

A crisis of disengagement: listening to, and learning from, teachers on school attendance

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Foreword



Reducing lost learning through school absence is one of the biggest challenges of our time. Last year, five million more days were spent in the classroom – the biggest improvement in attendance in a decade. But we cannot afford to be complacent. Rates of school absence are still too high, especially for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are more than two and a half times as likely to miss ten percent or more of their lessons than their better-off peers.

In my role as chair of the Education Committee, I know school matters. A good level of attendance gives young people the best chance of securing the qualifications they need to take the vital first steps into further education, employment and training.

But school is about more than grades. With so many young people spending more time online, being in school is more vital than it has ever been. It gives them the chance to build friendships, grow in confidence, and create the shared experiences and milestones that shape a life – inside and outside the classroom.

Teachers are absolutely critical to our efforts to turn the tide on attendance, and we need a workforce with the right skills for the job and that is getting the support they need to do it well. But this report tells us that teachers see high rates of absence rooted in something deeper: too many young people and families not understanding the value of school, not believing it is a place that will help them succeed, and disengaging as a result. It finds classroom teachers struggling with the daily administrative burden of attendance, enforcing sanctions that pit them against the pupils and parents that they are trying to support. It finds senior leaders struggling to meet the needs of students in distress who face significant challenges beyond the classroom, including poverty. And it finds everyone agreeing that belonging and trusted relationships are the key to improving attendance – but feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by the effort that takes.

Having a highly trained and skilled teacher in every classroom is one of the best ways we can improve outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Yet more teachers than ever are leaving the profession, and the strain of tackling attendance without the right support is part of the reason why. As this report shows, there are no silver bullets, but I agree with its central premise – we need to think differently about attendance and act differently to solve it – putting relationships, not compliance, at the centre of our response. That means backing teachers and school leaders with the time, training and support to build the trust that gets children through the door and creating a system where students and families see the tangible difference going to school makes to their lives, the lives of our communities and to society.

Helen Hayes MP,
Chair of the Education Committee

Executive Summary

School attendance has improved since the height of the post-pandemic crisis, but recovery remains slow and very uneven. Overall absence and persistent absence rates are significantly above pre-pandemic levels, and severe absence continues to rise. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds remain far more likely than their peers to be both persistently and severely absent.

This report is the final part of a three-year research programme exploring attendance through the eyes of parents, pupils and school staff. Our previous research found that many parents and pupils no longer think of daily school attendance as an automatic expectation. Instead, they make decisions on whether to attend school based on wellbeing, family circumstances, and whether school feels meaningful and worth attending.

The research for this report consisted of nine focus groups with classroom teachers, attendance leads and senior leaders working in secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities. We explored how school staff view attendance, what they believe is driving absence, what they think works to improve it, and the impact attendance work has on their daily working lives.

What we heard

School staff described the attendance crisis more as a problem of disengagement than of poor behaviour. Across the research, staff distinguished between occasional, short-term absence, and absence that is habitual, cumulative and increasingly difficult to recover from. The pupils that schools were most worried

about were not those missing the odd day, or even a planned week, but those whose absence was driven by a wider loss of engagement with school, learning, routines, friendships and trusted adults.

Staff themselves had different views on the importance of pupils being in school every single day. Classroom teachers were less convinced than middle and senior leaders about rigid attendance messaging. They recognised the impact of absence on learning, but many were sympathetic to families making trade-offs around illness, mental health, holidays and family circumstances.

The research, like our earlier research with parents and pupils, reinforces that attendance is not only a national challenge, but an issue of disadvantage. Staff working in schools serving disadvantaged communities described attendance as being influenced by poverty, unmet SEND needs, mental health, intergenerational educational experiences, lack of routine at home, and the decline of wider support services. For many school staff, absence was seen as both a symptom and a driver of disadvantage: once attendance begins to slip, it becomes harder for pupils to maintain friendships, keep up academically, engage positively in lessons, rebuild routines and feel that school is a place where they belong.

“The pupils schools worried about most were not those missing the odd day, but those gradually losing their connection with learning, routines, friendships and school itself.”

School staff repeatedly described a mismatch between the scale of the challenge and the capacity schools have to respond. Attendance leads and senior leaders often saw attendance as central to safeguarding, learning and life chances, and argued that it needed to be a whole-school priority. Classroom teachers were more likely to see attendance as one pressure among many, and often expressed frustration at being made responsible for a problem they felt sat beyond the classroom. This creates a practical tension inside schools: leaders want attendance to be everybody's responsibility, while many teachers experience attendance work as another layer of administration and emotional labour.

Staff were clear that the interventions they believed were most effective were also the hardest to sustain. Relationships, trusted adults,

belonging, flexible support and sustained work with families were seen as the things most likely to improve attendance, but this work was described as relentless, time-consuming and emotionally draining. Fines and sanctions captured the central tension. Some staff saw fines as a necessary escalation tool, but many believed they damage trust and undermine the very relational work needed to support pupils and families to re-engage positively with school.

The findings of our research suggest that improving attendance requires more than action designed to get pupils into school on any given day. It requires preventing attendance from deteriorating in the first place, rebuilding engagement where it has been lost, and creating the conditions in which pupils and families feel positively about school.



Our findings

1

Classroom teachers do not think of attendance as a **top-tier educational priority**.

6

School staff view the attendance crisis not as a problem of behaviour, but **as a problem of disengagement**.

2

Classroom teachers, like parents and pupils, are **unconvinced that every day in school matters**.

7

There is broad consensus across school staff that poor attendance is driven by **failures beyond the school gates**.

3

In contrast, attendance leads and senior leaders believe **a whole-school focus on attendance is essential** to educational outcomes.

8

Mental health has become a genuine driver of absence, but school staff worry about a broader decline in resilience.

4

School staff believe that families and the education system are struggling to sustain a **shared belief in the value of school**.

9

School staff believe relationships improve attendance, but the relational work required is **exhausting and 'relentless'**.

5

School staff echo parents and pupils in distinguishing between concerning and unconcerning **forms of absence**.

10

School staff believe there is a tension between **attendance fines** and the relational approach needed to improve attendance.

Our recommendations

1

Government should make better use of attendance data to **identify deterioration earlier** and recognise improvement.

2

The school system should put **building belonging and engagement** at the heart of attendance strategy.

3

Government, employers and the education system should support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to see **attendance as a tangible investment in their future.**



Introduction

In recent years, an optimistic narrative has emerged that school attendance is recovering following the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. There has indeed been some improvement. Overall absence fell from 7.15% in 2023/24 to 6.78% in 2024/25. Persistent absence fell from 19.95% to 18.14%.¹ But despite these improvements, recovery is far from complete.

