Attendance

Designing for Presence

EXCLUSIVE
A new leadership paradigm
The Attendance Ecosystem

School attendance is in crisis. Persistent absence has reached levels we have never seen before, disrupting learning, damaging wellbeing and limiting future opportunities for thousands of children.

This is not simply an operational problem. It is a profound signal that our education system **must change**; a reminder that we need to rethink how schools work, how they engage families and how they build trust with communities. Attendance is not a peripheral concern. It is the foundation on which all learning depends. When pupils are absent, we lose far more than teaching hours; we lose vital opportunities to foster relationships, build character and secure outcomes that shape lives. ***Tackling this challenge is no longer optional. It is a national priority.***

Addressing the attendance crisis requires more than ***chasing*** absence more efficiently. It demands a fundamental ***reimagining of leadership*** and ***culture*** across education. We must move beyond short-term fixes and *transactional* approaches. Instead, we must focus on what truly works:
- Chasing absence → Designing presence.
- Enforcement → Connection and relevance.
- Isolated roles → Shared professional responsibility.

Designing presence means creating schools that are not just places pupils attend out of obligation but spaces they actively want to be part of; where they feel safe, valued and connected and where learning holds meaning and purpose. This shift cannot be delivered by attendance officers or pastoral teams alone. It is the work of leaders at every level: reshaping culture, modelling priorities and aligning every system and relationship to build belonging.

Attendance Magazine has been created to be a ***catalyst*** for this change. It is a professional resource for educators, parents/carers/ health and social work professionals, leaders and policymakers who recognise that attendance is more than a number to be improved; it is a measure of whether schools are working for every child.
In every issue, we will bring you:
- *Insight and analysis*: Understanding DfE data, trends and what they mean in practice.
- *Practical strategies*: Evidence-informed tools and approaches ready for immediate use.
- *Case studies*: Examples of schools and trusts reversing persistent absence against the odds.
- *Candour*: Space to share expertise, debate ideas and build professional momentum.

Compliance-driven approaches such as warning letters, penalties and escalating sanctions may produce short-term results, but they cannot transform attendance.

Lasting improvement depends on:

- **Belonging**: When pupils feel known, supported and safe, attendance follows naturally.
- **Leadership**: When leaders prioritise attendance visibly and relentlessly, culture shifts.
- **Alignment**: When data, interventions and pastoral care work in harmony, impact multiplies.

Reframing attendance means rethinking education itself: building schools that feel purposeful and attractive to pupils and families alike.

From the Editor: Colin Cattanach

As Editor of Attendance Magazine, I bring to this publication three decades of experience in education leadership, school improvement and attendance strategy.

I have worked across primary, secondary and special schools, leading trust-wide attendance initiatives, advising on policy and supporting schools facing the steepest challenges. I know first-hand the complexity of this work and the difference it makes when attendance is approached not as a task but as an unrelenting mission.

I created this magazine because I believe we need a **refreshed conversation** about attendance. One rooted in evidence, professional collaboration and practical solutions but also in reimagining education as a more attractive, engaging proposition for teachers, support staff, young people and families.

This magazine is for everyone who shares that belief. Whether you are an attendance officer navigating daily complexities, a teacher working to connect with your tutor group, or a trust leader or professional shaping system-wide strategy, I hope this becomes your go-to professional space for ideas, reflection and solutions. Together, we can move beyond compliance and crisis-response towards a culture of presence, belonging and ambition in every school.

Our purpose at *Attendance* is simple: to bring clarity, evidence, leadership and candour to one of the defining challenges in education today.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are schools the 'shock absorbers' for all of societal ills?

Let's be blunt, yes, schools have become the shock absorbers for almost every societal ill and poor attendance is just one symptom.

When housing is insecure, health services are overstretched, mental health provision is at breaking point, social care is rationed to only the most acute cases and family poverty is rising, it's schools that pick up the pieces. Every unmet need, every delayed intervention, every gap in public services eventually lands at the school's door.

And because education is one of the last universally accessible public institutions left, schools absorb it all feeding children who arrive hungry, providing emotional support for those in crisis, stepping in when parents can't cope, and yes, chasing attendance when the barriers are far beyond their control.

The problem is schools were never designed to carry the full weight of society's failures. They can stabilise for a while, but without systemic reform across housing, health, social care and welfare, they will remain in permanent firefighting mode.

When we talk about attendance, we have to acknowledge this truth: until the wider social infrastructure is repaired, schools will keep absorbing the shocks but the cracks will keep widening.

In your school, how well are you meeting and managing the diverse and often complex needs of your pupils?

Preface

This first edition of Attendance Magazine has been carefully organised into clear, distinct sections, each offering a wealth of related content that provides practical applications for practitioners in schools and valuable insights for policymakers.

All contributors for this inaugural issue have been commissioned by SENDSational Education. As the magazine matures, we will be inviting respected professionals from associated fields to contribute articles, ensuring an even richer breadth of perspectives. Our October edition will have guest contributors to enrich our content.

Interwoven throughout the content are our **Candid Corner commentaries,** thought-provoking pieces that present real-world dilemmas for leaders to consider. Alongside these, you will find examples of best practice, reflective commentaries and key information points all generously embedded within the pages to enrich your reading experience.

Any errors remain the responsibility of the publisher, SENDsational Education and all data has been referenced to the Department for Education or other published work as appropriate.

This launch edition is a special bumper issue. Future editions will be limited to 40 pages, allowing us to explore selected issues in greater depth. Importantly, Attendance Magazine will always remain free for all readers.

We would greatly value your feedback via LinkedIn and encourage you to share the magazine with colleagues in your networks. Please also invite them to sign up for a free subscription so they can join the conversation and benefit from future editions.

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Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Why do some school leaders tackle the wrong things in the wrong order and often for the wrong reasons?

Some schools are failing to improve attendance because, bluntly, they are tackling the wrong things, in the wrong order and often for the wrong reasons.

At the heart of the problem is a compliance mindset. Leaders obsess over policies, letters and chasing codes, but don't address the lived experience of pupils. If children feel unwelcome, unsafe, or unseen, no amount of threats, fines, or attendance drives will sustain improvement. **Too many schools are managing absence rather than designing for presence.**

Leadership culture plays a big part. In some settings, attendance is still seen as the job of the admin team or the pastoral lead, rather than a shared leadership priority embedded into every classroom. Without visible leadership modelling, staff alignment, and a trust-wide strategy, the message to pupils and families is inconsistent and diluted.

There's also data without direction. Schools track absence endlessly, but don't turn that information into precise, timely intervention. They collect numbers instead of stories the why behind the absence so interventions are generic and ineffective.

Finally, there's a lack of deep engagement with families. Letters written in legalistic language, absence conversations that start with blame and little effort to understand the barriers parents face all push families further away. Trust erodes, and with it, attendance.

In short: some schools aren't improving attendance because they're mistaking enforcement for engagement, paperwork for presence, and activity for impact. Until leaders prioritise relationships, relevance, and belonging alongside robust systems, attendance will remain stubborn.

Is your school compliant led or designed for presence?
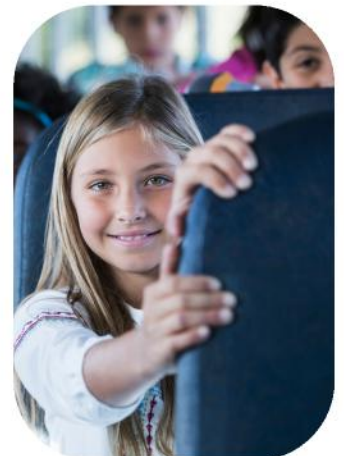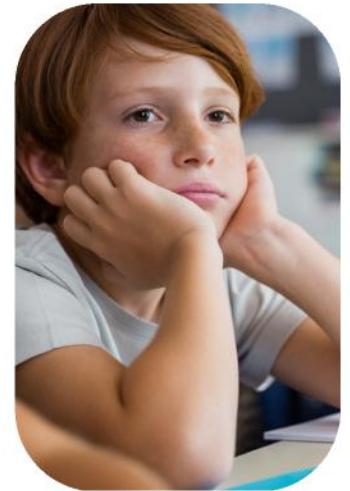
Understanding the attendance crisis
The post-pandemic challenge

COVID-19 has fundamentally reshaped education, with persistent absence rates nearly doubling since 2019. This represents more than a statistical concern; it's a genuine crisis threatening an entire generation's future prospects.

Schools face unprecedented patterns: anxiety-driven absence, disengagement following prolonged periods away and shifting parental perspectives on attendance. Traditional strategies are proving inadequate for these complex challenges. A new paradigm is needed to solve the challenges school face today with attendance.

The research is unequivocal
Attendance directly correlates with educational achievement and attainment. Every percentage point matters. But more importantly, consistent attendance builds the habits, relationships and sense of belonging that foster wellbeing and future success.

"Parents under threat don't open up, they shut down."

"You can't fine your way into a child's heart."

"When trust goes, honesty follows and so does the chance to solve the problem."

Year 9 Parent

Educational impact

Students with attendance below 95% are significantly less likely to achieve expected standards, creating achievement gaps that compound over time.

Social consequences

Irregular attendance disrupts peer relationships and undermines belonging, leading to social isolation and mental health challenges.

Long-term effects

Poor attendance patterns translate into problematic workplace habits, significantly affecting employment prospects and economic outcomes.

The Attendance Ecosystem: *New Paradigm*

Children don't attend schools where they feel they don't belong

The Attendance Ecosystem Model, developed over a number of years by Colin Cattanach through extensive work in both mainstream and special school contexts is a practical, evidence-informed approach to improving attendance.

It recognises that attendance is fundamentally **relational** and rooted in **belonging** rather than compliance. The model integrates five interconnected drivers: *engagement as a first principle, relational and connected leadership, a climate and culture of belonging, systems of care and response and data and insight.*
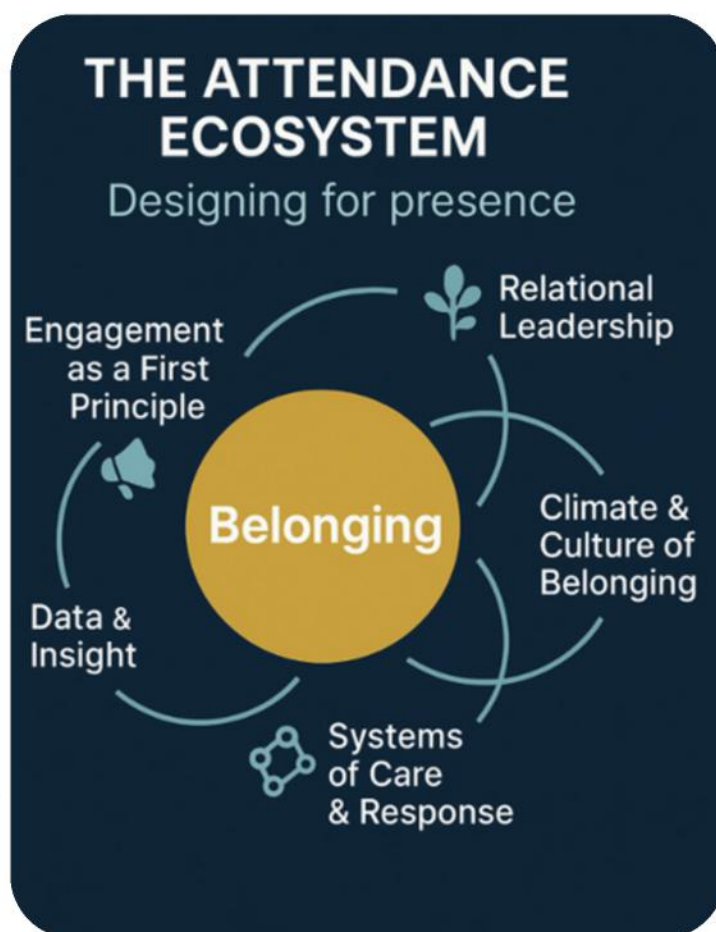
Drawing on experience across primary, secondary, and special education, Colin designed this model to address the complex challenges faced by diverse settings where barriers to attendance often go beyond school gates and require tailored, multi-layered strategies.

By combining data-driven precision with a deep focus on relationships and trust, the **Attendance Ecosystem** shifts schools from reactive, sanction-led approaches to proactive, sustainable cultures of presence, ensuring that both staff and pupils feel valued, connected and supported.

This approach has been successfully implemented across different contexts, demonstrating measurable improvements in persistent absence reduction, pupil belonging, staff retention and family engagement, making it a scalable and adaptable framework for schools at all phases.

"Since we started using the Attendance Ecosystem approach, I've seen a real shift in my tutor group. It's not just about chasing absences anymore; it's about knowing the pupils, understanding what's going on for them and building a culture where they actually want to be here. Attendance feels less like a battle and more like a shared responsibility across the school."

Year 8 Tutor and English Teacher

THE ATTENDANCE ECOSYSTEM
Designing for presence

- Engagement as a First Principle
- Relational Leadership
- Belonging
- Climate & Culture of Belonging
- Systems of Care & Response
- Data & Insight

Source: Colin Cattanach 2025

Belonging isn't about posters in the corridor or tokenistic initiatives.

It's about what pupils experience every day: the relationships they form, the way they are greeted the lessons they sit in, and how safe and valued they feel. For too long, our response to attendance has been driven by compliance and sanction. Yet we know that punitive approaches rarely shift entrenched absence.

As leaders, this is in our hands. Every decision we make signals to pupils whether they matter. Do our tutors greet pupils by name each morning? Do our classrooms feel calm and purposeful? Does our curriculum reflect the lives and identities of the children in front of us? When these things are absent, attendance becomes a battle. But when they are present, pupils choose to be there.

The Attendance Ecosystem
Quick wins for school leaders

Lead relationships from the front
Be visible. Know names. Model warmth and high expectations in equal measure. When leaders prioritise relationships, staff follow. When pupils feel noticed by the people in charge, it shifts how they see school itself.

Make the curriculum matter
If pupils are disengaged, attendance will suffer. Work with staff to strip out what feels irrelevant and bring in content that connects to pupils' worldviews and aspirations. A curriculum that recognises their lives says, "You belong here."

Embed fair and predictable behaviour cultures
Pupils thrive in environments where they feel safe and know where they stand. Inconsistent systems breed resentment and fear. Leaders must hold their nerve, ensuring every child sees behaviour policies applied fairly and consistently.

Champion staff stability and care
Attendance follows adults, not systems. Invest in retaining staff, reduce churn and protect teachers' capacity to build strong bonds with pupils. Stability in the workforce is stability for children.

Open the school gates to families
Attendance isn't solved in isolation. When families see school as an ally, not an enforcer, the partnership deepens. Host informal coffee mornings, celebrate successes with parents and replace **transactional contact** with **relational engagement.**

Leadership is **influence** and nowhere is that influence more visible than in the atmosphere of a school. Pupils know instantly when they walk through the gates whether a school feels safe, welcoming and purposeful or not. We set that tone.

Changing attendance means changing how our schools feel. It's about leading cultures where every child is seen, every lesson feels relevant and every adult radiates belief that children belong. Get those foundations right and attendance follows, not because children are forced to come, but because they want to.

> When the school started holding coffee mornings and changed the tone of their letters, it felt completely different. Instead of feeling blamed, I felt listened to and supported. Walking into school didn't feel intimidating anymore, it felt welcoming, like they genuinely wanted to work with me. It made me more confident to talk to staff and get better involved in my child's education.
>
> *Parent of Year 9 Pupil*

The Attendance Ecosystem
Engagement as a first principle: Staff & Pupils

Schools cannot be places of belonging for pupils if they are not first places of belonging for staff. Yet, too often, we see the opposite: toxic leadership cultures that drive good teachers away and in turn, destabilise pupils.

The Problem
- Some school leaders are profoundly unfit for their role in shaping culture.
- They lead through fear, micro-management and compliance, rather than trust, inspiration and purpose.
- High staff turnover, absence, and burnout become inevitable, impacting pupils most acutely.

When teachers feel undermined, unvalued, or professionally humiliated, they either leave the school or emotionally withdraw. (sometimes termed 'Quiet quitting')

This creates a cycle of instability
- Disrupted relationships whereby the very connections pupils rely on for belonging are broken.
- Lost expertise when talented, often experienced teachers walk away from the profession or from schools that need them most.
- Erosion of culture where pupils see the revolving door of staff and lose faith in the adults meant to model stability

Engagement as a first principle: Pupils
Schools cannot build strong attendance cultures without meaningful pupil engagement. When pupils feel disconnected, unseen, or disengaged from learning, absence becomes an inevitable consequence rather than an anomaly.

The Problem
- Low relational connections means too many pupils feel invisible in school, with minimal personal recognition or meaningful adult relationships.
- Curriculum irrelevance means learning often feels disconnected from pupils' lives, aspirations, or cultural identities, leading to disengagement.
- Transactional interactions which require over-reliance on rules, sanctions, and control undermines trust and fails to address the root causes of disaffection.
- When pupils feel unseen or alienated, they either resist by withdrawing from school (absence) or by challenging its structures (behaviour).

