

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE CHALLENGES

A HANDBOOK FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH
BARRIERS TO EDUCATION AND LEARNING



WRITTEN BY
SHERYL BOSWELL

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School Attendance Challenges (SAC): A Handbook for Supporting Students with Barriers to Education and Learning

- Identify barriers to attendance, engagement, education, & learning
- Explore compassionate, tiered, and whole-school solutions
- Foster a supportive learning environment
- Build student and school well-being and protective factors
- Understand what makes school feel impossible for some students
- Explore a range of individualized, strength and evidence-based strategies, accommodations, plans, support, and schooling models
- Understand the contents of the “invisible backpack” that students might carry
- Identify possible warning signs, school stress responses and thoughts, trauma experiences, exclusionary and ableist practices and respond with disability-aware, culture-informed, strength and evidence-based approaches



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Wayne Chu and Jim Yan: They created an excellent YMHC website focused on school attendance challenges. To contact them: alstra.ca

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YMHC National Survey on School Attendance Challenges:

The 519 families across Canada who have shared their challenges with us in our school attendance challenges survey and with their stories (see our story wall on the website with over 400 stories).

www.ymhc.ngo/sac

YMHC National Conference 2025:

Thank you to the international presenters and participants from across Canada who attended Canada's first conference on school attendance challenges. There were over 460 registered participants and almost 40% Indigenous professionals. We had presenters from Canada, United States, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Chile, Australia, and New Zealand.

Parent/Social Media Advocacy:

Louise Engels, Co-Founder and Director of Define Fine, United Kingdom. <https://www.definefine.org.uk/>

Define Fine is a parent/carer-led organization supporting families of children and young people experiencing school attendance difficulties, including emotionally based school avoidance and barriers related to mental health, SEND, bullying, academic pressure, or the school environment.

School Can't Australia, Louise Rogers. www.schoolcantaustralia.com.au

Student Advocacy:

Melchior Wammes, Netherlands. adviesraadeigenwijsheid.eu/melchior



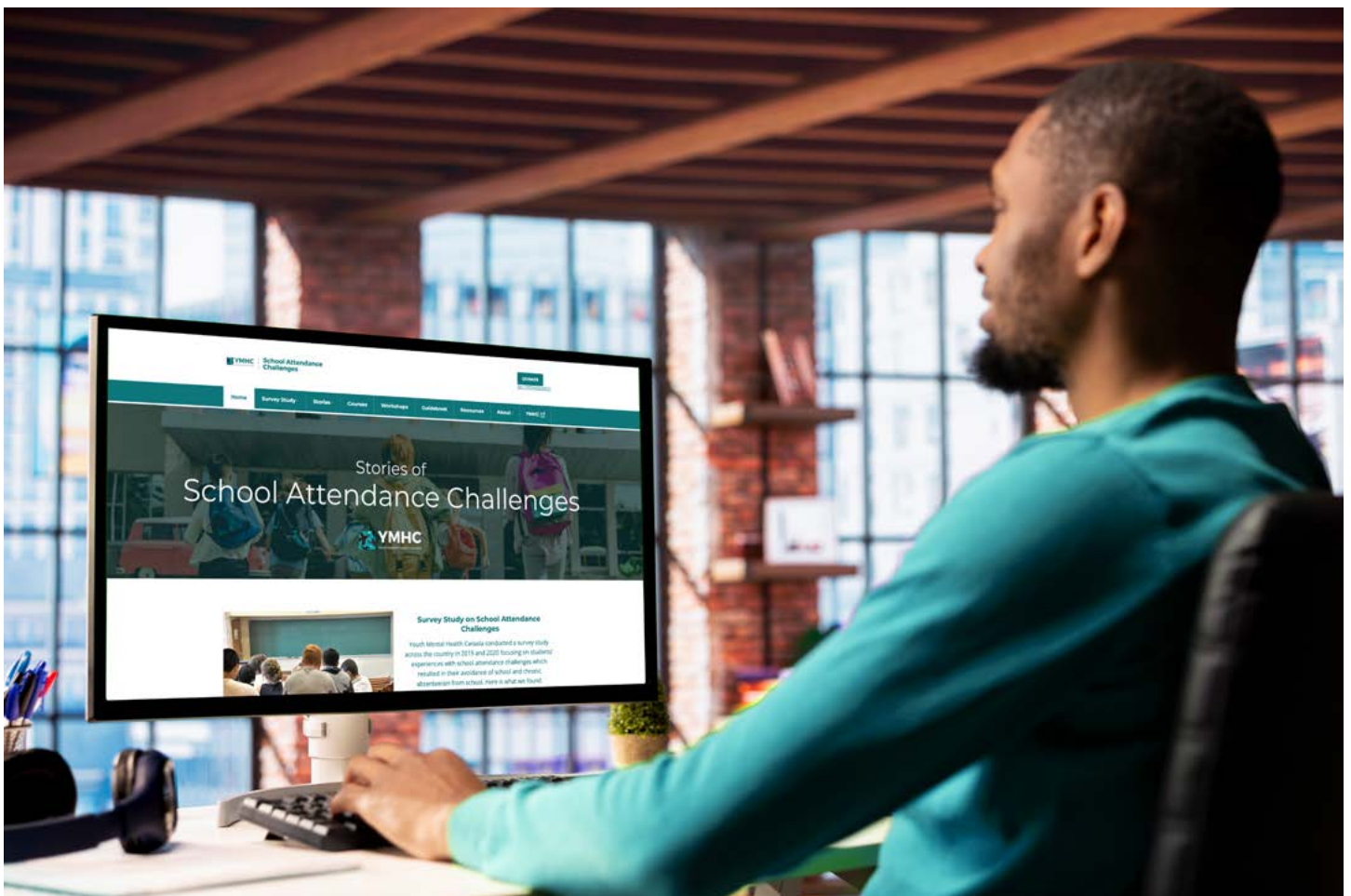
YMHC School Attendance Challenges Website

