School-level patterns of non-attendance, 2022/23 and 2023/24

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Seirbhís Tacaíochta Oideachais Tusla
Tusla Education Support Service

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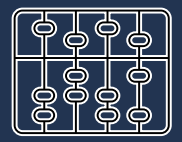
Why should we pay attention to school non-attendance?

School attendance as a **topic of growing international concern** given the **COVID-19 disruptions** (Dee, 2024; Fuller et al., 2024; Lichand et al., 2024; Tomaszewski et al., 2023).



School non-attendance has well-established links with **school performance** (Aucejo and Romano, 2016; Gottfried, 2010, 2011; Gottfried and Kirksey, 2017; Smyth, 1999), as well as with **long-term educational and labour market outcomes** (Smerillo et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021; Ansari et al., 2020; Klein et al., 2024, Klein and Sosu, 2024).

Introduction

Data from the AAR (Annual Attendance Report) collected by TESS (Tusla Education Support Service)

Non-attendance as measured by

- Share of students with chronic absenteeism
- Days lost per student in a given year

2022/23 and 2023/24 data

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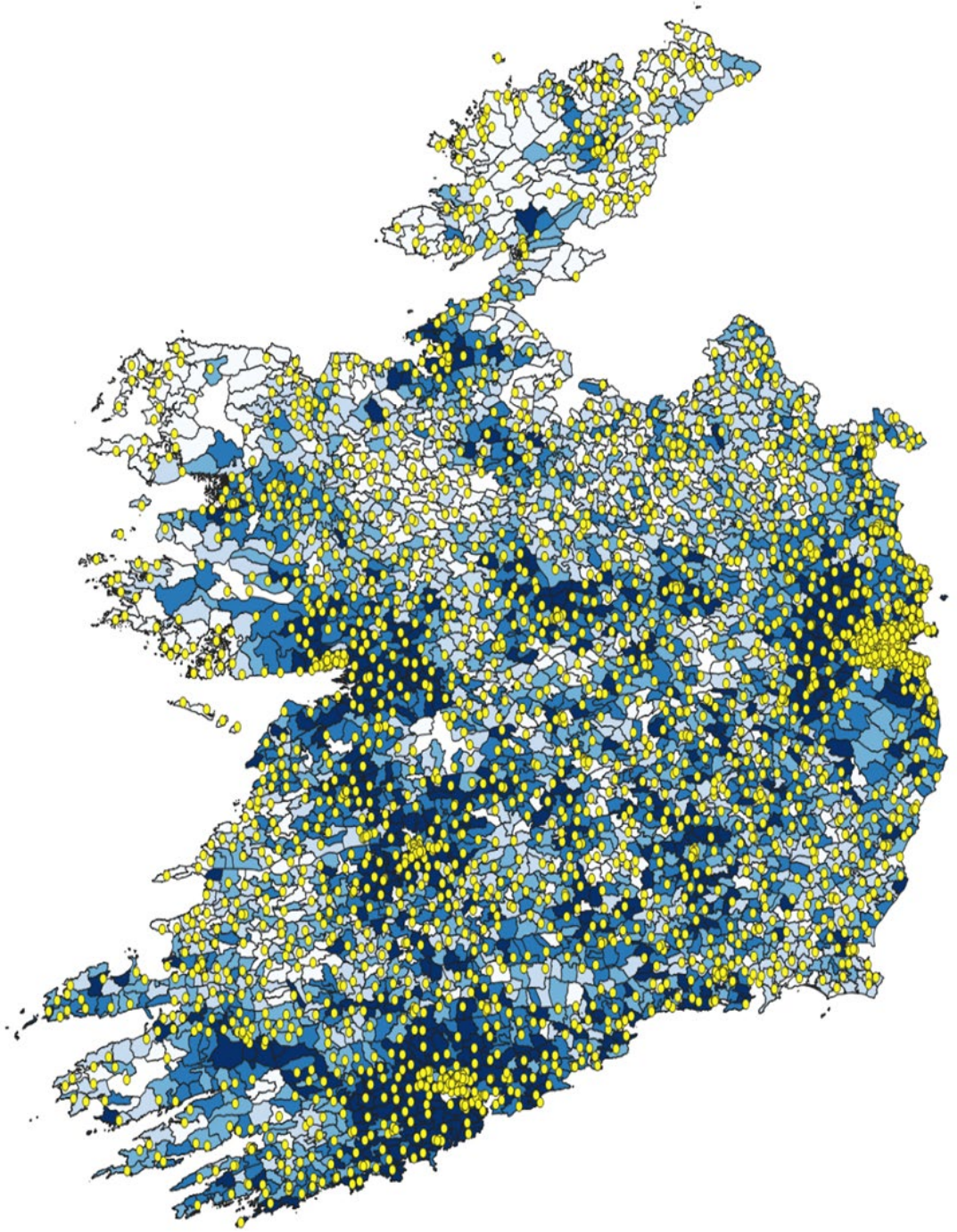
2 research parts:

1. How are the two outcomes distributed across subgroups of schools?

2. How do these outcomes differ between the two years, and does this change vary across school subgroups?

Methodology: data linkage

- We match AAR datasets to publicly available information from the Department of Education and Youth on schools
  - Ethos, school size, gender mix, language of instruction, address, DEIS classification, special school status, fee-paying status.
- We extract the level of deprivation of the electoral district where schools are located via the HP Pobal Index.



