What promotes school attendance? Parents' and students' perspective

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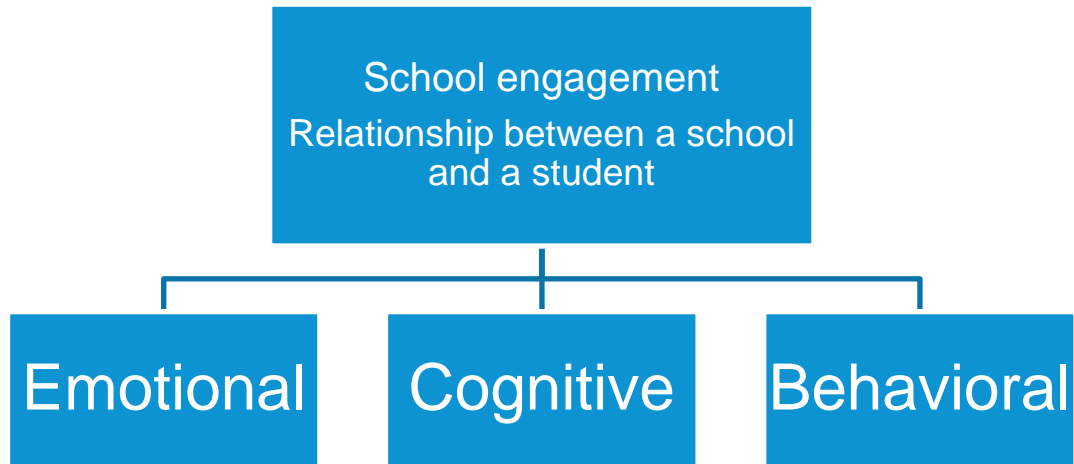Finnish Education Evaluation Centre; Finland

School attendance problems in Finnish basic education

- **The problem of school absenteeism has received considerable attention recently.**
  - School attendance problems (SAP) in compulsory education appear to be increasing in Finland.
- **The school is an important arena for development, both socially and academically.**
  - Students who struggle to participate in daily school activities are at risk of marginalization.

- **The reasons for absenteeism are wide-ranging:**
  - illness, mental health problems, problems at home and social problems at school
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to absenteeism

- **The number of learners whose absenteeism clearly affects their learning is estimated to be over 4,000 in lower-secondary schools in Finland.**
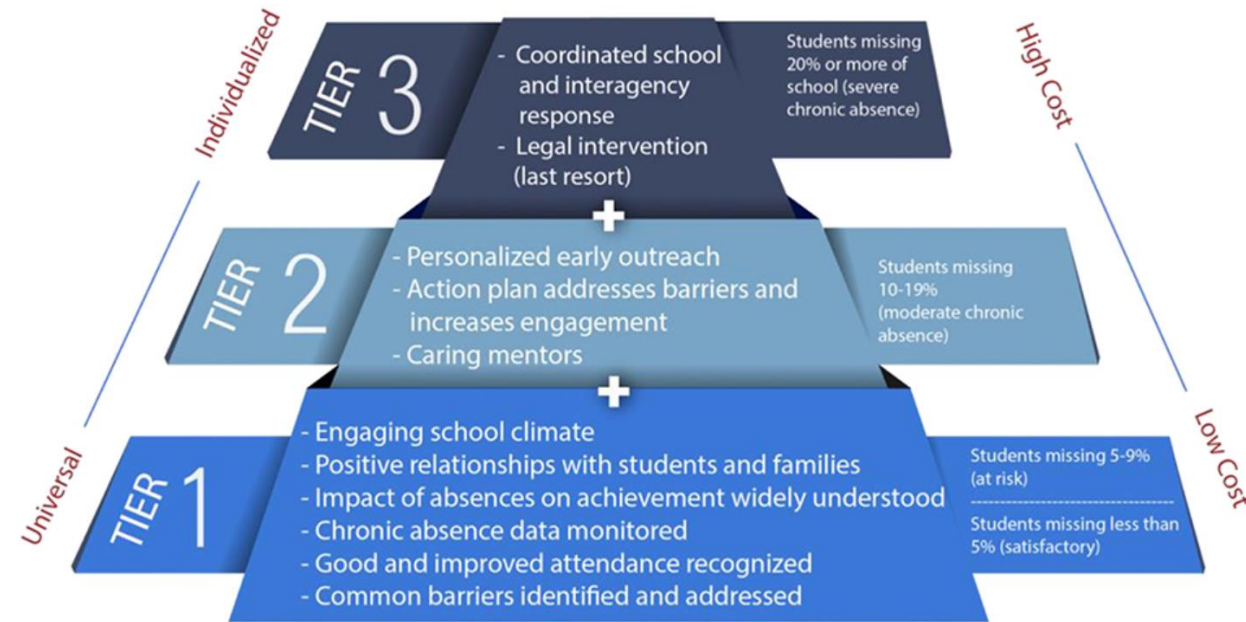 - approximately 2–3% of students from grades 7-9 (Määttä et al. 2020)

