Impetus

Listening to, and learning from, young people in the attendance crisis

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Foreword

At Impetus, we believe every young person should be able to thrive in school, secure crucial qualifications and take their first steps into the world of work on the journey to sustained employment for a fulfilling life. But persistent absence from school, now affecting 1 in 5 pupils in England, is disrupting this journey before it has even begun.

In 2023, we commissioned *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis*, which highlighted a worrying breakdown in trust between schools and families. That report made clear that absence wasn't simply about behaviour or compliance – it reflected deeper cracks in the social contract that underpins education.

This follow-up study takes that work a step further, by listening directly to the voices that matter most: young people themselves.

What we heard is sobering. Many pupils are making rational decisions not to attend school, based on how they experience it, which is exhausting, impersonal, or disconnected from their lives. But what we also heard was hope. Young people want to feel better. They want to succeed. And they are full of ideas for how to make school more meaningful, engaging and supportive.

This report does not offer simple fixes. But it does offer a clear challenge – to policymakers, schools and all of us who care about education. If we want attendance to improve, we must start by making school a place pupils want to be.

We are proud to have funded this work, and grateful to the pupils, schools and researchers who contributed to it. We hope its insights are read widely and taken seriously, as failure to act risks long term consequences for our young people, the economy and society.

Susannah Hardyman MBE
Chief Executive
Impetus

Executive Summary

In 2023, we published *Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis*, a landmark study which explored the shifting parental attitudes towards school attendance in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. That report described a breakdown in trust between schools and families, and warned that the social contract underpinning full-time education was fracturing.

Two years on, the same challenges persist – and this research finds that the concerns of parents are being mirrored by young people themselves.

This report builds on our earlier work by listening directly to young people. Drawing on a series of focus groups with Year 10 pupils from across the attendance spectrum, it explores how pupils perceive school, how they make day-to-day decisions about whether to attend, and what they believe needs to change.

What we heard from young people was striking in both its consistency and its candour. Pupils described schools as exhausting, overly rigid, and often disconnected from their lives and aspirations. They understood the importance of qualifications, and were often motivated to succeed, but described a system that left little room for enjoyment, agency or meaningful relationships. Some reported trading off school attendance against other priorities, including their own emotional wellbeing.

Although the structural causes of absence are varied, the message from young people was clear: if schools want to re-engage them, schools need to feel like places that care not just about attendance, but about the experience of being there. This is not a problem that can be solved through sanctions or data tools alone. Rebuilding attendance will require a deeper focus on connection, belonging and trust.

Our key findings are:

1   **Not attending school** every day has become the new normal for many pupils.

2   Pupils cite **exhaustion** as a key reason for missing school.

3   School is increasingly seen as just a **means to an end**, not a formative experience itself.

4   More structured school days **reduce pupils' sense of agency** and enjoyment of school.

5   Simply getting pupils through the school gate does not mean pupils **feel engaged**.

6   Pupils weigh up the value of school against **other priorities** – and school doesn't always win.

7   Pupils are monitoring their own **emotional wellbeing** and trading it off against school attendance.

8   The **online world** presents pupils with alternative definitions of success beyond school.

9   **Presenteeism online** outside the school day is driving absenteeism in schools.

10   There is **no one-size-fits-all solution**, but interventions can be actively harmful.

Our recommendations are:

1   Schools must value and structure **social time** to support friendships and belonging.

2   Schools must promote **enrichment activities** beyond the classroom.

3   Schools must separate support from sanctions, so pupils **trust the adults** who help them.

4   Schools must listen to their specific communities' challenges and **act on what they hear**.

5   Government must support schools and parents to develop clear **social norms around technology use** in and out of school.

6   Government must **undertake evaluation** to understand whether fines are helping or harming.

7   Government must enable and **incentivise innovation** on attendance in schools, with robust evaluation.

8   Government and schools must **take pupils' emotional wellbeing seriously**, and invest in the support they need.

Introduction

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, much in society has returned to normal and the pandemic has faded into our collective memory. However, while schools have now been fully open for 3 years, attendance has not recovered, and in many schools it remains extremely fragile. In the 2018/19 academic year, (the academic year before the Covid pandemic), the overall absence rate was 4.7%.[1] In the latest data for the 2024/25 academic year, that figure was 6.9%, only slightly down from a peak of 7.6% in 2021/22 and still a third higher than the 2018/19 figure.[2] Persistent absence – defined as missing 10% or more school days – now affects nearly 1 in 5 pupils[3], double the rate seen before the pandemic.[4] Among disadvantaged pupils, this figure is over 1 in 3.[5]

The Department for Education has taken a range of actions in response. Statutory guidance now requires schools to have clear attendance policies, monitor data regularly, and engage in multi-agency working. New processes for fines have been introduced, and over thirty attendance hubs have been funded to share practice across the system. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, currently under consideration, proposes further reforms to strengthen the support around attendance and embed wellbeing more fully in school culture.[6] These measures reflect the seriousness with which policymakers are treating the issue, with the Secretary of State recently positioning attendance as 'fundamental'.[7]

Yet despite the efforts made to date, the data remains stubborn. In Year 11 – arguably the most important school year in terms of impact on life chances – 27% of pupils were persistently absent in the Autumn and Spring terms of 2024/25.[8] There is little sign of sustained improvement.

A wide body of evidence has established the link between attendance and outcomes. At Key Stage 2, pupils with 95-100% attendance are almost twice as likely to meet expected standards in Reading, Writing and Maths than those attending 85-90% of the time.[9] At Key Stage 4, missing just 10 days of Year 11 can halve the chance of securing a grade 5 in English

1   Department for Education (2020). Pupil absence in schools in England; Academic year 2018/19.
2   Department for Education (2025). Pupil attendance in schools; Week 29 2025.
3   Ibid.
4   Department for Education (2020). Pupil absence in schools in England; Academic year 2018/19.
5   Department for Education (2025). Pupil absence in schools in England; Academic year 2023/24.
6   UK Parliament (2024). Children's Wellbeing and Schools.
7   Department for Education (2025). Education Secretary's speech on attendance at regional conference.
8   FFT Education Datalab (2025). Pupil absence in Autumn and Spring 2024/25.
9   Ibid.