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Methodology: data cleaning

Duplicate school ID entries were solved through student-level aggregated data

Inconsistencies and negative values

Matching difficulties due to school amalgamations and closures

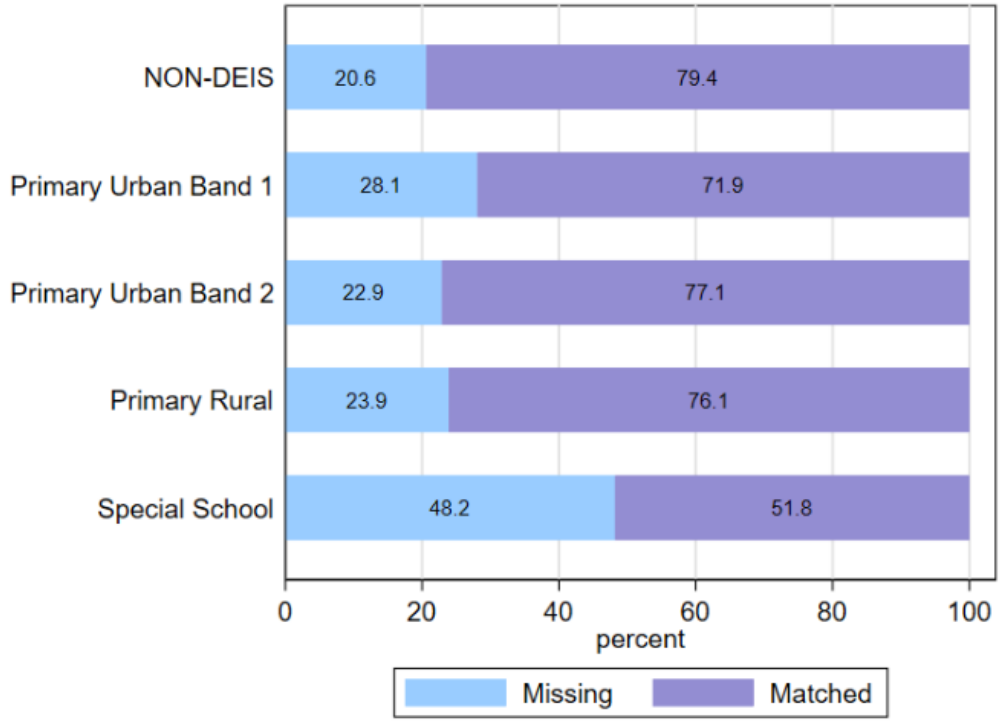
Identification and dropping of extreme observations

Methodology: response rate

23.5% *Primary non-response rate*

26.83% *Post-primary non-response rate*

Overall, missing responses do not concentrate around particular school characteristics, with the exception of Urban Band 1 and special schools



Missing responses rate at the primary level, aggregated data from the two years

Methodology: data analysis

2023/24 data

- Descriptive statistics with 4 quantiles of the two outcome variables
- OLS regression models

Time comparison

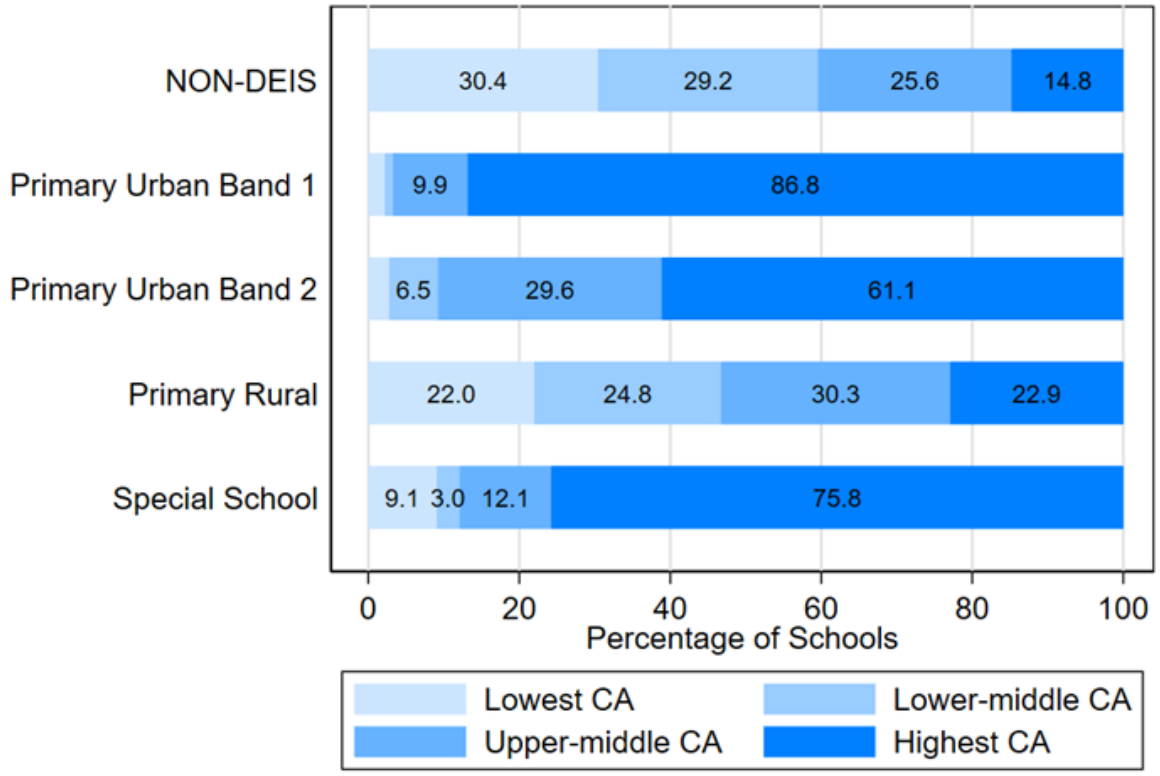
Two methods

- “Absolute” changes (year as dummy variable model)
- “Relative” changes (taking into account previous levels of absence)

