children's wellbeing and safety.

Those parents described experiences where school was:

- Traumatic for some children, with observable trauma-related symptoms linked to attendance.
- Overwhelming and intense for children where sensory, emotional, or behavioural supports may need further development.
- A context where unmet needs could impact some children's ability to fully access meaningful education.
- Too long a day for some children, with early start times and daily expectations creating additional challenges.

A recurring theme was the importance of continued focus on accommodations, flexibility, and responsive approaches, alongside ensuring that children's voices are heard, valued, and reflected in support planning.

4. School culture and experiences of bullying

Many parents identified school culture and relationships within the school community as important factors shaping attendance and wellbeing. Areas highlighted included:

- The importance of positive peer relationships and supportive school environments in helping children develop a sense of belonging and connection.
- Some parents described experiences of negative interactions including peer and adult bullying, which they felt had affected some children's sense of safety, wellbeing, or connection to school.
- The need for continued awareness and understanding of children's individual needs and circumstances, including where misunderstandings or challenges in relationships may affect a child's experience of school.
- The importance of ensuring that children experiencing attendance difficulties are met with understanding and support, with parents emphasising that non-attendance is often linked to wider circumstances rather than a lack of commitment from the child or family.

These accounts highlight the value of inclusive, relational approaches and ongoing partnership between children, families, and schools in supporting attendance, wellbeing, and engagement.

5. Impact of attendance messaging and thresholds

Parents described current attendance messaging, particularly letters from schools relating to the 20-day absence threshold as identified in the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, as:

- Stressful and intimidating.
- Causing anxiety where attendance correspondence referenced the Welfare Act and statutory responsibilities, which some parents perceived as creating concerns about possible legal consequences.
- At times perceived as reliant on “scaremongering”, rather than supportive engagement.

Many parents felt that attendance messaging from schools may inadvertently heighten parental anxiety and erode trust, particularly among families already navigating complex challenges.

6. Variability in school engagement with families

Experiences of school outreach were mixed:

- Several parents reported positive, proactive communication and support from schools.
- A majority of parents felt that schools could significantly improve their engagement, responsiveness, and partnership with families.

This highlights the importance of interpersonal approaches in supporting attendance.

3.2 What helps and encourages parents to send their child to school each day?

Overview

Parents identified a range of school practices and environmental factors that significantly influence children's willingness and ability to attend school. Their insights emphasise the importance of relational, sensory, and structural supports, particularly for children experiencing anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or difficulties with school engagement. The findings highlight both effective current practices and opportunities for system-level improvement.

1. School atmosphere, culture, and sense of welcome

Parents consistently stressed that a positive school atmosphere is critical to supporting attendance. They associated a welcoming culture with:

- Warm daily interactions, such as principals greeting children at the school gate.
- Calm arrival routines.
- A sense of belonging, particularly in smaller schools where staff can offer more personalised attention.
- Making meaningful efforts to involve children in decisions about how their school operates.
- Schools providing a holistic education, with a strong focus on wellbeing.
- Opportunities for friendships, sports, and hobbies, which parents viewed as essential motivators for young people.
- Supports for children who are anxious and finding school difficult.
- Schools respecting the culture of all children and their families.
- Recognition that sometimes the social and emotional benefits of school are more important than academic achievement.
- Predictable daily routines that help regulate trauma responses and reduce anxiety.

These elements were highlighted as important in fostering positive relationships, supporting children's wellbeing, and strengthening their sense of connection and belonging within the school community.



2. Relationship with staff

Positive relationships with staff were repeatedly identified by most parents as a significant and transformative influence on children's experience of school, attendance, and sense of belonging. Parents highlighted the importance of staff who take time to build trusting relationships, understand individual circumstances, and create a welcoming and supportive environment. Parents valued:

- Approachable teachers and year heads.
- Principals and deputy principals who are visible and engaged.
- HSCCL coordinators and SCP personnel who build trust and maintain informal communication channels.
- Schools that understand and support family circumstances.

One parent's experience of being told "She'll be grand" illustrates how the dismissal of concerns can delay intervention and contribute to school refusal, particularly when set against parents' broader emphasis on the importance of positive relationships with school staff. In contrast, parents consistently highlighted the value of approachable and visible school leaders, trusted support personnel, and schools that demonstrate understanding of and responsiveness to family circumstances.

3. Importance of connection during absence

Parents emphasised that maintaining connection when a child is out of school is critical for reintegration. Key factors included:

- Peer relationships, with friendship groups acting as a strong source of encouragement.
- Active outreach by the school, ensuring the child does not feel forgotten or excluded.
- Continuity of care, signalling that the school remains invested in the child's wellbeing.

Parents framed connection not as an optional courtesy, but as a core intervention for restoring attendance.

4. The importance of their children's education

Parents expressed a very strong desire to access education for their children and to ensure that their children have learning opportunities at school. They want them to develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

5. Sensory supports and movement breaks

Parents identified sensory and movement breaks as being highly effective for children who struggle with attendance. They highlighted:

- The need for flexible, individualised regulation strategies.
- The importance of collaboration between parents and schools to tailor supports.
- The role of sensory breaks in preventing escalation and enabling children to remain in class.

These supports were viewed, by parents, as essential rather than supplementary, particularly for neuro-divergent students.

6. Flexible approaches to sensory overload and anxiety

Parents highlighted the potential value of practical accommodations that acknowledge sensory and emotional needs, where appropriate and feasible, including:

- Allowing the use of ear pods during periods of sensory overload, implemented respectfully and in line with school expectations.
- Exploring alternative activities or arrangements during events such as sports days, which can be distressing for some children.
- Considering flexible approaches to start times or morning transitions for children who find busy arrivals overwhelming, for instance a quiet room, breakfast club or board games before classes commence in a quieter location with peers.
- Providing opportunities for children to connect with a familiar staff member on arrival where possible, to support regulation and a positive start to the school day.

Parents recognised these coordinated approaches as contributing to children and young people's sense of belonging, helping them feel valued and connected within the school community.

7. Behaviour and attendance management

Parents expressed a clear preference for approaches that help maintain children's connection with school and support reintegration following periods of difficulty. They also strongly favoured in-school suspension over external suspension, viewing it as:

- More constructive.
- Less socially isolating.
- More likely to maintain a sense of belonging.

Parents strongly endorsed structured reintegration plans, such as:

- Soft returns.
- Starting the school day with preferred subjects.
- Gradual re-entry.

These approaches were seen as effective in reducing overwhelm and rebuilding confidence.

8. Transition supports

Parents valued the role of structured transition supports in helping children feel welcomed, connected, and confident as they move through different stages of education. Buddy systems were particularly highlighted as a practical and relational support, with parents describing them as:

- Emotionally supportive by providing reassurance and a familiar point of connection during periods of change.
- Helpful for navigating transitions, particularly where children may feel uncertain, anxious, or overwhelmed by new environments, routines, or expectations.
- A practical way to strengthen peer connection, encourage inclusion, and support children's sense of belonging within the school community.

Parents highlighted that positive peer relationships can play an important role in children's engagement with school and their overall wellbeing. They noted that having a trusted peer connection can help children feel more comfortable, included, and connected during key transition points.

However, parents noted a perceived inconsistency across schools, with some implementing strong and structured transition systems, while others appeared to have fewer formal approaches in place.

Parents suggested that regularly reviewing and updating friendship group information could help ensure that transition supports remain relevant and responsive to children's changing circumstances and relationships. These suggestions reflect the importance of proactive transition planning and ongoing communication between schools, children, and families to support continuity, belonging, and positive engagement throughout a child's educational journey.

9. Identification of needs, early intervention and support planning

Parents reported that obtaining a diagnosis (e.g., ASD, ADHD, anxiety-related conditions) enables:

- Earlier identification of needs.
- Access to student support plans (SSPs).
- Preventative approaches before difficulties escalate into school refusal or chronic absenteeism.
- A whole-school understanding of the child's needs.
- More coordinated and appropriate support.

Parents emphasised that early identification of needs and timely, coordinated support can reduce distress, strengthen engagement, and help prevent longer-term disengagement from school. A significant proportion of parents of children with additional needs also highlighted challenges in accessing timely psychological and therapeutic supports within community settings. Parents described experiences of waiting lists and delays in accessing services, which they felt could make it more difficult to provide early intervention and appropriate support at key points in their child's educational journey. These experiences highlight the importance of continued collaboration across education, health, and community services to support children and young people's wellbeing and participation in school.

10. Understanding the system

Parents expressed a desire for greater clarity and guidance regarding:

- Curriculum structures.
- Progression pathways.
- Future educational options.

They felt that workshops or information sessions would help parents and students develop a shared vision for the future, reducing anxiety and supporting motivation.

