

TE HONONGA AKORANGA

COMET



Submission on the Inquiry into School Attendance

Submission [109/21](#)
Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, August 2021

Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.

Mā te mahi tahi o ngā whenu, mā te mahi tahi o ngā kairaranga, ka oti tēnei whāriki.

I te otinga me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.

Ā tana wā, me titiro hoki ki ngā raranga i makere nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

nā Kūkupa Tirikatene, ONZM, 1934 - 2018

The tapestry of understanding cannot be woven by one strand alone.

Only by the working together of strands and the working together of weavers will such a tapestry be completed.

With its completion let us look at the good that comes from it.

And, in time we should also look at those stitches which have been dropped, because they also have a message.

About COMET Auckland

[Te Hononga Akoranga COMET](#) is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country.

Briefly, our work involves:

Sector leadership – mapping data and evidence, working with sector leaders to identify and prioritise the most pressing areas of focus, and connecting people around that common agenda, to plan collaborative action.

That can then lead to advocacy or changes to partners' business as usual, or sometimes to planning and trialling new ways of working (incubation projects).

These incubation projects generally develop through scoping and planning to trialling, and then implementation and evaluation, with the goal of handing them on once they are fully developed so we can move on to focus on another part of the system.

Contact for communications:

Susan Warren, Chief Executive, COMET Auckland

Email: susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz

Ph 09 307 2101, Mobile 021 757 048, Fax 09 379 5053

PO Box 3430, Shortland Street, Auckland 1140

www.cometauckland.org.nz

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry on the Inquiry into School Attendance.

This submission has been assembled based on our own collective knowledge and experience, and our ongoing engagement with our stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, employers, parents and learners of all ages.

The decline in school attendance over the past few years is of great concern and we welcome this inquiry to explore the reasons behind it, so they can be addressed.

There is ample evidence that regular attendance at school is important for learning and that frequent absence for any reason can disrupt learning, not only because of time lost while absent but also because when students return, they may struggle to understand work that builds on what the rest of the class learned during their absence.

School attendance is an equity issue because frequent absence is more common in students from low-decile schools (in general), so contributes towards the disparities in achievement between students from different socio-economic groups. It is also possible that students from low socio-economic backgrounds and from non-dominant cultural groups may lose more academic progress from the same amount of absence because they do not have as many resources (e.g. computer access, quiet space to study, family members who can support their learning etc) to catch up on learning after a period away from school.

Exploring the reasons for reduced attendance

We have a few suggestions for how the inquiry can best explore the reasons for attendance and absence, and the reasons for the observed changes in attendance over time.

1. We recommend that the inquiry begins by asking a diverse group of students for their experience and views on this topic. The sample should include a significant number of students who do not currently attend regularly, but also some who attend more frequently. Just exploring correlations in data or even changes after interventions is not enough to establish causality. The inquiry needs to hear from students about the things that influence them to attend school regularly or to miss school, and what changes would make them more likely to attend regularly.
2. Keep the questions broad at first so students can raise issues and solutions you might not be expecting, but also probe for the things that research indicates may have an influence – including for example whether they see school as relevant to their lives; their relationship with teacher(s), to what extent they feel safe at school, changing school frequently, family stresses, whether they feel recognised (e.g. for their culture, language, identity, sexual orientation, ability/ disability), whether they experience bullying, whether they experience racism, and practical issues such as having lunch, a raincoat, or needing to care for siblings. Whatever students identify, ask them about things that could have made a difference for them, and how the issues could be addressed more effectively.

3. Similarly, we recommend asking parents about their views on school attendance – how important they perceive it to be for students to attend school every day, other priorities, pressures or events that might lead to students not attending on a particular day, their views of any actions the school or others (e.g. attendance service) have taken to try to increase attendance, what information or actions from the school might be more successful in encouraging/enabling higher attendance. Again, the sample should include a significant number of parents of students with low attendance, but should also include parents of moderate and high attenders.
4. Look at the data to see if any of the factors that students identified, and other factors such as those listed above, are linked with higher or lower attendance (recognising that data will only be available for some of these factors).
5. Map changes in attendance rates over time for different groups (socio-economic, age, ethnicity) against systems and societal changes. Key changes during this time would include the change to the attendance service in 2013, trends in child poverty rates, increasing school size, curriculum and assessment changes such as National Standards and the shift to NCEA, and health-related changes including the increased requirements for rental properties.

Identifying effective practice

If the inquiry starts by asking students and parents about their experience, as we have suggested above, those conversations are bound to uncover approaches that the students and parents perceive to help, and also approaches they haven't yet seen, but think might be helpful.

We suggest that the inquiry also talk to school leaders (principals, senior teachers and boards) to specifically ask them about approaches that they have seen work well in their own schools. Some of these successful approaches will be specific attendance programmes such as different types of attendance service, early follow-ups or rewards for regular attendance. Further inquiries should also identify other actions that schools take that improve attendance, such as building teacher-student relationships, encouraging students to use their home language in their learning, improving parent-teacher meetings, or addressing bullying.

We also suggest looking at per-school data in attendance rates by decile, identifying a few schools that seem to have significantly higher attendance than expected, and contracting the Education Review Office to examine what those schools are doing to achieve their results.

Based on our own work and our connections with other organisations, we also have some specific suggestions of programmes (both current and past) to look at:

1. The Every Day Counts programme that was designed and trialled across a large group of schools in Manurewa in the early 2000s, as part of the Ministry of Education's Schooling Improvement work there. Every Day Counts took a community approach,

raising awareness with families in the area about the importance of school attendance and the impact that even occasional days away can have on children's learning. As I recall, schools also tracked attendance for learning and improvement, and celebrated increased attendance (for example with weekly incentives for classes with full attendance).

2. Te Kotahitanga, the initiative designed by Professors Russel Bishop and Mere Berryman, to equip teachers and schools to become more effective for their Māori students. Given the initiative's focus on high expectations, teacher-student relationship and cultural awareness, it is likely that Te Kotahitanga increased attendance at school in the same way as it increased achievement.
3. Bilingual Education – usually a few classes within a school that teach the curriculum through the medium of the students' first or heritage language. There is data that students in these units do better academically than students of the same ethnicity in English-medium classes, and anecdotal information that students in bilingual units feel a greater sense of belonging and feel more valued at school. Looking at attendance data from students in these units compared to the rest of the same school, or compared to the average attendance for their ethnicity and decile would help identify if there are attendance advantages of Bilingual Education.
4. Our own Youth Employability Programme: License to Work (YEP) reaches students in their last year or two of secondary school, who are likely to move straight into work or unemployment when they leave school. Anecdotal feedback from schools indicates that they see increases in attendance after starting YEP among some students who had previously been attending only sporadically. This increase often extends to other subjects, as students start to see the relevance of their studies in helping them reach their goal of gaining meaningful work.