Overall absence remains far higher than the pre-pandemic rate of 4.73% in 2018/19, and persistent absence remains well above the 10.86% recorded before the pandemic. Most concerning, severe absence – defined as pupils missing half or more of school sessions – has continued to rise, from 2.30% in 2023/24 to 2.39% in 2024/25, compared with 0.85% in 2018/19. The most recent DfE attendance figures reinforce this picture. Overall absence rose slightly to 6.93% in 2025/26, and persistent absence rose to 19.05%, underlining the case for the broader, more ambitious response this report calls for.²

The national picture also hides a much deeper attendance crisis for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds (FSM). In 2024/25, pupils eligible for free school meals continued to have an overall absence rate almost twice that of pupils not eligible for free school meals. They were more than two-and-a-half times as likely to be persistently absent, and over three-and-a-half times as likely to be severely absent.³ Early signs from the 2025/26 autumn term suggest this gap is widening rather than narrowing. Absence, persistent absence and severe absence rates for FSM-eligible pupils all rose slightly on the same term the previous year, while rates for their non-FSM peers held broadly flat.⁴ The key question is therefore not simply whether attendance is improving overall, but which pupils are returning to regular attendance and which are becoming increasingly disengaged from school.

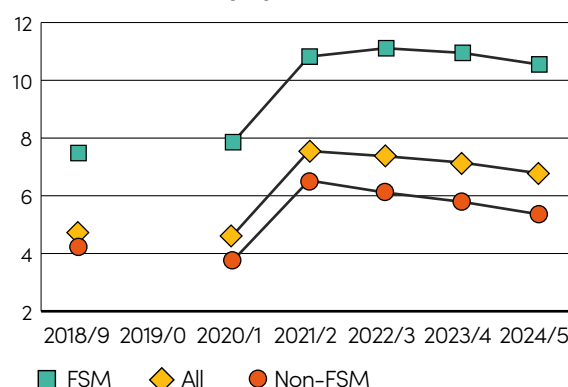
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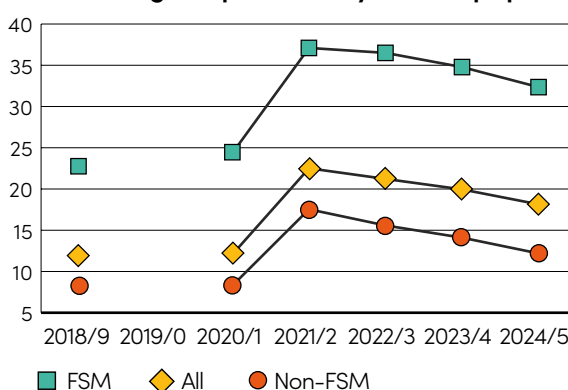
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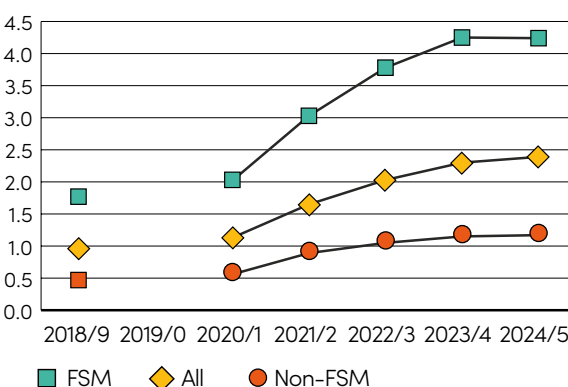
Overall absent pupils



Percentage of persistently absent pupils



Percentage of severely absent pupils



2.39%

Severely absent pupils
continue to increase
nationally

2.5×

Greater risk of
persistent absence for
disadvantaged pupils

3.5×

Greater risk of
severe absence for
disadvantaged pupils

“The key question is therefore not simply whether attendance is improving overall, but which pupils are returning to regular attendance and which are becoming increasingly disengaged from school.”

The Department for Education has responded to the post-pandemic rise in absence with a much stronger national focus on attendance. Schools are expected to have clear attendance policies, monitor patterns in their data, intervene quickly when absence emerges, and work with parents, local authorities and wider services where barriers are more complex. Attendance hubs, revised guidance, increased accountability and greater prominence within inspection have all reinforced the message that attendance must be a system priority.

These developments have focused on strengthening expectations and improving processes. Recent improvements in attendance data suggest some progress is being made. But attendance does not exist in isolation from wider social, economic and educational pressures. Across our research programme, attendance has consistently been linked to factors beyond attendance policy itself, including mental health, SEND, poverty, family circumstances, changing attitudes towards education, and the availability of wider support services.

In 2023, our research with parents found that many families no longer fully accepted the idea that ‘every day matters’. Parents described frustration with attendance systems in schools, weakening trust between families and schools, and the growing influence of mental health concerns, financial pressures and changing expectations of family life.

In 2025, our research with pupils showed many of the same themes from a different perspective. Young people described

attendance as something they weighed up day by day, shaped by tiredness, emotional wellbeing, friendships, online life, and whether school felt safe, meaningful and worth attending. Across both reports, attendance presented itself as an issue of trust, value and belonging.

This third report takes the next step by listening to the staff in schools who are expected to respond to the attendance crisis every day. Through focus groups with classroom teachers, attendance leads and senior leaders working in secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities, we explore how school staff understand absence, what they believe is driving it, what they think works to reduce it, and the impact that work has on their daily lives.

This is the final report in a three-part research programme examining attendance through the eyes of parents, pupils and school staff. It explores where these groups agree and disagree, how attendance is experienced within schools, and what school staff believe is needed to improve attendance among the pupils they are most concerned about.

As with our previous reports, this research is not intended as a criticism of schools. School staff described significant efforts to improve attendance, often under considerable pressure and with limited support. The aim of this report is to better understand how attendance is experienced within schools, and to contribute to the wider discussion about how attendance can be improved, particularly for pupils and communities facing disadvantage.

Methodology

This report is based on qualitative research undertaken with secondary school staff in England, conducted between March and April 2026.

The aim of the research was to understand how school staff think about attendance, the factors they believe shape pupils' attendance patterns, and the strategies schools use to improve attendance. The research explored similarities and differences in perspectives between classroom teachers, attendance leads and senior leaders, as well as between schools with different attendance profiles.

Participants and recruitment

We spoke to 62 secondary school staff across England through a series of nine online focus groups conducted outside of school hours.

Participants were recruited from secondary schools where more than 25% of pupils were eligible for free school meals. Recruitment was designed to achieve a broad balance of gender and ethnicity across groups. To avoid over-representation from any single area, no more than two participants from London were recruited into any individual group.

