



# School Attendance Enablers & Barriers

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**AIM:** To determine the enablers and barriers to school attendance using youth voice data collected via *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey app*.

## KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

- Seeing friends, learning, and fulfilling parent expectations, motivate young people to attend school.
- Most rangatahi felt happy about school, but think the education system does not work for everyone.
- Some young people found it hard to go to school and were more likely to report peer problems and feeling stressed, worried, and overwhelmed.

## What do we know?

Young people growing up in Aotearoa are going to school less now than in the past decade<sup>1</sup>. Although absenteeism is a worldwide issue<sup>2</sup>, Aotearoa's rates of attendance appear to have had a steeper decline over the past decade compared with Australia and the United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. However, school attendance is a complex issue<sup>3</sup>, determined by a range of factors both directly and indirectly related to the student.

## What can we learn?

Preventing absenteeism is important, but a key voice is often missing from the discussion of enablers and barriers to school attendance. Youth perspective provides essential insights for developing educational legislation and policy that works<sup>4</sup>, yet research about barriers to school attendance often includes parents or educators. Hearing directly from those most affected by non-attendance - the young people themselves - about their experiences of school, can help to inform policy that more specifically addresses the issue.

**ABOUT OUR VOICES** The Our Voices project aims to better understand the diverse and complex journey our young people experience growing up in Aotearoa to inform policy and services targeted to supporting their wellbeing. *Tō Mātou Rerenga - Our Journey* is an app co-designed with young people to share their lived experiences and resulted in the collection of rich qualitative multi-modal information from almost 1,000 13-year-olds participating in the *Growing Up in New Zealand* longitudinal study. The collaborative research programme uses innovative research methods and policy partnerships to help shape the future for generations to come. The project was funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment and involves a multidisciplinary team of national and international experts. For more information visit <https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/>.

# WHAT MOTIVATES YOUNG PEOPLE TO ATTEND SCHOOL?

Young people reflected on a range of factors that motivated them to attend school in Aotearoa. Many reported motivators related to experiences outside of learning and achievement, with responses generally falling into three overarching themes: friendship, obligation, and future-preparedness.

## Friendship

One of the primary reasons young people attended school was to spend time with friends. School was described as an important place for building relationships with peers, which contributed to young people's enjoyment of school. However, when friendships were not going well, they presented a barrier to attendance.

## Obligation


Young people felt a sense of obligation to attend school. This sense of obligation was often discussed in relation to making parents proud and fulfilling their expectations of the young person. Expectations were also discussed more widely in terms of conforming to social norms and systems. For example, young people talked about school attendance being compulsory and imposed by the government.

## Future-Preparedness

Rather than discussing learning and achievement as an end goal, young people often saw the function of their education as a way to prepare for the future. Some young people talked about working towards specific goals, like having a professional career. However, most reflected on the desire to have a good future more generally, demonstrating that young people believe school is the best way to enable good life outcomes.

Relationships are critical as school is more than reading and writing.

*"Friends are probably my main reason for going to school because I couldn't do it without support and their positive energy."*



*"I only like school because of my friends but not the classes."*

*"I don't really like my school because I haven't found my good friends yet."*


Meeting the expectations of parents, social norms and beyond.

*"I don't get a choice."*

*"My parents and dreams in life as well as my ancestor's life dreams."*



School, and the education we receive, helps us prepare for our future.



*"School is where I learn to help me look ahead to my future for a job. You need to write, read, spell."*

*"I attend to have a good future."*



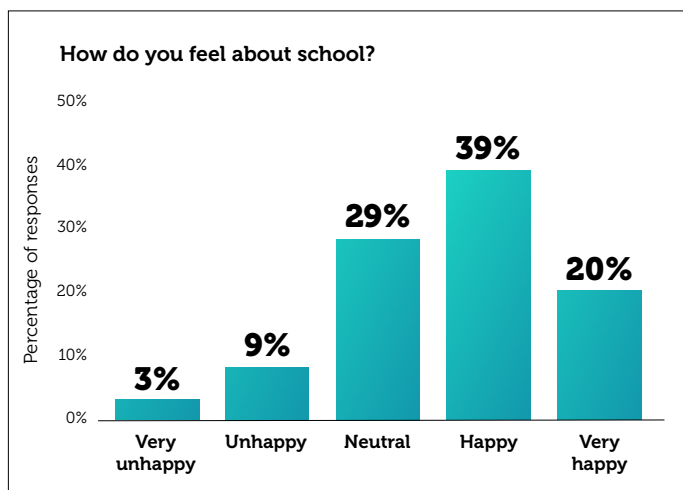
## How do young people feel about school?

