

# Missing Children, Missing Grades

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November 2023

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Since becoming Children's Commissioner, I have made tackling school absences one of my top priorities. I first came into this role in March 2021, after 30 years of experience in education as a multi-academy trust leader and headteacher. The nation was emerging from successive lockdowns and children's education had been immensely disrupted. I sensed that there were deep issues unravelling in our school system. We have since seen that school absence rates have become stuck at crisis levels.

I fear that attendance has become the issue of our time. The number of children regularly missing school has more than doubled compared to pre-pandemic and we are only making slow progress in steadying school absence rates. Worryingly, over 120,000 children are missing at least half of their time in school.

I am deeply concerned about the damage caused by school absences: thousands of children are missing out on their right to education. I have therefore made tackling school absences a core priority for my office. One of the first things I did when I became Children's Commissioner for England was carry out The Big Ask, to hear from children about their key priorities, concerns and needs coming out of lockdown. The Big Ask showed how much England's children prize education: they see it as important in and of itself, and as a pathway to opportunity.

However, The Big Ask also shone a spotlight on the group of children who had begun to disengage with education entirely. Despite desperately wanting to learn and to return to school, these children faced

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daunting barriers to attendance which were holding them back from achieving their true potential. I have put these children's voices at the heart of my work on education.

In 2021, I launched my Attendance Audit which drew on the stories and experiences of hundreds of children who were struggling to attend school. I spoke to children who were persistently and severely absent and those who had fallen out of the education system entirely. They told me that the reasons for absence were complex: some needed support with mental health issues, others lacked the special educational needs provision they needed to access education. No matter what the barriers were, children consistently told me that they wanted to be in school and that they wanted support to return.

This report looks at the relationship between school attendance and academic attainment. As Children's Commissioner, it is my mission to make England the best place for children to grow up. I want every child to be able to access their right to education and to leave school armed with the qualifications that they need to get a brilliant job and to thrive in later life. I am deeply concerned by this report's findings that children who attend school less regularly are less likely to get the GCSEs that they need.

This report finds that:

- School absence has become endemic in Key Stage 4. Over the last couple of years, over a third of all pupils in Key Stage 4 were either persistently or severely absent for at least one year.
- Poor attendance has a dramatic relationship with GCSE results. While 78% of all children who were rarely absent in both years passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths, only 36% of children who were persistently absent in both years and just 5% of children who were severely absent in both years reached this same standard.
- When pupils' attendance improves, the likelihood of achieving qualifications at the end of school massively increases. More than half (54%) of pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10 and then rarely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths, compared to 36% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years.

Our findings confirm the strong link between absence and attainment. Schools can offer a broad range of benefits to children including the opportunities to learn and gain vital qualifications. However, the benefits of school go beyond academic results. They can also be places of social and emotional

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development. If we want to offer every child the best chance in life, it must start with ensuring that they can regularly attend school.

It is my ambition that every child should be in school 100% of the time. This is a mighty ambition but one that we must meet because children can only benefit from an education if they are actually there.

I know that many people across our school system share the same resolve to help our nation's children return to school. As part of my work as a member of the government's Attendance Action Alliance, I spent this summer speaking to school leaders and multi-agency groups who are trying to tackle school absences.

This report draws upon the findings of these discussions and provides a plan for system reform which, if implemented, would help to improve school attendance and enshrine all children's right to education.

## Executive summary

*'The idea that kids being absent because they can't be bothered isn't true. I wanted to go to school and be educated and enjoy it like everyone, but it wasn't something I could do even if I wanted to.'* - Boy, 14, Attendance Audit

Since coming to office, the Children's Commissioner has made tackling the crisis in school attendance one of her key priorities. In her first year, she carried out an Attendance Audit to further understand the experiences of children who are absent from school.

Children have consistently told the Children's Commissioner's office how much they value school. Our work to date has detailed the main reasons for the increased school absences following the pandemic. We have heard that children who are out of school are desperate to learn yet they face a series of barriers to attendance. If we want to ensure that every child can thrive in education, we must tear down these barriers.

This paper looks at the relationship between school absenteeism and Key Stage 4 results. It provides new analysis looking at post-pandemic patterns of absenteeism and academic results. Our results provide evidence that pupils who attend regularly and those whose attendance improved are more likely to pass their GCSEs in Year 11, compared to their peers who had low attendance across both Years 10 and 11.

We do not know why school attendance improved for this cohort. It could be due to a range of factors beyond the scope of this report such as a change in family circumstances, an improvement in child health, or the success of initiatives to support children in education.

The statistics presented in this paper are descriptive only – they do not prove that poor attendance causes poor attainment. The numbers in this report should not be used to claim that an improvement in attendance will guarantee an improvement in attainment, nor to claim how big that improvement would be.

Even though attendance and attainment will likely have some form of direct relationship, there will be additional factors which influence both children's attendance and attainment. For example, a child without a supportive home environment will both be less supported in completing their homework, and less supported to travel to school.

This is why 100% attendance is so important. It's not about schools forcing children to attend in spite of the barriers they may face, it's about the whole system working together to tackle those difficulties which exist in children's lives, and to improve the lives of children so that they are able to attend school without hindrance or worry.

Our analysis of Department for Education data for academic years 2020/21 and 2021/22 finds that:

- **Just over a third of all pupils hit the threshold for either persistent or severe absenteeism in either Year 10 or Year 11.** 32% of pupils were persistently absent but never severely absent and 4% of all pupils were severely absent in at least one of Years 10 and 11.
- **Pupils who were persistently absent in both years received worse GCSE grades than their peers who were rarely absent in both years.** 36% passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 78% who were rarely absent in both years.
- **Similarly, children who were severely absent for both years also received worse GCSE grades than their peers whose absence was persistent.** 5% passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 36% who were persistently absent in both years.
- **A lower proportion of pupils who were eligible for free school meals or who had identified special educational needs (SEN) achieved good GCSE grades when they were persistently absent.**
  - 28% of pupils who were eligible for free school meals and persistently absent in Year 10 and Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. This compares with the 47% of pupils who were not eligible for free school meals and persistently absent in both years who met this standard.



- 9% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan who were persistently absent and 22% of pupils on SEN Support who were persistently absent in Year 10 and Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. This compares with 48% of pupils who had no identified SEN and were persistently absent in both years who met this standard.
- **Pupils whose absence improved in Year 11 achieved better GCSEs than pupils whose absence did not improve.**
  - 54% of pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10 and then rarely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 36% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years.
  - 31% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and then rarely absent in Year 11, and 18% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and then persistently absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 5% of pupils who were severely absent in both years.

This report sets out a plan for tackling school attendance and supporting children back into school. Our recommendations cover:

- **Setting a culture of regular school attendance;**
- **Tackling persistent and severe absenteeism;**
- **Developing a multi-agency approach to attendance; and**
- **Putting the right support in place to sustain attendance.**

## Summary of recommendations

This year, we must put a halt to the rising tide of school absenteeism. This report is a blueprint for tackling the school attendance crisis to ensure that every child identified as vulnerable is attending a good or outstanding school every day.

First, we must **set a culture of regular school attendance**. Since the pandemic, school absences have become pervasive across the education system. The Attendance Audit found that the social contract between schools and families had been damaged following school lockdowns. We urgently need to reset this relationship and rebuild a positive culture around school attendance.

### Recommendations:

- **Every school should appoint a member of the Senior Leadership Team to manage their attendance policy.** Their duties should extend beyond reviewing and implementing the attendance policy to include regular data check-ins to compare the school attendance rates with similar schools, hosting staff meetings to discuss how the school can support children on the path to persistent or severe absenteeism, and being the point of contact for families whose children have some of the lowest rates of attendance.
- **To equip school leaders, governors and attendance officers with the knowledge needed to tackle school absences, the Department for Education should roll out national training on school attendance.**
- **Every school attendance policy should have to detail the ways in which schools will build and sustain positive relationships with all parents and carers** to work jointly to promote school attendance. This is especially important for those children with attendance difficulties.
- **The Attendance Hub network should be extended to achieve national coverage. Schools with some of the worst rates of attendance should be targeted for support.** When Ofsted identify attendance as a weakness in their inspections, schools should be referred directly to the programme to improve their approach to attendance.

When patterns of non-attendance emerge, schools must be equipped to **tackle persistent and severe absenteeism**. Children who pass these critical thresholds of absences are less likely to achieve good grades in GCSEs. We must take a proactive approach to support these children back to school.

**Recommendations:**

- **Schools should make use of the data that they hold** to proactively put in place the support children need to attend school. Schools should look at historic attendance patterns to identify where to target their support most effectively.
- **The Department for Education should make attendance data sharing mandatory** and education leaders in schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities should use the insights gained from this data to inform their attendance strategies.
- **Governors should be given access to attendance data which is benchmarked against similar schools; tracks the attendance trajectories of children with histories of absenteeism; and can be broken down to individual days or year groups.** They should use this data to hold schools to account and challenge them, where necessary, on their attendance patterns.
- **School attendance policies should clearly state how schools will build and maintain strong relationships with persistently and severely absent children and their families** and use these to design bespoke packages of support for persistently and severely absent pupils. Parents and carers should be invited to regular meetings with the school to talk about the key issues driving school absences.
- **The Attendance Mentor programme should be scaled up to be offered in all Priority Education Investment Areas.** Funding should be made available to reengage all severely absent children in these local authorities.
- **The Department for Education should issue best practice guides for schools who want to integrate their enrichment and breakfast club provision into their broader attendance strategies.**

The support needed to address the barriers to attendance often lies beyond the school gate. If we want to tackle this issue, we must make attendance everyone's priority. The currently raised levels of school absences can only be addressed if we **develop a multi-agency approach to attendance.**