Participants were divided into three professional categories:

- **Classroom teachers** without designated attendance responsibilities
- **Attendance leads** and middle leaders with responsibility for attendance

- **Senior leaders**, including headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers

Throughout this report, the term 'school staff' refers to participants across these three categories. It does not include support staff such as teaching assistants, pastoral workers, school counsellors or administrative staff unless they also held one of the attendance or leadership roles outlined above.

Within each category, participants were grouped according to the overall attendance performance of their school:

- **Above average attendance** (above 92.5%)
- **Around average attendance** (89–92.5%)
- **Below average attendance** (below 89%)

This created nine focus groups in total, allowing comparisons between staff roles and between schools with different attendance outcomes.

	Above average attendance (above 92.5%)	Around average attendance (89–92.5%)	Below average attendance (below 89%).
Classroom teachers without designated attendance responsibilities	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Attendance leads and middle leaders with responsibility for attendance	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Senior leaders , including headteachers, deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers	Group 7	Group 8	Group 9

Research approach

Research was conducted through a series of semi-structured online focus groups, facilitated by trained researchers using a flexible discussion guide designed to encourage open and candid discussion.

Discussion topics included:

- Perceptions of the causes of pupil absence
- Barriers to improving attendance
- Effective and ineffective interventions
- Relationships with families
- The role of wider services and policy
- The practical realities of attendance management within schools

Participants were assured that their contributions would remain anonymous and would not be attributed to them or their schools.

Analysis

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Researchers undertook thematic analysis of the transcripts, identifying recurring themes, areas of agreement and disagreement, and differences between staff groups and school attendance profiles.

Findings were triangulated across groups to ensure conclusions reflected experiences reported by participants from a range of settings.

All quotations included in this report are drawn directly from the focus group transcripts and have been anonymised to protect participants and their schools.

Ethics and confidentiality

This research was conducted in line with Market Research Society (MRS) guidelines and Public First's internal research standards.

Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants before fieldwork commenced. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any stage.

Throughout this report, identifying details of participants, schools and local communities have been removed or obscured to protect anonymity and encourage openness in discussion.





Findings



1 Classroom teachers do not think of attendance as a top-tier educational priority



Classroom teachers were more likely than attendance leads and senior leaders to see attendance as one pressure among many competing demands. While they recognised that missing lessons creates learning gaps, issues such as behaviour management, pupil mental health and curriculum delivery often took precedence in their day-to-day priorities. Some felt attendance was given disproportionate attention relative to other challenges, particularly given how limited they felt their own ability was to influence it from the classroom.



If you were to ask my personal opinion, I would say it probably matters less. We probably give too much importance to it.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



I don't think it's the biggest concern that I have in the job.

Classroom Teacher, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

Workload was a common lens through which classroom teachers considered attendance. Many felt that tracking and chasing attendance was ultimately an administrative or pastoral responsibility, and that placing increasing expectations on classroom teachers distracted from their core role of teaching. Attendance work was often described as another layer of monitoring, communication and follow-up added to an already stretched workload.



I wouldn't say it was the biggest concern... I think there's bigger things that are affecting my workload, affecting behaviour management. I wouldn't say it was the biggest deal for me.

Classroom Teacher, 'Below Average Attendance' Group.



The distinction that emerged repeatedly was between caring about attendance and feeling responsible for improving it. Classroom teachers generally recognised the impact of absence on learning, but often resisted being held accountable for a problem they viewed as rooted in family circumstances, parenting, and pastoral needs beyond the classroom.



I don't agree that it's our job to sort attendance out... I just don't think the onus should be on the actual teaching staff.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



I do think tracking attendance is an admin role and ultimately we're here to teach. It's not really something I can do whilst I'm providing an education, it is an additional role that, really, an attendance officer or someone in a pastoral capacity should be responsible for. I can't do both at the same time.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

This finding stands in stark contrast to the views of attendance leads and senior leaders, many of whom described attendance as a whole-school priority that should sit at the heart of every member of staff's role.

2 Classroom teachers, like parents and pupils, are unconvinced that every day in school matters

Classroom teachers were often sceptical of rigid attendance rhetoric, arguing that the expectation of near-perfect attendance no longer reflects the realities of modern family life. They did not believe attendance was unimportant, but many questioned whether national messaging had kept pace with wider changes in work, technology and social expectations since the pandemic.



I don't feel the rhetoric around attendance has updated to the working situation... with parents, communities, all the rest of it, school is a bit of an outlier and doesn't match that bigger picture.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

As in our previous parent and pupil research, teachers frequently described a shift in expectations around autonomy and decision-making. Parents in our earlier research challenged the idea that 'every day matters', while pupils described attendance as something they weighed up day by day. Classroom teachers described the same shift from inside schools. Many felt that both pupils and parents increasingly expected to make their own judgements about when attendance was necessary, making traditional attendance messaging harder to enforce.



I think kids do have that little bit more autonomy over what they do, when they eat, how they speak to their parents. For a parent to just turn things around and get a kid to come in in the morning, I just don't feel that a lot of families have that disciplinarian kind of approach anymore.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



When you call the parents, you get the same conversations, like 'who are you telling me what to do with my children? I'll send my children when I want to send my children, you know, I can take my kids away when I want, it's my children, not the government's children'.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

This perspective was particularly evident in discussions about term-time holidays. Many classroom teachers were sympathetic towards families facing financial pressures and often distinguished between a one-off holiday and more concerning patterns of absence. For these teachers, the issue was one of proportionality. A planned holiday in the context of otherwise strong attendance felt very different from repeated sporadic absence.



If it's the only holiday you get to experience in a five-year period, I think that's probably worth more than a week in school in January.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



If I wasn't a teacher, I would take my daughter out of school and take her on holiday because it would be cheaper.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



While less common, similar views were also present among some senior leaders. Although they maintained formal attendance policies, several acknowledged privately sympathising with families who felt priced out of travelling during school holidays, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.



I've had many a conversation as principal with the parents and said, 'Look, I'm not going to tell you not to do it because I don't disagree with you, but I'm never going write that down. Enjoy your holiday.'

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

Overall, classroom teachers were not arguing that attendance does not matter, but that there is a distinction between different types of absence and a question about whether current attendance messaging leaves enough room for that nuance.

3 In contrast, attendance leads and senior leaders believe a whole-school focus on attendance is essential to educational outcomes

Attendance leads and senior leaders were much more likely than classroom teachers to strongly buy into the 'every day matters' messaging around attendance. For these staff, attendance was the foundation that made everything else possible: teaching, safeguarding, pastoral support, social development and improving life chances.



