wellbeing
in education

Managing Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour:
A Good Practice Guide for Post-Primary Schools

Contents

Purpose of the Document

This guidance has been developed by NEPS to provide schools with information on how to support students who display reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour. This includes those students who are reluctant about attending school, those who miss days regularly, and those who are continually absent from school.

Any reluctance going to school needs to be noticed, addressed early and supported quickly to prevent it becoming a more significant difficulty. It is possible for schools and parents to prevent more significant school avoidance patterns becoming established by working together as soon as signs of reluctant attendance first emerge.

This guide provides best practice for schools in working with parents and supporting their children to attend and stay in school.

What is Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour?

Reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour describes a student's reluctance to go to school, being late for school, missing specific classes, particular times of the day, or being absent from school regularly or for long periods of time.

'Emotionally based school avoidance', 'school refusal' or 'school avoidance behaviour' are some of the terms commonly used when students find attending school difficult due to emotional factors such as feeling stressed or anxious. Throughout this document we will use the term 'reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour'.

There is a difference between the behaviour of students who experience reluctant school attendance even though their parents persist in trying to get them to go to school and the behaviour of students who are absent from school due to 'truancy', i.e., where the student's parents/guardians do not know that their child has not gone into school or has left school without permission.

What are the Signs?

- The student has unexplained absences from classes or school
- The student has difficulty attending school after weekends or holidays
- Parent/guardian reporting that the student is distressed about going to school or frequently complaining about illness, e.g., headaches or stomach aches that fade if they are allowed to stay at home
- The student is frequently late to school or arrives appearing distressed following a morning of pleading with parents/guardians to allow them to stay at home
- Parent/guardian reporting that the student engages in behaviours of concern such as self-injurious behaviour or aggression towards others due to their distress
- The student is reluctant to separate from parent/guardian when they arrive to school
- The student appears distressed during breaks and lunch times and/or wishes to contact the parent/guardian during school time
- The student frequently complains of illness during school and requests to go home

Addressing Emerging Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour

If school become aware of a student being reluctant about attending school, it is important to act quickly and work with parents/guardians to address these early signs of emerging school avoidance to support the young person to attend and stay in school. It is important that schools acknowledge to parents/guardians that it is difficult for them if their child is reluctant to attend school, but reassure them that it is common and easily addressed. Provide the parents/guardians with *'Supporting your Child when they are Reluctant to Attend School: Guidance for Parents and Guardians of Post-Primary School Children'*, and emphasise that it is important to be firm about attending school.

Remind the parents/guardians that it is important that they stay calm and convey strong positive messages to their child about their ability to cope positively with their uncomfortable feelings.

Ensure school staff are available to facilitate the parent in leaving quickly after saying goodbye in the morning.

Advise the parents/guardians about anything in school that may be contributing to the recent reluctance.

Assure them that you will speak to the relevant staff in school to make them aware of the situation.

Other useful appendices for schools to select initial strategies to support the student to attend and stay in school include: **Appendix C** - Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - School Based Strategies and **Appendix F** - Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - Advice for All School Staff

What Causes Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour?

School avoidance can begin at any time, but is more likely to occur at points of transition, ie, when a student is starting primary school or when they are moving to post-primary. These are times when there are a lot of demands on the student to adapt to changes and when the stress they experience may be greater than their coping skills or the support available to them.

Other reasons why a student may avoid school include:

- They may feel anxious that something will happen to a parent/guardian when they are in school

- They may worry that they will not do well at school

- They may worry that they don't or won't fit in in school

- They might want to avoid certain situations or subjects at school that cause them stress

- They may want to avoid the feeling of anxiety they experience about going to school, even though they cannot name exactly what is causing it

Risk and Protective Factors

There is no single cause of school avoidance. Research suggests a combination of complex and interlinked issues can have an impact. Family, school, student and social factors can all play a part. Figure 1 lists examples of what are called 'risk factors' that make a student more vulnerable to school avoidance behaviour if they are insufficiently supported with the difficulties they encounter, or if the demands are higher than the coping skills they have developed.

Figure 1: Risk Factors for Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour

LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT

SEPARATION, DIVORCE, OR CHANGE IN FAMILY DYNAMICS

MOVING HOUSE

PARENT/GUARDIAN PHYSICAL OR MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES

FAMILY

A PARENTING STYLE THAT IS OVERPROTECTIVE OR UNDER INVOLVED

BEING THE YOUNGEST CHILD IN THE FAMILY

FAMILY STRESS

FAMILY HISTORY OF RELUCTANT SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE   CHILD IN ROLE OF CARER   COST OF EDUCATION

BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING

STARTING PRIMARY SCHOOL

TRANSITION TO SECONDARY SCHOOL

STAFF CHANGES

SCHOOL

ACADEMIC DEMANDS ARE TOO HIGH OR TOO LOW

PERFORMANCE ORIENTATED SCHOOLS

EXAMS/TESTS

PEER RELATIONSHIP DIFFICULTIES

POOR STUDENT TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS   CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SCHOOL AND FAMILY

ANXIETY   SEPARATION ANXIETY

ADDITIONAL NEEDS (LEARNING, SENSORY, MENTAL HEALTH, NEURODIVERSITY)

DIFFICULTIES IN SPECIFIC SUBJECTS

STUDENT

HISTORY OF ABSENTEEISM

FEAR OF FAILURE AND POOR SELF CONFIDENCE

TENDENCY TO WITHDRAW   TRANSITION AGES AND STAGES

HYGIENE/UNIFORM CONCERNS   PHYSICAL ILLNESS

SEXUAL/GENDER IDENTITY ISSUES   WORRIES ABOUT FAMILY MEMBERS' WELLBEING

EXPERIENCING TRAUMATIC EVENTS

CULTURAL ATTITUDES TO EDUCATION

PARENT/GUARDIAN EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL

SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

HOUSING ISSUES/HOMELESSNESS

TRANSIENT FAMILIES

SOCIAL

AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH & SUPPORT SERVICES

DISCRIMINATION   NOT FEELING SAFE

While the presence of risk factors in a young person's life may make them more vulnerable to experiencing school avoidance behaviour, we know that this is not the case for every young person who is exposed to such environmental risk factors. Studies have shown that there are individual/internal and external protective factors that, when present, provide a buffer between the young person and the risk factors and support a positive outcome for the young person. These protective factors include:

1. Skills that the young person may have, or have the opportunity to develop, including positive coping skills.
2. A supportive relationship that provides emotional support and helps mediate times of stress for the young person.
3. External support systems that are rewarding, such as school, where young people feel that they are safe, that they belong and where they experience a sense of self-efficacy.

Figure 2 below gives examples of these 'protective factors' or what school can do to reduce stress in the school environment and build the student's resilience.

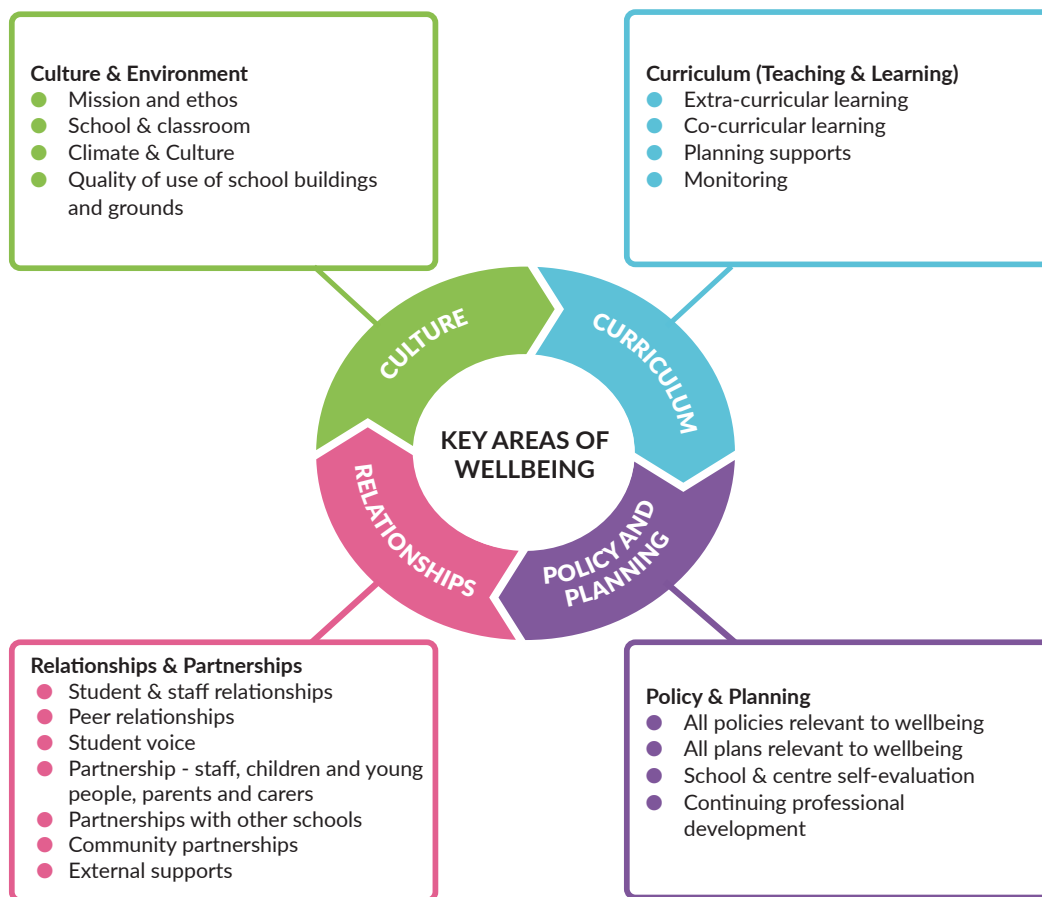*Figure 2: Protective Factors for Resilience*

We know that when a whole school approach to wellbeing is adopted, risk factors are reduced and protective factors are increased, leading to better outcomes for all. School based protective factors are those that minimise stress. Increasing 'within school' protective factors also acts as an important buffer between the student, societal and community risk factors. Protective factors can support a student's response to a risk factor, even in the presence of risk factors.