**Recommendations:**

- **Every public body which works with children with a history of absenteeism should make attendance their priority.** The Department for Education should make the 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance statutory and share fortnightly attendance data with services outside of education.
- **The Department for Education should also collate and disseminate best practice from other agencies who have played a role in reducing school absences.** This would help other statutory services to see how they can take a proactive role to tackle school absences.
- **To ensure that local government departments are held accountable for their efforts to reduce absenteeism, the government should seek to integrate performance on attendance into their existing accountability structures.** Ofsted should revise their SEND and social care inspection frameworks to include attendance as an evaluation criterion in every inspection. Ofsted should also conduct a thematic deep dive into school attendance in the worst performing local authorities.
- **To improve data sharing between different agencies, the government should introduce a unique identifier for children based off the NHS number.** This unique identifier would allow different agencies to seamlessly share information, identify attendance issues, and put in place the right support to keep children in school.
- **The government should increase the number of school nurses.** School nurses should act as a bridge between the health and education professions and should help to identify and triage children with higher level mental health needs to appropriate services, where needed.
- **The roll out of mental health support teams should be expedited to reach all children by 2025.**

- **The Department should roll out the SEND Review as rapidly as possible**, to ensure that no further children become disengaged from education due to a lack of specialist provision.
- **Families should be actively signposted to the services of a neutral advocate.** The Department should run a campaign to advertise the Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS).
- **Every local authority where the wait for an EHCP is longer than 20 weeks should have to detail what their plan is to reduce this** and should sketch out a plan for supporting learners to attend regularly during this period.
- **Research should be carried out on what interventions are most effective at improving the attainment and attendance of looked after children and children in need** at an individual and whole cohort level. The guidance on use of Pupil Premium Plus should then clearly signpost Virtual School Heads to the most effective interventions.
- **Local leaders should convene multiagency forums to discuss the specific local drivers leading to heightened levels of school absences and the role different agencies play in improving school attendance.**

While it is important to get children back to school, this cannot be achieved by simply forcing children back into education. We need to tackle the root causes of school absences and put in place graduated support to help children to reengage in learning. Schools should **put the right support in place to sustain attendance.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Schools should outline reintegration plans for children returning from long spells of absenteeism.** These plans should include provisions to improve children's confidence and social and emotional wellbeing.
  - **Where needed, schools should work with alternative providers to create a graduated return to school plan.** Short-term placements should be used to help children to reintegrate into education.
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- **The Department for Education should issue guidance about how local authorities should use their Section 19 duties** to provide alternative education to support children with a history of absenteeism.
- **If a child misses an extended period of school, school staff should craft a personalised catch-up plan.** This plan may need to be delivered through additional catch-up sessions. School leaders should look at how they can make use of the National Tutoring Programme to provide tailored lessons for children with a history of absenteeism.

## 1. Research design and methodology

This report is based on analysis of unpublished Department for Education data from 2020/21 and 2021/22, and also draws on data published by DfE in their 'Pupil absence in schools in England' publication. The analysis examines GCSE exam results from summer 2022 broken down by pupils' attendance histories. The analysis also includes whether pupils were eligible for free school meals (FSM) and whether they had special educational needs (SEN).<sup>i</sup>

The analysis does not attempt to explain the link between less absence and better exam results but does confirm other research findings that an association exists between attendance and attainment.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 Data sources used

The analysis in this report covers the 567,529 pupils in state-funded schools<sup>ii</sup> in England at the end of Key Stage 4 in the academic year 2021/22 who had been present at the same school in both Year 10 and Year 11.<sup>iii</sup> The analysis brought together four data sources<sup>iv</sup>: the 2020/21 and 2021/22 absence data; the 2022 GCSE data; and the 2021/22 Spring School Census, to find which pupils were eligible for FSM or who had identified SEN. Only data for the autumn and spring terms in the 2021/22 absence data was used, as pupils would have been sitting their exams during the summer term of 2021/22.

The attendance data for 2020/21 was affected by school shutdowns and lockdown restrictions. For most of spring 2021, only children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils could attend school. Schools were shut down for most pupils between the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 and 8<sup>th</sup> of March 2021. Schools reopened four

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<sup>i</sup> These were the only characteristics analysed. Analysis on gender, ethnicity, etc was not conducted.

<sup>ii</sup> This includes state-funded mainstream schools, state-funded special schools, state-funded alternative provision and non-maintained special schools.

<sup>iii</sup> The analysis also excluded any pupil not present in any of the four data sources used. This led to a total sample size 27,264 pupils (5%) smaller than DfE's [published population](#) of 594,793.

<sup>iv</sup> The data has been shared with the CCo from the Department for Education, who collect and own these datasets. The Department for Education do not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions made in this report.

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weeks before the end of the spring term. Covid related absences are not included in the calculation of attendance rates.

2022 saw the return of the summer exam series, after they had been cancelled in 2020 and 2021 due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, where alternative processes were set up to award grades (centre assessment grades, known as CAGs, and teacher assessed grades, known as TAGs). As part of the transition back to the summer exam series, adaptations were made to the exams (including advance information) and the approach to grading for 2022 exams broadly reflected a midpoint between results in 2019 and 2021.<sup>2</sup>

This means the 2022 GCSE data is the first exam data that can be analysed to explore the relationship between absence and attainment in a post-pandemic context.

Throughout this report, figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

## **1.2 Measuring attendance**

The absence data used in this analysis uses the same definitions of 'persistently' absent and 'severely' absent as the Department for Education (DfE)'s own absence publications.<sup>3</sup> For pupils who were neither persistently nor severely absent, this report introduces a new category of 'rarely' absent.

Rarely, persistently, and severely absent are defined based on the proportion of 'sessions' a pupil was absent for, out of all possible sessions which that pupil could have attended. School days are divided into 2 sessions: one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Year 10 pupils and Year 11 pupils were placed in one of three categories:

- Pupils who were absent for less than 10% of their possible sessions were 'rarely' absent.
- Pupils who were absent for 10% or more of their possible sessions, but less than 50%, were 'persistently' absent.
- Pupils who were absent for 50% or more of their possible sessions were 'severely' absent.

All reasons for absence – both authorised and unauthorised – have been included in the analysis. In line with DfE's guidance, arriving at school late but before registers close is not a type of absence, nor is

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missing school due to circumstances relating to Covid-19, and so neither of these have been included in the analysis.<sup>4</sup> Not counting absences relating to Covid-19 is particularly relevant as, during 2021, some pandemic restrictions were still in place in schools which means that there will have been further absences which are unrecorded in this data.

Arriving late after registers close is a type of absence and so has been included in the analysis.

### **1.3 Measuring academic outcomes**

The following measures of attainment in 2022 GCSEs were used:

- **At least 5 GCSEs at grades 4 to 9, including English and maths.** A grade of 4 to 9 is a pass, while a grade of U-3 is a fail. This measure is the modern equivalent of the historic headline GCSE measure of 5 A\*-C, including English and maths.
- **The English Baccalaureate.** The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a qualification achieved by passing English, maths, 2 sciences, a humanity, and a language. Not all pupils enter the EBacc, and only do so if they take all necessary subjects during Key Stage 4.
- **A pass in English and maths GCSEs.** A pupil can only pass in this category by achieving a pass (grade 4 to 9) in both of English and maths.
- **Highest maths grade achieved.** Within this category, pupils either passed (grades 4 to 9), failed (grades U- to 3) or did not enter GCSE maths.

## 2. Understanding the nature of absenteeism

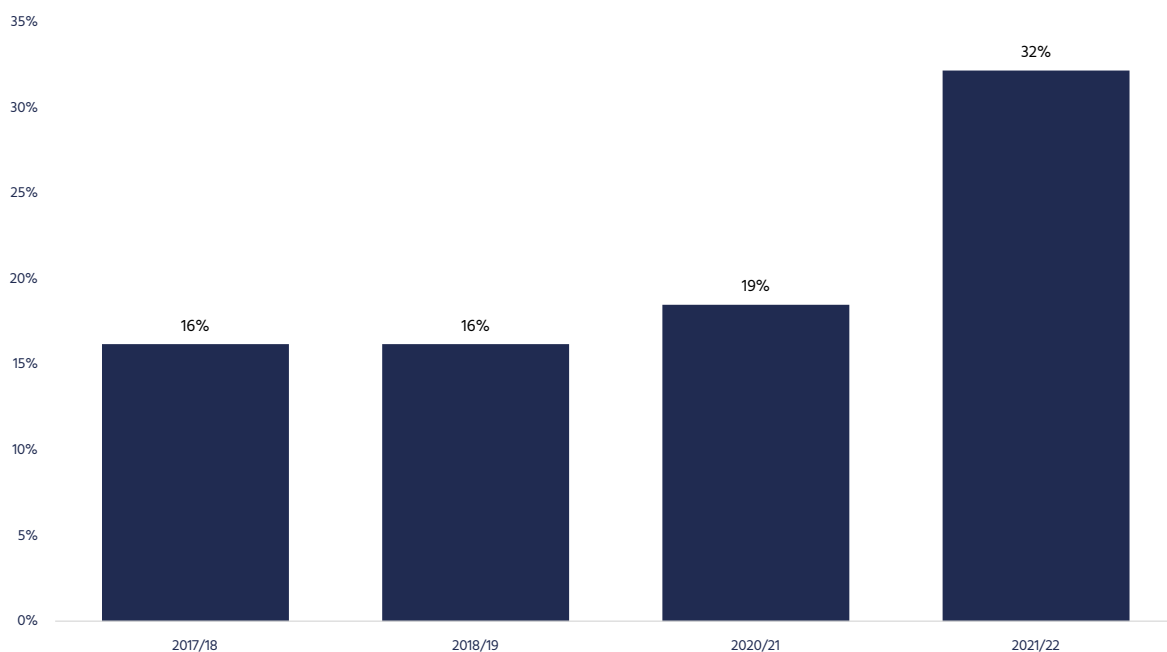
School absence rates have risen dramatically levels since 2018/19. The Covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted children's education and, despite the fact that schools have now fully reopened, we are still witnessing much higher rates of school absences.

