

Improving school attendance in England

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



1 Under the Education Act 1996, the parent is responsible for making sure that their child receives a full-time education.¹ Regular school attendance is very important for all pupils because they face a number of risks if they fail to attend. In particular, pupils who do not attend regularly are much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications, and more likely to be out of work after leaving school. They are also more easily drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour and some can be vulnerable to harm by adults.

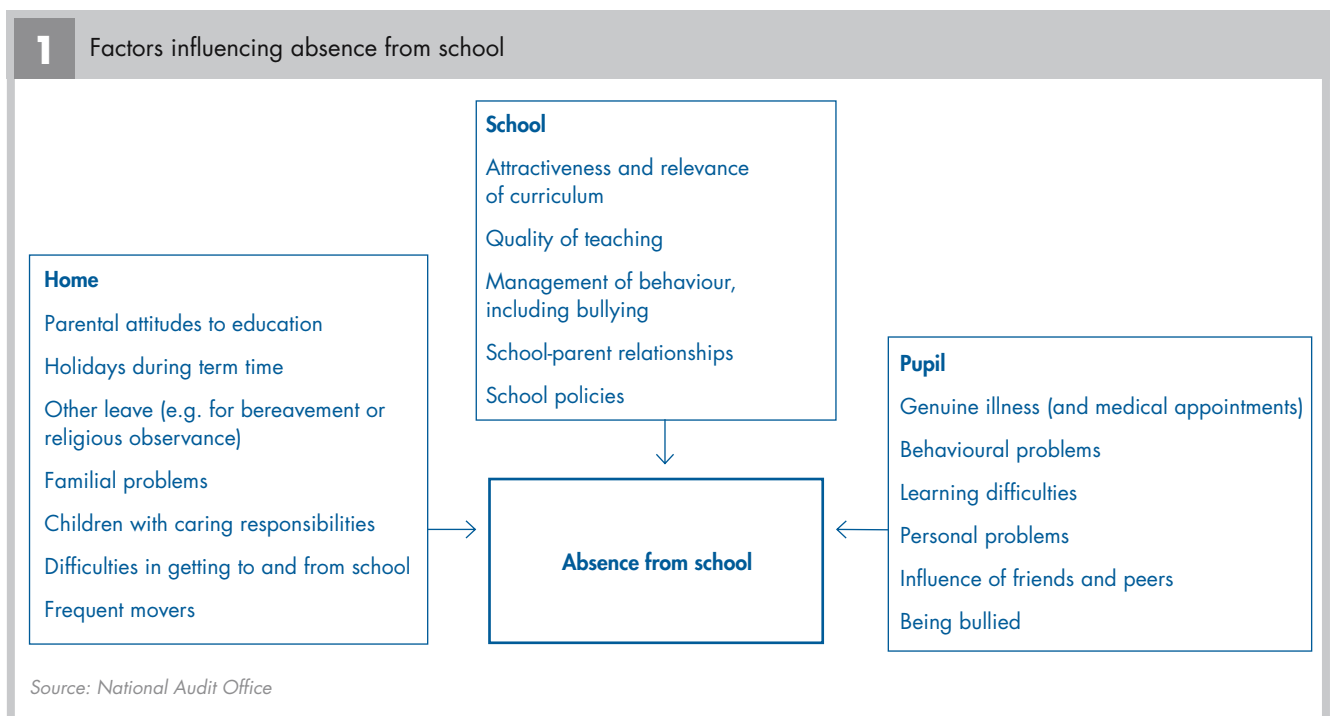
Improving pupil attendance is a major challenge

2 Absence from school can be caused by a wide range of factors, either on their own or in combination (Figure 1). Some causes lie in the quality and relevance of the curriculum and teaching and the school environment, and it is for schools to make the necessary improvements with support from local authorities and the Department. Other causes are associated with familial or wider problems in society such as drug addiction, and are usually much more difficult for schools alone to address.

3 Schools decide whether to authorise pupils' absence on a case by case basis. Absences owing to illness and other leave such as study leave are usually authorised. Other absences, such as for term-time holidays, may or may not be authorised depending on the circumstances and a school's policy on absence.

Unauthorised absence is steady but overall attendance is improving

4 The Department has overall responsibility for improving attendance in schools, providing funding to local authorities and schools for attendance management and initiatives to reduce absence. Its initiatives have included grant funding to local authorities and schools, consultancy support, best practice advice and establishing sanctions for use against parents whose children persistently fail to attend school. Between 1997-98 and 2003-04, the Department spent around £885 million on these initiatives that were intended, at least in part, to reduce absence. It plans to spend another £560 million by 2005-06.

