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Review

The Current State of School Attendance Research and Data in Canada

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Abstract

The issue of school absenteeism has received increased attention in previous years due to the widespread absences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, Canadian research is sparse on the topic, and a data-based picture of the extent of the problem does not exist. In this conceptual article, we briefly trace the origins of school absenteeism and outline the current status of prevalence data and research in the area of school absenteeism in Canada, drawing on a broad range of sources including national and international surveys. Our exploration suggests several recommendations to advance knowledge and practice in the area, including the identification and sharing of attendance-related data within and across provinces and territories, the development of partnerships between researchers and school boards, the integration of discipline-specific research in the area and the analysis of school absenteeism through nuanced, complex lenses.

Keywords: school attendance; school absenteeism; Canada; school engagement; at-risk youth

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1. Introduction

Concerns regarding school attendance have been raised in recent years in Canadian school systems and internationally, provoked largely by the COVID-19 pandemic, with anecdotes abounding of students who "just didn't return" and who are "missing" from the system. A 2022 report by UNESCO (2023) describes the "triple crisis" (p. 2) facing education, which includes a crisis of "equity and inclusion", resulting in millions of children not attending school, largely for reasons of access. Similarly, progress towards UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, has been slow, with projections estimating that 84 million children and youth worldwide will be out of school by 2030 (UNESCO, 2022). These international concerns have often been attributed to inequities facing marginalized populations—those with disabilities, living in rural areas or experiencing poverty—and rates of enrollment and completion vary widely across global regions (UNESCO, 2024). Europe, North America and Asia typically fare the best in these comparisons, and there has historically been a belief that school absenteeism is not an issue for countries like Canada. This narrative, however, is shifting.

Concerns around school absenteeism have been prominent in news media and in the communications of Canadian school districts (e.g., Carman & Wesley, 2024; CBC/Radio-

Canada, 2025; District School Board Ontario North-East, 2025; Greenslade, 2024; Long, 2024; Rivers, 2024). These highlight the negative impact of non-attendance, focusing mainly on chronic absenteeism and the influence of poor mental health. However, very little research has been conducted on school absenteeism in Canada. In fact, a review of Faculty of Education websites by Birioukov (2021) revealed that "no Canadian educational scholar investigates absenteeism as their primary area of research" (p. 723). The results of two scoping reviews conducted in the past 3 years on the literature examining school attendance problems among students in K-12 schools (Mokhtarian et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2022) identified only one Canadian study among the 317 articles, conducted in 2015 (Vellos & Vadeboncoeur, 2015).

In this paper, we briefly trace the origins of school attendance and outline the current conceptualizations of school absenteeism in Canada, drawing on existing data and studies as examples and sources. This paper offers a conceptual discussion aimed at furthering theoretical and practical development and knowledge in the field of school absenteeism. Accordingly, we focus on where and how school absenteeism appears in the Canadian research landscape, exploring these conceptualizations and contributing new thinking. As a conceptual article, this work draws on existing evidence combined with "coherent, compelling logic" to explicate a "focal phenomenon that is not observable but not adequately addressed in the existing research" (Jaakkola, 2020), namely the concept of school absenteeism (Reese, 2022; Rocco et al., 2022; Vargo & Koskela-Huotari, 2020). Explication involves "thinking theoretically about the essence of a concept and its critical elements, while thinking methodologically about what measures fit the concept" (Reese, 2022, p. 2).

The term "school absenteeism" has been chosen to capture the phenomenon under discussion in the present paper as it allows for an examination of all of the ways in which we can understand a student's absence from school. It has, at its core, a simple view of the physical presence of the student (are they at school or not?) but has been rendered complex with the introduction of virtual learning (how is presence defined virtually?) and is increasingly understood as differentiated based on the length of time for which a student has been absent (chronic absenteeism) and the reasons for which the student is absent (suspended, ill, family vacation).

In contrast to some conceptual articles, the goal is not to propose a new theory of school absenteeism but to present how it is currently understood within Canada and to identify pathways to a more cohesive and shared understanding of the concept, leading ultimately to a more theoretically connected and practically supportive evidence base. While this paper does not offer a comprehensive or systematic mapping of the Canadian literature, it draws on select sources and publicly available data to begin articulating how school absenteeism is currently understood and applied in Canadian contexts. This exploratory approach aims to surface conceptual and practical considerations that can inform future empirical and theoretical work. We end our conceptual paper with recommendations for future research and practice in the area, many of which have applications to other jurisdictions.

2. School Attendance—A Requirement, Not a Choice

School attendance holds a unique place in the spectrum of issues currently being addressed within school districts because of the associated legal implications. Students, typically between the ages of 6 and 18, are legally mandated to attend school in Canada, with some provincial and territorial variation (e.g., Gouvernement du Québec, 2024; Province of Manitoba, 2025). There are legal avenues that can be pursued when children do not attend school consistently—mostly fines or other punitive actions against parents or older students (Justice for Children and Youth, 2024). For example, the Education Act of Ontario requires attendance for children from the ages of 6 to 18 and requires parents/guardians to

"cause the person to attend school" unless they are at least 16 years old and have withdrawn from parental control. A parent/guardian who "neglects or refuses" to ensure their child's attendance at school is considered guilty of an offence and, if convicted, is liable for a maximum fine of CAD 200 (Government of Ontario, 2006). Students can also be charged with a fine or other penalty. In the Canadian province of Alberta, an Attendance Board exists to deal with significant attendance issues that are referred to them, and they have the legal power to issue orders to direct the child to attend, to refer to a child intervention worker or to impose a fine of CAD 100 per day for missed days (to a maximum of CAD 1000; Government of Alberta, 2025). Some provinces have added or have considered adding chronic school absenteeism, typically defined as missing more than 10% of the school year, to the criteria for the involvement of child protective or welfare services (Harris, 2020).