A Preventative Whole School Approach

Good practice for promoting emotional wellbeing and positive mental health, which also applies to supporting and dealing with reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour, is outlined in the Department of Education's **Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018)**. The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice suggests that such a whole school approach should consider how wellbeing is promoted within four key areas as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Whole School Approach: Four Key Areas of Wellbeing Promotion

Culture & Environment
- Mission and ethos
- School & classroom
- Climate & Culture
- Quality of use of school buildings and grounds

Curriculum (Teaching & Learning)
- Extra-curricular learning
- Co-curricular learning
- Planning supports
- Monitoring

CULTURE
CURRICULUM
RELATIONSHIPS
POLICY AND PLANNING

KEY AREAS OF WELLBEING

Relationships & Partnerships
- Student & staff relationships
- Peer relationships
- Student voice
- Partnership - staff, children and young people, parents and carers
- Partnerships with other schools
- Community partnerships
- External supports

Policy & Planning
- All policies relevant to wellbeing
- All plans relevant to wellbeing
- School & centre self-evaluation
- Continuing professional development

This document outlines good practice in the promotion of a whole school approach to wellbeing. A whole school approach means taking a shared responsibility and promoting wellbeing in all areas of school life. The first key area, 'Culture and Environment', promotes providing students with opportunities to be part of a school environment and culture that feels physically and psychologically safe, where they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, where their voice is heard, and they feel supported. The second area, 'Relationships and Partnerships', promotes opportunities to experience supportive

relationships within the school community. The third area 'Curriculum', focuses on giving students opportunities to experience success and a sense of achievement in their learning and to develop and build core physical, social and emotional skills and competencies. And finally, the fourth area, 'Policy and Planning', aims to ensure that approaches to supporting wellbeing and resilience are rooted in all of the school's policies and practices. Indicators of success in the four key areas of wellbeing are further expanded upon as statements of effective practice in section 2 of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice.

A suite of resources available **here** has been developed to support schools to engage in a wellbeing promoting process using Schools Self Evaluation. CPD opportunities are being provided by NEPS and also by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) to support schools in the important area of wellbeing promotion and resilience building.

The Continuum of Support (Figure 4) is a framework to guide the identification of students strengths and needs, to plan intervention and to monitor and review their response to intervention. This framework recognises that special educational needs occur along a continuum, ranging from mild to more significant, and from transient to enduring. It recognises that students require different levels of support depending on their identified needs. Using this framework helps to ensure that interventions are incremental, moving from class-based interventions to more intensive and individualised support, and that they are informed by careful monitoring and review of response to intervention. Using this framework helps to ensure flexible and timely allocation of supports, so that those with the greatest level of need have access to the greatest level of support.

Whole School and Classroom Support (ALL) involves support for all students in the school, and includes preventative and proactive teaching and learning approaches at classroom level as well as more targeted classroom-based support for individual students.

School Support (SOME) involves the provision of additional targeted teaching and learning supports in response to the identified and recorded special educational needs of small groups and/or individuals.

Figure 4: Continuum of Support
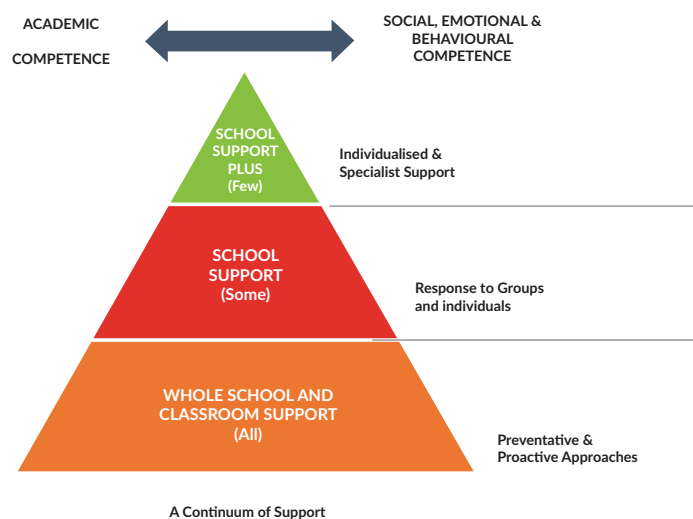
School Support Plus (FEW) involves the provision of highly individualised, intensive, targeted and additional teaching and learning supports for students, whose special educational needs are enduring, and significantly impact on their learning and participation in the school environment.

This is a useful framework, for considering how a school might address reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour. Some students will attend school and benefit from supports offered within their class or at a whole-school level to help them maintain their attendance. Those with greater risk and greater need might need extra support in order to successfully attend and stay in school while those whose needs are greatest may require more specific and intensive supports and the collaboration of a number of agencies over a longer period of time.

Many post-primary schools have a Student Support Team (SST) in place. This team is part of the student support system in a school. It is the overarching team concerned with providing for the welfare and wellbeing of all students. It is a mechanism through which many of the existing student supports are co-ordinated and planned. A SST works as a central team within a post-primary school and is a key mechanism through which many of the existing student supports that schools provide are coordinated and planned. This includes ensuring a coordinated approach when supporting students at risk of or experiencing difficulties including reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour. The resource **Student Support Teams in Post Primary Schools: A Guide to Establishing a Team or Reviewing an Existing Team (2021)** is designed to assist schools as they establish, develop or review their SST.

Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour and Emotions

A certain amount of stress or feeling anxious is a normal part of life. Students can be anxious about going to school after a break, like after a weekend, mid-term or summer holidays. Students can also feel stressed or anxious if they feel under pressure or if they feel that something bad might happen. This is all normal.

Some feelings of stress and anxiety can be positive, keeping us alert, motivated and ready to meet new demands. Stress can build resilience when exposure to tolerable stress is managed in the context of supportive relationships. Stress also has a function to keep us safe by avoiding danger. Our bodies have evolved natural reactions to events that we see and believe to be threatening, such as when we are in danger. When our brain thinks there is a threat, it sends signals to the body to prepare to take action such as stay and fight (fight), run away (flight) or shut down (freeze). We feel physical reactions in our body like our breathing getting faster, our heart racing, palms sweating and knees shaking. This is called the Stress Response.

Figure 5: The Stress Response

ANXIETY IS A NATURAL RESPONSE TO

A PERCEIVED **THREAT** OR STRESS

ADRENALIN ADRENALIN

FIGHT

FREEZE

FLIGHT

The stress response may also be triggered in a situation in which we are not in any physical danger but when we anticipate something threatening is going to happen, even though this threat may be difficult to pinpoint. People can have a vague sense of danger or think "something bad will happen", "I don't know what to expect" or "I won't know what to do" that causes the stress response to be activated. This can happen for students in relation to thinking about school. As the stress response can bring uncomfortable physical sensations, one way of responding is to leave or avoid the situation to reduce these sensations and feel better. Unfortunately when a student avoids or leaves school to feel better, they do not get the chance to experience coping or learning that the situation is not as bad as they thought it would be.