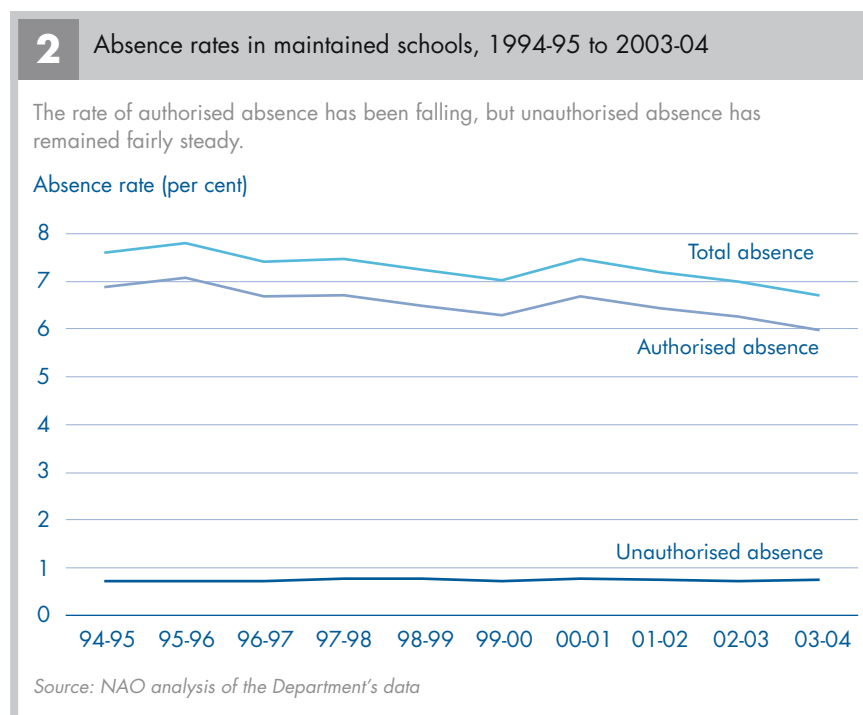


¹ In nearly all cases, education takes place in school, but a parent can provide an education for their child at home so long as the education is suitable and efficient. "Parents" are: natural parents; persons with parental responsibility; and, carers living with and looking after a child. Compulsory school age is from the start of the school term commencing on or after the child's fifth birthday and continues until the last Friday of June in the school year that they reach 16.

5 Whilst over half a million pupils (7.5 per cent) a year do not miss a single school day, it is not possible to reduce absence to zero or near zero because there will always be times when some pupils cannot attend school because they are ill. Nearly 7 per cent (450,000 pupils) do not attend their state maintained school each day, including more than 0.7 per cent (50,000 pupils) whose absences are unauthorised. Between 1998 and 2004, the Department's main focus has been to reduce the rate of unauthorised absence, but the causes have proved difficult to tackle and unauthorised absence has remained fairly steady.

6 From 2004 to 2008, the Department is targeting a reduction in total absence. Total absence is a more reliable measure than unauthorised absence, because it is not affected by schools' decisions about whether or not to authorise absence. We focus on total absence in our report.

7 As one of six Public Service Agreement targets for schools², the Department's target requires the 2003 total absence rate to be reduced by 8 per cent (from 6.83 per cent to 6.28 per cent) by 2008. This reduction represents around 39,000 more pupils in school each day. (As well as state maintained schools, the target includes independent schools, which are attended by 387,000 day pupils and have lower absence rates, though the Department is not able to influence these schools directly.) With authorised absence declining, there has been some progress in reducing total absence over the last nine years (**Figure 2**). By the end of the 2003-04 school year, the total absence rate had moved almost halfway towards the target for 2008.



2 The five other Public Service Agreement targets relate to:

- 1 Narrowing the gap in educational achievement between looked after children and their peers
- 2 Raising standards of 11-year olds in English and maths
- 3 Raising standards of 14-year olds in English, maths, ICT and science
- 4 Enhancing the take-up of sporting opportunities by 5- to 16-year olds
- 5 Sixty per cent of 16-year olds to achieve 5 GCSEs at grades A* to C (by 2008), and all schools to have at least 30 per cent of pupils achieving this standard (by 2008)

Full details of the 2004 targets are at <http://performance.treasury.gov.uk/recontopublishsr02to04.pdf>.

