

October 2025

Issue 2

Attendance

SEND SPECIAL EDITION

Exclusive SEND contributor insights

Candid corners: Uncomfortable truths

Practical Strategies for School Leaders

Reflection points for professionals

School Distress

November Issue Preview

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance

In the ever-evolving landscape of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision, the voices of those at the coalface of educational practice offer invaluable insights that can transform policy into meaningful action. This collection brings together the authentic experiences, innovative approaches and profound reflections of guest contributors who work tirelessly to support children and young people with SEND whilst addressing the complex challenges of school attendance.

Practitioner Perspectives

SENDCOs, teachers, and support staff share their daily experiences of working with SEND pupils, offering practical strategies for improving attendance and engagement.

Family Voices

Parents and carers provide honest accounts of their journeys, highlighting both challenges and successes in supporting their children's educational attendance.

Student Insights

Young people with SEND share their own stories, offering unique perspectives on what truly makes a difference to their school experience.

The relationship between SEND provision and attendance is intricate and multifaceted. Traditional approaches to attendance management often fail to account for the unique barriers faced by pupils with additional needs. Through these guest contributions, we explore how personalised support, flexible approaches, and genuine understanding can transform attendance patterns and educational outcomes.

Redefining Success

Our contributors challenge conventional thinking about what successful attendance looks like for SEND pupils. Rather than focusing purely on percentage figures, they advocate for a more nuanced understanding that considers individual circumstances, progress, and wellbeing. This shift in perspective opens doors to innovative solutions that prioritise the child's holistic development over rigid attendance metrics.

The stories shared reveal how creative adaptations to the school environment, curriculum delivery and support structures can remove barriers to attendance. From sensory-friendly spaces to flexible timetabling, these practical innovations demonstrate that with thoughtful planning and genuine commitment, schools can become truly inclusive environments where every child can thrive.



GUEST VOICES: SEND

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



Joshua Morgan is the Founder of the Kent Safeguarding and Attendance Forum (KSAF), a professional network dedicated to strengthening the link between attendance and safeguarding. He is a safeguarding and attendance practitioner, writer with experience spanning attendance, safeguarding, SEND and family support. Drawing on both professional practice and lived experience, Joshua is passionate about reforming attendance as a safeguarding tool, ensuring no child's absence is dismissed as just a statistic.

Invisible Warning: Attendance as a Safeguarding Indicator for SEND Pupils

Attendance has long been positioned as a performance metric: a percentage figure to be analysed in leadership meetings, displayed on dashboards and compared across trusts. Yet behind every figure lies a story and for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), that story is often far more complex than the data suggests.

Too often, persistent absence in SEND learners is approached as a compliance issue. Parents are reminded of fines. Schools escalate through letters and panels. Local authorities weigh in with penalty notices. Yet in many cases, absence is not a matter of unwillingness but it is a symptom. A symptom of unmet needs, of anxiety, of systemic barriers that prevent a child from accessing education in the same way as their peers. If we fail to interpret absence through a safeguarding lens, we risk missing the warning signs. Attendance data, when viewed carefully, can be one of the earliest indicators that a child is not safe, not supported or not thriving.

Hidden Barriers : What the Numbers Don't Show

On paper, a child who misses two days a week has 60% attendance. The figure looks stark, but it doesn't tell you that the child is autistic and cannot cope with the sensory overload of a crowded classroom. It doesn't tell you that transport has failed, leaving a wheelchair user at home because no suitable taxi arrived. It doesn't tell you that a child with an EHCP is waiting for months for therapy and the resulting frustration has escalated into school refusal.

Behind every number is a barrier – sometimes practical, sometimes emotional, often systemic. There barriers may include:

- **Transport Failures:** Particularly for pupils reliant on SEND-specific provision.
- **Health Needs:** Such as fatigue, anxiety or medical appointments.
- **Unmet EHCP Provision:** Where promised support isn't delivered.
- **Bullying and Isolation:** Often invisible until attendance drops.
- **Parental Stress:** Where families battling systems feel worn down by the constant fight for provision.

If schools approach these situations purely with attendance sanctions, they compound the harm. Each dip in attendance should trigger a safeguarding conversation: *what is this child trying to tell us through their absence?*

Case Study: National Evidence on SEND and Attendance

National data consistently shows that pupils with SEND face disproportionate challenges in attending school. According to the Department for Education, in 2022/2023 the persistent absence rate for pupils with an Educational, Health and Care Plan was 40.2%, compared with 21.2% for all pupils. For pupils receiving SEND support the rate was 33.7%. (DfE, 2023)

Evaluation of the Department for Education's Attendance Mentors Pilot also reinforced these trends. Delivered by Barnardo's in 2022-23, the programme worked intensively with pupils at risk of persistent absence, including those with SEND. Mentors provided weekly 1:1 support for up to 20 weeks, tackling barriers such as transport difficulties, unmet special educational provision and social anxiety. The evaluation found that around half of the pupils supported saw attendance improve, by an average of 11 percentage points. (DfE, 2023) This evidence illustrates a clear message: what looks like "poor attendance" for SEND pupils often reflects unmet needs, not parental disengagement. When systems intervene early, listen to families and address practical barriers, pupils can and do re-engage with education.

Spot, Link, Act : A KSAF Framework

At the Kent Safeguarding and Attendance Forum (KSAF), we developed the Spot, Link, Act framework as a simple but powerful way to help schools rethink how they interpret attendance.

- **Spot:** Look beyond the percentage. Use data to identify patterns. Which days are missed? Is absence linked to certain lessons, staff or transition?
- **Link:** Connect attendance dips to safeguarding systems. Consider unmet needs, neglect or emotional harm as possible factors.
- **Act:** Intervene early and supportively. Replace escalation letters with family meetings, EHCP reviews, reasonable adjustments and multi-agency support.

This model has been used in KSAF's professional learning sessions and feedback from colleagues is consistent: it reframes attendance data from a blunt instrument into an early-warning radar. For SEND pupils especially, it ensures absence is treated as a safeguarding signal, not a disciplinary failure.

The Role of Families

Families of SEND children are navigating impossible systems. They are balancing medical appointments, fighting for provision and managing the emotional toll of raising a child whose needs are frequently misunderstood. When attendance drops, it is rarely because parents "can't be bothered."

Schools must see families as partners, not adversaries. Genuine co-production – listening to parental insight, acknowledging their expertise and problem solve together is essential. A family who feels heard is far more likely to engage than one who feels threatened by fines or legal escalation.

A Call to Action

As practitioners, we cannot afford to see attendance as a number on a spreadsheet. For SEND pupils, persistent absence may be the first and loudest cry for help. Each unexplained gap in the register is an invitation to ask: *what's really going on here?*

By embedding safeguarding thinking into attendance practice and adopting frameworks, like the *Spot, Link, Act*, we not only improve outcomes but protect children from slipping silently through the cracks.

SEND absence is not a static. It is a story. And it is our duty to read it.

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance

Sarah Craner is a trustee at Long Covid Kids and a passionate advocate for children living with chronic illness and disability. Her commitment is personal—both of her children have Long Covid; one is recovering, while the other is chronically ill, housebound, and currently unable to access education.



Professionally, Sarah has over 25 years' experience in corporate responsibility and social impact within the financial services sector. She leads a UK grant-making programme, managing a portfolio focused on educational inequality, and has deep knowledge of the UK education sector. She has previously served as a governor at a non-selective state school in East London and holds a degree in psychology from the University of Birmingham.

Every Day Hurts: Reframing School Absence for Families Living with Chronic Illness

By Sarah Craner, Trustee at Long Covid Kids

"Every day counts." It's printed on school posters, echoed in assemblies, and embedded in educational policy. But for families like mine—families caring for children with chronic and disabling illnesses—it's not just a slogan. It's a sting.

I have two children with chronic illness. My daughter has been persistently absent for the last three academic years but, thanks to her school's support and her own sheer determination, recently achieved some of the highest GCSE results at her school. My son caught Covid at school in January 2022 and has never recovered. He is now very ill, largely housebound, and unable to access education. His future is deeply uncertain. The reality of Long Covid is brutal. It's not just fatigue—it's crushing exhaustion that doesn't lift with rest. For some children, even sitting upright or tolerating light and sound becomes impossible. Days can blur into weeks into months, (sometimes years), of missed milestones, missed school and missed friendships.

At Long Covid Kids, we hear from families every day who are navigating this heartbreak. With all due respect, Bridget Phillipson, we don't need to be told to "do more." We feel the pressure already—not just in the logistics of caring for a child at home, but in the ache of isolation and the quiet grief of watching a childhood derailed by illness. We feel it in the exhaustion of navigating attendance measures, advocating for support, and fighting for healthcare. Many children with conditions like Long Covid and ME/CFS also struggle to have their illness believed. That disbelief adds another layer of trauma—for both child and parent.

We are doing everything we can—managing symptoms, clinging to hope, and trying to keep our children connected to learning. While some schools offer tailored support, too many families face letters threatening fines, policies that punish rather than protect, and exclusion from attendance-based rewards. In other words, treats that reward good health. From an equality perspective, this feels like dangerous ground.

Behind these absences is suffering. It's children who desperately want to be present, but whose bodies won't let them. It's parents doing everything possible, yet still feeling judged. And it's a system that too often equates absence with neglect, rather than recognising the complexity and nuances of chronic illness.

The Systemic Blind Spot

One of the most overlooked strategies for improving attendance is reducing infection-related illness. Government statistics show that illness is the leading cause of absence in schools. Yet the prevailing narrative avoids any mention of it. It also fails to acknowledge the pandemic's legacy of increased physical illness and disability. As of early 2024, the Office for National Statistics estimated 111,816 children aged 3 to 17 in England and Scotland were living with Long Covid symptoms. This group represents a significant sub group of the 19% of children who are persistently absent, missing more than 10% of school.

And yet, despite this growing burden of illness, current government guidance still advises that children with acute (infectious) Covid-19 should attend school—effectively enabling infection to spread. For children with chronic illness, the very act of attending can put them at risk. My son's reinfections—quite possibly from school—have exacerbated his condition. He now has severe ME/CFS.

In classrooms across the UK, thirty children sit together for hours on end, often in poorly ventilated spaces. In winter, windows close, and risk rises. The result? More illness. More absence. More children like mine, sidelined not by choice, but by circumstance.

Clean air should not be a luxury but a minimum standard. Air filters, CO₂ monitors, and improved ventilation aren't just pandemic relics—they're tools for equity. They protect the most vulnerable and benefit every pupil. Research clearly demonstrates that better air quality leads to fewer absences and improved concentration. It's a win for health, inclusion, and learning.

More than a Data Point

And yet, the dominant messaging around attendance remains punitive. When government communications tell us that persistently absent children are likely to earn less as adults, it reduces our children's futures to a data point and erases all nuance. It implies that absence is a choice, a failure—rather than a consequence of illness, inequality, or unmet need. For families like mine, attendance measures often feel less like support and more like scrutiny—designed for a version of childhood where "getting to school" is simple and illness doesn't exist.

What Our Children Really Need

It's clear that one size doesn't fit all. For children with Long Covid and other disabling illnesses, schools must offer meaningful, tailored support. Key priorities include:

- **Informed understanding:** All school staff should be equipped to recognise and respond to invisible illnesses appropriately and with empathy.
- **Flexible learning pathways:** Remote access to lessons, home tuition, and outreach support should be available for children unable to attend school in person.
- **Health before attendance:** Recovery needs to be prioritised over rigid and arbitrary timelines for returning to full-time education. For children with Long Covid, recovery is rarely linear—symptoms wax and wane, and progress is unpredictable. And, for some, improvement doesn't come.

Our children deserve better from the education system. Chronically ill children—and indeed all children facing serious challenges—don't need pressure, but understanding. Not punishment, but flexibility. Not judgement, but compassion. Above all, they need kindness.

A Commitment to Every Child: Editor's Preface

Welcome to Our Special SEND Edition

In this transformative issue of *Attendance* magazine, we embark upon a journey that lies at the very heart of educational excellence ensuring that every child, regardless of their individual needs, has access to quality education that nurtures their potential and celebrates their unique contributions to our learning communities.

Our Mission

To champion inclusive education practices that transform lives and build stronger communities

Our Focus

Practical strategies, inspiring stories, and evidence-based approaches to SEND provision

Our Promise

To provide educators with the tools and insights needed for truly inclusive practice

Why this edition matters

As we navigate an increasingly complex educational landscape, the importance of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision has never been more paramount. This special edition represents more than just a collection of articles; it embodies our unwavering commitment to educational equity and our belief that inclusive practice benefits not just children with SEND, but enriches the entire school community.

Throughout these pages, you will discover the voices of practitioners who have dedicated their careers to breaking down barriers and creating opportunities. From pioneering headteachers who have transformed their schools into beacons of inclusion, to teaching assistants whose daily dedication makes the impossible possible, to families whose advocacy has reshaped policy and practice.

The statistics speak volumes: over 1.5 million children in England have identified special educational needs, representing approximately 17% of all pupils. Yet behind each number lies a unique story, a distinctive set of strengths and challenges, and unlimited potential waiting to be unlocked through thoughtful, inclusive education.

