

Responding to Student Absences

Process for MACS schools

September 2023



Melbourne Archdiocese
Catholic Schools

Collect, record and respond to absences daily, as per school-based [Monitoring School Attendance Procedures](#).
If the reason for absence has **NOT** been provided, **contact parents/guardians/carers or emergency contact** on the day to seek an explanation for the absence.
Refer to the [Student Absence School Guidelines](#) for advice on acceptable and not acceptable reasons for absence.

Approved / Explained absences

Record the reason for absence and monitor for recurring patterns, e.g. recurring reasons or specific days, etc.
If a pattern is noticed, make follow up contact to parents/guardians/carers to identify and address any concerns.

Unapproved/Unexplained absences

If the reason is deemed not acceptable or no reason is provided, implement the below **Staged Response to Absences**.

Staged Response to Absences

Stage 1: One day of unapproved or unexplained absence

Required

- In case of unapproved or unexplained absence, make phone contact with a parent/guardian/carer or emergency contact as per school-based procedures, to discuss the absence
- Send notification from the school indicating the absence is unapproved (e.g. [Stage 1 Sample Notification](#))
- Record actions on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/or in student file.

Considerations

- If the student is identified as part of the vulnerable cohort, liaise with the school's Learning Diversity team to ensure appropriate supports are in place, e.g. Personal Learning Plan (PLP), Program Support Group (PSG), translator, advocate, etc.
- If the absence follows a pattern of other concerning behaviours, consider further interventions
- Provide parent support where required.

Unexplained absence

If, following contact, the student's safety is established but no explanation is provided **within 10 days**, record the absence as **unexplained** and add to the student's file. Continue to closely monitor attendance data for the student.

If safety has not been established and/or there are concerns for the student or family's safety and wellbeing, the principal may approve a welfare check through Victoria Police.

A welfare check may also be considered at any stage of the response.

Stage 2: Three to five days of unapproved absences

Accumulated over a 12 month period

Required

- Make phone contact with a parent/guardian/carer or emergency contact as per school-based procedures
- Communicate concerns for emergence of chronic absence patterns with parents/guardians/carers and to the school wellbeing leader/attendance officer and leadership as per school procedures
- Send a notification home, keep a copy on file (e.g. [Stage 2 Sample Notification](#))
- Record actions on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/or in student file to inform relevant staff.

Considerations

- Allocate a staff mentor (advocate) for the student and initiate an individual check-in system
- Allocate a care team leader (preferably not the mentor, if possible)
- Investigate the student's circumstances, e.g. from student, relevant school staff, parents, other students, etc.
 - [Understanding the potential causes of student absences – Template for MACS Schools](#)
- Invite parents/guardians/carers to the care team.

Stage 3: Five days or more of unapproved absences

Accumulated over a 12 month period

Required

- Make phone contact with a parent/guardian/carer or emergency contact as per school-based procedures (in line with Stages 1 and 2) with increased offers of support
- Allocate case management responsibility to a senior staff member, e.g. wellbeing leader, year level leader, deputy principal (may also be care team leader), to oversee the care team and ensure there is consistent communication between the care team members, mentor, parents/guardians/carers, the student and Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools (MACS)
- Send a notification from a relevant leadership staff member, requesting a parent/guardian/carer attend a care team meeting (e.g. [Stage 3 Sample Notification](#))
- Inform MACS – Student Wellbeing Information Support Service (SWISS), and include information about actions undertaken and plans for ongoing support
- Record actions and decisions on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/or in student file.

Considerations

- Refer to the MACS Learning Diversity team where required
- Consider a secondary consultation or direct intervention from services, e.g. Victoria Police Community Liaison Officer, Pathways and Transition/Careers Teacher, etc.
- Consider a secondary consultation with Community/Allied Health services
- Liaise with any existing family service/seek support for family where necessary, e.g. The Orange Door, etc.

