

## **Attendance review – implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for school attendance**

Meilyr Rowlands – February 2022



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## **About the author**

Meilyr Rowlands was Chief Inspector at Estyn from 2015 to 2021. Previously, he taught science at Ysgol Botwnnog and Ysgol Aberconwy and was a teacher trainer at Bangor University and at UWIC, where he was director of the secondary PGCE course. He also worked at Estyn as an inspector, managing inspector and strategic director.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a hugely significant effect on all our lives and on all aspects of education in Wales. Some of this impact has been obvious and direct, for example the results of the illness itself and the subsequent loss of study time at school. Other effects have been more subtle and not necessarily easily assessed, for example the impact on the wellbeing and mental health of both learners<sup>i</sup> and staff is more difficult to gauge but may be even more significant in the long term. These effects are still ongoing at the time of writing with the emergence of the omicron variant and a further peak of infection. The resulting uncertainty is unsettling for learners and staff and is making policy planning at all levels even more challenging.

I was asked by Welsh Government to survey recent attendance trends in the light of the pandemic, to offer an understanding of the reasons behind non-attendance, and to suggest any additional measures or interventions that could help to support and re-engage learners in their education, especially those whose absence increased during this period (see appendix for the terms of reference of the review). I am very grateful to everyone that gave freely of their time to help me with the review (see appendix for a list of consultations), including the learners and professionals who took time to do so during a difficult and busy time for them. Everyone contributed helpfully and frankly.

During the review, those consulted touched on a wide range of reasons for non-attendance and suggested many different educational interventions that could contribute to improving learner attendance. The breadth of responses is unsurprising as the various elements of the education system are interrelated and improvement to one aspect often requires a 'whole system' response to ensure success. This review has therefore attempted to survey the main features of this broad and complex policy landscape and has noted at various points where further research could be usefully undertaken. While many of the suggestions made relate to long term strategies, the review also identifies recommendations for actions that should have a shorter or medium term effect.

The overriding impression left by the discussions held during the review is of a hard-working, resilient and constructive education system, but one that is under considerable strain. There is a lot of further work remaining to be done to overcome the effects of the pandemic, including ensuring that all learners gain the skills and conceptual understanding they need for further study or work, as well as addressing a range of personal wellbeing and mental health issues that have arisen during this period. It is not easy to estimate how long this process will take. Improving attendance, as with any other aspect of this process, depends on the breadth and cohesiveness of the response from the education system as a whole.

However, there are now often fewer professionals available to do this additional work due to illness or other effects of the pandemic. For example, I spoke to one headteacher who was teaching four lessons that day because there was no-one else to cover the classes. Clearly such arrangements are

unsustainable in the longer term and senior leaders need time to plan, manage and lead if the education system is to respond in a coordinated and effective way to increased demands. It is in this context of increased workload pressures and capacity challenges that the suggestions, recommendations for Welsh Government and broader considerations raised by this report are made. They are intended to be helpful and result in greater systemic capacity, both in the shorter and longer term. The broader policy context is set out in the Welsh Government's document 'Renew and reform: supporting learners' wellbeing and progression'<sup>ii</sup>.

The review assumes that there are a range of reasons or underlying causes for learner absence, including complex and multiple causes. It also assumes that learner attendance lies on a broad continuum, though the attendance of individual learners is often categorised using various terms such as permanent absence, frequent and occasional absence. There is also a group of anxious learners whose attendance may not have been necessarily affected by the pandemic but whose progress and motivation have nevertheless been badly effected by the disruption to their education over the last couple of years. On the other end of the spectrum, there will be learners who are not technically absent because they are no longer on the school roll, including those who have elected for home education and those excluded. Although the focus of the review is on improving attendance, the underlying causes of absence also affects these other groups of learners and it is hoped that the review findings will be helpful for these cases too.

## Attendance data

The way in which Welsh Government collects, analyses and publishes maintained school attendance data has changed during the pandemic. Because of the differences in how attendance is recorded, analysed and published before, during and after the pandemic it is difficult to fully identify trends or draw detailed conclusions about attendance rates now compared to before the pandemic, although the broad trends are clear enough to provide a basis for policy development.

Prior to the pandemic, maintained school attendance data was published annually and in a form that was summarised for a whole academic year. The most recent published data for the period before the pandemic is for the 2018-2019 academic year. This data shows a pattern that is broadly similar to that of preceding years. For example, there are higher rates of absence in secondary schools compared with primary schools, and greater absence rates for disadvantaged learners (those eligible for free school meals) and for pupils with additional learning needs (those with an SEN statement or on School Action plus), as shown in the table below.

Table 1 - Pre-COVID-19 absences<sup>iii</sup>

<b>Absences 2018-2019</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Primary</b>
<b>All pupils</b>	6.2%	5.3%
<b>Non-fsm</b>	5.3%	4.7%
<b>fsm</b>	10.5%	7.9%
<b>SEN statement</b>	7.8%	7.7%
<b>SA+</b>	10.3%	7.0%

Certain groups of learners such as Roma, Traveller and Gypsy learners also had poor attendance historically. Overall attendance had been improving gradually over the preceding decade, although it had plateaued during the last few years of that period. As can be seen from Table 1, learner attendance at school before the pandemic typically would have been around 94% on average.

Since September 2020, attendance data has been collected and published weekly at a higher level of detail, and now includes daily national attendance rates that had not been available previously. Welsh Government downloads school attendance data directly from the school's usual attendance accounts so that schools do not have the additional administrative task of submitting this data to Welsh Government. This process provides a nearly 'real time' picture of overall attendance in schools in Wales.

Table 2 - Attendance in autumn 2021<sup>iv</sup>

<b>Week beginning</b>	<b>Average % of pupils who were in attendance</b>
06/09/2021	91.4
13/09/2021	88.5
20/09/2021	84.7
27/09/2021	85.3
04/10/2021	87.3
11/10/2021	87.8
18/10/2021	85.5
01/11/2021	89.3
08/11/2021	89.1
15/11/2021	88.2
22/11/2021	86.7
29/11/2021	86.0
06/12/2021	85.7
13/12/2021	80.6

We can see from Table 2 that attendance (total for all maintained schools) during the autumn term 2021 has consistently been well below that of previous years, such as 2018-219, and has also varied a lot from week to week. In line with these figures, individual schools have reported to us that their attendance has been down, typically by 5% and usually within a range of 2% and 10%.

The 'coding' system used by schools to record pupil attendance or absence has also been adapted since COVID-19. For example, new codes were introduced to denote absences related to COVID-19 (eg 'Y' meaning 'School directed absence due to COVID-19' and '[' meaning 'Remote learning due to COVID-19 (where a learner is shielding or self-isolating)'). Refinements to this system are ongoing. For example, since 22 November 2021, illness due to COVID-19 (coded by schools with an additional ';') has been usefully included within 'COVID-19 related reasons' for absences (i.e. including the ; Y and [ codes) in Table 7 of the weekly published data. Currently, attendance data is published and presented in a weekly format and is not summarised further, though it is understood that year group attendance data will include a rolling summary figure in the near future, with further figures summarising overall attendance for primary age years and for secondary age years. Note also that Welsh Government attendance data is published of each year cohort and not separately for primary, all-age, special or secondary schools. Hence, for example Year 7 data includes all pupils in Year 7 in maintained schools including in this case secondary, all-age and special schools.

Provisional data for the week beginning 17 January 2022 show an overall maintained school attendance of 88% and absences due to COVID-19 related reasons of 3.8%. These figures are fairly typical of recent weeks and suggests that even after disaggregating COVID-19 related reasons that attendance generally has not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels yet<sup>v</sup>. It is not possible to compare directly attendance data from different countries because of the



variation in how the data is defined, collected and analysed. For example, attendance data in England is based on a self-selecting sample of schools that submit their figures. The most recently available data for England, published 11 January 2022, is 88.6% of state-funded pupils attended school with COVID-19 related absence being 3.9%<sup>vi</sup>.

Wales Government also publishes learner attendance data at local authority level<sup>vii</sup>. However, comparisons of learner attendance made between different local authorities in Wales should be treated with caution because of the relatively small number of pupils involved, the variable incidence of COVID-19 in different areas, and the way in which local policies varied across the phases of the pandemic (various lockdowns and firebreaks, reopening schools, tackling local 'waves' of infection). At best, analyses (for example Education Policy Institute, November 2020<sup>viii</sup>) take into account differing local rates of infection, but not the age distribution of cases. Comparisons, whether at local or national levels, would be most meaningful made after the last phases of the pandemic have been concluded, so that early strategies such as discouraging learners with COVID-19 from attending or phased return programmes that may have lowered attendance in the short term but increased it in the longer term, can be taken into account.

This review considers the data available at the time of writing, including unpublished Welsh Government data. For example, unpublished sources include rolling data on the proportion of pupils with no absences, 10.5 days or more absence, and 30.5 days or more absence (and for the equivalent period in the 2018-2019 academic year) for pupils with a range of characteristics. The rationale for having this 10.5 day analysis is that the self-isolation period is up to 10 days and one would expect absences of around this number of days to be a feature of the data. The analysis confirms that the most common period of absence, for Year 11 pupils for example, is between 5.5 and 20 days<sup>ix</sup>.

