



# What Works in Education?

Using Evidence to Improve Education

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## Are programmes to combat school absenteeism effective?

Sheila González Motos

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The concern over school absenteeism stems from both the determination of government authorities to ensure compliance with compulsory schooling and the correlation between this phenomenon and socio-educational inequalities of an academic nature (poorer performance, poorer academic achievement and higher dropout rates) and other kinds of problems (juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, etc.). Numerous programmes, plans and protocols have been developed to improve school attendance among children and young people. However, little research has been conducted into their effectiveness. This evidence review seeks to provide an insight into the impact of programmes to combat school absenteeism, thereby pinpointing the factors conducive to improving attendance and ascertaining whether this varies according to the student profiles or circumstances in which they apply.

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“For too long, education has been subject to inertia and based on traditions, and educational changes have been grounded in unfounded intuitions and beliefs. The ‘What Works’ movement irrupts into the world of education with a clear objective: to promote evidence based policies and practices. [Ivàlua](#) and the [Bofill Foundation](#) have come together to push this movement forward in Catalonia.”

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# What Works in Education?

Using Evidence to Improve Education

## Are programmes to combat school absenteeism effective?



### Sheila González Motos

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### Motivation

In Catalonia, school attendance is mandatory from the age of 6 to 16. This is established by the Education Act of Catalonia (Law 12/2009), and the various previous and subsequent state education laws (LOGSE 1990, LOCE 2002, LOE 2006, LOMCE 2013). The extension of compulsory schooling from 14 to 16 years of age in the 1990s contributed to the emergence of new forms of school absenteeism, over and above those caused by economic, social and cultural inequalities [1]. Certain factors linked to adolescence, but also the extension of a comprehensive education system without the necessary adaptation to older students, led to a rise in school absenteeism rates in the transition from primary to secondary school [1][2].

Although schooling is compulsory, the available figures show that there are children and young people who do not attend school regularly. The official figures of the Barcelona Education Consortium reveal 1.4% of students with

regular absences in compulsory education (primary and secondary) in the city of Barcelona [3], but other more qualitative studies have placed the figure above 10%, and in some schools it has even exceeded 30% [1]. School absenteeism occurs at all

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stages of education but with different causes and effects [4]. In primary school, absenteeism is mainly sporadic and of low intensity, whereas chronic absenteeism is more common in secondary school [2]. In addition, while absence in pre-school education is mainly the result of the family, absenteeism in secondary school is often on account of young people's decisions or socio-cultural pressures, especially in the case of girls from certain cultural minorities [5].

Table 1.

### **Merton Social Inclusive Service (London - United Kingdom)**

The Merton Social Inclusion Service (London) prepared a strategy to combat school absenteeism from different domains in 2001 and 2004. The strategy is based on the training and provision of advice to administration technicians and schools. The mechanisms implemented include incentives, calls to families, and data monitoring and control strategies. One of the purposes of the programme is to gain in-depth knowledge of absenteeism through the collection and coding of student information. This information is used to identify the schools that require the most support.

Further information at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2005/02/0405212.pdf>  
<https://www.merton.gov.uk/education-and-learning/schools/school-attendance-welfare-and-support>

However, the concern over school absenteeism is not only due to its extent and cross-cutting nature, but also on account of the inequalities and disadvantages it creates, which is widely covered in the literature on the topic. On a strictly school level, absenteeism results in

poorer academic achievement and gaps in the development of the skills, aptitudes and behaviours required for educational success [5][6] and leads to a stronger likelihood of school dropout without completing one's education [7][5][8][9]. Effects are also noted beyond the school environment: the most absentee students are more prone to risky behaviours such as smoking, juvenile delinquency, alcoholism, drug use, risky sexual behaviours or unwanted pregnancies [6][10][11]. The effects appear to manifest themselves in adulthood, which diminishes the life opportunities for young absentees (higher rates of unemployment, marital problems, alcoholism, etc.).

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## **What kind of programmes are we talking about?**

The effects are diverse, as are the contributing or correlating factors to school absenteeism. Individual, family, school and contextual factors have been widely pointed out by the specialised literature:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some of these factors, especially those in the school domain, need to be handled with caution, whilst the direction of causality is unclear.

