

## School experience & belonging

A positive school experience and a strong sense of belonging are consistently linked to better mental health, engagement with learning, and overall wellbeing. OxWell 2025 placed particular emphasis on belonging, informed directly by young people’s input. Understanding which aspects of school life foster connection, and for whom, offers an important opportunity to strengthen inclusive school environments and reduce risk at a population level. The Survey asked about whether the students feel part of the school, participate in extracurricular activities and then what helps them feel part of the school community and likely to therefore help foster a sense of belonging.

### 1. School Absence

The survey was mainly completed in March 2025, approximately halfway through the school year. Students were asked to estimate how many days they had missed of school so far that academic year. It is important to note that students who are persistently absent are less likely to be present to complete a school-based survey, meaning these figures are likely to underestimate both the proportions of students this affects and the level of need within this group.

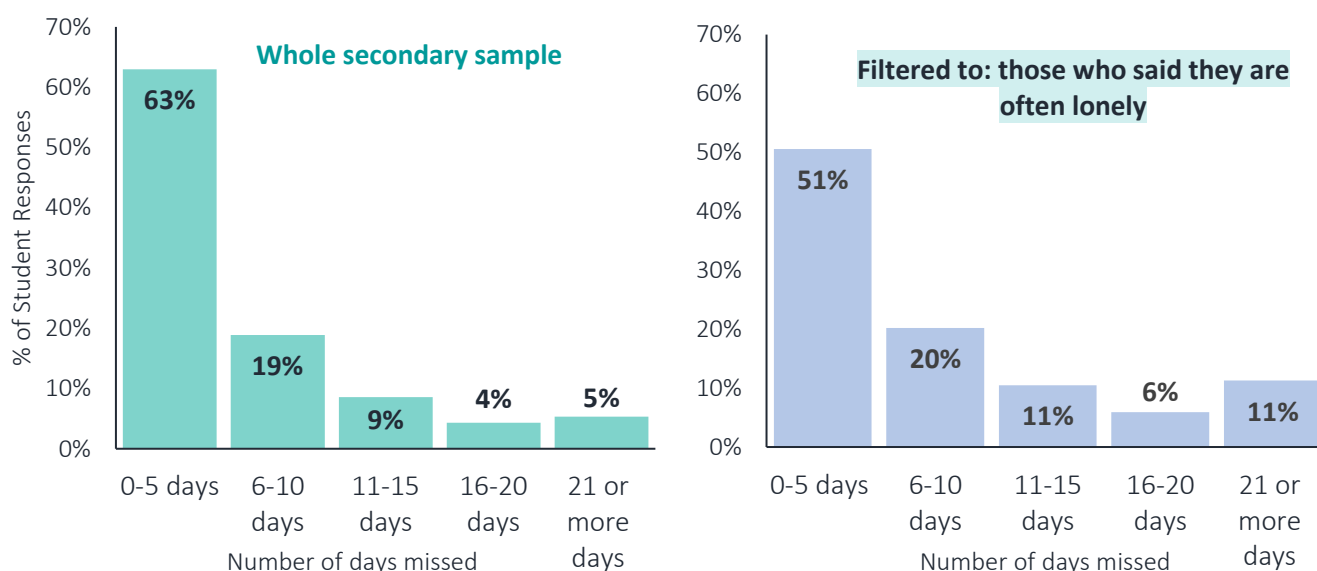
Findings are presented for the whole sample and then explored by the filter of loneliness. Of the students who reported that they *often* felt lonely, 17% (compared with 9% of the total sample) reported that they had missed 16 or more days of school so far in the academic year.

Schools are encouraged to examine their own administrative data; however, similar patterns are evident across the sample for several groups. Higher levels of reported absence (16 days or more) are also observed for those with special educational needs (16%), those who self-identified as autistic (17%), those who self-identified as having ADHD (16%), and those with a likely clinical anxiety or depressive disorder (18%).

Trans and gender diverse students had some of the highest levels of absence, with up to 21% reporting 16 or more days missed. Within this group, reported school absence was highest among students in Year 9 (25%).

During this academic year (since September) roughly how many days of school have you missed?