A legal, punitive focus on school attendance is reflective of a long history of compulsory schooling in Canada and beyond, typically in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Recent updates to provincial and territorial education acts related to absenteeism include "excused" absences for reasons of mental or physical illness, for religious reasons, for homeschooling, etc. The term "excused" is often used to distinguish between absences that are approved or authorized by guardians and/or by the school (e.g., illness, medical appointments, sports tournaments) and those that are not approved and are seen as illegitimate reasons for missing school (e.g., skipping a class to spend time with friends) (Kearney et al., 2019).

Contemporary approaches to addressing chronic absenteeism vary from zero-tolerance policies for what is termed "truancy" to multi-pronged interventions (Weathers et al., 2021). Despite the availability of legal measures in most Canadian jurisdictions, they are rarely enforced, and interventions are primarily addressed outside the legal system. Increasingly, school attendance problems of all types are seen as a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973) to be addressed by schools in partnership with families and community agencies (Government of Manitoba, 2023; Office of the Child and Youth Advocate—Newfoundland and Labrador, 2019).

3. Rationale for School Attendance

Given the legal requirement for school attendance, a rationale for attending school is rarely discussed. Students attend school, at least in part, because they must. However, attending school matters for many reasons. These reasons have shifted somewhat over the past 150 or so years since compulsory schooling was introduced in Canada and the US. In a bulletin released by the US Office of Education in 1935, the authors consider problems of "non-school attendance" and state that

> These [school attendance] laws had their conception in the faith that education is essential to the perpetuity of popular government and social justice. This faith continues unabated. Although the problems of non-school attendance, together with child labor, do not exist to the same extent as formerly, they are still in need of solution. There is now, perhaps more than at any previous time, widespread opinion that a more satisfactory solution to the problems relating to school attendance will afford vital aid in solving other social problems. (Deffenbaugh & Keesecker, 1935, p. VII)

The prevailing belief in the early 20th century was that school attendance was key to broader social improvement and change. The "evils of nonattendance and truancy" are described alongside concerns about the continued employment of children in manufacturing industries. Compulsory attendance laws faced strong opposition on the grounds of parent choice and liberty in particular. Approximately 25 years after the passing of attendance laws, Deffenbaugh and Keesecker noted that the US data showed that "a huge army of

children are out of school each day" (approximately 27.5%), which was mostly attributed to parental neglect, family farm work and truancy. A similar history exists in Canada, where laws were "motivated by the assumption that children who would otherwise leave school early are, in fact, better off if they stay, or that society benefits collectively because a higher level of educational attainment promotes good citizenship and economic development" (Oreopoulos, 2006, p. 23). Oreopoulos (2006) cites an Ontario teacher who contributed to a 1975 report of the Ontario Teachers' Association, who described the right of Canadian children to receive an education that would make them "a good, loyal subject" (p. 23). The average daily attendance rate reported for Canadian students in 1900 was 61%, and most children attending were quite young, with older children leaving for factory or farm work.

Contemporary rationales for school attendance move beyond assumed contributions to the social fabric of the country. While attending school does not ensure exposure to, for example, high-quality instruction, breakfast programs, structured literacy programs, arts education, technology labs or mental health curricula, the absence of students from school typically removes these opportunities. For students who are in significant need of school-based interventions or supports, who are "at risk" for school failure, this lack of access can compound existing barriers to their short- and long-term outcomes (John et al., 2022). Students with disabilities, as one example, often benefit from the structure of schooling to facilitate social relationships (Schoop-Kasteler & Müller, 2020). Research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how many in this diverse group of students lost access to essential relationships with staff and peers when schools closed (Whitley et al., 2024). For other students, who may not face barriers to academic or social success, schools may offer windows into possibilities for their futures, diverse viewpoints on social or political issues and a range of skill development options (e.g., Ng & Fergusson, 2020; Seward & Gaesser, 2018; Westheimer, 2024). The somewhat distant possibility of public schools as a great social equalizer (Tranjan et al., 2022), reminiscent of the origins of compulsory school law, has no chance if students are not actually present.

4. How Is Absenteeism Understood?

Chronic absenteeism—the 10% rate used by many school systems and researchers to signal a problematic rate or frequency of absenteeism—typically encompasses all possible reasons for being absent, including therapy appointments, vacations, sports tournaments, skipping school, suspensions, chronic medical conditions or mental health needs. The use of this rate reflects a belief that all attendance matters and that, regardless of the reason, students are placed at risk for negative educational outcomes if they miss a certain amount of school (Attendance Works, 2025).

In parallel with this approach, school attendance has been studied for decades using a categorical approach, typically excused (e.g., medical reasons, school- or family-sanctioned events, suspension) or unexcused (skipping school or truancy), as identified by school staff and/or families. Others have similarly used the terms authorized or unauthorized (for a review, see Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015) or problematic and non-problematic (Kearney, 2008a). These categories are not as clearly demarcated as one might imagine—for example, parents might sanction an absence that a school might not, or an adolescent might fail to provide evidence of a medical appointment. According to Birioukov (2016), "The overreliance on excused/unexcused absences that posit the school and the family as the arbitrators of the validity of an absence is a troubling concern, as it glosses over the underlying causes for an absence" (p. 340). Nonetheless, there is some evidence from the US and the UK that absences that are not sanctioned by home and/or school are more predictive of later academic difficulties, compared to authorized ones, although both play a role in long-term educational outcomes (Dräger et al., 2024; Henderson & Fantuzzo, 2023; Pyne et al., 2023).