and Maths.[10] This has costs now and in the future. According to the Department for Education, 'persistently absent pupils in secondary school could earn £10,000 less at age 28 compared to pupils with near-perfect attendance'.[11] Every additional day of absence between Year 7 to 11 costs £750.[12]
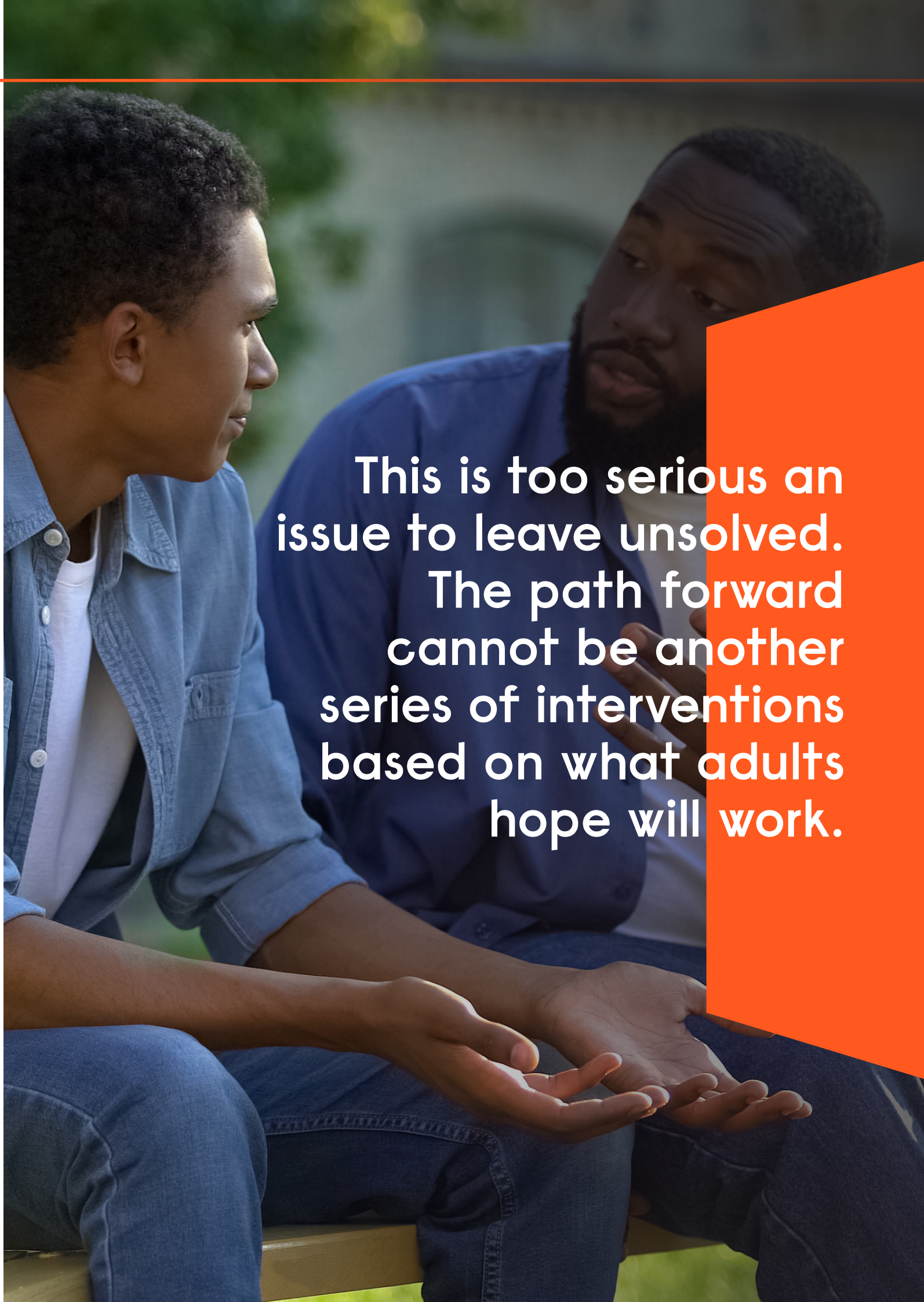
What remains less well understood is why so many pupils are choosing not to attend, particularly in cases where there is no acute illness, exclusion or formal alternative provision. Quantitative data can track trends and risk factors, but it cannot explain behaviour.

Our previous research with parents began to address this gap. That report, published in 2023, found that many families had stopped believing that "every day matters". Parents described a breakdown in trust between home and school, a system that felt inflexible and unsupportive, and growing frustration with the use of sanctions. Parents also told us that they no longer assumed full-time schooling was the only path to success – or even to safety and wellbeing.

Building on these insights, this new research takes the next step: listening directly to pupils themselves. Through focus groups with Year 10 pupils across the attendance spectrum, it explores how young people view school, the factors that influence their decisions about attending, and the changes that might make a real difference. In doing so, it aims to fill a crucial gap in our understanding of the attendance crisis – not just what is happening amongst young people, but why. The perspectives presented here reflect what pupils told us, shared neutrally, because understanding their experiences is essential to tackling attendance issues.

This report is not intended to criticise schools. We acknowledge that they operate under significant pressures, within a set of expectations that don't always work for them, and in the context of challenges that often begin well outside the classroom. But improving attendance depends on pupils feeling that school belongs to them, and that they belong to school. Achieving this required listening to their experiences with genuine openness and a commitment to respond meaningfully.

This is too serious an issue to leave unsolved. The path forward cannot be another series of interventions based on what adults hope will work. We believe that by engaging directly with young people, about their views and their lives, interventions can better grasp the scale of this issue, and start to truly move the dial.

10   Ibid.
11   Department for Education (2025). Why school attendance matters, and what we're doing to improve it.
12   Ibid.

This is too serious an issue to leave unsolved. The path forward cannot be another series of interventions based on what adults hope will work.

Methodology

This report is based on qualitative research with secondary school pupils in England, conducted between March and July 2025.

The aim of the research was to understand how pupils themselves think and feel about school attendance, in their own words. It focused on the emotional, social and practical factors that shape their decisions about whether to attend.

Participants and recruitment

We spoke to 60 pupils across 5 school settings, covering a mix of urban and rural areas across the country. Participants were all in Year 10 at the time of the research. This year group was selected because attendance at this stage of schooling is particularly challenging, it is a GCSE teaching year, and pupils were considered likely to be of an age where they could offer detailed and thoughtful reflections on their experiences.

Pupils were grouped into 5 attendance profiles:

• Pupils with attendance rates below 50% ('severely absent')

• Pupils with attendance rates between 50% and 70% ('persistently absent – lower end')

• Pupils with attendance rates between 70% and 90% ('persistently absent – upper end')

• Pupils with attendance rates between 88% and 92% ('below average' at just below the national average of 92%)

• Pupils with attendance rates above 92% ('above average')

For each cohort, we conducted research both with pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils not eligible for free school meals, to allow us to compare responses between attendance rates and between socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were broadly balanced across other characteristics. Recruitment of pupils was supported by their schools.

Research approach

Research was conducted mostly via semi-structured focus groups, and a small number of one-to-one depth interviews. Sessions were all delivered in-person by trained researchers, using a flexible discussion guide. Questions, prompts and activities were designed to encourage open, honest discussion in a safe and respectful environment. Pupils were assured their contributions would remain anonymous and would not be shared with their teachers or schools.

Analysis

All sessions were audio recorded and transcribed with consent. Thematic analysis was carried out by the research team. Key patterns were identified across transcripts and triangulated with fieldwork notes.

Quotations contained in this report are drawn directly from these transcripts and are attributed with pupils' year, attendance category and broad location. All quotes are anonymised.

Ethics and safeguarding

This research was conducted in line with ethical guidelines for working with children and young people and in accordance with MRS guidelines.[13] Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parent or carer. Researchers had up-to-date enhanced DBS checks and were trained in safeguarding procedures. Pupils were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

13   Market Research Society. (2023, May 15). MRS Code of Conduct. Market Research Society.

Findings

1   **Not attending school** every day has become the new normal for many pupils.

2   Pupils cite **exhaustion** as a key reason for missing school.

3   School is increasingly seen as just a **means to an end**, not a formative experience itself.

4   More structured school days **reduce pupils' sense of agency** and enjoyment of school.

5   Simply getting pupils through the school gate does not mean pupils **feel engaged**.

6   Pupils weigh up the value of school against **other priorities** – and school doesn't always win.

7   Pupils are monitoring their own **emotional wellbeing** and trading it off against school attendance.

8   The **online world** presents pupils with alternative definitions of success beyond school.

9   **Presenteeism online** outside the school day is driving absenteeism in schools.

10   There is **no one-size-fits-all solution**, but interventions can be actively harmful.

Not attending school every day has become the new normal for many pupils.

Across all attendance levels and socioeconomic backgrounds, pupils described a shift in how they and their peers think about school attendance. The assumption that attending school every day is expected or automatic has broken down. Instead, pupils now see daily attendance as a decision – one that can be made every morning depending on circumstances, mood or competing priorities.

This mirrors the change we observed among parents in our 2023 research. Then, we noted that '*it is no longer the case that every day matters – at least from the perspective of parents*'. This new research suggests that many pupils have adopted the same mindset. Pupils now accept that their peers will miss school fairly regularly, and often describe doing so themselves. Occasional absence is no longer treated as unusual or irresponsible, but simply as part of how school works for many young people.

These attitudes were remarkably consistent across the sample. Pupils who were severely absent and those with over 92% attendance expressed strikingly similar beliefs about school. So too did pupils who were eligible for free school meals and those who were not.

The key difference was not how young people felt about school, but how and how often they acted on those feelings.