This data is also helpful more generally in being able to identify trends in the length of absences. For example, it has been suggested that increased overall school absence may be more due to learners with poor attendance records being absent for longer rather than more learners being absent. However, the data shows that increased school absence is due to both more learners being absent and learners being absent for longer. A selection of this data is shown in the table below.

Table 3 - Proportion of pupils with significant absences<sup>x</sup>

Proportion of pupils with	10.5+ absences Sept - Dec 2018	10.5+ absences Sept - 01 Dec 2021	10.5+ absences Sept - 26 Jan 2022
All pupils	8.2	20.1	35.9
Traveller	39.0	50.8	67.5
Gypsy	35.3	51.5	67.1
Asian	5.9	14.5	29.0

<b>Proportion of pupils with</b>	<b>10.5+ absences Sept - Dec 2018</b>	<b>10.5+ absences Sept - 01 Dec 2021</b>	<b>10.5+ absences Sept - 26 Jan 2022</b>
<b>fsm</b>	17.3	33.3	51.5
<b>non fsm</b>	6.1	15.8	30.5
<b>SEN</b>	13.4	27.5	42.0
<b>non SEN</b>	6.6	17.8	32.2
<b>fsm and SEN</b>	21.2	36.3	50.9

The table shows that overall absence rates have increased for all groups of pupils this autumn term compared to the autumn before the pandemic and is continuing to increase. In particular, absences for Gypsy and Traveller learners, learners eligible for free school meals, and pupils with special educational needs have all increased substantially, though not disproportionately more than for other learners. The increased absence for these groups of pupils remains a considerable concern however because of their high absolute level both before and after the pandemic.

It is also probable that other historic patterns persist in broad terms. There are still higher absence rates in secondary school year groups rather than in primary on a daily and weekly basis and therefore overall. The currently weekly published attendance data consistently shows that attendance declines as statutory aged pupils get older, with attendance for learners in Year 10 and Year 11 (at key stage 4) and for those in Year 12 and Year 13 (in the sixth form) being particularly worrying<sup>xi</sup>.

There has been debate in the past regarding the relative significance of overall absence or unauthorised absence when analysing attendance data. Overall absence is easier to define as the borderline between authorised and unauthorised absence is subject to interpretation, discussion and change. In general, the impact of absence on learning is however similar whether the absence is authorised or not and this report will focus mainly on overall attendance and absence data. It is interesting to note that many schools increasingly find that analysing their attendance data by COVID-19 related and non-COVID-19 related absence is most useful for them.

While learner attendance has decreased overall compared to before the pandemic, it can be argued that to some extent this is to be expected. What we do not know is how much attendance could reasonably have been improved under these circumstances or the relative impact of various initiatives on attendance. Discussions with similar countries such as the home countries and the Republic of Ireland could provide useful comparisons for this purpose. All the home countries report increased learner absences following the pandemic, but differences in recording and reporting make detailed comparisons difficult. While recognising the considerable challenges of achieving agreement between countries around data collection, further joint consideration of attendance recording and coding practice could be usefully

undertaken now, especially since there has been considerable changes in the codes used for recording attendance in other administrations recently, for example codes have been changed in Scotland and Northern Ireland<sup>xii</sup> and proposals for changes have also been made in England.

- \* **Recommendation - Discuss the definition, recording and analysis of attendance data with similar countries in order to learn from the latest practice and to consider how comparison of data and policy can be further facilitated**

There has also been a debate around the definition of 'persistent' absence, which is currently generally taken as being less than 80% attendance (or more than 20% absence) in Wales. This is significant as it is often set as the trigger for certain kinds of intervention such as the involvement of Education welfare service. Strong arguments were made during the consultation that a definition of worse than 85% attendance as in Northern Ireland (and in many Welsh local authorities in practice) or 90% as in England, could lead to earlier intervention and better outcomes.

- \* **Recommendation - Review the definition of persistent absence and the related trigger points for interventions**

In practice, it is unlikely that support services in Wales, such as local authority education welfare services, youth services or social services, would be able to cope under the present circumstances with an increase in workload<sup>xiii</sup> and so implementing this suggestion would not make an appreciable difference in the short term without increasing the capacity of these services.

#### Careers Wales destinations data

Every year, Careers Wales surveys the destinations of all Year 11 leavers to see whether they remain in education or training or have entered employment. Staying on rates at full-time education for 2020 Year 11 leavers (90.4%) appears to have increased by around 2 percentage points from that of 2019 (88.2%)<sup>xiv</sup>. Discussions around initial feedback is indicating that this trend broadly remains for 2021 leavers, and finalised data will be published by Careers Wales in spring 2022. It also appears that the proportion of school leavers that are not in education, employment or training (NEET) remain low overall, at least in the short term, and has not increased substantially. Possible reasons for the increase in full-time education were offered during the consultations, including that improved GCSE and other qualification grades have meant that more students have progressed to the next level courses than in the past.

There are concerns however that this trend may not be sustainable. For example, if GCSE and other qualification grades remain higher than in the past then progression course leaders may increase their acceptance grades. There is also a concern that although grades have increased, the current student cohorts have had their education disrupted and it may be that they have skills and knowledge gaps that, if not addressed, will make it more difficult for them to continue on their selected courses. Work is ongoing in

Welsh Government on analysing the progression of Year 11 students into post-16 learning for 2021-2022, which will also look at data on students dropping out from or switching post-16 programmes.

#### Data for Education other than at school (EOTAS) and Elective Home Education (EHE)<sup>xv</sup>

The number of learners educated other than in school (including learners in pupil referral units or being home tutored for example) does not seem to have increased substantially in 2020-21 compared with previous years. The number for 2020-21 is similar to that for 2018-19, though the number for 2019-20 was substantially lower. Although no explanation for this pattern has been suggested, it may be that there is a maximum capacity for EOTAS provision that cannot be exceeded, even when demand increases.

However, the number of learners whose parents have elected to educate them at home has increased significantly to just over 4,000 in 2020-21, while in previous years the number was never been greater than around 2,500 (in 2018-19). Similar increases in EHE have been seen in England<sup>xvi</sup>. It was suggested by those consulted that possible reasons for this increase may be that some families are choosing home education because they fear the ongoing effects of COVID-19, while for others the experience of home education during lockdown may have given them the confidence to elect for home education in the longer term. Further research into the reasons given by families about why they are increasingly electing to home educate could be usefully undertaken.

#### Other research into attendance data

Recently, the Welsh Government has asked WISERD to analyse longitudinal attendance data at an individual learner level so as to identify patterns of attendance by learners over their 11-year school career. Initial analysis has identified four possible groups of pupils, those with:

- Consistently good attendance: 41% of the sample had levels of attendance that were consistently high across the 11-year period, with the proportion experiencing up to 2 weeks' absence not dipping below 70% in a year for the 11-year period.
- High levels of non-attendance: A group of young people, accounting for 9% of the sample, exhibited persistent levels of non-attendance over the 11-years, with those missing more than 6 weeks of school reaching a peak of 46% within an academic year.
- Improving in secondary school: The pattern of improving attendance up to Year 6 with a step change in Year 7, seen in the cohort as a whole, may be driven partly by a single group of individuals, who accounted for 32% of the sample.
- Problematic attendance: A last group of students had levels of non-attendance that could be considered problematic but falling short of prevalent persistent non-attendance, accounting for 19% of the sample.<sup>xvii</sup>

Further research could provide insights into individual learner absence patterns that may help policy making in future. In particular, it would be useful to develop a typology of attendance patterns and identify pre-patterns that could indicate possible deteriorating attendance. The categories of such a typology could then be linked to suggested differential support responses.

It is also known that deteriorating attendance can be a precursor to and predictor of a range of behavioural and emotional problems for learners that if not addressed may lead to exclusion of these learners from school<sup>xviii</sup>. It would be useful if further research into attendance patterns could also focus on how best to identify and support learners who could be heading for exclusion.

- \* **Recommendation - Undertake further research into attendance patterns that would help to identify learners who may be in danger of being excluded**

#### School staff attendance data

We were told that school staff absence (including for senior school staff, teachers, and teacher assistants and in addition staff across a range of local authority support services) is higher currently than usual due to a range of COVID-19 related reasons, including absence due to illness, self-isolation or anxiety. However, there is little official data available in Wales on school staff attendance or sickness patterns for before or after the onset of the pandemic. A snapshot of teacher absence during the first week in January 2022 (based on a sample of local authority returns) suggested that teacher absence that week was around 10%<sup>xix</sup> which is roughly twice higher than would normally be expected.