12. Advocacy

Parents highlighted the importance of having a supportive staff member, such as a HSCL coordinator or student support teacher, who could:

- Help the school understand the child's and family's needs.
- Navigate systems.
- Ensure concerns are heard.
- Coordinate supports.

A significant minority of parents in the sample had access to the HSCL scheme via their school. Many of these parents stated that they valued HSCL coordinators as trusted, approachable points of contact who helped to build positive relationships between home and school, maintained regular informal communication, and supported families in navigating challenges as they arose. Their ability to understand family circumstances, facilitate early intervention, and provide consistent encouragement was seen as strengthening children and young people's sense of belonging and supporting sustained engagement with school.

13. Parental Role

Parents acknowledged their own responsibilities, including:

- Setting boundaries at home.
- Ensuring school does not become the "less desirable option".

They recognised that home and school must work in partnership to support attendance.

14. Other Supports

Other supports mentioned included:

- Homework Clubs.
- Provision of curricular/short course(s) to meet the interests and needs of young people from the Traveller community.
- Appropriate physical activities for children during the school day, particularly for children whose space is restricted in the home.
- Transport to school.
- Supports for parents/carers while children are in school to allow opportunities for personal wellbeing and practical tasks.
- Supports with transitions from primary to post-primary.

Parents were asked to prioritise and rank order the factors that support them in ensuring their children attend school. These are the results.

Rank	Theme	Description of what it includes
1	School connection	Relationships with staff and peers; sense of belonging; daily connection; communication with school; positive interactions.
2	Atmosphere and culture of the school	Kind, responsive, safe, fun environment; happiness in school; supportive culture.
3	Support from key school personnel	For example, HSCL coordinator and SCP staff where available, advocacy, approachable staff, strong communication with parents, trust based relationships.
4	School practices	Reasonable accommodations to soften the return such as a quiet space in the morning, smaller meeting points for breakfast etc., reintegration supports, routines, homework clubs, consistent approaches.
5	Sensory and wellbeing supports	Sensory breaks, understanding overload, sensory/quiet spaces, wellbeing supports.
6	Peer relationships and extracurricular opportunities	Friendships, access to extracurricular activities.
7	Early intervention	Early interventions and supports, preventative approaches.
8	Understanding the system	Greater clarity around the workings of the education system in terms of progression pathways, future employment prospects.
9	Parental role and home expectations	Setting boundaries, supporting attendance, ensuring school remains a positive option.
10	Practical supports	Transport and other logistical supports that reduce barriers to attendance.

3.3 What makes it difficult or challenging for parents to send their child to school?

Overview

Parents across all focus groups described a wide range of pressures—emotional, structural, social, financial, and systemic—that make daily school attendance challenging. While these pressures vary in form and intensity, they share a common thread: they place families in situations where the demands of the school system collide with the realities of children’s and parents’ lives. This section synthesises these challenges under three analytical headings: why attendance becomes difficult, how these challenges manifest, and how parents themselves interpret and experience these pressures.

1. School system and academic pressure

Parents described the academic structure of the Irish school system as a major barrier to attendance, particularly when pressure is felt early and intensely. Some parents felt that the Transition Year at post-primary level offered a far more balanced and developmental model, providing a contrast to the earlier high-stakes environment.

Why it makes attendance difficult

- High-stakes assessment creates a stressful school atmosphere.
- Children fear letting teachers down, which increases avoidance.
- Academic pressure overshadows social and emotional needs, especially during transitions.
- Children who are not academic and who have skills in other areas feel undervalued, and this gives rise to low self-esteem and poor school attendance.
- Children sent home early or repeatedly disciplined feel targeted and unwelcome.
- Inaccurate attendance data - lack of mechanism for recording genuine psychological distress - leads to punitive responses.



How it manifests

- Standardised tests in primary school trigger anxiety; children often resist attending on test days.
- First year in post-primary is perceived as overly academic, with insufficient time for bonding and adjustment.
- Homework creates nightly conflict; incomplete homework leads to school avoidance.
- Parents struggle to support homework due to changing methodologies (Irish, Maths).

Parent perspectives

- Tests are “over-emphasised,” especially early in the morning.
- Children experience anticipatory anxiety before standardised tests.
- A weekly homework window was suggested to reduce pressure.
- Every school should offer the LCA.
- A shared vision of an alternative pathway would help keep students in the education system up to age 18 and beyond.
- Attendance data doesn’t reflect the reality.
- Some parents reported lack of follow-up from schools, and lack of meaningful interventions following family meetings.
- Parents reported not feeling valued by the schools.



2. Emotional and additional needs

Parents repeatedly identified a need for greater supports in the community and in schools for their children's emotional and psychological issues as challenges to attendance.

Why it makes attendance difficult

- Children with anxiety or neurodiversity often experience school as overwhelming, unpredictable, or unsafe.
- When supports are inconsistent, parents feel they are sending their child into an environment that cannot meet their needs.
- Lack of understanding of diagnoses among staff.

How it manifests

- Lack of emotional regulation supports, especially in post-primary.
- Information about a child not being passed on to teachers.
- Teacher-student personality clashes escalating into withdrawal.
- Children with ASD or ADHD not receiving appropriate accommodations.

Parent perspectives

- "One size does not fit all"—schools often expect children to adapt to rigid systems.
- Parents feel isolated, unsupported, and sometimes question whether school is the right environment.
- Repeating concerns and issues that are affecting their child can be exhausting in some schools where communication between staff is less than satisfactory. Parents reported that some staff may not be fully au fait with the child's SSP.
- Parents struggle with feelings of judgement and stigma.
- Difficulties accessing diagnoses, delays in receiving reports, challenges in obtaining appropriate supports.

3. Technology and online influences

Technology was described as both a comfort and a threat, creating a powerful pull away from school.

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Devices offer immediate stimulation and safety, making school feel less appealing. → Online content can normalise or encourage school avoidance. → Cyberbullying creates fear and social anxiety.
How it manifests	→ Exposure to influencers who mock school or promote avoidance. → Social media platforms-based bullying that continues outside school hours.
Parent perspectives	→ Monitoring device use is a “full time job”. → The addictive nature of technology competes with school engagement.

4. Bullying, including during transitions from primary to post-primary

Bullying, both in person and online, was identified as one of the most significant barriers to attendance.

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Children who feel unsafe socially will resist attending. → Transition to post-primary is a vulnerable period where peer groups shift dramatically. → Racism, derogatory language and social exclusion make school feel unsafe.
How it manifests	→ Children thriving in primary but struggling to fit into post-primary. → Children hide, refuse to get dressed, or feign illness. → Children from small rural schools entering large post-primary settings alone. → Being separated from familiar peers in first-year class allocations. → Inadequate yard supervision leading to unaddressed incidents.
Parent perspectives	→ By the time mood changes are noticed, the problem is often “too far advanced.” → More staff needed on the yard to prevent and respond to incidents.

5. Transitions from primary to post-primary school are stressful

Transitions from primary school to post-primary school are stressful for many children.

Why it makes attendance difficult

- Post-primary school is much more stressful than primary.
- Highly focused on performance and exams.
- Less personal due to larger school populations.

How it manifests

- Children struggle with increased workload and expectations.
- More difficult for teachers to identify struggling students.

Parent perspectives

- Some schools could manage the transition from primary to post-primary more effectively.
- Some children become disengaged during the transition from primary to post-primary.
- Greater investment and support needed at second-level, particularly for students from migrant backgrounds and those experiencing emotional or academic difficulties.
- Some felt that post-primary schools do not provide the same levels of care and nurture to their children as they received in primary schools.



6. Teaching and Learning practices not meeting modern needs

Parents felt that some of the traditional teaching methods used in schools are failing to engage today's "digital citizens."

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Passive, desk-based learning feels irrelevant compared to interactive digital environments.
How it manifests	→ Children find school disconnected from real life. → Limited opportunities for active learning or practical application. → Reduced student agency in learning.
Parent perspectives	→ More fun, practical, and movement-based learning is needed. → Children require stimulation that matches their lived experience. → More practical applications of learning to real-life scenarios e.g. Maths.

7. Children in care

All guardians and foster parents who participated shared concerns that some foster children and children in care may experience stigma, feel different from their peers, or worry about disclosing aspects of their personal circumstances within school settings. They described how these concerns can, in some cases, contribute to social isolation, reduced confidence, and lower levels of participation in both academic and extracurricular activities.

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Stigma around care status. → Insensitive classroom activities. → Administrative embarrassment - permissions signed by social workers. → Fear of disclosure. → Exclusionary practices. → Negative labelling. → Trauma can hinder concentration and academic performance.
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How it manifests

- Being singled out in class.
- Heightened vigilance.
- Social isolation.
- Reduced school days.
- Informal exclusion.
- Restricted participation.
- Children may feel “behind” educationally due to disrupted learning experiences.