There is scope for further reductions in absence

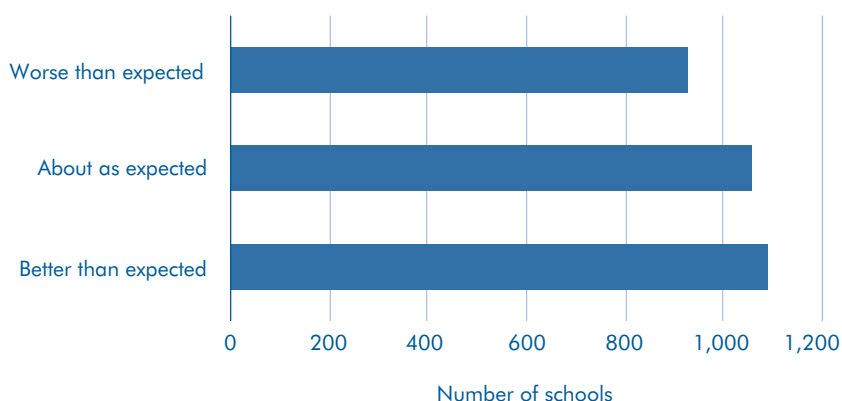
8 Schools' absence rates vary substantially. In 2002-03, total absence in primary schools ranged from less than one to nearly 30 per cent of days and in secondary schools from two to nearly 20 per cent of days.³ Some of the variation is associated with pupils' socio-economic conditions. In particular, higher levels of pupils with free school meals are associated with higher rates of absence. Other contextual factors such as the number of exclusions of pupils from school and the number of pupils with special educational needs are also associated with relatively high rates of absence. Relatively low rates of absence are associated with factors such as high proportions of pupils from certain (most) minority ethnic groups.

9 Our analysis, set out in Part 2 and Appendix 2, confirms that total absence in secondary schools is strongly associated with contextual factors, such as levels of take up of free school meals, and attainment (for example, schools' average GCSE point scores). Total absence in primary schools is also associated with these factors (see Figure 2 in the Appendix), but not as strongly as for secondary schools. Nevertheless, even after adjusting secondary schools' total absence for their context, a large number of schools have absence rates that are clearly better or worse than would be expected given their context (**Figure 3**). Within secondary schools, we found that selective schools and voluntary-aided schools in particular were associated with lower rates of absence after adjusting for their context.

3 Secondary schools' performance on absence, after adjusting for their context

Most secondary schools' absence rates are either clearly higher or lower than the rates that we expected given the schools' context, such as the percentage of pupils with free school meals.

Absence rates after adjustment for schools' context



Source: NFER analysis for the National Audit Office

³ There are also wide variations in absence between local authorities, ranging from 5.48 per cent in Buckinghamshire to 8.54 per cent in Manchester in 2003-04.

10 Some of the remaining difference from absence rates that would be expected may partly be accounted for by factors that we could not include in our analysis – such as parental education, employment and attitudes. We concluded, however, that at least part of the difference is likely to be accounted for by schools’ practice in dealing with absence. We drew this conclusion from our direct contacts with the schools we visited, views of our reference panel, and our surveys of head teachers and education welfare officers. Head teachers, local authority education welfare services, Ofsted and the Department all agree that it should be possible to bring up the weaker standards and performance of some schools and improve pupil attendance across the country.

Achieving reductions through national initiatives

11 The Department has introduced a range of initiatives to fund and support tackling absence at a local level. We examined each of the main initiatives, sought opinions across the education sector about their effectiveness and reviewed evaluations of the initiatives. Overall, we found that the initiatives are contributing positively to managing school attendance (**Figure 4**).

12 Evaluations of initiatives are important to identify how well they work and to provide an assessment of their costs and benefits. The Department has commissioned evaluations of most of its attendance-related initiatives. Its most extensive initiative related to attendance, the Behaviour Improvement Programme, started in July 2002 and will continue until at least 2005-06 by which time £331 million will have been spent. Evaluation of the impact of the Programme is underway.