I think it's vital, because there's evidence out there that tells us that the more they attend school, the more likely they are to do well, the higher wages they will earn in later life... if they're not in front of us and we're not educating them, they're not going to achieve their full potential.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



If they're in school, we can safeguard them as well. So it's essential. It underpins everything else, all the work that we do, all the socialising, all the academic stuff, all the extra stuff, it's integral.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



To tackle absence, attendance leads and senior leaders typically advocated a whole-school approach. Because attendance was seen as intimately linked to learning, safeguarding, belonging, family engagement and disadvantage, they believed every adult in the school had a role to play in improving it.



Just like safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, attendance is everyone's responsibility, and it takes a whole school to improve that.

Attendance Lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

For many leaders, attendance was not seen as being the responsibility of a specialist team but of the entire school community. Staff described approaches in which every adult had a part to play, whether through reinforcing expectations, building relationships, noticing when pupils were absent, or simply by making them feel welcome when they returned.



Everybody across the school is actively involved in conversations around attendance... For us, attendance is spoken about by every single member of staff in the school.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



What we're trying to move towards is every single child in our school being asked every day by at least one person, 'How are you today? How is it going?' It's taking that personal interest so they're not just another faceless student in the school.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



This contrast between classroom teachers and school leaders was one of the clearest divisions in the research. While attendance leads and senior leaders described this whole-school approach, many classroom teachers viewed attendance as primarily a pastoral or administrative responsibility. In some schools, this disagreement had become a source of genuine tension.



Teachers are going, 'I'm just going to do what my day-to-day jobs tells me I have to do, and I'm not going to go above and beyond it', because people are fed up of doing so much, but then they don't think about the senior leadership team and all the different hats that they have to wear.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



The school want more from us in terms of the form tutor role and how we're going to intervene to support attendance. The things that we're now being asked to do in terms of calling home, every tutor group has between five to ten students who we have to one-to-one mentor, and the unions are saying 'this isn't part of your role'... it's a real issue at our school at the moment.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

This difference in perspective is important because attendance policy often assumes schools speak with one voice on attendance. In practice, the staff responsible for setting attendance strategy and the staff responsible for delivering it day-to-day are not always aligned on either the importance of attendance or who should be responsible for improving it.

4 School staff believe that families and the education system are struggling to sustain a shared belief in the value of school

School staff questioned whether some pupils and their families fully buy into the value proposition of school, particularly following Covid. This echoes our previous research with parents and pupils, where attendance was increasingly described as a choice to be weighed up against other demands, rather than an automatic expectation. Across all three audiences, the value of school appeared to be less secure than it once was.



The value of getting young people into school seems to have gone down... lots of our students now just want to get the bare minimum.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



I think there's an element of people in society who think, 'Well, Covid wasn't that big of a problem, so why do I need to send them in now?'

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

School staff felt parental attitudes towards attendance had shifted significantly, with some describing weaker routines at home, greater willingness to accept absence, and lower confidence or desire among parents to enforce attendance. For school staff, this was an issue because maintaining and improving attendance relies on families reinforcing the expectation to attend each morning. Where that expectation was weaker at home, schools felt they were trying to swim against a tide.



I think a lot of parents want to be their child's best friend, and then that boundary is blurred between you going into school today, versus, 'can I just stay off, but I'll only have one day', and then one day becomes five days, which becomes a week.

Attendance Lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

But staff were not simply blaming parents. These concerns were often framed through wider social and economic pressures, including intergenerational disadvantage, poor parental experience of education, changing work patterns, declining trust in the state, and poverty-driven exhaustion. Staff articulated compellingly why some families may no longer see school as a reliable route to security, opportunity or belonging.



The vulnerability of some families... generations of not attending school, parents may have been school refusers... they've got fears or trauma, so you have history repeating itself.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



We're battling against second, and in some cases, extreme third generation unemployment... they think 'the state's providing for me, so why would I need to come to school?'

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

School staff also pointed to social media, online alternatives to in-person teaching, curriculum and exam pressure, and a perceived lack of relevance as contributing to disengagement. This links closely to our research with pupils, where young people described online worlds that offered alternative routes to success, status and income. For some pupils, this made the school offer feel narrower, more transactional and less obviously connected to the futures they imagined for themselves.

Many school staff felt that improving attendance therefore requires improving the school experience itself. That means increasing relevance, flexibility, enrichment, and activities that foster belonging, rather than simply increasing pressure on families to accept the same proposition of school.



There's this idea of 'I can teach myself online'... there are great resources and we push them there for revision, but there's this blended world now and I think certain kids feel like 'well I'll do it better at five to eight in the evening and teach myself, so I'll just show up to the lessons I think are a benefit to me.'

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



I don't think we offer enough of a range of vocational type courses for students... I just don't think a lot of the curriculum now is enjoyable for some of the students.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



Getting the children to feel like they belong to something was very important. It worked for me. And I think it does work, so the extracurricular club is a very big thing.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

This is one of the most important themes in the research. If pupils and families are less convinced that school leads to a future they are aiming for, then attendance becomes much harder to rationalise. Improving attendance is therefore not only about reinforcing expectations, but about making the value of school feel clearer, more relevant and more credible.

5 School staff echo parents and pupils in distinguishing between concerning and unconcerning forms of absence

One of the clearest themes across all three pieces of research was that parents, pupils and school staff do not view absence as a single issue. Term-time holidays, illness, anxiety, sporadic absence, persistent absence and entrenched disengagement were all discussed very differently.

Many school staff described a growing normalisation of taking time off school for holidays, mild illness and mental health issues. This did not mean they believed these absences were inconsequential. Rather, they tended to judge absence according to its pattern, cause and likely consequences.



It depends on the type of attendance issue. Persistent absence is different to the student that's been off related to anxiety or illness.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

In contrast, school staff were most concerned about repeated, habitual patterns of absence. These absences were often described as self-reinforcing: once attendance begins to slip, it becomes increasingly difficult for pupils to re-establish routines, maintain friendships, keep up academically, and remain engaged with school. Many staff described this as a spiral that becomes progressively harder to reverse.



It's the habitual 'a day here, two days there' which is killing us.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



It becomes a never-ending spiral really, because once they start feeling like they've disengaged from their subjects, it's really hard to reintegrate them because they then feel that they've missed so much that they don't know what they're doing when they come in, and so that just leads to more and more issues with absence.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group





School staff also questioned whether current attendance data adequately reflects pupils' actual engagement with learning. Several pointed to growing concerns around lesson attendance, internal truancy, and pupils who were technically present in school but missing significant amounts of learning.



They're actually only in my lesson for 10 minutes, but they're now being marked as present. SLT said, 'Well, again, she's made no progress in her last mock', and I said, 'But she hasn't been in my lesson... her book is empty'. But if you look at the data, the data shows that she is there.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

For these pupils, staff questioned whether traditional attendance interventions were targeting the right problem. Approaches that may improve attendance amongst the majority of pupils, such as rewards or punishment, were often viewed as ineffective or even counterproductive for those experiencing entrenched attendance difficulties.