Parent perspectives

- Recognition of systemic stigma.
- Concern about unfair labelling.
- Value of trauma-informed training.
- Desire for equitable treatment.
- Reduce academic pressures and place greater emphasis on life skills and emotional development.

8. Pressures on working parents

Logistical pressures make attendance difficult even when children are willing to go to school.

Why it makes attendance difficult

- Parents with multiple children in different schools struggle with staggered opening and closing times.
- Fatigue, stress, and the demands of managing large families reduce parents’ capacity to maintain consistent routines.

How it manifests

- Drop-off and pick-up times that do not align.
- Younger children finishing earlier than older siblings.
- Children miss school because parents cannot physically bring them.

Parent perspectives

- A coordinated timetable (e.g., infants staying until older siblings finish) would reduce stress.
- When a parent is sick, nobody gets to school.

9. Understanding the education system (migrant parents)

Migrant parents reported that they face unique barriers that directly affect attendance.

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Lack of clarity about progression pathways creates uncertainty and stress. → Children may be placed in inappropriate year groups due to system mismatch. → Prior learning from abroad not recognised.
How it manifests	→ Repeating content already mastered. → Parents needing to independently research the Irish system. → Difficulty navigating the points system and National Qualifications Framework. → Lack of access to school transport. → Financial pressures - uniforms etc.
Parent perspectives	→ "Neither the parent or the child understood the Irish system." → Lack of challenge leads to disengagement.

10. Weather, winter conditions and start times

Environmental and seasonal factors can make it challenging for parents to get their children to school.

Why it makes attendance difficult	→ Dark, wet mornings increase reluctance, especially for anxious or tired children. → Early start times are challenging for families with long commutes. → Some families live in remote/isolated areas, and bad weather can impact on transport.
How it manifests	→ Difficulty getting children up and out in winter. → Poor weather can make getting to school more difficult, especially for families walking with multiple children. → Some children cannot get to and from school during prolonged periods of bad weather.

Parent perspectives

- Parents suggesting fewer days per week in school or more flexible models.
- Later start times could improve attendance and wellbeing.

11. Social and financial pressures

The current situation with housing instability was cited by many parents as a challenge.

Why it makes attendance difficult

- Homelessness, overcrowding, and lack of space undermine routines, sleep, hygiene, and homework.
- Lack of washing/drying facilities leads to embarrassment and non-attendance.
- No uniform days - anxiety about clothing choices and peer judgement leads to non-attendance.
- School trips cause financial pressure, anxiety or lack of inclusion and discourage attendance.
- Transport difficulties are especially acute for families in emergency accommodation.

How it manifests

- Housing instability results in no clean uniform, no homework done and poor sleep.
- On no-uniform days, children stay at home to avoid judgement.
- Children avoid school on trip days.

Parent perspectives

- "We can't get from the hostel to the school."
- "We can't dry clothes in the accommodation."

12. Difficulties for children and young people

Parents reported that children may avoid school due to low self-esteem, fear of judgement or reputational harm, anxiety about returning after absence, the absence of friends, and feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

Why it makes attendance difficult

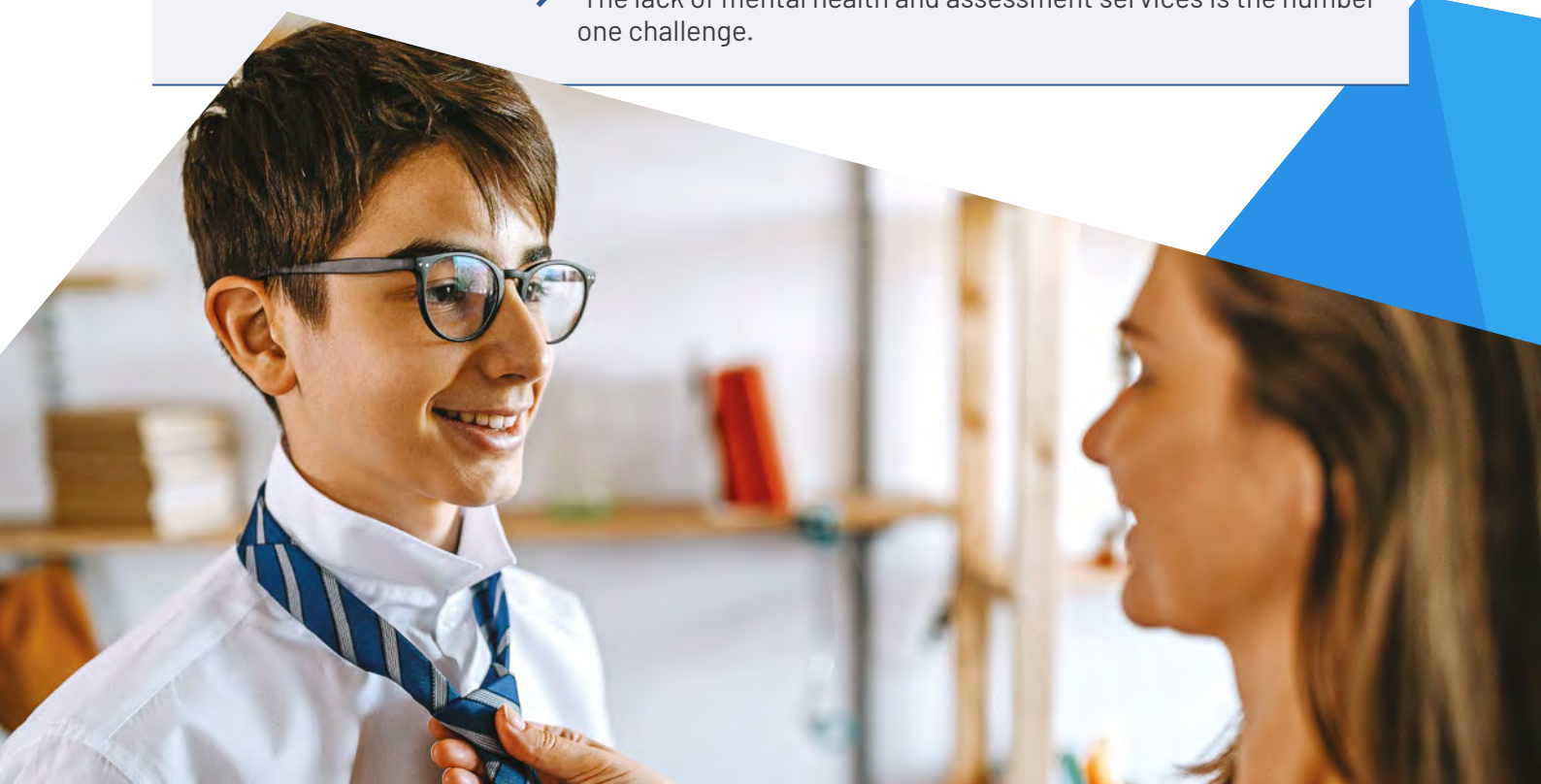
- Children's feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem leads to avoidance, shame, and fear of failure.
- Fear of social scandal - girls fear rumours or reputational harm, leading to school avoidance.
- Returning after prolonged absence - children fear judgement, academic gaps, and social reintegration.
- Children absent themselves from school when friends are absent to avoid isolation.
- Children experience social isolation and loneliness in school which reduces willingness to attend.

How it manifests

- Refusal, tears, stomach aches, or avoidance on days with challenging subjects.
- Recharge days - parents allow occasional absences to protect mental health.

Parent perspectives

- Morning assemblies can be overwhelming for some children when the whole school or class/year group are gathered together in the same space.
- The lack of mental health and assessment services is the number one challenge.



Parents were asked to rank order the factors that make it challenging for them to send their children to school. This is the result.

Rank	Theme	Description of what it includes
1	Health and wellbeing issues	→ Medical issues and illness. → Health/medical issues. → Lack of mental health services. → Illness in the family. → Emotional wellbeing. → Parenting challenges.
2	School inclusion / SEN / support needs	→ SEN/AEN. → Supporting children with special needs. → Need for support for inclusion and differentiation. → Need for therapeutic support. → Need for a reassuring adult. → Difficulties with homework.
3	Transport and access difficulties	→ Transport difficulties. → Weather conditions. → Different starting times.
4	Bullying, discrimination, and peer relationships	→ Friendships. → Bullying. → Racism/discrimination. → Discrimination from teachers.

5	School pressure and emotional stress	→ Exam pressure. → Feeling inadequate/not as good as others. → Returning to school anxiety. → Pressures within school.
6	School systems and transitions	→ System difficulties. → Transitions within the system. → Maintaining routine.
7	Financial and family pressures	→ Financial pressures. → Parental wellbeing.
8	School policies and participation issues	→ No uniform days. → School trips. → Pressures of purchasing specific school shoes/clothing.
9	Technology-related issues	→ Technology/social media concerns.