This creates a cycle of disengagement
- Eroded trust means pupils view school as hostile or indifferent, weakening the bond needed for attendance and progress.
- Surface-level compliance at best means, students "attend" in body only, sitting passively without real participation or investment in learning.
- Attendance decline for many; disengagement precedes persistent absence as school becomes a place to avoid.

"When I first started secondary school, everything felt so big and scary. Having a trusted adult who checked in with me every day made such a difference. I knew I could talk to them if I was worried, and it made me feel safe and like I belonged here. That's why I want to come to school—it feels like someone really cares about me."

Year 7 Pupil

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Is collaboration to resolve attendance simply empty rhetoric?

Let's be candid collaboration in the attendance arena is, right now, more of a slogan than a reality.

Local authorities, once the anchor for attendance and welfare work have been hollowed out. Many simply lack the staffing, expertise and resources to provide the sustained support schools need. MATs, meanwhile, often focus inward, protecting their own priorities and ways of working rather than building effective cross-partnership approaches. The wider educational landscape is fragmented with no single body holding the strategic reins.

Health services are under immense strain, so getting timely support for pupils with medical or mental health needs is a battle. Social care is frequently in crisis; thresholds for intervention are so high that children with serious attendance issues often fall through the cracks. CAMHS waiting lists are measured in months or years, and for many families, support is effectively non-existent when it's needed most.

This is the perfect storm

- No shared ownership of attendance across agencies.
- Systems that are overstretched, siloed or absent.
- Vulnerable children left without the coordinated help that could keep them in school.

In that storm, the most vulnerable suffer first and worst. Until collaboration moves from rhetoric to reality with clear accountability, shared data, and joint investment attendance work will remain patchy, reactive and too often, too late

How are you fostering robust, collaborative partnership working ?

School leader Quick Reference

Embed *these things in your school to improve engagement*

BEST PRACTICE

1. Model engagement from the top.
- Be a visible and approachable leader in corridors, playgrounds, and community spaces.
- Actively greet pupils, parents, and staff; know names and key details about them.
- Demonstrate curiosity and empathy in every interaction.

2. Design for belonging, Not compliance.
- Ensure pupils feel safe, valued, and connected from their first day.
- Audit your school culture for any practices that may unintentionally alienate pupils or families.
- Build rituals and routines that signal welcome and care (e.g., morning greets, celebration of attendance milestones).

3. Create two-way communication.
- Replace one-way, directive messages with listening opportunities (forums, surveys, coffee mornings).
- Use multiple channels to meet different needs such as in-person, phone, email, translated letters, and social media.
- Provide feedback loops so stakeholders see how their input influences decisions.

4. Equip staff for relational practice
- Provide CPD in motivational interviewing, restorative practice and trauma-informed approaches.
- Ensure every tutor or key adult knows their role in maintaining daily contact with pupils and families.
- Allocate time for staff to build relationships without being rushed.

5. Focus on early identification and intervention
- Use attendance and engagement data together to spot emerging risks.
- Follow a graduated response — from light-touch curiosity to intensive, wraparound support.
- Always involve the family early, framing interventions as partnership, not policing.

6. Embed engagement in curriculum and environment
- Ensure the curriculum reflects pupils' identities, aspirations, and contexts.
- Design spaces that are clean, welcoming, and inclusive.
- Celebrate cultural and community events to reinforce a sense of belonging.

7. Measure what matters
- Track not only attendance, but also pupil voice, parental engagement rates and staff wellbeing.
- Use qualitative data (stories, feedback) alongside quantitative metrics.
- Report on engagement regularly at SLT and governor/trust level.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: With the decline in EWO services, are we trusting the fox to guard the henhouse?

Let's be candid some schools have quietly stepped away from using an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) not because they've developed a better in-house model, but because they want to possibly reduce outside scrutiny.

Without an independent set of eyes looking at registers, codes and intervention records, it becomes far easier to hide questionable practice whether that's overly generous authorisations, creative coding or quietly off-rolling hard cases.

The uncomfortable question then is: who's holding them to account?

If the local authority isn't involved, and the trust board or governors aren't actively interrogating the data at pupil level, the reality is no one. Attendance becomes a self-reported metric, reliant entirely on the integrity of school leadership.

In that vacuum, the risk of manipulation, neglect and missed safeguarding cues grows. For some pupils, the absence of scrutiny means their absence becomes invisible until a crisis emerges.

A robust accountability framework needs to ensure that every school has its attendance practice independently reviewed, whether through EWOs, trust-wide attendance audits or external safeguarding checks. Without that, we're trusting the fox to guard the henhouse.

How confident are you that your attendance data can withstand robust external scrutiny?

The Attendance Ecosystem
Relational Leadership

Use your spreadsheet to spot who needs you. Then go and be the thing they need.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between tracking attendance and truly turning it around. We're all good at running the reports. We know how to colour-code, sort by band, highlight persistent absence. And that's important, it helps us see the scale of the challenge.

But it's what we do next that really counts.

Behind every data point is a child with a story. A child who might be anxious, exhausted, unseen, or simply unsure whether school is still a place for them. And for many of those children, it's not a strategy or a policy that brings them back: it's a person. A voice. A gesture. A moment of connection.

This is why I believe we need to stop designing for attendance and start designing for presence. *We need to build great relationships with pupils and families.*

Presence means being noticed. Being welcomed. Being somewhere you feel safe enough to return to tomorrow.

When we get this right when schools create spaces where children feel they matter, we don't just see better numbers. We see children choosing to show up, not because they have to, but because they want to.

That's the shift. That's the work.

So yes, use your spreadsheet. Let it guide you to who needs help. But remember the data tells you who's missing. **You decide who shows up.**

However..... tracking sheets and spreadsheets won't resolve the attendance crisis.

Yes, they have their place.
They help us diagnose. Spot patterns. See gaps.

But let's be honest: data isn't the solution. It's just the signal.

So why are so many schools focused on the peripheral stuff such as chasing codes, building colour-coded trackers, holding attendance briefings that never touch the real issues?

If the culture and relationships doesn't shift, the numbers won't either.

💬 Do pupils feel they belong here?
💬 Are we meeting their emotional and educational needs?
💬 Do our systems reflect the reality of the children we serve?

It's time to move beyond surface-level strategy and face the uncomfortable truth:

If we don't redesign schools for belonging, safety, and trust, attendance won't improve.

School leaders: the change doesn't start with data.

It starts with you!
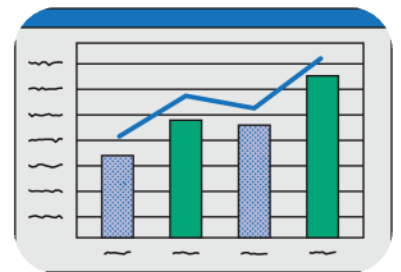
Are we truly designing schools for inclusion or simply expecting children to fit a narrow system?

Attendance isn't just about what families do. It's about how schools feel. It's about whether pupils can belong. **Let's name the real issues and lead the change.**

The Attendance Ecosystem
Relational Leadership

Why it matters

Behind every attendance figure is a child and behind every child is a family, with their own challenges, hopes and history with education. If we want to move the dial on attendance, we need to move beyond *transactional conversations* about absence and into *transformational relationships* built on trust. This is the work of relationship leadership a discipline that blends empathy, clarity, and accountability.

The Do's

1. Lead with listening
Begin every attendance conversation by seeking to understand. Ask open questions: "Can you tell me what a typical morning looks like?" or "What's been getting in the way lately?" When parents feel heard, they're more likely to be honest and honesty is the foundation for effective support.

2. Speak as a partner, Not a prosecutor
The language we choose can either invite collaboration or build a wall. Use "we" and "us" to reinforce that you're in this together. Swap "Your child's attendance is unacceptable" for "We both want to see Mia here more, how can we make that happen together?"

3. Be visible and approachable
Strong relationships start before the first attendance meeting. Greet parents at the gate, join in community events, and attend informal gatherings. Familiarity creates safety, and safety makes it easier for parents to come to you when problems arise.

4. Tailor communication
Not all parents engage in the same way. Consider work hours, language needs, and access to technology. A quick InApp message or voice note may be far more effective than a formal letter.

5. Celebrate the wins
Acknowledge every improvement even if it's a small step. "We've noticed Sophie's been here every day this week, that's fantastic!" reinforces positive behaviour far better than focusing solely on what's missing.

The Don'ts

1. Don't 'weaponise' data
Attendance figures should inform the conversation, not dominate it. If the first thing a parent hears is "Your child's attendance is at 84%," they may immediately shut down. Start with empathy, then use data to explore solutions.

2. Don't wait for a crisis
If your first serious conversation with a parent happens after weeks of absence, you've already missed vital opportunities for early intervention. Small nudges and check-ins early on can prevent escalation.

3. Don't assume disinterest equals neglect
Some families face complex challenges from insecure housing to mental health struggles that impact attendance. Lack of engagement may be a sign of overwhelm, not a lack of care.

4. Don't hide behind policy
Policy should guide decisions, not replace humanity. "We have to follow the rules" should never be the only answer. Good leaders balance consistency with compassion.

5. Don't let the tone slip
The tone of your letters, calls, or meetings will set the tone for the relationship. Cold, formal letters or impatient phone calls can undo months of trust-building.

- Relationships are the strongest *early intervention* they reduce the need for escalation later.
- Consistency builds credibility; parents notice when leaders *keep promises* and follow up.
- *Engagement is proactive;* it starts before problems arise, not when attendance is already low.
- Respect unlocks honesty; parents are more willing to share real barriers when they *feel valued, not judged.*

The Attendance Ecosystem
Relational Leadership

Phrases that build trust and cement good relationships

Use these in conversations, letters and calls to foster collaboration

- "We both want the same thing for your child to thrive here."
- "Tell me what mornings are like for you at the moment."
- "I really appreciate the effort you've been making."
- "How can we work together to make this easier?"
- "I can see you care about this, let's figure it out together."
- "I'd like to understand what's been getting in the way."

When compliance approaches to relationships becomes a barrier

In some schools, the default response to absence has become a predictable cycle: letters, fines and sanctions. It's a mindset rooted in control, often aligned with what's been labelled the "trad" approach. firm, zero-tolerance and unbending.

The intention isn't malicious. Leaders are under pressure to improve attendance quickly, and compliance tools seem to promise an instant fix. But *here's the uncomfortable truth*: attendance rarely improves through fear alone. You might compel a child through the gates for a day, a week even but if they don't feel safe, seen, or valued, *they won't stay.*

The Problem with rigid Systems

A heavy focus on enforcement risks missing the human story behind absence. It can reduce complex situations to a tick-box exercise

- Anxiety isn't solved by detentions. Children with school-based anxiety need *relational safety* and tailored support, not punitive measures.

Phrases that break trust and present barriers to good relationships

Do **not use** these in conversations, letters and calls to foster collaboration

- "Your child's attendance is unacceptable."
- "If you don't sort this out, there will be consequences."
- "We've sent you the letter, you should know the rules."
- "You need to get your priorities straight."
- "We've already explained this to you before."
- "That's not my problem, you'll need to speak to someone else."

- SEND needs aren't met with fines. Families managing complex medical, sensory, or behavioural needs often require *flexibility, understanding*, and joined-up provision.

- Disconnection can't be bridged by compliance letters. Automated notifications may satisfy policy requirements but *rarely repair trust* or *rebuild engagement.*

- When schools lead attendance like **police officers** rather than shepherds, they may win short-term battles on the register but they risk losing the long-term war on chronic absence and disengagement.

The Impact on families

Parents under constant threat of fines or formal warnings often withdraw. Conversations become guarded. They stop sharing the full picture such as the health concerns, the mental health struggles, the late-night work shifts for fear it will be used against them.

This erosion of trust has a ripple effect. Support agencies are brought in later, solutions are harder to find and children remain caught in cycles of partial or non-attendance.

School leader Quick Reference
Relational Leadership led v Compliance led

Aspect	Compliance-led	Relationship-led
Core Mindset	Control, enforcement, and strict adherence to policy.	Connection, collaboration, and problem-solving.
First sign of attendance dip	Automated letter or email quoting attendance % and warning of consequences.	Immediate personal contact (phone or face-to-face) to listen, understand, and plan next steps.
Communication style	Formal, standardised and often legalistic.	Personalised, empathetic and adapted to the family's context.
Use of data	To trigger sanctions, fines, or formal procedures.	To explore root causes, identify barriers, and tailor interventions.
Response to persistent absence	Rapid escalation to formal warnings, fines, or legal action.	Increased personal support, pastoral involvement and multi-agency work before sanctions.
Approach to SEND needs	Applies policy uniformly, regardless of individual need.	Makes reasonable adjustments with specialist input while maintaining expectations.
Handling of anxiety/Mental Health	Treated primarily as an attendance breach to be addressed with sanctions.	Supported through gradual reintegration, safe spaces and wellbeing interventions.
Parent relationship	Parent seen as failing in responsibility; tone often accusatory.	Parent seen as a partner; tone focuses on shared goals for the child.
Outcome focus	Short-term register gains, risk of relapse.	Long-term engagement, improved wellbeing and sustainable attendance.
Example message	"Your child's attendance is at 85%. If this doesn't improve, you may face a fine."	"We've noticed attendance has dipped. Can we meet to talk about what's going on and how we can help?"

The Attendance Ecosystem
Climate & culture of belonging: Essentials for leaders

If we are serious about improving attendance, we must first confront a simple truth: children don't attend schools where they don't feel they belong.

Belonging isn't about posters in the corridor or tokenistic initiatives. It's about what pupils experience every day; the relationships they form, the way they are greeted, the lessons they sit in and how safe and valued they feel. For too long, our response to attendance has been driven by compliance and sanction. Yet we know that punitive approaches rarely shift entrenched absence. What does make a difference is culture: the day-to-day climate leaders create.

As leaders, this is in our hands. Every decision we make signals to pupils whether they matter. Do our tutors greet pupils by name each morning? Do our classrooms feel calm and purposeful? Does our curriculum reflect the lives and identities of the children in front of us? When these things are absent, attendance becomes a battle. But when they are present, pupils choose to be there.

What leaders can change starting now

Lead relationships from the front
- Be visible. Know names. Model warmth and high expectations in equal measure. When leaders prioritise relationships, staff follow. When pupils feel noticed by the people in charge, it shifts how they see school itself.

Make the curriculum matter
- If pupils are disengaged, attendance will suffer. Work with staff to strip out what feels irrelevant and bring in content that connects to pupils' worldviews and aspirations. A curriculum that recognises their lives says, "You belong here."

Embed fair and predictable behaviour cultures
- Pupils thrive in environments where they feel safe and know where they stand. Inconsistent systems breed resentment and fear. Leaders must hold their nerve, ensuring every child sees behaviour policies applied fairly and consistently.

Champion staff stability and care
- Attendance follows adults, not systems. Invest in retaining staff, reduce churn and protect teachers' capacity to build strong bonds with pupils. Stability in the workforce is stability for children.

Open the school gates to families
- Attendance isn't solved in isolation. When families see school as an ally, not an enforcer, the partnership deepens. Host informal coffee mornings, celebrate successes with parents and replace transactional contact with relational engagement.

A call to action

"Leadership is influence, and nowhere is that influence more visible than in the atmosphere of a school. Pupils know instantly when they walk through the gates whether a school feels safe, welcoming, and purposeful or not.

We set that tone.

Changing attendance means changing how our schools feel. It's about leading cultures where every child is seen, every lesson feels relevant, and every adult radiates belief that children belong. Get those foundations right, and attendance follows not because children are forced to come, but because they want to."

The Attendance Ecosystem
Climate & culture of belonging

Belonging is the blueprint for improving attendance...

Some thoughts from our Editor, Colin Cattanach

I've spent years looking at attendance data. Spreadsheets, reports, heat maps, the works. But here's what I've learned: numbers don't move unless people do. And people move when they feel they belong.

We can keep sending letters, making calls, and chasing codes, but none of that changes how a child feels walking through the school gate each morning.

The real questions are:
Does this place feel like it's for me?
Do I feel welcome here?
Will anyone notice if I don't come?

We talk endlessly about tackling absence, but rarely about designing presence. That means being intentional about the culture we create. It's in the tutor who greets a child by name, the head who's on the gate every morning, the classroom where a pupil's voice is heard, not just tolerated.

When belonging is strong, attendance shifts almost invisibly. Pupils want to be there. Parents stop dodging calls and start working with us. Staff stop firefighting and start building. It feels different because it is different.

If we want better attendance, we need to stop treating it like a numbers game and start seeing it as a design challenge. Build the conditions where pupils want to come in, and they will.

So here's my challenge:
- What would it look like if we designed our schools around belonging first and attendance second?
- What are the daily rituals that make every child feel they're seen, safe and valued?
- And how often are we asking ourselves these questions not just at INSET, but every single week?

Because attendance doesn't live in a spreadsheet. It lives in the corridors, the conversations and the quiet signals we send every day. If we want to fix attendance, we need to stop chasing it and start designing presence.

