Guidance

Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities

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Department for Education

Overview

This document gives guidance to schools and local authorities to support them to improve school attendance.

The first part of this document sets out the principles underpinning an effective whole school strategy for attendance.

The second part of this document outlines actions that school staff and local authorities may consider taking to improve attendance for disadvantaged, pupils at risk of persistent absence and persistently absent (PA).

This guidance has been developed with:

- our engagement with schools who have significantly reduced their persistent absence levels
- Teachers' standards
- Ofsted's school inspection handbook
- other DfE statutory and non-statutory guidance

Principles of an effective whole school attendance strategy

This section sets out the core principles underpinning an effective whole school strategy for attendance, which impacts commitment from every member of the school community.

Leadership and management

1.Offer a clear vision for attendance, underpinned by high expectations and core values, which are communicated to and understood by staff, pupils and families.

2.Make sure staff, pupils and families understand that absence from school is a potential safeguarding risk and understand their role in keeping children safe.

3.Expect good attendance and punctuality from all members of the school community. Model this through staff and governor behaviours.

4.Convey clear messages about how absence affects attainment, wellbeing and wider outcomes. Empower staff to implement this effectively.

5.Recognise attendance as an important area of school improvement. Make sure it is resourced appropriately (including through effective use of pupil premium funding) to create, build and maintain systems and performance.

6.Have a designated attendance champion in the senior leadership team with clearly defined responsibilities, who is accountable for the school's attendance policy, and collection of procedures and school improvement plan.

7.Make sure staff receive professional development and support to implement attendance systems effectively.

8.Governors should have an accurate view of school attendance and engage in escalation processes where appropriate.

Relationships and communication

1.Build respectful relationships with staff, pupils, families and other stakeholders in attendance matters. Ensure communication with these can have a sustained and positive culture since the school.

2.Communicate openly and honestly with staff, pupils and families about their concerns about attendance and performance so that they understand what is expected and what is supposed to happen.

3.Liaise with other agencies working with pupils and their families to support attendance. For example, where a young person has a social worker or is otherwise vulnerable.

4.Model mental health awareness and appropriate communication for staff and pupils. This will help relationships between pupils and staff to reflect a positive and respectful culture and high expectations.

5.Avoid pupils with rights, black and minorities related to sexual orientation, receiving proper boundaries.

6.Make sure school staff understand the vulnerability of some pupils and the ways in which this might contribute to absence, including confidential information sharing.

7.Understand the importance of school as a place of safety where pupils can enjoy positive relationships with staff and pupils particularly for children with a social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) need.

8.Communicate effectively with families regarding pupils' attendance and well-being.

9.Parents and carers should:

- treat staff with respect
- actively support the work of the school
- call on staff for help when they need it
- communicate as early as possible circumstances which may affect absence or require support

Systems and data

1.Use clear and consistently applied systems and processes to improve, reward and incentivise attendance and address absence. Make sure these systems are inclusive and appropriate for all pupils.

2.Make sure education providers to address absence are trained proactively, consistently and effectively. Implemented consistently and their impact reviewed regularly.

3.Every member of staff should know and understand their responsibilities for attendance.

4.Reduce school systems provide useful data of where, when and who is at risk of poor attendance, reasons for absence and patterns emerging/ groups such as:

- children who have a social worker including looked after children
- young carers
- children who are eligible for free school meals
- children who speak English as a second language
- children who have special educational needs and disabilities

5.Make sure school systems are flexible and responsive to allow early intervention to address issues. This includes sharing concerns with other agencies (like children's social care and early help services which are working with families.

6.Attendance leaders may consider providing regular reports to staff across the school to enable them to track the attendance of pupils and to implement attendance procedures.

7.In school attendance, safeguarding and pastoral support policies should clarify outline:

- the roles and responsibilities
- what data is used to follow
- routines
- consequence systems

8.The escalation of procedures for address absence needs to be:

- understood by pupils, parents and carers
- implemented consistently
- reviewed regularly

Intervention

1.Deliver intervention in a targeted way, in response to data or intelligence.