> I think it's more important to come in most days, but there is (sic) some days that you can have off.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%) in alternative provision, London*

> It's only a problem if they really miss a lot...
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

Pupils described school as something to be endured. It was routine, repetitive and emotionally draining, especially when little space was made for rest or autonomy. Even pupils who had relatively high levels of attendance (average or better) used terms like "*tiring*", "*stressful*" and "*boring*" to describe their experience.

> Five days [of school] is too much anyway...
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

> You get tired of doing the same thing every day...people just don't like that.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> No one would say they like school – it's 6 hours where you're forced to be there.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50–70%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

Several pupils also spoke about the emotional toll of school, describing how the demands of the day, particularly in an unsupportive environment, could feel overwhelming. In this context, occasional absence was not seen as failure, but as a legitimate coping mechanism.

> I feel like some people might struggle to be able to get to school and then once they're in school, because school, it can have a lot of pressure onto a young mind like some of us, that we're still young, we're still developing our mind and whatnot...

Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%) in alternative provision, London

> People struggle with being in a school setting....they genuinely can't get themselves to do stuff.

Male, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire

Taken together, these views point to a significant shift in how young people feel about school attendance. Pupils may still understand the expectation to be in school, but they no longer take it for granted. Many now weigh up whether school feels worth it – and for some, that calculation tips away from school, particularly for those young people that feel they are unlikely to do well in their exams, who have little sense of what they want their future to look like, or who face challenges that make it difficult for them to tolerate the school environment.

2 Pupils cite exhaustion as a key reason for missing school.

Pupils across the attendance spectrum described school as overwhelming, emotionally draining, and physically exhausting. They spoke of tiredness not as an occasional difficulty, but as a near-constant condition, and one that shaped how they experienced school and whether they felt able to attend.

When asked to describe school in three words, some of the most common answers were *"exhausting"*, *"tiring"*, and *"stressful"*. Pupils repeatedly spoke about the relentlessness of the week, the length of the school day, and the lack of time to rest or recover. Some felt that the intensity of school was simply incompatible with them living a healthy life.

Exhausting, tiring, stressful

*Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

Sometimes five days a week... six hours a day... it's too much for your brain, your brain can't process it on hardly any sleep and no energy...

*Male, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)
in alternative provision, London*

No, it's not important to me, like getting ready for school, because it's just tiring, and my brain's not active at home really, so I'm not focused.

*Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

Some pupils linked this tiredness to their own habits – particularly to staying up late online. But rather than framing this as irresponsible behaviour, they described it as part of teenage life. Phones, messages and social media were seen as ever-present, and sleep was something that got squeezed out as a result.

Yeah, everyone's on snapchat [at night].

*Female, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%),
not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

Even if you don't [stay up late] it's not enough sleep, man. Nine hours.

*Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

Others felt school failed to accommodate tiredness in any meaningful way. They described being told to focus, being reprimanded for disengagement, or pushed through a rigid timetable, regardless of how they were feeling. A small number of pupils who had experienced wider challenges with schooling contrasted this with previous experiences on reduced timetables, which gave them more flexibility and made attendance feel more manageable.

If I was on a reduced timetable, like I was in mainstream, then I'd come in, because I could have a lie in and I wouldn't be coming into school absolutely knackered and falling asleep.

*Male, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)
in alternative provision, London*

Several pupils also spoke about school dominating their lives, leaving little time or energy for anything else. They felt that they were expected to work constantly – with school continuing even once they were home with homework, messages or emails to parents – and described a deep sense of imbalance.

> **The school sends emails to your mum, and your mum says 'you can't go out and see your friends until you've done your homework'... it's constant, just school, school, school.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

> **Like I'm here at school more than I'm at home, I barely see my mum.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

Tiredness and emotional fatigue were clearly central, and often under-addressed, drivers of disengagement. **Pupils are not just tired in school, they are tired of school.** For many, absence is not about rebellion or apathy, but about trying to find space to recharge and recover.

3 School is increasingly seen as just a means to an end, not a formative experience itself.

Across all groups, pupils were clear that school matters, but primarily as a stepping stone. They described school as a necessary gateway to qualifications (mostly GCSEs), and by extension, to future stability and success. Many were motivated to do well, but this motivation was largely framed in terms of outcomes: securing a job, avoiding hardship, or being successful in life. The pupils we spoke to were often very aware of the economic challenges and competition for jobs they would face as adults; for some, achieving qualifications was therefore the main driver for attending school; for others who felt they would be unable to achieve those qualifications, it took away the purpose of school entirely.

Getting into a good college, getting a good job, and making lots of money so I can take care of stuff like bills.

*Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

It means... 'cause without school what can I do in life? Can't really do anything.

*Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

This framing was consistent across the attendance spectrum. Pupils often expressed ambition and a sense of purpose, but few spoke about enjoying school, or about education as valuable in its own right. Most said they came to school not because it was fulfilling, but because they had to.

I want to make it in life, so I have to put up with school, so yeah, even though I don't like it, I just tolerate it, so that I can just get these grades and be a lawyer.

*Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70–90%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

I don't like it, but it's needed.

*Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

Even when asked directly, pupils struggled to name aspects of school they valued intrinsically. Some mentioned friends or particular lessons, but these were typically afterthoughts rather than core reasons for attendance.

This echoes the findings of our earlier research with parents, who increasingly viewed attendance through the lens of utility: school was important only insofar as it enabled future success. For pupils too, the idea that school should offer fulfilment, purpose or belonging felt largely absent.

Because it determines whether you're gonna do good in the future. If you want to do good in school then you will get a better job and stuff.

*Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70–90%),
eligible for free school meals, London*

This shift in perspective matters. When school is reduced to a transactional process, or something to be endured in exchange for exam results, pupils are more likely to weigh up each day's value and opt out when the balance does not seem worth it. A system that offers qualifications but not meaning to young people risks losing not only attendance, but engagement too.

When school is reduced to a transactional process, or something to be endured in exchange for exam results, pupils are more likely to weigh up each day's value and opt out when the balance does not seem worth it.

4 More structured school days reduce pupils' sense of agency and enjoyment of school.

Pupils described school as highly structured and tightly controlled. From the moment they arrived, to the moment they left, their day was managed by others, with limited space for autonomy, self-expression, or sometimes even basic comfort. For many, this rigidity had stripped school of any personal meaning or enjoyment.

> ...you're not allowed to go toilet during lessons, they say, "Oh you should have went at lunch and break," but like I didn't go to at lunch and break, I needed to go in the lesson, I want to go in the lesson, and they don't let you, unless you've got a toilet pass.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

> It's at lunchtime, but there's still teachers everywhere, and there's stuff like... we were nearly supposed to be silent between lessons. It's pointless.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (<50-70%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> ...[there's] no breaks... like between the lessons, we just sit down there and just like listen to the teachers just talking.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

These moments – lunchtimes, lesson transitions, lining up – were described not as opportunities to connect with others, but as extended times of adult control. Pupils felt that even outside of lessons they were being watched, directed or silenced. Small acts of self-expression, like removing a blazer on a hot day, became points of tension.

> You make sure you look around, there's no more teachers, take off the blazer, 'cause "no that's unacceptable", like I'm outside the school. I'm outside the school! Why can I not take off my blazer, it's blazing hot, this is daft, like the sun seeps through, it's really difficult, it's unbearable.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

> I feel like other schools can, other schools can do that [relax uniform standards] and it's just like... it's not that deep.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

Pupils questioned the educational value of rules such as lining up, remaining silent in corridors, restrictions on make-up or jewellery, and punishments for what they perceived as minor infractions. Many felt these structures were outdated or performative, and that their cumulative effect undermined pupils' sense of autonomy and belonging.

> There's also a lot of things you've got to do. Like, we have to line up in the mornings and stuff. And that doesn't... it seems like a waste of effort, if that makes sense?
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50-70%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> **They line us up in the morning, like a prison. They check the girls' skirts.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50-70%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

In this environment, many pupils said they felt more like passive participants than active learners. Several used the metaphor of being "robots" to describe the expectations placed on them.