We are grateful for their contributions and we want to amplify their voices.

Colin Cattanach, Editor
Attendance Magazine



Did You Know?

Schools with strong inclusive practices show improved outcomes for *all* students, not just those with identified SEND.

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Note to Contributors

If you submitted an article to Kate@SENDSational.education and it has not appeared in issue 2, please don't worry, we will save it for a future issue. We were inundated with SEND articles and will feature SEND again in Issue 3 with the Ofsted framework.

Note to readers

Candid Corner will appear again in issue 3. Thank you for all the wonderful comments and feedback. We know its a feature of the magazine which already has a great following. We will be posting more candid corners online via Linkedin as previews fro the November issue.

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Executive Summary: The complex relationship between SEND and School Attendance

The relationship between SEND provision and school attendance represents one of the most pressing challenges facing the UK education system today. Students with special educational needs and disabilities experience significantly lower attendance rates than their mainstream peers, with persistent absence rates reaching alarming levels across all educational phases.

This edition synthesises perspectives from key stakeholder groups: parents and carers, teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), senior leadership teams, local authorities, government representatives, and healthcare professionals.

Each group brings unique insights into the barriers preventing effective SEND attendance and the solutions that could transform educational outcomes.

The evidence reveals a complex web of interconnected challenges spanning inadequate funding, insufficient training, systemic barriers, and gaps in mental health support.

However, it also highlights innovative practices, collaborative approaches, and evidence-based interventions that demonstrate the potential for significant improvement when stakeholders work together effectively.

The path forward requires coordinated action across all levels of the education system, from individual classroom practice to national policy reform. This document provides a strategic framework for understanding these challenges and implementing sustainable solutions that place the needs of SEND pupils at the centre of attendance improvement efforts.



84%

**SEND pupils with
persistent
absence**

Compared to 47% of all pupils

£3.2B

Annual funding gap

For SEND provision nationally

Introduction: Defining SEND and the Attendance Crisis

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) encompasses a broad spectrum of learning difficulties, disabilities, and conditions that require additional or different provision from that made generally available to pupils of the same age. The SEND Code of Practice identifies four broad areas of need: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social emotional and mental health difficulties, and sensory and/or physical needs.

Communication & Interaction

Including autism spectrum conditions and speech, language and communication needs

Cognition & Learning

Such as specific learning difficulties, moderate and severe learning difficulties

Social, Emotional & Mental Health

Including ADHD, anxiety disorders, and behavioural difficulties

Sensory & Physical Needs

Including visual, hearing, multi-sensory and physical disabilities

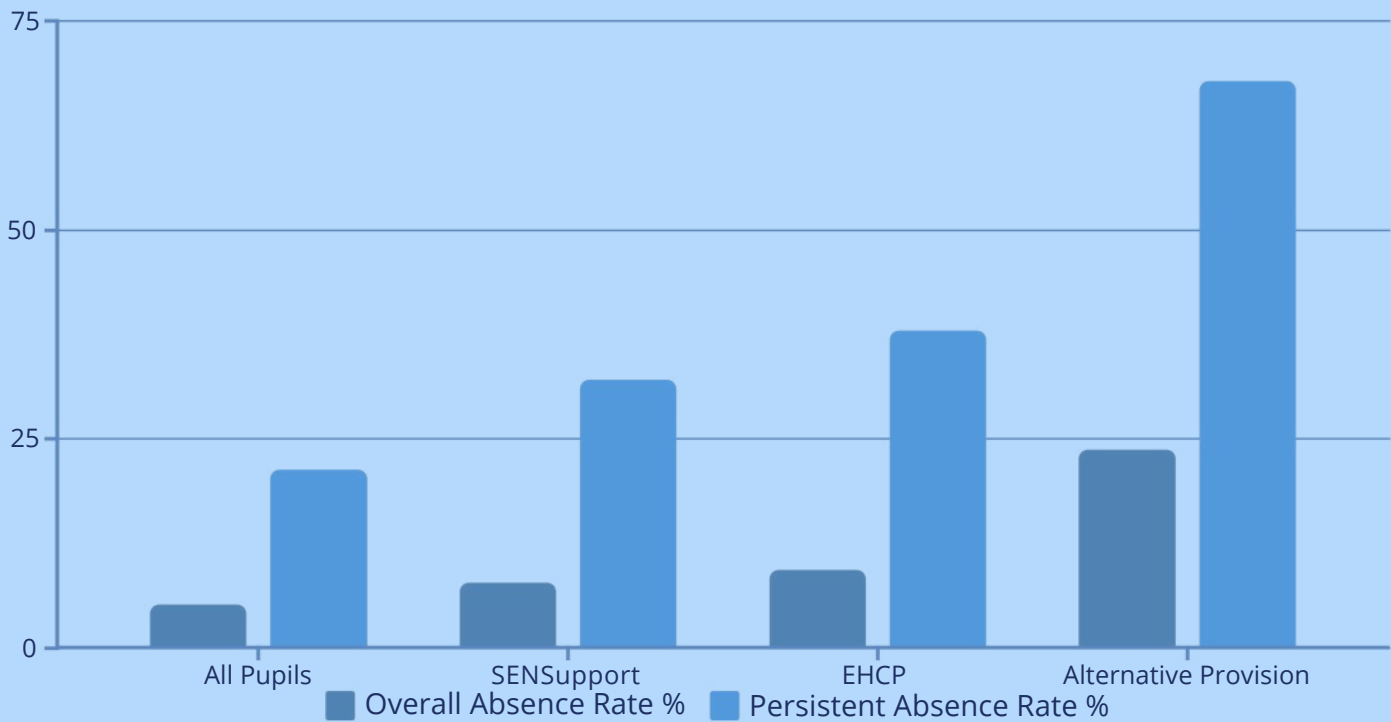
The attendance crisis within SEND provision has reached unprecedented levels, with persistent absence rates among pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) now exceeding 50% in many local authorities. This represents not merely a statistical concern but a fundamental barrier to educational equality and life chances for some of our most vulnerable learners.

Understanding this crisis requires recognition that attendance is both a symptom and a cause of broader systemic failures. Poor attendance may result from inadequate SEND provision, but it also perpetuates educational disadvantage, limits access to therapeutic interventions, and reduces opportunities for social development and peer interaction that are crucial for young people with additional needs.

The complexity of SEND attendance cannot be understood through simple cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, it requires a nuanced appreciation of how individual needs, family circumstances, school environments, and systemic factors interact to either support or undermine regular school attendance. This document seeks to unpick these relationships and identify pathways toward more effective support for SEND pupils and their families.

The Scale of the Problem: Current SEND Attendance Statistics in the UK

The statistical landscape of SEND attendance reveals the magnitude of the challenge facing the education system. Recent Department for Education data demonstrates persistent and widening gaps between SEND pupils and their mainstream peers across all measures of attendance and absence.



Primary Phase Challenges

In primary schools, SEND pupils experience absence rates 2.3 times higher than their peers. Early intervention during these formative years is crucial, yet many primary schools lack specialist SEND expertise and resources. The transition from early years provision often marks the beginning of attendance difficulties, particularly for pupils with undiagnosed or newly identified needs.

Primary phase attendance patterns frequently establish long-term trajectories. Research indicates that pupils experiencing persistent absence in Key Stage 1 are significantly more likely to continue this pattern throughout their educational journey, making early identification and intervention critical for long-term success.

Secondary Phase Crisis

Secondary schools face acute challenges, with SEND persistent absence rates reaching 45% in some local authorities. The complexity of secondary school environments, combined with increased academic pressures and social challenges, creates particular difficulties for young people with additional needs.

Transition from primary to secondary education represents a critical juncture where attendance difficulties often escalate. The loss of familiar routines, increased independence expectations, and reduced individual attention can overwhelm pupils who were previously managing their school attendance successfully.

Pupil Perspectives: Understanding the SEND Student Experience

The voices of SEND pupils themselves provide crucial insights into the barriers they face in maintaining regular school attendance. Recent research involving over 500 young people with additional needs reveals complex emotional, practical, and systemic challenges that directly impact their ability to engage with education.

"School is overwhelming. The noise, the crowds, the constant changes to routine - it makes me feel panicky and I just want to hide."

- Year 8 pupil with autism spectrum condition

"I want to learn, but when I can't understand what the teacher is saying and everyone else seems to get it, I feel stupid and embarrassed."

- Year 6 pupil with dyslexia

"The other kids don't understand why I'm different. Sometimes it's easier to stay home than face another day of feeling left out."

- Year 10 pupil with ADHD

Sensory overload emerges as a primary barrier for many SEND pupils, particularly those with autism spectrum conditions or sensory processing difficulties. Traditional school environments, designed for neurotypical learners, often present overwhelming sensory experiences that can trigger fight-or-flight responses, making attendance physically and emotionally challenging.

Academic Frustration and Anxiety

SEND pupils consistently report feelings of academic inadequacy when classroom activities are not appropriately differentiated. This frustration compounds over time, creating anticipatory anxiety about school attendance. Many describe a cycle where academic struggles lead to avoidance behaviours, which in turn increase anxiety about falling further behind.

The pressure to 'keep up' with age-related expectations, despite having identified learning difficulties, creates significant psychological stress. Pupils report feeling caught between wanting to succeed and knowing they face barriers that their peers do not experience.

Agency and autonomy emerge as crucial factors in pupil perspectives. SEND students express frustration when decisions about their education are made without meaningful consultation.

Social Isolation and Peer Relationships

Social challenges represent another significant barrier to attendance. SEND pupils frequently describe feeling excluded from peer groups and struggling to navigate complex social situations. This isolation is particularly acute during unstructured times such as break and lunch periods.

Many pupils report that their differences are misunderstood by peers, leading to bullying or social exclusion. The fear of social rejection becomes a powerful motivator for school avoidance, as the emotional pain of isolation outweighs the perceived benefits of attendance.

Parent and carer viewpoints: Navigating the system and advocating for their children

Parents and carers of SEND pupils occupy a unique position in the attendance challenge, serving simultaneously as advocates, support providers, and often reluctant enforcers of school attendance policies that may not align with their child's needs. Their perspectives reveal the intense emotional and practical pressures faced by families navigating complex educational and healthcare systems.

Daily battles and morning struggles

Many parents describe morning routines as battlegrounds, where the stress of encouraging reluctant children to attend school creates family tension and emotional exhaustion. The physical and emotional energy required to support daily attendance often leaves families depleted and relationships strained.

System navigation challenges

Parents consistently report feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of SEND systems, with unclear pathways between education, health, and social care provision. The bureaucratic burden of securing appropriate support often requires significant time and expertise that many families lack.

Advocacy and conflict

The need to constantly advocate for their child's needs places parents in adversarial relationships with schools and local authorities. This conflict creates additional stress and can undermine collaborative working relationships that are essential for effective SEND support.

Employment implications represent a significant concern for many SEND families. Parents frequently report having to reduce working hours or leave employment entirely to support their child's school attendance or manage frequent school calls requesting collection due to behavioural incidents or medical needs. This economic impact compounds family stress and can perpetuate cycles of disadvantage.

Trust and communication challenges

Relationships between SEND parents and schools are often characterised by mutual frustration and misunderstanding. Parents report feeling blamed for their child's attendance difficulties, whilst simultaneously feeling that schools do not understand their child's complex needs. This breakdown in trust creates barriers to collaborative problem-



Teacher Perspectives: Classroom Challenges and Support Needs

Classroom teachers represent the frontline of SEND provision, yet many feel ill-equipped to meet the diverse needs of pupils with additional requirements whilst maintaining high educational standards for all learners. Their perspectives reveal significant gaps between policy expectations and classroom reality, highlighting the need for enhanced training, resources, and systemic support.

Insufficient training and preparation

The majority of classroom teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to support SEND pupils effectively. Initial teacher training often provides limited exposure to special educational needs, whilst continuing professional development opportunities are frequently insufficient to address the complexity of needs present in mainstream classrooms.

Resource and time constraints

Teachers consistently highlight the tension between providing individualised support for SEND pupils and meeting the needs of all learners within large class sizes. The additional planning, differentiation, and assessment required for effective SEND provision often exceeds available non-contact time.

Behavioural management challenges

Many teachers feel unprepared to manage complex behaviours associated with certain SEND conditions, particularly when traditional behaviour management strategies prove ineffective. This can lead to exclusion of SEND pupils or the removal of other students, creating lose-lose situations for all involved.

The pressure to maintain academic standards whilst providing inclusive education creates significant stress for classroom teachers. Accountability measures that focus primarily on attainment data do not adequately recognise the progress made by SEND pupils or the additional effort required to support their learning effectively.

Professional isolation emerges as a common theme, with many teachers feeling unsupported when facing complex SEND challenges. The lack of readily available specialist advice and the limited time for collaboration with SENCOs and other support staff means that teachers often resort to trial-and-error approaches that may not be effective or evidence-based. However, teachers also identify factors that enable successful SEND support. These include access to high-quality training, collaborative working relationships with specialist staff and manageable class sizes.



SENDCo Insights: Coordinating support and managing competing demands

Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENDCos) occupy a pivotal role in schools, responsible for coordinating SEND provision whilst navigating complex relationships between pupils, families, teachers, and external agencies. Their insights reveal the systematic challenges inherent in current SEND provision and the innovative approaches being developed to address attendance barriers.