- Individual factors: school disaffection, learning difficulties, poor academic development, behavioural problems, low self-esteem, anxiety, origin, etc. [5][8][17][18][19]
- Family factors: economic difficulties, single parent families, limited family involvement in education, residential mobility, lack of authority, origin, etc. [17][18][20]
- School factors: bullying, school's lack of attention to student needs, poor standard of teaching staff, school's disciplinary policy, pedagogy that is rigid and/or unappealing to students, lack of attention to specific needs, etc. [8][15][17][19]
- Contextual or environmental factors: socio-economic characteristics of the neighbourhood, violence, drug problems, crime, etc. [15][18]

The programmes included in this evidence review are primarily focused on modifying or reducing the impact of individual and family factors, though a significant number combine elements – with varying degrees of intensity – of all four factors. Virtually all the programmes analysed are aimed at absentee students and mainly take the form of correctional programmes rather than prevention programmes.

The scope of factors to be addressed has led to the inclusion of a wide range of school programmes and plans to curb absenteeism, with differentiated features on the basis of:

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- **Responsibility for the design:** Several government authorities allocate resources to improving school attendance during compulsory schooling. Schematically, a distinction can be made between programmes promoted by the educational authorities, those rooted in social or community services, and thirdly, those developed under the administration of justice (truancy courts, youth courts, etc.).<sup>2</sup>
- **Stakeholders involved:** Stakeholders from a large number of domains are involved and various professionals may participate in the programmes. Staff in the field of education (teachers, leisure activity leaders, school counsellors, etc.), in the legal domain (tutors, police, judges, etc.) or in the community domain (social workers, psychologists, job counsellors, managers of housing programmes, etc.).
- **Intervention tools:** Individual therapy, training for parents, family therapy, monitoring and control guidelines, incentives for students and/or the family, penalties and fines, social services intervention, tutors, teacher training, strategies for improving academic performance, after-school activities, family engagement protocols, etc., are just some of the tools designed to improve school attendance. Programmes are usually multimodal, that is, they combine different intervention tools.
- **Stage of education:** Most of the programmes are developed during compulsory secondary education, but there are also programmes aimed at primary school students or mixed programmes (aimed at students at different stages of education).

<sup>2</sup> It should be borne in mind that the literature reviewed is primarily from the English-speaking world. Despite the fact that in most countries the option of court proceedings as a response to absenteeism is taken into account, there are specific courts in the United States to handle this matter.

- **Level of absenteeism addressed:** Some interventions are aimed exclusively at students with severe absenteeism, while others address children and young people with varying levels of absenteeism. There is a wide range of programme admission criteria (students whose absenteeism is below 20%, students whose absenteeism exceeds 40%, non-absentee students with older absentee siblings, etc.).
- **Focused on the intervention target:** Although most programmes are aimed at absentee students, few programmes target the whole school or a territory (neighbourhood, city, etc.).
- **Duration and magnitude of the intervention:** There is no guideline in place on the magnitude and duration of the programmes. The review includes interventions with a minimum duration of one month but with significant variation, from one month up to two years. In addition, the frequency is also variable (weekly, monthly or semi-annual interventions).
- **Family role:** The family becomes the focus of a large number of anti-absenteeism programmes, although their degree of involvement varies according to the instrument. In some cases, the family is the ultimate target of the intervention, while in others it only acts as a support for the absentee child or young person.

Table 2.

### Jefferson County Truancy Diversion Project (Louisville – Kentucky – United States)

The Jefferson County Truancy Diversion project was initiated in 1997 in Louisville (United States), and has gone on to become a national model. The project seeks to improve school attendance and to enhance families' capacities to care for their children, by bringing the judge and community resources (housing, employment, social services, extra-curricular activities, etc.) directly to the school environment.

The project is based on the creation of a multidisciplinary team consisting of a judge, a school/court liaison, a school counsellor, a social worker (case manager) and any personnel involved in the required areas for each case.

The programme begins with collecting comprehensive information about the family and their social issues, before making a home visit to the family. During this visit, the family is advised that the child is eligible to be charged by formal court petition for their truancy, but they are given the opportunity to volunteer for an alternative programme. The programme lasts from 10 to 12 weeks, during which the families attend a court session, located in their school, once a week, and the service provision proceedings are begun according to the needs identified. In parallel, teachers are informed of the children's social and family difficulties so that the child's needs are taken into account in the classroom. The programme organises complementary activities, such as field trips and after-school activities, to improve the ties between the school and the family.

