

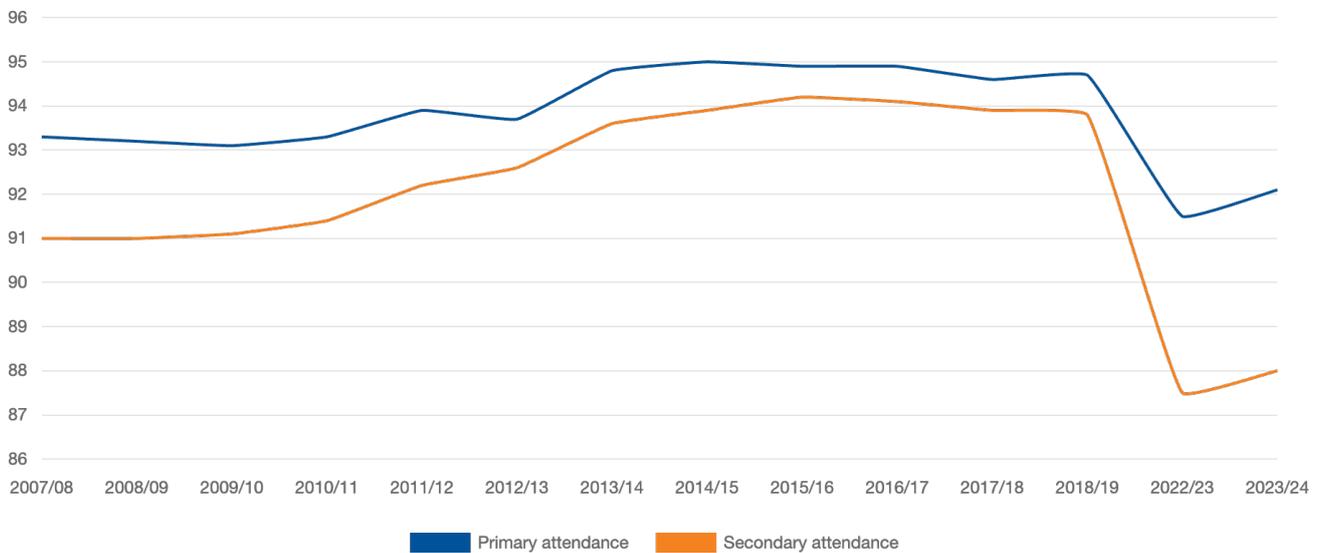
Attendance

What the data is telling us

The following evaluation is based on data from a variety of Welsh Government releases, links to which are provided in Appendix A.

In the 2022-2023 Estyn annual report, we highlighted the notable decrease in school attendance following the pandemic. The fall was particularly large for secondary-age pupils, with the national rate of attendance falling by 6.3% points between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023. This equates to each pupil, on average, attending school for 12 days less in 2022-2023 than they did in 2018-2019. For primary-age pupils, attendance fell by 3.2% points over the same period. Figure 1 shows the trend in the rate of attendance over time, from 2013-2014 to 2023-2024. Data for the academic years 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 is not available.

Figure 1: School Attendance Statistics (2013-2024)

