

Government changes definition of persistent absence to deal with reality of pupil absenteeism in schools

Press notice

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- Over 430,000 children miss a month of school lessons a year
- Government to change definition of persistent absence in school performance tables from 20 per cent to 15 per cent absenteeism

The Department for Education is changing the definition of “persistent absence” to deal with the reality of pupil absenteeism in schools and its impact on their learning.

Latest figures show that while 184,000 pupils miss 20 per cent of lessons, more than 430,000 pupils miss 15 per cent of lessons a year – the equivalent of having a month off school a year.

The Department is reducing the threshold at which a pupil is defined as “persistently absent” to 15 per cent, down from 20 per cent now. Some schools tend to take action to intervene when pupils near the persistently absent threshold, but nearing 20 per cent is too late. Lowering the threshold will ensure that schools take action sooner to deal with absence. Ministers will continue to look at the possibility of further lowering the threshold over time.

The new threshold will be published in statistical releases from October 2011 onwards, with the old threshold being published alongside it. In addition, the Department for Education will also be releasing national figures showing the numbers of pupils who miss 12.5, 10 and five per cent of lessons, although we recognise that pupils could reach this level with relatively minor illnesses.

Ofsted will continue to take into account the number of pupils over the ‘persistently absent’ threshold when looking at a school’s performance on attendance. They will explore ways of taking this new threshold into account in the 2012 framework, which is due to come into effect from January 2012.

Persistent absence is a serious problem for pupils. Much of the work children miss when they are off school is never made up, leaving these pupils at a considerable disadvantage for the remainder of their school career. There is also clear evidence of a link between poor attendance at school and low levels of achievement:

- Of pupils who miss more than 50 per cent of school, only three per cent manage to achieve five A* to Cs including English and maths.
- Of pupils who miss between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of school, only 35 per cent manage to achieve five A* to C GCSEs including English and maths.
- Of pupils who miss less than five per cent of school, 73 per cent achieve five A* to Cs including English and maths.

Charlie Taylor, the Government’s expert adviser on behaviour in schools, said:

As a teacher, I know how the poor attendance of pupils can disrupt their own learning and that of other pupils. Quickly these children begin to fall behind their friends and often fail to fill in gaps in their skills or knowledge – sometimes in basics like reading or writing.

Over time these pupils can become bored and disillusioned with education. These pupils are lost to the system, and can fall into anti-social behaviour and crime. That is why it is vital schools tackle absenteeism.

Schools Minister Nick Gibb said:

We know that children who are absent for substantial parts of their education fall behind their friends and struggle to catch up. By changing the threshold on persistent absence, we are encouraging schools to crack down on persistent absenteeism.

We will be setting out over the coming months stronger powers for schools to use if they wish to send a clear message to parents that persistent absence is unacceptable.

In secondary schools there has been consistent progress made to improve pupils' attendance and over the last four years absence rates have been falling. However, in primary schools the picture is not so positive. Whilst the overall rates of absence and persistent absence are lower than in secondary schools, the rates of absence in primary schools have not shown the steady improvement seen in secondary schools.

Primary schools seem to be more reluctant to challenge poor attendance than secondary schools. On average, they allow twice the amount of time off for holidays than secondary schools do. Evidence shows that pupils who are persistently absent in secondary schools have had poor attendance levels in primary school.

Ofsted allows for flexibility around the inspection of attendance and the individual circumstances of pupils with good reason to be off school will not affect the final judgement. For example, there are pupils who are off school for long periods of time for medical reasons and it is important that the government is not being seen to be heavy handed with these families going through difficult times. Nor should schools be penalised for the absence of genuinely sick children.

Notes for editors

1. Department for Education [analysis of persistent absence data](#).
2. The latest annual Pupil Absence in Schools in England statistics are available on [the research and statistics gateway](#).