

Attendance in secondary schools

Briefing note

Ofsted undertook a survey of attendance in 31 secondary schools in the summer and autumn terms 2006. Ofsted and the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) were concerned about 351 secondary schools whose overall absence or unauthorised absence rates were unsatisfactory. The survey evaluated the impact of the National Strategy in promoting attendance and identified critical factors in reducing and preventing attendance problems in secondary schools.

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Introduction

Ofsted undertook a survey of attendance in 31 secondary schools in the summer and autumn terms 2006. Ofsted and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) were concerned about 351 secondary schools whose overall absence or unauthorised absence rates were unsatisfactory. The survey evaluated the impact of the National Strategy in promoting attendance and identified critical factors in reducing and preventing attendance problems in secondary schools. This briefing paper provides evidence and recommendations for secondary schools, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), and Ofsted.¹ A summary leaflet about the findings is also available.²

Evidence base

The judgements on attendance in secondary schools made during Section 5 inspections in 2005/06 were analysed. In addition, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 31 secondary schools in 23 local authorities. Of these schools, 24 had been identified as target schools by the DfES because their unauthorised absence rates or overall absence rates had been too high. The remaining seven schools were selected because inspection had indicated good practice in attendance.

During the visits to schools, inspectors:

- held discussions with senior staff
- observed lessons
- scrutinised attendance data and other documentation
- talked to 300 students in three attendance bands (below 80%, 80–90% and 90–95%)
- held discussions with lead officers for attendance in the local authorities.

The link between schools' overall effectiveness and attendance

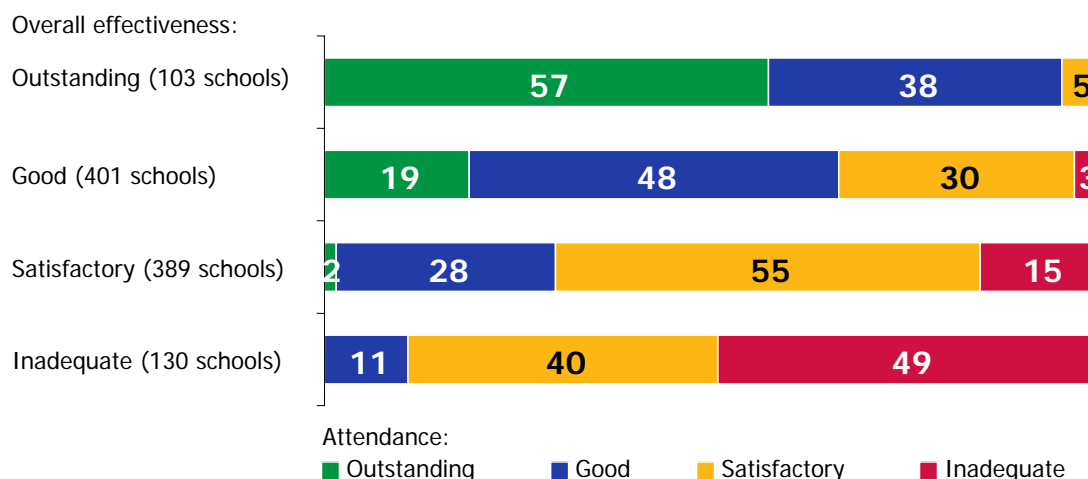
The better the quality of education, the better the students' attendance. Good leadership and management, high quality teaching and a flexible curriculum have a significant impact on attendance.

¹The new Department for Children, Schools and Families was set up on 28 June 2007. The DfES ceased to exist on this date.

² *Attendance in secondary schools* (070014C), Ofsted, 2007.

The graphs below illustrate the association between good quality provision and good attendance. Figure 1 shows that 95% of schools judged as outstanding overall have correspondingly good attendance rates. In those judged good, the proportion with good or outstanding attendance falls to 67%. A further fall is noted in schools judged satisfactory. Unsurprisingly, attendance is judged to be worst in schools whose overall effectiveness is inadequate.