> **You're expected to get like 100%, but then we're not robots, we're not AI, we're humans…**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

For the young people we spoke to, this erosion of agency made the act of attending school feel like the only decision they still had control over. For some, each day was a fresh calculation, not just about what lessons were scheduled, but about how tightly the day would be managed, and whether it felt worth it.

> **[Attending depends on] my mood…'Cause I just wake up and I'm just like, 'actually no' – it depends like the days, what lessons I have. For example if it was like Tuesday or something, like just, no, I wouldn't want to go in.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

Pupils even felt the end of the school day didn't belong to them.

> **We're supposed to finish at 3:15, the bell went at 3:15 but then you have to do a line-up, that takes another like 15 minutes, and then shuffle to the bus stop and then time I get home it's like 4:30.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%), eligible for free school meals, London*

And for some, staying at home wasn't just about rest, it was about reclaiming freedom and making an active choice about their day.

> **Literally just freedom. You can do whatever you want for like the entire day.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

These views we heard from young people suggest a deep misalignment between how schools are structured and how young people experience them. Pupils were not asking for chaos, but for trust, flexibility and a degree of choice in how they navigate the school day. Without this, many are opting out.

5 Simply getting pupils through the school gate does not mean pupils feel engaged.

Many pupils that we spoke to said that they came to school not because they actively wanted to, but because they felt they had no choice. Sanctions, and particularly the threat of their parents being fined, loomed large in their decision-making. But while these measures may prompt some pupils to attend when they otherwise wouldn't have done, pupils told us how their punitive nature damaged trust and engagement, reinforced feelings of resentment and detachment towards school, and ultimately failed to address the root causes of absence.

> It's like, you just think, like, oh, if I skip this amount of days, my attendance goes down. And then they're gonna fine my parents, they start sending them letters and stuff like that. And it's just, like, really stressful, because then you have to come into school, like you feel forced to come into school, so like you don't want to anymore, like you're forced to, you know?
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70–90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

This sense of coercion came up on multiple occasions. Pupils described the pressure they felt to avoid getting their families in trouble, even when they themselves felt overwhelmed or unmotivated. Some spoke openly about how this pressure led to compliance, not commitment.
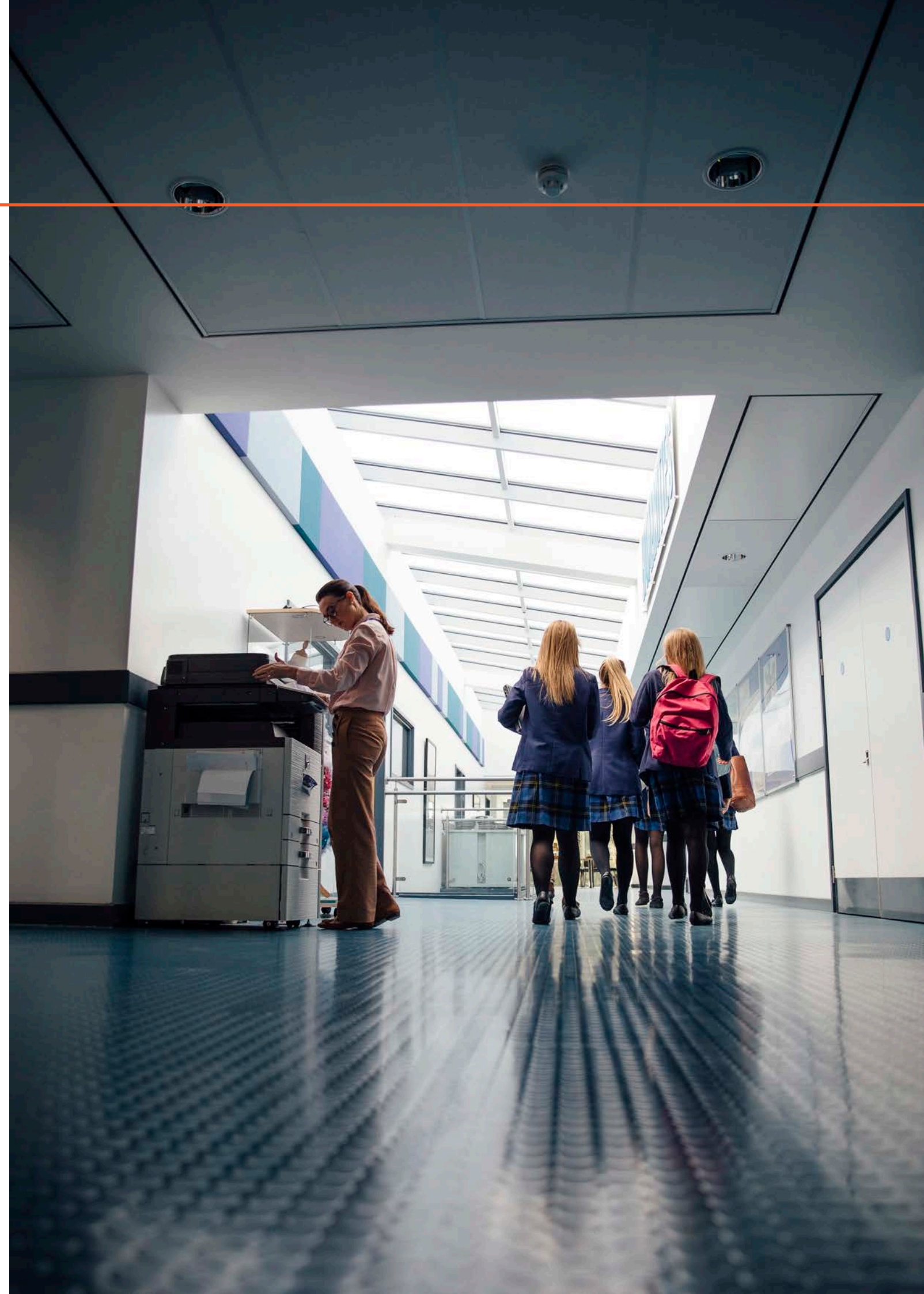
> **Researcher: Are you sometimes tempted to stay off school and play PlayStation?**
>
> **Pupil: Every day.**
>
> **Researcher: Every day – and why do you come in even though you're tempted?**
>
> **Pupil: Because of the fines.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

Rather than motivating attendance positively, these measures often created a sense of internal resistance. Several pupils drew comparisons to being forced to do chores, where obligation stripped the activity of any intrinsic motivation.

> Let's say you're gonna go through and do the dishes, and then your mum forces you to do dishes, and you don't feel like doing it anymore because they told you to do it. It's like that, like when you wake up for school on your own, it's fine, but when they start pressing... 'now, you have to go, you have to go to school'... You don't want to do it.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

This dynamic – doing something under pressure rather than by choice – is important. Pupils told us that although they might be physically present, they were mentally checked out. And when attending school feels like an act of compliance rather than participation, it undermines the very goal of increasing attendance.

Put simply, getting pupils through the door does not mean they feel connected, involved, or ready to learn. In some cases, it does the opposite. It reinforces the idea that school is something being done to them, and that their voice, feelings and needs are secondary.

6 Pupils weigh up the value of school against other priorities – and school doesn't always win.

For many pupils, attendance is not a given, it is a daily calculation. They weigh up the importance of school against other priorities: rest, family time, friendships, and cost. These decisions are rarely careless or rebellious. Instead, they seem to reflect a rational weighing of what feels worthwhile, what feels fair or healthy to them, and what the consequences might be.

This type of reasoning was common. Pupils were acutely aware of the cost pressures their families faced, and many felt that decisions about absence, particularly for holidays, were shaped by financial necessity, rather than irresponsibility. In some cases, pupils were also clear about the consequences of these choices. They knew that fines might follow, but some still felt the trade-off was worth it.