4 National initiatives to help manage pupil attendance

Initiative	Description	Our findings
Behaviour Improvement Programme (paragraphs 3.2 to 3.6)	Provides funding to local authorities in deprived areas to tackle poor standards of behaviour among pupils, including poor attendance.	Absence rates have declined in targeted schools on average twice as fast as the decline in the national absence rate. Around one fifth of schools have not reduced absence.
Behaviour and attendance strand of the Key Stage 3 strategy (paragraphs 3.7 to 3.9 and 3.11)	Provides funding for every local authority to employ behaviour and attendance consultants to work with schools and provides training and other materials for schools.	Attendance is being given a higher priority in some local authorities and schools.
Attendance adviser support (paragraphs 3.10 to 3.11)	From February 2003 to April 2004, provided expert support and advice to 60 local authorities with high levels of unauthorised absence.	The need for more advice and guidance is generally accepted and the local authorities involved showed improvements. However, there was resistance in some authorities, for example because they perceived that advisers lacked local knowledge.
Electronic registration systems (paragraphs 3.12 to 3.15)	Provides capital funding to targeted schools to help them install computer systems to record and monitor attendance.	Systems provide very effective support. A minority of schools have found it difficult to implement systems.
National truancy sweeps (paragraphs 3.16 to 3.20)	Carried out in most local authority areas, sweeps stop pupils in public places during school hours.	Effective in raising the profile of school attendance, though relatively small numbers of pupils are returned to school.
Increased emphasis on prosecution (paragraphs 3.21 to 3.28)	Prosecution of parents by local authorities.	The prosecution process has been streamlined. The overall effectiveness of prosecution is uncertain, but thought to provide a deterrent and has changed behaviour in some cases.
Penalty notices (paragraphs 3.22 and 3.29)	Local authorities and schools can fine parents £50 where pupils are absent from school without authorisation.	Too early to evaluate, but some schools are optimistic about effectiveness.

Source: National Audit Office

13 The Department funds a wide range of other initiatives aimed at improving schools' leadership, curricula and teaching, as well as the physical environment of the school. These wider initiatives are likely to have an impact on attendance. For example, our analysis indicated that Excellence in Cities⁴ schools, which receive additional funding, are associated with falls in total absence and unauthorised absence. It is important that the Department's evaluations of wider initiatives include an assessment of the impact on pupil absence.

14 For some of its initiatives to work more effectively, the Department needs to improve communications with and between local authority education welfare services and schools. For example, we found that some local authorities did not see value in the advice given by the advisers whom the Department funds. They considered that the advisers did not provide expertise over and above that of their own staff, and that some did not tailor their advice to meet local circumstances. On the other hand, around half of the head teachers we surveyed would welcome more guidance on aspects such as term-time holidays, dealing with difficult parental attitudes, and use of sanctions. Guidance is already available in some of these areas, but schools need help in how best to apply it locally.

15 Pupils who struggle with academic subjects at secondary school are at particular risk of being absent and failing to attain basic skills. Alternative curricula and vocational education can motivate these pupils to attend school by matching courses more closely to their aspirations. Small numbers of schools and colleges provide vocational training to 14 to 16-year olds, generally as part of a locally developed and promoted initiative. The Tomlinson Report⁵ on education and training of 14 to 19-year olds concluded that schools need to strengthen their vocational programmes over the next ten years. In our recent report on improving adult literacy and numeracy⁶, we noted the progress being made in developing combined programmes of vocational learning and literacy, language and numeracy training for adults. These developments provide a source of good practice and experience in addition to the progress already being made in some schools.

Achieving reductions through more effective local practices

16 We identified a number of practices that worked well in schools. **Figure 5 overleaf** outlines these practices and sets out our findings on how well the schools that we surveyed and visited have implemented them.

17 Most of the schools we visited had most of these practices in place. However, they represented a wide range of levels of attendance – both in absolute terms and adjusted for their context. The main common factor we identified in the schools with the highest attendance was that the schools had adopted all or virtually all the practices some time ago, and had followed them consistently over several years. Other schools that had more recently started to operate the practices in a consistent manner were beginning to see signs of improvement.

18 Local authorities' education welfare services provide support to schools in handling difficult cases and many services also advise schools on attendance management. Head teachers acknowledge the importance of the services' role, and most schools are satisfied with the service they receive, but a minority responding to our survey (14 per cent in secondary schools) suggested that the service provided by their local authority was ineffective. We observed that the most effective services were providing a comprehensive, consistent service that supported the range of expectations of schools outlined in Figure 5. In particular, effective services provided in-depth analyses of the causes of absence as well as comparative information between schools. They provided links between schools in similar circumstances to encourage them to share and spread effective practice.