In addition to identifying what constitutes problematic absenteeism, either through a specific percentage or number of days of overall or unexcused absences, the underlying reasons for or functions of school attendance problems (SAPs) have also been conceptualized. One of the most often cited models of school absenteeism was proposed by Kearney (2008b). Briefly, Kearney aimed to create a model that (a) included common definitions (including problematic and unproblematic absenteeism, with specific criteria based on percentages of missed time over a period of days of weeks), (b) was comprehensive enough to account for the myriad proximal and distal factors relevant to absenteeism (e.g., child, parent, family, peer, school and community), (c) was fluid and flexible enough to account for the frequent shifts typical in the school attendance of a student and finally (d) was useful for assessment and for intervention.

Looking at the types of school attendance problems more broadly, Heyne et al. (2019) analyzed the existing literature in the area and identified four SAP typologies of (1) school refusal (emotional/anxiety-based absenteeism), (2) truancy (unexcused absences), (3) school withdrawal (parent-motivated absenteeism) and (4) school exclusion (school-initiated absenteeism) to differentiate between attendance problems. Publicly available Canadian data (e.g., PISA) focus solely on the "truancy" or student-motivated explanation for absenteeism. School board and provincial data often capture some range of all four functions of SAPs, although school-motivated absences (e.g., formal exclusions, partial day schedules, suspensions) are not always considered as part of attendance data.

School attendance problems often serve as a "canary in the coal mine", sending a signal that children may be facing challenges at school, at home or in the community long before other issues are noted, thus triggering supports before problems are deeply entrenched (Kearney et al., 2023). Research has shown that SAPs have dynamic, compounding relationships with mental health and academic achievement issues, which often begin in elementary years (Klan et al., 2024). Unfortunately, the "early" nature of the attendance warning that characterizes the role of the canary is often not the reality of busy and resource-strapped community agencies and school systems. School attendance problems, once established, have proven to be complex, difficult to resolve and persistent. To truly address the complex cases that have been studied (e.g., Klan et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024), one often requires an understanding of family challenges, academic difficulties, peer and social relationships and identity-related changes and needs, as well as the family, school and community contexts in which these are situated (Melvin et al., 2019). A child may not attend because they do not have winter boots, and another may not attend because a family member struggling with mental illness may not be able to get them on the bus (Adams, 2022). An adolescent may face peer victimization and hate online and fear of attending school (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). Multi-tiered models addressing SAPs have been developed (Graczyk & Kearney, 2024), which reflect the layers of prevention and intervention suggested to make a difference for SAPs.

In theory then—and, to varying degrees, in practice—schools are where all students can receive supports and services necessary to thrive academically, can engage with diverse cultural and social contexts, can be exposed to new ideas and gain new skills and can experience belonging, inclusion and the valuing of themselves and their identities. Children experiencing chronic absenteeism are deprived of these essential opportunities for positive development.

5. Canadian School Attendance Data

In contrast to many other countries, including the US and the UK (e.g., UK Department for Education, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025), the scope of the problem of school absenteeism in Canada is difficult to measure, in part because of the lack of a national body

focused on K-12 education. While the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) does have a collaboration with Statistics Canada (StatCan), namely the Canadian Education Statistics Council, the wider range of education-related data captured (e.g., enrollment and graduation rates) and shared does not, at this time, include student attendance or absenteeism. StatCan surveys such as the now defunct National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Statistics Canada, 2012) did have questions about skipped days and suspensions, and the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (Statistics Canada, 2025) has questions about attending and skipping school (see Appendix A). CHSCY data are not easily publicly available but can be accessed by researchers within data centers, which are located on several Canadian university campuses via an application process.

Two national sources of educational data do exist, namely the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), administered by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). Both are focused on the academic performance of Grade 8 or 15-year-old students, and both also include contextual surveys completed by the students that include items related to missed days and classes.

5.1. Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP)

The PCAP (Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC, 2025)) has been administered approximately every three years, beginning in 2003, to assess the knowledge and skills of Canadian students in Grade 8. Each iteration features one of three core subjects (mathematics, reading, science), with more limited testing of the non-core subjects.

The most recent PCAP was administered in 2023, with results yet to be published. The latest available reports are from the 2019 version (O'Grady et al., 2021). In the spring of 2019, approximately 30,000 Grade 8 students from 1600 schools in 10 provinces (no territories) took part in the PCAP. Mathematics was the main focus of the 2019 version of the assessment, with reading and science as minor domains. In addition to the academic testing, students, their teachers and school principals also complete questionnaires on topics such as demographics, family socioeconomic status[1], language profiles, teaching and learning conditions and the school climate. In 2019, the student questionnaire asked respondents to report on their absences in the current school year, and principals were asked what proportion of students were absent on a typical day.

