



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLIC RESPONSE, DOCUMENT

Improving attendance in secondary schools: government response

What we plan to do in response to Estyn's report on improving attendance in secondary schools.

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Report details

Estyn have undertaken a thematic review into attendance rates in secondary schools since the removal of restrictions in place as a result of the pandemic. It is based on evidence from secondary inspection and follow-up findings since February 2022.

This thematic review was not formally commissioned by the Minister as part of Estyn's 2023 to 2024 remit, but contains a number of recommendations for schools, local authorities and Welsh Government.

Summary of main findings

The key findings of the report are as follows.

- Prior to the pandemic, overall attendance in secondary and all-age schools was gradually improving across all pupils as well as for those eligible for free school meals. During this time, the proportion of pupils who were persistently absent from school was reducing, although it remained too high.
- Since 2020, there has been a notable increase in the percentage of pupils who are absent from school. Both authorised and unauthorised absence has increased rapidly and there has only been limited improvement in 2022 to 2023.
- While core data sets shared with schools are helpful, it would be helpful to include additional information in order to allow schools to evaluate more robustly.
- Most schools and many local authorities understood the importance of improving pupils' attendance. However, the work to improve attendance had not had enough impact over the past 2 years.
- Where schools were beginning to bring about improvements in attendance,

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leaders had high expectations, monitored and analysed attendance rates rigorously and had effective processes to evaluate the impact of their work.

- Where schools were having difficulty improving attendance, leaders tended to believe that they were doing all they could, despite not having sufficient impact, and did not use the broad range of information available to them to track, monitor or intervene with poor attendance.
- Many schools have improved their approaches to gathering pupils' views on how they can work to improve attendance. However, these views are mainly gathered from pupils who are attending school more regularly so do not give leaders enough information about the barriers to those pupils who do not attend school well enough.
- In the most effective cases, leaders in schools have a strong focus on improving teaching and their curriculum offer to support pupils to engage effectively when they were in school.
- Overall, local authority support for improving attendance has had limited impact over the past 2 years. School improvement officers did not challenge or support school leaders well enough to improve this aspect of their work and, when pupils were referred to local authority services, officers did not build well enough on the work already carried out by schools. In the most effective cases, local authorities and schools worked closely together to plan and target support.
- Current financial challenges, along with the decrease in pupils' attendance, had reduced the capacity of support staff to respond to concerns. In addition, resources to support schools to improve attendance were not always prioritised effectively.
- There were a number of barriers to improving pupils' attendance, which were increasingly difficult for schools to address. These included a decline in parental perception about the importance of good attendance, the capacity of schools to respond given the increased number of targeted pupils, and the timing of school terms and holidays.
- A particular challenge was the fact that pupils are only eligible for free transport if they live beyond a 3-mile radius. School leaders had identified,

that during months where there is increased rainfall and darker mornings and evenings, pupils who usually walk to school, especially those who are eligible for free school meals, generally did not attend as often.

- Over the previous 2 years, schools had increased their capacity to provide targeted support to improve pupils' attendance. Given the current pressures on school budgets, school leaders were concerned about the sustainability of this work. Schools would welcome longer-term, ring-fenced funding to address this important national priority.
- At the time of writing this report, attendance remains a concern across Wales and there is a large variation in attendance rates in individual schools across Wales.

Recommendations: overview

Schools should:

- strengthen planning to strategically improve attendance, including making effective use of data to identify trends and in planning long-term approaches to improving pupils' attendance
- strengthen their approach to monitoring, evaluating and improving attendance
- strengthen their work with parents and carers to explain why good attendance is important
- develop more effective methods to gather the views of pupils who do not attend school regularly
- ensure that teaching and the curriculum offer engages pupils in learning

Local authorities should:

- provide schools with regular and effective challenge and support to improve pupils' attendance and help evaluate the impact of their work

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- ensure that local authority interventions build on work already carried out by schools
- work with schools to support them to work with parents and carers to understand the importance of good attendance

Welsh Government response

The report sets out some positives in how schools are working to improve attendance, noting that the majority of schools they engaged with recognise the importance of improving attendance, with many having it as a whole school priority. It also found that schools were making increasing use of pupil voice to involve pupils fully in the development of strategies and to identify the types of support that may help improve attendance.

We will write to local authority directors of education to advise them of the recommendations for schools and local authorities.

