Absent but Not Unseen:
How attendance tracking reveals the hidden challenges keeping girls out of school.

Summary

Enrolment alone is not enough – Shifting the focus to consistent attendance tracking helps prevent gradual disengagement and dropouts.

Early identification of irregular students is crucial – More than half of irregular students attend school only 2-3 days a week, making them easier to re-engage if supported in time.

Household responsibilities are a major barrier – Addressing these not only improves attendance but also increases student interest in studies and strengthens family support.

Targeted individual student tracking yields better results – child-centric monitoring ensures focused intervention and higher retention rates.

Community-women play a transformative role – Their outreach efforts have helped 35% of irregular girls return to school, demonstrating the impact of scaling this approach

Introduction

It has been observed that despite increased school enrolment, foundational learning gaps persist among 14-18-year-olds, with **25% struggling to read a Std II-level text, over half unable to solve basic division problems, and limited English proficiency**[1]. While school enrolment is a widely accepted educational indicator, merely ensuring students are enrolled does not guarantee improved learning outcomes. **A more critical factor is their regular attendance.** Additionally, adolescent girls face **heightened risks of harm, violence, and exploitation when they are not in school**, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to keep them engaged in education.

A girl in school is a girl who is not at work or married early.

While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 does not explicitly define "irregular attendance," it emphasizes the importance of consistent school attendance for effective learning. Prayas, an initiative by the Jharkhand Education Promotion Council (JEPC) and UNICEF, considers more than 50% attendance per month as the benchmark for regularity[2], while Aangan sets a higher benchmark at 60% attendance in its program.

Aangan's **School and Safety Program** in Jharkhand (operational in Pakur, Dumka, and Jamtara) ensures that every girl is **in school and accounted for**. To support this, **353 School Safety Committees (SSCs)**—comprising school principals, community women, and adolescent girl representatives—identify and address barriers to consistent school attendance, especially for girls. These committees foster collaboration between school and women volunteers, enabling dialogue, strategy development, and preventive actions to keep children in school, learning, and thriving.

School Safety Committees (SSCs) facilitate regular dialogue and action among school authorities, parents, and adolescents.

While enrolment is a key educational milestone, the **next challenge is ensuring attendance and preventing disengagement**. Without regular attendance, students are unlikely to benefit from learning opportunities, making them more vulnerable to **dropout and exploitation**. Our achievements underscore how targeted interventions can improve regularity and learning retention.

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[1] *ASER 2023: Beyond Basics – Main Findings* *https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER-2023_Main-findings-1.pdf*

[2] *https://www.academia.edu/7886906/Prayas_an_attempt_to_enhance_student_attendance_in_schools_in_Jharkhand_India*

Unpacking Absenteeism in Schools

By **December 2024**, during the **2023-24 academic session, 1,550 adolescent girls** who previously had irregular attendance were **regularised** in schools, maintaining **60% or more attendance** for the past three months. They represent **3.2% of all adolescent girls enrolled in classes 6 to 12** across **353 schools** where the Aangan program is implemented[3].

A total of **4,620 adolescent girls**, nearly **10% of enrolled girls in classes 6 to 12** across **353 schools**, were identified as **irregular due to frequent absenteeism**. This proportion of irregular students is lower than commonly perceived. However, a notable achievement is that **one-third of these girls have already consistently improved attendance.**

While these numbers highlight progress in improving attendance, it is equally important to understand the nature of absenteeism itself. Many students with irregular attendance remain unnoticed, making it crucial to identify absentee patterns rather than focusing only on those who have completely dropped out.

Unveiling irregular attendance - patterns and reasons

The first step toward this achievement is **recognising unnoticed absenteeism**. Well-known educational data sources in India, such as **UDISE+, ASER and AISES** do not report on student attendance. While the education system primarily focuses on **enrolment and dropout rates**, the need for attendance tracking has already been recognised by NEP as well as the MIS systems like e-Vidya Vahini.

