



House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

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# Department for Education and Skills: Improving school attendance in England

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**Eighteenth Report of  
Session 2005–06**

*Report, together with formal minutes,  
oral and written evidence*

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## Summary

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Regular absence from school is damaging, making a young person much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications and potentially vulnerable to involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. Parents are responsible under the Education Act 1996 for ensuring that their child of compulsory school age receives a full-time education. The Department for Education and Skills (the Department), local authorities and schools share responsibility for managing and improving school attendance in England.

The Department has had two targets to reduce unauthorised absence in schools and has missed both targets. Unauthorised absence in maintained schools remained static for years, before increasing in 2004–05. The Department is disappointed not to have made progress, but has made more headway in reducing total absence, with absence in maintained schools declining by just over one percentage point in the ten years to 2004–05.

Between 1997–98 and 2003–04, the Department spent £885 million on initiatives to reduce absence and improve behaviour. It is not possible to identify how much was spent on reducing total absence or unauthorised absence, but expenditure that has been highly targeted on a relatively small number of schools has had some success in improving attendance. The initiatives have also helped to reduce the number of pupils permanently excluded from school. Information on causes of absence would help to strengthen assessments of impact and targeting of initiatives.

Using electronic registration systems, schools can record and monitor attendance and follow up individual cases of absence efficiently. The Department has provided specific funding for schools to assist the introduction of electronic systems, but no longer does so as it expects schools to use their devolved budgets for this purpose. The Department will evaluate the different types of system and encourage schools to invest in them.

Each year, local authorities prosecute around 7,500 parents whose children do not attend school, usually resulting in conviction and a fine. Prosecution can be effective but is not the right approach in all cases of persistent absence. Some local authorities have successfully used penalty notices as an alternative to prosecution. Pupils returning to school after a long period of absence can find it difficult to settle in. More needs to be done to reintegrate these pupils and, where relevant, to break the cycle of truancy.

It is important that head teachers create a strong ethos in their school that reinforces the importance of attendance and learning, but not all are doing so. It is also important that any problems with children's or parents' attitudes to education are picked up early before a pattern of absence is established. Secondary school pupils are at particular risk of absence where they find academic subjects unattractive or not relevant to them. A varied, alternative curriculum can engage these pupils and provide them with skills that they will need at work. The Department is looking at different ways of engaging teenagers' interest.

Parents are expected to restrict their family holidays to the school holidays, but term-time holidays account for around 15% of absence. Head teachers have discretion on whether to authorise holidays and some take a firm line on absence, while others are uncertain about the circumstances in which they should give authorisation. The Department and some

local authorities are trying to tackle the problem through discussions with the travel industry and the introduction of a six-term year.

On the basis of a Report<sup>1</sup> by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Committee examined the Department on the progress made in reducing absence, on identifying and tackling absence where it occurs, and on persuading parents and pupils of the importance of attending school.

## Conclusions and recommendations

1. **Total absence in maintained schools has been reducing — by 6% between 2002–03 and 2004–05 — but unauthorised absence stayed around the same level for many years, before increasing in 2004–05 to over 0.8% of available school days.** We have identified 10 key practices to help schools manage attendance more effectively (**Figure 1**) and the Department and Ofsted should encourage schools and local authorities to apply them consistently.

Figure 1: Effective practices in attendance management

Effective practice	Commentary
1. Head teacher support for attendance management	Head teachers determine the priority that schools give attendance management and the resources that they apply. Some schools have higher absence rates than their circumstances suggest that they ought to have. They may need to give a higher priority to attendance management.
2. Communication of a clear policy on attendance	The onus is on head teachers to ensure that parents, pupils and teachers know what is expected of them and why. Most, but not all, schools have a documented attendance policy. Some head teachers are uncertain about when to authorise holidays during term-time.
3. Electronic registration at each lesson	All schools have to take a register and, used well, electronic registration systems produce reliable attendance data efficiently. Many schools do not have electronic registers and could use their devolved funding to implement these systems.
4. Early contact with parents of absent pupils	Most, but not all, schools contact parents on the first day of a child's absence. Early contact demonstrates to parents that attendance matters and absence is noticed, so contributes to the building of a strong ethos of attendance.
5. Regular analysis of attendance data	Analysis of attendance data enables schools to identify causes and patterns of absence and whether individual pupils need support. Most schools analyse data to varying extents.
6. Schemes to reward attendance	Reward schemes can be effective in reducing absence. The schemes can be designed to tackle the particular problems of a school and they increase the profile of attendance.
7. Provision of alternative curricula	Curricula need to match pupils' aspirations to make school attractive. Some schools work effectively with colleges of further education to provide vocational training.
8. Collaboration between schools	Schools apply management practices in different ways to tackle absence. Sharing their knowledge and also their resources can improve practices.
9. Effective working with education welfare services	Local authority education welfare services provide specialist support for difficult cases, for example where pupils have severe behavioural problems or have home circumstances (such as caring responsibilities) that make school attendance difficult. Some education welfare services also give expert advice to schools on attendance management.
10. Threat of legal sanctions	Where other approaches fail, in some cases the threat of sanctions can get pupils to return to school. Some local authorities have used penalty notices very effectively.

2. **A school's shared values, or ethos, can make a big difference to a school's attendance level.** It can take time to build an ethos that encourages regular attendance, but there are plenty of examples of how schools with good head teachers have achieved impressive reductions in absence. The Department and Ofsted should expect and assist head teachers, through the promulgation of good practice, to work with their governors, management teams, parents and pupils to build and sustain a strong ethos that values the regular attendance of all pupils.

- 3. Children and young people brought up in deprived circumstances suffer a double disadvantage because absence from school reduces their life chances further.** Disadvantaged pupils are much more likely to be absent from school. For example, pupils in secondary schools with a very high take up of free school meals tend to be absent from school for seven days a year more than pupils in schools with average levels of free school meals. Good schools use strategies to encourage positive attitudes to school, such as seeking to build good relationships with parents from the start, and making the curriculum more relevant to pupils' aspirations. For example vocational and academic subjects may be combined in ways that capture pupils' interest and **clearly prepare them for employment.**
- 4. Making the curriculum more relevant to reluctant attenders takes time and effort but has been successful in raising pupils' attendance and helping them want to learn.** Good examples of pupils being provided with a broad, vocationally-based curriculum are often achieved through partnerships between schools and colleges of further education. The Department should encourage such collaboration to give pupils a relevant and challenging mix of subjects. Schools and other education providers involved should learn from the experience of others.
- 5. The Department and schools spend substantial sums on tackling absence, but national absence data is of limited use and not completely reliable.** Schools have discretion over what absence they classify as authorised and unauthorised, so the split is uninformative. From 2006, the Department will have absence data on a pupil-by-pupil basis, which will facilitate analysis of particular groups of pupils. As schools increasingly use electronic systems to collect more detailed information on causes of absence, the Department should consider costs and benefits of aggregating it at a national level.
- 6. Around 60% of secondary schools have electronic registration systems and most find them effective in helping to tackle absence.** The Department no longer provides specific funding for these systems, but should encourage schools to apply their devolved funds to introducing registration systems where they are likely to improve the information available and administrative efficiency.
- 7. Reintegration of pupils returning to school after a long period of absence requires appropriate planning and resources.** Pupils who return to school after a long absence may find it difficult to settle without personalised support, and unless they get the right support they can distract teachers and other pupils or go absent again. The Department should encourage local authorities and schools to implement the recommendations of its recent research report on reintegration, and should help them by providing more guidance on effective practice in settling pupils back in to school.
- 8. Too many pupils are absent from school on term-time holidays.** Although term-time holidays do not bring the same problems as truancy because the absent pupils are unlikely to be involved in crime or anti-social behaviour, they still represent a substantial and unnecessary loss of education. The Department should give head teachers clear guidance on term-time holidays – for example that the 10 days per year is a limit not an entitlement – and encourage head teachers to take a firm line on authorising this type of absence.



# 1 Progress in improving school attendance

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1. Regular absence from school is damaging, making a young person vulnerable to involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour and much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications. It also disrupts the education of other pupils because teachers have to spend time helping poor attenders catch up with work that they have missed. The absent pupils effectively forfeit the value of their education. In 2003–04, the unit cost of education (teaching, facilities and other resources, but excluding capital expenditure) was £3,620 per pupil. Based on the average daily absence figure of 450,000 pupils, absent pupils missed £1.6 billion worth of education.<sup>2</sup> Even small reductions in absence rates would have a substantial impact on the value of education delivered to pupils.

2. Responsibility for managing and improving school attendance is shared between the Department for Education and Skills, local authorities and schools. The Department designs policy on school attendance, provides guidance to schools and local authorities, runs initiatives to tackle absence, and monitors national performance. Local authorities work with schools and take specific action to improve attendance, including supporting pupils and parents to address any underlying reasons for absence. Schools tackle absence primarily by encouraging good attendance through day-to-day contact with parents and pupils, taking a register, and dealing with absentees.<sup>3</sup>

3. Whenever a pupil does not attend school, their parent or carer must provide an explanation to the school which then decides whether to authorise the absence. Most absence is authorised, occurring for understandable reasons such as illness. Unauthorised absence is often known as “truancy”, but it also includes instances such as term-time holidays that are not authorised by the head teacher.<sup>4</sup> Unauthorised absence is the form of absence with which government, education workers and schools have been most concerned.<sup>5</sup>

4. The Department has had three targets to reduce absence in (maintained and independent day) schools (**Figure 2**), which it seeks to achieve through schools and local authorities. The first two targets to reduce unauthorised absence were missed by a long way, though the Department believes that there has been progress in tackling truancy. Although the number of pupils with very short periods of unauthorised absence has increased, these pupils’ average length of absence has come down. The Department believes that some of the increase in shorter episodes is due to head teachers taking a tougher line on persistent absentees and on holidays during term-time, which the head teacher may classify as unauthorised absence. The two effects leave the overall unauthorised absence rate slightly higher than it was ten years ago.<sup>6</sup> In maintained schools, unauthorised absence remained for years at just over 0.7% of half days missed, and then it increased to over 0.8% in 2004–05 (**Figure 3**).

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2 C&AG’s Report, paras 1.1, 1.5

3 *ibid*, para 1.15, Figure 10

4 Q 26

5 C&AG’s Report, para 1.9

6 Q 3

**Figure 2: Performance against the Department's absence targets**

The Department missed its first two absence targets but is making good progress towards its most recent target

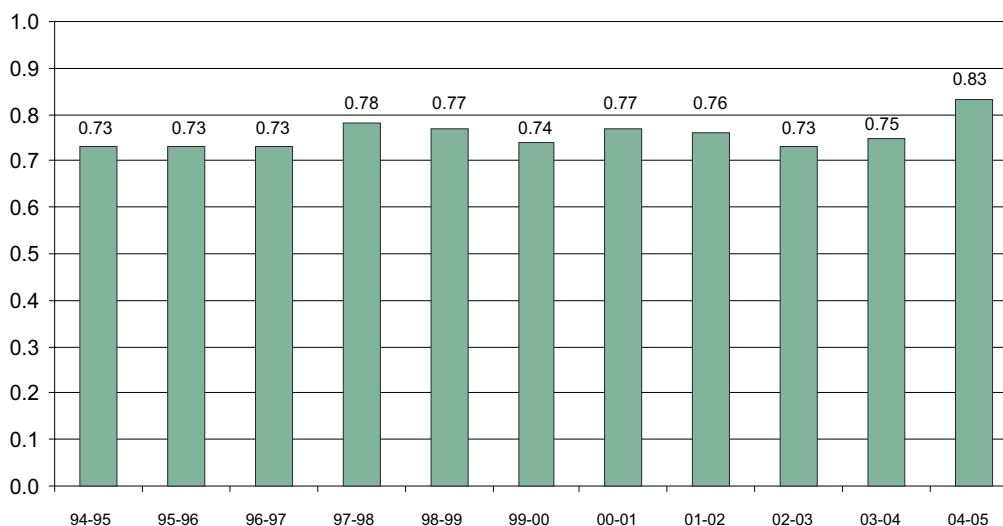
Target	Performance
Public Service Agreement 1998 To reduce unauthorised absence by a third between 1999 and 2002	Target missed. Unauthorised absence fell by 1%: from 0.73% in 1998–99 to 0.72% in 2001–02.
Public Service Agreements 2000 and 2002 To reduce truancy by 10% between 2002 and 2004	Target missed. Unauthorised absence remained at 0.72% from 2001–02 to 2003–04.
Public Service Agreement 2004 To reduce total absence by 8% between 2003 and 2008 (equivalent to 39,000 more pupils in school each day).	Initial progress has been good. Total absence has fallen by 6%, from 6.83% in 2002–03 to 6.45% in 2004–05.

Source: C&AG's Report, paras 1.17–1.18, NAO analysis of the Department's (provisional) attendance statistics for 2004–05

**Figure 3: Unauthorised absence in maintained schools, 1994–95 to 2004–05**

Unauthorised absence has increased slightly since 1994–95

Unauthorised absence (percentage of half days missed)

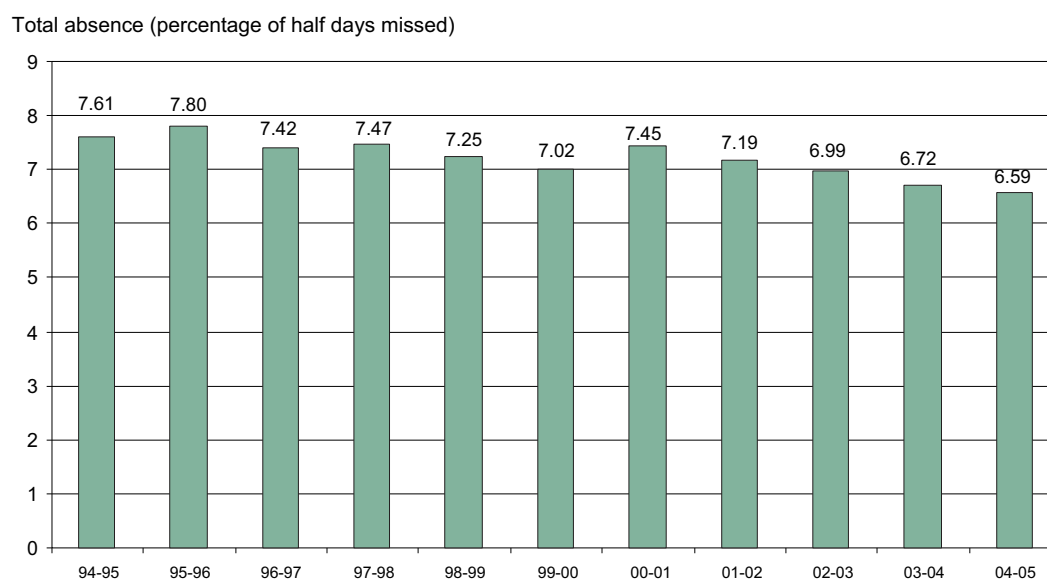


Note: These absence rates do not include the lower absence of day pupils at independent schools, which are included in the Public Service Agreement targets. They are therefore slightly higher than the absence rates that are measured against the targets.

5. Total absence in maintained schools fell by about one percentage point in the nine years to 2003–04 (**Figure 4**). The most recent (provisional) figures for 2004–05 show a further substantial drop in total absence, from 6.72% in 2003–04 to 6.59%. If this improvement were sustained in subsequent years, the target would be met early, a big achievement for the Department, local authorities and schools.