Stage 4: Ongoing unapproved absences

Required

- Make phone contact as per previous stages, as soon as practicable
- Send a notification to parents/guardians/carers summarising all intervention and support offered to date, signed by the principal/principal delegate (e.g. [Stage 4 Sample Notification](#))
 - Recommend to send a copy via registered mail
 - Parents are required to respond within 7 days.
- Arrange a formal meeting with the student, family, mentor and relevant care team members (school and external), to develop and implement [Attendance Support Plan](#), even if the student has already returned to school, to prevent potential future absences
- Contact MACS SWISS for notification and update on ongoing support (this is not required if you have already engaged the MACS Learning Diversity team for individual intervention)
- Record actions on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/or in student file.

Considerations

- Following the outcome of the meeting, consider a secondary consultation and external referrals (if not already in place), e.g. Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), School Focused Youth Services (SFYS), The Orange Door, etc.
- Explore potential for age-appropriate flexible learning options or re-engagement programs at a school level or in the community
- Continue to liaise with any existing family service or seek support for family
- Continue to support the student's education through PLP, [Student Absence Learning Plan](#) or [School Return Plan](#)
- Continue to liaise with the MACS Learning Diversity team if this is in place.

If the student cannot be located at any point in the above processes, request a **Police Welfare check**. If it becomes apparent that the student cannot be located, the principal should submit a [Whereabouts Unknown](#) form to the Department of Education (DE) Student Attendance Officer (SAO) and notify the MACS Regional Leadership Consultant (RLC) of this action.

Consider moving to **School Refusal** process at principal/delegate's discretion.

Stage 5: Unresolved ongoing unapproved absences/complex cases

Required

- Principal to notify the RLC of the situation and the process undertaken, to discuss next steps, e.g. make a Navigator referral, consider a referral to the MACS Complex Cases team or DE SAO
Discuss with the RLC the student and family circumstances and audit of school efforts/strategies implemented to re-engage student. Seek to establish and ensure that all aspects of the case have been addressed before considering Complex Cases or SAO referral. *Note: A principal does not have to make a referral for all ongoing absences but may continue to manage the absences at a school level if they believe the support is effective*
- Record actions and outline of next steps decided upon on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/or in student file.

Considerations

- When contacting the RLC, ensure to inform them of previous contact with the MACS Learning Diversity team or SWISS so that previous notes may be obtained. All future contact with MACS for this case should be via the RLC
- Consider whether it is appropriate for a MACS attendance letter to be sent by the RLC
- Continue to liaise with external support organisations or programs.

Consider moving to **School Refusal** process at principal/delegate's discretion.

Stage 6: Referral to the Department of Education School Attendance Officer

If the decision has been made to make a referral to the DE SAO:

- Principal completes appropriate referral documentation and forwards it to the RLC for approval ([Referral Form – Unexplained-Absence](#))
- Send the [Stage 6 Sample Notification](#) from the principal advising parents/carers/guardians that the matter has been escalated to the DE SAO
- Continue to record, monitor and respond to absences as per the school's requirements until notification from the SAO indicates otherwise.

Referring a student attendance matter to the DE SAO may be appropriate where the principal, in consultation with a RLC, determines that:

- intervention strategies have been unable to secure parental engagement and improvement in school attendance (or engagement in an alternative educational program)
- requiring the parent to respond to the notice will convey the seriousness of the matter and is likely to elicit an improvement in attendance.

Principals should be certain they have adequate evidence to demonstrate the parent has not been meeting their responsibilities under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* before making a referral to the DE SAO.

School Refusal Process

If school refusal is established to be the reason for ongoing absences:

- The school must work with the parents/guardians/carers to ensure support is in place to address causes, e.g. external support services for anxiety.
- The school is to refer to the MACS Learning Diversity team through the [Record of Student Adjustment & Evaluation application](#) (ROSAE) for support to ensure a PLP, PSG, Attendance Support Plan and other appropriate support is provided.
- It is possible that the student may already be linked to MACS Learning Diversity for other reasons. If so, work with the school learning diversity leader and other relevant staff to ensure that PLPs and PSG meetings address needs arising from school refusal as well as implement supportive strategies for the student to maintain or increase school engagement.
- School refusal is **not deemed an unapproved absence** if the school believes a parent/guardian/carer is behaving in a protective manner to meet physical, social and emotional needs of student.
- Allocated case manager/mentor (from Stage 2) to maintain contact with the student to ensure a sense of belonging to the school and welcome whenever return occurs.
- If the school forms reasonable belief that a parent/guardian/carer is negligent in meeting physical, emotional or social needs of the student, which is contributing to the student's inability to re-engage with school, refer the matter to PROTECT. This step may occur at any stage of the process.**
- Record actions on school management platform, e.g. ICON/SIMON, and/ or in student file.