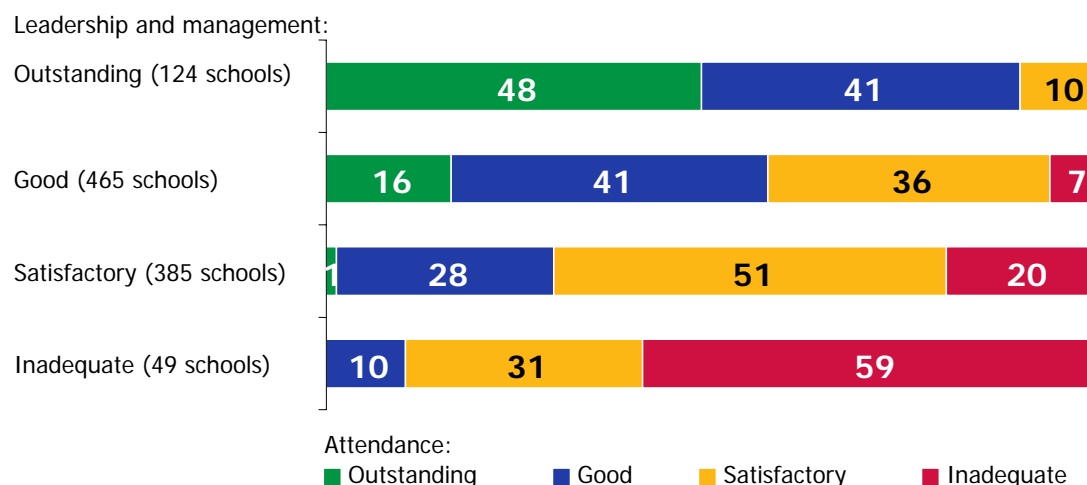
Figure 1: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with overall effectiveness judgements (percentage of secondary schools).



These figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100%. Judgements are from Section 5 inspections (2005/06).

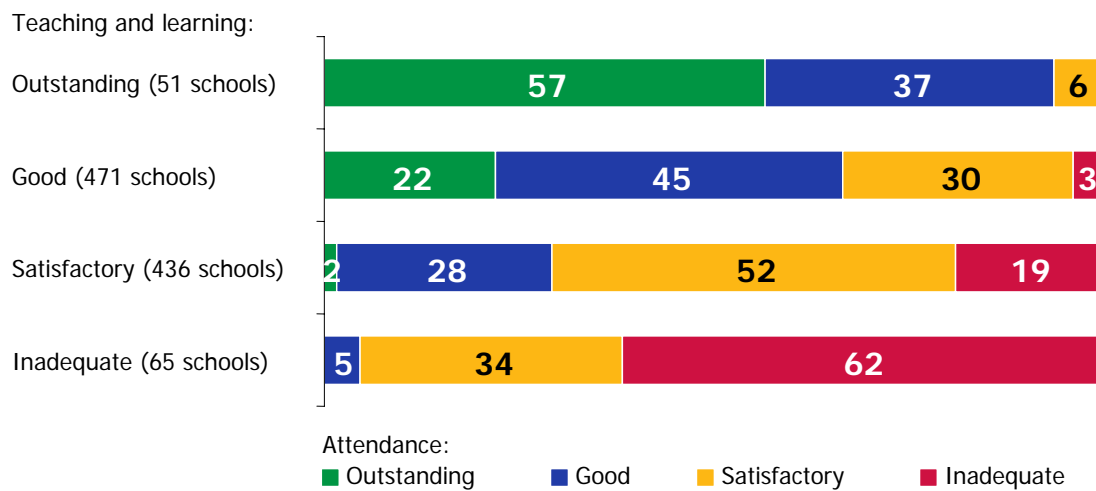
A similar pattern emerges when the inspection judgement on attendance is compared with judgements on leadership and management, teaching and learning, the curriculum and achievement (see Figures 2–5). In particular, there is a strong correlation between inspection judgements about attendance and the quality of teaching and learning.

Figure 2: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with leadership and management judgements (percentage of secondary schools).



