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MISS SCHOOL = MISS OUT

A Strategy for Improving Pupil Attendance

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Terms Used in this Document

BoG	Board of Governors
CFS	Common Funding Scheme: Under the provisions of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, a Common Funding Scheme (Scheme) has been drawn up to apply to all grant-aided schools funded under the Local Management of Schools (LMS) arrangements.
Department	Department of Education
EA	Education Authority
ETI	Education & Training Inspectorate
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
EWS	Education Welfare Service is a specialist education support service which helps young people of compulsory school age and their families get the best out of the education system. EWS enables the EA to fulfil its statutory duty in respect of pupil attendance.
FSME	Free School Meal Entitlement
IDS	Inclusion & Diversity Service; offers advice, resources and support to schools and teachers who are working with Newcomer pupils.
LAC	Looked after Child. A child or young person who is in the care of a Trust or who is provided with accommodation by a Trust.
Newcomer	A child or young person who is enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher.
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
Parent	Refers to the parent, carer and/or legal guardian of a child or young person.
TESS	Traveller Education Support Service; It provides support to schools, Traveller children and young people to improve educational outcomes.

Minister's Foreword

At the centre of my school improvement policy *Every School a Good School* are the needs and aspirations of children and young people. My aim is to raise educational standards for all and reduce the attainment gap. Ensuring that all of our children are engaged and involved in education is the best way for us to invest in their future success. Attending school regularly can help pupils maximise their own life chances and the potential contribution they can make to society and our future economy. I am therefore pleased to be introducing this strategy to help focus our efforts on improving pupil attendance.

Although the evidence shows that the majority of pupils attend school regularly, there are children and young people within our schools who struggle to attend and who need extra support. This strategy will provide the impetus to build more effectively upon existing good practice in our schools and will bring together our existing policies to strengthen our determination to improve pupil attendance.

The key role for the Department is to provide a coherent strategy for improvement and to help translate the strategy into actions for parents, schools and support services that will encourage regular attendance at school. This strategy focuses on strengthening four key areas:

- improving attendance as a key element of school development planning;
- ensuring systems are in place to identify issues and take action at the earliest possible opportunity;
- supporting children struggling with attendance, particularly those children within vulnerable groups; and
- engaging and collaborating across education and other relevant services to improve regular school attendance.

The Department will continue to work in partnership with all stakeholders to ensure that the importance of improving school attendance and therefore the life chances for our children and young people is widely understood and promoted.

Although the responses to the public consultation on this strategy will be received after my term in office I am keen that the views of as wide a section as possible of key stakeholders, including young people themselves, are heard in order to inform a new Minister's thinking about such an important strategy.



John O'Dowd MLA
Minister for Education

Executive Summary

Attending school regularly is important for all children and young people because of the link between attendance and attainment. Although the evidence shows that most pupils attend school regularly there are some who struggle with attendance. Overall school attendance was 94.6% of possible attendance in 2014/15 but this translates into 2.8 million missed school days or the equivalent of 10 days for each pupil enrolled in our schools.

School attendance is managed within the existing legislative framework and the current policies and processes. Parents have a legal responsibility to ensure their children regularly attend the school in which they are enrolled. This strategy draws upon the good practice already in existence in schools to build an overarching framework to guide the actions of all those working to support improved school attendance.

The schools most successful at improving attendance take a holistic approach. These schools are proactive in the use of effective strategies for those struggling with attendance. Shared key elements in these schools are:

- **Leadership committed to prioritising attendance;**
- **Effective early intervention;**
- **Appropriate support for pupils; and**
- **Effective collaboration and engagement.**

This strategy encompasses all of these key elements and sets out the indicators of success in each of the elements.

Commitment from school leadership allows the creation of a school ethos and culture that values the importance of attendance and its link to attainment. School attendance will be considered when developing school plans and attendance will be discussed by the Board of Governors (BoG). Leaders will promote school attendance policies and be proactive in implementing appropriate strategies to address attendance issues. This will be tailored to the school circumstances and might include extra support for those struggling with regular attendance such as adjustments and tailoring of the curriculum, personal education plans, or homework clubs.

Schools which successfully address poor attendance will monitor data closely, take prompt action on potential concerns and involve parents at an early stage. Some schools will use internal resources successfully to provide additional support to improve attendance. When they feel they have exhausted their own strategies and need help to address the concern they will involve support services in a timely manner.

If a school is concerned about a pupil's pattern of attendance or attendance has reduced to below 85% they should seek support from the EA. The EA has a dedicated Education Welfare Service (EWS) which helps young people of school age and their families to get the best out of the education system. Its aim is to promote a culture of regular attendance at school. EWOs work proactively with schools to raise awareness of attendance issues using agreed strategies for example; Primary Attendance Matters programme, whole school assemblies, information sessions for parents/teaching staff on the role of EWS.

This strategy outlines a universal approach to supporting pupil attendance. It applies to all schools and all pupils; however, there are specific vulnerable groups of children and young people who may require additional support. The Department provides additional support for pupils who fall within specific vulnerable groups including those entitled to Free School Meals, newcomer and traveller children and looked-after children. There are also a number of policies and intervention in place to support children and young people struggling with other issues which might impact upon attendance such as emotional health and well-being or bullying.

It is vital that parents are involved at all times in their child's education to provide encouragement and support from an early age and to establish positive attitudes to attending school. Engagement with parents will form an important element of every school's attendance policy and procedures. At a strategic/system level, government departments and agencies can work together to promote the importance of regular attendance at school, so that when individuals (parents/carers and pupils) engage with services, such as health, justice, local government or social care, a consistent message on school attendance is understood and shared. This cross-sectoral collaboration can also help us to engage with local communities to ensure that the value of education and regular school attendance is understood and championed within those communities.

There are plenty of examples of good practice to improve attendance in schools which other schools could draw upon. The Department provides guidance for schools on improving attendance. In addition to this the Education and Training Inspectorate is developing a good practice guide based upon examples of best practice in schools which will be available to assist schools in improving attendance.

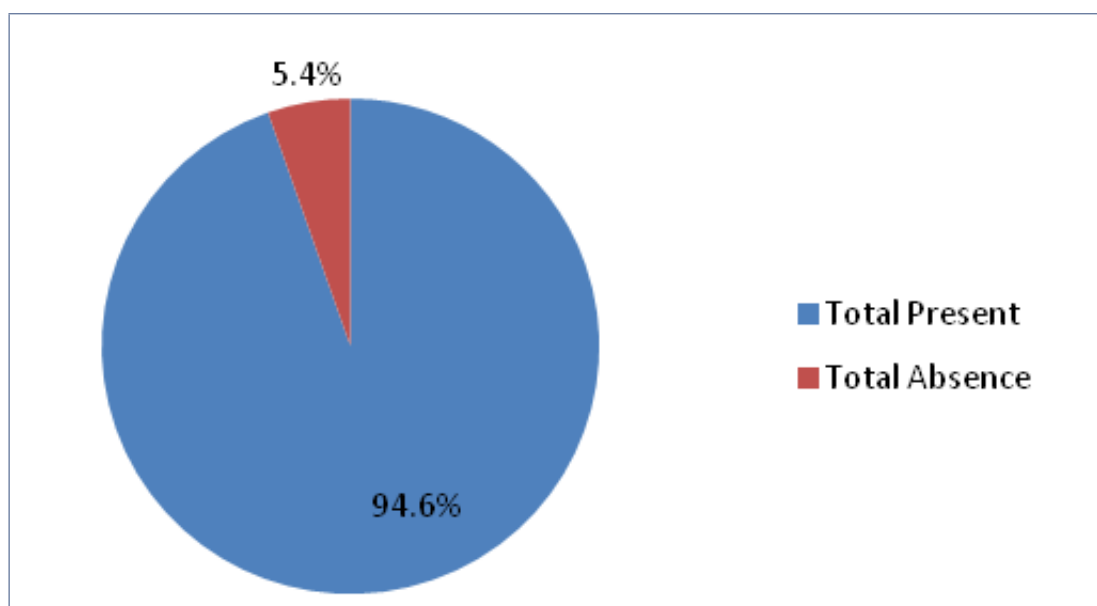
Despite the importance of attendance and the great work currently ongoing in school and support services the statistics show that there has been little change over the past number of years. DE has reaffirmed its commitment by growing existing policies on attendance into a single framework based upon the key elements shared by schools that are most successful in improving attendance to guide the way forward. The strategy alongside the guidance the Department issues and the support services provided by the EA will support schools parents and pupils to improve attendance.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 "Miss School = Miss out" has been a consistent theme within recent materials aimed at promoting the value of regular school attendance. This simple phrase summarises and simplifies the potential impact of non attendance at school and supports the evidence that shows the direct link between school attendance and educational achievement. This strategy will set out the importance of improving attendance at school and therefore enhancing the life chances of our children and young people, particularly those who are struggling with attending school.
- 1.1.2 The majority of pupils attend school regularly and are supported to do so by their parents. Engagement with schools has highlighted multiple examples of good practice in respect of managing attendance in schools and the dedication of staff within schools to supporting and encouraging regular attendance.
- 1.1.3 Therefore it is no surprise that statistics show that the overall attendance rate, which does not change much from year to year, is similar to that of other jurisdictions. The overall attendance rate in 2014/15 was 94.6% with an absence rate of 5.4% (see *Figure 1*). Although this statistic would appear quite positive, it translates into some 2.8 million missed school days in 2014/15, or 10 days for each pupil.