For further information: [12]

<https://kycourts.gov/aoc/familyjuvenile/truancydiversion/Pages/default.aspx>

The reviewed literature echoes this broad range of options, while accepting that such heterogeneity often makes it difficult to clearly identify the impact of each of the factors on the success of the programme evaluated.

## Questions influencing the review

The programmes to combat school absenteeism in this review present markedly distinct goals and methodologies, but share the aim of channelling resources into improving school attendance among children and young people with previous records of absenteeism. This evidence review seeks to add to the reflection by answering the following questions: 1) Can school absenteeism be reduced? 2) What other impacts can be exerted by programmes to combat absenteeism?, 3) Which interventions are proving most effective in improving school attendance?, 4) Which students benefit most from the implementation of these strategies? and 5) Is the development of such programmes in Catalonia advisable? Under what conditions?

## Reviewing the evidence

### Reviews and studies considered

School absenteeism has generated an enormous body of literature, most of which has focused on identifying its causes and studying its effects. In contrast, despite the large number of initiatives aimed at reducing absenteeism in recent decades, there has been little evaluation of their success. There is some research, mainly qualitative in nature, aimed at assessing and satisfying the various stakeholders involved in these programmes, but little robust evidence is available in terms of the findings on reducing school absenteeism.

Moreover, among the small amounts of evidence available, there are several limitations that must be considered in the analysis of the findings presented herein. Firstly, the lack of evaluations of existing programmes in Catalonia or in its vicinity brings us to review evaluations and reviews carried out in other contexts. Most of the evaluation studies on programmes to combat absenteeism are in the United States of America (and a few in other countries, including the English-speaking world, such as Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia). Although educational inequalities are universal, the contexts in which they occur determine a certain degree of variability in the magnitude of the multiple causes, in the prevalence of their effects, as well as in the resources available, so the findings must be analysed carefully.

Secondly, a significant number of the evaluations are based on programmes run by the justice system, with specific courts to deal with truancy and other youth behaviours in the United States. Responses in our system are infrequent, although, as we shall see, most of the evaluations target programmes that extend beyond the strictly judicial content through the incorporation of school and/or community

instruments and resources, more akin to the responses put forward by the authorities in Catalonia.

Thirdly, a considerable number of the identified studies pose certain methodological limitations, some in information collection and others in the use of data. The lack of data and the multiplicity of programmes with distinct characteristics in some cases hinder the execution of more comprehensive analyses. The evaluation of the response to school absenteeism has not been sufficiently analysed, but the studies presented herein provide the most solid current evidence for appraising and discussing the fight against school absenteeism [5].

**The evaluation of the response to school absenteeism has not been sufficiently analysed, but the studies presented herein provide the most solid current evidence for appraising and discussing the fight against school absenteeism.**



This review basically comprises 108 studies (included in three meta-analyses and three systematic literature reviews, [Table 1](#)), carried out as of the 2000s in the United States, with the occasional inclusion of some studies from other English-speaking countries. To complement this work, five evaluations of specific programmes are included ([Table 2](#)). The meta-analyses, systematic reviews and specific evaluations correspond to three types of methodological approaches: Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT), Quasi-Experiment (QE), and Pre-Post test with no control group (P-P Test).<sup>3</sup>

As regards the characteristics of the programmes included in the meta-analyses and evidence reviews, as well as in the evaluations of specific programmes, there is a high degree of heterogeneity with regard to the intervention's duration (from one week to years), the stage of education in which it is developed (primary, secondary or mixed), responsibility for the design (school, judicial or community domain), the stakeholders involved (psychologists, teachers, activity leaders, judges, social workers, etc.), the intervention tools (therapies, school support, sanctions, incentives, etc.) or even the type of absenteeism targeted (occasional, severe, chronic, etc.). Other variables, such as those related to social class or student origin, despite being identified by specialised literature as especially pertinent factors, have not been systematically collected by the evaluations, and therefore have not been incorporated into all the analyses.

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, see [14].