Figure 1: School Absence

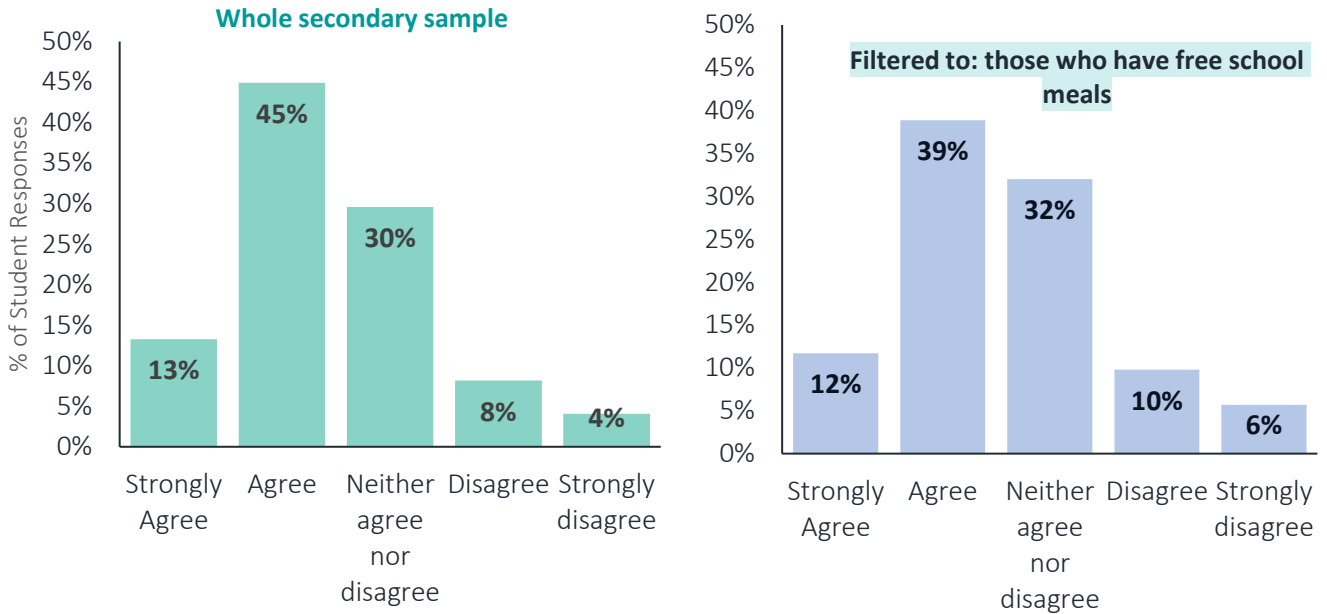


The survey also asked about various aspects of school belonging, including whether students felt like a part of their school, whether they felt they had a voice in matters at their school, and whether they feel supported in their learning. Students were also asked about their perceptions of extracurricular activities, an aspect of school life that we’ve learned from previous waves of the OxWell survey can serve as an essential element of students’ wider school experience. Filtering according to factors linked to wider vulnerability, such as free school meals or loneliness, sometimes revealed interesting differences (such as those who were *often lonely* being less likely to participate in

extracurricular activities) but other times did not (such as those receiving free school meals not feeling substantially less like a part of their school).

