

## **Early identification of school attendance problems: How helpful are Dutch laws, policies, and protocols?**

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The identification of emerging school attendance problems (SAPs) is highly important. Early identification permits early intervention, which reduces the likelihood of SAPs becoming established and contributing to additional problems. In the short term, SAPs can contribute to academic and social-emotional problems for the young person and stress for the family, and they place extra demands upon school resources. In the longer-term, SAPs can lead to school drop-out which contributes to problems for the community at large. Local, national, and international efforts aimed at the identification of emerging SAPs are thus a priority. This paper commences with a review of national laws and policies in the Netherlands that have a bearing on the identification of SAPs. Two Dutch protocols relevant to the identification of SAPs are also considered. Thereafter, we discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Dutch laws, policies, and protocols, paying particular attention to the question of whether they satisfactorily stimulate early identification of SAPs. The paper concludes with recommendations about ways to improve early identification in the Netherlands. These recommendations can stimulate thinking among educational professionals and policy-makers in other countries.

*Keywords:* School attendance problems, early identification, Dutch laws and policies, national protocols.

*Identificación temprana de problemas de asistencia escolar: ¿Cómo son de útiles las leyes, las políticas y los protocolos holandeses?* La identificación de problemas emergentes de asistencia escolar (PAE) es muy importante. La identificación temprana permite la intervención temprana, lo que reduce la probabilidad de que los PAE se establezcan y contribuyan a problemas adicionales. A corto plazo, los PAE pueden contribuir a problemas académicos y socioemocionales para los jóvenes y al estrés para la familia, e imponen demandas adicionales a los recursos escolares. A más largo plazo, los PAE pueden llevar a la deserción escolar, lo que contribuye a problemas para la comunidad en general. Los esfuerzos locales, nacionales e internacionales dirigidos a la identificación de PAE emergentes son, por lo tanto, una prioridad. Este documento comienza con una revisión de las leyes y políticas nacionales en los Países Bajos que inciden en la identificación de los PAE. También se consideran dos protocolos holandeses relevantes para la identificación de PAE. A partir de entonces, discutimos las fortalezas y debilidades de las leyes, políticas y protocolos holandeses, prestando especial atención a la cuestión de si estimulan satisfactoriamente la identificación temprana de los PAE. El documento concluye con recomendaciones sobre formas de mejorar la identificación temprana en los Países Bajos. Estas recomendaciones pueden estimular el pensamiento entre los profesionales de la educación y los responsables políticos en otros países.

*Palabras clave:* Problemas de asistencia escolar, identificación precoz, Leyes y políticas holandesas, protocolos nacionales.

School attendance problems (SAPs) impact youth (children and adolescents), parents, schools, and the community. In the short term, SAPs can negatively affect youths' school performance (e.g., Carroll, 2010). SAPs also contribute to social-emotional problems including loss of confidence, behavioural problems, and difficulty making friends (Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, & Kirk, 2003). Family conflict can arise (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006) and teachers are faced with the additional task of supporting youth with SAPs (Malcolm et al., 2003). When youth are not at school they may cause disturbance elsewhere (e.g., hanging around in the neighbourhood), negatively affecting the community (Malcolm et al., 2003). Absenteeism increases risk for school drop-out (Cabus & De Witte, 2015) which contributes to long term socio-economic problems for the community.

It is important to identify and respond to SAPs when they first emerge, rather than waiting until they become established. Higher levels of absenteeism are associated with increased emotional and behavioural problems for youth (Lenzen et al., 2013), rendering absenteeism less responsive to intervention. Indeed, treatments for SAPs are not effective for all youth (Heyne, Sauter, & Maynard, 2015). The importance of early identification and intervention is clearly presented in Kearney and Graczyk's (2014) Response to Intervention (RtI) model for managing school absenteeism. It includes three 'tiers' or levels of intervention, including universal interventions to prevent absenteeism (Tier 1), interventions with youth at risk for problematic absenteeism such as those who are late to school or skip some classes (Tier 2), and intensive interventions with those meeting some criteria for severe or chronic absenteeism (Tier 3). Since its introduction, the RtI model for managing absenteeism has gained attention in research and practice (e.g., Ingul, Havik, & Heyne, 2019; Skedgell & Kearney, 2018), suggesting that early intervention is gaining prominence.

