Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga
Ministry of Education

Stepped Response – For distance schools

Responding to all non-engagement

The Stepped Response sets expectations for school, student, parent/guardian, Ministry of Education and broader system responses to student absence in face-to-face schools and non-engagement in distance learning.

From Term 3 2026, distance schools must have regard for the Stepped Response when developing their Engagement Management Plan (EMP). It is important to use this direction to develop your own response to engagement at the set thresholds.

How to use the Stepped Response

The Stepped Response outlines escalating actions at non-engagement thresholds and promotes distance school-wide approaches to:

- strengthen engagement culture
- improve data quality and use
- enable timely support and escalation
- identify what works well and areas for improvement to support student engagement.

When responding to non-engagement, distance schools should consider:

- the student's learning aspirations and whānau context
- reasons for non-engagement and likelihood of reoccurrence
- the student's engagement history, and prior interventions.

Regional and National teams work alongside schools to support them to improve engagement.



Ongoing Responsibilities

Day-to-day attendance management activities

Distance Schools

- Set engagement targets and regularly review engagement data.
- Communicate clearly with parents and supervisors: expectations, procedures and follow-up steps the distance school will take when a student is not engaging.
- Act early to support students to stay engaged.
- Escalate as needed, develop support plans, involve other services.
- Assess attendance history of new students and share engagement history when students move between schools.
- Use school-wide strategies, including strong relationships and minimising disruptions to the school week.

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Regional and National teams

Provide targeted support and services to your distance school including assistance with:

- understanding engagement data and trends
- support development of engagement policies and procedures, including Engagement Management Plans
- provide access to specialist services where needed
- whānau and community engagement
- engagement leadership and governance
- engagement barriers arising from factors in the wider community.

Non-engagement means

When a student is not returning work on time and not communicating with the school about this.

Individual Student Attendance activities

Individualised student responses to non-engagement thresholds for full-time students. The thresholds reflect a student's consecutive days of non-engagement.

Less than 7 consecutive days non-engagement

Parents/Guardians

- Ensure student engages every day they are able.
- Reinforce good engagement habits.
- Support other parents to reinforce good engagement habits.
- Open communication with school.
- Follow school engagement management plan and associated policies and processes.

Distance Schools

- Communicate with parents about every instance of non-engagement.
- Maintain contact details of parents.
- Provide student with regular updates on their own engagement.
- Report regularly to parents on engagement of their child.
- Support student engaging with school-work pathways where appropriate.

Up to 14 consecutive days non-engagement

Parents/Guardians

- Return student to regular engagement.
- Contact school to discuss reasons for non-engagement and impact on learning.
- Support student to catch up on missed learning.
- Engage in supports offered.

Distance Schools

- Contact parents to discuss reasons for non-engagement and impact on learning.
- Support student to catch up missed learning where required.
- Use in-school resources as appropriate to remove barriers e.g. counsellor, alternative timetables, PB4L.

Up to 30 consecutive days non-engagement

Parents/Guardians

- Return student to regular engagement.
- Participate in meeting with school to analyse reasons for non-engagement and to collaborate on a support plan.
- Implement strategies at home.

Distance Schools

- Contact parents to escalate concerns.
- Hold meeting to analyse reasons for non-engagement and to collaborate on support plan.
- Develop and implement a support plan tailored to the reasons and circumstances around the student's non-engagement.
- Use in-school resources as appropriate to remove barriers and request support from other agencies as needed.

Up to 60 consecutive days non-engagement

Parents/Guardians

- Return student to regular engagement.
- Engage in support plan.
- Participate in regular meetings.

Distance Schools

- Contact parents to inform of escalated response
- Participate in multi-agency response
- Maintain implementation and monitoring of support plan
- Undertake school-led prosecution, or request Ministry-led prosecution, when considered appropriate if supports are offered and not taken up

60 consecutive days or more non-engagement

Parents/Guardians

- Return student to regular engagement.
- Engage in support plan.
- Participate in regular meetings.
- Unenroll if student will not be returning to school.

Distance Schools

- Contact parents to inform of escalated response.
- Participate in multi-agency response.
- Maintain implementation and monitoring of support plan.
- Undertake school-led prosecution, or request Ministry-led prosecution, when considered appropriate if supports are offered and not taken up.

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Regional and National teams

- Facilitate involvement of other agencies.
- Support students who are accessing distance school as an alternate pathway.
- Consider system-wide initiatives for high-risk non-engagement.
- Reprioritise regional support resources to where most needed/effective.
- Undertake Ministry-led prosecution when considered appropriate if supports are offered and not taken up, when requested by schools.

Individual Student Engagement Activities

Individualised student responses to non-engagement thresholds for full-time students. The thresholds reflect a student's consecutive days of non-engagement.

Less than 7 consecutive days non-engagement	Up to 14 consecutive days non-engagement	Up to 30 consecutive days non-engagement	Up to 60 consecutive days non-engagement	60 consecutive days or more non-engagement
Parents/Guardians	**Parents/Guardians**	**Parents/Guardians**	**Parents/Guardians**	**Parents/Guardians**
Distance School	**Distance School**	**Distance School**	**Distance School**	**Distance School**

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Regional and National teams

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