It is important to learn to manage stress and anxiety without avoidance. Adults can play an important mediating role in this process, providing emotional support and encouragement, as the pupil learns skills and strategies to manage and cope.
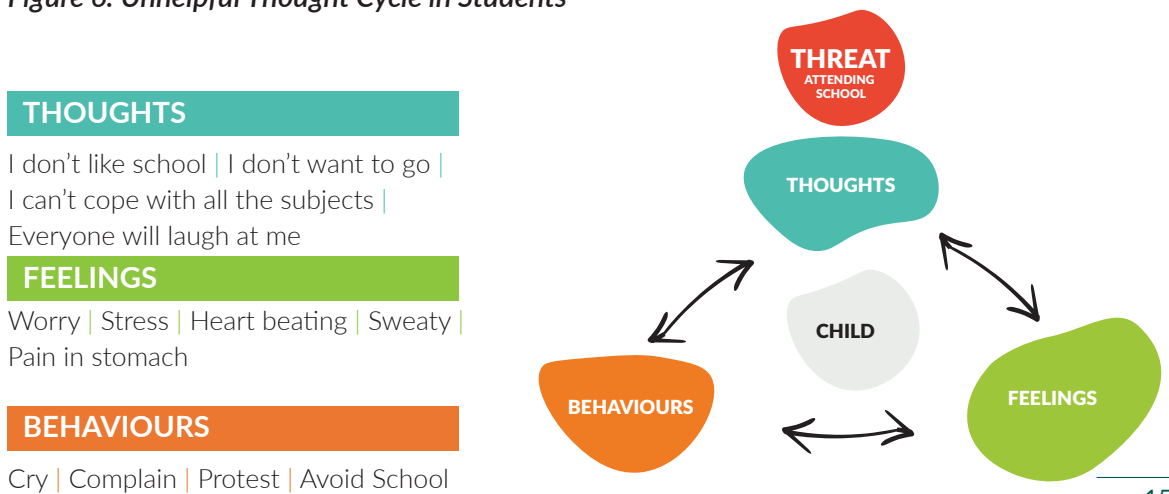
Thoughts Feelings Behaviours

Our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are all connected. Our thoughts can affect the way we feel, the way we react and the way we behave in a situation. It is normal to have lots of different thoughts about a situation. These are sometimes called 'self talk' – what we say to ourselves inside our heads that no one else can hear. Some self talk can be helpful thoughts that make us feel good "I've never done this but it could be fun" while some self talk can be unhelpful that makes us feel worried "I'll be no good at this, people will laugh". It is ok to have unhelpful thoughts, everybody does, but it is important to notice when we have them and maybe even say "that's an unhelpful thought" and not let them take over.
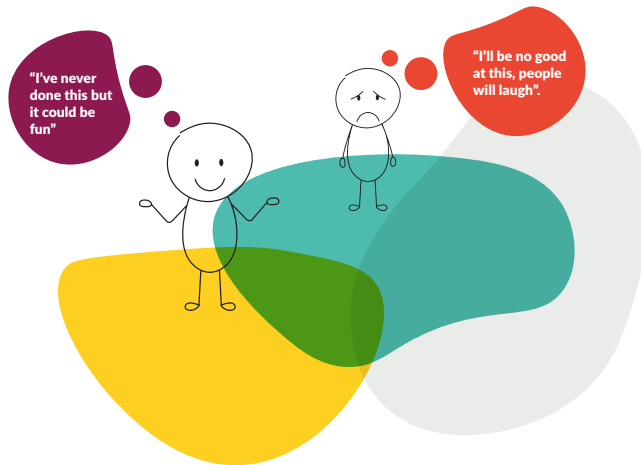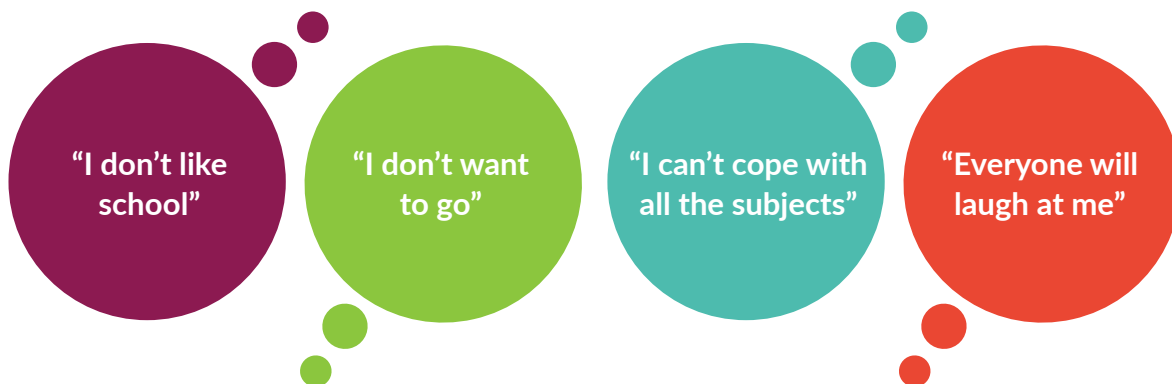

Helping students to become aware of their helpful and unhelpful thoughts is an important starting point to changing the way they feel and behave. Learning to think in helpful ways helps students to feel more confident to cope with what they think are difficult situations. Students can be guided to become aware of their thoughts and self-talk, to decide if they are helpful or unhelpful, and to challenge their unhelpful thoughts. If they chose to believe their unhelpful thoughts, they may continue to feel sad or worried and may avoid situations in order to feel better. This can keep the cycle of avoidance going.

Figure 6 shows how a students thoughts, feelings and behaviour are linked and how unhelpful thoughts can affect, feelings and behaviours about 'attending school'.

Figure 6: Unhelpful Thought Cycle in Students

THOUGHTS

I don't like school | I don't want to go | I can't cope with all the subjects | Everyone will laugh at me

FEELINGS

Worry | Stress | Heart beating | Sweaty | Pain in stomach

BEHAVIOURS

Cry | Complain | Protest | Avoid School

As shown in Figure 6, a student can have unhelpful thoughts like:

"I don't like school"

"I don't want to go"

"I can't cope with all the subjects"

"Everyone will laugh at me"

These thoughts may make them feel worried or stressed. Because of these feelings they might feel physical stress sensations such as their heart beating faster, sweaty palms or pains in their stomach. These feelings are uncomfortable for them, and they may do something to avoid the 'threat' so that the bad feelings stop. Behaviours can include crying, complaining, protesting, and trying to avoid going to school.

When a student avoids going to school so that uncomfortable feelings go away, it may bring them short term relief. However, this avoidance doesn't make the feelings of stress or anxiety any better in the long term. It actually makes it worse. A student learns that staying at home stops the uncomfortable feelings, but they miss an important opportunity to experience coping, i.e., that by doing what they are being asked to do, and what is expected of them, and going to school even when they feel stressed or uncomfortable, these feelings do in fact reduce as the day goes on.

Parents may begin with good intentions to encourage their child to go to school but can fall into the trap of trying to help their child feel better and relieving their uncomfortable feelings, by giving in to them when they display strong emotions, protest behaviours and say they can't go. A cycle of avoiding school to relieve anxious feelings starts and continues. Avoiding going to school easily becomes an established pattern, and because it results in a student feeling less stressed or anxious it gives them the message that the way to cope is to stay at home and not go to school. This is why it is important to be firm that the student must attend school.

If this cycle is not broken, the student may start to feel worse about their situation. Also, being absent from school on an ongoing basis can create new situations that may cause anxiety for the student, such as gaps in their learning, feeling isolated from friend, or unwanted attention from their classmates and teachers about why they have not been at school. Home may become a more comfortable place and they may find it difficult to go back to school. Figure 7 shows how school avoidance starts and continues.

Figure 7: The Cycle that Reinforces School Avoidance

(Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service: Emotionally Based School Avoidance Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies)
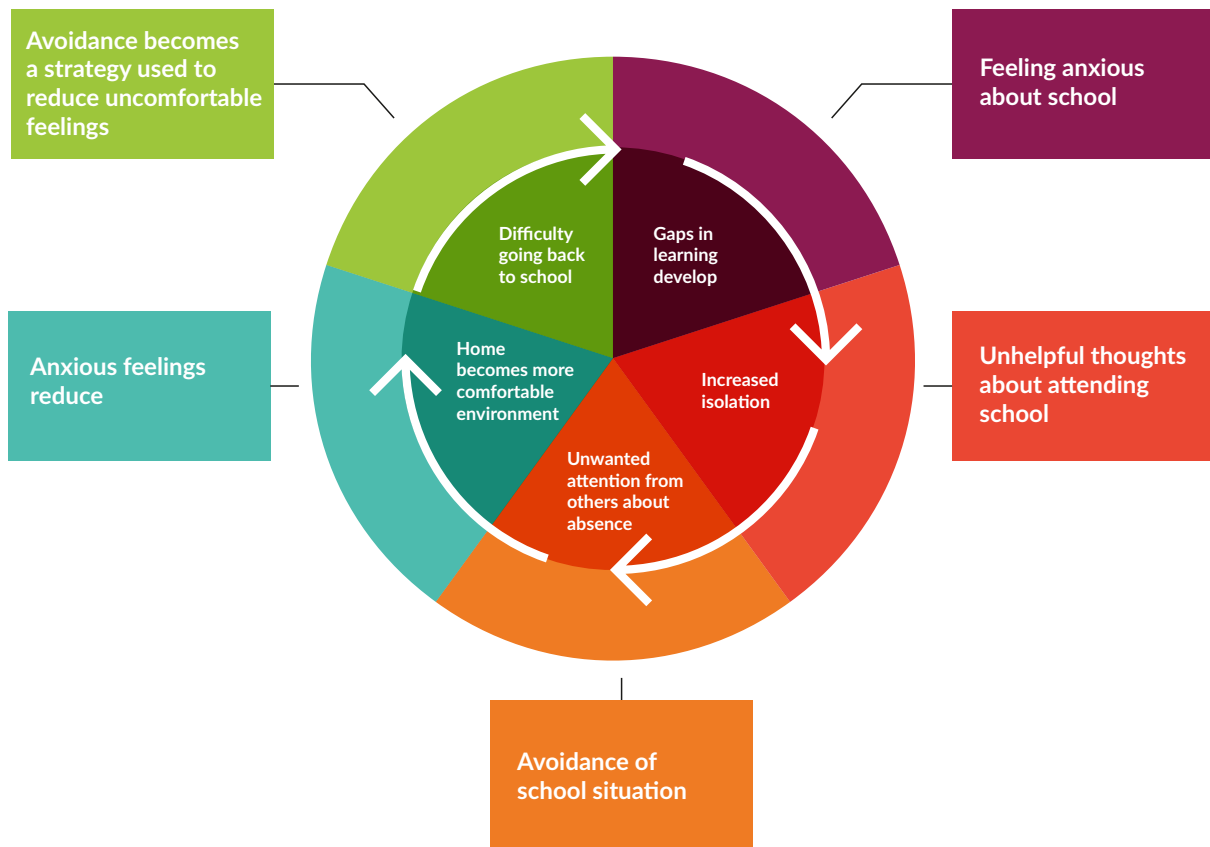
It may be difficult for parents and teachers to witness the young person experiencing some discomfort (crying, complaining, protesting) as they are supported to attend and stay at school. A useful resource to help students to understand and manage stress and anxiety is ***Managing Stress and Anxiety - A Guide for Students***.