There is no uniform definition of 'early' identification. Authors have suggested that the very first absence should be carefully examined (Williams, 1927), that "every day counts" (Hancock, Shepherd, Lawrence, & Zubrick, 2013, p.168), and that school staff should respond to the first day of absence (Reid, 2014). Ingul et al. (2019) suggested that a pragmatic threshold for deciding to conduct further assessment or initiate early intervention might be based on 10 percent absence across the last 10 school days, or 5 percent absence across the last 15 school weeks. In principle, practitioners and researchers converge on the notion that the earlier a potential SAP is identified, the better, because interventions can be implemented to prevent SAPs becoming chronic and severe.

It is incumbent upon communities at the regional, national, and international level, to efficiently identify and respond to school absenteeism to prevent negative short and long-term consequences. The current paper addresses early identification of SAPs at the national level in the Netherlands. We first review Dutch laws, policies, and protocols

concerning school attendance. Thereafter, we discuss ways in which these laws, policies, and protocols do and do not promote early identification of SAPs. We conclude with recommendations to improve early identification.

## **DUTCH LAWS AND POLICIES REGARDING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

### *School Attendance Law*

Compulsory education in the Netherlands starts at the age of five (but most children begin school at the age of four) and finishes either at the end of the school year in which youth turn 16 or once they have completed the Dutch equivalent of Year 12, whichever is first. The age limit is extended to 18 years if youth have not yet reached a certain level of education (i.e., a diploma at level 2 or above in vocational education, a diploma at HAVO level [higher general education], or a diploma at VWO level [pre-university education]) (Ingrado, Stichting Halt, het Openbaar Ministerie, & de Raad voor de Kinderbescherming, 2017). In general, school enrolment of youth aged 18 to 23 years will still be monitored for as long as an acceptable level of education has not been achieved (Ingrado, n.d.).

Youth aged 5 to 16 years must attend school fulltime. Most schools conduct lessons between 8:30 and 15:00, Monday to Friday. Youth aged between 16 and 18 years may engage in a combination of school and work if this is part of a specified educational program (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-b). Currently, home-schooling is not a legally valid alternative for compulsory education.

The School Attendance Law 1969 (“Leerplichtwet 1969”) differentiates between authorised absence from school (e.g., being sick, attending a funeral) and unauthorised absence. Unauthorised absence is subdivided into ‘absolute absenteeism’, not being enrolled at a school, and ‘relative absenteeism’, when youth are enrolled but not attending (elucidated below). Parents are held responsible for their child’s school enrolment and attendance. With regard to absolute absenteeism, parents remain solely accountable. In the case of relative absenteeism, youth above 12 years can also be held legally accountable for absence (Ingrado et al., 2017).

School attendance officers are public servants employed in every city council in the Netherlands. They are responsible for enforcing the School Attendance Law. When youth are 18 years or older, the monitoring of school enrolment and attendance occurs via the Regional Registration and Coordination Function for early school leaving (“Regionale Meld- en Coördinatiefunctie voortijdig schoolverlaten” [RMC]). Before 2009, school attendance officers were also tasked with checking schools’ compliance with the School Attendance Law. Since 2009, this is the responsibility of the Dutch Inspectorate of Education (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2010).

*Absolute absenteeism.* Absolute absenteeism is monitored by the city council. If the young person is exempt from the School Attendance Law (“vrijstelling”) then non-enrolment is not regarded as absenteeism. Conditions for an exemption include: (1) the young person experiences physical or psychological difficulties making it impossible to be enrolled; (2) the parents have strong objections, usually religious, to the ideals of the schools located within a reasonable distance of their home; (3) the young person is enrolled in a school abroad; (4) the parents of primary school children earn a living on the move (e.g., working for a travelling fair); and (5) the young person is 16 years or older, there are exceptional circumstances (e.g., ongoing difficulty with the structure of school), and alternative education is provided (e.g., there is an opportunity for employment following an internship, and the employer agrees to provide the young person with opportunities to achieve ‘on the job’ certificates) (Ingrado et al., 2017).