### 2.1 Absenteeism rates over time

The rates of persistent absenteeism have been increasing since the pandemic. According to statistics published by DfE, 11% of all pupils were persistently absent in 2018/19. By 2021/22, that figure had increased to 23%.<sup>5</sup>

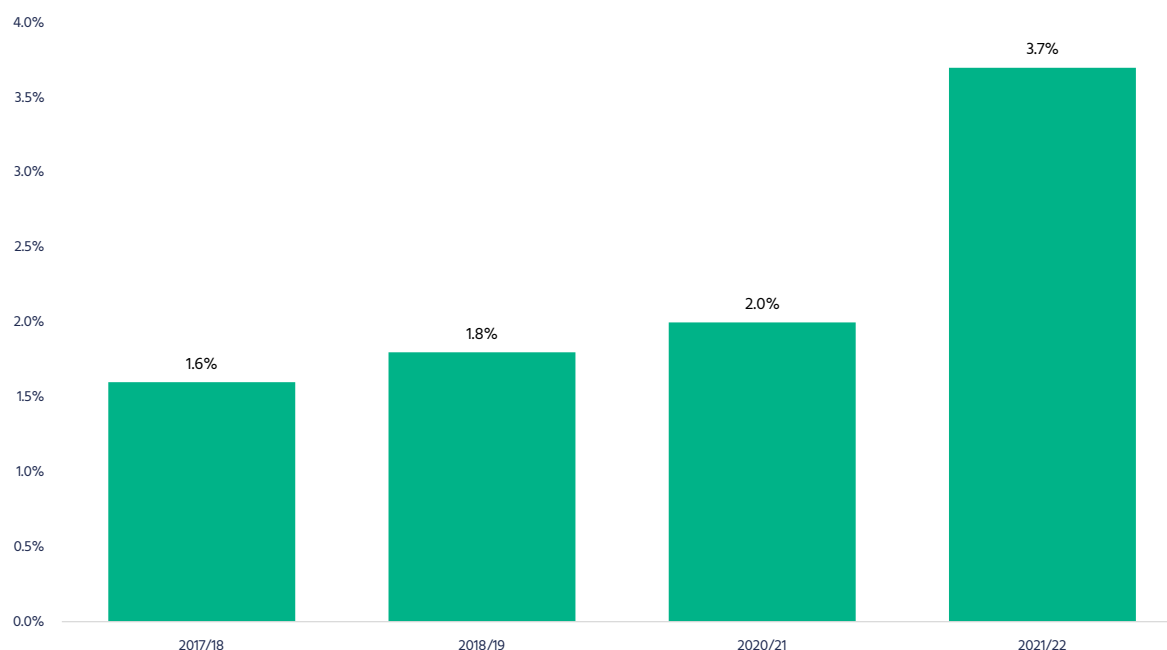
This pattern is particularly acute in Year 11. Year 11 pupils tend to have higher rates of absenteeism than other pupils. In 2021/22, they had the highest rate of persistent absenteeism compared to all lower year groups.<sup>6</sup> Around a third (32%) of all Year 11 pupils were persistently absent in 2021/22. For comparison, the rate of persistent absenteeism was nearly half that, 16%, in 2018/19, the last full year which was uninterrupted by the pandemic.

**Figure 1: Proportion of Year 11 pupils who were persistently absent, 2017/18 to 2021/22**



A similar pattern has emerged with severe absenteeism rates. In 2021/22, 3.7% of all pupils in Year 11 were severely absent. Pre-pandemic in 2018/19, 1.8% of pupils in Year 11 were severely absent. This mirrors the national trend in persistent absenteeism rates.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2: Proportion of Year 11 pupils who were severely absent, 2017/18 to 2021/22**



## 2.2 Attendance trajectories throughout Key Stage 4

In our analysis throughout this report, absence rates are measured in both Year 10 and Year 11. Published attendance figures only present the national attendance rates for pupils in each year, however our analysis allows us to look at the attendance trajectory of each pupil from the start of Year 10, at around age 14, to their exams at the end of Year 11, around age 16.

While the majority of pupils in this cohort (64%) were rarely absent in both years of Key Stage 4, 36% of pupils were either persistently or severely absent for at least one year of the two. In total, 362,385 pupils (64%) were rarely absent in both years, 182,398 pupils (32%) were ever persistently absent but never severely absent, and 22,365 pupils (4%) were ever severely absent.

**Figure 3: Number of pupils with each absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern			Total
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely	
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	362,385	32,502	729	395,616
	Persistently	83,879	6,6317	3,183	153,379
	Severely	1,763	9,806	6,884	18,453
Total		448,027	108,625	10,796	567,529 <sup>v</sup>

**Figure 4: Proportion of pupils with each absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern			Total
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely	
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	64%	6%	0%	70%
	Persistently	15%	12%	1%	27%
	Severely	0%	2%	1%	3%
Total		79%	19%	2%	100%

Throughout the paper, we refer to three categories: always rarely absent, ever persistently absent but never severely absent, and ever severely absent. They are shown in the tables as light blue, mid blue, and dark blue respectively.

By looking at both year groups, we can examine how many pupils' attendance improved or deteriorated relative to their absence pattern in Year 10. Our analysis shows that the majority of pupils (435,586 pupils, 77%) have the same absence pattern (either rarely, persistently, or severely absent) in both Year 10 and in Year 11. The next most common trajectory was for the absence pattern to worsen, for example from rarely absent in Year 10 to persistently absent in Year 11 (17% of pupils). Only 6% of pupils improved their absence pattern.

<sup>v</sup> Grand total includes pupils with zero possible sessions across all settings attended in at least one of Year 10 and Year 11, and so who cannot be said to be rarely, persistently or severely absent.

**Figure 5: Flows between absence patterns in Year 10 (left) and in Year 11 (right)**



In total, 448,027 pupils were rarely absent in Year 10. Of these, 362,385 pupils (81% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10) remained rarely absent in Year 11. However, 83,879 pupils (19% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10) became persistently absent in Year 11. A further 1,763 pupils (less than 1% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10) became severely absent in Year 11.

There were 108,625 pupils persistently absent in Year 10. The most common absence pattern for these pupils in Year 11 was persistent absenteeism. 66,317 pupils (61% of all pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10) remained persistently absent in Year 11. However, 32,502 pupils (30%) who were persistently absent in Year 10 improved their attendance and were instead rarely absent in Year 11. Conversely, 9,806 pupils (9% of all pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10) went on to be severely absent in Year 11.

Of the 10,796 pupils who were severely absent in Year 10, similarly, the most common attendance trajectory was severe absenteeism in Year 11 (6,884 pupils, 64% of all pupils who were severely absent in Year 10). However, 36% of pupils' attendance improved from severely absent in Year 10. 3,183 pupils

(29% of all pupils who were severely absent in Year 10) went on to be persistently absent in Year 11, and a further 729 pupils (7%) were rarely absent in Year 11.

## 3. The relationship between attendance and attainment

**On every measure examined in this report, pupils who were persistently or severely absent were less likely to perform well, relative to their peers who were rarely absent throughout Key Stage 4.**

### 3.1 Passing at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths

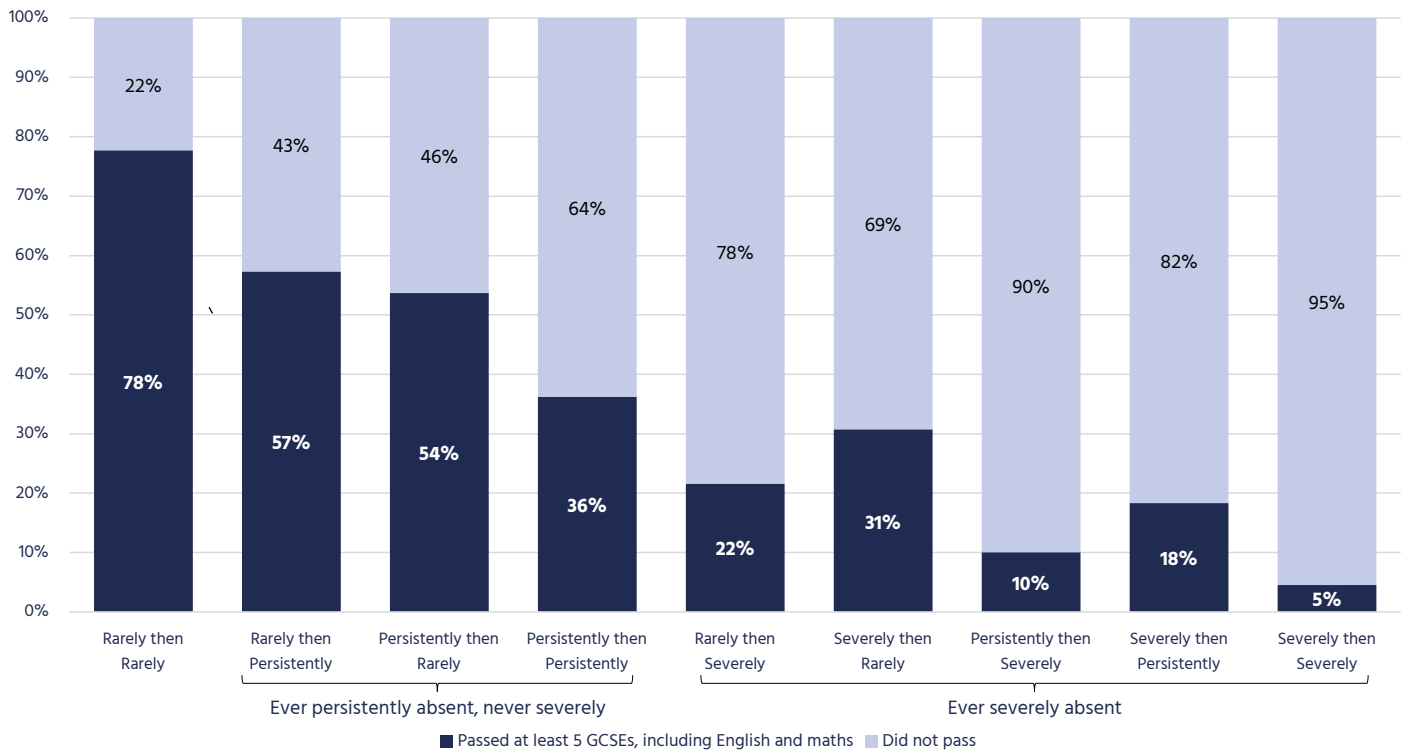
In 2021/22, 66% of all pupils passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. Pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 and Year 11 were more likely to pass, while pupils with some spell of either persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely.

