



Bureau
Boekhoorn
Sociaal-wetenschappelijk
Onderzoek



Insight into tackling unauthorized pupil absenteeism

The Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism (MAS)

Summary

Paul Boekhoorn
Ton Eimers

Nijmegen
September 2022

This study was commissioned by the Dutch Scientific Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of Justice and Security. ©2022, WODC. All rights reserved.

Summary

Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism

When dealing with absenteeism among school-age children it is considered important that steps are quickly taken to make sure it does not become a long-term problem. An unambiguous approach, and clarity about who does what at which stage, may help. In March 2007 the MAS (a Dutch acronym meaning 'Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism') was launched as a follow-up to the 'Criminal-Law Approach to Pupil Absenteeism'.¹ Ingrado (the national association for school attendance and regional reporting and coordination centres), HALT (a nationwide organisation that works to prevent youth crime – the name is based on the Dutch words for 'The Alternative' and also means 'Stop'), the Child Care and Protection Board and the Public Prosecution Service have together taken the lead here, in consultation with the Ministry of Justice and Security.

The approach, which focuses on prevention and voluntary youth care rather than criminal-law measures, enables school attendance officers to make motivated choices when tackling the problem of absenteeism. Key components of the approach are early use of youth care, cooperation between partner organizations (POs) and made-to-measure solutions.

For a specific approach to cases of pupil absenteeism, officers can basically choose between four separate routes and combinations of these: (1) voluntary youth care, (2) HALT, (3) civil-law coercive measures and (4) criminal-law coercive measures. The guiding principle in making their choices is 'mild if possible, harsher if necessary: a made-to-measure approach'.

When the MAS was introduced, it had two main goals:

- reducing the use of judicial and coercive measures to tackle pupil absenteeism, with emphasis instead on voluntary or other care. 'The idea with this approach is voluntary, mild measures where possible, and criminal- or civil-law measures only where necessary. The important thing is a made-to-measure approach, using the method that is deemed most effective in stopping absenteeism and tackling the underlying issues' (MAS guidelines, 2022);
- implementing a methodical approach to school attendance issues, which means that school attendance officers work and assess implementation in the same, uniform way.

The MAS was developed at a time when there was already a shift in the approach to pupil absenteeism by school attendance authorities, with more emphasis on care and less on law enforcement. This shift can be viewed in a broader perspective, with two relevant developments:

¹ Ingrado. Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism – HALT, Child Care and Protection Board, Public Prosecution Service, Ingrado, most recent version March 2022.

- increased efforts to prevent dropout, reflected in policy, additional funding and a more regionally based approach;
- formal changes to school attendance legislation (introduction of the qualification requirement up to the age of 18) and the regional reporting and coordination (RMC) scheme (measures to prevent dropout up to the age of 23).

In these approaches school attendance authorities and the RMC have been assigned a major role in preventing and tackling dropout. This has led to expansion of training, professionalisation and a new role and status for school attendance authorities and the RMC in regional cooperation. Efforts to prevent dropout have led to greater focus on measures to tackle absenteeism. Against this background the main role of school attendance officers has changed from that of law enforcers to that of contributors to care and prevention.

It was also considered important to have a joint strategy for tackling pupil absenteeism that would lead to a more uniform approach. Major differences in ways of working and practical details were sometimes observed, especially when dealing with relatively high rates of truancy with background warning signs.

The introduction of the MAS was in keeping with this development of a more preventive, care-oriented approach and more uniform, professionalised ways of working. Key features are a shift towards 'milder' (less punitive) approaches to absenteeism and a methodical way of working.

Purpose of the study and main questions to be answered

After the MAS was first introduced in the field, it was adapted in 2017, and was then also evaluated. This first evaluation showed that the methodology was well received by its users (school attendance authorities and POs).²

As a follow-up to this, the purpose of the present study is to determine how absenteeism among teenagers is tackled by school attendance officers in cooperation with POs that use the MAS approach, how the MAS is actually implemented there, and what improvements can be made to it. The two main questions to be answered in the study are:

- (a) How is the methodical approach to absenteeism among 12- to 18-year-olds applied?
- (b) How could the approach be improved?