Table 1.  
**Meta-analyses and systematic reviews considered**

Study	Study type	Impact on absenteeism
Maynard (2010) [4]	Meta-analysis, which includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 RCT</li> <li>• 11 QE</li> <li>• 12 P-P Test</li> </ul>	Positive effects on absenteeism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>g = 0.47</math> (effect of RCT and QE)</li> <li>• <math>g = 0.60</math> (effect of P-P Test)</li> </ul>
Sutphen (2010) [12]	Systematic review, which includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 RCT</li> <li>• 6 QE</li> <li>• 8 P-P Test</li> </ul>	Positive effects of most of the research on absenteeism. The effectiveness of programmes for students with disabilities and school reorganisation programmes is noteworthy. A positive effect of programmes that include rewards is also noted.
Gottfried & Ehrlich (2018) [11]	Systematic review, which includes 8 narrations	Positive effects of programmes compiled.
Maynard <i>et al.</i> (2015) [6]	Meta-analysis, which includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 6 RCT</li> <li>• 2 QE</li> </ul>	Positive effects of programmes on reducing absenteeism. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>g = 0.54</math> (psychosocial intervention programmes)</li> <li>• <math>g = 0.61</math> (programmes that combine psychosocial intervention and medication)</li> </ul>
Maynard <i>et al.</i> (2012) [5]	Meta-analysis, which includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 16 RCT/QE</li> <li>• 12 P-P Test</li> </ul>	Positive effects on improving school attendance, with distinct findings for the different assessments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <math>g = 0.57</math> (RCT)</li> <li>• <math>g = 0.43</math> (QE)</li> <li>• <math>g = 0.95</math> (P-P Test)</li> </ul>
Decker <i>et al.</i> (2003) [22]	Systematic review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13 narrations</li> <li>• 2 RCT/QE</li> </ul>	Reduction in absenteeism by the programmes evaluated with the exception of a programme focussed on applying sanctions to families.

Source: Drawn up by the author.

RCT = Randomised Controlled Trial / QE = Quasi-Experiment / P-P Test = Pre-Post test of a single group

$g$  = Hedges' estimator to measure the mean difference between the control group and treatment group and between the pre-test and post-test results. Effect size: small effect, 0.2; medium effect, 0.5; large effect: 0.8.



Table 2.  
**Evaluation of programmes to combat school absenteeism**

Study	Study type	Stage of education	Duration	Primary responsibility	Other stakeholders involved	Impact on absenteeism	Other impacts
Muñoz (2001) [23]	P-P Test	Primary school	3 months	Truancy board	School and community services	Improved school attendance during the programme (24%)	
Fantuzzo <i>et al.</i> (2005) [24]	QE	Primary and secondary school		Truancy board	School and community services	Improved school attendance in the short and long term	No differences on account of gender, age or ethnicity
Mueller & Stoddard (2006) [15]	P-P Test	Primary school	2 years	Truancy board	School and community services	Improved school attendance during the programme	Increase in tardiness
Lehr <i>et al.</i> [25]	RCT	Primary school	2 years	Department of Education	School	Improved school attendance during the programme (20%)	Increase in school engagement Decrease in tardiness
Hendricks <i>et al.</i> [10]	P-P Test	Secondary school	3 months	Truancy board	School and community services	Improved school attendance during the programme	Reduction in other disciplinary sanctions but no effect on school engagement

Source: Drawn up by the author.

RCT = Randomised Controlled Trial / QE = Quasi-Experiment / P-P Test = Pre-Post test of a single group

### Can school absenteeism be reduced?

There is virtually unanimous agreement between all the reviewed evidence of the positive impact of participating in programmes to combat school absenteeism.

With varying degrees of success – but always small to moderate – almost all the evaluated programmes have managed to

improve school attendance among the participating students. The improvement in absenteeism is evident; most studies reveal that absentee students show higher attendance rates after completing the programme. However, despite the fall in absenteeism, the problem is not eradicated and the figures are still high among absentee students [4][15]. By way of example, Maynard *et al.* conclude that 20% of the experimental studies (RCT and QE) presented a number of absent days that surpassed 40% upon completion of the programmes. In all three meta-analyses reviewed, in more than 50% of the studies, the level of absenteeism still exceeded 10%. It can therefore be deduced that the programmes designed mitigate the magnitude of absenteeism but do not reverse the trend.