01

Identification and Assessment

Early identification of SEND remains challenging, with many pupils not receiving appropriate assessment until attendance problems have already emerged. SENCos report pressure to demonstrate that mainstream interventions have been exhausted before accessing specialist support, often delaying crucial early intervention.

02

Resource Coordination

Managing limited resources across multiple pupils with diverse needs requires complex prioritisation decisions. SENCos often describe feeling like they are 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' when allocating teaching assistant time, specialist equipment, or intervention programmes.

03

Multi-Agency Liaison

Coordinating between education, health, and social care professionals presents ongoing challenges, with different agencies operating on different timescales and priorities. SENCos frequently find themselves mediating between competing professional perspectives and bureaucratic requirements.

04

Family Partnership

Building effective partnerships with families requires significant time and skill, particularly when relationships have been damaged by previous negative experiences. SENCos often serve as bridges between frustrated families and overwhelmed school systems.

The administrative burden associated with SEND coordination has increased significantly, with SENCos reporting that paperwork and compliance requirements consume disproportionate time that could otherwise be devoted to direct support for pupils and families. The complexity of EHCP processes, combined with increasing numbers of pupils requiring assessment, creates unsustainable workloads for many SENCos.

Professional Development and Expertise

Many SENCos highlight the need for enhanced professional development opportunities, particularly in areas such as mental health awareness, autism spectrum conditions, and trauma-informed practice. The diversity of SEND needs requires broad expertise.

Innovation and Problem-Solving

Despite systemic challenges, SENCos demonstrate remarkable innovation in developing attendance solutions. Examples include flexible timetabling, sensory break opportunities, peer support schemes, and creative use of technology.

Senior leadership views: Balancing accountability, resources and student needs

Senior school leaders face the complex challenge of balancing statutory accountability requirements with the genuine needs of SEND pupils and their families. Their perspectives reveal the systematic pressures that influence school decision-making and the innovative approaches being developed to create more inclusive learning environments whilst maintaining educational standards.

Accountability pressures and SEND Inclusion

The tension between inclusive education and performance accountability creates significant challenges for senior leaders. Ofsted expectations for attendance data, progress measures and academic outcomes can conflict with person-centred approaches that prioritise individual pupil wellbeing over statistical targets.



Financial sustainability and resource allocation

Budget constraints force difficult decisions about SEND provision, with many schools facing deficits due to the costs of supporting pupils with complex needs. Senior leaders must balance immediate support requirements against long-term financial sustainability, often making decisions that feel inadequate for addressing genuine need.



Staff development and retention

Recruiting and retaining high-quality staff with SEND expertise presents ongoing challenges. Senior leaders report difficulty attracting experienced SENCos and specialist teachers, whilst providing adequate training for existing staff requires significant investment. i



Local Authority stance: Policy implementation and resource allocation

Local authorities occupy a unique position in the SEND landscape holding statutory responsibilities for ensuring adequate provision whilst managing finite resources across diverse geographical areas and school settings. Their perspectives reveal the complex interplay between national policy, local implementation, and individual pupil needs that shapes SEND attendance outcomes.

Strategic Planning Challenges	1	
Demographic changes, increasing SEND identification rates, and evolving understanding of neurodiversity create unpredictable demand for services. Local authorities struggle to plan provision effectively when needs assessment data may not reflect actual demand or emerging requirements.	2	Market Management
		Overseeing diverse provision across mainstream schools, special schools, and alternative providers requires sophisticated commissioning and quality assurance processes. Local authorities must balance choice and competition with collaboration and resource efficiency.
Partnership Coordination	3	
Facilitating effective relationships between education, health, and social care requires sustained leadership and diplomatic skills. Different agency priorities and funding streams often create barriers to seamless service delivery.	4	Performance Accountability
		Balancing local democratic accountability with national performance expectations creates tensions around resource allocation and service priorities. Local authorities must respond to community concerns whilst meeting statutory requirements and inspection standards.

Funding challenges dominate local authority planning, with the high needs block experiencing unprecedented pressure. The mismatch between identified need and available resources forces difficult prioritisation decisions that inevitably leave some pupils and families without adequate support. Local authorities report feeling trapped between statutory duties and financial reality.

Government Position: Legislative Framework and Performance Expectations

Central government's approach to SEND attendance reflects complex policy tensions between inclusion principles, accountability frameworks, and resource constraints. The legislative and regulatory environment shapes local practice whilst attempting to balance individual rights with system-wide performance expectations and fiscal responsibility.

1

Legislative Foundation

The Children and Families Act 2014 established current SEND frameworks, emphasising person-centred approaches and improved coordination between agencies. However, implementation has revealed gaps between policy intention and practical delivery capacity.

2

Regulatory Oversight

Ofsted's inspection frameworks increasingly focus on SEND provision and attendance outcomes, creating accountability pressure that can drive improvement but may also encourage risk-averse approaches that limit innovation and person-centred practice.

3

Funding Mechanisms

The National Funding Formula attempts to create equitable resource distribution but struggles to address the complexity and variability of local SEND needs. High needs funding remains inadequate for identified demand across most local authorities.

Policy coherence across different government departments creates ongoing challenges. Education policy emphasising attendance and achievement must align with health policies around mental wellbeing and social care approaches to family support. These different policy streams do not always complement each other effectively, creating confusion and conflicting expectations for local implementers.

Performance measurement challenges

Government accountability frameworks struggle to capture the complexity of SEND outcomes effectively. Traditional attainment measures may not reflect meaningful progress for pupils with significant learning difficulties, whilst attendance data can penalise schools and authorities working with the most vulnerable populations.

Innovation and research investment

Government funding for SEND research and innovation has increased, with programmes supporting evidence-based practice development and dissemination. However, the scale of investment remains modest compared to the magnitude of identified challenges and the potential returns from effective intervention. International comparisons reveal that England's SEND outcomes lag behind other countries.

Healthcare Professional perspectives: Medical and Therapeutic support considerations

Healthcare professionals provide crucial support for SEND pupils, yet their perspectives reveal significant systemic barriers that impact attendance outcomes. The intersection between health and education services often creates gaps in provision that directly affect pupils' ability to engage with learning effectively and maintain regular school attendance.



Paediatric Services

Long waiting times for developmental assessments and ongoing medical support create significant barriers to timely intervention. Many SEND pupils experience months or years without proper diagnosis, during which attendance problems may develop and become entrenched.



Mental Health Services

CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) face unprecedented demand, with many SEND pupils waiting extensive periods for therapeutic support. The lack of early intervention mental health provision often means attendance issues escalate before professional support becomes available.



Speech and Language Therapy

Communication difficulties significantly impact school engagement, yet access to speech and language therapy remains limited. Many schools lack regular access to specialist support, leaving pupils with unmet communication needs that affect their learning and social interaction.



Occupational Therapy

Sensory processing difficulties and physical coordination challenges affect many SEND pupils' ability to cope with school environments. Limited access to occupational therapy assessment and intervention means that environmental adaptations and support strategies are often inadequate.

The medicalisation of attendance problems creates both opportunities and risks. While medical perspectives can provide crucial insights into underlying conditions affecting attendance, there is a risk that school-based factors are overlooked in favour of individual pathology explanations. Healthcare professionals increasingly advocate for whole-system approaches that address both individual needs and environmental barriers.

Multidisciplinary Working Challenges

Effective support for SEND pupils requires coordinated input from multiple healthcare professionals, yet current systems often operate in silos.

Identifying primary barriers:

Inadequate resources and funding constraints

Resource and funding inadequacy emerges as the most significant structural barrier to effective SEND attendance support across all stakeholder perspectives. The gap between identified need and available provision has widened consistently, creating impossible choices for schools, local authorities, and families whilst undermining the fundamental right to appropriate education for pupils with additional needs.



Schools reporting inadequate SEND funding

According to the National Association of Head Teachers survey

Annual high needs funding shortfall

Identified by local authorities across England

Increase in EHCP requests

Over the past five years without proportional funding increase

The National Funding Formula's approach to high needs distribution fails to account for the true complexity and variability of local SEND populations. Areas with rapid demographic change, increasing social disadvantage, or historical under-provision face particular challenges in meeting statutory requirements within allocated budgets. This creates a postcode lottery of provision that directly impacts attendance outcomes for vulnerable pupils.

Staffing crisis and recruitment challenges

Funding constraints directly impact schools' ability to recruit and retain specialist SEND staff. SENCo positions remain difficult to fill, with many schools relying on inexperienced coordinators or existing teachers taking on additional responsibilities without appropriate preparation or support time.

Teaching assistant roles, crucial for SEND support, often offer poor terms and conditions that limit recruitment and retention. The lack of career progression opportunities and professional development means that expertise is constantly lost from the system, requiring continuous retraining and reducing overall support quality.

Infrastructure and Environmental barriers

Many school buildings lack appropriate facilities for supporting SEND pupils effectively. Sensory rooms, quiet spaces, and accessible facilities require capital investment that schools cannot afford. These environmental barriers directly impact attendance by creating overwhelming or unsuitable learning environments.

Technology infrastructure and assistive technology provision remain inadequate in many settings. The initial costs of appropriate equipment, combined with ongoing maintenance and training requirements, create significant barriers to effective digital inclusion for SEND pupils.

Educational Barriers: Curriculum accessibility and inclusive practice gaps

The structure and delivery of education itself creates significant barriers to SEND attendance with curriculum design, assessment systems, and pedagogical approaches often failing to accommodate diverse learning needs effectively. These educational barriers frequently compound other challenges, creating cycles of disengagement and attendance avoidance that can persist throughout a pupil's educational journey.

Curriculum Rigidity	Assessment Pressure	Pedagogical Limitations
The National Curriculum's prescriptive content and age-related expectations create barriers for pupils whose learning develops at different rates or in different ways. The lack of flexibility to pursue alternative curriculum pathways often leads to frustration and disengagement for SEND pupils who cannot access mainstream curriculum content.	High-stakes testing and assessment regimes create anxiety and stress for many SEND pupils, whose performance may not reflect their actual learning or capability. The emphasis on standardised assessment often undermines teacher confidence in using alternative approaches that might be more appropriate for individual pupils.	Traditional teaching methods based on whole-class instruction and written tasks disadvantage pupils with different learning styles, sensory needs, or processing difficulties. The lack of pedagogical training in differentiation and universal design principles limits teachers' ability to create truly inclusive learning experiences.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles offer significant potential for reducing educational barriers, yet implementation remains patchy across the school system. UDL approaches that provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression can benefit all learners whilst specifically addressing the needs of SEND pupils. However, the systemic change required for effective UDL implementation requires sustained investment and cultural transformation that many schools struggle to achieve.

Technology integration offers opportunities for enhanced curriculum accessibility, yet digital divides and technological barriers often exclude SEND pupils from these benefits. Assistive technology that could transform learning experiences for pupils with specific needs often remains expensive, complex to implement, or unavailable in schools lacking technical support and expertise. Professional development in inclusive pedagogy remains insufficient across the education workforce.



Social and emotional barriers: Mental Health, Anxiety and School Avoidance

Mental health and emotional wellbeing challenges represent profound barriers to school attendance for many SEND pupils, creating complex cycles where attendance difficulties exacerbate mental health problems, which in turn make school attendance even more challenging. The intersection between SEND conditions and mental health requires sophisticated understanding and coordinated response across education and healthcare systems.

Anxiety and School Phobia

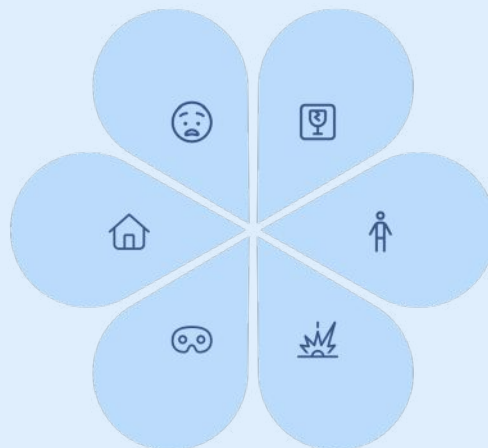
Overwhelming anxiety about school attendance affects many SEND pupils, often stemming from previous negative experiences, fear of failure, or sensory overwhelm. Once established, school anxiety can become self-perpetuating and resistant to traditional attendance management approaches.

Depression and Low Mood

SEND pupils experience higher rates of depression and persistent low mood, often related to feelings of difference, academic frustration, and social isolation. These mental health difficulties directly impact motivation and energy for school engagement.

Home-School Disconnect

When pupils feel fundamentally different or unsafe at school compared to home, the transition between environments becomes traumatic. This disconnect can make leaving home for school feel impossible on difficult days.



Social Isolation

Difficulties forming and maintaining peer relationships create profound loneliness for many SEND pupils. The social aspects of school can become sources of anxiety rather than support, leading to attendance avoidance and further isolation.

Masking and Burnout

Some SEND pupils, particularly those with autism, exhaust themselves trying to appear 'normal' in school environments. This masking behaviour can lead to emotional burnout and school refusal as pupils become unable to cope with the demands of school.