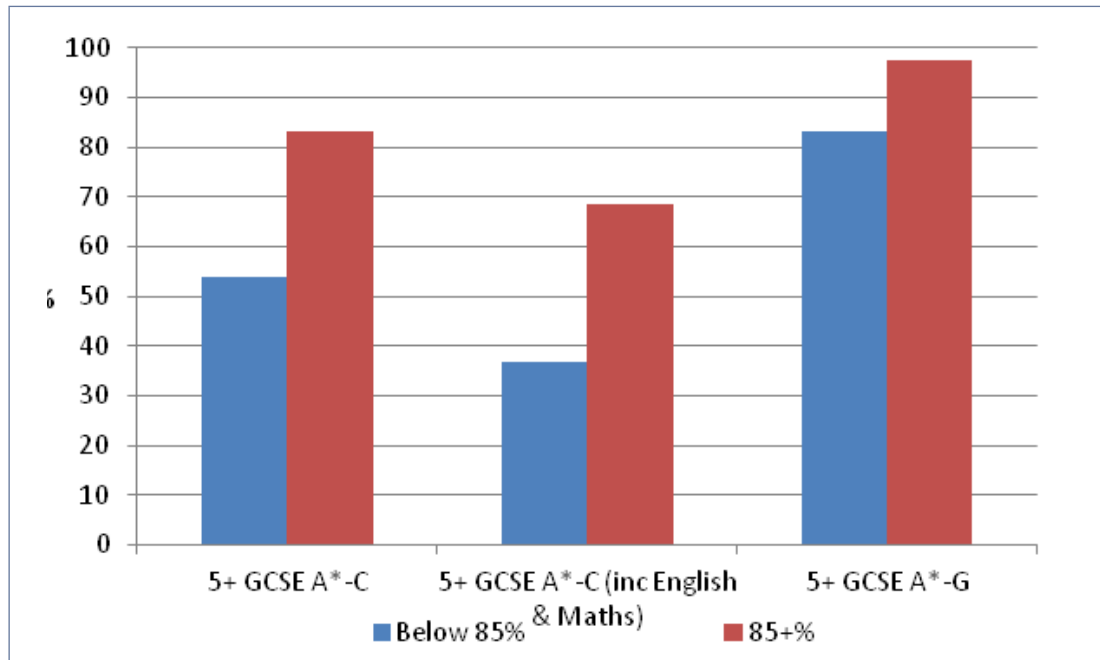
Figure 1 Attendance and non-attendance 2014/15



Source: The Northern Ireland School Census 2015/16

1.1.4 Low levels of attendance are a concern with 18,401 pupils¹ in 2014/15 missing 15% or more school days, meaning each pupil missed over 5 weeks of school. Figure 2 demonstrates that the educational attainment of those pupils with less than 85% attendance is markedly lower than those pupils who achieve an attendance rate of 85% or higher.

Figure 2 GCSE performance of school leavers by attendance 2013/14



Source: The Northern Ireland School Leavers Survey 2013/14²

1.1.5 Considerable work has been undertaken by schools in respect of managing attendance and the number of pupils with attendance of 85% or less has reduced³ significantly from almost 25,000 in 2009/10 to almost 18,500 in 2014/15⁴ (see Figure 3).

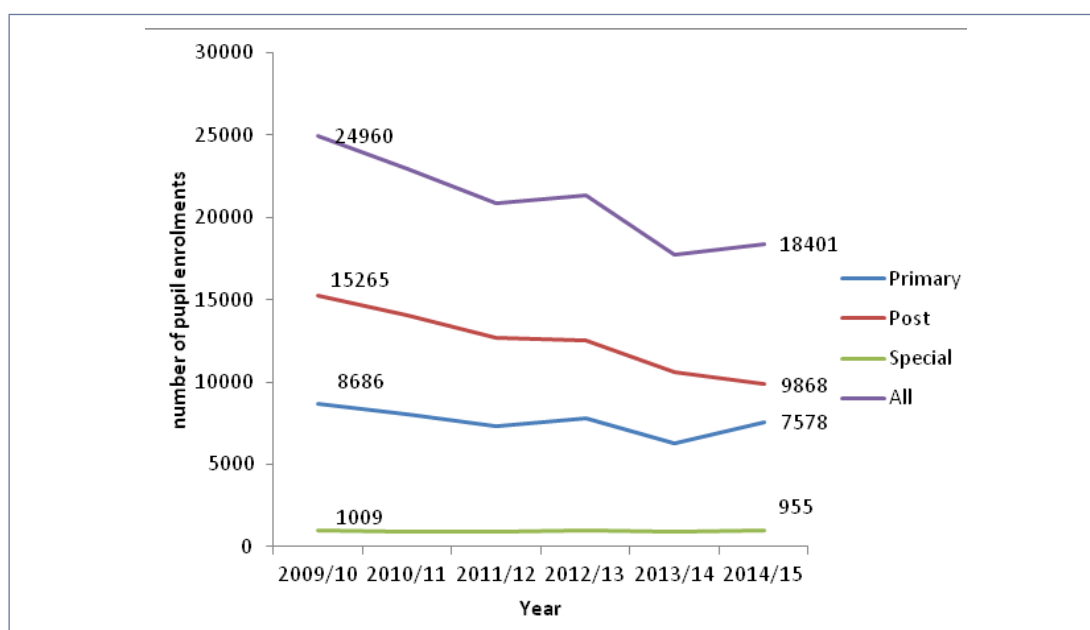
¹ The term pupil is used to represent all pupil enrolments. Pupil enrolments allow for pupils moving between schools during the academic year therefore it is possible for a pupil to have more than one enrolment for a particular academic year and have more than one attendance monitoring return.

² At the time of publication GCSE results for 2014/15 was not available.

³ There has been a slight reduction in the school population over this period with the total number of pupils reducing from 283,000 in 2009/10 to 282,000 in 2014/15.

⁴ NI Schools Census.

Figure 3 Pupils enrolments with less than 85% attendance; all schools 2009/10–2014/15



Source: The Northern Ireland School Census 2009/10–2015/16

- 1.1.6 Managing pupil attendance is further complicated by the percentage of unauthorised absence, where no acceptable reason has been provided to the school for the absence. Table 1 shows the reality of the actual number of school days lost due to absences, both authorised and unauthorised, in 2014/15.

Table 1 All schools in the north of Ireland; attendance and non-attendance 2014/15

All schools attendance data 2014/15 ⁵	Number of days ⁶ (millions)	Percentage of total number of possible days attended
Total possible attendance	50.9	100
Total present	48.2	94.6
Total absence	2.8	5.4
Total authorised absence	2.0	3.9
Total unauthorised absence	0.8	1.5

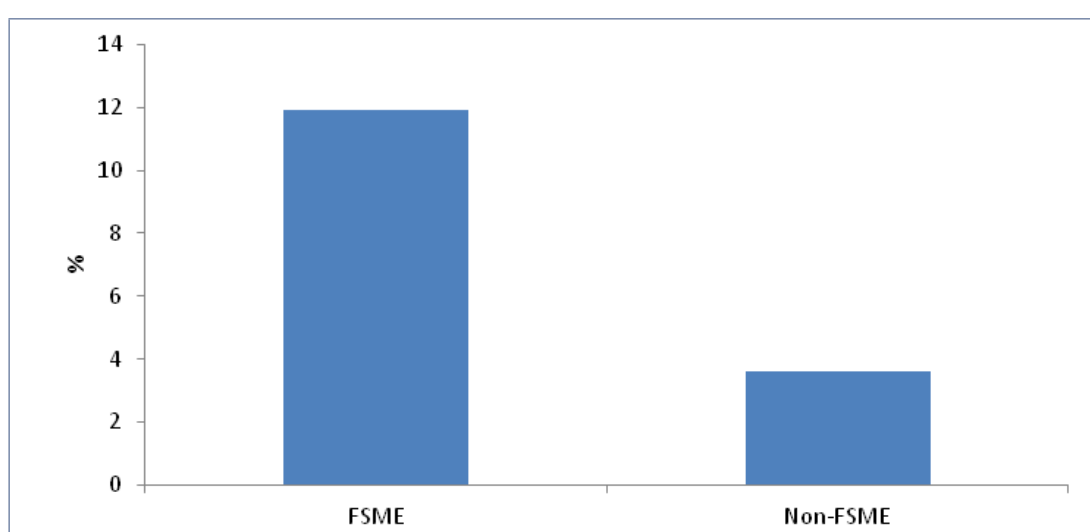
Source: The Northern Ireland School Census 2015/16

⁵ The figures for the number of days in the table are rounded however the percentage figures are calculated from unrounded data; the result being that the reader should not attempt to replicate the percentages from the rounded figures in the table.

⁶ For ease of interpretability attendance data in the table are presented as days; schools report pupil attendance in half day periods which have been converted to days in the table.

