



Children who do not attend school regularly are much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications, and they are more likely to be drawn into crime and anti-social behaviour. Parents are responsible, by law, for ensuring that their children receive suitable full-time education.

Our report *Improving School Attendance in England* looked at the connections between schools' circumstances and absence rates, the effectiveness of the Department for Education and Skills' initiatives, and gathered examples of good practice in managing attendance.

This leaflet has been written to disseminate the lessons from the NAO report.

ABSENCE - THE FACTS

Absence as a percentage of half days missed in state maintained schools in England has fallen from 7.61 per cent (1994-95) to 6.72 per cent (2003-04). The current rate of absence is equivalent to:

- 13 days missed per pupil;
- 450,000 of the 6.7 million pupils failing to attend school each day; and
- absent pupils sufficient to fill 816 average-sized primary schools plus 252 average secondary schools each day.

Absent pupils missed the equivalent of £1.6 billion of education in 2003-04.

IF PUPILS AREN'T AT SCHOOL,

Helping the nation spend wisely

The National Audit Office scrutinises public spending on behalf of Parliament.

The Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn, is an Officer of the House of Commons. He is the head of the National Audit Office, which employs some 800 staff. He and the National Audit Office are totally independent of Government. He audits the accounts of all Government departments and a wide range of other public sector bodies; and he reports to Parliament on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which Government bodies have used public money.

Our work saves the taxpayer millions of pounds every year; at least £8 for every £1 spent running the Office.

Value for money examinations look in detail at specific central government programmes and activities in order to assess performance, identify good practice and suggest ways in which public services could be improved.

High rates of absence are associated with low academic achievement. A survey of 30,000 16 year olds showed that persistent truants are less likely to be successful in their GCSEs. Occasional truants were also less successful than pupils who did not truant.

	(Percentage of respondents)		
	Persistent truants	Occasional truants	Non-truants
Achieved 5+ GCSEs at grades A* to C	13	40	60
Achieved no GCSEs	25	5	2

Source: Youth Cohort Study 2002, Department for Education and Skills

A matter of circumstance?

There are many causes of absence from school, with illness being the most common cause. Underlying causes of absence relate to school, home and pupil influences. For example, weaknesses in the quality and relevance of the curriculum can lead to absence, as can familial problems or drug addiction.

Working with the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), we found that high absence is associated with schools' circumstances and tends to be found in schools where there are:

- higher levels of pupils with free school meals;
- more exclusions;
- more pupils with Special Educational Needs; and
- more pupils whose first language is not English.

Levels of free schools meals are the best available proxy for measuring "school-level" deprivation. Our analysis found that the percentage of pupils that take up free schools meals is the contextual factor most closely associated with absence. Primary schools with very high levels of free school meals tend to have 4 days more absence per pupil each year than primary schools with average levels of free school meals. Secondary schools with very high levels of free school meals tend to have 7 days more absence per pupil annually than secondary schools with average levels. For more information on contextual factors that have a significant effect, see Appendix 2 of the NAO report at www.nao.org.uk.



THEY CAN'T LEARN



Room for improvement?

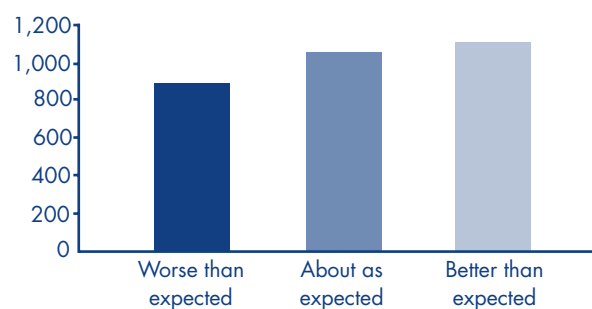
After examining secondary schools' absence rates in relation to their circumstances, we found that:

- 1,091 schools had absence rates that were better than expected given their circumstances;
- 1,059 schools had absence rates about as expected given their circumstances; and
- 928 schools had absence rates that were worse than expected given their circumstances.

Although many primary and secondary schools have practices in place to manage attendance, the efforts must be continued over a long period to achieve a substantial and lasting effect. Some schools also need to apply more effective practice, and regularly review their approach to attendance management, preferably in collaboration with other schools and their local authorities.

The main common factor that we identified in the schools with the highest attendance was that they had adopted all or virtually all of the effective practices (set out overleaf), and had followed them consistently over several years.