Conclusion

Overall, the factors that make it difficult for parents to send their children to school are complex, interconnected, and deeply rooted in both family circumstances and school systems. High academic pressure, particularly within a performance-focused education system, alongside emotional distress, unmet additional needs, bullying, and difficulties during key transitions, were seen as significant barriers to engagement. Parents also highlighted the impact of social challenges, including low self-esteem, isolation, stigma, fear of judgement, and the absence of friendships, which can undermine a child's sense of belonging in school. At the same time, technology, housing instability, logistical difficulties, environmental factors, and the unique challenges faced by migrant and foster families were identified as additional obstacles to regular attendance. Parents consistently emphasised the need for greater understanding and support, flexibility, and relational support, elements that, when present, can transform school from a site of stress into a place of safety and belonging.

3.4 If a child is absent from school for any period of time, how does their absenteeism affect (a) the child and (b) their family?

Overview

Parents were asked to reflect on how absenteeism affects both their children and their wider family life. Their responses highlighted that a child's absence from school often creates significant emotional and practical strain, even when the absence is due to genuine illness. Families described the pressure of managing disrupted routines, the worry about a child falling behind, and the stress of navigating school expectations during periods of absence. Parents also emphasised the importance of peer support, for both children and themselves, noting that strong friendships and supportive networks can make the return to school easier and help families feel less isolated during challenging periods.

(a) Impact on the child

- Parents consistently reported that each period of absence, whether due to illness, anxiety, or school breaks, weakens a child's connection to school, making it progressively harder for them to return.
- Socially, children feel friendships have moved on without them and worry they no longer "fit" into their peer group.
- Academically, they fear falling behind in classwork and losing continuity in learning, particularly in Mathematics.
- Children feel less prepared for exams.
- Children feel they miss out on aspects of their education such as Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).
- Relationally, they feel disconnected from teachers and the relationships that normally build over time.
- Even children with previously regular attendance experience anxiety after breaks, such as bank holidays or mid-term weeks.
- Returning after absence triggers apprehension and depression, with children fearing attention, questions, or judgement from peers and teachers.
- Parents noted that "when you are out of school, it is harder to go back", capturing the cumulative effect of disconnection.
- Children often express a strong sense of self-consciousness on return – "You don't want the eyes on you."

(b) Impact on families

- Parents reported that absenteeism disrupts family routines and impacts on siblings.
 - It places pressure on parents, especially mothers, and it is difficult to maintain employment when a child cannot attend school.
 - It places an extra financial burden on families with additional grinds and therapies often required which have to be privately funded.
 - It increases family stress and pressure on household relationships.
 - It negatively impacts on parental wellbeing and mental health.
 - It leads to increased workloads at home.
 - It can become a habitual cycle that becomes almost impossible to break.
 - It is hugely stressful in limited living spaces and limited play spaces.
- Parents experience significant stress when a child is absent, even when the absence is due to genuine illness.
- Parents experience a sense of helplessness.
- Families emphasised that they only keep children home when they are truly unwell, yet still feel pressure to justify absences.
- Some parents feel judged or criticised by the system, particularly when absences accumulate or when schools question their decisions.
- There is a fear of official consequences from the authorities, including the EWO.
- Parents expressed a desire for a more individualised, compassionate understanding of each child's circumstances rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Encouraging children to return after extended illness or holiday breaks is often difficult, as routines are disrupted and children may feel anxious about re-entry.
- School attendance initiatives were viewed positively, especially when they are supportive rather than punitive.
- Strong peer friendships help children reconnect and ease the transition back into school routines after time away.

3.5 Who or what helps children most to catch up when they miss a day or days from school (a) in the school (b) in the family (c) in the community?

Overview

Parents highlighted that when children miss school, whether due to illness, anxiety, or additional needs, effective catch-up requires sensitive, structured support rather than pressure. They noted that children often feel overwhelmed or disconnected on their return, and that gradual, confidence-building approaches work best. For families supporting children with additional needs, catching up is closely linked to wellbeing, diagnosis, and access to appropriate interventions, underscoring the importance of tailored, strengths-based approaches.

(a) What helps children to catch up in the school?

Role of school staff and school structures

Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)	→ HSCL identified as a key support in schools in the DEIS programme and for migrant parents.
Specialised support for children absent due to anxiety or with SEN	→ Parents suggested dedicated supports for children who miss significant time due to anxiety, ASD, depression, or other psychological needs.
Teacher-led catch-up or tutorial sessions	→ Parents suggested short, focused end-of-week sessions to review key concepts in core subjects (e.g., Maths, English). → Helps reduce overwhelm and rebuild confidence.
Greater flexibility in delivery modes	→ Parents suggested providing alternative or blended learning options to help children stay engaged while their needs are being supported.
Key role of SEN teachers	→ Parents recognised the support the SEN teachers can provide for their children to help them to keep up with class work.

Approaches that support reintegration

Parents offered their perspectives on how school staff might best support children who return to school following a prolonged absence from school. The parents expressed that reassurance was the key and that the approaches taken needed to avoid overwhelming the returning children.

Slow reintegration rather than overwhelming the child

- Parents stressed that catch-up works best when delivered in small, manageable steps.
- Avoid highlighting how much the child has missed; reassure them that they will catch up over time.

Reduce pressure of the points system

- Parents felt exam pressure and the points system make reintegration harder for young people who have missed time.

Play to the child's interests and strengths

- Parents suggested short, focused end-of-week sessions to review key concepts in core subjects (e.g., Maths, English). Using a child's passions (sport, music, practical skills) helps rebuild motivation and confidence.
- These sessions could be supported through school/ community programmes.

The use of technology

- Parents spoke of how their children use technology to catch-up with class work.

Supports for children with additional needs

Recognise ASD-related anxiety as a major attendance barrier

- Many parents awaiting or receiving ASD diagnoses.
- Anxiety often makes school attendance impossible at times.

Diagnosis improves access to interventions

- Parents with confirmed diagnoses felt better able to manage attendance due to targeted supports.

Parents prioritise wellbeing over attendance thresholds

- One parent noted: "The least of our worries is 20 days missed," highlighting that wellbeing takes precedence over EWS referral markers.

Trauma-informed training for teachers and school staff

- Providing safe spaces or designated staff when children become overwhelmed.
- Allowing children regulated 'breaks'.
- Creating individualised support strategies.
- Improved communications between schools and carers.

What supports in the family and in the community help the children catch up?

Family support with routines and emotional reassurance

- Parents help children manage the stress of returning after absence and rebuild their confidence gradually.

Managing homework expectations

- Homework can overwhelm children who are already exhausted or sensory-overloaded.
- Support at home helps prevent homework stress from becoming a barrier to attending the next day.

Extracurricular learning

- Many children engage well with online grinds, extracurricular classes, or community programme.
- These supports help maintain learning momentum even when school attendance is disrupted.

Peer support and friends

- Strong friendships help children feel less isolated and more confident about returning to school.

Family members

- Older family members/siblings help with schoolwork.

Community-based supports

- Support groups, psychologists and therapeutic support, multidisciplinary services, Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), home work support provided by migrant support services.

Other supports suggested by parents

Provide structured, personalised catch-up plans

→ Tailored supports for children who miss school due to anxiety or SEN.

Communication between the school and home is vital

→ Some parents stated that when their child was absent, they felt unsupported by the school.

Ensure access to hybrid or flexible learning options

→ Particularly for children with elevated anxiety or those awaiting assessment.

Use strengths-based and interest-led approaches

→ Helps rebuild engagement and reduces the emotional burden of catching up.

Make information accessible for parents

→ Some parents are unsure who to approach for support when their children miss school.

Twenty days

→ Notification texts are useful, but are also stressful for some parents.

HSCL

→ Parents in schools not in the DEIS programme would welcome the service and many had not been aware of it prior to the focus group discussions.

Parents' experiences show that family and community-based supports play a crucial role in helping children re-engage with learning when school attendance is disrupted. They highlighted that children often thrive in flexible, low-pressure environments, and many engage strongly with online learning, extracurricular classes, and community programmes when traditional school settings feel overwhelming. Parents' insights underline the need for a more joined-up approach between schools, families, and community services, one that recognises the diverse ways children learn and ensures that meaningful support is available wherever they are best able to access it.

3.6 If a child has difficulty attending school, what sort of things could the school do to help them to improve their attendance?

Overview

Schools play a central role in shaping whether children feel able and motivated to attend, and parents highlighted a range of practical steps that can make a meaningful difference. Guardians and foster parents emphasised the importance of school staff understanding the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences on children's emotional regulation, behaviour, and engagement with learning. They described how trusting relationships with teachers and consistent, compassionate responses helped children feel safe, understood, and more willing to attend school.