"When we lead attendance like police officers rather than shepherds, we might win the register but lose the child."

"Control might bring a child to the gate; connection keeps them there."

"Compliance can fill the register today, but only relationships keep it full tomorrow."

"Enforcement might win you a battle, but it rarely wins the war on absence."

"Rigid systems may tick boxes but they don't win hearts."

"Attendance isn't a number, it's a story."
"Every story starts with a child who needs to feel they belong."
"The strongest attendance strategy is a school a child wants to come back to."
"You can't mandate belonging, you have to create it."

The Attendance Ecosystem
Systems of care and response

The new paradigm recognises that improving attendance requires a **system of care** as well as a **system of response.** It's a shift from "How do we make them come?" to "How do we help them want to be here?"

What is a System of Care?

A system of care is the proactive, relational framework that surrounds every child and family before attendance becomes a crisis. It focuses on belonging, wellbeing and trust.

This includes:

- Daily relational touchpoints such as greetings at the gate, knowing pupils by name, noticing when they're not themselves.

- Safe and inclusive environments; clean, welcoming spaces; classrooms where behaviour is calm and purposeful; a curriculum that reflects pupils' lives.

- Support for the whole family with signposting to community resources, flexibility for genuine hardship and a culture where asking for help is normalised.

- Trusted adults for every child so no pupil is "unknown" to the system.

"Good leaders know when to follow policy and when to follow humanity."
Headteacher Primary

What is a System of Response?

A **system of response** is what happens when attendance starts to slip. In the new paradigm, this is not about immediate enforcement, but about **graduated, supportive escalation.**

It includes:

- Early, personal contact such as phone calls or face-to-face conversations at the first sign of a dip.

- Root cause analysis using data as a diagnostic tool to uncover the "why" behind absence, not just the "how much."

- Flexible intervention menus from pastoral mentoring to timetable adjustments, phased returns, or multi-agency involvement.

- Measured accountability with clear expectations for improvement, but framed in partnership rather than punishment.

How They Work Together

In the new model, care and response are inseparable. Care without response risks **tolerating absence;** response without care risks **fuelling disengagement**.

Together, they create:
- Prevention and reducing the likelihood of absence by embedding connection and belonging.
- Early intervention by catching small dips before they escalate.
- Sustained recovery whilst ensuring gains in attendance are maintained because the underlying barriers have been addressed.

Old Model	New Paradigm
Reactive, triggered only by absence thresholds.	Proactive, starting before absence occurs.
Data used for compliance and sanction.	Data used for understanding and targeted support.
Parents engaged only when problems are severe.	Parents engaged regularly as partners.
Uniform approach regardless of need.	Flexible, needs-led interventions.
Attendance improvement seen as a numbers game.	Attendance improvement seen as a wellbeing and engagement journey.

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The Attendance Ecosystem
Data and Insights

The DfE's latest termly release (August 2025) shows persistent absence fell to 17.8% in Autumn 2024/25 (down from 19.4% a year earlier). Year-to-date weekly returns through late June indicate attendance around 93.2% and persistent absence ~18.4%, still well above pre-pandemic norms. Severe absence remains stubborn (≈2% of pupils in Autumn), with particular vulnerabilities for groups such as young carers. These figures tell us two things: the direction is improving and the challenge is far from over.

Data vs Insight (and why leaders must stop conflating them)
- **Data are the raw facts**: *percentages, codes, counts, bands, reasons. Examples: your weekly attendance %, number of PA pupils, reason codes.*
- **Insight is the meaning you extract to guide decisions**. *Examples: 'Mondays are driving half our absence gap'; 'Year 8 girls with anxiety cluster around one corridor'. Rule of thumb: if it doesn't change a decision, it isn't an insight just a statistic.*

From Data to decisions: A Practical flow
- Assemble clean, timely data and use the DfE tool alongside your MIS so your daily view aligns with national definitions.
- Interrogate patterns and go beyond whole-school averages and segment by group, band, reason and teacher.
- Generate hypotheses and triangulate/pair quantitative data with qualitative checks.
- Choose proportionate responses e.g. early dips need light-touch, supportive action.
- **Track impact, not activity,** you need to judge interventions by actual days regained and movement between bands.

What good MIS practice looks Like in a nutshell
Modern MIS platforms now provide out-of-the-box dashboards and improved analytics. Use them deliberately to drive attendance improvement. Examples include daily custom reports, data dashboards, band movement tracking and intervention groups linked to risks and predicted attendance trends.

Five decisions leaders should be able to make in 10 minutes every day
- Who needs us today? Which students are at risk?
- Where are we leaking time? Year group? Cohort sub group?
- Which interventions earn attendance back fastest?
- Which adults unlock attendance?
- Are we compliant and fair?

Common pitfalls that keep data from becoming insight
- Averages only by focussing on whole-school figures, we can mask subgroup variation.
- Lagging reports; if we re slow off the mark, late data misses the window for action.
- Activities over outcomes ; we need to think impact and focus on days regained.
- Policy without humanity by ruining relationships and causing damage through premature enforcement.

KPIs that actually shift attendance
- % PA and % Severe with band movement week-on-week.
- Days regained per intervention.
- Time-to-first-contact after a missed session.
- Tutor effect (variance between tutor groups).
- Stickiness of recovery over 6–12 weeks.
- Reason code accuracy against guidance.

Preparing for the Autumn Term
Audit & Analysis

Begin with a comprehensive review of last year's attendance data. This critical first step establishes your baseline and helps identify key areas for improvement. A thorough audit provides the foundation for a targeted, effective attendance strategy.

Pattern Identification

Look for day-of-week trends, subject-specific absences, and seasonal variations that might reveal systemic issues. Analyse these patterns to determine if absences cluster around specific days (Monday/Friday syndrome), lessons, or times of year (dark winter mornings, pre-holiday periods)

Cohort Analysis

Identify persistent absentees and analyse attendance patterns by year group, demographic factors and vulnerability indicators. Pay particular attention to pupil premium, SEND and specific ethnic groups who may face unique barriers to attendance.

Comparative Data

Consider local context set against national and if in a group of schools, comparable schools in your group or MAT.

Remember: Your attendance audit should go beyond the numbers. While data provides a valuable starting point, it is the stories behind the absences that often hold the key to improvement. Gathering qualitative insights from staff, pupils and families can reveal underlying barriers such as wellbeing issues, unmet needs, or disengagement that raw figures alone cannot capture.

Preparing for the Autumn Term
Policy & Procedure refresh

Review Current Policy

Evaluate your existing attendance policy against the latest DfE guidance and best practices. Identify outdated elements, procedural gaps, and areas requiring strengthening in light of post-pandemic attendance challenges. Ensure your policy reflects current understanding of attendance

Ensure Accessibility

Make your policy understandable to all stakeholders. Provide translations for community languages, visual summaries, and plain language versions. Eliminate educational jargon and complex terminology that might create barriers for parents and carers. Verify readability levels to ensure accessibility across your school community.

Update Procedures

Define clear roles, responsibilities and processes for monitoring, intervention and celebration. Procedures should be specific and actionable, detailing exactly who manages each aspect of attendance from daily register monitoring to complex case intervention. Include clear thresholds for different action levels and explicit timelines for escalation.

Communicate Changes

Develop a comprehensive plan for sharing the refreshed policy with staff, pupils, parents, and governors. Highlight key changes and their rationale. Use different formats for different audiences and create opportunities for questions and clarification to ensure everyone understands both requirements and reasoning.

An effective attendance policy balances clear expectations with supportive approaches. Avoid overly punitive language that can alienate families facing genuine barriers. Instead, emphasise partnership and the shared goal of supporting pupils' education and wellbeing.

Involve parent representatives, pupil councils, and staff when reviewing and updating your attendance policy. A collaborative approach not only strengthens the quality of the policy but also fosters shared ownership of attendance improvement.

Give particular focus to the section on medical absences, ensuring it strikes the right balance between supporting health needs and maintaining educational expectations.

Provide clear, practical guidance on when children should attend despite minor ailments, while showing sensitivity and understanding towards genuine health concerns.

Preparing for the Autumn Term
Team Preparation

Your attendance strategy's success depends entirely on your team's readiness to implement it. Strategic preparation before term begins, transforms policy into practice, ensuring every team member understands their role and possesses the skills to execute it effectively.

Targeted CPD

Deliver specialised professional development tailored to each role. Attendance officers need advanced data analysis skills, pastoral teams require intervention expertise and form tutors need techniques for sensitive conversations. Focus on practical application rather than theoretical knowledge.

Clear protocols

Establish unambiguous communication pathways and decision-making structures. Develop visual flowcharts and step-by-step guides for common scenarios, eliminating uncertainty and ensuring consistent policy application across all staff levels.

Resource development

Create comprehensive toolkits including conversation scripts, letter templates, and intervention materials. Produce an attendance handbook containing essential processes, key contacts, and quick-reference guides that support both experienced and new staff members.

Data systems

Configure appropriate system access levels and provide targeted training on data interpretation. Implement automated reporting and early warning systems that enable proactive rather than reactive attendance management.

"The most effective attendance teams have clearly defined roles but share a common vision. Everyone understands not just what they're doing, but why it matters."
MAT Executive Lead

Incorporate scenario-based training sessions where staff practise responses to challenging attendance situations. Role-playing difficult conversations, escalation procedures and multi-agency coordination builds confidence and competence, particularly crucial for newer team members who may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of attendance management.

Preparing for the Autumn Term
Communication Planning

Strategic communication forms the cornerstone of attendance improvement. A well-crafted termly communications campaign reinforces attendance expectations and cultivates engagement across your school community.

Pre-Term communication

- Welcome letters emphasising attendance importance
- Summer holiday reminders about term dates
- Personal outreach to families of persistent absentees
- Social media countdown with positive messaging

First week messaging

- Attendance-focused assemblies for each year group
- Parent information sessions at welcome events
- Daily attendance celebrations and challenges
- Visual displays showing attendance goals

Communication ongoing

- Weekly attendance updates in newsletters
- Personalised communications about individual patterns
- Social media posts celebrating achievements
- Half-term review meetings for targeted families

Tailor your approach

Customise messages for different audiences - Year 7 parents have different concerns than Year 11 families. Develop messaging that reflects your community context and addresses local challenges while celebrating strengths.

Use multiple channels

Combine traditional methods (letters, phone calls) with digital channels (email, text, social media, apps). This ensures messages reach all stakeholders while accommodating different communication preferences and accessibility needs.

Develop a communication calendar that maps key messages across the term, balancing universal messages for all families with targeted communications for those requiring additional attendance support.

First week essentials
Setting the tone

The first week back is crucial for establishing attendance expectations. Research demonstrates that patterns set in September often persist throughout the academic year, making these initial days a critical window for intervention. The tone, systems and expectations established during this period can significantly impact attendance trends for months to come.

Schools that prioritise attendance from day one see measurably better annual attendance rates than those that allow patterns to establish before intervening. Studies indicate that schools implementing structured first-week attendance initiatives achieve up to 2.7% higher annual attendance rates compared to those that don't emphasise attendance from the outset.

First Week Strategies

- Hold a dedicated attendance assembly highlighting the link between attendance and achievement
- Display attendance data prominently in communal areas, celebrating high and improved attenders
- Ensure form tutors personally welcome back every pupil and immediately follow up on any absences
- Create a festive, welcoming atmosphere that makes pupils want to attend
- Begin engaging curriculum activities immediately rather than administrative tasks
- Share compelling attendance data in visual formats that pupils can understand
- Establish clear morning routines that set positive expectations
- Launch attendance reward systems immediately

"How you welcome pupils back sets the precedent for the entire year. Make that first morning so positive and engaging that they can't wait to return the next day."

Year 9 Tutor

Consider creating a special "Welcome Back" experience that transforms returning to school into an event pupils don't want to miss. This might include special activities, small welcome gifts, photo opportunities or community-building experiences that reinforce the value of being present from day one and establish a positive foundation for the year ahead.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

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Issue: Does Ofsted recognise attendance as an integral part of the wider safeguarding framework?

Let's be candid any new Ofsted framework worth its salt should treat attendance practice as a core safeguarding issue.

The overlap is glaring. Persistent absence, unexplained codes, sudden drops in attendance, or pupils disappearing from the roll are not just "attendance problems" they are potential safeguarding red flags. Yet, in the current inspection climate, attendance is often treated as a data set to be examined in isolation, rather than a live indicator of risk.

Embedding attendance within the safeguarding judgement would raise the stakes for leaders. It would mean that creative coding, overly generous authorisations, long registration windows, or off-rolling aren't just poor management they could be judged as failures to protect children. That shift in framing would deter questionable practices far more effectively than a standalone attendance measure ever could.

If leaders knew that every attendance decision would be examined through the lens of safeguarding with the same seriousness as any other child protection concern we might finally see an end to the gamesmanship and a renewed focus on what matters: ensuring every child is safe, supported and present in school.

Are you thinking yet about the new Ofsted report card for attendance?

First Week Essentials
Early Intervention

Identifying at-risk pupils before term begins and implementing targeted strategies immediately can prevent attendance problems from developing or recurring. Swift action in the first week creates a foundation for sustained improvement throughout the year.

Personal welcome Meetings

Schedule individual meetings with pupils who had previous attendance concerns. Set positive expectations, address specific barriers and develop personalised support plans before patterns re-establish themselves.

Buddy system

Establish peer support networks for vulnerable pupils or those transitioning between key stages. Pair them with reliable peers who can provide social encouragement and practical assistance with attendance.

Immediate follow-Up

Implement same-day contact for any unexplained absences in the first week . This demonstrates that attendance is monitored from day one and helps identify emerging barriers before they become entrenched.

Attendance Mentors/trusted adults

Deploy dedicated mentor/trusted adults to check in daily with previously persistent absentees. These regular connections build supportive relationships whilst providing accountability and encouragement.

For every day of intervention delayed at the start of term, attendance patterns become exponentially harder to change. Establishing clear expectations and robust support systems immediately can transform annual attendance outcomes. The most effective approaches combine genuine welcome-backs with clear expectations, helping pupils and families understand both the support available and the non-negotiable importance of regular attendance from the very beginning of term.

> ℹ️ Create a priority intervention list before term begins, categorising pupils by risk level: previous persistent absentees, pupils with attendance in DFE bandings below 90%, 90-95%, 95-100% in the previous year, vulnerable pupils with known risk factors and those transitioning between key stages or schools. This proactive approach ensures immediate, targeted support where it's needed most.

Building Momentum
Autumn Term Strategy

A structured, progressive approach to the autumn term helps maintain momentum and prevent the traditional attendance dips that often occur as the term progresses. Breaking the term into distinct phases allows for targeted strategies and regular review points, ensuring sustained improvement rather than initial enthusiasm that fades.

1

Weeks 1 Establish Expectations

- Launch comprehensive attendance rewards programme
- Implement clear, consistent morning routines
- Personally contact vulnerable families
- Create prominent attendance visual displays and tracking systems

2

Weeks 2-3: First Analysis

- Conduct comprehensive data analysis of emerging patterns
- Identify pupils showing early signs of attendance decline
- Begin targeted interventions for at-risk pupils
- Review and refine morning procedures based on initial feedback

3

Weeks 4 - 6: Half-TermPush

- Implement pre-half-term attendance challenge to maintain momentum
- Celebrate early successes and acknowledge improvements
- Review and adjust interventions based on effectiveness
- Send personalised communications highlighting individual progress

4

Weeks 7-15: Sustain and Strengthen

- Intensify support as darker mornings and challenging weather arrive
- Escalate interventions for persistent absentees
- Conduct family attendance clinics and support sessions
- Prepare meaningful end-of-term celebrations for improved attenders

The key to success lies in understanding that attendance improvement is *a marathon, not a sprint.* Sustained effort, regular review points and the flexibility to adapt strategies based on emerging data create the conditions for lasting change. Schools that maintain their focus throughout the autumn term lay the foundation for year-round attendance success.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

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Issue: Why do some school or Trust leaders not engage fully with the attendance agenda and growing evidence?

We need to be candid… some school leaders are rudderless with improving attendance.

If we're being candid, yes, some school leaders are failing on attendance because they simply haven't engaged with the evidence.

They fall back on what they've always done such as blanket letters, rigid sanctions or termly "attendance drives" without ever reading the growing body of research on what actually works. They miss the clear message that punitive measures alone don't shift entrenched absence and that culture, relationships and relevance matter as much as systems.

The result? They're navigating a complex issue with no map, relying on instinct and habit rather than informed strategy. In practice, this leaves them clueless about root causes and rudderless in their approach, chasing surface-level fixes while the underlying issues such as belonging, engagement, parental trust all go untouched.

It's not a lack of resources that's the main barrier here; it's a lack of professional curiosity. Leaders who won't read the evidence will keep repeating the same mistakes and their pupils will keep paying the price.

Do you have a strategic plan for designing presence in your school?