Findings

Primary 2023/2024

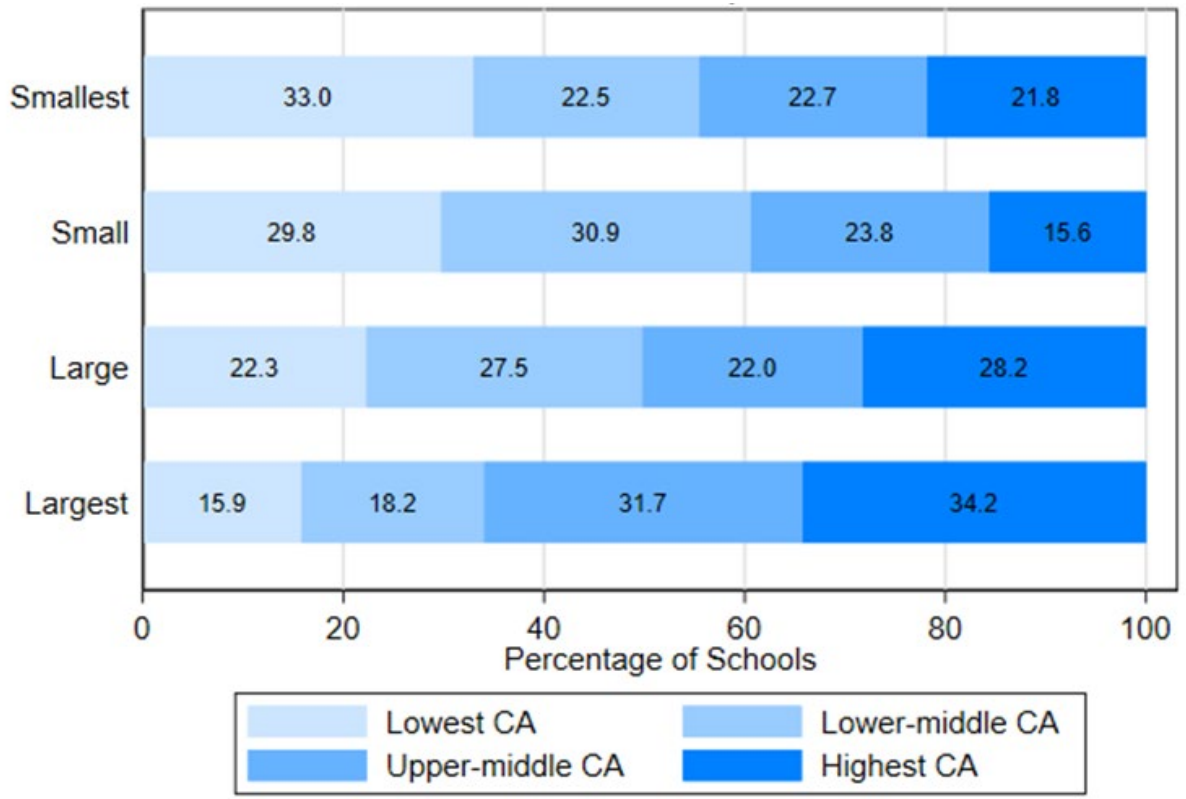
By DEIS and special school status, CA rates



Findings

Primary 2023/2024

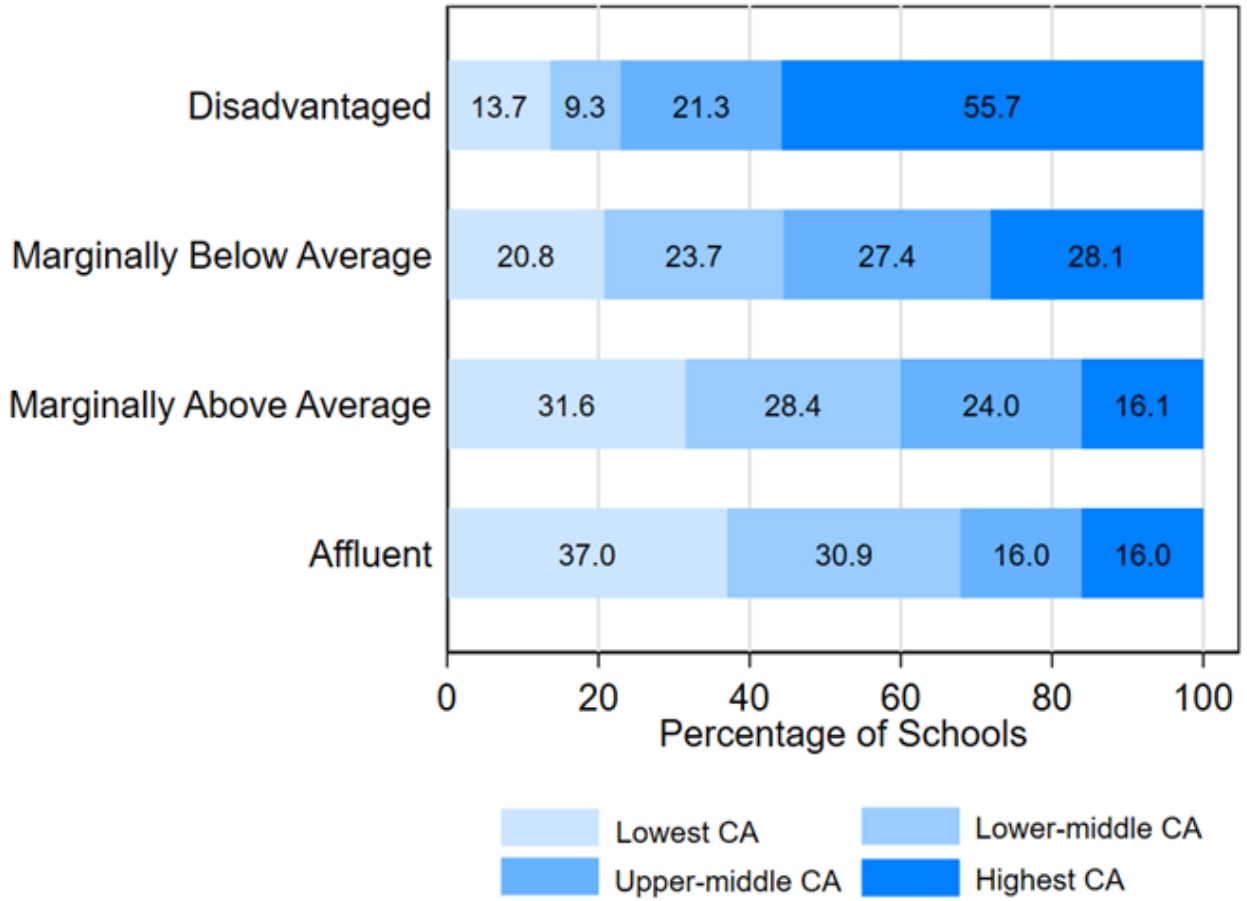
By school size, CA rates



Findings

Primary 2023/2024

By HP Pobal Index, CA rates



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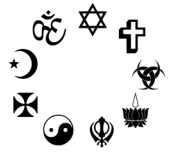
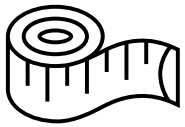
Findings: Main model

Primary 2023/2024

DEIS and special schools have highly significantly higher levels of chronic absenteeism and days lost, compared to non-DEIS schools. Band 1 report 17.4 pp higher share of CA, and special schools report 15.6 pp higher.