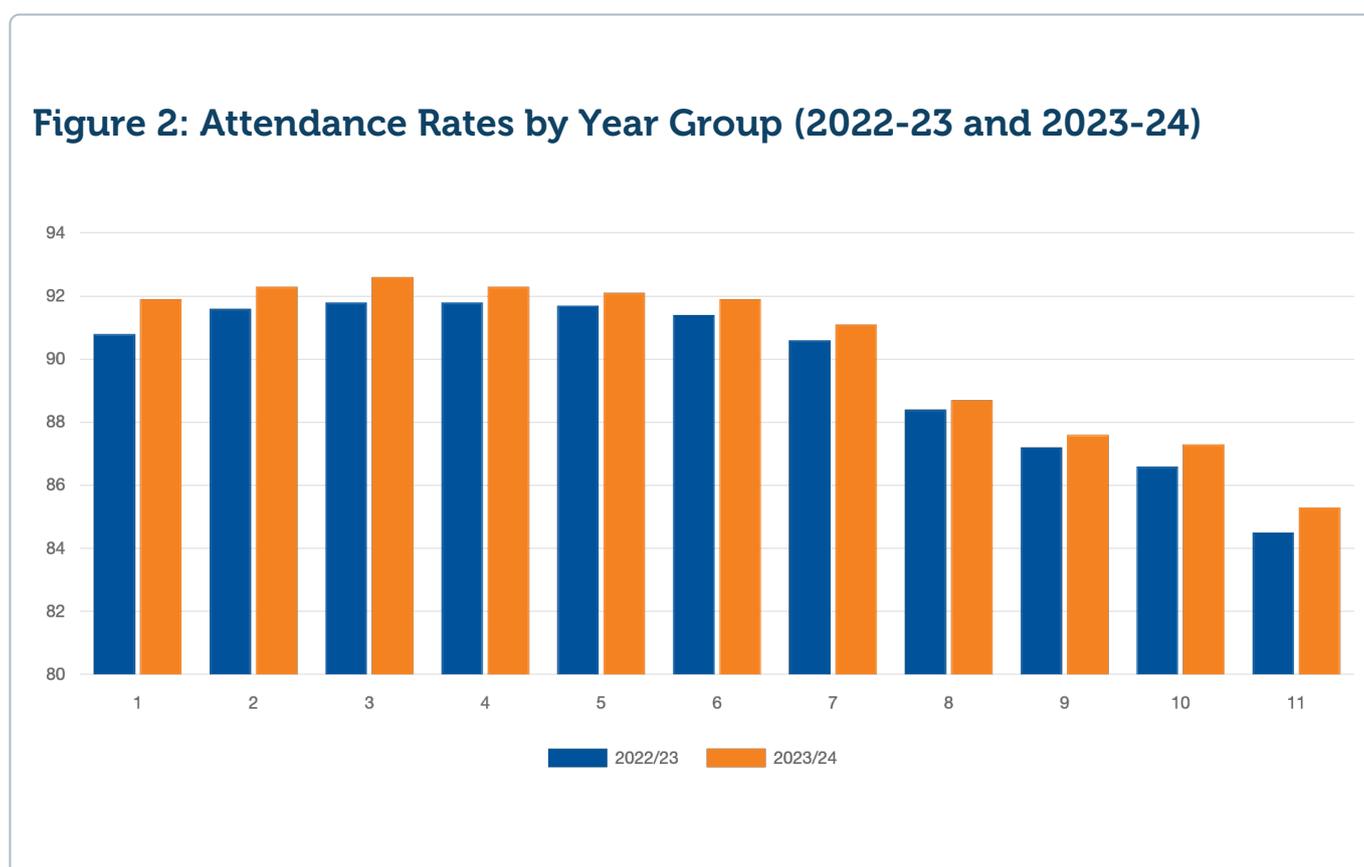


During the most recent academic year, 2023-2024, the rate of attendance for primary-age pupils has increased by 0.6% point to 92.1%, although the rate remains 2.5% points below the pre-pandemic level. For secondary-age pupils, the attendance rate has remained stubbornly low. Over the last

academic year, the rate of secondary attendance has increased by only 0.5% points and remains 5.7% points below that seen in 2018-2019. At the current rate of improvement, it would take over 10 years for secondary attendance to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Analysis of attendance rates post pandemic also shows a much wider variation in attendance than rates prior to the pandemic. For example, in one secondary school, attendance in 2022-2023 was just 1.3% points below that in 2018-2019, whereas 10 other secondary schools saw their attendance fall by more than 10% points over the same period. There is also variation in the attendance rates between local authorities, and the quality of support offered by local authorities to support schools with improving attendance. In the most severe cases of poor attendance, local authorities have not responded quickly enough to develop bespoke arrangements to support individual schools.

When the data is considered by school Year, Figure 2 shows that the rate of attendance is fairly similar for pupils of all ages in the primary sector. However, for secondary-age pupils, the rate of attendance falls substantially as pupils get older. The data also shows that, while the attendance of Year 11 pupils increased by 0.9% points between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the increases in the rates of attendance of pupils in Years 8 and 9 were very small.