Designing Presence
Autumn term strategy

The concept of "designing presence" represents a fundamental shift in how we approach school attendance. Rather than merely tracking absences and responding to problems, this approach focuses on creating educational environments where pupils actively want to be present: physically, emotionally and intellectually engaged. If you get this right in the autumn term, you will have solid foundations for the rest of the year.

Beyond Compliance

Transform from a compliance-focused model ("you must attend") to a belonging-centered approach ("this is your community"). Research demonstrates that pupils with a strong sense of school belonging achieve up to 15% better attendance rates and show greater resilience during challenging periods.

Holistic Engagement

Understand that physical presence alone is insufficient for meaningful learning. Design experiences that capture attention, foster curiosity and create authentic connections between pupils, content, and community. Engaged pupils are 60% less likely to develop persistent attendance problems.

Proactive Design

Intentionally structure every aspect of the school experience to minimise barriers and maximise pull factors. This encompasses everything from timetabling and physical spaces to relationships and recognition systems.

This paradigm shift challenges us to move beyond traditional attendance management approaches that focus primarily on monitoring, following up and sanctioning absence. Instead, it demands we *critically examine our educational offer and environment,* ensuring they create compelling reasons for pupils to choose attendance.

Schools that have successfully embraced this approach report not only improved attendance figures but also enhanced pupil wellbeing, behaviour, and academic outcomes. The transformative effects of designing presence create positive ripple effects that extend far beyond daily attendance registers, fundamentally changing the school experience for all.

Practical Applications
Autumn term strategy

From day one, leaders are visible on the gate, every absence is followed up the same day and vulnerable pupils are met with a trusted adult. Lessons start immediately in welcoming classrooms, with tutors building daily connections and keeping registers accurate. Parents are engaged early through positive contact and attendance data is used to spot and act on small dips before they grow. **The culture is clear when every pupil is known and every day matters.**

Morning Experience

Implement "soft starts" with engaging activities - music, mindfulness, games or reading, creating positive transitions into the school day.

Strategic Scheduling

Place engaging lessons on traditionally high-absence days. Avoid concentrating less engaging tasks on Mondays or Fridays.

Relationship Building

Develop authentic connections through regular check-ins and interest-based conversations. Prioritise connection before curriculum.

Physical Environment

Create welcoming spaces with positive entrance experiences, inclusive displays and comfortable seating options.

Positive Focus

Celebrate presence rather than penalising absence. Develop recognition systems that value being present.

Pupil Ownership

Incorporate pupil voice in curriculum design and school policies. Ensure pupils understand the reasoning behind school structures.

"We've moved beyond asking 'How do we get them here?' to 'How do we create a place they don't want to miss?' It's completely transformed our approach to attendance."

Secondary Headteacher

Focus on creating environments that meet pupils' psychological needs consistently rather than relying on external rewards or punishments for sustainable attendance improvements.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are some CEOS of MATS more soundbite than substance?

Let's be blunt attendance has become a safe soundbite for some MAT CEOs.

They'll talk about "making every day count" in glossy reports, reference attendance as a "strategic priority" in conference speeches, and nod gravely at the national crisis but when you drill down, there's little beyond empty rhetoric.

No resourcing plan. No trained attendance leadership. No investment in data literacy. No coherent family engagement strategy. Just a vague instruction for schools to "do better" and a hope that headteachers will somehow fix it without additional support.

In some trusts, the CEO's role on attendance is purely performative: a few quotes for the newsletter, maybe a one-off meeting with the LA or DfE, and then back to other priorities. Meanwhile, schools are left to struggle in isolation and the most vulnerable pupils pay the price.

If attendance is truly "everyone's business" as the slogans claim then MAT CEOs have to own it. That means visible leadership, tough conversations, funding decisions that back up the talk and a willingness to challenge poor practice in their own schools.

Otherwise, it's just PR gloss on a deepening problem.

So what kind of CEO are you?

Case Studies
Autumn term strategy

A Bedfordshire Community School

1

Implemented "Connection before content" with the first five minutes of every day focused on relationship building. Form tutors used specific connection strategies and conversation resources.

Result: 2.8% attendance improvement in one year, with 32% more students reporting "someone would notice and care if they were absent."

A Somerset Academy

2

Redesigned curriculum to start each day with engaging, hands-on subjects. Created mixed-age "attendance families" who celebrated milestones and supported struggling members.

Result: Persistent absence dropped from 18.2% to 11.4% over two terms, with 43% more pupils "looking forward to school."

A Bristol Primary

3

"Created welcoming classroom entrances personalised for each pupil and implemented soft start" with pupil-chosen activities 15 minutes before registration.

Result: 67% decrease in late arrivals, 1.9% attendance improvement with 89% of parents reporting children "eager to arrive."

ℹ️ These case studies demonstrate the power of **intentional design** in improving attendance. Each school took a different approach based on their context, but all focused on creating environments where pupils actively wanted to be present.

👍 **BEST PRACTICE** All tutors should engage in daily conversations with students to build a strong sense of belonging and connection. Administrative tasks must take second priority during this time. No other activities should take place other than the formal and accurate recording of attendance. PSHE activities will enhance belonging if executed well.

Are you part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)? Are you a LA or independent school?
If so, how actively do you collaborate across schools on attendance strategy?
Are there regular forums or working groups where attendance leads share ideas, resources and challenges?
Do case studies lead to tangible changes in practice, or do they sit unused?

The Attendance Ecosystem

Essay: An uncomfortable truth in our schools from Colin Cattanach

We highlight the hidden crisis in education; talented teachers and leaders are leaving, not from incompetence or lack of will, but because the system strips them of time, energy and dignity.

Schools rely on the unsustainable goodwill of exhausted staff, pushing them beyond reasonable limits with unrealistic workloads and insufficient resources. The erosion of "surplus" capacity, the time and space to think, care and adapt undermines morale, reduces effectiveness, and accelerates burnout.

The problem isn't a shortage of good people, but a system design that drives them away, perpetuating a cycle of vacancies and underperformance.

 This staffing crisis directly impacts pupil attendance. When staff are overstretched and constantly firefighting, there is less capacity for proactive relationship-building, early intervention, and personalised support; the very strategies that help keep students engaged and present in school.

Inconsistent staffing and high turnover disrupt continuity and trust, making it harder to address emerging attendance issues before they escalate. As a result, instability in the workforce feeds instability in attendance, creating a feedback loop that harms both students and the professionals who serve them.

Every week, another brilliant teacher or school leader quietly steps away from the profession. They don't leave because they're lazy. They don't walk away because they're incompetent. They leave because the system slowly starves them of what they need to keep going: time, energy, space to think and the basic dignity of being treated like a human being.

Still, the question gets asked: why can't we find good people to work in schools? The truth is, we had them. We trained them, trusted them, and then we put them in positions where success was almost impossible without personal sacrifice. And when they inevitably burned out, we blamed them instead of looking at the system that failed them.

There's a staffing crisis in education, but it's not just about recruitment. It's about design. It's about the quiet erosion of capacity that happens when roles become overloaded, when expectations outpace resources, and when people are asked to carry more than they can without breaking. It's about schools running on the goodwill of exhausted professionals who are praised for going above and beyond but never given enough to simply do their job well.

What's often missing from the conversation is the idea of surplus. In any complex role, especially one rooted in relationships and care, people need a margin. They need surplus time, surplus energy, surplus space to respond flexibly and empathetically. That surplus is what allows a teacher to pause and check in with a distressed student. It's what gives a SENCO the capacity to follow up on a delayed assessment. It's what allows leaders to think strategically instead of firefighting constantly.

Take away that surplus and even the most capable, committed professionals begin to falter. They become more reactive, less relational. Less able to adapt. Less able to give their best. And then we wonder why morale drops, why retention falls, why the same vacancies go round year after year.

We have built a system that relies on unsustainable sacrifice. The only way to survive in too many school roles is to overwork, to absorb the strain and to do the emotional labour in silence. But no one can run on empty forever. A system that depends on people giving more than they can afford to give will always fail.

We need to stop thinking the problem is a lack of good people. The problem is what we do to them once they arrive. We overload, underfund and overpromise. We build job descriptions that sound doable on paper but collapse under the weight of real-life complexity. And then we blame the person, rather than the structure.

Good people are not failing in schools. The structure is failing them. Until we are brave enough to name that, to stop quietly rewarding overwork and start designing roles that are actually possible to sustain, we will keep losing the very people trying hardest to help.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Schools are running on empty.

Let's be candid, many schools simply do not have the capacity to tackle attendance effectively.

For some, the root cause is lack of funding; for others, it's a poorly understood or badly executed allocation of the funding they do have. Money is poured into reactive measures, piecemeal interventions, or short-lived projects, while the structural investment needed for sustained attendance improvement, skilled staff, robust systems, and sustained family engagement, never materialises.

In some cases, leaders even blame MAT subscriptions or central costs, claiming they have been left without the resources to build a proper attendance team. The uncomfortable truth is that in many schools, attendance leadership is being run on a shoestring — often handed to a single overworked admin or pastoral lead, with no real authority, no specialist training, and no time to do the job well.

The result is predictable: attendance remains stubbornly low, interventions lack depth, and the cycle repeats each year. Without serious investment, not just in budget, but in understanding how to deploy it strategically attendance leadership will continue to deliver poor impact, no matter how committed the individuals are.

How are you tackling staff wellbeing ?

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Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: How do we stop schools from bending the attendance rules?

Let's be candid, there are schools that appear to post "good" attendance figures while quietly bending the system.

Lengthy open registration windows allow late arrivals to be marked present without challenge. Creative coding masks the true level of absence by using authorised codes liberally or recoding sessions in ways that flatter the data. And off-rolling, moving persistently absent pupils off the roll under the guise of "best interests" can all but erase the hardest cases from the statistics.

These practices don't just distort the picture; they erode public trust, mislead governors and inspectors, and, most importantly, fail the very pupils most in need of support. If a leader deliberately manipulates attendance reporting rather than tackling the underlying issues, that is an abuse of their professional responsibility. In any other sector, falsifying performance data is a sackable offence, education should be no different.

Authentic improvement means facing the data honestly, however uncomfortable it is, and being prepared to have those difficult conversations about culture, systems and support. Anything else is smoke and mirrors.

How do you know that your staff are not bending the rules with attendance data?

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Is the school curriculum no longer fit for purpose or relevant for many children?

Let's be candid the way we structure curriculum, assessment, and accountability is actively driving some pupils away from school.

For too many, the curriculum feels narrow, irrelevant, and joyless. The relentless march towards GCSEs, underpinned by a fixation on Progress 8 scores, squeezes out creativity, vocational learning and opportunities to shine in areas beyond English and maths. For pupils who don't see themselves reflected in the content or the measures of success, disengagement becomes almost inevitable.

The assessment regime adds to the problem. High-stakes testing from an early age fosters anxiety, dents self-esteem, and turns school into a place of constant judgement rather than growth. For some, avoiding school feels safer than facing daily failure.

This isn't about lowering expectations, it's about broadening what we value. A system that recognises different talents, pathways, and definitions of success is far more likely to keep pupils engaged and present.

Until we address the structural drivers of disengagement, the curriculum's relevance, the assessment system's intensity, and the distorting effect of Progress 8, we'll keep treating symptoms rather than causes. Reform isn't optional; it's essential if we want attendance to improve in a meaningful and lasting way.

Is you curriculum relevant for ALL your pupils?

DfE National Attendance snap shot 24/25

What's the biggest positive shift in your school or group of schools?

Metric	Figure
Overall attendance	93.10%
Absence rate	6.90%
Year-on-year change in absence	▼ 0.3 percentage points

School Type	Absence Rate	Authorised	Unauthorised
Primary	5.20%	3.70%	1.50%
Secondary	8.60%	5.30%	3.30%
Special Schools	12.90%	—	—

School Type	Persistent Absence	Year-on-Year Change
All Schools	18.70%	▼ 2.0 pp
Primary	13.50%	—
Secondary	24.30%	—
Special Schools	35.80%	—

Group	Absence Rate	Persistent Absence
FSM-eligible	10.60%	33.00%
Non-FSM	5.40%	13.40%
SEN – EHC Plan	13.70%	36.90%
SEN Support	10.60%	29.90%
No SEN	6.00%	16.50%

DfE Bandings
School leader Quick Reference

The Department for Education's attendance classification framework provides a standardised approach for monitoring and intervention.

- National averages are not the benchmark for success.
- Good attendance should mean above 96% if we are to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Band	Percentage	Classification	Impact
1	100%	Perfect attendance	No absences
2	98 - 99.9%	Excellent	Minimal absence
3	96 - 97.9%	Good	Few justified absences
4	93 - 95.9%	Requires Improvement	Occasional Absence. Significant attainment risks
5	90-92.9%	Concerning	Severely affecting outcomes. At risk of PA
6	Below 90%	Persistent Absence	Requires urgent intervention
7	Below 50%	Severe Absence	Requires extreme intervention

This framework enables graduated responses and early intervention before pupils reach the 90% persistent absence threshold.

ℹ **Help parents understand that even 93 - 95.9% attendance means missing enough school to affect attainment.**

BEST PRACTICE Always translate attendance data into real terms such as days or lessons missed to make it meaningful. For example, an attendance rate of 92% over a full school year equates to approximately 15 days of school missed or around 75 lessons.

Leaders should critically reflect on how effectively they are using attendance bandings in their daily and weekly reporting to pinpoint shifts in pupil groups. Simply recording attendance is not enough; the value lies in tracking movements between bands in real time, enabling targeted intervention before patterns become entrenched. A well-configured MIS should be maximised to produce clear, actionable group lists that are small enough to manage but precise enough to identify the pupils who need immediate support. By combining this with consistent intervention tracking, leaders can not only measure the current state but also predict the likely impact of their actions on attendance outcomes, ensuring that resources are focused where they will make the greatest difference.

DfE Bandings
Practical Implementation

BEST PRACTICE Using DFE bandings effectively

The DfE bandings are not merely administrative categories. They provide a framework for strategic intervention. Consider these practical approaches for maximising their impact in your school.

Visual communication

Create clear visual representations of the bandings for displays, parent communications and pupil discussions. Use consistent colour- coding across all materials (e.g., green for bands 1-3, amber for bands 4-5, red for bands 6-7). This visual approach helps all stakeholders understand attendance patterns at a glance.

Resource allocation

Prioritise intensive support for pupils in bands 6-7 while implementing preventative measures for those in bands 4-5. This balanced approach addresses current persistent absence while preventing future cases. Consider creating specific staffing allocations and intervention programs for each band.

Graduated response

Develop specific intervention protocols for each band, ensuring proportionate and appropriate action. This prevents over-intervention with pupils whose attendance is good while ensuring sufficient support for those with concerning patterns. Document these responses clearly in your attendance policy.

Progress tracking

Celebrate movement between bands, not just overall percentages. Recognising a pupil who moves from band 6 to band 5 acknowledges significant improvement, even though they may still be below the desired attendance level. This approach motivates continued progress.

⚠️ Common pitfalls to avoid

- Focusing exclusively on persistent absentees while neglecting those at risk Using
- punitive approaches for pupils in lower bands rather than supportive strategies
- Failing to differentiate between bands when designing interventions Overlooking
- pattern analysis within bands (e.g., specific days or subjects)
- Not communicating the significance of bands to pupils and parents

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: The DFE is connecting with schools with its attendance analysis tools and the country is making some 'green shoots' of recovery.

Let's be blunt, credit where it's due, the DfE has significantly improved its attendance data analysis and the support it offers to schools and that progress should be acknowledged.

The national dashboards are sharper, more timely and more transparent than in the past. Schools and trusts can now access comparative data, spot trends earlier and benchmark themselves more meaningfully. The guidance, toolkits and sector engagement while not perfect are a step up from the patchy, reactive approach of previous years.

In a landscape where criticism of government policy is often justified, it's important to recognise when they get something right. These improvements give schools a stronger evidence base for action and that's a genuine gain.

The challenge now is to ensure this momentum is sustained and that data insight continues to be paired with investment, training and systemic reform, so schools can actually act on what the numbers reveal.

Great work DFE! But more still to do in 2025/26........ when we look in more depth to the 2024/25 headlines.

Key Point	Detail
Uneven distribution	Vulnerable groups, particularly FSM-eligible pupils and those with SEND/EHC plans, are significantly more likely to be absent.
Secondary challenge	Persistent absence remains high in secondary schools, affecting almost 1 in 4 pupils.
Action required	Targeted, evidence-based interventions are needed to address structural barriers and specific needs of disadvantaged learners.

Theme	Key Ideas
Progress & limitation	National attendance at 93.1% shows improvement, but absence still equals millions of lost learning
Uneven recovery	Primary attendance is stronger; secondary absence rates nearly double. Causes range from
Inequality gap	FSM and non-FSM pupils show a persistent absence gap of 20 percentage points.
What works	Focus on belonging, early intervention, and whole-school culture rather than penalties alone.
Leadership priorities	Attendance embedded into culture, systems that notice/respond early, curriculum/pastoral care to

DfE Bandings
Intervention Mapping

A structured intervention map ensures resources are allocated appropriately, with intensity increasing as attendance decreases.