- 1.1.7 Attendance is important for every pupil, as non-attendance has been attributed to potentially increasing the risk of young people making poor life choices such as anti-social behaviour, criminality and exploitation. Some vulnerable groups of children and young people who require additional support to help them to achieve their best.
- 1.1.8 Data shows that there are links between social deprivation and school attendance. The overall absence levels increase in line with the percentage of pupils enrolled who are eligible for free school meals (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Percentage of all school pupil enrolments with less than 85% attendance by Free School Meals Eligibility (FSME); 2014/15



Source: School Census 2015/16

- 1.1.9 A key element of this strategy is to ensure that attendance issues are identified and addressed at the earliest possible opportunity, to ensure that all our children and young people regardless of their circumstances get the best possible opportunity to fulfil their potential.

1.2 Context

The current position

- 1.2.1 This strategy takes cognisance of the existing legislative framework, systems and policies for managing pupil attendance. Its development has been informed by recent research into improving school attendance including stakeholder engagement and reports from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)/Public Accounts Committee (PAC).

Legislative Framework

- 1.2.2 Parents have a statutory duty, as set out in Article 45 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (1986 order), to ensure that each child of compulsory school age receives full time education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. If a parent registers their child in a school they have a legal duty under the 1986 order to ensure they attend school regularly.
- 1.2.3 Schools have a duty, as set out in the Registration and Attendance of Pupils Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1974, to keep details of their pupil's attendance and have arrangements in place to address attendance issues. The Education (School Development Plans) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 state that schools should include strategies for promoting attendance in their School Development Plan.
- 1.2.4 Under the 1986 order if a child or young person who is registered at a school does not attend regularly the Education Authority (EA) can initiate court action which could result in the parent receiving a fine not exceeding (£1,000) for each child. The EA can also apply under the Children (NI) Order 1995 for an Education Supervision Order⁷ to be made by the court.

Existing system

- 1.2.5 The key elements of the existing system for managing attendance are as follows:
- The importance of attendance is communicated through published materials, promotional activities and best practice guidance for schools.
 - Schools inform parents and pupils of the schools attendance policies and procedures including the roles and responsibilities of the pupils and parents.
 - Schools record details of pupil attendance electronically and use the data to monitor and analyse attendance to take prompt appropriate action in cases of persistent poor attendance or patterns that give cause for concern. Parents are involved at the outset.
 - Attendance information on a pupil is regularly provided for the parent and the parent is contacted when any issue or concern arises.
 - If a school has concerns it is unable to resolve or attendance falls to below 85% they should refer the pupil to the EA's Education Welfare Service (EWS).

⁷ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance at School (November 2004).

- EWS provides support for schools, pupils and parents to improve attendance at school and the EA has the legal authority to take action against a parent. The enforcement of penalties upon parents is used as the last resort mainly when a parent fails to co-operate and no improvement in the pupil's attendance occurs.

Approaches in other jurisdictions

- 1.2.6 Research into other jurisdictions confirmed broadly similar policies in respect of attendance. Attendance policies in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada and New Zealand, emphasise the central and key role of the parent in securing their child's regular attendance at school. Each country ensures that schools and local authorities have attendance policies and support mechanisms in place both to assist parents and to understand influences upon attendance emanating from both the school and the external environment.
- 1.2.7 Schools and local authorities are assisted through the provision of non-statutory guidance from central government on what constitutes an effective attendance policy. The guidance provides the basis for schools to develop and tailor their attendance policies to their specific circumstances. The enforcement of penalties upon parents is used as the last resort mostly in circumstances where a parent fails to co-operate.
- 1.2.8 A summary of the attendance policies in other jurisdictions has been provided in Appendix 1.

Views of schools, parents, young people, and the Education Authority

- 1.2.9 In order to inform the content of this strategy a number of engagement events were held with schools, parents, young people and Education Authority staff. Further detail of these events is included in Appendix 2. A full list of stakeholders is provided in Appendix 3.
- 1.2.10 A number of themes emerged from the engagement events including the need for a common understanding across all groups about the benefits of full parental engagement and communication in relation to poor attendance at the earliest possible opportunity. There was also a consensus about the value of support mechanisms to address non-attendance.
- 1.2.11 Engagement was carried out with young people (aged 15–22 years) who had struggled to attend school. Some of them referred to a sense of demoralisation whenever they perceived that the curriculum was not sufficiently relevant for them and teachers

simply gave up on them if they struggled to attend and attain. However when asked, if they, would do anything differently, they all said that they would have attended school more regularly to improve their opportunities.

- 1.2.12 Younger (primary age) children were consulted via a questionnaire. Many valued school as a safe supportive environment and indicated that teachers and friends were crucial to that feeling. However some identified reasons why they would not want to go to school, such as tiredness, schoolwork and bullying. Parents had a vital role in the children's lives in encouraging attendance and praising good performance.
- 1.2.13 Whilst parents proved difficult to engage, those who attended the engagement events agreed upon the value of schooling. Bullying was an issue parents raised as a concern and valuing strong and robust approaches by their school to the problem. Parents expressed their support for incentives such as reward and recognition for good attendance.
- 1.2.14 Engagement with support services and principals revealed similar concerns around the availability of resources to deal with attendance concerns. They also both expressed some concern around liaison between schools and support services and the effectiveness of the legal system. The role of the school in managing attendance and the requirement for schools to have an attendance policy were also raised as concerns.
- 1.2.15 The engagement events confirmed that key elements of improving attendance are identifying potential concerns at an early stage, parental engagement in improving attendance and strong support systems to assist those who struggle with attendance.

Recent reports

- 1.2.16 The NIAO produced a report on improving pupil attendance in 2004⁸ and a follow-up report was published in 2014⁹. The PAC also published its own report on Improving Pupil Attendance on 11 June 2014¹⁰. These reports made a number of recommendations including the need for the development of a clear strategic perspective in relation to improving school attendance.

⁸ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-up Report (February 2014).

⁹ Report on Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-up Report – Public Accounts Committee 2014.

¹⁰ Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas – RSM McClure Watters 2012.

- 1.2.17 The Department commissioned research by McClure Watters¹¹ into pupil attendance in socially deprived areas in 2012. The report noted that there cannot be one single solution to improving attendance. It also identified positive outcomes from Extended Schools funding which had provided opportunities to strengthen links with families and communities and to communicate with parents on a range of issues including attendance. The benefit of every school developing an Attendance Policy, which clearly sets out its expectations for pupils and parents, was emphasised. It recommended that easily accessible best practice examples and case studies should be provided to guide schools and help them to address the common issues on attendance management. These recommendations have been encompassed into our strategic direction.
- 1.2.18 Charlie Taylor, the UK government expert advisor on behaviour¹² confirmed the emphasis on early intervention when he highlighted the link between poor attendance at school and lower academic achievement. Non-attendance starts at primary level and becomes a pattern. This pattern is very often repeated throughout secondary years and establishes poor attitudes towards school. Early intervention is a key strand of our existing policies and this strategy.

¹¹ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/180772/DFE-00036-2012_improving_attendance_at_school.pdf

¹² IPSOS MORI The Amsterdam Project.

2. Our Vision for School Attendance

2.1 "There is no one solution or 'magic bullet' to school attendance"¹³. However this overarching strategy for school attendance provides a framework for all those involved in managing and improving attendance in our schools. The overall policy aim is to:

- Maximise the attendance rate for pupils so that they are in school being educated and supported to reach their full potential.

2.2 This strategy will:

- Provide a framework which brings together and builds upon the work already in progress to improve attendance.
- Establish the strategic direction in respect of school attendance to inform the actions of those responsible for managing attendance.

2.3 Research indicates that schools which are most effective in promoting pupil attendance share a number of key features:

- **Leadership committed to prioritising attendance;**
- **Effective early intervention;**
- **Appropriate supports for pupils; and**
- **Effective collaboration and engagement.**

An effective attendance strategy must therefore incorporate all of these elements as well as the use of effective tailored strategies by schools such as additional support or curriculum adjustments for those struggling with attendance. Underpinning this approach must be the sharing of best practice, so that schools can learn from each other to the benefit of their pupils.

¹³ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-up Report (February 2014).

2.4 The indicators of effective performance associated with each of the key features of successfully managing attendance are set out below:

Indicators of leadership committed to prioritising attendance
A clear commitment exists within the school leadership to promote regular attendance and to communicate the impact of non-attendance at all appropriate opportunities to staff, pupils and parents.
The school has an attendance policy and challenging individual school attendance targets which are part of the School Development Plan and discussed regularly at BoG meetings.
Attendance is a consideration when determining school improvement plans and resource allocations from within delegated school budgets.
Everyone in the school has a role in respect of attendance and they are clear on their own responsibilities and those of the staff with additional specific roles.
School leaders are proactive in implementing a range of strategies to improve attendance such as additional support measures for those struggling with regular attendance including curriculum adjustments or personal education plans.