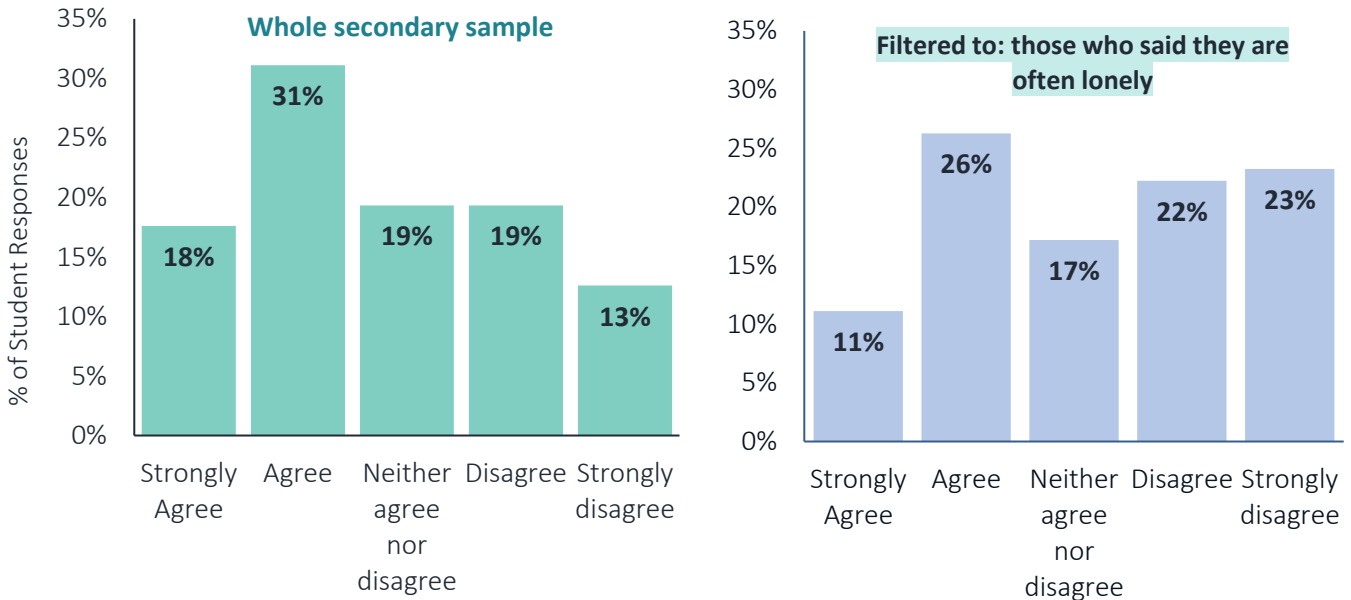
2. I feel like I am part of my school

Figure 2: I feel like I am part of my school



3. I participate in extracurricular activities

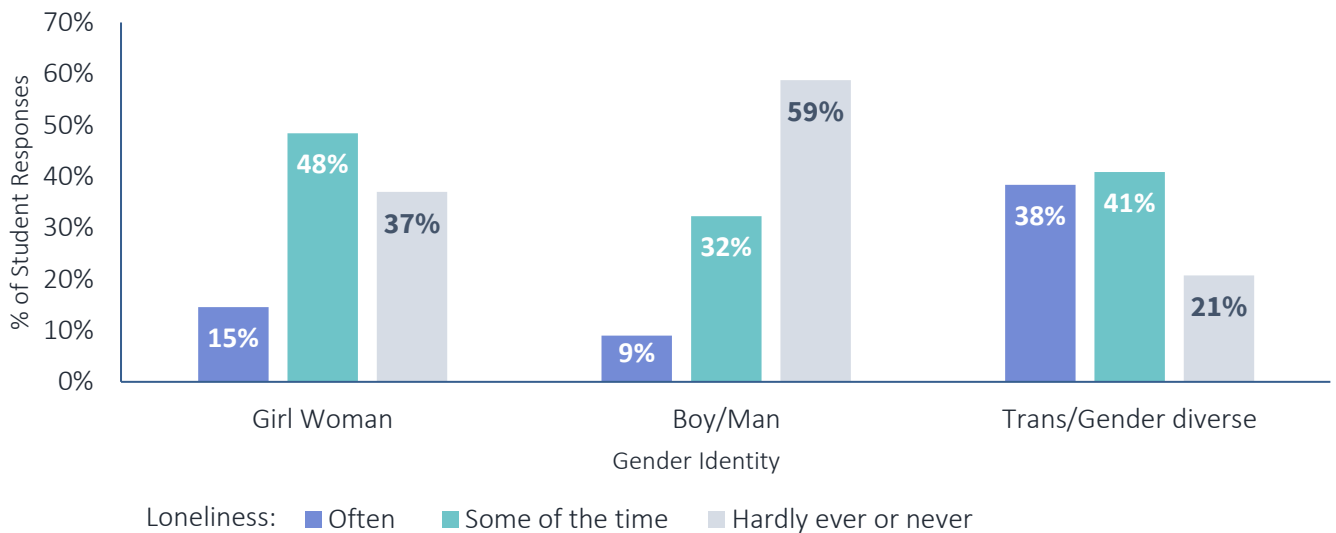
Figure 3: Extracurricular Activities



Throughout the survey, loneliness was an important filter for understanding which groups of students might be particularly at risk of poor outcomes across a whole spectrum of areas. Recognising how vulnerabilities might overlap, it can be useful to dig deeper by looking into groups who might be more likely to report feeling lonely. The graph below shows that girls, and even more strikingly trans and gender diverse students, are generally more likely than boys to report feeling lonely, highlighting potential for tailored approaches by gender.

4. Loneliness: By Gender Identity

Figure 4: Loneliness and Gender Identity



5. **Belonging:** Which of these options engages you most with the school community?

We have a strong interest in whether fostering a sense of belonging might support the overall mental health and wellbeing of the school community given how often students who are depressed are also lonely and how those who have high absence rates also do not feel a sense of belonging. We therefore had a particular interest in understanding **which aspects of school life students themselves identify as most important** for feeling connected to their school community.