Bands 1-3: Maintenance & Celebration

- Recognition in assemblies, Tutor conversations
- Termly rewards
- Positive home communication

Band 4: Early Intervention

- Form tutor monitoring
- Pupil conversations
- Parent letter

Band 5: Targeted Support

- Attendance action plan
- Parental meeting
- Weekly monitoring

Band 6: Intensive Intervention

- Attendance team referral
- Multi-agency assessment
- Tailored support package

Band 7: Crisis Response

- Statutory intervention
- Daily welfare checks
- Alternative provision

> ⚠️ Document your intervention map clearly and share it with all stakeholders to create accountability and transparency.

Tracking Data

Essential Reports schools should be using

Daily Monitoring

Immediate oversight for swift intervention is critical for effective attendance management. These daily reports enable rapid response to absence patterns before they become established.

First day absence report

All pupils absent without notification. This report drives same-day contact with families, demonstrating that absence is noticed immediately and enabling early identification of any safeguarding concerns.

Unexpected absence alert

Pupils with previously good attendance suddenly absent. These unexpected changes in pattern often indicate significant new barriers that require prompt investigation and intervention.

Pattern trigger warning

Pupils absent on their "pattern day" (e.g., third Monday). This report identifies pupils developing regular absence patterns that might otherwise be missed in overall attendance figures.

Vulnerable pupil alert

Absence of any pupil on safeguarding registers. This critical report ensures that absence of vulnerable pupils receives immediate attention from appropriate staff.

Group anomaly report

Unusual absence rates in specific classes or year groups. This report helps identify potential wider issues such as bullying incidents, challenging lessons, or community events affecting attendance.

Weekly Analysis

Regular review forearl yintervention provides a structured approach to attendance monitoring that catches concerns before they escalate to persistent absence.

Weekly reports should include declining trend analysis, threshold alerts for pupils approaching persistent absence boundaries, intervention impact summaries, code analysis to identify patterns in reasons for absence, and punctuality reviews that identify late arrivals as potential absence precursors.

Tracking Data
Beyond Percentages

Effective attendance monitoring goes far beyond headline percentage figures. Sophisticated data analysis reveals patterns, triggers and intervention opportunities that might other wise be missed.

Pattern analysis

- Day of week trends (Monday/Friday syndrome)
- Subject-specific absences
- Weather-related patterns
- Post-holiday dips
- Seasonal variations
- Time-of-day patterns
- Staff-related correlations

Cohort tracking

- Pupil premium
- Ethnic groups
- Prior attainment bands Year groups
- Looked after children
- Geographic clusters
- Heat maps by postcode
- SEND Categories

Early warning Indicators

Track precursors to persistent absence: increasing lateness, pattern changes, declining trends, specific absence codes and incomplete registers.

Intervention Impact

Measure strategy effectiveness through pre/post comparisons, control group analysis, cost-benefit calculations and sustainability measures.

Advanced data analysis enables schools to move from reactive to proactive attendance management, implementing interventions before problems become entrenched.

> **i**   Balance comprehensive analysis with practical usability. Provide different levels of detail for different users such as headline figures for governors, cohort analysis for middle leaders, and individual pupil data for form tutors.

The Role of Attendance Champions
## *Selecting the right person for your school*

An Attendance Champion is a dedicated staff member who leads the school's attendance strategy, coordinating all aspects of implementation to create sustainable improvement.

Strategic leadership

Develops the school's attendance vision, sets targets, and ensures alignment with school improvement plans.

System design

Creates effective monitoring, intervention, and celebration systems that are consistently implemented and evaluated.
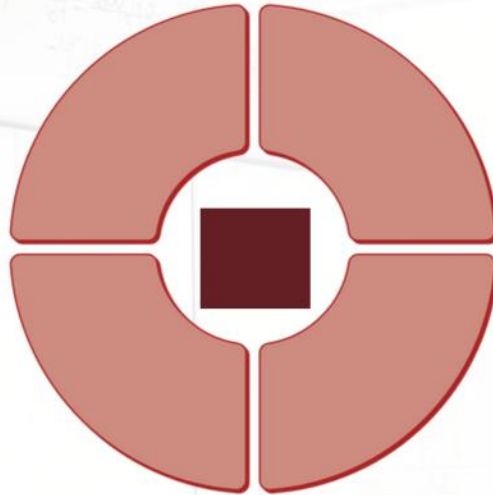
Data analysis

Conducts regular analysis to identify patterns and trends, translating raw data into actionable insights for staff.

Staff development

Provides training and support to all staff, ensuring everyone understands their role in promoting attendance.

Desirable attributes of an Attendance Champion

An effective Attendance Champion is data-literate, relentless in follow-up and able to build strong, trusting relationships with pupils, families and staff. They are proactive rather than reactive, noticing small changes in attendance patterns before they escalate and they communicate clearly, consistently and with empathy. They understand the wider context of each child, using both hard data and soft intelligence to inform actions. Resilience, discretion and the ability to influence without authority are critical traits.

The role of good line management

Even the most skilled Attendance Champion will underperform without effective line management. Leaders must set clear expectations, provide the right tools and training and ensure regular, focused supervision. Line management should balance challenge with support, giving the Champion space to act while holding them accountable for impact. Strong leadership ensures the Champion's work is aligned to school priorities, sustained over time and evaluated for its contribution to improved attendance outcomes

The Champion serves as the central coordinator for all attendance activities, balancing reactive responses to absence with proactive measures to promote and celebrate good Attendance.

Attendance Champions
Selection & Support

Selecting Your Champion

The right Attendance Champion can transform your school's approach. Look for these essential qualities:

Influence

Sufficient authority to drive change across the organisation, typically a senior leader who can make decisions and influence colleagues.

Interpersonal effectiveness

Skilled in working with diverse stakeholders while maintaining positive relationships in challenging circumstances.

Passion

Genuine belief in the importance of attendance and its impact on outcomes.

Resilience

Determination to pursue improvements despite setbacks and maintain momentum through challenges.

Analytical skills

Ability to interpret data, identify patterns, and translate numbers into actionable insights.

Organisation

Strong administrative capabilities to manage systems, track interventions, and coordinate stakeholders.

This role works best when assigned to a senior leader with administrative support from an attendance officer.

Supporting your champion

For Champions to succeed, they need:

Protected time

Dedicated hours for attendance work, not an add-on to existing responsibilities.

Professional development

Access to training, networks, and resources to deepen expertise.

Data systems

Efficient tools for tracking, analysing, and reporting attendance information.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are attitudes in some schools the real barrier?

Let's be blunt, the answer is yes. In some schools attitudes are a significant barrier to resolving attendance.

There's often a gap between the inclusive rhetoric in policy documents and the reality in corridors and classrooms. On paper, every child matters; in practice, some leaders and staff quietly write off the "hard-to-reach" particularly those with complex needs, poor behaviour histories, or entrenched absence. The unspoken attitude is: they're too much work, they drag down results, and if they don't want to be here, so be it.

It's a 'too much bother' mentality a resignation dressed up as pragmatism. This isn't universal, but where it exists, it's toxic. Marginalised children pick up quickly on who's genuinely fighting for them and who's just going through the motions. Once they sense they're not valued, their attendance spirals further, confirming the low expectations in a self-fulfilling loop.

The brutal truth? You can't fix attendance without confronting these mindsets head-on. That means leadership calling it out, making inclusion a lived reality and holding staff to account for how they engage with the most challenging pupils not just the easy wins.

Otherwise, all the strategies in the world won't matter, because the message those children hear is still - we don't really want you here.

To what extent do staff in your school translate inclusive rhetoric into meaningful action?
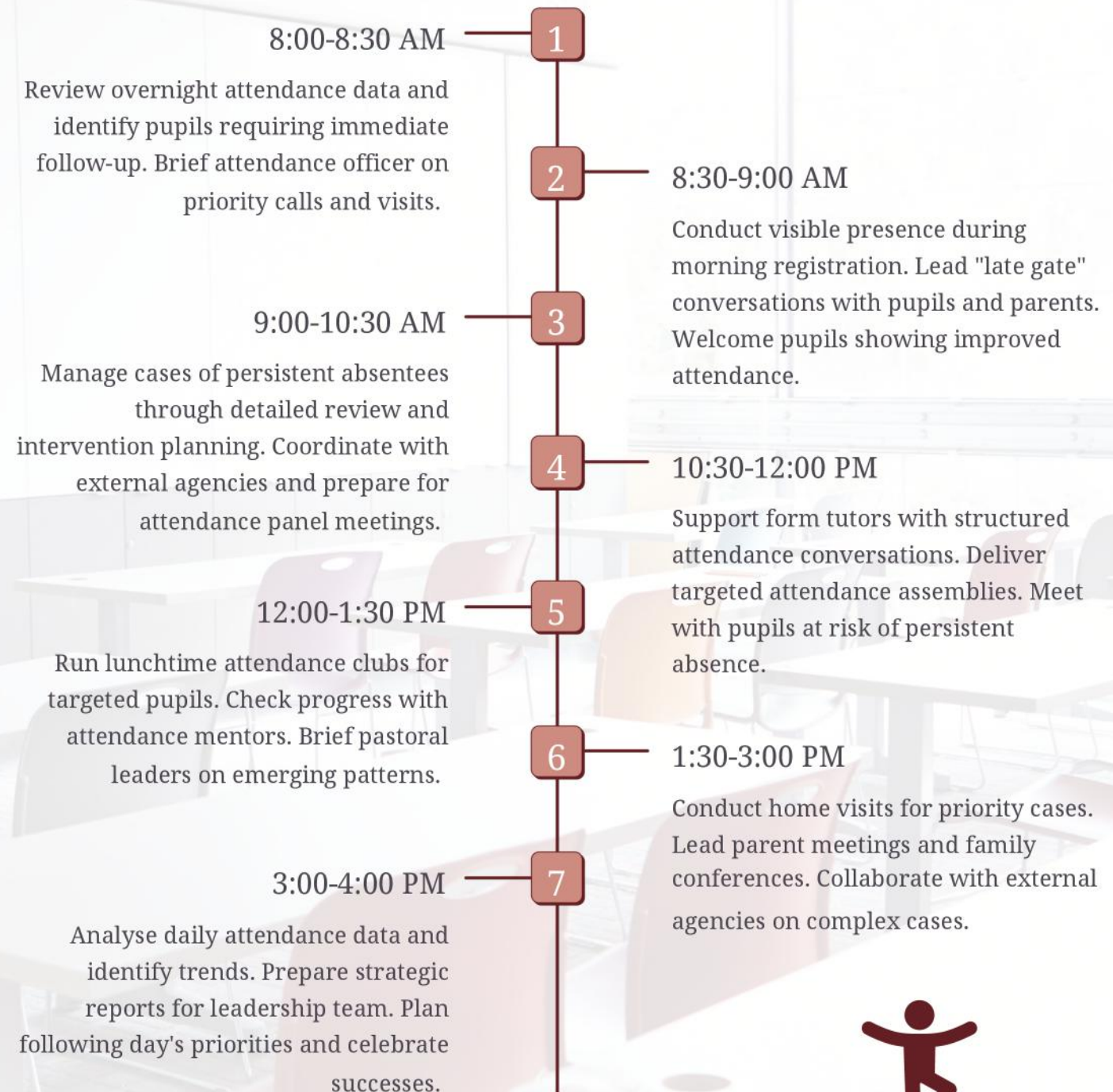
Attendance Champions
A Day in the Life

Understanding the daily rhythms of an effective Attendance Champion helps schools structure the role appropriately. This typical schedule illustrates the breadth of responsibilities and strategic importance of a structured approach.

1 — 8:00-8:30 AM

Review overnight attendance data and identify pupils requiring immediate follow-up. Brief attendance officer on priority calls and visits.

2 — 8:30-9:00 AM

Conduct visible presence during morning registration. Lead "late gate" conversations with pupils and parents. Welcome pupils showing improved attendance.

3 — 9:00-10:30 AM

Manage cases of persistent absentees through detailed review and intervention planning. Coordinate with external agencies and prepare for attendance panel meetings.

4 — 10:30-12:00 PM

Support form tutors with structured attendance conversations. Deliver targeted attendance assemblies. Meet with pupils at risk of persistent absence.

5 — 12:00-1:30 PM

Run lunchtime attendance clubs for targeted pupils. Check progress with attendance mentors. Brief pastoral leaders on emerging patterns.

6 — 1:30-3:00 PM

Conduct home visits for priority cases. Lead parent meetings and family conferences. Collaborate with external agencies on complex cases.

7 — 3:00-4:00 PM

Analyse daily attendance data and identify trends. Prepare strategic reports for leadership team. Plan following day's priorities and celebrate successes.

This structured approach ensures attendance remains a daily priority with balance between reactive responses to absence and proactive measures to promote consistent attendance. The most effective Champions maintain this equilibrium.

Attendance Champions
Impact Measures

Measuring the impact of your Attendance Champion helps justify the investment in the role and identifies areas for development. Consider both quantitative and qualitative measures to build a comprehensive picture of effectiveness.

94%

Champion Effectiveness
of schools with dedicated Attendance Champions report improved overall attendance within two terms

78%

Persistent Absence
reduction in persistent absence rates when Champions implement comprehensive tracking and intervention systems

65%

Parental Understanding
of parents report better understanding of attendance importance following Champion-led communication campaigns

Source: South West Trust

Measuring the impact of your Attendance Champion should go beyond headline figures. Consider these additional metrics:

Quantitative measures

- Improved attendance of specific vulnerable groups
- Reduction in late arrivals
- Decreased number of pupils in lower attendance bands
- Increased speed of intervention after absence
- Reduction in term-time holiday requests
- Improved attendance on traditionally low-attendance days

Qualitative measures

- Increased staff confidence in addressing attendance issues
- Improved parental engagement with attendance matters Enhanced pupil attitudes toward school attendance
- Development of sustainable systems that function even in the Champion's absence
- Increased governor understanding and oversight of attendance
- Improved relationships with external agencies

The most effective Champions create cultural change, where attendance becomes everyone's priority rather than the responsibility of a single individual. This cultural shift is perhaps the most significant indicator of success even though it may be the most challenging to measure directly.

The Role of Middle Leaders in Attendance
Heads of Year, Subject leaders & Pastoral managers

Middle leaders including heads of year, department leaders and pastoral managers occupy a unique position in the attendance strategy, bridging the gap between whole-school policies and individual pupil interventions.

Monitoring

Regularly reviewing attendance data for their area of responsibility, identifying patterns, and raising concerns early. Effective middle leaders look beyond overall percentages to understand the stories behind absences.

Leading

Setting clear expectations for their team, modeling effective practice, and ensuring consistency in approach. They translate whole-school policies into practical actions for their departments or year groups.

Supporting

Providing guidance to form tutors, subject teachers, and support staff in addressing attendance concerns. They facilitate challenging conversations and broker additional support when needed.

Communicating

Maintaining regular contact with pupils, parents, and colleagues about attendance matters. They ensure that messages are consistent, timely, and appropriately tailored to different stakeholders.

Middle leaders are particularly effective in attendance improvement because they combine sufficient authority to implement changes with detailed knowledge of individual pupils and families. This position allows them to personalise approaches while maintaining consistency with whole-school systems.

The most successful schools develop clear expectations for middle leaders' attendance responsibilities, provide appropriate training and resources, and create regular opportunities for middle leaders to collaborate on attendance strategies. This structured approach ensures that attendance remains a priority across all departments and year groups.

👍 **BEST PRACTICE**
Middle leaders are instrumental in driving improvements in attendance.
They must hold tutors to account for the daily routines that build a culture of presence.
As the engine room of delivery and impact, middle leaders play a vital role in translating strategy into consistent action across the school.

Middle Leaders
Subject Leaders' Impact on Attendance

Beyond Administration

While attendance is often viewed as a pastoral concern, subject leaders play a crucial role in creating lessons that pupils don't want to miss. Research consistently shows that engagement in learning is a significant factor in attendance decisions.

Effective subject leaders can influence attendance by:

Ensuring curriculum content is relevant,

- Ensuring curriculum content is relevant, engaging and accessible
- Creating a positive learning environment where all pupils feel valued
- Monitoring subject-specific attendance patterns (e.g., particular topics or teachers teachers)
- Supporting staff in building positive relationships with previously absent pupils
- Designing assessment approaches that encourage rather than discourage attendance
- Addressing subject-specific anxieties that might lead to avoidance

Practical Strategies

Subject leaders can implement these specific approaches:

- Scheduling engaging practical activities or assessments on days with traditionally higher absence
- Creating "can't miss" lesson experiences that are referred to in subsequent sessions
- Developing differentiated catch-up materials that don't punish absence but facilitate return
- Explicitly showing pupils how each lesson builds on previous learning Celebrating subject-specific attendance improvements
- Ensuring consistent application of the school's attendance policy across their department

BEST PRACTICE

Subject leaders should regularly analyse attendance data specific to their curriculum area, looking for patterns that might indicate particular barriers. For example, consistently lower attendance in specific topics might suggest curriculum adjustments are needed, while teacher-specific patterns could indicate a need for additional support or development.