#### 3.1.1 The relationship with absenteeism

**Pupils with a history of persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely to pass at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to their peers who were rarely absent in both years.** 78% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, in 2022. By comparison, only 36% of pupils, just over a third, who were persistently absent in both years also passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths.

Just one in twenty pupils who were severely absent in both years passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths. Almost all pupils who were severely absent in both Year 10 and Year 11 did not reach this standard (95%).

**Figure 6: Proportion of pupils who passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by their absence pattern**



### 3.1.2 The impact of improved attendance

**Our results show that a greater proportion of pupils whose poor attendance improved passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths than their peers whose absence patterns remained the same.**

Over half of pupils whose attendance improved from persistent absenteeism in Year 10 to rarely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs including English and maths (54%), an improvement over the 36% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years who reached this standard.

Pupils whose absenteeism improved from severe also had better results. 31% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 but then rarely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. 18% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and whose absenteeism improved to



persistent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. For comparison, just 5% of pupils whose absenteeism remained severe in both years reached this standard.

**Figure 7: Proportion of pupils who passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern		
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	78%	54%	31%
	Persistently	57%	36%	18%
	Severely	22%	10%	5%

**Conversely, among pupils whose attendance deteriorated, a smaller proportion passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, than pupils whose absence patterns remained the same.**

57% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 but then became persistently absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. 22% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 but then severely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. For comparison, 78% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years reached this standard.

There is a similar pattern looking at pupils whose attendance deteriorated from persistent to severe. 10% of all pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10 but then severely absent in Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. For comparison, 36% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years reached this standard.

### 3.1.3 Breakdown by pupil characteristics

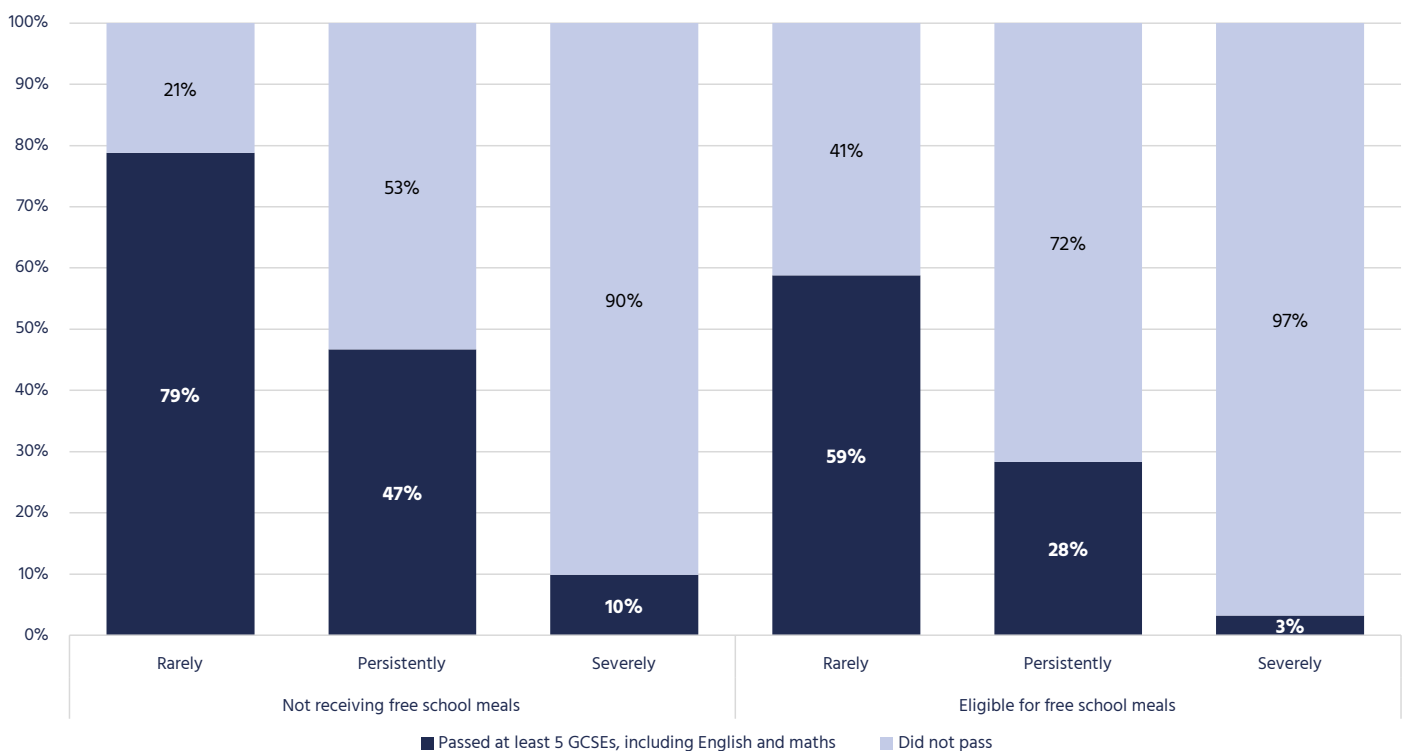
Pupils who were eligible for free school meals and pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities do less well, on average, in their GCSEs than other pupils. It is therefore all the more important to ensure the right support is in place for children who were eligible for free school meals and who have special educational needs and/or disabilities to attend regularly.

These vulnerable groups of pupils were even less likely to pass 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, when they were persistently or severely absent compared to their peers with the same additional

vulnerabilities but better attendance. This is a concern as the Attendance Audit found that pupils with additional vulnerabilities were more likely to be absent from school than their peers.

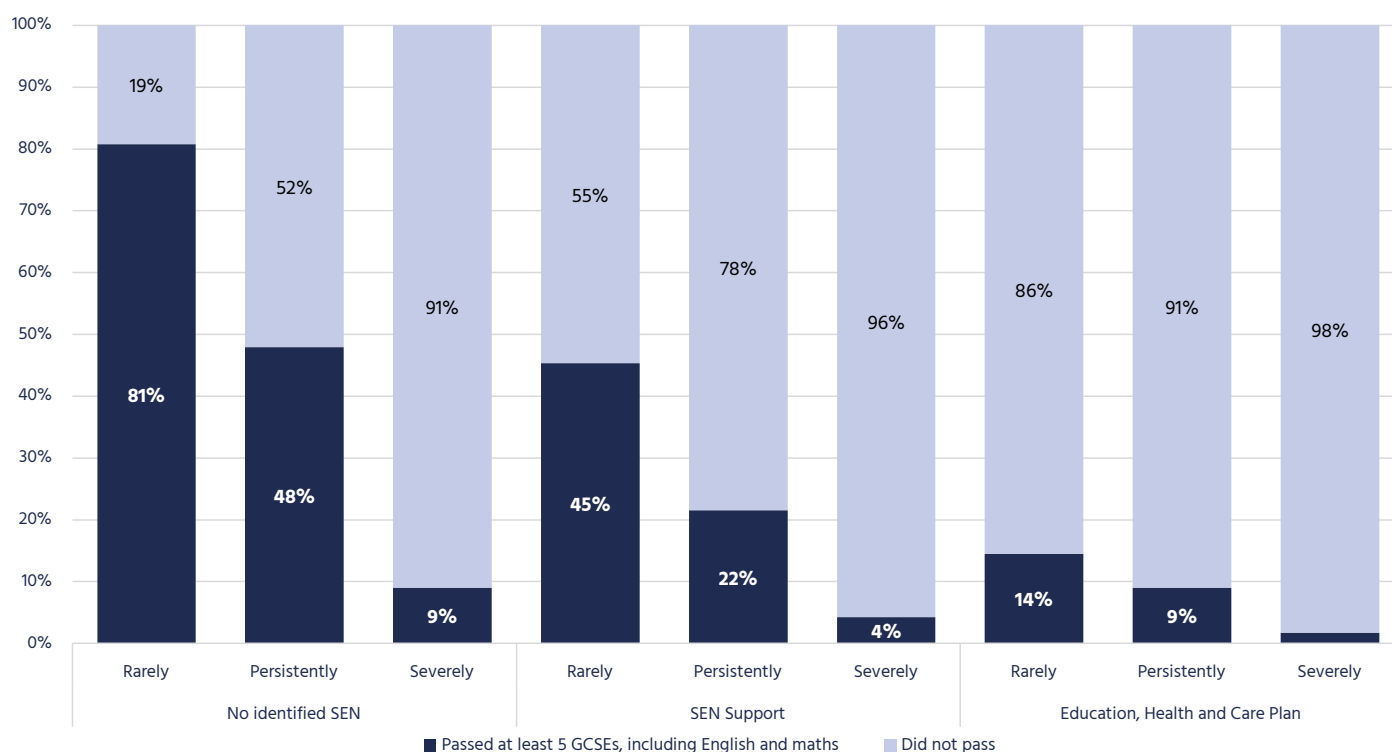
Pupils who were eligible for free school meals and have a history of persistent or severe absenteeism have some of the lowest likelihoods of meeting this standard. Among pupils who were eligible for free school meals, across all of Year 10 and Year 11, 59% of all pupils who were rarely absent, 28% of all pupils who were persistently absent, and 3% of pupils who were severely absent passed 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. For comparison, among pupils who were not eligible for free school meals, 79% who were rarely absent, 47% of pupils who were persistently absent, and 10% of those who were severely absent met this standard.

**Figure 8: Proportion of pupils who passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by their absence pattern in Year 10 and Year 11, and by their free school meals eligibility in Year 11**



Similarly, pupils with special educational needs were more likely to be absent than their peers. Those who were persistently or severely absent were less likely to pass 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, when compared to their peers who had no identified SEN and similar levels of attendance.

**Figure 9: Proportion of pupils who passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by their absence pattern in Year 10 and Year 11, and by their special educational needs status in Year 11**



Among the pupils included in the analysis, 116,972 (21%) were eligible for free school meals while 450,001 (79%) were not. 23,939 (4%) had an Education, Health and Care Plan, 65,951 (12%) had SEN Support, and 477,083 (84%) had no identified SEN.

