Reactive captains wait while storm clouds rise.
Proactive captains plan with opened eyes,
Empowering crew to reach the fairer skies.

From Absence to Attendance

Steering Towards Proactive Laws and Policies
to Promote Learning and Well-Being

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Ingrado

Contents

Summary

How can schools and the organisations assisting them shift from merely reacting to absences to fostering conditions that actively support attendance?

This report addresses this challenge by examining recent legislative and policy reforms in England, Finland, and Norway, showcasing how these reforms have fostered more proactive approaches to school attendance. These examples highlight the potential of legal frameworks to advance learning and well-being through equity and inclusion.

Chapter 1 provides context, contrasting proactive and reactive approaches to attendance and absence, and outlining the current situation in the Netherlands.

Chapter 2 presents the research methodology, detailing how contributors were engaged and how insights into attendance-related reforms in England, Finland, and Norway were obtained.

Chapter 3 summarises the core features of attendance-related reforms in the three countries. In essence, their proactive laws and policies prioritise prevention, systematic monitoring, early intervention, shared responsibility, and holistic support for young people[1] and their families.

Chapter 4 explores the processes behind these reforms, drawing on lessons from these countries to identify shared pathways to attendance-related legal and policy changes. It identifies four key drivers of reform:

1. **Collaboration**: Actively engaging a wide range of stakeholders— municipalities, schools, families, the organisations that assist them, young people, policymakers, researchers, and others—to build shared ownership and develop widely embraced reforms.

2. **Community Voice:** Incorporating grassroots advocacy and lived experiences to make reforms relevant and impactful.

3. **Research and Data:** Using robust evidence to highlight the need for change and ensure reforms address gaps in attendance-related practices.

4. **Political Will:** Building political support to turn shared priorities into meaningful mandates.

The insights gained from these international examples informed recommendations, presented in Chapter 5, that offer direction for the Netherlands in steering towards a more proactive approach to educational rights, with a natural link to school attendance. Central to these recommendations is the proposed Collective Initiative Reforming Care & Learning Equity (CIRCLE), envisioned as a collaborative effort to co-create a strategic foundation for advancing proactive laws and policies.

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[1] In this report, 'young people' is used to refer to children and adolescents.

1. Charting a New Course

A Proactive Approach to Attendance

There is a growing impetus—both nationally and internationally—to adopt a proactive approach to attendance, characterised by two interrelated dimensions: timing and focus. This proactive approach prioritises anticipating and addressing challenges early (timing) while creating supportive conditions that empower all students to engage fully in opportunities for learning (focus). Key elements include addressing inequities, leveraging data to identify students at risk of attendance challenges, and fostering positive relationships and engaging curricula, so barriers such as socioeconomic challenges, mental health issues, or insufficient learning support are addressed before contributing to absence.

Because it is a supportive approach centred on every student's needs and rights, proactive measures not only reduce risks for students, families, schools, and communities—such as declining academic outcomes, strained family-school relationships, and disengagement from education—but also promote sustained engagement, well-being, academic success, and inclusive learning. These outcomes are achieved by addressing the causes of absence holistically, thereby creating environments where all students can reach their full potential.

In contrast, a reactive approach to absence is characterised by its delayed timing—waiting for absences to become persistent or chronic before taking action—and its narrow focus on correction rather than support. Reactive measures often involve disciplinary actions administered by school attendance officers[2], such as fines or other legal consequences, and frequently overlook the root causes behind absence, including the systemic barriers faced by families. As a result, these measures offer limited support to the families and students who need it most, compounding challenges rather than resolving them.

In short, reactive approaches concentrate on managing the consequences of absence instead of anticipating and preventing it, missing critical opportunities to create supportive environments where students can consistently engage in learning. Proactive strategies, by contrast, hold the transformative potential to build equitable, supportive educational systems where every student can succeed academically and grow socially and emotionally.

A proactive approach to attendance does not exist in isolation; it requires a strong foundation in legal and policy frameworks to sustain and scale its impact. These frameworks provide the structural support necessary to address barriers to education comprehensively and ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities for all students.

Frameworks to Drive the Proactive Approach

Legislative and policy frameworks are essential for translating the principles of a proactive approach to attendance into purposeful action. Robust frameworks—intentionally developed and continually enhanced to overcome diverse barriers to education—are widely regarded as

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[2] 'School attendance officer' is a term used to describe professionals who monitor and enforce student attendance. The title and responsibilities vary across countries, such as truancy officer or student welfare officer. In the Netherlands, the equivalent is 'leerplichtambtenaar,' which translates to compulsory education officer.

critical for safeguarding students' educational rights and creating supportive conditions for learning (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

These frameworks operationalise proactive strategies by mandating, incentivising, and scaling up key attendance-related processes, such as creating supportive and inclusive school environments that foster belonging and value every student, data-driven interventions (e.g., identifying the extra support needs of students), early intervention, teacher development (e.g., strengthening educators' capacity to support diverse student needs), flexible learning pathways, family engagement (e.g., involving and truly supporting parents or guardians in promoting attendance), community partnerships, and targeted funding (e.g., directing resources where they are most needed to remove attendance barriers). Together, these measures promote attendance and address attendance challenges before they escalate into persistent problems, fostering an education system that prioritises prevention and inclusion.

Furthermore, by addressing structural barriers to attendance and gaps in support—including those arising from poverty, adverse childhood conditions, and inequities in access to resources—well-designed frameworks help reduce the ways absence from school compounds inequity. They ensure equitable access to education by removing barriers that hinder students' participation and success, offering targeted solutions that benefit all learners. This is especially important given that absence is more prevalent among disadvantaged students (Klein et al., 2024), making such frameworks essential for promoting fairness in access to opportunities while fostering broad educational inclusion for all students, including those with diverse needs.

Proactive legal and policy frameworks not only reduce risks for absence and related challenges but also promote sustained engagement, well-being, and academic success. By addressing issues holistically rather than merely reacting to symptoms of deeper problems, such frameworks create the conditions for lasting improvement. They underpin a supportive rather than reactive education system where every student can thrive by ensuring equitable access to education and removing barriers that hinder students' success.

Think of proactive attendance laws and policies as charting a sailboat's course. A proactive approach is like a well-prepared captain—symbolising the advocates for young people's education and development—setting a clear direction, anticipating shifting winds, and equipping the crew (students, families, schools, and the organisations that assist them) with resources in advance. This focus on preparation, support, and collaboration helps the sailboat navigate changing conditions and reach the fairer skies that represent improved attendance, engagement, and outcomes for all students. In contrast, a reactive approach sees the captain scrambling only when a storm hits—too late to adjust—and blaming the crew for setbacks. Such reactive approaches to school absence often rely on punitive measures that fail to address the broader realities of students' and families' lives. By prioritising preparation and collaborative support, proactive approaches transform otherwise turbulent passages into successful voyages.

Despite the advantages of proactive frameworks, reactive approaches often prevail. While many jurisdictions around the world measure absence extensively (Heyne et al., 2022a), and there is acknowledgment of consistent monitoring's potential as an early-warning system for identifying students at risk and fostering engagement (Sälzer et al., 2024), policymakers often hesitate to adopt prevention-oriented strategies to address attendance challenges before they escalate (Posamentier et al., 2024). Posamentier and colleagues observe that education agencies focus heavily on measuring absence but make limited progress in addressing its root causes. This

reactive approach—centred on identifying problems rather than preventing them—overlooks the critical link between school connectedness, belonging, and emotional well-being on one hand, and attendance on the other. Posamentier and colleagues also highlight that legislative policies often lack specificity, failing to prioritise preventative strategies like inclusive, supportive school environments, thus tackling symptoms rather than causes.

The Current Situation in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, attendance laws focus heavily on compulsory education (*leerplicht*) and unauthorised absences, which are treated as legal offenses requiring schools to report cases to the local compulsory education officer (*leerplichtambtenaar*). This narrow, reactive approach not only overlooks young people with authorised absences such as illness—leaving them invisible in data—but also fails to proactively provide support for understanding and addressing the underlying causes of unauthorised absences. By prioritising enforcement over understanding and holistic support, the reactive approach not only risks missing opportunities to engage students and families but also fails to adequately help schools address the mental health, socioeconomic, and systemic factors contributing to both authorised and unauthorised absences, ultimately fuelling the broader challenge of educational disengagement.

Local governments are recognising the need to support young people absent for authorised reasons (Heyne et al., 2024), and compulsory education officers already use a more supportive Methodological Approach to School Absenteeism, addressing underlying barriers to attendance rather than relying solely on punitive measures. However, this broader and more supportive approach to absence is still missing from legislation, revealing a persistent mismatch between law and practice.

Fresh winds are beginning to blow, heralding change in education policy in the Netherlands. A new bill—known as the Act to Reduce Absenteeism (*Wet terugdringen schoolverzuim*)— has reached the House of Representatives, representing a formal effort to address ongoing challenges with absence. The bill proposes amendments to the Compulsory Education Act 1969 and related laws. Its core aim is to reduce absence, early school leaving, and unnecessary exemptions from attendance on physical or psychological grounds, ensuring better consideration of each student's educational needs and possibilities. To achieve these goals, the bill calls for stronger absence policies, earlier involvement of compulsory education officers, clear data collection and sharing, and robust collaboration—so that absences and their underlying causes are addressed in a timely, well-informed manner.

The bill represents a shift towards a more proactive approach to attendance, requiring schools to develop a comprehensive absence policy that emphasises early intervention, helping to identify and address issues before absence becomes entrenched. The school's policy must outline how it will analyse the causes of absence, ensuring it takes a structured approach to identifying underlying barriers and guiding efforts towards more targeted and preventative measures. Another key element is the requirement for schools to define procedures for collaboration with municipalities, partnerships for appropriate education (*samenwerkingsverbanden*), and other relevant parties. By formalising collaboration as a mandatory component of school policies, the bill seeks to foster a unified approach to supporting students and addressing absence.

While the bill takes important steps to address absence, it retains reactive elements. Its focus remains on identifying, analysing, and reporting absences rather than implementing proactive measures to tackle root causes and promote consistent attendance.

Enhanced data recording and reporting provide insights into absence patterns but do not require schools to develop individualised strategies or address underlying issues before absences escalate. The role of the compulsory education officer also remains reactive, triggered by unauthorised absences that have already occurred. While schools can flag concerning unauthorised absences (*zorgelijk ongeoorloofd verzuim*) earlier, this does not shift the officer's role to supporting those with authorised absences, such as absences linked to chronic illness or mental health challenges.

As a result, gaps in support persist, leaving schools and the organisations that assist them to manage these challenges with limited guidance. Criminal-justice responses—like fines or community service—remain options when unauthorised absence continues despite interventions. These gaps and reactive measures hinder collaboration between families, schools, and municipalities in achieving equitable and inclusive opportunities for education, limiting the bill's potential to foster transformative change.

The question arises: How can attendance-related laws and policies in the Netherlands chart a stronger course, steering away from a reactive focus on absence and navigating decisively towards a proactive approach to attendance? Such a shift would equip schools and the organisations that assist them—such as municipalities, partnerships for appropriate education (*samenwerkingsverbanden*), youth care services, and mental health care providers—to collaborate on removing barriers to attendance while enriching both educational experiences and young people's opportunities for personal development.

Crossing Borders to Inspire Reforms

For advocates in the Netherlands focused on young people's education and development, insights from other countries provide valuable opportunities to enhance the supportive initiatives already underway in Dutch schools and communities—efforts that are only partially reflected in current legislation. By exploring how nations like England, Finland, and Norway have introduced proactive laws and policies that focus on preventing absence and supporting attendance, the Netherlands can chart a course towards a more proactive approach to school attendance.

2. Gathering Insights from Abroad

This chapter describes a project commissioned by [INGRADO][3] and conducted by the author to gather actionable insights that can support legislative reform in the Netherlands. It outlines the methodology for selecting and examining international cases of attendance-related legislative and policy change, introduces the contributors, and provides links to further resources.

Identifying Potential Contributors

The first step in identifying examples of legislative and policy change employed convenience sampling[4], reflecting the exploratory nature of the project. This approach enabled the swift identification of individuals based on their availability and relevance to policy-related work. Invitations to participate in the project were sent to 56 individuals across 18 countries ([click here to view countries]). Recipients included those directly engaged in policy-related activities, individuals with expertise in attendance laws and policies through their professional roles, and authors of pertinent published literature. Additionally, some participants were recommended by initial invitees, further expanding the pool of potential contributors. Casting a wide net increased the likelihood of identifying examples of shifts towards proactive laws and policies.

Narrowing the Field

Of the 56 individuals invited, 18 (32%) completed a survey designed to identify suitable cases for further exploration ([click here to view the survey]). The survey included questions on familiarity with laws and policies, details of legislative and policy changes, and permissions for continued participation in the project.

Survey responses informed the selection of cases for further exploration, representing a shift to purposive sampling[5]. The following criteria guided this selection:

- **Firsthand Involvement or Extensive Knowledge:** Priority was given to participants directly involved in or with substantial familiarity with legislative and policy changes. This ensured reliable, detailed insights into the processes behind reforms.

- **Scope of Positive Changes:** Cases that demonstrated broader positive changes at the national or state level were prioritised over isolated developments, offering richer insights for potential reforms in the Netherlands.

- **Permissions for Participation:** Only participants who consented to a screening interview and agreed to have their state or country identified in the report were considered. This aligned with ethical considerations and supported the project's practical goals.

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[3] INGRADO is the Dutch association for school attendance officers and related professionals, dedicated to empowering its members so every young person has access to the education they deserve.
[4] Convenience sampling is a non-random method where participants are selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate, rather than through systematic or random selection.
[5] Purposive sampling is a non-random method where participants are deliberately selected based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives, aiming to gather rich, detailed insights.