Emotional Dysregulation

Many SEND conditions involve challenges with emotional regulation, leading to intense reactions to school stressors. When schools lack understanding of these difficulties, behavioural incidents.

Systemic barriers: Policy conflicts and bureaucratic challenges

Systemic barriers within education, health, and social care systems creates significant obstacles to effective SEND attendance support. These structural challenges often undermine well-intentioned interventions and create frustration for families and professionals alike. Understanding and addressing systemic barriers requires examination of how different policies, agencies, and accountability systems interact to either support or hinder collaborative working.

1

Fragmented service delivery

The separation between education, health, and social care creates artificial boundaries that do not reflect the holistic needs of SEND pupils and families. Different agencies operate with different priorities, timescales, and eligibility criteria, making coordinated support planning extremely challenging.

2

Conflicting accountability systems

Schools face competing pressures from attendance expectations, academic achievement targets, and inclusion requirements. These different accountability measures may conflict with each other, creating perverse incentives that prioritise statistical outcomes over individual pupil wellbeing.

3

Complex bureaucratic processes

EHCP processes, tribunal systems, and multi-agency assessments create bureaucratic complexity that delays support provision and exhausts family resources. The administrative burden often consumes time and energy that could be devoted to direct support for pupils and families.

4

Information sharing barriers

Data protection requirements, different recording systems, and professional confidentiality create barriers to effective information sharing between agencies. These barriers can result in duplication of effort, gaps in support provision, and missed opportunities for coordinated intervention.

Proven Solutions: Evidence-based interventions that work

Despite the significant challenges facing SEND attendance support, numerous evidence-based interventions demonstrate the potential for meaningful improvement when appropriate approaches are implemented with adequate resources and commitment. These proven solutions span individual, school-level, and system-wide interventions that address the multiple factors influencing attendance outcomes.



Person-centred planning

Individualised approaches that involve pupils and families as equal partners in planning support arrangements consistently produce better attendance outcomes. These approaches prioritise pupil voice, family expertise, and collaborative goal-setting over professional-led decision-making.

- Regular review meetings with meaningful participation
- Goal-setting based on pupil and family priorities
- Flexible support arrangements that adapt to changing needs



Flexible approaches

Schools that implement creative flexibility around timetabling, attendance expectations, and learning environments achieve significantly better outcomes for SEND pupils with attendance difficulties.

- Graduated return programmes following absence
- Modified timetables during difficult periods
- Alternative learning spaces and support arrangements



Early intervention

Proactive identification and support for emerging attendance difficulties prevents escalation and reduces the need for intensive crisis interventions. Early intervention approaches demonstrate significant cost-effectiveness alongside improved outcomes.

- Attendance monitoring with graduated response protocols
- Preventative mental health and wellbeing programmes
-



Multi-Agency coordination

Effective collaboration between education, health, and social care professionals produces more comprehensive and sustainable solutions than single-agency approaches. Coordination requires dedicated time and clear communication protocols.

- Regular multi-agency planning meetings
- Shared assessment and intervention planning
- Coordinated professional development

Collaborative Approaches: Multi-Agency working and stakeholder partnerships

Effective multi-agency collaboration represents one of the most powerful approaches to addressing complex SEND attendance challenges, yet it remains one of the most difficult to implement successfully. When different agencies work together effectively, they can address the multiple factors influencing attendance whilst avoiding duplication and service gaps that characterise fragmented approaches.

Shared Assessment

Joint assessment processes reduce burden on families whilst ensuring comprehensive understanding of needs across different professional perspectives. These approaches require shared frameworks and protocols that respect different professional expertise.

Shared Monitoring

Joint outcome monitoring and review processes ensure that all agencies remain focused on shared goals and can adapt support arrangements when outcomes are not being achieved. This requires shared outcome measures and regular review processes.



Coordinated Planning

Multi-agency planning meetings that involve families as equal partners can develop holistic support plans that address education, health, and social care needs simultaneously. Success requires skilled facilitation and clear decision-making processes.

Integrated Delivery

Coordinated service delivery through co-location, joint working, or shared case management can reduce fragmentation and improve efficiency. These approaches require significant organisational change and sustained leadership commitment.

Leadership across agencies represents a critical success factor for collaborative approaches. When senior leaders from education, health, and social care demonstrate commitment to joint working through resource allocation, policy development, and performance management, frontline collaboration becomes significantly more effective and sustainable.

The problem, is that for many children, they caught between different agencies and inertia to move cases along.

Innovation in Practice: Technology and Alternative Educational Provision

Innovation in SEND attendance support increasingly focuses on harnessing technological solutions and developing alternative educational provision that can engage pupils who struggle with traditional school environments. These approaches demonstrate significant potential for transforming attendance outcomes whilst creating more flexible and responsive educational systems.



Virtual and Augmented Reality

Immersive technologies can create engaging learning experiences that accommodate different sensory needs and learning preferences. VR applications allow pupils to explore curriculum content in ways that may be more accessible than traditional classroom approaches, whilst also providing opportunities for social skills practice in safe virtual environments.



Assistive Technology and Apps

Personalised learning applications and assistive technology tools can provide individualised support that adapts to specific SEND needs. Communication apps, sensory regulation tools, and cognitive support software can make learning more accessible whilst building independence skills.



Hybrid and Remote Learning

Flexible learning delivery combining face-to-face and remote elements can provide options for pupils who struggle with full-time school attendance. These approaches require sophisticated pedagogical design but can maintain educational engagement during difficult periods whilst gradually rebuilding school attendance capacity.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning applications show promising potential for early identification of attendance difficulties and personalised intervention planning. AI systems can analyse patterns in attendance data, behaviour records, and academic performance to identify pupils at risk of attendance deterioration, enabling proactive rather than reactive support approaches.

November Issue 3 will focus on the new Ofsted Framework and how schools can demonstrate evidence to secure exceptional practice

Recommendations: A Strategic Framework for Improving SEND Attendance

Addressing the complex challenges of SEND attendance requires coordinated action across multiple levels of the education system, from individual practice to national policy reform. This strategic framework synthesises evidence from stakeholder perspectives and proven interventions to propose a comprehensive approach that places SEND pupils' needs and rights at the centre of attendance improvement efforts.

01	02	03
Immediate Actions (0-12 months)	Medium-Term Developments (1-3 years)	Long-Term Transformation (3-10 years)
Implement rapid response measures that can provide immediate relief for pupils and families experiencing attendance crises whilst building foundations for longer-term improvement.	Establish systematic improvements in training, resources, and collaborative working arrangements that can create sustainable change in SEND attendance outcomes.	Implement fundamental system reforms that address structural barriers and create truly inclusive educational provision for all SEND pupils.

Immediate priority actions



- Emergency funding release** for local authorities facing critical SEND budget short falls
- Rapid training programmes** for teachers and support staff on trauma-informed practice and attendance support
- Clear guidance** on flexible attendance arrangements for SEND pupils experiencing difficulties
- Streamlined assessment pathways** to reduce waiting times for SEND identification and support
- Crisis intervention teams** to provide intensive support for pupils at risk of permanent attendance breakdown

November *Attendance* Magazine Edition: Navigating the new Ofsted framework and strengthening school-parent partnerships

New Ofsted Framework

Understanding the latest inspection criteria and quality judgements that will define educational excellence

School Distress & EBSA

Supporting pupils experiencing emotionally- based school avoidance with evidence-based interventions

Attendance Programmes

Implementing structured, taught approaches to improve school attendance and engagement

Parent Communication

Building stronger partnerships through effective outreach and meaningful dialogue strategies

Next month's edition addresses four critical areas that determine educational success: regulatory compliance, student mental health, attendance management and community engagement. Together, these elements form the foundation of a thriving educational ecosystem that serves every child effectively. Our focus extends beyond mere compliance to embrace innovative approaches that foster genuine improvement in educational outcomes.

From understanding Ofsted's evolving expectations to implementing compassionate support systems for vulnerable learners, we'll explore practical strategies that make a real difference in school communities across the nation.



Ofsted's New Framework for School Attendance: A critical first look at the September 2025 guidelines

England's education regulator Ofsted has unveiled its most significant overhaul of attendance inspection protocols in over a decade. The September 2025 framework marks a pivotal shift in how schools will be held accountable for pupil attendance, introducing new metrics, expectations, and quality assurance measures that promise to reshape the educational landscape. Yet as schools across the nation prepare for implementation, fundamental questions remain about whether this framework addresses the right priorities and whether it will genuinely drive meaningful improvement in educational outcomes.

New Inspection Criteria

Schools now face rigorous assessment across four key attendance domains: persistent absence rates, attendance improvement trajectories, intervention effectiveness, and community engagement strategies.

Data-Driven Accountability

The framework introduces sophisticated analytics requiring schools to demonstrate measurable progress through detailed attendance tracking and evidence-based intervention programmes.

Contextual Considerations

For the first time, Ofsted will formally recognise socio-economic factors, mental health challenges, and community circumstances when evaluating attendance performance.

The timing of this framework's release coincides with England facing its most severe attendance crisis in recent memory. Post-pandemic attendance rates have stubbornly remained below pre-2020 levels, with persistent absence affecting nearly one in four pupils nationwide. The government's response has been to demand greater accountability from schools, positioning attendance as a fundamental indicator of institutional effectiveness.

However, the framework's approach has drawn criticism from education professionals who argue that it places disproportionate responsibility on schools for factors often beyond their control. Headteachers across the country have expressed concerns about being held accountable for complex social issues including poverty, mental health crises, and family breakdown – all significant contributors to persistent absence. In November's issue, we will complete a deep dive on the new Ofsted framework for school leaders.



Frequently Asked Questions on School Attendance: A comprehensive guide for parents and students

School attendance is one of the most critical factors in a child's educational success, yet it remains a source of confusion and concern for many families. Regular attendance doesn't simply mean showing up to school; it represents a fundamental commitment to learning, personal development and academic achievement that extends far beyond the classroom walls.

Research consistently demonstrates that students with excellent attendance rates perform significantly better academically, develop stronger social connections with peers and teachers, and are more likely to graduate successfully. However, navigating the complexities of attendance policies, understanding legitimate reasons for absence, and managing the delicate balance between health concerns and educational continuity can be challenging for even the most dedicated families.

Academic Impact

Students missing just 10% of the school year (approximately 18 days) are academically at risk and may struggle to read proficiently by the end of Year 3. This "chronic absence" threshold affects learning outcomes across all subject areas.

Social Development

Regular attendance helps children develop essential social skills, build meaningful friendships, and participate in collaborative learning experiences that are impossible to replicate through make-up work alone.

Future Success

Attendance patterns established in primary school often continue through secondary education and into adult employment, making early intervention and positive habits crucial for long-term success.

Common Attendance Challenges

- Balancing illness and educational needs
- Understanding school attendance policies
- Managing family emergencies and circumstances
- Addressing school anxiety and reluctance
- Coordinating medical appointments
- Handling unauthorised absence consequences



Model Answers and Best Practices for Common Attendance Queries and Concerns

When is an absence considered authorised?

Authorised absences include genuine illness (supported by medical evidence if prolonged), pre-approved family emergencies, religious observances and exceptional circumstances agreed upon by the headteacher. Medical appointments should be scheduled outside school hours when possible, but urgent healthcare needs are always considered authorised.



How ill should my child be to stay home?

Children should remain at home if they have a fever above 37.8°C, vomiting, diarrhoea, or contagious conditions like chickenpox. However, minor colds, slight headaches, or general tiredness don't typically warrant absence. The "48-hour rule" applies after vomiting or diarrhoea stops before returning to school.

What constitutes persistent lateness?

Arriving after registration closes (typically 30 minutes after school starts) counts as an unauthorised absence for that session. Persistent lateness is defined as being late for more than 20% of possible sessions and can trigger formal intervention procedures,



Can I take my child on holiday during term time?

Holiday requests during term time are only authorised in exceptional circumstances. Schools cannot approve holidays for cheaper costs or convenience. Applications must be submitted well in advance, and unauthorised holiday absences may result in penalty notices including legal action for chronic cases, and referral to the local authority.

Best Practice Communication

Always contact the school by 9:30 AM on the first day of absence. Provide specific reasons and expected return dates. Follow up with written explanation within 48 hours for absences longer than three days, including medical evidence where appropriate.

Supporting Your Child's Return

After absence, liaise with teachers about missed work and upcoming assessments. Create a structured homework schedule to catch up gradually rather than overwhelming your child. Communicate any ongoing health concerns that might affect participation.

Addressing Attendance Concerns

If your child's attendance falls below 95%, expect increased school monitoring and support. Work collaboratively with attendance officers to identify barriers and develop improvement strategies. Remember that legal intervention is always a last resort.

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



Heine M. Jensen, Co-founder and CEO at Attender

Heine has over 31 years of experience in the EdTech industry and has spent his entire career focused on developing digital solutions for the education sector. With deep insight into the daily challenges and needs of schools, he founded Attender – a platform designed to help educational institutions manage attendance and simplify complex systems.