Moving beyond enrolment drives to sustained attendance monitoring is a key strategy to reduce dropout risks.

Our findings indicate that **girls with inconsistent attendance** (missing school **2-3 days a week**) make up **59% of irregular students** and are the **easiest to regularise**. This form of absenteeism often goes unnoticed and does not appear alarming, as these students still attend school periodically. The attendance tracking journey begins with recognising these students as irregular.

12% of irregular girls, those who never attended school after enrolment or were absent for 2-3 consecutive months, fall under the accepted definition of dropouts, where a student missing school for 30 consecutive days is classified as a dropout[4].

Understanding **why students are irregular** is key to designing **effective interventions**. Simply assuming that students lack interest in studies ignores the underlying **social and economic factors. Barriers to regular school attendance (for all the girls identified as regular)**

[3 & 4] *Aangan's monitoring data FY 2024-25 (up to Q3)*

Working in agriculture

Health - related problems/menstrual hygiene

Child not interested in school/studies

Attends another school (private/madrassa)

Burden of siblings/elderly care

lack of family support/family not interested

Distance from school/no transport

Child Labour

Unsafe route to school

Child marriage

Burden of household chores

Migration (with family or alone)

Grazing animals

> The three topmost barriers to regular school attendance were **lack of interest of girls in studies (25%), Burden of care (19%) and health/ menstrual hygiene-related issues (19%).**

Discussions with girls revealed that this **lack of interest** masks deeper issues, which **is often shaped by family pressure, financial struggles, safety concerns, and school-related factors[5].**

Parents say "What will you do with studies? Girls are better suited for household work." ... "She is old enough now, better to get her married than to waste time in school." ... "Sometimes, it feels like there's no point in studying," one girl admitted. "What's the use if we're just going to get married early or if people don't let us study properly?"

"If a girl is weak in studies, teachers scold her. Some girls feel ashamed and stop coming." ... "Some schools don't have clean toilets. During our periods, we don't come to school."

"Once a girl stops going, she never comes back. Then one day, we hear she is married, or working somewhere far away, and it's too late."

~ Adolescent girls from Pakur

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[5] *FGDs conducted by Aangan in Pakur district with adolescent school-going girls, who are also part of the adolescent girls' safety network. Dec 2024*

The fear of **harassment on the way to school** and **safety concerns while travelling through desolate roads or forested areas** are major issues that girls hesitate to share with their parents. They fear that instead of addressing the problem, parents might further **restrict their movement**.

"The boys near the shop make comments. They stare. It makes us uncomfortable."… "It's not just about teasing. If something serious happens, people will blame the girl, not the boys. They will say she brought shame to her family." …. "My friend told her mother, but instead of helping, her mother stopped her from attending school."

~ Adolescent girls from Pakur

Additionally, many girls prefer to **travel in groups for safety**, so when a few members miss school, the entire group often follows, leading to **collective absenteeism**. The lack of interest is also associated with the burden of household work and lack of family support.

Barriers to regular school attendance (for all the girls regularised in school)

It is evident from the word map presented below that the three key reasons cited by the regularised girls for irregular attendance were the burden of household work (40%), lack of interest in studies (39%),

and lack of family support (13%). These three factors are closely interlinked, suggesting that alleviating the burden of household work could play a crucial role in keeping girls in school[6].

Students' lack of interest in studies is closely tied to household responsibilities and parental disengagement.

Child not interested in school/studies

Health – related problems/menstrual hygiene

Migration (with family or alone)
Attends another school (private/madrassa)

Burden of household chores

Burden of siblings/elderly care

Working in Agriculture

lack of family support/family not interested

Distance from school/no transport

It was also observed that the primary barriers for girls who remain absent for 30-50% of the days in a month are the burden of household work and lack of interest in studies. Additionally, during the agricultural season, when family members are occupied with farm work, girls take on increased household responsibilities, further contributing to seasonal absenteeism. The volunteer women were relatively more successful in addressing the issue of the burden of household chores.

