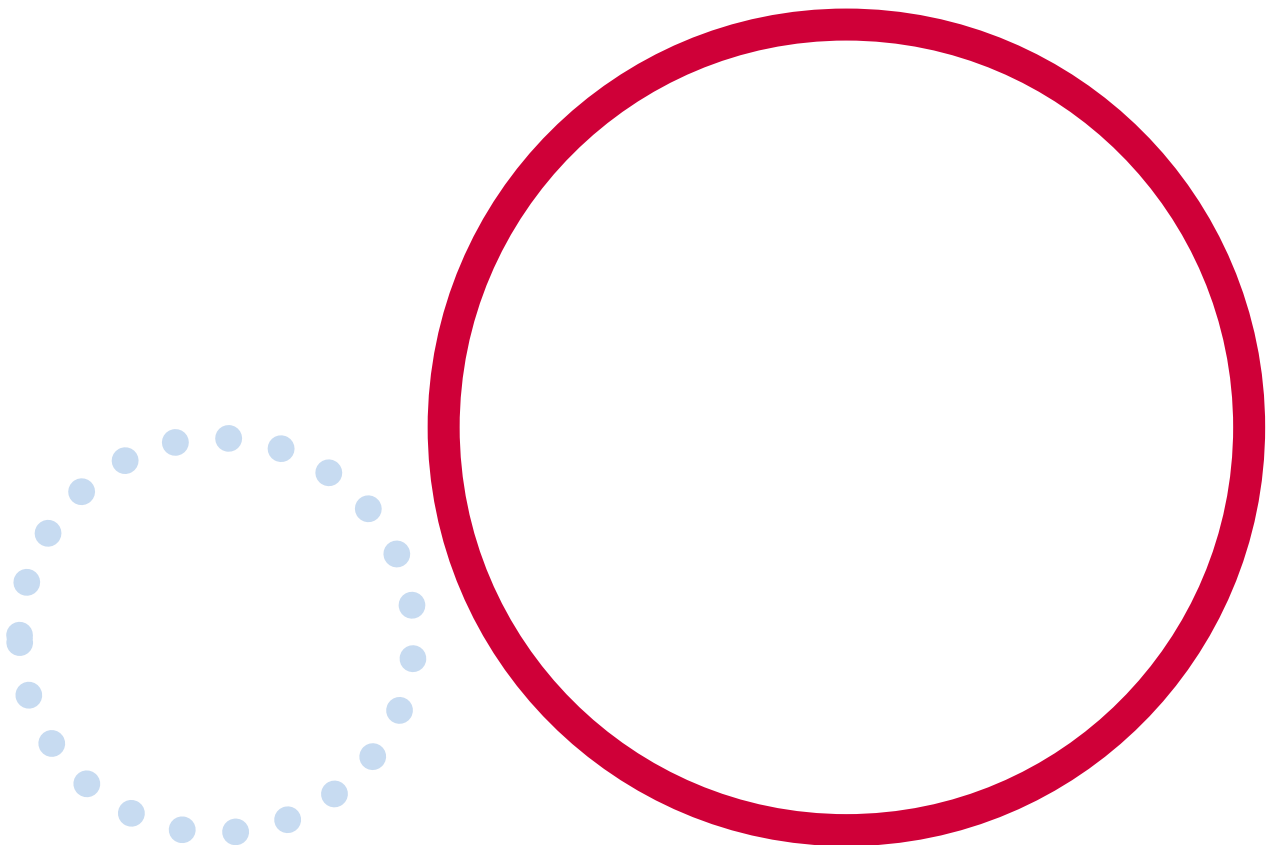
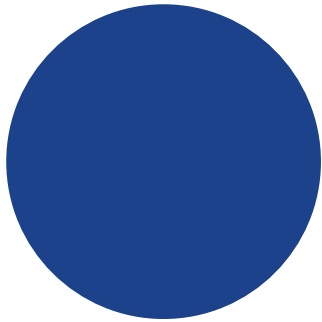


Effects of COVID-19 on attendance during Semester 1 2020



Introduction

This factsheet provides an overview of 2020 Semester 1 student attendance data at NSW government schools. Semester 1 attendance data for students in Years 1 to 10 is a key performance measure for both national and local reporting. In particular many NSW government schools have targets to increase the proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that NSW student attendance data in Semester 1, 2020 is not comparable to previous years. The NSW Government encouraged students to learn from home, where possible, for a seven week period from 24 March to 22 May. During this period, schools monitored engagement with learning to determine whether students should be marked present. This changed the definition of the attendance measure which traditionally only requires attendance at school premises for marking students present.