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Most of the research studies have limited the assessment of the short-term impact. Research into the persistence of the effects subsequent to the intervention's

completion is lacking. The evaluations of some specific programmes have sought to shed light on this issue, and the findings reveal that once students cease to participate in the programme, there is a slight reduction in their school attendance, although it still exceeds the figures prior to the intervention [10][23].<sup>4</sup>

Beyond this impact, it must be taken into account that many of the programmes experienced high dropout rates during the process, whether due to the fact that children and young people changed school or relocated, or on account of unjustified departures. In addition, there is a certain negative correlation between the programme impact and the dropouts recorded: programmes with higher dropout rates show lower effects on absenteeism [4]. It can therefore be understood that the programmes with the most dropouts are also the programmes with the greatest weaknesses, whether in their design or in their implementation, in their endeavour to combat school absenteeism. In short, these are programmes that have a higher dropout rate and, at the same time, have fewer effects on the students that complete them.

### **What other impacts can be exerted by programmes to combat absenteeism?**

Most of the research studies in this evidence review have focused on school absenteeism. However, some research has also addressed the impacts on punctuality, school disaffection, anxiety or juvenile delinquency. Nonetheless, despite the fact that some studies incorporate information on students repeating the year or their academic results at the outset of the intervention, these variables have not been systematically analysed; hence, there are no findings on their variation following students' participation in the programme.

A few – mainly evaluations of specific projects – have also monitored tardiness, i.e. improvements in punctuality. The findings are inconclusive: in some cases, there is both a drop in tardiness and a fall in absenteeism [25]. In other programmes, however, the decrease in absenteeism has been accompanied by a rise in tardiness, which may be explained by the possible replacement of absences with tardiness. In other words, in some cases it seems that the intervention has somewhat improved attendance as the students attend but arrive late for class [15].

Other evaluations have combined the study of absenteeism with the observation of other effects. Surprisingly, the findings reveal that reducing absenteeism does not lead to less disaffection, anxiety or juvenile delinquency [22]. With regard to the former, there is no evidence to support the effect of programmes to combat absenteeism on school engagement,<sup>5</sup> but it should be borne in mind that school engagement

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4 However, the heterogeneity of the programmes and their impacts is very high, which points to major variability in the effectiveness of the interventions. The findings also seem susceptible to some methodological issues. Firstly, the meta-analyses and literature reviews largely encompass evaluations published in academic journals, so while a certain quality of research is guaranteed backed by publication requirements, the evaluations that have obtained findings may be overrepresented, while those evaluations that did not identify impacts were not published and therefore were not included either in the meta-analysis. Secondly, among the evaluations with no control group (Pre-Post Test), the impacts are greater but it must be taken into account that the absence of a control group means that all the gains cannot be attributed to the programme. Lastly, in the evaluations carried out by the institution responsible for the intervention, the reported impacts are even higher [15].

5 School engagement has been built on different scales related to students' perceptions of time spent at school, their connection with the school, academic expectations, etc. [4].

numbers were already extremely high among the most absentee students prior to the intervention [10]. Anxiety, one of the factors identified by the literature as the cause behind school detachment and subsequent absenteeism, does not appear to be responsive to anti-absenteeism programmes either. Participation in these programmes is not noted to contribute to lessening anxiety and some studies even point to a negative effect. Curbing absenteeism means that the student spends more time at school, thus increasing their exposure to situations that generate anxiety for them. This may explain why anxiety has not decreased but longer-term research into this issue is required [6].

In the case of juvenile delinquency, improving school attendance does not appear to reduce the likelihood of a student becoming involved in juvenile delinquency cases [22], despite the identification by other research studies of a considerable reduction in disruptive behaviour recorded by students participating in a programme to combat absenteeism [10].

Finally, several studies have incorporated teachers and families' perceptions of some school-related aspects into the analysis. With certain methodological limitations, these research studies attribute a positive impact to participation in school absenteeism programmes, both in terms of school organisation [10] and families' perception of the school environment [23] or the appraisal of parental involvement by the professionals involved [10].

Table 3.