Background information

- The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre evaluated practices related to preventing and intervening in school absences in grades 5–9 of basic education in 2021–2022.
- The evaluation is part of the development of national engaging school community work for 2021–2023, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Culture.
  - The essential goal of the program is to produce a national model for tackling SAP
  - preventive actions at school level.
  - The national model will be prepared based on local pilots.
- The evaluation was carried out using an enhancement-led evaluation framework.
- The aim of the evaluation was to produce information to support the drafting of a national model for engaging school community work while supporting local development work at the same time.
- The focus was on administrative and structural solutions that enable engaging school community work and promote intervening in absences, and practices and pedagogical solutions that support school engagement and prevent absences as well as operating methods for intervening in absences.

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Theoretical framework

School engagement
Relationship between a school and a student

Emotional Cognitive Behavioral

Appleton et al. 2006; Fredricks et al. 2004

Individualized

TIER 3
- Coordinated school and interagency response
- Legal intervention (last resort)
Students missing 20% or more of school (severe chronic absence)

High Cost

TIER 2
- Personalized early outreach
- Action plan addresses barriers and increases engagement
- Caring mentors
Students missing 10-19% (moderate chronic absence)

TIER 1
- Engaging school climate
- Positive relationships with students and families
- Impact of absences on achievement widely understood
- Chronic absence data monitored
- Good and improved attendance recognized
- Common barriers identified and addressed
Students missing 5-9% (at risk)
Students missing less than 5% (satisfactory)

Universal

Low Cost

A Change in the Frame: From Absenteeism to Attendance
Carolyn Gentle-Genitty, James Taylor, Corinne Renguette
Front. Educ., 21 January 2020
| https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00161

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE

Principle of enhancement-led evaluation

Goal-orientation and futures consciousness

Making the current state and trends visible

Continuous improvement

Future-oriented approach

Participatory and interactive approach

Trust

Participation

Cooperation

Tailored methods

Appropriateness

Multi-method approach

Flexible approach to methods

Supporting change

Evaluation as a learning process

Information from feedback: strengths, best practices and recommendations

Monitoring of enhancement work and change

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"Rather than just a method, enhancement-led evaluation is about underlying values: participation, trust and appreciation of the evaluation participants.

Practices for intervening in absences vary between education providers

- According to the evaluation results, education providers mainly use a written action plan for monitoring and intervening in absences.

- The thresholds for intervening in absences defined in action plans vary greatly between education providers and schools, indicating a need to harmonise practices at national level.

- A large variation within the number of hours for intervening in absences also illustrates that different actors have different interpretations of when the absence is a cause of concern or problematic.

