 

Steps towards school engagement, and the pupil commitment model

Handbook

**The school engagement model of Kuopio – how to support pupil commitment and intervene in absences**

**Each school day matters — Preventive work**

Strengthening encounters, inclusion and the sense of community

Strong general support

Close school-home collaboration

Systematic support for group bonding, and strengthening emotional and interactive skills

Regular monitoring of attendance and compiling statistics on absences

Safe learning environment: immediate intervention in bullying and discrimination

Communal pupil welfare

**Bringing it up; absence rate 5–10%**

Concerns will be brought up with the pupil and the person who has custody

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Assessment of pupil’s overall situation by the school and by the social welfare and health services

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# Introduction

Long-term absence from school is often a symptom of something that jeopardises the pupil’s development. The underlying causes may have to do with the pupil’s learning or physical or mental health, the school’s practices, or with school mates or challenges at home or in parenting. When absenteeism persists, it undermines the pupil’s chances to complete compulsory education, excluding him or her from further education opportunities.

The steps towards school engagement, or the school attendance model, are designed to prevent and reduce absences and contribute to a positive culture in schools. The “Steps towards school engagement” model was piloted in the city of Kuopio in the school years 2021–2022 and 2022–2023. Under project funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture, two school community workers, Riia Iivarinen and Lotta Turunen, were employed in two local comprehensive schools (Puijonsarvi and Neulamäki). They drew up the model in collaboration with the principals and a consulting special needs teacher of the hospital school. Introduced in November 2021, the model was further developed in June–August 2022 and May–June 2023 on the basis of feedback from teachers and recommendations issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The absences-related operating model is integrated into the overall operation of schools, and its continuous follow-up and improvement must be an integral part of quality control.

An amendment to section 26 of the Basic Education Act came into effect on 1 August 2023. It provides that the education provider must prevent and monitor the absences of pupils attending basic education and intervene in them systematically. The education provider must notify the person who has custody of the pupil or the pupil’s other legal representative of any unjustified absences. The present model is an aid for operating under the new legislative amendment and the updated basic education curriculum.

# Each school day matters — Preventive work

## Strengthening encounters, inclusion and the sense of community

Positive and encouraging interaction and a positive and encouraging general atmosphere at school are a source of empowerment for pupils. Positive and empathetic speech that reinforces an individual’s strengths helps to sustain the entire school community.

As a teacher, you should notice even minor positive things and improvements and tell the pupil concerned about them. Remember, in particular, to take up the positive notes made in the Wilma online system when a pupil has done his or her assignments or worked in pairs or teams successfully, or has let others work undisturbed. In a pupil’s behaviour and actions, focus on the things that you would like to see more of. This way you create a cycle of positive action. You may also like to think about the following and discuss your observations with the pupil concerned:

* What is there in the pupil’s behaviour that you would you like him or her to continue doing?
* What is the pupil good at?
* What particular interests, talents or pastime activities does the pupil have and how could they have a positive effect on school work and school enjoyment?

A feeling of inclusion and togetherness is one of the basic three psychological needs of every individual. When you experience inclusion, it is easier to trust, value and respect other people, commit to joint rules and help others. Pupil engagement in school is supported by their chances to have a say and make choices and the feeling that they can get along and be accepted just the way they are.

Positive relationships in school are a big part of school enjoyment. The adults employed at the school must see to it that pupils gain experiences of collaboration and democratic action in their own teaching group, in the school and its immediate surroundings, and in various networks.

## Strong general support

General support is the first step in responding to a pupil’s need for support. It usually means single pedagogical solutions as well as guidance and support measures that intervene in a situation at the earliest stage possible as part of everyday life at school. General support is provided as soon as the need arises, and no particular investigations or decisions are required to launch it. If strong general support is not enough, the pupil must be given intensified support.

## Close school-home collaboration

A child needs encouragement and guidance both at home and at school. Involving the custodians in the collaboration with the school and its pupil welfare officers is necessary because the parents are primarily responsible for bringing up their child and know him or her the best. Effective and transparent collaboration with the home should be started early on, for it makes it easier to approach challenging situations and deal with them later on. It is the duty of the school to contact the child’s home as soon as concerns arise. The first contact is normally made by the classroom teacher or class teacher. The rules for monitoring school absences provide a tool for teachers and thereby also support the home in its education task. Joint rules allow to intervene in instances of non-attendance as uniformly as possible.

