Department for Education

Guidance

Improving school attendance: support for schools and local authorities

Updated 1 September 2020

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Overview

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

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

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

This guidance has been informed by:

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

Principles of an effective whole school attendance strategy

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

Leadership and management

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

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

3. Expect good attendance and punctuality from all members of the school community and make sure that pupils understand its importance.

4. Convey clear messages about how absence affects attainment, wellbeing and wider outcomes. Empower staff to take responsibility for attendance.

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

6. Have a designated attendance champion in the senior leadership team with clearly assigned responsibilities which are identified within the attendance policy, escalation of procedures and school improvement plan.

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

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

Relationships and communication

1. Build respectful relationships with staff, pupils, families and other stakeholders in order to secure their trust and engagement. Make sure there is a welcoming and positive culture across the school.

2. Communicate openly and honestly with staff, pupils and families about their expectations of school life and performance so that they understand what to expect and what is expected of them.

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

4. Model respectful relationships and appropriate communication for staff and pupils. This will help relationships between pupils and staff to reflect a positive and respectful culture. All staff members should:

- treat pupils with dignity, build relationships rooted in mutual respect and observe proper boundaries
- take into consideration the vulnerability of some pupils and the ways in which this might contribute to absence
- communicate effectively with families regarding pupils' attendance and well-being

5. Parents and carers should:

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

Systems and data

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

2. Make sure escalation procedures to address absence are initiated proactively, understood by pupils and families, implemented consistently and their impact reviewed regularly.

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

4. Robust school systems provide useful data at cohort, group and individual pupil level to give an accurate view of attendance, reasons for absence and patterns amongst groups such as:

- children in need
- looked after children
- children who are eligible for free school meals
- children who speak English as a second language
- children who have special educational needs and disabilities

5. Monitor and analyse attendance data regularly to allow early intervention to address issues. This includes raising concerns with other agencies like children's social care and early help services which are working with families.

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

7. School attendance, safeguarding and pastoral support policies should clearly outline:

- the key principles
- rules pupils need to follow
- routines
- consequence systems

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

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

Intervention

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

2. Monitor and analyse attendance data regularly to ensure that intervention is delivered quickly to address absence (register inspections, code analysis, cohort and group monitoring, punctuality, lesson attendance across subjects and benchmarking).

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

4. Create action plans in partnership with families and other agencies that may be supporting families, for example, children's social care and early help services. Commission or deliver interventions to improve attendance.

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

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

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

Actions for school staff and local authorities to improve attendance

The following sections outline the actions that school staff and local authorities could consider taking to improve attendance for all pupils, pupils at risk of poor attendance and pupils who are persistently absent. You might have different staffing structures and policies, so the designated staff we have used as examples below may not be an exact match. However, the actions we are recommending are relevant to all settings.

Go to information for:

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

School leaders

All pupils
You may want to:

- deliver clear messages about expectations, routines and consequences to new pupils and families through prospectus and admission/transition events
- use physical presence to reinforce routines and expectations on arrival and departure
- regularly communicate expectations for attendance and punctuality and school performance through your regular channels of communication with staff, pupils and parents
- establish and monitor implementation of rewards for attendance and punctuality and sanctions for absence and lateness
- monitor implementation of policy and practice, for example through:
  - form time drop in
  - shadow late gate
  - planner checks
- engage community businesses, partners and residents to promote attendance and report non-attendance
- monitor whole school data regularly to identify reasons for absence, patterns, attendance of particular groups and the impact of interventions
- establish, implement and monitor robust arrangements to identify, report and support children missing education (CME)
- develop good support for children with medical conditions (including the use of individual healthcare plans), mental health problems and special educational needs (SEND)
- engage pupils in consultation on attendance policy, practice, rewards and sanctions
- ensure that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education

Pupils at risk of persistent absence
You may want to:

- establish robust escalation procedures which are initiated before absence becomes a problem, for example by:
  - sending letters to parents
  - having a weekly tutor review
  - creating attendance clinics
  - engaging with local authority attendance teams and/or independent attendance organisations
  - using fixed penalty notices
- establish a range of evidence-based interventions to address barriers to attendance
- monitor the implementation and quality of escalation procedures (and intervention), for example:
  - having a review and clinic drop in
  - sampling of case files
- evaluate the impact of escalation procedures and seek robust evidence of the escalation procedures that work and that reflect the school context best
- attend or lead on attendance reviews and clinics in line with escalation procedures
- engage governors in attendance panels to reinforce messages and outline relevance in terms of training and employment.