19 Absence rates in primary schools are lower than those in secondary schools, at an average of around 5.5 per cent of days missed compared with 8 per cent respectively. This does not, however, mean that attendance among primary school pupils should receive low priority. Indeed the opposite is likely to be true, since pupils tend to fall into a pattern of absence that tends to increase over time if the causes are not resolved. How absence is handled in primary schools can therefore have a lasting impact – positive or negative – into secondary education. Some local authorities have therefore set up schemes to support pupils throughout their school careers, and especially during the transition from primary to secondary school.

⁴ Excellence in Cities is a targeted programme to bring additional resources to schools in deprived urban areas.

⁵ *14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform*, October 2004. (www.14-19reform.gov.uk/)

⁶ *Skills for Life: Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy* (HC20 2004-05), December 2004. (www.nao.org.uk/pn/04-05/040520.htm)

5 Effective practices in attendance management in schools

Effective practice

Clear policy on attendance, that is communicated to all parties (paragraph 4.5)

Head teacher supports and resources attendance management (paragraph 4.6)

Collection and regular analysis of reliable attendance data (paragraphs 4.7 to 4.9)

“First day calling” of parents of absent pupils (paragraph 4.10)

Electronic registration at each lesson (paragraph 4.11)

Reward schemes (paragraph 4.12)

Alternative curricula (in particular, more vocational education) (paragraph 4.13)

Threat of legal sanctions (paragraph 4.14)

Collaboration with other schools (paragraph 4.15)

Effective working with the local authority’s education welfare service (paragraphs 4.17 to 4.18)

Benefits

- Pupils and parents know what is expected and why
- Helps teachers to be consistent

- Staff more willing and able to give high priority to attendance
- Sufficient resources for initiatives to improve attendance

- Allows patterns to be identified, e.g. by year group, class, weekday or pupil
- Helps identify pupils with problems who need support
- If well communicated, helps reinforce the importance of good attendance

- Communicates to parents and pupils that absence is noted and needs explanation
- Identifies cases where support may be needed

- Used well, is efficient and provides reliable information, supporting monitoring and first-day calling
- Enables registration for each lesson, identification of lateness and post-registration truancy

- Encourage and recognise attendance
- Increase the profile of attendance

- Stimulate interest of those pupils who are less likely to achieve if focused solely on academic qualifications

- Where other methods fail to work, parents and pupils know that legal sanctions may be used

- Share best practice
- Strong schools can assist weaker schools

- Through expert advice and resources, helps schools to manage attendance effectively
- Provides specialist support for pupils with difficulties

Our findings

Most schools have a clear policy but there can be problems with communicating the policy to staff and parents, leading to inconsistent implementation.

Schools decide how to allocate their resources and the amount they allocate to attendance varies widely. Some schools give attendance a relatively low priority and they do not allocate sufficient resources to it.

The quality of information produced and its monitoring varies widely. Some schools use the information well in communicating with pupils and their families.

Most, but not all, schools operate first day calling, some using electronic systems linked to electronic registration.

Most secondary schools and some primary schools use some form of electronic registration, but more should do so – in particular the 1,100 or so secondary schools that use manual systems. A small minority of schools have had difficulties using it effectively.

Most secondary schools use reward schemes and consider them to be effective, and they are also often used in primary schools.

Relevant mainly to secondary schools, alternative curricula can be difficult to organise and are not widely used. The Tomlinson Report concluded that schools need to strengthen their vocational programmes.

Used mainly by local education authorities, but now more scope for schools to use them.

While some schools collaborate effectively, there is too little collaboration in some areas.

Some local authorities provide very effective services, but a small minority of head teachers consider that their authorities do not provide good support.

Source: National Audit Office

20 Many head teachers and local authorities consider that negative parental attitudes to education are the external factor that is most closely associated with high rates of absence. Their views are supported by our analysis of the findings of Ofsted inspections, as well as by research that has shown a link between parental attitudes and truancy. Changing the views of parents and carers who do not see the value of their children attending school regularly takes time and is unlikely to be achieved quickly. We found that the most successful schools had focused on changing their own culture towards attendance first. Over time they had integrated their views on the importance of attendance into their wider communications with parents and carers, especially by setting high expectations in promoting their school to new parents and during the first year of school.

21 Through its inspections of schools and local authorities, Ofsted is in a good position to influence and support the strengthening of local practices. Its reports carry great weight and poor performers are obliged to respond to its findings. Ofsted inspection teams have a unique insight into how schools are run, yet attendance has a very small part in most inspections. There is a risk that the most is not being made of inspectors' wide experience to help schools and authorities improve, particularly in the context of pupil attendance as one of just six national targets for schools.