Participants highlighted the value of strong communication and partnership between schools and families to ensure that children's individual needs were recognised and supported.¹⁰ This suggests that strengthening understanding, supportive relationships, and emotional safety may help reduce barriers to attendance for children who have experienced adversity.

Parents also expressed a range of perspectives regarding teaching and learning, reflecting diverse views on how education could better support children's engagement, motivation, and sense of success. Some parents highlighted broader system-level issues, such as the perceived need to reduce the emphasis on examinations and academic outcomes by providing greater recognition of practical subjects, vocational pathways, and a wider range of skills and abilities. These views relate to wider educational structures and reforms that extend beyond the remit of individual schools, although parents' experiences highlight the importance of ensuring that children's diverse strengths and interests are valued within the education system.

Trusting relationships with teachers, and consistent, compassionate responses helped children feel safe, understood, and more willing to attend school.

¹⁰ These findings align with the NCSE Relate framework, which emphasises that positive relationships and emotional safety are fundamental to children's participation, wellbeing, and learning. By adopting trauma-informed, relationship-based approaches, schools can better understand behaviour as a form of communication, foster a sense of belonging, and create environments in which children feel secure enough to engage with education.



Build understanding, relationships and emotional safety

Parents suggested the following measures:

Understanding staff who know children well	→ Staff who understand children's personalities, needs, and triggers were seen as the single most important factor.
Consistent, supportive language across the school	→ Predictable, calm communication helps reduce anxiety and builds trust.
Therapeutic and trauma-informed supports	→ Ensures children experiencing overwhelm or dysregulation feel safe and understood.
Supports for emotional regulation	→ Practical strategies and spaces for children who struggle with anxiety or sensory overload.
Respectful interactions	→ Treating both the child and the parent with respect.

Reduce stress and overwhelm in the school environment

Make school less stressful and less frightening	→ Lower-pressure environments help children feel better able to attend. → Support schools to be more approachable and flexible.
Adapted, flexible and responsive learning environments	→ Particularly important for children experiencing overwhelm or anxiety.
Staggered arrival times	→ Reduces morning stress and sensory overload.
Make school more fun and engaging via multiple means of representation and expression	→ Enjoyable learning increases motivation to attend.

Strengthen support systems within the school

Wellbeing and counselling supports in schools

→ Accessible, confidential counselling without fear of external agency involvement.

Support ongoing teacher engagement with NCSE resources and professional learning to enhance inclusive educational practice

→ Helps staff understand anxiety, ASD, trauma, and dysregulation.

HSCL support available in all schools

→ Parents in schools not in the DEIS programme expressed strong interest in this role.

Schools providing continuity of support where access to external services is delayed or limited

→ Schools should be supported to implement flexible interim measures that help children remain engaged in learning while appropriate long-term community and other supports are arranged.



Promote agency, increase motivation and value all cultures

Encourage children's voices and choices	→ Ask children what would help them attend school, and offer them choices during the day.
Recognise children's agency and aspirations	→ Helps build a sense of belonging and ownership over their school experience.
Encourage and motivate	→ Children attend more consistently when they feel wanted and valued.
Increase the sense of belonging	→ Embracing and celebrating all cultures, backgrounds and abilities.
School culture	→ Be mindful of activities that isolate or expose children from vulnerable groups such as care-experienced or children from minority groups. → Reduce practices that single children out publicly. → Promote inclusion and emotional safety.

Review attendance drives and reward systems

Careful use of attendance rewards	→ Parents had mixed views: some found them motivating; others felt they increased peer pressure on children who were absent.
Avoid systems that shame or single out children	→ Ensure that attendance initiatives do not unintentionally increase anxiety.

Provide targeted support for children with additional needs

Strengthen therapeutic, ASD-informed, and anxiety-informed supports

- Essential for children whose attendance is affected by neurodiversity or mental health.

Expand access through exploring flexible learning models

- Parents stated that many children with ASD or anxiety engage very well with online learning.

Recognise the role of diagnosis in accessing specialist supports for children with complex additional needs

- Acknowledge that, in some cases, diagnosis can enable access to additional specialist wrap around support which makes attendance more manageable.

Further enhance coordinated planning to meet individual needs via the SSP process

- Continue to strengthen meaningful collaborative practice to include parents/carers, teachers and support personnel in planning supports for children with additional needs.
- Advance planning for emotionally difficult situations.

Trauma informed approaches for children and particularly children in care

- Strengthen targeted support for children with additional needs and those experiencing vulnerability.
- Tailored disciplinary approaches, and stronger emotional supports are sometimes required to help them feel less distressed and more secure and supported.

Teaching and learning

Reduce the emphasis on exams	→ Include more practical subjects.
More homework clubs	→ Parents feel disadvantaged when supporting literacy and numeracy homework. → Homework can become a source of stress when parents cannot assist. → After-school clubs could provide additional support.
The importance of career pathways	→ Meaningful, early guidance is important. → LCA programme should be available for all students.
Importance of relationships	→ Relationship of family with principal and HSCL coordinator is critical. → Teachers must be interested in all students. → Parents want schools to be places where their children will be minded, cared for and looked after.
Non-academic settling-in tasks	→ Not having Maths/Irish first thing every morning on the timetable.

These suggestions highlight the importance of continuing to support approaches that go beyond monitoring absences alone, building on the many ways in which schools already work to foster environments where children feel understood, supported, and motivated to attend. They emphasise the value of ensuring that all children have meaningful opportunities to experience success in their learning, and to have their diverse strengths, intelligences, and skills recognised and nurtured. Overall, these insights suggest a policy direction that places relationships, flexibility, and emotional safety at the centre of efforts to improve attendance.



3.7 What changes would most improve attendance and development for families like yours?

Overview

Parents identified a range of changes that they believe would make school attendance easier and more sustainable for children. These point to the need for a more supportive, flexible, and engaging school environment, where academic pressure is balanced with wellbeing, consistency, and positive daily experiences. They emphasised that improvements in areas such as school culture, together with stronger emotional and practical supports, and greater awareness of children's needs would have a significant impact on attendance improvements.

Reduce academic pressure

- Less focus on academics.
- Address exam pressure.
- Increase awareness, recognition and celebration of diverse pathways as alternatives or alternative routes to higher education.
- Promote a balanced approach that values emotional wellbeing as well as academic performance.

Academic preparedness

- Build on existing approaches to strengthen literacy and numeracy foundations in primary schools.
- Improve continuity between primary and post-primary Maths.
- Address feelings of inadequacy – children fear being labelled “stupid” when they struggle to understand.
- Need for a greater variety of teaching approaches – adapt and explain concepts differently and more clearly.
- Need for early identification of disengagement.



Continue to build a positive school culture, atmosphere and daily experience

- Continue to foster a positive and inclusive school culture.
- Include one fun thing every day.
- Reduce stressful practices like Friday test days.
- Further develop and embed wellbeing initiatives (e.g. Wellbeing Wednesdays).
- Continue to promote inclusive practices and respond effectively to racism and bullying.
- Foster a school environment that helps reduce perceptions of judgement and stigma.
- Strengthen communication and follow-through with parents.

Increase flexibility and reduce overwhelm

- Staggered punctuality or arrival times.
- Consider flexible approaches to punctuality and arrival times, recognising that a uniform approach may not meet the needs of every child.

Belonging and sense of identity

- Support children to feel accepted and valued in their ethnic identity.
- Foster school environments where children feel safe and confident expressing their ethnic identity.
- Promote inclusive school cultures in which children feel a sense of belonging regardless of their identity.
- Encourage mentoring-style teacher relationships which are key to engagement and attendance.
- Ensure that children feel safe and emotionally secure in their schools setting.

Transition to post-primary

- Improve communication and clarity of expectations.
- Reduce fear of authority around absence.
- Explore underlying reasons for absence.
- Intervene early when difficulties arise during transitions.

Practical supports and daily logistics

- Improve transport and reduce commute times.
- Support families in homeless accommodation.
- Parents need to know who to contact regarding attendance, what supports exist, and how to access them.
- Parents need transparency about timelines and processes.