- Monitoring and collecting statistics on absences is hampered by a lack of uniform practices and operating methods.
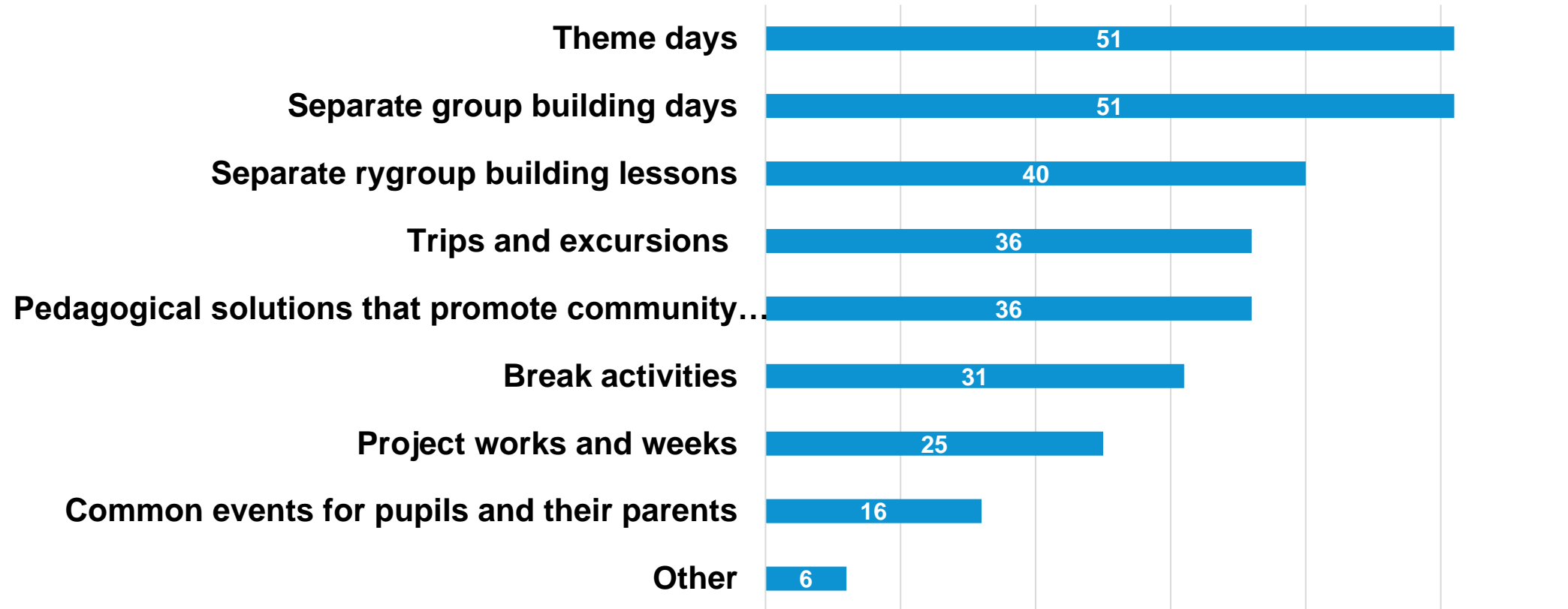
Treshold for intervening (hours missed)	The lowest value	The maximum value
Early interventions	1	60
Targeted interventions	15	100
Intensive interventions	30	150

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The evaluation data

- **The evaluation data was collected during the school year 2021–2022 with surveys directed at several different actors.**

- **In addition, material was collected from school staff, pupils and guardians with school visits, interviews and workshops.**

- **A sample was selected from the schools involved in the development of engaging school community work, and these schools carried out a self-assessment in a group consisting of management representatives, teachers and other persons working on the theme under evaluation.**

  - Responses to the school management and staff self-assessment were received from 132 schools with a response rate of 56%.

- **A survey was directed to guardians of students from grades 5-9**

  - A total of 3615 responses were received from guardians from 135 schools.