Exemption under the first condition requires support from an independent physician or psychologist who is assigned by the city council and has no prior working relationship with the young person (Ingrado et al., 2017). The Dutch government is currently seeking to reduce the number of exemptions under the first condition by adapting the School Attendance Law (Slob & De Jonge, 2018). The adaptation will oblige regional Collaborations (“Samenwerkingsverbanden”; described below) to find ways to engage the young person in some form of education, prior to an exemption being supported by a physician or psychologist. The government also intends to end exemptions under the second condition by legalising home-schooling under strict conditions (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2015).

*Relative absenteeism.* Every primary, secondary, and vocational school is obliged to register relative absenteeism. The law does not specify how often registration should occur (e.g., per lesson or half day) nor which registration system to use. Schools do need to register whether absence is authorised or unauthorised. Since 2009, schools have been obliged to state their attendance policy in information made available to parents (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2010).

School principals are responsible for reporting relative absenteeism to a national service administering the education department regulations (“Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs” [DUO]), except in the case of private schools and international schools. Reporting to DUO occurs via a digital system and since 2017 all primary, secondary, and vocational schools have to use the same absenteeism registration program (i.e., “Verzuimloket”) (De Vries & Richelle, 2016). Reporting is mandatory when the young person: (1) is away from school for so-called ‘luxury absenteeism’ such as family holidays taken during school term without the school’s permission; (2) had 16 hours of unauthorised absences in four consecutive school weeks (primary and vocational schools report the number of missed hours; secondary schools report missed lessons); or (3) had continued unauthorised absence for four or more school weeks (called ‘long-term

relative absenteeism'). In the case of youth above 18 years, schools are only obliged to file a report when youth are consistently absent, unauthorised, for four school weeks or more. DUO may also be notified when there are concerns about a youth's absence even though absence does not exceed the criterion of 16 hours in four consecutive school weeks (e.g., often skipping the first lesson of the day). This is referred to as 'other absenteeism'. After receiving a notification of absenteeism, DUO notifies the local school attendance officer or, in the case of youth over 18 years, the RMC coordinator (Ingrado et al., 2017; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-e).

Schools are not permitted to report authorised absences to DUO, such as absenteeism due to illness. The School Attendance Law stipulates that a young person who is ill is relieved from the obligation to go to school. It is sufficient for parents (or youth older than 18 years) to provide notice of absence due to illness within two days after the absence. If this is not done, then theoretically, parents or youth need to prove that illness kept the youth from going to school (Ingrado et al., 2017).

#### *Other Laws and Policies Related to School Attendance*

Since 2014, the law on Appropriate Education ("Passend Onderwijs") has been operational in the Netherlands. In general, it aims to ensure all youth have a suitable place in the education system, befitting their abilities and potential, preferably within mainstream education (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, n.d.). In addition, the law aims to reduce the number of youth absent from school for a prolonged period ("thuiszitters"), which includes youth who: (1) are not enrolled in a school for four school weeks or more and who do not have an exemption; or (2) have not attended the school they are enrolled at for four school weeks or more, without a valid reason (also known as long-term relative absenteeism) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-a).

Concurrent with the introduction of the Appropriate Education law, primary and secondary schools were grouped within specific regions to form Collaborations ("Samenwerkingsverbanden"). Each Collaboration is responsible for ensuring there is a full range of educational opportunities for youth in their region, such as different levels of education and levels of educational support (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, n.d.). Since 2015 the Dutch Inspectorate of Education has required all Collaborations to report the number of youth in their region who have an exemption and those who stay at home, unauthorised, for more than four school weeks (i.e., "thuiszitters"). The reporting of youth staying at home for a prolonged period of time ("Thuiszittersregistratie") occurs every three months (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-f) and the Collaborations are tasked with finding educational solutions for these youth.