Multi-denominational schools have significantly higher levels of absenteeism than Catholic schools. This is somewhat surprising, given that GUI data show these schools tend to have a more advantaged profile than Catholic schools.

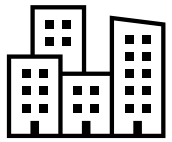


Smaller schools tend to present better attendance outcomes, even though the relationship is not entirely linear. One explanation could be related to greater social pressure in this context.

Irish-medium schools are associated with significantly better attendance outcomes – which could be related to their more advantaged socioeconomic mix or to a greater sense of identity / community.

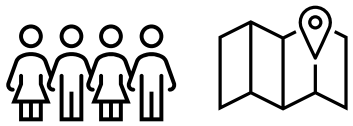
Findings: Main model

Primary 2023/2024



Higher levels of socio-economic deprivation are consistently associated with greater absenteeism as measured by both outcomes, over and above the effects of school DEIS status. The only exception to this gradient is the comparison between disadvantaged areas and those classified as marginally below average.

> ***Interaction terms:*** The increase in absenteeism associated with being located in a deprived area is less pronounced for DEIS Urban Band 1 schools than for non-DEIS schools

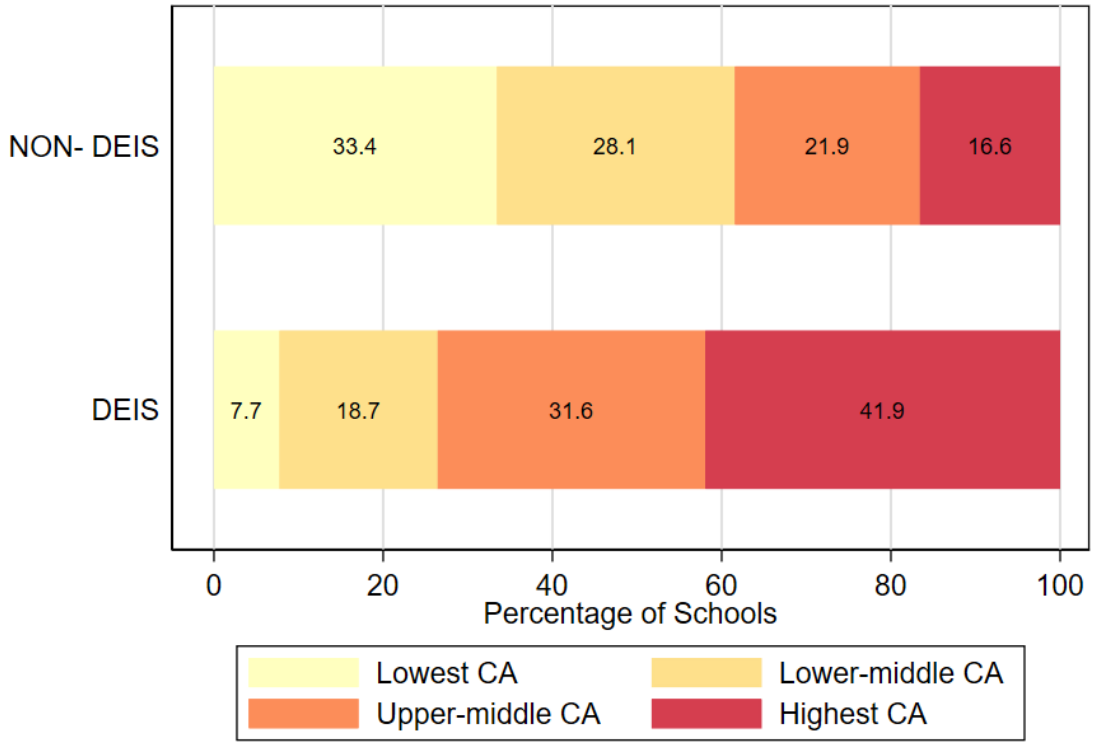


Gender mix and county are not found to be a significant factor.