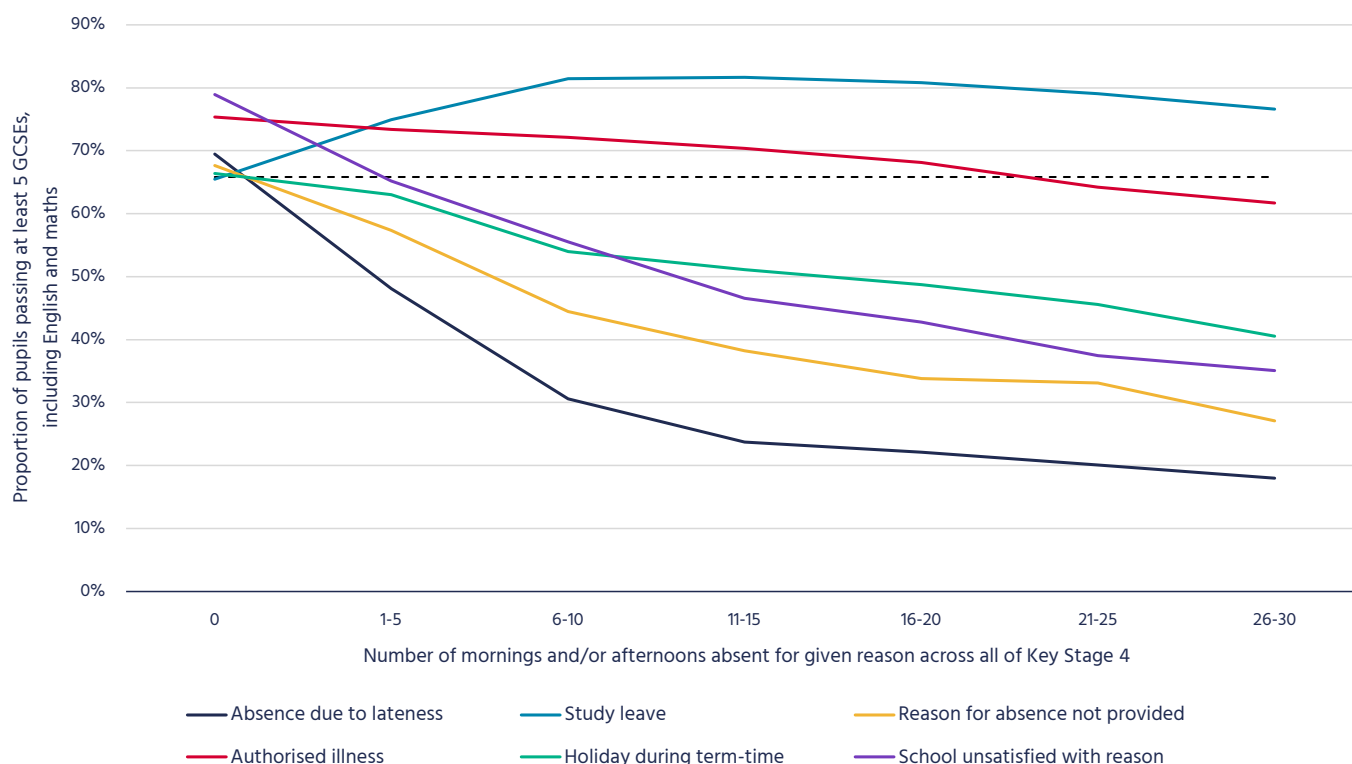
### 3.1.4 The relationship between absence reasons and attainment

Our analysis also finds that absences for most reasons were associated with a lower likelihood of passing 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. This held true in all cases except those where pupils who had a limited number of absences specifically for religious observance or study leave, which instead increased their likelihood of meeting this standard.

The below graph shows the relationship between passing 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, and the following types of absence: lateness; study leave; holidays (both authorised and unauthorised); illness; absences where a reason was not provided; and absences where the school was not satisfied with the

reason. Pupils who miss zero sessions for these reasons were more likely to pass at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, than their peers who miss one or more sessions for these reasons.

**Figure 10: The relationship between absence and passing at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, by reason for absence (with the average pass rate for all pupils as the dashed line)**



Our analysis shows that:

- 69% of pupils with zero absences due to lateness across Year 10 and Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. This falls to 48% for those who were late to just one to five sessions<sup>vi</sup> across the two years, and 31% for pupils who were late to six to ten sessions over Years 10 and 11.

<sup>vi</sup> A session is an afternoon or morning at school.

- 79% of pupils with zero absences where the school was not satisfied with the reason across Year 10 and Year 11 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. This dropped to 65% for pupils with one to five such absences over Year 10 and Year 11.
- The fall in the proportion of top grades is less steep for pupils who have periods of illness. 75% of pupils who have zero absences due to illness throughout Key Stage 4 passed at least 5 GCSEs, including English and maths. 73% of pupils who had between one and five sessions of illness absence met the same standard.
- 69% of pupils who were absent for 1-5 sessions for religious observances passed 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, compared to 66% of pupils who had zero absences for religious observances. Up to 11-15 sessions of absence due to study leave was similarly associated with an increased likelihood of passing 5 GCSEs, including English and maths, peaking at 82% of pupils passing, compared to 65% for pupils with zero absences for study leave.

## **3.2 English and maths GCSEs**

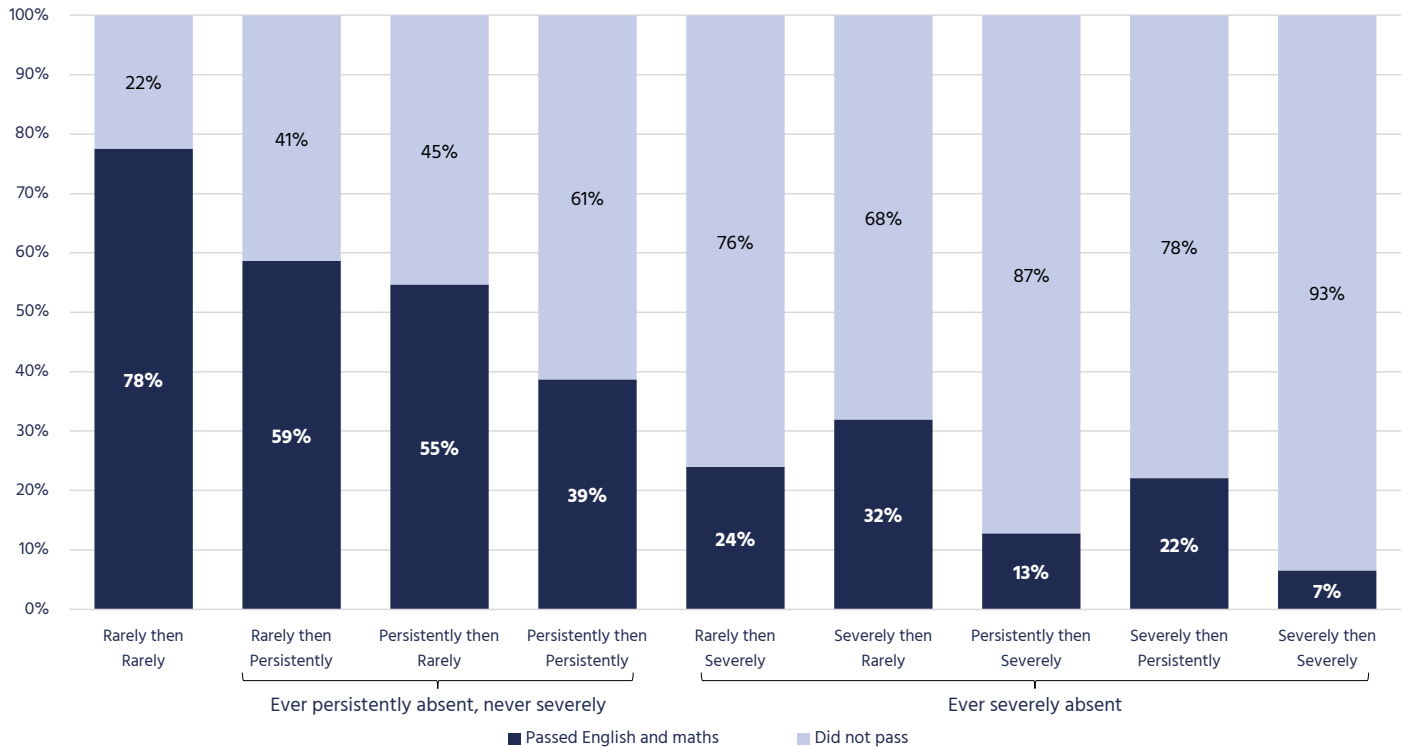
Pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 and Year 11 were more likely to pass their English and maths GCSEs, while pupils with some spell of either persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely.

### **3.2.1 The relationship with absenteeism**

**Pupils with a history of persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely to pass English and maths GCSE.**

78% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years passed English and maths GCSEs. Only 39% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years passed English and maths GCSEs. Just 7% of pupils who were severely absent in both years reached this standard.

**Figure 11: Proportion of pupils who passed English and maths GCSEs by their absence pattern**



### 3.2.2 The impact of improved attendance

**Our analysis finds that a greater proportion of pupils whose attendance improved passed English and maths GCSEs, compared to their peers whose absence patterns remained the same.**

55% of pupils whose attendance improved from persistent absenteeism in Year 10 to rarely absent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. For comparison, 39% of pupils who were persistently absent for both years passed English and maths GCSEs.

Pupils whose absenteeism improved from severe also had better results. About one third (32%) of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 but then rarely absent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. 22% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and whose absenteeism improved to persistent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. For comparison, just 7% of pupils whose absenteeism remains severe in both years reached this standard.

**Figure 12: Proportion of pupils who passed English and maths GCSEs by absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern		
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	78%	55%	32%
	Persistently	59%	39%	22%
	Severely	24%	13%	7%

**Similarly, a smaller proportion of pupils whose attendance deteriorated passed English and maths GCSEs, compared to their peers whose absence patterns remained the same.**

Over half (59%) of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 but then persistently absent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. 24% of all pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 but then severely absent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. For comparison, 78% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years reached this standard.