### Check and Connect (Minnesota – United States)

The Check and Connect Programme was initially designed to enhance the engagement of students at risk of dropping out. The aim of the programme is to help students attend classes regularly and to actively participate in curricular activities. It was originally intended for secondary school students but has been adapted for primary school students in the State of Minnesota. The programme is currently being implemented throughout the United States in primary and secondary education, in both mainstream and special education. It has also been applied beyond the field of education, through community or judicial-based programmes.

The programme's "Check" component refers to the process whereby mentors systematically monitor student performance variables (absences, tardiness, disruptive behaviour, marks, etc.). The "Connect" component involves one-on-one tutoring to help students solve problems, build skills and enhance competence. Mentors also work with the families and act as a liaison between home and school, striving to build constructive family-school relationships.

The programme lasts for at least two years and the mentor agrees to monitor the family, should they change school or relocate.

Further information at: [13]

<http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/>

## Which interventions are proving most effective in improving school attendance?

The range of programmes to combat school absenteeism is very wide, which raises the question of whether it is possible to identify the distinguishing features of the most effective interventions.

All the evaluations show an improvement in school attendance by the participating children and young people, regardless of the characteristics of the programmes assessed. However, the literature review identifies a number of elements that may make a difference in the impact of the programmes designed:

**The literature review identifies a number of elements that may make a difference in the impact of the programmes designed.**



- **Domain responsible for the programme:** The programmes evaluated have mainly been implemented in the education, justice, community and health domains. The findings of the meta-analyses do not attribute different effects to the programmes according to the domain. [5] Evaluations of specific programmes, on the other hand, point to a lesser effect borne by coercive programmes than those of a school-based, community or clinical nature.
- **Collaborative or unimodal programmes:** Most recommendations for the design of interventions to combat school absenteeism advise involving various professionals from different fields (teachers, psychologists, judges, social workers, etc.). However, on the basis of the findings, it cannot be asserted that participation in collaborative programmes is more advisable than unimodal programmes, although in some evaluations of specific programmes, initiatives based on the involvement of different fields do prove to be more effective. On the other hand, the variation in impact between multimodal programmes is markedly higher than among unimodal programmes. This reveals that, although single-domain programmes seem to have a more homogeneous impact, multimodal programmes show significant disparities in terms of the effects [4]. Some authors propose that, despite the fact that collaborative programmes are more comprehensive and address a higher number of risk factors, the difficulties of implementing them can diminish their effect compared to simpler programmes [4][5].
- **Focused on age and stage of education:** A lesser effect is noted by multilevel programmes, that is, programmes aimed at students of different ages and year groups, whereas those aimed exclusively at primary or secondary education present clearer impacts [4]. Adaptation to the target population could explain the better performance of targeted programmes, compared to broader programmes. However, the review also highlights the importance of absenteeism programmes during transition phases, that is, on completing primary school and beginning secondary school, a stage during which the risk of absenteeism is heightened.
- **Programme duration:** Duration does not appear to have a differentiated effect on curbing school absenteeism [4][5]. In fact, positive effects are observed in very short-term interventions [22]. However, most evaluations end with the programme, without appraising their long-term effect. The scant research that has tracked participants' school attendance some time following the intervention's completion shows some fall-off in the effects [4]. In that regard, a positive impact

is expected to last throughout the programme, regardless of its duration, but research that addresses the long-term effects based on the duration of the intervention is lacking.

- **Family involvement:** Family involvement varies significantly from one programme to another. In some cases, they are targeted by the intervention, while in others they are afforded less attention than the students and, sometimes, their collaboration is anecdotal. There is some agreement over the identification of positive effects when family participation goes hand in hand with other tools, whether of a disciplinary [22], educational or community nature. Among the different forms of participation, family training appears to be more effective than family therapy, and binding agreements or contracts have also been proven to be constructive [4].

- **Instruments:** The evidence review reveals that sanctions have borne no effect on reducing school absenteeism [22]. In some programmes that combine sanctions with other forms of intervention, a positive effect has been noted but it cannot be attributed to the sanction. In fact, the evaluation of some specific programmes has isolated the effect of different tools and has assigned a lower impact to the sanction than the other tools [12].