Findings

Post-primary 2023/2024

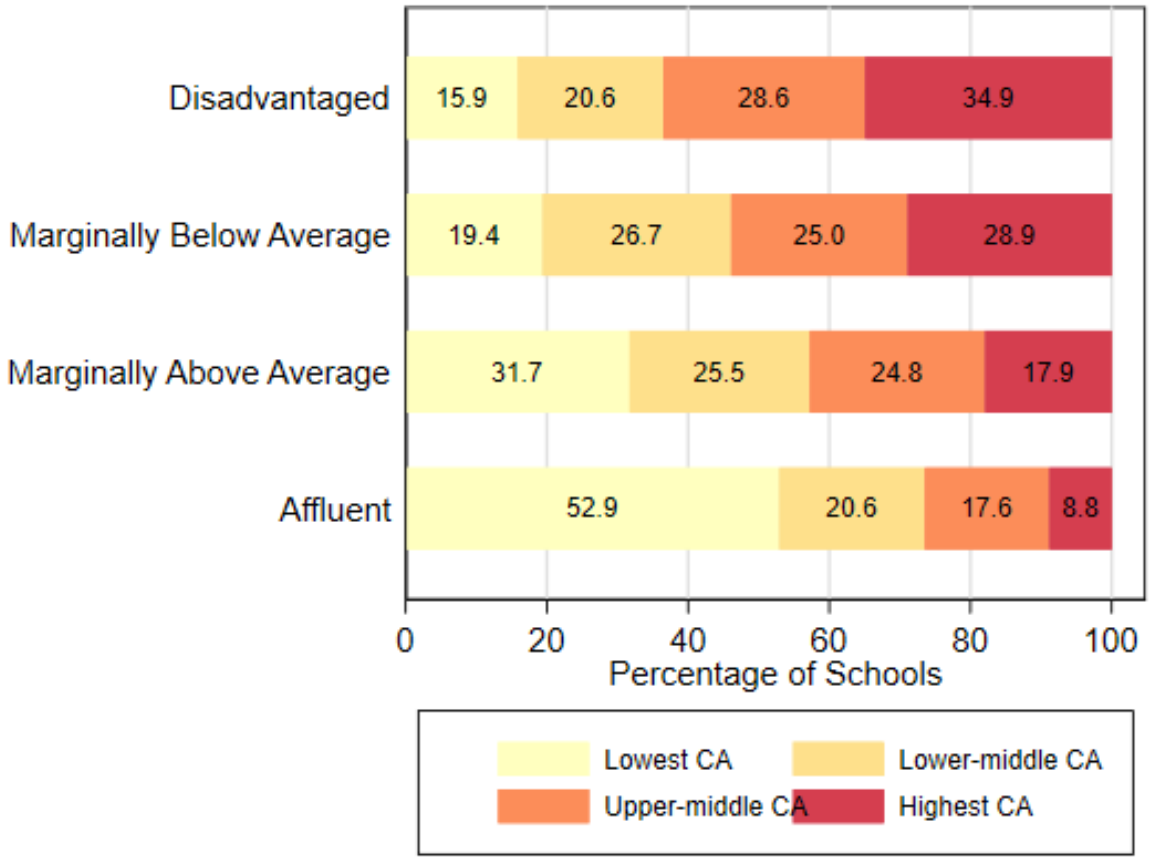
By DEIS, CA rates



Findings

Post-primary 2023/2024

By HP Pobal Index, CA rates



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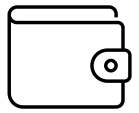
Findings: Main model

Post-primary 2023/2024

As in primary, **DEIS schools have highly significantly higher levels of chronic absenteeism and days lost**, compared to non-DEIS schools. DEIS post-primary schools report a 7.1 pp higher CA rate



Fee-paying (non-DEIS) schools are highly associated with significantly better attendance outcomes, with large size effects.

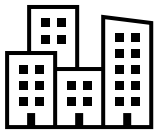
Boys' schools are associated with significantly lower counts of chronically absent students compared to mixed-gender schools – but no differences for days lost.

Schools with a minority religious ethos have better attendance outcomes than other schools, a pattern that may be due to the socio-economic mix of their student population.

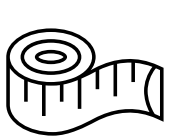
Findings: Main model

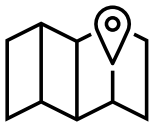
Post-primary 2023/2024

Irish-medium schools have better CA rates



Higher levels of socio-economic deprivation are consistently associated with greater absenteeism as measured by both outcomes, over and above the effects of school DEIS status.





Size and county are not meaningful factors

Interaction terms: The detrimental effects of being a post-primary DEIS school on attendance are consistent across the population of schools.

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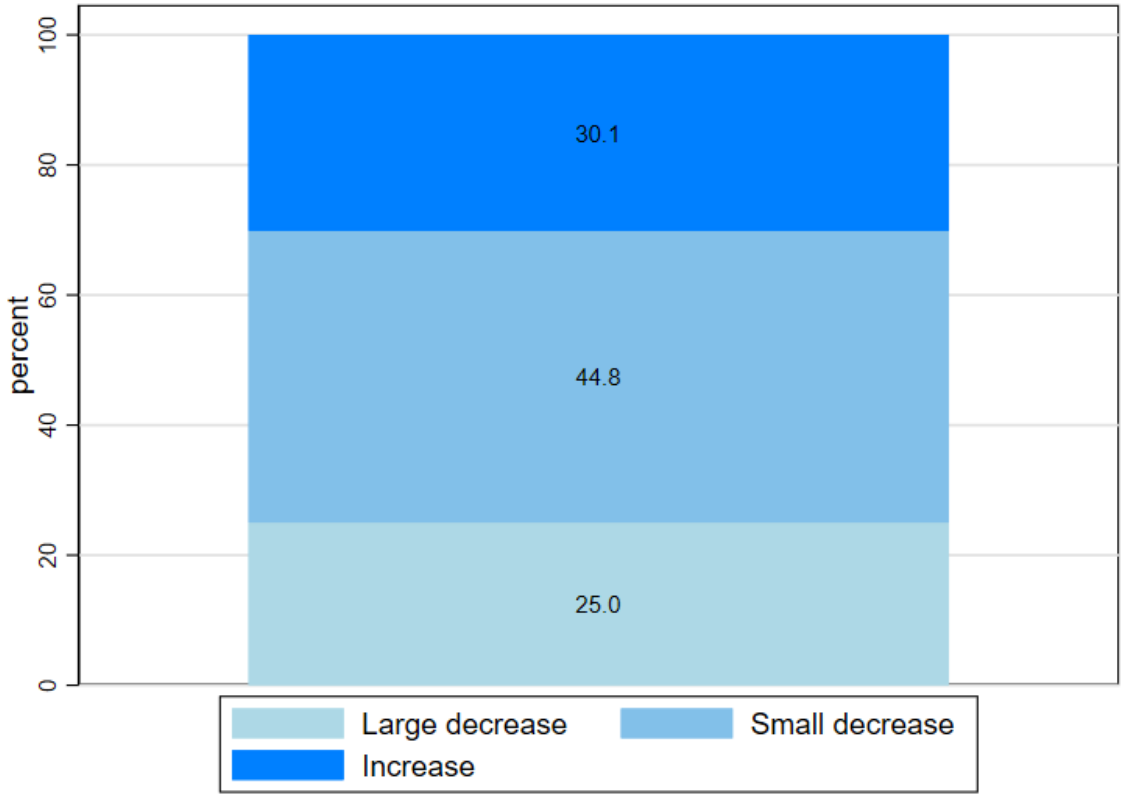
Time comparison