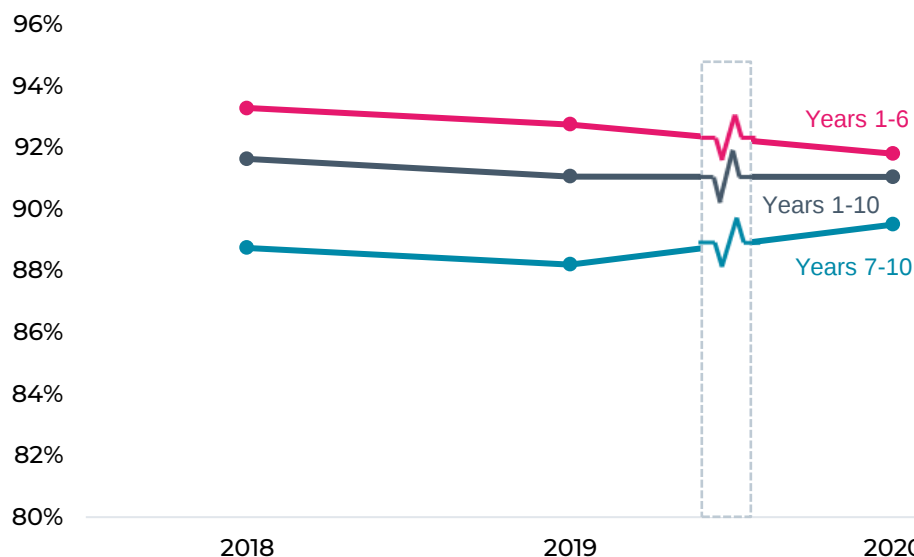
There was also some evidence of varied marking practices as schools adjusted to the learning from home period, with some schools recording higher attendance rates while others recorded markedly lower rates.

This factsheet shows the variation in attendance reported by schools to explain why Semester 1 2020 data is a break in series and should not be compared to previous years.

Summary of attendance rates

Figure 1 shows attendance rates for primary and secondary students for the last three years. On initial analysis the overall 2020 Semester 1 attendance rate appeared to be stable, only changing by 0.1 percentage point from 91.1% to 91.0%. However this small change masks significant variation between primary and secondary attendance rates. As the chart shows, primary attendance fell by 1.0 percentage points from 92.8% to 91.8% while secondary attendance rose by 1.3 percentage points to 88.2% to 89.5%. This level of variation is 5 to 7 times greater than the average year-on-year variation observed for primary or secondary in previous years when a consistent methodology was used to calculate attendance rates.

Figure 1: 2018-2020 Semester 1 attendance rate by education level



For more information on previous years' attendance data visit '[Government school student attendance bulletin \(2012-2019\)](#)' on the datahub.

Attendance by scholastic year

There are two key measures of attendance which are usually reported on the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) My School website and are used to assess school and system performance. These are the attendance rate for students in Years 1 to 10 and the proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time (attendance level). The attendance level

measure was introduced nationally in 2015 to help identify and support cohorts of students with lower attendance. NSW government schools have reported the attendance level since 2018.

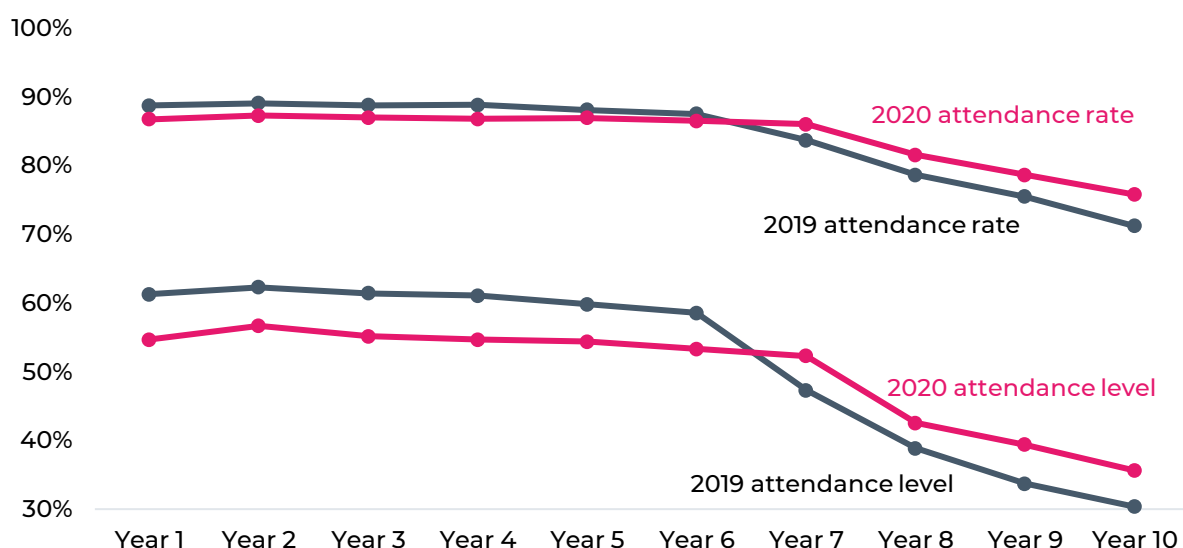
In 2020, during the learning from home period at the end of Term 1 and beginning of Term 2, schools were advised to mark students absent if they did not engage with learning. Schools varied in their method of delivering remote learning and also in their interpretation of attendance marking guidance.

