

Managing whānau non-engagement

Purpose of this guidance

This guidance is for attendance service providers. It gives ideas and options for what to do when whānau are not engaging. This includes when they refuse to meet or when meetings are not constructive.

If you are unable to locate the ākonga (student) or whānau, please refer to [Locating students and whānau](#).

Recording activity in the case management system

All actions taken to support a ākonga or whānau should be recorded in the case management system. This includes factual case notes, contact attempts, emails, meeting minutes, letters sent, and any involvement from other agencies. Keeping accurate records helps track progress, supports decision-making, and supports any further action that may be required.

Continuation of service

Persistence matters

Engagement refusal is a complex problem in attendance services. There is no one single solution. What matters is keeping the case open and active; continuing to look for a way forward, so ākonga get the help they need.

Working with whānau who are not engaging takes time, patience and persistence. You never know what might work, or when something will begin to shift.

Attendance service providers are expected to keep supporting (or trying to support) ākonga and whānau. This is part of the service commitment. It can be helpful to try new approaches, offer other services, try different staff members, or connect with other organisations over time.

Schools as an ally

Schools can play an important role in supporting engagement. They often have existing relationships with the whānau and can provide insight into what might help. Ask the school to share any strategies that have worked before and keep them updated on your efforts. When schools and providers work together, it shows a united approach and helps avoid mixed

messages. Schools can help by making the return to class feel safe and positive — for example, by offering a welcoming environment, flexible options, or extra support for the ākonga.

Community connections

Most whānau have some connection to their community — through church, sports, marae, youth services, or other groups. These links, or tethers, can help build trust and open the door to conversations about education.

Trusted voices

Sometimes, the first conversation about school might not come from the attendance service. It could come from someone the whānau already trust — a community leader, an aunty or other relation, a health worker, or another agency. That person can help introduce the attendance service, or education, in a way that feels safe and respectful.

This is why strong relationships with other services and the community matter. Shared planning, multi-agency forums or round tables, and regular contact with local networks can make a big difference. Some of the people who connect well with hard-to-reach whānau — such as youth workers or mentors — may have had difficult experiences with school themselves. They might not see returning to school as a priority. Working together to build shared understanding, helps everyone stay focused on what is best for the ākonga.

Escalation as a last step

Even after repeated efforts, some whānau may still choose not to engage. In these cases, escalation — including legal action — may be the only remaining option.

To summarise:

- Keep cases open and active.
- Be patient and persistent.
- Partner with schools as an ally.
- Use community connections.
- Work with trusted voices.
- Build strong relationships with local services.
- Escalate only if all efforts fail.

Understanding non-engagement

Non-engagement can look different in each case. Some whānau may not respond at all. Others may come to meetings but do not take part in a useful or constructive way. There are many reasons for this, such as:

- Past negative experiences with education or social services
- Stress or other pressures
- Not feeling safe or respected in the system
- Historical trauma
- Distrust of schooling or government

- Cultural disconnection or systemic barriers
- Mental health challenges or substance use

Principles for engaging with whānau

- **Whanaungatanga first:** Build whānau-centered relationships and connections. This can take time. Good relationships are mana-enhancing and respectful.
- **Non-judgmental listening:** Validate concerns without endorsing harmful narratives. Be ready to have courageous constructive conversations if you need to.
- **Be patient and persistent:** Engagement may take time. Keep trying, even when progress is slow.
- **Cultural safety:** Ensure approaches are informed, respectful and inclusive.
- **Stay informed:** Maintain a deep understanding of attendance pathways, policies, information and guidelines so that you can offer the best possible support to whānau. You do not want to risk offering wrong or incorrect advice. Do not guess.
- **Do what you say:** Follow through on commitments. Reliability builds trust. Be realistic about what can be done. Avoid overpromising. Keep the whānau informed at every step.
- **Be authentic:** Be honest, open and real in your communication. People respond better when they feel you are genuine in what you say.

Practical strategies and options to consider

Getting support from others

Sometimes other people can help.

- A health nurse may already know the whānau.
- Trusted church leaders, local iwi or marae, youth workers, or community leaders may have strong connections.

Always ask for consent if needed and be clear about who is involved.

Working with other agencies can help. When services like health, social support, Police, and education teams work together, it shows the seriousness and complexity of the situation. For some whānau, it is easier to send their child to school than to keep attending multiple meetings and follow-ups.

When another agency leads

Sometimes another agency may take the lead because they have a stronger relationship with the whānau. You still have a responsibility to support the ākonga. Coordinate with the other agency so efforts are aligned and the whānau is not overwhelmed.

Safety support

If a provider feels unsafe visiting a whānau — for example, due to aggressive behaviour, dogs, or weapons — they can seek support from the local community constable. Safety should always come first.

Check the Ministry website to read more on staying safe, refer to Safety Guidance which will be available shortly.

Multi-agency forums

Forums can help when engagement with whānau has been difficult. These groups often include local community organisations, government services, school leaders, and professionals who work with young people.¹ Examples include Family Harm, Rock On, Fast Track and Gateway.

Someone in the forum may already know the whānau and can share useful context. They may be in a better position to start a conversation about education or help connect the attendance service to the home.

Forums make sure support is joined up across services. They give providers a space to share ideas and find new ways to help. Strong multi-agency connections mean the attendance service is not working alone.

Working with MSD to support attendance

If the whānau receive a benefit, the Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora | Ministry of Social Development (MSD) may be able to help.

Under [Section 133](#) of the Social Security Act 2018, beneficiaries must take all reasonable steps to make sure their child is enrolled and regularly attending a registered school.²

If this is not happening, MSD may follow up with the whānau. Attendance service providers can contact MSD to discuss support options or raise concerns.

Commencing escalation action

Formal letters can help encourage engagement. Start with a gentle reminder about attendance and legal obligations, then move to firmer messages if needed.

Letters should be respectful, easy to understand, and focused on helping the ākonga return to school.

Before sending any letters:

- Check if the school has already sent formal letters.
- Let the school know you are sending a letter and share any response you receive.

¹ We will pilot attendance-focused forums (round tables) in six catchments in Terms 1 and 2, 2026. This section will be updated as more information becomes available.

² [Social Security Act 2018 No 32 \(as at 01 July 2025\), Public Act 133 Attendance of dependent child aged 6 to 15 years at registered school – New Zealand Legislation](#)

Legal considerations

Parents and caregivers are responsible for making sure their child is enrolled and attending school. If they do not, and all other support options have been tried, legal action can be considered. This is a last step and should be approached with care.

Sometimes, the possibility of legal action can be enough to show the seriousness of the situation and prompt engagement. It should never be used as a threat, but as a clear and honest explanation of what may happen if attendance does not improve.

For more information and templates, refer to Escalating Attendance Letters guidance which will be available shortly.

Useful resources

If you would like to know more, you can read these Ministry of Education resources.

- [Prosecution and Warnings Policy 2025.pdf](#)
- [Student attendance guide - Ministry of Education](#)
- [Communicating with parents about attendance.pdf](#)