

“School attendance cannot be separated out from other aspects of the child’s life.”

What practitioners told us

- The **main reasons** for persistent absence given by questionnaire respondents are: home, family, or social issues; parents; and disaffection or boredom.
- **Students in certain ‘groups’**, such as looked after children or young carers, have particular issues around persistent absence. There are issues for some black and minority ethnic students resulting from racism and stereotyping. However, analysis of persistent absence by ethnic group suggests that this sort of generalisation is not necessarily helpful, as there is significant variation between groups. The size of this project has not allowed for a detailed exploration of the possible reasons for this, and further research or consultation is needed to examine the issues in more detail.
- **Individual or group support**, and **personalised learning** or lesson improvements, are needed to help persistent absentees improve their attendance.
- **Parents and carers** of persistent absentees would benefit from individual support.
- The capacity to provide support to parents, and partnership work with other agencies, are the sort of **support schools might need** to tackle the issue of persistent absence.
- Parent or family support or intervention, student support, and multi-agency work, are the **most effective interventions** in reducing persistent absence.
- **Key success factors** in particular interventions include: students being given individual attention and having their needs met; different approaches to learning; the relationship with staff; a less formal environment and approach; and a multi-agency aspect.
- **Multi-agency working**, in conjunction with the whole-school approach and ownership, is key in tackling persistent absence, rather than it being seen as an issue only for education staff or members of the attendance strategy team. In some cases, practitioners find it difficult to engage other agencies. The CAF (Common Assessment Framework) is seen as a potentially useful tool.

For more information about the research, or for a copy of the full report, please contact:

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Report author: Kate James. Research carried out in partnership with the attendance strategy team. Copyright © 2008 Education Leeds.

Key recommendations

- Improve partnership working to support young people and their parents or carers to address the wide range of issues which can lie behind persistent absence. This will also mean that education and attendance strategy team staff are not dealing with complex needs without specialist input.
- Develop a strategy for each agency, that sets out what they will do to reduce persistent absence.
- Make sure that persistently absent students or those at risk of persistent absence have the opportunity for individual support or to talk to someone in confidence. The nature of support offered should be clearly explained in order to help young people engage with it.
- Increase the level of early multi-agency intervention to prevent persistent absence.
- Identify different ways of learning and achieving for students who may not respond to existing teaching methods, and find ways of personalising the curriculum and providing individual support with learning.
- Give more help to young carers, including extra support and practical measures such as allowing access to a phone while at school.
- Carry out further work to identify and address issues for specific pupil groups.

Education Leeds 

Attendance strategy persistent absence research report Executive Summary

‘Just a symptom of confusing lives’

“Persistent absent pupils often have many other issues – non-attendance at school is just a symptom.”

Practitioner

“Everyone tells you different things at one time – we have confusing lives.”

Young person



Children Leeds

Education Leeds 

Background

A persistent absentee is a student who misses at least a fifth of the available sessions in a school for any reason or combination of reasons. If more than nine per cent of students at a school are persistent absentees, then the school is classified as a persistent absence target school. There are currently 18 target schools in Leeds, making Leeds one of more than 50 DCSF target local authorities in the country. In the autumn and spring terms of the 2006/07 academic year, there were 4,055 (9.8 per cent) pupils in Leeds secondary schools who were persistent absentees. Analysis has shown that persistent absentees attain significantly less than those with better attendance.

We carried out research to explore the reasons for persistent absence and what interventions might help to address it.

There are many potential reasons for persistent absence, including illness, holidays, and exclusion.

The research focuses on absence which cannot necessarily be explained using these specific categories, and where absence is not due to something outside the direct control of the family. The main focus of the research is on disengagement and disaffection, which may be linked with a complex set of factors, including some of those listed above.

The findings from this research will inform the development of a children's services attendance strategy. This executive summary highlights the key findings and recommendations of the research.

Methodology

The following methods were used to gather data.

- Interviews with key practitioners (51 meetings).
- Questionnaire circulated to schools and key agencies (56 responses).
- Interviews and focus groups with 54 young people.
- Interviews and a focus group with 22 parents/carers.

What young people told us

- **Key factors in absence** are: problems at home and with parents, and issues with the curriculum and lessons. Bullying is also a factor.
- **Young carers** face particular issues. The young carers we consulted made several suggestions which could help them to improve their attendance.
- **Activities when absent** from school include: socialising with friends; using drugs or alcohol; offending; staying in bed late; and caring for a family member.
- They **do not feel that it is fair to punish parents** for their child's absence.
- Individual support from attendance improvement officers; attending appropriate alternative education provision; influence of friends; and realising the importance of school, can **improve attendance**. Whether parental action makes a difference to attendance depends on the relationship between the young person and their parents.
- **Schools do not ask** them about why they have been absent in a way they feel comfortable responding to.
- It is important for them to be able to **confide in someone** at or outside school about their issues. However, there are issues around young people accessing and accepting the support that is available, because they may not fully understand what it involves, and may have concerns about the possible implications of disclosing personal information to someone in authority.
- Many of the young people have **clear aspirations** for the future, but others express **disaffection** and do not always see the relevance of school. Some said their parents or carers have a negative attitude towards education.

“Your head's just full of things that worry you.”

What parents and carers told us

- **Problems at home** can impact on school attendance.
- Their **own experiences of education** are mixed. Several had poor attendance themselves, or had not liked school. However, overall they are keen for their own children to attend school.
- Most were **claiming benefits or on a low income**, and several mentioned financial difficulties. Analysis of attendance data indicates that there is a link between low income and persistent absence. 23.7 per cent of students eligible for free school meals in 2005/06 were persistent absentees, compared with 10 per cent of the total secondary school population.
- Participants for whom **English was an additional language** have experienced communication difficulties with school.
- They have had mixed experiences of **school intervention and support**. Some feel that more support could have been offered, whereas others feel that support, such as from attendance improvement officers, had helped improve their child's attendance.
- Talking about an attendance improvement officer, one parent said: "She was really good; she asked me if there were any problems, and we worked out things we could do."

“I'll take anything.”

Parent talking about support.