Strengthen support structures

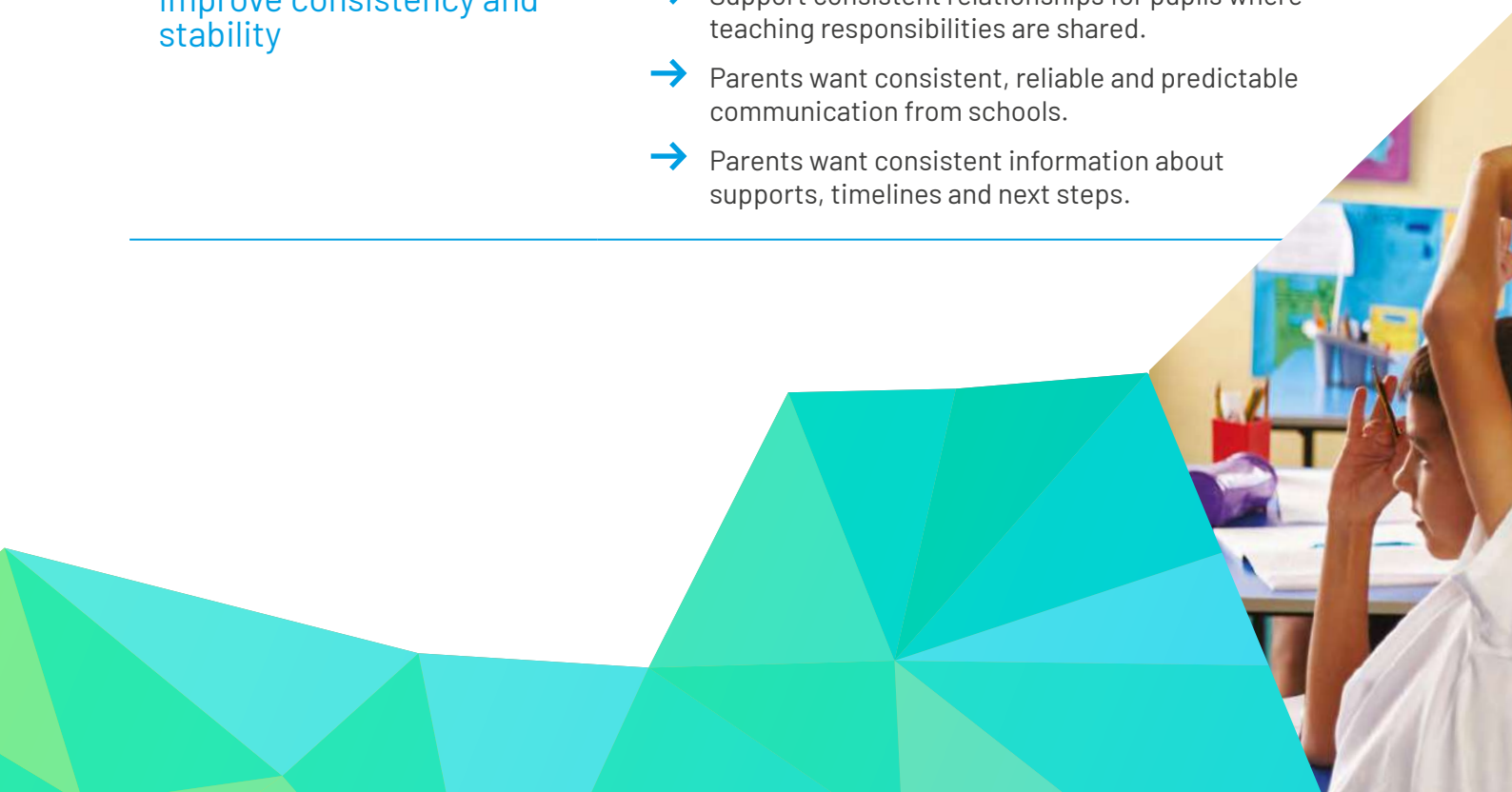
- More SNA support.
- Guidance counsellor support.
- HSCL service in every school.
- Better communication and awareness among teachers.
- Better communication between schools and parents.

Review behaviour and discipline approaches

- Reduce reliance on suspensions for challenging behaviours.
- Extend supportive, relational behaviour strategies.
- Automated attendance messages inadvertently add to stress where parents are already engaged collaboratively with the school.
- Trauma-informed practices are often required.

Improve consistency and stability

- Support consistent relationships for pupils where teaching responsibilities are shared.
- Parents want consistent, reliable and predictable communication from schools.
- Parents want consistent information about supports, timelines and next steps.



Overall, parents suggested that children's attendance may be influenced not only by academic demands, but also by their sense of belonging, identity, and emotional wellbeing at school. Many parents described primary schools as generally supportive and inclusive. Some parents felt that challenges emerged during the transition to post-primary, particularly where links between primary and post-primary schools were perceived to be less well established. For example, some suggested that children moving from smaller or more rural primary schools to larger urban post-primary settings could experience a less connected transition process, which they felt sometimes contributed to uncertainty for both parents and children, and to underlying difficulties not always being recognised at an early stage.

Parents also stressed the importance of strong academic foundations, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and called for better continuity between primary and post-primary learning. Practical supports such as better access to transport, shorter commutes, and targeted help for families in homeless accommodation were seen as essential to sustaining engagement. Across all groups, families expressed a clear desire for schools to continue to create environments where every child feels valued, understood, and able to succeed, regardless of background or circumstance.

“ *Children's attendance may be influenced not only by academic demands, but also by their sense of belonging, identity, and emotional wellbeing at school.* ”



4. A summary of parents' views on school attendance based on the focus group discussions

Parents expressed broad support for the principle of daily school attendance	→ Parents highlighted their support for daily school attendance in principle, citing routine, socialisation, and discipline as core benefits.
Parents' views on acceptable levels of absence varied considerably	→ Although most parents believe children should attend school regularly, a significant minority consider 5-10 days of absence acceptable, with smaller proportions accepting higher thresholds. ¹¹
Tension between policy and lived experience	→ While parents support school attendance, some highlighted that existing systems and approaches may require greater flexibility to fully respond to the diverse needs and circumstances of their children.
Emotional and psychological safety	→ Parents reported that for some children, school environments can be extremely challenging, suggesting a need for empathetic trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming practices.
Equity and inclusion	→ Parents' accounts pointed to possible disparities in how some schools respond to children with additional needs, underscoring the importance of ensuring that supports are both adequate and accessible.
Parental pressures	→ A small number of parents facing significant attendance challenges said they felt under considerable pressure and would benefit from greater support, understanding, and partnership from schools. - Some of these parents felt that school correspondence, particularly where it referred to legislative responsibilities under the Education (Welfare) Act, could appear formal, intimidating, or judgemental. - They emphasised the importance of communication that addresses attendance concerns while remaining supportive, collaborative, and sensitive to the wider circumstances affecting a child's ability to attend school regularly.

¹¹ Tusla Education Support Service and Department of Education and Youth concur that satisfactory attendance is 95% of the academic year or greater.



Homework is a significant pressure point

- According to parents, many children, particularly in primary and special classes, experience homework as stressful or overwhelming, indicating a mismatch between workload and developmental readiness.

Academic confidence strongly influences attendance

- Parents highlighted that children who feel academically behind, especially in literacy and numeracy, are more likely to avoid school.
 - Parents feel that many of their children struggle not because they lack ability, but because academic pressure, gaps in foundational skills, and inconsistent teaching approaches undermine their confidence and engagement.
 - Reducing pressure, strengthening core skills, and providing clearer, more responsive teaching were viewed by parents as essential to preventing disengagement and supporting regular attendance.
 - Gaps between primary and post-primary Maths were a recurring concern for parents.

Attendance is fundamentally about relationships

- Parents consistently emphasised that attendance improves when children feel known, understood, and supported by school staff.
 - Relationships with trusted adults matter more than systems or sanctions.
 - Children attend school more regularly when staff recognise their triggers, needs, and strengths.

Belonging and identity are central

- Parents indicated that a strong sense of belonging, cultural safety, and equal treatment is crucial, especially for children from minority ethnic backgrounds. They highlighted that:
 - Feeling safe in one's identity supports school engagement.
 - They felt that this sense of belonging is strong in primary school, but often weakens in post-primary.

Anxiety, overwhelm, and emotional safety are major drivers of absence

- Parents described attendance difficulties as deeply connected to anxiety, sensory overload, and emotional dysregulation.
 - Emotional safety is a prerequisite for school attendance.
 - Punitive responses (e.g., suspensions) often exacerbate the problem.

Transitions, especially to post-primary, are a pressure point

- Parents reported that the move to post-primary school brings new expectations, less personalised communication, and greater fear of authority.
- More transition support is essential to prevent disengagement.

Practical barriers matter more than schools often realise

- According to parents, transport difficulties, long commutes, and unstable housing and homelessness all reduce attendance.
- Practical supports are essential for families facing structural challenges.

Parents want partnership, not pressure

- Parents value schools that work with them.
- They felt that collaborative approaches improve attendance far more than monitoring or sanctions.
 - Parents want schools to explore why a child is absent, not simply to record that they are.

Flexibility and alternative pathways help children stay engaged

- Parents stated that many children, especially those with ASD or anxiety, engage well with hybrid, online, or low-demand learning.
- They felt that flexible learning options can prevent long-term disengagement.