Selecting Three Cases

Based on the preceding criteria, six individuals representing four countries and one U.S. state were invited to participate in a screening interview designed to clarify key aspects of the changes identified via the survey. These interviews explored whether the changes involved laws, policies, or both; when they occurred; and any additional changes not covered in the survey. (Click here to view the Interview Schedule.)

Following the screening interviews, the focus shifted to selecting three cases to serve as this report's case studies. Limiting the selection to three ensured a balance between capturing diverse insights and managing the practical constraints of the project's timeframe (November to December, 2024).

Case selection was informed by data from both the survey and screening interviews, with the following criteria ensuring the relevance and value of insights for this report:

- **Similarity to the Dutch Legislative System:** Priority was given to cases with national legislation, ensuring relevance to the Dutch context, as opposed to systems combining national and state legislation, such as in the US and Australia.

- **Type of Changes:** Legislative changes, rather than policy changes alone, were prioritised for their potential to provide a stronger foundation for systemic and lasting impacts on attendance-related practices.

- **Recency of Changes:** Recent changes were favoured to ensure pertinent and fresh insights through access to current information in contributors' knowledge and records.

The final cases selected—England, Finland, and Norway—met these criteria and offer insights to inform potential Dutch reforms.

Contributor from England

Victoria Franklin, an Independent Education Consultant and Past President of the National Association for Support Workers in Education, provided key insights into attendance-related changes in England.

With "very extensive knowledge" of relevant laws and policies, including recent updates, she has played a direct role in shaping attendance-related legislation. As an external consultant to the Department for Education's Attendance Policy Team, Victoria contributed to the development of the School Attendance Regulations, Statutory Guidance, and the National Framework for Penalty Notices. She has also supported local authorities and schools in implementing these changes.

In her role as Independent Education Consultant, Victoria participated in both the screening and in-depth interviews, offering valuable insights that informed the analysis of attendance-related reforms in England.

Contributor from Finland

Johanna Sergejeff, a doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, provided detailed insights into attendance-related changes in Finland. Her "very extensive knowledge" of relevant laws and policies is grounded in her direct involvement in shaping these changes.

From 2021 to 2023, Johanna served as a ministerial adviser at the Ministry of Education and Culture, where she coordinated national efforts to reform school attendance legislation and policy. Her role was instrumental in supporting the change process and ensuring the reforms were effectively designed and implemented.

Johanna's expertise informed her contributions to the screening and in-depth interviews, enriching the analysis of attendance-related reforms in Finland.

Contributors from Norway

Maren-Johanne Nordby and Kristine Damsgaard, senior advisers at Statped, provided valuable insights into attendance-related changes in Norway. Statped, a national agency under the Ministry of Education and Research, supports individuals with special educational needs to promote active participation in education, work, and society.

Maren-Johanne, who has been with Statped since 2017, possesses "very extensive knowledge" of relevant laws and policies. Although not directly involved in the legislative changes, her insights are informed by professional networks, government publications, media reports, and conferences. She also led an Erasmus+ project comparing Nordic educational systems regarding school absence.

Kristine, a Statped senior adviser since 2019, brings "extensive experience and a strong focus" on legal frameworks. Together, Maren-Johanne and Kristine offered complementary perspectives during the screening and in-depth interviews, enriching the analysis of reforms in Norway.

In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews with the contributors provided detailed insights into the 'what' and 'how' of changes in attendance-related laws and policies. These 90–120 minute discussions delved into the motivations behind the changes, the processes and key stakeholders involved, and the conditions that facilitated reform. (Click here to view the Interview Schedule.)

Developing Recommendations

The recommendations in this report are based on a qualitative synthesis of data from the screening and in-depth interviews with the contributors from England, Finland, and Norway. This synthesis distilled actionable insights to guide potential legislative reforms in the Netherlands through the following steps:

1. **Thematic Analysis:** Core themes—recurring patterns in the data—were identified, focusing on the mechanisms driving reform. Preliminary observations from the interview material were iteratively refined into themes that highlighted shared insights across the three cases. AI tools, including ChatGPT, supported the analysis and refinement process.

2. **Additional Insights:** Reflections on qualitative data uncovered additional considerations beyond the identified themes. The contributors' repeated points and areas of emphasis highlighted specific aspects of the process of legislative and policy reform.

3. **Recommendation Development:** Themes and insights were synthesised into practical recommendations, grounded in the experiences of the selected countries, to offer actionable guidance for Dutch reforms.

A review of legislative and policy documents shared by the contributors complemented the interview data, enriching the understanding of changes discussed in the interviews. Relevant documents are cited throughout the report, with links provided for further exploration.

3. Highlighting the Changes Abroad

This chapter presents attendance-related legislative and policy changes in England, Finland, and Norway. For each country, a summary of reforms is followed by a reflection on their proactive nature. Additional background information is provided in the Appendices on topics such as data recording and reporting and the role of school attendance officers. This background highlights how attendance-related practices typically operate in the countries discussed, without solely emphasising the recent changes covered in this chapter.

England

Summary of Recent Reforms

Recent changes to attendance-related laws and policies in England, encapsulated in the August 2024 statutory guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#), represent a comprehensive and significant shift towards consistent and accountable attendance-related practices. This guidance, applicable to maintained schools, academies, independent schools, and local authorities, incorporates amendments to existing laws such as the [School Attendance (Pupil Registration) (England) Regulations 2024](#) and the [Education (Penalty Notices) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2024](#). By making these changes legally binding, the statutory guidance codifies attendance and absence management in England in a unified way for the first time, embedding a national framework for consistent practices and marking a transformative step in England's approach to attendance and absence.

One of the key updates in the reforms is the mandatory use of standardised attendance codes, ensuring consistent recording and reporting across schools (further information about the recording and reporting of data in England is found in Appendix C). Central to this system is the daily sharing of student-level attendance data through [Wonde](#), a third-party provider that operates independently of schools, local authorities, and the government. Wonde connects with schools' information systems to extract and securely transfer data to the Department for Education. Schools achieve compliance with the data-sharing regulations by maintaining accurate attendance information and granting Wonde access to the data. The system provides schools and local authorities with secure access to their own student-level data and a range of reports, enabling the early identification of attendance issues and the allocation of resources to areas of greatest need. By August 2024, when data sharing became mandatory, 95% of schools were already participating in the data sharing process, reflecting broad recognition of its value.

The guidance also places a strong emphasis on the importance of school culture and working with families in efforts to improve attendance. It highlights that fostering a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive school environment is foundational for good attendance, specifying that "good attendance begins with school being somewhere pupils want to be" (p. 8). Addressing attendance begins with a holistic approach to school culture, involving not only curriculum and behaviour but also bullying prevention, mental health support, and special educational needs. To strengthen the role of leadership in these efforts, the guidance requires every school to appoint a 'Senior Attendance Champion' from its senior leadership team, underscoring that attendance is a leadership responsibility. Schools must consistently promote the benefits of good attendance and build strong relationships with students and parents, treating them with dignity and respect to create a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. Working with families

involves actively listening in order to understand the barriers to attendance they face, then collaborating to remove those barriers. This includes providing tailored in-school support and connecting families with external services, such as health services and community organisations, to address challenges holistically. By focusing on leadership accountability, school culture, and partnerships with families, attendance improvement becomes a central part of broader efforts to support students' well-being and engagement in learning.

Provisions for young people missing education are also strengthened, ensuring they do not fall through the cracks and lose access to education. For example, a student's name can only be removed from the school's admission register for specific reasons, such as transferring to another school or when a parent provides written notification that the student will be educated otherwise than at a school. Schools are legally required to notify the local authority of such removals, supplying all necessary details to facilitate monitoring and support.

Another important focus of the guidance is addressing severe absence—now formally defined as missing 50% or more of school—with a mandated, coordinated response from schools and services. While the concept of severe absence has been acknowledged previously, this statutory guidance marks its first incorporation into formal policy, requiring systematic efforts to address this issue. Previously, efforts primarily focused on overall absence and persistent absence (missing 10% or more of school). By broadening the scope, the guidance ensures more targeted and structured support for students at high risk of educational disengagement.

The guidance redefines the role of local authorities (LAs), shifting their focus from monitoring attendance to providing strategic leadership in improving attendance across their geographic areas. LAs are tasked with rigorously tracking attendance data, identifying trends, and setting clear goals to address barriers and support students, cohorts, and schools with the greatest needs. They must establish School Attendance Support Teams to offer universal services—communication, advice, targeted support, and multi-disciplinary family assistance—free of charge to all schools. While persistent and severe absence remains a priority, LAs also focus on early intervention and collaborative problem-solving to prevent attendance issues from escalating. Emphasising multi-agency collaboration, LAs work with partners such as health, youth justice, and the voluntary sector to address complex barriers holistically. Legal interventions, though still within their remit, are framed as a last resort, reflecting a shift towards a 'support first' approach.

The changes to legal interventions further reflect the shift towards prevention and collaboration. The guidance introduces a graduated approach that prioritises voluntary and formal support measures before considering legal action. Local authorities are required to explore Education Supervision Orders[6] as alternatives to prosecution. The guidance also reframes 'parenting contracts' as 'attendance contracts' to foster collaborative agreements aimed at improving attendance and shared responsibility between families, schools, and authorities. Additionally, it formalises a National Framework for Penalty Notices, standardising thresholds and procedures for issuing penalty notices, and introduces Notices to Improve as a step before issuing penalty notices. In sum, this approach reinforces prosecution as a last resort, strengthening the focus on early intervention and supportive measures.

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[6] An Education Supervision Order is a formal order made by the Family or High Court, which gives the local authority a formal role in advising, helping, and directing the student and their parents to ensure the student receives a suitable education, thus ensuring legal avenues are pursued only when absolutely necessary.

It is worth noting that the 2024 guidance was developed through a phased process, starting with its initial release as non-statutory guidance in May 2022. This approach allowed schools, local authorities, and other stakeholders to become familiar with its content, begin embedding its principles, and provide feedback that informed revisions ahead of its statutory implementation in August 2024.

Proactive Features of These Reforms

The reforms in England reflect a clear shift towards a proactive approach to school attendance. By embedding policies within a statutory framework, the guidance promotes consistency and accountability across schools and local authorities, emphasising systemic responsibility and shared action through the principle of 'working together to improve school attendance'. This framework prioritises prevention and early intervention, focusing on understanding and addressing root causes of absence—such as inequities, mental health challenges, or inadequate support—before absences escalate.

Key features of the guidance highlight its proactive ethos. Strengthened provisions for young people missing education demonstrate a commitment to identifying and addressing barriers early to prevent disengagement. By aligning with broader safeguarding reforms, the guidance underscores a preventative focus to ensure no young person is left without access to education.

Central to the reforms is a 'support first' ethos, which the contributor from England frequently emphasised as foundational to the guidance's principles. This approach shifts the narrative from punitive to preventative, ensuring that legal actions, such as penalty notices, are reserved as a last resort. For instance, the guidance mandates considering whether penalty notices will genuinely support behavioural change and encourages alternative strategies where fines are unlikely to help.

Local authorities (LAs) are positioned as proactive leaders, tasked with analysing attendance data, benchmarking against national trends, and fostering multi-agency collaboration to address systemic challenges. Their expanded role reflects a significant shift from reactive measures, positioning them as architects of strategic solutions that promote equity and inclusion.

The reforms also prioritise school culture and leadership accountability. By requiring the appointment of 'Senior Attendance Champions', the guidance ensures that attendance is treated as a key strategic priority within schools. Promoting strong relationships with families and addressing barriers holistically, schools and LAs create conditions that empower students to thrive and fully engage in their education.

Together, these reforms represent a proactive approach grounded in equity, early intervention, and shared responsibility. They position attendance not merely as an operational issue but as an opportunity to foster inclusive and supportive educational systems. By embedding accountability within a supportive framework, the reforms aim to reduce risks for students while promoting sustained engagement and well-being.

Finland

Summary of Recent Reforms

As of August 2023, Finland introduced consequential updates to its Basic Education Act and the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education[7], accompanied by guidelines titled Our Common School Path, published by the Ministry of Education and Culture in June 2023. These developments demonstrate a strengthened commitment to addressing absence and promoting school engagement. Each of these three developments—the Act, the Core Curriculum, and the guidelines—is addressed in turn.

The amended Section 26 of the Basic Education Act explicitly requires education providers[8] to proactively prevent absences and systematically monitor and address attendance issues: "The education provider shall prevent the absences of pupils participating in basic education and monitor and intervene in them systematically." This legislative change reflects a significant shift from focusing solely on unauthorised absences to addressing all absences, recognising the broader impact of missed school days. Schools were already legally obligated to notify parents of unauthorised absences, fostering parental awareness and encouraging active involvement in addressing attendance challenges. While this legal obligation to notify parents applies specifically to unauthorised absences, Finland's updated Core Curriculum and accompanying national guidelines reinforce the importance of monitoring and addressing all absences to promote consistent attendance and student success.

Complementing the legislative change, updates to the National Core Curriculum also took effect in August 2023. As both a regulation and a policy document, the curriculum is legally binding while offering flexibility for local adaptation to meet specific community needs. Developed by the National Agency for Education, it serves as a comprehensive framework for basic education in Finland, outlining standards and objectives for subjects taught, assessment methods, special needs education, and student welfare. Emphasising holistic development and lifelong learning, the curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping educational practices, particularly in preventing and addressing student absences.

The Core Curriculum now includes provisions requiring education providers to establish clear and actionable procedures for promoting attendance and preventing absence, as well as systematically monitoring and addressing absences, regardless of the reason. These procedures include protocols for notifying parents promptly about absences, initiating early responses, and collaborating with student welfare professionals. The updates to the Core Curriculum emphasise a whole-school approach to attendance, integrating the efforts of staff members, students, and families. If absences increase or become prolonged, student welfare professionals must be contacted without delay, with targeted monitoring and follow-up tailored to individual needs.