**Figure 4: Total absence in maintained schools, 1994–95 to 2004–05**

Total absence has been in decline since 2000–01



6. Pupils most likely to be absent from school are those from deprived backgrounds: pupils in secondary schools with a very high take up of free school meals tend to be absent from school on average for seven days a year more than pupils at schools with an average take up of free school meals.<sup>7</sup> Absence from school represents a double disadvantage for pupils already disadvantaged by their home circumstances. Where they do not master basic skills, their chances in life will be poor, and absence can result in long-term costs to society, for example through welfare payments and crime.<sup>8</sup>

7. The Department has spent £885 million from 1997–98 to 2003–04 on its main initiatives that were intended at least in part to reduce absence (**Figure 5**). Five out of the six initiatives were intended to address poor behaviour as well as reduce absence, and it is not possible to disentangle the two. The Department is therefore unable to identify how much was spent on reducing either total absence or unauthorised absence. The costs of day-to-day attendance management in schools and local authorities are not included in the costs of these initiatives.<sup>9</sup>

7 C&AG's Report, para 2.13 and Appendix 2 (Table 2)

8 Qq 35, 82, 89

9 C&AG's Report, para 1.16; Q 13

**Figure 5: Expenditure on attendance related initiatives, 1997–98 to 2003–04**

The Department has spent £885 million on six initiatives intended, at least in part, to reduce absence

Initiative	Expenditure (£m)	Activities funded
Excellence in Cities: learning mentors, learning support units	444.0	Provides 10,000 mentors in schools and over 1,000 learning support units intended to help pupils with behavioural issues, poor attendance and weak learning skills.
School Inclusion: Pupil Support Grant (initiative has now ended)	268.0	A range of activities, including education of excluded pupils, intended to help local authorities reduce exclusion and truancy.
Behaviour Improvement Programme	115.2	Measures to support schools facing the greatest behaviour and attendance challenges, such as multi-agency teams, learning mentors, learning support units and police in schools.
Key Stage 3 Strategy: behaviour and attendance strand	24.4	Provides behaviour and attendance audit and training materials, training days and consultants.
Behaviour Grant (initiative has now ended)	21.8	Local authority work on inclusion issues, pupils with poor attendance records and pupils at risk of exclusion.
Capital Modernisation Fund: electronic registration (initiative has now ended)	11.2	Installation of electronic registration systems at secondary schools with high rates of unauthorised absence.
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>884.6</b>	

Note: An additional £560.1 million will be spent from 2004–05 to 2005–06 on the three continuing initiatives

Source: Department for Education and Skills

8. Where expenditure from the £885 million for behaviour and attendance initiatives has been highly targeted on a relatively small number of schools, it has been more successful. For example, the schools in the first wave of the Behaviour Improvement Programme have collectively achieved improvements in attendance at twice the rate for all schools, and unauthorised absence also fell, bucking the national trend. The Department's initiatives have also helped to reduce permanent exclusions from school by 25%.<sup>10</sup>

9. Good quality absence data is required to monitor progress in reducing absence, identify patterns of absence and pinpoint issues requiring attention, for example schools with high or increasing absence rates. All schools collect "whole school" data (as opposed to pupil-level data) and they now submit it to the Department every term, having submitted annual returns prior to the 2004–05 school year. The returns show authorised and unauthorised absence but do not identify the causes of absence. The Department is looking to improve absence data by collecting it on a pupil-level basis from 2007. This data will permit a more powerful analysis of the factors associated with high absence rates, for example which types of pupils are particularly at risk, and how well individual schools are performing in relation to their context.<sup>11</sup>

10 Qq 9–14, 25

11 C&AG's Report, paras 2.5, 2.12; Q 93

10. The amount of authorised and unauthorised absence is affected by decisions of head teachers on whether to approve absence, for example for holidays during term-time. This local effect is one reason why the Department decided to focus more recently on total absence, which can be more reliably measured.<sup>12</sup> Causes of absence are important. At one extreme, absence owing to illness is understandable but truancy, which may be condoned by parents, is always of great concern. Because the Department's Public Service Agreement target focuses on total absence, there is a risk of losing sight of unauthorised absence, but the Department plans to continue to monitor unauthorised absence and, within that, truancy.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Q 48

13 Q 93

## 2 Identifying and tackling absence quickly when it occurs

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11. Some pupils are absent from school without their parents' knowledge. Electronic registration systems enable schools to record and monitor attendance efficiently and they provide information to follow up individual cases. Schools can then contact parents early on the first day that a pupil is absent from school without prior authorisation. In some schools this process is automated. The Department spent £11 million between 2002–03 and 2003–04 assisting the introduction of electronic registration in 530 secondary schools. An estimated 60% of secondary schools and 40% of primary schools now use them. Most head teachers at schools with electronic systems consider them to be effective in helping to tackle truancy and improve attendance.<sup>14</sup>

12. The Department is simplifying school funding, moving away from grants allocated to schools for particular purposes, and giving them more choice as to how they spend their money. Schools now have more devolved capital funding and could choose to spend it on electronic registration if they felt it was a good investment for the school. The Department is evaluating the different types of electronic systems available and how they are best used. It will then encourage schools without electronic registration to invest in appropriate systems.<sup>15</sup>

13. Local authorities prosecute some parents whose children do not attend school, including for the more serious offence that is committed where a parent knows that their child is not attending school but fails to act. Most local authorities prosecute parents and around 7,500 parents are prosecuted each year. Around 80% of these prosecutions result in a conviction and the most common penalty is a fine of £50 to £100, although the statutory maximum fine is £2,500. For some parents £100 is a lot of money, but it is easily affordable for others. The Department sees prosecution as just one approach that local authorities can use, but believes that tough action is required in some cases.<sup>16</sup> Prosecution is not right in all cases, for example where parents are incapable of organising their own lives.

14. A fast-track process for managing non-attendance cases has had some impact in improving attendance. The process includes early access to the courts, and is most useful where parents are capable of getting their children to school regularly but fail to do so. An evaluation of the fast-track process found that absence rates declined during the process and rose again afterwards, but not to the rates experienced at the start of the process. The evaluation measured absence rates only up to 24 weeks and there is a risk that absence rates could have continued to rise.<sup>17</sup>

15. There is a wide range in absence rates between local authorities, from 5.56% in Buckinghamshire in the 2004–05 school year to 8.64% in Manchester.<sup>18</sup> Absence statistics

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14 C&AG's Report, paras 3.13, 3.15

15 Q 16

16 C&AG's Report, paras 3.21–3.24; Qq 17, 75

17 C&AG's Report, para 3.27

18 Department for Education and Skills, *Pupil absence in schools in England 2004–05*, Table 2

for 2004–05 published by the Department show that 116 out of 150 local authorities reduced total absence rates in their areas. One of the best performers was Birmingham City Council, an urban authority that had reduced total absence from 7.01% in 2003–04 to 6.54% in 2004–05.<sup>19</sup> This local authority's range of measures includes effective use of truancy sweeps and penalty notices, two approaches recommended by the Department. The authority's Pupil Watch Officers patrol the streets looking for truants and return them to school. They challenge parents shopping with their school-age children during school hours. The Council has also used £50 fixed penalty notices, which were introduced under the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003, and are intended to be used early to deter parents from allowing patterns of unauthorised absence to develop. In its first use of the power to issue penalty notices, Birmingham City Council used, or threatened to use, penalty notices on 800 occasions and achieved improved attendance in 776 cases (97%). Few cases have proceeded to prosecution.<sup>20</sup>

16. Pupils returning to school after a long period of absence can find it difficult to settle because they have fallen behind academically or because the underlying causes of the absence have not been resolved. For persistent truants, there is a need to break the cycle of truancy. Putting in the effort to avoid persistent truancy could lead to savings later by reducing the risk of involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. Schools and local authorities can increase the chances of these pupils rejoining mainstream school, for example by providing personalised support and not just putting them back in class and expecting them and their teachers to cope.<sup>21</sup> The Department has published research on reintegration that concluded that successful reintegration occurs where there is a culture of inclusion, commitment from schools and appropriate resources to provide individually tailored support where necessary. The research suggested that the coverage of reintegration support was unacceptably low in some areas and for some groups.<sup>22</sup> Some pupils might be better suited to education in a special school, and a state boarding school is one option for preparing persistent truants to resume their education.<sup>23</sup>

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19 National Audit Office analysis of *Pupil absence in schools in England 2004–05*

20 C&AG's Report, para 3.22; Q 94

21 Qq 76–77, 89

22 *The reintegration of children absent, excluded or missing from school*, GHK Consulting, Holden McAllister Partnership and IPSOS Public Affairs, Department for Education and Skills (2004)

23 Qq 28–29, 109

### 3 Persuading pupils and their parents of the importance of attending school

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17. If pupils do not attend school, they cannot learn. It is important that head teachers create a strong set of values, or ethos, which reinforces the importance of attendance and learning. Head teachers can build and communicate such an ethos through their contact with parents, including on open days, parents' evenings and in pupils' school reports, and good head teachers make attendance an integral part of how they run their school. Weak head teachers whose schools had very poor attendance records would be identified by Ofsted inspections, and action could ultimately be taken to remove the head teacher.<sup>24</sup>

18. Faith schools and voluntary aided schools (many schools are both) tend to have good levels of attendance. Analysis of 2002–03 pure absence rates in faith schools and non-faith schools, without adjustment for schools' context, found that faith schools tend to have lower total absence rates (**Figure 6**).<sup>25</sup> Their performance is likely to be related to ethos and parental support for the school, and to the types of children who are pupils.<sup>26</sup> A more sophisticated analysis of factors associated with school absence rates showed that some types of school are statistically associated with lower rates of absence after allowing for schools' context, such as the take up of free school meals. At secondary level, selective schools, voluntary aided schools, specialist schools, foundation schools and boys' schools tended to have lower absence rates.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Qq 57–59

25 Q 63

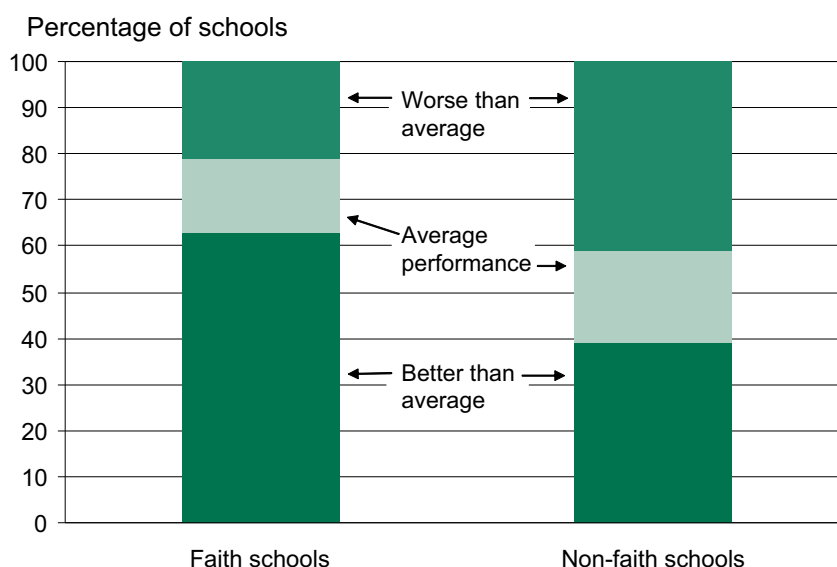
26 Q 6

27 C&AG's Report, Figure 17



**Figure 6: Performance of faith and non-faith secondary schools on attendance, 2002–03**

Secondary schools that are faith-based are more likely to have better than average attendance (without any adjustments for schools' contexts).



Note: This figure compares secondary schools' total absence rates with the average for their local authority, with average performance equating to within (+/-) 0.5% of the local average. The analysis is not adjusted for any of the factors, such as free schools meals, which are known to be linked to absence rates, and differences between the contexts of faith and non-faith schools will account for some of the difference between the two bars.

Source: National Audit Office

19. Pupils' and parents' attitudes to education are formed during the early years and can be difficult to change. It is very important to create positive attitudes in young children, and to identify, challenge and change negative parental attitudes during pre-school and primary school education.<sup>28</sup> The Department has been encouraging primary schools to identify problems early, because a pattern of absence can become established. Local authorities provide support to families on parenting and how to bring up a child, sometimes even before a child is born. The Sure Start programme provides some support, and the Department has decided to provide substantial support of this kind to some of the most deprived parts of England.<sup>29</sup>

20. Secondary schools pupils are absent more often than primary school pupils – in 2004–05, pupils in maintained secondary schools missed 7.82% of school time while primary pupils missed 5.43% of school time. Both authorised and unauthorised absence rates are higher in secondary schools.<sup>30</sup> This difference is likely to be due at least in part to some pupils finding academic subjects unattractive or less relevant to them. For example, a teenage pupil with poor English language skills might be expected to attend lessons in a foreign language. A varied, alternative curriculum that may include vocational elements can engage these pupils better and provide them with skills that they may need at work.

28 C&AG's Report, para 4.23

29 Qq 75, 78

30 Ev 17

Education welfare officers consider that changes to the curriculum are important for improving attendance.<sup>31</sup> Some colleges of further education have been successful in taking school-age pupils who had been truanting and teaching them in an adult environment.<sup>32</sup> There is a need to look for different ways of engaging teenagers' interest, which might involve more work experience or more vocational options.<sup>33</sup> Reward schemes can be effective in reducing absence by increasing the profile of attendance among pupils.<sup>34</sup>

21. In normal circumstances parents are expected to restrict family holidays to the school holiday periods, so that pupils do not miss any school time. In-term holidays are nevertheless estimated to account for around 15% of total absence, which is equivalent to around 66,000 pupils each day during 2004–05.<sup>35</sup> In a small proportion of cases, families may be genuinely unable to take holidays during school holidays. Head teachers have discretion to authorise up to 10 days of absence for holidays in a school year, taking account of the pupil's attendance record and the timing of the holiday, but these days are not an entitlement. The Department publishes guidance for schools on term-time holidays, but some head teachers are still uncertain about the circumstances in which they should authorise this type of absence.<sup>36</sup> Some schools take a much firmer line on authorising holidays than others, for example by refusing to authorise any absence (as does The London Oratory School) or by reinforcing the importance of attendance by interviewing parents on their return from holiday (**Box 1**).<sup>37</sup>

**Box 1: Example of a school's firm approach to term-time holidays**

The head teacher of Millbank Primary School in the London Borough of Westminster believes that improving parental attitudes is extremely important in tackling absence. In particular, the head teacher takes a firm line on term-time holidays.

She asks to interview parents who take their child on a term-time holiday. She explains the link between attendance and academic attainment and demonstrates to the parents what their child has missed by showing them the work completed by classmates during the period of absence. In some cases, she warns parents that their child may lose its place if it takes extended unauthorised absence. On one occasion, a family's children lost their places at the school as a result.