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[6] *Aangan's monitoring data FY 2024-25 (up to Q3)*

How irregular students were identified before

All schools maintain an **attendance register** for every class and regularly upload data to the **e-Vidya Vahini MIS**. The system primarily focuses on the **cumulative daily attendance** of each class rather than tracking individual students. As a result, school principals and teachers focused more on **how many students were absent** rather than identifying **who was absent** consistently. The Prayas program, launched by the Jharkhand Education Department in partnership with UNICEF, emphasises identifying and monitoring irregular students and thus has introduced a house system to improve attendance. Under this system, students were divided into four houses, and their attendance was monitored by Bal Sansad (children's parliament) and the School Management Committee. If a student was absent for three consecutive days, house members reached out to the family to understand the reason and encourage attendance. However, in many program schools, despite the regular use of e-Vidya Vahini MIS, the Prayas initiative's tracking system was not effectively implemented, and engagement was often limited to maintaining registers in a given format.

Since **RTE and NEP 2020** emphasise **100% enrolment**, schools primarily focused on enrolment drives at specific times of the year. NEP 2020 also recommends l**imiting teachers' involvement in non-teaching administrative tasks.** In Jharkhand, a significant challenge remains the high prevalence of **single-teacher schools**. Around **10% of all schools** in the state are **single-teacher schools**, accommodating **6% of the total student population**[7].

In our **program schools, 11% are single-teacher schools**, most of them located in **Pakur**, where the principal manages both academic and administrative responsibilities alone. Additionally, **22% of schools** operate with just **one principal and one teacher**, making attendance tracking and student engagement particularly challenging.

Changed strategies to identify irregular students

Aangan focuses on a **child-centric attendance tracking system** that enhances the monitoring of irregular students. This system is implemented through the **School Safety Committee**, which includes **school authorities, community women**, and adolescent girl representatives. The committee plays a crucial role in identifying and addressing barriers that prevent children, particularly **adolescent girls**, from attending school regularly.

While e-Vidya Vahini MIS and Prayas recognise the need for attendance tracking, Aangan differentiates itself by continuous child-centric attendance tracking of irregular students and leveraging community women for outreach and intervention.

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[7] *UDISE_Report_2023_24_NEP_Structure*

All students who attend school **less than 50% of the days** or have prolonged periods of absence are identified and tracked separately. The school maintains an attendance tracking register for irregular students and continuously monitors **monthly attendance records** of these identified students until they achieve regular attendance—defined as **at least 60% attendance for three consecutive months**.

The attendance tracking system helps us track individual irregular children month on month. Knowing the reason for irregularity also helps in addressing their issues, including timely interventions to prevent child marriages." ~ A principal of Higher Secondary School from Ranishwar block, Dumka district

School Safety Committees plan strategies to bring children back to school, leveraging rapport and community relationships of women and girls who are also part of this committee. Women volunteers play a key role in identifying and supporting irregular students, ensuring they return to school. They personally visit families or speak directly with students to **understand the reasons for absenteeism** and **encourage them to return to school**.

They also assess whether additional support is required and **coordinate with relevant stakeholders**—such as the **panchayat, local functionaries, or school authorities**—to resolve underlying issues through targeted interventions.

- Household responsibilities and lack of family support were tackled through home visits and PTMs, resulting in child marriage prevention and re-enrolment.
- Health challenges were addressed with sanitary solutions and health referrals.
- Economic hardships were mitigated by linking families to financial aid, reducing child labour.
- Unsafe school routes were improved through police patrolling, road repairs, and school barricades, ensuring a safer learning environment for girls.

School Safety Committees **relies on community engagement**. The follow-up efforts are led by **community women volunteers**, who are typically **parent representatives, local influencers, or active women functionaries** identified by the school. Women volunteers influenced **35% of the girls**, who successfully resumed regular school attendance[8].

> Prayas system engages students to follow-up on their irregular peers.