Most young people felt positively towards school. This was significant given that these respondents were about to or had just transitioned to high school which can be both a time of challenge and opportunity. Young people valued learning and recognised its importance, but also noted that school was not working for everyone.

**The current school system is: outdated, rigid and overly focused on conformity.**

"It turns people into clones of each other."

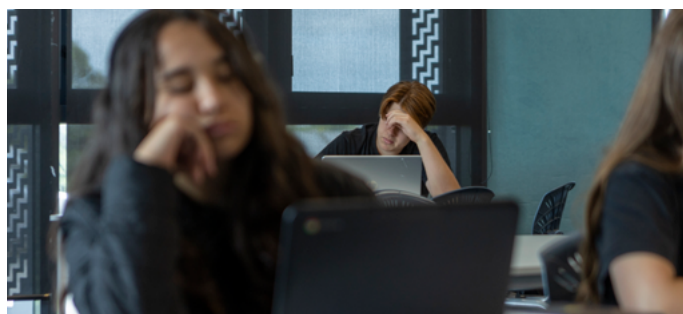
"I only question if the system we have still works."



**Some young people described it as: boring, stressful, repetitive, irrelevant, and unenjoyable.**

"Learning is fun but school sucks."

"I think that there are very big changes that need to be made in order to create a better system and environment for people to learn."



## What makes it difficult for young people to attend school?

Young people identified a range of factors that make it difficult to go to school which were grouped into nine categories. The four most commonly reported categories reflected challenges experienced by young people both within and outside of school.

### **Sleep, Fatigue and Routine Challenges**

encompasses challenges at home, relating to feeling tired and having trouble with waking up and getting out of bed, in addition to challenges at school, like managing long days, feeling fatigued, and balancing time commitments.

"Long day, I'm tired."



Challenges related to **School Curriculum and Workload** include assessments and anxiety, school subjects, and schoolwork being too hard or too easy. This mismatch in level of schoolwork and student ability sometimes led to boredom.

"It's hard when I have a lot of work and assignments."



### **Peer Conflict and Lack of Social Connection**

describes the challenges of navigating 'problems' or 'drama' with friends, or having no friends at all. Both sets of circumstances could lead to experiences of bullying.

"I'm worried that someone will say something mean to me or my friends will leave me out."



### **Challenges related to Lack of Engagement and Motivation**

include feeling unmotivated, disengaged, or disinterested in school. Young people acknowledged, however, that their levels of motivation could change over time and is likely influenced by numerous factors.

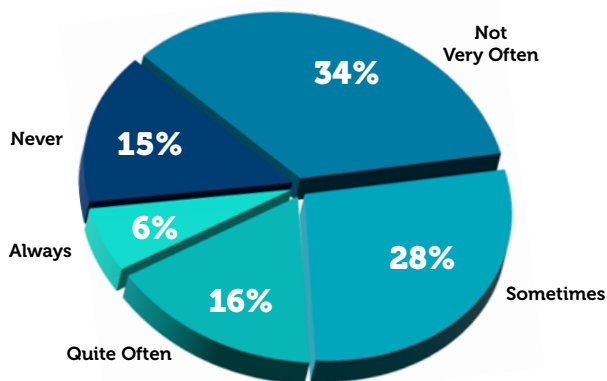
"I don't like some subjects and it's long and boring sometimes."



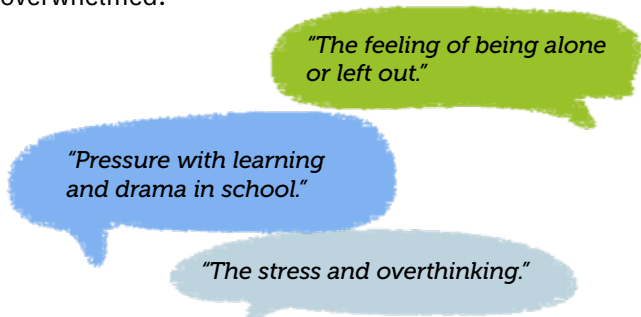
## Do young people who find it more difficult to attend school face different challenges than young people who find it less difficult?

Approximately one-quarter of rangatahi reported they found it 'quite often' or 'always' difficult to attend. Surprisingly, the types of challenges reported were similar regardless of the level of difficulty experienced. Instead, the frequency and intensity differed.