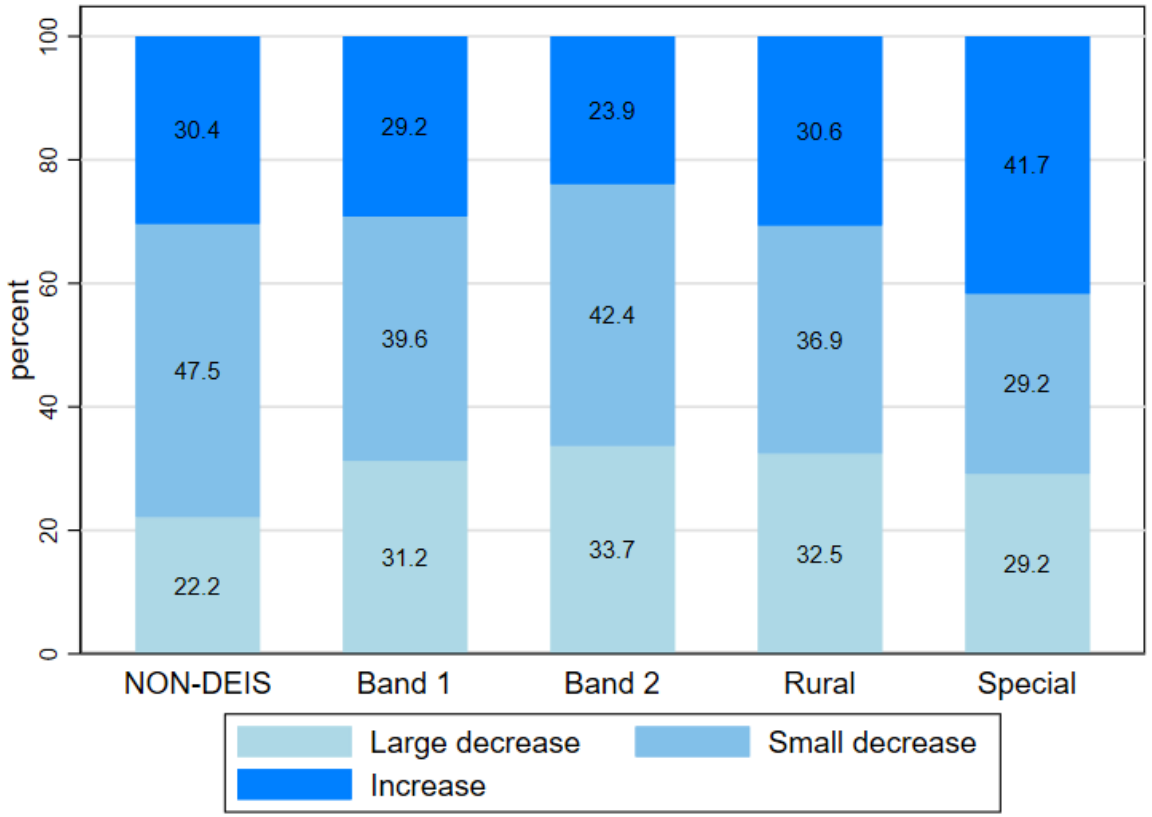
Primary time comparison



Time comparison

Primary time comparison

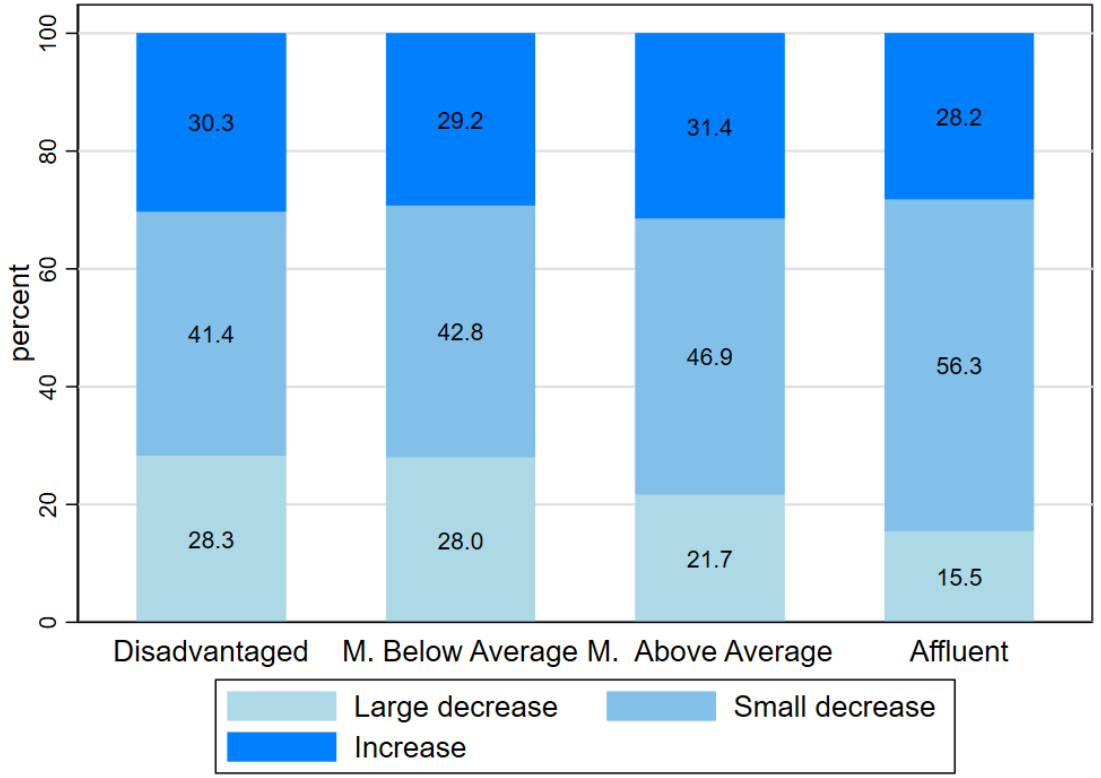
By DEIS and special school status, CA rates