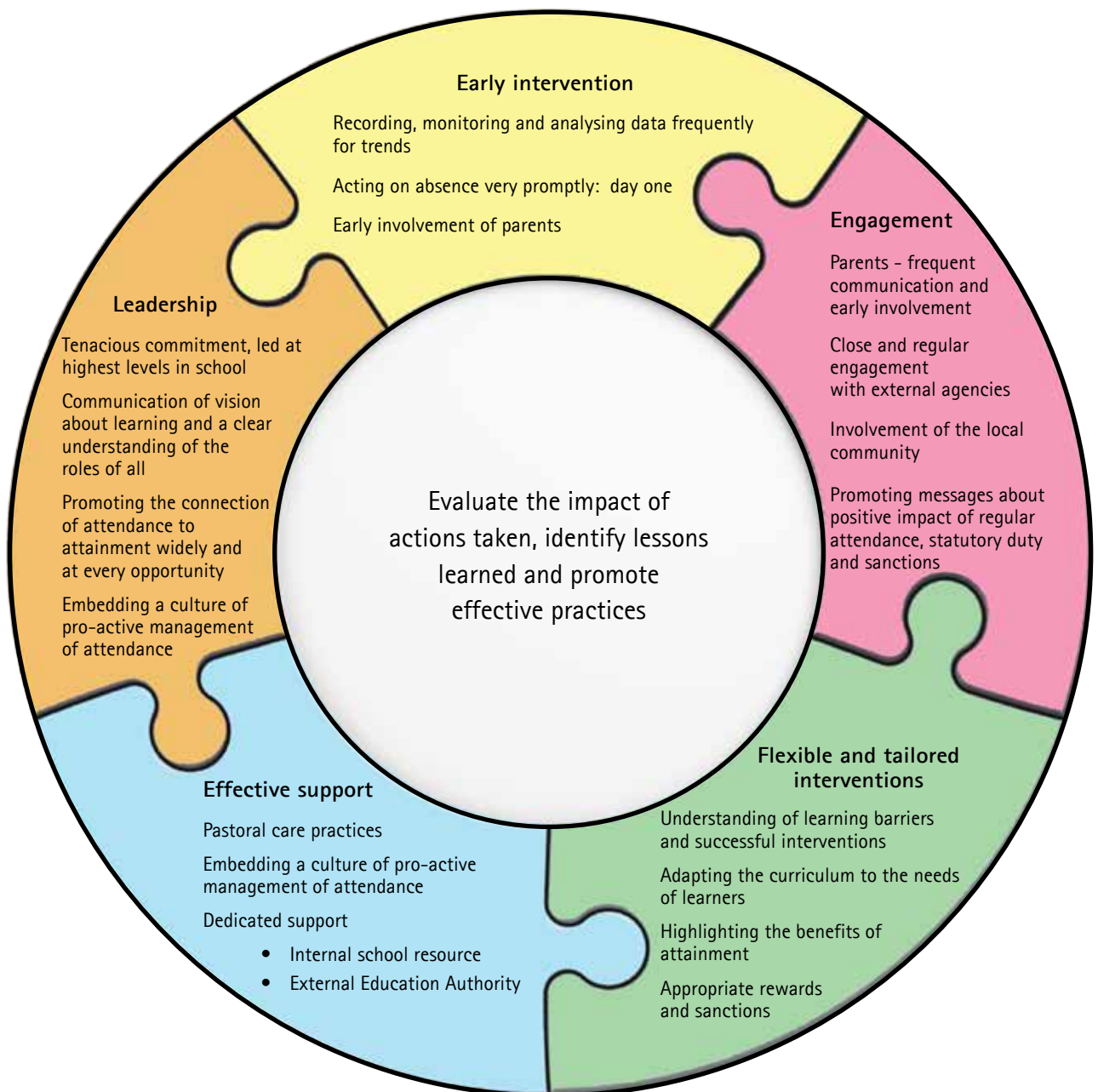
Indicators of effective early intervention
Registration information is recorded and appropriate and timely analysis of the information leads to the identification of patterns of attendance which are a cause for concern.
Attendance information on their children is shared with parents frequently.
Parents are promptly contacted and their input sought when there has been a breach of the school attendance policy and/or their child's attendance at school is a cause for concern.
Pupils and their parents are aware and understand the schools policy and procedures in respect of attendance.
The school acts promptly to seek additional support when they have failed to improve attendance of a pupil sufficiently by applying the schools attendance procedures.

Indicators of effective supports
School allocate resources to allow individuals with key roles to provide support for improving attendance if appropriate.
Pro-active support is available and schools, pupils and parents know about the support and how to access it.
Detailed up to date guidance and best practice examples on managing attendance are easily accessible and all schools are aware of and utilise the resources.
Support services are sufficiently resourced to provide timely and appropriate interventions to improve attendance.
Support services actively analyse school attendance data to identify schools that need additional whole school support and take action in a timely manner to address attendance concerns.
Appropriate support is provided for vulnerable pupils who struggle with regular attendance including timely reference to a range of specialist services as required.
Legal action is taken, when appropriate, to ensure parents fulfil their legal responsibilities to ensure their child receives an appropriate education.

Indicators of effective collaboration/engagement
Good relationships exist that facilitate engagement and communication between the school, its' parents and the wider community it serves.
The school uses its involvement in programmes such as Extended Schools or SureStart to build effective relationships with parents and the community and to promote the importance of regular school attendance.
The school works closely with other relevant statutory and voluntary agencies whose work impacts upon education, especially Health, Social Services and where appropriate, local Neighbourhood Renewal groups.
Good relationships and clear channels of communication are in place between the school and the EA and any other agencies including youth groups as appropriate who can assist in improving attendance.
Good relationships exist that facilitate engagement between the EA and other agencies that can assist in providing support to improve pupil attendance particularly Social Services and Department of Employment and Learning.
The Department collaborates with cross sectoral and cross departmental partners to explore how the importance of attendance can be promoted and to ensure regular pupil attendance is a consideration in other relevant policy areas such as the DHSSPS Looked After Children Strategic Statement.
The Department and the EA utilise a range of promotional activities and materials such as the Education Works campaign and the Miss School Miss Out film clip to communicate widely the importance of attendance and parental engagement.

- 2.5 The schools most successful at managing attendance take a holistic approach to improving attendance and consider all of the pieces within the attendance jigsaw.

The attendance jigsaw



3. Leadership

- 3.1 "School principals determine the level of priority given to school attendance."¹⁴
Schools that are effective in managing pupil attendance are led by principals committed to promoting and prioritising attendance within their schools. Schools with effective attendance management will have targets in respect of attendance in their school development plan which is discussed regularly by the BoG.
- 3.2 The BoG of a school will provide challenge, direction and support to the principal in respect of pupil attendance, who in turn will communicate the commitment to meeting attendance targets to staff, parents and pupils.
- 3.3 Commitment from school leadership allows the creation of a school ethos and culture that values the importance of attendance and its link to attainment. Staff must be clear about what is expected of them and every opportunity should be taken to communicate the importance of attendance to pupils and parents.
- 3.4 Leaders will be proactive in implementing appropriate strategies to address attendance issues. This will be tailored to the school circumstances but might include extra support for those struggling with regular attendance such as adjustments and tailoring of the curriculum, personal education plans or homework clubs.

Leadership – our goal	
To assist school leaders to prioritise improving school attendance.	
In support of this goal we will:	
✓	Work with the EA to ensure that attendance targets form part of every school development plan.
✓	Work with the EA to provide clear up to date guidance for school leaders and resources on good practice in respect of improving attendance.
✓	Ensure that the importance of school attendance and its effective management is part of leadership development provided by the EA for both school leaders and governors.

¹⁴ NIAO Report – Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-up Report (February 2014).

4. Early Intervention

- 4.1 Early intervention is a vital tool in preventing poor school attendance. Patterns of non-attendance, which develop in the early years, become very difficult to reverse in post-primary school "These children often come from families who do not value education and where the parents often missed school themselves. There is also a pattern of increased non-attendance as pupils progress through post-primary school".
- 4.2 Schools are required to record and monitor pupil attendance and have appropriate measures in place to deal with attendance issues. Effective interrogation and monitoring of attendance data is essential to putting effective interventions in place before a pattern of non-attendance escalates. Schools which successfully address poor attendance are those that take action in accordance with school attendance policies and involve parents at an early stage when concerns are identified. Patterns of non-attendance will be analysed to identify any early signs which may be a cause for concern.
- 4.3 School staff should be clear about their own roles and responsibilities and those of others in the school in relation to pupil attendance. Many of our schools put considerable effort into managing attendance. The schools will consider how best to adapt their approach to tackling non-attendance depending upon the specific circumstances, in conjunction with support from the EWS. Schools/EWS may in some cases need to engage with other agencies or third parties to effectively address the underlying issues.

Early intervention – our goal

To assist schools to be proactive in identifying promptly potential causes of concern in respect of a pupil's attendance at school and support them to take appropriate action.

In support of this goal we will:

- ✓ Work with the EA to provide clear up to date guidance to schools and resources on good practice in respect of early intervention to improve attendance.
- ✓ Ensure that attendance continues to be examined as part of all inspections and that action is taken by schools to remedy any weaknesses following identification of attendance issues by ETI.
- ✓ Work with the EA to ensure the importance and value of attendance is communicated and that there is active and regular engagement between schools, parents and young people.