Recommendations and Welsh Government response

The Welsh Government should develop a national campaign to promote the importance of good attendance with parents, carers and pupils

Welsh Government response

Partially accept. We understand the importance of communicating with children and their families about attendance, but it is important to understand the factors

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and behaviours that lie behind non-attendance. We are actively working with stakeholders, including children, parents, carers, schools and local authorities to develop this understanding to ensure that communication can be tailored and impactful. This is proven to be more effective than blanket communications. One example of this is work underway with Parentkind to engage further with parents and carers to understand what more Welsh Government and partners can do to support parents and carers with attendance.

The Welsh Government should consider how pupils living within the 3-mile radius who are not eligible for free transport could be better supported to attend school more regularly

Welsh Government response

Accept. Discretionary powers are already available to local authorities to make any arrangement they think fit to facilitate home-to-school transport. This can include providing free school transport to children whose parents or carers are in receipt of certain benefits, in recognition that transport affordability can be a barrier to some children attending school.

I will be asking the National Attendance Taskforce to build on Estyn's findings regarding the role that transport provision plays on school attendance; notably how we can improve the practices and processes between schools and local authorities to support them to work in partnership to identify and overcome the barriers.

The Welsh Government should publish core data sets for attendance twice a year, including regression analysis,

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residuals for persistent absenteeism and year group attendance to better support schools' own evaluation processes

Welsh Government response

Partially accept. We are committed to continuing to provide schools and local authorities with attendance core data sets for primary and secondary attendance, but it is important to acknowledge that any new data collections or data analysis will have workload implications for schools and Welsh Government. We will engage with stakeholders to understand what additional analysis would be useful as part of their self-evaluation processes.

The Welsh Government should continue to provide weekly analysis of school level attendance to provide more frequent information and improve the quality of this data

Welsh Government response

Partially accept. We will continue to publish frequent attendance data throughout the school year to support schools and local authorities.

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The Welsh Government should consider how funding can be allocated more effectively to support schools to improve attendance

Welsh Government response

Accept. The new amalgamated grant arrangements will allow local authorities increased flexibility to target local needs. Attendance is a key priority for the grant and terms and conditions will set out expectations around how local authorities will support schools with attendance issues, and particularly at schools where attendance is a concern.

The Welsh Government should consider how reform of the school year might better support pupils to attend school more regularly

Welsh Government response

Accept. Through the Consultation on the School Year, published in November 2023, the Welsh Government is keen to examine the current structure of the school year, including the length of terms and breaks.

The initial proposals presented in the consultation include extending the length of the October half-term break to 2 weeks and shortening the length of the summer break to 5 weeks as well as having a spring break at the mid-point of the spring term rather than a break attached to Easter. Subsequent proposals explore extending the May half-term break to 2 weeks and shortening the summer break to 4 weeks. These changes are being proposed with no change

to the overall number of school holidays for learners and teaching staff and the summer break will last for at least 4 weeks.

Proposals have been developed following extensive research and engagement and intend to support consistency of term length to maximise learning potential and provide a more consistent learning structure. Furthermore, spreading break weeks more evenly throughout the year and offering an additional break week during the longest term (autumn) could better support wellbeing and help to reduce fatigue felt by learners and school staff.

Though this work the Welsh Government seeks to ensure that learner fatigue is not a barrier to attending school. Through more consistent term lengths and by ensuring terms are not overly long, we hope to better support learner attendance.

Subject to the findings of the consultation, any amendments to the school calendar are expected to be announced in spring 2024, for implementation from the 2025 to 2026 school year.

The Welsh Government should carry out research to identify the factors impacting on poor attendance and to discover the most effective methods of improving attendance

Welsh Government response

Partially accept. We already have multiple sources of research we can draw upon to identify the factors impacting on poor attendance. These include the [‘Attendance review, implications of the COVID-19 pandemic’](#) and the [Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry ‘Pupil Absence’](#). We also have the results from the recent [Parentkind survey](#)

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which contained useful findings such as perceived barriers to attendance and parental perceptions and attitudes towards schools and education.

Our ongoing and planned research programme looks at the implications of the pandemic upon learners, prevention of exclusions, the effectiveness of community focused schools, the additional learning needs system, and the impact of poverty on attainment. All these projects consider how the policies involved can be optimised to support attendance and engagement.

We continually review our evidence base to ensure we have a full understanding of factors affecting attendance. We are aware that our understanding of home and family factors affecting attendance needs to deepen, and an immediate priority is therefore to build on the survey undertaken by Parentkind. Engagement such as this will continue to inform all our policy and intervention.

Publication details

The report was published on 18 January and may be accessed on the [Estyn website](#).

This document may not be fully accessible.

For more information refer to our [accessibility statement](#).

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