Nicolaj has worked closely with municipalities and schools to develop tailored solutions for the public sector. He is passionate about creating value for public clients through simple systems that save time and motivate students. **Nicolaj Bang, Sales Executive at Attender**



Beyond Carrots and Sticks: How Gamification can support school attendance

Traditionally, schools have relied on a binary approach: rewards for attendance and punishments for absence. Yet research and real-world experience highlight the limits of this approach. Mental health challenges, anxiety and changing perceptions of illness mean that punitive measures alone often demotivate students and repeated reminders of absences can worsen stress and disengagement (Moore & Walker, 2025). Additionally, school policies often focus on rewards for perfect attendance or punishments for absence, leaving little space for understanding the underlying reasons for missing school. Evidence suggests that such an approach can increase stress and demotivation, particularly for pupils already experiencing anxiety (Moore & Walker, 2025).

Why Punishment Alone Often Fails

Traditional punitive approaches frequently have unintended consequences. Students returning from absence can experience guilt and stress when faced with repeated questions, public reminders, or alarmist language about attendance. This can exacerbate anxiety and make students less likely to re-engage (Moore & Walker, 2025). Conversely, environments that prioritise a sense of safety, belonging and understanding – often delivered through personal teacher support – tend to see improved attendance outcomes. Punitive measures alone do not address the psychological and social factors that contribute to absenteeism, highlighting the need for a more holistic approach.

Research highlights that a supportive, safe atmosphere reduces absenteeism and fosters engagement (Moore & Walker, 2025). Gamification can serve as a supplementary tool, creating an engaging framework that complements, rather than replaces, teacher support.

What is Gamification?

Gamification is the integration of game-like elements into non-game settings to enhance motivation and participation. In schools, this may involve awarding points or badges for attendance, introducing friendly challenges, or setting milestone-based rewards that acknowledge effort and improvement. Importantly, gamification is not about turning school into a game – it is about creating visible, tangible feedback loops that encourage students to take ownership of their attendance while under the guidance of educators. Studies show that gamification, when thoughtfully implemented alongside personal support, can significantly increase motivation and engagement (Pinter et al., 2020).

Gamification in Practice

Several schools have successfully introduced gamification and a rewards-based system as part of a broader attendance strategy. At Haven High Academy in Lincolnshire, pupils who maintain perfect attendance over two-week periods are entered into a draw for a smart TV, leading to a 3% improvement in attendance rates since the last academic year (Zuckerman & Philips, 2025). Similarly, Subotica Tech in Serbia implemented a system, which gamified attendance tracking for first-year students, resulting in increased class participation and decreasing pupil absence.

In our accumulated experience with schools using Attender, a secondary school reported that 92% of students felt more motivated to attend and a business academy estimates a 50% fall in student dropouts. These cases illustrate that gamification can make engagement visible and rewarding, particularly when rewards recognise improvement and effort rather than perfection.

Digital tools provide an added layer of support. Badges, points, and progress tracking allow students to see their own improvement in real time, encouraging a sense of agency and ownership. Teachers can also use these tools to identify students who may need additional one-to-one support, making their interventions more targeted and effective. However, research consistently shows that the primary driver of attendance remains personal, pedagogical support; gamification is a tool to enhance, not replace, these interactions.

Conclusion

Attendance should not feel punitive; it should feel engaging and supported. Evidence and practice suggest that the combination of one-to-one teacher support, thoughtfully implemented rewards, and supportive gamification tools can create environments in which students are motivated to attend. Gamification and EdTech, when positioned as part of a broader, empathetic strategy, give students a sense of control and allow educators to better guide each student's journey.

Attendance is not a matter of forcing students to comply – it is about creating a structure where engagement, support, and recognition work together. Gamification is part of schools' toolbox, but ultimately the human connection remains the heart of success.

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Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



Christine Franklin is the Director of Safeguarding & Inclusion at Academy Transformation Trust. She collaborates with her team to implement Trust-wide initiatives aimed at improving inclusion, attendance, safeguarding practices, and culture. Christine is passionate about empowering staff to support every child to thrive.

From Roots to Resilience: Strengthening SEND Attendance

How a Trust-wide approach to SEND provision is helping attendance take root and flourish.

At Academy Transformation Trust, we've come to see attendance not as a standalone metric, but as a living system, one that needs nurturing, pruning, and patience. Like a garden, our SEND attendance journey has been about planting the right seeds, tending to early shoots, and watching leaves unfurl in unexpected ways. Our Waves of Provision model has been the soil in which these improvements have taken root. Across 18 of our 22 academies, we've seen SEND attendance blossom, not through quick fixes, but through a graduated response that meets learners where they are.

Wave One is the earth: rich with universal strategies that build belonging and resilience. It's where the roots form, through tutor relationships, delivering the attendance curriculum, personal development programs, and inclusive environments that anticipate need.

Wave Two is where the shoots emerge: Targeted interventions like our "Know me to teach me" and "Help me to understand" tools help us identify barriers and gently guide growth through impactful interventions that support students with the "right intervention at the right time". We use tools like Boxall Profile and SDQ to understand the whole child, not just the symptoms.

Wave Three is the canopy: Specialist support like Art Therapy, CAMHS referrals, Counselling and Speech and Language Therapy which helps our most complex learners stretch towards the light.

Our Wave Two is where the shoots emerge: Targeted interventions like our "Know me to teach me" and "Help me to understand" tools help us identify barriers and gently guide growth through impactful interventions that support students with the "right intervention at the right time". We use tools like Boxall Profile and SDQ to understand the whole child, not just the symptoms.

Wave Three is the canopy: Specialist support like Art Therapy, CAMHS referrals, Counselling and Speech and Language Therapy which helps our most complex learners stretch towards the light.

Our adaptive practice, rooted in Judith Carter's 7Cs, ensures that every student is supported. Given the conditions to thrive, as a bespoke learning experience is cultivated in our academies. Whatever their area of need, our staff are equipped to flex and respond with empathy. But we're not done growing. Our next season focuses on Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN). We know that when pupils feel seen, heard and understood, they show up, not just physically, but emotionally and cognitively. We're expanding Talk Boost, embedding SLCN CPD, and strengthening partnerships with external specialists. Improving SEND attendance is not a race, it's a cultivation. And while some plants grow quickly, others take time. We're proud of our garden, but we're still planting, still pruning, still learning. Because when the conditions are right, every shoot can flourish.

Waves of Provision Secondary



Wave One

Universal Academy Support 95%+

- Curriculum to promote confidence and resilience.
- Whole-school personal development programme.
- Tutor/HOY relationships with the pupil and family.
- Literature available to pupils to support SEMH.
- Whole-school promotion of good attendance through literature, website, competitions & Newsletters.
- Whole school Rewards system in-line with school policy
- Teacher level rewards – Postcards and notes home.
- Breakfast provision available for all pupils' academy specific.
- Wide ranging afterschool enrichment opportunities – taking school beyond the academic offer



Wave Two

Targeted Support 90-95%

- Structured programme for catching up missed work.
- Altered curriculum where appropriate.
- Altered school day (could be start/end of day or extended lunch times for home visit) This must be temporary and be phased out in a timely manner.
- Case worker assigned to the student.
- Lesson check-ins with case worker.
- SENCo observation to identify potential unmet need.
- Nurture group (lesson time or lunch time).
- Barriers to attendance meeting with pupil and a member of the pastoral team/attendance officer.
- Big Emotions Support (anger management).
- Protective behaviours support.
- AM/PM registration Meet and Greet.
- Early Help to be offered to family (must be offered to all children who are persistently absent).
- Signpost students to self-help resources.
- Parenting support literature to be offered.
- Additional tutoring to be offered where appropriate.
- Breakfast club to be offered to support lateness and support school readiness.
- Afterschool clubs to be offered free of charge where appropriate.

Undertake Assessments

- Dyslexia Screening
- Speech & Language screening
- Fluency reading age tests
- Boxhall profile or equivalent
- 'Barriers to Attendance' questionnaire
- Strengths and difficulties questionnaire
- What is Worrying Me tool
- Child-centred plan
- My STAR worksheet or equivalent
- CAHMs referral if appropriate



Wave Three

Specialist Support 50-90%

- Educational Psych referral.
- ASD referral.
- Mental Health/School Nurse referral.
- Art/Play therapy.
- Refer to CAMHS.
- Refer to social care.
- Refer to Flexible Learning/Virtual schools.
- EHCP referral (where appropriate)
- Refer to other appropriate agency as needed.
- Parenting Classes (where appropriate)
- Attendance at a bridging centre.
- Free Breakfast club to be offered to support lateness and support school readiness
- Free afterschool clubs to be offered



Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



Katrina Medley is an Executive Leader, SEND Consultant, and school culture shifter with extensive experience developing inclusive and safeguarding strategies across specialist schools, alternative provisions, and local authorities. She is also the mother of a neurodivergent young person, bringing a lived perspective to her professional work. Katrina challenges systemic barriers and campaigns for authentic inclusion, with a mission to ensure that belonging, not blame, remains at the heart of every conversation about SEND.

Absence isn't a Choice, it's Survival

Silenced No More

For children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities attendance is rarely about 'refusal', it's about belonging; knowing you are accepted for who you are by those who care for you between the hours of 9.00-3.00pm. My son never felt like this, he describes schools as a "battlefield", never quite knowing what to expect or "who was on your side".

My Son's Lived Experience

At 17 years old my son described primary school as "the worst years of his life". He felt "unwanted, embarrassed and constantly judged". He remembers the disappointing look in his teachers' eyes when he couldn't sit still on the carpet or line up in the middle of the dinner line. He remembers the relentless sighing, and a repeated phrase "that's not right" and he shared that he can still see their heads shaking to this day.

"It was horrible mum, I didn't know what to do but I knew that I hated it".

His stomach aches and nausea began in Year 2, like clockwork just before bedtime and as soon as he woke up in the morning.

He wasn't a school refuser; he was a scared 8-year-old boy. He was not persistently absent, he felt unsafe, every single day. Yet, his transition into year 7 was framed around "putting the past behind him and new beginnings" but he couldn't brush these feelings under the carpet, they remained with him throughout his school life.

Imagine being expected to attend a place every day that caused your nervous system to go into overdrive, that was his reality for 10 years. And when school itself became the trigger for fear and anxiety, absence was never about attendance, it was about survival.

The Human Cost

When you put all these things together, feeling unwanted, the lack of connection, the ball in the pit of his stomach, not quite having the words to explain exactly how he felt at the time. For him, absence was never about attendance, it was about survival.

As parents, the dilemma is brutal. Do we add to our child's anguish by forcing them through the school gates, or do we show unconditional positive regard and push back against an attendance policy that cannot see the bigger picture? I chose the latter, but it was not easy. The phone calls and letters did not stop. But neither did I, every day felt like a choice between protecting my child or appeasing the system and either way, we paid the price.

What saddens me the most when I think back to that time, is how desperately we needed a lifeline, someone, anyone, to show us that they understood. Someone willing to go beyond the attendance policy and support us to remove the multiple layers of shame and blame. We needed a lifeline, but it never came, and the silent battles continued.

As a family we did everything we could to support our son during his school years. We were relentless in ensuring that he didn't feel blamed for the way he experienced the world. But it never changed the fact that he never felt like he belonged at school, he felt out of place and nothing we did changed that. He found comfort at home, but that sense of belonging never followed him into school.

The changes we needed then are the same changes that thousands of children need today:

1. Flexibility in policies
2. Curiosity not judgement
3. The freedom to show up as their authentic selves

I am calling for all schools to look beyond the policy and go back to the basics, see all children and young people with SEND as human beings who survive on connection, the assurance that they are wanted, valued and understood.

Attendance Begins with Belonging

At 17, my son is looking forward to the start of term, for the first time in a decade. His needs haven't changed, but his college has chosen connection over compliance."

Discussions about attendance are too heavily focussed on statistics or worse, blamed on parenting. But who sees the child beyond the policy?

Lauren Richards Biography

Lauren is an Advanced AuDHD coach, positive psychologist, and psychotherapist. She is passionate about supporting families raising neurodivergent children, helping teens thrive through her background in education, and guiding women through burnout and life transitions. With lived experience of AuDHD and parenting children with neurodivergent traits, Lauren brings both empathy and deep insight to her work. She supports both diagnosed and self-diagnosed individuals in making sense of their experiences and in developing practical, meaningful strategies to navigate life



ADHD in the Classroom: Understanding Barriers to Attendance and Learning

Introduction

Research indicates that children with ADHD are more likely to underachieve in literacy and numeracy, experience more teacher reported behavioural problems, hold less positive attitudes towards school and show poorer attendance with more unauthorized absences (May et al., 2021). This article explores the lived experience of ADHD in the classroom, highlights why attendance can be so difficult, and considers practical strategies schools can adopt to better support students with ADHD.

The Lived Experience of ADHD in the Classroom

To better understand the difficulties faced by students with ADHD, imagine for a moment that you have ADHD and are sitting in a classroom. It's difficult to concentrate because so many thoughts are whirling around your head and your peers are misbehaving. Perhaps you struggle to sit still, experiencing almost physical discomfort as you try to restrain yourself from wriggling.