5. Effective Support

- 5.1 There are many reasons why pupils struggle with attendance including illness, family problems, and bullying. Schools monitor attendance to identify potential concerns at an early stage. When a concern is identified the school will contact parents to seek their assistance. Some of our schools have been successful in improving attendance by allocating resources to provide dedicated support to pupils and their families who struggle to engage with education. However there are instances when, despite the school using a range of intervention strategies to support them, the pupil will still struggle with attendance.
- 5.2 When schools are unable to resolve an attendance issue and the school is concerned or attendance has reduced to below 85% they can seek support from the EA. The EA has a dedicated Education Welfare Service (EWS) which helps young people of school age and their families to get the best out of the education system. Its aim is to promote a culture of regular attendance at school.
- 5.3 The EWS has service level agreements with every school and each school has a dedicated Education Welfare Officer (EWO). EWOs work proactively with schools to raise awareness of attendance issues using agreed strategies for example; Primary Attendance Matters programme, whole school assemblies, information sessions for parents/teaching staff on the role of EWS. EWS carries out termly attendance audits which they discuss with school staff.
- 5.4 This strategy outlines a universal approach to supporting pupil attendance. It applies to all schools and all pupils; however, there are specific vulnerable groups of children and young people who may require additional support. This additional support may be provided through the EA support services or by schools themselves. The Department provides additional delegated funding to schools through the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) for each pupil who falls within specific vulnerable groups (*see Table 3 below*). Pupils within these groups are often more likely to have attendance issues. It is for schools to determine their spending priorities, from within the totality of funding they receive. Some schools have indicated that employing a Home/School Liaison Officer can have a positive impact on improving attendance and tackling the underlying issues in relation to absenteeism, either short or long term.

Table 3 Additional Support

Group	Support
Pupils in receipt of free school meals	Schools receive an additional amount of funding for each child through the CFS.
Traveller children	<p>Schools receive an additional amount of funding for each Traveller Child through the CFS.</p> <p>The EA's regional Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) is also funded by the Department to support schools with traveller children and young people and their families. TESS provides specific advice and guidance in relation to Traveller attendance and transition matters, and attendance is a specific priority area in its delivery plan.</p>
Roma children	Schools receive additional funding from the Department through the CFS.
Looked-after children	<p>Schools receive additional funding from CFS.</p> <p>The Department funds the EA to provide support to LAC within schools to help them achieve their full potential.</p>
Newcomer pupil ¹⁵	<p>Schools receive additional funding for each child assessed as being Newcomer through the CFS.</p> <p>The Department funds the EA's regional Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS) which exists to strengthen and improve support to newcomer children and young people and their families, primarily working through schools.</p>
School Age Mothers	The Department funds the EA's School Age Mother (SAM) programme. The programme offers financial support for childcare and transport for those who require it. Home tuition may also be provided for short periods of time if needed.

¹⁵ A "Newcomer pupil" refers to a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher.

- 5.5 From our engagement with stakeholders, including with pupils and teachers, it is clear that emotional health and well-being challenges, along with issues related to bullying, can have a negative impact on school attendance. A variety of policies and interventions are in place to support children and young people who may be struggling with these issues.
- 5.6 Every school is required to have pastoral care policies in place. The pastoral care policies must include:
- Clear procedures in place to be followed, where the school has been alerted to possible abuse, utilising, where appropriate, the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) guidance and procedures.
 - A separate Child Protection Policy.
 - A Promoting Positive Behaviour policy which includes affirmative approaches to good discipline and anti-bullying.
 - A Code of Conduct for staff, teaching and non-teaching, which provides guidance on contact with pupils.
 - Clear policies and procedures for the vetting of staff, volunteers, sports coaches etc - which take account of recent and updated circulars from the Department.
- 5.7 Key elements of a school's pastoral care provision include equipping pupils to cope with personal challenges through teaching the personal development strand of the curriculum, having in place systems for monitoring pupils' academic and social progress and wellbeing; and ensuring that a range of supports are available within the school to those pupils experiencing difficulties.
- 5.8 Under the Department's iMatter programme which supports pupils' emotional health and well-being, schools are provided with materials that address topics that can be a challenge to children and young people today. These consist of leaflets, posters and diary inserts, covering a range of topics such as Peer Pressure, Mental Health, Alcohol, Drugs and Solvents, and Body Image.
- 5.9 The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) is available in all post-primary schools and special schools with a post-primary cohort. The counselling service is independent of the school, is responsive confidentially to pupils needs and operates as an integral part of the schools pastoral care provision.

- 5.10 All schools have a legal duty to have a positive behaviour policy which should outline the behaviour it expects from registered pupils and the sanctions it will impose for breaches in discipline. There is a further legal duty adding a specific requirement for the positive behaviour policy to include measures to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils. All schools must provide a copy of their positive behaviour policy to the parents and pupils of the school.
- 5.11 The NI Anti-Bullying Forum is funded to raise awareness of the need to effectively tackle bullying and to provide best practice resources on how schools can respond effectively to this problem. The Forum gives advice and signposts to specific organisations that can assist in addressing specific problems such as homophobic, racist or religiously motivated bullying.
- 5.12 The Department is currently taking forward legislation in the Assembly aimed at addressing bullying in our schools by:
- a. Providing a common definition of bullying;
 - b. Introducing a requirement for all grant aided schools to centrally record all incidents of bullying, their motivation and the actions taken to address each incident; and
 - c. Requiring all schools BoG to be actively involved in developing, monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of their anti-bullying policy and procedures.

Should the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill become law, it will be supported by guidance to schools, pupils and parents.

Effective support for improving attendance – our goal

To ensure that schools, pupils and their families can access high quality effective support.

In support of this goal we will:

- ✓ Work with the EA to provide clear up to date guidance to schools on effective support for pupils with poor attendance and the need to refer all cases which are a cause for concern to EWS.
- ✓ Monitor the impact of timely and effective support provided by the EA to schools, parents and pupils to address concerns about attendance.
- ✓ Provide additional support to schools for a range of vulnerable groups to facilitate additional measures to be put in place to tackle barriers to learning, including poor school attendance.
- ✓ Give advice, direction and support to schools on effective pastoral care arrangements.
- ✓ Share updated resources with schools on issues that may affect a pupil's emotional health and well-being.
- ✓ Provide guidance and resources on best practice approaches to teachers and BoG to assist with the discharge of their duties under any new legislation aimed at addressing bullying in schools.
- ✓ Provide specific guidance for parents and young people on addressing bullying in schools.

6. Collaboration and Engagement

Parental engagement

- 6.1 It is vital that parents are involved at all times in their child's education to provide encouragement and support from an early age and to establish positive attitudes to attending school. Communication with parents will form an important element of every school's attendance policy and procedures. Schools should inform parents and pupils regularly of their expectations and provide attendance information for parents on a regular basis. If a concern arises regarding a pupil's attendance, the school will contact the parent to discuss the issue and to seek their help to address the issue.
- 6.2 Schools may also be involved with parents in initiatives such as the Extended Schools Programme. In recognition of the vital role played by parents in their children's learning a strand of funding is aimed specifically at involving parents in the life of the school. These resources enable schools to deliver a co-ordinated approach to providing parenting programmes and activities which help parents/carers support their children at home including dealing with a range of social, emotional and behavioural issues, which may adversely impact on attendance, and in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. The Extended Schools Programme is available to schools serving socially deprived areas and the McClure Watters¹⁶ research identified positive outcomes from Extended Schools funding on a range of issues, including attendance.
- 6.3 SureStart provides a range of support services for parents and children under the age of four, who live in disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland. Its focus is to support parents from pregnancy and to give children the best support in life and get ready for pre-school. The programme aims to help a child's social and emotional development, build on their communication and language skills and encourage their imagination through play. SureStart encourages parents to participate too because, parents play a key role in encouraging and helping children to succeed at school and in life. Statistics show that children who attend educational programmes in early life are more likely to have higher attendance rates when at school.
- 6.4 An important role for the Youth Service is to promote positive influences on those young people who are struggling to attend school on a regular basis. Many schools have recognised that youth workers have the skills and background knowledge to engage many young people who do not or cannot comply with the expected norms.

¹⁶ Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas - RSM McClure Watters 2012.

The Youth Service can engage with young people in non-formal settings, and can be particularly successful in reengaging young people at risk and helping to encourage them to aspire to reach their full potential.

Strategic/system level collaboration

- 6.5 At a strategic/system level, government departments and agencies can work together to promote the importance of regular attendance at school, so that when individuals (parents/carers and pupils) engage with services, such as health, justice, local government or social care, a consistent message on school attendance is understood and shared. This cross-sectoral collaboration can also help us to engage with communities to ensure that the value of education and regular school attendance is understood and championed within those communities.
- 6.6 The community use of the schools estate in order to meet the needs of pupils, their parents and families and the wider community has significant benefits, including developing positive attitudes to learning which increases motivation to attend school. In addition the community planning process being led by the new local councils will provide an opportunity for education to become a partner alongside local communities and other stakeholders in the development of a vision for local areas "working together to plan and deliver better services which make a difference to people's lives"¹⁷.

Working together to help pupils

- 6.7 At an individual pupil level, co-operation between services is essential, particularly when the cause of poor attendance may be due to complex issues facing a family. Schools and the EWS when dealing with pupils who struggle with attendance often need to work with others particularly social care workers. "There can be a range of complex reasons for a pupil being absent from school. This might include personal or family problems. Whilst the school could take action against and offer support for the pupil, without addressing the family issues poor attendance patterns would almost inevitably reoccur."¹⁸
- 6.8 The Department and the EA will continue to build and expand upon existing cross Departmental/Agency groups to ensure that other stakeholders are aware of the impact of non attendance and that co-ordinated action is taken centred upon the child/young person.