It is important that all adults around the student manage their own anxiety about the situation in a positive manner, and demonstrate positive coping strategies for them. This is a key message for parents. By providing positive coping statements and modelling how to manage anxiety positively, this will show the student that they can overcome their difficulties with reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour.

More information and advice for school staff, parents/guardians and students on managing stress/anxiety is available on ***Wellbeing in Education***.

NEPS has developed an e-learning course for schools titled **'Introducing a Trauma Informed Approach. The Stress Factor: Getting the Balance Right'**. It is a short course that focuses on stress and its impact on wellbeing, learning and behaviour. Familiar and new approaches based on research and the experience of NEPS psychologists are used to guide thinking planning and action. The training aims to support school staff to build resilience for all including students with additional needs and those affected by trauma and adversity.

Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour and Special Educational Needs

Student's with special educational needs are a group who may experience particular challenges which can lead to reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviours. Higher levels of stress and anxiety may occur if demands become overwhelming across the school day and in unpredictable situations. These higher levels of stress and anxiety may overshadow coping strategies which the pupil has learned.

When addressing the reluctant school attendance of a student with identified special educational needs, it is important to remember the context of a wide range of risk factors detailed in Figure 1 as well as to consider what needs they may have in the following areas:

- Language and communication skills (hearing and understanding what is being said and being able to respond)

- Social skills (interacting with others, asking for help, making needs known)

- Academic Skills (understanding literacy and numeracy concepts, understanding academic tasks and what is required to complete a task)

- Motor Skills

- Attention, initiation, organisation (starting tasks, sustaining tasks, completing tasks)

- Self-regulation (recognising emotions in self and others, coping and self-calming strategies)

- Coping with sensory experiences (noise, light, smells, touch, busy corridors)Situations requiring using these skills can be unpredictable and can cause stress.

The Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools (2022) is an important document to help identify and respond to need. The guidelines have been developed for students with autism, however, they have a wide application in responding to the needs of all students across the continuum of support for students with a wide range of needs.

How to Respond to Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour – Planning how to Support a Student.

Research emphasises that early intervention, clear planning and good communication between parents/guardians, school, and the student is crucial to successful outcomes. It is important from the outset for parents and teachers to be clear and committed to the common goal of getting the young person to attend and stay in school.
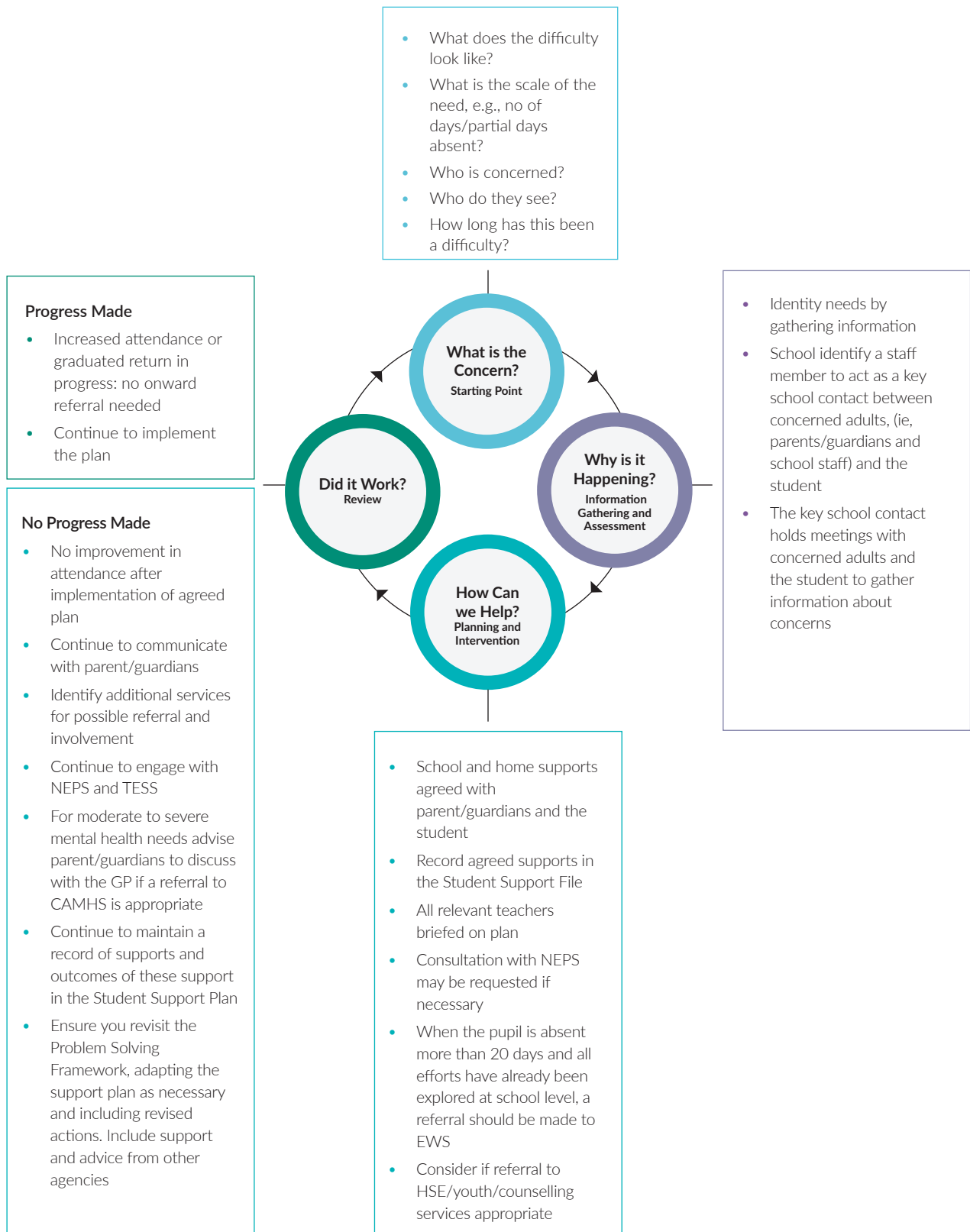
As soon as a school or a parent/guardian becomes aware that a student is avoiding going to school, there should be a meeting between home and school and supports should be planned and implemented, as detailed in the step by step guide overleaf.

There are many aspects to a student's life, therefore, it may be necessary for a number of agencies and services to work together to ensure best outcomes. Successful return to school is more likely when everyone is clear on their role in supporting the student to successfully attend school.

The NEPS four stage problem solving framework, as used within the Continuum of Support Framework, provides a useful approach for schools to gather information and plan supports for student. Figure 8 provides an overview of the problem solving framework being applied to the issue of reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour. On the following pages actions that can be taken under each step are provided in greater detail.

Figure 8: Overview of the NEPS Problem Solving Framework Used to Address Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour

- What does the difficulty look like?
- What is the scale of the need, e.g., no of days/partial days absent?
- Who is concerned?
- Who do they see?
- How long has this been a difficulty?