If a child has emotional based school avoidance or any issues, fines make no difference at all.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



Your average school refusal who's sitting on 35%, we're not going to have a massive impact on their attendance... So the students that are sitting on the sort of the 85% mark, the 90% mark... if we can get them in, we can have a massive impact on our overall attendance.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

School staff are less concerned with absence itself than with what absence represents. Their greatest worry was not occasional absence, but absence which becomes became habitual, cumulative and difficult to reverse.

6 School staff view the attendance crisis not as a problem of behaviour, but as a problem of disengagement



School staff rarely talked about attendance as a behaviour problem. Instead, they described it as part of a wider process of disengagement from school. They repeatedly linked poor attendance to a loss of connection to school, friends, routines and trusted adults.

This echoes our previous research with pupils. Young people didn't tend to describe attendance in terms of rules or compliance; they talked about whether school felt safe, meaningful, welcoming and worth attending. School staff were describing the same issue from the other side.



Missing a day is not only an educational loss, it's actually that galvanising of friendship loss as well and sense of belonging.

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



It's also those students that are dependent on routines... that are both relationally motivated and routinely motivated. They don't have that and that becomes harder and a great big void and a barrier to them returning because they don't have the routine, they don't have the relationships with staff and their peers.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

The same factors that staff believed drove disengagement were also the factors they believed brought pupils back from absence. Belonging, friendships, routine and trusted adults were not described as soft or secondary concerns. They were described as practical and fundamental attendance levers. Staff felt pupils were more likely to attend when school offered good relationships, predictable routines and a sense that someone would notice whether they were there or not.



Getting the children to feel like they belong to something was very important.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



If they're comfortable, they're happy, we've got a good relationship, they're going to come back.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

School staff also linked disengagement to changes in pupils' social lives outside school. Many felt that online worlds now play a much larger role in pupils' friendships and identities, while some pupils appeared less confident navigating face-to-face relationships and conflict. As a result, returning to school after a disagreement, embarrassment or period of absence could feel increasingly difficult.

School staff also described the behavioural impacts of poor attendance. Pupils who miss lessons return feeling behind, exposed or unable to follow the work. This leads to anxiety, poor behaviour, internal truancy and further absence.



Because they've missed so much learning, when they're in the classroom they don't know what's going on, and then it just spirals because then they're constantly getting removed from class or they're not coming in.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



Sometimes it's as simple as they've had a fallout with the friendship group. Rather than tackle these difficult situations, students nowadays are lacking some resilience to deal with that head on, and will hide away in a world on social media, on a mobile phone all evening... and suddenly it's a downward spiral of not wanting to come to school because it's harder now to go in.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

These discussions indicate a different way of thinking about attendance. For many school staff, the attendance crisis is not primarily a crisis of behaviour – it is a crisis of disengagement.

7 There is broad consensus across school staff that poor attendance is driven by failures beyond the school gates

Across all staff groups, attendance was discussed as a symptom of wider pressures, rather than as a standalone educational problem. Teachers described schools as increasingly absorbing the consequences of long CAMHS waiting lists, limited family support services, rising mental health needs, unmet SEND provision and growing poverty.

Many felt that schools had gradually taken on responsibilities that would previously have sat elsewhere in the system, as external services became harder to access, more stretched, or disappeared altogether.



Due to the fact that there's been cuts in so many other services... schools are now seen as the one stop shop for everything.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



Now I feel like we're doctors, psychologists, we are lawyers, we are doubling up as home security, we're doubling up as chefs.

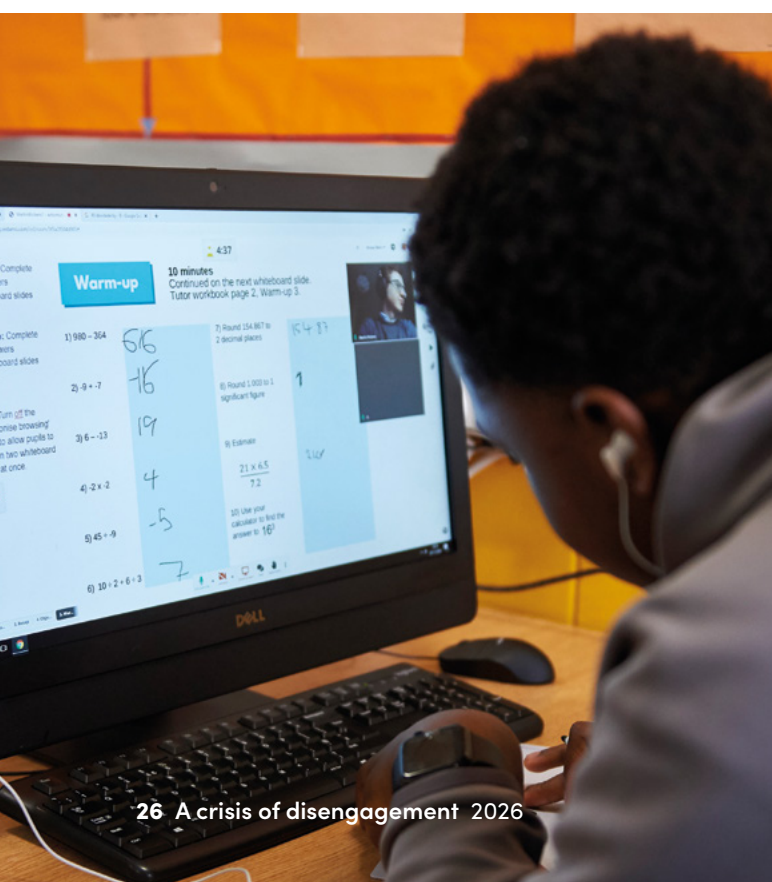
Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

This was felt most acutely in relation to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those experiencing difficult home circumstances. For these pupils, staff described school as the only reliable source of routine, stability, food and adult support available to them. In these cases, poor attendance was viewed as both an educational issue and as a safeguarding concern.



Teachers being social services, that is exactly what I am... we're having to feed them, we're having to keep them in... they are going home to nothing.

Classroom Teacher, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



Attendance was therefore often discussed as the point at which wider system pressures become visible – the canary in the mine. Staff drew direct links between poor attendance and failures elsewhere in the systems intended to support children and families.



There's a backlog for the NHS, loads of kids have got anxiety and haven't been tested for this or that... They're just sitting at home waiting for all of these things to be put in place.