  - 87 % respodents were women, 11 men, 2 % other

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According to the views of the school staff, theme and grouping days are important in promoting community

The perceptions of the school staff on the best practices that promote community(%)

Practice	%
Theme days	51
Separate group building days	51
Separate rygroup building lessons	40
Trips and excursions	36
Pedagogical solutions that promote community…	36
Break activities	31
Project works and weeks	25
Common events for pupils and their parents	16
Other	6

Engaging school community work, survey to school personnel, n = 132

In the guardians' views of the factors promoting and hindering well-being at school, good teacher-student and peer relations and feeling safety were emphasized

Parents perceptions of factors that promote well-being at school (n = 3607)	%	Parents perceptions of factors that prevent well-being at school (n = 1765)	%
Friends	83	Teachers	33
Teacher(s)	50	Difficulties with learning	29
Feeling safe at school	45	Loneliness	27
Learning	31	Problems with peer relations	26
Adequate support for learning	17	Bullying	25
Comfy learning environment and school yard	16	Particular school subject	20
Break activities	15	Feeling unsafe at school	18
Particular school subject	10	Inactivity during school days	17
Active school day	6	Other	16
Special theme days and activities at school	6	Insufficient support for learning	14
School lunch	6	School lunch	11
Other school personnel	3	Break activities	3
Muu	3	Other school personnel	2
		Special theme days and activities at school	2

Survey for parents of grades 5-9 pupils, n = 1765 -3607

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Many guardians worry about their own child's school engagement