Other published data suggests that the average number of days lost for illness for full-time teachers reduced to 6 days in 2020 from 7 days in 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016 and 2015<sup>xx</sup>. This counter-intuitive finding may be related to a possible reduction of illnesses being reported during the lockdown period. See Effective management of school workforce attendance in primary schools (Estyn, 2017)<sup>xxi</sup> and Covering Teachers 'Absence: Follow-up (Wales Audit, 2020)<sup>xxii</sup> for good practice and further detail on the management of the school workforce.

The lack of school staff attendance data makes assessing the impact of the pandemic on learners' educational experience difficult, since their learning experience depends not only on the learner's own attendance but also on whether they were taught by their usual teacher or a subject specialist, when they did attend. Other home countries have also identified this gap in their education data, and Northern Ireland for example have recently introduced a daily collection at national level of teacher attendance.

- \* **Recommendation - Consider how best to collect, analyse and publish education staff attendance in more detail**

- \* **Recommendation - Explore developing and publishing a set of metrics for learners' experience that include data on teacher absence, the use of supply cover, and the availability of subject specialists**

## **Underlying reasons for increased learner absence**

Learners emphasised the sheer shock they experienced when re-integrating back rapidly into school after a long period of lockdown and disruption. While the transition had been especially difficult for a minority, and led to serious wellbeing and mental health concerns in a few cases, all learners reported that they had experienced a certain amount of disorientation and many felt more vulnerable. Learners reported that many learners had lost some of their basic social and study skills, including the ability to focus on study for an extended time. All this added to the stress and pressure they felt on returning to school and coping with academic work and a suddenly unfamiliar social environment.

The findings from the analysis of attendance data presented in section 2 were supported by the education professionals interviewed. Those consulted reported that learner absence had increased for all groups of learners and that there were two broad reasons for the increase: there were a range of new COVID-19 related reasons for absence, and long-standing pre-COVID-19 attendance problems remained which had been exacerbated by the pandemic. The general sense was that attendance has got significantly worse for learners of all characteristics (see Table 3) and that this was a worry.

Before COVID-19, it was well-established that vulnerable learners (defined in the literature as those eligible for free school meals, with additional learning needs, or having English as an additional language) were more likely to have poorer attendance records. Correlations exist between increased absence and deprivation (measured by eligibility for free school meals), and additional learning needs (statement of SEN and school action plus), as mentioned previously. The increased absence for disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups of learners was a particular concern because of the high absolute absence levels and because it was felt that these learners had found lockdown a more difficult period to learn than more advantaged learners and so needed to be back regularly in school now in order for support arrangements to have an effect.

It was also stressed by consultees that the attendance picture is a complex one and not easily generalised. Attendance patterns and trends in individual schools can change a lot over time and were said to be highly variable. This variability is due to COVID-19 affecting schools in waves - COVID-19 'running hot and cold' at different times in various localities. Some schools have experienced more COVID-19 'waves' than others. It was noted also difficult to predict attendance patterns for individual learners, including when their attendance had been good before COVID-19. A further potential complication is that various factors may affect different groups of learners in varied ways. Overall, whether a learner attends or absents themselves from compulsory education depends on a complex range of underlying factors, and for any particular learner, the reasons for absence could be a combination of generic and specific reasons. The various factors and reasons that featured most prominently in the consultation responses are discussed below for learners of different characteristics and home circumstances, and academic research findings are discussed in Appendix D.

## **Pre-existing reasons for absence exacerbated by COVID-19**

### Poverty, disadvantage and learners eligible for free school meals

A range of possible reasons why absence for learners in this group could have been exacerbated by the pandemic were suggested during the review consultations. For example, almost by definition disadvantaged families will have fewer resources (financial and physical, and often also emotional and cultural) to draw on to cope with difficult situations. They may for example have poorer physical resources such as computer and internet facilities, smaller or no spaces for quiet study, fewer books and so on, so they may have found the education challenges of home educating during lockdown more difficult than more advantaged families. As a result of this negative lockdown experience, these learners may find returning to school more challenging than for more advantaged learners, who had not experienced these difficulties during lockdown.

### Special and additional learning needs

The focus of this review is mainly on learners in primary, secondary and all-age schools. Many learners attending special schools and pupil referral units continued their education at school during lockdown. It has also been reported that the schools with the lowest attendance rates during the pandemic and its aftermath have been special schools<sup>xxiii</sup>. Some of this absence will reflect rational decisions made by families for their children not to attend school, given that pupils at special schools have particular health care needs and are more likely to suffer from medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus. They could also have found the pandemic stressful and challenging as the coronavirus posed a dangerous additional health threat. As a result, it is difficult to generalise regarding attendance in special schools beyond the above.

In terms of learners with additional learning needs in mainstream schools, the data discussed above shows that as with other learners the attendance of learners with additional learning needs has decreased overall. A range of possible reasons why their absence could have been exacerbated by the pandemic were suggested during consultation. We also heard evidence in particular about learners on the autistic spectrum. Some of these pupils may have preferred aspects of home and distance learning, such as the opportunity for learning at their own pace and at the time of their choosing, and believed that the learning environment at home was quieter, calmer or less distracting than at school. However, specialists cautioned against assuming that autistic learners necessarily preferred home study. These learners also valued and missed human relationships, particularly with friends and trusted school or college staff who understood them and their needs. They may have also experienced difficulties with using technology during lockdown and preferred human contact, and it was also reported that many of these learners have enjoyed re-engaging with college and school and have attended well after lockdown. Overall, school absence in autism spectrum learners and other learners with additional learning needs has received little attention by researchers and the little that exists predates the pandemic<sup>xxiv</sup>.



## Cultural issues - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners had the poorest attendance levels of any minority ethnic group before the pandemic. The reasons for this and the various mitigating strategies used by schools and local authorities are described in several reports including those by Estyn<sup>xxv</sup>. Support officers working with these learners report that most Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families withdrew their children from schools on the onset of the pandemic and that it has been particularly difficult, especially for secondary age pupils, to persuade these families that schools are now safe. The pandemic seems to have strengthened cultural predispositions against secondary education. No other cultural issues or other minority ethnic group were raised in the consultations as having been particularly affected by the pandemic in terms of attendance, although research from the US suggests that non-White parents were more concerned about adherence to mitigation strategies, schools reopening safely, their child contracting COVID-19, and their child bringing home COVID-19 compared with White parents<sup>xxvi</sup>.

## Parental influence and families with complex and multiple needs

A consistent theme in the consultation discussions was the key role played by parents and families of learners in all attendance issues. For younger learners in primary schools particularly, their attendance is strongly dependant on parental and family attitudes, not least as they often depend on them to get them physically to school. Some learners have established a pattern of not attending school during lockdown that they and their families find difficult or unnecessary to change. In some cases the exact underlying reasons for these absences may be unknown because the learner and family have multiple, complex needs that are long standing and even 'inter-generational'. Many of these challenges existed before lockdown, but some have been reported as deepening since, and as a result these families have become 'harder to reach' after the pandemic. For all learners, parents and families are well placed, in addition to the learners themselves, to provide important insights into the specific reasons for absence, especially in the case of untypical absence patterns.

## Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues

It is well established that poor attendance patterns for students prior to the pandemic was often related to a range of anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues. Poor mental health in particular has previously been linked to poor school attendance, with anxiety often described as a key risk factor. There are many aspects of the school setting that may cause anxiety, such as separation from parents/carers, social interaction with peers and school staff, and academic stress. This may lead children to avoid school in an attempt to reduce their anxiety.

These pre-existing issues, from school phobia to bullying, may have been exacerbated by the circumstances of the pandemic - see the literature review in Appendix C for detail on the relevant research. The main focus of the consultation discussions was around new causes of anxiety relating to the

pandemic and the extent to which pre-existing causes of anxiety may have been exacerbated, and these are considered in more detail in the next sub-section. Addressing both pre-existing and new causes of anxiety and discussed together in section 4 of the report.

## **New COVID-19 related reasons for absence**

There are also new factors affecting attendance that relate more or less directly to the pandemic.

### COVID-19 as an illness, self-isolation and school-directed absence

The most obvious reason is illness due to COVID-19 itself. It was consistently said during the review consultations that many children have lost substantial amounts of schooling due to COVID-19 illness. In addition, 'Long COVID-19' is said to be an increasing feature of learner absence.

There are also a range of COVID-19 related reasons for absence not involving being ill or being 'symptomatic'. For example, being non-symptomatic and isolating following positive testing (LFD or PCR), or having been in contact with someone who has tested positively (themselves or others in the home or in school groups or bubbles).

These absences are coded by a 'Y' (school-directed absence) and 'I' for 'Remote learning'. Learner absence that schools think may be due to illness is coded 'I' with an additional '; ' if the illness is thought to be due to COVID-19. Since 22 November 2021, all three 'COVID-19 related' codes are grouped together and published weekly. As discussed in the data section above, the data suggests that current attendance reductions are not entirely due to these direct COVID-19 related absences.

### Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues

As mentioned above, there is general consensus that many of the causes underlying increased absence are related to learner wellbeing, resilience or mental health. For example, some students with previously good attendance record may have developed mental health issues during lockdown. In some cases, pupils are reported to have developed a general anxiety about returning to a large, busy institution after a period of relative quiet and isolation during lockdown.