Supporting these measures, the Ministry of Education and Culture introduced Our Common School Path, a non-statutory national handbook offering practical strategies to help education

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[7] Basic education refers to primary education and lower secondary education.

[8] Municipalities are considered education providers, responsible for organising and delivering basic education through municipal schools, managing funding and administration, and implementing curricula based on the national Core Curriculum, while ensuring education is accessible and free for all students.

providers implement reforms. This resource provides a detailed framework for developing effective, context-sensitive attendance models at the local level. To enhance consistency, the Ministry has also recommended a standardised five-category absence classification system to improve the accuracy of data collection across municipalities (see Appendix C), though its use remains optional. In alignment with the updated Core Curriculum, local action plans should include a description for education providers, schools, and students on how absences will be systematically monitored, ensuring that data is used to guide prevention and early intervention during the school year. Additionally, schools are obligated to report absence data to their municipality, enabling municipalities, as education providers, to monitor attendance trends and evaluate the impact of interventions.

Proactive Features of These Reforms

The reforms in Finland represent a transformative shift in addressing school attendance, embedding proactive and preventative measures into both legal and policy frameworks. These changes underscore a commitment to addressing all absences—not just unauthorised ones—while understanding immediate reasons for absence and mitigating underlying causes. By mandating systematic monitoring and proactive interventions, the reforms empower schools to identify attendance challenges early, tailor support to individual student needs, and reduce the risk of educational disengagement.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of these reforms, fostering partnerships among schools, families, student welfare professionals, and community stakeholders. Updates to the Core Curriculum require schools to actively engage parents or guardians in attendance-related efforts, framing attendance monitoring as a supportive rather than punitive measure. This approach strengthens family-school relationships and establishes attendance as a shared responsibility. Education providers are further required to develop local attendance models—guided by the updated curriculum and supported by the Our Common School Path handbook—encouraging municipalities to innovate and adapt solutions tailored to their unique contexts.

The introduction of a standardised absence classification system enhances consistency and transparency across municipalities, enabling education providers to analyse attendance trends and allocate resources more effectively. This data-driven approach aligns attendance promotion with broader goals of equity, inclusion, student well-being, and engagement. Furthermore, the emphasis on addressing absences based on their impact on learning and well-being, rather than focusing solely on their duration, reflects Finland's holistic and inclusive ethos.

By embedding proactive strategies within legal and policy frameworks, Finland's reforms elevate attendance as a critical component of inclusive education. These measures create a cohesive system that supports students, fosters engagement, and promotes well-being, ensuring every young person has the opportunity to thrive within a caring and equitable educational environment.

Norway

Summary of Recent Reforms

The new Education Act, effective August 2024, introduced a significant mandate to address student absence. Section 10.6 explicitly requires municipalities (responsible for primary and lower secondary schools) and county authorities (responsible for upper secondary schools) to ensure systematic follow-up for students who are absent. It states: "The municipality and the county authority shall ensure that students with absence from education are followed up." This provision clarifies the responsibilities of schools and local authorities, offering clear guidance previously lacking. The aim is to increase school attendance, prevent excessive absence, and improve students' chances of succeeding in and completing their education.

The Act strengthens accountability by defining the roles of municipalities and county authorities, addressing a history of insufficient intervention, particularly for students without diagnosed learning disabilities. While schools have always been obligated to provide education and a supportive environment, Section 10.6 refines this duty by mandating systematic follow-up. This clarification implies proactive and timely actions to address absence, encouraging schools to collaborate closely with students and families to prevent attendance issues from escalating.

Complementing Section 10.6, the Act introduced provisions that enhance young people's learning and well-being:

- **Section 12.2** establishes a statutory right to a safe, inclusive school environment that promotes health and learning.

- **Section 11.2** mandates teachers to monitor students' progress and report concerns to principals.

- **Section 11.6** updates the right to individually adapted education, formerly special education, for students unable to benefit from standard instruction.

- **Section 11.9** sets new competence requirements for educators providing adapted education.

- **Section 9.5** emphasises smooth transitions from primary to secondary education, requiring municipal and county cooperation.

Existing laws regarding alternative education were refined to prioritise students' best interests and promote inclusive education. In Norway, alternative education involves accommodations within mainstream schools rather than separate educational settings. While some special schools exist in larger cities, the emphasis remains on adapting local schools to support all students effectively, including those with special needs. Temporary home-based education, provided by schools during prolonged absences, aims to rebuild relationships and prepare students for reintegration into their local school. This approach aligns with Norway's commitment to inclusion, placing significant accountability on local schools to ensure all students can thrive within their communities. Home education by parents, distinct from school-provided home-schooling, remains rare and requires rigorous approval. Schools are obligated to monitor the sufficiency of such education, reflecting education's status as a fundamental human right.

To complement these legislative changes, Norway is developing national non-statutory guidelines on school attendance. Directed by a cross-sectoral working group under the Ministry of Education and Research, these guidelines aim to provide practical support for interpreting and implementing the new law, harmonising practices across municipalities and schools, and ensuring inclusive, student-centred approaches. Developed collaboratively with input from experts, stakeholders, parents, and students—and informed by World Health Organization methodologies—this process ensures the guidelines address practical challenges and promote a unified approach to attendance work nationwide.

Effective collaboration remains central to Norway's reforms. The 2012 Coordination Reform laid the groundwork for inter-agency cooperation, requiring collaboration among municipal, county, and state agencies—including health and social services—to support vulnerable individuals through prevention, early intervention, and coordinated follow-up. Building on this foundation, the 2021 Amendment Act to the Welfare Services Legislation introduced child coordinators to oversee service alignment for young people and families requiring long-term support. This collaborative approach reinforces Norway's emphasis on shared responsibility in addressing attendance challenges.

Proactive Features of These Reforms

Norway's recent reforms embody a proactive and inclusive approach to education, clarifying and enhancing the responsibilities of schools and municipalities, particularly through Section 10.6, which requires systematic follow-up on student absences. By mandating follow-up for student absences, such as promptly contacting parents or guardians to understand the reason, the reforms demonstrate a commitment to addressing attendance issues before they escalate.

The revised Education Act explicitly connects attendance to students' health, well-being, and learning outcomes, reflecting a holistic understanding of education's role in fostering young people's development. While attendance has long been a priority in Norway, these updates further clarify the school's obligation to create environments where students can thrive. Provisions such as Section 12.2, which guarantees a safe and inclusive school environment, underscore this commitment, ensuring that attendance policies are not punitive but instead part of broader efforts to promote engagement and well-being.

Another feature of Norway's reforms is the formal recognition of temporary, school-provided home-based education and individualised support measures for students facing prolonged absences. These measures aim to maintain students' connection to education, facilitate their reintegration into local schools, and uphold their right to learn. The Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (PPT) plays a key role in determining the scope of these supports, ensuring they are tailored to individual needs. By integrating alternative measures with mainstream schooling, the reforms prioritise inclusion over segregation, creating environments where all students, including those with complex needs, have equitable opportunities to thrive. This approach underscores shared responsibility, holding schools accountable for supporting every student within their community.

The reforms' proactive nature extends to cross-sectoral collaboration, building on Norway's 2012 Coordination Reform and 2021 amendments to the Welfare Services Legislation. These frameworks foster cooperation between education, health, and social services, enabling a unified response to complex challenges like absence and disengagement. The iterative development of these guidelines reflects Norway's emphasis on practicality and inclusivity,

ensuring that they address the real-world challenges educators face while fostering consistent and unified practices nationwide. Such collaboration ensures that the reforms address systemic barriers holistically, creating sustainable solutions for student success.

By combining legislative clarity, a rights-based framework, and collaborative practices, Norway's reforms exemplify the transformative potential of proactive strategies. These measures not only mitigate risks associated with absence and early school leaving but also promote equitable, inclusive educational environments where all students can reach their full potential.

From 'What' Changed to 'How' Change Happened

Recent attendance-related reforms in England, Finland, and Norway reflect significant progress in laws and policies prioritising equitable, student-centred practices. Recognising attendance as a complex issue requiring a coordinated approach, these reforms encourage education systems to reimagine attendance support as a holistic practice that fosters supportive educational environments and positive outcomes for all students. Moving away from reactive measures, the reforms prioritise prevention, systematic monitoring, early intervention, and partnerships among schools, families, and social services.

These priorities reflect key principles of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework for attendance and absence (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020), serving as an interpretive lens for understanding the countries' reforms. While MTSS is not explicitly referenced in all their documentation, the reforms align with its universal, targeted, and intensive levels of support. Level 1 supports foster inclusive school environments, promote attendance, and prevent absence on a schoolwide scale; Level 2 supports address early signs of attendance issues or mild absence patterns with tailored interventions to prevent escalation; and Level 3 involves multi-agency collaboration to tackle the underlying causes of chronic or severe absences and ensure sustained engagement (Heyne, 2024). This structured approach not only underscores the shift from punitive measures to preventative and early response systems but also offers a potentially valuable lens for the Netherlands, where attention to the MTSS model is growing (Karel et al., 2022).

The reforms outlined in this chapter define the 'what' of proactive attendance approaches. Such significant shifts did not occur by chance—they emerged from deliberate strategies and collaboration among diverse stakeholders. The next chapter draws on interviews with contributors to explore the 'how' behind these reforms, uncovering the strategic approaches and collaborative efforts that enabled their success. These insights offer guidance for countries seeking to transition from reactive responses to absence towards proactive laws and policies designed to support learning and well-being.

4. Understanding the Drivers of Change

Exploring how England, Finland, and Norway achieved attendance-related legal and policy reforms reveals themes that underpin success across all three countries. While each national context brings its own nuances, these common drivers of change have broader relevance, extending beyond any single setting. This chapter examines these drivers of change, offering a basis for reflection by advocates for young people's education and development. The subsequent chapter builds on this foundation, exploring how these insights could inform efforts to strengthen legal and policy frameworks in the Netherlands.

Theme 1: Collaboration

Collaboration played a pivotal role in the success of attendance-related reforms in the three countries. By encouraging coordinated efforts among key stakeholders—such as national ministries, local authorities, schools, and communities—these countries aligned diverse perspectives to address attendance challenges collectively. This multi-level approach, combining vertical collaboration (e.g., ministries working with local authorities) and horizontal engagement (e.g., partnerships among educators and professional associations), ensured that reforms were grounded in shared priorities and practical realities rather than imposed through top-down directives.

England

The Department for Education maintained a regular dialogue with professional associations, local authorities, and parents to ensure reforms reflected on-the-ground realities. A key focus of the dialogue was achieving greater consistency in attendance-related practices across the country.

This drive for consistency arose from recognising inequities caused by a lack of uniformity in addressing attendance and absence. For example, some head teachers authorised most absences, even for non-essential reasons, while others enforced stricter policies. Such variations meant students across different schools had unequal access to support, with some continuing to miss out on learning despite officially approved absences. Inputs from additional stakeholders, including the Children's Commissioner, further highlighted systemic inconsistencies in addressing attendance issues, including schools' varied use of attendance codes.

By incorporating diverse perspectives, the Department for Education identified best practices and addressed systemic gaps collaboratively. This feedback laid the foundation for reforms aimed at promoting consistency and accountability. The Working Together to Improve School Attendance statutory guidance operationalised these reforms by creating a national framework to standardise policies and procedures, promoting fairness, clarity, and effectiveness across schools and local authorities.

Anecdote – Shared Solutions

Education practitioners brought valuable on-the-ground insights to the reform process through regular stakeholder meetings with the Department for Education. They shared specific examples of challenges in managing attendance, such as inconsistent approaches to absence

authorisation or varying levels of support for families. This input directly informed refinements to the statutory guidance.

Finland

Finland's reform efforts were characterised by collaboration at every stage, guided by a multi-faceted, multi-level approach. This process united the Ministry of Education and Culture, the National Agency for Education, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, schools, municipalities, families, and professionals from various disciplines. Stakeholders played a crucial role by contributing through research, policy development, and municipal pilot programs organised in clusters, as well as by providing recommendations and reports that shaped the reforms. This cooperation was central to aligning law with practice.

The [VIP Network](#) played a significant role in shaping Finland's attendance-related reform process. As a network of professionals focused on supporting students with complex needs, VIP became an early catalyst for addressing challenges related to school absence. Through its connections with schools and municipalities, the VIP network identified absence as a key issue affecting students with complex needs. Schools frequently raised concerns about significant student absences, highlighting it as a pressing problem that required immediate attention.

A multi-disciplinary working group was established to address school absence concerns raised by the VIP network. Comprising ministerial advisers, representatives from the National Agency for Education, professors, the Finnish contributor to this report, and other professionals, the group played a pivotal role in shaping the reform process. For instance, it initiated a national survey to assess the prevalence of school absence, which drew the Ministry of Education and Culture's attention to the issue and laid the groundwork for reforms.

Municipal pilot programs, a key component of the Ministry of Education and Culture's SKY project (**S**itouttava **k**oulu**y**hteisötyö) launched in 2021, exemplify Finland's collaborative approach to reform. These pilots, organised in clusters of 4–10 municipalities, served as testing grounds for innovative attendance strategies. Feedback gathered during the pilots ensured that reforms were practical and grounded in everyday school experiences. Pilot coordinators, working closely with municipalities and national agencies, played a pivotal role in shaping legislation and the Core Curriculum. Iterative feedback loops between local programs and national bodies informed updates to the Core Curriculum and the introduction of proactive measures into official guidance.

As noted, the [Finnish Education Evaluation Centre](#) played a significant role in Finland's reform process. The Centre provided reports and recommendations, informed by surveys of municipalities, which helped shape policies. Their insights supported the Ministry of Education and Culture's efforts, including the introduction of the SKY framework, which operationalised a whole-school ethos to promote attendance and reduce absences by fostering collaboration across the school community.