When you finally manage to focus on the teacher, you quickly feel overwhelmed; your processing speed is just a little slower than the pace of the lesson. You don't bother asking questions though, because you know they will think you're "not listening" again. Then it's PE and you've forgotten your kit (again) which adds another black mark to your name alongside the homework you forgot to hand in this morning. The girl who was friendly yesterday seems distant today and you are almost overwhelmed with the worry that you might have said something to make her think you are weird. You hardly slept last night because thoughts wouldn't stop racing.

You feel exhausted from pretending to understand what everyone is talking about and from trying not to let anyone notice that you are sinking. If only you could catch up all the work you keep missing but the handouts don't make sense. Some are crumpled in your schoolbag and some left on your desk, because no one has helped you to stick them in your books. You might as well give up now.

Why ADHD Impacts Attendance

When considering what a student with ADHD has to manage, it is hardly surprising that attendance often suffers. ADHD frequently involves:

- Time blindness: experiencing time only as "now" or "not now."
- Auditory processing difficulties: struggling to absorb spoken information.
- Rejection-sensitive dysphoria: intense emotional responses to real or perceived rejection, criticism, or failure.

Sensory sensitivities are also common, meaning that bright lights, noisy classrooms, crowded corridors, and even the fabric of a school uniform can be overwhelming.

Niemi, Lagerström, and Alanko (2022) found that adolescents with ADHD reported significantly more symptoms of agoraphobia and panic, as well as strained parent relationships compared to neurotypical peers. These factors were identified as contributing to poor attendance. Additionally, around 60% of children with ADHD have co-occurring autism, which brings further challenges.

The Hidden Cost of Masking

Before they can engage with academic demands, a young person with ADHD must first manage these invisible struggles. Many do an incredible job of appearing to cope – especially girls, who may even excel academically, despite the heavy masking. But it comes at a cost. By the time they get home, they are drained. Without a safe space or time to decompress, they may experience meltdowns or shut down completely.

Because ADHD frequently runs in families, children may lack organisational or emotional support at home. Which means that forgotten PE kits, misplaced homework, or late payment for school trips could be a reflection on a bigger picture and a different support need.



Unfortunately, undiagnosed ADHD is often misunderstood. Teachers may interpret behaviours as defiance or deliberate disruption, which compounds the issue. By the age of twelve, children with ADHD may have received up to 20,000 more negative messages than their peers – no surprise that so many struggle with low self-esteem and anxiety.

Unfortunately, undiagnosed ADHD is often misunderstood. Teachers may interpret behaviours as defiance or deliberate disruption, which compounds the issue. By the age of twelve, children with ADHD may have received up to 20,000 more negative messages than their peers – no surprise that so many struggle with low self-esteem and anxiety.

Towards a Supportive School Environment

So what can be done to make school a place they *want* to be – a place where they feel safe, supported, and able to learn?

Teacher Training and Awareness

The first step is ensuring that all staff receive training in ADHD and broader neurodiversity. Awareness of how symptoms present differently across genders is vital. A teacher who “gets it” is more likely to:

- Build positive relationships with students
- Deliver lessons with varied intonation.
- Provide concise, clearly written and spoken instructions, supported by visual aids.
- Allow classroom time for organising handouts.
- Link lessons to the wider curriculum and outline key objectives at the start.
- Incorporate movement, problem-solving, and creativity into lessons
- Provide fidget toys on desks.

Teachers who understand ADHD also recognise the strengths that accompany it, for example energy, creativity, outside-the-box thinking, and hyperfocus and find ways to harness these. These strategies benefit *all* students, not only those with ADHD.

The Role of Exercise

Movement plays a critical role in supporting learning. Ratey (2008), in *Spark*, demonstrates how just 20 minutes of aerobic exercise stimulates the release of BDNF, a chemical that enhances learning. Schools (in an American study) that introduced exercise before maths and science lessons saw a remarkable improvement in academic results.

However, students need opportunities to move throughout the day. Incorporating short activity breaks, such as yoga, star jumps, or quick laps of the playground, can help meet both the physiological need for movement and the psychological need for novelty.

Listening to Students

Despite structural barriers such as staffing ratios, limited resources, and restrictive policies, listening to students remains one of the most effective interventions. Research shows that ADHD students who feel heard, seen, and understood are more likely to thrive. Providing students with more choice in subjects studied (an option that typically arises later in their school journey) can enhance engagement and positive experiences (Russell et al., 2023). A truly forward thinking school might reimagine timetables and subjects based on neuroscience rather than government policy, enabling students to focus deeply on fewer subjects

Conclusion

A child with ADHD navigates a complex set of challenges before they even begin to engage with academic demands. Without understanding and support, these students face increased risks of poor attendance, low attainment, and reduced wellbeing. However, schools that invest in staff education, flexible teaching methods, movement-based learning, and genuine listening can transform outcomes. When students feel safe, understood, and supported, attendance and achievement improve not only for those with ADHD, but for all. Take inspiration from the strengths of an ADHDer – make attendance your area of hyperfocus, be enthusiastic, creative and think outside the box. Have empathy for the challenges ADHDers and all neurodivergent students face and create a system that includes them. Be brave.

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Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



By Louise Pink, former headteacher and Account Manager at ParentPay Group

Tackling the absenteeism crisis: How technology is helping schools improve attendance

Pupil attendance remains a pressing issue facing schools across the UK, as the full impact of the pandemic continues to ripple through today's education system. As of Spring 2024, approximately 20% of pupils in England were persistently absent - a 67.8% increase compared to pre-pandemic levels - while severe absence (missing at least half of school sessions) rose a staggering 160.7%.

The reasons are complex. Rising levels of poor mental health and anxiety among students, shifting parental attitudes influenced by new remote working norms, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis all play a role. There has also been a post-pandemic surge in illness-related absences, with children more vulnerable to common bugs due to reduced immunity during lockdowns.

This stark rise in absenteeism continues to have serious consequences. Research from Thinktank has highlighted unauthorised absence as a 'leading cause' of the performance gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, with the North East seeing higher absence rates than any other English region. Vulnerable groups are also being significantly impacted. Students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and those with emotional, behavioural, or school-related anxiety - conditions that have intensified since the pandemic - face a heightened risk of chronic absenteeism. These challenges call for more than isolated interventions. Schools need a broader, more integrated system of support, along with the time to embed them, and many are turning to software as a powerful part of that solution.

Real-time data: a whole new perspective

Many schools are responding with smarter systems for tracking and responding to absence. Management Information Systems (MIS) can be great for producing data, but it's crucial to make sure that this is the kind of data you actually want and need. When it comes to attendance, that increasingly means real-time information, which can revolutionise tracking and allow staff to follow up on incidents of unauthorised absence. And as all school leaders are distinctly aware - the data that can be extracted from any system is only as good as that which is inputted in the first instance.

Whilst attendance tracking is far from new, the way schools are approaching it has evolved dramatically. Traditional registers and delayed reporting often limited the ability to act quickly. Today, modern MIS platforms offer real-time data to identify patterns, respond to issues faster, and better understand the root causes of absence.

Having classroom-level access to this attendance data means that staff can instantly see if a pupil is absent from school for a whole day or even a single lesson. This immediate visibility allows attendance officers to act without delay, whether that's contacting home, providing interventions, or checking for safeguarding concerns.

Smarter communication with parents

Attendance issues, however, cannot be solved by data alone. In conversations with school, Trust and wider education leaders for our recent report, '[Generation catch-up: The research revisited](#)', effective parental engagement consistently emerged as playing a key role in raising attendance levels. At St Thomas More Catholic Primary, A Voluntary Academy in Sheffield, for example, embedding attendance expectations into parent inductions and using visual tools to show the impact of absence on learning has helped maintain strong attendance. Similarly, ONE Academy Trust in Derbyshire has tackled post-pandemic shifts in parental attitudes by prioritising education and consistent messaging - linking absence directly to lost learning in newsletters and parent communications. How schools talk to parents about attendance is also crucial. Traditionally, attendance has been reported as percentages, but this can be confusing and often misleading. For example, a 90% attendance rate can sound positive, but it actually represents nearly three weeks (15 days) of school missed over the academic year. Today's communication platforms allow for smarter engagement, like timely, automated, and personalised messages to parents or carers based on attendance trends. For example, if a pupil regularly misses school on Mondays, a supportive Sunday evening message can remind parents of the exciting learning experiences that are happening in school the next day, offering assistance, or simply highlighting that missing one day a week adds up to 39 days of lost learning a year.

Supporting staff without increasing workload

As schools adopt new technologies, it's vital that these tools empower staff to tackle attendance, rather than adding to staff workload or mental burden. That means that new systems introduced need to be user-friendly, properly supported and accompanied by the right introduction and training. Ensuring strong staff comfort levels with technology is essential to successful implementation. Familiar interfaces, ongoing support, and open communication are key. When done right, EdTech solutions can boost confidence and act as an added safety to support teachers in doing what they're there for: ensuring that young people can learn to the best of their ability. Rather than adding admin-heavy processes, it should be about freeing up staff to focus on meaningful interactions with students and families.

A connected ecosystem to support attendance

The goal is not just to monitor absence, but to create an ecosystem that actively supports attendance. This involves linking data, communication, and early intervention seamlessly - bringing together staff, students and families to tackle absenteeism in a united effort. In secondary education settings, this often means setting firm expectations with students themselves. At Mossbourne Federation in London and Essex, if a pupil misses their induction day, they'll be required to attend another one. Lateness is followed up that very same day, escalated to lunchtime or Saturday sessions if needed. By identifying students who can attend but don't, staff can focus more effectively on those who need tailored support. For pupils with more complex challenges that contribute to absence - such as caregiving responsibilities - Mossbourne works closely with families and agencies like CAMHS to build personalised attendance plans.

Similarly, at ONE Academy Trust, understanding the story behind the data is key. For instance, a pupil missing school due to a family holiday requires a different response than one chronically disengaged from learning. Tailored interventions are essential.

Paving the way forward

Whilst there's no single solution to the persistent gaps in attendance schools are facing - the schools combining real-time data, strong parent communication and robust internal processes are already seeing promising results.

Technology is not a silver bullet - but used strategically, it can help schools act earlier, engage with families more effectively and support staff and students. By building a connected, proactive approach to attendance, schools can help ensure every pupil has the opportunity to succeed.

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance

Claire Rushton-Plant is a former high school teacher and senior leader with 20+ years experience in the classroom. Claire now runs MiniMe Mindfulness® Staffordshire and Derbyshire working in nurseries, schools, colleges and community settings to teach a range of mindfulness and mindset techniques to children aged 3+ and their parents, carers and teachers.



Mindfulness & Mindset: Unlocking Attendance Potential for SEND Students

In recent years, school attendance has emerged as a pressing issue; especially for students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Often, attendance difficulties for these learners stem not from disinterest but from severe emotional distress linked to sensory overload, anxiety or unmet needs. According to the blog, Authentically Emily, 94% of such challenges are underpinned by genuine distress, with over 80% affecting neurodivergent pupils.

Encouragingly, practices such as mindfulness and growth-mindset techniques are gaining traction as promising, school-based supports. Evidence suggests that nurturing emotional resilience and adaptive thought patterns can offer SEND students the psychological grounding they need to attend more regularly and engage more fully.

They support children in Calming Anxiety and Building Self-Regulation

Mindfulness-based school interventions (MBSIs) have demonstrated meaningful reductions in stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue and other mental health concerns—key contributors to school avoidance ([Mindfulness in Schools Project](#)). In essence, these practices help students better regulate overwhelming emotions and sensory input. Additionally, meta-analyses report that mindfulness enhances sustained attention, working memory, emotional regulation and metacognitive skills; aptitudes crucial for maintaining focus, managing transitions and coping with challenging school environments. Improvements that align directly with attendance outcomes. These interventions have an impact on that feeling of 'felt-safety' needed for a child to thrive in a school environment. All strategies that MiniMe Mindfulness® actively teaches.

Support Children with Building Enhanced Focus, Well-being and Academic Engagement

Mindfulness has been tied to improved academic performance, fewer suspensions and reduced stress in middle-school students. While those studies didn't exclusively focus on SEND populations, they underscore that cultivating calm and awareness can support engagement; a gateway to more reliable attendance.

Similarly, mindfulness instruction has been shown to strengthen attention skills and coping mechanisms, critical for SEND learners who may otherwise be overwhelmed by the pace or stimuli in the classroom according to the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#).

Mindsets Matter: Growth, Belonging, Resilience

Parallel to mindfulness, fostering a growth mindset (the belief that intelligence and abilities can grow with effort) may be especially powerful for learners who have faced repeated challenges or exclusions. Encouraging a belief in personal progress can help SEND pupils reframe difficulties as surmountable, reducing the anxiety that contributes to absence.

While specific research in SEND contexts remains sparse, broader studies note that growth mindset interventions are particularly effective for students with lower prior achievement; suggesting strong relevance to SEND learners who may feel academic difficulties acutely.

The Bigger Picture: Attendance, Well-being and Inclusion

Persistent absence carries long-term social, educational and economic risks. Meanwhile, the House of Commons reports that about 1.9 million children in England (as of January 2024) have SEN and are entitled to specialised support; a figure that has soared dramatically in recent years ([UK Parliament](#)).