2.Monitor and analyse attendance data regularly to ensure that intervention is effective and to identify patterns of absence. Use this information to inform and plan group monitoring, particularly, lesson attendance across subject and teacher/tutor.

3.Use attendance, pastoral and SEND staff who are skilled in supporting pupils and their families to identify and overcome barriers to attendance.

4.Create action plans in partnership with families and other agencies that may be supporting families, for example, children's social care and early help services, to overcome barriers to attendance. Review these regularly.

5.Monitor the impact of any intervention, making adjustments if necessary and using findings to inform future strategy.

6.Where interventions fail to address persistent absence, identify the reasons why and, where appropriate, change or adjust the intervention.

7.Follow local authority codes of conduct, policies and procedures and make referrals for statutory intervention when interventions have not resulted in improved attendance and relevant triggers / thresholds are met.

Actions for school staff and local authorities to improve attendance

The following sections outline the actions that school staff and local authorities could consider taking to improve attendance for all pupils, pupils at risk of persistent absence and pupils who are persistently absent. You might have different staffing structures and roles to those in schools and local authorities but the principles and actions will still apply. Use it as a framework for action. We are recommending we research to set settings.

Go to information for:

- school leaders
- teachers and pastoral staff
- attendance officers, pastoral staff and family support workers
- local authorities and external partners

School leaders

All pupils

You may want to:

- deliver clear messages about expectations, routines and consequences to new pupils and families through induction and transition processes
- ensure attendance is central to routines and expectations and is communicated regularly in communication expectations for attendance and punctuality and school performance through regular channels of communication with pupils and parents
- establish and monitor implementation of rewards for attendance and punctuality and sanctions for absence and lateness
- monitor implementation of policy and practice. For example through:
  - lesson attendance
  - shadow pupils' day
  - planner checks
  - attendance processes, partners and residents to promote attendance and report non-attendance
- monitor whole school data regularly to identify reasons for absence, patterns, vulnerabilities and barriers to attendance, including for specific groups
- establish, implement and review school arrangements to identify, support and support children missing education (CME)
- develop pastoral support for children with medical conditions (including the use of individual healthcare plans), mental health problems and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
- engage pupils in consultation on attendance policy, practice, rewards and sanctions
- ensure that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education

Pupils at risk of persistent absence

You may want to:

- establish robust escalation procedures which are initiated before absence becomes a pattern. For example, when:
  - attending letters to parents and carers
  - having a weekly tutor review
  - attendance monitoring
  - engaging with local authority attendance teams and/or independent attendance organisations
  - using fixed penalty notices
  - engaging with children's social care staff, including Virtual School Heads and designated teachers for LAC
- establish a range of evidence-based interventions to address barriers to attendance
- monitor the implementation and quality of escalation procedures (and interventions), for example, by:
  - having a review and clear, timely, actions
  - sampling of cases file
- ensure staff understand the escalation procedures and seek robust evidence of the escalation procedures have been and that reflect the school context
- attend or lead on attendance reviews and clinics in line with escalation procedures
- ensure that school staff are prepared to contribute to wellness messages and address messages in terms of training and embedding them

Pupils who are persistently absent

You may want to:

- establish clear and effective service level agreements with external partners to support pupils with persistent absence, including:
  - local authority education welfare and attendance services
  - independent attendance organisations
  - alternative providers
  - youth offending
  - school nursing and mental health professionals
  - children's social care staff where appropriate
- ensure that school staff are prepared to contribute to multi-agency organisations and clinics to support vulnerable pupils including those with persistent absence, for example:
  - mental health charities
  - voluntary organisations
  - young carers services
- engage in and lead on attendance reviews and clinics in line with escalation procedures

Teaching staff and tutors

All pupils

You may want to:

- enhance and reinforce attendance and punctuality expectations continually
- emphasise the importance of attendance and its impact on attainment
- model high expectations and the importance of the lesson to motivate pupils to be in the classroom
- promote rewards and celebrate progress but continue to outline sanctions
- apply rewards and sanctions consistently
- follow up on absence and lateness with pupils to identify barriers and reasons for absence
- contact parents and carers regarding absence and punctuality
- review form or tutor group attendance weekly to share data, identify issues, celebrate success and set targets
- periodically review practice and consistency both across and between departments
- proactively promote attendance practice as part of staff induction
- consider the individual needs and vulnerabilities of pupils

Pupils at risk of persistent absence

You may want to:

- welcome pupils back following an absence and provide good catch up support to build confidence and bridge gaps. This could include:
  - 1 to 1 support
  - buddy support
  - one to one input
- meet with pupils to discuss absence, patterns, barriers and problems
- provide a flexible approach to remove barriers, provide additional support and set targets. This could include:
  - lunchtime arrangements
  - flexible start times (for example), wake up routines or emotional wellbeing
- feed data or weekly checks back to review progress and the impact of support
- make regular contact with families to discuss progress
- consider what support for re-engagement might be needed, including for vulnerable groups

Pupils who are persistently absent

You may want to:

- prepare supporting resources to ensure pupils can access learning when they return
- develop targeted intervention to address gaps and build pupils' confidence
- provide additional support and intervention where needed
- contribute to action plans which address barriers to school attendance and reintegration
- provide tutorial phase and encouragement when pupils attend and arrive on time

Attendance officers, pastoral staff and family support workers

All pupils

You may want to:

- engage with feeder schools or organisations to access absence information in order to identify target cohorts prior to transition, including mid-year transfers and managed moves
- provide appropriate support and challenge to establish good attendance patterns
- carry out return first step calling procedures including promptly routine for vulnerable groups and those with persistent absence (PA)
- undertake home visits in line with our policy to engage families and ensure children are safe
- ensure, where possible, mitigate potential barriers to good attendance in liaison with families and relevant organisations
- implement punctuality routines such as late gate or sign in procedures
- ensure school attendance and exclusion (CME) procedures are understood
- ensure that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education (EHE)
- where pupils have additional needs which may require multi-agency meetings: try to arrange those meetings outside of lesson time, where possible

Pupils at risk of persistent absence

You may want to:

- provide regular attendance reports to tutors to facilitate weekly reviews with leaders (including special educational needs coordinators, designated safeguarding leads and pastoral leaders) and to inform intervention and support
- debrief and oversee the administration of absence procedures. This may include:
  - letters home
  - home visits
  - engagement with local authorities and other external agencies and partners
  - work with families and the community to identify which methods of communication are most effective in encouraging attendance. This may reach families and find methods that work and are consistent
  - consideration if further interventions are required in line with the statutory intervention framework and local authority codes
- provide regular reports to leaders on the at risk cohort
- provide regular reports/updates to local authority attendance team or independent attendance organisations to raise awareness of emerging at-risk pupils

Pupils who are persistently absent

You may want to:

- develop and implement persistent absence action plans with pupils and families which address barriers and help establish positive attendance patterns
- identify tailored intervention which meets the needs of the pupils. For example:
  - careers advice and guidance
  - college placement
  - mentoring programmes
  - alternative provision where appropriate
- feed daily or weekly checks back to review progress and impact of support
- make regular contact with families to discuss progress
- hold regular meetings or reviews of caseload with the local authority attendance team and other partners and alternative providers to check on welfare and progress
- liaise with school leaders (designated safeguarding, special educational needs coordinators and pastoral leaders) on referrals to external agencies and multi-agency commissioners
- coordinate and contribute to multi-agency meetings to review progress and agree on next steps
- work in partnership with local authority attendance team and other agencies to ensure the appropriate use of statutory parental responsibility measures
- provide regular reports to leaders on the impact of action plans and interventions