¹⁷ Local Government Reform Guidance to Councils: Community Planning Foundation Programme, DoE, October 2013

¹⁸ NIAO Improving Pupil Attendance: Follow-up Report 2014.

Collaboration and engagement – our goal

To encourage the building of strong relationships and joined up working between school, parents, the EA, the Department and other service providers and third parties who can have a positive impact on improving school attendance.

In support of this goal we will:

- ✓ Work with the EA to provide up to date guidance to schools encouraging engagement, regular communication and provision of information to parents in respect of attendance.
- ✓ Work with the EA and schools, to build and strengthen relationships with government, community and youth bodies that can assist in promoting school attendance.
- ✓ Continue, together with the EA, to promote the value of school attendance via multi-media outlets.
- ✓ Explore and expand opportunities to ensure that government and Executive initiatives, including the extended schools programme, emphasise the value of attendance.
- ✓ Explore and expand opportunities to ensure that the policies, strategies and delivery of statutory duties of other government departments support and promote school attendance, where appropriate.

7. Sharing Good Practice

- 7.1 The four key elements of leadership commitment, early intervention, effective support and collaboration and engagement are visible in schools that are most effective in improving pupil attendance through the provision of an appropriate curriculum and effective teaching. Our research on improving attendance consistently highlighted the need to develop a structured, strategic approach to disseminating good practice throughout the school sector.
- 7.2 There is already a lot in the way of good practice on improving pupil attendance happening at school level and beyond. Many schools are innovative and committed to the implementation of attendance policies to address non-attendance and raise standards. Innovative approaches can range from reward and recognition of excellent attendance rates, to procedures to identify and provide support as soon as poor attendance shows potential to become an established pattern.
- 7.3 The Department issues guidance for schools, which highlights practical techniques for improving pupil attendance, such as the need for an attendance policy, clear communication with parents and monitoring of attendance patterns as an early indicator of cause for concern. It is important that schools learn from each others' successes and failures. The Department has therefore asked the ETI to produce a good practice publication¹⁹ which will draw together practical examples of effective strategies which have been successful in our schools in improving pupil attendance. This guide will allow schools to draw upon the experience of others facing similar issues and to introduce interventions with a proven track record.
- 7.4 The Department will work with the EA to determine other mechanisms to share best practice and to access resources on improving attendance. Building upon the current methodologies such as ESAGs TV, which provides an effective platform to disseminate good practice, the EA will also look to develop a single repository for educational staff to access online resources to promote improving pupil attendance.
- 7.5 There is no single approach that every school can adopt the bigger the challenge in a school, the greater the need to be flexible in approaches and to seek to learn from other schools in similar situations.

¹⁹ Publication prepared by the Education and Training Inspectorate for issue in 2016.

Sharing good practice – our goal

Our strategies and policies support the sharing of good practice.

In support of this goal we will:

- ✓ Work with the EA and ETI to identify and share good practice in our educational system in respect of improving attendance.
- ✓ Publish up to date guidance on school attendance and absence recording which includes examples of proven good practice.
- ✓ Work with EA to utilise all available means to effectively disseminate good practice and encourage schools to learn from each other.

8. Roles and Responsibilities

- 8.1 The earlier sections of this document identify key areas that must be addressed in order to promote regular attendance at school. In setting this strategic framework for promoting attendance; it is also helpful to draw out the roles and responsibilities of pupils, parents, schools, the EA and Department. Identifying how each contributes to the overall goal of maximising the attendance rate for pupils, so that they are in school being educated and supported to reach their full potential.

Pupils

- 8.2 Pupils should be aware of what is expected of them in respect of attending school. Pupils should be informed by school staff what they need to do if they are absent and should take the opportunity to clarify anything they are not sure about. The level of responsibility will increase as young people progress from primary to post-primary education.

Pupils	
Pupils should:	
✓	Know and obey the rules of their school in relation to attendance and timekeeping.
✓	Understand or ask their teacher or parent to explain why missing school is missing out for them.
✓	Tell their teacher/s, and parents, about anything that is affecting their attendance and attainment at school, including reporting bullying.

Parents

- 8.3 Parents have a legal duty to ensure that each child of compulsory school age receives full-time education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise. If a parent registers their child in a school they have a legal duty to ensure they attend school regularly. Positive support from parents can impact upon their child's regular attendance at school.

Parents	
Parents should:	
✓	Be aware of their legal responsibilities for ensuring their child's regular and punctual attendance.
✓	Comply with the school's Pupil Attendance Policy and procedures and support their children to obey the rules.
✓	Provide a reason immediately each time their child does not attend school and advise the school on issues such as medical appointments, which should not normally result in a full-day absence. Attend all parent/teacher interviews and be willing to discuss poor attendance patterns and possible solutions.
✓	Take an active interest in their child's education and promote the benefits of regular attendance.
✓	Support school staff in their efforts to control difficult or challenging behaviour.
✓	Not book holidays during term time.

Schools

- 8.4 Schools have a duty to keep details of their pupil's attendance and have arrangements in place to address attendance issues. Schools are also expected to include strategies for promoting attendance in the School Development Plan. Every school should have an Attendance Policy in place and BoG should discuss school attendance regularly.

Schools	
Schools should:	
✓	Promote the importance of school attendance and the link between attendance and achievement.
✓	Remind parents of the potential sanctions for failure to meet their responsibilities.
✓	Consult with the learners about their views of the appropriateness of the curriculum and the effectiveness of the teaching to engage the learner.
✓	Have in place forms of pupil participation to help children and young people to participate in making decisions that affect them including curriculum choices.
✓	Have a Pupil Attendance Policy which is approved and endorsed by the BoG. All staff, pupils and their parents should be aware of the policy.
✓	Include school attendance targets in the school development plan and ensure pupil attendance is included in the agenda of every Board of Governors' meetings.
✓	Ensure that all absences are recorded correctly. Emphasise the need for an explanation for every absence.
✓	Inform all parents what information is required in respect of their child's non-attendance and when it should be provided.
✓	Monitor their pupils' attendance so any issues can be identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.
✓	Have clear procedures in place to identify and follow up all pupil absences and lateness. Monitor post-registration pupil absence and advise parents/carers of post-registration absenteeism by, for example, a phone call or text message.
✓	Refer pupils whose attendance is a cause for concern, or falls below 85% to the EWS.
✓	Provide attendance information to pupils and their parents on a regular basis, and not just at formal parent/teacher interviews and end of year reports.

The Education Authority/Education Welfare Service

- 8.5 The EA was established on 1 April 2015, with responsibility for the delivery of education services. The EWS enables the EA to fulfil its statutory duty in respect of pupil attendance and provides support for pupils and parents in relation to attendance issues. They also provide advice to schools in managing non-attendance. In cases where parents do not co-operate with the advice and guidance of the EWS the EA may make an application to the court which may result in a parental fine or an Education Supervision Order being made by a court under Article 55 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1955.

Education Authority/Education Welfare Service	
Education Authority/Education Welfare Service should:	
✓	Disseminate best practice to schools both at a system level and individual school level.
✓	Establish agreed criteria for pupil referrals with schools and respond appropriately.
✓	Carry out termly audits of attendance and respond appropriately when whole school attendance levels are 90% or lower and/or when an individual pupil's attendance level falls below 85%.
✓	Use appropriate legislation to proceed with court action if this is in the best interest of the child.
✓	Work closely with schools, social services and other agencies to provide the necessary help to support children to maintain their education.
✓	Engage with parents in a positive way to improve attendance at school.
✓	Establish effective working relationships with appropriate external bodies, in the best interests of children.

Department of Education

- 8.6 The Department has the lead role in policy development and setting strategic direction. The Department works in partnership with the EA, and other Departments as appropriate, to promote the value of education and attainment in a young person's life.

Department of Education	
The Department should:	
✓	Provide strategic direction on improving attendance.
✓	Work with the EA to provide updated advice and guidance to schools on attendance and absence recording.
✓	Work with the EA to consider promotional activities, such as an attendance week, to raise awareness of non-attendance.
✓	Put in place policies and supports to assist those vulnerable groups who are identified as at greatest risk of under achievement.
✓	Ensure that all its policies and initiatives, where possible, promote regular attendance at school.
✓	Promote the importance of school attendance across all government departments to ensure a joined up approach and to maximise opportunities across the public sector to support and promote school attendance.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

- 8.7 The ETI's key objective is to promote the highest possible standards of learning, teaching and achievement throughout the education, training and youth sector. As part of the school inspection process they comment on the influence and outcomes of the policies and strategies of the Department of Education. This includes how well schools are providing a curriculum and qualifications which meet the needs of all of the learners and are providing effective and highly effective teaching. Where school data indicates that managing attendance may be an area for improvement for the leaders and the governors, it will be reported as such.

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

The ETI should:

- ✓ Continue to evaluate and report on attendance in its school inspection reports, raising any concerns as appropriate and publishing the outcomes.
- ✓ Identify good practice in schools with good or improving attendance and share this information via a good practice publication.
- ✓ Work with the Department in relation to attendance management strategies.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1 The Department of Education is committed to promoting regular pupil attendance, so that every child has the maximum opportunity to reach their full potential. This strategy will provide a coherent framework for action and improvement to guide all those working to support regular and improved pupil attendance. The focus will be to strengthen leadership commitment, early intervention, effective support and collaboration and engagement, underpinned by the sharing of best practice, to ensure that fewer of our young people *Miss School and Miss Out*.