Time comparison

Primary time comparison

By HP Pobal Index, CA rates



Time comparison

Primary time comparison

Absolute changes *(year as dummy model)*

- In 2024, controlling for school's characteristics, the **share of chronically absent students** was **3.2 percentage points** lower than in 2023.
- In 2024, schools recorded an average of **1 fewer days lost per student**

These changes are overall consistent across schools - with the exception of Band 1 schools and schools in deprived areas reporting a marginally (absolute) better improvement

Time comparison

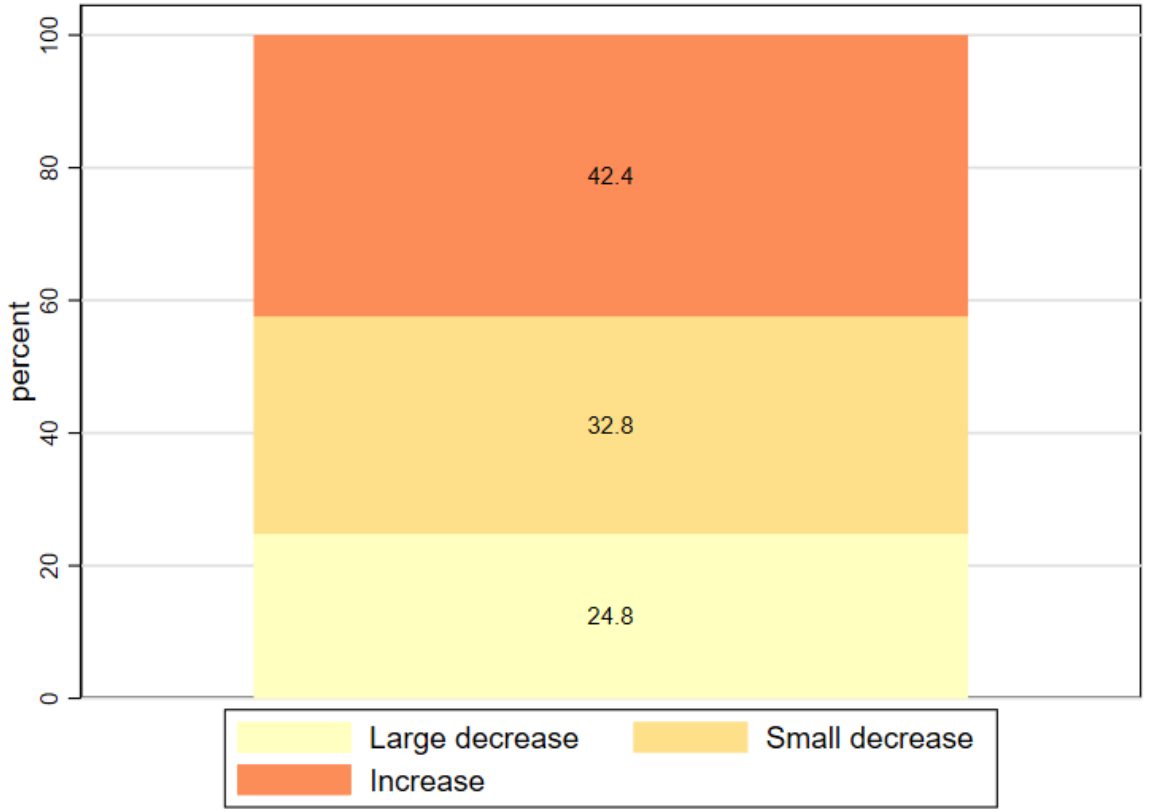
Primary time comparison

Relative changes *(accounting for 2023 levels)*

- Among schools with similar levels of absenteeism in 2023, **DEIS and special schools showed higher rates of chronic absenteeism and days lost in 2024**
  - Special schools report a 7.5 pp higher share of CA, and Band 1 a 5.6 pp higher share
- Mixed-gender schools, as opposed to single-gender schools, and smaller schools, as opposed to larger ones, perform better in both days lost and CA.
- Schools in more socio-economically advantaged areas also show a better trajectory