*Source: National Audit Office, February 2005*

22. The Department is trying to tackle the high cost of family holidays during school holiday time. Its discussions with the Association of British Travel Agents and others have considered how travel companies might give discounts to families during the main school

31 C&AG's Report, para 4.13

32 Q 107

33 Qq 83, 88

34 C&AG's Report, para 4.12

35 Q 95

36 C&AG's Report, para 4.16

37 Qq 44, 49

holidays if they book early enough. Some local authorities are testing a six-term year that could create more options for family holidays.<sup>38</sup>

## Formal minutes

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**Monday 19 December 2005**

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Greg Clark  
Mr Ian Davidson  
Helen Goodman

Mr Sadiq Khan  
Sarah McCarthy-Fry  
Jon Trickett

Draft Report (Department for Education and Skills: Improving school attendance in England), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 22 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Eighteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 11 January at 3.30 pm

## Witnesses

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**Monday 28 February 2005**

*Page*

**Sir David Normington KCB**, and **Mr Peter Housden**, Department for Education and Skills

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## List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2005–06

First Report	Managing National Lottery Distribution Fund balances	HC 408 ( <i>Cm 6712</i> )
Second Report	The regeneration of the Millennium Dome and associated land	HC 409 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Third Report	Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2004	HC 410 ( <i>Cm 6712</i> )
Fourth Report	Fraud and error in benefit expenditure	HC 411
Fifth Report	Inland Revenue: Tax Credits and deleted tax cases	HC 412 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Sixth Report	Department of Trade and Industry: Renewable energy	HC 413 ( <i>Cm 6689</i> )
Seventh Report	The use of operating theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services	HC 414
Eighth Report	Navan Centre	HC 415
Ninth Report	Foot and Mouth Disease: applying the lessons	HC 563
Tenth Report	Jobskills	HC 564
Eleventh Report	Local Management of Schools	HC 565
Twelfth Report	Helping those in financial hardship: the running of the Social Fund	HC 601
Thirteenth Report	The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Tackling homelessness	HC 653
Fourteenth Report	Energywatch and Postwatch	HC 654
Fifteenth Report	HM Customs and Excise Standard Report 2003–04	HC 695
Sixteenth Report	Home Office: Reducing vehicle crime	HC 696
Seventeenth Report	Achieving value for money in the delivery of public services	HC 742
First Special Report	The BBC's investment in Freeview: The response of the BBC Governors to the Committee's Third Report of Session 2004–05	HC 750
Eighteenth Report	Department for Education and Skills: Improving school attendance in England	HC 789
Nineteenth Report	Department of Health: Tackling cancer: improving the patient journey	HC 790

The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number

# Oral evidence

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## Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Monday 28 February 2005

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Mr Brian Jenkins

Mr Siôn Simon  
Mr Gerry Steinberg

**Sir John Bourn KCB**, Comptroller and Auditor General and **Ms Angela Hands**, Director of Education and Skills Value for Money Studies, National Audit Office, further examined.

**Mr Brian Glicksman CB**, Treasury Officer of Accounts, HM Treasury, further examined.

### REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL:

#### Improving School Attendance In England (HC 212)

*Witnesses:* **Sir David Normington KCB**, Permanent Secretary and **Mr Peter Housden**, Director General for Schools, Department for Education and Skills, examined.

**Q1 Chairman:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Committee of Public Accounts, where today we are looking at improving school attendance in England. We are joined once again by Sir David Normington, who is the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Education and Skills. You are very welcome. Would you like to introduce your colleague, please?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes; Peter Housden, who is the Director General for Schools in the Department.

**Q2 Chairman:** Could you start by looking at page 13 of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, paragraph 1.3, where we see that total absence from school has declined by only one percentage point in nine years. Why has so little been achieved?

**Sir David Normington:** I think actually that is quite a considerable achievement over the period. Because overall attendance is running at well over 90%, it is quite hard to squeeze the remaining number of people who are absent. The overall attendance is improving quite sharply. Unauthorised absence, which you will no doubt come on to, is very static.

**Q3 Chairman:** Let us look at unauthorised absence straightaway and page 18, paragraph 1.17. You have the two targets there. Why did you not make any progress towards meeting either of your targets?

**Sir David Normington:** It is quite a complicated story. It is clear that we did not make progress. What has been going on with unauthorised absence is that although the number of pupils with very short periods of unauthorised absence has been going up, the average amount of time that people are absent has been coming down overall. What we think is actually happening—and this is borne out by our discussions with the people out there, the teachers and so on—is that heads are being much tougher in whether they authorise absence or not. That is driving some of the figures up, but they are also being much tougher on persistent absentees and that

is pushing the amount of time they are absent down. So we have two effects going on and it has left the overall figure pretty much as it was over 10 years. We are dealing with something really difficult here, make no bones about that. It is very, very difficult to get unauthorised absence down significantly.

**Q4 Chairman:** Even given your answer I presume the figure here is right, that the equivalent of around 60,000 more pupils are back in school each day. Is that right?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, that is right.

**Q5 Chairman:** What are we going to do about it then? Heads are absolutely crucial in this, but if you look at paragraph 4.6 on page 42 you will see there that some heads apparently are not giving sufficient priority to this matter. At the bottom of the paragraph it says "... some schools see attendance as an issue that they do not need to deal with, but as something that the local authority will sort out for them". Why are some heads not giving sufficient attention to this?

**Sir David Normington:** It is a small number. Most schools now have attendance policies in place and are being very tough in enforcing measures against absence and picking up people who are absent. There are some head teachers who are not doing that. If we could get all head teachers very focused on this, we would get the results improving much faster. I do not just blame heads: it has to be a combined effort between heads, it has to involve a lot of parental support for the school, the local authority has resources and it is very important that they come in behind, particularly through their education welfare service. It has to be a joint effort.

**Q6 Chairman:** Let us look at different types of school then, because clearly the schools are crucial to this. I know from my experience with my own children that it is the ethos of the school, how the head treats

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parents when they arrive on the open day and all those other factors which are vital. If we look at Figure 17 on page 27, we see there obviously that selective schools have very low absence rates. One would perhaps accept that as axiomatic. Why do you think voluntary aided schools have a much lower absence rate?

**Sir David Normington:** You have probably put your finger on it. This is something to do with the ethos of the school and something to do with the type of children who go there, something to do with the parental support which those schools get. You have to be a bit careful in generalising, but it is going to be all those things. Many voluntary aided schools, which are effectively the faith schools, have a very strong ethos, very strong parental support for those schools. I am sure it is going to be something to do with that.

**Q7 Chairman:** That is certainly my experience, but there is no point labouring the point as it is an obvious point. There it is.

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, it is.

**Q8 Chairman:** You are very difficult to interview, Sir David, because you always put your hand up and accept all the points we make.

**Sir David Normington:** I shall try to disagree at some point.

**Q9 Chairman:** Let us look at this behaviour improvement programme. If we look at Figure 18 on page 31, I do not know whether you were briefed on this but I did ask the Prime Minister at the Liaison Committee about this matter. I put to him in broad terms that he had spent £1 billion on this over the last ten years and precious little had been achieved. We can probably agree that in terms of unauthorised absence that is right. He said that they had not spent anything like £1 billion on truancy; he said most of the money had been spent on behaviour, so presumably, if I asked you the same question, you would give me the same answer. You would not disagree with your own Prime Minister, would you?

**Sir David Normington:** I would not.

**Q10 Chairman:** However, it says here in the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report that little more than half the surveyed head teachers think that the behaviour improvement programme is effective. It does not look to me as though they are very impressed with this programme either. Of course if you cannot get the children to school in the first place, behaviour improvement programmes will make very little difference, will they?

**Sir David Normington:** We think that the behaviour improvement programme is one of our successes. It has been very highly targeted in its initial phases on about 1,500 schools and it has provided extra resources to those schools to improve behaviour, which of course has an indirect effect on attendance. It has actually improved attendance in those 1,500 schools at twice the rate for all schools and it has also bucked the trend on unauthorised absence in that unauthorised absence in those schools has gone

down. We think that means that we have evidence that that is money which is well spent. It is not the whole of the £885 million, but it is quite a substantial proportion of it and it looks as though it is having a significant effect. That is why, and this is shown in Figure 18, we are extending it to other schools and other local authorities. It is very targeted on those schools which have the worst attendance records.

**Q11 Chairman:** I should have mentioned Figure 18 in my initial questions and that quote from the Report about the attitude of head teachers is in Figure 20 on page 33. They were asked how effective the behaviour improvement programme had been. It is true that a very small minority say that it is ineffective, but I am just surprised, given all this money spent, if you look at the last line, that only 56% say it has been effective.

**Sir David Normington:** It is surprising.

**Q12 Chairman:** It is obviously right, it is agreed with you and this is a lot of money.

**Sir David Normington:** As you say, there is a great chunk of heads there who are undecided about it. It is important to judge the programme on what it is delivering and it is delivering faster improvements in attendance and also reductions in unauthorised absence. It is right on the button in terms of what we are trying to do.

**Q13 Chairman:** Following my question to the Prime Minister, I should say that I have written back to him after his answer to me and I am sure he was trying to answer me honestly. In my letter to him I said that I found it difficult to accept his assertion that "the vast bulk of that money goes for excluded pupils in the pupil referral units". I therefore said to him that the inference is that little has been spent on tackling absence. I said to him that the National Audit Office's Report says that all of the initiatives which combine to form the £885 million of spending are intended at least in part to reduce absence and that attendance and behaviour are closely related. I am sure you accept that point, do you not?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, I do accept that. It is very difficult to disentangle behaviour from attendance, but most of the initiatives which are included in the £885 million have been spent either on improving behaviour or reducing exclusion. Both those things are related to whether people attend school or not.

**Q14 Chairman:** When I said to the Prime Minister that he had spent the better part of £1 billion—£885 million—on dealing with truancy, I was right, was I not?

**Sir David Normington:** With respect, no you were not. The £885 million is spent on improving behaviour and reducing exclusions which affect absence, not just unauthorised absence, but overall absence. Some of it is spent on unauthorised absence.

**Q15 Chairman:** I do not think we are going to get any further on that.



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*Sir David Normington:* No.

**Q16 Chairman:** Obviously it is very important when we deal with truancy to have a quick response. These electronic registration schemes are mentioned in paragraph 3.13 and 3.15 on page 34, but very little funding has been provided for them. It seems to me to be absolutely key that you can track down pupils very quickly early on in the day through an electronic registration scheme. Are we going to have more government or departmental resources spent on these electronic registration schemes?

*Sir David Normington:* Probably not. I can explain why. We have spent £11 million on helping 530 secondary schools to introduce electronic registration schemes. We are evaluating that to see what is the best type of system and what is its best effect. We will then encourage schools to use their substantial amount of devolved capital to invest in those registration schemes. We are trying to get away from providing one-off slugs of money for particular purposes and actually giving schools some choice as to what they spend their money on. We have increased the amount of devolved capital they have and therefore we think if they have the evidence, they will be keen to spend the money on it. I think 60% of secondary schools already have these systems, so it is quite a high proportion.

**Q17 Chairman:** Let us look now at how we can try to force parents to take more of an interest. If we look at paragraph 3.24 on page 36, do you really think that a fine of £100 in the event of a successful prosecution, which rarely happens anyway, will really change parental attitudes?

*Sir David Normington:* It flags up for them that this is an important issue and for some parents £100 will be a lot of money. If they do not pay it, they have the threat lying behind that of prosecution. It is just one issue in the armoury of persuading parents of persistent truants to get their children to school, but it is one important thing in the armoury.

**Q18 Chairman:** Do you accept this whole programme is around targets? Certainly in terms of unauthorised absence, which is the most serious part of this, you are not meeting those targets, are you? Is your whole approach fundamentally flawed?

*Sir David Normington:* It is important to reduce all absence because absence is very much correlated with poor performance at school. It is very important within that to try to reduce unauthorised absence and I accept that the figures are very disappointing in that regard. If we can get persistent truancy down, it will have great benefits to communities, to cities, to those pupils themselves and we are having a struggle doing that.

**Chairman:** I now pass on to a former head teacher who can question you further.

**Q19 Mr Steinberg:** I would prefer to meet in—where was it?—the Cinnamon Club where we last met.

*Sir David Normington:* We did.

**Q20 Mr Steinberg:** Were you on expenses?

*Sir David Normington:* I was not.

**Q21 Mr Steinberg:** I was; my son was paying. I think this Report is a very good Report, but really it is airy-fairy, is it not? Frankly it is possible that we are actually pouring good resources down the drain trying to solve the problem. Do you think that your department is spending money wisely, effectively, value for money, the whole lot?

*Sir David Normington:* We can show that these targeted amounts of money which we spent within that £885 million, which is, by the way, on average £125 million a year, because this is a seven-year spend, have produced. However, what they have not done is affect the whole system. Where we have targeted resources it has produced improvements.

**Q22 Mr Steinberg:** On unauthorised absences?

*Sir David Normington:* As yet, we have not seen unauthorised absence coming down overall.

**Q23 Mr Steinberg:** This is the point. If you look at page 14, Figure 6, you have just reiterated and validated exactly what I have said. You have had no success whatsoever with unauthorised absences. I do not blame you at all, but I blame the system. Look at Figure 6. I know graphs cannot be 100% accurate, but I took a piece of paper with a straight edge and tried to work out unauthorised absences since 1994 to 2003–04 and there is virtually no difference at all. So unauthorised absence has not changed since this graph started in 1994–95 up to 2003–04; no difference whatsoever. What was it 20 years before that? Can the National Audit Office tell me? Can you tell me?

*Sir David Normington:* I do not think we collected these figures before this.

**Q24 Mr Steinberg:** It would have been important to do so.

*Sir David Normington:* They only go back 10 years.

**Q25 Mr Steinberg:** I can tell you as a former head teacher that I would suspect you could go back 20 years and those figures would be no different; there would be absolutely no difference whatsoever. In other words, the money you have been putting in to try to solve unauthorised absence is an absolute waste of resources which could have been spent in the education system on something better.

*Sir David Normington:* We have not been spending most of that money on tackling unauthorised absence: we have been spending it on reducing permanent exclusions, which are down 25%; we have been spending it on trying to tackle behaviour in schools, in other words trying to tackle the problem upstream rather than downstream. Relatively small amounts of money have gone directly into unauthorised absence.

**Q26 Mr Steinberg:** And truancy.

*Sir David Normington:* Unauthorised absence. Truancy is part of unauthorised absence, you cannot equate them exactly.

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**Q27 Mr Steinberg:** I am sorry, I thought you meant authorised absence.

**Sir David Normington:** No; unauthorised. Your general point is right, you can see it, it is there in the graph.

**Q28 Mr Steinberg:** It was the same when I was a head teacher 20 years ago. You had targets and you failed to reach those targets and you spent a lot of money and nothing has changed in 30 years. In other words, the system does not work. What you are trying to do cannot work, because there is a hard core of truants who will not go to school, for one reason or another, and it does not matter what you do, you will never get that hard core of truants back to school. You might say this is a very pessimistic outlook, but it is true; it is actually true. You have to look to see why they do not want to go to school. If you look at paragraph 1.12 on page 16, it tells you why they do not want to go to school. It says “It is self-evident that pupils who regularly fail to attend school reduce their chances of fulfilling their academic potential” that is obvious “and research has demonstrated that high rates of absence are associated with low academic achievement”. Again, that is absolutely obvious. I know one should not say “slow learners” or “educationally subnormal”, it is not particularly politically correct to say that now though in my day it was, but the fact of the matter was that those kids would not go to school because they could not fit into the school. It did not matter what the school did for them, they could not fit in because they were frustrated, because they were picked on or they had other interests. They would not go to school. Has anybody ever thought of actually taking those kids out of the school and putting them into special schools?

**Sir David Normington:** That is indeed what happens.

**Q29 Mr Steinberg:** No, it is not.

**Sir David Normington:** With some of them.

**Q30 Mr Steinberg:** Some of them, but I am not talking about some of them. I am talking about Figure 6 and the number at the bottom which has not changed for 20 years.

**Sir David Normington:** The behaviour improvement programme which we talked about a moment ago has bucked that trend. In those 1,500 schools unauthorised absence has begun to fall and that is the result of very, very targeted effort on the very children you are talking about.

**Q31 Mr Steinberg:** What we have done is we have opened up specialist schools, which we could express an opinion about later but not at this particular time, and we have closed special schools and tried to integrate and it has not worked, it has made the system worse. I had experience of children being taken out of comprehensive schools because they could not cope and sent to my school. They were truants but they did not truant when they came to me and I did not thump them or beat them; well, sometimes, not regularly. They did not truant because they were in a school where they were all the

same, they all had exactly the same abilities, they were not left to become frustrated and they attended school. What we have done is completely the opposite policy: we have kicked them out of these schools and put them into comprehensive schools with 2,000 kids and they are lost.

**Sir David Normington:** We still have a lot of special schools. It is not the policy to force children who are unsuitable into the ordinary secondary schools. Secondly, we have increased the number of places in pupil referral units and ensured that in the majority of those—and the aim is to have it in every one—the pupils get a full timetable, which they never used to get before.