Creating a culture where attendance is valued within each subject area requires explicit messaging about the sequential nature of learning and the challenges of catching up. Subject leaders should help their teams develop effective approaches for supporting pupils returning after absence without making them feel overwhelmed or exposed.

Middle Leaders: Year Leaders'
Attendance Toolkit

Year leaders are ideally positioned to address age-specific attendance challenges through their understanding of developmental stages and year group dynamics.

Year group Attendance Plans

Develop year-specific strategies addressing unique challenges like transition anxiety in Year 7, social pressures in Year 9, or exam stress in Year 11. Include preventative measures, targeted interventions and age-appropriate celebrations.

Attendance clinics

Hold regular supportive sessions where parents can discuss barriers and solutions. Structuring these by year group allows focused discussions about age-specific challenges and creates peer support opportunities.

Peer mentoring

Establish systems where pupils with strong attendance mentor those struggling to attend regularly. This harnesses peer relationships to motivate attendance improvements, particularly effective in secondary settings.

Targeted celebrations

Design year-appropriate rewards and recognition for attendance improvements. What motivates Year 7 pupils may be ineffective for Year 11s, so differentiated approaches are essential.

Communication templates

Create standardised but personalised communication tools for form tutors. Year-specific templates ensure communications reflect appropriate tone and expectations for different age groups.

Effective year leaders balance supporting form tutors with routine attendance matters while personally intervening in complex cases. They should coordinate with colleagues at transition points to ensure attendance patterns and concerns are communicated effectively, preventing vulnerable pupils from falling through the cracks.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: GCSE results often mirror attendance patterns, but they're only a partial proxy, for success depends on more than just being present.

Let's be candid with GCSE results day just around the corner, the link between attendance and attainment is about to be laid bare whether schools choose to confront it or not.

The pattern is well established: pupils with the highest attendance almost always outperform those with poorer attendance, often by a wide margin. For some cohorts, you can almost plot the grades against attendance bands and get a perfect downward slope. The uncomfortable part is that this isn't just about the persistent absentees even moderate drops in attendance (say, from 96% to 90%) can have a measurable impact on outcomes.

The big question is whether schools will actually analyse their own data. Too often, results analysis is done in isolation from attendance records, missing the chance to unpick exactly how absence has shaped performance. Yet, with modern MIS platforms such as Arbor (and yes, other MIS are available!) it's perfectly possible to run side-by-side or integrated reports showing GCSE outcomes mapped directly against Key Stage 4 attendance.

It is essential that schools analyse attendance alongside attainment not as an optional extra, but as a core part of their results review. Without this, the real story behind the grades will remain hidden, and the opportunity to turn data into targeted, early intervention for future cohorts will be lost.

How are you intending to triangulate year 11 attendance with outcomes?

Middle Leaders
The Attendance Analysis Cycle

Effective middle leaders adopt a systematic approach to attendance improvement through a continuous cycle of analysis and action.

Identify patterns

Review attendance data to spot trends, patterns, and anomalies specific to your department or year group.

Refine approach

Adjust strategies based on evidence of impact, sharing learning with colleagues.

Monitor impact

Track effectiveness through quantitative data and qualitative feedback with regular review points.

Investigate causes

Explore reasons behind attendance patterns through pupil voice, parent feedback, and staff insights.

Develop solutions
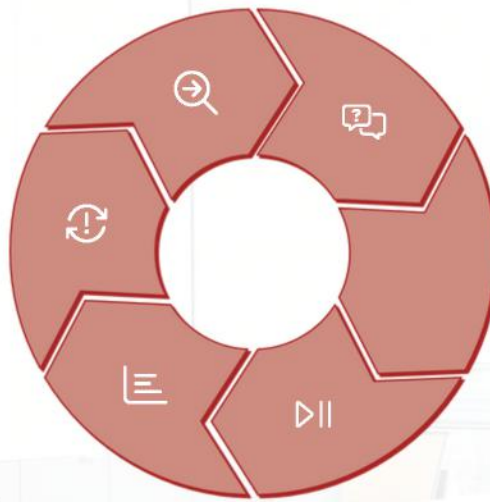
Create targeted strategies to address identified issues, focusing on root causes rather than symptoms.

Implement actions

Put plans into practice with clear responsibilities, timelines and success criteria.

BEST PRACTICE

This cyclical approach ensures continuous improvement rather than repeating ineffective practices. The cycle operates on multiple timescales weekly for immediate concerns, half-termly for broader patterns, and annually for strategic planning. The most effective middle leaders document this process systematically and collaborate regularly with colleagues to share insights and successful strategies across departments and year groups.

Tutors as frontline advocates
Graduated response

Form tutors/Primary class teachers have the most regular contact with pupils and often develop the strongest relationships. This makes them ideally positioned to influence attendance.

1
Building relationships

Creating meaningful connections with every pupil in their form, ensuring each child feels known, valued, and missed when absent. These relationships provide the foundation for all other attendance interventions. Effective tutors invest time in understanding pupils' interests, concerns and circumstances.

2
Daily monitoring

Maintaining accurate registers, following up on unexplained absences, and identifying patterns early. Effective tutors notice when attendance begins to slip and intervene before habits form. They track not just absences but also punctuality, mood and engagement.

3
Consistent communication

Maintaining regular contact with parents about attendance matters, celebrating successes as well as addressing concerns. This communication should be proactive rather than merely reactive. Regular positive contact builds the foundation for more challenging conversations when needed.

4
Reintegration support

Welcoming pupils back after absence, helping them catch up, and ensuring they don't feel isolated or overwhelmed. This reduces the likelihood of repeated absences. Effective reintegration includes both practical academic support and social-emotional re-engagement.

BEST PRACTICE

Tutors serve as the critical first line of response in attendance management. Their daily contact with pupils allows them to notice subtle changes that might indicate emerging attendance concerns. This early identification, combined with immediate, low-level intervention, can prevent many attendance issues from escalating.

While tutors should not be expected to manage complex attendance cases alone, their knowledge of individual pupils provides invaluable context for pastoral teams and attendance specialists. Creating clear communication channels between tutors and attendance leaders ensures this information informs intervention planning.

Tutors: Daily Attendance Routines
Morning Registration Excellence

The first 10-15 minutes of the day set the tone for attendance. How registration is conducted can significantly impact pupils' attendance motivation and establish patterns of punctuality and engagement.

BEST PRACTICE **Effective tutors**

- Create a welcoming atmosphere where pupils want to arrive
- Begin with engaging activities rather than administrative tasks
- Personally greet each pupil, noticing their presence
- Take registers promptly and accurately
- Follow up immediately on absences, showing pupils are missed
- Celebrate attendance successes publicly
- Review the day positively, highlighting achievements
- Preview tomorrow's activities, creating anticipation
- Check in with pupils who were previously absent
- Acknowledge improved attendance
- Address any patterns of internal truancy
- End on a positive note that makes pupils want to return
- End-of-Day reflection
- Afternoon registration provides an opportunity to reinforce attendance messages

The Tutor's Role in Embedding an Attendance Culture

Tutors are the daily heartbeat of attendance culture. They are often the first adult a pupil sees each morning, and their actions set the tone for the day. Leaders should ask: Are tutors having meaningful, regular conversations about attendance, not just reacting when problems arise? Could a short, taught attendance module or pastoral session help pupils understand why presence matters? Are tutors actively celebrating presence and recognising improvement, so pupils feel seen and valued? The tone of a tutor's language is powerful; is it warm, encouraging and inclusive? Do tutors smile often showing genuine connection? Is their tutor room tidy, organised and welcoming, signalling that learning here is important? When tutors are trained, confident and supported to notice, engage and follow up, they become one of the most *effective levers* for improving attendance and building belonging.

Tutor conversation starters
Choosing the right language to discuss attendance

Effective attendance conversations are at the heart of a tutor's role. These discussions should be supportive rather than accusatory, focused on solutions rather than problems.

For pupils with declining attendance

"I've noticed you've missed a few days recently. Is everything okay? I'm asking because I care and want to make sure you're not falling behind."

Follow-up questions:

- Is there anything about school that's making it difficult to attend?

- Are there specific lessons or days that are more challenging?

- What would help make it easier for you to be here every day?

- Is there something at home that's making it hard to get to school?

- How can I help you feel more comfortable/successful here?

For pupils returning after absence

"It's really good to see you back. We missed you while you were away. Let's talk about how we can help you catch up."

Follow-up questions:

- What work do you think you need help with first?

- Would it help to have a buddy to go through the missed material?

- How can we make tomorrow even better than today?

- Is there anything that happened while you were away that you'd like to know about?

- What would help you feel more connected to the class again?

For celebrating improvements

"I've been looking at the attendance figures, and I wanted to tell you how impressed I am with your improvement. What do you think has helped?"

Follow-up questions:

- What difference has being in school more regularly made to you?
- What would help you maintain this positive pattern?
- Is there anything else we could do to support you?
- How does it feel to be in school more consistently?
- What goals would you like to set for your attendance going forward?

👍 **BEST PRACTICE** Conduct attendance discussions privately rather than in front of peers. Choose moments when the pupil is calm and receptive and ensure there's adequate time for genuine dialogue rather than rushed exchanges. *Active listening* is crucial during these conversations. Tutors should focus on understanding the pupil's perspective rather than immediately jumping to solutions or consequences.

Engaging Parents/Carers
Communication Strategies

Proactive Messaging

Don't wait for attendance problems to develop before communicating. Proactive approaches establish expectations, build awareness and create a foundation for addressing any concerns that may arise later.

Consider these proactive approaches

- **Termly attendance newsletters** highlighting the link between attendance and achievement
- **Regular positive text messages** for pupils with good or improving attendance
- **Personalised letters** at key points showing current attendance percentages and trends
- **Clear visual information** about the impact of even small absences over time
- **Explicit guidance** on when to send children to school with minor ailments
- **Attendance celebration events** that recognise families' efforts
- **Information sessions** explaining attendance support available

Language choice significantly impacts the effectiveness of attendance communications. Avoid accusatory language ("your child has missed..." or "you have failed to...") in favour of collaborative framing ("we've noticed..." or "we're concerned about the impact of..."). This subtle shift can dramatically affect how messages are received by parents.

Consider developing a communication framework that outlines the type, tone, and frequency of contact for different attendance scenarios. This ensures consistency across staff members and helps parents understand what to expect. Such frameworks typically include templates for different communication types while allowing for appropriate personalisation.

Is empathy evident in the way your school approaches attendance challenges?

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

◆

Issue: Is fining for poor school attendance really a stealth tax?

Let's be candid fining parents for absence isn't delivering the results its defenders claim, and it's fair to ask whether it's drifting into stealth tax territory.

For some families, a penalty notice is simply absorbed as a cost of doing things their way a paid-for extra holiday or a short-term convenience. For others, especially those in hardship, it creates resentment and further erodes trust, without shifting the underlying causes of absence. Either way, the evidence shows fines alone don't drive sustained attendance improvement.

And then there's the awkward question: where does the money go? The answer isn't exactly transparent. Revenue from attendance fines is retained by local authorities, ostensibly to cover the costs of enforcing attendance and pursuing legal cases. But in reality, some suspect it props up overstretched education welfare services, or worse, sustains roles and structures that have little direct impact on getting children back into school.

If fines are genuinely about deterrence and supporting attendance, then every pound raised should be ring-fenced and reinvested directly into frontline attendance improvement not swallowed by general budgets or used to sustain ineffective systems.

Right now, for too many, fining feels like a blunt instrument that fails to change behaviour and risks looking more like revenue generation than child-focused intervention.

What strategies does your school use to bring parents on board with attendance expectations in a supportive, non-punitive way?

Engaging Parents/Carers
Digital Tools

Technology offers powerful opportunities to enhance parental engagement with attendance. Digital tools can provide real-time information, streamline communication and remove barriers to engagement for many families.

Attendance Apps

Dedicated applications that allow parents to monitor attendance in real-time, receive notifications about absences, and communicate directly with school staff. The best apps include features like absence reporting, attendance history visualization, and appointment booking.

Automated Messaging

Systems that send immediate alerts when a pupil is absent, along with scheduled communications about attendance patterns. These can be tailored to different thresholds and include positive messages for improvements.

Virtual Meetings

Online platforms that facilitate attendance discussions for parents unable to attend in-person meetings. These can significantly increase parental engagement, particularly for working parents or those with transport limitations.

Online Booking Systems

Tools that allow parents to schedule non-urgent medical appointments and other commitments outside of school hours. Some schools partner with local GP practices to establish priority slots for school-aged children.

> ⚠️ When implementing digital tools, ensure they are accessible to all families, considering language needs, digital literacy and access to technology. Provide alternative options for families without digital access and offer training and support for those who need it.

👍 **BEST PRACTICE**

The most effective digital attendance strategies combine automation with personalization. While automated systems can efficiently handle routine communications and alerts, these should be supplemented with personalised follow-up for more complex or persistent attendance concerns.

Data security and privacy must be prioritised in all digital attendance systems. Clear policies about data storage, sharing and access rights should be established and communicated to parents. Building trust in these systems is essential for their effectiveness.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are some MATS too distant from their communities?

Let's be blunt yes, some MAT structures are too distant from the real problems in schools and attendance is a prime example.

As trusts scale up, layers of leadership grow, central teams expand, and decision-making often moves further away from pupils, families, and the day-to-day reality of the classroom. Senior leaders at the MAT level may be working from offices miles away, looking at aggregated dashboards, and discussing attendance in abstract percentages all while the lived struggles behind those numbers go unseen.

This distance can create a dangerous detachment:
 • Policies look tidy on paper but are unworkable in practice.
 • Data is reviewed without the human stories that explain it.
 • Attendance becomes a KPI to hit rather than a child's experience to improve.

The best MATs counter this by keeping leaders close to schools, investing in regular on-site presence, and building systems where central decisions are informed by frontline reality. But where that doesn't happen, the structure itself becomes part of the problem creating a gap between strategy and impact, and leaving schools to bridge it alone.

In attendance, that gap can be fatal if trust leaders aren't in the trenches understanding the barriers, they can't design solutions that work.

Are there times when MATs appear remote from the lived realities of their families and communities?

Engaging Parents/Carers
Understanding the Roots of Resistance

Parental resistance to attendance interventions often stems from complex factors that go beyond simple non-compliance or lack of concern. Identifying these underlying causes is the first step in developing effective engagement strategies.

Resistance often stems from

- **Personal educational trauma** from their own school experiences
- **Cultural differences** in perceptions of education and attendance
- **Mistrust** of authority figures or institutions
- **Feeling judged** or criticized as parents
- **Genuine barriers** that they feel unable to overcome
- **Previous negative interactions** with the school or other services
- **Feelings of powerlessness** or lack of agency
- **Conflicting priorities** or competing family needs

Breaking through barriers

- **Home visits** that demonstrate commitment and build rapport
- **Parent champions** from similar backgrounds who can build bridges
- **Non-threatening venues** for meetings (coffee shops, community centres)
- **Active listening** to understand underlying concerns
- **Practical support** with specific barriers (alarm clocks, transport solutions)
- **Clear boundaries** combined with genuine empathy
- **Cultural mediators** to bridge understanding gaps
- **Strength-based approaches** that recognise parental efforts

BEST PRACTICE

When engaging resistant parents, relationship building must precede expectations and demands. Taking time to establish trust and demonstrate genuine care for the child and family creates a foundation for more challenging conversations about attendance expectations.

The most successful approaches recognise that resistance is often a protective response based on previous experiences or genuine challenges. By addressing these underlying factors compassionately while maintaining clear boundaries about attendance expectations, schools can transform resistant relationships into productive partnerships.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are some families genuinely beyond reach?

Let's be candid some parents have a deep-seated dislike or distrust of schools and authority and that mindset can directly sabotage attendance.

For a small but significant group, negative experiences from their own school days, mistrust of institutions, or resentment towards perceived interference from teachers fuels open hostility. This isn't just passive disengagement — it's active undermining. Conversations about attendance become battles, with parents framing school as the enemy and justifying absence as a way of "protecting" their child.

In the most concerning cases, this tips into neglect or abuse of opportunity. Parents knowingly keep children at home for trivial reasons, treat term time as disposable, or encourage absence under the guise of family choice all while ignoring the long-term damage to education, wellbeing, and life chances.

When parental behaviour crosses this line, it stops being a partnership issue and becomes a safeguarding concern. Schools must be prepared to challenge it robustly, escalate where necessary, and make it clear that sanctioning absence is not a parental right it's a direct harm to the child's future.

When families feel hard to reach, what steps are you taking to build trust and connection?

Engaging Parents/Carers
*Handling difficult messages: **The term time holiday***

The uncomfortable truth about school attendance

We tell parents "Every day counts."
We fine them for taking children out during term time. We point to the evidence on how absence affects outcomes.

And then… the travel industry adds £800 to the cost of a family holiday the moment schools break up.

For some families, that isn't "paying a bit more." It's the choice between a week away or months of food and energy bills.