Some schools provided written workbooks, especially for younger students, while other schools delivered learning through online platforms such as Google Classrooms, Seesaw or Zoom. The department provided support and resources for schools to assist with remote learning.

Figure 2 presents both attendance rates and attendance levels for each scholastic year. Primary attendance rates and levels were consistently lower for all years (Years 1 to 6) in 2020 compared to 2019, while secondary attendance rates and levels (Years 7 to 10) were consistently higher. These results show a clear difference between primary and secondary students in the effect of COVID-19 on attendance marking.

The overall Semester 1 attendance level decreased by 1.6 percentage points from 73.0% in 2019 to 71.4% in 2020. The primary attendance level decreased by 4.9 percentage points from 78.5% to 73.6% while the secondary attendance level increased by 3.6 percentage points from 64.0% to 67.6%.

Figure 2: 2019-2020 Semester 1 attendance by scholastic year



Attendance rates during the learning from home period

Table 1 provides further evidence of the effect of COVID-19 on 2020 Semester 1 attendance rates. It shows that the attendance rate during the seven week learning from home period was far higher than during the face-to-face teaching period. Secondary attendance was reported as 7.0 percentage points higher during the learning from home period, significantly more than primary attendance (1.7 percentage points).

Table 1: 2020 Semester 1 attendance rates during learning from home period

	During learning from home	Excluding learning from home	Difference
Primary (Years 1-6)	93.0%	91.3%	+ 1.7 pp
Secondary (Years 7-10)	94.4%	87.4%	+ 7.0 pp
Total (Years 1-10)	93.5%	89.8%	+ 3.7 pp

The learning from home period spanned Term 1 Weeks 9 to 11 (23 March to 9 April) to Term 2 Weeks 1 to 4 (29 April to 22 May). All other days in Semester 1 are counted in the 'excluding learning from home' column.