**Q32 Mr Steinberg:** It is a waste. Let me give you an example. I had a secondary school kid who was sent to me, who never attended school at all, he was a truant, he thieved when he was playing truant and he was at a comprehensive school. He was sent to me, as a special school, with a reading age of 6 and an IQ below 70; I do not even know whether it is politically correct to say that these days. He could not even read *The Sun* and if you cannot read *The Sun* it is pretty bad, is it not? When I read his Report, do you know what it said? It said “This boy does not try in French and I had to remove him from the lesson”. He could not even speak English and they were trying to teach him French. What was he doing in the comprehensive school? You talk about giving them curricula which are relevant to them, but you are giving them curricula which are based on the standard curriculum and based on the school to which they are ashamed to go because of their ability.

**Sir David Normington:** We are trying to ensure that every pupil gets the support they need, whether it is in a special school, in a pupil referral unit or in an ordinary state secondary school and trying to provide them with the extra support, whether they are in school or in a special unit. I would not want to equate all these problems with special needs, because truants come in all shapes and sizes. We know that quite a lot of truants, that is people who are not in school, who are unauthorised absentees, are with their parents and it is condoned by their parents. Some are looking after their younger siblings, for instance. Truants come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

**Q33 Mr Steinberg:** Of course they do.

**Sir David Normington:** What I accept though is that there are some children with special needs who find it very, very difficult to fit into their schools and the curriculum.

**Q34 Mr Steinberg:** So what do we do with them? We either exclude them because they are a problem, or we do not bother with them at all and they play truant.

**Sir David Normington:** I should prefer, and this is the aim, either that they were in a special school where they were getting the special treatment you are talking about or they were in the mainstream school and getting a personalised curriculum supported by

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a specialist worker. That is also what happens more and more. Either of those is a possible solution, but we are dealing with some really tough cases.

**Q35 Mr Steinberg:** This Report says that it was not sure, if I remember correctly, whether truancy bred crime or the crime bred the truancy. Well I can tell you: truants have nothing to do and they gather in their twos and threes from the same school and they plan crime or they get into mischief. It is as simple as that. If they were at school, they probably would not. The solution to the problem is to provide them with places where they feel comfortable, where they are not ashamed to go and where it is made interesting for them. That can be done in a special school, it cannot be done in the comprehensive school.

**Sir David Normington:** Sometimes it can be done in the comprehensive school.

**Q36 Mr Steinberg:** Tell me one. Which schools has it been done in? Look, there is not a hap'orth of difference in 10 years and I would argue that there is not a hap'orth of difference in 20 years on that ever since we started to close special schools. Baroness Warnock said it was a mistake, once when she was in front of the Education and Skills Select Committee. She said she had changed her mind.

**Sir David Normington:** We have a lot of special schools still; every local authority is expected to have special school provision which deals with some of the children you are talking about. The aim is to give every child the support they need wherever they are in the education system. I just repeat this one fact. Within that unauthorised absence figure, what is happening is that the average length of time that people are off school is coming down; the total number of pupils taking small amounts of unauthorised absence is going up. It is a static figure in that chart, but within those figures something very interesting is happening, which is heads being very tough in not allowing people to be off school and not authorising it and also there are some signs that we are getting people back to school and keeping them there more than we have ever done before. I agree with you that the overall figure remains static and there are some real hard cases in those figures.

**Q37 Mr Steinberg:** The final point I would make is that I do not believe either that it is a good idea necessarily to involve or blame the parents—authorised absence is totally different—in terms of unauthorised absence. They tend to come from an environment which has bred that anyway, whether through their genes or through the environment in which they live. I had a case which I can remember clearly. I brought the parents in because he was not coming to school. The excuse was, as the father stood in front of me chewing chewing gum, that he did not care that his kid was away from school because education had done nothing for him. I can tell you that I had not done very much for him. When the parent has that attitude, there is no chance for the kid at all and that is why punishing those sorts of parents is a waste of time. It is different with

unauthorised absence. I could go on about unauthorised absences, which is a different kettle of fish altogether.

**Sir David Normington:** Neither you nor I would want us to give up on any of those children. We should never give up on them.

**Q38 Mr Steinberg:** No, I am not saying give up. What I am saying is that the approach is totally wrong. The approach should be to remove them from the mainstream altogether and place them into special schools.

**Sir David Normington:** Sometimes that happens.

**Q39 Mr Steinberg:** It should happen the majority of the time and not the minority of the time.

**Sir David Normington:** I do not always equate truancy with sending them to a special school. I cannot agree with you that that is always the solution.

**Q40 Mr Steinberg:** If you do not know why they are playing truant in the first place, that is the important factor. I would say that the vast majority are playing truant for the reasons I have given.

**Sir David Normington:** Certainly parents not caring whether they are at school or not is one factor. Another factor is the fact that they are not getting the sort of education they need at school. I accept that. Sometimes it is pressure from older brothers particularly who are encouraging them to bunk off school. It is all those things.

**Q41 Mr Steinberg:** Can I take it that tomorrow you will be opening some new special schools?

**Sir David Normington:** Some new special schools are being opened, but generally the pattern is—

**Mr Steinberg:** I do not know where. I will tell you what to do. Go back and open two or three new specialist schools for drama and dance. That is the best thing to do. Let us have everybody poncing around doing drama and dance.

**Q42 Chairman:** Thank you Billy Elliot for that. You talk about these figures and how you find it very difficult to deal with them. One of the problems of dealing with unauthorised absence is that although you are putting a lot of pressure on head teachers to deal with unauthorised absence, you are also putting pressure on them to be much less lenient with parents who ask to take their children away during school time. The parent then says he is going to take the child away anyway and the school then says it is an unauthorised absence, does it not?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, that is what happens.

**Q43 Chairman:** It may also be that you are going to move away from unauthorised absence because there is so little. Are you going to move now towards total absence?

**Sir David Normington:** That is what we are trying to do. We are monitoring and our targets relate to, overall absence. We are going to continue, nevertheless, to measure the underlying trend in unauthorised absence. The reason we have moved to

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overall absence is precisely as you say: it is very susceptible to whether a head teacher in an individual school authorises absence or not. Quite a few have very tough attitudes to authorising holidays in the school term. That is quite true.

**Q44 Chairman:** I know for instance from personal experience that the headmaster of the London Oratory, with which I have had a lot of personal experience, does not give any authorisation whatsoever for taking kids away on holiday, even to posh villas in Tuscany.

**Sir David Normington:** There are plenty of school holidays in which to take holidays.

**Chairman:** I apologise for that last remark; I should not have made it.

**Q45 Mr Bacon:** Sir David, congratulations on your knighthood.

**Sir David Normington:** Thank you.

**Q46 Mr Bacon:** What did you get it for?

**Sir David Normington:** For 32 years in the public service.

**Mr Bacon:** Excellent, well done. I take it that it was nothing to do with Individual Learning Accounts.

**Chairman:** I think you also should withdraw that last remark, as I withdrew my remark.

**Mr Bacon:** I withdraw it unreservedly.

**Chairman:** Sir David is a fine public servant, who always helps us.

**Q47 Mr Bacon:** I would not dream of saying anything else. Surviving 32 years in the public service is something for which anyone deserves a knighthood. Chairman, I hope you get one as well soon. Sir David, you said unauthorised absences were not the whole £885 million by any stretch of the imagination. How much have you spent on unauthorised absences?

**Sir David Normington:** I just cannot break that down. I can break it down into what we have spent on each category, but I cannot break it down into authorised and unauthorised absence. In truth, we have focused on behaviour and attendance, not just on unauthorised absence, but I just cannot give you that breakdown.

**Q48 Mr Bacon:** There is a quote somewhere in the Report which says the whole difference between authorised and unauthorised is basically a con. Did you see that? Page 42, column two, just below paragraph 4.8. The principal education welfare officer from a local authority said “The figures [authorised and unauthorised absence] are false, the figures are unreliable . . . They can be manipulated. Principal education welfare officer”. Presumably so he can keep his job his name has not been put in there. Is that the case that these are basically open to manipulation?

**Sir David Normington:** I do not know about “open to manipulation” but certainly susceptible to what the head decides to do in any particular case; whether authorised or not. We have just been talking about holidays and practice varies very greatly

between schools. In that sense, they are very susceptible to local decision making and that is why we have focused more recently on the overall absence figure and have been accused, of course, of taking our eye of unauthorised absence. It is true that heads are being much tougher on unauthorised absence.

**Q49 Mr Bacon:** It is certainly true that the head teacher of the London Oratory does not mind rapping anybody on the knuckles, however high in the land they are. It is also true that the London Oratory has extremely high academic standards. Would you take it that there is a relationship between the fact that the head does not allow any absences during term time and the fact that there are high academic standards? This is obviously only one of a number of factors.

**Sir David Normington:** It is one of a number of factors and it is almost certainly the case that the way that school is run—

**Q50 Mr Bacon:** There is a positive correlation, is there not?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, there is a correlation.

**Q51 Mr Bacon:** Apart from paragraph 4.6, which I just found shocking, about head teachers thinking they could leave it to others and I want to come onto that in a minute, the two things which struck me most in this Report were paragraph 17 on page 7 and paragraph 20 on page 9. Paragraph 17 on page 7 basically says “The main common factor we identified in the schools with the highest attendance was that the schools had adopted all or virtually all the practices” that is the practices referred to in Figure 5 on the following page, page 8 “some time ago and had followed them consistently over several years”. In other words, if you had a well-managed school with the right range of practices which were being implemented, you got results.

**Sir David Normington:** Yes.

**Q52 Mr Bacon:** Second, again pretty unsurprising “. . . negative parental attitudes to education are the external factor that is most closely associated with high rates of absence”; startlingly unsurprising in a way and intuitively obvious. If parents tell their children not to bother to attend because it never did anything for them, they are not going to attend. Equally, if you have head teachers who do a very good job of managing the problem, you get a solution. That brings me on to paragraph 4.6, the most shocking bit and the Chairman referred to it earlier. I quote from page 42 “. . . some schools see attendance as an issue that they do not need to deal with, but as something that the local authority will sort out for them”. Surely, employing a head teacher who runs a school who has that sort of attitude is simply a waste of taxpayers’ money, is it not?

**Sir David Normington:** If there are such heads, yes.

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**Q53 Mr Bacon:** The Report says that there are.

**Sir David Normington:** The Report says that the principal education welfare officers say that; I am not doubting that.

**Q54 Mr Bacon:** Are you saying that there is a difference between the education service in England and Wales?

**Sir David Normington:** Of course not. I should not say that.

**Q55 Mr Bacon:** Do you wish to withdraw it unreservedly?

**Sir David Normington:** I will do that. I believe that there are some head teachers who are not consistently applying all these practices and do not see the need to focus on this as opposed to other things. I believe that. I do not actually believe there are all that many these days who are doing that, but there are some, otherwise we would be seeing greater improvements.

**Q56 Mr Bacon:** When you say “other things”, do you mean other things *vis-à-vis* attendance or other things full stop.

**Sir David Normington:** Different things.

**Q57 Mr Bacon:** Surely it is axiomatic, is it not, that if the children are not there, they cannot learn? This is absolutely essential and every head teacher must focus on that and most do.

**Sir David Normington:** Yes and most do and good schools have that as an integral part of how they run the school.

**Q58 Mr Bacon:** What is the Department doing to root out and get rid of, sack, head teachers who are not doing that? Even if they are a minority, they need to go.

**Sir David Normington:** We do not sack head teachers ourselves, because we do not employ them.

**Q59 Mr Bacon:** No, I know you do not, the local authorities do. What are you doing to encourage local authorities to get rid of such people?

**Sir David Normington:** Usually this action follows an Ofsted inspection of the school, where Ofsted do pick up this issue along with others and usually, when schools are failing, one of the failures is that their attendance record is very poor and that is usually when action is taken against the head teacher.

**Q60 Mr Bacon:** I should like to turn to the subject of faith schools. You mentioned earlier that faith schools tend to have a better record of attendance, a lower record of non-attendance. If that is the case, in order to get value for money out of the money we are spending on education, should we be thinking of expanding the faith school sector?

**Sir David Normington:** There are no barriers to faith groups setting up schools as long as they can find the resources to do so. One of the things which makes it difficult for faith groups to do so is that they have to put some money into the school themselves. We are

not discouraging that from happening. There are very, very large numbers of faith schools, as you know; 40% of the primary sector is faith schools.

**Q61 Mr Bacon:** The church was doing it before the government, was it not?

**Sir David Normington:** It was and that was part of the 1944 Act.

**Q62 Mr Bacon:** Is it true that the top two schools in the UK in terms of the performance tables were a Moslem girls’ school and a Sikh school? I heard that on the radio recently.

**Sir David Normington:** I think that is quite likely. They are certainly up there. I cannot recall precisely whether it was those two, but certainly the Moslem girls’ school, which I think is probably in Bradford, is at the top.

**Q63 Mr Bacon:** You very kindly did an extra note for me on faith schools and it says in paragraph 2.21 on page 27 “Although faith schools are associated with lower rates of unauthorised absence in primary schools, our model did not find that there was a significant relationship between faith schools and total absence rates”. You have very kindly done this extra note in which you have given me some actual figures rather than blobs on a chart.<sup>1</sup> Looking at it, for example, among secondary schools, among the 3,071 schools in your survey, 517 were faith schools and 2,554 were non-faith schools. Of those 517 faith schools 326 had a performance better than average and only 108 had a performance worse than average. Of those 2,554 non-faith schools 994 had a performance better than average and 1,048 had a performance worse than average, so in the non-faith schools nearly as many were doing better as doing worse. However, for the faith schools, there was a radical difference. The faith schools had significantly more out of your total sample of 517 which were doing better than were doing worse. My question is: why is that not a significant relationship?

**Ms Hands:** The two analyses are different. If we look at page 23 of the Report, those two graphs are the basis for the analysis that we developed for you, which is looking at the distance of the schools from the local authority average. The statistical significance that we talk about in the paragraph you quote is referring to the analysis at the back of the Report, which has been adjusted for various factors like proportion of free school meals, ethnicity of the students in the schools, the kinds of areas the schools are in, whether they are in a coalfield ward, the big list of factors which are in the appendix. They are actually different analyses. It is not saying that there is no difference: it is saying that there is no statistical significance.

**Q64 Mr Bacon:** If you adjust, but if you look at the raw data you sent me, there is a difference, is there not?

**Ms Hands:** Yes. There is a clear pattern, which you have just described, in the raw data.

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**Q65 Mr Bacon:** If you tweak it enough, you can eliminate any difference.

**Ms Hands:** Yes, in terms of the factors we have used to adjust the data in the back of the Report.

**Sir David Normington:** If you turn to page 58, I thought that was showing that in the secondary sector in voluntary aided schools, which are effectively faith schools, total absence is quite significantly lower than in secondary schools generally. Is that not what that is showing?

**Ms Hands:** Yes, but when you add the voluntary controlled to the voluntary aided the statistical difference—

**Sir David Normington:** But there are many fewer which are voluntary controlled, are there not, than voluntary aided?

**Ms Hands:** Yes.

**Q66 Mr Bacon:** This is exactly the point. I notice the Report, in paragraph 2.21, says there is no difference "... the former status is associated with lower absence while the latter status is not". I immediately looked at your figures and I noticed that out of 18,000 schools you looked at only 93 were voluntary controlled and of those 28 were worse than average and 46 were better than average.<sup>2</sup> So even there, there appears to be, at least on the raw numbers, a trend in favour of what I am suggesting.