Appendix 1

Summary of the attendance policies in other jurisdictions

Wales

Document:

www.new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/policy_strategy_and_planning/schools/339214-wag/?lang=en

Summary

The role of central government is to provide guidance as to what constitutes an effective Attendance Policy.

Schools should develop an Attendance Policy with emphasis on the specific circumstances eg the age of the pupil(s), level of parental interest or engagement, geographical location, and local and family-specific social/economic circumstances. When developing a policy schools should consult with stakeholders (staff, parents, Board of Governors, pupils, etc). The policy should allow both for the investigation and analysis of underlying issues/themes (to help improve the policy) and set out strategies for the way issues are to be dealt with. Maximum use should be made of electronic attendance records when investigating issues such as identifying and/or examining patterning in attendance data.

Parents are ultimately responsible for the attendance of their child(ren) and so their engagement is crucial, both at the school-policy development stage and in the solution to the specific needs of their children.

Scotland

Document:

www.gov.scot/resource/doc/294630/0091104.pdf

Summary

Like Wales, central government in Scotland provides advice to parents/carers on why attendance matters and what's available to them by way of support. In this way, it emphasises that attendance is a parental responsibility, but that assistance for parents/carers can be provided. A variety of information is available, including a booklet which provides parents with a description of the level of support that a child is entitled to.

England

Document:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/361008/Advice_on_school_attendance_sept_2014.pdf

Central government in England was the most specific of the UK regions in setting out that it was providing non-statutory advice to schools and local authorities which was developed to help them maintain high levels of attendance and plan the school day and year. The document also provides information about the interventions available to address pupils' poor attendance and behaviour at school and advises that the guidance should be read alongside the statutory guidance on parental measures for school attendance and behaviour.

The guidance is clearly aimed at Local Authorities, schools (including BoG), parents and carers.

Ireland

Document:

www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/attendance_and_discipline_in_schools/school_attendance.html

Summary

The emphasis is placed on the legislation and parental responsibility when parents elect to send their child(ren) to school. The document then sets out that it is the Child and Family Agency's responsibility to ensure that every pupil attends school regularly. The Agency's emphasis is on helping schools, families and children rather than imposing penalties for non-attendance at school. It employs educational welfare officers at local level throughout the country to provide support and advice to parents and schools and to follow up on absences from school. They also help to co-ordinate all policies concerning attendance and educational welfare.

New Zealand

Document:

www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Managing-your-school/Guides-for-managing-your-school/Understanding-attendance

Summary

The practice in New Zealand is that central government provides (non-statutory) guidance to Boards of Governors and schools which are expected to make the appropriate interventions supported by facilities such as electronic attendance monitoring.

Canada

Document:

www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/docs/reports/attendance/school_attendance_final.pdf

Summary

The document is an intermediate/low level document, unlike those previously considered. It reflects more of the on-the-ground approach taken by a "local authority" (Manitoba) rather than the non-statutory guidance of central government.

Appendix 2

Engagement with Stakeholders

Essential to the formulation, development and ongoing improvement of any policy is the inclusion of the views of stakeholders. With regard to an Attendance Policy, key stakeholders are pupils, parents, and ex-pupils, school principals and teachers, and Education Authority officials (formally known as the Education and Library Boards – ELBs). To collect the views of the various stakeholder groups the Department provided each with an opportunity to express their views through:

- The Primary School Questionnaire which was issued to primary schools. The age appropriate questionnaire was developed for year 5 to year 7 pupils.
- Parental engagement events – facilitated by a range of schools who offered their assistance.
- Engagement with disadvantaged young people who had a negative school experience and were now homeless.
- South Eastern Region's Youth Service workshops with young people within community groups and also with the Youth Justice System.
- Attendance workshops with:
 - Principals from schools with – varying attendance rates, and Newcomer pupils;
 - The Education Welfare Service (EWS) of the Education Authority;
 - School Aged Mothers (SAMs) co-ordinators; and
 - Inclusion & Diversity Service (IDS)

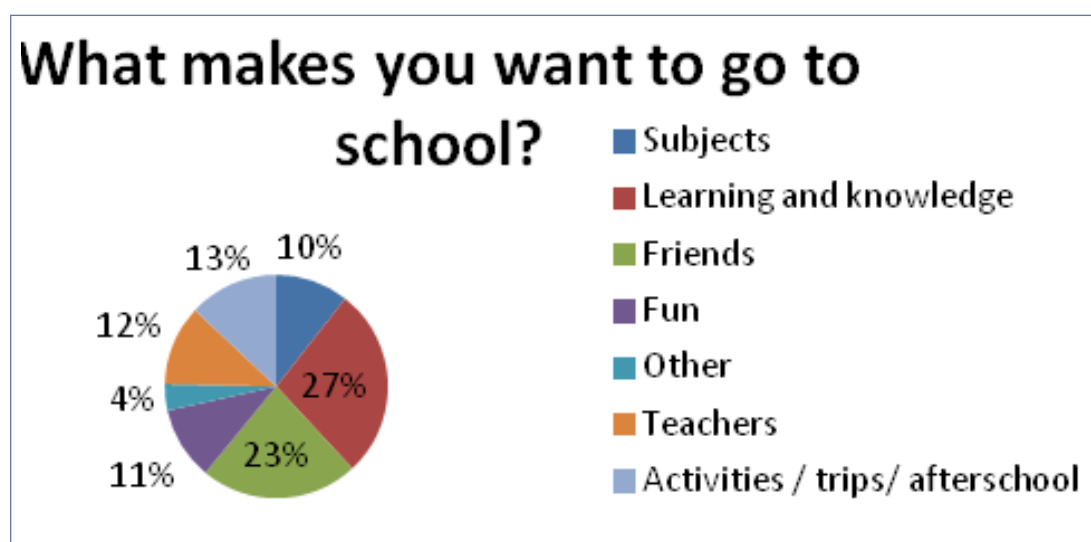
Table 4 Stakeholder engagement statistics

Stakeholder	Engagement type	Numbers
Pupils	Primary school questionnaire	1,530 completed
Young people	Workshops with youth group aged (15 to 22)	6 events
Parents	Questionnaire	171 completed
	Engagement events	9 events with 171 attendees
Principals	Engagement events	3 events with 138 attendees
Education Welfare Service	Engagement Workshop	1 event with 56 attendees
School Age Mothers co-ordinators	Engagement Workshop	1 event with 10 attendees

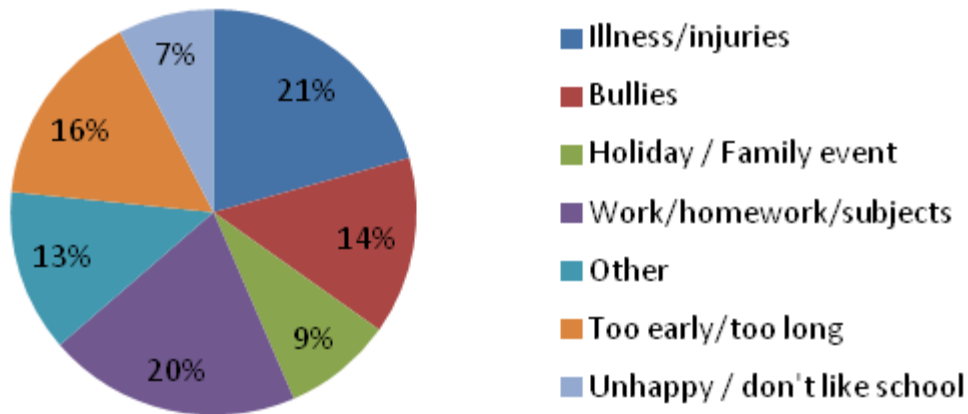
Feedback

1. Primary school pupils

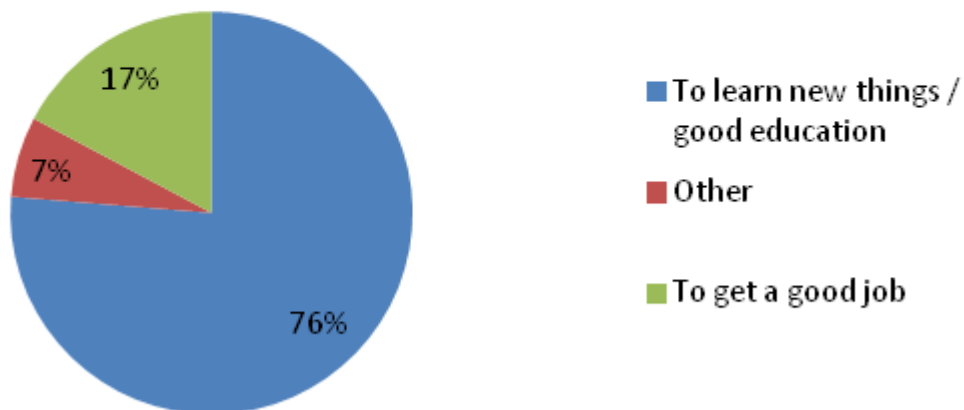
Completed questionnaires were received from over 1,500 pupils giving their views on a number of areas.