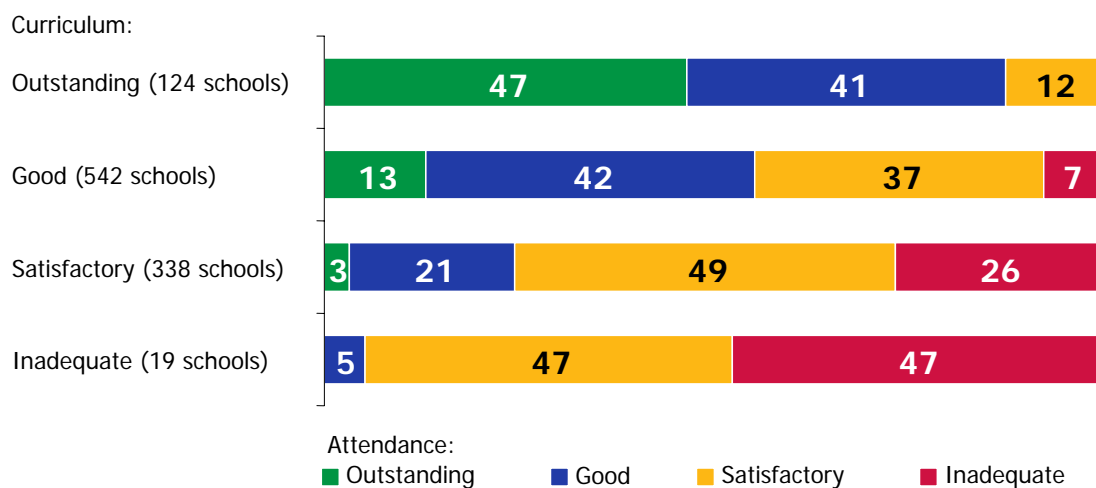
These figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100%. Judgements are from Section 5 inspections (2005/06).

Figure 3: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with teaching and learning judgements (percentage of secondary schools).



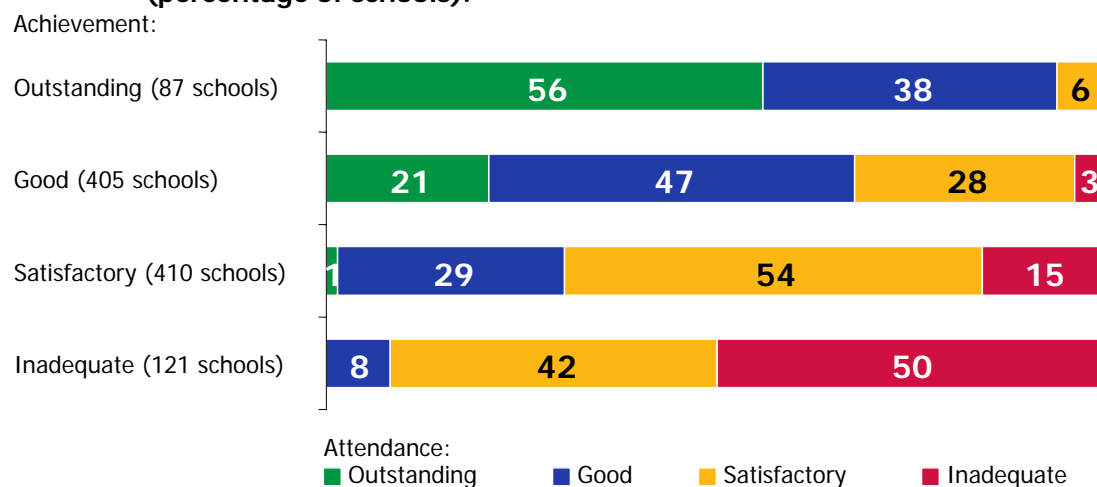
These figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100%. Judgements are from Section 5 inspections (2005/06).

Figure 4: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with curriculum judgements (percentage of schools).



These figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100%. Judgements are from Section 5 inspections (2005/06).

Figure 5: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with achievement judgements (percentage of schools).



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Data from Section 5 inspections conducted in 2005/06 show that poor or unsatisfactory attendance is often related to a small number of students or particular year groups. For example, one inspection report noted,

‘Attendance levels have improved since the last inspection but are still well below the national average, and the school has not got to grips with the very poor attendance in Year 11.’

National attendance rates

Attendance rates have improved nationally since 2002/03. However, unauthorised absence has not shown the same level of improvement and practice in schools is inconsistent. One school may accept a reason for absence that another may not be prepared to condone.

Authorisation practices

Table 1 shows general improvements in attendance since 2002, although levels of absence rose in 2005/06. Unusually high levels of illness go some way to explain the rise in authorised absence. The rise in unauthorised absence can be explained in part by the different ways in which schools authorise absence. Some schools accept explanations from pupils which would be challenged in other schools.

Table 1: Absence in maintained secondary schools (percentages of half days missed due to absence).