This growing need underscores the urgency of evidence-based, inclusive practices to support attendance and approaches like mindfulness and mindset training may offer accessible, scalable tools to bolster resilience and emotional safety in school.



Embedding Mindfulness & Mindset in Schools: Practical Insights

Approach	What It Looks Like	SEND Attendance Advantage
Mindfulness sessions	Short daily practices; breathing, sensory checks	Reduces stress, improves focus, supports transitions
Growth-mindset talk	Celebrating effort, normalising struggle	Builds persistence, reduces school-related anxiety
Inclusive climate	Emotional literacy support, relationship building	Reinforces belonging—lowers emotional absence

Take-Aways for Educators

- Mindfulness supports emotional regulation, which can reduce stress-driven absences among SEND pupils
- Building a growth mindset reinforces resilience and belonging, helping students face school days with confidence
- Embedding these within universal or small-group formats, supported by trained staff, strengthens the inclusive culture and directly tackles barriers to attendance
- Building a culture of emotional regulation, open discourse for staff and parents/carers about wellbeing and mental health will support children in feeling comfortable to open up about their own emotions

Final Thoughts

By equipping SEND students with tools that calm the mind and empower thinking, schools don't just improve attendance; they foster environments where learners feel safe, capable and seen. Embedding mindfulness and mindset approaches within inclusive, emotionally aware settings can make school a place of belonging—not just simply attendance.

Crucially, these approaches work best when they are part of a whole-school culture, rather than a standalone intervention. A mindful school is one where staff, parents, carers and children all share common strategies for self-regulation, emotional resilience and compassionate communication. Research from the Mindfulness in Schools Project notes that when adults model mindful behaviour, pupils are more likely to internalise and benefit from these practices.

For SEND pupils in particular, consistency is key. A mindful culture means that the breathing technique used by a teaching assistant in the morning might be the same strategy encouraged by a parent before school or echoed by a carer in the evening routine. This alignment across environments reduces anxiety and strengthens predictability; two vital factors in supporting regular attendance.

Staff wellbeing is equally important. When teachers and support staff practise mindfulness themselves, they are better able to regulate their own stress responses, respond calmly to challenges and model resilience. A calm adult nervous system is one of the most powerful tools for helping a dysregulated child return to balance. In turn, this builds trust and strengthens relationships; factors strongly linked to improved attendance for SEND learners.

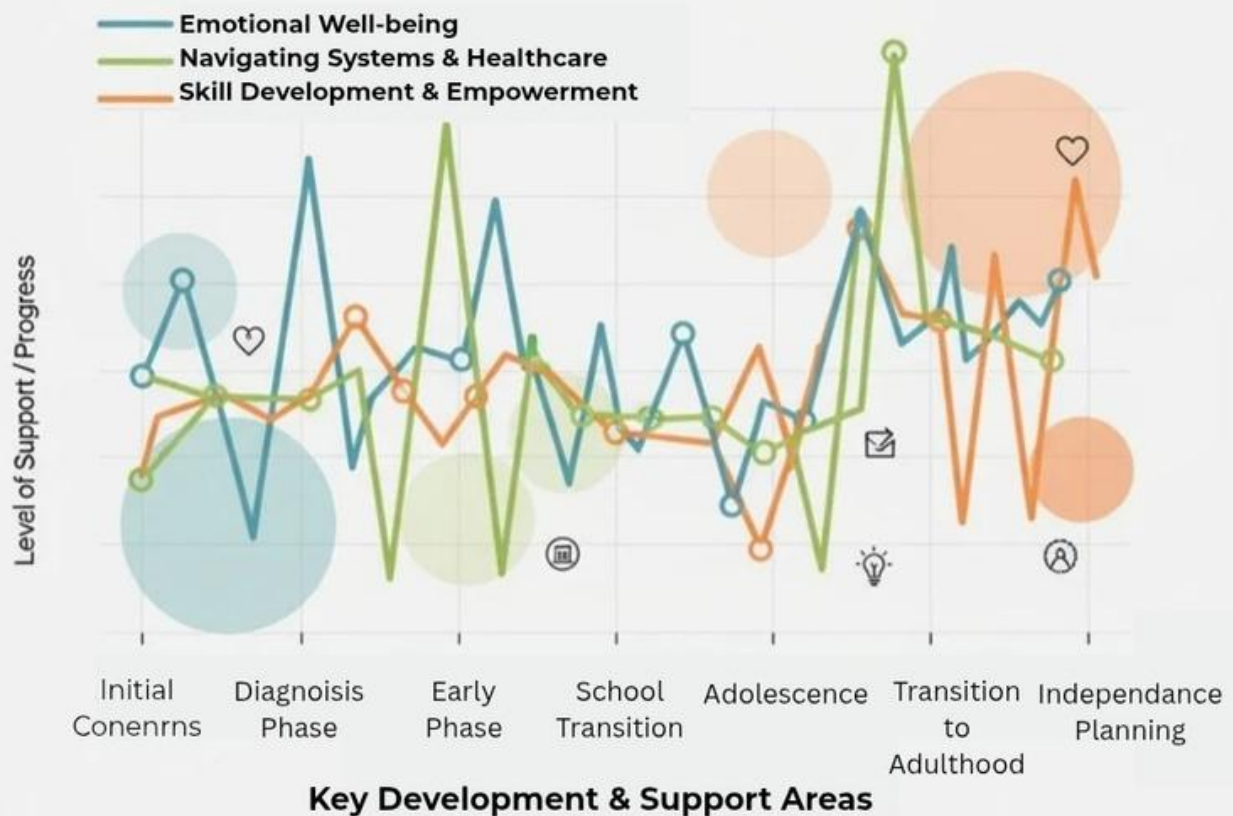
Ultimately, creating a mindful culture is about embedding shared values of compassion, patience and presence across the school community. When parents, carers, staff and pupils all participate in these approaches, mindfulness and growth-mindset strategies become woven into the fabric of daily life, helping SEND students not only to attend but to thrive.

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance

Carla Bowley is a specialist SEND consultant, trainer, and founder of ND Parent Pathways. With over 17 years of professional experience, her work is now deeply informed by her lived experience as a parent to neurodivergent children and as a possible neurodivergent person herself. This unique blend of personal insight and professional expertise is at the heart of her mission: to bridge the gap between traditional policy and compassionate practice by empowering professionals to implement neuro-affirming, co-produced strategies for children and their families.



NEURODIVERGENT PARENT PATHWAYS: A JOURNEY OF SPIKY PROFILES





Beyond the Spiky Profile: Understanding the Pathway to Support for Neurodivergent Children

When a child struggles to attend school, the conversation often defaults to a place of consequences, rewards, and a focus on getting the child through the school gates. But what if that perspective is the very barrier we need to overcome? What if the challenge of attendance isn't about a child's choice, but about the design of the system itself? This is the central debate in neuro-inclusive practice, and it's a vital paradigm shift that sits at the heart of fostering genuine presence in our schools.

The Spiky Profile: A New Way of Seeing

The outdated approach views a child's abilities as a single, flat line. But neurodiversity reveals a different reality: a **spiky profile**. This model shows that a person can have significant strengths in some areas (e.g., visual thinking, creativity) while facing profound challenges in others (e.g., social communication, emotional regulation). It is this "spiky profile" that often drives the behaviours we see. The key to understanding this is to move from "what's wrong?" to "what do they need?"

The challenge is not in the individual, but in the system that is not designed to accommodate these spiky profiles. The old paradigm views attendance as a binary issue. The new paradigm argues for a different lens, one that sees a child's struggles as a communication of distress. This approach is rooted in the belief that a child's persistent lateness is not a choice, but a consequence of his unmet needs.

Building an Ecosystem of Belonging

This shift in perspective leads to a holistic approach to support. A child doesn't exist in isolation; they are at the centre of an ecosystem of support that includes their family, school, and community. When one part of this ecosystem fails, the whole system becomes unsafe. The true barriers to attendance are often hidden beneath the surface, in a child's neurobiological and sensory needs, and in a lack of psychological safety within that ecosystem.

This approach is best illustrated by a real world experience. When a parent raised concerns about their son's persistent lateness, a school's initial response was to act as if it wasn't a big problem. Their initial advice of "get him to school when you can" entirely missed the point that the child's lateness was a direct manifestation of his significant distress and anxiety. In another instance, after a child exhibited aggression at a school event, a staff member suggested the child would be fine if the parent were not there. This places the responsibility of the child's emotional state on the parent and entirely ignores the sensory and environmental factors that may be the true cause.

A lack of support in one part of the system often creates a communication of distress in another. The stark contrast between a child's behaviour on a "normal" day and their willingness to go to school on a day they were looking forward to clearly indicates that the nature of the environment and activities has a direct and profound impact on their ability to attend. This echoes Tony Attwood's concept of the "Jekyll and Hyde" presentation of autistic behaviours, where a child can hold it together at school only to release their distress at home.

Your Pathway to Empowerment

Designing for presence is not a theoretical concept; it's a practical, actionable approach. A powerful example of this is the battle for accurate documentation. In one instance, a parent discovered their son's School Support Plan was factually incorrect. The plan stated the child's part-time timetable was "parent-led" due to "transitions," when in fact, written confirmation from the previous school confirmed the decision was "school-led" and based from the child's inability to cope with a full day of school. This narrative, based on assumptions rather than evidence, had the potential to severely compromise the child's future support. This is a powerful example of why co-production isn't just about feeling heard; it's about ensuring documentation is accurate and reflects a child's true, evidence based needs.

The new paradigm means being flexible. It means moving from a fixed idea of what attendance looks like to one that is focused on a child's capacity and needs. EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) is not a last resort; it's a design for presence when a traditional school environment is not a safe or viable option. It's a proactive, compassionate solution that prioritizes a child's well being and their right to an education.

A Vital Mission

The conversation is no longer about forcing a child to be present but about creating a system where they can thrive. This is a vital mission that is at the core of my work. The attendance paradigm is shifting from reactive management to proactive design, and it's a conversation that is long overdue. By challenging outdated thinking and embracing a neuro-affirming approach, we can build a future where every child has a right to be present.





Euan MacLean is Founder and CEO of &Parents CIC and a doctoral researcher at the University of Nottingham. His practice and research focus on parental involvement, engagement, and participation, with a particular emphasis on online and international schooling. He advises schools and systems on rethinking practice and reshaping culture, and writes regularly on parent-school relationships and evidence-informed practice.

Attendance, power, and parental participation: whose priorities shape the 08:35 decision?

Parental participation matters when families can influence decisions, not only receive messages. Many mornings place attendance third or fourth in a family's queue, after eviction threats, temporary accommodation moves, empty meters, bare cupboards, or a child's spiralling anxiety. National figures show that 1.49 million children and young people were persistently absent in 2023–24, about one in five, with severe absence still affecting a small but significant minority. The scale keeps attendance high on every agenda and raises a hard question about whose priorities rule the first hour of the day. Here is how that looks at 08:35.

A composite scene helps. A parent in a hotel room waits for a housing officer who may not arrive. An automated text pings about an unauthorised absence, then another. A head of year calls at 08:35, kind yet brisk, because the escalation clock is already running. "Decisions happen somewhere else," says the parent. "Discretion exists on paper," replies the head, "yet the timetable makes it hard to use." Participation is present, influence is not. Families feel the system acting *on* them rather than *with* them. 'If you're not at the table, you're probably on the menu.' The rest of the work is to make the table real, defined, and reachable in the places where decisions move outcomes.

That scene is common, and the data show who carries the heaviest load. Children and young people supported by social care face the steepest barriers. Forty-four per cent of children in need were persistently absent in 2023–24, more than double the overall rate. Severe absence in child protection cohorts reached 15.6 per cent, against 2.5 per cent overall, which signals a different order of risk and need. Children and young people with an education, health and care plan recorded persistent absence at 35.5 per cent, and those eligible for free school meals remain far likelier to be persistently or severely absent than peers. These differences point to equity gaps rather than motivation gaps. Behind those numbers sit health needs that shape mornings. About one in five children aged 8 to 16 had a probable mental health challenge in 2023, rising to almost one in four among 17 to 19-year-olds. Attendance systems that rely on generic reminders and penalties struggle when the underlying driver is anxiety, trauma, or unmet need. Families disclose more when disclosure produces help rather than judgement.

This is where systems and systemic issues matter. Power sits inside monitoring, coding, and escalation. Systems decide who is seen, how quickly, and for what purpose. Equality offers identical timelines and template letters. Equity varies contact, language, timing, and support by need, using proportionate universalism, a simple baseline for everyone and a stronger offer for those who need it most. Evidence shows that disadvantage, special educational needs, and social care involvement correlate with higher absence and exclusion, which should shift where decision rights sit and how resources move. A safeguarding lens should therefore frame attendance decisions, not a compliance lens alone.

Trust is the precondition for participation that works. Families share hard truths when the school is a safe place to tell them. A named adult calling at 07:50 beats an anonymous message. A soft start and a breakfast slot are offered without stigma. Travel passes, emergency food, or an energy top-up are arranged through local partners. The attendance plan records these as standard adaptations, not favours. Government guidance sets out structures for a whole-school approach, including clearly staged escalation. Schools can use the same structures to embed shared decision-making rather than to narrow it.