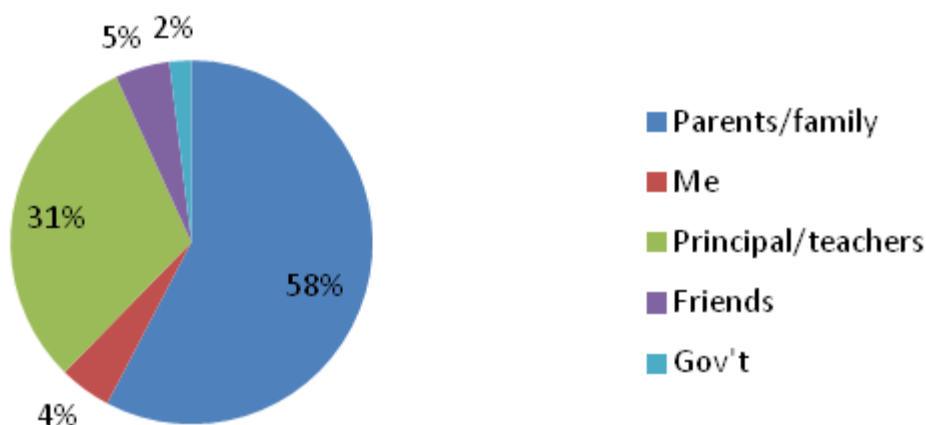
Why would you not go to school?



Why do you think it is important to be in school everyday?



Who cares about you going to school?



Summary of key issues – primary school children

Likely to improve attendance

Learning opportunities	The most common reason identified for going to school was to provide opportunities to learn and be educated so as to have a better future.
Friends	To see and make new friends was identified as a significant reason for primary school pupils to attend school.
Activities & fun	The pupils found that activities such as trips, sports and after school clubs and having general fun were key determinations whether they wanted to go to school or not.
Teachers	Having an approachable teacher was important to a pupil's school experience and regular attendance.

Contributing to absences

Illness/appointments	Pupils identified being sick as the main reason not to attend school.
School work	A considerable percentage of the pupils identified school work and specific subjects as a reason for not wanting to go to school.
Bullying	Identified as a issue for pupils not wanting to attend school.
Tiredness	Many of the pupils stated tiredness being a reason for not wanting to attend school.

2. Young people

DE worked in partnership with the EA's Youth Service and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum to engage with young people who struggled to attend school. The participating groups consisted of:

- homeless young people;
- those from socially deprived areas;
- those located in rural areas; and
- a group currently involved in the youth justice system.

Summary of key issues – young people	
Likely to improve attendance	
Enticements	Financial incentives, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was identified as a way to increase attendance. It was also seen as a way of treating young people as adults.
Better subject choice	Being able to take more vocational subjects, which they perceived as more beneficial to everyday life, was identified as a way of making school more appealing.
Support	A number of the young people felt more pastoral support was needed when dealing with school matters and issues external to school but which were impacting on it.
Contributing to absences	
Curriculum	Some young people stated they liked school but struggled with a number of compulsory subjects which made them not want to attend.
Bullying	Being bullied by teachers was raised and the need for teachers to have specific training on dealing with difficult situations with empathy and concern rather than defensively.
Lack of respect	Many of those who took part in the workshop felt teachers/schools did not show enough respect to the pupils by allowing them to make decisions for themselves on issues such as their appearance or treating them as adults.
School hours	The young people stated that one of the main reasons they either didn't attend or didn't want to attend was because the school day started too early and went on too long.
Not understanding the impact	There was an overwhelming consensus that they would all go back and listen and try harder to ensure they had a better future. This was a clear statement even amongst those where school had a negative impact on them.

3. Parental engagement

The Department wrote to over 100 schools to ask for their assistance in facilitating parental engagement. DE then carried out workshops with parents and teachers from nine schools and there were a number of common issues identified to improving attendance and also contributing to absences.

Summary of key issues – parents	
Likely to improve attendance	
Enticements/rewards	There was an overwhelming support for enticements/rewards for good attendance, and many of the parents stated they used this at home to encourage school attendance.
Better subject choice	Parents felt if the schools offered a choice of life skills or vocational subjects, their children would take a more positive approach to school.
Friends	Socialising with peers is identified as a key aspect of improving school attendance. Non-curricular activities such as breakfast clubs and after school clubs were highlighted as being very popular amongst pupils.
Contributing to absences	
Curriculum	Many parents felt being forced to do certain mainstream subjects and the heavy workload had a negative impact on their child's school life and attendance.
Bullying	Bullying was identified by almost all participants as a reason why their children at times did not want to attend school. Many of the parents felt when a school addressed this seriously there was almost always a positive outcome to school attendance.
Lack of respect	Many of those who took part in the workshop felt teachers/schools did not show enough respect to the pupils by allowing them to make decisions for themselves on issues such as their appearance or treating them as adults.
School hours	Quite a number of the parents voiced their opinion that the school day was too long especially with the amount of coursework and homework that had to be completed after school.

4. Support services engagement

The Department held a number of workshops with the Education Welfare Service (EWS), the Inclusion & Diversity Service (IDS), and School Age Mothers' (SAMs) co-ordinators.

Summary of key issues – support services	
Likely to improve attendance	
Resources	Appropriate resources to deal with attendance issues in a timely manner.
Legislation	Effective legal system to deal with persistent non-attendance.
Attendance Policy	Mandatory for every school to have an attendance policy and schools role to be strengthened in addressing attendance issues.
Joint working	Meaningful liaison between EWS and schools.
Contributing to absences	
Parents attitude	Parents who don't see the problem with unauthorised absences or the need to give reasons.
Resources	Insufficient resources to deal with attendance issues.
Communications	Communications between schools and EWS not being effective.
Legal system	Legal system and penalties not effective enough.

5. Engagement with principals

Engagement events took place with a range of Principals from schools with varying attendance rates, and levels of Newcomer pupils.

Summary of key issues – principals	
Likely to improve attendance	
Resources	Appropriate resources to deal with attendance issues in a timely manner.
Legislation	Effective legal system to deal with persistent non-attendance.
Parental engagement	Parents engaging with the schools.
Joint working	Meaningful liaison between EWS and schools.
Support	Outreach support to take forward home school liaison.
Recording and targets	Simpler coding system for recording absences. Small number of pupils can cause huge difference for a schools' attendance levels with issues outside the schools controls.
Contributing to absences	
Parents attitude	Parents who don't see the problem with unauthorised absences or the need to give reasons.
Resources	Insufficient resources to deal with attendance issues.
Effective relations with EWS	Relations between schools and EWS not being effective enough.
Legal system	Legal system and penalties not effective enough.
Pupils responsibilities	Pupils responsibilities can impact, particularly for school age mothers and young carers.

Appendix 3

List of Stakeholders

Thank you to the following schools and stakeholder groups who participated in various ways in our engagement through return of questionnaires, attendance at engagement events and facilitation of parental engagement evenings.

Abercorn Primary School
Armstrong Primary School
Ashfield Girls High School, Belfast
Avoniel Primary School
City Armagh High School
Clounagh Junior High School
Drumgor Primary School
Fane Street Primary School
Holy Family Primary School, Magherafelt
Holy Trinity Primary School, Enniskillen
Holy Trinity Primary School, Cookstown
Knockbreda High School
Lagan College
Londonderry Model Primary School
Malone Integrated College
Methodist College
Millington Primary School
Nettlefield Primary School
Newtownbreda High School
Omagh County Primary School
Our Lady's Girls' Primary School
St Anne's Primary School, Belfast
St Anthony's Primary School, Craigavon
St Brendan's Primary School
St Bride's Primary School
St Comgall's Primary School, Antrim
St Francis Primary School
St John the Baptist Primary School, Craigavon
St John's Primary School, Dungannon
St Joseph's Boys' High School, Newry

St Joseph's College
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn
St Mary's Primary School, Belfast
St Michael's Primary School, Belfast
St Patrick's College, Ballymena
St Patrick's College, Dungannon
St Patrick's Primary School, Armagh
St Patrick's Primary School Dungannon
St Paul's Junior High School
Windsor Hill Primary School
Mallusk Primary School
Fane Street Primary School
St Anne's Primary School, Belfast
Currie Primary School
St Mary's PS, Newtownbutler
Milltown Primary School
Knocknagoney Primary School
Rathcoole Primary School
St Patrick's Primary School, Eskra, Omagh
Londonderry Primary School, Newtownards
Hazelwood Integrated Primary School
Scoil An Droichid
Earlview Primary School
Nettlefield Primary School
Botanic Primary School
Our Lady's Girls Primary School
St Mary's Primary School, Melmount, Strabane
Whitehead Primary School
St Joseph's Primary School, Lisburn
Armstrong Primary School
St Joseph's Covent Primary School, Newry
Kilcooley Primary School, Bangor
Northern Ireland Youth Forum: Council for the Homeless
Education Authority:
 EA Youth Service:
 - Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre, Rathgael
 - Colin Youth Development Centre
 - Ards Rural Project, Ards Peninsula
Education Welfare Service
Inclusion & Diversity Service