> **There's loads of reasons. The main reason that my Mum says is because, like in August, that stuff, when we usually go, is really expensive and in the school time it's just... still expensive, but less expensive because a lot of people... [don't go then].**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), eligible for free school meals, London*

> **[Researcher] And when you got fined, did you think it was worth it?**
>
> **[Pupil] Yeah... to see my family and have fun.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

Other pupils expressed discomfort not with the fines themselves, but with who was being penalised. Pupils did not want their families to suffer financially for decisions they felt partly responsible for.

> **I don't want my parents to be fined... I'd be okay if I could pay it myself, but I'd need a job to do that.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), eligible for free school meals, London*

> **It's like... they said if I was late one more time, then my dad would get a £165 fine!**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), eligible for free school meals, London*

Pupils are no longer passively accepting the idea that school comes first, always. Instead, they are navigating a complex set of priorities and sometimes school doesn't come out on top. This does not mean pupils don't care about school. It means they are thinking, often deeply, about what matters most to them and their families.

Understanding this mindset is crucial. It suggests that punitive approaches, like fines, may prompt attendance, but at the cost of trust. And they do not address the underlying issues: that many young people no longer see school as obviously more valuable than the things they miss it for.

7 Pupils are monitoring their own emotional wellbeing and trading it off against school attendance.

Emotional wellbeing came up unprompted in nearly every conversation. Pupils spoke openly about anxiety, overwhelm, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. For many, this wasn't a background factor, it was a central reason why they decided not to come in to school.

> At mainstream I had a day off a week. I used to not want to go in. Ever. I had a panic attack at the school gates...
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)*
> *in alternative provision, London*

The pupils we spoke to were highly attuned to their mental state and described making day-to-day decisions about attendance based on how they were feeling. While some framed this as a coping mechanism, others described it as a last resort, or a way to protect themselves when school felt too much to manage. These choices were not made lightly. In fact, pupils often felt very conflicted: aware of the consequences of absence, but also of their own limits.

For some pupils, it was the school environment itself that caused distress, or made existing distress worse. For this group, not attending school on any given day was a way of managing their emotional wellbeing.

> I do feel pressure, it's like too much to think about...
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, London*

> If my mum sees I'm struggling then she's not going to send me in...
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

For others, problems arose when the emotional distress they experienced at school was not taken seriously by their school or teachers. There was a deep sense that schools were not recognising the scale of the issue. Several pupils expressed frustration that emotional distress was being minimised or ignored.

> I feel like they push it aside because a lot of kids do have anxiety now, because of the generation that we live in, and like the problems with everything.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50-70%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> People might have like mental health problems, they might be struggling mentally, but might be feeling like they don't have anyone to speak to, they might feel like they don't have like a teacher that they can just come to and just speak their feelings, or they might feel like sometimes you know, like they're not heard...
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

Other pupils described teachers as unaware, or even if they were aware, as unlikely to do anything about it. This was particularly acute for pupils with lower attendance, who felt overlooked, deprioritised and misunderstood as a result.

> So I think there's a lot of people in our school that probably struggle with stuff like that, but the teachers don't really know this [...] if there's people like us that hardly ever come in school and they still give us absolutely like no resources.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)*
> *in alternative provision, London*

Pupils also questioned the fairness of attendance rewards, which they felt ignored the complexity behind absence. Several expressed hurt or frustration that they were being excluded from trips or activities despite having what they perceived as valid reasons for staying home.

> I don't think they should do rewards, because for a lot of kids, there's very valid reasons to not go to school, and then they might be going through a lot and they're not getting the same treatment, and like, being allowed to have fun, like, go on trips...

Male, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%), not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire

These views paint a sobering picture. Pupils are monitoring their own emotional wellbeing, and when school feels like a threat to that wellbeing, rather than a source of support, they are taking their own actions. In many cases, that means staying at home.
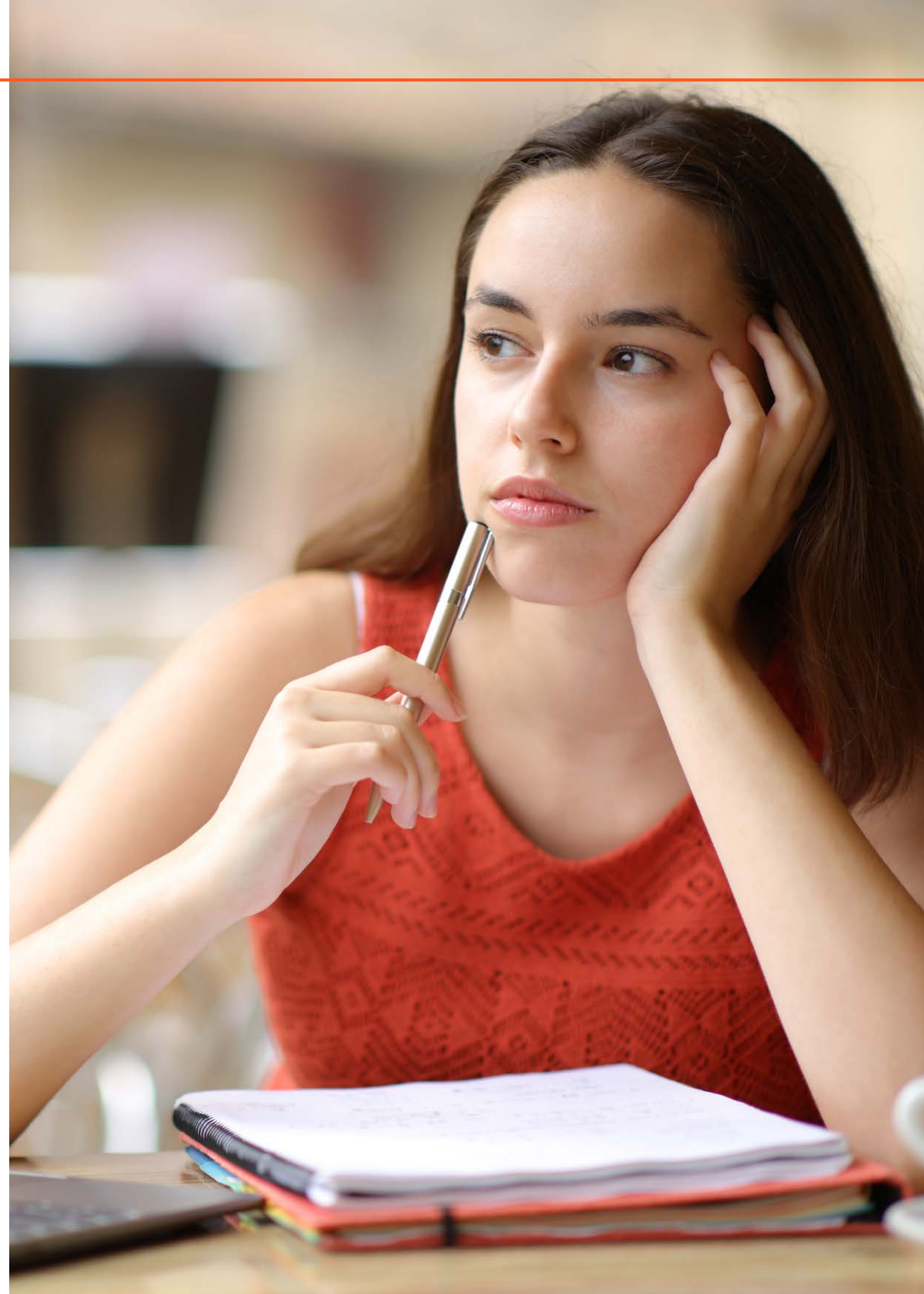
8 The online world presents pupils with alternative definitions of success beyond school.

Pupils are not just weighing school up against rest or social life – they are also comparing it to entirely different versions of success than pupils have had in the past. Online, they are constantly exposed to people making money through gaming, content creation and social media, often without traditional qualifications. These role models are reshaping what pupils think is possible, and for some pupils make school feel irrelevant or outdated. This was particularly true for pupils who felt they were unlikely to achieve the qualifications they were working towards at school.