There is a similar pattern when pupils' attendance deteriorates from persistent absenteeism to severe absenteeism. 13% of all pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10 but then severely absent in Year 11 passed English and maths GCSEs. For comparison, 39% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years reached this standard.

### 3.3 Maths GCSE

In 2021/22, 73% of all pupils passed maths GCSE. Pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 and Year 11 were more likely to pass, while pupils with some spell of either persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely.

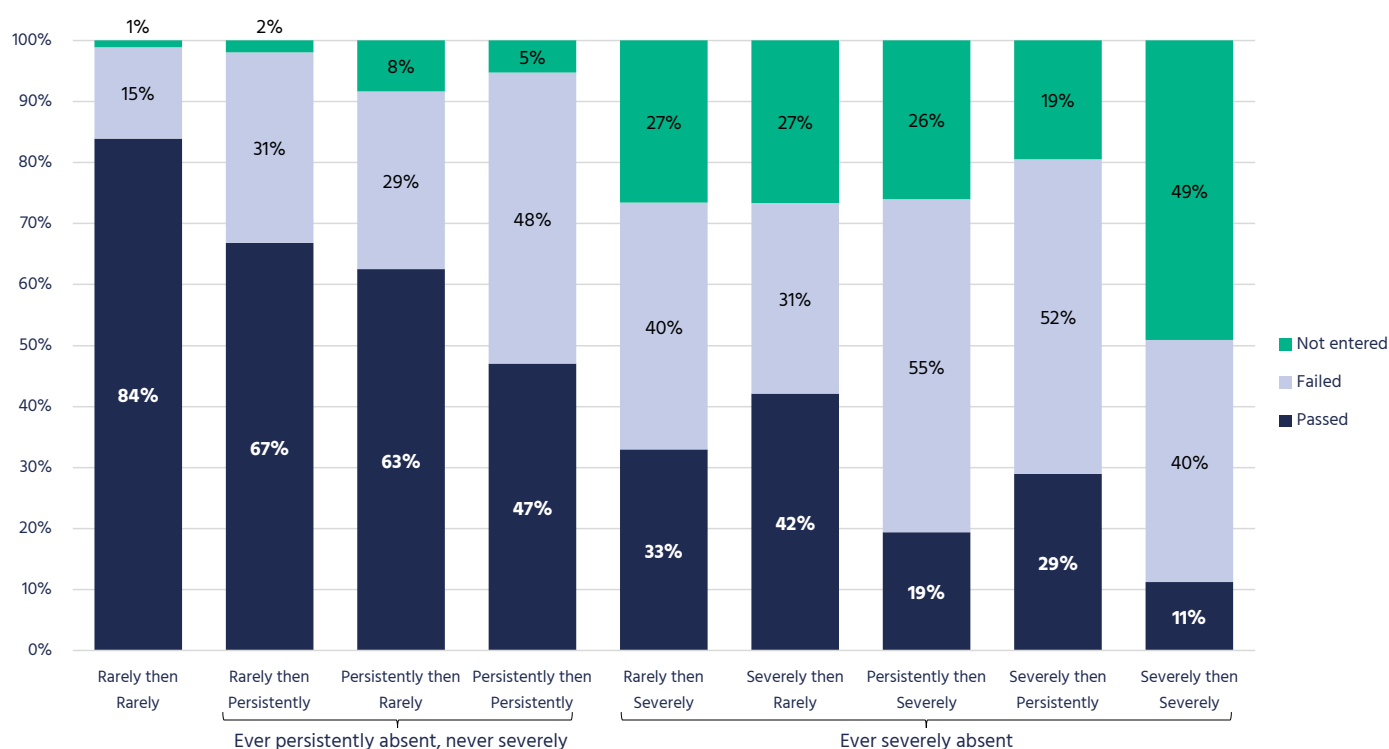
#### 3.3.1 The relationship with absenteeism

**A smaller proportion of pupils with a history of persistent or severe absenteeism passed maths GCSE relative to their peers who were rarely absent for both years.** 84% of pupils who were rarely absent in both years passed maths GCSE. Only 47% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years passed maths GCSE. 11% of pupils who were severely absent in both years reached this standard.

**Pupils who had higher levels of absences were also more likely to not be entered for maths GCSE.**

Just 1% of all pupils who were rarely absent in both Years 10 and 11 were not entered for maths GCSE. However, 5% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years and 49% of pupils who were severely absent in both years were not entered for maths GCSE.

**Figure 13: Maths GCSE performance by absence pattern**



### 3.3.2 The impact of improved attendance

**Our analysis shows that pupils whose attendance improved between 2020/21 and 2021/22 were more likely to pass maths GCSE, relative to their peers whose absence rates stayed the same. However, the relationship between improved attendance and the proportion of pupils entered for maths GCSE is less clear cut.**

As with other attendance metrics, pupils whose attendance improved between Years 10 and 11 were more likely than their peers, whose attendance rate stayed the same, to pass maths GCSE. 63% of



pupils whose attendance improved from persistently to rarely passed maths GCSE, compared to 47% of pupils who remained persistently absent in both Years 10 and 11.

Similarly, the proportion of pupils passing maths GCSE from a history of severe absenteeism in Year 10 was higher if pupils' attendance had gone on to improve in Year 11. 29% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and persistently absent in Year 11 passed maths GCSE. Further, 42% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and rarely absent in Year 11 passed maths GCSE. For comparison, just 11% of pupils who were severely absent in both years passed maths GCSE.

**Figure 14: Proportion of pupils who passed maths GCSE by absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern		
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	84%	63%	42%
	Persistently	67%	47%	29%
	Severely	33%	19%	11%

Despite the better results of pupils whose attendance improved, the relationship between improved attendance and entering the maths GCSE is not so immediately apparent. For example, while 5% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years were not entered for maths GCSE, 8% of pupils whose attendance improved from persistently absent to rarely absent were also not entered for maths GCSE.

Regardless, those with the worst absence pattern were also the least likely to be entered into the maths GCSE. 49% of pupils who were severely absent in both years did not enter the maths GCSE, compared to 1% of those who were rarely absent in both years. This may be due to the timings of the decisions to enter pupils for GCSEs or due to the reasons for the initial spell of severe absenteeism. This may also reflect those with the most severe special educational needs, who are not able to attend school regularly, and who are not able to navigate the national curriculum at the same pace as their peers and so are not ready to sit the maths GCSE in Year 11.

## 3.4 The English Baccalaureate

In 2021/22, 27% of all pupils were entered for and passed the English Baccalaureate.<sup>vii</sup> Pupils who were rarely absent in Year 10 and Year 11 were more likely to pass, while pupils with some spell of either persistent or severe absenteeism were less likely.

### 3.4.1 The relationship with absenteeism

**Our analysis finds that pupils with a history of persistent or severe absenteeism were both less likely to enter and to pass the English Baccalaureate.**

**Across all attendance trajectories, less than half of all pupils were entered for the English Baccalaureate.** However, a far smaller proportion of pupils with a history of severe absenteeism were entered for these qualifications. 53% of pupils who were rarely absent in each year were not entered for the English Baccalaureate. This compares with 79% of pupils who were not entered who were persistently absent in both years and 98% of pupils who were not entered who were severely absent in both years.

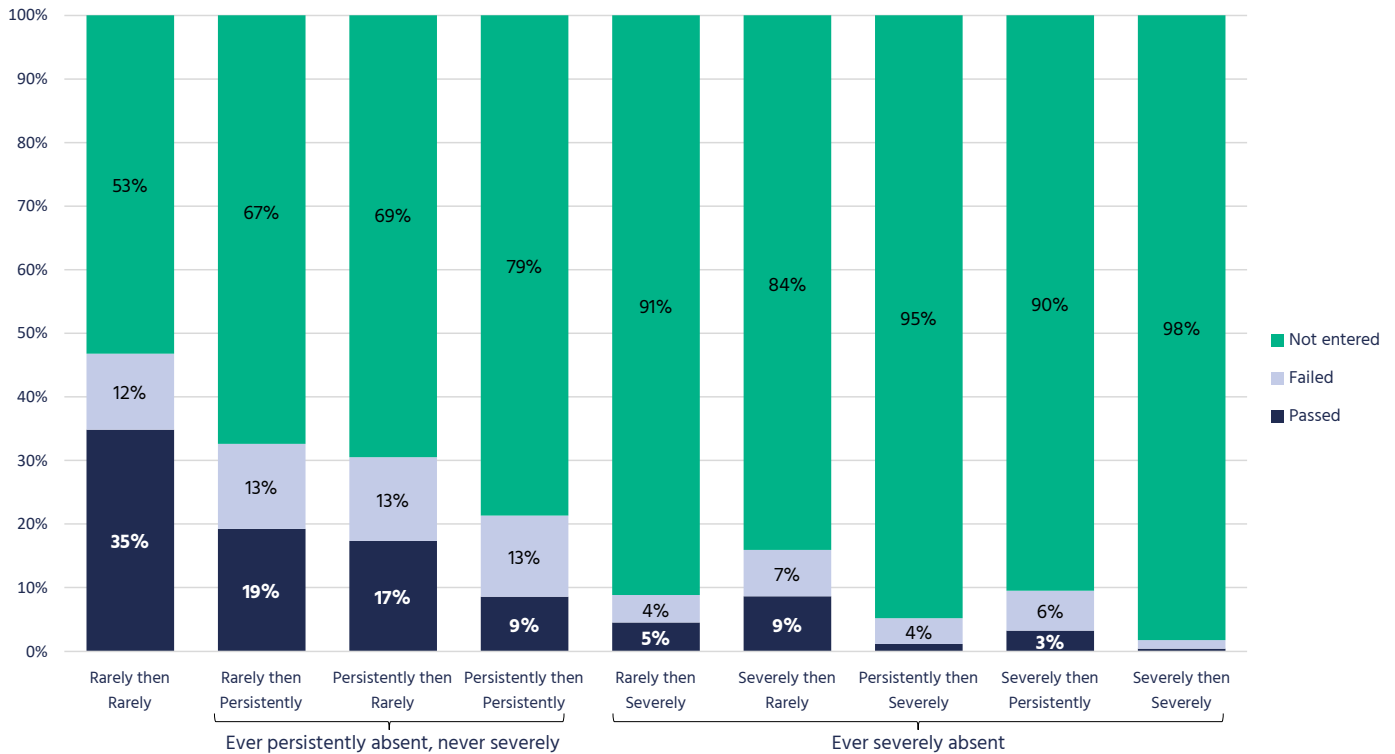
Even when pupils were entered, pupils with a history of persistent and severe absenteeism were less likely to pass the English Baccalaureate, relative to their peers. 35% of all pupils who were rarely absent in both years entered and passed the English Baccalaureate. This compares to 9% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years and less than 1% of pupils who were severely absent in both years.