Fines deserve sober treatment, especially where hardship is visible. The national framework standardises penalty levels and thresholds. A penalty notice can alter behaviour in some cases. A penalty notice cannot top up the meter, shorten a waiting list, or reduce panic in a neurodivergent child. A needs-first protocol that screens for hardship, mobilises practical relief within 24 hours, and offers a rapid review before any notice aligns sanction with fairness. Families already rationing heat and food gain little from added debt, and relationships can fracture in ways that harm attendance longer than any short-term gain. Official advice and parliamentary scrutiny both point to the limits of sanction-led strategies in the face of unmet need.

A practitioner's voice shows the shift from consistency to fairness. "Consistency was our mantra," says a pastoral lead. "Fairness is a better goal. We now publish the steps taken before any sanction, invite a parent onto the panel that applies the criteria, and schedule a five-minute data check-in every fortnight. Arguments reduced, workload eased." A parent's voice offers the simplest metric. "The first time I said there was no money on the meter, the school sent support and adjusted the start time for a week. My daughter believed they would listen after that."

Participation gains meaning when families help set agendas in three places that move outcomes. Data and communication come first. Co-design of message cadence, language, and thresholds for switching from automated contact to a human call makes information usable rather than performative. Reasonable adjustments and pathways come next. Published criteria for flexible starts, short-term reduced timetables, dual registration, or alternative provision should include a parent seat when criteria are applied. Monitoring and escalation complete the picture. A parent-led review before any sanction, and a termly audit of anonymised cases to check equity and unintended harms, converts voice into leverage.

School culture changes when self-scrutiny is routine. Leaders can ask if escalation starts before unmet need has been addressed, if meeting times exclude carers on shifts, if translators and advocates appear by default, and if digital tools assume bandwidth and literacy that some families do not have. Staff learning on participation and power should sit alongside training on process compliance. Families should see a published participation map that explains where they can influence decisions on data, support, and escalation, and what evidence the school will use.

Outcomes matter as well as values. Persistently or severely absent children and young people record lower attainment, which reinforces the case for early, equitable support rather than a narrow focus on compliance. National trends show gradual improvement in persistent absence since the peak, although severe absence remains stubborn for the most disadvantaged. Progress depends on what happens to those who face the steepest barriers, not only on averages.

A closing thought returns to power, priority, and care. Participation that moves attendance is a shift in who sets the order of the morning when life intrudes, who reads the data, and who decides the next step. Children and young people are more likely to attend when families experience the school as a safe place where telling the truth about their day changes what happens next without judgement.

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Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance

Lucy Bayliss MBA FCMI CMgr is an interior designer with a first degree in Interior Architecture and a Master of Business Administration. With over 20 years' experience in the public sector, she specialises in creating inclusive, user-focused environments that support wellbeing and performance. She is also a proud SEN parent. Lucy combines design leadership with strategic insight to influence policy and practice. She is particularly passionate about neurodiversity and sensory-informed design. Lucy currently manages a team of architectural technicians at Solihull Council and is a vocal advocate for inclusive, evidence-based design in education, healthcare, and workplace settings.



Reimagining Education Autistic Children in the UK: A collaborative call for change.

The UK's Labour government plans to integrate more children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream schools. While this may understandably worry some parents, it also presents a valuable opportunity—if approached thoughtfully—to make education more inclusive, adaptable, and genuinely fit for purpose ([The Guardian, 2024](#)).

As both a parent of an autistic child and a professional interior designer with over 20 years' experience in the public sector, I've seen first-hand how the physical environment can either support or hinder a child's learning and wellbeing. During a recent visit to an independent SEN school in the West Midlands, I saw what's possible: small class sizes, personalised workstations, natural light, effective acoustic control, and calm, uncluttered interiors that felt more like home than school.



Figure 1 Typical Classroom 1950



Figure 2 Typical Classroom 2025

These aren't unnecessary luxuries—they're evidence-based design strategies that support emotional regulation, engagement, and cognitive development. In contrast, many mainstream classrooms retain a 50-year-old model: 30 plastic chairs in regimented rows facing a (now interactive) whiteboard. That layout persists not because it best serves learning, but because it's affordable and familiar.

This isn't a criticism of schools—budgets are under real pressure, and educators cannot be expected to remodel classrooms as a commercial company might refit an office. But if we take inspiration from modern workplace design—where **ergonomic spaces, biophilic elements, hybrid working models, and flexible environments** are now commonplace—we stand to make significant gains in supporting all learners, including autistic pupils.

A parallel to hybrid working is hybrid learning: a structured mix of on-site lessons, online modules, and flexible, quiet spaces that give students greater control over their environment and pace of learning. Evidence from both higher education and school settings shows blended approaches often outperform purely face-to-face or purely online formats ([McKinsey, 2020](#)).



Figure 3 Hybrid Office k2space.co.uk

Why this matters

Many adults now highly value the option to work from home occasionally—whether to focus on a complex project without interruption or to manage an “off day” without falling behind. According to a recent McKinsey survey, more than half of UK workers report higher productivity and satisfaction when given the flexibility to choose their working environment ([McKinsey, 2022](#)). For an autistic child, that same flexibility could be transformative: the ability to learn from home on days when school feels overwhelming, without losing progress, would provide balance, autonomy, and a genuine safeguard against burnout.



Figure 4 What if our classrooms were more like workspaces?

Office Snapshots Oktra South Offices - Guildford | Office Snapshots

Some practical include:

Comfortable, DSE-compliant seating to replace rigid plastic chairs, reducing fatigue and supporting focus. **A range of flexible spaces as per current standards of workplace design** **Quiet breakout zones** to provide essential respite during moments of sensory overload. **Flexibly zoned classrooms**—with areas for collaboration, independent work, and movement—linked to improved engagement and outcomes (McKinsey, 2020). **Neurodiverse pupils equipped with laptops and noise cancelling headphones** so they can access high-quality online lesson content on days when being in a busy mainstream classroom is too overwhelming—helping them stay on track without adding stress or anxiety.

Thoughtful

personalisation and accessibility, rather than being an afterthought.

Access to quality- online pre-recorded content. <https://wolseyhalloxford.org.uk/>

Acoustic Pods for quiet focus work

Smart Furniture with plug sockets and acoustic properties

Acoustic wall and ceiling treatments to absorb sound

Neutral colour palette, subtle textures and patterns

Biophilic design (inspired by nature)

Access to the outdoors and nature. Outdoor classrooms / pods.

Uncluttered classrooms, teaching wall storage units

Remove/ significantly reduce classroom display boards (reduce visual stimuli)

Somewhere safe, that a pupil knows they can always retreat to if they are struggling.

Somewhere safe and quiet to eat lunch.

Meanwhile, local authorities spend over £2 billion a year on independent SEN Government

Association, 2023). Some of this funding could be redirected towards creating spaces

within mainstream schools. While this would require higher upfront investment, the long-term educational, emotional, and financial benefits make it a sound and sustainable choice.



Figure 5 AI Generated Hybrid Classroom



Figure 6 One of my designs for an inclusive, hybrid classroom (Junior age pupils)

In Conclusion

Our education system has a unique opportunity to create classrooms where every child can thrive—regardless of their needs. By applying proven workplace design principles.



Figure 12 – Acoustic work pods – AMAZING for autistic students. Very flexible, can be moved around to suit changes in need.

Guest Voices: SEND and Attendance



Written by Fiona Holmes
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Former SENDCo, Deputy Headteacher and DSL
Schools Consultant at Studybugs

During my years as a teacher, senior leader and SENDCo, there's so much I wish I'd known about boosting school attendance. Back then, we had an attendance officer and I thought, great, that was one job I didn't have to do – I didn't question it. Now, as a Schools Consultant with Studybugs, supporting schools nationwide with attendance, I see it differently.

In hindsight, that separation of roles was a fundamental misunderstanding, and a missed opportunity. Attendance and SEND are not separate entities, nor should they be managed that way. They are intrinsically linked and must be addressed through a collaborative, whole school approach. Nationwide, SENDCos strive to achieve the same goal: to ensure that every child that comes through the door has access to a suitable education that meets their individual needs and helps them achieve their full potential. But what if they don't make it through the door? Or what if all they can do is make it to the doorway, and refuse to advance on that, what happens then?

I've been there many times before. Standing at the school gates, practically begging children I barely knew to come in, telling them that everything will be fine. Reassuring parents through half smiles; internally panicking about the workload on my desk that was piling up and wondering if they'd ever come inside. Minutes dragged on as I questioned whether I was making any difference, or was I simply speaking into a void? What if there was a better way? Thankfully there is, and the best advice I can offer is not to do it all on your own.

Embedding a Whole-School Approach

Improving attendance for pupils with SEND is not, and must not, be the responsibility of one person. Everyone in school has a role to play and each staff member will have a different relationship with pupils and their families. In fact, one of the biggest things I learned as SENDCo is that sometimes you're not the best person to lead that conversation – and that's okay. What matters is identifying who the child trusts, who the family feels heard by, and building solid relationships. One Year 6 pupil I worked with refused to enter the school building for nearly 6 weeks. It wasn't until we involved the lunchtime TA she trusted, someone I hadn't even considered key to the process, that we saw movement. Within days, the child was accessing part-time provision. That wasn't strategy. That was relationships.

But here's the reality: most staff already know this.

This isn't about a lack of understanding or compassion, it's about time. Building relationships takes time. Listening takes time. Following up with parents, noticing patterns, joining the dots, it all takes time. And when time is in short supply, we fall back on reactive responses. Not because we don't care, but because we're overwhelmed.

The Power of Data: Spotting Small Problems Before They Become Bigger Ones

Effective early intervention is impossible without accurate, timely and accessible data. Percentages often only tell part of the story. Identifying subtle shifts in patterns and trends (a day missed here, a late there; a child who starts missing mornings after PE, or avoids Mondays altogether) will signal emerging barriers before they escalate. These aren't just absences, they're clues, which is why everyone in school, from teachers to support staff, should have access to the right information at the right time.

Of course, understanding the "why" behind the data is just as important as understanding the "what". Changes in individual attendance could reflect early signs of deteriorating health, anxiety or breakdowns in support either in school or at home. Analysis of trends by SEND area of need e.g. SEMH, SLCN etc, should be regularly reviewed alongside patterns: by day of the week or subject, cross referenced with behaviour, progress and attainment and safeguarding information.

Attendance is often the only visible indicator of a bigger issue, and knowledge of data is the key to decoding it. That's why giving staff access to clear, timely information - the right data, in the right hands - really matters. It saves them from wading through spreadsheets or chasing five different sources. It gives them space to do what they do best: respond with patience, curiosity, and care.

The goal is never just to get pupils through the door. The goal is to understand what's keeping them out, and do something meaningful about it.

Applying Policy with Compassion: Supporting Parents Before It's Too Late

By now, many of us will have read Anna Maxwell Martin's reflections on her experience as a parent of a child with additional needs, and how school responses to attendance challenges often fall short of what families really need. And if you haven't read it yet, I'd highly recommend you do.

From speaking with hundreds of schools this year alone, I'd say the vast majority still issue fines and sanctions in line with whole-school policy, and I'll be honest, I probably would have too. These policies are carefully agreed upon, signed off by SLT and governors, and are there to protect us when difficult decisions need to be made.

If you're interested in finding out about how Studybugs can support your school and establish a whole school approach to attendance, you can [book a demo here](#).

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Resources:

- Studybugs Child Friendly Attendance Posters: <https://hubs.ly/Q03Cn04g0>



But when a parent is in crisis and looking for help, a cold “sorry, it’s policy” response is rarely what they need to hear. I’m not suggesting we throw out policy altogether – it exists for a reason – but we can embed kindness and flexibility within it.

That starts with early, proactive support: understanding what’s going on behind the absence, listening to parent voice, and offering tailored solutions before the situation escalates. Compassion isn’t a soft option, it’s how we build trust. And when trust is strong, attendance improves.

Three things to consider before reaching for the attendance policy:

- **Policy should be a safety net, not a starting point.** Use it when needed, but don’t let it replace personalised conversations or early interventions. Families in crisis need support, not a standardised response.
- **Compassion can co-exist with consistency.** You don’t have to rewrite your policy, just deliver it with empathy. A proactive conversation, a check-in, or a tailored plan can make all the difference.
- **Kindness isn’t soft – it’s strategic.** Meeting parents with respect and understanding builds trust, which leads to engagement. And engagement leads to better attendance.

It takes a whole school to build belonging – and every adult plays a part.

A child who feels they belong at school is far more likely to attend, not because they have to, but because they want to. And everyone in school has a role to play. It comes from school culture, data awareness and positive, solid relationships. From knowing who your people are. From walking into a classroom and feeling seen; feeling noticed; feeling valued and feeling welcomed.

For our most vulnerable learners, that feeling might be the single most powerful driver of attendance. It might be the reason they come back.

We need to stop asking, “How do we get them in?” and start asking, “Why is it so hard for them to stay?”

Schools we support who make the biggest difference in improving attendance rates take a whole-school, holistic approach. They are proactive in creating a positive and respectful culture where if a pupil is missing, they are missed by everyone.

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ATTENDANCE

Deep Dive on the new Ofsted Framework

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