Conclusion

The findings show that while parents are strongly committed to education and daily attendance, many feel that current systems do not adequately support children whose needs fall outside standard expectations. They highlight the importance of flexible, inclusive, and emotionally safe school environments, along with clearer communication and stronger recognition of children's individual needs and voices. Collectively, the evidence indicates that improving attendance requires a holistic, trauma informed approach that addresses educational, emotional, social, and structural factors affecting children and their families.

5. Considerations for schools and society

Parents shared a strong desire for an education system that places emotional safety, belonging and positive relationships at its core. Their perspectives highlighted the importance of relational, inclusive approaches that recognise the diverse needs of children and young people and support them to engage, learn and thrive.

Most parents highlighted the importance of emotional safety becoming a foundational element of education, reflecting the emphasis within NCSE guidance on relational approaches, understanding children's individual needs and creating inclusive environments where children and young people feel a sense of belonging. Parents identified the need for schools to continue developing supportive environments through access to quieter spaces, sensory supports, flexible routines and approaches that promote emotional regulation.

The majority of parents also emphasised the importance of codes of behaviour that are constructive, relational and focused on understanding the reasons behind behaviour and absenteeism rather than relying primarily on punitive responses. They highlighted the need for behaviour approaches that support connection, repair and skill development, while recognising that responses such as suspension or exclusion can, in some circumstances, increase distress for children with additional needs or those experiencing vulnerability.

Most parents expressed that pastoral care, counselling and wellbeing supports should be viewed as central components of educational provision, alongside early mental health supports within attendance approaches to prevent difficulties becoming more entrenched. These perspectives were particularly highlighted in relation to students with autism, students experiencing anxiety, children and young people with experiences of trauma, and those from marginalised groups. This aligns with NCSE guidance on relational practice, which emphasises the importance of understanding the child's perspective, building positive relationships and creating supportive conditions for learning, participation and inclusion.





5.1 For schools

Support for schools to further embed relationship-based approaches as a core element of effective educational practice, alongside approaches that promote engagement and positive outcomes

The findings suggest that attendance improves when children experience trust, connection, and emotional safety. This challenges schools that rely heavily on monitoring, sanctions, or punitive responses.

- Parents called for a change in education system priorities, placing greater value on relational approaches that foster trust, connection and belonging as central to children and young people's wellbeing, inclusion and learning.
- Staff training should include:
 - trauma-informed practice.
 - emotional regulation.
 - neurodiversity awareness.
 - culturally responsive teaching.
 - restorative approaches.

Success measures need to expand beyond attendance percentages to include belonging, wellbeing, and engagement

Parents highlighted the importance of broadening how success is understood, recognising that attendance is closely connected to children and young people's sense of belonging, wellbeing and engagement. They suggested that measures of progress should look beyond attendance percentages alone to consider the wider conditions that enable children to participate positively in education. This represents a shift from focusing solely on how to encourage attendance, towards understanding and addressing the factors that help children and young people feel safe, valued, connected and able to attend.

Emotional safety must become a foundational educational requirement

- Schools need quieter spaces, sensory supports, flexible routines, and emotional regulation supports.
- Behaviour policies may need redesign, especially where suspensions or exclusion intensify distress.
- Support the continued development and integration of pastoral care and counselling services as key components of a whole-school approach to wellbeing.
- Attendance interventions should include mental health supports early, before patterns become entrenched.

These are particularly important for students with autism, students with anxiety, students with histories of trauma and students from marginalised groups.

Transitions to post-primary education require greater support

The transition to post-primary emerges as a major vulnerability point.

Post-primary schools may need:

- Continuity of trusted adults.
- Improved phased transitions.
- Further bridging programmes between primary and post-primary.
- To continue to develop family communication approaches that prioritise meaningful dialogue, connection and partnership.

The findings suggest that many post-primary structures currently assume emotional independence earlier than many children can actually manage.

Inclusion must be understood as a lived experience, and must include the voices of all children on a continuous basis

Belonging, identity, safety, and equal treatment directly influence school attendance.

- Schools may need to further evaluate whether minority ethnic students, neuro-divergent students, students from the Traveller community, migrant students, and other marginalised groups genuinely feel represented and safe within their school environments.
- Diversity and inclusion efforts cannot remain symbolic or simply paper-based.
- Curriculum, staffing, disciplinary practices, and school culture all affect attendance indirectly.

The findings suggest that students disengage from systems in which they do not feel recognised.

Academic support and attendance are inseparable

Children avoiding school because they feel “behind” suggests attendance and attainment reinforce each other.

- Early literacy and numeracy interventions as part of an attendance strategy.
- Schools may need more rigorous diagnostic supports and further.

differentiated teaching to address children’s needs.

- The primary to post-primary Maths gap may require further alignment.
- Shame and fear of failure may need to be addressed explicitly.

The findings suggest that poor attendance is not necessarily the cause of poor attainment; low confidence and poor self-esteem contribute to absence first.

Explore the potential for more flexible educational pathways

A significant minority of parents highlighted the importance of considering how greater flexibility within education could support their children to engage and participate successfully. While recognising that current educational structures and resources may not always allow for a wide range of flexible options, parents identified the potential value of exploring approaches such as phased reintegration, flexible timetables, blended approaches and alternative pathways where appropriate.

The perspectives shared suggest that, for some students, particularly neurodivergent learners and those experiencing significant anxiety, engagement in learning may need to be considered alongside physical attendance, rather than measured by attendance alone. This reflects a broader conversation about how education can continue to adapt to meet diverse needs, while ensuring children and young people remain connected, supported and able to progress.

In order to support some students' attendance, their education may increasingly require:

- Blended learning.
- Part-time reintegration.
- Online options.
- Flexible timetables.
- Alternative pathways.

Building trust between schools and families is increasingly important

Parents consistently ask for partnership rather than pressure.

- Families are more likely to stay engaged when schools feel supportive, respectful and accessible.
- Collaborative, considerate communications tend to produce better outcomes than surveillance-based approaches.
- Relationships benefit from demonstrating responsiveness and empathy.

5.2 For society

Schools cannot solve attendance by themselves

Parents highlighted that attendance is shaped by a range of factors, many of which are beyond the school environment, reflecting wider socioeconomic and community circumstances. A small number of parents described experiencing complex circumstances, including homelessness, delays in accessing school transport, and lengthy waiting lists for children's mental health services. They stressed that these factors had a significant effect on their child's wellbeing and contributed to difficulties in maintaining regular school attendance.

This perspective aligns with national policy approaches that recognise the importance of collaboration across education, health, social care, housing and community services in addressing barriers to participation and inclusion.

While schools play a critical role in supporting engagement, parents emphasised the value of a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach to ensure children and young people receive the right supports at the right time.



The findings suggest that education systems need to further coordinate with:

- Housing services.
- Social care.
- Transport systems.
- Mental health services.
- Community organisations.

The need for a wider national conversation about how society supports children and young people, and how we measure success and value in our schooling system

Parents felt that the following were impacting adversely their children.

- Academic competition and the points system.
- Technology.
- Reduced community connection.
- Social inequality and the cost of living.
- Mental health strain and waiting lists for community-based supports.

Inequality becomes reproduced through attendance patterns

A significant number of parents spoke about how attendance patterns can be influenced by a range of social and economic factors. Barriers such as financial pressures, housing instability, transport challenges and differences in access to supports may affect some children and young people's ability to attend and engage consistently with education. These factors can contribute to differences in educational experiences and outcomes for some groups of learners.

Research indicates that sustained absence from education can be associated with a range of longer-term outcomes, including reduced attainment, fewer qualifications and impacts on wellbeing and future opportunities. The findings highlight the importance of considering school attendance within the wider context of inclusion, equity and the social factors that influence children and young people's participation in education.

A significant minority of parents who were associated with urban DEIS schools commended the programmes that were on offer to themselves and their children via the HSCL scheme and the School Completion Programme. However, this was not available to all parents in the sample.



6. Recommendations

The findings from the consultations highlight several practical actions that schools can implement to support and improve student attendance.

Adopt trauma-informed and neuro-diversity affirming practices	→ Ensure all schools embed approaches that prioritise emotional and psychological safety, particularly for children with trauma histories, anxiety, or neuro-divergent profiles.
Make consistent use of existing resources to enhance the visibility and recognition of Traveller and Roma cultures across the curriculum.	→ Ensure all schools are familiar with, and make use of the resources available to enhance the visibility and recognition of Traveller and Roma cultures across the curriculum. (See Appendix 1).
Analyse attendance patterns and attendance percentages	→ Implement a more consistent monitoring and responsive approach to attendance, with early identification of emerging concerns, and meaningful engagement with children and families to understand the factors influencing attendance. ¹²
Shift attendance messaging from compliance to support	→ Replace punitive or automated messaging with relational, strengths based communication that encourages families to seek help early.
Strengthen equity and inclusion measures	→ Build on strong practice already evident in many schools by supporting consistency in how schools respond to children with additional needs, recognising existing good practice while supporting all children to access appropriate supports and inclusive, culturally responsive environments.