In 2016 a pact was developed between the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science; the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport; the Ministry of Justice and Security; the national councils of primary education and secondary education; and the national

association of municipalities. This pact, aimed at tackling prolonged school absenteeism (“Thuiszitterspact”), intends to ensure that by 2020 no young person is away from school for longer than three months (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie, PO-Raad, VO-Raad, & VNG, 2016). Recent indications are that this pact is not on track to achieve desired results (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2019).

Another recent development in school attendance policy occurred in 2018, when the law known as “Variawet” became operational. This law encourages schools and Collaborations to find customized solutions for youth with physical or psychological problems. It makes it possible for youth within mainstream primary and secondary schools to attend school part-time or not at all for a certain period of time. Prior to the “Variawet” only special education schools were permitted to offer part-time education for specific youth. The aim of the “Variawet” is to enable youth with physical or psychological problems to progress towards full-time school attendance, reducing the need for them to be exempted from school enrolment, and ensuring that mainstream schools are accountable for the educational progress of youth (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-c).

## **PROTOCOLS FOR RESPONDING TO SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM**

Dutch laws and policies have been translated into protocols to support professionals working with youth displaying SAPs. We describe two prominent protocols, the first targeting unauthorised absences and the second targeting authorised absences due to illness.

### *‘MAS’: Methodical Approach to School Absenteeism*

In 2017 the Methodical Approach to School Absenteeism (“Methodische Aanpak Schoolverzuim” [MAS]) was developed to foster a nationally uniform approach to SAPs. It was developed by “Ingrado” (National Association for School Attendance Officers and Related Professionals), “Stichting Halt” (Halt Foundation, via which ‘Halt’ punishment serves as a voluntary alternative to prosecution), juvenile justice, and child protection, as an expansion of the 2012 Judicial Approach to School Absenteeism (“Strafrechtelijke Aanpak Schoolverzuim”) (Ingrado et al., 2017). It is intended for use by all school attendance officers in the Netherlands. Inherent to the MAS is the ‘apply or explain’ tenet, which means that school attendance officers are assumed to work according to MAS guidelines unless they have provided justification for not doing so.

The MAS comprises five phases in addressing absenteeism: signaling, analyzing, planning, executing, and evaluating. The phases are concretized in 10 steps which are coordinated by the school attendance officers. While school attendance

officers oversee the overall execution of MAS, they are not directly involved until Step 2. A preliminary step in the MAS (Step 0) concerns each school's obligation to inform DUO when a young person enrolls or unenrolls from that school, to help the city council identify youth not registered at a school (absolute absenteeism). The signaling phase comprises Steps 1 to 3, the steps most directly relevant to the identification of absenteeism. Step 1 refers to the school's registration of school absenteeism and their response to absenteeism. The MAS assumes that each school has a policy on managing school absenteeism and that schools act according to this policy. When a school identifies absenteeism that is presumably unauthorised, the MAS states that action should be taken, and that school staff, parents, and/or the young person need to be involved in this process. For example, schools can send a warning letter to the parents and young person, youth can be sanctioned (e.g., after-school detention), extra support within school can be provided, and the needs of non-attending youth can be discussed in regular meetings between regional partners (e.g., partners from mental health care, members of the Collaboration, and practitioners from Youth Health Care Services). When unauthorised absence reaches 16 hours in four consecutive school weeks, the school is legally obliged to report this to the school attendance officer via DUO. Schools may report absenteeism below this threshold (i.e., 'other absenteeism').

Step 2 occurs after the school has made a report to DUO. The school attendance officer contacts the school to receive relevant information. This includes an overview of absences; the suspected reason(s) for the young person being absent; interventions implemented by the school to manage the absenteeism and the reactions of the parents and young person; and the school's expectations of the school attendance officer.