Finland's collaborative and inclusive approach ensured that reforms were grounded in research and practical realities, successfully aligning diverse perspectives to achieve meaningful changes within just three years. The contributor highlighted that this success was not only due to structural collaboration but also to the dedication and expertise of skilled individuals working

towards a shared goal. She noted that having a dedicated coordinator in the Ministry was pivotal, yet the true game changer was the synergy and shared commitment among all involved.

Anecdote – Collaborative Fridays

For two and a half years, every Friday, the contributor from Finland met online with up to 30 coordinators from municipal pilot programs across the country. These meetings were dynamic forums where coordinators shared experiences from schools and municipalities, collaboratively tackled challenges, and developed new strategies. This regular and structured dialogue ensured that the national reform initiative stayed deeply connected to the realities of everyday school life.

Norway

Collaboration across sectors lies at the heart of Norway's approach to addressing attendance challenges and implementing new legal obligations. Education, health, and social services departments work in concert to align policy with practice, exemplifying the inter-agency cooperation that defines Norway's strategy.

A key feature of this cooperation is the development of national guidelines to support schools in interpreting and applying new laws. This inclusive process involves Statped, the Norwegian national service for special needs education, which contributes specialised expertise to address diverse student needs. By engaging a broad range of stakeholders—educators, health professionals, and social services—these efforts ensure that schools are equipped with practical tools to meet legal requirements effectively.

Anecdote – Shared Efforts, Clear Goals

The inter-agency working group, led by the Directorate for Education, brings together experts from education, health, and social services, to develop professional guidelines to support the new Education Act. By incorporating input from parents and students, consulting specialists, and reviewing research, the group ensures the guidelines are practical and evidence-based. More than just crafting recommendations, this collaborative effort aligns diverse perspectives to turn legal mandates into actionable strategies. Expected by 2026, the guidelines will offer clear steps for schools and municipalities, highlighting how shared efforts can drive meaningful change.

Cross-Country Insights for Driving Change

The experiences of England, Finland, and Norway underscore that meaningful collaboration is key to effective reforms. England demonstrated how practitioner engagement can inform practical policies that address systemic inequities in attendance practices. Finland highlighted the transformative potential of multi-level collaboration, where municipal pilots, research, and inclusive dialogue informed reforms, including updates to legislation and curriculum. Norway showcased the strength of blending formal inter-agency cooperation with grassroots advocacy, ensuring reforms addressed systemic challenges while resonating with local communities. Together, these examples illustrate how collaboration enhances the relevance of reforms.

Theme 2: Community Voice for Change

Community voices—expressed through grassroots advocacy and public feedback—play a vital role in shaping laws and policies. In England, Finland, and Norway, parents, advocacy groups, and local communities were instrumental in driving reforms. While grassroots input is related to the previously mentioned theme of collaboration, here it stands out as a distinct force, sharpening the focus of the reform process. By amplifying the everyday realities and priorities of those most affected, community voices ensured that policy changes were not only collaborative but also deeply practical and relevant.

England

Parent and practitioner feedback, gathered through consultation periods, stakeholder meetings, and open calls for submissions, played a key role in identifying challenges in attendance management. Concerns about inconsistencies in support and practice across England were a major focus, including variations in how attendance and absence were managed, inconsistent use of attendance codes, and differing applications of penalty notices by local authorities. Stakeholders also highlighted a lack of clarity in existing guidance, particularly regarding the roles of different stakeholders involved in managing attendance.

As an example of providing a structured platform for community input, the Department for Education published the initial [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#) guidance in May 2022. During the [public consultation](#) in February 2022, parents, local authorities, and schools provided feedback on improving consistency in attendance support. These on-the-ground insights were communicated directly to policymakers, shaping reforms that prioritised practical and transparent expectations in attendance policies.

This feedback underpinned the development of a more coherent and unified framework, embodied in the final Working Together to Improve School Attendance statutory guidance. It emphasised a 'support-first' ethos, focusing on understanding the root causes of absence and providing appropriate support rather than relying on punitive measures. Additionally, [a toolkit for schools](#), grounded in public-first research, was developed to help schools communicate effectively with families.

Anecdote – Voices in Balance

Not all stakeholders agreed with every aspect of the reforms outlined in the Working Together to Improve School Attendance guidance. For instance, some parents expressed concerns about mandatory daily data sharing by schools, viewing it as excessive state involvement. However, the overall belief was that these changes would benefit most young people and help align attendance policies with practical and transparent expectations.

Finland

The reform process in Finland began with growing concerns about rising student absences, initially raised by schools and later taken up by political parties. Recognising the vital role of educators, the Ministry of Education and Culture actively involved teachers in consultations and pilot programs. This collaboration fostered practical, adaptable solutions grounded in classroom realities.

Pilot projects, organised in clusters of municipalities, provided grassroots input that shaped Finland's National Model for Engaging School Community Work. These pilots tested innovative strategies, channelling school-level experiences into actionable reforms. Feedback from municipalities influenced updates to the Core Curriculum, laws, and policies, with coordinators ensuring pilot outcomes informed national guidance. This bottom-up approach empowered municipalities and schools as active participants rather than passive recipients, ensuring reforms were practical, responsive to local needs, and a testament to community-driven policymaking.

Feedback from parents, teachers, and practitioners was also gathered through structured forums and Finland's online legislative consultation platform. These channels connected policymakers with those closest to the challenges, ensuring reforms were proactive, rooted in real-life educational contexts, and reflective of diverse voices. Teachers, unions, and municipalities actively used the legislative consultation platform to influence policy changes, demonstrating Finland's commitment to transparency and inclusivity.

Anecdote – Amplifying Voices

Central to Finland's reform process was a commitment to amplifying community voices and aligning reforms with local needs. Key contributors to the reform process, drawing on their educational expertise and facilitation skills, built connections with teachers, municipal coordinators, and policymakers, creating opportunities for diverse voices to be heard and valued. By prioritising listening, fostering dialogue, and encouraging varied perspectives, they helped bring the insights and concerns of those closest to the challenges into the reform process. This inclusive approach transformed fragmented efforts into a cohesive movement, demonstrating how elevating community voices can drive practical, widely supported reforms rooted in shared ownership and collaboration.

Norway

Parent advocacy networks in Norway have played a role in shaping attendance-related legislative and policy reforms. These grassroots groups, primarily organised through social media platforms like Facebook, connected families, shared experiences, and amplified concerns about systemic issues such as inconsistent follow-up on absences. Their collective efforts exposed gaps between legal mandates and the realities faced by students and families, shifting the national conversation towards greater accountability in schools.

Parents became increasingly adept at leveraging legal frameworks to hold schools accountable, lodging complaints when their children's rights were unmet and effectively advocating for systemic change. A notable example was a coordinated social media campaign that garnered significant public attention and secured meetings with senior policymakers. Parents presented compelling data and personal stories, vividly illustrating the consequences of inadequate follow-up on absences. Their persistence was instrumental in the inclusion of explicit follow-up mandates in Section 10.6 of the Education Act, transforming shared concerns into enforceable legal obligations.

By turning individual struggles into collective advocacy, these networks have not only championed their own children's rights but also shaped policies to better serve all students. Their efforts demonstrate the power of community voices to drive meaningful, systemic change.

Anecdote – The Voices of the Absent

A turning point in shaping Norway's Education Act came when policymakers engaged directly with students and families. Parents raised concerns about schools blaming them for absences while ignoring deeper issues like bullying, feelings of unsafety, or inadequate support. They highlighted failures such as young people missing out on special education or being taught by unqualified staff. Parents also pushed for clearer legal language to hold schools accountable. This input shifted reform from enforcing attendance to fostering schools where students feel safe, supported, and motivated to return, ensuring policies reflected lived realities and drove meaningful change.

Cross-Country Insights for Driving Change

Grassroots advocacy and community voices have proven essential in transforming broad concerns into actionable reforms. By amplifying everyday realities, such as inconsistent school practices and unmet student needs, community input exposed systemic challenges and shaped the direction of policy. England's policymakers actively sought practitioner and parent feedback, Finland relied on insights from local pilot programs and structured forums, and Norway showcased how organised advocacy by parent networks elevated community concerns to the national agenda. In all three countries, these efforts ensured that reforms were practical, transparent, and closely aligned with the needs of those most affected. Together, these examples highlight how integrating community contributions into policymaking fosters reforms that are inclusive and responsive.

Theme 3: Research & Data

As collaborative priorities and goals become clearer, robust research serves as a critical tool, prompting policymakers to act and shaping the direction of their decisions. Moving beyond assumptions and subjective reasoning, a strong evidence base justifies the need for change, identifies effective strategies, and lends legitimacy to legal and policy reforms. In England, Finland, and Norway, research and data were instrumental in uncovering specific gaps and informing targeted reforms, ensuring these changes directly addressed tangible educational and well-being challenges.

England

Independent evaluations—including evidence from inspections by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)—and analyses of attendance patterns drove the push for greater consistency and a support-first approach in statutory guidance. For example, Ofsted was tasked with investigating attendance disparities following the pandemic, and identified best practices in schools with strong attendance rates, directly informing policy development. Research by the Children's Commissioner, including an analysis of attendance codes such as the inconsistent use of the 'B code', highlighted systemic gaps and reinforced the need for clarity and uniformity in data collection and usage.

The Department for Education also conducted extensive field visits to document best practices, observing successful strategies used in schools and local authorities with high attendance rates. These efforts ensured reforms were grounded in tested, practical solutions rather than abstract ideals. Studies by organisations such as ImpactEd further emphasised measuring the

effectiveness of interventions, refining the evidence base for policy development. This focus on evidence-based approaches extended to the [Education Endowment Foundation's](#) evaluation of attendance mentoring schemes. Together, these insights shaped the statutory guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#), which prioritised consistency, practical solutions, and a 'support first' ethos.

Anecdote – Data in Action

During their field visits, Department for Education officials encountered specific examples of how schools applied strategies to improve attendance. At one school, they observed a 'support-first' approach, where relationships with families were prioritised to uncover the reasons behind a student's absence. At another, they saw the use of data analysis to identify students in need of extra support, enabling early interventions to prevent persistent absence. These grounded, real-world practices underscored the importance of ensuring the statutory guidance reflected practical solutions rather than relying on assumptions.

Finland

Finland's reform efforts were firmly grounded in research, with national surveys, working group reports, and commissioned studies offering a comprehensive understanding of absence's prevalence, causes, and interventions. Anecdotal data gathered by the VIP Network highlighted the need for a systemic approach to attendance, prompting the formation of the multi-disciplinary working group. This group conducted the pivotal 2020 [study](#) on school non-attendance, which quantified the issue and captured the Ministry of Education and Culture's attention. Additional urgency stemmed from Finland's declining PISA[9] scores.

Research conducted in Finland inspired proactive measures, including the integration of attendance monitoring into the Core Curriculum and the development of the National Model for Engaging School Community Work ([Yhteisellä koulutiellä](#)). Created through an iterative feedback process involving municipal pilot programs, this framework was piloted across municipalities to standardise and enhance attendance practices. Serving as a practical guide for municipalities, it ensured reforms were adaptable to local needs while aligning with national guidelines for preventing, monitoring, and intervening in absences.

To ensure the effectiveness of these changes, evaluations are being conducted on the impact of Core Curriculum reforms on municipalities. This ongoing monitoring reflects Finland's dedication to assessing and refining reforms based on their outcomes.

Anecdote – The 2020 Survey as Wind in Finland's Sails

In Finland, transforming attendance policies began with a stark revelation. For years, concerns about absence raised by the VIP Network lacked concrete data. This changed in 2020 when a national survey, initiated by the multi-disciplinary working group as part of the VIP effort, quantified the problem for the first time. Conducted by the University of Jyväskylä and funded by the National Agency for Education, the survey revealed absence to be far more pervasive than assumed. The Ministry of Education and Culture used these findings to secure funding for the

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[9] PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) is a global triennial study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that assesses the academic performance of 15-year-old students in mathematics, science, and reading.

SKY project and lay the groundwork for reforms. The 2020 survey turned fragmented observations into actionable data, becoming a cornerstone of Finland's efforts to galvanise a unified policy response.

Norway

Comprehensive studies, especially a 2017 report by the Ombudsperson advocating for the rights of young people, revealed that absence often arose from unmet educational and well-being needs rather than parental neglect. These findings exposed systemic gaps in the support provided to young people with special needs and highlighted the need to clarify schools' legal responsibilities. Policymakers relied on this evidence to shape Section 10.6 of the Education Act, which mandates schools to systematically address absences. By grounding reforms in credible research, these changes strengthened accountability and empowered schools to take proactive responsibility for student attendance.

Anecdote - Evidence That Drove Reform

The 2017 report became a turning point for policymakers, providing irrefutable evidence of systemic failures in delivering mandated special education. It showed that absence often arose from insufficient school support, galvanising calls for clearer legal obligations. Policymakers leveraged this research to advocate for reforms, ensuring that changes were firmly rooted in evidence rather than assumptions. This demonstrates how robust data can catalyse policy changes that address deep-seated challenges.

Cross-Country Insights for Driving Change

The experiences of England, Finland, and Norway demonstrate that rigorous research underpins policymaking. By identifying gaps, clarifying needs, and highlighting proven strategies, data-informed approaches not only legitimise reforms but also provide actionable pathways to address systemic challenges. England exemplified how data collection and practical evaluations foster clarity and consistency in school attendance policies—through, for example, standardised coding, mandated daily data sharing, and a national penalty framework. Finland's iterative feedback loops showcased the importance of piloting and refining reforms to ensure they are adaptable to local contexts and aligned with national priorities. Norway illustrated how comprehensive studies, like the 2017 report by the Ombudsperson for Children, can uncover systemic gaps and directly inform legislative changes such as Section 10.6 of the Education Act. Each country's approach demonstrates how research-based and data-informed insights drive reforms that are relevant, build trust, and enhance the likely durability of policy changes.