Barriers to Education – Youth Mental Health Canada (YMHC)

Please visit our website at: <https://sac.ymhc.ngo/> or <https://www.ymhc.ngo/sac>

Includes:

- School attendance challenges survey results from 519 families across Canada
- Over 400 stories from families with children who have school attendance challenges



A Call to Action: Roles and Responsibilities



Adequate special education is not a dispensable luxury. It is the ramp that provides access to the statutory commitment to education made to all children.

- *Supreme Court of Canada, Moore vs BC*



From my many years working with children and families, I believe strongly that the most important element of an inclusive educational setting is the attitude of the teachers and the staff at a school. It is the best, because it is free, it can be implemented tomorrow and it can make a huge, life-long difference in children's lives. Everyone can do it. Starting right now.

- *Dr. Natalie Thompson, Lecturer in Education, Charles Sturt University*



When adults work in partnership - listening openly, sharing insights, and respecting each other's role in a young person's life - we create the conditions for a truly supportive school-home relationship. And at the centre of that relationship is the child, who benefits most when the adults around them are united, collaborative, and grounded in care.

- *Symone Wheatley-Hey,
Square Peg Round Whole,
SPRW National Manager, Australia*

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Introduction



Introduction

Across Canada and around the world, school attendance challenges have emerged as one of the most pressing issues in education, youth mental health, disability inclusion, and suicide prevention. Attendance challenges are not a matter of refusal, avoidance, truancy, and wilful defiance; they are a visible sign of invisible struggles and systemic barriers in education.

Schools are a crucial site of protective factors, including safety, belonging, support, and hope. This handbook is designed to help schools transition from reacting to individual crises to building a proactive, tiered, school-wide system that supports all students.

The Definition of Chronic School Absenteeism

In Canada, chronic school absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the total school days in an academic year. Based on a standard 180-day school year, this equates to roughly 18 to 19 days or more, or approximately two days per month.

The scope of the problem of school absenteeism is difficult to measure. School boards collect their own attendance data within varying regulations.

School attendance and engagement matter because education matters. Chronic absenteeism is a key early risk factor for suicide, educational loss, peer and school support loss, as well as financial, employment, and life challenges.

School attendance challenges can be seen as the 'canary in the coal mine'.

Research has also shown that attendance problems have dynamic, compounding relationships with mental health and academic achievement issues, which often begin in elementary years (Klan et al., 2024).