The school maintains collaboration with homes and works to improve it actively. The school should inform about its own practices through multiple channels and often enough. Parents are free to contact the school whenever they wish. The most appropriate forms of collaboration with homes are identified for individual schools, classes and pupils.

Practical modes of collaboration include:

* Open Days and parent-teacher meetings
* parents’ associations
* festivities and other events
* online messages and information bulletins through the Wilma system.

## Systematic support for group bonding, and strengthening emotional and interactive skills

Regular group bonding activities allow pupils to learn to know each other and practice emotional and interactive skills. Such activities should take place systematically throughout the school year. They are particularly important at educational transition phases and at the beginning of each school year. When every pupil feels good and safe in their own classroom, their wellbeing increases and there are fewer absences. A plan for group bonding should ideally be made for each school year, taking various themes up for discussion as they emerge in each class in the course of the year. For some, exercises that focus on not disturbing others are important, whereas for others, priority should be given to learning friendship skills. You don’t have to plan for the group bonding activities on your own. Just ask another teacher, a special needs teaching assistant, peer supporters, a youth worker, the school social worker, the school nurse, or why not the municipal drama educator to join you. You will easily find group bonding exercises online and in the literature. Below you can find some useful links to materials with tips on how to integrate group bonding into the different subjects.

* [“For friendship”, a programme against bullying (in Finnish) by Drama education teacher Anni Marin](https://www.kuopio.fi/documents/7369547/7488410/Kiitos%2Bkaveruudelle%2B-k%C3%A4sikirja/24a71851-db63-4a38-bd76-45a864a8272d)
* [“Draamaa!”, handbook by Johanna Hopia (in Finnish)](https://peda.net/kuopio/yhteiset-hankkeet/peh2/draamaa-kasikirja-on-ilmestynyt/draamaa-kasikirja.pdf#top)

## Regular monitoring of attendance and compiling statistics on absences

Each school day counts and every absence undermines the pupil’s regular school attendance. Absences and late arrivals are recorded in the Wilma online system at the beginning of each lesson, if feasible. The classroom teacher or class teacher regularly monitors absences and lesson notes concerning each pupil. When looking at such notes, focus is placed on the overall picture to see if any changes have occurred in the pupil’s absences or other notes in the Wilma system. All absences are considered, whether they have been cleared or remain unjustified. Absences regularly recurring on certain days or lessons are of particular concern.

Safe learning environment: immediate intervention in bullying and discrimination

Being bullied or insulted has a major impact on how a pupil feels about school and learning. By focusing on supporting the wellbeing of pupils we can also prevent other bullying-related phenomena, such as discrimination, harassment and hate speech. Acquaint yourself with your school’s own bullying intervention and monitoring policy and find out who the designees are. It is, however, the obligation of everyone in the school community to intervene in instances of bullying immediately when witnessing such behaviour and to report it. Pupils are encouraged to tell an adult about any bullying they have experienced.

## Communal pupil welfare

Working for communal pupil welfare is the duty of everyone employed in the school. One of the tasks of communal pupil welfare is to support school attendance and prevent and monitor any negative phenomena observed in the school.

In Kuopio, communal pupil welfare work includes the pupil welfare groups (“ArkiOHR”) set up in individual schools. These groups discuss the strengths, challenges and absences of each class, assessing their need for support. The meetings also deal with e-questionnaires on the classroom atmosphere and the pupils’ wellbeing. The classroom teacher or class teacher sees to it that their own class fills in the questionnaire.