² PwC (2019), *Evaluatie van de implementatie van de Methodische Aanpak Schoolverzuim* ('Evaluation of implementation of the Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism').

Approach to the study

File analysis

The first part of the study is a file analysis of how absenteeism is dealt with by the school attendance authorities in four Dutch cities and a regional school attendance board. The analysis was conducted at the offices of the school attendance authorities in the cities of Amersfoort, Eindhoven, Utrecht and Zwolle and the Central Gelderland regional school attendance board. The study covered a total of 427 cases, with fairly similar numbers (80-90) for each city and region.

This was not an analysis of individual cases handled by the school attendance authorities, including analysis of subsequent action by POs. Such an approach, requiring access to details of personal files held by both school attendance authorities and POs and so allowing individual teenagers' case histories to be reconstructed, would have contravened privacy legislation. However, the analysis does provide a broad and detailed picture of the extent to which each of the MAS routes is used, in the light of the school attendance files that were studied.

Interviews and group discussions with school attendance officers and POs

The second part of the study is an inventory of the ideas and experience acquired by school attendance authorities and POs when implementing the MAS, and the cooperation that this requires.

In this connection, five group discussions and individual interviews were held with a total of 27 school attendance officers, quality-assurance officers, and team leaders in the five communities studied. In each community at least three school attendance officers were interviewed in addition to the team leaders. Apart from the group discussions, there were interviews at various points with individual staff of the school attendance authorities (often quality-assurance officers) in the five communities in order to obtain additional written or oral information about unanswered questions.

As part of efforts to adopt a joint approach to pupil absenteeism, cooperation with POs was also examined. Interviews (usually individual) were held with staff of POs working with school attendance authorities in the five communities studied: HALT, the Child Care and Protection Board and the Public Prosecution Service. A total of 18 people were interviewed: six from HALT, five (key members of advisory teams and case managers) from the Child Care and Protection Board, and seven (court clerks and prosecutors) from the Public Prosecution Service in the districts concerned (Central Netherlands, Gelderland and Overijssel).

Interviews with parents

In the third part of the study, ten parents of absentee teenagers were interviewed. These interviews provided insight into the parents' personal experience of their children's absenteeism and a general picture of how it was dealt with by various organisations (schools, care institutions and in some cases also school attendance authorities).

A. The MAS in practice

When answering the main question about how the MAS is applied there are three distinct issues that show the various angles from which the question can be answered:

1. the MAS as a methodical/practical instrument when MAS approaches are used by school attendance authorities to deal with absenteeism
2. the MAS when adopted as a basic organisational principle by school attendance authorities
3. the MAS as an instrument for cooperation between school attendance authorities and POs when tackling the problem of absenteeism.

1. The MAS as a methodical/practical instrument

The MAS process first of all involves the use of MAS routes by school attendance officers in cases of truancy. Although the chosen MAS routes are not always explicitly named in the files, they can usually be identified. The researchers used referrals and other details to label cases according to the chosen MAS routes.

MAS routes used in cases of absenteeism

File analysis shows that more than half of cases (56%) involve one of the four MAS routes (voluntary care, HALT, civil-law measures, and criminal-law measures). The other cases (44%) involve a 'basic route' – reported cases are then usually dealt with by school attendance officers with a mild measure, such as talking to the parents and the teenager, or notification without compulsory or voluntary care.

Of the four MAS routes, the one most commonly used – in 47% of cases – is voluntary care. The other (follow-up) routes are less frequently used; 9% of cases involve HALT or a judicial procedure by the Child Care and Protection Board or the Public Prosecution Service. The large number of referrals to voluntary care reflects one of the wider goals of the MAS: less reliance on judicial and coercive approaches to pupil absenteeism, and more emphasis on voluntary care.