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Authorised absence	7.21	6.92	6.58	6.82
Unauthorised absence	1.07	1.13	1.23	1.42
Total absence	8.28	8.05	7.81	8.24

Almost half of the schools in the survey analysed the attendance of different groups of students. However, at the time of the survey, data on the attendance of different groups were not presented to schools and they were not able to compare their outcomes with the attendance of similar groups in other schools. However, in March 2007 the DfES began to publish absence data for different groups of pupils in secondary schools.

Term-time holidays

One of the schools in the survey was reluctant to authorise holidays in term time at all. More usually, schools expressed sympathy with the view expressed by one headteacher:

‘We are taking a much firmer stance but do not want to give a blanket ban on authorised holidays in term time, given that many parents could not afford a holiday at other times.’

Some of the schools in the survey avoided problems by publishing criteria and procedures and making these clear to parents. These publications could then be referred to in any discussions with students and parents before requests for absence were made. Most often, the criteria meant that holidays were not authorised if examinations were approaching or if a student’s attendance was a concern.

Schools which used attendance panels, often including a governor, found this practice particularly helpful in conveying to parents and students the importance of attendance.

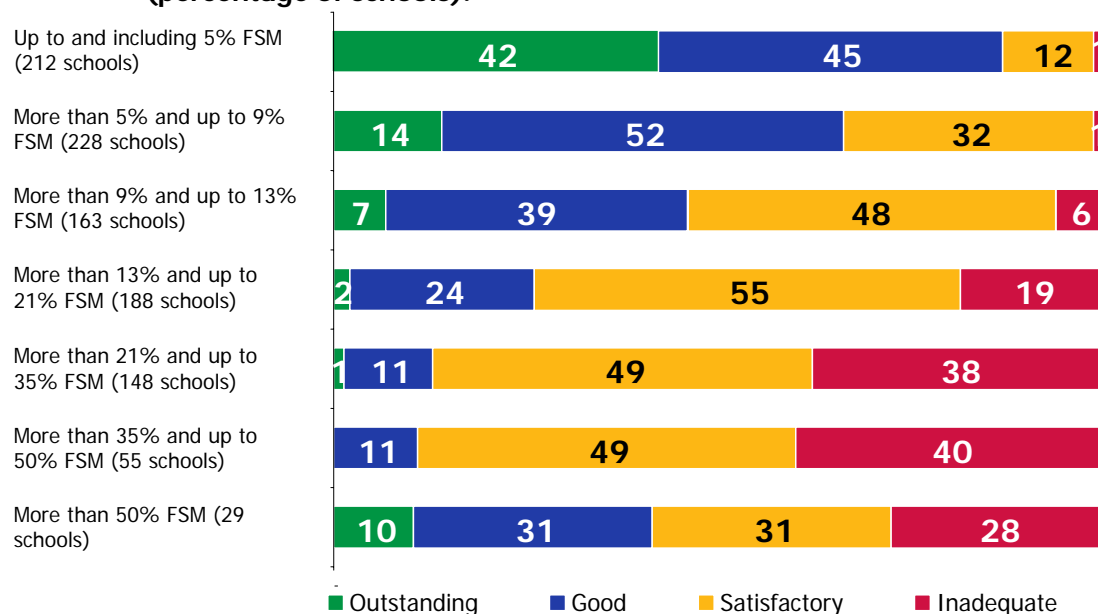
The impact of socio-economic factors on attendance

There is a strong correlation between social deprivation and lower rates of attendance.

Schools with the lowest eligibility for free school meals (FSM) have the highest levels of attendance (see Figure 6). As the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM increases, the overall attendance deteriorates. However, a small number of schools in the highest FSM band have good or outstanding attendance. Although this is only a very

small sample of schools, it suggests that the level of eligibility for FSM is not a reason for low levels of attendance.

Figure 6: A comparison of attendance rate judgements with free school meal rates. (percentage of schools).



The attendance rate judgement figures have been rounded and may not add up to 100%. Judgements are from Section 5 inspections (2005/06).

The consequences of missing work

Many schools in the survey did not do enough to ensure that students caught up with work that they missed. Schools' systems were inconsistent. Individual teachers were left to organise provision rather than being supported by clear policies and expectations.

Arrangements to ensure that students who miss lessons are able to catch up were seldom systematic, and teachers did not organise these arrangements consistently. Some students interviewed during the survey said that they did not have sufficient help with catching up with work and had to rely on copying notes from peers. They found this dull, and some of them avoided it where possible. Students in one school particularly valued catch-up sessions which were timetabled for after school.