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<sup>vii</sup> This doesn't exactly match the figure published by DfE because of the specific coverage of this analysis, as discussed in chapter 1.

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**Figure 15: English Baccalaureate performance by absence pattern**



### 3.4.2 The impact of improved attendance

**As with other attendance metrics, pupils whose attendance improved between Years 10 and 11 were more likely to enter and pass the English Baccalaureate.**

17% of pupils whose attendance improved from persistent absenteeism in Year 10 to rarely absent in Year 11 entered and passed the English Baccalaureate. For comparison, 9% of pupils who were persistently absent for both years reached this standard.

Results were better among pupils whose absenteeism improved from severe. 9% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 but then rarely absent in Year 11 entered and passed the English Baccalaureate. 3% of pupils who were severely absent in Year 10 and whose absenteeism improved to persistent in Year 11 entered and passed the English Baccalaureate. For comparison, less than 1% of pupils whose absenteeism remained severe in both years reach this standard.

**Figure 16: Proportion of pupils who entered and passed the English Baccalaureate by absence pattern**

		Year 10 absence pattern		
		Rarely	Persistently	Severely
Year 11 absence pattern	Rarely	35%	17%	9%
	Persistently	19%	9%	3%
	Severely	5%	1%	0%

Conversely, pupils whose attendance deteriorated between the two years were less likely to be entered and pass the English Baccalaureate.

While 35% of pupils whose absence remained rare in both years entered and passed the English Baccalaureate, only 19% of pupils whose absence deteriorated to persistent and 5% of pupils whose absence deteriorated to severe met this standard.

In a similar vein, 9% of pupils who were persistently absent in both years entered and passed the English Baccalaureate but just 1% of pupils who were persistently absent in Year 10 and severely absent in Year 11 met this standard.

## 4. The way forward

### 4.1 Setting a culture around regular school attendance

**This report has highlighted the sheer scale of children who miss significant chunks of their education in Key Stage 4.** Amongst the cohort analysed in this report, who sat their GCSEs in 2022, 32% of pupils were ever persistently absent but never severely absent, and a further 4% were ever severely absent.

Since the pandemic, absence from school has become pervasive across our education system. Between 2018/19 and 2021/22, Year 11 persistent absenteeism rates have doubled from 16% to 32%. Year 11 severe absenteeism rates similarly doubled over the same period.

We urgently need to reset the culture around school attendance. This can only be achieved if we establish high expectations of consistent school attendance. If we want to turn the tide on school absences, we will need school leaders to be equipped with the very best knowledge around both the reasons behind increased absences and the strategies to employ to bring their absence rates down.

#### 4.1.1 Driving school attendance cultures from the top

If we want to turn the tide on school absences, we need leaders who obsess over school absences and make it their top priority. Leaders should know about their local schools' overall attendance rates and also the specific challenges of pupils who have the lowest rates of attendance.

Schools which have effectively driven down post-pandemic absences have done so by making school attendance a whole-school priority. Senior leaders have taken responsibility for addressing absences and working with children who have particularly acute attendance difficulties.

Leaders who are knowledgeable in school attendance issues can help to set a high attendance culture across the whole school.

**Recommendation:** Every school should appoint a member of the Senior Leadership Team to manage their attendance policy. Their duties should extend beyond reviewing and implementing the attendance policy to include regular data check-ins to compare the school attendance rates with similar schools,

hosting staff meetings to discuss how the school can support children on the path to persistent or severe absenteeism, and being the point of contact for families whose children have some of the lowest rates of attendance.

The 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance states that schools should include training on attendance in their continued professional development offer for all staff alongside dedicated attendance training for any staff with a specified attendance function in their role.

However, at present, there is no national training available on improving school attendance. In some cases, local authorities provide training to attendance staff in schools as a traded good, which means that schools have to pay for this service, however, this is offered at their discretion.

In summer 2023, the Children's Commissioner hosted multi-disciplinary regional roundtables to discuss the key barriers to tackling absences. In these roundtables, we heard how headteachers and senior leaders who have come into positions of leadership through a non-pastoral route struggle to access appropriate training to equip them to make decisions around attendance.

Since the pandemic, our understanding of the key issues around attendance has been unfolding at pace. It is essential that all schools are equipped with the latest training to enable them to understand and to tackle school absences.

**Recommendation:** To equip school leaders, governors and attendance officers with the knowledge needed to tackle school absences, the Department for Education should roll out national training on school attendance.

#### **4.1.2 Developing strong relationships with families**

Establishing a strong attendance culture must start with establishing strong relationships with families. Parents and carers should be seen as partners when it comes to addressing school attendance. They know their children best and can often provide valuable insights into the reasons for absenteeism.

In some instances, families will face specific barriers to attendance and will need support from schools to help to remove them. It is essential that schools build strong relationships with families by listening to them and understanding their individual situations.

In the Attendance Audit, we unfortunately heard of many cases where the relationships between parents and schools broke down. We heard that parents did not feel trusted, and children did not feel understood.

**Recommendation:** Every school attendance policy should have to detail how schools will build and sustain positive relationships with all parents and carers, to work jointly to promote school attendance. This is especially important for those children with low attendance.

### **4.1.3 Extending the Attendance Hub programme**

The government has introduced a network of 14 Attendance Hubs which will support 800 schools to 'improve their attendance by sharing effective practice and practical resources'. It is expected that this initiative will reach a maximum of 400,000 children from the 800 schools involved.<sup>8</sup> The hub programme shows great promise and could be a vehicle for spreading best practice on attendance across the school system.

While we welcome the initial rollout of 14 Attendance Hubs, we believe that this programme should be more ambitious. At present, the initiative will only capture 800 schools out of a total of 24,000.

The government has already introduced a series of hubs to raise standards in maths, English, and behaviour. The Maths Hub programme was launched with 32 schools and had the potential to reach every school in England. We must match this scale of ambition with the Attendance Hub Programme.

**Recommendation:** The Attendance Hub network should be extended to achieve national coverage. Schools with some of the worst rates of attendance should be targeted for support. When Ofsted identify attendance as a weakness in their inspections, schools should be referred directly to the programme to improve their approach to attendance.

## **4.2 Tackling persistent and severe absenteeism**

**Our analysis evidences the link between persistent and severe absenteeism and academic attainment.** Proportionally fewer children with histories of school absences in Years 10 and 11 go on to achieve passes in their GCSEs. If we want to offer every child the best chance in life, it must start with ensuring that they can regularly attend school.

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### 4.2.1 Identifying children who need extra support

The Education Endowment Foundation's rapid evidence assessment on attendance interventions found that targeted and responsive interventions are more effective when it comes to tackling school absences.<sup>9</sup> More needs to be done to target limited attendance resource on pupils who are likely to become persistently absent.

In a previous Children's Commissioner's report, *Back into school: New insights into school absence*,<sup>10</sup> the CCo examined data around attendance patterns and provided evidence for when schools need to intervene, before a child becomes persistently or severely absent. The report found that children who miss the first few days of a new term or those who miss mid-weekdays are more likely to be habitually absent from school. Schools should use these findings to inform their processes for identifying children at risk of disengaging.

**Recommendation:** Schools should make use of the data that they hold to proactively put in place the support children need to attend school. Schools should look at historic attendance patterns to identify where to target their support most effectively.

Last year, the Department for Education launched their first ever voluntary collection of real-time data on attendance. To date, 85% of schools have opted-in to sharing their attendance data.<sup>11</sup> Sharing the data in real-time has led to the release of fortnightly attendance figures, which are helping to shape policy and to improve the support available for persistently and severely absent children.

Real-time attendance data can also help schools, multi-academy trusts, and local authorities to tackle absenteeism before it becomes severe. Schools which agree to share their data can access daily attendance reports which they can interrogate at an individual level. These reports are also available for multi-academy trusts and local authorities. We have heard how schools which take a proactive approach to managing their school attendance data are better equipped to identify children who need extra support.

**Recommendation:** The Department for Education should make attendance data sharing mandatory and education leaders in schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities should use the insights gained from this data to inform their attendance strategies.

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The insights garnered from attendance data collection should be used to shape the whole-school approach to school attendance. Governors play a key role in helping to shape the strategic direction of schools and can help school leaders to focus support on pupils who are at risk of becoming persistently or severely absent.

**Recommendation:** Governors should be given access to attendance data which is benchmarked against similar schools; tracks the attendance trajectories of children with histories of absenteeism; and can be broken down to individual days or year groups. They should use this data to hold schools to account and challenge them, where necessary, on their attendance patterns.

#### **4.2.2 Understanding and addressing the barriers to attendance**

Children have consistently told the Children's Commissioner that when they need to access support, they want to do it through school. We have seen that children thrive at schools which provide holistic support that is built around a deep understanding of children's individual needs.

To establish this understanding, schools need to work with children and families as soon as they start to disengage to unearth the reasons for not attending schools. Schools should approach communication with children and families in a caring and non-judgmental way while still challenging attendance problems.

**Recommendation:** School attendance policies should clearly state how schools will build and maintain strong relationships with persistently and severely absent children and their families and use these to design bespoke packages of support for persistently and severely absent pupils. Parents and carers should be invited to regular meetings with the school to talk about the key issues driving school absences.

In our Attendance Audit, we heard of instances where the relationship between school and home had deteriorated to such an extent that made working together hard. Relationships between home and school can be especially difficult when children have been out of school for extended periods of time and sanctions have been used.