In Step 3, the school attendance officer decides which of two routes should be followed within the MAS; the route for managing luxury absenteeism or the route for managing unauthorised absenteeism. Subsequent MAS steps, which are not directly related to identification, include further analyzing the reported absenteeism (Steps 4 to 6), planning (Step 7), executing (Step 8), and evaluating the intervention (Steps 9 and 10).

The MAS presumes that structures and guidelines are in place at the community level to foster cooperation between different organizations involved in the care of youth (e.g., school attendance officers, mental health care, schools). Differences in implementation may occur due to differences in regional support systems across the Netherlands. Each year the MAS is evaluated by a taskforce including representatives from the organizations involved in its development. Adaptations are made if needed, the most recent being made in September 2018. The MAS now states that its future development will include broadening the approach to focus more on the prevention of school absenteeism.

It is important to note that authorised absenteeism such as absence due to illness is not addressed directly in the MAS. The MAS does however stipulate that effective interventions, such as M@ZL (see below), should be employed in cases signaled as authorised absence due to illness.

*M@ZL: Medical Advice for Sick-reported Students*

M@ZL (“Medische Advisering van de Ziekgemelde Leerling” [Medical Advice for Sick-reported Students, or MASS]) was developed in 2006 by a medical practitioner employed in a Youth Health Care Service, to target secondary school youth who are reportedly ill. A version for post-secondary vocational education is now available and M@ZL is currently being tested for use with young people at primary school. M@ZL aims to reduce youths’ absenteeism due to illness and optimize their participation in education. It involves the timely identification of youth with absenteeism due to illness, followed by appropriate intervention and effective collaboration between participating organizations (i.e., school, Youth Health Care Services, and occasionally school attendance officers) (Vanneste, 2014). Prior to implementation of the steps associated with M@ZL, schools are to refine their policy on absenteeism due to illness, with explicit reference to the M@ZL protocol. The school’s policy is then communicated to all involved parties (parents, youth, and professionals).

M@ZL comprises five steps. In Step 1, when the school administration receives notice of absence due to illness, parents are asked when they think their child will be able to return to school. They are asked to contact the mentor if they think their child is not able to return to school on the agreed-upon date. (All students have a mentor, one of the teachers at the school and the main contact person for students and their parents). Communication with parents is recorded in the school’s student tracking system.

In Step 2, the mentor contacts the parents. Each school has its own policy on how and when this is done (e.g., after three missed school days). Agreements are made regarding the youth’s return to school, the nature of the contact between the mentor and parents, and whether catch-up schoolwork is to be done at home. These agreements are also recorded.

Step 3 is initiated if absenteeism reaches a threshold specified by M@ZL: every fourth illness-related absence in 12 school weeks, or illness-related absence on seven consecutive school days. The school mentor or another staff member from student support makes an appointment to meet with the young person and parents at school. The aim of the meeting is to share concerns and responsibilities (“the school cannot do this alone”), to determine the reason(s) for absence (especially school-related reasons), and to make clear agreements about support needed to promote attendance. This information is

recorded. Based on the outcomes of this meeting, the school decides whether to refer the young person to the medical practitioner from the Youth Health Care Service.

In Step 4, in cases where referral is deemed necessary, a school-based professional explains to the young person and their parents the reasons for and aims of referral. The school provides information to the Youth Health Care Service (e.g., an overview of absences and other difficulties for the young person; the nature of support provided until now) and poses questions (e.g., whether the young person is capable of attending school part-time). Within two weeks of referral the young person and parents are seen by a medical practitioner from Youth Health Care Services and a management plan is developed (Step 5). In Step 6, the plan is monitored by the medical practitioner in collaboration with the school, and the school continues to monitor further absenteeism.

## DISCUSSION

### *Do Dutch Laws, Policies, and Protocols Promote the Early Identification of SAPs?*

There are several ways in which the School Attendance Law facilitates the identification of SAPs. For example, all schools are required to report unauthorised absenteeism, at the very least, when a young person has missed 16 hours in four consecutive school weeks. This provides a clear directive for policy and practice within schools, and it emphasises each school's responsibility for identifying and reporting absence. Historically, the law required that schools report a lower level of absenteeism. Prior to 1992, *every* instance of absence needed to be reported to the city council within three days (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 1992). This was very labor-intensive for schools and city councils. The current law reduces this burden of reporting, and in doing so, it may increase school compliance with reporting.