Theme 4: Political Will & Cross-Party Support

Interviews confirmed that genuine commitment on the part of policymakers can transform collaborative ideas into enforceable mandates. In all three countries, political will was not a given but rather a cultivated force behind meaningful reforms.

England

Evidence of inconsistent support for young people and families highlighted the need for a national framework to standardise attendance policies and practices. Cross-party agreement proved instrumental in facilitating legislative amendments, as policymakers across party lines

recognised that improving attendance required a unified response. The Attendance Policy Team within the Department for Education—supported by bipartisan political backing—leveraged its expertise, aligning stakeholder input and research findings with political priorities to ensure practical and equitable reforms. Their efforts culminated in the statutory guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#), which emphasises consistent practices nationwide. Ultimately, this bipartisan alignment not only streamlined the reform process but also reinforced a collective commitment to reducing educational inequalities.

Anecdote – Unified Resolve

The contributor from England recalled that the reforms were originally part of a broader Schools Bill that was ultimately withdrawn. Rather than discarding these measures, the Department for Education isolated the attendance provisions and successfully navigated them through Parliament—thanks to steadfast cross-party support, even amidst government transitions. All parties recognised the urgency of improving attendance, ensuring these reforms remained a legislative priority.

Finland

In Finland, growing concerns about rising student absences coincided with falling PISA scores and pressure from municipalities, creating a sense of urgency for reform. The Ministry of Education and Culture took a proactive role, securing cross-party political support and financing 24 pilot projects across municipalities. These pilots were designed to test strategies for addressing school absence and engaging students in schooling, with the aim of developing a scalable operating model that could be adopted nationwide.

The Ministry collaborated with the National Agency for Education, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, the Institute for Health and Welfare, and other stakeholders to advance the reforms. A working group, including a ministerial adviser, academics, and experts, conducted a national survey quantifying school absences, which highlighted the scope of the issue and underscored the need for action. This evidence was instrumental in securing Ministry funding for the SKY project.

As part of the SKY project, pilot programs were strategically designed to engage municipalities and foster local buy-in. Municipalities received funding to test innovative approaches, such as tracking and addressing school absences, while schools trialled methods to enhance student engagement. Coordinators facilitated weekly and monthly discussions, ensuring that feedback from these pilots directly informed updates to laws, policies, and the Core Curriculum. Another important element in the reform process was the role of a dedicated coordinator within the Ministry, who orchestrated and aligned the reform efforts.

This collaborative approach transformed reforms from a top-down mandate into a shared, community-driven effort. The broad-based consensus among politicians, municipalities, and educators reinforced the Ministry's commitment to ensuring all young people had equitable opportunities for education. By aligning political will, evidence, and local insights, Finland achieved meaningful changes in attendance laws and policies.

Anecdote – When Politics and Evidence Align

Reforms in Finland were propelled by what the Finnish contributor described as "a lucky coincidence," though luck was only part of the story. A government program already prioritising school engagement aligned perfectly with a report on school absences, initiated by a working

group. This convergence of political will and robust data created an opportune moment for action. With school engagement high on the political agenda, policymakers were ready to act when presented with compelling evidence. This alignment transcended party lines, reflecting a shared recognition of the urgency for change. The combination of political consensus and evidence secured the funding and resources needed for the SKY project, enabling the implementation of new laws and the Core Curriculum.

Norway

Broad political consensus was central to advancing clear legal mandates to address student absences. This cross-party agreement extended beyond reducing absence to promoting educational inclusion and safeguarding every child's right to education through proactive follow-up measures. Policymakers recognised the urgency of reform, driven in part by economic concerns about the long-term costs of supporting young people who are not in education or employment.

The reforms to the Education Act were shaped by several interconnected drivers: broad political agreement, advocacy by parent networks, and research exposing systemic gaps in addressing absences. This alignment of priorities fostered a collaborative environment, ensuring the amendments passed through parliament with minimal resistance and uniting stakeholders around shared goals of equity, accountability, and improved educational outcomes.

Anecdote – United for Education

Interviews with the Norwegian contributors revealed how amendments to Norway's Education Act gained traction by aligning with the political priority of safeguarding every child's right to education. Cross-party commitment to reducing absence was bolstered by sustained advocacy from parent networks, whose efforts highlighted gaps in the system and emphasised the need for change. This alignment of advocacy and political will created a collaborative environment that ensured the legislative reforms were enacted with minimal resistance, demonstrating the power of shared priorities in driving impactful change.

Cross-Country Insights for Driving Change

Legislative reforms gain momentum when political leaders align their priorities with evidence, stakeholder advocacy, and public will. England, Finland, and Norway illustrate how broad political consensus and cross-party commitment can ensure reforms address systemic challenges while reflecting shared societal values. In England, bipartisan support facilitated the passage of reforms despite broader legislative hurdles, demonstrating the importance of sustained political resolve. Finland showcased how aligning political will with research findings and local insights enabled scalable, community-driven reforms. Norway exemplified how cross-party consensus, advocacy by parent networks, and economic considerations converged to prioritise educational inclusion and accountability. Together, these examples highlight that aligning political priorities with societal needs, evidence, and grassroots-informed practical realities fosters collaboration and ensures reforms resonate with the communities they serve.

From Reforming Abroad to Reforming at Home

The reform processes in England, Finland, and Norway highlight key drivers: effective collaboration that engages all relevant stakeholders, grassroots advocacy, data-informed strategies, and aligned political commitment. These approaches demonstrated how

participatory methods can address challenges effectively and build broad-based support, translating shared priorities into actionable frameworks that uphold every young person's right to education.

For the Netherlands, these examples offer valuable insights into strategies adaptable to its unique context. The next chapter presents practical recommendations to strengthen outcomes for young people, families, and school communities in the Netherlands.

5. Turning Knowledge Into Momentum

Ensuring optimal conditions for young people's learning and well-being relies on schools and the organisations assisting them transitioning from reactive responses to absence to proactive approaches to attendance. Achieving this shift requires reforms in laws and policies that prioritise prevention, early intervention, and holistic support for students and families. To steer towards a more proactive approach in the Netherlands, attendance-related laws and policies must foster environments where all students can engage and reach their full potential.

This chapter outlines recommendations for steering towards a more proactive approach to school attendance, aimed at fostering equitable, inclusive, and supportive educational environments. These recommendations are designed for all who advocate for young people's education and development, including INGRADO and other stakeholders such as municipalities, schools, families, and organisations working towards these shared goals.

Advancing proactive approaches to school attendance requires more than drafting and passing reforms alone; it depends on thorough preparation, including collaboration among stakeholders, clear goal-setting, and the development of essential practices to create the conditions for progress. Accordingly, this chapter presents recommendations as a framework for thoughtful reflection, adaptation, and application, ensuring the reform process is well-grounded and positioned to deliver meaningful outcomes.

Recommendations 1 to 4, outlined in the following pages, reflect the four themes explored in Chapter 4: stakeholder engagement, grassroots input, data-informed decision-making, and political backing. Together, they focus on the 'how' of reform—processes and actions that foster change. Building on these, Recommendation 5 introduces a collaborative approach to also establish the 'what' of reform—the key elements of change inspired by international examples. Collectively, the five recommendations provide practical guidance for translating insights into momentum towards legislative and policy improvements.

While some recommendations may seem self-evident and risk being overlooked, they are grounded in lessons from successful reforms in England, Finland, and Norway. These international examples offer actionable guidance for fostering progress in attendance-related policies and practices within the Dutch context, showing that even intuitive steps can play a pivotal role in driving transformative change.

To enhance their relevance and impact, each recommendation concludes with reflection questions designed to inspire deeper thinking and innovative approaches. These questions encourage advocates to explore how the recommendations—shaped by lessons from other countries—can inform and enrich their efforts, even if aspects of the recommendations may have been trialled previously. At the same time, responses to the recommendations must be adapted to the distinct realities and priorities of the local context, ensuring optimal support for Dutch young people's education and development.

Recommendation 1: Ensure All Hands Are On Deck

To create an environment where proactive attendance laws and policies can take shape, it is essential to involve all relevant stakeholders—municipalities, schools, families, the organisations that assist them, young people, policymakers, researchers, and others—from the

earliest stages of development. International insights suggest that reforms are more likely to succeed when the process is inclusive and collaborative.

This approach prioritises mutual understanding and relationship-building, helping address barriers such as mistrust or uncertainty. By fostering diverse input and shared ownership, stakeholders are more likely to feel invested in the outcomes. Furthermore, developing reforms aligned with practical, on-the-ground realities—a goal made more attainable through broad representation—increases the likelihood that the reforms will be embraced and implemented.

For instance, involving educators early in the process allows them to raise concerns—such as the risk of additional responsibilities—before policies are finalised. Collaboratively addressing these issues ensures that the resulting policies are realistic, practical, and more likely to be successfully implemented.

Practical Measures

To operationalise this inclusive approach, the initial focus should be on identifying and engaging diverse stakeholders early in the reform process. Systematically mapping relevant groups—such as municipalities, schools, families, the organisations that assist them, young people, policymakers, researchers, and others—ensures broad representation across sectors and regions. Establishing forums for dialogue allows stakeholders to share their priorities, insights, and concerns during the early design phase, fostering mutual understanding, trust, and ownership of the process.

Simple mechanisms like surveys or targeted consultations can complement these forums, actively engaging underrepresented groups and ensuring their voices are heard. This inclusivity helps to build a shared purpose and strengthens the foundation for collaborative reform.

By prioritising early and meaningful participation, these steps lay the groundwork for attendance-related reforms. Focusing on diverse representation and engagement embodies the 'all hands on deck' principle, setting the stage for effective collaboration.

Reflection Questions

1. How consistently are key groups brought together to collaboratively contribute to the reform process, and what steps could improve the frequency and impact of these interactions?
2. How can participation be broadened to include voices currently missing from the reform process, and in what ways might their inclusion shape and enrich the outcomes?
3. How can attendance-related reform efforts foster equity and inclusion by aligning diverse stakeholder contributions with existing specialised policies and initiatives?
4. To what extent have past efforts to 'ensure all hands are on deck' achieved their intended outcomes? What factors might explain instances where collaboration fell short of expectations?

Recommendation 2: Ensure Frontline Experiences Shape Reforms

Building on the emphasis on collaboration (Recommendation 1), this recommendation highlights the critical role of grassroots experiences in shaping proactive laws and policies. Genuine progress requires prioritising the insights of those most directly engaged with—and affected by—attendance laws and policies, including students, parents, educators, and

professionals in the municipality. Centring these voices ensures that reforms are practical, relevant, and reflective of real-world challenges and opportunities.

Examples discussed in Theme 2 of Chapter 4 demonstrate the value of grassroots input in successful reforms. In England, policymakers incorporated field-based insights; in Finland, local successes provided a foundation for legislative improvements; and in Norway, parent advocacy networks amplified community concerns to the national level. These cases illustrate that grassroots perspectives do not conflict with strategic guidance from government bodies. Instead, they complement it, adding practical depth and ensuring that reforms are grounded in lived experiences and real-world contexts.

Practical Measures

Operationalising this recommendation requires creating accessible and structured consultation channels that allow diverse stakeholders—students, parents, schools, and professionals in the municipality—to share their insights and concerns. A coordinating coalition (as outlined in Recommendation 5) tasked with synthesising this input can ensure grassroots perspectives meaningfully shape the reform process.

Locally focused surveys and user-friendly data-gathering tools are critical for capturing the everyday realities of those affected by attendance-related policies. Embedding researchers, practitioners, families, and schools in the design and implementation of these processes ensures they effectively reflect lived experiences, creating a strong foundation for grounded and relevant reforms.

Providing transparency on how frontline input shapes the reform process is essential. Publishing summaries of consultations and surveys, along with clear explanations of how these insights influence the reform process and policy drafts, demonstrates the value of grassroots contributions and builds trust and accountability among stakeholders.

Organising exchange visits or workshops with stakeholders in England, Finland, or Norway can further enhance understanding of how grassroots input has been successfully embedded into national reform efforts. These exchanges would offer practical, real-world examples of how consultation and collaboration lead to improved legislative outcomes.

Reflection Questions

1. What mechanisms are being implemented—or could be implemented—to systematically identify and document frontline experiences that inform policymaking, ensuring diverse perspectives are included?
2. How can consultation processes ensure that insights from frontline stakeholders—such as the consultation approach used by the U.K.'s Department for Education—are thoughtfully integrated into legislative proposals, fostering alignment between policy design and lived experiences?
3. To what extent have past efforts to 'ensure frontline experiences shape reforms' achieved their intended outcomes? What factors might explain any gaps, and how can future efforts address these challenges?

Recommendation 3: Anchor Reforms in Data & Best Practices

Proactive attendance-related laws and policies that genuinely support students, uphold their right to quality education, and improve attendance must be built on a foundation of robust research and reliable data. Research drives reform by highlighting the need for greater attention to attendance challenges and identifying effective solutions. Best practices, grounded in evidence, help shape reforms that address real-world challenges and improve outcomes for young people.

Insights from England and Finland illustrate how proven approaches informed legislative design, resulting in reforms that effectively tackled persistent attendance challenges. By leveraging evidence-based insights, advocates for young people's education and development can build a compelling case for reform and guide its development.

Practical Measures

Effectively embedding research and data into the reform process requires mechanisms to ensure robust data collection and purposeful use of evidence, while fostering a smooth, transparent, and engaging process for stakeholders.

Developing standardised templates and protocols for schools and municipalities to report attendance-related metrics consistently is an essential first step. This approach ensures data comparability across contexts and generates actionable insights to guide reforms.

Equally important is commissioning research to uncover the key factors driving improved attendance and well-being outcomes. This includes leveraging international qualitative studies—such as insights from young people, parents, and professionals—while conducting research that captures Dutch-specific perspectives. Together, these efforts ensure reforms are grounded in both global evidence and the lived experiences of local stakeholders.