Although it is not always easy to distinguish the sources of such anxieties and differentiate between pre-existing anxieties that may have been exacerbated during lockdown (such as the examples given above) and new anxieties specifically related to COVID-19, the main focus of the consultation discussions was around the new causes of anxiety relating to the pandemic. These include the fear of the learner (or of their family) about returning to school for a variety of reasons, such as anxiety regarding safety in terms of health (including worries about the possibility of catching COVID-19 and affecting one's own health or transmitting the virus to vulnerable family members), as well as the fear of not being able to cope with the school's educational demands.

A fear of not being able to cope with school work could arise from a perceived loss of skills or knowledge (real or imagined) during lockdown, or from a fear of the requirements of studying for qualifications (examinations or course work). A specific manifestation of this fear for some learners is the development of a preference for continuing to study digitally from home. The implications of these forms of anxiety are explored further in the following sections.

### Disengagement and more casual attitudes to learning

It was reported that a more lax attitude, from both learners and parents, towards regular attendance at school was increasingly evident, including from learners that previously had exhibited good attendance. A specific manifestation of this attitude is an increase in 'tactical' absence prior to holidays or family events, the purpose of which is to avoid potential contact with the virus that would endanger holiday arrangements.

Part of the reason for this general casual attitude towards learning and schooling in particular may lie in an element of disenchantment with schooling that started during lockdown and has been subsequently aggravated by impatience with ongoing COVID-19 related disruption to school life, such as staff absences or new hygiene arrangements, and a belief that missed school time can be caught up through other means, including school catch up and blended learning arrangements.

### **Summary of learner characteristics and home circumstances that may be behind increased absence**

Pre-existing reasons exacerbated by COVID-19

- poverty - disadvantaged learners
- additional learning needs
- cultural issues - Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners
- parental influence and hard to reach families
- anxiety, mental health and wellbeing and disengagement issues

New COVID-19 related reasons

- COVID-19 as an illness, self-isolation and school-directed absences
- anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues
  - relating to health concerns
  - relating to education concerns
- disengagement and more relaxed attitudes to learning and attendance

## Strategies for improving attendance

Learners emphasised the central importance for them of schools taking their wellbeing and mental health issues 'seriously'. They welcomed the general wellbeing-focused approach taken by most schools. They appreciated in particular any additional pastoral support provided to help them make the difficult transition back to 'normal' schooling as easy as possible. They particularly highlighted the importance to them of schools ensuring a positive, forward-looking and friendly ethos - of teachers and other pastoral staff asking them individually how they were - and for the provision of specialist support and nurture groups if required. They felt that asking learners about their views on how this could be achieved, for example through consulting with school councils, would be valuable, as would giving learners, especially older ones, some control over how and when they learn.

## Re-establishing and extending pre-existing best practice

The attendance of learners in school, in addition to being directly related to physical health, is also affected by wellbeing and mental health, and by attitudes towards learning and schooling (also called school engagement or connectivity in the literature). The inter-relationship between attendance and general wellbeing is considered so strong that attendance has often been taken as a proxy measure for wellbeing in the past. We also know that attendance has a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression. For example, examination outcomes strongly correlate to attendance rates<sup>xxvii</sup>.

Because of this well-established link between attendance and attainment, improving learner attendance has long been an important policy aim for successive Welsh Governments<sup>xxviii</sup><sup>xxix</sup>, as well as for local authorities and individual schools. The explicit focus on attendance in government policies, including its inclusion as a measure in categorisation and in inspection arrangements, led to a steady improvement in attendance rates over the last decade.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a broad consensus around what constituted best practice for improving attendance. A succession of reviews, reports and toolkits were made available, including by the inspectorate<sup>xxx</sup> <sup>xxxi</sup>. There was a general agreement among the education professionals consulted that these pre-pandemic strategies for improving attendance remained valid, and need to be re-established, adapted and extended where needed in light of the pandemic experience.

The case study schools in this review were selected by their local authority as demonstrating good practice, typically during the pandemic built on their pre-existing practice for improving attendance. They had already recognised the importance of establishing trusting relationships with parents, family and the local community generally. They preferred an approach that was supportive of families rather than relying on formal and punitive methods. They had set high expectations in terms of attendance with learners, families and staff. They identified attendance issues early and had a graduated response and a range of interventions to help to support learners who were absent or in

danger of absenting. They worked well and closely with local support services and agencies. Their experience during the pandemic served to confirm to them the importance of parental engagement and early intervention. They consulted widely and effectively with families and adapted their policies and approaches where necessary (see Appendix C for details).

### Good practice in tackling poor attendance

A strong feature of previous best practice was the need for a consistent, rigorous but graduated approach to applying agreed procedures to tackling poor attendance. Basic good practice includes careful record keeping and analysis, early identification, prompt contacting and engagement of families in discussions, offering support to help with any underlying problems, and continued close monitoring of ongoing attendance. It was however felt that implementation of this good attendance practice had weakened recently and was less prevalent than it had been before the pandemic, mainly because of staff capacity limitations resulting from the cumulative effect of general increased workload demands and staff absences.

- \* **Recommendation - Share and disseminate best practice for improving attendance, including how schools can best engage with learners and their families, by adapting, re-packaging and re-issuing relevant guidance and promoting them through targeted professional development**

A key element of the best practice was the support offered to learners and their families to address any identified problems they faced. This required partnership working with a wide range of services, such as social services, youth services, behaviour management, educational psychology, counselling and mental health, national health service, housing and police, for example. However, as with teacher capacity, it was reported that all these services were also currently experiencing capacity limitations that made it challenging to address these needs in a timely way.

One of the most contentious issues regarding pre-existing attendance practice raised during the review was that of the use of fixed penalty notices (FPNs) and divergent opinions were expressed around this matter. On the one hand, fixed penalty notices were felt, particularly by Education Welfare Officers and some secondary schools, to be an important and well-established 'tool' for persuading families to take school attendance seriously when other methods had failed. On the other, it was felt that it would be inappropriate to use fixed penalty notices now in the same way as before the pandemic. Despite these differing opinions, there was also considerable common ground. All agreed that there was a place for formal procedures in extreme circumstances (and this is still possible legally), as part of a full range of options. There was agreement that formal letters should be used as a warning in the first instance and as a way of encouraging families to engage with officials in constructive discussion, and no-one suggested that formal procedures should be used until all other options had been fully explored.

It is clearly important that the impression of insensitivity is avoided during the current pandemic period and its aftermath (for example, consider the handling of school meal payments in a North Wales school recently<sup>xxxii</sup>) and this sensitive approach is also that taken currently in other home countries. An 'Evaluation of Fixed Penalty Notices issued for regular non-attendance at school' was carried out by ICF Consulting and Arad on behalf of Welsh Government in 2018<sup>xxxiii</sup> which includes a review of literature on the best practice for improving attendance. The review found that there are mixed views among survey respondents on the efficacy of fixed penalty notices with 56 per cent believing they are effective but 37 per cent believing they are not. Also, it found that the research literature does not provide strong evidence that financial sanctions by themselves always have a positive effect on the behaviour of adults in social policies. As there is still a question mark over the effectiveness of fixed penalty notices in changing behaviours in the long term (it is argued that they do not tackle the underlying issues for non-attendance), it is worth considering undertaking further research into the long term effectiveness of fixed term penalties in the light of the experience of the pandemic.

- \* **Recommendation - Review and undertake further research into the use of fixed penalty notices and their impact on learner attendance patterns**

#### Improving learner experiences

A major strategy prior to the pandemic for improving attendance was based on an acknowledgement that attendance will improve if learners want to come to school and if they find what is offered engaging, interesting and relevant to them. Schools that had successfully improved attendance in the past have given particular attention to their curriculum offer and to improving pedagogy through professional development and research-informed practice. At a national level, this understanding formed a major part of the rationale behind curriculum reform and the development of the new Curriculum for Wales. All those consulted recognised the continuing importance of such curriculum reform and the related need for improving pedagogy. Even when consultees argued for 'no new initiatives' so that school staff could maximise the time they have for addressing the immediate post-pandemic needs of learners, they exempted curriculum reform from this request. They saw the new Curriculum for Wales, and the strong emphasis it gives to health and wellbeing, as 'part of the answer' rather than as an additional burden.

There was also a general feeling that aspects of the ALN reforms should help improve the attendance of these learners as the intention of the reforms is to place learners at the centre of the process of identifying needs and provision. Person-centred planning should lead to better understanding of what's important to the learner and help identify issues before they escalate and should also help with early intervention. Extended professional development opportunities<sup>xxxiv</sup> should also increase awareness of staff of the needs of these learners, for example resources for supporting learners with autism are available on the Autism Wales website<sup>xxxv</sup>. Additional funding for supporting the reforms and learners with ALN were announced recently<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

## Supporting learners in key stage 4: Vocational curriculum and transition to post-compulsory education and training (PCET)

The need to make the learning experience worthwhile and relevant is particularly important for older learners in key stage 4 whose attendance tends to be worse and who are more likely to become disengaged. This was the case before the pandemic, but the issue is reported to have become sharper since. The consensus about re-engaging these learners, especially those that are particularly 'hard to reach', is to ensure that once they and their families are contacted and engaged, then the learning experience on offer must be bespoke to the learner's needs and aspirations, and should include interesting and relevant vocational options. These vocational routes for learning should lead to worthwhile progression and career development.