Incentives, on the other hand, prove to be effective in many ways, whether in academic terms (for example, reduced number of exams to be taken in the event of continuous class attendance)

**Incentives, on the other hand, prove to be effective in many ways, whether in academic terms or economic terms.**



or economic terms (allowances, meal grants, after-school activities, etc.) [12]. On the other hand, programmes that feature some kind of behavioural therapy also exert a positive impact on improving school attendance and little discrepancy is noted between those programmes [4][6]. With regard to mentoring, the conclusions are unclear, although some studies present it as a successful intervention [5], whereas others do not observe significant effects [4].

- **School organisation:** Replication of the same programme in different schools has not been sufficiently studied but the little evidence that exists presents major differences in findings between schools, such that the schools' organisation could affect the programme's success (involvement of teaching staff, organisational dynamics, coordination capacity, etc.) [25]

### Which students benefit most from the implementation of these strategies?

Although the literature points to the prevalence of school absenteeism among students from more vulnerable families and students from ethnic minority families, most of the research studies included in this review have not appraised the different impact of programmes **based on these socio-demographic variables**. Only in some specific evaluations based on the Pre-Post Test has attention been drawn to the profile of the participating student, but the conclusions are not unequivocal. In some cases the findings do not show differentiated effects according to the socioeconomic characteristics or origin of the students [5][24], whereas in others a greater impact is observed among the students of Latin American origin, followed by African-American students and, finally, the white population [4]. No gender differences

were observed [24]. Less attention has been devoted to students with disabilities, but little evidence is available to support the positive effect of antiabsenteeism programmes on these students [12].

- **Stage of education:** Measures to improve school attendance have been implemented in both primary and secondary education, with positive effects at both stages and no clear differences identified between them [5]. On the whole, the research does not detect significant differences based on the age of the student [23], but some research has shown a lesser effect borne by primary school-focussed programmes [4], while other evaluations of specific programmes identify a higher fall-off in absenteeism among primary school students than secondary students [25].
- **Severity of absenteeism:** Finally, counterintuitively, programmes to combat school absenteeism show better results when initial absenteeism is more acute, although differences are not always significant [4][5][10][15][22]. As mentioned previously, measures to combat absenteeism involve mitigating rather than eradicating the problem, and this may be particularly successful for students with severe absenteeism, in which the margin for diminishing its magnitude is greater. In addition, it is among the students with the most acute absenteeism problems where the benefits gained during the programme appear to last longer in the long term [10].

**On the whole, the research does not detect significant differences based on the age of the student.**



## Summary

A wide range of programmes, plans and protocols has been designed to curb absenteeism in primary and secondary schools. Despite the positive impact of all the measures to curb absenteeism, the phenomenon has not been eradicated.

The studies consulted identify the overall effect of interventions to combat school absenteeism, with some, albeit limited, differences in impact based on certain variables. The effectiveness of the programmes is evident in both primary and secondary education, especially when the programmes are exclusively aimed at one stage of education. There is also the impact of programmes regardless of the field in which they are developed (education, judicial, community or health domain), but it seems that more cross-cutting programmes do not yield better results. With regard to instruments, only sanctions appear to exert no effect whilst incentives and behavioural therapies prove to be more effective tools. Family involvement also proves to be a paramount factor, especially when combined with other forms of intervention.

There is insufficient evidence to identify the effect of the duration of the programmes or to ascertain the sustainability of the effects in the medium or long term. Further information is needed as regards the impact of anti-absenteeism programmes on students from more vulnerable families, overrepresented among absentee students but not in the evidence review.

Table 3.  
**Supporting arguments and limitations of the programmes to combat school absenteeism**

Supporting arguments	Limitations
All the programmes evaluated reduce school absenteeism.	The problem is not reversed, only its magnitude is reduced.
Education, community, health and judicial-based programmes contribute to reducing absenteeism.	The cross-cutting nature of programmes seems to reduce their impact, probably on account of the difficulties intrinsic to their coordination.
Absenteeism can be combatted at all ages and stages of education.	Focussing on specific ages and stages of education is advisable, in order to adapt them to the needs of each stage.
Both short-term and long-term programmes reduce school absenteeism.	There is not sufficient information on the sustainability of the effects produced during the intervention.
Family involvement increases the impact of programmes.	Family involvement often requires other disciplinary or incentive-based elements.
Most tools demonstrate a positive impact (incentives, behavioural therapy, etc.).	Research is not conclusive as regards some tools, such as mentoring, while it identifies the lack of effects of others, such as sanctions.
There is a marked improvement in the most absentee students.	Lack of evidence of the impact on minority students and those from more vulnerable backgrounds.
Other impacts are noted such as a reduction in disruptive behaviour and the perception of the school environment.	Expected impacts such as reducing anxiety or juvenile delinquency, or improving school engagement are not observed.