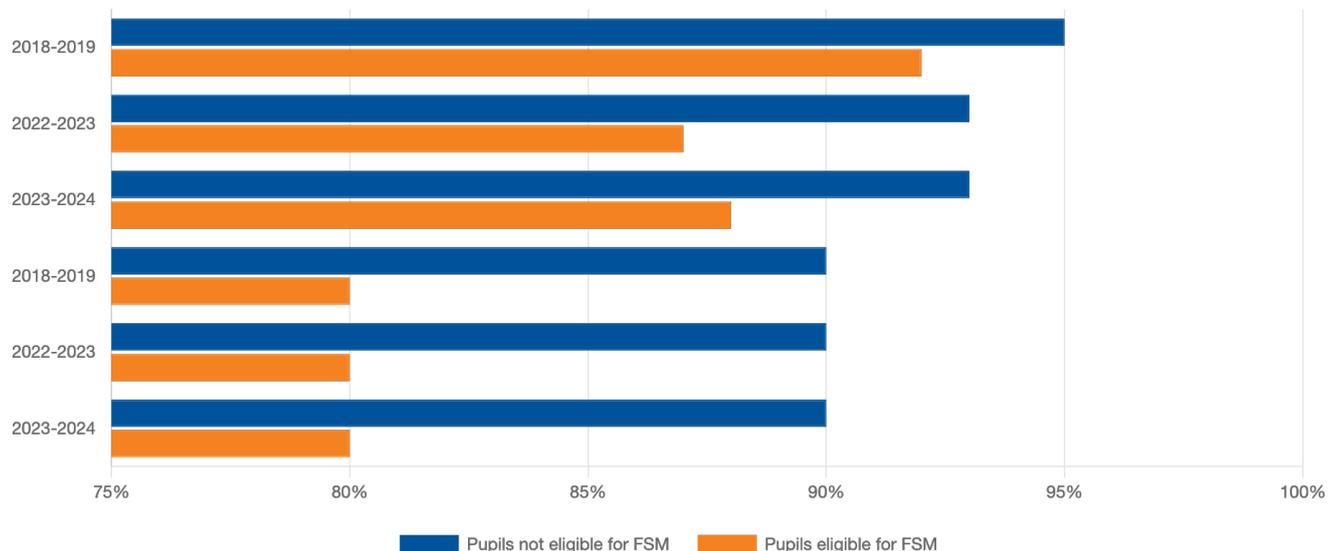
Historically, the differences between the attendance of males and females have been small. This has continued to be the case since the pandemic.

One of the groups of pupils whose attendance was most affected by the pandemic was that of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. In 2018-2019, the gap between the attendance of pupils who were eligible for free school meals and their counterparts was 3.1% points in the primary sector and

5.2% points in the secondary sector. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals fell by a notably bigger amount than that of their counterparts during the pandemic. As a result, these differences increased substantially, and in 2022-2023 the gaps were 5.8% points for primary age pupils and 10.4% for secondary aged pupils. Between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the difference between the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers grew smaller, but only by a very small margin. However, this difference is still substantially bigger than pre-pandemic levels. In the secondary sector, pupils eligible for free schools are still, on average, missing one day of school per week.

Another concern is the substantial increases in the number of pupils whose parents are electing to educate them at home. The rate of elective home educated pupils in 2023-2024 is 13.0 of every 1,000 pupils. This rate has increased every year since 2009-2010 when it was 1.6 of every 1,000 pupils.