In these instances, schools may need someone to help to mediate the relationship and to reestablish a pattern of working together to address absence issues. The Department for Education's attendance mentor programme shows great promise, but it is only set to meet 1,665 children in its first three years.<sup>12</sup>

**Recommendation:** The Attendance Mentor programme should be scaled up to be offered in all Priority Education Investment Areas. Funding should be made available to reengage all severely absent children in these local authorities.

### **4.2.3 Drawing on different forms of educational support**

In our Attendance Audit, we saw outstanding examples of schools who had made use of their existing enrichment and breakfast club provision to further support children with a history of absenteeism.

Breakfast clubs can help children to start their day well with a nutritious meal. They can be a lifeline for children who need a structured routine in the morning or for those who would otherwise struggle to get into school on time.

Similarly, enrichment activities can be a great way of reengaging children who have stopped attending school. Fun activities and clubs can act as a hook to improve school attendance. We saw in the Attendance Audit that children with a history of absenteeism were more likely to come into school on the days where they had clubs on afterwards.

**Recommendation:** The Department for Education should issue best practice guides for schools who want to integrate their enrichment and breakfast club provision into their broader attendance strategies.

## **4.3 Developing a multi-agency approach to tackling school absence**

**Once the key barriers to attendance have been identified, local agencies should work with schools to put in place the support children need to attend every single day.**

While schools play a pivotal role in setting high standards around attendance, these standards can only be met if the requisite support is put in place to tackle the barriers to attendance. Often, the support that children need lies beyond the school gates.

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### 4.3.1 Making attendance everyone's priority

Other agencies, such as health, social care, transport, and housing, must view daily attendance at school as a priority and must play their role in establishing a local authority wide approach to attendance.

At present, it seems that very few agencies outside of education are aware of the government's 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance.<sup>13</sup> Our roundtables found that some statutory services are also unaware of the fortnightly absence data published by the Department for Education.

**Recommendation:** Every public body which works with children with a history of absenteeism should make attendance their priority. The Department for Education should make the 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance statutory and share fortnightly attendance data with services outside of education.

**Recommendation:** The Department for Education should also collate and disseminate best practice from other agencies who have played a role in reducing school absences. This would help other statutory services to see how they can take a proactive role to tackle school absences.

**Recommendation:** To ensure that local government departments are held accountable for their efforts to reduce absenteeism, the government should seek to integrate performance on attendance into their existing accountability structures. Ofsted should revise their SEND and social care inspection frameworks to include attendance as an evaluation criterion in every inspection. Ofsted should also conduct a thematic deep dive into school attendance in the worst performing local authorities.

### 4.3.2 Sharing information between relevant agencies

In the Attendance Audit we heard that one of the key barriers to working together was an inability to share data and information about children who had begun to disengage from school. Professionals are unable to share data in a timely manner and this has implications for resourcing the right support needed for children who are on the path to becoming persistently or severely absent.

**Recommendation:** To improve data sharing between different agencies, the government should introduce a unique identifier for children based on the NHS number. This unique identifier would allow

different agencies to seamlessly share information, identify attendance issues, and put in place the right support to keep children in school.

### **4.3.3 Having a clear pathway for triaging mental health support**

Mental health came up as a key barrier to attendance in our conversations with multi-agency professionals. Both education and health agreed that there is a lack of consensus around who is responsible for supporting children with sub-clinical mental health needs. Professionals also noted that there is no common language to describe or way of measuring children's mental health. This can lead to children not receiving the health support they need to attend school regularly.

**Recommendation:** The government should increase the number of school nurses. School nurses should act as a bridge between the health and education professions and should help to identify and triage children with higher level mental health needs to appropriate services, where needed.

In The Big Ask, we heard from over half a million children and young people who said that they needed support they wanted to access it in school. Those who did access support in school were happier than their peers. Having readily available mental health support in schools can help to support children for whom poor mental health is a barrier to attendance.

Mental Health Support Teams are currently being rolled out across England. They provide support and extra capacity for mild to moderate mental health issues and also help schools to create a whole-school approach to mental health. In 2022-23, a total 28% of schools and colleges and 35% of pupils had access to a mental health support teams.<sup>14</sup>

**Recommendation:** The roll out of mental health support teams should be expedited to reach all children by 2025.

### **4.3.4 Improving the quality of education for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)**

Children with SEND have some of the worst rates of school attendance. In our Attendance Audit we heard from children who had disengaged from school because they did not receive reasonable adjustments or additional support to aid their learning at school.

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While the SEND Review goes some way to addressing these issues, the Children's Commissioner is deeply concerned about the pace of change.

**Recommendation:** The Department should roll out the SEND Review as rapidly as possible, to ensure that no further children become disengaged from education due to a lack of specialist provision.

**Recommendation:** Families should be actively signposted to the services of an independent advocate. The Department should run a campaign to advertise the Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service (SENDIASS).

Often, children who start to disengage from school are awaiting an Education, Health, and Care Plan. In our conversations we heard how lengthy waiting lists for diagnoses can lead to extended periods of school absence.

**Recommendation:** Every local authority where the average wait for an EHCP is longer than 20 weeks should have to publish what their plan is to reduce this and should set out a plan for supporting learners to attend regularly during their wait.

#### **4.3.4 Prioritising education for children in care**

In a previous piece of research, the Children's Commissioner showed that children in care are more likely than their peers to be missing from education.<sup>15</sup> This included children who were in unregistered education, not on a school roll, and those on a school roll but not attending.

School can be a safety net and vital form of early help for children. For children who have been identified as having a vulnerability and placed on a child in need or child protection plan or as a looked after child, school is an essential form of support and safeguarding structure.

In recognition of the additional challenges that looked after children have faced, Virtual School Heads receive Pupil Premium Plus to support them to improve attainment of looked-after children and to close the attainment gap between them and their peers.

As this report evidences, attendance and attainment are strongly linked. Despite this, there is no specific guidance on how to improve the attendance of looked after children. The office believe that more work

is needed to identify best practice interventions that improve the attainment and attendance of looked after children and children in need.

**Recommendation:** Research should be carried out on what interventions are most effective at improving the attainment and attendance of looked after children, children on child protection plans, and children on child in need plans at an individual and whole cohort level. The guidance on use of Pupil Premium Plus should then clearly signpost Virtual School Heads to the most effective interventions.

#### **4.3.5 Convening multi-agency leaders**

In our regional roundtables, we heard that professionals outside of education wanted to make attendance a priority but they were struggling to do so. Operational staff in health said that they wanted to support attendance initiatives but needed capacity to do so and support from director level. Directors said that they had not realised attendance was such a big issue in their area.

At present, there is no forum for multi-agency leaders to meet regularly to discuss the local drivers of poor attendance rates. School leaders have told us that this can make it difficult to resolve issues around school attendance where the barriers lie outside the reach of education as it is hard to convene and share information with other agencies.

**Recommendation:** Local leaders should convene multiagency forums to discuss the specific local drivers leading to heightened levels of school absences and to develop a plan to jointly improve school attendance.

#### **4.4 Putting the right support in place to sustain attendance**

The findings in this report show the importance of sustaining regular attendance in both years. Children who are returning from spells of long absences may find it difficult to sustain regular attendance without additional support.

Children who have been absent from school for extended periods will often need additional help to sustain their attendance when they return to school. In our Attendance Audit, we heard from children about how being out of school for a long period of time can hit their confidence. Being in the classroom

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can become more intimidating and some children find it hard to catch up on the work that they missed while they were out of school.

We must make sure that every child who is reengaging in school is given the support not only just to be back in the classroom but to also feel confident and ready to learn with their peers. The support needed may range from social and emotional support through to academic catch up.

#### **4.4.1 Reintegrating children after an extended period of absenteeism**

Having a plan for sustaining reintegration is every bit as important as having a plan to identify and tackle the barriers to attendance. Children need to be able to access consistent support to reengage with education. Often reengagement is not a linear journey and schools may need to adapt their plans to meet the needs of children while they return to school.

**Recommendation:** Schools should outline reintegration plans for children returning from long spells of absenteeism. These plans should include provisions to improve children's confidence and social and emotional wellbeing.

In our Attendance Audit, we saw how short-term placements in alternative provision (AP) can help to reintegrate children into mainstream education. These settings can offer additional social and emotional support and put in place part-time timetables to help to reestablish routines around education.

Short term placements in alternative provision can be helpful for children re-entering education after extended periods of absenteeism. In my Attendance Audit I saw multi-academy trusts who had developed their own alternative provision, as part of their family of schools. I saw this alternative provision school being used to provide bespoke support for children with histories of persistent absenteeism.

While AP should never be a long-term destination, it can play a crucial role in helping to reengage children who have missed long periods in formal education.

**Recommendation:** Where needed, schools should work with alternative providers to create a graduated return to school plan. Short-term placements should be used to help children to reintegrate into education.

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Local authorities must provide alternative education if a child of compulsory school age is unable to attend school over a longer period. If a child cannot attend school because of a mental or physical health issue, the local authority should provide an alternative as soon as it is clear that they will be away from school for more than 15 days (either consecutively or over time).

We have heard there is currently confusion between local authorities, parents and carers, and schools about whether this duty extends to providing educational alternatives other than school when a child is not attending school regularly.

**Recommendation:** The Department for Education should issue guidance about how local authorities should use their Section 19 duties to provide alternative education to support children with a history of absenteeism.

#### **4.4.2 Targeting academic support to address gaps in learning**

Children who have been absent for long spells should also be given the academic support needed to catch up to their peers. Being out of school for several days can lead to children falling behind on the curriculum. It is often difficult for children who have missed foundational content to catch up on later learning. In our Attendance Audit, we heard from children who were worried about returning to school as they believed that they would not be able to keep up with lessons, given their periods of lost learning.

When children are absent from school, they should be given the academic support needed to stay on top of their lessons at their own pace. This support should be gradual and tailored around each child's individual needs.

**Recommendation:** If a child misses an extended period of school, school staff should craft a personalised catch-up plan. This plan may need to be delivered through additional catch-up sessions. School leaders should look at how they can make use of the National Tutoring Programme to provide tailored lessons for children with a history of absenteeism.



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