What is the Concern?
Starting Point

Why is it Happening?
Information Gathering and Assessment

Did it Work?
Review

How Can we Help?
Planning and Intervention

Progress Made
- Increased attendance or graduated return in progress: no onward referral needed
- Continue to implement the plan

No Progress Made
- No improvement in attendance after implementation of agreed plan
- Continue to communicate with parent/guardians
- Identify additional services for possible referral and involvement
- Continue to engage with NEPS and TESS
- For moderate to severe mental health needs advise parent/guardians to discuss with the GP if a referral to CAMHS is appropriate
- Continue to maintain a record of supports and outcomes of these support in the Student Support Plan
- Ensure you revisit the Problem Solving Framework, adapting the support plan as necessary and including revised actions. Include support and advice from other agencies

- Identity needs by gathering information
- School identify a staff member to act as a key school contact between concerned adults, (ie, parents/guardians and school staff) and the student
- The key school contact holds meetings with concerned adults and the student to gather information about concerns

- School and home supports agreed with parent/guardians and the student
- Record agreed supports in the Student Support File
- All relevant teachers briefed on plan
- Consultation with NEPS may be requested if necessary
- When the pupil is absent more than 20 days and all efforts have already been explored at school level, a referral should be made to EWS
- Consider if referral to HSE/youth/counselling services appropriate

NEPS Problem Solving Framework for Responding to Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - A Step by Step Guide

What is the Concern?
Starting Point

Why is it Happening?
Information Gathering and Assessment

Step 1: What is the Concern? Starting Point

- School staff can consider the following: Who is concerned? When did the difficulty start? What is the scale of the difficulty, e.g. number of full/partial absences. Is there a pattern to attendance/absence, e.g., late, missing specific classes or missing particular times of day? This may be recorded in page 1 of the template 'Information Gathering: School and Parent/Guardian Checklist' in **Appendix A**

Step 2: Why is it Happening? Information Gathering and Assessment

- A key school contact (e.g., Support Teacher, Year Head, Deputy Principal, Guidance Counsellor, Student Support Team member including HSCL Teacher or school completion officer where available etc.) should arrange a meeting with parents/guardians to gather information about concerns and to try to better understand the student's school avoidance and any barriers to their return to school. It is important that all are mindful that it may be hard for parents/guardians to talk about the difficulty they are having getting their child to go to school. Parents/guardians often worry that they may be blamed for their child's absence or that their parenting skills may be judged. Also, parents/guardians may have concerns about some specific aspects of their child's school life. It is key that the focus of all conversations is on understanding what is happening for the student and what can be done to help increase attendance. Sensitivity and empathy will be required. The school can identify a suitable staff member to act as a key school contact between parents/guardians, school staff and the student. The key school contact can be chosen in consultation with the student.

- The school can advise parents/guardians on initial strategies and supports that may help their child to re-establish attendance, and provide the resource *'Supporting your Child when they are Reluctant to Attend School: Guidance for Parents and Guardians of Post-Primary School Children'.*

- The 'Information Gathering: School and Parent/Guardian Checklist' in **Appendix A** provides useful prompts to the key school contact when drawing together information from both school and home, to understand what the student may be experiencing. When gathering information from parents/guardians, an understanding of the family background and the student's developmental/educational history is important.

- The key school contact should engage with the student to find out about their views. Empathise with them and acknowledge how difficult things have been. Information can be gathered about strengths and challenges, positives they can identify about school, any worries they may have and about their relationships with peers and school staff. Tools used to gain the student's view will vary depending on their age, level of understanding and language. Visual supports and drawings can be helpful to support a conversation as many student find verbalising their thoughts, feelings and wishes challenging. **Appendix B** – 'My Views about School' will be useful when exploring the student's thoughts and feelings about school.

- The key school contact should gather information from relevant adults in school, e.g., what is going well, observations of strengths, difficulties, friendships, academic ability, current supports and the student's response to them etc. The Subject Teacher Survey on page 29 of the Continuum of Support for Post-Primary Schools will help with collating this information from multiple teachers.

How Can we Help?
Planning and Intervention

Step 3: How Can we Help? Planning and Intervention

- Using the information gathered, a student support plan should be agreed between the school, parents/guardians and the student using the **Student Support File**. This plan should incorporate practical strategies and adjustments to support the student to return to school/stay in school. Strategies can be selected from 'Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - School Based Strategies' in **Appendix C,** though this list is not exhaustive and strategies selected will depend on the needs of each student as identified at the "Why is it happening?" step.

- A 'My Being in School Plan' template in **Appendix D,** can be a useful way of recording the agreed supports for the student. The student themselves can keep a copy of this plan for reference.

- For students who have been consistently absent from school, and who may benefit from a gradual return, the plan may include agreed times to attend. **Appendix E - **'Sample and Blank Templates: Steps in a Gradual Return' - outlines sample gradual steps that may be agreed with the student that they will take based on what they are most likely to be able to cope with in order to gradually increase the time spent in the school/classroom.

- All relevant adults in school should be briefed about the support plan, i.e. what supports are being put in place and by whom, particularly any differentiation, accommodations, environmental adjustment or changes in routines in classes/corridors/yard needed.

- Supports should be implemented straight away and a review date set for the support plan.

- Further meetings between the key school contact and the parents/guardians to offer support will be helpful throughout the period of implementing the plan.

- It will also be helpful to offer support to the student, e.g., using strategies from the skills teaching part of 'Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - School Based Strategies' in **Appendix C.**

- 'Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - Advice for All School Staff' in **Appendix F** can be shared with all teachers to ensure consistency of approach.

- A record of attendance and time spent in school should be kept by the school. If a reduced school day is implemented, the school will need to **The use of Reduced School Days in Schools. Guidelines for schools on recording and the notification of reduced school days.**

- The school may wish to contact their NEPS psychologist (see 'The Role of The National Educational Psychological Service, in reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour' in **Appendix H**). When the student is absent more than 20 days and all efforts have already been explored at school level, a referral should be made to the EWS, (see 'The Role of Tusla Education Support Service in reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour' in **Appendix I**). The NCSE may be able to provide advice if the student has Special Educational Needs.

- Seek parents/guardians consent if referrals to relevant HSE/Youth/Counselling services is appropriate.

Did it Work?
Review

Step 4: Did it work? Review

Review the support plan detailed in the Student Support File with everyone involved, ensuring all steps were implemented. **If progress has been made consider the following:**	If there is no improvement in school attendance after implementing the plan consider the following:
• Identify which strategies worked. • Identify what slowed progress and explore solutions. • Identify interventions that were successful, and need to continue. • Consider if the plan can be adapted to include new outcomes or actions and consider if additional supports are needed? Use the problem solving framework again to identify and implement these as soon as possible. • Continue to record school based interventions in the support plan.	• Continue to communicate with parents. • Identify, and make a prompt referral to any relevant services for possible involvement. • An Education Welfare Service (EWS) referral can be made to TESS stating school avoidance on referral. Parents/guardians should be informed of referral as good practice. • Engage/re-engage with NEPS. • For moderate/severe mental health needs, advise parents/guardians to talk to their GP and discuss a possible referral to CAMHS. • Setting up an interagency forum, such as a 'Meitheal' process, may be helpful to highlight additional supports that the student may require. • Sometimes, despite the best efforts of parents/guardians and school, a return to full attendance does not occur quickly. This may reflect the complexity of the situation and the need for ongoing collaboration. • Ensure you revisit the Problem Solving Framework, adapting the support plan as necessary and including revised actions. Include support and advice from other agencies as they become available.

Appendix A - Information Gathering School and Parent/Guardian Checklist

Adapted from: Roscommon School Refusal Resource Pack. Information for Schools and Parents

Date	
Name of Student	
Name of Parent	
Name of Key School Contact completing form	
Is there a Student Support File/Plan What is working?	
Are teachers aware of identified needs or recommended supports the student may require?	

Student's strengths

What is the concern? Who is concerned? When did the difficulty start?

What is the scale of the difficulty? e.g., full/partial days absent.

Is there a pattern to attendance/absence?, e.g., late, missing specific classes or missing particular times of day?

Describe what the difficulty looks like, e.g., complaining, crying, aggression toward others, asking to leave early

What does the student dislike about school? What worries/triggers them e.g., work, exams, particular situations, peers.
What is different on days the student goes to school successfully?
Student's support networks (who can help?)

Environmental	
Change, e.g. moving house/school, separation of parent/guardians/family members, additions to the family, addiction, death of a family member	
Student living in more than one home/ temporary accommodation	
Practical/financial challenges in getting to school	
Other	

SEN and Additional Needs	
Any known/emerging learning, literacy, language needs	
Avoidance of particular school activities	
Sensory, attention, concentration organisational, physical, mental health needs	
Other	

Social	
Bullying/cyberbullying	
Difficulties with peer/teacher relationships	
Social/communication difficulties	
Social isolation, low confidence	
Struggles during unstructured time	

Emotional Well Being	
Appears tired	
Appears to be lacking in motivation/interest	
Demonstrates low self-esteem	
Shy, quiet or passive	
Appears worried/anxious	
Difficulty regulating him/herself	
Change in mood/presentation	

Physical Well Being	
Has a serious illness or medical condition	
Complains of sickness or headaches	
Other concerns	

What have you as parents/guardians found helpful to date? What has been the response to the school intervention so far?	
What are parents/guardians goals for this child?	
What are the school's goals for this child?	

Appendix B – My Views about School

Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service: Emotionally Based School Avoidance Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies

We would like to find out a little more about your feelings around going to school.

How do you feel about going to school? *(Please circle a number from 1 to 10)*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Not Good!   Okay...   Great!

It is okay and normal to feel excited or scared about going back to school. You might even feel both of these at the same time. You can talk to the adults at home and at school about your feelings, because they will want to help you.

When thinking about school, which of these statements are true for you?

(Please put a tick in the box under the picture if it is true)

I feel worried	I worry about leaving my parents/guardians to go to school	I can do things if I really try	I need help with my learning	People don't listen or believe me
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I don't like reading out loud	There are people who help me at school	I feel mixed up	I prefer to spend time doing stuff at home	I believe people care about me at school
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I don't like some teachers	Some people are mean to me	I worry about getting unwell	I think things will get better	I would rather spend time on my games or watch TV
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

School is too noisy or busy	I feel embarrassed	I have friends at school	I don't understand what the teacher is saying	I would rather be at home
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Here are some more statements. When thinking about school, which of these statements are true for you?