37 % **of guardians have been worried about their own child's well-being at school**
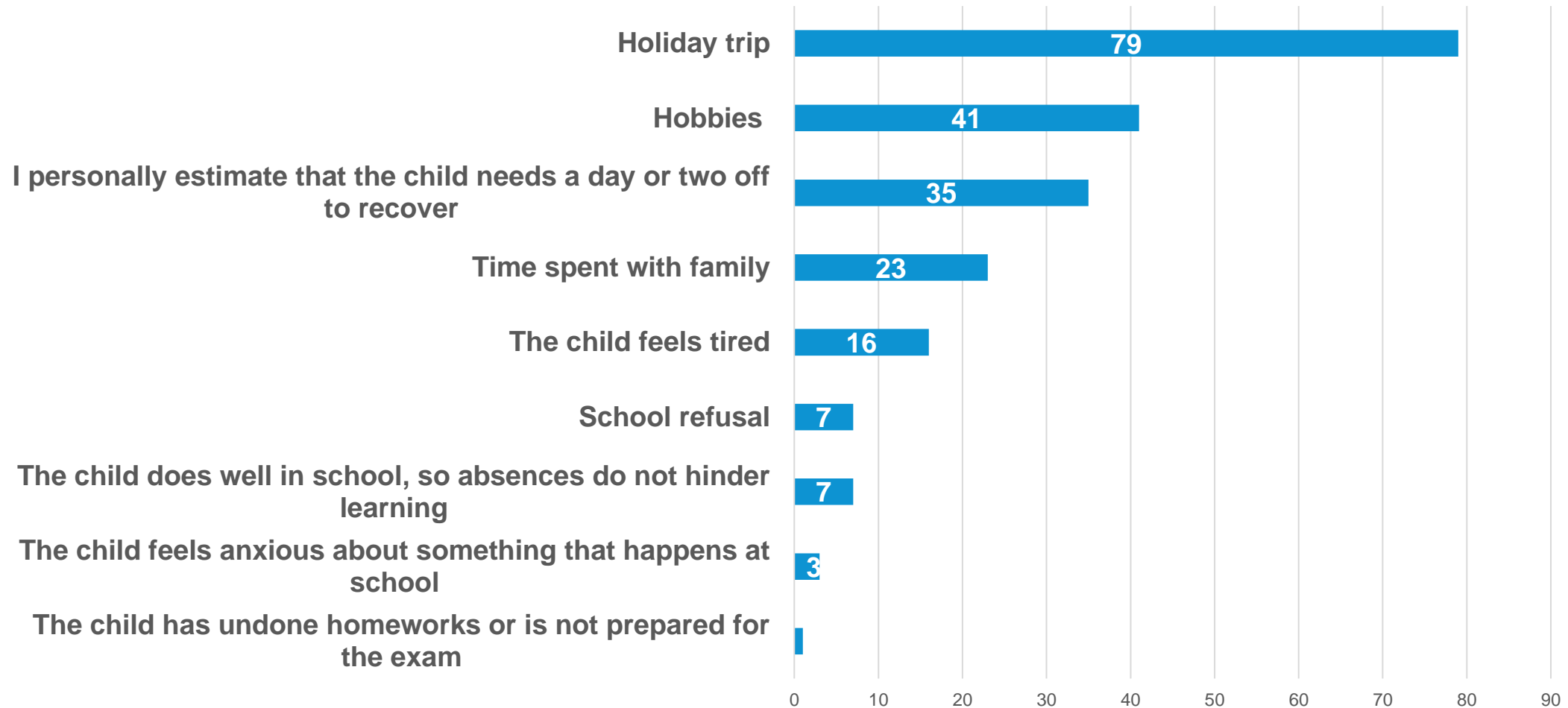
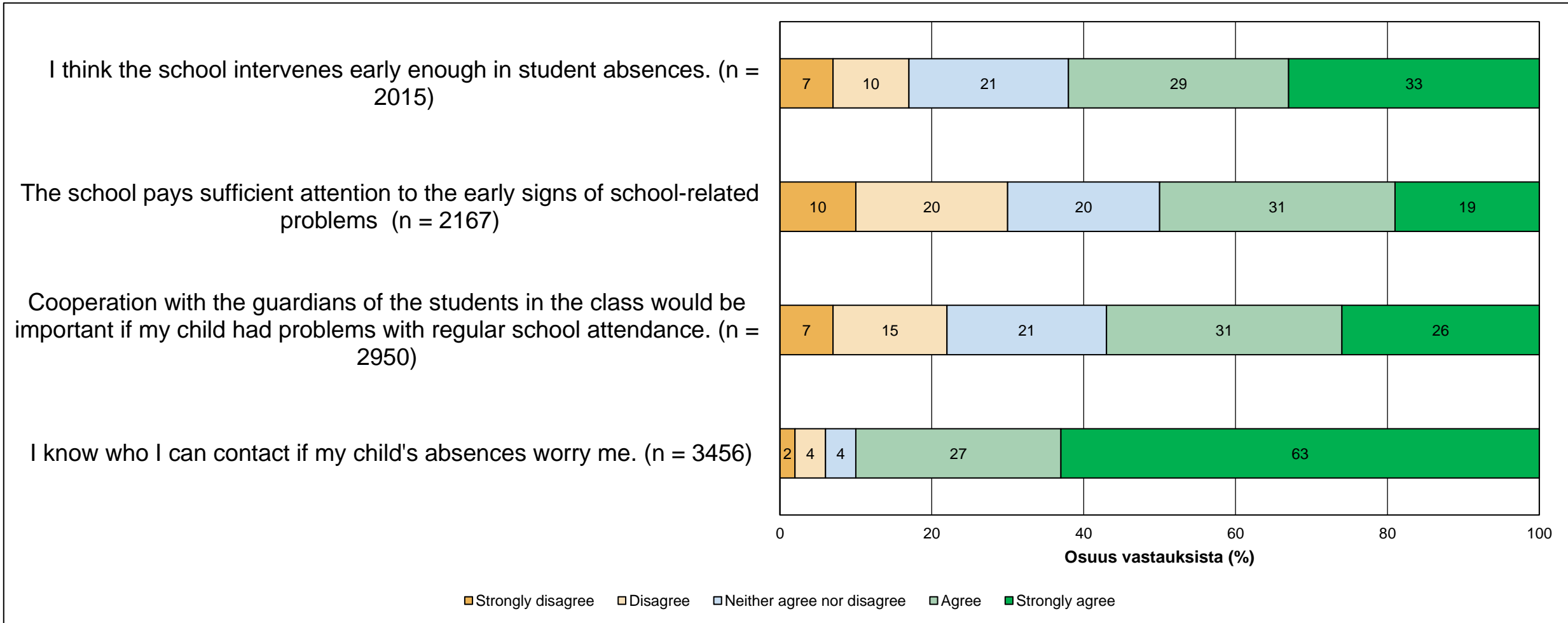**27 %** **of guardians have been worried about their own child refusing to go to school**