This is where the attendance conversation gets messy. It's not just about discipline, sanctions, or "parental priorities."
It's about the real-life economics that drive behaviour.

So here's the question:
Do we want to carry on pushing families into impossible decisions? Or do we want to talk honestly about how education, government, and the travel industry could work together so children aren't forced to choose between memories and milestones?

Until then, attendance will remain complex and no amount of slogans or fines will change that.
Activate to view larger image,

Key Arguments
Statutory Duty & Legal Framework
Parents have a legal duty under the Education Act 1996 to ensure their child attends regularly.

Headteachers may not grant leave during term time except in exceptional circumstances (per Education (Pupil Registration) Regulations 2006, amended 2013). Case law (Isle of Wight Council v Platt, 2017) confirmed that "regular attendance" means attending every session unless authorised.

Impact on Learning & Outcomes
Even short absences disrupt learning sequences and can widen attainment gaps.

Missed lessons particularly affect core subjects, cumulative knowledge, and exam preparation. Absence undermines continuity in social relationships and class routines.

Equity & Fairness
Authorising some term-time holidays while refusing others creates inequity and challenges enforcement.

Consistent application of policy avoids perceptions of favouritism and supports community trust.
Persistent Absence Risk
One-off authorised leave can normalise absence, increasing risk of habitual absence.

Pupils taking term-time holidays are statistically more likely to fall into persistent absence categories.
Community & Economic Context
While families may cite cost savings for off-peak travel, the long-term educational cost outweighs short-term financial gain.

Schools must balance compassion with the principle that education is not optional

Key Actions
1. Clear Policy & Communication
Ensure the school's attendance policy explicitly states:
Only exceptional circumstances qualify for authorised leave.
Requests must be in writing, explaining the exceptional reason.
Publish the policy on the website and highlight it in newsletters, parents' evenings, and induction packs.

2. Consistent Decision-Making
Apply the exceptional circumstances test uniformly.
Keep a central log of all requests and decisions to ensure consistency.
Use a standardised decision letter template, citing legislation and impact on learning.

3. Proactive Parent Education
Use termly communications to share:
Data on the link between attendance and attainment.
Case examples showing the cumulative effect of missed days.
Address misconceptions about "just a few days" being harmless.

4. Escalation Pathway
For unauthorised leave:
Record using code G (family holiday not agreed or in excess of agreement).
Refer to the Local Authority for Penalty Notice where thresholds are met.
Maintain timely communication with parents about the process and implications.

5. Positive Promote local, low-cost school holiday activities to reduce perceived need for term-time travel.
Engage with community partners to offer support for family time outside school weeks.

6. Data Monitoring & Reporting
Track requests, authorised vs unauthorised decisions, and subsequent attendance patterns.
Report trends to governors/trust boards to inform strategic response.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are we truly engaging with families or just ticking boxes?

Let's be candid in some schools, parental engagement on attendance is little more than a box-ticking exercise.

There are coffee mornings, newsletters and the occasional "attendance week" but beneath the surface, there's no genuine moral drive to dismantle the real barriers families face. Conversations are often scripted, transactional and focused on compliance rather than connection.

Why? Because real engagement is hard. It means tackling uncomfortable truths about poverty, housing, health, transport, and trust in institutions. It means accepting that some parents' negative experiences of education often going back to their own childhood are shaping how they interact with the school now. And it means stepping into a space where leaders and staff may feel out of their depth or fear the challenge it will bring.

For some, it's easier to keep engagement polite but superficial **"going through the motions"** without rocking the boat. But without that moral purpose to truly break down barriers, the relationship stays shallow and attendance stays stuck.

Real engagement isn't just about turning up; it's about turning towards leaning into the challenge and refusing to settle for surface-level connection.
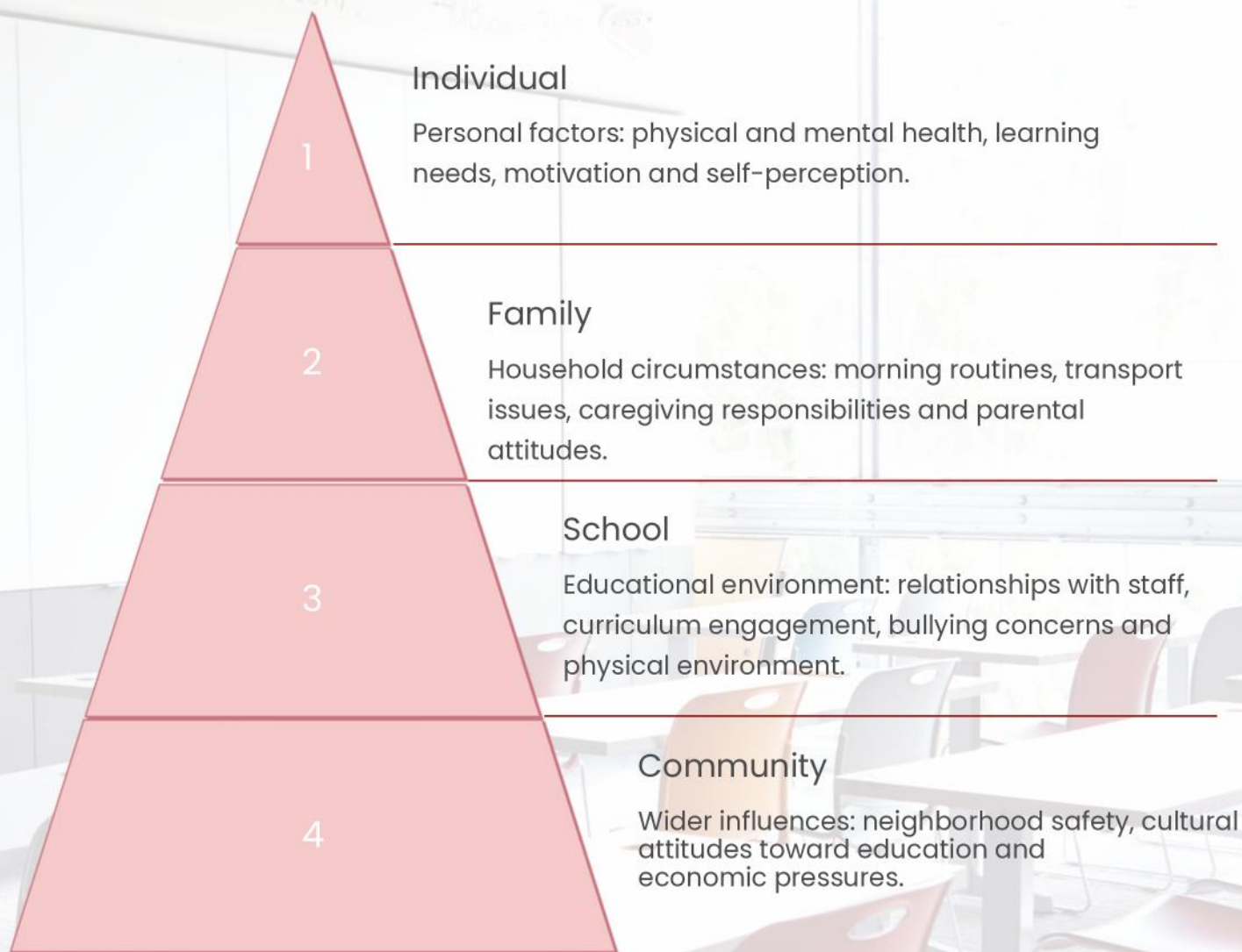
Do you actively listen to parents' perspectives on barriers to attendance or do you default to telling them what to do?

Overcoming attendance barriers:
A framework for school leaders

Every absence has a cause. Effective attendance strategies identify and address the specific barriers preventing regular attendance through a structured approach.

Individual

1

Personal factors: physical and mental health, learning needs, motivation and self-perception.

Family

2

Household circumstances: morning routines, transport issues, caregiving responsibilities and parental attitudes.

School

3

Educational environment: relationships with staff, curriculum engagement, bullying concerns and physical environment.

Community

4

Wider influences: neighborhood safety, cultural attitudes toward education and economic pressures.

The most effective interventions address barriers at multiple levels simultaneously. For example, anxiety-related absence might require individual therapeutic support, family strategies, school environmental adaptations, and community mental health resources.

i When identifying barriers, move beyond surface explanations to understand root causes. "Oversleeping" might actually reveal parental mental health challenges, housing insecurity, or anxiety about school. Gather perspectives from multiple sources - pupil, parents, school staff, and external agencies - to develop comprehensive solutions.

Overcoming Barriers: Individual Factors
Advice for schools

Individual barriers to attendance encompass personal factors that directly affect a pupil's ability or willingness to attend school regularly. Addressing these requires personalised, evidence-based approaches.

Anxiety and mental health

Signs: Absence patterns linked to specific days/subjects; physical complaints without medical cause; visible distress about school attendance.

Interventions:

Graduated return plans with flexible timetabling

Designated safe spaces and trusted adults

Cognitive behavioral anxiety management techniques

Environmental adaptations to minimise triggers

Consistent routines and transparent expectations

Academic struggles

Signs: Avoidance of specific subjects/assessments; incomplete homework patterns; negative self-perception about abilities.

Interventions:

Targeted academic support to build confidence

Strategic seating for peer support

Pre-teaching key concepts

Recognition systems celebrating effort over achievement

Alternative assessment approaches

Assistive technology for specific needs

Physical health challenges

Chronic conditions and frequent illnesses create attendance barriers. Address through individualised healthcare plans, staff training and healthcare professional partnerships.

Social and peer difficulties

Friendship conflicts, bullying, or social anxiety make school feel unsafe. Address through social skills development, buddy systems and proactive peer relationship monitoring.

Motivation and engagement

Some pupils struggle to see education's relevance. Re- engage through personalised goal-setting, connections to interests, meaningful mentoring and explicit links to future aspirations.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Let's be honest, many schools proudly display their "graduated response" to attendance, but too often it's more 'show' than substance.

Let's be blunt schools love to showcase their "graduated response" to attendance, but in too many cases, it's more presentation than practice.

The posters, flowcharts, and policies look impressive, but scratch the surface and you find that the so-called "steps" aren't being consistently applied, data isn't driving timely action, and the interventions lack both coordination and teeth.

The deeper problem is that in many schools there isn't even a shared sense of responsibility. Attendance is still seen as the remit of one overworked pastoral lead or admin officer, rather than a whole-school mission owned by every adult in the building. Without that collective accountability, the graduated response becomes fragmented a few actions here, a few there but no coherent, sustained push that actually shifts attendance.

A true graduated response only works when:
• Leadership drives it relentlessly.
• Every member of staff knows their role.
• Actions are tracked for impact, not just logged for compliance.

Until schools move from displaying the model to living it with genuine shared responsibility and coordinated, high-impact interventions the "graduated response" will remain just another piece of paper in the policy folder.

How do you know that your graduated attendance framework is more than a paper exercise?

Overcoming Barriers: Family Factors
Morning Routines

Signs: Consistently late arrivals, unprepared pupils, chaotic mornings, siblings with similar patterns.

Solutions

- Morning routine charts and visual timetables
- Multiple alarm systems with gradual responsibility transfer
- Evening preparation checklists
- Breakfast club places for structure
- Parent workshops on establishing
- routines
  Wake-up calls for vulnerable families

Transport Issues

Signs: Weather-related absences, irregular patterns, geographic clusters.

Solutions

- School-organised walking buses
- Carpooling networks among families
- Bus pass subsidies or transport
- assistance
- Flexible start arrangements
- Community transport partnerships
  Bicycle loan schemes

Parental capacity

Mental health challenges or other difficulties can impact parents' ability to support attendance. Address through multi-agency support and wraparound services.

Family responsibilities

Young carers may struggle with regular attendance. Provide support through young carer groups and flexible arrangements when appropriate.

Housing instability

Temporary accommodation or frequent moves disrupt attendance. Work with housing services and provide consistent support during transitions.

When addressing family factors, maintain a non-judgmental approach that recognises parents as partners. Practical support often proves more effective than advice alone.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Is the attendance crisis a public health issue?

Let's be blunt, we should be treating the attendance crisis as a public health issue.

The scale and impact of persistent absence now reach far beyond the boundaries of education. Chronic non-attendance is linked to poorer mental health, reduced life expectancy, increased risk of unemployment, and long-term social disadvantage. These are exactly the kinds of outcomes public health strategies are designed to prevent.

If we frame attendance purely as an education metric, we limit the tools and partnerships available to address it. Viewing it through a public health lens would:

• Bring health, social care, and education into a coordinated response.
• Allow early-intervention models similar to those used in vaccination uptake or smoking cessation.
• Focus on prevention, not just crisis management.
• Recognise the social determinants poverty, housing, health inequalities as core drivers of absence.

Right now, schools are carrying the load almost entirely alone. Reframing attendance as a public health issue could open the door to wider investment, shared responsibility and a more systemic, preventative approach exactly what's needed if we're serious about reversing the crisis.

In your school, is attendance addressed in isolation, or is it embedded in a broader conversation about safeguarding, health and community resilience?

Overcoming Barriers

The School is the basic problem !

School factors represent the barriers most directly within **our control to change.** By systematically addressing school-based barriers, we can create environments where pupils actively want to attend.

Curriculum engagement

When pupils don't find learning relevant, attendance suffers. Transform engagement through curriculum audits, pupil voice exercises, real-world connections and strategic scheduling of engaging activities on high-absence days.

Relationships

Staff relationships significantly impact attendance motivation. Strengthen connections through regular relationship-building activities, check-in/check- out systems with trusted adults, and ensuring every pupil has adult connection.

Environment

Physical and emotional safety directly affects attendance willingness. Create supportive environments through safe spaces, clear anti- bullying strategies, consistent routines and welcoming physical spaces.

Policy Implementation

How attendance policies are applied matters as much as their content. Ensure policies balance accountability with support and are applied with appropriate flexibility for individual circumstances.

Transition Management

Attendance often dips during transitions. Create robust transition support with enhanced monitoring, buddy arrangements and additional check-ins during vulnerable periods.

> ℹ️ Regular self-evaluation of school factors should be integral to any comprehensive attendance strategy through pupil surveys, focus groups with improved attenders and critical analysis of attendance patterns.

Overcoming Barriers
It's the Community we serve

Cultural Attitudes

Community cultural and religious factors significantly influence attendance patterns. Schools can respond by conducting community listening exercises, reviewing calendars for cultural events, engaging community leaders as advocates and recruiting culturally representative staff.

> "In many cases, attendance is not simply a reflection of school practice, but a mirror of the community we serve. Social, economic and cultural factors; from housing instability to health inequalities can shape whether pupils are able to attend regularly. Addressing absenteeism, therefore, means addressing the wider conditions in which our families live."
>
> Colin Cattanach

Economic Pressures

Financial hardship creates significant attendance barriers. Children from low-income families are more than twice as likely to be persistently absent. Address through uniform banks, discreet financial support, local business partnerships, and signposting to support services.

Safety mapping

Work with pupils, parents, and community partners to identify unsafe routes affecting attendance. Develop walking buses, adult presence at key locations or alternative route planning.

Community partnerships

Develop relationships with local police, community organisations and businesses to create collaborative approaches to attendance barriers beyond the school's direct control.

Advocacy

Work with local authorities to address infrastructure issues affecting attendance, such as dangerous crossings, inadequate lighting or insufficient transport options.

BEST PRACTICE

Improving attendance in disadvantaged communities means tackling real barriers such as housing, work, health, transport and building trust. The best schools know their families, communicate with warmth and offer practical help like breakfast clubs, uniform banks and on-site support. **When families feel understood and welcome, children are far more likely to come to school every day.**

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Getting secondary year 6 -7 transition wrong

Let's be blunt in too many secondary schools, we're getting transitions wrong and it's showing up in the attendance data by the back half of Year 7 and rolling straight into Year 8.

The glossy induction days, welcome assemblies and early pastoral focus often give way to business as usual far too quickly. By Christmas, the novelty has worn off, the structures loosen, and for some pupils especially the vulnerable or socially marginalised the cracks start to widen.

Why this happens
- Over-focus on the first weeks but no sustained plan for the rest of the year.
- Pastoral drop-off form tutors and heads of year shift to firefighting behaviour, leaving quieter attendance concerns to drift.
- Academic shock the jump in curriculum pace leaves some pupils feeling behind and disengaged.
- Social reality hits friendship groups change, peer conflicts emerge, and some pupils never find their place.
- SEND and SEMH gaps initial plans aren't followed through once term one is over, so needs go unmet.

By Year 8, the pattern is often set and those who felt invisible or overwhelmed in late Year 7 now see absence as a coping mechanism. And because Year 8 isn't an exam year, the urgency to act can slip until the problem reappears magnified in KS4.

If secondaries treated the whole of Year 7 as transition, with targeted belonging work, sustained pastoral intensity and sharper tracking from day one, we'd see fewer attendance collapses by Year 8. *Right now, we're handing pupils the welcome mat in September and quietly rolling it up by spring.*

Have you evaluated whether your transition work sustains impact beyond September and truly carries pupils through the challenges of the first secondary year?

