

Blockbuster lesson for schools on kids in classrooms

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*Education systems historically count attendance as physical presence, discounting students' ability or desire to 'be there' when they physically can't. :
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Albert Einstein once said: “In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity.”

It took a pandemic to prove just that, accelerating education’s “[Blockbuster](#) moment” as schools were [forced to solve chronic student absence](#) that started long before today’s “[school refusal](#)”.

In a feat probably unmatched by any other industry, schools improvised a lifeline to students by [bringing classrooms online](#), virtually overnight.

These bridged bricks-and-mortar models to “learn from anywhere”, avoiding a crisis of [chronic school absence](#) at scale by keeping students connected to teachers and peers.

Fast forward four years and Australia still faces a school attendance crisis that should be treated as a [public health emergency](#).

At least [1.2 million \(or one in three\)](#) school children have a medical or mental condition serious enough to affect attendance and wellbeing, with [24 percent of enrolled students](#) receiving an educational adjustment due to disability and [14 percent](#) having a spectrum disorder.

Backing on to this, some claim [two in five Australian children](#) are now confronting so-called “school refusal”.

However, the [exact number](#) of children missing school due to [one of these](#) or overlapping diagnoses – and the extent of their absences – remains unknown.

What we do know is [children who miss school](#) often, or for long periods, face increased risk of academic failure or [lower performance, incomplete schooling, and poor career prospects](#). They also face [social isolation](#), bullying and risk of [maltreatment](#), and poor mental health.

But the solution forced on education by COVID has seemingly been forgotten.



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Competing with the 'status quo'

When lockdowns ended, governments directed [students back to in-person classes](#).

"Old school" expectations turned telepresence off as a logical solution to forced non-attendance, leaving a large and vulnerable cohort of students [stranded once again](#).

Post-COVID, education systems seem [singularly focused on mental health](#) and a student population pigeon-holed by the [school refusal label](#), while [trauma](#) and other anxiety triggered by long-standing absence in [students facing medical crises](#) remain unacknowledged.

The UN now asserts that the driver of sustainable development is "beset by twin crises of equity and relevance," declaring "[education as we know it is no longer fit for purpose](#)." Innovation is needed to meet disruption head on and beat the status quo.

A child who misses just five days per term – [less than 90 percent attendance](#) – pays [penalties in academic and mental health outcomes](#).

There is "[no safe threshold for absence](#)" and the global rise in [chronic conditions](#) and "[school refusal](#)" underline the urgent need for solutions.

It is fair to say that criticism – and decisions – about "remote learning" technology are anecdotal, as any negative experiences reported during the sudden scale up to telepresence were conflated with collective trauma, [shock of school closures](#), and the pandemic itself.

Australian not-for-profit MissingSchool has collaborated with Australian schools to reconnect more than 6,900 classmates via telepresence. This initiative has been [beneficial in connecting children to their peers](#) during extended hospital or home isolation and allowing teachers – during a [workforce shortage](#) – to "teach once".

Untangling the attendance dilemma

Education systems historically count attendance as physical presence, discounting students' ability or desire to "be there" when they physically can't. This policy frame codes absences in a way that punishes children for physical absence, missing vital innovations.

Students with invisible conditions, or delayed diagnosis, lacking medical documentation, could be coded to an “unauthorised” category. Over time, they may be disbelieved, or labeled as “school refusers”, not dissimilar to “truants”. School services pause, parents are pursued.

On the flip side, students maintaining a certified (documented) diagnosis are coded to an “approved” absence category.

Regardless of duration or frequency, physical absence is agreed – and school services are paused – until the student returns to the classroom.

In Australia, these coding outcomes contradict the [Disability Standards for Education \(DSE\)](#), which require schools to make “reasonable adjustments” for students with medical/mental conditions during absence and to “impute” illness based on symptoms before formal diagnosis.

Just as wheelchair ramps provide accessibility, without discrimination the DSE effectively regulates for access to classrooms, curriculum, [and support](#) on the same basis as peers, including via “assistive technology/devices”.

Cracking the code

Due to a systemic [blind spot](#) in which many schools, in the face of conflated absence framing, are failing to consistently connect (diagnosed or imputed) medical/mental conditions with the DSE, close to two-in-three students, who come to MissingSchool, lack an individual education plan.

But a cold is not the same as cancer or chronic anxiety, nor trauma the same as truancy. Schools should be able to differentiate between “approved” absences for short-term or minor illnesses, and longer-term conditions or serious injury causing ongoing chronic absence (and respond).

In March 2022, the Australian Government adopted MissingSchool’s [policy proposal](#) to introduce a “health condition” code in the “approved absence” category.

Then progress stalled.



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Now the code, in a better and fairer [measurement framework](#), is back on the agenda.

[New absence coding](#) will help schools detect chronic absences early and trigger DSE adjustments, giving children (isolated in hospital and at home) continuity of access to classes. It will help [address national data](#) deficits and match [advances in other countries](#).

Back to the global future

We can seize the day and ease economic, health, and social consequences for students – not forgetting mothers, who typically carry the load as carers/home educators (affecting paid work) and also recognise siblings, young carers, and peers caught in the cross-fire.

There is no need to wait for [potentially hundreds of thousands of kids](#) with medical and mental conditions, or post-pandemic trauma, to physically return to school and hope for [educational and social equity](#) when they can achieve “presence” now.

[Lost productivity from incomplete education](#) in Australia equates to almost \$1 million per student. Addressing school attendance now can tackle this universal primary and secondary education challenge [choking higher education](#) and [stifling equitable growth of a knowledge economy](#).

This is why [there is a push](#) to get this huge, hidden cohort counted and mainstream “learn from anywhere”, as a matter of “business as usual”, to equitably meet the educational and social needs of students with complex health and attendance challenges. It is vital for digital resilience.

For young people, this is their future, so it should be on the global agenda now. This reflects UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ call to action via the UN Summit of the Future this September 2024 to [harness digital tools to expand access, improve learning, and build future capacities](#).

Countries running [fit for purpose models of school education](#) and social continuity will conquer 21st century forces causing mass disruption to student attendance and teacher workforce, and future-proof learning and wellbeing outcomes for all ... on any day, and in any crisis.

We don’t have to be Einstein to know that the cure for absence is not “attendance”, it is presence.

Old school models face a Blockbuster moment to pivot or perish. In the 21st century, presence can be virtual when physical attendance is not possible.

Presence has the power to make sure all children are seen, heard, and counted ... the power countries need to reach our potential.

Megan Gilmour is a Churchill Policy Fellow, a Deakin University Honorary Fellow and 2020 Alumna of Year. She co-founded [MissingSchool](#) in 2012 after watching her son, Darcy, struggle with a two-year period of school isolation. Since then, Gilmour has led the not-for-profit, tirelessly advocating for the needs of students with complex attendance and medical and mental health conditions. Megan Gilmour is a director of Robots4Good. Robots4Good provides technical support to the Missing School organisation in running its technology services. Originally published under [Creative Commons](#) by [360info](#)™.