Variation in attendance rates across schools

Figure 3: 2019-2020 Semester 1 attendance at primary schools

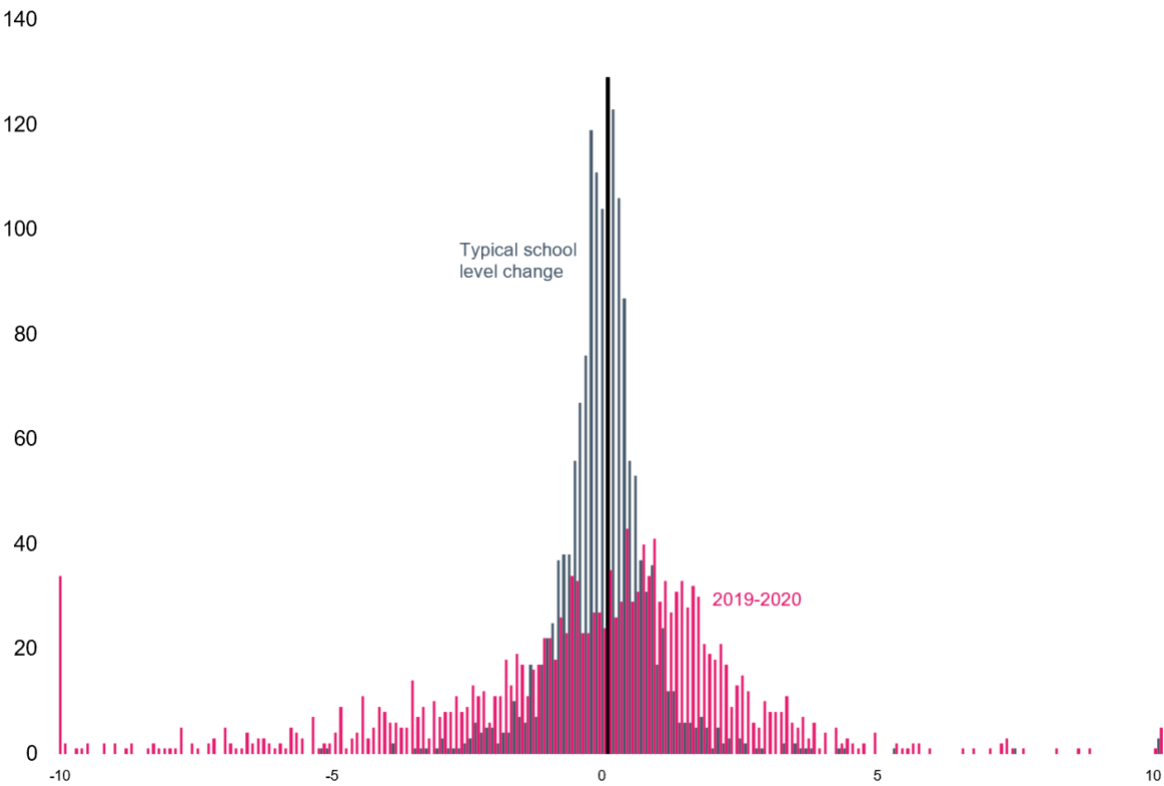
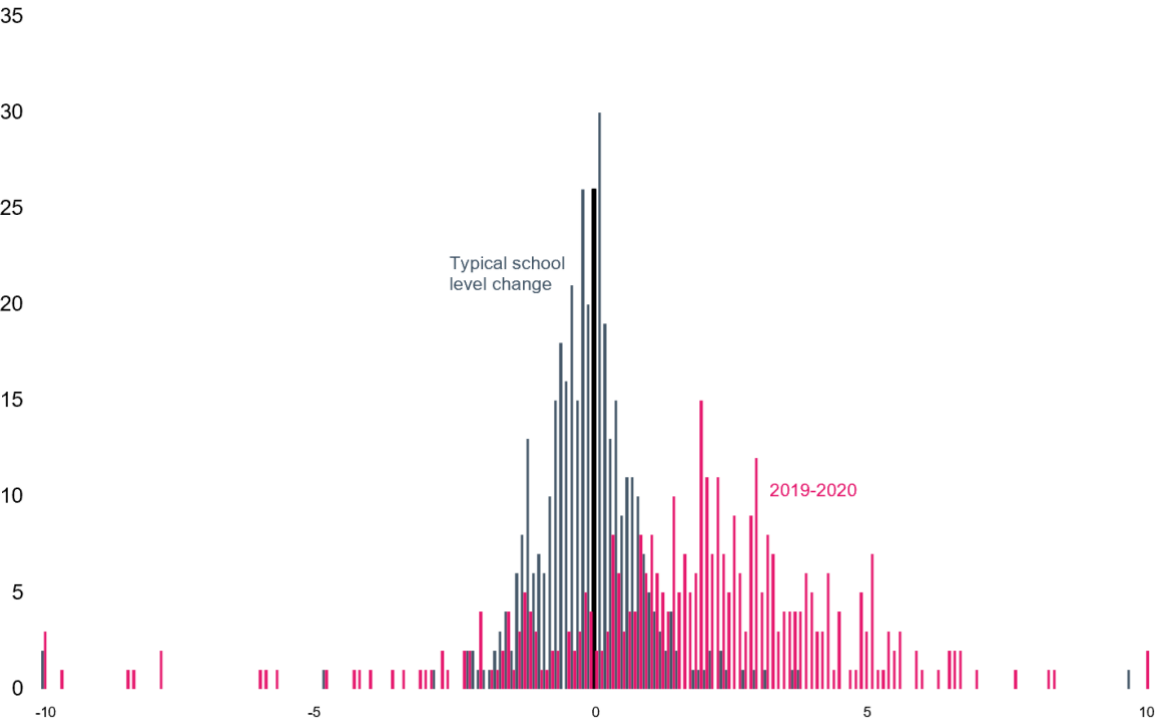


Figure 4: 2019-2020 Semester 1 attendance at secondary schools



Figures 3 and 4 shows that the school level attendance rate change between 2019 and 2020 was much more variable than previous years.

- A total of 1,169 schools saw a rise in their attendance rate. Out of those 819 were primary schools, 307 were secondary schools and 43 were central/community schools.
- 880 schools saw a fall in attendance, of those 780 were primary, 78 were secondary and 22 were central/community.
- 58 schools recorded an attendance rate increase of 5 percentage points or more, while 135 schools recorded an attendance rate decrease of 5 percentage points or more.