(Please put a tick in the box under the picture if it is true)

I worry about tests	I feel like I belong at my school	My family need me to be at home	I worry about seeing my classmates	I worry that my family will become unwell
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I worry about what people think of me	I don't like breaktimes	People listen to me at school	I feel sad	I don't know how to make friends
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel lonely	I don't like working in a group	I want to go to school	I worry about schoolwork	I feel safe when I am at school
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am a good learner	I prefer to spend time with my family or pets	I don't like changes to routine	I feel my head is too full	I feel my head is too full
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

At school, I would like to get better at:
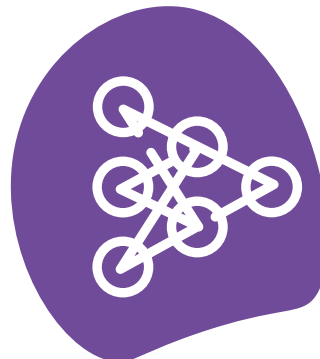
(Please circle those that apply)

Coping with my feelings

Making or keeping friends
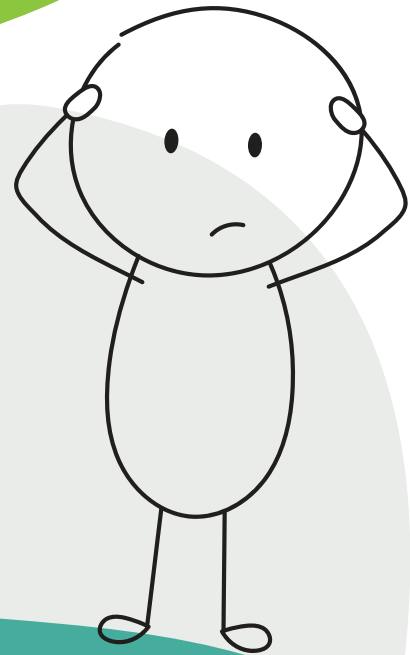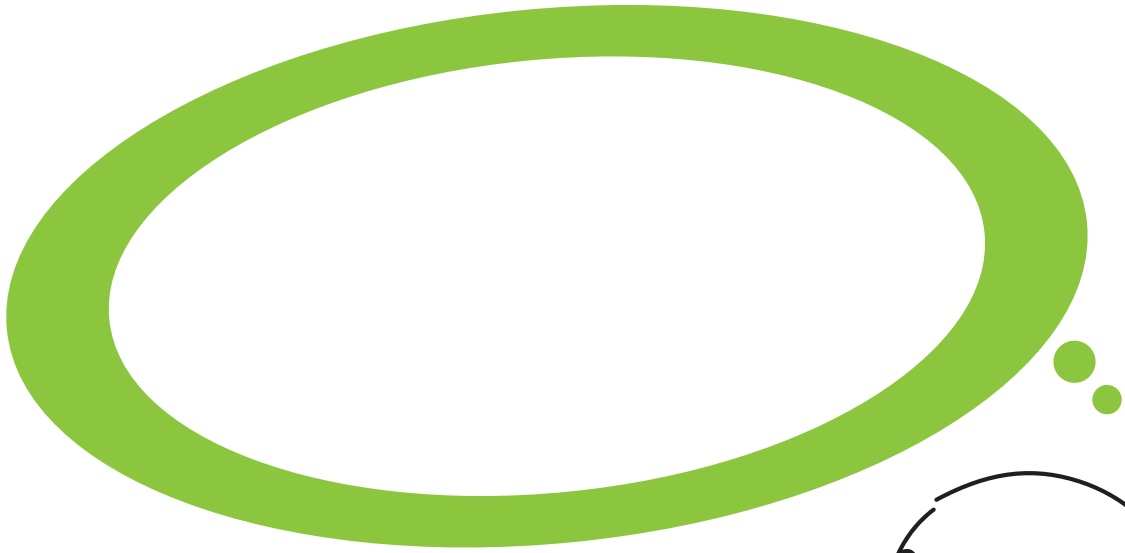
Reading or writing

Other types of learning

Asking for help

Is there anything else you would like to get better at?

When I feel stressed - things that help me

When I feel stressed, these things help me most: *(Please select those that apply)*
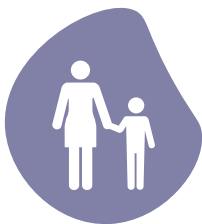
Try to think about something else

☐

Exercise

☐

Take calm breaths

☐

Draw, colour in or paint

☐

Play or listen to music

☐

Talk to a friend

☐

Talk to an adult

☐

Have some quiet time by myself

☐

I don't know

☐

What could help?

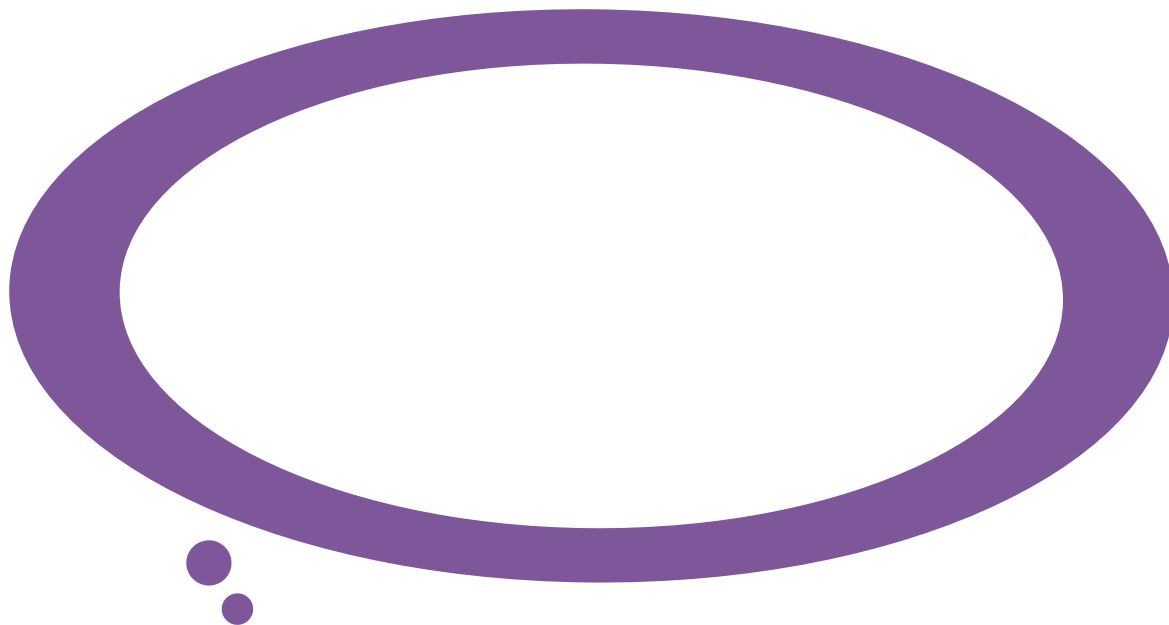|	
Name your feeling to give it less power	**Use your breath to calm your body**
Meet your key adult	**Use your break card**
Practice positive self-talk (This will pass - I will be ok)	**Distract yourself**

Other

Is there anything else you do that helps you?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. Your answers will help adults to plan how they can support you back to school.

Is there anything else you want to ask or tell the adults at school or home?
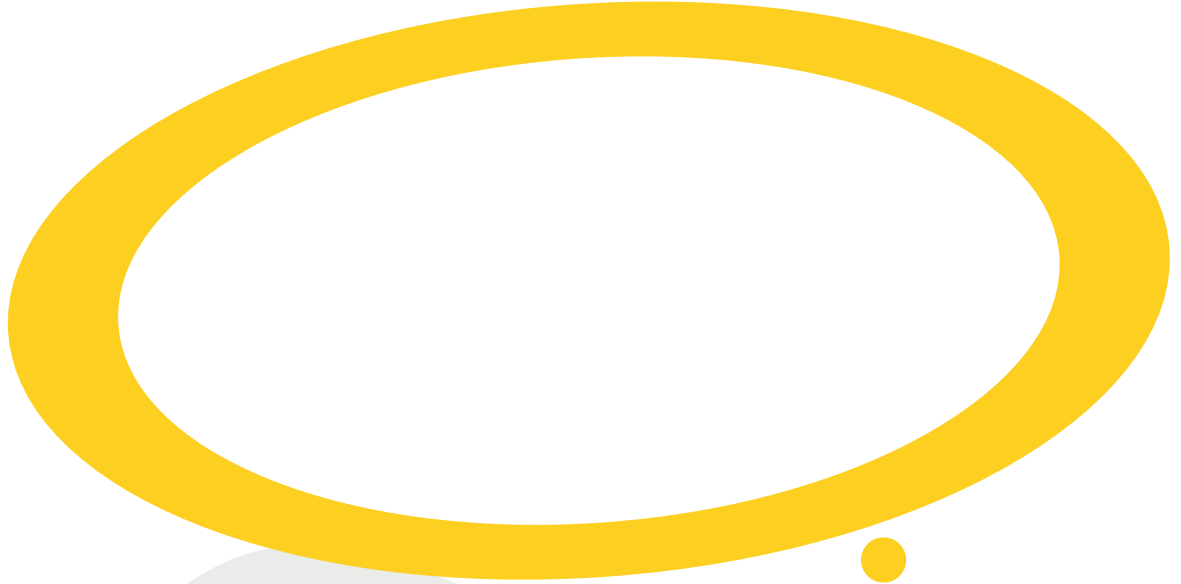
Appendix C - Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - School Based Strategies

Proactive strategies adopted at a whole school and whole-class level are an essential element in preventing and minimising difficulties for students. As outlined earlier, a preventative whole school approach to wellbeing provides a solid base for supporting students experiencing reluctance attendance and school avoidance behaviour.