The systematic attendance tracking system has been implemented in 335 schools (95%), ensuring regular monitoring of student attendance. Currently, 90% of schools actively track irregular students, with 56% conducting checks weekly or fortnightly, 25% monthly, and 10% quarterly, while 5% identify and follow up with irregular students only once or twice a year[9].

[8 & 9] *Aangan's monitoring data FY 2024-25 (up to Q3)*

The school authorities have also started recognising the value of the attendance tracking system[10].

> *"When the attendance tracking mechanism was first introduced, I was initially sceptical. Despite numerous efforts by the school to improve student regularity, we had not seen much success. However, with the volunteer didis conducting regular home visits for children with irregular attendance, we have seen a significant improvement in just a short time—around 5 months—with attendance rates increasing by 30% to 40%.*
> *This progress is unprecedented and is a direct result of the SSC members' active involvement. The volunteers even reached out to families in different villages, motivating children from those areas to attend school consistently as well."*
>
> *~A principal of High School from Masalia block, Dumka*

As a result of household-level follow-ups and conversations with adolescent girls, 41 potential child marriage cases, 12 cases of child labour, and one runaway child were identified. Among these, 10 child marriages were successfully delayed, and 2 children were removed from labour.

Learning and call to action

1. Shifting Focus from Out-of-School Children to Irregular Students Can Minimize Dropout

While out-of-school children are often the primary focus of educational interventions, a significant proportion of students at risk of dropping out are those who are still enrolled but attend irregularly. By tracking and supporting these students early, schools can prevent them from completely disengaging. Our findings show that 59% of irregular students attend school periodically (missing 2-3 days per week), making them easier to re-engage compared to those who have already dropped out. Addressing irregular attendance proactively ensures that students stay connected to education, reducing dropout rates in the long term.

2. Identifying Hidden Absenteeism is Crucial

Many students with irregular attendance (missing school 2-3 days a week) go unnoticed, as traditional attendance systems focus on class-wide absence rather than individual tracking. Recognising these patterns is essential to prevent students from gradually disengaging from school. Adolescent girls, in particular, face multiple barriers, including household responsibilities, safety concerns, and lack of family support, which need to be addressed proactively.

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[10] *In-depth Interviews conducted with the principals of the program schools; July 2024*

3. Child-Centric Monitoring Leads to Better Outcomes

A structured and child-focused attendance tracking system (ATS) enables schools to identify at-risk students early and intervene effectively. School Safety Committees (SSCs)—comprising school principals, community women, and adolescent girl representatives—play a pivotal role in monitoring attendance, engaging with families, and resolving underlying issues. Personalized follow-ups and community-led interventions ensure that attendance is more than just a statistic—it becomes an active effort to support students in staying in school.

4. Systematic Interventions Make a Measurable Impact

Consistent tracking, regular follow-ups, and community engagement significantly improve student attendance. In 335 schools (95%), the ATS has helped 1,550 previously irregular girls maintain 60% attendance for three consecutive months. Community solutions to help girls plan or reschedule household chores around school times could help children return to school.

The active role of volunteers has led to delaying 8 child marriages, removing 2 children from labour, and identifying 37 potential child marriages and 11 child labour cases. These results highlight that proactive, structured interventions can drive meaningful change, keeping students—especially adolescent girls—safe, engaged, and learning.

This factsheet highlights the critical issue of **student absenteeism** and underscores the need for a **systemic shift**—moving beyond **enrolment drives** to **sustained attendance monitoring** as a strategy to **reduce dropout risks**. Instead of focusing solely on **increasing enrolment numbers**, policies should prioritise systematic tracking of irregular attendance to prevent students from **gradually disengaging from school**. By **leveraging community participation** and ensuring **simple yet structured monitoring systems**, schools can **reduce dropout risks and improve learning retention.**

However, sustaining these efforts requires deeper insight into the role of women volunteers, their engagement with children and families, and the support provided by schools. Moving forward, further exploration of these community-led interventions will be crucial in ensuring long-term impact and institutionalizing attendance tracking as a core strategy for reducing dropout rates.