# Number of absences, in percentages and school hours

Interruptions in school attendance due to absenteeism may make it difficult to return to school. The number of absences of a pupil is always evaluated in relation to the number of school hours to be attained under their personal learning plan. Absenteeism warrants particular attention when the cumulation of absence hours amounts to 10 per cent of the number of hours attended during the school year. If the absence rate is as much as 20 per cent, intensified support measures should be granted in accordance with the Steps. The numbers of hours to be attained should be monitored throughout the school year, responding to absences without delay as and when they increase. This is to ensure that school absences are monitored and responded to uniformly throughout the country. The below table shows indicative absence numbers and rates by grades.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
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# Bringing it up; absence rate 5–10%

## Talking to the pupil

When a pupil has accumulated absences, a meeting with him or her and one of the custodians will be arranged in order to talk about the pupil’s feelings and the situation at home. Absenteeism is brought up and the reasons for concern are expressed. The expression of concern is recorded in the Wilma system.

#### Examples of questions you can ask the pupil:

* What are the things that you would like to see stay as they are in school?
* Who can best help you when you have a problem in school?
* What do you enjoy doing when you are not in school?
* When do you not have problems in school? What is different on those occasions? What should you or the others do for there to be more moments like that?
* What could we do to make the school a nicer place for you?
* Is there anything else we should know so that we can help you?

## Discussing with the person who has custody

It is important to discuss the reasons for absences together with the custodians as soon as concerns arise. The discussion should be agreed upon with the custodians in advance, and it can be conducted over the phone or face to face. The purpose is to consider the possibilities for school engagement and together find ways to support attendance.

#### Here are some examples of topics which you can take up when you approach a custodian about the pupil’s situation:

* Current family circumstances
* Discussing the absences and their impact on school work
* The assignments done in school during the child’s absences and agreeing on how they will be completed to prevent jeopardising the pupil’s schooling.

#### Examples of questions that you might ask the custodian:

* What is your child good at?
* What does your child prefer to do in his or her free time?
* Who can best help your child when he or she has a problem?
* Have you noticed that your child has accumulated x hours of absences?
* What do you think are the reasons for these absences?
* What are the things that your child has difficulties in?
* What kind of changes in the school would help your child enjoy school?
* Is there anything else that we should know to be able to help your child in school?

## Assessing the need for support for learning and school attendance

A team for support coordinates the planning, implementation and evaluation of the three-tier support model (general, intensified and special support) in the school. The pupil’s need for support and its correct targeting is evaluated at regular intervals during the school year, as soon as the need for support arises or changes.

The mission of the team for support is to provide guidance and assistance regarding e.g. pedagogical documents, and to put in place support arrangements for a pupil or an entire class and find a suitable support resource (special needs teacher, resource teacher, or special needs teaching assistant). The team for support also provides consultation for parties beyond the school on learning and school attendance support. Teaching and learning support are primarily delivered through flexible teaching arrangements and by grouping pupils in a flexible manner. During the school year, changes are introduced case by case whenever necessary for the planning and delivering of support for a teaching group or an individual pupil.

The team for support also regularly monitors how the different forms of support actually work and how well they are targeted. The team collaborates to improve current practices, teaching arrangements and learning environments and their suitability for the pupils. The team also lends its support to delivering simultaneous teaching and team teaching and consults with teachers at regular intervals in order to find the most appropriate pedagogical solutions for a teaching group or for an individual pupil. Monitoring the support given in the school and delivering it in a flexible manner calls for multi-professional collaboration with communal pupil welfare work professionals and an open dialogue with the management team of the school.

## If needed: Individual pupil welfare group

Coordinated collaboration with pupil welfare services supports an individual pupil’s schooling. Pupil welfare workers can find out the reasons for absences and assess the need for further services together with the pupil and the custodians. If the pupil has a treatment contact outside the school, a consultation can be requested from the treatment provider at this point already.

# Clarifying and supporting; absence rate 10–20%

## Close cooperation with custodians

Contacts with custodians are maintained with a low threshold so that all parties are kept informed. If the agreed support measures prove inadequate, the custodians must also be made aware of it, and further measures need to be considered actively.

You may like to ask the custodian to fill in the SRAS-R inquiry on school absences:

[http://www.socca.fi/files/7719/Koulupoissaolokysely\_-\_vanhemmat.pdf (in Finnish)](http://www.socca.fi/files/7719/Koulupoissaolokysely_-_vanhemmat.pdf)

[http://www.socca.fi/files/7717/Koulupoissaolokysely\_-\_arviointiohje.pdf (in Finnish)](http://www.socca.fi/files/7717/Koulupoissaolokysely_-_arviointiohje.pdf)

## Pedagogical planning for learning

The strengths and challenges of a pupil are discussed with him or her, and work is based on that discussion and the school-specific guidance plan. When a pupil can have a say in the working methods and his or her goals, they are more likely to be attained; motivation is kept up by realistic goals that are based on the pupil’s personal circumstances and divided into sufficiently small elements.