¹² This is in line with the TESS Anseo framework and a Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Support (MDMTSS) approach. Schools can continue to use attendance data proactively to identify patterns, understand emerging needs and respond with appropriate levels of support. Regular monitoring of attendance patterns and percentages can help identify students who may be experiencing barriers to attendance, while collaboration with students and families supports a deeper understanding of individual circumstances and informs timely, targeted and proportionate interventions.



Improve trust and communication between schools and families	→ Support and strengthen communication approaches to create more timely and responsive communication with parents so parents know who to contact, what supports exist, and how to access them. Continue to use translation tools to communicate with families where a language other than English is spoken at home.
Reduce academic pressure and build confidence	→ Prioritise emotional wellbeing over performance, reduce exam driven pressure, and provide responsive teaching that rebuilds confidence in literacy, numeracy, and core skills.
Strengthen academic preparedness	→ Improve continuity between primary and post primary curricula (especially Maths), identify disengagement early, and adapt teaching approaches to prevent students feeling “left behind.”
Improve relationships	→ Ensure every child has access to trusted adults who understand their triggers, needs, and strengths; embed mentoring style relationships as part of school culture.
Improve responses to anxiety and overwhelm	→ Provide targeted supports for anxiety, sensory overload, and emotional dysregulation; avoid punitive responses that escalate distress.
Strengthen transition supports for children and parents	→ Build on existing transition supports by promoting early, collaborative planning between primary and post-primary schools for children who may require additional support during the transition process. Continue to expand access to evidence-informed initiatives, such as My Child, My Vision through the HSCL scheme, to support parents in navigating school transfer and promoting their child’s successful progression in education. ¹³
Strengthen and sustain home-school partnerships	→ Recognise and build on the considerable work already undertaken by schools to engage with families by continuing to promote collaborative, solution-focused approaches that seek to understand and address the factors influencing attendance, alongside meeting statutory attendance recording requirements.

¹³ It is worth noting that the HSCL scheme has now expanded into a number of non-DEIS schools in rural and urban locations under the DEIS Strategy 2026-2035 on a pilot basis.

Strengthen flexible approaches to learning and participation

- Support schools to provide flexible, individualised approaches to learning and participation, where appropriate, for children whose additional needs, anxiety or other circumstances present barriers to regular attendance. This may include adapting how learning is accessed and delivered on a temporary basis, with the aim of maintaining engagement with education and supporting a planned return to full participation where possible.

Colour-coding system in school software

- Adopt a colour-coded system within attendance monitoring software platforms to alert teachers that a student is:
- Currently being supported for attendance difficulties.
 - In need of additional understanding regarding homework or absences.
 - Currently being supported a part of a coordinated reintegration plan following a period of absence.

Review homework policies and procedures

- Examine homework policies to ensure that they encourage attendance by removing anxiety and frustration, and that they focus on flexibility, positive reinforcement and collaborative support between teachers, students and parents to keep learners engaged.

Address practical barriers

- Provide information on school transport schemes, and ensure attendance policies are sensitive to the needs of children in situations of housing instability and homelessness.

Appendix 1: Some useful resources

- Department of Children, Disability and Equality (2022), Supporting parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/supporting-parents-a-national-model-of-parenting-support-services/>
- Department of Education and Youth (2021), Intercultural education strategy. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/intercultural-education-strategy/>
- Department of Education and Youth. Inclusive education. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/inclusive-education/>
- Department of Education and Youth (2024), Traveller and Roma education strategy 2024–2030. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/>
- Health Service Executive. Knowing if your child is well enough to go to school or childcare. <https://www2.hse.ie/babies-children/parenting-advice/caring-for-a-child/knowning-if-your-child-is-well-enough-to-go-to-school-or-childcare/>
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005), Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Enabling children to respect and celebrate diversity, to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination. https://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/236745b0-a222-4b2a-80b1-42db0a3c7e4c/Intercultural-Education-in-Primary-School_Guidelines.pdf
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2019), Traveller culture and history in the curriculum: A curriculum audit. https://ncca.ie/media/4324/ncca_draftaudit_travellerculturehistory_0919.pdf
- National Council for Special Education (2025), NCSE Relate: A regulation-first approach to reframing behaviour and supporting student engagement and participation. <https://www.ncse.ie/school-leaders/resources-for-school-leaders/relate/>
- National Educational Psychological Service. Supporting your child when they are reluctant to attend school: Guidance for parents and guardians of primary school children. <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/6101bb81-supporting-your-child-when-they-are-reluctant-to-attend-school-guidance-for-p.pdf>
- National Parents Council (2019), Parental involvement, engagement and partnership in their children's education during the primary school years. <https://www.mie.ie/media/5k0da2u1/july-2021-final-version-of-report-inc-exec-summary.pdf>
- Department of Children, Disability and Equality (2026), Parent consultation guidelines: A step-by-step guide for consultations with parents. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/parent-consultation-guidelines-a-step-by-step-guide-for-consultations-with-parents/>
- STAR Initiatives. Resources for working with Traveller and Roma children and families. <https://padlet.com/janetcolgan/star-initiatives-21arwhk4zk9s4z7b>
- Tusla Education Support Service (2019), My child, my vision: Supporting parents in the transition from primary to post-primary school. https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/My_Child_My_Vision_Second_Edition_2019.pdf
- Tusla Education Support Service. Five-Year Plan for School Attendance (2023–2028). https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/TESS_5_Year_Plan_for_School_Attendance_2023-2028.pdf
- Tusla Education Support Service. National school attendance campaign. <https://www.tusla.ie/tess/national-school-attendance-campaign/>
- Tusla Education Support Service. Statement of strategy for school attendance: Guidelines for schools. <https://www.tusla.ie/tess/tess-ews/statement-of-strategy-for-school-attendance/>

Appendix 2: The pro forma administered to participants



Seirbhís Tacáíochta
Oideachais Tusla
Tusla Education Support Service

Parent Focus Group – Background Information Proforma Survey

1. What is your relationship to the school-going child(ren) in your care?

- a) ☐ Mother
- b) ☐ Father
- c) ☐ Guardian
- d) ☐ Foster Parent
- e) ☐ Other (please specify)
- f) ☐ Rather not answer

2. Which best describes your ethnic or cultural background?

- a) ☐ Irish
- b) ☐ Irish Traveller
- c) ☐ Roma
- d) ☐ Other (please specify)
- e) ☐ Rather not answer

3. Is your child's school a DEIS school?

- a) ☐ Yes
- b) ☐ No
- c) ☐ I don't know

4. What type of school does your child attend?

- a) ☐ Primary school
- b) ☐ Post-primary school
- c) ☐ Special school
- d) ☐ Special class within a mainstream school
- e) ☐ Alternative education setting
(Youthreach, Training Centre, iScoil etc.)
- f) ☐ Other (please specify)
- g) ☐ Rather not answer

5. Which best describes your household?

- a) ☐ One-parent household
- b) ☐ Two-parent/guardian household
- c) ☐ Other (please specify)
- d) ☐ Rather not answer

6. Has your child experienced any of the following in the past two years? (tick all that apply)

- a) ☐ Frequent absences
- b) ☐ School avoidance or anxiety related to attendance
- c) ☐ Reduced day or flexible timetable
- d) ☐ Suspension
- e) ☐ Extended period out of school
- f) ☐ Expulsion
- g) ☐ None of the above
- h) ☐ Rather not answer

Appendix 3: Survey administered to participants



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Tusla Education Support Service

Section 1: [15 mins]- If you have more than one child, please think of one of them in particular when answering the following questions.

1. In your opinion is regular school attendance important for your child's development?

- a) ☐ Yes
- b) ☐ No
- c) ☐ Not sure

2. Thinking of your child and your circumstances what in your opinion is an acceptable level of absenteeism per school year?

- a) ☐ less than 5 days
- b) ☐ 5 to 10 days
- c) ☐ 10 to 15 days
- d) ☐ 15 to 20 days
- e) ☐ 20 to 30 days
- f) ☐ More than 30 days

3. Have there been times when your child has struggled to attend school regularly?

- a) ☐ Yes
- b) ☐ No

4. How does your child feel about homework?

- a) ☐ Enjoys it
- b) ☐ Neutral
- c) ☐ Dislikes it
- d) ☐ Finds it stressful

5. Why do you think your child feels this way about homework?

6. Do you feel that your child is engaged in his/her schoolwork and activities

- a) ☐ Very engaged
- b) ☐ Somewhat engaged
- c) ☐ Not very engaged
- d) ☐ Disengaged

7. Is it easy for you to connect with your child's school?

- a) ☐ Very easy
- b) ☐ Somewhat easy
- c) ☐ Not very easy
- d) ☐ Difficult



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