At the same time, current law fails to encourage schools to engage in what Reid (2014) referred to as immediate school-based response to absenteeism. Indeed, the current requirement of reporting 16 hours in four weeks corresponds with approximately 16-18 percent of missed school time. The variation (16-18%) stems from differences in yearly minimum total hours of education per level (primary, secondary) and type (e.g., higher general education, pre-university education) (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, n.d.-d). Regions also differ in the number of school weeks per calendar year. We used the number of school weeks in the 2018-2019 school year for primary and secondary schools in the north of the Netherlands to derive the 16-18 percent range. International experts in the field of school absenteeism regard this level of absence (i.e., 16-18%) as problematic, not simply a sign of emerging absenteeism. For example, Skedgell and Kearney (2018) suggested that problematic absenteeism (Tier 2) might be distinguished from non-problematic absenteeism (Tier 1) based on a threshold of 1, 3, or

5 percent absenteeism. Moreover, they suggested that severe/chronic absenteeism (Tier 3) might be based on a threshold of 10 or 15 percent absenteeism. By this international standard, Dutch law requires schools to identify and report absenteeism that is severe/chronic, failing to stimulate schools to identify emerging SAPs.

Dutch law includes a description of various forms of absenteeism (e.g., authorised versus unauthorised; relative versus absolute) but it does not provide infallible guidelines for dealing with authorised absenteeism due to illness. Authorised absence due to illness cannot be reported to the school attendance officer via DUO, except when schools *presume* absenteeism to be unauthorised (labelled ‘other absenteeism’). In practice, this generates disagreement about whether the absence of a youth whose parents report them to be ill, should or should not be reported to DUO. Research indicates that absences due to illness represent a substantial proportion of youths’ absence from school (Havik, Bru, & Ertesvåg, 2015). In addition, absences often regarded as ‘typical’ by virtue of their being illness-related are negatively associated with learning outcomes (Hancock, Gottfried, & Zubrick, 2018). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that not all youth reported as ill might actually be ill (Kearney, 2003). Given all of this, it seems unlikely that the current School Attendance Law in the Netherlands encourages school staff to pay sufficient attention to illness-related absence. In fact, current Dutch law may serve to maintain SAPs like school withdrawal. In school withdrawal, absence stems from parent motives for not getting a child to school, and it is in these cases that parents may notify the school that their child is ill when this is not really the case (Heyne, Gren-Landell, Melvin, & Gentle-Genitty, 2019).

The national protocols MAS and M@ZL offer more specific guidelines for those charged with addressing absences, including absences regarded as authorised. For example, the MAS specifies that it is not the responsibility of the school or school attendance officer to determine whether young people are genuinely ill. If a youth’s absence due to illness causes alarm for school staff, the school can contact a medical practitioner from the Youth Health Care Service and ask them to meet with the young person to find out the cause(s) of frequent illness-related absences. If youth or parents do not cooperate with the medical practitioner or if the advice offered does not lead to improved attendance, the school can require that youth and parents clarify the reasons for the absence. If there is no cooperation with this request then the school can report unauthorised absence to DUO (Ingrado et al., 2017). While this guideline offers a clear procedure, it does not promote early intervention because by the time absence is ultimately reported to a school attendance officer it is often quite chronic.

Another problem with the School Attendance Law’s handling of authorised absence due to illness is that it does not distinguish between physical and mental illness. The absence of youth with school refusal, a SAP associated with emotional distress (Heyne et al., 2019), would probably be classified as authorised absence due to illness.