Classroom Teacher, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



So it's funding for schools, it's funding for the local authority, it's funding for services, for CAMHS, for social care, for early help support, for mentors, it's funding across the board... I think mental health is one of my biggest concerns and students getting the right support to enable them to attend school.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

Senior leaders in particular described schools as holding the wider system together. Attendance was seen as the visible signal that wider failures were becoming overwhelming, with schools expected to tackle increasingly complex needs without the resources or specialist support required.

Many staff also described a growing expectation from some families that schools should step in to perform parenting functions, particularly around attendance. While often expressed with real frustration, these comments were usually framed as another consequence of wider pressures on families and support services.



I think there's a huge expectation from parents at the moment for us to parent their child, particularly in terms of attendance.

Attendance lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



I think parents are challenging. I think there's a lot of that expectation of us doing the parenting... and it ends up being quite a lot of like us versus them, rather than all working together.

Attendance lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



We've got children who should have specialist provision, and they're in our building every day... we also need external agencies such as CAMHS and social workers to have the right capacity and not turn us down.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

Many school staff increasingly view school absence as an indicator of wider pressures on children, families and public services.

8 Mental health has become a genuine driver of absence, but school staff worry about a broader decline in resilience

Anxiety, emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) and wider mental health challenges dominated discussions across all staff groups. School staff were not dismissive of these issues. Many described a genuine rise in anxiety, self-harm, EBSA, and wider emotional distress, and saw this as one of the most significant changes affecting attendance since the pandemic.

This reinforces what we heard in our previous research with parents and pupils. Parents described anxiety and wider wellbeing concerns as major drivers of absence, while pupils described staying home as a way of managing overwhelm when school felt too much. School staff were describing the same shift.



Since Covid, it's had a huge impact on our children's mental health, and therefore directly correlated with their attendance.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



I've dealt with more self-harming and mental health anxiety issues in the last few years than I have in my whole career... definitely now the mental health is most certainly on the up.

Attendance Lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

However, many staff also worried that conversations about mental health had become increasingly difficult to navigate. They described feeling uncertain about where the boundary now sits between genuine mental health need, low resilience, parental reinforcement of avoidance, and normal adolescent discomfort. Many felt that navigating attendance conversations had become more complicated because they wanted to take pupils' distress seriously, while also recognising that avoiding school could sometimes make problems worse over time.



There's a significant lack of resilience from a lot of parents that then trickles down to the student.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



Parents are seeing absence as part of their diagnosis, part of their entitlement as a young person with a special educational need.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



Many staff felt schools were increasingly expected to respond to highly complex emotional needs without the specialist support or capacity required to do so. They described having to hold together pastoral care, attendance enforcement, family support and mental health triage simultaneously, often while waiting months for external services to become involved.



We'll do a referral, but the likelihood is you're looking at months, and it all falls back on us. It's such a lot of strain, and you are dealing with children and their mental health.

Attendance Lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



We really do go above and beyond, but some of the expectations, you think to yourself, 'well this is a parental responsibility, or actually, this is a mental health, this is CAMHS, this is social care'. But the expectation for schools is to take on everything.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

School staff were not questioning whether mental health matters – most saw it as one of the most important drivers of attendance problems today. Their concern was that schools are increasingly being asked to navigate complex questions about mental health, resilience, family support and attendance without the specialist support, clarity or capacity required to do so.

School staff believe relationships improve attendance, but the relational work required is exhausting and 'relentless'

Across all staff groups, participants returned to the same types of intervention when asked what helped improve attendance: trusted adults, supportive home visits, daily phone calls, flexible timetables, mentoring and sustained parent engagement. These were all described as highly personalised forms of support. Staff felt that the pupils and families schools were most worried about often needed to feel known, understood and consistently supported before attendance could improve.

This closely echoes what we heard from pupils and parents in previous research. Pupils talked about the importance of school feeling safe, welcoming and worth attending, while parents described how easily trust could break down when schools felt impersonal or punitive. School staff agreed: attendance improves through trust, but trust takes time to build.

This was particularly evident in discussions about pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Staff often described attendance work as requiring a deep understanding of a child's wider circumstances. For some pupils, school was viewed as a source of stability, routine and care that they might not reliably experience elsewhere. Improving attendance therefore meant building relationships not only with pupils, but often with their families as well.



I always find that the most effective things are the rewards and the relationships... that's the reason why they want to come in to school. The relationships that we build with them are probably the most important thing.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



Getting to know them as individuals and trying to build a strategy around what works for them. So just as simple as just being told on a morning, 'Love you, mate. See you. Have a good day.' They're coming to school and they're wanting that care and affection from our staff.

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



Those links you can establish with those families, they're gold. It takes a certain type of colleague who can manage that.

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



We have a lot of vulnerable students... It's actually safer for the children to be in school and being exposed to a safe nurturing environment, as opposed to what they might be experiencing at home.

Classroom Teacher, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



However, school staff repeatedly described this kind of work as emotionally demanding, resource-intensive and difficult to sustain. It also rarely had a clear endpoint. A phone call could become a longer conversation with a parent, followed by logging, follow-up or a home visit. Staff viewed this work as valuable, but also as something that expanded quickly and competed with teaching, planning and wider school responsibilities.



It feels relentless. It is constant and there's not enough time to do everything that needs to be done to meet all the targets.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



I feel like you're just on this constant loop. You feel like you could never stop. And that is just exhausting.

Attendance Lead, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



I think it takes up a lot of adult hours... if you looked proportionally at how time was broken down... attendance is very, very time consuming.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



Every student in the school has a story to tell and our most disadvantaged students have some of the trickiest backgrounds and stories that you could ever imagine. So it's really building that bond with them and building that relationship with the family... just getting to know them inside out and just knowing what they're going through and having a safe space.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group

One of the clearest tensions in the research was that the interventions staff believed worked best were also the most difficult to deliver at scale. Relationships, trust and belonging were widely seen as the foundation of good attendance, but they required significant time, capacity and emotional energy. Schools were therefore being asked to invest in precisely the forms of support that are hardest to sustain under existing resource pressures.

10

School staff believe there is a tension between attendance fines and the relational approach needed to improve attendance

School staff described attendance work as increasingly conflicted: schools are expected to simultaneously support vulnerable families, maintain positive relationships, safeguard pupils and enforce attendance expectations. Staff generally accepted that both support and enforcement have a role to play, but many described the task of finding the right balance between them very challenging.



The amount of safeguarding and mental health concerns these students have got is just a massive contributing factor to their attendance. And you can kind of understand the reasons... However, that doesn't make it acceptable because of the challenges we're facing, we're under pressure to get the basic figure up... We are expecting the students to attend irrelevant of their circumstances going on.

Senior Leader, 'Around Average Attendance' Group



We've got sometimes a little bit of a battle between the attendance team and pastoral team. I obviously want them in school, but I also need them to be happy, feel safe, and then they're going to learn in a better environment.