Findings released by the CMEC (O'Grady et al., 2021) showed that approximately 23% of students reported having been absent for one full day at least one time in the two weeks prior to the assessment, with 15.6% skipping some classes at least once (see Figure 1). These are similar rates to the 2016 administration (21% for full day, 13% for some classes; O'Grady et al., 2019). Students were not asked about attendance in the two weeks prior in the 2013 version of the PCAP, so comparisons are not possible.

Students were also asked whether absences were for non-school-related reasons (e.g., illness, appointments, travel, non-school sports activities, community events) or the result of school-related activities (e.g., field trips, school sports activities, music or cultural events). Approximately one-third of students reported having been absent from school for 10 days or more in that school year for non-school-related reasons, while 8% reported being absent for the same duration for school-related reasons. Analyses showed that there was a negative relationship between the frequency of absences and mathematics test scores, with non-school-related absences having a significant relationship and school-related absences impacted only at extreme levels (20+ absences; O'Grady et al., 2021).

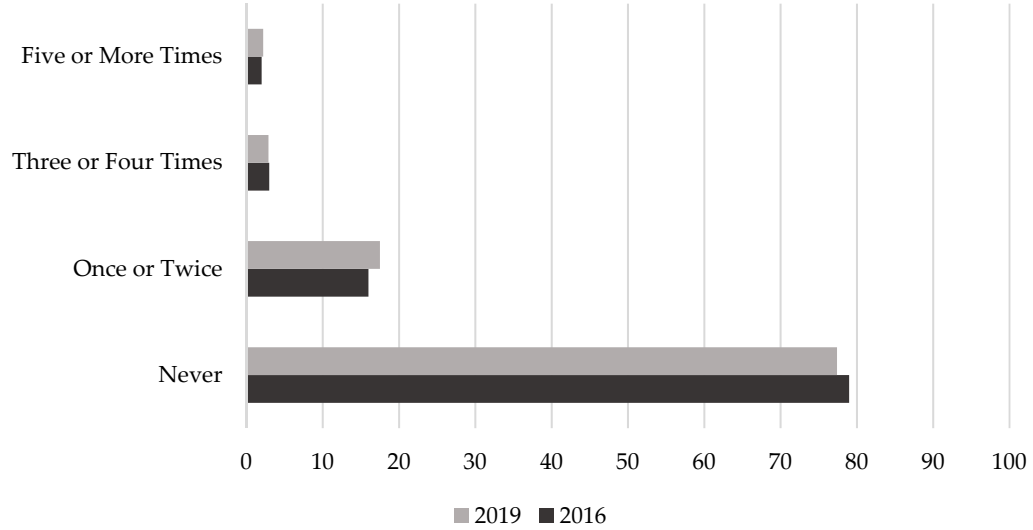


Figure 1. Percentage of Grade 8 students reporting skipped days in the past two weeks on the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program. (O'Grady et al., 2019, 2021).

In reports from school principals, just under half (46.5%) noted less than 5% absenteeism on a typical day, with similar percentages reported for 5–10% absenteeism (46.6%) and 6.8% reporting more than 10% absenteeism on a typical day for reasons other than school-sponsored activities (O'Grady et al., 2021). These reports are similar to the 2016 PCAP results, where 6% of principals reported more than 10% of students absent on a typical day (O'Grady et al., 2019), while higher than the 2013 results, where almost 4% reported more than 10% absent (O'Grady & Houme, 2015).

In considering contextual challenges to learning in their schools, 62% of principals indicated that students "skipping classes" was not a hindrance, with 30% reporting this as a "little" hindrance, 5.7% as "more than a little" and 2.5% as "a lot" of a hindrance. Principals were more concerned about excused student absences, with 48.8% seeing these as a little hindrance, 27.1% as more than a little and 12.9% as a lot of a hindrance.

While limited in several respects, including a sole focus on Grade 8 students who were present on the day of the assessment and narrowly defined, unconfirmed attendance data, these data provide some unique insights into attendance in Canadian schools from the perspective of students and school principals. About a quarter of students were absent on one day in a two-week period. However, in general, while these rates have increased over iterations of the PCAP, school principals reported low average daily rates of absenteeism, and most were unconcerned about students "skipping classes". Interestingly, they expressed more concern about excused absences, with most seeing these as a challenge.

5.2. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

The PISA study is conducted every three years by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD, 2025). Canada is one of over 100 countries that has participated since 2000. Like the PCAP, the study focuses only on 15 year olds who are randomly selected across participating countries, assessing math, reading, science and creative thinking; questions about attendance and other contextual variables, such as the school climate, safety and peer relationships, are also included. Moreover, similarly to the PCAP, students report on classes and days skipped, as well as lates. Students are not asked if they have missed school for any reason other than "skipping". In the most recent version of the PISA, students also report on any long-term absences (missing school for more than 3 consecutive months) that they have experienced throughout their schooling. As with the PCAP, principals also complete a questionnaire asking to what extent the

learning of students is hindered by students skipping classes or truancy (see Appendix A for specific items).

In 2022, 23,073 Canadian students took part across 867 schools, representing 92% of the population of 15 year olds in Canada. Approximately 30% of students reported having skipped at least one full day, which is higher than the OECD average (20%), as well as the highest rate reported by Canadian adolescents for the past 10 years of PISA testing (OECD, 2023; see Table 1). It is also higher than the 23% reported in the PCAP data (O'Grady et al., 2021). There is no way to know how reflective the previous weeks were; if students did miss at least one day every two weeks over the course of the year, this would result in approximately 19 missed days or 10% of instructional days, meeting the threshold for chronic absenteeism.