> Because like you see these people online having fun and everything, doing nothing, just staying on their chair gaming all day, making money at the same time, and like they probably think why can't they do that too.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

Pupils repeatedly cited online influencers who had achieved wealth and fame without school success. These examples were not just entertainment, they were genuinely seen as credible alternatives.

> Because I watch this influencer, and he was telling us that in school he wasn't like well behaved, and he still got how he is now... like rich, and famous.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

> Yeah, because you can still get a job without GCSEs. There's people who don't have GCSEs but they're millionaires.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

The effect of this content was that pupils were questioning the value of school. Some even viewed education as outdated, or simply not aligned with the kind of lives they aspired to. For pupils who felt the only or main purpose of school was to achieve qualifications, this online evidence that qualifications were not a necessary condition of success made them less likely to place value on going in to school every day.

> I feel like, you know, nowadays, social media and all that, people are seeing a lot of content that says like school isn't needed to be successful, and like, and I feel like people are, you know, placing less value on school nowadays.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

A small number of pupils were actively pursuing these alternative paths. One spoke confidently about running their own online business; another about making money through digital platforms.

> I've already got my own [online] business and I'm already making money.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

> Well not exactly because there's so many options without education... [like] content creating and game making, computer coding or something like that. You don't even need to go to work to do that. You just make money online by using influence, something like that.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

In some cases, these influences did not just shape career aspirations, but also the pupils' daily habits, from sleep routines to morning rituals, where pupils were mimicking the discipline promoted by some entrepreneurial online creators.

> **He does videos as well. It said wake-up at 3am. But I'm not like that strict, I wake-up at six though. He goes sleep really early... goes sleep at like 7pm, 8pm. And you jump in the air for five minutes.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

All of this suggests a growing disconnect between the narrative that many schools promote – GCSEs as the key to a good future – and the visions of success that pupils are seeing online every day. These alternative role models may not reflect the reality for most young people, but they are vivid, compelling and available 24/7. For some pupils, particularly those who are struggling with their grades at school, they seem to be more relatable than the classroom.

q Presenteeism online outside the school day is driving absenteeism in schools.

For many of the young people we spoke to, social life happens online and it never switches off. Apps, games, group chats and messages fill evenings and early mornings, and create a sense of constant connection. While this can feel comforting and social for pupils, it also leaves them feeling exhausted and overstimulated before the school day even begins. In turn, this 24/7 digital presence can make attendance harder and feel more optional.

> Just relax. Sitting around on my phone talking about things.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

Many pupils described spending evenings and late nights talking to friends via messaging apps or gaming platforms. These were not just casual distractions, they were central to how pupils created and maintained friendships and belonging.

> Playing games… like you can add [friends] online and you can join a party together which means you can talk to each other and that.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88-92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

For some, staying up late and messaging friends felt less like a genuine choice, and more like a social obligation. Being available, especially when someone else was upset or struggling, was described as a basic form of care for others.

> I message her the night before then I message her in the morning just to make sure if she's awake…
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)*
> *in alternative provision, London*

> It's like, what if something's wrong? If they're upset… or they just like, need to talk. And then you could just ignore them, and show you don't really care about them – it might come across that way, even if you don't mean…
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> If someone messages you, it's rude to wait until the morning…
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'above average' (>92%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

This culture of digital availability, or online presenteeism, can come into direct conflict with the demands of school. Pupils described arriving at school tired and disengaged, or simply opting out after a night of being online. But they also described these online relationships as vital, often more responsive than school support.

In this context, it is not surprising that some pupils choose the online world over the school world. It offers them affirmation, flexibility and immediacy, which are qualities they often feel are lacking in their school experience. The result is a growing gap between how pupils live their lives and how school asks them to behave, especially around rest, availability and attention.

> The school think I can do really good but it's 'cause of what I'm getting now… they want me to get more but they don't tell me like what to revise.
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

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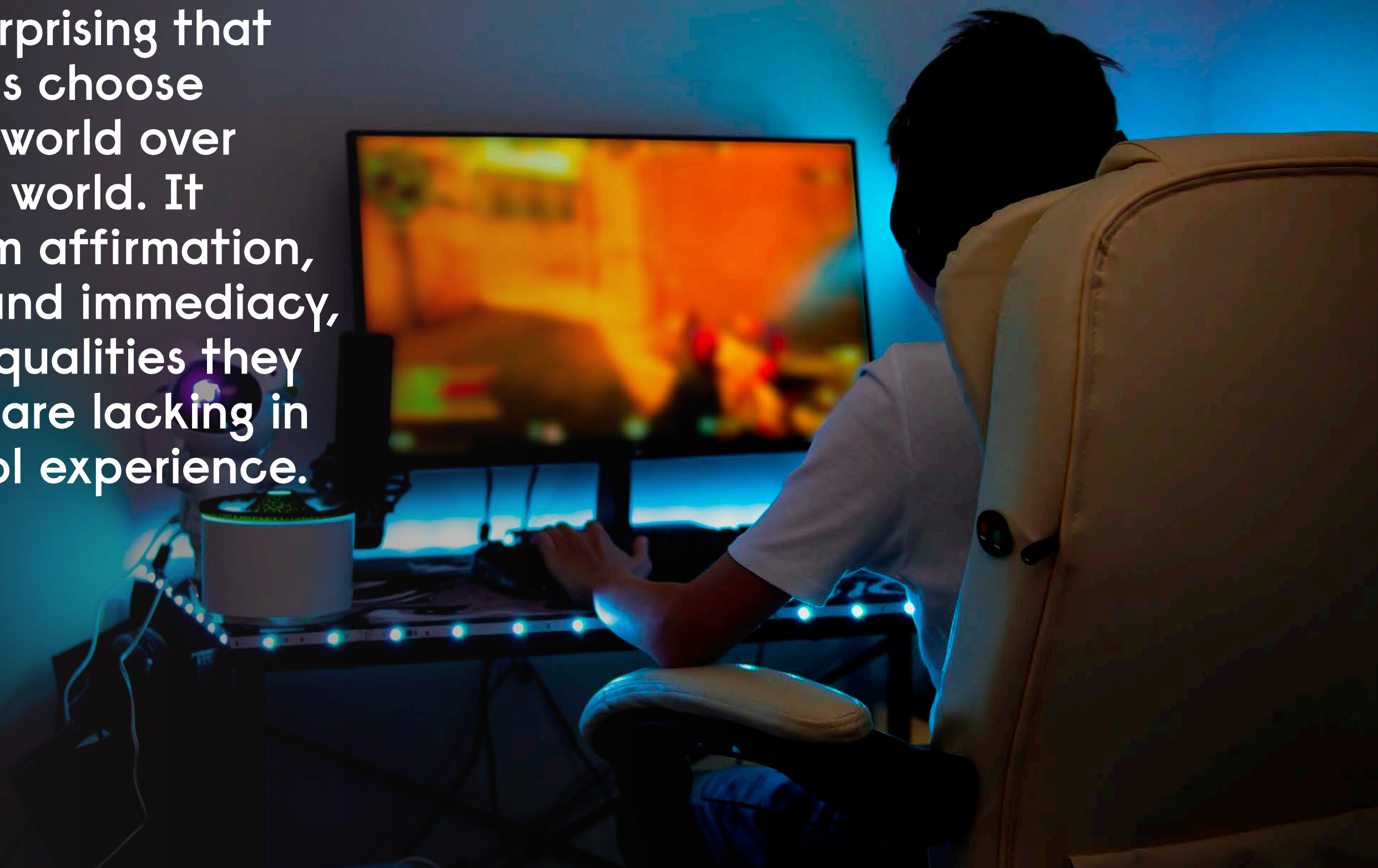
10 There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but interventions can be actively harmful.

When asked what schools were doing to address attendance, most pupils described strategies that felt more like punishment than support. Whilst schools and individual staff members are in many cases trying their best in often difficult circumstances and with minimal resources, these limitations were not appreciated by pupils, who were highly dismissive of both school-based incentives and sanctions. Fines, phone calls to parents and home visits came up repeatedly, and were often experienced as frustrating, stressful, and even humiliating.