Do you ever find it hard to go to school?

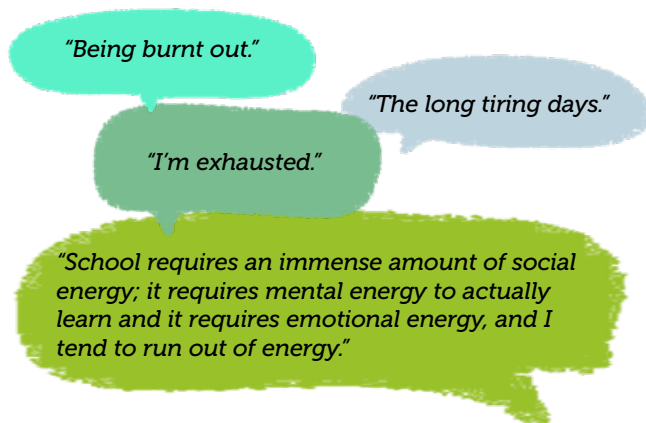


Young people who found it difficult to go to school were more likely to report peer problems and emotional or psychological barriers such as stress, worry, or feeling overwhelmed.



## Sleep, fatigue, and routine challenges were the most commonly reported difficulty.

Young people who found it hard to go to school tended to describe their challenges with greater intensity.



Young people who found it less difficult referred to situational or temporary reasons, such as not wanting to wake up early.



## CONCLUSION

Attendance data alone offers an incomplete picture of the factors that influence school attendance. Our findings highlight that young people bring a unique perspective to understanding enablers and barriers—perspectives that often diverge from those of parents, educators and policymakers. Including young people in conversations about educational policies and practices is essential.

Young people have clear views on what should be done to motivate them, stating that they are more motivated to attend school when they are less tired and stressed and have positive relationships with their friends and teachers, and when they are taught content where the importance for their future is clear and aligns with their aspirations.

Our findings suggest that in addition to more external factors such as individual and family circumstances, efforts to improve school attendance should include a focus on internal factors within the education system itself. This could include consideration of how to ensure the relevance of the curriculum is made explicit and consideration of the structure of the day, as well as fostering school environments that support, inspire, and help young people to build meaningful connections with each other, their teachers, and their learning.



## APPENDIX

### App questions used:

How do you feel about school?  
 What makes you feel like this?  
 What motivates you to attend school?  
 Do you ever find it hard to go to school?  
 What can make it hard to go to school?



**Method of data analysis:** Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data<sup>5,6</sup>. Researchers developed themes that represented patterns of meaning that centred on a key idea or concept. A theme offered a rich description of the experiences or perspectives shared by participants. Braun and Clarke<sup>5</sup> outline a six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis but note that this type of research is iterative in nature.

A key component of reflexive thematic analysis is that the researcher is valued as an important and integrated part of the research process. This means that different researchers may develop different themes and reflects the complexity and richness of both researchers' and participants' lived realities.

Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative (text) data<sup>7</sup>. Researchers developed categories that were used to summarise the content. These categories were often based on how often codes were present in the dataset. Content analysis uses a structured approach in which a codebook is developed based on consensus between researchers. This allows multiple coders to apply codes to data in a systematic way and reduce researcher bias.

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This report is part of the *Our Voices Summer Snapshot Series*. These reports focus on youth understandings and lived experiences of wellbeing in Aotearoa, including school experiences and social support.

Visit <https://ourvoices.auckland.ac.nz/> for more information or contact us at [ourvoices@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:ourvoices@auckland.ac.nz).

### References:

- <sup>1</sup> Education Review Office. (2023). *Attendance: Getting back to school* (Publication No. 978-1-99-103056-6). New Zealand Government.
- <sup>2</sup> Newton, K. (2024, May 21). *The scariest driver of school non-attendance: More parents who just don't care*. RNZ.
- <sup>3</sup> Richards, A., & Clark-Howard, K. (2023). *What are the reasons for absenteeism in secondary education in New Zealand/Aotearoa? A systematic review of the qualitative literature using student voice research*. *Kairaranga*, 24(2), 73-94.
- <sup>4</sup> Anderson, D. L., & Graham, A. P. (2016). *Improving student wellbeing: Having a say at school*. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 27(3), 348-366.
- <sup>5</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- <sup>6</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis*. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3-26.
- <sup>7</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? *Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches*. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37-47.

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