Table 1. Percentage of students with at least one missed day in the past 2 weeks by individual characteristics on the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment.

Student Characteristic	% (SE)
Gender	
Girls	30.4 (0.7)
Boys	26.8 (1.0)
Socioeconomic Status	
Disadvantaged	33.2 (1.2)
Advantaged	25.8 (0.8)
Immigrant Background	
Non-immigrant	29.2 (0.7)
Immigrant	26.6 (1.4)

Note: SE = Standard Error.

Approximately 30% also reported having skipped at least one class in the past two weeks. This is also higher than the OECD average (22.5%) and significantly lower than the Canadian 2018 PISA findings, albeit higher than in the 2012 and 2015 surveys (OECD, 2013, 2016, see Figure 2).

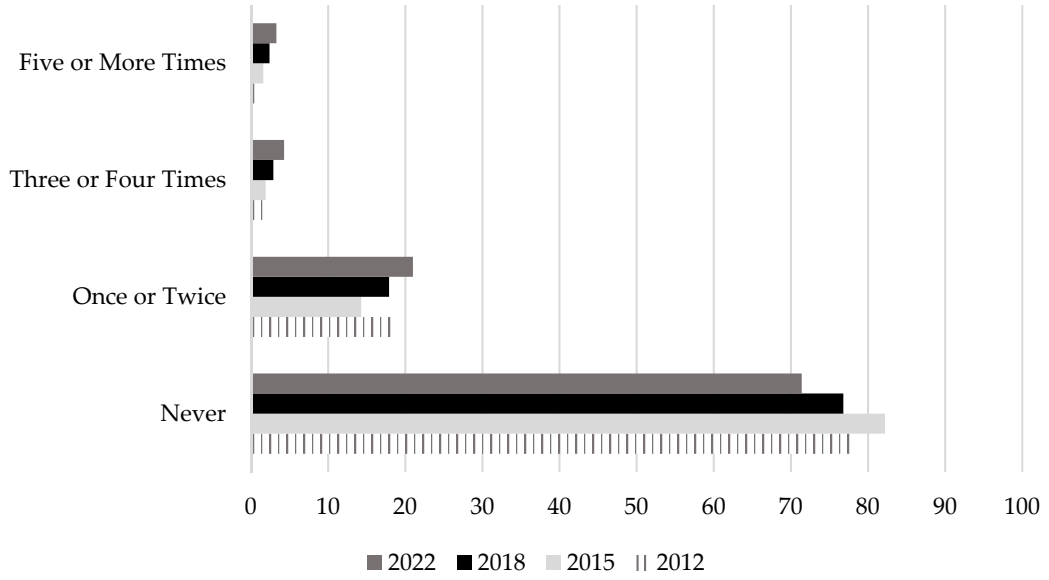


Figure 2. Percentage of 15-year-old students reporting skipped days in the past two weeks on the Programme for International Student Assessment. (OECD, 2013, 2016, 2019, 2023).

Analyses conducted by the OECD on the 2022 data found that, in Canada, students were significantly more likely to have skipped a day of school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA assessment if they were female or of a lower socioeconomic status[2]. Differences between immigrant and non-immigrant students did not reach significance.

In terms of school characteristics, students were significantly more likely to have missed at least one day of school in the two weeks prior to the PISA survey if they attended a school with a disadvantaged SES profile or in a rural area (see Table 2). Other differences were not significant.

Table 2. Percentage of students with at least one missed day in the past 2 weeks by school characteristics on the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment.

School Characteristic	% (SE)
Socioeconomic Status[3]	
Disadvantaged	30.5 (1.8)
Advantaged	26.3 (1.3)
Location	
Rural	35.4 (2.8)
Town	28.3 (1.2)
City	28.3 (1.1)
Type of School	
Public	29.4 (0.5)
Private	19.3 (5.8)
Concentration of Immigrant Students	
Low	29.4 (1.1)
High	28.3 (0.8)

Analyses conducted by the OECD indicated that Canadian students who attended classes regularly performed significantly better in mathematics, which was the subject of focus in the PISA in 2022. Specifically, students who reported skipping a whole day or some classes in the past two weeks scored 36 points lower (the mean score being 472), explaining 3.5% of the variance in math performance (SE = 0.4). The relationship increased significantly based on the number of days or classes missed, reaching as high as a 72-point difference between those who did not miss any school days and those who missed five or more days.

Student reports of long-term absenteeism were rare, with 8.3% of Canadian students reporting at least one instance. Students identified with lower SES and who were immigrants were significantly more likely to experience long-term absenteeism. The reasons provided by students most often were being sick (51%), schools being closed because of a natural disaster (22.3%), not feeling safe at school (19.1%), experiencing transportation barriers (19.2%), being bored (18.2%) or having to take care of a family member (17.8%). Given that the 2022 PISA was administered shortly after school closures due to COVID-19, it is likely that some students considered the pandemic a cause for long-term absenteeism.