**Ms Hands:** There certainly is on the raw data.

**Q67 Mr Bacon:** Sir David very helpfully points out that there are in fact very few voluntary controlled schools anyway. The reason I think this is interesting from the point of view of trying to understand it, is that it is a matter of huge controversy. There are people in the political parties who think faith schools are a good thing and there are people in political parties who think it is a bad thing. I happened to be listening to something on the radio the other day and there was a Labour MP who thought faith schools were a very good idea and a Liberal MP who thought they were a very bad idea and they were busy tearing each other's eyes out, obviously something with which, personally, I do not have great problem about, but nonetheless it is very important that we have some very clear facts on this. It looks so blindingly obvious in the raw data that there is a very significant relationship, that I am surprised you managed to will away this relationship by putting it into a pot, stirring it for a bit of ethnicity or free school meals and coming out with a non-statistically significant relationship.

**Ms Hands:** The factors we used are in the appendix on page 52; there is quite a range of factors there. The free school meals one can actually change the position of the school. If it has very low numbers of free school meals then it will be expected to have a lower absence than otherwise, than if it had a high level.

**Q68 Mr Bacon:** The Chairman mentioned the ethos earlier and of course we all know that faith schools are often associated with a very particular and identifiable ethos and the Department for Education has itself said that the right ethos is extremely important. Is it possible that the NAO will look further at this issue of faith schools and whether, and if so how, they are providing, as these raw figures seem to suggest that they are, better value for money for the taxpayers?

**Ms Hands:** Yes, we will have opportunities to do that.

**Q69 Mr Jenkins:** When you read the Report, Sir David, were you pleased with it or disappointed with the content of it?

**Sir David Normington:** I thought it was a fair Report. I should have liked the unauthorised absence figures to have been better, though I knew them of course, but I thought it was a fair Report.

**Q70 Mr Jenkins:** I should have liked the unauthorised absence figures to have been better, but I am not in charge of the Department. I do not have the levers to pull to get them lower. If I were in the Department and this Report had come forward saying I was making no headway, I should be sending signals out down the line saying "We know the problem, this is a fair analysis of what the problem is". It is no surprise to me that the London Oratory has a low absence record, when it selects the parents. Any school which can select good, well-motivated parents, be it a faith school or specialist school or any other school, will have a low absence record. Is that right?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, it may be a factor, but it is only just one of the factors; the parents are only one of the factors.

**Q71 Mr Jenkins:** Let us see whether we can get it better than "may be a factor". I can assure you that it will be a factor.

**Sir David Normington:** Yes, who the parents are is a factor.

**Q72 Mr Jenkins:** So we are dealing now not just with the child but we are dealing with the parents in our society, are we not?

**Sir David Normington:** Yes.

**Q73 Mr Jenkins:** This Report is a condemnation in very many cases of the parents of those children. It was no big surprise to me that this showed a deprived area, low qualifications, unemployment, low income, high levels of free school meals are associated with higher absence rates than we want. We have this constant level of absence and the worrying figure for me is in the primary school. What do you think the strategy should be within your Department to send down to the local education authority and to send down to the education welfare officers if you have a five- six- or seven-year-old child who is not attending school because their parents does not get up in the morning, either through drugs, drink or pure inactivity they

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<sup>2</sup> Note by NAO: Mr Bacon refers to 93 voluntary controlled schools out of 18,000, but our (the NAO's) briefing shows that there were 93 voluntary controlled schools out of 3,071.

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decide they cannot get up to get the child ready for school? What action do you think we should take as a society to protect that child?

**Sir David Normington:** We should certainly focus on those children and on those parents. We should find out what the solution is in each case, because it will be different. In the extreme case of course you can take the child away from the parent. I would not normally recommend that as a solution but in the extreme case that is what you should do. In a sense this is what the education welfare service does and why we are putting other support into professionals, both for primary and secondary schools. You need to focus on that family and on that child and find out what is going to solve the problem. If it is drugs, it may be that you have to tackle it through drug rehabilitation and so on. There may be indirect means of getting that child back to school.

**Q74 Mr Jenkins:** One of the free gifts in this country which is available to every child is a free education. To deny that child, for any reason whatsoever, that opportunity is a crime against the child.

**Sir David Normington:** Yes.

**Q75 Mr Jenkins:** If we were not feeding that child or not clothing that child, we would step in very quickly. I get the impression that when we do not send that child to school, we are very slow to react to that situation. Am I right?

**Sir David Normington:** I do not think we are. I think schools are very quick in picking it up these days and referring it to the specialist services, if that is what is needed. The solution to the problem is much slower because the solutions are intractable. We are quite quick at picking up those problems now and that is what we have been trying to encourage. I agree with you that this needs dealing with in primary school; that is where the pattern of absence can get established. I agree with that, but these are really difficult cases. In the end you do have to be tough, you do have to take tough action; every year 7,500 prosecutions of parents. In the end that is what you have to do, but in the really difficult cases it still will not solve the problem.

**Q76 Mr Jenkins:** I agree with this 7,500 prosecutions, but somewhere deep inside me I believe that we are flogging a dead horse. It is no good trying to prosecute the people who are themselves incompetent, incapable, cannot organise their own lives. What action do we have planned to get that child back into mainstream school or, taking that child out of mainstream schooling, to accelerate their development to a position where we can get them back into mainstream schooling and break the link? If we do not break the link, and I can take you to any young offender institution or any prison in this country and show you people in there who started on that route by not attending school, playing truant, getting into crime, we have to pay £30,000 to £35,000 per year to incarcerate them in a prison and in some cases give them their first opportunity of education. Do you not think it would

be better value for money if we were to put that money at the start of the programme rather than at the end?

**Sir David Normington:** I do. I agree with you that we should put it earlier.

**Mr Housden:** You are on a very important point here. Our experience is that you are right, once those patterns are established early on in a child's career, it can be progressively more difficult to turn that pattern of behaviour round. We found one of the key things that prevents a pattern of poor attendance emerging is the extent to which the young person is able to behave properly in school, the link between attendance and behaviour very early on. We are doing some serious work now both in the early years setting and in primary schools, in nurseries and in reception classes, on the way youngsters treat each other, the way they behave with each other, their general adaptation to formal learning. We believe that is having a good effect. You then go on to say that parents are in different situations. In some cases it is an incapacity; there are so many other things going on in a parents' life that the attendance of their child at school can seem to be a very low priority. That is where the Department's *Every Child Matters* strategy is very important to make sure that the school is able to bring in all the support services, whether it is about drugs or housing, employment, whatever it is, to support them, to work with that family in need. The last point you make is equally important, which is the question of speed. Our experience had been that where you had a circumstance where the parent really, probably, was capable of getting their child to school regularly but was not doing so, it was a matter of will, often those cases were getting bogged down between the school, the local authority and the courts. This is where—and the Report brings this out—the fast track to prosecution has been very important. What it is basically is a case management system which makes clear to the parent right from the outset that the consequences of them not collaborating with the school and the education welfare services will be a prosecution which is likely to result in a fine or worse. The evidence on that is not overwhelming, but it is generally positive and is producing improvements in behaviour. That question of taking early action, recognising that you need things to support parents in a variety of circumstances, but all the while the system showing its determination, that there is an end point and there are consequences if you do not send your child to school.

**Q77 Mr Jenkins:** It is that emphasis on the prosecution of the parents about which I have some doubt. I am not interested in prosecuting the parent; honestly, I am not, or penalising the parent in any way, shape or form. The only thing in which I am interested is the welfare of that child and ensuring that we can break the cycle and give that child the opportunity to step outside. Are you looking and have you looked at what effect you are having, because the figures do not show this at the moment, to be honest. They are lost in the total numbers. Are

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you analysing and are you looking at the effect your problem has had to date with the greater involvement? For instance, do you send education officers at eight o'clock in the morning to make sure the child is dressed and make sure the child is taken to school? Have you considered agreeing with the parent that that child should go away for a short while, maybe a month, from Monday to Friday over a term or two terms to some sort of boarding school where that child can get up to standard before being re-admitted into the primary school? Are we taking direct action of this nature? I do not get the feeling that we are taking this action.

**Mr Housden:** This would go back to one of the first points Sir David made. It is actually about an individual response to the circumstances of the case. You are quite right to say that good practice is that as soon as you spot a trend you look at what the reasons are and what you need to do to reverse it. If those measures you indicated were appropriate, yes, they ought to be done. The other thing which has been very effective and this speaks to the electronic registration point a bit, is actually phoning parents. Schools who know very quickly in the morning who is not in school are actually having staff phone home, and parents are very supportive of this, to say "Your son/your daughter is not in school" and then action is taken. Young people need to know—

**Q78 Mr Jenkins:** I smiled when I found that electronic registration and being able to mark children through the day now showed an increase in absence rates because it was the first time we were able to find the true figure. I agree that we can tackle some of the stuff by developing the curriculum, I know we can work in the right direction and on page 46 I thought the strategy laid out by the Millbank Primary School was brilliant and one which should be rolled out over the country. There is no difficulty there. When we have all these things in place, we recognise and I think society will recognise that we are never going to stop children not attending school. I did see a brilliant tape the other day where one of the head teachers had a book with nearly 200 pages; a child attends school for about 194 days a year. He took the 10 pages at the back and ripped them out. He asked whether, when they took their child off on holiday, they would like to read the book and told them, by the way, the last 10 pages were missing. This was to drive home the point that the last 10 days of a term for that child can be very, very important, or any 10 days. We have to tackle parents and make them recognise the disadvantage they put their children under. I think, by and large, most parents are responsible. All I was saying was at the very, very sharp end there is that very small group of people we need to tackle and that is the group which very often sends the signal back down the line as well. They are the ones who affect other students, other families. I am not sure we are really taking the welfare issues of that child seriously enough. On reading the Report, I do not see that degree of commitment.

**Sir David Normington:** I do not know to what extent the people who wrote the Report were able to follow the services and see how they deal with those very difficult cases. I think they picked it up to some extent but actually there is a huge amount of help going in to support those children and families now. It has greatly increased. We have talked here before about Sure Start. It has to start almost before the child is born in some families so that the issue of parenting and how to bring up that child starts immediately. That is why we put so much effort into Sure Start in some of the most difficult bits of the country. That is a precise example of prevention and putting the money in to prevent them rather than having to deal with the problems at the other end. It is a long process.

**Q79 Mr Jenkins:** The Sure Start programme is brilliant; I think it is very effective and does tremendous work. Hopefully, if we can crack this issue at primary school, where we are going to be more supportive of their attempts to get children sometimes in difficult circumstances with difficult families into primary education. The secondary school education system is a different scenario; totally different. I am not sure we should be penalising parents in this scenario. Have we ever thought about paying children to go to school; not from the day when they are sixteen-years' old but from day eleven? If they fail to turn up, they fail to get paid.

**Sir David Normington:** I do not think so. I would not want to encourage that thought at all. There are many other things on which to spend money than paying children to go to school. They ought to be there and their parents ought to get them there.

**Q80 Mr Jenkins:** At the moment we pay them; we call it child benefit.

**Sir David Normington:** We support families in various ways, but we are not linking that to whether their children attend school or not.

**Q81 Mr Jenkins:** It is a socialising exercise, is it not?

**Sir David Normington:** I entirely agree with you. We need children to be in schools. The Report says that attendance at school is one of the few things which is compulsory in this world; the Report picks that up. The law says you have to be at school between 5 and 16 and if you are not then you are breaking the law and your parents are.<sup>3</sup>

**Q82 Mr Jenkins:** Lots of laws get broken every day in this country.

**Sir David Normington:** They do and that is why we have to keep on working at it. For children to be out of school is damaging their education and those who are most disadvantaged are already behind and for them to be out of school is a double disadvantage.

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<sup>3</sup> *Note by witness:* My note answer relates to registered pupils. Parents may fulfil their legal duty by arranging for their child to receive education other than at school.



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**Q83 Mr Jenkins:** There are many strategies and I have one at the present time. In my constituency we are trying to knit together enough staff in September for a skills academy where 14-year-olds will be brought in and hopefully, before they get to 14 even, we shall start to introduce them to the world of work, so they can see what vocational aspects they want to concentrate on and maybe improve their attendance because they can see the relevance. I understand that is the important part of the roll-out we are going to do with regard to education and hopefully keep people on board.

**Sir David Normington:** It is. We have not talked very much about part of this actually being to make education interesting and relevant to people. If you are going to get them back in school, you then have to engage their interest. What you have just described for people in their teens will sometimes mean thinking in different ways of engaging their interest through vocational options and so on. I think that is right.

**Q84 Mr Simon:** Sir David, as today there seems to have been a vogue for congratulations on your knighthood to be qualified, my qualification is that it is a shame to leave behind the reassuring solidity of Mr Normington.

**Sir David Normington:** Some of my family think that.

**Q85 Mr Simon:** Lady Violet Bonham-Carter always used to refer to Mr Roy Jenkins, even in the vocative case, Mr Roy Jenkins; never Roy and never Mr Jenkins, but Mr Roy Jenkins.

**Sir David Normington:** I do not mind how I am referred to.

**Q86 Mr Simon:** You said earlier, very sincerely and almost passionately—and it is rare for us to have passion from your desk there other than in defence of self—that we cannot give up on any children, we cannot just let them go. Clearly as a society, in respect of those individuals, that is true. Nevertheless, it could be the case that as a department strategically having spent however much it is—I am not interested in the exact number—a large amount of money, a great deal of energy, resource and effort over a long time attempting to change this small but significant percentage of hardcore truants, to keep the term simple, it could be the case that the department says “Perhaps the best use of our resources in future will not be simply to continue to aim to get those children to go to school”. Is that the Department’s view? Has the Department thought that? It must have thought that but what has it concluded?

**Sir David Normington:** No, it is not the Department’s view, but all through education, there is an issue as to whether you are dealing with the 98% or whether you are dealing with the 2%.

**Q87 Mr Simon:** That is all through everything; that is politics.

**Sir David Normington:** That is the precise issue you are highlighting, as to where you put your resources.

**Q88 Mr Simon:** No, I am not. Please do not misunderstand me. That is why I started by referring to your admirable and accurate statement that you cannot give up on everybody and also with reference to what Mr Jenkins said about the cost of truancy throughout the truant’s later life of crime and dysfunction. I am not saying that there is any question that we give up on those individuals. I am saying that perhaps the Department takes a strategic and positive decision that it is simply not, never mind cost effective, but it does not even look to be possible to vary that percentage and that therefore, perhaps the Department, but certainly the Government more broadly, take a different approach to dealing with those children, not to try to put them into school, but to try to do something else. For instance, an illiberal person might say “String ’em up. Lock ’em up”. I am not saying that, but that would be an example of taking a different approach to the problem. “Fine ’em and chain ’em to lamp posts”. I am not suggesting that would be the approach you would come up with, but you might have come up with some other approach than simply saying you have to incentivise, educate, find them and get them back into any school.

**Sir David Normington:** What is true about this is that it is what then happens to them when they are back in school. We were just touching on that when addressing Mr Jenkins’ last question, which is that, particularly from 14 onwards, we are looking now at what alternative provision there is to what you might think of as a normal education. In other words thinking about whether there are different things, not just vocational; sometimes we equate vocational with this problem, but sometimes it is. It is actually looking for different ways of engaging those teenagers’ interest, which might be more work experience, might be more vocational options. In a sense we have reached that view for 14-year-olds upwards. We have not reached that view in other respects.

**Q89 Mr Simon:** That is a relatively unequivocal note then. The intention is still by whatever new means to try to get this miscreant percentage into school.

**Sir David Normington:** It is among younger children and young teenagers, yes. We need to keep on trying because if they do not get the basics, their chances in life are going to be poor. The cost equation here, by the way, is very significant. As you know, as the Report says, if they go on truanting the cost to society in terms of crime is long term and therefore is a lot of cost and therefore it is worth going on trying to get them back into school and dealing with that. However, with one qualification: what you do with them when they are back in school will vary. It is important that you do not just stick them back in the class and expect them to cope. You have to provide them with support to help them back in. It might be quite personalised support, it might be special treatment and support while they are in school. It is wrong to think of them being stuck back in a class and just coping with the rest.