> Because if I'm getting fined I'm like, no, I don't want to go back there.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent (<50),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

> Just the school being greedy, innit? Like, they just want money off us. The second you get fined, it's a good thing for them 'cause they're just getting money at the end of the day.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

Fines were not only seen as ineffective, but as damaging. Pupils often felt protective of their parents, who they saw as bearing the brunt of the punishment even when they were trying their best.

> People feel like they're getting punished and sometimes they have their reasons not to come to school and sometimes they can have valid reasons. And the fines, they come to your parents or your carers, and I find that unfair, how they blame the parents [because] sometimes they try and get you up and they'll try to send you into school, but like I feel like it adds a lot more stress into the parents when they've already got the stress they're trying to deal with...
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%)*
> *in alternative provision, London*

Others spoke about relentless phone calls homes, which they saw not as helpful nudges, but as background noise that further eroded trust. Many pupils had experienced home visits, and the emotional response was often visceral. In many cases, attendance sanctions were enforced by the school staff who were also responsible for being a source of support for pupils in school, which had created issues around trust and respect between these staff and pupils.

> All they do is call my mum. They'll keep calling her every day, "When's [Name] coming back in? Oh she can't do this, like you're gonna get a fine", or this, that, oh yeah, that's all they do is call, call, call.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

> Violated. It made me feel violated.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50-70%),*
> *not eligible for free school meals, Cambridgeshire*

> Teachers coming to my house [all laugh], are you mad? If a teacher came to my house, come on.
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70-90%),*
> *eligible for free school meals, London*

> **People like to keep their outside life separate from school, so maybe they find that their homes, their comfort space, where no one at school knows what their home is like.**
>
> *Pupil, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%) in alternative provision, London*

For many pupils, the problem was not just about how these interventions felt, it was that they misunderstood the nature of the problem. Pupils wanted support, not surveillance. They wanted the chance to talk honestly without fear of judgement or escalation.

> **I think bringing like someone who's not a teacher is good, because then I feel like you can say more of what you're feeling than to a teacher.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'severely absent' (<50%) in alternative provision, London*

Even positive efforts, like reward systems, were not always welcomed. Certificates were widely seen as meaningless. What pupils wanted were experiences that felt real and relational.

> **It has no meaning.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50–70%), eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

> **It wouldn't be memorable, you'd forget about it, place it somewhere and that's it. You wouldn't remember going somewhere, seeing something, it's just a piece of paper.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'persistently absent – lower end' (50–70%), eligible for free school meals, West Yorkshire*

By contrast, pupils responded relatively well to incentives that offered enjoyment, novelty or connection, such as trips or themed days. These felt more like school trying to engage them, rather than punish them.

> **I love trips. Honestly, I'm just a trips person.**
>
> *Female, Year 10, 'persistently absent – upper end' (70–90%), eligible for free school meals, London*

> **Wednesday... the teachers were like 'that's the day most kids don't want to come into school', so that's why they have to do Wing Wednesday.**
>
> *Male, Year 10, 'below average' (88–92%), eligible for free school meals, London*

Ultimately, pupils were not asking for schools to stop caring about attendance; they were asking to be treated as individuals and as people, rather than as problems. Many of the current strategies for improving attendance, and especially those rooted in threat or intrusion, are backfiring. Pupils want connection, not compliance, and understanding, not escalation. Whilst resources are hugely stretched, this can feel like an impossible ask of school staff but the status quo is not neutral, it is actively harmful and undermining the valuable attempts many school staff are making to build relationships and rapport.

Summary of findings

Across all ten findings, a consistent message emerged: pupils do not see school as self-evidently meaningful. While many still believe in the importance of qualifications, they described school as rigid, exhausting, and disconnected from their interests and realities.

Pupils told us they are:

Making active decisions about attendance, not simply drifting into absence;

Balancing school against other priorities, including rest, health, family and freedom;

Navigating an emotional economy, in which attendance can cost more than it offers;

Disengaged by pressure and punishment, not motivated by it; and

Increasingly drawn to the online world, where they see alternative versions of success, connection and agency.

The findings also revealed the current interventions, however well-intentioned, often feel disconnected, performative, or intrusive. Fines, phone calls and home visits may compel attendance on that particular day or week, but rarely foster positive engagement and interaction with school longer term. In contrast, small moments of freedom, enjoyment or recognition were remembered and valued by many pupils.

Above all, there was a sense that young people want to feel heard. They want school to work, but it has to work *for* them, not just on them.

Recommendations

Schools must...

Value and structure social time to **support friendships and belonging**.

Promote **enrichment activities** beyond the classroom.

Separate support from sanctions, so pupils **trust the adults who help them**.

Listen to their specific communities' challenges and **act on what they hear**.

Government must...

Support schools and parents to **develop clear social norms around technology** use in and out of school.

Undertake evaluation to understand whether fines are helping or harming.

Enable and **incentivise innovation** on attendance in schools, with robust evaluation.

Schools and Government must...

Take pupils' emotional wellbeing seriously, and invest in the support they need.

1 Schools must value and structure social time to support friendships and belonging.

When the only perceived purpose of school is to secure a set of GCSE results, many pupils become disengaged. Some believe they will scrape through with the minimum grades regardless of daily attendance. Others feel they are unlikely to succeed academically at all. For both groups, school loses meaning entirely.

Across all groups, the most commonly cited positive reason for coming to school was simple: friendship. Pupils value in-person connection, especially in a world where so much of their interaction happens through screens. They want time to talk, laugh and be with their friends, without it being policed.

But opportunities for socialising are shrinking. Lunchtimes and breaks are generally becoming shorter. Rules around silence, movement and lining up are stricter. Moments of unstructured fun, the glue that pupils told us helps them tolerate more difficult parts of the day, are being eroded. Schools must recognise that friendship and belonging are not side effects of education; they are conditions for it and must be carefully fostered by schools.

2 Schools must promote enrichment activities beyond the classroom.

Pupils told us there is less and less space in school for anything that is not about academic performance. When exam results become the only goal, pupils who are struggling, or who do not believe they can or will achieve good grades, stop seeing a reason to go to school every day.

Schools need to widen this definition of success for pupils, and government must support this. Enrichment activities – like sport, music, drama, clubs, volunteering, trips – give pupils other ways to succeed, connect and enjoy school. These activities foster resilience, confidence and identity, and are especially valuable to pupils who feel disengaged from lessons.

This is not a call for lessons to be more fun, or for academic attainment to be deprioritised. Teaching is serious work, and lessons are for learning. But lunch breaks are for socialising, and that matters too. Schools must think of enrichment and unstructured time as essential, not expendable.

3 Schools must separate support from sanctions, so pupils trust the adults who help them.

In many of the schools we did research in, the same adult is responsible for encouraging attendance, delivering punishments for absence, and supporting pupils to re-engage. Pupils told us this set-up undermines their trust in those individuals.

If the person they are supposed to turn to for support is also the one issuing detentions, calling home, or authorising fines, it becomes harder for pupils to ask those individuals for help when they need it. We heard that parents, too, can become wary of contact that blends care and compliance.

Government should provide examples of how schools can separate these roles effectively. Further research is also required to understand the emotional and practical toll this dual responsibility places on school staff.

4 Schools must listen to their specific communities' challenges and act on what they hear.

While most schools treat attendance as a serious concern, few are taking bold steps to address it because to do so is to actively go against the grain. In the face of challenge, either in the structure or culture of the system, schools often default to minor tweaks or no action. Absence is now too widespread and embedded to solve with superficial fixes. Pupils are voting with their feet. Listening alone is not enough; schools must be willing engage effectively, act on what they hear and change as a result.

If schools are serious about improving attendance, they should consult their pupil and parent populations directly about what would make school more accessible, engaging and supportive; be genuinely open to implementing what they hear; and consider structural reforms that go beyond current boundaries.

Schools must be supported to do this by the government and other actors in the system. Suggestions raised in this research include later start times, shorter individual lessons, more flexibility in uniform policies and a greater focus on wellbeing.

