

Reducing absence – ensuring schools intervene earlier

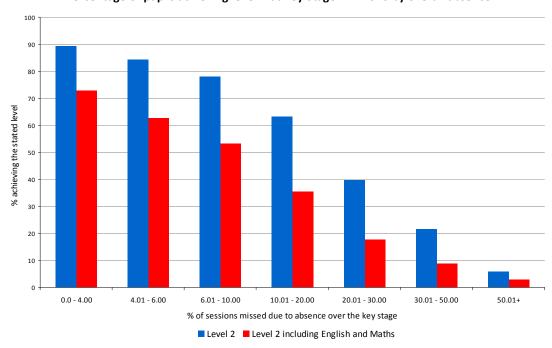
Pupil absence means falling results

The poor attendance of a number of pupils can disrupt their own learning and that of other pupils. These children quickly begin to fall behind their peers and often never fully catch up with gaps in their skills or knowledge. Over time these pupils become bored and disillusioned with education and by years 10 and year 11 they are lost to the system. These pupils are the most likely to become 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) when they leave school and easily fall into anti-social behaviour and crime.

Not surprisingly there is a clear 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.

This compares to 73 per cent of pupils with over 95 per cent attendance achieving five A* to Cs including maths. In 2010, the national average for attendance across all schools was 94 per cent.

Percentage of pupils achieving level 2 at Key Stage 4 in 2010 by overall absence



The scale of the problem

In recent years progress has been made in reducing truancy, particularly in secondary schools. However there are still major issues with the number of children who are absent from school.

Currently the Government publishes data on how many children are absent for 20 per cent of school in a year – i.e. absent for 32 school days. There are 175,718 children (47,510 at primary and 128,208 at secondary) who are absent for this length of time. Out of a school population of six million children this does not seem like a huge amount.

However, the number of children who are absent for slightly smaller percentages – 15 and 10 per cent – of school is dramatically higher. There are nearly half a million children who miss 15 per cent of school – 23 days. And over a million children who miss 10 per cent of school – three weeks.

	Persistent Absentee threshold							
	Current threshold (64 sessions around 20%)		46 sessions around 15%		38 sessions around 12.5%		30 sessions around 10%	
	No. of enrolments	%	No. of enrolments	%	No. of enrolments	%	No. of enrolments	%
Primary	47,510	1.4	148,411	4.4	259,911	7.7	462,301	13.7
Secondary	128,208	4.4	271,226	9.2	401,163	13.7	613,201	20.9
Special	8,300	10.5	13,492	17.1	17,432	22.1	23,229	29.5
All Schools	184,018	2.9	433,129	6.8	678,506	10.6	1,098,731	17.2

Of course some of these children will be pupils with long-term sickness. But many will also be children who can and should be in schools. Much of the work children miss will never be made up and they will be left at a considerable disadvantage for the remainder of their school career. Not being in school means their education and life chances are being damaged.

Ensuring schools intervene earlier – lowering the persistence absence threshold

Currently children who miss 20 per cent – just over six weeks – of their education are deemed to be Persistently Absent (PA). PA data for each school is published twice a year and when Ofsted come to inspect they will look closely at what the school has done to improve the attendance of PA pupils. Good schools intervene and start speaking to parents before a child nears the persistent absence threshold of 20 per cent. But many only start looking seriously at the attendance of pupils when they are nearing this threshold.

There is clear evidence to show that pupils who are persistently absent in secondary schools have had poor attendance levels in primary school. Once a child has begun to play truant regularly, it becomes increasingly hard for parents to get them back into school.

Primary schools seem to be more reluctant to challenge poor attendance than secondary schools with the result that some families get into bad habits around getting their children into school regularly. Primary schools allow twice

the amount of time off for holidays that secondary schools do. Often secondary schools have a battle with parents to convince them that having a two week break every summer term is not an automatic right.

The message can be inadvertently given to parents that attendance at primary school is not as important as it is at secondary school. However, pupils who miss out on learning the basic skills at primary school will find it hard to catch up, particularly in the subjects like maths where the learning is incremental and gaps in understanding mean the pupil will struggle to get on to the next stage. 20 per cent of pupils leave primary school unable to read properly and these pupils usually fail to achieve five good passes at GCSE.

Improving attendance in our primary schools, particularly of those pupils who miss a lot of school, will lead to a reduction in pupils becoming irredeemably PA at secondary school.

There is no doubt that earlier intervention with families who tolerate low levels of attendance will address these patterns and prevent the children becoming disengaged from school.

Therefore we will reduce the threshold for persistent absence from 20 per cent to 15 per cent. 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.

Pupils with long-term sickness

Of course 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.

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.