Local authorities and external partners

All pupils

Local authorities may want to:

- monitor and interrogate local and national data, feedback from schools and families to identify patterns and trends to develop an 'it while strategy to improve attendance and monitor impact (including join up with early help, children's social care and youth services)
- ensure that school attendance information with schools for specific groups of pupils is shared in line with protected characteristics
- maintain regular communication and build relationships with school leaders (including local leaders and Trusts). Share local and national data, disseminate best practice and support school improvement plans
- use your children's services to facilitate community strategies and initiatives. For example:
  - community messages on holidays
  - minimise mid-week starts to school terms
  - shared agency messages to reinforce attendance
- ensure that your children's services are flexible and responsive to ensure that they understand attendance expectations and ensure that the vulnerable cohort they serve are supported to sustain good levels of attendance
- ensure that your children's services are flexible and responsive to ensure psychologist, educational attendance representatives/responsibilities and work collaboratively with them to link families into the right support
- ensure that your children's services are flexible and responsive to understand current absence, exclusion patterns and to facilitate appropriate signposting
- establish and implement robust elective home education (EHE) procedures to support parents from school and other educational providers who are considering EHE
- ensure that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education (EHE)

Virtual School Heads may want to:

- monitor the attendance of looked after children
- agree with schools and their governing bodies a strategy for attendance that reflects the attendance of looked after and previously looked after children
- provide advice and guidance to those services supporting previously looked after children and their families about parenting and early parenting support

School nursing teams may provide support to help implement care plans to support the attendance of pupils with healthcare needs.

Pupils at risk of persistent absence

Local authorities may want to develop processes for how attendance issues should be managed and co-ordinated if unresolved. Initial steps may refer to Ofsted inform steps of intervention and involving all relevant agencies.

Social workers and family support workers should:

- convey high expectations for attendance
- make sure school attendance is prioritised within multi-agency plans
- in line with local guidance, use children in need or other multi-agency plans to identify barriers to attendance and manage checks and services in partnership with intervention support

For looked after children, Virtual School Heads should ensure personal education plans identify and address barriers to good attendance.

Pupils who are persistently absent

Local authorities may want to:

- consider using the full range of Parental Responsibility Measures (including fast track, parenting contracts and parenting orders, education supervision orders, penalty notices, and attendance prosecutions) using supportive measures alongside enforcement and sanctions where appropriate
- build relationships with families of persistently absent pupils, and provide practical support to unblock barriers to attendance
- ensure that school attendance information is shared that messages on attendance are consistent and that information is shared appropriately

Social workers and family support workers should convey expectations for attendance and support children and families to overcome barriers to attendance.

For looked after children, Virtual School Heads should use personal education plans to identify and address barriers to attendance and appropriate interventions delivered regularly by tutoring or mentors.

To help pupils return to school, school nursing teams can also provide support and advice on:

- attendance routines
- hospital education provision
- home tuition
- medical needs provision

Further resources

Statutory guidance

- School attendance: guidance for schools
- Keeping children safe in education
- Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school
- Supporting children with a education
- Children missing education
- Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school
- School exclusion

Guidance and resources

- School attendance: guidance for schools
- Checklist for school leaders to support high expectations for behaviour and attendance
- Pastoral health and wellbeing resources
- Mental health and behaviour in schools
- Approaches to preventing and tackling bullying
- Responsible School Communities Fund
- Education Endowment Foundation: a toolkit to support Commissioners about returners to education settings in September
- Education Endowment Foundation: research on testing parents
- Education Endowment Foundation: research on parental engagement
- National statistics: Pupil absence in schools in England

Further resources

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Services and information

Benefits

Births, deaths, marriages and care

Business and self-employed

Childcare and parenting

Citizenship and living in the UK

Crime, justice and the law

Disabled people

Driving and transport

Education and learning

Employing people

Environment and countryside

Housing and local services

Money and tax

Passports, travel and living abroad

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