This question was co-designed with young people. Students helped shape both the wording of the question and the range of response options offered. They were shown **nineteen different options** and asked to select up to **three** that best reflected what helped them feel engaged with their school community (which is why percentages may total more than 100%). Response options were presented in a **random order** for each student to reduce ordering effects. This question appeared at the **end of the survey**, meaning students could take time to reflect on their responses without additional time pressure.

Across the whole sample, **school trips** emerged as the most frequently selected option by a clear margin, followed by **lunchtime and after-school activities**. These findings suggest that experiences outside formal lessons play a particularly important role in supporting students' sense of belonging.

Notably, this pattern was **consistent across all groups examined**, with school trips ranked as the most important contributor to school belonging, including for students from minority and more vulnerable groups (across, for example, different ethnicities, SEN, neurodiversity and gender diversity) as well as for those who reported feeling lonely.

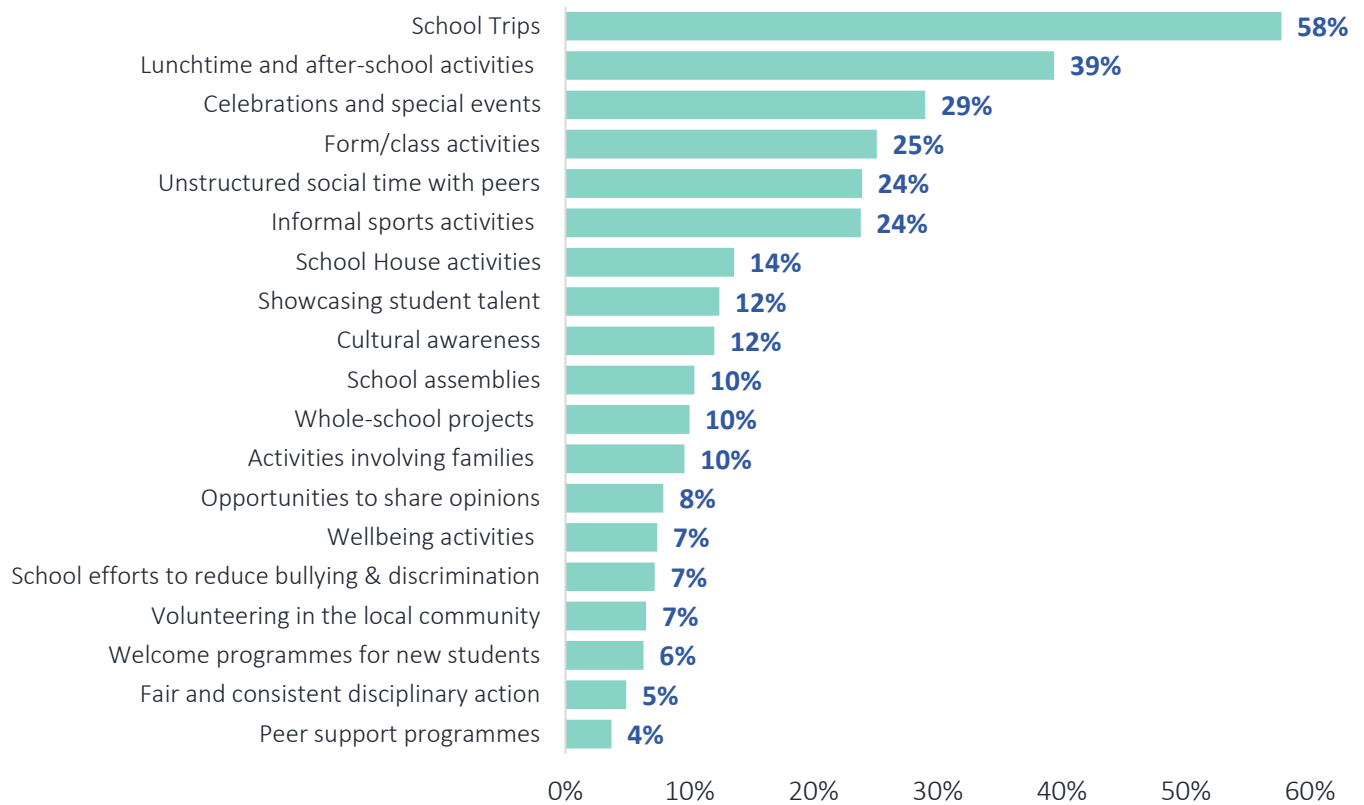
We present three sets of findings below, for:

- 1) the whole sample,
- 2) students with likely depression and anxiety, and
- 3) students who reported missing 16 or more days of school so far in the academic year.