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Contacts and definitions

Updated September 2023



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Contacts

Relevant MACS contact details for attendance and absence matters

MACS SWISS – Call 9267 0228 and request to speak with the Student Wellbeing Information Support Service.

MACS Learning Diversity – Call 9267 0228 and request to speak with a member of the Learning Diversity team regarding school refusal.

MACS Regional Offices:

- Eastern Regional Office – 9427 6400
- Northern Regional Office – 8387 3200
- Southern Regional Office – 8301 7400
- Western Regional Office – 8412 2400.

Definitions

Including acronyms and community support services

Attendance

A student attends school when onsite and/or involved in an offsite curriculum program or other activity organised by the school (for example an excursion or camp). A student is also considered to be in attendance when the student is engaged in a re-engagement program or another school part-time to make up full-time attendance, and the schools or settings have agreed the time fractions, allocation of funding (if appropriate) and the student's PLP.

Care team

Also known as Student Support Group (SSG)/Program Support Group (PSG)/Action Team/Wellbeing Response Team. Usually comprised of a wellbeing leader, a learning diversity leader, counsellor/psychologist/social worker, etc., a trusted advocate for the student, the student and a parent/guardian/carer. If the student is supported by external allied services, they may be invited to join the care team.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

CAMHS provide specialist mental health treatment and care to children and adolescents up to 18 years of age.

Child and Youth Mental Health Services (CYMHS)

State-funded mental health services for young people aged 12–25.

The Orange Door

A service providing help with parenting, for the wellbeing or development of a child or young person, including safety issues or if experiencing family violence.

Personalised Learning Plan (PLP)

PLPs support the learning and teaching of students with disabilities and additional needs.

Program Support Group (PSG)

The PSG brings together key stakeholders who have relevant knowledge of, and responsibility for, the student.

School management platform

Also known as a Learning Management System (LMS). An online platform the school uses to record student information and store contact details, e.g. ICON, SIMON, etc.

RLC – Regional Learning Consultant

Record of Student Adjustment & Evaluation (ROSAE)

ROSAE is an online portal for schools to record all of the evidentiary requirements for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD).

School Attendance Officers (SAO)

In the context of attendance, the DE SAO are empowered through the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006* to issue school attendance notices, school enrolment notices, and infringement notices. Refer to the DE infringement notices guidance for further information.

School refusal

School refusal is said to occur when:

1. a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress
2. the young person does not try to hide associated absence from their parents/guardians/carers
3. the young person does not display severe antisocial behaviour
4. the parents/guardians/carers have made reasonable efforts to secure attendance at school, and/or express their intention for their child to attend school full-time.¹

School Focused Youth Services (SFYS)

The SFYS support schools and community organisations to work together to assist young people aged 10–18 years (Year 5 to Year 12) who are attending school but are vulnerable to or showing signs of disengagement from school.

Student Wellbeing Information Support Services (SWISS)

SWISS is a dedicated MACS Student Wellbeing Unit line to report student issues or seek advice.

Unexplained or unapproved absences

A principal can approve or not approve any absence, based on the requirements of the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*, an individual school policy or on a case-by-case basis.

- A principal will record an absence as **unexplained** if no explanation about the absence is given to the school by the parent/guardian/carer of the student.
- In general, a principal may record an absence as **unapproved** when no reasonable explanation has been given for the student's absence.

Refer to the [Student Absence School Guidelines](#) for advice on acceptable/ not acceptable reasons for absences.

Victoria Police Community Liaison Officer

The Community Liaison Officer Program is an initiative of Victoria Police to enhance the relationship between Victoria Police and communities across the state.

¹ Heyne, D, Gren-Landell, M, Melvin, G & Gentle-Genitty, C 2019, 'Differentiation Between School Attendance Problems: Why and How?', *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 8-34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.006>.