Attendance Lead, 'Above Average Attendance' Group

This reflects what we heard from pupils in our previous research. Attendance is shaped not only by whether pupils are physically able to get to school, but by how school feels once they are there. Pupils repeatedly linked attendance to emotional wellbeing, safety, belonging and whether school felt "worth it". For staff, this creates a difficult balance: attendance work mostly focuses on getting pupils through the school gates, but improving attendance also depends on making school feel like somewhere pupils can engage, learn and feel safe.



Fines captured this tension particularly clearly. Most school staff disliked them and viewed them as blunt or relationship-damaging, but some attendance leads and senior leaders still saw them as a necessary escalation tool. Several also described inconsistent practice between local authorities, adding further complexity to an already difficult area of attendance work.



I think it causes a divide between the family and the school. We'll send a penalty notice out and then we've really annoyed that parent... we've just broken a relationship between a family that we want to get into school.

Senior Leader, 'Below Average Attendance' Group



There may be some families that it's absolutely right to go down the fining route, as long as you've done all the early help... for some families, that is the right and proper approach.

Attendance Lead, 'Below Average Attendance' Group

Across the research, attendance interventions that blurred the boundary between support and punishment made trust hard to build and sustain between schools and families.



We're at the coalface of dealing with these parents... and we should be building relationships, not trying to knock them down.

Senior Leader, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



I think the issue is when you come in with that hard line, it can extend the gap, it can build those barriers more... we're doing a lot of damage to those relationships sometimes.

Classroom Teacher, 'Above Average Attendance' Group



School staff recognised that attendance expectations need to have some bite, but suggested that fines and sanctions sit uneasily alongside the relational work they believe is most likely to improve attendance, particularly for the pupils and families they are most worried about.



Recommendations

As a result of the findings from this research, we make the following three recommendations.



Recommendation 1

Government should make better use of attendance data to identify deterioration earlier and recognise improvement.

Over the past five years, the government has rightly increased its focus on school attendance. Measures of average attendance, persistent absence and severe absence have helped to keep attendance high on the national agenda and focused attention on pupils missing substantial amounts of education.

However, these **measures provide only a partial picture**. 'Average attendance' measures can conceal important differences between groups of pupils, while 'persistent' and 'severe absence' measures identify problems only once significant absence has become established. Tracking how pupils move across different attendance bands over time, rather than just whether they cross fixed thresholds, would provide a richer understanding of where attendance is improving, where it is beginning to deteriorate, and where pupils are at risk of becoming persistently or severely absent.

This is important because school staff consistently described **absence as a process rather than an event**. They distinguished between occasional, time-limited absence and patterns of repeated absence that gradually

become habitual and self-reinforcing. Once pupils begin to lose routines, fall behind in lessons and disengage from school life, improving attendance becomes progressively harder and more resource-intensive.

Our research also highlights **the importance of context**. Schools serving disadvantaged communities face very different attendance challenges from those serving more advantaged populations. Poverty, unmet SEND needs, poor mental health, challenging family circumstances and limited access to wider services all drive challenges with attendance. School practice matters enormously, but it should be understood alongside the circumstances in which schools are working.

We welcome the government's recent commitment to rolling out new data tools giving schools pupil-level insight and to set every school a clear attendance improvement target. Our research supports strengthening this direction of travel further, by ensuring the data that schools receive also identify exceptional progress in comparable circumstances.

We therefore recommend that the Department for Education publishes changes in attendance across clearly defined attendance bands, reports these separately for disadvantaged pupils, and combines this with existing similar-schools analysis to identify schools making exceptional progress in comparable circumstances and understand the practices driving their success.

What this means in practice

The Department for Education should:

- Define a small number of clear attendance bands and publish information on the movement of schools within and between these bands over time, with figures for disadvantaged pupils shown separately
- Use this data to identify pupils whose attendance is beginning to deteriorate, before they reach the persistently absent threshold where recovery becomes much more difficult
- Combine this with existing similar-schools analysis to identify schools achieving stronger outcomes than comparable schools
- Support trusts, governing bodies and school leaders to use these data to identify and learn from effective practice in similar schools
- Use these insights to support earlier intervention, school improvement, and the systematic sharing of effective practice

This recommendation should sit alongside existing measures of average attendance, persistent absence and severe absence. Together they would provide a fuller picture of attendance in schools, recognising improvement as well as identifying failure, enabling earlier intervention, and helping the system learn more systematically from schools achieving strong outcomes in challenging circumstances.

Recommendation 2

The school system should put building belonging and engagement at the heart of attendance strategy.

School staff described the enormous effort and resource now devoted to improving attendance in schools. Schools have developed increasingly sophisticated systems of attendance monitoring, phone calls, home visits, meetings with parents, rewards, sanctions and escalating interventions. Staff described this work as ‘relentless’, requiring constant attention and substantial emotional and administrative effort.

However, despite this effort, attendance among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds remains stubbornly low. For some groups, including for white working class pupils, severe absence continues to rise. While schools have become increasingly effective at identifying attendance problems and intervening when they arise, there is little evidence that ever-greater investment in these approaches alone will fundamentally change outcomes for the pupils that schools are most concerned about.

Across all three strands of this research programme, parents, pupils and school staff consistently pointed towards a different set of interventions. The approaches they had the most confidence in were the relational ones: having trusted adults in schools, creating a sense of belonging, providing enrichment opportunities, and ensuring pupils feel understood, listened to and valued within the school community.

This does not mean schools should stop responding to attendance problems. All teachers – whatever their role – should see attendance as a priority. Effective systems for identifying absence, contacting families and intervening where concerns arise will always be necessary. However, our research suggests that the system may be approaching the limits of what can be achieved through increasingly intensive attendance management alone.

Measures that bring reluctant pupils through the school gates each morning require sustained daily effort and significant resource. Unless those pupils experience school differently once they arrive, the same effort will be required again tomorrow. Sustainable improvements in attendance depend not only on getting pupils into school, but on giving them reasons to want to come back.

This is partly reflected in the government’s recent commitment to encouraging schools to trial engagement strategies such as enrichment activity on Fridays, alongside its wider expansion of breakfast clubs, free school meals and Mental Health Support Teams. Our research suggests these efforts will have the greatest impact where they sit within a broader, whole-school culture of belonging, rather than as isolated or single-day interventions.

We therefore recommend that the marginal pound should increasingly be directed towards making school somewhere pupils actively want to be, rather than solely towards activities designed to get them through the gates on any given day.