Piloting evidence-based practices in selected schools or municipalities before full-scale implementation can generate valuable data on their impact, gather feedback to refine reforms, adjust strategies based on real-world insights, and build confidence among stakeholders.

Creating and managing platforms to share research findings and foster meaningful engagement around the insights is also critical. Mechanisms such as data-anchored roundtables, workshops, and dedicated working groups can provide opportunities for dialogue, build trust, and ensure alignment among stakeholders regarding reform goals and priorities. Additionally, creating an accessible, centralised platform—such as an online dashboard—can enable stakeholders to share and access research findings, including best practices and data insights. This platform would streamline the exchange of information and ensure that stakeholders stay informed and actively engaged throughout the reform process.

To ensure transparency and accountability, those involved in the reform process could publish clear summaries of how data and evidence are being used to inform decisions, demonstrating how analytical insights shape priorities and actions.

Reflection Questions

1. What mechanisms are being implemented—or could be implemented—to systematically identify and document effective practices already in place across the country, ensuring they inform the reform process?

2. How can insights gathered from data and best practices be used to shape proactive laws and policies, ensuring alignment with both evidence and stakeholder priorities?
3. To what extent have past efforts to 'anchor reforms in data and best practices' been successful? What challenges were encountered, and how can they be addressed to enhance future efforts?

Recommendation 4: Cultivate Political Support

Political support is critical for translating frontline experiences, stakeholder insights, and research findings into meaningful reforms. Building on the foundations established in Recommendation 2 (ensuring frontline experiences shape reform) and Recommendation 3 (anchoring reform in data and best practices), this recommendation emphasises the importance of cultivating and sustaining political support. Securing such support—even for widely shared priorities such as equity, well-being, and long-term educational benefits—is not an afterthought but a catalyst for achieving reform.

Achieving this alignment requires engaging policymakers across the political spectrum early and consistently. Grounding discussions in frontline insights, evidence, and shared principles enables proposals to gain traction across diverse political perspectives. While partisan divides can present challenges, interviews with contributors to this report underscore that open dialogue and a focus on shared priorities can help bridge gaps and pave the way for impactful reforms. Examples from countries like Finland and England illustrate how supportive political environments can drive progress, inspiring stakeholders to champion similar efforts.

Anticipating legislative complexities and fostering flexibility in the design of laws and policies aimed at improving outcomes for young people are essential strategies for navigating potential challenges. A relevant example is England's experience with the Schools Bill. When the bill faced significant obstacles in Parliament and was ultimately withdrawn, the Department for Education adapted by breaking its proposals into smaller, standalone measures, many of which were successfully passed. This adaptive and incremental approach highlights the importance of maintaining momentum and ensuring progress, even when comprehensive legislative efforts encounter setbacks.

Practical Measures

Efforts to cultivate political support should prioritise fostering trust and alignment among diverse political stakeholders. Cross-party forums can serve as platforms to identify and clarify shared priorities—such as equity, well-being, and long-term educational benefits—while grounding discussions in experiences, data, and evidence from national and international contexts. These forums enable open dialogue, allowing policymakers to explore mutual interests and establish a foundation for collaboration.

Within these forums, linking proactive attendance measures to improved educational outcomes and highlighting examples from other countries where reforms have been accompanied by on-the-ground support for proactive laws and policies can emphasise the tangible benefits of reform initiatives.

Organising exchange visits with England's Attendance and Policy Team could offer firsthand insights into effective strategies for securing and sustaining political backing. These visits could also demonstrate the value of adaptive approaches, such as breaking comprehensive

legislative proposals into incremental steps to overcome challenges while maintaining reform momentum.

Reflection Questions

1. What mechanisms can be used—or developed—to map proposed reforms against widely endorsed political priorities, ensuring they resonate with core values across party lines?
2. How can data be identified, generated, and presented to highlight the value of reform and its relevance to shared political priorities, fostering broad-based support?
3. Which trusted advisers or advocates could be seconded to Ministry-led attendance initiatives to strengthen the credibility and practical relevance of proposed reforms, strengthening political resolve?
4. To what extent have past efforts to 'cultivate political support' achieved their intended outcomes? What challenges were encountered, and how can they be addressed to enhance future efforts?

Recommendation 5: Co-Create a Framework

Before proactive laws and policies can be developed, it is essential to establish a clear understanding of the challenges and priorities that need to be addressed. In the countries examined—England, Finland, and Norway—this preparatory phase was critical in ensuring reforms were grounded in evidence and aligned with real-world needs.

Key partners in the Netherlands can collaboratively and iteratively develop a strategic framework to facilitate the achievement of optimally proactive attendance-related laws and policies. Designed to align reform efforts, the framework fosters system-wide coherence and clarifies shared priorities while maintaining the flexibility to evolve. By prioritising universal support strategies, addressing all forms of absence, and equipping families, schools, and the organisations assisting them with robust guidance and resources, the framework ensures preventative measures are in place before students become disengaged from education. Components from this framework could inform—or eventually transition into—statutory guidance tailored to the Dutch context.

Operating as the 'Collective Initiative Reforming Care and Learning Equity' (CIRCLE), this coalition of stakeholders develops the framework that lays the foundation for attendance-related reform. As a 'Collective Initiative,' CIRCLE embodies unity and shared purpose, recognising that systemic change requires meaningful collaboration among diverse stakeholders rather than the efforts of a single organisation. 'Reforming' reflects the coalition's focus on preparing for proactive laws and policies. 'Care' underscores a compassionate, human-centred approach, demonstrating that attendance is not simply about young people being at school but about nurturing well-being and fostering holistic development—cases in this report illustrate that support-first strategies are integral to proactive approaches. 'Learning Equity' highlights the commitment to fairness and justice, ensuring that every young person's right to education is upheld through proactive measures designed to address systemic barriers. By uniting values-driven goals with purposeful, action-oriented processes, CIRCLE establishes a dynamic framework for driving meaningful reform.

To achieve its goals, CIRCLE draws on the expertise and perspectives of a diverse range of organisations and stakeholders, ensuring representation that reflects both breadth and inclusivity in developing its framework for attendance-related reform. These include INGRADO,

the Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, the PO-Raad, the VO-Raad and its Steunpunt Passend Onderwijs, the MBO Raad, the Kennisnetwerk Schoolaanwezigheid, Ouders en Onderwijs, Oudervereniging Balans, Adviesraad ÉigenWijsheid, the Gelijke Kansen Alliantie, and advisers from the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science. Grassroots stakeholders from education, health, and youth and family services also play an integral role in CIRCLE's work. As a coalition, CIRCLE fosters inclusive cooperation while preventing dominance by any single entity. Its processes incorporate accountability measures to ensure partners remain committed to shared goals and that the framework's development reflects the input of all participants.

Once stakeholders are engaged (Recommendation 1), CIRCLE shifts its focus to co-creating a framework that reflects shared goals and actionable strategies for fostering proactive, inclusive, and equity-focused attendance-related practices. Sustained grassroots input ensures the framework reflects lived experiences and addresses local realities (Recommendation 2). It is further grounded in data and evidence-based practices, providing practical and context-specific attendance-related solutions (Recommendation 3). Aligning the framework with broader policy goals is achieved through the graduated involvement of Ministry advisers (Recommendation 4). Their participation is adaptable, reflecting the nature of existing working relationships between policymakers and other stakeholders. Initially, Ministry advisers may serve as periodic consultants, offering technical advice. As trust and collaboration deepen, their role can expand to ensure closer alignment between CIRCLE's work and overarching policy objectives.

Progressively, the framework developed through CIRCLE would consolidate key elements of a proactive approach to attendance into a cohesive document, serving as a precursor to statutory guidance. Developing a shared theory of change would be a critical initial step, enabling CIRCLE to define core roles, clarify whether improved attendance is the ultimate outcome or part of a broader vision for equitable and inclusive education, and ensure partnerships are aligned with these shared priorities. The iterative development of this framework would then ensure that high-level reform goals are translated into actionable, context-specific strategies tailored to the Dutch context.

While the framework will ultimately reflect the specific needs and priorities identified by CIRCLE collaborators, it can also draw inspiration from insights discussed in Chapter 3. For example:

- **England:** Statutory guidance emphasises standardised attendance codes and leadership accountability in the form of 'Senior Attendance Champions'.

- **Finland:** Proactive attendance monitoring and transparent data-use protocols are integrated into the national curriculum, offering a foundation for consistent practices while allowing room for local adaptation.

- **Norway:** Systematic follow-up on absences is emphasised in the revised Education Act, with clearly defined roles for schools, municipalities, and other stakeholders.

CIRCLE's focus encompasses both the content of the framework—proactive attendance-related practices and recommendations for laws and policies—and how the implementation of these practices will be effectively supported. By providing clear guidance and advocating for the necessary resources to implement these practices, CIRCLE ensures the framework is not only a vision but also a practical tool for driving sustainable progress. This dual focus on content and implementation strengthens the framework's capacity to improve attendance and promote equity in education across diverse contexts.

Privacy considerations are crucial for fostering trust and ensuring the framework's effective implementation. Finland and England highlight the importance of privacy compliance and transparency in building stakeholder confidence. Finland integrated transparent data-use protocols into their curriculum, while England embedded clear data protection guidelines in statutory frameworks. Incorporating similar measures into the Dutch framework will align attendance-related practices with robust privacy standards and strengthen stakeholder alignment. (For details, see Appendix D.)

Practical Measures

Establishing the CIRCLE involves practical steps to ensure a strong foundation for its operations. Building on the stakeholder mapping outlined in Recommendation 1, the CIRCLE's early phases should focus on engaging a broad and representative group of participants to ensure its work reflects diverse perspectives. INGRADO could facilitate this by coordinating outreach, defining collaborative processes and leadership roles, and organising an inaugural meeting to set initial objectives and develop participation criteria that promote balanced representation. Additionally, INGRADO might assist in drafting a foundational charter that outlines the CIRCLE's mission, decision-making processes, and strategies for fostering collaboration. By laying these operational foundations, CIRCLE begins its work with clear objectives and a structure that supports effective collaboration.

Once CIRCLE is established, its initial focus can include defining the framework's core principles. Another early task is to consult data protection experts to ensure robust privacy measures are integrated from the outset. The CIRCLE can also work on clarifying strategic leadership roles, such as appointing 'Senior Attendance Champions' within schools, to emphasise accountability and leadership in attendance initiatives. INGRADO, as a national association for school attendance officers, could contribute by defining how attendance officers support these champions in their roles. For further insights, Appendix E highlights the contrasting roles of attendance officers in the countries featured in this report.

The CIRCLE should establish robust feedback systems to enable stakeholders to evaluate and refine its activities and outcomes continuously. Stakeholder liaisons, serving as communication bridges between their respective organisations or communities and CIRCLE, can facilitate two-way feedback, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives remain integral to the process (Recommendation 2). Complementary systems—such as online platforms and physical forums—can provide accessible channels for stakeholders to share input, track progress, and stay informed about CIRCLE's work. To enhance trust and reinforce shared ownership, CIRCLE should publish transparent summaries showing how feedback is used to shape decisions and activities.

The CIRCLE can also facilitate the development and trialling of self-assessment tools for schools and professional groups. These tools would help stakeholders evaluate their practices, identify areas for improvement, and better support young people's education and development opportunities, aligning closely with Recommendation 3. Insights gathered from these assessments would feed directly into the CIRCLE's work, fostering an iterative process of refinement and collaboration. By embedding this feedback loop and testing components of the framework in real-world settings, CIRCLE ensures that the guidance remains practical, grounded in lived experiences, and adaptable. These steps enhance the framework's relevance and establish a solid foundation for its eventual transition into legislation.

Reflection Questions

1. What mechanisms can be implemented to ensure stakeholders play a sustained and active role in shaping CIRCLE's framework, fostering genuine collaboration?
2. Which priorities within a pre-statutory framework should be addressed first to build credibility among stakeholders and generate momentum for eventual legislative reforms?
3. How can applying a theory of change approach enhance CIRCLE's framework, ensuring its immediate priorities align with shared long-term goals across stakeholders? (See Kearney et al., 2022.)
4. What key lessons from past attempts to 'co-create a framework' can guide the development of CIRCLE's framework to ensure it is impactful—for both the reform process and, ultimately, for young people?

6. Steering Towards Our Proactive Approach

There is local and global recognition that proactive approaches are essential for addressing attendance challenges. These approaches can dismantle barriers to learning and well-being, ensuring equitable access to and engagement in education for every young person. A growing number of countries are already adopting such approaches, creating new possibilities for equitable and inclusive quality education. As the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2021) reminds us, "Now is the time to accelerate implementation of the right to education, taking into account all the barriers holding it back" (p. 3).

The metaphor of a sailboat's captain charting a thoughtful course embodies the proactive mindset: anticipating attendance challenges and adapting with care, by fostering supportive school environments that prevent small issues from escalating into chronic problems. Proactive systems gain their strength by enabling municipalities, schools, families, and the organisations that assist them to address both barriers and facilitators of attendance. By decisively steering towards a proactive approach, the Netherlands has the opportunity to create a legislative framework that ensures education is accessible, supportive, and beneficial for all, laying the foundation for every young person's learning and well-being.

Revisiting the question introduced in Chapter 1 brings us back to the central issue: How can attendance-related laws and policies in the Netherlands chart a stronger course, steering away from a reactive focus on absence and decisively navigating towards a proactive approach to attendance? This report offers a compass for advocates in the Netherlands striving to advance a proactive vision for young people's learning and well-being. Drawing on the experiences of attendance-related reforms in England, Finland, and Norway, it outlines potential elements of reform (Chapter 3) and highlights key drivers of change (Chapter 4) to support this shift. These international examples provide both inspiration and practical strategies for Dutch legislative reforms that are ambitious yet achievable.