The pupil’s strengths can be mapped, for example, by using various methods of the strengths-based approach and by discussing with the pupil the support measure that would be best for him or her. The team for support helps to find a resource who can help with the performance of school work and guide the pupil. These professionals may include the classroom teacher, special needs teacher, guidance counsellor, instructor, resource teacher or school youth worker. Long-term outcomes may not materialise quickly. Encouraging and inspiring the pupil and listening to him or her makes it easier to reach the goals.

The Basic Education Act and the National Core Curriculum allow the restructuring of the pupil’s school day and shortening it in order to stabilise the situation, and the learning contents of different subjects can be differentiated in collaboration with the teachers concerned. If necessary, it is thus possible to restructure the pupil’s school day and shorten it in order to stabilise the situation, and learning contents can be reduced in collaboration with the subject teachers. Increasing the share of action-based learning can also be an appropriate measure.

In case of a longer absence, a return plan must be drawn up for the pupil. The return can take place gradually, and the plan must include concrete measures to ensure a successful return. The steps should be small enough: attainable things supported by regular monitoring and meetings and by listening to the pupil. The return plan is recorded in the Wilma system, in the documents relating to the three-tier support.

## Individual pupil welfare group

An individual pupil welfare group is set up specifically for each case that calls for pupil welfare measures. The pupil and/or custodian may also request that the pupil’s case be taken up by such a group. The individual pupil welfare group convenes to discuss the pupil’s situation and the effectiveness of support measures and whether they need to be intensified. The aim is to bring out the root causes for absences together with this group. A useful tool is the Inventory of School Attendance Problems (ISAP) that can be given to the pupil (designed for over 11-year-olds). Link to the questionnaire (in Finnish): <http://www.tuuve.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Koulupoissaolojen-oireet-ja-syyt-ISAP-Versio1.2.pdf>. Filling in the ISAP questionnaire is not necessary if the reason behind the absences is known with certainty.

The individual pupil welfare group sets up a multi-professional team to support the pupil and resolve the issues. This team may include the classroom teacher or class teacher, special needs teacher, guidance counsellor, instructor, school social worker, school psychologist, school community worker, youth worker, social worker, instructor or caseworker from the child welfare unit, and the person who has custody of the child. One or more designees will be appointed from within the group to monitor any improvements in school attendance and convene regular monitoring meetings until the pupil shows an attachment to school. The monitoring meetings can be held in a smaller composition.

## Meeting with relevant professionals to review support measures

Set up a meeting with all the necessary professionals, who may include the classroom teacher, special needs teacher, a representative of the school health care service, or any other staff member who has engaged with the pupil closely. Review the support measures put in place for the pupil and discuss, together with the pupil, whether they are adequate.

While the pupil should, as a rule, attend school for the normal number of school hours, extra breaks can be introduced during the school day. Depending on the school’s resources, a method such as CICO could be introduced. The pupil will then be met by a designed adult when arriving in school in the morning (Check-In) and when leaving the school in the afternoon (Check-Out). It may be easier for the pupil to face challenging situations at school in the presence of a safe adult. If the CICO method does not suffice as such, it could be adapted into the CICO Plus method, with extra 3–4 weekly encounters with the CICO coach in the middle of the school day. The purpose of the encounters is to improve the pupil’s functioning in the classroom and in other social situations at school. A CICO Plus period must be long enough to allow skills to be reinforced and become durable (approx. 8–10 weeks).

Multi-professional collaboration is a safety net that prevents pupils from falling through the cracks and out of the reach of the professionals involved. The “Yhdessä aika” multi-agency cooperation model may prove useful in individual pupil welfare. It allows to bring together nearly all actors involved in multi-professional collaboration (not just the school’s own professionals and but also CSOs, parishes, the health and social services of the family centre, and youth services), for whom a certain time has been set aside weekly. These professionals can be convened by the custodian, a school staff member, or any other actor involved in this cooperation model.