Pupils who are persistently absent
You may want to:

- establish clear and effective service level agreements with external partners to support pupils with persistent absence, including:
  - local authority education welfare and attendance services
  - independent attendance organisations
  - alternative providers
  - youth services
  - school nursing and mental health professionals
  - children's social care staff where appropriate
- establish good relationships with a network of voluntary organisations and charities to support vulnerable pupils including those with persistent absence, for example:
  - mental health charities
  - mentoring organisations
  - young carers association
- engage in or lead on attendance reviews and clinics in line with escalation procedures

Teaching staff and tutors

All pupils
You may want to:

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

Pupils at risk of persistent absence
You may want to:

- welcome pupils back following an absence and provide good catch up support to build confidence and bridge gaps. This could include:
  - lesson resources
  - buddy support
  - one to one input
- meet with pupils to discuss absence, patterns, barriers and problems
- establish action plans to remove barriers, provide additional support and set targets. This could include:
  - lunchtime arrangements
  - support with uniform, transport, wake up routines or emotional wellbeing
- lead daily or weekly check-ins to review progress and the impact of support
- make regular contact with families to discuss progress
- consider what support for re-engagement might be needed, including for vulnerable groups

Pupils who are persistently absent
You may want to:

- prepare supporting resources to ensure pupils can access learning when they return
- develop targeted intervention to address gaps and build pupils' confidence (including considering small group additional support)
- contribute to action plans which attendance staff draw together where appropriate
- provide tailored praise and encouragement when pupils attend and arrive on time

Attendance officers, pastoral staff and family support workers

All pupils
You may want to:

- engage with feeder schools or organisations to access absence information in order to identify target cohorts prior to transfer, including mid-year transfers and managed moves
- provide appropriate support and challenge to establish good registration practice
- carry out robust first-day calling procedures including priority routine for looked after children and vulnerable children
- undertake home visits in line with your policy to engage families and ensure children are safe
- identify and, where possible, mitigate potential barriers to good attendance in liaison with families and relevant support agencies
- implement punctuality routines such as late gate or sign in procedures
- implement children missing education (CME) procedures when appropriate
- ensure that that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education (EHE)

Pupils at risk of persistent absence
You may want to:

- provide regular attendance reports to tutors to facilitate weekly reviews with leaders (including special educational needs coordinators and pupil premium leads) for monitoring and evaluation purposes
- initiate and oversee the administration of absence procedures. This could include:
  - letters home
  - attendance clinics
  - engagement with external agencies
  - work with families and the community to identify which methods of communication work best, recognise potential barriers in hard to reach families and find methods that work and are understood
- provide regular reports to leaders on the at-risk cohort
- provide regular reports/caseloads to local authority attendance team or independent attendance organisations to raise awareness of emerging at-risk pupils

Pupils who are persistently absent
You may want to:

- develop and implement persistent absence action plans with pupils and families which address barriers and help establish positive attendance routines
- identify tailored intervention which meets the needs of the pupil, for example:
  - mentoring
  - careers advice and guidance input
  - college placement
  - out of hours learning
  - alternative provision where appropriate
- lead daily or weekly check-ins to review progress and impact of support
- make regular contact with families to discuss progress
- hold regular meetings or reviews of caseload with the local authority attendance team, external partners and alternative providers to check on welfare and review progress
- liaise with school leaders (designated safeguarding, special educational needs coordinator and pastoral leads) on referrals to external agencies and multi-agency assessments
- coordinate and contribute to multi-agency meetings to review progress and agree on actions
- work in partnership with local authority attendance team and other agencies to ensure the appropriate use of statutory intervention to reinforce parental responsibility
- provide regular reports to leaders on the impact of action plans and interventions

Local authorities and external partners

All pupils
Local authorities may want to:

- establish and implement robust children missing education (CME) procedures to follow up reports from school and other educational organisations within agreed timescales
- monitor and share relevant absence information with schools for specific groups of pupils including those with protected characteristics
- ensure that parents fully understand the demands and responsibilities of elective home education (EHE)
- use your children's services team to facilitate community strategies and initiatives, for example:
  - local authority messages on holidays
  - minimise mid-week starts to school term
  - shared agency messages to reinforce attendance

Virtual school heads may want to:

- monitor the attendance of looked after and previously looked after children
- set aspirational targets for attendance within personal education plans

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

Pupils at risk of persistent absence
Virtual school heads should review attendance action plans for looked after and previously looked after children.

Social workers and family support workers should:

- convey high expectations for attendance
- make sure school attendance is prioritised within multi-agency plans

Pupils who are persistently absent
Local authorities may want to coordinate strategies and services to ensure that messages are consistent and that information is shared appropriately.

Virtual school heads should secure appropriate intervention for looked after and previously looked after children who are persistently absent.

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

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

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

Further resources

Statutory guidance

- School behaviour and attendance: parental responsibility measures
- Children missing education
- Supporting pupils with medical conditions at school
- Keeping children safe in education
- Alternative provision
- Education for children with health needs who cannot attend school
- School exclusion

Guidance and resources

- School attendance: guidance for schools
- Checklist for school leaders to support full opening: behaviour and attendance
- Mental health and wellbeing resources
- Mental health and behaviour guidance
- Approaches to preventing and tackling bullying
- Respectful School Communities Tool
- Skills for care: toolkit for social workers to support conversations about returning to education settings in September
- Education Endowment Foundation: research on texting parents
- Education Endowment Foundation: research on parental engagement
- National statistics: Pupil absence in schools in England

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