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**Q90 Mr Simon:** You have had a series over the last few years of apparently relatively random and fairly outlandish looking targets for unauthorised absence: reduce it by one third, then reduce it by 10%, then reduce total absence by 0.55 percentage points between 2003 and 2008. As I understand it, the plan from here on is not to have a target.

**Sir David Normington:** No, we do now have a 2004 target. Let me explain.

**Q91 Mr Simon:** I am talking about an unauthorised absence target, not an attendance target.

**Sir David Normington:** We have a total absence target now not an unauthorised absence target. The previous two targets were unauthorised.

**Q92 Mr Simon:** I do not suspect any ill intent on your Department's part, but I do suggest that it does give the impression, when you had this series of outlandish targets, none of which has been hit, and now, even though you say you intend to continue to address the deficit with the same vigour as before, you no longer identify this problem in a target as a discrete problem. I do not think you even need to answer that because you have already explained why you are now talking about absences. Just for the record I would suggest that although I am not suggesting it is fishy, I do suggest that it perhaps looks a bit fishy. One of the things which concerns me beyond that is whether you have plans in place to collect sufficiently high quality data in sufficient detail. It strikes me that you need not only to know numbers, but qualitative detail about exactly who is truanting and exactly what lessons they are missing and exactly in what patterns and exactly the details of a distinction we have not touched on much today between condoned unauthorised absence and uncondoned unauthorised absence. I think probably that one of the hardest nuts to crack is that problem of parentally condoned unauthorised absence. I suspect that is actually quite a big part numerically of the total number. I do not have any sense, not just that this data exists historically, but any sense that the new systems, the electronic registration, are intended to be able to collect data in a sufficiently detailed and qualitative way for the kind of step change needed if you are going to crack a problem which has got nowhere.

**Mr Housden:** First of all, the target which is now set about total attendance is entirely appropriate for a PSA target regime. It focuses every school on all the reasons which can cause pupils' absence and on the need to take action across that spectrum. I think that is right. The second point is that you are absolutely right also to say—

**Q93 Mr Simon:** May I just interrupt as you chose to make that point when I said you did not have to? In which case, why do you have at least three recent outlandishly different targets which all focused specifically and discretely on unauthorised absence? You cannot just say that you think the target, as it is, is definitely right and it is definitely completely different to all the previous targets.

**Mr Housden:** I was going to go on to say that your second point was powerful as well. By setting that target on total attendance, it would be wrong to take the eye off the ball of unauthorised absence and including within that truancy. Under the data system we now have in place, we have an annual collection of data which we will split between unauthorised and authorised. It will give us school by school and from 2007 related to individual pupil characteristics exactly that fine weave of data you are talking about. Through the new inspection and accountability system, we shall have the opportunity to talk specifically with the schools which have significant problems. We shall be able to use the same type of analysis that this Report uses to see what type of absence levels you might expect from a school which had a given pupil population and how an individual school is varying. It could be doing particularly well or particularly poorly, in relation to those median figures. We think we shall be able to use that data very powerfully. We are also collecting the data on a termly basis to give local authorities and schools a regular ongoing picture of how things are moving forward in that way. It is interesting that that termly collection of data and a range of other strategies which the Report speaks about together seem to me to have had the effect of lifting the profile that school attendance has within the service as a whole.

**Q94 Mr Simon:** Thank you for that. Just one micro question, because I should be interested in your view. Birmingham, where I come from, does quite well in its numbers. I know that I have been out in my local area with wardens who quite simply patrol the streets looking for truants. When they find them, they grab them and drag them back to school. Anecdotally, at the local level, as a smallish part, but a part of a mix of everything which is in this Report and everything which you have been talking about, the most important part is what they find when they get back into school, obviously. I ought to say that I am often amazed, not at the number of kids who do not go to school, but the number of kids who do, a kid whose parents are both drug addicts and alcoholics, his mother is a prostitute, his father has not been seen for five years, who effectively lives in a multi-storey car park but still goes to school. I am amazed by the number of kids there are like that, for whom school is actually the only bit of normality in their lives. I should just like to know about wardens before we close. Is it that simple? If it is not an annual thing, but a consistent thing, send them out, find them, drag them back to school and if what they find when they get to school is the right thing, then maybe that helps to start.

**Mr Housden:** In relation to truancy sweeps, the issue you are talking about, they have played a part in lifting the whole community sense of attendance as an important issue. They have a symbolic value, visible, as well as the individual cases. You must be right to say that a lot of this will be about the school system and the experience that they have returned

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to. You would not regard truancy sweeps on their own as a sufficient strategy, but they are seeming to make a difference as part of an overall programme.

**Sir David Normington:** May I say that Birmingham has been using fixed penalty notices very actively and very, very successfully. It is one of the best examples and it has hardly actually had to prosecute anyone. It has actually just put people on notice that they need to get their children back to school and it has worked in 776 out of 800 cases. That is a really good measure and Birmingham has a very concerted approach. It is not just about that, it is then about what happens when they get back in school. Birmingham has really been tackling this and I congratulate them on it.

**Q95 Chairman:** Will you look at page 15, Figure 8, "Reasons for absence from school"? I believe that this question of parents taking children away on holidays is absolutely key to this. The fact is that I asked the NAO what proportion of this truancy is actually accounted for by parents taking their children away on family holidays and they do not know. This information is only known at the school level. So we asked head teachers what they considered the most significant causes of pupil absence from school: illness, first of all, fair enough, then family holidays, very high indeed. To me this is the absolutely key point. I know your powers are limited in terms of ordering schools what to do and what not to do, but can you not have a policy of zero tolerance of parents taking their children away on holiday during term time issued through the head teachers?

**Sir David Normington:** By the way, we think it is about 15% of absence is accounted for by holidays. We do not have a full survey, but we think it is about 15%.

**Q96 Chairman:** Which is completely unnecessary.

**Sir David Normington:** We do discourage parents from taking their children out of school.

**Q97 Chairman:** I do not like that phrase "We do discourage". In the good schools I know, the head teacher says "I will not tolerate this".

**Sir David Normington:** As you know, the present position is that the law says that heads may authorise up to ten days of absence for holidays in the school year.

**Q98 Chairman:** But why? There is no need for this. There are perfectly adequate school holidays. Parents do not need to take their children away on holiday during term time and good heads absolutely say "No, I will not have it and if you come to me, I will put it down as an unauthorised absence. If you persist, you will be liable to prosecution."

**Sir David Normington:** We are quite clear about this. We prefer people to be in school during the school term, but we have not gone as far as—

**Q99 Chairman:** Do you not think you should consider it?

**Sir David Normington:** It has been considered at various points but the position is the same as it was in 1995, which is as I have described. We have not changed that position because you have to leave some discretion for the head teachers. There will be circumstances when it may be necessary to authorise that absence. This is very difficult. We are sometimes criticised for telling the schools precisely what to do. You have to leave the head teacher to take that decision.

**Q100 Mr Steinberg:** Once again it is the system which is wrong, is it not? You are trying to fiddle with the system as it is at the present time. What we should be looking at is that the point is that people go abroad for holidays now and it is extremely expensive to go on holiday during the school holidays and that is specifically done by the travel companies because they know they have them in a stranglehold.

**Sir David Normington:** We have been trying to tackle that.

**Q101 Mr Steinberg:** Have you thought about a different term system? There is no reason these days to be off for six weeks in the summer; there is just no reason for that at all. There is no reason to have these long holidays. If the school year were actually broken down into more terms it would give families the opportunity to go away at different times of the year when it is not so expensive and that is what it all boils down to; the reason why they take them away is because it is too expensive. This place here has tried to accommodate different times of the year and found it impossible because the times in Scotland when everybody is on holiday are different to the times in England when everybody is on holiday. We have tried to accommodate that and you just cannot do it. If you had more terms, then you could accommodate everybody.

**Sir David Normington:** There is already quite a lot of variety and some of it is related to all kinds of historical reasons like when the factories closed and so on. However, some local authorities, with the agreement of their schools, are actually testing out the six-term year and we are very interested in seeing how that works. There is just the danger that all it will do is re-establish another pattern, which will then mean that there will be more options spread through the year for when you go on holiday, but nevertheless that will be the school holiday and that will be the point at which there is the greatest demand for a holiday. We are interested in whether that six-term year can be made to work. Just as an aside, we have even been in discussion with the Association of British Travel Agents and others about this issue and they have been looking at how they can actually change the incentives so that if you book early enough you get discounts on your holidays, even if you take them in the main school holidays. The more initiatives we have like that the better.

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**Q102 Mr Simon:** On the same point, just to challenge your previously noted “emollence”, I should like to put to you that in fact the Chairman and Mr Steinberg are completely wrong and the danger of the issue of children’s holidays is that that issue, which is a *canard*, becomes over-resourced and is used as a fig leaf to cover the much more important issue of truancy. The fact that little Johnny misses a week of school to go to San Gimignano with his parents may be sub-optimal in terms of that child’s education, but we do not think that because Johnny is not in the Oratory, he is in San Gimignano, he is going to be setting fire to cars, because he is not, is he? He is not the problem, he is not the issue. Getting down those massive numbers of kids who go on perfectly harmless supervised holidays with their parents, though it may have some impact on the prevailing atmosphere and may be sub-optimal in terms of their education, that is not the big issue in terms of all those kids who are hanging around a shopping centre, smashing up the bus stops, setting fire to cars and starting out on a life of crime. They are not the same kids; it is not the same phenomenon.

**Sir David Normington:** It is not the same issue. We are at two ends of the spectrum here.

**Q103 Mr Simon:** It is not.

**Sir David Normington:** Nevertheless, I was asked about that and we would prefer them to be in school.

**Q104 Mr Simon:** Of course, but let us not confuse it with truancy.

**Sir David Normington:** Of course they are not truanting in the town centre, but nevertheless we would prefer them to be in school.

**Q105 Mr Simon:** Actually there is a good argument that they might enrich and broaden their experiences if they do not just stay in San Gimignano but get around Italy rather than being in the Oratory.

**Sir David Normington:** I am not sure I want to follow you in this.

**Q106 Mr Simon:** The point is that they are not just hanging around the park.

**Sir David Normington:** Having said that, that is of course why you leave the discretion of the head teacher to decide what the damage to the pupils’ education is by taking them out of school in term time. The other thing to say is that we do not spend lots of money on this issue of term time holidays. That can be quite easily dealt with between the head teacher and the parent. That is what we encourage to happen.

**Chairman:** We have had a good debate on that.

**Q107 Mr Bacon:** Keeping to the subject of money for the minute, there are 450,000 pupils, according to the Report, who do not turn up to school every day. If you are roughly spending £5,000 in total per pupil in the UK, then we are talking about a good chunk of money which is going towards the education service for these 450,000 pupils who are not turning up; arguably a couple of billion pounds or more.

You mentioned that what matters crucially is what happens when they return and what they find there. There is an FE college in my constituency, Easton College where I have been doing a work shadow with the principal and they have started taking school-age pupils between 14 and 16. You mentioned this yourself in passing. It is tremendously successful for students who have not been very good at school, who have been truanting, not done well, finding themselves in an adult environment where they are treated completely differently. I just wonder whether, therefore, some of the £2.2 billion, or whatever it is, which is being directed at the education service, towards secondary schools, should not be re-directed in other ways such as—and I am not necessarily saying just towards FE—towards FE because that might produce better results.

**Sir David Normington:** I entirely agree with you about trying to develop that sort of provision. That is what the Government is seeking to do and we will see a great increase in that kind of provision because it works just in the way you are describing. It is not possible to get that £2 billion out because it is tied up in places which are not occupied, if you see what I mean. The teacher is there, the classroom is there, the pupil is not, but the other 25 or 30 pupils are. There is not a simple way of digging that money out and spending it on expanding the provision in other areas. If there were, that would be a good thing to do and we are very interested in that.

**Q108 Mr Bacon:** I am not suggesting it is simple, but the fact that they do thrive in other environments suggests that you should be redeploying resources to other environments.

**Sir David Normington:** They do thrive and we have begun that and we are going to do more of it.

**Q109 Mr Bacon:** My second question is about state boarding schools. I think I am the vice chairman of the all-party group on state boarding schools. A French journalist once phoned up the Department for Education and Skills to ask about Britain’s state boarding schools, only to be told that there were none, because there are so few that the Department for Education and Skills were not aware of them. I am pleased to say that they now are. I think there are about 30 in the country, one of which is in my constituency, Wymondham College. As well as taking day pupils from the catchment area and boarding pupils, who just pay the hotel costs but obviously not for the tuition because it is a state school, they also take people from deprived backgrounds whom social services recommend they take. I just wonder, following up my earlier point about deploying resources to other environments, where it is going to do the most good, since you are already spending a lot of money with arguably not terrific results in terms of changing the phenomenon, if it is changeable and Mr Simon is wrong—I am not saying he is—that it is not an irreducible minimum, then deploying resources in other areas and other environments might achieve better results. Have you given much thought to what you might do to expand

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the state boarding school sector? The ethos, certainly in the one that I know about, is exceptional.

**Sir David Normington:** We have not given a lot of thought to it, no. I think there are 60, but I may be wrong.<sup>4</sup> When we were talking about setting up new academies for instance, we were encouraging sponsors to think about different alternative forms of provision and one specific one which we have talked about with some was providing some state boarding facilities, for the reason you describe. We have sort of thought about it, but we have not brought it right to the centre of the policy. It is worth thinking about, because I agree with you about the experience of many of those schools.

**Q110 Mr Bacon:** One quick question about age. I could not see it in the Report, but perhaps it is there. If it is not, is it possible you could supply us with a breakdown by age of the 450,000 pupils?

**Sir David Normington:** I think we can provide you with some. As pupils get older they are more likely to truant and I think we have some of that evidence. We shall provide you with what we have<sup>5</sup>.

**Q111 Mr Jenkins:** When we used to have holidays we used to have block fortnights when the car factories shut down or the mines shut down and today we have fathers working in one industry and mothers working in another industry and very often they have great difficulty taking their holidays together. The only time they may have together is two weeks at the beginning of June, or whenever, and being a family friendly Government we like to

insist that they maintain that family unity and go away together always. It is one of the problems we have. With regard to Mr Bacon's question, in my constituency we have had the FE running this 14+ consortium for a long time where the youngsters can go and the money follows the youngster in that context. Unfortunately, looking at the figures and looking at this chart, it has not had the impact we should love to have seen with regard to the attendance rates. Looking through the comparison of school absence rates by LEA, I notice that the lowest absence rate was in the City of London in the primary sector and, surprise, surprise—

**Sir David Normington:** I think they only have one school.

**Q112 Mr Jenkins:** It is very, very low and they have one primary school which was brought down from 5.37 to 3.6, a reduction of 1.77, the biggest reduction. What a success story that was. Is it possible for us to have a note with a list of these LEAs? Every LEA has funding with regard to its deprivation. Is it possible to list the LEAs according to the level of funding they receive for deprivation and then the same figures for the absence rates? I want to see just how close the correlation is between these two sets of figures.

**Sir David Normington:** I do not know, but we can try. I guess we can try to do that. We shall certainly try to<sup>6</sup>.

**Chairman:** Thank you very much, Sir David. As Mr Bacon has reminded us, 450,000 children fail to attend school every day. It is a huge problem. Clearly in terms of unauthorised absence we are making very little difference, so hopefully we can be helpful to you in our Report on how we are going to address this issue. Thank you very much, Sir David and Mr Housden.

<sup>4</sup> Note by witness: There are in fact 32 state boarding schools.

<sup>5</sup> Ev 16

<sup>6</sup> Ev 17

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**Memorandum from the Department for Education and Skills**

In view of the recent press comment about the expenditure on improving on improving school attendance I thought it would be helpful to send you a breakdown of the £885 million which the Department spent that were intended, at least in part, to reduce absence. This sum appears in paragraph 4 of the NAO Report.