This is potentially problematic because school staff or parents may be less inclined to identify and address psychosocial factors maintaining school refusal when the absence is classified as authorised, and the failure to identify absenteeism at an early stage could lead to more severe and chronic absenteeism (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Although the MAS and M@ZL protocols encourage careful assessment of the reasons for absenteeism, they do not refer to evidence based distinctions between types of absenteeism (i.e., school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, school exclusion; Heyne et al., 2019) or the functions of SAPs (i.e., differentiation according to primary maintaining variables; Heyne, Vreeke, Maric, Boelens, & Van Widenfelt, 2017; Kearney & Silverman, 1990).

Whereas the MAS protocol is intended for use by all school attendance officers throughout the Netherlands, the M@ZL protocol is not uniformly implemented by schools and Youth Health Care Services. One explanation might be the time and cost of implementing M@ZL. Vanneste (2014) estimated that secondary school staff using M@ZL engage in school-based meetings about illness-related absenteeism with 10 percent of all enrolled youth, and that one in five of these youth are referred to a medical practitioner from Youth Health Care Services. The time involved in this process is costly for schools and communities. However, Prinsen, Steinbuch-Linstra, and Krähe (2015) estimated that the benefits of the M@ZL protocol for society outweigh the costs by five-fold. With respect to benefits for individual youth, those in a M@ZL intervention group were found to have significantly fewer illness-related absences relative to a control group (Vanneste, Mathijssen, Van de Goor, Rots-De Vries, & Feron, 2016).

#### *Recommendations for Facilitating Early Identification*

Our review of current Dutch laws, policies, and protocols leads to several recommendations for the early identification of SAPs. First, in keeping with Kearney's (2016) suggestion that early intervention be initiated at the moment that an emerging SAP is identified, school staff should bear in mind that the legal requirement of reporting 16 hours of unauthorised absence is not the moment to undertake action. Indeed, Step 1 of the MAS states that school staff should take action the moment unauthorised absenteeism is identified (Ingrado et al., 2017). In other words, schools must not wait until youth have met the legal quota of 16 missed school hours. MAS also assumes that schools have a policy for responding to absenteeism, but there is no specification of what these policies should entail and how policy should support early identification of SAPs. This gap needs to be addressed, preferably via the regional Collaborations and at national policy level.

Second, there needs to be better management of so-called authorised absenteeism. National law or policy should be established around the reporting of

authorised absenteeism to Youth Health Care Services, in line with the approach recommended in the M@ZL protocol.

Third, Kearney and Graczyk's (2014) RtI model for managing school absenteeism at multiple tiers could be incorporated within Dutch policy and protocols. This would increase attention to identification at Tier 1 and early intervention at Tier 2.

A final recommendation concerns improvement in early intervention for SAPs once they have been identified. By including information in protocols like MAS and M@ZL about different types and functions of SAPs and strategies for assessment, professionals in education and health settings could better tailor early intervention to the specific needs of youth with emerging SAPs. Simultaneously, low-intensity interventions for emerging SAPs need to be developed and tested if the field is to meet the growing demand for early intervention (Tonge & Silverman, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In the Netherlands, the importance of youth attending school is underscored at the national level via law, policy, and protocols, such as the pact to reduce prolonged school absenteeism ("Thuiszitterspact"). At the same time, greater attention needs to be paid to the early identification of SAPs. Early identification benefits early intervention which obfuscates the need for intensive and costly interventions once absenteeism has become severe or chronic. Although this paper addresses the Dutch context, the relative strengths and shortcomings of laws, policies, and protocols in the Netherlands may be of interest for educational professionals and policy-makers in other countries. Absenteeism is a universal problem (Heyne, 2019) and professionals from many countries are grappling with issues such as the relevance of distinguishing between authorised and unauthorised absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2019). Furthermore, the field of school attendance and absence will benefit from greater consistency across countries with respect to the conceptualization and classification of school attendance problems. This permits cross-national research and progress towards international guidelines where appropriate. Finally, laws, policies, and protocols change over time, but the empirical basis for these changes may be lacking. Rigorous research is needed to determine the effects of changes, whether they are changes at the local, national, or international level.

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