The conclusion is that the MAS approach based on voluntary care is working. Not only do most school attendance officers support the approach, but they also implement it in practice.

MAS routes and periods

File analysis shows that the 'harshness' of the chosen route (as reflected in the applied penalties) correlates with the frequency and duration of the teenager's absenteeism. The follow-up routes involve a higher number of reported cases and longer periods of absenteeism than the basic route and voluntary care. Teenagers with whom the basic route is used are significantly less often reported for absenteeism, and for shorter periods, than those with whom the other routes are used.

MAS routes and types of absentees

No significant gender differences were found between the various MAS routes: the basic route, voluntary care and the follow-up routes were used with fairly similar proportions of boys and girls. However, the follow-up routes were used more often with the older age group (15 to 17) than with the younger one (12 to 14).

As regards type of education, the follow-up routes were more often used with teenagers attending pre-vocational secondary and vocational schools, and voluntary care with those receiving special-needs education. A high proportion of absentees (40%) came from single-parent families. There were significant differences in family background between the basic route and MAS routes. The percentage from single-parent families was markedly higher in the voluntary care and follow-up routes.

The vast majority of absentees (86%) had problems in at least one area (home situation, health, school, behaviour). A typical feature of more serious cases was that they often involved multiple problems, which were therefore more persistent and harder to treat.

The worst problems (several problems in several areas) were found in 37% of cases. Such teenagers clearly end up in follow-up routes more often than others. Another factor is that more information is gathered and recorded about teenagers with longer periods of absenteeism and follow-up treatment.

There is evidence that absenteeism often does not stop after the civil-law and criminal-law coercive routes are used. When the civil-law coercive route is used, absenteeism continues or recurs. This happens to almost all teenagers following a criminal-law route involving a magistrate or judge. This may be interpreted as a sign of insufficient intervention, but it may also be a sign that the problems are becoming worse or more concentrated; it is mainly the more complex cases that end up in the follow-up routes, which reduces the chances that the absenteeism will end. Absenteeism is then often not the main problem.

Nearly half (45%) of absentees have milder problems (a single problem in a single area). Most of this group (80%) end up in the basic route. However, a fifth of teenagers with whom this basic route is used have multiple problems. It is not clear why other MAS routes were not used with them.

File analysis also shows the nature and extent of absenteeism, and the underlying problems point to a shift in approach, with fewer police reports and fewer referrals to follow-up routes. It is now mainly teenagers with serious problems that end up in the MAS routes involving the courts and/or compulsory care.

MAS routes and school attendance authorities

File analysis shows that school attendance officers do not often play a leading part in the care process. Care has often been provided before absenteeism is even reported, and school attendance officers do not have a coordinating role. However, as long as the absenteeism continues, officers do remain involved in the case. The cases also show that officers are not always involved in follow-up routes, and there is often no feedback about these.

The use of the various routes by school attendance authorities is not only determined by the types of absentees as described here. It partly depends on communities' differing emphasis on the various types of school or age categories in their approach to absenteeism. For example, one of the communities studied refers teenagers to HALT more often than the others do. This is partly due to the available alternatives, and the importance that each school attendance authority attaches to the use of the various MAS routes. It also means that communities may still make different choices when deciding where to focus their school attendance policies when implementing the MAS.

2. The MAS as a basic organisational principle for school attendance authorities

The question of the MAS process also concerns its adoption as an organisational principle by school attendance authorities.

The study shows that the MAS, designed as a method for structured, uniform approaches to pupil absenteeism by school attendance officers, is not yet a well-established organisational feature among school attendance authorities. In the communities studied, the MAS is positively evaluated as a methodical basis for action but has not been structurally and consistently implemented by school attendance authorities as a guiding organisational principle. For example, school attendance officers do not always receive MAS training. The notification tool developed as an aid when choosing specific MAS routes is seldom if ever used. Nor in many cases is it a structural part of regular consultations between school attendance teams, and it is not covered in peer consultations among school attendance officers. Furthermore, implementation of the various MAS phases and routes often proves incompatible with the school attendance authorities' registration systems.