Both the representatives of schools and colleges were of the view that vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, were the kind of provision that would re-engage a significant group of learners. However, such provision, because of its practical and experiential nature, tends to be more expensive than traditional classroom-based school provision. The availability of these curriculum arrangements was said to have decreased since specific funding for the 14-19 learning pathways initiative was discontinued around 2015, and currently is funded from a school's general budget.

Developing and funding a suite of well-understood, vocational options was one of the main suggestions raised during the review consultation to address short-term attendance challenges for the most disengaged key stage 4 students, but also as an important long-term strategy supporting the planned curriculum reforms and the associated reforms to qualification and examination practices. These vocational curriculum options should be made available to pupils of all aptitudes and abilities but would be likely to appeal particularly to those learners who need to re-engage following the experiences of the pandemic.

- \* **Recommendation - Explore resourcing further education institutions and work-based training providers to increase the availability of vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, for key stage 4 students**

Also, there is a potentially larger group of learners whose attendance may not be particularly poor but whose progress and motivation had been adversely affected. Although these learners are likely to progress to the next level of courses, they may struggle to complete them or to achieve as well as they might. Further education college representatives already report that more students entering college have skill shortfalls in basic study skills such as numeracy and essay writing for example. One suggestion is to explore providing these learners with the option to have more time to complete or re-sit their GCSE, vocational or A level courses. The availability of this option would reduce the worry of failure experienced by these students.

- \* **Recommendation - Explore further the provision of funding, flexibility and time scales for school, sixth form and college students to be able to complete their qualification courses**

#### Family engagement and community schools

A key strategy mentioned during the consultation, and features strongly in the research and inspection literature, is communicating, engaging and building strong relationships with the families of learners. This is especially important with all groups of vulnerable learners (disadvantaged and eligible for free school meals, with additional learning needs, or with English as an additional language) and underpins and strengthens other strategies mentioned already.

One way that successful schools achieve better engagement with families is through adopting a 'community school' approach. The aims of a community school have been described as being to:

- 'strengthen family and community engagement
- expand the use of their assets for the benefit of the community served by the school
- provide a range of services, including health and social services, through co-location or the provision of service hubs within the community'<sup>xxxvii</sup>

An important characteristic of community schools is therefore improving family engagement, particularly through being seen to be supporting learner wellbeing, both internally within the school but also by facilitating better access to external support services, and also by involving families more in the life of the school. To help them do this, most community schools employ 'family engagement officers' or similar staff. This was a recommendation of the recent Estyn report for schools to 'Employ family and community engagement staff to work with families, the community and wider partners.' The expansion of the community school model and the use of family engagement officers was also strongly supported by those consulted, who saw it in a wider context as contributing to the broad policy agenda of reducing educational inequalities. We will discuss in the concluding section 6 how the community schools model could also provide a basis for a unifying vision for improving learner engagement in the longer term. The use of such additional 'pastoral' staff is also a feature of best practice in Northern Ireland where they are called Family Liaison Officers, and in academies in England where there is a proposal to further roll out Attendance Mentors as they are called there<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

- \* **Recommendation - Consider how best to support and provide funding to enable all schools to employ family engagement staff to work with families and wider partners**

In the short term, the focus should be on providing additional funding that would ensure all schools can undertake the key task of family engagement during this difficult and busy period for schools. Without extra resource, those consulted believed that implementation of agreed best practice for tackling



absence would continue to be limited by workload issues and staff absences. We will return to the challenges of reduced staff capacity in section 5. Further research should also be undertaken and consideration given to the optimal arrangements for employing such staff in schools, for example whether family engagement officers are best employed by individual primary schools or deployed on a cluster basis.

### Youth work and the Youth engagement and progression framework

Youth work plays an important part in supporting young people<sup>xxxix</sup>. In particular, some youth workers act as lead workers for young people who are identified under the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework as being at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training, or who are 'not in education, employment or training', ('NEET'). For example they may help them and their families access a network of services, initiatives and provisions designed to help them not to become NEET. The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework<sup>xl</sup> was introduced in 2013 to reduce the number of young people who are NEET or are at risk of becoming NEET and the Framework guidance is currently being updated, as part of an overall strengthening of the Framework. The framework provides a useful staged structure to identify young people in need of support, establish what support available to them, and monitor their progress. The framework clarifies which service is responsible for coordinating the support available for each stage.

- \* **Recommendation - Consider how the Youth engagement and progression framework could be used in the context of community schools and universal family engagement officers**

### **Strategies for addressing COVID-19 related absence**

#### COVID-19 as an illness, self-isolation and school-directed absence

The health, safety and wellbeing of learners and staff are top priorities for all those consulted during this review. Much of the current extra workload for school leaders, teaching and support staff, and for local authority and central government officers, is associated with devising and implementing measures to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 in schools and to keep everyone safe. As the pandemic changes, policy advice and practice are constantly revised to meet new circumstances. Developing and evolving new approaches in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders is challenging and time consuming. Communicating the agreed approaches to learners and their families also takes extra time and effort. As the pandemic develops this work will continue to the best of everybody's ability and in the most effective way possible. In doing this it is essential to build on the collaborative approach that has characterised this effort to date. Effective partnership working and communication are key to ensuring this process is carried out as efficiently as possible.

Rules for isolating when a learner has been in contact with someone with COVID-19 or has tested positive are complex and have changed over time.

They have also been interpreted slightly differently in different local authorities and schools. These arrangements need to be kept under review and communicated clearly and consistently to learners, parents and families. It would be helpful to provide local authorities and schools with templates to help them do this, whenever the rules are changed.

- \* **Recommendation - Provide local authorities and schools with templates for communicating national policies including those relating to arrangements for self-isolation**

### Anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues

Welsh Government has funded several programmes that include a wide range of activities designed to help re-engage learners, overcome a sense of isolation, and to make the transition from lockdown back into schooling easier, for example the 'Summer of Fun'<sup>xli</sup>. See the Welsh Government policy 'Renew and Reform' for a summary of these funded initiatives.<sup>xlii</sup>

Most of those consulted reported an increase in problems associated with learner wellbeing, mental health and behaviour when pupils returned to school after the lockdown period. Where necessary, they arrange for specialist intervention from support agencies such as CAMHS, local authority counselling or behaviour teams. In some cases, schools may also negotiate a 'phased return' to school with learners and their families.

There was again however a general agreement that these services did not have the capacity to address the increased levels of demand in the system currently. Even where these services have been allocated extra resources, it was reported that it has been difficult for them to recruit extra staff, as these staff often require specialist skills and qualifications, and years of training. There are no obvious mechanisms (and no data) for supplying staff to 'cover' for absences or in response for increased demand in these services, although local authorities can to some extent re-structure their services and move staff to where they are most needed. It would therefore be useful as part of the broad context of the work around this review that Welsh Government engage in discussions with local authorities about the strategic capacity needs of their services as highlighted by the challenges of meeting current increased demands.

### Health-related anxieties

Some learner and staff absences are reported to be directly related to anxieties around catching COVID-19 in school. All school, local authority and government policies are designed to make schools safe places to be, but there is a tension between making sure that operational arrangements in school are such that they minimise transmission of the virus on the one hand and the desire on the other hand to 'return to normal' and avoid arrangements that may have negative educational and other wellbeing effects. There are tensions too between offering reassurance that everything is being done to minimise transmission (which would help those anxious about returning) and ensuring a normal smooth running of the school (which would reassure those

who are fed up with the inconveniences of overly stringent arrangements). In practice, schools have relatively limited room to manoeuvre in terms of policy and practice in that they must follow the current scientific advice. Clear communication and constant engagement with those that are anxious are the main strategies adopted, and these too take additional time and energy.

### Education-related anxiety

Another major reported source of anxiety for learners is related to schoolwork. Learners may be anxious about not being able to cope with school work any more, or not being able to 'catch up', possibly due to loss of skills or knowledge (real or imagined) during lockdown. In the short term, in order to address this issue, schools are offering a range of extra support for learners. Welsh Government has provided extra resources for employing additional staff to provide this support (the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) programme<sup>xliii</sup>) though there is anecdotal evidence that employing suitable teachers, teacher assistants or tutors to undertake this work has been difficult. There has been an evaluation of the effectiveness of the RRRS programme which is due to be published in summer 2022. Additional resources to support and provide career advice for exam year learners and for improving attendance specifically was announced in December 2021<sup>xliv</sup>. In the longer term, improving the learning experience for pupils including re-looking at the curriculum and pedagogy to encourage learners to want to attend school is the key strategy. There was full support during the review for continuing with curriculum and ALN reforms, as it was believed that these reforms would support the re-engagement of learners.