The DfES behaviour and attendance strategy

This strategy has had a positive impact in the 351 high absence schools targeted by the DfES during the 2005/06 school year.³ Audits prompted by the National

³ At the time of the survey, the DfES had selected 204 schools for the project on the basis of their high overall absence rates in comparison to schools in similar circumstances. One hundred and ninety-

Strategy's regional advisers for attendance and behaviour, and the subsequent action plans, have helped to focus resources more purposefully. Education welfare services in local authorities have been effective in challenging senior leaders, and schools' partnerships with other agencies are improving.

The DfES behaviour and attendance strategy focused its efforts in 2005/6 on selected secondary schools. Considerable work was done to reduce the number of students identified as persistent truants, defined by the DfES as those students with 20 or more days of unauthorised absence in the previous year. In 2005/6, there were 27% fewer persistent truants in the target schools compared with the number in 2004/05. Unauthorised absence throughout the target schools fell by 0.89 percentage points and the overall absence rate dropped by 0.63 percentage points.

The schools visited for the survey confirmed this positive picture. They have ensured that improving attendance is a high priority and have responded well to the support they have received.

The DfES strategy has raised awareness and focused attention on attendance. The National Strategy regional advisers, who led this work, provided schools with support for auditing, which they found particularly helpful in focusing their resources more effectively. Together with other work done by the regional advisers on attendance and behaviour, this has:

- raised the profile of attendance in some 'coasting' schools and local authorities
- improved the role of the Education Welfare Service, its status in schools and, notably, its ability to challenge senior leaders
- increased multi-agency involvement; for example with Connexions, police liaison, health advisers, and child and adolescent mental health services.

Legal sanctions and 'first day calling'

Legal sanctions, such as fixed penalty notices and prosecution, and telephoning student's homes on the first day of absence have all been effective deterrents but they have not reached the most disaffected groups. These strategies alone cannot resolve all attendance problems.

Local authorities and schools do not shy away from using legal sanctions and the survey found instances of improved attendance immediately after schools used sanctions. However, overall, the effect on the most disaffected students was limited.

eight schools were identified for additional support as they had high unauthorised absence. Some of the schools were in both groups; 351 schools were involved altogether. The project has moved into its third year and the DCSF is now working with 436 secondary schools to reduce levels of persistent absenteeism (those students absent from 20% or more of available sessions).

Nevertheless, such sanctions send an important message to other students and their parents and are a useful deterrent. The headteacher of one school commented that fixed penalty notices had had a limited effect on individual cases, but he had noted that they had sent an important message to parents generally. Improved attendance coincided with a time when the school publicised its use of fixed penalty notices.

First day calling has been beneficial and automated truancy calls have also been effective: relentless calling has pressed parents/carers to respond. One school used an automated 'truancy call' system for first day calling which continually telephoned or sent a text message to parents of every absent pupil up to 20.00 until the parents responded. Previously, some parents would often not answer if their phones indicated that the call was from the school, so this was a major improvement on the previous system. A member of staff commented:

'Now they know that they will be pestered with continual calls from the automated system unless they do respond.'

Attendance thresholds

Many students whose attendance was marginally over 90% regarded this situation as entirely acceptable. Since schools mainly focus their attention on students whose attendance is below this threshold, they may be inadvertently condoning relatively poor attendance.

The 90% threshold is often a first trigger for escalating strategies and rewards, but some students saw this as legitimising an absence level of 10%. Schools in the survey were developing ways of avoiding this. One school had revised the way it uses percentage figures in communicating with parents: it published the number of half-days missed, together with what this meant for their child. For example, 90% attendance meant 19 missed days in one year or approximately one month's absence. Parents and students found this information more useful and, as a result, attendance rates overall had improved.

Presenting data in terms of absence rather than attendance also gives schools and local authorities a clearer message to take action. Currently, a school's attendance figures are provided in PANDAs and RAISEonline and inspectors use these when making judgements about a school's attendance rate. Some official publications publish the percentage of students absent, whereas in others the information is presented in terms of attendance. Liaison is under way between Ofsted and the DCSF to resolve this inconsistency.

Recommendations

The DCSF should:

- make available to all secondary schools the attendance audit materials used with its target schools.

Ofsted should:

- continue to work with the DCSF to agree a format for presenting data about absence for schools and inspectors.

Secondary schools should:

- ensure catch-up arrangements for returning absentees are effective
- recognise the need to focus attention on students whose attendance is marginally above 90% as well as those below this threshold.

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