Classroom practices which create a safe and predictable learning environment support all students, and facilitate the implementation of more individualised supports for those who need them. **Appendix G** - 'Learning Environment Checklist', is a useful tool to help teachers identify actions that may be taken at a whole class level to make a difference for all, but that may also support the student experiencing reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour.

When whole school and whole class strategies have been considered, think about what school can do to reduce stress and increase coping in students who experience reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour, based on information gathered at the 'Why is it happening?' stage of the NEPS Problem Solving Framework for Responding to Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour.

To **reduce stress**, consider if differentiation is needed in relation to:

- Attention/concentration/focus (e.g. movement breaks)
- Learning/literacy/language needs, (e.g. reducing language demands or not asking the student to read aloud/answer in class)
- Social skills, (e.g. class groupings, scaffolding how break times are spent)
- Motor skills/coordination (e.g. improving accessibility/navigability of building)
- Executive functioning (e.g. reducing organisation demands, increasing visual cues)
- Sensory needs (e.g. a quieter bell to reduce loud noise, early dismissal from class to increase personal space and avoid transition times on corridors using an 'early leave' card or uniform adaptations to address tactile sensitivity)
- Schools may wish to seek the support of the NCSE Support Service who provide support to school staff to enhance their capacity to meet the needs of students with special educational needs

To **increase coping** consider:

- Increasing structure (e.g. allowing seating in preferred location, with preferred peers or by providing structured activities for break times to make socialisation easier)
- Increasing predictability (e.g. introducing a 'transitional object' or 'supportive object' can be useful when the student is reluctant about attending school). It can help the student feel safe. Offering a staggered start time when corridors are quieter and arranging for a designated staff member to meet the student in the morning at the entrance also increases predictability

- Providing routine (e.g. agree with the student how they will indicate they need a break from class if stressed, such as showing a 'break card' to their teacher and going to a quiet supervised space or meeting a designated staff member). It will be helpful for the student to have access to a supportive staff member or a supervised space when they feel like they cannot stay in school as this will help them to remain in the school, rather than leave and go home when feeling anxious

- Continuing to encourage connection with peers and extracurricular activities. A buddy could be asked to meet with a returning student to help re-integrate them into school life. It is important to draw on any strengths in non-academic areas, e.g., sports, dance, music etc. to support a student to reintegrate to school

- Teaching skills where gaps exist. Schools can support the student during support time to learn about:

  ✓ Anxiety and the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviour and about anxiety. The documents: ***Managing Stress and Anxiety. A Guide for School Staff, Normalising Thoughts, Feelings and Behaviour: A Guide for School Staff, Managing Stress and Anxiety - A Guide for Students*** and ***Managing Thoughts and Feelings - A Guide for Students***, may be useful.

  ✓ Coping and self-regulation skills. The documents ***Self-Regulation for Students. A Guide for School Staff*** and ***Managing Panic*** may be useful

  ✓ Social skills to support making and maintaining friendships and navigating social situations in school

  ✓ Problem-solving skills

- **Appendix F** – 'Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - Advice for All School Staff' will be useful to share with teachers. Most importantly, if a student returns to school after a long absence, staff should be advised not to quiz the student or question why they have not been in class. It will take time for student to adjust to being back in the school environment and to engage fully with teaching and learning. The student should be given reassurance that once settled in they can be supported with anything missed.

Appendix D - My Being in School Plan Template

My Being in School Plan[1]		
Name:	Date:	Class
At school these things can make me feel upset:		
When I start to get upset, I notice these things about myself:		
When I start to get upset, others notice these things about me:		
Things I can do to make myself feel better when I'm at school:		
My key adult(s) in school is/are: When I can speak to my key adult(s): Where I can speak to my key adult(s):		
Things that other people (staff and peers) can do to help me feel better when I'm at school:		
Things that my family can do to support me to attend school:		

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1   *Adapted from West Sussex Educational Psychology Service: Emotionally Based School Avoidance Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies*

Name:	Date:	Class
My being in school plan includes me attending school on[2]: Days: Times:		
My signature	**Key School Contact's signature**	**Parent/guardian signature**
Other people who have access to the plan are:		

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[2] This section should only be used with students who have been consistently absent from school, and may benefit from a gradual return to school

Appendix E - Sample and Blank Templates: Steps in a Gradual Return[3]

Going to class from lunch time to the end of the day

Joining in with class before home time

Going into a small group lesson

Seeing peers around the school

Going into an empty classroom

Going into the reception area

Meeting a staff member in the carpark

Putting on uniform at home

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[3] This resource should only be used with students who have been consistently absent from school, and may benefit from a gradual return

Appendix F - Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour - Advice for All School Staff

You have an important role to play in supporting students who are experiencing reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour to increase the time that they spend in school. Proactive strategies adopted at a whole school and whole-class level are an essential element in supporting school attendance. Putting in place effective whole school and whole-class structures and practices can support the active engagement of all students. To help you review your whole class structures and practices, it would be useful to review **Appendix G** – 'Learning Environment Checklist'. Additionally, for students who experience reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour, the following advice will be useful to you:

- Familiarise yourself with any support plan that has been agreed with the student, their parents/guardians and the key school contact and recorded in the student's Student Support File. Consistency of approach across classes is key

- Identify any barriers that may be contributing to reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour in the classroom and explore solutions, e.g. academic demands that are too high or too low, social or emotional needs, anxiety, bullying, etc.

- Remove any obstacles that might prevent success if you can, e.g. ensure work and activities are provided that the student is motivated to try and is able to do

- Keep communication open with the school's key school contact about what is working or what is not working and about the student's strengths and needs

- Maintain a positive relationship with the student

- Remain welcoming and inclusive when they are in school

- Do not question the student about the reasons for their absenteeism

- Acknowledge their feelings and their difficulty but convey a belief that they can cope and reassure them that the school will help them to learn to do this. Here are some scripts that a teacher may use:

"I know it's hard to come back to school after the weekend/mid-term/summer, I feel the same"

"I know you can do this; we are here to support you

_____

will check in with you after your first class"

"Remember you have... (insert favourite subject/preferred activity) after break today"

"We can often feel a bit stressed at the start of the day, let's do something nice to settle in"

"This seems difficult right now, but I know you can do this. Let's try ... (practising our square breathing... what you will say to yourself to make yourself feel strong)"

"I know it seems difficult, but I bet that before long you will be back to enjoying coming to school and being with your friends"

"I remember yesterday you felt a bit stressed coming in, but later you were fine"

- Consider how supportive peers can help the student in the classroom. If the student has missed school time, a return to social activities can be daunting, and a peer may help with this

- Support the student to access key curricular content that they may have missed. It is important that school staff do not rush into a focus on academic learning and 'catching up' before first ensuring that the student feels safe and secure. A focus on wellbeing and belonging will enhance their readiness to engage in learning

- Reinforce the student's use of any self-regulation/coping strategies that have been taught as part of their intervention plan

"Can you help me with (insert special job you have organised for them – e.g. collect PE equipment, check technology, etc.) for a while, before going back to class"

Appendix G – Learning Environment Checklist

Mark (√) the area where action could be taken to make a difference for the student

Environment/Physical Conditions:

	Layout of room & furniture
	Adequate working space for students & teacher
	Good decor/lots of displays etc.
	Ease of movement in room
	Temperature
	Lighting
	Noise level
	Seating (Facing board, neighbouring pupil compatibility, height for writing)
	Appropriate resources, equipment organised and readily available for all students

Social Factors/Relationships:

	Classroom procedures & rules are made clear and understood by all students and consistently applied
	Clear instructions are given about the tasks in a variety of ways (oral, visual, gestures).
	Changes between tasks are managed smoothly and effectively
	Students know what to do next without asking
	The class is generally on task
	A variety of different actions (academic & behaviour) are frequently noticed and praised
	A variety of praise and rewards are used
	Students can be monitored sufficiently during a task to ensure understanding and continuing progress
	Any disruptive or off-task behaviour is effectively managed
	Good communication and feedback between teacher and each student about progress is maintained

Classroom Activity:

Check if you have established routines for the following areas. Mark (√) if any need further action.

	entering class
	leaving class
	giving out resources
	gathering resources
	asking for help
	gaining whole class attention

Rules/Rewards/Consequence

Check if your rules, rewards and consequences meet the following criteria. Mark (√) if any need further action.