Time comparison

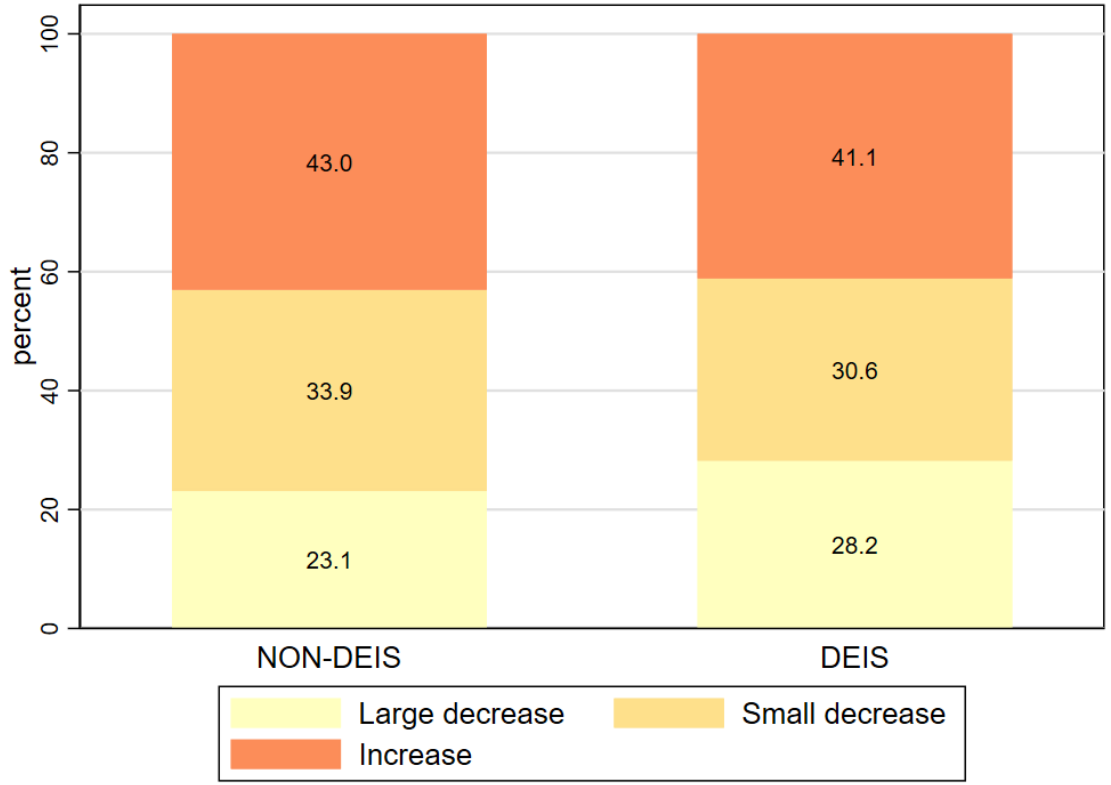
Post-primary time comparison



Time comparison

Post-primary time comparison

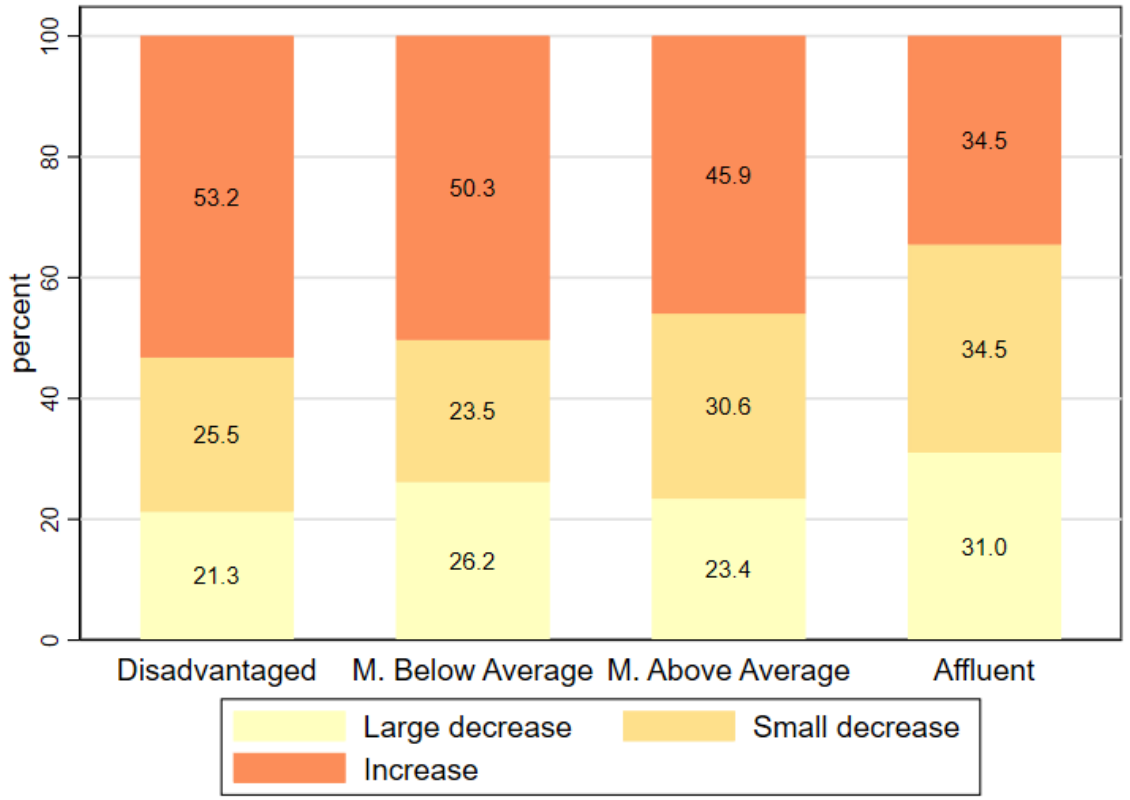
By DEIS, CA rates



Time comparison

Post-primary time comparison

By HP Pobal Index, days lost per student



Time comparison

Post-primary time comparison

Absolute changes *(year as dummy model)*

- In 2024, controlling for school characteristics, **the rate of chronic absenteeism** was **1.7 percentage points lower –** a slightly worse trajectory than primary schools.
- In 2024, there were **0.71 fewer days lost per student**

This (absolute) moderate reduction is overall consistent across schools

Time comparison

Post-primary time comparison

Relative changes *(accounting for 2023 levels)*

- **DEIS post-primary schools**, compared to non-DEIS ones with similar CA levels in 2023, had **a 2.11 percentage point higher CA rate in 2024 and 2.15 more days lost per student**
- Schools in more socio-economically privileged areas had slightly better trajectories, though only for days lost.
  - Compared to schools in disadvantaged areas, those in marginally above average areas had 1.45 fewer days lost per student and those in affluent areas had 4.09 fewer days lost.
- The relative changes are otherwise consistent across schools

Conclusions

Main findings

- **Non-attendance is more pronounced in schools serving disadvantaged communities**, and such schools are also also not recovering as well post COVID-19.
- Given attendance's links with attainment and early adulthood outcomes, such patterns could act as a source of the **(re)production of socioeconomic inequalities.**

Limitations

- Lack of information on **student socio-demographic characteristics** limits our ability to determine whether the observed differences are compositional or contextual
- **Missed school records** for a substantial share of schools.

Conclusions: implications

Data implications: need for built-in validation systems in data entry; encouragement of schools to submit returns; need for data linkage to look at student and school characteristics

Policy implications:

- International research has shown that multi-tiered interventions involving multidisciplinary teams and promoting interaction between children, parents and schools may be successful in promoting attendance (Arbour et al., 2023; Kearney and Graczyk, 2020).
- However, approaches need to be tailored to address the reason(s) underlying school absence.
- There is a need for further research on absence in special schools.
- School interventions alone may be limited in their ability to address the financial, social and emotional difficulties among families that contribute to non-attendance. Broader social policy is needed to tackle these issues.

Thank you!

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