A large part of this was spent on programmes which had the combined purpose of improving behaviour and attendance and on reducing exclusions.

**TABLE OF BEHAVIOUR, INCLUSION AND ATTENDANCE RELATED INITIATIVES**

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>1997–98 to 2003–04 (£m)</i>	<i>2004–05 to 2005–06 (£m)</i>	<i>Main activities funded</i>
Excellence in Cities: Learning Mentors and Learning Support Units	444.0	295.2	Helps pupils with behavioural issues, poor attendance and weak learning skills. There are around 10,000 mentors in schools. There are over 1,000 learning support units.
Behaviour grant	21.8	n/a	Grant for LEAs to deal with inclusion issues, children with poor attendance records and to support behaviour management for pupils at risk of exclusion.

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>1997–98 to 2003–04 (£m)</i>	<i>2004–05 to 2005–06 (£m)</i>	<i>Main activities funded</i>
Behaviour Improvement Programme	115.2	216.1	Provides extra funding to LEAs for measures to support selected schools facing greatest behaviour and attendance challenges (about 1,500 schools now extended to about 2,000 in 2005–06). Measures typically include multi-agency Behaviour and Education Support Teams (BESTs), extra learning mentors and learning support units and police in schools.
KS3 Behaviour and Attendance strand	24.4	48.8	Provides B&A audit and training materials, training days for school staff and expert B&A Consultants (at least one in every LEA) to help schools with audit, action planning and training.
Electronic registration (part of Capital Modernisation Fund)	11.2	n/a	Provided funding assistance to secondary schools with higher than average rates of unauthorised absence to purchase electronic registration systems. 530 schools have been allocated funding.
School Inclusion: Pupil Support grant	268.0	n/a	A grant for LEAs to reduce exclusions and truancy: supported the education of pupils excluded for 15 days or more for example in pupil referral units or other forms of alternative provision. Grant also assisted schools, pupil referral units and the youth service in delivering education about drugs.
<b>Total</b>	<b>884.6</b>	<b>560.1</b>	

*Sir David Normington KCB*  
Permanent Secretary  
Department for Education and Skills

24 February 2005

#### Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department for Education and Skills

*Question 111 (Mr Bacon): A breakdown by age of the estimated 450,000 pupils on average absent from school each day.*

The Department does not collect data for individual pupils or by year group so it is not currently possible to analyse absence rates by age. We will however be able to do so in the future. For secondary schools data will be available from 2006 and for primary schools from 2007.

The Department does have the figures broken down between primary and secondary schools. This shows that absence has generally been higher in the secondary sector (particularly unauthorised absence).

#### PUPIL ABSENCE IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS (ENGLAND)

<i>All Schools</i>	<i>2000–01 (%)</i>	<i>2001–02 (%)</i>	<i>2002–03 (%)</i>	<i>2003–04 (%)</i>
Total Attendance	92.73	92.98	93.17	93.43
Total Absence	7.27	7.02	6.83	6.57
Total Authorised	6.54	6.30	6.13	5.85
Total Unauthorised	0.73	0.72	0.70	0.72

<i>Primary Schools</i>	<i>2000–01</i> (%)	<i>2001–02</i> (%)	<i>2002–03</i> (%)	<i>2003–04</i> (%)
Total Attendance	93.92	94.15	94.19	94.51
Total Absence	6.08	5.85	5.81	5.49
Total Authorised	5.59	5.40	5.38	5.08
Total Unauthorised	0.49	0.45	0.43	0.41

<i>Secondary Schools</i>	<i>2000–01</i> (%)	<i>2001–02</i> (%)	<i>2002–03</i> (%)	<i>2003–04</i> (%)
Total Attendance	90.96	91.28	91.72	91.94
Total Absence	9.04	8.72	8.28	8.06
Total Authorised	7.98	7.63	7.21	6.92
Total Unauthorised	1.07	1.09	1.07	1.14

There is pupil-level evidence from the NFER research on pupil attendance in Excellence in Cities areas which is mentioned in the NAO Report. Table 3.1 on page 9 of the NFER Interim Report from that research (DfES Research Report 571) looks at absence by year group. Looking at the averages for 2001 and 2002 combined, it shows that the number of half-day absence sessions by year group was as follows:

<i>Year Group</i>	<i>Authorised Absence</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence</i>	<i>All Absence</i>
7	23.7	3.7	27.4
8	25.7	3.4	29.1
9	26.4	7.0	33.4
10	28.4	5.8	34.2
ALL	26.0	4.7	30.7

*Note:* figures for year 11 were not available.

Based on a school having 380 half-day sessions in a year this table translates into:

<i>Year Group</i>	<i>Authorised Absence %</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence %</i>	<i>All Absence %</i>
7	6.24	0.97	7.21
8	6.76	0.89	7.66
9	6.95	1.84	8.79
10	7.47	1.53	9.00
ALL	6.84	1.24	8.08

*Question 112 (Mr Jenkins): A list of local education authorities showing the level of funding they receive for “deprivation” and their absence rates.*

I attach tables listing LEAs by Additional Educational Needs (AEN) indices. These indices constitute the main basis on which deprivation is allowed for within the Education Formula Spending system. In general, LEAs with the highest values on the indices receive proportionately the most additional funding for deprivation and *vice versa*.

The Primary AEN Index is a combination of measures capturing the incidence of English as an Additional Language, Income Support and Working Families Tax Credits for each LEA.

The Secondary AEN Index is a combination of measures capturing the incidence of ethnicity (low achieving ethnic groups), Income Support and Working Families Tax Credits for each LEA.

The figures have been analysed separately for each sector. On each table, LEAs have been ranked according to their AEN index value, with the LEA having the highest index value being ranked 1. In general, in both sectors, there is a tendency for absence to decline as we move down the AEN rankings. But the relationship is far from perfect. This is consistent with the findings of the NAO Report which found that there was a strong but by no means perfect association between absence rates and the incidence of Free School Meals (itself closely related to the figures on Income Support included in the AEN index).

PRIMARY SCHOOLS—ABSENCE 2003–04 BY LEAs RANKED ON THE BASIS OF THE  
PRIMARY ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (AEN) INDEX

<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
1	0.7944	Tower Hamlets	5.94	4.75	1.19
2	0.6558	Newham	5.29	4.58	0.71
3	0.6140	Hackney	6.49	5.33	1.16
4	0.5695	Haringey	6.63	5.50	1.13
5	0.5607	Islington	6.75	5.79	0.96
6	0.5398	Westminster, City of	5.82	5.31	0.51
7	0.5283	Lambeth	6.20	5.23	0.97
8	0.5247	Camden	6.76	6.20	0.56
9	0.5017	Southwark	6.29	4.68	1.61
10	0.4872	Manchester	6.69	5.84	0.85
11	0.4868	Brent	6.05	5.50	0.55
12	0.4779	Leicester City	6.53	5.82	0.71
13	0.4587	Birmingham	6.15	5.50	0.64
14	0.4568	Hammersmith and Fulham	5.99	5.29	0.70
15	0.4380	Ealing	5.59	5.32	0.27
16	0.4364	Waltham Forest	5.98	5.30	0.68
17	0.4288	Nottingham City	6.48	5.86	0.62
18	0.4192	London, City of	5.37	5.08	0.29
19	0.4182	Bradford	5.56	4.86	0.70
20	0.4142	Lewisham	5.79	4.83	0.97
21	0.4122	Blackburn with Darwen	6.25	5.75	0.50
22	0.4121	Hounslow	5.78	4.62	1.16
23	0.4046	Greenwich	6.75	5.52	1.24
24	0.4030	Liverpool	6.40	5.92	0.48
25	0.3807	Sandwell	6.63	6.14	0.48
26	0.3787	Enfield	5.98	5.17	0.81
27	0.3765	Knowsley	6.37	5.62	0.75
28	0.3757	Kensington and Chelsea	6.21	5.80	0.40
29	0.3750	Wandsworth	6.21	5.64	0.57
30	0.3734	Luton	6.20	5.70	0.50
31	0.3712	Slough	6.15	5.37	0.79
32	0.3710	Middlesbrough	6.45	6.03	0.42
33	0.3607	Oldham	5.64	5.23	0.41
34	0.3509	Redbridge	5.90	5.12	0.77
35	0.3493	Barking and Dagenham	6.46	5.12	1.34
36	0.3489	Wolverhampton	6.27	5.77	0.51
37	0.3488	Newcastle upon Tyne	5.85	5.47	0.38
38	0.3422	Rochdale	5.84	5.14	0.70
39	0.3402	Kingston upon Hull, City of	5.76	5.21	0.55
40	0.3319	Harrow	5.66	5.49	0.17
41	0.3222	Stoke on Trent	6.23	5.56	0.67
42	0.3189	Walsall	6.20	5.80	0.40
43	0.3124	Salford	6.30	5.71	0.59
44	0.3082	Peterborough City	5.57	5.08	0.49
45	0.3026	South Tyneside	5.60	5.40	0.20
46	0.3023	Bolton	5.04	4.71	0.33
47	0.3014	Barnet	5.71	5.06	0.65
48	0.3004	Kirklees	5.29	4.89	0.40
49	0.2997	Coventry	6.12	5.81	0.31
50	0.2983	Derby City	5.39	4.80	0.60



<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
51	0.2966	Halton	5.82	5.37	0.44
52	0.2944	Hartlepool	5.14	4.55	0.60
53	0.2875	Croydon	6.22	5.49	0.73
54	0.2849	Sheffield	5.64	5.00	0.64
55	0.2825	Southampton	6.24	5.58	0.66
56	0.2791	Blackpool	6.16	5.45	0.71
57	0.2774	Sunderland	5.82	5.62	0.21
58	0.2733	Redcar and Cleveland	5.85	5.60	0.25
59	0.2730	Hillingdon	6.10	5.52	0.58
60	0.2722	Bristol, City of	6.72	5.83	0.89
61	0.2690	Merton	5.44	5.11	0.33
62	0.2663	Wirral	5.46	5.16	0.30
63	0.2661	Calderdale	4.97	4.67	0.30
64	0.2653	Gateshead	5.32	5.05	0.27
65	0.2605	Tameside	5.57	5.26	0.32
66	0.2590	North East Lincolnshire	5.50	5.27	0.23
67	0.2586	Rotherham	5.74	5.34	0.40
68	0.2555	Doncaster	5.76	5.45	0.31
69	0.2531	Barnsley	5.91	5.38	0.53
70	0.2489	Leeds	5.49	5.10	0.39
71	0.2439	St Helens	5.66	5.33	0.33
72	0.2438	Reading	5.74	5.28	0.46
73	0.2420	Plymouth	5.65	5.39	0.26
74	0.2406	Telford and The Wrekin	5.33	5.04	0.29
75	0.2405	Portsmouth	5.78	5.05	0.73
76	0.2403	Stockton on Tees	5.31	5.09	0.22
77	0.2383	Southend-on-Sea	5.75	5.35	0.40
78	0.2347	North Tyneside	4.99	4.83	0.17
79	0.2342	Torbay	5.60	5.25	0.35
80	0.2338	Brighton and Hove	6.10	5.58	0.51
81	0.2330	Darlington	6.10	5.77	0.33
82	0.2322	Durham	5.65	5.53	0.12
83	0.2278	Dudley	5.82	5.54	0.28
84	0.2268	Wakefield	5.65	5.10	0.55
85	0.2244	Lancashire	5.05	4.72	0.32
86	0.2228	Sefton	5.54	5.33	0.20
87	0.2189	Bury	4.93	4.68	0.25
88	0.2150	Isle of Wight	5.71	5.61	0.10
89	0.2118	Bournemouth	5.40	5.19	0.21
90	0.2073	North Lincolnshire	5.23	5.01	0.22
91	0.2056	Trafford	4.80	4.62	0.18
92	0.2023	Milton Keynes	5.37	5.15	0.22
93	0.2022	Wigan	5.26	5.02	0.24
94	0.1963	Cornwall	5.74	5.42	0.32
95	0.1952	Thurrock	6.16	5.59	0.57
96	0.1941	Kingston upon Thames	5.02	4.79	0.23
97	0.1930	Medway	5.46	5.15	0.31
98	0.1874	Bexley	5.67	5.34	0.33
99	0.1839	Northumberland	5.49	5.29	0.19
100	0.1811	Nottinghamshire	5.39	5.04	0.35
101	0.1780	Norfolk	5.90	5.49	0.41
102	0.1736	Stockport	5.13	4.83	0.30

<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
103	0.1693	Cumbria	4.81	4.64	0.17
104	0.1688	Kent	5.34	4.98	0.36
105	0.1682	East Sussex	5.23	4.70	0.53
106	0.1680	Swindon	5.15	4.92	0.23
107	0.1666	Sutton	5.33	5.02	0.31
108	0.1661	Derbyshire	5.25	4.89	0.36
109	0.1658	Lincolnshire	5.13	4.84	0.29
110	0.1631	Northamptonshire	5.38	5.00	0.38
111	0.1630	Poole	5.43	4.97	0.46
112	0.1608	York, City of	4.78	4.46	0.32
113	0.1603	Warrington	4.54	4.08	0.47
114	0.1601	Havering	5.74	5.52	0.22
115	0.1598	Devon	5.33	5.08	0.26
116	0.1585	Solihull	4.83	4.47	0.36
117	0.1552	Bromley	5.50	4.91	0.60
118	0.1542	Bedfordshire	5.08	4.91	0.17
119	0.1535	Staffordshire	4.97	4.78	0.19
120	0.1489	Suffolk	5.05	4.77	0.27
121	0.1478	Essex	5.62	5.25	0.37
122	0.1471	Worcestershire	5.29	5.06	0.23
123	0.1443	Herefordshire	5.22	5.03	0.20
124	0.1441	Richmond upon Thames	4.76	4.41	0.35
125	0.1424	Somerset	5.14	4.88	0.26
126	0.1421	Cheshire	4.78	4.38	0.39
127	0.1421	Warwickshire	4.95	4.76	0.19
128	0.1413	East Riding of Yorkshire	4.73	4.60	0.13
129	0.1373	Gloucestershire	4.98	4.75	0.23
130	0.1360	Hertfordshire	5.11	4.78	0.32
131	0.1353	Buckinghamshire	4.60	4.37	0.24
132	0.1351	West Sussex	5.05	4.84	0.21
133	0.1327	Bath and North East Somerset	5.20	4.88	0.32
134	0.1316	Leicestershire	4.97	4.79	0.18
135	0.1303	Shropshire	4.90	4.77	0.13
136	0.1301	North Somerset	5.50	5.25	0.26
137	0.1288	Dorset	5.28	5.02	0.25
138	0.1276	Oxfordshire	4.89	4.63	0.26
139	0.1242	North Yorkshire	4.73	4.56	0.17
140	0.1239	Cambridgeshire	5.25	4.86	0.39
141	0.1227	Windsor and Maidenhead	4.75	4.35	0.40
142	0.1175	South Gloucestershire	5.10	4.89	0.21
143	0.1169	Hampshire	4.82	4.52	0.30
144	0.1150	Wiltshire	4.83	4.52	0.31
145	0.1021	Bracknell Forest	5.10	4.94	0.16
146	0.1009	Surrey	5.16	4.91	0.25
147	0.0922	West Berkshire	4.95	4.64	0.31
148	0.0776	Isles of Scilly	4.73	4.30	0.42
149	0.0728	Wokingham	4.40	4.19	0.21
150	0.0669	Rutland	4.21	4.14	0.07

SECONDARY SCHOOLS—ABSENCE 2003–04 BY LEAs RANKED ON THE BASIS OF THE  
SECONDARY ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (AEN) INDEX