As with the PCAP data, the PISA provides valuable information about attendance and absenteeism in relation to certain academic areas, and it also allows us to compare our rates of attendance with other OECD countries and for Canada over time. It also involves a very large, national sample of 15 year olds. The PISA data indicate that approximately 30% of this sample reported skipping school at least once in the prior 2 weeks and that

girls and those with socioeconomic disadvantages were more likely to be absent. The negative impact of absences on mathematics was significant, and the effect multiplied as the number of days increased. Limitations to analysis exist in part because the assessment is not intended to focus on attendance and absenteeism; again, there are student reports of missed classes or days and, beginning in 2022, there is a question about long-term periods of absenteeism, which is difficult to interpret in light of COVID-19 shutdowns. The PISA does not capture classes or days missed due to, for example, medical, mental health or extracurricular reasons or because of school discipline (suspensions or expulsions) or exclusion. The PISA also relies on the perspectives of students who are present on the day of the assessment, which may not include those with chronic absenteeism or those who have left the system altogether. While accompanied by several limitations, student reports are of value in understanding absenteeism—so too are school- and district-level data.

As evidence of the conceptualization of school absenteeism, however, the available national Canadian data, from both the PISA and PCAP, reveal a major focus on student reports of "skipping" or truancy, reflecting a view of absenteeism that prioritizes "unexcused" absences that result from a choice being made by a student. This view neglects the broader range of reasons or motivations for a student not attending school, including decisions made not by students but by schools (e.g., disciplinary exclusion) or families (e.g., holidays, a need to work). These surveys also rely on a measure of days missed within a 2-week period—it is unclear how valid this approach is and whether it reflects a broader pattern of missed days for the respondents.

5.3. School Board Attendance Data

School attendance data are typically collected by school boards or districts within each province and territory. With no federal body of education in Canada, these data are rarely shared or considered in a national fashion (Smith et al., 2022) and are not consistently, publicly available by province or territory. A recent CBC news investigation (Carman & Wesley, 2024) found that chronic absenteeism (10% + missed days) has risen significantly in many parts of the country. In the Toronto Catholic District School Board, for example, the proportion of elementary-aged students absent for 10% or more of the school year rose from 15% in 2018–2019 to 25% in 2021–2022 and 33% in 2022–2023. Similar increases were seen in Newfoundland and Labrador, with elementary students at 50% for 2022–2023 and secondary students holding steady at rates of almost 70% chronically absent.

Alongside challenges in sharing attendance data across the country is the issue of the accuracy of estimates. Most require classroom teachers to complete a daily attendance roll on paper or in digital form. Some districts rely on attendance mobile apps, with predetermined options and fields for parents and guardians to complete when absences occur; others have staff specifically tasked with monitoring daily and even class-by-class student presence; and others rely on a mix of notes or phone messages sent to office staff (e.g., Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, 2025; Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2025). The complexities of very large secondary schools, with multiple classes and teachers, present challenges, as do a myriad other features of busy schools. Most provinces and territories use specific labels or codes to categorize absences (suspension, parent-authorized vacation, illness), but, again, these vary in terms in terms of how they are defined and applied.

Research does not yet exist in Canada that examines the veracity of attendance data collected by school boards and how they might reflect or fail to reflect the estimates provided by students in national and international surveys. Conceptually, school boards tend to prioritize the 10% chronic absenteeism rate as the point at which absenteeism warrants intervention and/or the threshold where negative impacts on student outcomes can be expected. Efforts by school boards to collect information regarding the explanations

for missed days reflect an understanding of the differentiated nature of absenteeism and of the varied effects on student outcomes.

6. Canadian Research on Attendance

As is the case with data, research in Canada on this topic is sparse. A scan completed by Birioukov (2021) of Canadian Faculty of Education webpages revealed the absence of any explicit focus on school attendance. However, Birioukov's review did not extend to related constructs such as student participation, inclusion or engagement at school, where more extensive research has been conducted. Many researchers identify their related work more specifically with a particular population, such as those with disabilities (Miller et al., 2016; Sentenac et al., 2019), with health conditions (Kohen, 2010), in special education (Buliung et al., 2021) or with mental health issues (Klan et al., 2024; Rogers et al., 2024); Indigenous students (Rogers & Aglukark, 2024; Whitley, 2014), Black students (Livingstone & Weinfeld, 2017; Radebe, 2024) or immigrant or refugee populations (Anisef et al., 2010; Archambault et al., 2017; St-Pierre et al., 2022); or students who are racialized (Sanders et al., 2024).

As with the broader theoretical discussions in the field, these studies also consider attendance in broad ways, including school disciplinary actions, graduation rates, daily attendance or school exclusion (e.g., Sanders et al., 2024). The range of disciplines, theoretical foundations and conceptualizations of school attendance reflected in Canadian research leaves the already limited knowledge base scattered. This fragmentation, particularly when combined with the lack of available data, constrains a deeper understanding of the problem, as well as opportunities for intervention, advocacy, lobbying and policy development at the local, provincial and national levels.

One strand of research that can be drawn upon to better understand attendance and absenteeism in the Canadian context is focused on high school dropout. Dropout is not always considered in absenteeism research but fits within a broad view in many respects. Dropout is a form of school withdrawal, often but not always precipitated by other types of attendance problems, such as suspension, truancy or skipping classes. Dropout is usually understood as a long-term process of academic difficulties and disengagement; however, as with attendance problems broadly, multiple dropout typologies and models exist (e.g., Bowers & Sprott, 2012; Dupéré et al., 2015; Finn, 1989; Tinto, 1975; Rumberger & Larson, 1998), and the complexity of the phenomenon is well recognized. In contrast to school absenteeism, trajectories, determinants, correlates and interventions for dropout have been examined for many years in Canada (e.g., Archambault et al., 2009, 2017; Dupéré et al., 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Janosz et al., 1997, 2000, 2008; Noble et al., 2021; Pagani et al., 2008; Stamp et al., 2022; Thouin et al., 2022). Much of this research has taken place in the province of Québec, led by a single group of researchers.

