What promotes school attendance? Parents' and students' perspective

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School attendance problems in Finnish basic education

- The problem of school absenteeism has received considerable attention recently.
  - School attendance problems (SAP) in compulsory education appear to be increasing in Finland.
- The school is an important arena for development, both socially and academically.
  - Students who struggle to participate in daily school activities are at risk of marginalization.

- The reasons for absenteeism are wide-ranging:
  - illness, mental health problems, problems at home and social problems at school
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to absenteeism

- The number of learners whose absenteeism clearly affects their learning is estimated to be over 4,000 in lower-secondary schools in Finland.
  - approximately 2–3% of students from grades 7-9 (Määttä et al. 2020)
The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre evaluated practices related to preventing and intervening in school absences in grades 5–9 of basic education in 2021–2022.

- The evaluation is part of the development of national engaging school community work for 2021–2023, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture.
  - The essential goal of the program is to produce a national model for tackling SAP preventive actions at school level.
  - The national model will be prepared based on local pilots.
- The evaluation was carried out using an enhancement-led evaluation framework.
- The aim of the evaluation was to produce information to support the drafting of a national model for engaging school community work while supporting local development work at the same time.
- The focus was on administrative and structural solutions that enable engaging school community work and promote intervening in absences, and practices and pedagogical solutions that support school engagement and prevent absences as well as operating methods for intervening in absences.
Theoretical framework

School engagement
Relationship between a school and a student

Emotional  Cognitive  Behavioral

Appleton et al. 2006; Fredricks et al. 2004

A Change in the Frame: From Absenteeism to Attendance
Carolyn Gentle-Genitty, James Taylor, Corinne Renguette
Front. Educ., 21 January 2020
https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00161
Principle of enhancement-led evaluation

- **Goal-orientation and futures consciousness**
  - Making the current state and trends visible
  - Continuous improvement
  - Future-oriented approach

- **Participatory and interactive approach**
  - Trust
  - Participation
  - Cooperation

- **Tailored methods**
  - Appropriateness
  - Multi-method approach
  - Flexible approach to methods

- **Supporting change**
  - Evaluation as a learning process
  - Information from feedback: strengths, best practices and recommendations
  - Monitoring of enhancement work and change
Rather than just a method, enhancement-led evaluation is about underlying values: participation, trust and appreciation of the evaluation participants.
Practices for intervening in absences vary between education providers

- According to the evaluation results, education providers mainly use a written action plan for monitoring and intervening in absences.
- The thresholds for intervening in absences defined in action plans vary greatly between education providers and schools, indicating a need to harmonise practices at national level.
- A large variation within the number of hours for intervening in absences also illustrates that different actors have different interpretations of when the absence is a cause of concern or problematic.
- Monitoring and collecting statistics on absences is hampered by a lack of uniform practices and operating methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treshold for intervening (hours missed)</th>
<th>The lowest value</th>
<th>The maximum value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early interventions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted interventions</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive interventions</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The evaluation data

- The evaluation data was collected during the school year 2021–2022 with surveys directed at several different actors.
- In addition, material was collected from school staff, pupils and guardians with school visits, interviews and workshops.
- A sample was selected from the schools involved in the development of engaging school community work, and these schools carried out a self-assessment in a group consisting of management representatives, teachers and other persons working on the theme under evaluation.
  - Responses to the school management and staff self-assessment were received from 132 schools with a response rate of 56%.
- A survey was directed to guardians of students from grades 5-9
  - A total of 3615 responses were received from guardians from 135 schools.
  - 87 % respondents were women, 11 men, 2 % other
According to the views of the school staff, theme and grouping days are important in promoting community.

Engaging school community work, survey to school personnel, n = 132.

The perceptions of the school staff on the best practices that promote community (%):

- Theme days: 51%
- Separate group building days: 51%
- Separate group building lessons: 40%
- Trips and excursions: 36%
- Pedagogical solutions that promote community: 36%
- Break activities: 31%
- Project works and weeks: 25%
- Common events for pupils and their parents: 16%
- Other: 6%
In the guardians' views of the factors promoting and hindering well-being at school, good teacher-student and peer relations and feeling safety were emphasized.

### Parents perceptions of factors that promote well-being at school (n = 3607)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher(s)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling safe at school</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate support for learning</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfy learning environment and school yard</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break activities</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular school subject</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active school day</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special theme days and activities at school</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School lunch</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other school personnel</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muu</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Parents perceptions of factors that prevent well-being at school (n = 1765)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with learning</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loneliness</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with peer relations</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particular school subject</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling unsafe at school</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactivity during school days</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient support for learning</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School lunch</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Break activities</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other school personnel</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special theme days and activities at school</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey for parents of grades 5-9 pupils, n = 1765 - 3607
Many guardians worry about their own child's school engagement

- 37% of guardians have been worried about their own child's well-being at school.
- 27% of guardians have been worried about their own child refusing to go to school.
- 18% of guardians have accepted their own child's unexcused absence.

Survey for parents of grades 5-9 pupils, n = 3615
Guardians' attitudes to absences vary

The guardian's assessment of the reasons why the child can be absent from school (%)

- Holiday trip: 79%
- Hobbies: 41%
- I personally estimate that the child needs a day or two off to recover: 35%
- Time spent with family: 23%
- The child feels tired: 16%
- School refusal: 7%
- The child does well in school, so absences do not hinder learning: 7%
- The child feels anxious about something that happens at school: 3%
- The child has undone homeworks or is not prepared for the exam: 1%

Situttavan kouluyhteisötyön arviointi, huoltajakysely, n = 3495
Many guardians wish the school would pay more attention to the identification of school attendance problems and early intervention.

I think the school intervenes early enough in student absences. (n = 2015)

The school pays sufficient attention to the early signs of school-related problems  (n = 2167)

Cooperation with the guardians of the students in the class would be important if my child had problems with regular school attendance. (n = 2950)

I know who I can contact if my child's absences worry me. (n = 3456)
Addressing absences or supporting attendance? - a change of perspective requires building a common understanding

“Addressing absences is giving the homes support, not criticism or disapproval. Many think so.”

Parent of pupil from grade 8

”The teacher has been in contact twice regarding my child's absences after reaching a certain number of hours. At this point, it was asked if the parents had any concerns about going to school, and since there was not, and neither did the teacher, it was jointly concluded that no support measures were needed. I think this has been a good course of action, because if I had noticed the need for support, it would have been easy to tell the teacher and the support measures would have started in a timely manner.”

Parent of pupil from grade 8
Conclusions

• According to the evaluation material, staff, pupils and guardians had varying perceptions of practices that promote comfort and communality at school. Staff members emphasized separate group building and theme days as a reinforcement of communality, while pupils and guardians emphasized everyday encounters and regular group building.

• Supporting school engagement should be strengthened, especially as part of a school’s culture of interaction and daily pedagogical solutions.

• Pupils’ school engagement, well-being and positive culture of interaction at school are significant factors in the prevention of absences. It is important to extensively see the work that supports school engagement as part of a school culture that supports inclusion.
The perspective of absence prevention should be switched towards supporting attendance

- School staff describes support measures related to absences largely from the perspective of the schools’ official structures, while pupils hope for non-urgent encounters, listening and understanding.

- While systematic and recorded shared practices are being developed in schools, it is important to ensure that pupils’ and parents’ thoughts and ideas are heard both when planning the support measures of an individual pupil and when planning a school’s operating methods more extensively.

- Supporting school engagement should be strengthened, especially as part of a school’s culture of interaction and daily pedagogical solutions.

- Building experiences of belonging in a community and facilitating encounters requires time and space, which should also be taken into account when developing structures at school.