Number of secondary schools



Absence rates after adjustment for schools' circumstances

HEREWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE, PETERBOROUGH

Hereward Community College is a secondary school located in a relatively deprived part of town. In the 2002-03 school year, its total absence rate was 7 per cent (close to the national average) and its unauthorised absence rate was 1.9 per cent (much higher than the national average). The school has a relatively high number of pupils from traveller families and high levels of free school meals. After adjusting total absence rates for the

school's context, we found that it was performing far better than might be expected given its circumstances: the school was ranked the 7th best performing secondary school in England. When visiting the school, we found that the head teacher placed great emphasis on getting pupils to attend school. The school has a full-time attendance officer and runs an electronic registration system.



EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

We identified a number of practices that worked well in schools. Here we outline these practices and our findings on how well the schools we surveyed and visited have implemented them.

Millbank Primary School, London Borough of Westminster

The head teacher believes that improving parental attitudes is extremely important in tackling absence, so the school has adopted a number of measures to achieve this:

- parents who take their children on term-time holidays are invited to an interview with the head teacher – she shows them the work that other pupils have produced during their child's absence in order to emphasise the lessons that they have missed;
- the head warns parents that they may lose their child's place if the child is absent for an unauthorised extended leave – one family's children lost their places at the school as a result;
- the link between attendance and attainment is constantly reinforced by teachers and through the school newsletter; and
- attendance figures are shown in large print at the top of pupils' school reports.

The head teacher considers that it took more than three years to achieve a change in some parents' attitudes and to see the effects on attendance levels. Our analysis found that Millbank Primary's absence rate in 2002-03 was much lower than predicted by its circumstances and 2.7 percentage points lower than in 1999-00.

Acland Burghley School, London Borough of Camden

This school runs a weekly lottery for a five pounds cash prize. At assembly, a tutor group is first drawn at random from a bag, and then a pupil number is drawn from another bag. If that pupil has a 100 per cent attendance record for the fortnight, they win a prize, but if not then the prize rolls over to the next week. Pupils enjoy the event and it helps to increase their motivation to come to school.

Effective practice	Benefits
Clear policy on attendance that is communicated to all parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pupils and parents know what is expected and why ■ Emphasises the link between attendance and attainment ■ Helps teachers to be consistent
Head teacher supports and resources attendance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Staff more willing and able to give high priority to attendance ■ Sufficient resources for initiatives to improve attendance
Electronic registration at each lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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
Collection and regular analysis of reliable attendance data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 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
"First day calling" of parents of absent pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Communicates to parents and pupils that absence is noted and needs explanation ■ Identifies cases where support may be needed
Reward schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Encourage and recognise attendance ■ Increase the profile of attendance
Alternative curricula (in particular, more vocational education)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Stimulate interest of those pupils who are less likely to achieve if focused solely on academic qualifications
Threat of legal sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Where other methods fail to work, parents and pupils know that legal sanctions may be used



What we found

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.

Most secondary schools and some primary schools use some form of electronic registration, but more should do so – in particular the 1,400 or so secondary schools that use manual systems. A small minority of schools have had difficulties using it effectively.

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

Schools should use the data to devise solutions that address specific problems as they emerge, such as targeting groups of pupils that most impact on attendance levels. They can also raise the profile of attendance by asking older pupils to analyse the data themselves.

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

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. Schools can achieve this by drawing on the experience of those schools that are already making a success of combining vocational and academic learning.

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

Abbey Wood School, London Borough of Greenwich

Electronic registration involves either teachers using IT in classrooms to record attendance or “optical mark reading” equipment converting paper registers into electronic data. The software produces reports and analysis of attendance records.

Abbey Wood School has a system that allows teachers to record the register each lesson using a personal digital assistant, which then transmits the results by radio waves to a central personal computer. The personal computer generates a daily contact list of parents of pupils absent that day. The school’s administrative staff telephone the parent and record the response on the computer system. Where telephone calls are not answered, the system generates letters to parents. The system is also useful for quickly identifying “internal truancy” that occurs when pupils register at the beginning of the session but then miss individual lessons. The school uses weekly and monthly reports to identify patterns of absence. The school is, in particular, aiming to increase attendance by pupils who currently attend between 75 per cent and 89 per cent – these pupils have a disproportionate effect on the overall absence rate.