## Consultation with the hospital school

The hospital school provides a guidance and consultation service in intensive special needs support to facilitate the schooling of children and adolescents. The purpose of the consultation is to support the schooling of children and adolescents and discover, on a case-by-case basis, appropriate practices in support of school work, together with the pupil’s immediate network and particularly their own school. Another goal is to support the work of teachers and other adults present in the classroom. LINK: consulting for special needs [teaching](https://peda.net/kuopio/erityisopetus/konsultoiva-erityisopetus) (in Finnish)

As a rule, the initiative for consultation on special needs teaching in support of school work is made by a pre-agreed representative of the team for support. The targeting and impact of the chosen support measures will already have been discussed, implemented, assessed and monitored by the team prior to the consultation. It is advisable to make an anonymous request for consultation preventively at an early stage, as soon as concerns arise.

The working practices of the consulting special needs teaching include telephone consultations, visits to the school, meetings with the school and networks, treatment consultations, collaboration with various professionals such as child psychiatrists and the mental health services for children and adolescents, and supporting the work of the other adults present in the classroom.

## If needed: A child welfare notification on the basis of concern

The authorities have an obligation to contact the social welfare services or submit a child welfare notification whenever a concern arises that the growth, development and health of a child may be jeopardised. In the school, such concerns may be triggered by frequent school absences and subsequent concern about the child’s growth and development. The child welfare notification should list the measures thus far implemented by the school to reduce the number of absences and describe the worries related to the child. A notification must be submitted by the person who becomes concerned about a child. If necessary, you may consult with the principal, school social worker or special needs teacher.

The child welfare services should be contacted with a specific online form. The purpose of the online contact is to request an assessment of the pupil’s need for support. The request may be made together with the custodian and/or the child. It can also be made by the child and the custodian themselves. Instead of submitting a child welfare notification, the person with notification duty may make a request to the social welfare services together with the child or custodian, provided that the request is made without delay.

If this request is not sufficient, or making it together with the child or family member is not possible or appropriate, the person with notification duty must submit a child welfare notification. If the social welfare services have already been contacted about the pupil, no child welfare notification is needed. In the Wellbeing Services County of North Savo, the authorities must use an online child welfare notification, available at https://pshyvinvointi[alue.fi/lastensuojelu](https://pshyvinvointialue.fi/lastensuojelu)[.](https://www.kuopio.fi/yhteydenotto-sosiaalihuoltoon)

[Child welfare notification - Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)](https://thl.fi/fi/web/lastensuojelun-kasikirja/tyoprosessi/lastensuojeluilmoitus-ja-lastensuojeluasian-vireilletulo/lastensuojeluilmoitus)

# Intensive support; absence rate over 20%

## Consultation with hospital school

See the previous step. You should consult the hospital school on the pupil’s situation. As mentioned above, an initiative for consulting the special needs teaching in support of schooling can be made by the custodian, the school or a treatment provider. The process is triggered by contacting the consulting special education teacher. A representative of the hospital school is invited to join the individual pupil welfare group.

## Monitoring meetings within the individual pupil welfare group

Regular monitoring promotes attainment of the goals set for the pupil. Meetings should be arranged regularly, with a greater frequency in the beginning. Close and regular monitoring can take place in a smaller composition. Precise monitoring dates should be agreed for these meetings so that the family and the pupil will also be aware of them.

## Submitting a child welfare notification on the basis of concern

See the previous step. If absenteeism persists, a new child welfare notification should be submitted, or a first notification should be submitted at this point at the very latest.

## Special teaching arrangements

Part of the pupil’s studies can temporarily be provided for in a manner other than laid down in section 18 of the Basic Education Act or section 11 of the Basic Education Decree. Special teaching arrangements also allow for some leeway in the pupil’s studying, teaching and evaluation. The pupil’s studying can, to a certain extent, be arranged differently than laid down in the Basic Education Act and other relevant regulations, when justified for reasons relating to the pupil’s health. Section 18 of the Basic Education Act allows for example to shorten the pupil’s school day if necessary or to exempt the pupil from certain studies or elements of studies for a set period of time. The objectives, contents and follow-up of special teaching arrangements are always recorded in the pedagogical document in the Wilma online system.