Key findings from Canadian high school dropout research include the protective role of extracurricular activities, regular attendance and reduced school mobility (Archambault et al., 2009; Stamp et al., 2022). For example, one study by Stamp et al. (2022) examined the role of temporality in the relationship between non-mandatory school changes and high school dropout in a sample of 545 secondary school students in the province of Québec. This study was part of a larger investigation conducted across 12 socioeconomically disadvantaged, French-language high schools that experienced higher than average dropout rates. Dropout was defined as school records indicating (a) an official document signaling the termination of studies, (b) unjustified absence lasting at least 1 month or (c) a transfer to a general adult education program. Students were asked to report on school changes in their secondary years (Grades 7–11) and these were coded in terms of their seasonal (what part of the year) and developmental (while they were in early or later grades) timing. The

results of logistic regressions showed that students who changed schools during the year and those who changed later in their school years were significantly more likely to drop out of school—between 2.4 and 3.6 times more likely.

Conversely, risk factors include a recent experience of clinically significant depression (Dupéré et al., 2018a) or of a stressful life event (Dupéré et al., 2018b), socioeconomic factors such as parent education levels and school variables such as being held back a grade (Pagani et al., 2008). Immigrant status has also been explored as a risk factor for absenteeism and dropout. One study by Archambault was conducted with a sample of 2291 students in 10 low-socioeconomic high schools in Québec. The goal was to examine whether differences existed between first-, second- and third-generation-plus immigrant students in terms of dropout status. The authors drew on several theories that have been developed to understand gaps between outcomes for immigrant and non-immigrant students. Approximately 55% of the sample had a recent immigrant background (25% first generation, 55% second generation), with most coming from the West Indies, Africa, Latin and South America or North America and Europe. Dropout status was determined using Ministry of Education data that captured students who did not earn their high school diploma five or six years after they were expected to graduate and who were no longer in school. Students were also asked to report on their frequency of truancy over the school year. The results showed that students in the third-generation-plus group had significantly higher rates of dropout compared to their first-generation peers and also had more drug use, delinquent behaviors and deviant peers. Interestingly, no group differences were observed for student-reported truancy, although truancy did contribute to a significant predictor model of dropout for the global sample, along with various motivation factors.

In general, findings in the Canadian dropout literature are similar to those in other Western countries, although unique populations and contexts, such as the varied secondary schooling structures across provinces and the realities of newcomers and First Nations, Inuit and Métis (Indigenous) students, have not been thoroughly explored within this complex contemporary lens. The dropout literature is just one example of a theoretically grounded, multifaceted research body that does exist in Canada that is highly relevant for our understanding of school absenteeism, if considered within a broad, complex conceptualization.

7. Discussion and Recommendations

Despite school absenteeism being discussed in many spheres as a growing and deeply concerning phenomenon in Canada, very little is known about how it is defined and conceptualized and about its prevalence and trends over time, its impact on various communities, its influential and manipulable predictors or the efficacy of the range of prevention and intervention approaches that no doubt exist in many school boards. In part, our ignorance comes from the lack of national data beyond the PISA and PCAP, which are limited to Grade 8 or 15-year-old students and questions related to skipped days or classes. The data that do exist from these sources, which are largely based on student reports and on a narrow view of absenteeism as truancy, reflect high rates of absenteeism relative to past years and to other countries and demonstrate the significant impact that attendance has on mathematics test scores. School board attendance data, and the aggregate data no doubt held by provincial and territorial ministries of education, hold promise in capturing the observed attendance of students and varied reasons for absenteeism but are, as this point, inconsistently collected, analyzed (i.e., by socioeconomic or identity group) and shared.

Little research has been conducted in Canada using provincial or even the limited national data to better understand the experiences and outcomes of students. However, there are many researchers conducting studies through a range of disciplinary lenses, using diverse measures and indicators of attendance and absenteeism. Dropout research

is one example, but there are many others, focused on a range of communities, issues, questions and goals. Researchers have used absenteeism rates as an outcome measure of the functioning of students with asthma, as a predictor of engagement with the youth justice system, as a measure of behavioral engagement among adolescents and as an indicator of health (Cicutto et al., 2005; Kennedy-Turner et al., 2021; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013).

So, what can and should be done to advance our conceptualization and understanding of school attendance and absenteeism in Canada and in other countries facing similar challenges? First, the sharing of broad data related to absenteeism that are collected within each province and territory would allow for a national portrait of absenteeism as it is currently being captured, as well as opportunities for disaggregation based on geographic, socioeconomic or identity-based groupings. The Canadian Education Statistics Council (CMEC and StatCan) may have a role to play in collecting and consolidating these data and in creating a consensus regarding definitions and operationalizations across the country. Alternately, the development of a network of attendance-focused representatives from each jurisdiction might allow for collaborative efforts to compile and conceptualize these important data and highlight important conceptual, theoretical and empirical next steps to advance the field. These data can be considered in light of high-level economic, social and health efforts for Canadians, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Public Health Agency of Canada framework, which both include high school completion rates as key indicators (Government of Canada, 2024; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all) is one of Canada's five priority SDGs, and, while high school completion rates continue to increase, the most recent report highlighted the inequities in outcomes for Indigenous students and those with disabilities (Government of Canada, 2023). Attendance and absenteeism data that precede high school graduation are key to advancing these goals and should be a priority at the federal level.