Most schools leaders and teachers are particularly worried about Year 10 and Year 11 pupils and those in the sixth form. Anxieties exist around returning to school work is reported to be a particular issue for some learners in these cohorts and is believed to be an important factor in the disengagement from school of these cohorts. In some cases this anxiety is due to fearing the requirements of qualifications (examinations or course work). In order to address this concern, extensive modularised learning materials to support examination revision has been made available on HWB and particularly on the WJEC website. There was some concern expressed during the consultation that these materials were not easy to find and it is now intended to rationalise and better organise and signpost these materials soon.

#### **\* Recommendation - Ensure plans for rationalising and signposting GCSE revision materials on the WJEC website are implemented**

Although a decision has been made and clearly communicated that there will be examinations in the summer 2022, there remains in practice a perceived uncertainty over the arrangements among teachers. Quite properly, contingency arrangements involving centre determined grades (CDGs) have also been made in case examinations have to be cancelled for health and safety reasons, such as a significant increase in the virus during the summer 2022. It was reported that as a result of this unintentional uncertainty, schools were preparing learners for both eventualities that is for examinations (for example arranging mock exams) and for CDG (for example ensuring detailed

marking of course work). The effect of this is to increase the pressure on both learners and teachers.

Many teaching professionals and educational commentators hope that there will be, in both the short and long term, a more balanced and varied approach to assessment which includes both teacher assessment and examinations, in particular recognising that different learners prefer different types of assessment. There is already a range of views about exams in 2022, with some in support and others preferring more teacher-based assessment. The experience of 2021 highlights that the CDG process introduces a range of different inequities (eg increasing the attainment gap, variation across centres, between schools and colleges, and so on), and create additional teacher burden at a time when the focus should be supporting their learners. Qualifications Wales are looking to introduce more types of assessment in the new qualifications being developed for the Curriculum for Wales.

### Blended learning

Despite the overall negative effect of the pandemic on many learners, home and distance learning has been successful for some groups of pupils, particularly those who have a predisposition for learning remotely and digitally, and had the resources and home support. Also, blended learning is an appropriate means for students to continue to learn during illness or phased return to school irrespective of the pandemic, although this possibility has become more of a practical option following the experience gained of managing blended learning during lockdown.

Many of those consulted wanted to take this line of thinking further, and while they believed that school was the best place for learners to be to learn and to be well and safe, they also acknowledged that for some (mainly older) learners, it would be appropriate for schools to find a way for them to learn through a managed blended learning approach. For example, on request and through negotiation and agreement by the school, a learner could attend school for part of the week, during which they could discuss progress face to face with a teacher and have further work set, attend a certain number of lessons and practical sessions, and benefit from wellbeing and pastoral sessions and from general socialising with peers, but the learner would also work digitally from home. It was felt that older learners especially should have a greater say in deciding when, where and how they learn, though a minimum of face-to-face contact was considered essential, not least for safeguarding reasons.

#### **\* Explore the need for a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning to address the needs of those who are not or cannot be present in schools**

As many teachers now have the skills required to organise blended learning, the barrier to this approach would be its resource and workload implications. Another barrier is that often such home study is not recorded as attendance in school, but as authorised absence, (although attendance code B could possibly be used in this context). It is therefore suggested that a review of

attendance policy and the use of registration codes, as included in the All Wales Attendance Framework<sup>xlv</sup>, be undertaken in this context, and by considering the evolving attendance policy landscape in the home countries and the research literature findings (see Appendix D). For example, agreed blended learning is coded as present in Northern Ireland and similar changes have been proposed but not agreed in England (the legislative frameworks for attendance in England and Wales are parallel and more prescriptive than for the other home countries). Such a change in coding would also mean that attendance records and analysis would be more meaningful during periods of school lockdown.

**\* Recommendation - Consider how attendance policy and records could be best adapted for use with blended learning**

Digital learning was generally considered more successful in the second school lockdown period than the first. There is research which found that more advantaged learners and their families had established more effective habits by the second lockdown, but disadvantaged learners had not done so, thus widening the gap in remote learning impacts. Other research notes that there are still learners with no access to devices, no internet and no home space to study.

By the second lockdown, most schools had developed effective digital learning arrangements. The extent to which elements of blended learning have continued after the return to on-site schooling varies considerably between schools<sup>xlvi</sup>. Schools understand that continuing with blended learning helps in supporting learners who are absent from school for whatever reason. However, while the majority of learners are in school, most schools have found it difficult for teachers to teach full classrooms and also prepare digital lessons and materials for remote learning for a minority of learners.

In a minority of cases, lessons are being recorded as a matter of course and can then be used by absent learners or for revision, though this approach still requires time from teachers to discuss with and set work for the absent learners. The schools that are most familiar with using digital and blended learning are those with previous experience of using digital materials on HWB and e-sgo<sup>xlvii</sup> for example or have a track record of professional development for staff on using digital technology. Those consulted thought it would be useful to establish a 'national digital school for Wales' or similar arrangement that would contain resources that all schools and learners could use as appropriate.

**\* Recommendation - As part of the wider development of a strategic digital and blended learning policy, explore establishing a national repository of teaching and learning materials for all school years as soon as possible**

## **Workload pressures and staffing capacity**

The suggestions made above on how schools and local authority support services can help learners re-engage with education and improve their attendance (by helping pupils progress academically as well as tackling their wellbeing and mental health issues) all involve the input of staff time and effort, especially if they are to be implemented rigorously and fully. They therefore constitute an increase in workload for staff. However, it was consistently reported that undertaking this extra workload has been particularly difficult during this period because of the effect of staff absences, which has resulted in limited staff capacity for schools as well as for local authority support services. In addition to ongoing teacher and staff absences (often because of contracting COVID-19 or needing to self-isolate), another difficulty has been sourcing enough supply staff to cover for the increased level of absences.

The exact extent of teacher absence is unknown, but is generally believed to have increased relative to pre-COVID-19 levels following the general return to school after the lockdown period. The reasons given for this increased teacher absence are similar to many of the reasons for learner absence and include illness from COVID-19 itself, long-COVID-19, self-isolation, COVID-19 related issues with their children or other dependent relatives, anxiety about catching COVID-19 in school, and various mental health issues. Cases of unvaccinated teachers not attending school during COVID-19 outbreaks were cited, although this did not appear to be a widespread issue.

The impact of more teacher absence is threefold. First, it has a negative effect on learner progress as the learners attending school are taught by non-specialists or by supply teachers they do not know. Second, regular teacher absences and the resulting routine changes may also disincentivise or demotivate learners. And thirdly, arranging cover further increases the administrative burdens on senior management teams and who may have to undertake some of the cover themselves.

Schools have found it particularly difficult to replace absent teachers for certain subjects such as Science, especially in Welsh-medium or rural schools. Appointing teachers in these specialist area was challenging prior to COVID-19, but is said to be even harder now. It was reported that these challenges varied considerably in extent between schools across the country. The workload challenge was felt to be particularly acute for smaller schools.

Those consulted much appreciated and approved of the scheme for employing newly qualified teachers (NQTs) who have not secured permanent employment on paid placements. This scheme has been extended from the autumn term to now cover the spring term. There was a belief that this scheme could usefully be further extended to the summer term and into the next academic year for the next cohort of newly qualified teachers (that is for those who are training this year). There are two rationales given for this suggestion. First, the student teachers who are training currently have had their initial teacher education disrupted and would benefit from additional experience and support in their induction year, if they do not secure full

employment (this is was the original rationale for the current scheme for the present cohort of NQTs). Second, extending the scheme would also help schools with their ongoing capacity challenges which are likely to continue into the next academic year (although this was not part of the original rationale for the scheme).

**\* Recommendation - Consider extending the scheme for employing NQTs who have not secured permanent employment to include the next cohort**

Senior school managers reported that recruiting teachers, and teaching assistants, to posts was particularly difficult currently. To ease this situation, it was suggested that schools would welcome greater flexibility in employment-based routes into qualified teacher status including encouraging a broader range of providers (there is currently one provider, the Open University, and the other accredited Welsh University-based partnership providers do not offer employment-based routes, though schools are involved with them for other routes) and a wider range of allowed subject specialisms (currently restricted to shortage areas). Consultees felt that this would help alleviate the current capacity challenges, though policy officers warned that commissioning new courses was expensive and time consuming under current accreditation arrangements.

**\* Recommendation - Explore the possibility of introducing more flexibility and more providers into employment-based and part-time routes to initial teacher training**

Specific challenges are reported for finding supply cover for teachers and teaching assistants. The main reason for the difficulty in finding supply teachers seems to be the steep increase in demand. Currently, there are some 4,200 supply teachers registered by the EWC<sup>xlvi</sup> and some 40 private agencies and a few local authority still have their own schemes. Some 25 of the agencies have voluntarily joined the Welsh Government's NPS framework which guarantees better pay, terms and conditions for supply teachers. A recently announced cooperation agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru includes a commitment to removing a market approach to the supply teacher system<sup>xli</sup> though policy officers highlighted difficulties in achieving this as both agencies as providers and schools as consumers had rights set out in primary legislation.