Figure 3: Attendance by Free School Meal Eligibility



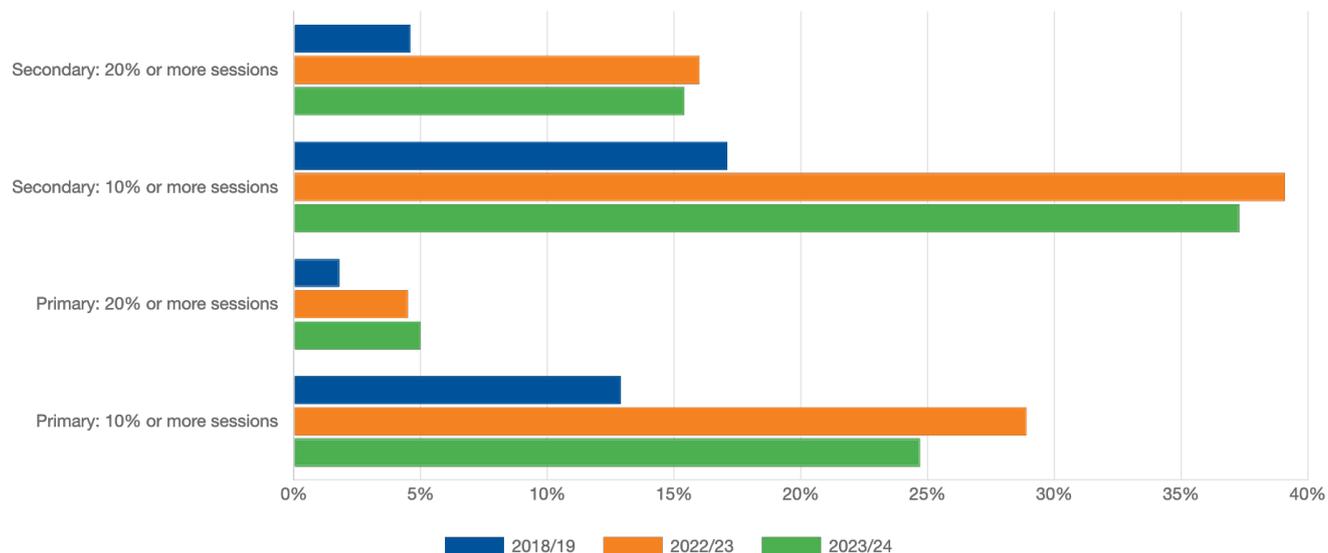
During inspection and other interactions with school leaders, they stated that there are two main reasons that attendance rates remain low:

- A substantial increase in the number of pupils who are absent on a frequent basis or refuse to attend school. This includes an increase in the number of pupils who have mental health issues and are therefore either not attending, or who are absent regularly.
- A change in the culture amongst parents, who now place less importance on their children attending schools regularly.

The Welsh Government now publishes data on persistent absences at two different thresholds, those

pupils that are absent for more than 10% of sessions, and those that are absent for more than 20% of sessions. This data highlights the severity of the challenges facing the education system in Wales regarding the attendance of pupils. Between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023, the percentage of secondary-age pupils who were absent for more than 20% of sessions more than tripled from 4.6% to 16.3%. For primary-age pupils, the rate increased from 1.8% to 4.5%. Figure 4 shows that, during the last academic year, there have been only small improvements in these rates, and that the pace of improvement is too slow. Too many pupils are persistently absent from schools. During our inspection activity and other interactions with school leaders, they stated that schools and local authorities do not have the capacity to cope with the substantial increase in persistent absence. This is particularly the case in the secondary sector. One of the most concerning statistics is that, in 2022-2023, 32.5% of secondary-aged pupils who are eligible for free school meals were absent for at least 20% of their sessions. There was a slight improvement in 2023-2024, but just under a third of this group of pupils (31.5%) continue to miss on average one school day per week.

Figure 4: Persistent Absence Rates



Evidence from school inspection and thematic work

During the academic year 2023-2024, most primary schools had sound arrangements for monitoring attendance and intervening when pupils were not attending regularly enough. Particular strengths were the communication between the primary school and its parents, and the strong sense of a community that these schools had built. These factors contributed to the 1% point increase seen in the attendance of primary-age pupils. In a few primary schools, the rate of recovery of attendance was too slow.

In the secondary and all-age sectors, around half of schools received a recommendation to improve

their attendance. Shortcomings in the schools' work in this area included:

- Leaders not having a sufficiently detailed overview of the work in this area.
- Leaders not using data to monitor pupils' attendance rigorously enough or not targeting their interventions sufficiently.
- A lack of effective communication with parents and carers.
- A lack of coordination in schools' approaches. For example, leaders do not always consider the links between strategies to improve attendance and those to support other aspects of the school's work. These aspects include pupils' well-being, strategies to develop community working, and the impact that improving teaching and the curriculum as well as extra-curricular activities can have on pupils' engagement in school.
- A lack of a whole school approach, with attendance being seen as the responsibility of one person or a small pastoral team rather than making connections between aspects of the school's work.
- Leaders not setting ambitious enough targets for attendance.
- Leaders being too slow to intervene when pupils' attendance falls. For example, some schools did not intervene until a pupil's attendance fell under 80%.
- Schools not working well enough in partnership with outside agencies.

A common shortcoming in these schools was that leaders did not evaluate their work in this area well enough. As a result, they did not have a clear enough understanding of which aspects of their work were having the most and least impact.