Bedford College, Bedfordshire

Bedford College is a further education college that has introduced vocational programmes for 14-16 year old pupils of five local secondary schools. Training is available in a range of fields including catering, vehicle maintenance, hairdressing and construction. The schools retain the registration of the pupils and still receive local authority payments for them, but reimburse the college the costs of the course. At the College, pupils are given a mixture of vocational training and unpaid work experience with local employers. Some still go to their school to study English and Mathematics. Most pupils and their parents like these arrangements and attendance has improved.

HOW EFFECTIVE HAVE THE NATIONAL INITIATIVES BEEN IN TACKLING ABSENCE?

The Department for Education and Skills has directly funded a number of initiatives, including consultants and electronic registration systems, which encourage local authorities and schools to take action to improve attendance. We examined the impacts of the Department's initiatives.

Initiative

What we found

Behaviour Improvement Programme

The Behaviour Improvement Programme provides local authorities and schools with funding to tackle poor standards of behaviour, including poor attendance. Absence rates have declined in targeted schools on average twice as fast as the decline in the national absence rate. Four fifths of the targeted schools have reduced absence.

Behaviour and attendance strand of the Key Stage 3 strategy

The initiative provides funding for every local authority to employ behaviour and attendance consultants to work with schools. The initiative is leading to some local authorities and schools giving a higher priority to attendance.

National truancy sweeps

Sweeps have raised the profile of school attendance, though relatively small numbers of pupils are returned to school. They can also help to tackle parentally-condoned absence. But some local authorities consider that sweeps are not cost-effective.

Increased emphasis on prosecution

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. In our school survey, 43 per cent of head teachers of primary and secondary schools responded that they consider the fast-track to prosecution process has been effective.

Penalty notices

Too early to evaluate at school level, but some schools are optimistic about their effectiveness. Birmingham City Council has used, or threatened to use, penalty notices on 800 occasions and achieved improved attendance in 776 cases (97 per cent).

Using Behaviour Improvement Programme funding

Newcastle City Council allocated some BIP funding to one secondary school and its four feeder primary schools. The schools decided together to spend some of their funding to supplement the local authority's education welfare service. Part of the service is now dedicated to the five schools and physically located in each of the schools. The service is still managed by the local authority but its priorities are decided by the schools. The service's roles include first day visiting parents of persistently absent pupils, and developing schemes for encouraging attendance such as home reading books that emphasise the importance of good attendance. Participants felt that this arrangement allowed the service to provide better support for the schools and families, and that it has contributed to reductions in absence across the five schools.

We recommended that:

- The Department, local authorities and schools must sustain the current momentum and emphasis on improving attendance, as we found that efforts to reduce absence must be maintained over a long period in order to achieve a substantial and lasting effect;
- The Department, local authorities and schools need to work together to develop strategies for changing negative parental attitudes to education;
- The Department should look to reinforce the focus of attention on unauthorised absence of primary schools pupils;
- Schools should embed a range of actions, based on established good practice, in the day-to-day life of the school;
- An improvement is needed in the collection and use of data on absence;
- The Department should encourage more secondary schools to use electronic registration systems; and
- The Department and local authorities need to help schools develop their curriculum in ways that match the aptitudes and aspirations of their pupils.





OTHER NAO REPORTS ON SCHOOLS

Making a difference: Performance of maintained secondary schools in England (November 2003)

Improving the academic achievement of all pupils is a key priority of the Department for Education and Skills, but the extent to which schools make a difference is only partly due to factors within their control.

The Department takes prior educational achievement into account when constructing league tables of schools' performance. But this NAO report also analysed a range of other external factors – such as economic and social background, ethnicity, gender, age and special educational needs – to demonstrate how these might affect a school's ranking.

Maintained schools in England - Improving under-performing schools (Expected Dec 2005)

The report will examine whether:

- enough is being done to identify and support schools that show signs of deteriorating performance;
- effective measures are being taken to address under-performance; and
- “turned round” schools are continuing to improve performance after coming out of difficulties.

All NAO reports can be found at www.nao.org.uk

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Useful Links

Improving School Attendance in England
http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/04-05/0405212.pdf

House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts:
transcript of hearing
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmpubacc/uc404-i/uc40402.htm>

Department for Education and Skills:
School Attendance Website
<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/schoolattendance>

Teachernet: Attendance & Discipline
www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/behaviour

Ofsted:
Improving Attendance and Behaviour in
Secondary Schools
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/docs/1021.pdf>