Second, stronger partnerships should be developed between researchers and school boards to allow for theoretically and empirically grounded data collection, sharing, piloting and the evaluation of attendance-recording approaches, as well as the integration of validated screeners into attendance procedures and other activities. Most school boards have limited research and data teams, and priorities are typically and necessarily programmatic and evaluation-focused. However, the efficacy of board-developed interventions that are necessary to address their own absenteeism issues will be improved by a thorough understanding of factors such as the nature, duration, pattern and cause of the attendance problem. This understanding requires a theoretical foundation, as well as data collection and/or analysis, which can be conducted in collaboration with teams of researchers who have expertise and flexibility in terms of scope. Researchers can also disseminate findings in collaboration with districts to promote the sharing of approaches across educational jurisdictions.

Third, efforts should be made among multidisciplinary researchers to connect areas of research that, while disparate in many respects, shed light on the reasons that students are not attending school or have left school and the ways in which they can be engaged and retained. Prevention-focused researchers can similarly come together to better understand how to avoid the development of school absenteeism, drawing on longitudinal studies and existing findings in the areas of health, disability, etc., that can inform practices in early childhood and primary education.

Some larger and more philosophical questions regarding school attendance have not fully been addressed in this article but should be considered on a national and, by extension, international scale going forward. For example, is the physical presence of

students in classrooms for a set number of hours per day still a goal in our education systems? If a mix of virtual and in-person learning across systems is embraced, how then is attendance defined and measured? Are there some students who really do not "need" to attend school in order to successfully meet curricular requirements, as many discovered during the COVID-19 shutdowns? Is a chronic absenteeism rate of 10% justified or helpful in education systems? Does it allow us to identify students who are at a significant risk of negative outcomes? Do "unexcused" absences really impact students in ways that "excused" ones do not? Is this binary helpful or illuminative in identifying students in need of support in schools? As the field of attendance-focused research continues to grow and become more cohesive and conceptually sophisticated in coming years, and as data are more consistently collected, shared and analyzed for multiple purposes, we are hopeful that our questions can move from "how often" and "why" to more complex and nuanced investigations that can inform educators, clinicians and policymakers as they seek to improve outcomes for children and youth.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SAPs	School Attendance Problems
CMEC	Council of Ministers of Education, Canada
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
StatsCan	Statistics Canada
PCAP	Pan-Canadian Assessment Program
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development

Appendix A. Items Related to Attendance and Absenteeism in Canadian Surveys

Data Source	Year(s)	Sample/Participants	Items/Questions
National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY)	1994–2009 Every 2 years (Inactive)	Began in 1994 with longitudinal sample of children aged 0 to 11 to be followed to age 25; additional young cohorts added at several points; additional cross-sectional samples; longitudinal sample is representative of the Canadian population	Student Respondent: Since the beginning of this school year, how many times have you (a) skipped a day of school without permission or (b) been suspended from school? (4-point scale) Have you ever dropped out of school for more than a week? The last time you dropped out of school, how long was it for? (4-point scale)

Data Source	Year(s)	Sample/Participants	Items/Questions
Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (CHSCY)	2016 2019 2023 Occasional data collection	2019—Aged 1 to 17 2023—Aged 1 to 21 Nationally representative Cross-sectional design and longitudinal follow-up	Student Respondent: In the past 12 months, about how many times have you skipped a day of school without permission? (4-point scale) In the past 7 days, how many days did you attend school, even if for only part of the day? (6-point scale) What is the main reason that you are not currently enrolled in school? (Options: illness or dropped out)
Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP)	2007–2023 Every 3 years	Random, representative selection of Grade 8 students 10 provinces (no territories)	Student Respondent: In this school year, how many days have you been absent from school for (a) reasons that are not school-related and (b) reasons that are school-related? (6-point scale) In the last two full weeks, how often did the following things occur? (a) I skipped a whole day of school, (b) I skipped some classes, (c) I arrived late for school (4-point scale) School Administrator: In your school, to what extent is student learning hindered by the following? (a) student absenteeism (all excused absences), (b) students skipping classes (4-point scale) On a typical day, what percent of students are absent from your school for reasons other than a school-sponsored activity? (3-point scale)
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)	2000–Present Every 3 years	Random, representative selection of 15-year-old students 10 provinces (no territories)	Student: In the last two full weeks of school, how often did the following things occur? (a) I skipped a whole school day, (b) I skipped some classes, (c) I arrived late for school. (4-point scale) Have you ever missed school for more than 3 months in a row? (3 point-scale); If yes, why did you miss school for more than 3 months in a row? (11 options) School Administrator: In your school, to what extent is the learning of students hindered by the following phenomena: (a) student truancy, (b) students skipping classes?

Notes

[1] The PCAP combines two measures that serve as proxies for socioeconomic status: parents' education and the number of books in the home (O'Grady et al., 2019).

[2] In the PISA, a student's socioeconomic status is estimated by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status, a composite measure that combines into a single score the financial, social, cultural and human capital resources available to students. In practice, it is derived from several variables related to students' family backgrounds, which are then grouped into three components: parents' education, parents' occupations and an index summarizing a number of home possessions that can be taken as proxies for material wealth or cultural capital, such as the possession of a car, the existence of a quiet room to work, access to the Internet, the number of books and other educational resources available in the home (OECD, 2019).

[3] School SES is the mean SES score for all students in the school who participated in the PISA.

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