Effective practice

Inspectors reported that most schools had sound processes for first-day response to pupils' absence, and many leaders we met saw the promotion of good attendance as a priority. Where schools were effective in ensuring that rates of attendance were improving, common features of provision in this area included:

- Leaders sharing high expectations on this aspect with the whole school community.
- Leaders analysing data rigorously to look for patterns and trends in attendance. This included looking at the data by day and times, by Year group, by groups of pupils and by peer groups.
- Leaders identifying early any pupils who are at risk of not attending and putting steps in place to support these pupils.
- Schools using a graduated response with all class teachers involved in the first instance, with more severe cases being dealt with by leaders, senior leaders and then outside agencies.
- Strong work with families to support pupils to improve their attendance.
- Regular contact with parents and carers, often through effective use of technology and social media.
- Providing safe areas when pupils start to attend such as breakfast clubs, lunchtime clubs and areas where the pupils could be provided with extra support as and when they required it.
- Secondary schools working well with their partner primary schools to ensure that pupils settle quickly at the start of Year 7.
- Schools adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils and ensuring that pupils are provided with high-quality learning experiences.

- Leaders regularly canvass the views of pupils on how to ensure that they were regularly attending school.
- Leaders emphasising the link between regular attendance and educational achievement to both pupils and parents.
- Schools promoting good attendance through rewarding regular attendance. This includes the use of class attendance leagues and competitions.

During the last year, Estyn published a number of case studies and cameos of effective practice related to improving attendance, which include the work of the following schools:

- [Cefn Hengoed Community School](#)
- [Pontarddulais Comprehensive School](#)
- [St Teilo's Church in Wales High School](#)
- [Ysgol Emmanuel](#)

Questions to consider when analysing data relating to attendance

The following questions could be used when evaluating the school's approaches to attendance. When analysing attendance data, it is important that leaders use the to provides lines of inquiry, which can then be further investigated.

- How has the overall rate of attendance changed over time? How well does the overall rate of attendance compare with that of similar schools?
- Is the trend in attendance in line with or different to that of other schools nationally / other schools in the local area / other schools that have a similar context?
- How often do we analyse internal data on attendance? Do we analyse data for different groups of pupils, for example by Year group, peer group, gender, eligibility for free school meals, school day, proximity of their home to the school etc? How do we use these findings to plan for improvement?
- What trends can we see in our pupils' attendance? For example, are there trends relating to the time of day, day of the week, time of year?
- Do we analyse data according to the reasons for absence? Do we use comparative data for similar schools when looking at rates of persistent absences?
- How does the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals compare to that of other pupils within the school and their peers nationally?
- How does the attendance of pupils with additional learning needs compare to that of other pupils at the school?
- Are there any Year groups where attendance is particularly strong or weak?
- Are there any other groups of pupils for whom attendance is a concern?

Questions for considering the support for improving pupils' attendance

- How well do we record and analyse attendance data, and identify areas for improvement?
- How well do we promote good attendance?
- How well do we work with families and the community to support pupils with low attendance?

- How well do we respond where pupils are absent because their well-being is adversely affected when they attend school?
- How effective is our work with other agencies to support pupils with low attendance?
- If any pupils are on a reduced timetable for school attendance, are the arrangements for their education appropriate and monitored closely?

Questions for leaders to use when evaluating the school's work to improve attendance

- Do leaders and teachers have a good overview of attendance in their areas of responsibilities?
- Do leaders and teachers have an overview of the areas for improvement regarding to attendance?
- How well do we as leaders plan for improvement in attendance?
- How well is the school using its resources to support good attendance?
- What impact has our work had in improving pupils' attendance?
- How accurate and robust is our analysis of attendance data?
- How well do we use attendance data to identify areas for improvement and to evaluate any strategies we have implemented? Do we have a good understanding of which strategies are having the most impact?

Appendix A

Sources of data:

The commentary on attendance is based on two different data sets. For secondary-age pupils we have used the annual verified data on absenteeism from secondary schools: ([Welsh Government, 2023d](#) and [Welsh Government, 2024d](#)). For primary-age pupils we have used the annual verified data on absenteeism from primary school ([Welsh Government, 2023e](#) and [Welsh Government, 2024e](#)). These are the latest in the series of annually published data that were reinstated following a three-year pause between 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 due to the disruption of the pandemic.