Medical Barriers to attendance
Navigating Health Challenges

Medical conditions present complex attendance challenges that require a careful balance between supporting genuine health needs and maintaining consistent educational engagement. Addressing these situations calls for nuanced strategies that both validate legitimate medical requirements and optimise opportunities for learning.

Chronic conditions

Long-term health conditions requiring ongoing management need proactive, personalised solutions:

- Develop comprehensive Individual Healthcare Plans (IHPs) with specific attendance protocols
- Create flexible timetabling accommodating treatment schedules and medical appointments
- Establish robust remote learning pathways for treatment days and recovery periods
- Build partnerships with hospital education services and medical teams
- Design structured reintegration following extended medical absences

Frequent illness

Recurrent short-term illnesses creating problematic attendance patterns require careful monitoring and intervention:

- Implement balanced medical evidence protocols maintaining trust while ensuring accountability
- Conduct systematic return-to-school health interviews to identify underlying patterns
- Develop collaborative relationships with school nurses, GPs, and community health teams
- Analyse illness patterns systematically to identify potential environmental factors
- Provide clear, evidence-based guidance on attendance expectations during minor ailments

Mental health

Psychological conditions affecting school attendance require sensitive, evidence-based approaches:

- Integrate therapeutic support with practical attendance planning and goal-setting
- Teach anxiety management strategies and develop personalised coping mechanisms
- Make environmental adaptations to reduce known triggers and stress factors
- Design gradual reintegration programmes with clear milestones after extended absence
- Balance necessary accommodations with appropriate exposure to build resilience

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Are we failing large numbers of SEND children in our schools?

Let's be candid SEND provision in England is in crisis, and it's showing up starkly in attendance figures.

Families are battling for assessments, waiting months or years for EHCPs, and facing patchy provision when support is finally agreed. Schools are often left trying to meet complex needs without the resources, training, or specialist staff to do it well. The result? Pupils with SEND too often find school overwhelming, unwelcoming, or simply inaccessible and absence climbs.

We can't keep pretending attendance is a separate issue from SEND. For many pupils, the two are inseparable. If the environment isn't designed to meet their needs, they won't attend no matter how many letters are sent or fines issued.

Designing for presence means starting with the child, not the code. It's about creating learning spaces, timetables, and relationships that make school feel possible and safe. It means flexibility, genuine inclusion, and removing barriers before they become excuses.

Until SEND is fixed not just on paper, but in lived reality, we'll keep failing some of the very pupils who most need us to get attendance right.

If Ofsted or governors asked tomorrow, could we show that our approach to SEND attendance is compassionate, evidence-based, and improving outcomes?

Medical Barriers to attendance
Working with Healthcare Professionals

Establishing effective partnerships

Effective collaboration between schools and medical professionals begins with clear, shared objectives whilst ensuring that a student's health needs are met while safeguarding their right to consistent education. Schools can adopt the following approaches to achieve meaningful impact:

Establish formal communication protocols
Identify a named contact in both the school and the healthcare setting.
- Use secure, GDPR-compliant channels for sharing relevant information.
- Agree on response times for urgent and non-urgent matters.
- Develop Joint Care and Education Plans
- Co-create Individual Health Care Plans (IHCPs) with input from medical practitioners, parents, and the student where appropriate.
- Include clear guidance on attendance expectations, adaptations, and re-integration plans following absence.
- Schedule regular Multi-Agency Reviews
- Hold termly or half-termly review meetings to update plans, assess progress, and respond to changing medical needs.
- Use a solution-focused approach to balance medical advice with educational priorities.
- Promote early intervention
- Encourage prompt referrals to medical services when concerns arise.
- Act quickly to adapt timetables, learning environments, or workload to prevent prolonged disengagement.
- Invest in relationship-building
- Foster mutual respect and understanding between education and healthcare professionals.
- Provide staff with CPD on medical conditions and their educational implications, ensuring advice is acted upon consistently.
- Impact of strong protocols and partnerships
- When schools and medical professionals work within agreed frameworks, students benefit from consistent messages, timely support, and coordinated care. This reduces unnecessary absence, supports re-engagement in learning and builds trust with families, leading to improved attendance, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

When developing medical evidence protocols, be mindful of the pressures on healthcare services and the potential costs to families. Avoid policies that place undue burden on families or healthcare providers. Instead, focus on obtaining the specific information needed to make appropriate attendance decisions while respecting medical confidentiality.

Candid Corner

Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

Issue: Parents have a point about holidays and the claim 'every day counts'

Let's be blunt parents might have a point.

When schools challenge families over term-time holidays, the moral high ground is built on the idea that every day in school counts and that lessons are purposeful, high quality, and led by skilled teachers. But if, in reality, a child's experience is dominated by relentless supply cover, repeated lesson disruption, or weak provision, then the argument becomes harder to defend.

From a parent's perspective, they're being told that missing a week for a holiday is educational sabotage yet their child may already be losing significant learning time inside school due to staffing instability or poor curriculum delivery. In that context, some families calculate that the educational trade-off isn't as catastrophic as the rhetoric suggests, and the family benefit of time away together outweighs the cost.

That doesn't mean term-time absence is without consequence it still impacts continuity, relationships, and assessment but if schools want moral authority in this debate, they need to guarantee the quality of the time children are in school. Otherwise, the "every lesson matters" message risks sounding hollow, and parents will continue to question whether it's always true

Hypocrisy risk: If pupils arrive at the end of term to movies and "filler days", families may rightly question why a family holiday is treated more harshly.

Message alignment: The way schools design the final week is a litmus test of whether "every day matters" is rhetoric or reality.

Medical Barriers
Chronic Condition Management e.g. Diabetes, anxiety.....

Pupils with chronic health conditions face unique attendance challenges that require specialised approaches. Effective management balances medical needs with educational participation, recognising that these pupils often can and should attend school regularly with appropriate support.

63%
Attendance Impact

pupils with chronic health conditions report that their condition affects their school attendance

14.2
Days Missed

Average additional days missed annually by pupils with chronic conditions compared to peers

82%
Improvement Potential

Schools report significant attendance improvements after implementing structured health management plans

Creating effective Individual Healthcare Plans (IHPs) is essential for supporting pupils with chronic conditions. The most effective IHPs include:

- Clear guidance on symptoms that do/don't require absence
- Specific protocols for medication administration at school
- Strategies for managing condition-related fatigue or discomfort
- Flexible arrangements for medical appointments and treatments
- Communication plans for sharing essential information
- Emergency procedures and contact information
- Regular review dates to update as conditions or treatments change

These plans should be developed collaboratively with health professionals, parents, and the pupil themselves, ensuring shared ownership and understanding. The most effective plans are practical documents that guide daily management rather than simply recording medical information.

Schools that excel in supporting pupils with chronic conditions typically designate specific staff members as condition coordinators. These staff receive specialised training, coordinate communication between families, health professionals and school staff, and ensure consistent implementation of healthcare plans. Peer education about chronic conditions can also significantly improve attendance outcomes. When classmates understand a pupil's condition in age-appropriate ways, they can provide better support and reduce stigma or misunderstandings that might otherwise create social barriers to attendance.

Medical Barriers to attendance
Emotional-Based School Avoidance

Emotional-Based School Avoidance (EBSA), previously known as school refusal, presents one of th emost challenging attendance barriers. It requires a nuanced, multi-faceted approach that addresses underlying emotional needs while maintaining educational expectations.

Identification

Recognise early warning signs such as increasing anxiety about school, physical complaints without medical cause, patterns of absence around specific triggers, difficulties separating from parents, withdrawal from social activities, deterioration after school holidays or weekends.

Assessment

Conduct thorough investigation of underlying factors: anxiety disorders, bullying, learning difficulties, family dynamics, traumatic experiences, school environment issues, transition challenges, sensory processing concerns, social relationship difficulties.

Intervention

Implement tailored support such as therapeutic approaches (CBT, anxiety management), environmental adaptations, gradual reintegration plans, parent coaching, peer support systems, alternative curriculum pathways, clear routines and boundaries, rewards for brave behaviour.

Maintenance

Sustain progress through ongoing monitoring, celebration of successes, anticipation of challenging periods, building resilience, transfer of coping strategies across contexts, gradual reduction of accommodations, consistent communication between home and school.

The most successful EBSA interventions maintain a dual focus on emotional wellbeing and educational participation, recognizing that these are complementary rather than competing priorities. Extended absence from education often exacerbates anxiety rather than alleviating it, creating a cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to break.

Graduated return plans are typically essential for pupils with established EBSA patterns. These carefully structured reintegration programs build exposure gradually, often starting with brief visits at less challenging times and progressively increasing duration and demand. Each step must be achievable yet slightly challenging, with success celebrated before moving to the next level.

Parent partnership is particularly critical in EBSA cases. Parents often need specific guidance and support to manage separation anxiety, avoid reinforcing avoidance behaviors, and maintain consistent expectations. Parent coaching or support groups can be valuable in providing both practical strategies and emotional support during the challenging reintegration process.

Frequently Asked Questions

Through out our work with schools on attendance improvement, certain questions arise consistently. We've compiled responses to these common queries to provide additional clarity and guidance.

How quickly should we expect to see improvements in attendance figures?

Attendance improvement typically follows a pattern of initial progress, followed by plateaus requiring refined approaches. Most schools see measurable improvements within 1-2 terms when implementing comprehensive strategies. However, sustainable change often takes 12-18 months to become fully embedded. Focus on trend direction rather than expecting immediate transformative results.

How do we balance supportive approaches with necessary enforcement?

Effective attendance management operates on a continuum with support and enforcement representing complementary rather than competing approaches. Begin with supportive strategies for all attendance concerns, intensifying both support and consequences proportionately as non-attendance persists. Clear communication about this graduated approach helps families understand expectations and available help.

What is the most effective use of attendance rewards?

Research indicates that reward systems work best when they recognise improvement and effort rather than only perfect attendance. Design systems that acknowledge progress from individual starting points, celebrate consistent attendance over time, and include group/class rewards to harness peer influence positively. Avoid rewards that disadvantage pupils with genuine medical conditions.

How do we address term-time holidays effectively?

Develop a clear policy based on exceptional circumstances rather than blanket approvals or refusals. Communicate the cumulative impact of holiday absence on learning outcomes through visual materials and specific examples. Consider implementing dedicated catch-up protocols for unavoidable term-time absences, while maintaining consistent messaging about the importance of attendance.

Frequently Asked Questions
Advice from SENDsational.education

Through out our work with schools on attendance improvement, certain questions arise consistently. We've compiled responses to these common queries to provide additional clarity and guidance.

How do I plan training for a 'Graduated' response model?

Staff training on the Graduated Response Model begins with a clear purpose that is to ensure early intervention, effective support and consistent application across the school. The session is structured around the four stages of the model. **Identify** focuses on recognising early signs of need and gathering baseline information. **Plan** covers setting measurable targets and involving parents or carers. **Do** address implementing interventions, making adjustments and maintaining accurate records. **Review** the impact of actions taken and determines the next steps.

As a 'Champion' I need reasons to explain to my line manager I need more time.

The Champion role drives early intervention, consistent practice and stronger outcomes for students. Since taking on the role, measurable progress has been made but current time allocation limits the ability to follow up cases promptly, coach staff, and coordinate complex multi-agency work. Allocating more time would reduce risk, ensure statutory processes are met, and embed proven strategies across the school. This is not simply about doing more; it is about scaling what works to deliver sustained improvements for pupils and the school as a whole.

How do I handle a disenfranchised parent?

When a parent feels disenfranchised and hostile, the aim is to lower defensiveness and rebuild trust before tackling the issue. Begin by preparing thoroughly; know the facts, anticipate their concerns and have clear examples to reference. Start the conversation in a neutral, non-judgmental tone, showing that you want to understand their perspective. Listen actively without interruption, acknowledge their feelings and reflect back what you've heard to show you value their input.

How do we handle occasional absence?

Occasional absence is infrequent, non-patterned time away from school, but it can be an early warning sign for emerging issues. *(Band 90- 95% DFE) It should be monitored closely, with each instance recorded, reasons checked and parents contacted promptly (formally) in a supportive way. Quick low-level interventions such as check-ins or encouragement help prevent it from developing into persistent absence.

Candid Corner
Uncomfortable truths we can no longer ignore

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Issue: Is poor behaviour in our schools undermining attendance?

Let's be candid, the behaviour crisis in many schools is directly undermining attendance, and we can't fix it in isolation from the wider culture.

For some pupils, school feels chaotic, unsafe, or hostile. Poorly managed behaviour whether low-level disruption that makes learning miserable, or more serious incidents that threaten safety, drives disengagement. Parents, too, will vote with their feet if they believe their child is at risk or learning is constantly disrupted.

But the roots run deeper than the school gates. The erosion of respect for authority, rising levels of aggression and intolerance, online toxicity spilling into classrooms, and the normalisation of conflict are all societal issues. Schools are left firefighting symptoms that reflect a broader cultural climate.

This is why we need government-led cultural change, a long-term, cross-departmental commitment to rebuilding social cohesion, respect, and shared values. It can't be left to headteachers and classroom staff to solve alone. Education policy, justice, health, media, and community leadership all have to pull in the same direction.

Without that shift, schools will remain the shock absorbers for society's fractures and attendance will continue to suffer.

Are we analysing whether behaviour policies support attendance, or inadvertently create barriers (e.g. rigid uniform policies, punitive sanctions for lateness)?

October Edition
Preview: SEND & Vulnerable Pupils focus

Our October edition will focus specifically on attendance strategies for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities(SEND) and other vulnerable groups such as young carers and children experiencing hardship and poverty. This dedicated focus recognises that these pupils often face unique barriers to attendance and require tailored approaches.

1
SEND-specific strategies

Exploring how to adapt attendance approaches for different areas of need, including communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health and sensory/physical needs. The magazine will provide practical strategies tailored to specific SEND profiles.

2
Environmental adaptations

Practical modifications to the school environment that can remove barriers for vulnerable pupils, from sensory spaces to movement breaks, visual supports to alternative routines. Learn how to conduct environmental audits and implement targeted adjustments.

3
Multi-agency collaboration

Effective partnership working with external agencies to support complex needs, including frameworks for information sharing, joint planning and coordinated intervention. Discover best practices for navigating multi-agency landscapes effectively.

4
Celebrating diverse success

Recognising and rewarding attendance achievements that acknowledge individual circumstances and starting points, ensuring inclusive celebration systems. Learn how to develop personalised attendance targets and meaningful recognition approaches.

The October edition will draw on case studies from schools that have successfully improved attendance for SEND and vulnerable pupils, providing practical examples of effective interventions and systems. It will also include insights from SEND specialists, educational psychologists and parents of children with additional needs.

This focused magazine will complement the strategies outlined in the current edition, providing deeper exploration of approaches specifically designed for pupils with additional needs. While the principles of good attendance practice apply to all pupils, these specialised approaches address the unique challenges faced by those with SEND and children with other barriers to attending school.

Look out for our email notification when the October edition is released or subscribe to our magazine list to ensure you don't miss this valuable resource.

SENDsational. education
UK-wide SEND expertise that delivers real change

At SENDsational Education, we know that navigating the SEND system can feel overwhelming. Whether you're a parent fighting for the right support for your child, a teacher looking for practical strategies or a school leader driving inclusion, we're here to make the process clearer, faster and more effective wherever you are in the UK.

We don't just tick boxes. We partner with you to create real, lasting change for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities.

How we help

For Parents & Carers
- Clear, practical advice to help you secure the right provision
- Expert EHCP reviews, redrafting and compliance checks
- Costed provision maps and SMART target writing to strengthen your case
- Step-by-step support through applications and reviews

For Schools & Trusts
- SEND "desktop deep dives" – in-depth analysis of your provision with actionable recommendations
- Pupil screening – Boxall profiling for SEMH needs or dyslexia assessments
- Ready-to-use SEND toolkits packed with resources, strategies and templates
- Flexible Virtual SENDCo services – from 5 to 15 hours per week, tailored to your needs
- Bespoke training for governors, trustees and SLTs on SEND strategy and leadership

Why choose SENDsational Education?
UK-wide reach – we work remotely or on-site to suit you
Independent expertise – over 30 years' experience in SEND leadership
Solutions that stick – practical, evidence-based approaches, not just theory
Support for every level – from classroom strategies to trust-wide planning
A personal touch – we take time to understand your context and priorities

"Kate's support in developing our EHCP has been invaluable. Her attention to detail, commitment to securing the right resources, and ability to navigate complex systems made the experience smoother and less overwhelming. Thanks to Kate, we feel confident that the child's EHCP truly reflects their needs."
QSEN Training Academy CIC

Wherever you are in the UK, we're here to help you champion inclusion and unlock every child's potential.

Book your free 30 minute consultation today via our website
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Attendance

October edition will be out 21 September 2025

SEND Attendance
Alternative Provision Attendance
Dealing with 'Occasional Absence - 90-95%'
Triangulating behaviour with Attendance
Triangulating KS4 outcomes with Attendance
and much more...........