These patterns suggest the potential importance of **shared experiences that take place outside the structured classroom environment**, where students may interact with peers and staff in different, often less formal, ways. While such activities are not always easy to organise or resource, the consistency of this finding across groups suggests they may represent a valuable opportunity to support belonging, particularly for students who are otherwise at greater risk of isolation or disengagement.

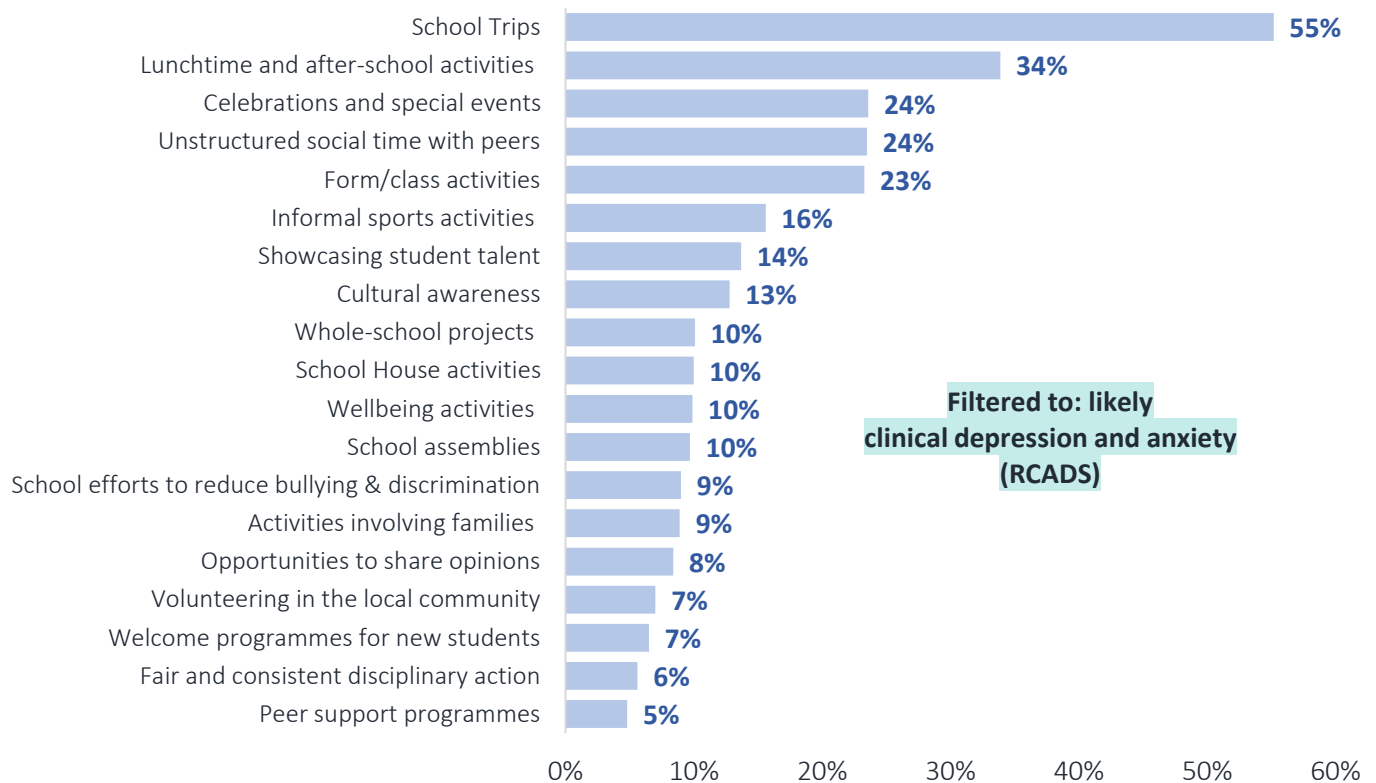
a) Whole sample findings:

Figure 5: Belonging - Whole sample



b) For students falling in the likely clinical range of depression and anxiety:

Figure 6: Belonging - Clinical Depression & Anxiety (RCADS)



c) For students who had higher rates of school absence (16+ days):

Figure 7: Belonging & School Absence