<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
1	0.7868	Tower Hamlets	7.62	5.64	1.97
2	0.6356	Hackney	7.82	5.96	1.86
3	0.6110	Newham	6.46	5.23	1.23
4	0.6010	Southwark	8.27	6.52	1.74
5	0.5969	Lambeth	7.48	6.98	0.50
6	0.5952	Islington	7.92	6.51	1.41
7	0.5585	Haringey	8.68	6.84	1.84
8	0.5021	Manchester	11.01	8.77	2.24
9	0.4904	Westminster, City of	8.02	6.07	1.95
10	0.4861	Lewisham	8.45	5.96	2.49
11	0.4632	Camden	8.61	7.44	1.17
12	0.4617	Hammersmith and Fulham	8.39	6.68	1.72
13	0.4560	Waltham Forest	7.69	6.12	1.57
14	0.4492	Birmingham	8.11	6.52	1.59
15	0.4436	Nottingham City	10.43	8.25	2.18
16	0.4424	Brent	7.80	6.91	0.89
17	0.4291	Wandsworth	7.89	7.07	0.82
18	0.4107	Greenwich	9.43	6.61	2.82
19	0.4034	Liverpool	10.13	8.22	1.91
20	0.3986	Bradford	8.82	5.99	2.83
21	0.3870	Ealing	7.47	6.67	0.80
22	0.3767	Knowsley	9.79	7.69	2.10
23	0.3711	Luton	8.23	7.50	0.74
24	0.3659	Middlesbrough	11.11	8.88	2.23
25	0.3585	Sandwell	10.10	8.16	1.94
26	0.3544	Barking and Dagenham	8.64	6.70	1.93
27	0.3509	Leicester City	9.68	6.64	3.04
28	0.3433	Enfield	7.91	6.43	1.49
29	0.3422	Croydon	8.59	7.41	1.18
30	0.3414	Wolverhampton	8.53	7.40	1.13
31	0.3402	Hounslow	7.09	5.93	1.15
32	0.3380	Kensington and Chelsea	7.36	6.35	1.01
33	0.3372	Blackburn with Darwen	8.94	7.81	1.13
34	0.3364	Kingston upon Hull, City of	10.81	8.38	2.43
35	0.3353	Oldham	8.53	7.28	1.24
36	0.3330	Rochdale	9.11	7.48	1.62
37	0.3280	Newcastle upon Tyne	9.49	8.52	0.96
38	0.3267	Slough	7.72	6.17	1.55
39	0.3164	Stoke on Trent	8.14	7.64	1.50
40	0.3039	Salford	11.32	8.65	2.67
41	0.3036	Walsall	8.40	7.33	1.07
42	0.2979	Halton	10.21	7.50	2.71
43	0.2975	South Tyneside	9.68	7.98	1.70
44	0.2928	Hartlepool	8.07	6.95	1.13
45	0.2922	Peterborough City	7.87	6.70	1.17
46	0.2890	Derby City	8.24	6.52	1.71
47	0.2884	Redbridge	6.42	5.48	0.94
48	0.2872	Sheffield	9.00	6.97	2.03
49	0.2804	Merton	8.24	6.90	1.34
50	0.2773	Blackpool	9.78	7.89	1.88
51	0.2770	Bristol, City of	11.02	8.90	2.12

<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
52	0.2750	Kirklees	7.50	6.41	1.09
53	0.2737	Sunderland	8.53	7.34	1.19
54	0.2660	Redcar and Cleveland	8.55	7.52	1.03
55	0.2655	Wirral	7.76	7.14	0.61
56	0.2651	Coventry	8.81	8.00	0.81
57	0.2646	Southampton	8.86	7.67	1.19
58	0.2635	Gateshead	8.61	7.71	0.90
59	0.2629	Calderdale	7.51	6.90	0.61
60	0.2610	Barnet	7.43	6.37	1.07
61	0.2583	Bolton	8.55	7.18	1.37
62	0.2572	North East Lincolnshire	10.02	8.22	1.80
63	0.2554	Rotherham	8.39	6.80	1.60
64	0.2549	Doncaster	8.67	7.09	1.59
65	0.2513	Barnsley	8.55	7.20	1.35
66	0.2509	Tameside	7.88	7.43	0.46
67	0.2507	Reading	9.31	7.18	2.13
68	0.2494	Harrow	6.91	6.43	0.48
69	0.2436	Leeds	8.97	6.97	2.00
70	0.2432	St Helens	8.18	7.10	1.07
71	0.2391	Plymouth	7.85	7.13	0.72
72	0.2378	Stockton on Tees	7.78	6.91	0.87
73	0.2374	Telford and The Wrekin	7.96	7.34	0.61
74	0.2339	Brighton and Hove	8.53	7.03	1.50
75	0.2321	Portsmouth	9.71	8.01	1.70
76	0.2321	North Tyneside	7.73	6.47	1.26
77	0.2310	Southend-on-Sea	8.57	6.78	1.78
78	0.2313	Darlington	9.22	8.17	1.05
79	0.2311	Durham	8.13	7.44	0.68
80	0.2304	Torbay	8.34	6.87	1.47
81	0.2293	Hillingdon	8.36	6.93	1.43
82	0.2248	Dudley	8.00	7.01	1.00
83	0.2236	Wakefield	8.16	7.21	0.94
84	0.2224	Sefton	7.58	6.86	0.72
85	0.2157	Bury	7.41	6.92	0.49
86	0.2140	Lancashire	8.13	7.25	0.88
87	0.2135	Isle of Wight	7.88	7.10	0.78
88	0.2047	Trafford	6.79	6.11	0.68
89	0.2035	Bournemouth	7.77	7.10	0.66
90	0.2011	North Lincolnshire	8.16	7.27	0.89
91	0.2007	Wigan	7.74	7.13	0.60
92	0.2004	Milton Keynes	8.35	7.59	0.76
93	0.1966	Cornwall	8.37	7.58	0.79
94	0.1934	Thurrock	8.47	7.21	1.25
95	0.1925	Medway	7.80	7.20	0.60
96	0.1865	Bexley	8.20	7.09	1.11
97	0.1846	Nottinghamshire	8.79	7.05	1.75
98	0.1825	Northumberland	7.58	7.17	0.41
99	0.1738	Norfolk	8.80	7.78	1.02
100	0.1722	Bromley	7.83	6.82	1.00
101	0.1706	Stockport	7.82	6.88	0.94
102	0.1696	Havering	8.05	7.44	0.61
103	0.1687	Sutton	6.80	6.11	0.69

<i>Rank on Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Primary AEN Index</i>	<i>Local Education Authority</i>	<i>Overall Absence (%)</i>	<i>Authorised Absence (%)</i>	<i>Unauthorised Absence (%)</i>
104	0.1684	Cumbria	7.74	6.81	0.94
105	0.1683	East Sussex	7.91	6.49	1.41
106	0.1670	Derbyshire	7.81	6.83	0.98
107	0.1659	Northamptonshire	8.55	7.39	1.16
108	0.1656	Lincolnshire	7.18	6.35	0.83
109	0.1640	Kent	7.91	7.09	0.82
110	0.1616	Poole	7.44	6.38	1.06
111	0.1602	Swindon	7.30	6.23	1.07
112	0.1589	Kingston upon Thames	6.89	6.55	0.33
113	0.1582	Devon	8.43	7.06	1.36
114	0.1571	York, City of	7.89	6.83	1.05
115	0.1567	Warrington	7.20	6.39	0.81
116	0.1567	Solihull	7.01	6.39	0.62
117	0.1541	Staffordshire	6.99	6.36	0.63
118	0.1509	Bedfordshire	6.40	5.98	0.42
119	0.1495	Suffolk	7.65	6.33	1.32
120	0.1482	Essex	8.00	7.00	1.00
121	0.1480	Worcestershire	7.45	6.85	0.60
122	0.1445	Herefordshire	7.79	6.81	0.99
123	0.1424	Somerset	7.56	6.74	0.82
124	0.1415	Cheshire	7.54	6.66	0.88
125	0.1403	East Riding of Yorkshire	7.60	6.93	0.67
126	0.1401	Richmond upon Tyne	8.68	6.69	1.99
127	0.1377	Gloucestershire	7.17	6.61	0.56
128	0.1353	Buckinghamshire	6.51	5.81	0.70
129	0.1338	Warwickshire	7.47	6.72	0.75
130	0.1328	Bath and North East Somerset	7.78	6.96	0.83
131	0.1323	Hertfordshire	7.56	6.81	0.75
132	0.1305	West Sussex	8.11	7.39	0.73
133	0.1302	Shropshire	6.91	6.46	0.45
134	0.1293	North Somerset	8.18	7.16	1.03
135	0.1293	Dorset	7.12	6.65	0.46
136	0.1257	Oxfordshire	7.50	6.30	1.19
137	0.1243	North Yorkshire	7.18	6.61	0.57
138	0.1197	Cambridgeshire	7.56	6.76	0.80
139	0.1175	Leicestershire	7.44	6.26	1.18
140	0.1774	South Gloucestershire	7.82	6.72	1.09
141	0.1156	Windsor and Maidenhead	7.40	6.65	0.75
142	0.1151	Wiltshire	7.61	6.88	0.73
143	0.1141	Hampshire	7.44	6.38	1.06
144	0.0995	Bracknell Forest	7.14	6.44	0.70
145	0.0960	West Berkshire	7.23	6.37	0.86
146	0.0930	Surrey	7.93	6.85	1.09
147	0.0775	Wokingham	7.25	6.44	0.80
148	0.0688	Rutland	6.56	6.15	0.41

*Note:* Isles of Scilly and City of London excluded as they have no secondary schools.

28 February 2005

**Supplementary memorandum submitted by the National Audit Office**

*Question 63 (Mr Bacon): Analysis of the relationship between absence rates and type of school*

1. In 2002–03, the national absence rates were 5.7% in primary schools and 8.4% in secondary schools. While schools' absence rates vary across the country, most schools have absence rates that are close to the average absence rate for their local authority. However, a minority of schools have absence rates that are much higher or lower than their local authority average. Our Report sets out variations in schools' absence rates (Figure 12 on page 22) and compares schools' absence rates with their local authority average (Figure 13 and Figure 14 on page 23).

2. Richard Bacon has requested supplementary information on how many schools fell into each of the percentage point bands used in Figure 13 and Figure 14, what types of schools they were, and whether or not they were faith schools.

3. In response, we have analysed the underlying data to produce a tabular analysis of the kind Mr Bacon requested:

- primary schools are analysed in Annex 1; and
- secondary schools are analysed in Annex 2.

4. The results are similar for both primary and secondary schools. Faith schools are more likely to have absence rates that are lower than their local authority's average. Voluntary aided schools, voluntary controlled schools and foundation schools are also all more likely to have lower absence rates. Amongst primary schools, almost all voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools are also faith schools. Amongst secondary schools, almost all voluntary aided and around half of the voluntary controlled schools are faith schools.

5. This analysis is not as sophisticated as the school type analysis in Appendix 2 of the NAO Report (for example, Figure 11 on page 58) because it does not include other factors that influence absence such as socio-economic deprivation, as measured by the level of free school meals amongst pupils. The results of this additional analysis should therefore be treated with a degree of caution. Nevertheless, the results are broadly consistent with Figure 11 of Appendix 2.

**Primary schools’ total absence rates compared with their local authority average**

1. Table 1 shows the numbers of schools grouped by the (rounded) difference between their total absence rate and the average rate of their local authority, and analysed by whether they were faith schools or not. For example, there were 4,013 schools with an absence rate that was one percentage point lower than that of their local authority, and 44.7% of these were faith schools. Faith schools accounted for 5,511 schools (38.4%) of the 14,338 primary schools in the dataset.

**Table 1**

**PRIMARY SCHOOLS’ TOTAL ABSENCE RATES COMPARED WITH THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY AVERAGE, 2002–03—BY RELIGIOUS CHARACTER**

Difference in absence rate from local authority average (percentage points)	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	16	20	24	Total
Non-faith schools	0	1	7	13	95	681	2,218	2,501	1,807	905	358	145	50	26	5	2	0	4	4	1	2	1	1	8,827
Faith schools	1	0	3	16	140	760	1,795	1,600	753	260	116	34	16	8	5	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	5,511
Total schools	1	1	10	29	235	1,441	4,013	4,101	2,560	1,165	474	179	66	34	10	2	1	5	5	1	2	2	1	14,338
Faith schools as percentage of total schools	100.0	0.0	30.0	55.2	59.6	52.7	44.7	39.0	29.4	22.3	24.5	19.0	24.2	23.5	50.0	0.0	100.0	20.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	38.4

2. Table 2 is similar to Table 1, except that schools are categorised by type rather than by religious character.

**Table 2**

**PRIMARY SCHOOLS’ ABSENCE RATES COMPARED WITH THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY AVERAGE, 2002–03—BY TYPE OF SCHOOL**

Difference in absence rate from local authority average (percentage points)	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	16	20	24	Total
Community schools		1	6	12	87	648	2,117	2,416	1,754	878	355	145	49	26	5	2		4	4	1	2	1	1	8,514
Foundation schools			1	1	5	34	94	86	51	25	5		1											303
Voluntary aided schools	1		2	13	112	532	1,119	910	409	165	70	21	10	2	3		1							3,370
Voluntary controlled schools			1	3	31	227	683	689	346	97	44	13	6	6	2			1	1			1		2,151
Total schools	1	1	10	29	235	1,441	4,013	4,101	2,560	1,165	474	179	66	34	10	2	1	5	5	1	2	2	1	14,338
Non-community schools as percentage of total schools	100.0	0.0	40.0	58.6	63.0	55.0	47.2	41.1	31.5	24.6	25.1	19.0	25.8	23.5	50.0	0.0	100.0	20.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	0.0	40.6

**Annex 2**

**Secondary schools' total absence rates compared with their local authority average**

1. Table 3 shows the numbers of schools grouped by the (rounded) difference between their total absence rate and the average rate of their local authority, and analysed by whether they were faith schools or not. For example, there were 615 schools with an absence rate that was one percentage point lower than that of their local authority, and 18.7% of these were faith schools. Faith schools accounted for 517 schools (16.8%) of the 3,071 secondary schools in the dataset.

**Table 3**

**SECONDARY SCHOOLS' ABSENCE RATES COMPARED WITH THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY AVERAGE, 2002-03—BY RELIGIOUS CHARACTER**

Difference in absence rate from local authority average (percentage points)	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	11	Total
Non-faith schools	11	18	47	137	281	500	512	463	263	143	78	50	26	13	5	6	1	2,554
Faith schools	3	16	29	56	107	115	83	49	30	18	3	4	4	0	0	0	0	517
Total schools	14	34	76	193	388	615	595	512	293	161	81	54	30	13	5	6	1	3,071
Faith schools as percentage of total schools	21.4	47.1	38.2	29.0	27.6	18.7	13.9	9.6	10.2	11.2	3.7	7.4	13.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.8

2. Table 4 is similar to Table 3, except that schools are categorised by type rather than by religious character.

**Table 4**

**SECONDARY SCHOOLS' ABSENCE RATES COMPARED WITH THEIR LOCAL AUTHORITY AVERAGE, 2002-03—BY TYPE OF SCHOOL**

Difference in absence rate from local authority average (percentage points)	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	11	Total
Community schools	3	11	15	81	201	368	389	396	222	125	68	47	24	12	3	6	1	1,972
Foundation schools	4	5	23	47	69	109	109	57	37	21	8	3	1	1	2			496
Voluntary aided schools	7	17	33	59	110	112	78	40	29	13	5	4	3					510
Voluntary controlled schools		1	5	6	8	26	19	19	5	2			2					93
Total schools	14	34	76	193	388	615	595	512	293	161	81	54	30	13	5	6	1	3,071
Non-community schools as percentage of total schools	78.6	67.6	80.3	58.0	48.2	40.2	34.6	22.7	24.2	22.4	16.0	13.0	20.0	7.7	40.0	0.0	0.0	35.8