18 % **of guardians have accepted their own child's unexcused absence**

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Survey for parents of grades 5-9 pupils, n = 3615

Guardians' attitudes to absences vary

The guardian's assessment of the reasons why the child can be absent from school (%)

Reason	%
Holiday trip	79
Hobbies	41
I personally estimate that the child needs a day or two off to recover	35
Time spent with family	23
The child feels tired	16
School refusal	7
The child does well in school, so absences do not hinder learning	7
The child feels anxious about something that happens at school	3
The child has undone homeworks or is not prepared for the exam	

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Sitouttavan kouluyhteisötyön arviointi, huoltajakysely, n = 3495

Many guardians wish the school would pay more attention to the identification of school attendance problems and early intervention

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the school intervenes early enough in student absences. (n = 2015)	7	10	21	29	33
The school pays sufficient attention to the early signs of school-related problems (n = 2167)	10	20	20	31	19
Cooperation with the guardians of the students in the class would be important if my child had problems with regular school attendance. (n = 2950)	7	15	21	31	26
I know who I can contact if my child's absences worry me. (n = 3456)	2	4	4	27	63

Osuus vastauksista (%)

■Strongly disagree □Disagree ■Neither agree nor disagree ■Agree ■Strongly agree

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Addressing absences or supporting attendance? - a change of perspective requires building a common understanding

" A message to the homes that addressing absences is giving the homes support, not criticism or disapproval. Many think so."

Parent of pupil from grade 8

" The teacher has been in contact twice regarding my child's absences after reaching a certain number of hours. At this point, it was asked if the parents had any concerns about going to school, and since there was not, and neither did the teacher, it was jointly concluded that no support measures were needed. I think this has been a good course of action, because if I had noticed the need for support, it would have been easy to tell the teacher and the support measures would have started in a timely manner."

Parent of pupil from grade 8

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Sitouttavan kouluyhteisötyön arviointi, huoltajakysely, n = 3615

Conclusions

- According to the evaluation material, staff, pupils and guardians had varying perceptions of practices that promote comfort and communality at school. Staff members emphasized separate group building and theme days as a reinforcement of communality, while pupils and guardians emphasized everyday encounters and regular group building.

- Supporting school engagement should be strengthened, especially as part of a school's culture of interaction and daily pedagogical solutions.

- Pupils' school engagement, well-being and positive culture of interaction at school are significant factors in the prevention of absences. It is important to extensively see the work that supports school engagement as part of a school culture that supports inclusion.

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The perspective of absence prevention should be switched towards supporting attendance

- School staff describes support measures related to absences largely from the perspective of the schools' official structures, while pupils hope for non-urgent encounters, listening and understanding.

-> While systematic and recorded shared practices are being developed in schools, it is important to ensure that pupils' and parents' thoughts and ideas are heard both when planning the support measures of an individual pupil and when planning a school's operating methods more extensively.

-> Supporting school engagement should be strengthened, especially as part of a school's culture of interaction and daily pedagogical solutions.

-> Building experiences of belonging in a community and facilitating encounters requires time and space, which should also be taken into account when developing structures at school.

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