

# School Attendance Exemption Guidance for School Leaders

## Background

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From 1 January 2027, all principals of State and State-integrated schools must follow the new School Attendance (Exemptions) Rules 2026 when deciding whether a student may be exempt from attending school.

The new rules support a more consistent and transparent approach to how attendance exemptions are applied across schools and kura. The rules set out five exemption grounds and the notification and evidence requirements that apply at different absence thresholds.

Attendance exemptions are only one part of supporting attendance. Schools and kura should continue to work in partnership with students and whānau, understand the circumstances affecting attendance, and support students to return to learning where appropriate.

This guidance explains how to apply the rules and record attendance exemptions.

- 1 Understanding** the attendance exemption framework
- 2 Applying** the exemption rules, including the exemption grounds and evidence requirements
- 3 Recording** exemptions using the appropriate attendance codes and Student Management System (SMS)

# 1. Understanding the attendance exemption framework

Principals can exempt a student from attending school when one of the exemption grounds applies and any notification or evidence requirements have been met.

A student may be exempt from attendance when one of the following grounds applies:

- Medical absence
- Bereavement
- Cultural or religious events
- Recognised provincial, national or international events
- Exceptional circumstances

The rules use three absence thresholds: 1 to 5 days, 6 to 10 days, and 11 or more days. Parents or caregivers must notify the school of an absence and the reason for the absence before an exemption can be granted. Where known, they should also provide the student's expected return date.

Principals can request evidence at any threshold. For absences of 11 or more days, the principal will request and receive credible evidence before granting an exemption.

| Student absence | What is required?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1-5 days        | <p><b>Notification:</b> Parent or caregiver must notify of the absence, reason for absence, and expected return date through the school's usual attendance notification process (for example, SMS, email, phone call or other approved process).</p> <p><b>Evidence:</b> The notification provided by the parent or caregiver will generally be sufficient. The principal may request additional evidence, but it is not a requirement.</p> |
| 6-10 days       | <p><b>Notification:</b> Parent or caregiver must notify of the absence, reason for absence and expected return date through the school's usual attendance notification process.</p> <p><b>Evidence:</b> The notification provided by the parent or caregiver will generally be sufficient. The principal may request additional evidence, but it is not a requirement.</p>                                                                  |
| 11+ days        | <p><b>Notification:</b> Parent or caregiver must notify of the absence, reason for absence and expected return date through the school's usual attendance notification process.</p> <p><b>Evidence:</b> In addition to the parent's or caregiver's notification, the principal will request and receive credible evidence for the absence before an exemption can be granted.</p>                                                           |

## 2. Applying the exemption rules

When a student is absent, principals should first determine whether one of the five exemption grounds applies. Before granting an exemption, principals should be satisfied they have the information or evidence needed to support their decision.

The table below gives examples of when each exemption ground may apply and the types of evidence that may be appropriate where evidence is requested or required. The following examples are intended as a guide and may not cover every situation.

| Exemption Reason       | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Examples of credible evidence<br>(where evidence is required or requested)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Medical absence</b> | <p>May apply where a student is unable to attend school because of illness, injury, or mental health, including where an immediate family member's illness or injury affects the student's ability to attend school.</p> <p><b>Example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Student with a chronic health condition requires periods of absence from school as part of managing their condition.</i></li><li>• <i>A student is absent for two weeks while recovering from surgery.</i></li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information provided by the parent or caregiver</li><li>• Medical certificate</li><li>• Letter from a health practitioner</li><li>• Confirmation of medical appointment including doctor, dentist, hospital, specialist, counsellor or other therapy</li><li>• ACC letter or certificate</li></ul> |

| Exemption Reason                                               | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Examples of credible evidence<br>(where evidence is required or requested)                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bereavement</b>                                             | <p>May apply where a student is affected by the death of an immediate family member or someone closely associated with the student or their family. This may include time required to attend a tangihanga, funeral, memorial, or other bereavement-related activities.</p> <p><b>Example:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>A student travels with family to attend a tangihanga following the death of a close relative.</i></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information provided by the parent or caregiver</li> <li>Funeral details</li> <li>Confirmation from family where appropriate</li> </ul>                                                                 |
| <b>Cultural or religious events</b>                            | May apply where attendance is connected to a cultural or religious commitment that is an important part of a student's cultural identity or religious observance.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information provided by the parent or caregiver</li> <li>Event details</li> <li>Confirmation from a cultural or religious organisation where appropriate</li> </ul>                                     |
| <b>Recognised provincial, national or international events</b> | May apply where a student is participating in a recognised provincial, national or international event.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Selection letter</li> <li>Letter from a governing body setting out the role of the student in the event.</li> <li>Event registration</li> <li>Travel information</li> <li>Official programme</li> </ul> |
| <b>Exceptional circumstances</b>                               | May apply where a student is unable to attend school due to a legitimate reason that does not fit another exemption ground.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information provided by the parent or caregiver</li> <li>Documentation relevant to the circumstances</li> <li>Information from supporting agencies where appropriate</li> </ul>                         |

## Health-related Absences

When requesting evidence for students with disabilities, chronic health conditions, or recurring health-related absences, schools and kura should take a reasonable and proportionate approach. Existing information already held by the school should be considered before requesting additional evidence.

## Family holidays and one-off events

Family holidays, birthdays and other discretionary family events during term time are not considered sufficient grounds for an attendance exemption. Students may still be absent for these reasons; however, the absence should be recorded as non-exempt.

## Requesting evidence before 11 days

Principals may request evidence before the 11-day threshold if they have concerns about a student's pattern of absence or the reason provided for the absence. For example, a student may be absent every Monday and Friday for several consecutive weeks.

When deciding whether to request evidence, principals should consider the student's individual circumstances and any relevant local or community context.

# 3. Recording exemptions in SMS

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An exemption should only be recorded once the principal is satisfied that the relevant exemption ground applies and any required evidence requirements have been met.

Once an exemption has been approved, the absence should be recorded using the appropriate attendance code and the school's usual attendance processes.

Schools and kura should retain and store securely any notification or evidence used to support the exemption decision in their SMS.

For absences of 11 or more days, schools and kura should also record the date evidence was requested, the date it was received, and the type of evidence provided.

Refer to the Attendance Code Guidance for more information on selecting and applying the appropriate attendance code.

For further support contact your local  
[\*\*Regional offices - Ministry of Education\*\*](#)