What this means in practice

For schools serving disadvantaged communities, this should include greater investment in:

- Expanding enrichment opportunities
- Funding trusted adult and mentoring programmes
- Supporting pupils through transition periods, including between primary and secondary schools
- Protecting time within the school day for friendship-building and social connection
- Explicitly focusing on attendance strategies that create belonging and engagement

This recommendation is not about reducing expectations around attendance; it is about recognising that high attendance is only achievable when pupils feel that they want to be in school every day. If the first phase of post-pandemic attendance policy focused primarily on systems and accountability, the next phase should prioritise promoting, measuring and rewarding activity that reinstates the joy of school.

The recent government announcement is a welcome first step towards what we hope will be a sustained trajectory.

Recommendation 3

Government, employers and the education system should support pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to see attendance as an investment in their future.

We heard evidence across the research that belief in the value of attending school every day has weakened. Parents often described weighing attendance up against other priorities, while pupils talked about school as something to be endured rather than enjoyed. Many struggled to see a clear relationship between attending school every day and achieving the future they wanted for themselves or their children. School staff described a growing difficulty convincing some pupils and families that attending school every day is essential to future success.

This challenge appeared to be particularly acute amongst pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. School staff linked attendance issues to a wider loss of confidence in the value of education itself. They described pupils who struggled to see how attendance related to employment, financial security, independence or success. Some related this to intergenerational disadvantage and poor previous experiences of education, while others pointed to the growing influence of social media, changing labour markets and alternative narratives of success.

If pupils cannot see how school helps them build the future they want, then not attending school becomes a rational and understandable decision. Efforts to improve attendance are therefore less likely to have a sustained impact unless schools, employers, government and wider society can make a more compelling case for why attending school matters.

We welcome the government's increasing focus on strengthening the link between education and future opportunity, including recent proposals to give local leaders a stronger role in shaping skills pathways and employment opportunities. These developments recognise that pupils are more likely to engage with school when they can see how education relates to the futures they want. However, this work needs to begin much earlier than post-16 decision-making. For many disadvantaged pupils, disengagement from school begins well before they reach Key Stage 4.

We therefore recommend earlier and more sustained strategic collaboration between schools, employers, further and higher education providers, local authorities and local communities to help pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds see a clearer connection between school attendance and tangible opportunity in their communities and beyond.

What this means in practice

- Developing local strategies, led by local authorities and mayoral combined authorities, that bring together schools, colleges, universities and employers around education, skills and employment pathways, with engagement beginning well before Key Stage 4
- Building stronger partnerships between schools and local employers
- Expanding opportunities for work experience, mentoring and encounters with the world of work
- Helping pupils understand how what they are learning relates to future study, employment and adult life
- Ensuring pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds experience success and achievement throughout their time at school

Attendance will be easier to sustain when pupils believe school is helping them build the future they want. Improving attendance therefore requires more than just persuading pupils to attend on any given day; it requires rebuilding confidence that education remains a worthwhile investment of a young person's time, effort and ambition.

Conclusion

This report completes a three-part research programme exploring attendance through the eyes of parents, pupils and school staff.

One of the clearest findings across all three pieces of research is that attendance is no longer experienced as a straightforward issue of compliance. Parents, pupils and school staff all described it as being shaped by wider issues of trust, belonging, wellbeing, family circumstances and confidence in the value of education.

“Improving attendance is not just about getting pupils through the school gates; it is about creating schools that pupils want to attend, feel they belong in, and believe will help them build their future.”

School staff consistently distinguished between different forms of absence. They were far less concerned about isolated episodes of absence than they were about the point at which absence becomes habitual, self-reinforcing and increasingly difficult to reverse. The pupils that schools were most worried about were those whose attendance reflected a broader sense of disengagement from school, learning and support systems.

This is important because so much of the current attendance debate treats absence as a single issue. But school staff told us that different patterns of absence have different causes, different consequences and require different responses.

There was also remarkable consistency in what people believed helped – and what didn't. Parents, pupils and staff repeatedly pointed towards relationships, belonging, trusted adults and positive engagement with school as being the interventions they had the most faith in. Many were far less convinced by approaches that risked damaging trust between schools and families.



“Absence is increasingly both a symptom and a driver of disadvantage. Preventing attendance problems from becoming entrenched means investing in belonging, engagement and trusted relationships.”

The challenge of improving attendance appears to be particularly acute for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Attendance is increasingly both a symptom and a driver of disadvantage. The pupils most likely to miss school are also the pupils most likely to face poverty, and most likely to have the most limited opportunities outside school. Once attendance begins to deteriorate, the consequences can accumulate quickly for these pupils.

For the last five years, policymakers have rightly focused on improving attendance through stronger systems, better monitoring and identification, and greater accountability. This report suggests that the next phase should have a slightly different focus: on identifying and preventing attendance problems before they become entrenched, investing more heavily in activities that foster belonging and engagement, and rebuilding the sense that attending school every day is a worthwhile investment in your future.

We are encouraged by the government’s recent shift in approach to attendance policy, but any credible attempt to address the attendance crisis must go beyond addressing symptoms, and towards tackling the systemic root causes. Trialling enrichment on particular days, such as Fridays, is a sensible response to a real pattern in the data, but one-day interventions will not resolve a problem rooted in disengagement on their own. These measures need to sit within this broader, more holistic effort to re-engage and better support pupils.

The recent announcements on technical education, Mental Health Support Teams, breakfast clubs and free school meals, alongside restrictions on mobile phone use and social media, are all welcome steps toward building the wider conditions for improving engagement. They begin to address the deeper drivers of disengagement that we heard across all three reports, from

parents, pupils and teachers. To rebuild attendance, pupils must arrive at school well rested and well nourished, feeling happy and supported, with a clear sense that attendance is an investment in a future they want to achieve. These measures will directly help to make that a reality for more young people, especially those facing the biggest disadvantages.

We must also dig deeper than headline figures and national averages when it comes to attendance data. School staff and pupils are best served by monitoring, reporting and responding to changes across the full attendance spectrum, rather than just where pupils cross thresholds for ‘persistent’ and ‘severe’ absence.

The government’s commitment to rolling out data tools to giving schools insight down to the level of individual pupils is a step in the right direction here, and one we would encourage it to build on.

Attendance should also be considered relative to schools facing similar challenges, with school leaders, trusts and governing bodies encouraged to examine what stronger-performing comparable schools are doing differently. This would allow success in difficult contexts to be recognised and effective practice shared more widely. The government’s plans to provide improved, locally contextualised data and individual school improvement targets reflect this, but this must form part of a supportive, collaborative approach, working with schools to learn from successes elsewhere.

Ultimately, school staff described absence as a crisis of disengagement. Improving attendance is therefore not just about getting pupils through the school gates on any given day; it is about creating schools that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds want to attend, feel they belong in, and believe will help them build the future they want.



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