Aboriginal attendance rates

Attendance rate trends for Aboriginal students for 2019 to 2020 largely followed the pattern for all students, with the headline Aboriginal attendance rate staying relatively steady at 84.4%. Table 2 shows that Aboriginal attendance for primary students fell by 1.6 percentage points from 88.5% to 86.9% and secondary attendance rose by 3.2 percentage points from 77.5% to 80.7%.

The overall Aboriginal attendance level (proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time) fell by 3.1 percentage points from 51.9% to 48.8%. The attendance level for Aboriginal primary students fell by 5.9 percentage points from 60.7% to 54.8% and secondary rose by 4.7 percentage points from 38.0% to 42.7%.

Table 2: 2020 Semester 1 Aboriginal attendance data

	Attendance rates			Attendance level		
	2019	2020	change	2019	2020	change
Primary (Years 1-6)	88.5%	86.9%	- 1.6pp	60.7%	54.8%	- 5.9pp
Secondary (Years 7-10)	77.5%	80.7%	+ 3.2pp	38.0%	42.7%	+ 4.7pp
Total (Years 1-10)	84.2%	84.4%	+ 0.2pp	51.9%	48.8%	-3.1pp

Impact on selected student cohorts

There were specific cohorts of students with particularly large changes in attendance rates or levels between 2019 and 2020:

- Year 10 Aboriginal student attendance rate increased by 4.5 percentage points compared with a 2.0 percentage point increase for non-Aboriginal students.
- Year 8 remote attendance rate increased by 10.0 percentage points compared with a 1.3 percentage point increase for Year 8 students in major cities.
- Year 10 female remote attendance rate increased by 9.8 percentage points compared with a 2.1 percentage point increase for Year 10 students in major cities.

Conclusion

Semester 1 2020 attendance data should be interpreted with caution and is not comparable to previous years. The apparent stability of the state attendance rate masks opposite trends in primary and secondary rates. In addition, the variation in attendance rates is not uniform across contexts, with certain cohorts particularly affected. There is evidence that this variation is partially due to differences in attendance marking across schools during the learning from home period.

Definitions

Government school systems in Australia measure attendance rates throughout the first semester (Terms 1 and 2). This is the time period specified for data collection in National Education Agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Schools for Specific Purposes' attendance data was collected for the first time in 2020.

Nationally, the attendance rate is defined as the number of actual full-time equivalent student days attended by full-time students in Years 1-10 in Semester 1 as a percentage of the total number of possible student-days attended in Semester 1 (Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia – Key Performance Measure 1(b)).

The attendance level is defined as the proportion of full time students in Years 1-10 whose attendance rate in Semester 1 is equal to or greater than 90% (Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia – Key Performance Measure 1(c)).

National student attendance data for Years 1 to 10 are published annually on the ACARA data portal. The data portal also includes more information on the Measurement Framework for Schooling Australia and both Key Performance Measures previously mentioned.

Ongoing data quality improvements can result in changes to the business rules in reports and affect the comparability of data with previous years.

Explanatory notes

1. National standards for student attendance data reporting

Since 2018, NSW government schools have reported attendance data in accordance with the National Standards published on the [ACARA website](#).

At the start of 2020, there was no explicit methodology to record attendance data in the National Standards in the event of a pandemic. Standards for reporting student attendance [related to COVID-19](#) were published on April 14 2020 and stipulated that students should only be marked present while learning from home if there was reasonable evidence of participation in learning.

Reasonable evidence could consist of many forms including a return of schoolwork in either paper or online form, participation in an online classroom or the teacher doing a roll call in another form of virtual way.

As well as variation in the delivery of remote learning, attendance is marked differently at primary and secondary schools. Primary schools usually take a roll at the beginning of the school day and mark partial absences through late arrivals and early departures from school. One teacher is responsible for marking attendance for each class.

Secondary schools are required to mark attendance during every class, however the day's attendance is generally based on a roll call session at the beginning of the day, adjusted by partial absences. Assessing lack of adequate participation in remote learning requires coordination across multiple subject teachers.

Varied approaches to remote learning and different interpretations of "reasonable evidence" resulted in variation in marking across schools. In consequence, 2020 student attendance data is a break in time series and should not be compared with previous years.

2. Reasons for absences

Students may be absent from school for a number of reasons, including sickness, suspension, truancy or a range of other reasons. For example:

- misadventure or unforeseen event
- participation in special events not related to the school
- domestic necessity such as serious illness of an immediate family member
- attendance at funerals
- travel in Australia and overseas
- recognised religious festivals or ceremonial occasions
- other absences not explained by parents, or the principal does not accept the explanation offered for the absence.

In particular communities, attendance rates can be affected by a number of factors including the level of sickness in the community and natural events such as floods.