Overall, the school leaders consulted did not see an easy way to address the current short-term teacher supply challenge but rather see the solution to the system's capacity problem in increasing the capacity of support services (such as social, youth, careers, counselling, education welfare or similar services), so that these services could better support schools' efforts to re-engage learners in education or training. However, as mentioned earlier, these support services have their own capacity challenges, for similar reasons to the school and teacher supply issue. Broadly speaking, they too have increased workload, ongoing uncertainties because of COVID-19 related reductions in workforce, and generally no quick mechanisms for increasing

supply of suitably trained workers. For example, we heard that the capacity of the youth service was 'stretched'.

Despite these serious concerns about the system's capacity, most of the professionals consulted thought that now is the time to re-evaluate past practices and to introduce or accelerate the introduction of new practices, rather than returning to previous ways of working that may not have been the best or have now been overtaken because of the changed circumstances following the pandemic. Many thought that we should build on these successes in a strategic way, while also doing as much as possible to alleviate the most pressing capacity and workload issues.

The Welsh Government Managing Workload and Reducing Bureaucracy working group has a wide diversity of representation and has continued to meet regularly during the pandemic period. The working group has identified around 15 action points as part of its work in developing a workload charter. A few of these actions are related to the COVID-19 pandemic and are in line with the findings of this review, though most of the issues being addressed are ongoing concerns that existed prior to the pandemic, including issues such as the importance of avoiding duplication in data collection and multiple teacher surveys.

In summary, there are staffing capacity challenges at teacher, teacher assistant and local authority support staff levels. More qualified teachers are required to cover for absent teachers and to staff various 'catch up' initiatives for tutoring learners. More teaching assistants are needed for supporting the wide range of wellbeing, mental health and family engagement initiatives that schools would like to undertake. More local authority support staff are needed to help schools address a backlog of acute and persistent learner wellbeing and mental health issues. The capacity challenges are inter-related, so action to address shortages for one category would relieve the pressure on the others. Teachers and support staff require specialist qualifications and there are few quick solutions to addressing these capacity limitations, though we suggest that the initiative of using unemployed newly qualified teachers could be usefully extended. Funding the employment of more teacher assistants, particularly to carry out family engagement work, seems the most practical suggestion for the short term.



## Conclusions and recommendations

There is little doubt among those consulted that the education system as a whole, including schools, local authority support services and central government, is working hard to improve attendance by tackling the underlying reasons for absence, both those that are new to COVID-19 and those that existed before but have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This was also the finding of the inspectorate<sup>1</sup>. There is much good will, better cooperation and interagency relationships, and additional funding and guidance.

The review has not found any major gaps at a strategic policy level, and the main answers to improving attendance seem therefore to lie in the re-establishment, extension and better coordination of existing best practice and policies. A few adjustments to policy at an operational level have been suggested as indicated by the recommendations made throughout the report.

Nevertheless, the extra workload issues and capacity challenges identified in this report mean that there are no easy or quick solutions to improving attendance. Hence, addressing workload pressure and increasing staff capacity is the major theme emerging from the review. As this applies to support services as well as for schools, tackling this central concern also requires discussion with local authorities on their strategic capacity needs and that of their services. Addressing the workload and staff capacity issues requires a strategic approach, more efficient partnership working between services and agencies, effective communication, and more professional development and sharing of best practice.

Common themes around what strategies would further help the system work more coherently emerged from the review. The importance of following these strategic principles was consistently stressed by a wide range of those consulted. Most of these common themes represent continuities or natural developments of current policy, including continuing with the current curriculum and ALN reform agendas, taking a whole system approach, focusing on learner and staff wellbeing, with a particular focus on taking a more learner-centred or personalised approach to learning, including introducing more 'blended' or distance learning opportunities, particularly for older learners where appropriate. Introducing and developing these various ways of working together represent developing an educational culture along a direction of travel broadly agreed to before and during the pandemic.

In addition, this report suggests that family engagement, and a 'community school' approach to achieving this engagement, has the potential of becoming an important unifying policy and a key part of a long term vision for tackling the underlying causes of educational underperformance that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This community focus for schools explicitly addresses the coordination and partnership working between services and agencies at a local level. In the best cases, such schools know their learners and their families well and have family engagement officers who can help to orchestrate the support available, and ensure that local knowledge of specific learner needs are met.

In conclusion, the review found that there is a growing consensus among learners, educational practitioners and policy makers around the most important underlying reasons for learner absence, though there is more to learn through further research and analysis about this understanding and the resulting practice. The reasons for absence are complex and multi-faceted as discussed in this review, but the most fundamental causes are believed to be related to learner wellbeing and mental health, and to their attitude to learning and to school (a concept variously described in the literature as school engagement or connectivity). In practice, the ways in which schools try to improve this connectivity is by building trusting relationships, by engagement and communication, consulting actively, seeking and acting on feedback, providing responsive and relevant learning opportunities, and crucially, understanding and trying to help families overcome the socioeconomic and other barriers to learning, by working in liaison with a range of external support services and agencies. Improving school engagement requires a personalised, empathetic and flexible approach tailored to each learner and family and that recognises their individual circumstances. This grouping of understandings and activities is often characterised as a community school approach, which sees improving attendance not in isolation but as part of a broader strategy for helping learners to achieve their best. Though existing before COVID-19, the experiences of the pandemic has strengthened this group of beliefs. In policy terms, it seems sensible to build on this growing understanding that aligns in broad terms both with current policy direction and literature findings.

## **Summary of recommendations for Welsh Government**

### **Family engagement and community schools**

- \* Consider how best to support and provide funding to enable all schools to employ family engagement staff to work with families and wider partners
- \* Consider how the Youth engagement and progression framework could be used in the context of community schools and universal family engagement officers

### **Supporting learners in key stage 4**

- \* Explore resourcing further education institutions and work-based training providers to increase the availability of vocational routes and taster courses, and work experience, for key stage 4 students
- \* Explore further the provision of funding, flexibility and time scales for school, sixth form and college students to be able to complete their qualification courses
- \* Ensure plans for rationalising and signposting GCSE revision materials on the WJEC website are implemented

### **Blended learning**

- \* Explore the need for a strategic approach to digital teaching and learning to address the needs of those who are not or cannot be present in schools
- \* As part of the wider development of a strategic digital and blended learning policy, explore establishing a national repository of teaching and learning materials for all school years as soon as possible
- \* Consider how attendance policy and records could be best adapted for use with blended learning

### **Workload and staffing**

- \* Consider extending the scheme for employing NQTs who have not secured permanent employment to include the next cohort
- \* Explore the possibility of introducing more flexibility and more providers into employment-based and part-time routes to initial teacher training

### **Communication and sharing best practice**

- \* Share and disseminate best practice for improving attendance, including how schools can best engage with learners and their families, by adapting, re-packaging and re-issuing relevant guidance and promoting them through targeted professional development
- \* Provide local authorities and schools with templates for communicating national policies including those relating to arrangements for self-isolation

### **Data and research**

- \* Undertake further research into attendance patterns that would help to identify learners who may be in danger of being excluded

- \* Discuss the definition, recording and analysis of attendance data with similar countries in order to learn from the latest practice and to consider how comparison of data and policy can be further facilitated
- \* Review the definition of persistent absence and the related trigger points for interventions
- \* Consider how best to collect, analyse and publish education staff attendance in more detail
- \* Explore developing and publishing a set of metrics for learner experience that include data on teacher absence, the use of supply cover, and the availability of subject specialists for example
- \* Review and undertake further research into the use of fixed penalty notices and their impact on learner attendance patterns

# Appendices

## Terms of reference

1. To analyse and interpret data sources on current attendance/non-attendance rates in Welsh schools.
2. To make contact with key organisations and individuals within the education system and to collect intelligence on the emerging situation and what measures/interventions are needed to better re-engage learners to avoid them becoming NEET in future.
3. The organisations/individuals to include Local Authorities/Regional Education Consortia/Estyn/ NAEL/ the Further Education Sector/Work-Based Learning Providers, the Youth Service, the Careers Service and the Equity and Inclusion Higher Education Collaborative Research Network.
4. To hold focus groups with learners.
5. To undertake some 'deep dives' in one local authority area in each of the four regions of Wales to gather information from head-teachers, Family Engagement Officers and Education Welfare Officers.
6. To consider UK/international evidence in this area.
7. To work with colleagues in the Education Directorate/SHELL to consider the evidence gathered and to agree recommendations to be brought to the Welsh Government.
8. These recommendations to include consideration of how additional support could be offered to pupils whose poor attendance and lack of engagement may have resulted in lower than expected examination outcomes. This additional support should seek to support their progression as learners and avoid them becoming NEET.