Rules are

	few in number
	decided upon in consultation with pupils
	displayed
	implemented

Rewards and consequences are:

	named
	linked to behaviour
	rewards are rewarding to class
	rewards are achievable
	sanctions are understood and fair
	sanctions are imposed consistently

School Environment

Mark (√) the area where action could be taken to make a difference for the student

	Playground/yard: layout equipment supervision rules
	Movement: effective routines for movement around school lining up corridors
	Break/lunchtimes: clear simple rules rewards and consequences clear activities available
	Staff support: staff discuss difficulties
	Policy: positive behaviour policy / code of discipline exists policy is understood and agreed by staff range of rewards for good class, yard, school behaviour range of sanctions in place range of strategies used for managing behaviour is assessed and monitored

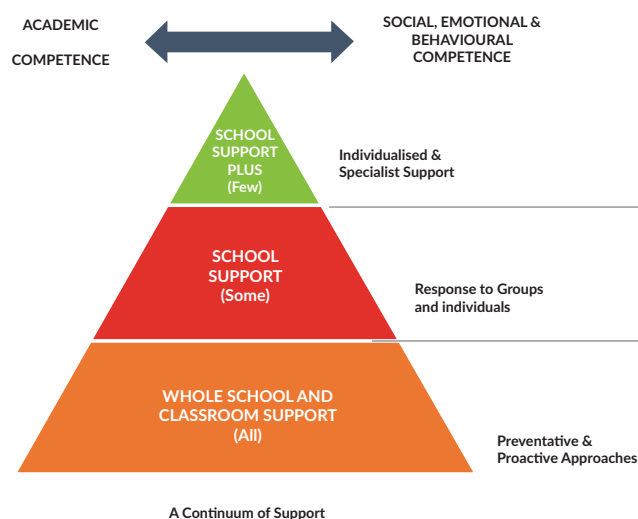## Summary of Concerns

Actions Required

Appendix H - The Role of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) in Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour

NEPS psychologists can support school communities with reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour at all stages of the Continuum of Support.

At the Whole-School and Classroom Support (All) level, your NEPS psychologist may:

- Consult and advise on whole-school approaches to wellbeing

- Signpost evidence-based approaches to support wellbeing

- Build staff capacity on managing reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour through provision of staff in-service on topics related to wellbeing, including:

  - Friends Resilience (anxiety prevention and resilience programme)

  - Wellbeing and Resilience in Schools: the NEPS Series of Webinars, including 'Introducing Trauma Informed Approaches - The Stress Factor' suitable for whole-staff CPD

ACADEMIC COMPETENCE ⟷ SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL & BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCE

SCHOOL SUPPORT PLUS (Few) — Individualised & Specialist Support

SCHOOL SUPPORT (Some) — Response to Groups and individuals

WHOLE SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM SUPPORT (All) — Preventative & Proactive Approaches

A Continuum of Support

At the School Support (Some) level, your NEPS psychologist may provide consultation and advice to:

- Explore why reluctant attendance and school avoidance behaviour might be happening

- Identify helpful strategies and supports

- Support the school in reviewing actions taken to date

At the School Support Plus (Few), your NEPS psychologist may provide consultation, liaise with other services and advise or become directly involved with the student to:

- Review progress with school staff, student and parents/guardians

- Identify other strategies and supports

- Liaise with, or make onward referral to, other services

An early consultation with a NEPS psychologist can be helpful for school staff supporting reluctant school attendance and to decide on the most appropriate course of action.

Appendix I – The Role of Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) in Reluctant Attendance and School Avoidance Behaviour

The legislation governing school attendance in Ireland is the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. Under the Act the minimum school leaving age is 16 years or the completion of three years of post-primary education, whichever comes later. The Act sets out roles for parent/guardians and schools.

Parents/guardians are required to ensure that their students from the age of 6 to the age of 16 attend a recognised school or receive a certain minimum education, which allows for alternative forms of education delivery to them such as home tuition and home schooling

Schools are obliged to keep a register of the students enrolled in their school and maintain attendance records for them all.

They must inform the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) if a student is absent for more than 20 days in a school year.

School Attendance Strategy

The Board of Management in each school is obliged to prepare a school attendance strategy and submit it to the agency. The strategy statement will provide for:

- Incentives to encourage good attendance
- The identification of students who are at risk of dropping out at an early stage
- The establishment of closer contacts between the school and the families concerned
- The co-ordination with other schools of programmes aimed at promoting good behaviour and encouraging attendance
- The identification of barriers and supports within the school system

TESS is responsible for supporting school attendance. This service comprises the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Educational Welfare Service (EWS). HSCL and SCP are supports available under the DEIS[4] programme, available in urban primary DEIS schools, and in post-primary DEIS schools. Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) are based throughout the country and offer advice and guidance to parents/guardians who need support in ensuring that their student attends school regularly.

Where a school principal is concerned about the attendance of a student and having exhausted in-school interventions, an Educational Welfare referral can be made to TESS in relation to these individual students via the Tusla portal. Once this referral is screened and assigned to the local EWO, the EWO will contact the school principal to get an insight into the interventions that have been tried and get an understanding of the current situation for the student. The EWO will then make contact with the parents/guardians to discuss the issues impacting on the student's attendance at school. The EWO will work with the student and the parents/guardians to liaise with other relevant services and professionals as appropriate to remove the barriers impacting on school attendance.

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[4] DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a key policy initiative to support students at risk of educational disadvantage

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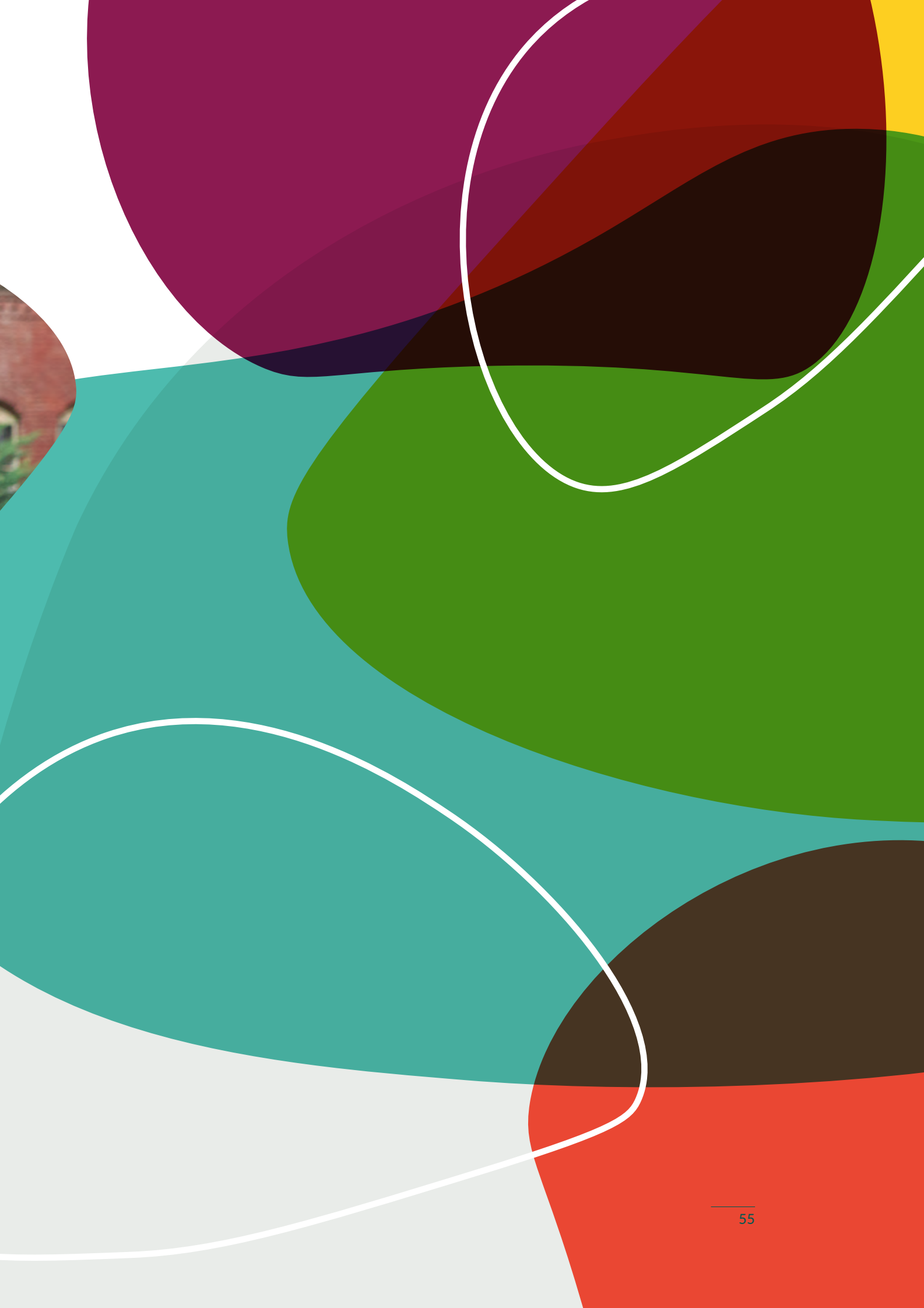
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