3. The MAS as an instrument for cooperation

Third, the question of the MAS process concerns the involvement of school attendance authorities and POs in tackling pupil absenteeism. The purpose of the MAS is to increase uniformity in approaches by school attendance authorities and cooperation with POs.

The interviews show that the MAS is positively evaluated in the field as a basic methodical principle. It helps increase professionalisation and uniformity of performance of tasks by school attendance authorities. There is broad support for the care-based approach to absenteeism. A more enforcement-based or coercive approach is only backed by school

attendance authorities and POs in cases of demonstrably culpable and structural absenteeism, and when care is refused by those concerned. The decline in the number of police reports for absenteeism in recent years reflects the shift from a criminal-law approach to a wider range of possible routes, with care as the first option available to parents and their children.

As POs, the Child Care and Protection Board and the Public Prosecution Service are in general positive about cooperation and the results of the chosen approach to cases of absenteeism. It is recognised that the MAS contributes to more well-considered, uniform approaches. Cases submitted for JCO-L (judicial consultation on cases of pupil absenteeism) are also generally better prepared and presented than they used to be. There is often less close and frequent cooperation with HALT because of the relatively small number of referrals (specifically the number of HALT reports).

After the implementation phase of the MAS, it was observed that there was minimal evaluation and inadequate feedback between POs on case information. The study shows that feedback between HALT, the Child Care and Protection Board and the Public Prosecution Service has improved. However, there is no structural joint evaluation of the progress and results of judicial and non-judicial procedures.

There is far less feedback and evaluation on cases of absenteeism in voluntary procedures. Coordination between school attendance authorities and field units (specifically youth care institutions) is by no means always clear and is often hampered by application (correctly or otherwise) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). School attendance officers often do not know what stage of a care procedure absentees have reached, or what the effects the procedure is having. This has implications for their guiding role in tackling absenteeism.

B. Recommendations for further development of the MAS

The second main question in the study concerns possible ways of improving the MAS. The study found a number of starting points for improvement and further development. These including anchorage of the approach within school attendance teams, exchange of information and coordination with organisations in the school attendance chain, the part played by school attendance officers in this chain, and 'made-to-measure' application of the HALT route.

Application and anchorage of the MAS by school attendance authorities

In order for the MAS to be further developed and anchored as a work methodology in school attendance cases, more attention needs to be paid to the training of school attendance officers in this area, the capabilities of the notification tool and adaptation of the school attendance registration system to the MAS.

It is also recommended that there be more frequent internal evaluation of the MAS and that room be created for peer consultation, allowing internal reflection on the chosen MAS routes and possible follow-up action.

Communication on the roles of school attendance authorities and use of the MAS in organisations

Despite general satisfaction regarding cooperation with POs, the various partners' tasks and responsibilities when following MAS routes are not always clear. This particularly applies to organisations that are not specifically mentioned in the MAS 'absenteeism network', including schools, district social work teams and care institutions. Further information and coordination between partners, as well as with teachers and care workers, on the involvement of school attendance authorities and use of the MAS may be useful here. Since cases of absenteeism reveal that school attendance authorities are by no means always helpful to pupils, more contact with care institutions is needed.

More attention should also be paid to the possibilities that the GDPR *does* provide for exchange of information on cases of absenteeism between the various partners. The available information-sharing and cooperation protocols offer more opportunities than is often assumed in the field.

Parents' experience also points to the need for good communication and clarity about how cases are dealt with. Because of their children's absenteeism, parents often find themselves involved in procedures in which the roles and input of schools, care institutions and school attendance authorities appear to clash. When dealing with complex cases of absenteeism, the possible routes and facilities provided by organisations should be made very clear to parents. School attendance authorities can play a key role here.