The co-creation of a strategic foundation, as outlined in Recommendation 5 (Chapter 5), reflects a commitment to proactive change and establishes the conditions needed to initiate and sustain meaningful reform. This process includes uniting stakeholders, fostering sustained collaboration, encouraging thoughtful reflection, consolidating priorities, and ensuring the ability to adapt to evolving needs. Ultimately, this groundwork will support the development of a legislative framework that empowers municipalities, schools, families, and the organisations that assist them, to uphold every young person's right to education and development.

The guidance in this report serves as a compass for navigating the way forward. The real challenge now lies in harnessing the winds of change to bring this proactive vision to life, aligning with the global movement to uphold every young person's right to education.

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Appendix A: Overview of Invitations Sent

Country	Number of Invitees
Australia	2
Belgium	2
Canada	8
Chile	3
Czechia	1
Denmark	2
England	2
Finland	1
France	1
Germany	3
Ireland	5
Italy	3
New Zealand	1
Norway	6
Scotland	2
Spain	3
Sweden	6
USA	5
Total	**56**

Appendix B: Interview Schedules

Schedule for the Screening Interview

1. Relationship-Building

Brief rapport-building to establish a comfortable discussion environment.

2. Introducing the Interview

- **Goal:** Clarify and explore changes in laws and/or policies to determine the value of the case for deeper exploration.
- **Structure:** Overview of the discussion format and topics.
- **Permission to Record:** Request consent to record the interview.

3. Exploring Survey Responses (7a-7f)

For each 'yes' response:

- **Nature of Change:** Was it a change in laws, policies, or both?
  7a – Right to education
  7b – Attendance included or emphasised
  7c – Promotion of attendance included or emphasised
  7d – Proactive support measures included
  7e – Role of attendance officer or related professional
  7f – Other: [Specify]
- **Timing of Change:** When did the change occur?
  (Options: <6 months / 1–2 years / 5 years / 10 years / >10 years)

For a 'yes' response to 7b ('attendance' included or emphasised):

- What changed?
- Was there a shift from focusing on 'unauthorised absence' to all absences?
- Is 'attendance' explicitly included as a term in the law/policy?

For a 'yes' response to 7e (role of the attendance officer or other professional):

- How did the role change (e.g., from primarily enforcement to support)?

4. Exploring Additional Changes

Discuss any relevant changes beyond the survey responses.

5. Topics Not Included in Survey

Have there been changes in laws or policies related to:
a. Recording attendance/absence (e.g., what is recorded, frequency).
b. Reporting attendance/absence (e.g., what is reported, frequency, recipients).
c. Using attendance/absence data (e.g., what data is used, how it is used).
d. Monitoring attendance/absence (e.g., by whom, frequency).
e. Responsibilities for attendance/absence (e.g., who is accountable, in what ways).
f. Enforcement of laws/policies (e.g., response time to absence, enforcement process).
g. Home education:
- Does the law allow for the provision of home education?
- Is it a right?
- Have laws or policies related to home education changed?
- If home education is permitted, what oversight exists regarding its quality?

6. Clarifying Survey Responses

Address any unclear survey responses, ensuring accuracy.

7. Requesting Documentation

Ask for relevant documents or website links detailing the changes discussed.

8. Individual-Specific Questions

Tailor additional questions based on the interviewee's survey responses or background.

9. Next steps

- Notify the interviewee about selection for an In-Depth Interview.
- Inform them of the honorarium for participation in an In-Depth interview.
- Express gratitude for their contribution to the project.

10. Extra Questions (Time Permitting)

- Are you aware of the number/percentage of young people in your country/state unable to exercise their right to education? If so:
  (a) How many?
  (b) How is this information obtained?
  c. What are the main reasons young people are unable to exercise their right?
- Is 'safety at school' included in laws and/or policies?

Schedule for the In-Depth Interview

1. Reconnecting (as needed)

- Brief re-establishment of rapport to create a comfortable discussion environment.

2. Introducing the Interview

- **Goals:** To gain insights into how changes in laws and policies were achieved in your context. This includes understanding the context behind the changes and the processes involved to provide practical guidance for creating similar changes in the Netherlands.
- **Structure:** Overview of the discussion format and topics.
- **Permission to Record:** Request consent to record the discussion.

3. Discussing the Context for Change: 'Why' Did Changes Occur?

a. **Reminder:** Refer to changes indicated in the survey and screening interview.
b. **Open Question:** What are your perspectives on why these changes occurred?
c. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- Was there an increase in absence? How was this identified?
- Did public sentiment, community feedback, or consultations influence the changes?
- Were specific groups or societal influences key drivers?
- How did political priorities or financial considerations influence change?
- What role did research, data, or expert recommendations play?
- Were international laws, frameworks, or examples influential?
- Did historical context or past reform attempts play a role?
d. **Outcomes:** What were the intended outcomes of these changes? Were they specified?

4. Exploring the Agents of Change: Who Was Involved?

a. **Open Question:** Who were the key agents driving changes in laws and policies?
b. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- Were there key individuals?
- Were there key organisations?
- Were there interest groups advocating for change (e.g., boards of education, attendance officers, school districts)?

5. Exploring the Processes of Change: How Were Changes Achieved?

a. **Open Question:** How did people or organisations convince lawmakers of the need for change?
b. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- How was the message about 'the need for change' communicated to gain support?
- How were other stakeholders engaged in the process of change?
- Were there pivotal events or actions that shifted perspectives or spurred action?

6. Timeframe for Change

- How long did it take for changes in laws and/or policies to occur?

7. Exploring Barriers and Opportunities

a. **Open Question:**
- What barriers did your country/state face in changing laws and/or policies?

b. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- Was there resistance from stakeholders?

c. **Open Question:**
- What role, if any, did privacy concerns related to student attendance data play during the process of changing laws or policies?

d. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- To what extent was the privacy of student-related data discussed during the process of changing laws and/or policies?
- Were privacy concerns raised by any stakeholders, and if so, by whom?
- Did privacy concerns create any barriers to changing laws and/or policies?
- If privacy concerns became a barrier, what steps were taken to address them?

e. **Open Question:**
- How did key stakeholders in your country/state effectively build support for changes in laws and policies?

f. **Follow-Up Questions (as needed):**
- What specific actions were taken to create or enhance opportunities for changes in laws and policies?
- Were there significant barriers they encountered, and if so, how were these addressed?
- What strategies were used to build support for creating change?

8. Considering the Impact of Changes

- What do you know about the impact of these changes (anecdotally or empirically)?
- Are there projects or processes in place to monitor their impact?

9. Addressing Information Gaps

- Address any remaining gaps identified during prior interviews. If time is short, follow up on these via email.

10. Final Advice

- What advice would you give to INGRADO and Dutch policymakers about changing laws and policies related to attendance, absence, and the right to education?

11. Next Steps

a. **Reporting:** Explain how the information will be used in the report.
b. **Further Consultation:** Notify interviewees of potential follow-ups for clarification.
c. **Honorarium:** Explain the process for claiming the honorarium.
d. **Gratitude:** Thank the interviewee for their valuable contribution.

Appendix C: Recording and Reporting Attendance Data

This appendix complements the information in Chapter 3 by focusing on practices related to recording and reporting data on school attendance and absence (hereafter referred to as 'attendance data'). While Chapter 3 highlights recent legislative and policy reforms, this appendix provides broader context, detailing practical aspects of recording and reporting. Some material overlaps, as certain reforms discussed in Chapter 3 directly relate to these practices, but the appendix also includes information beyond the scope of recent changes. For further insights into attendance data practices in the three countries featured in this report, see the special issue of *Orbis Scholae* on data recording, reporting, and use across 13 countries (Heyne, Keppens, & Dvořák, 2022b).

In this appendix, 'recording' refers to practices such as roll marking, registering presence and absence, or monitoring, while 'reporting' involves sharing recorded data with relevant stakeholders. While the focus here is on the recording and reporting of attendance data, it is important to note that a separate and broader challenge lies in measuring and addressing the 'Three P's'—presence, participation, and progress (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). These concepts reflect a holistic understanding of attendance, extending beyond a narrow focus on 'getting kids to school' without regard for their well-being. Instead, the 'Three P's' represent a commitment to creating opportunities for young people to thrive: 'presence' involves being in an educational environment that best meets their needs; 'participation' entails active engagement in educational activities, going beyond physical presence; and 'progress' includes not only academic growth but also social-emotional development. This broader challenge of fostering presence, participation, and progress falls beyond the scope of this appendix.

England

(a) Recording data on school attendance and absence

The Working Together to Improve School Attendance document introduced updates to enhance consistency and accuracy in recording attendance and absence in England. Schools are required to use nationally standardised attendance and absence codes, ensuring consistent tracking of whether students are present, absent, or attending approved educational activities. These codes apply uniformly to all young people, regardless of age—including those younger or older than compulsory school age—and help schools, local authorities, and the government monitor education delivery and understand reasons for absence. For a neat summary of these codes, refer to this document.

Attendance registers, which must be maintained electronically to improve accuracy and facilitate data sharing, are taken at the start of each morning session and once during each afternoon session. Schools use these registers to record attendance and note reasons for absence using appropriate codes. The codes also apply to off-site educational activities, such as sports, work experience, or trips. In such cases, schools remain responsible for safeguarding students and must be notified of any absences. Similarly, students receiving remote education while absent from school must still be recorded as absent using the most appropriate code.

Schools are required to establish clear policies on lateness, including how long registers remain open. Late arrivals are discouraged, and students arriving after the register closes are marked

absent. When the reason for absence is unknown at the time of recording, it must initially be marked with Code N, and the correct code must be entered within five school days.

As legal records, attendance registers must be preserved for six years. Any amendments, such as changes to original entries, must be fully documented, including the original entry, the amendment, the reason, the date, and the name of the person making the change. Amendments are allowed only when the reason for absence was unknown at the time of recording, and a correction is required later.

(b) Reporting data on school attendance and absence

England now requires all schools, except independent schools, to share daily student-level attendance data with the Department for Education. This process is facilitated by the automated extraction of data directly from school information management systems via Wonde, a third-party platform independent of schools, local authorities, and the government. The system facilitates consistent and accurate data sharing without imposing additional administrative burdens on schools. Schools and local authorities can securely access their data through a password-protected portal.

In addition to daily reporting to the Department for Education, schools are legally required to share attendance data with local authorities at least monthly, although more frequent automated sharing is encouraged to enhance the monitoring and support of school attendance. Local authorities are expected to coordinate with schools to establish the frequency of these data returns. The shared data includes the names of students of compulsory school age who fail to attend regularly or have been absent for ten consecutive school days with unauthorised absences, notifications when a student's name is added to or deleted from the school admission register, and information about students recorded as ill where there are reasonable grounds to believe they will miss 15 consecutive or cumulative school days due to sickness. Local authorities are authorised to access the attendance and admission registers of all types of schools to fulfil their functions under the Education Acts and support joint working, with the ability to take digital or physical extracts of these registers as needed.

These reporting measures, including daily data sharing with the Department for Education and regular updates to local authorities, aim to strengthen attendance management across schools and local authorities. Thus, alongside these reporting expectations, the guidance highlights the importance of tools such as the 'View Your Education Data' platform. This platform offers schools near real-time access to student-level attendance data, allowing them to monitor trends, compare outcomes across different cohorts at local and national levels, and pinpoint areas where intervention is most needed. By examining patterns beyond headline percentages—such as specific attendance codes, days of poor attendance, or subjects with low participation—schools can implement targeted strategies to support students and families, focusing their efforts on those requiring the most assistance.

Finland

In Finland, a legal change now requires education providers—typically municipalities[10]—to systematically prevent, monitor, and address absences. The approach has evolved from

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[10] Municipalities are considered education providers, responsible for organising and delivering basic education through municipal schools, managing funding and administration, and implementing curricula based on the national Core Curriculum, while ensuring education is accessible and free for all students.

focusing solely on unauthorised absences to addressing all absences, recognising their broader impact on learning and well-being. Schools are not only expected to record absences but also to actively use this data to understand and promote student well-being.

(a) Recording data on school attendance and absence

In Finland, in both primary and secondary schools, absences are mainly recorded by lesson. The collection of this data serves several key purposes: enabling early intervention in absences, ensuring timely support for students, and informing parents or guardians of absences as soon as possible. Additionally, the data helps detect risk factors, supporting the development of local models for preventing and addressing absences.

Efforts to harmonise attendance and absence data recording began with recognising significant variation in how municipalities categorised absences, with over 60 different categories identified. This inconsistency created barriers to systematic monitoring and hindered the development of comprehensive national absence records.

To address these inconsistencies and move towards more harmonised practices, the Ministry of Education and Culture recommended a standardised classification system. Developed with input from coordinators of pilot projects, this system aims to enable consistent data use across localities and serves as a step towards creating national data on absences. Although not legally mandated, the system categorises absences into five types.

- **Absences related to health reasons** include situations where a student is physically absent due to illness or appointments related to physical or mental health care, such as visits to a dentist, therapy, or surgery.
- **Pre-arranged leave** refers to absences requested in advance by a guardian, such as for a holiday trip, participation in hobbies, or staying with a remote parent.
- **Other authorised absences** apply only to cases that do not fit into other categories, such as self-quarantine or unexpected family situations.
- **Unauthorised absences, explained**, include instances of truancy or tardiness longer than one lesson that, although classified as unauthorised, are later explained by a parent or teacher.
- **Unexplained absences** occur when the school does not know why the student is absent; these can later be clarified by a teacher or parent/guardian, allowing the category to be updated accordingly.

Certain situations are not classified as absences in statistics. These include participation in authorised school activities, recorded as 'other school work, present,' such as attending student welfare services or student association tasks, and 'studying elsewhere,' covering cases like attending a hospital school or following an agreed shortened school day or week. Additionally, 'tardiness shorter than one lesson' is recorded as attendance, with the duration of the tardiness noted.