The curriculum may specify that under section 11 of the Basic Education Act a pupil may be allowed to study the different subjects at his or her own pace following an individual syllabus, independently from grades. The curriculum specifies study modules that have to be completed in order to progress in studies in the subject concerned. When the school year ends, the pupil moves on to the next grade. A personal syllabus is always drawn up for the pupil in the pedagogical document in the Wilma system. The syllabus defines, among others, the progress, goals and contents of the studies and their monitoring subject by subject.

Teaching arrangements suitable for the individual pupil, such as a shortened school day or action-based learning, is discussed with the pupil and the individual pupil welfare group. The feasibility of activities-based practices, such as flexible basic education (“JOPO”) and temporary special arrangements in teaching (“OTE”), should be assessed separately. The team for support will monitor the situation, and teaching arrangements are readapted if necessary.

## Assessment of pupil’s overall situation by the school and by the social welfare and health services

If the pupil’s functional capacity is reduced to an alarming extent and there is no improvement despite the support measures in place, the pupil welfare services, social services and/or health services may be asked to provide an opinion on the pupil’s capacity to attend school.

## Towards school attachment; goals to be reached step by step

A pupil’s school attendance should be supported by all available means. Once the underlying causes of the absences have been clarified, the individual plans and support measures can be correctly targeted. The goal may initially be just a short visit to the school grounds or to the school building.

When a pupil suffers from anxiety and mood symptoms, his or her level of strain must be closely monitored and the plans adopted should be relaxed if necessary. Ideally, all teachers who teach the pupil should be kept adequately informed so that they can give their support to the pupil. The pupil and the custodian, the teachers and other adults who support the pupil should have a clear idea of the teaching arrangement plan and the goals pursued. If the pupil benefits from support by the family work services, their role in encouraging school attendance should be agreed upon.

### Questionnaires for pupils and their custodians

SRAS-R

School Refusal Assessment Scale – Revised (Kearney). Separate questionnaires for parents and the child/adolescent. The questionnaire to be given to pupils is designed for 7–18-year-olds.

[http://www.socca.fi/files/7718/Koulupoissaolokysely\_-\_lapsi\_nuori.pdf (for the child; in Finnish)](http://www.socca.fi/files/7718/Koulupoissaolokysely_-_lapsi_nuori.pdf)

[http://www.socca.fi/files/7719/Koulupoissaolokysely\_-\_vanhemmat.pdf (for the parents; in Finnish)](http://www.socca.fi/files/7719/Koulupoissaolokysely_-_vanhemmat.pdf)

[http://www.socca.fi/files/7717/Koulupoissaolokysely\_-\_arviointiohje.pdf (evaluation instructions; in Finnish)](http://www.socca.fi/files/7717/Koulupoissaolokysely_-_arviointiohje.pdf)

ISAP

Inventory of School Attendance Problems, (Knollmann, 2018). (Translated into Finnish in 2019.) Designed for pupils aged 11–17 years.

Link to the questionnaire (in Finnish): [http://www.tuuve.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Koulupoissaolojen-oireet-ja-syyt-ISAP-sio1.2.pdf](http://www.tuuve.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Koulupoissaolojen-oireet-ja-syyt-ISAP-Versio1.2.pdf).

SNACK

School Non-Attendance Checklist (in Finnish):

<https://koulupoissaolo.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Koulupoissaolojen-tarkistuslista-1.pdf>

THE SCHOOL AND ME (an inquiry, in Finnish only)

Master’s thesis on school attachment of lower secondary school pupils (by Saara Nolvi)

Questionnaire in Finnish at [https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26621/1/URN%3ANBN%3Afi%3Ajyu-](https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26621/1/URN%3ANBN%3Afi%3Ajyu-201103021841.pdf) [201103021841.pdf](https://jyx.jyu.fi/bitstream/handle/123456789/26621/1/URN%3ANBN%3Afi%3Ajyu-201103021841.pdf)