Enhancing the role of school attendance officers

In many cases, approaches to absenteeism involve voluntary care. If voluntary care is not chosen, the MAS allows school attendance officers to upscale efforts within their own organisations, after notifying the district social work team and/or the care worker concerned. One possibility is an order requiring care workers to find a solution in consultation with the local authorities. One of the main features of the MAS is to identify the point at which upscaling is required and can be initiated by school attendance officers.

A key point here is the role and position of school attendance officers in these procedures. The officers often depend on other organisations to get a case discussed by a JBT (Youth Care and Protection Committee). It is recommended that school attendance officers be more often involved in JBTs in cases of absenteeism. A more structural solution is for school attendance officers to personally initiate discussion of a case by a JBT.

The MAS and HALT

The MAS offers school attendance officers various routes for tackling pupil absenteeism. The motto here is 'mild if possible, harsher if necessary: a made-to-measure approach'. HALT is part of the mild, non-judicial route, with emphasis on an educational approach to absenteeism. The study shows that the HALT option is relatively seldom chosen in most of the communities studied. Referral to care institutions when absenteeism first begins is one reason why HALT is not involved at first – and later, when absenteeism and care have lasted longer, it is no longer involved, mainly because of contraindications to taking that route. In practice, little use is made of a 'combined route' involving two parallel measures (including HALT).

Given the availability of several measures and variations in the nature and scale of absenteeism, as well as the motto 'mild if possible, harsher if necessary', closer examination of the function and contribution of the HALT route to reduction of absenteeism is recommended.

Concluding remarks

The study of implementation of the MAS shows that its basic principles are broadly supported and applied. This can be seen from the relatively small proportion of cases involving a follow-up MAS route (HALT, the Child Care and Protection Board or the Public Prosecution Service). The MAS goal of focusing more closely on voluntary care is broadly backed by school attendance officers, and they act accordingly.

Absenteeism may be an indicator of underlying problems. In such cases school attendance officers may play a key role in reporting the need for support and the use of care. Especially in the initial phase of such a procedure, they also act as supervisors and coordinators.

In many other cases it is already known that there are underlying problems and that some form of voluntary care is already involved, for example through the school. Here the role of school attendance officers is more passive – the initiative lies elsewhere.

The shift in school attendance officers' tasks from law enforcement to care is clearly visible from the study, the cases and also the interviews. What the precise role of school attendance officers in a voluntary care procedure is or should be will vary from case to case.

Perhaps as a result of this shift, the role of school attendance officers is not always clear. This can be seen, for example, in cases where a teenager is faced with problems but a mild measure (warning) is deemed sufficient. At the other end of the spectrum (follow-up routes) we see that school attendance officers are not always involved or kept informed. Because the MAS is not a protocol for action, we can see that there is no systematic feedback to the school attendance authorities in follow-up routes. This is surprising, because absentees often end up in civil- or criminal-law procedures, and the school attendance authorities are again involved.

The MAS has created – or in any case encouraged – a new role for school attendance officers but does not always provide enough clues for how it should be performed. Nearly half of absenteeism reports are dismissed with a mild measure (the ‘basic route’), even though the MAS pays no attention to this route and provides no clues about it. The main purpose of the MAS was to reduce the use of coercive care and criminal-law measures, and it has succeeded in this.

The MAS is not in fact a comprehensive instrument that enables school attendance officers to perform a new care-based role. Despite its name, the Methodical Approach to Pupil Absenteeism is not so methodical, at least in the case of the milder and voluntary routes. But even in the ‘harsher’ follow-up routes there are problems that suggest there is still no integrated, methodical approach. Many of the new roles that school attendance officers must perform still have to be learned, such as notification, networking with care workers, and working on location in schools and districts. The aforementioned shift in approaches to absenteeism by school attendance authorities is in fact still taking place: one half of the process has already taken effect (fewer police reports, less use of HALT, less use of the courts), but the other half regarding the role of school attendance officers as links between teachers, pupils and parents, and care institutions is still going on. Much remains to be done regarding the future development of the MAS.