## Implications for practical application

Official figures show school absenteeism in Catalonia to be a relatively small-scale phenomenon. Nevertheless, more qualitative research studies reveal that it is a far more widespread reality and that it particularly affects certain schools and student profiles. The evidence gathered herein demonstrates that the design of programmes to combat school absenteeism is effective. However, it also reveals the limitations of their scope. Some deliberation is needed to ensure that government intervention aimed at improving school attendance yields the desired effect.

- There is a frequent call for a consensus to be made on the definition of school absenteeism in international literature [4] and in the research carried out in Catalonia [1][3]. At local level, **a definition must be agreed for all the schools that allow school absenteeism to be monitored and compared.** Although absenteeism can be shown in a variety of ways, the definition must be refined, and categories and methods of information gathering must be created, so that official figures are attuned to the school reality.
- None of the programmes analysed have managed to completely reverse school absenteeism, and often the most evident effect has been identified among students showing chronic absenteeism. **The latter students must be set apart from those with other less intense forms of absenteeism** and specific care mechanisms for each type must be created.

- Further analysis must be conducted **to identify student profiles prone to school absenteeism**. This requires on-going and immediate monitoring as of the first absences, as well as the help of other prevention tools such as the identification of absentee siblings, families at risk of exclusion, etc.
- The evidence gathered points to greater heterogeneity of the effects of more cross-cutting, open and multi-level programmes. Since there are many causes and the forms in which absenteeism occurs are heterogeneous, mechanisms must be found that meet the specific needs of **each student, avoiding rigid protocols and generating direct measures, which diminish the complexities intrinsic to large-scale programmes**. Being equipped with an extensive list of resources and services to address the multiplicity of situations is necessary, but an assessment phase is needed to direct absentee students towards the most appropriate resource.
- The research has identified different impacts based on the schools' characteristics. **Work must be carried out with schools to bring invisible absenteeism to light, as well as to support them in the prevention and detection phase of absentee students**. It seems that some teaching and/or discipline dynamics are counter-productive in the fight against school absenteeism, so they need to be identified and adapted to avoid exacerbating the spread of the problem.
- Family involvement has proven to be effective in reducing absenteeism. **This participation must address the role the family plays in student absenteeism, which varies in different cases**: are they the cause behind the absenteeism? Do they justify the absenteeism? Do they report the absenteeism? The programme will thereby be able to optimise family involvement.
- Programmes targeting various stages of education have exerted a smaller impact, and **the need to pay special attention to the transition between primary and secondary school** has become evident, a time in which absenteeism figures soar. The link with emotional and behavioural problems in adolescence but also with the increase in schools' level of demand, the rise in student numbers in the classroom and the risk factors in the environment exacerbate the fall in attendance. Prevention and support in this transition are paramount to control school absenteeism.
- Of all the areas from which measures can be taken, the judicial domain seems to be the least effective one. Therefore, **the development of educational, community or health measures is preferable, leaving judicial and disciplinary measures as a last resort**. However, the combination of disciplinary initiatives with educational, community or health initiatives has also proven to be effective.



- Given the lack of evidence on the duration of the effects and the observation of a reduction in absenteeism during the intervention, **proposing programmes that support the absentee child or young person throughout their schooling seems appropriate**. One issue facing programmes to combat school absenteeism is the risk of participants dropping out, which limits the impact of the intervention. The design of these programmes should include student engagement mechanisms.

Finally, in view of the limitations set forth herein, we reiterate the need for caution in interpreting some of the impacts presented. Moreover, this piece of advice urges us to tackle the challenge of working to improve school absenteeism in Catalonia but also to appraise programmes already in place in our immediate environment.

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