5 Government must support schools and parents to develop clear social norms around technology use in and out of school.

Most schools have clear rules about mobile phone use during the school day, but pupils told us that the real issue lies outside of school hours.

Late night gaming, messaging and group chats leave pupils tired, distracted and emotionally drained. Many feel a social obligation to be constantly online. For some, this 24/7 digital life is directly undermining their ability to attend school the next morning.

Schools cannot tackle this alone. The Government must support families and communities to build healthier norms around technology. This could include introducing a national expectation that every school implements a 'tech contract' – a clear agreement between pupils, families and school about healthy digital habits. The content can be flexible and could be embedded into existing home-school agreements, but the existence of the agreement should be non-negotiable. Shifting digital culture requires more than individual rules; it needs coordinated, national leadership.

6 Government must undertake evaluation to understand whether fines are helping or harming.

Fines and home visits are a central part of current attendance policy. But we do not yet know whether they work, and pupils have raised serious concerns about their unintended consequences.

While some said fines pressured them into school, others described feeling resentful, ashamed or alienated. Even when these measures bring pupils into the building, they do not guarantee positive re-engagement with school. On the contrary, they can damage the trust between families, pupils and schools, especially when parents feel blamed despite feeling they are doing their best.

At the moment, the system is acting without clarity on this trade-off. Future policy must weigh the relational cost against effectiveness (short and long-term). We need proper evaluation, not just of whether these interventions succeed in getting pupils through the gate, but whether they help them to thrive once inside.

7 Government must enable and incentivise innovation on attendance in schools, with robust evaluation.

We have years and a vast range of attendance interventions to look back on, but not enough evidence of what actually works. This is a major gap in our understanding.

Government should establish a mechanism for collecting and sharing what does and doesn't work for tackling school attendance, mirroring successful approaches in other sectors. As part of this, schools should be funded and encouraged to trial new ideas, evaluate their impact, and openly share their findings – whether they succeed or fail.

Alongside this, Ofsted and other accountability systems must evolve to support this kind of approach. Schools should not be penalised for honest experimentation. In the short term, we should value transparent testing and shared learning over perfect results.

8 Government and schools must take pupils' emotional wellbeing seriously, and invest in the support they need.

Pupils told us that poor mental health is a major driver of absence. Pupils described anxiety, burnout and emotional exhaustion, not just as occasional issues but as part of everyday life. For some, school itself is the source of distress.

Pupils are managing this by taking 'mental health days'. This is not, we heard, an act of defiance, but an act of self-protection and self-care. In the absence of adequate support, pupils feel invisible, and teachers are left to manage crises without the tools they need.

In our report two years ago, we recommended investment in CAMHS, noting that: '*Children who are not supported adequately are unable to access the education system*.' Whilst we acknowledge the difficult fiscal landscape, we continue to make this recommendation – our research tells us this is a foundation of improving attendance.

This support should include trusted adults within every school – ideally mentors who are not part of the disciplinary structure. Schools should also train staff to respond more sympathetically when pupils raise emotional concerns. The current system asks young people to show up to school ready to learn, without offering the support they need to do this. This has to change.
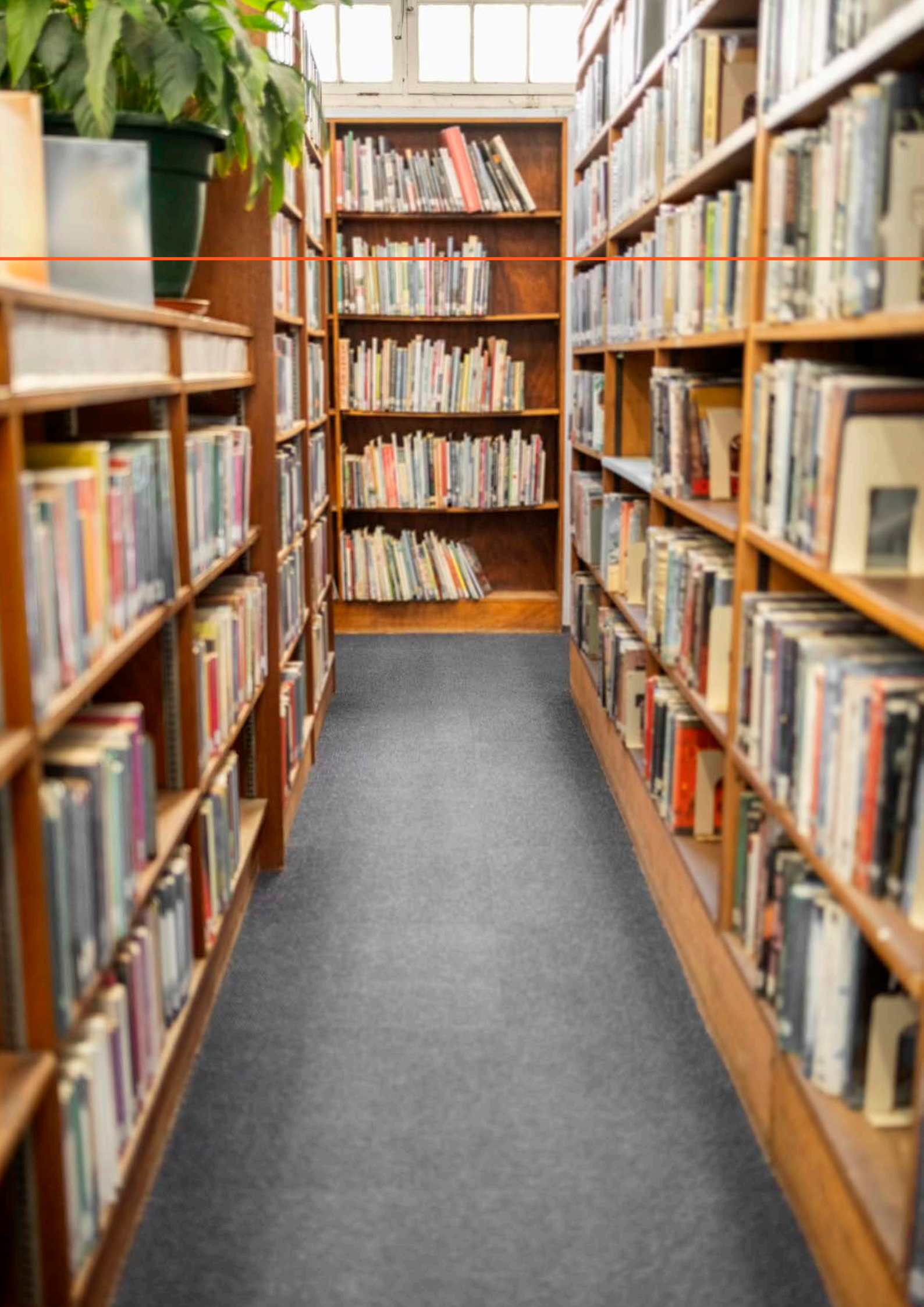
Conclusion

Our research shows there is no single cause of the current attendance crisis, and therefore no single solution. But one message came through clearly: pupils are not passive. They are making active, rational decisions about whether school feels worth it, based on how it makes them feel, how it fits into their lives, and what it offers in return.

Broadly, pupils want to learn. Many still value qualifications, but they are also dealing with mental health struggles, family stress, school environments that feel rigid and unwelcoming, and online lives that offer them connection, creativity and even income, without judgement or uniform. When schools feel exhausting, disempowering or irrelevant, it is not surprising that some pupils choose not to attend every day.

Crucially, what we heard in this research was not apathy – it was ambivalence. Pupils are not disengaged from education, but from an experience of school that does not work for them. Many still show up every day or most days; many want things to be better; many had clear, thoughtful suggestions for what needs to change.

Schools are stretched, working within constraints that they did not design, and often facing problems that start far beyond the school gates. But if attendance is to improve, pupils have to feel that school is for them. That means us listening with real curiosity, not control. And it means acting on what we hear.