Piloted in numerous municipalities, this classification system was found to be comprehensive and effective. While municipalities are not required to adopt the system, reflecting Finland's decentralised education model, most have chosen to implement it.

In addition to monitoring school attendance, municipalities are also required to oversee the progress of home-schooled students. This ensures that all students, regardless of their educational setting, remain connected to learning and receive appropriate support.

(b) Reporting data on school attendance and absence

In Finland, schools are required to report absence data to their respective municipalities. However, the frequency and timing of these reports are not specified by law, allowing municipalities to establish their own practices. Many municipalities have adopted a system where schools report three times per year, though this is not a legally mandated requirement.

Municipalities use this data to monitor and address attendance issues at the local level, aligning with Finland's decentralised education model, which prioritises local governance and community-based solutions over centralised oversight. While there is no national reporting system, the Ministry of Education and Culture encourages municipalities to adopt the five-category absence classification system to harmonise data practices and enable more consistent use of data across localities.

Effective use of recorded and reported data is critical for supporting student well-being and attendance management. Absence data guides interventions at various levels. For all students, it informs preventative measures, such as fostering a positive school environment that encourages regular attendance. For students with increased or prolonged absences, data helps identify those needing targeted support, often involving student welfare professionals. In severe cases of persistent absence, reported data supports the design of intensive interventions involving multidisciplinary teams or external services to address complex issues comprehensively.

In addition to informing interventions, reported data supports compliance with specific legal obligations. Education providers—typically municipalities—are required to notify parents or guardians of unauthorised absences as soon as possible. While this responsibility formally rests with the education provider, schools typically handle the practical implementation under municipal guidance. Resources like the handbook Our Common School Path provide practical advice for engaging students and families. For instance, the handbook recommends proactive discussions when absences reach 5–10% and highlights the importance of involving student welfare professionals promptly when absences increase or become prolonged.

This integrated approach to reporting and using data underscores Finland's commitment to aligning attendance management with broader goals of student well-being and equitable education.

Norway

In Norway, monitoring student attendance and following up on absences is legally required to ensure students receive the education and support they are entitled to. Municipalities and county authorities are responsible for tracking attendance and intervening when students are absent, focusing on improving their chances of completing education. This points to the critical role of attendance data in identifying at-risk students and monitoring progress. However, while a new law mandates follow-up on absences, it provides no specific guidance on how attendance data should be recorded or reported. This lack of clarity contributes to inconsistent practices across municipalities, making it difficult to ensure effective support for students.

The government is working towards a uniform national system to enable all schools to consistently record and monitor attendance data. This initiative aims to foster a proactive approach to attendance issues, with an emphasis on student support and well-being. A national system would help schools meet legal obligations more effectively by enabling early

identification of attendance problems, timely communication with families, and targeted interventions to prevent chronic absence. Whether the system will be mandated by law or implemented through guidelines remains unclear.

(a) Recording data on school attendance and absence

The recording of attendance and absence data in Norway remains inconsistent, largely due to the absence of a unified national system. This has resulted in varied documentation practices across municipalities and schools, making it difficult to assess absence trends accurately or implement timely interventions. Inconsistent terminology and differing interpretations of absences by teachers further exacerbate the problem, highlighting the need for standardised recording practices.

New laws in Norway imply the importance of adopting standardised practices for recording attendance data to support educational responsibilities. For example, schools are tasked with ensuring smooth transitions between education levels, with particular emphasis on the transfer of critical information, such as attendance records. The Education Act further highlights the importance of monitoring student development, requiring teachers to report concerns to principals if a student is not benefiting satisfactorily from their education. These examples demonstrate that accurate attendance records are essential for identifying students at risk and ensuring they receive the necessary support to progress in their education.

This reinforces the need for a unified national approach to attendance data practices. While some larger municipalities have developed their own systems to address challenges in recording attendance data, these efforts remain fragmented and lack nationwide standardisation. However, work is already underway to establish a cohesive national system.

(b) Reporting data on school attendance and absence

Teachers in Norway are mandated to monitor student development and report concerns to principals if there are doubts about a student not benefiting satisfactorily from their education. This highlights the role of attendance data in evaluating progress and identifying students at risk, forming the foundation for such reports to principals.

Municipalities and county authorities in Norway are legally required to follow up on students absent from education in both primary and secondary schools, an obligation that, despite lacking specific guidance on reporting methods, implies the necessity of reporting systems to enable effective action by relevant authorities.

Another key aspect of Norway's approach is fostering stronger cooperation between education, health, and social services, indicating a role for sharing attendance data across multiple agencies to enhance collaboration. Upcoming guidelines are expected to address data sharing, and robust reporting mechanisms would be essential for coordinated efforts to tackle absence and provide effective support for vulnerable young people.

Appendix D: Data Privacy

Data privacy was not a consistent theme across all three countries in relation to the process of achieving attendance-related reforms and, as such, was not included as a theme in Chapter 4. However, privacy measures played varying roles in these reforms. In England and Finland, they were actively integrated to ensure compliance with legal frameworks and build public trust, whereas Norway relied on existing safeguards that were perceived as adequate. This appendix summarises the discussions on data privacy that emerged during interviews with contributors from all three countries.

England

England introduced a new national data collection system for daily sharing of attendance and absence data with the Department for Education. Mandatory for all schools except independent schools, this system was developed as part of the updated guidance and regulations outlined in [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](#).

During consultations about this data collection system, data privacy concerns emerged prominently. Parents expressed specific worries about the sharing of student-level data and its implications for privacy. In response, the Department for Education worked closely with a dedicated data information team and legal advisers to ensure strict compliance with the [General Data Protection Regulation](#) (GDPR) and other privacy laws. This collaboration led to the implementation of robust privacy safeguards, ensuring the secure handling of student-level data. By addressing these concerns, the Department reassured stakeholders and strengthened trust in the system.

To reduce the administrative burden on schools and ensure consistent reporting, attendance data is automatically extracted from schools' information management systems by a third-party provider[11], [Wonde](#). The data is accessible through a secure, password-protected portal, where schools and local authorities can monitor trends using aggregated reporting functions, such as the proportion of students falling within 5% bands of absence. Although the system collects data at the student level, access is strictly limited to schools and local authorities already holding existing records for their own students. For example, School X cannot access information about students at School Y, ensuring data privacy.

Finland

In Finland, data privacy was a central consideration during efforts to harmonise the recording and reporting of attendance and absence data (see Appendix C for details on recording and reporting). To support the goal of harmonisation, a working group was established, including lawyers, data protection officers, and other representatives from the Ministry of Education and Culture as well as the National Agency for Education. Their efforts resulted in recommendations that adhered to GDPR and other privacy regulations, addressing potential legal and privacy concerns early in the process.

The Office of the Data Protection Ombudsman played a pivotal role, providing detailed guidance on GDPR compliance and ensuring the system supported robust data practices while safeguarding student privacy. By embedding privacy considerations into the process, Finland

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[11] The third-party platform is independent of schools, local authorities, and the government.

successfully balanced the need for consistent data collection with the protection of sensitive information, avoiding potential barriers to adopting the recommendations.

The proposed classification system was piloted in 10 municipalities, revealing specific challenges, particularly in how health-related reasons were recorded in absence categories. Some municipalities raised concerns about whether health-related reasons could be included in absence classifications, highlighting the need for clear data protection guidelines to ensure consistency and legal compliance. Feedback from the pilots informed revisions, resulting in a final set of five absence categories (see Appendix C), which are now part of national non-statutory guidelines.

To reinforce privacy safeguards, the Ministry of Education and Culture included a comprehensive 20-page appendix on data protection in the [Our Common School Path](#) handbook shared with municipalities. This appendix outlines key measures to ensure the lawful and proportionate[12] handling of data. These measures enable municipalities to process and use data securely and anonymously, while also facilitating the effective allocation of student welfare services.

Norway

Privacy concerns were not reported by the Norwegian contributors as significant barriers to the development or implementation of reforms related to school attendance. They noted that the emphasis of the new Section 10.6 of the Education Act on systematically following up on absences aligns with broader priorities in Norway's education system, such as inclusion and children's rights. Norway's strong legal framework, which upholds these principles, may have reinforced the perception that data privacy is already adequately addressed.

One key challenge noted by the contributors is the lack of a national system for recording absences in lower education. This gap is currently being addressed, and its absence may explain why privacy has not emerged as a major issue to date. However, as attendance tracking becomes more standardised and robust, privacy considerations are expected to gain greater prominence. According to the contributors, the new guidelines under development are likely to include more detailed attention to privacy as part of a framework for ensuring consistent data collection and management. As national attendance tracking systems and guidelines evolve, privacy concerns may play a more substantial role in discussions surrounding data collection and usage[13].

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[12] 'Proportionate' refers to data handling that is appropriate and limited to what is necessary for specific purposes, in line with the General Data Protection Regulation principles requiring fair, lawful, and necessary processing of personal data.
[13] Norway is not a member of the European Union but it is part of the European Economic Area (EEA) and has implemented the General Data Protection Regulation, a relevant framework for data protection.

Appendix E: School Attendance Officers

School attendance officers, often known by different titles and roles across countries, were discussed during interviews for this report. While not a central theme in achieving changes to laws or policies, and therefore not included as a theme in Chapter 4, their functions provide important context for understanding how legislative shifts interact with local practices.

For example, in the Netherlands, 'leerplichtambtenaren' (compulsory education officers) play a longstanding and critical role in monitoring school attendance and enforcing attendance laws. Their newer role, as described in Chapter 1 (The Current Situation in the Netherlands), aligns with shifts towards tailored and more inclusive education. In this evolving landscape, Dutch school attendance officers have begun to support schools, students, and parents in more comprehensive ways. This reflects the tension between traditional sanctioning approaches and a move towards a more supportive and inclusive model of attendance.

This appendix presents an overview of how responsibilities for addressing student attendance are structured across England, Finland, and Norway. It reveals the different approaches these countries take, from specialised attendance officer roles to integrated responsibilities within schools and broader support networks.

England

School attendance officers (or those with similar roles) have long been a part of the English school system, with their roles and responsibilities adapting to shifting priorities over time. Historically, local authorities employed 'education welfare officers' who played a key role in enforcing attendance laws. Over time, their roles evolved to reflect broader shifts in education policy and priorities. Today, attendance officers may work within individual schools, across several schools, or be employed by local authorities, illustrating the absence of a single, uniform system across the country.

This flexibility allows schools and local authorities to tailor their attendance management approaches to meet local needs and expectations, as outlined in the statutory guidance [Working Together to Improve School Attendance](). The guidance does not prescribe a rigid model for attendance officer roles, allowing for local variation. For example, school-based attendance officers often focus on operational tasks such as maintaining contact with parents and addressing attendance concerns. In contrast, Local Authority School Attendance Support Teams provide strategic and advisory support for schools and families. Members of these teams are sometimes referred to as 'school attendance support officers', although some local authorities retain the title of 'attendance officer' for their staff, even as their responsibilities shift towards strategic and advisory functions.

Local Authority School Attendance Support Teams play a pivotal role in attendance management. They offer core functions to schools, including communication and advice, and regularly hold Targeting Support Meetings to identify students at risk of poor attendance and develop tailored interventions. These teams also facilitate access to early help services for students and families before problems escalate and can initiate legal interventions when necessary. Additionally, local authorities are expected to coordinate multi-agency support for students with persistent or severe absence, ensuring that the underlying causes of absence are addressed comprehensively through collaboration across education, social care, and other relevant services. In line with this, recent guidance has further shifted the responsibilities of

roles such as 'education welfare officers' towards more strategic and advisory work, reflecting a broader emphasis on proactive and systemic approaches to managing attendance.

Under the new guidance, schools have become the first point of contact for addressing absence concerns, with a senior leader—referred to as the 'Senior Attendance Champion'—designated to take responsibility for attendance. This new role involves setting a clear vision for improving attendance, establishing effective systems to tackle absence, and using data to guide the school's efforts. By placing schools at the centre of attendance management, the guidance redefines roles to promote a more proactive and structured approach. Previously, local authorities and their education welfare officers often played a more direct role in managing individual cases of absence. While local authorities continue to play a vital role, particularly in cases of persistent and severe absence, the initial responsibility now lies with schools, marking a significant shift in how attendance management is structured.

Finland

In Finland, there are no dedicated school attendance officers. Instead, teachers and principals are responsible for preventing, monitoring, and addressing absences as part of their legally mandated duties. Schools report to municipalities, which serve as the main education providers and hold overall responsibility for ensuring compliance with attendance-related laws. For example, if parents have decided for their child to be home-schooled, the municipality of the student's residence must monitor their progress. This structure integrates attendance management within the existing educational system, eliminating the need for specialised roles like school attendance officers.

Norway

Norway does not employ dedicated school attendance officers. Instead, responsibility for addressing student absences is shared between schools and local authorities, as outlined in Section 10.6 of the Education Act, introduced in August 2024. This legislation explicitly requires municipalities (responsible for primary and lower secondary schools) and county authorities (responsible for upper secondary schools) to ensure systematic follow-up for students who are absent. While schools have a longstanding duty to provide education and maintain a supportive learning environment, Section 10.6 clarifies that municipalities and county authorities must oversee and ensure that schools fulfil these responsibilities. The aim of this provision is to increase school attendance, prevent excessive absence, and improve students' chances of succeeding in and completing their education.

Schools receive support from the Educational and Psychological Counselling Service (PPT), which is legally mandated to assess students' needs and collaborates closely with schools on implementing effective interventions. In addition, municipalities can seek assistance from Statped, a national agency specialising in support for students with special needs and their schools. Statped is tasked with addressing school attendance challenges when absences are prolonged, complex, and multifaceted. It provides tools to identify underlying causes of absence and delivers a five-day training programme that includes a session on attendance laws. Together, PPT and Statped form a vital part of the broader support network that enables schools to fulfil their responsibilities in supporting students effectively.