## Consultations contributing to the review and methodology

To meet the review aims, a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches were undertaken. The following research activities were completed:

- Analysis of available Welsh Government and other data on learner attendance in Wales
- A review of academic and grey literature - see appendix D
- Semi structured Teams consultation interviews using interview questions agreed with welsh Government officers - see below for full list of consultees
- Case study Teams discussions with staff from 8 schools - see below for list of schools

The consultations were carried out mainly in November and December 2021 as follows:

Focus group discussions with:

Learners (two meetings facilitated by Children in Wales)

National Academy for Educational Leadership associates  
Secondary headteachers  
Local authority Directors of Education (three meetings)  
Regional consortia CEOs  
Education Welfare Officers  
Gypsy, Roma and Traveller local authority support officers  
Home nations attendance policy officers

Discussions with representatives of national education organisations:

Estyn  
Qualifications Wales  
Children's Commissioner for Wales  
Colegau Cymru  
Teacher unions and associations

Individual interviews with the following:

Tegwen Ellis - Director of the National Academy for Educational Leadership  
Robin Hughes - Education consultant  
Dr Carmel Conn - Collaborative research network lead  
Dr Jennifer Hampton - Welsh Education Data Laboratory, WISERD Education Data Lab  
Shirley Rogers - CEO of Careers Wales  
Jonathan Angell, Headteacher, Eastern High School, Cardiff

Interviews with Welsh Government policy officials on:

Education statistics  
Youth engagement  
Young person's guarantee  
Community schools  
Knowledge and Analytical Services  
Education Other Than At School and Elective Home Education  
Additional Learning Needs  
Blended learning  
Assessment  
Teacher education  
Teacher supply and workload

Case study discussions were carried out in January 2022 with the following schools:

Ysgol Bontnewydd, Gwynedd  
Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn, Gwynedd  
Ysgol Llys Hywel, Carmarthenshire  
St John Lloyd Catholic Secondary School, Carmarthenshire  
Parc Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taff  
Pontypridd High School, Rhondda Cynon Taff  
Usk Church in Wales Primary School, Monmouthshire  
Chepstow High, Monmouthshire

## Case studies

Case study discussions were carried out in January 2022 with the following schools identified by their local authority as showing good practice in improving attendance during this period. The local authorities were chosen to provide a regional, socioeconomic and linguistic spread, and contained two authorities (Monmouthshire and Rhondda Cynon Taff) that have demonstrated consistently high learner attendance rates across the pandemic period including when taking local infection rates into account.

### **Ysgol Bontnewydd, Gwynedd** - 200 pupils, primary school

Ysgol Bontnewydd's approach to improving pupil attendance is to be consciously constructive and non-punitive in all its dealings with learners and parents. Senior learners aim to make the school a welcoming place for learners, to avoid any possible negativity attaching to attendance, and to establish a close and trusting relationships with families. For example, children are encouraged to contribute ideas actively about what they should study and how they could learn about topics. Parents are also contacted for their suggestions, for example on the nature of school trips. As another example of this constructive approach, the school does not publish class attendance rates or offer certificates for good attendance anymore, as it feels that this can be a disincentive for some learners.

During the pandemic, the school built on its good relationships with parents, supported them and kept them fully informed. In particular, the school successfully encouraged parents to keep their children at home and to test them for the virus when they first showed early symptoms of the illness. By helping to keep the circulation of the virus as low as possible in school in this way, and by reinforcing high expectations for hygiene, they have been able to achieve consistently excellent attendance rates of over 90%, often in the high 90s%, even when the pandemic was at its most virulent in the local area. This approach has also contributed to the attendance of teachers being high during the pandemic.

The school has prioritised learners' wellbeing when they returned to school after lockdown or after any significant absences. They understand the challenges and anxieties that the pandemic has caused learners and their families, and have established nurture groups to support individual learners. 'Lego therapy' sessions have proved particularly helpful for some children and gives them an opportunity to talk informally with teachers about their worries.

### **Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn, Gwynedd** - 560 pupils, all-age school

The school gave examples of pupils whose daily routines had changed to such extent during lockdown - mainly staying up late at night talking with friends or gaming or using the internet and getting up late in the morning - which they found returning to a 'normal' school attendance routine very difficult. These learners found that their communication and social skills had also been negatively affected during this period. The greatest challenge in these respects has been presented by the older students in key stage 4.

The school believed that its approach to lockdown helped to make the transition back to face-to-face schooling as smooth as possible for all learners. The school organised 'live' lessons for learners from the start of lockdown. Senior managers sought feedback from learners and their families on how the arrangements were working through regular questionnaires. They listened carefully to this feedback and adapted the provision to make sure that it was not too overwhelming. Form teachers took a 'register' daily based on engagement with the digital provision and immediately contacted parents of those learners who were causing concern.

Teachers were helped in this engagement work by two 'cymorthyddion cynhwysiant' (inclusion assistants) who previously had been employed by the school as part of its inclusion unit. These teaching assistants contacted parents regularly, especially of vulnerable learners, and helped them with practical issues including delivering meals in some cases. The relationships established during this difficult time helped to keep the number of learners who had a traumatic lockdown to a minimum. It is estimated that around 80% of pupils had benefitted from the work of the inclusion unit at some point or other. As a result of these strategies, attendance is now improving and is around 89% compared with around 95% before COVID-19, despite the high levels of COVID-19 related illnesses in the locality.

### **Ysgol Llys Hywel, Carmarthenshire - 160 pupils, primary school**

Ysgol Llys Hywel is a small, rural primary school that has maintained an attendance rate of 94% after lockdown, which compares well with the school's pre-COVID-19 target of 96%. Frequent communications with parents emphasise the importance of attendance and positive engagement with families is a core feature of the school's approach to improving pupil attendance.

Accurate and consistent recording of attendance is considered a high priority at Ysgol Llys Hywel. It is the first step in a rigorous approach to attendance which includes early follow up of non-attendance. A phone call is made to the home from the first day of absence. Good attendance is rewarded during assembly periods, but this initiative has been adapted during the pandemic so that absence due directly to illness is discounted from the calculations.

School procedures include a rigorous fortnightly whole-school review of attendance. A graduated approach to non-attendance is employed and the school works closely with the local authority support services. Pupils with attendance lower than an 85% cut off figure or are suspected to be in any danger are referred to the School Safeguarding and Attendance Team and to Education welfare officers. The school is proactive in referring to the Team Around the Family for additional support. Support plans for pupils and families are implemented quickly. A flexible approach is taken that takes into account the needs of each individual learner and family, for example, arrangements can be made for blended learning and school work could be delivered through Teams where necessary.



**St John Lloyd Catholic School, Carmarthenshire** - 480 pupils, secondary school

Key features of St John Lloyd Catholic School's approach to improving attendance are establishing a culture that promotes pupils' wellbeing, creating excellent relationships with parents and families, and working closely with local authority support services. There is a graduated approach to tackling absence. Pupils with attendance between 95%-90% are mentored individually by teachers, attendance between 85%-90% triggers support from the school's attendance lead officer, and attendance under 85% means that referrals are made to the local authority School Safeguarding and Attendance Team and Education welfare officers are involved.

The school actively reviews its quality of teaching and curriculum offer in order to engage pupils and make them want to attend school. Option blocks in key stage 4 are adapted annually to tailor them to learners' wishes and the choices include Prince's Trust courses. Vocational options are available in collaboration with the local further education college, and as a result of all these measures no Year 11 leavers have been identified recently as not in education employment or training (NEET).

During the first lockdown period, the school developed an extensively used 'pupil online support team' (POST) which provided a way for pupils who wished to do so to maintain a regular contact with an adult they trusted. POST evolved during the second lockdown period, so that in addition form tutors made weekly contact with all pupils. POST has continued to be in use and is used as a support mechanism for learners with a range of anxieties that have continued after learners have returned to school.

The low rate of referrals to external services indicates that the school makes extensive efforts to improve attendance prior to referral. The school's attendance lead officer uses a range of supportive and flexible strategies to re-engage pupils. For example, pupils may be offered a later start to the day. These learners would be met at registration and taken to the school's pastoral hub. A purposely designed new room - the 'cwtch lles' - has been recently added to the school's resources available for facilitating this type of work. These pupils are also offered a 'phased curriculum' of a limited number of lessons or a modified curriculum if required.

**Parc School, Rhondda Cynon Taff** - 220 pupils, primary school, 39% free school meals

Prior to the pandemic, Parc School had developed a vision that centred around ensuring that the school environment and culture encouraged pupils to want to attend school and learn. The staff wanted to 'get learners wellbeing right' and felt that the key to this was to get to know and understand each family well, and offer them help to overcome barriers to learning where necessary. A Family engagement officer (FEO) has been in post for four years and has been central to this process.

The role of the FEO is wide ranging and includes, meeting and greeting each child and family as they arrive at school every day. Each new family is visited at home when a pupil first attends school, and school approaches and policies, including the attendance policy, are explained clearly from the outset. Each day, the parents of absent pupils are texted and asked for an explanation, and rung individually if there is no adequate response. If necessary, families are visited at home and offered support to improve attendance, such as adapting morning routines temporarily. Nurture groups are used to help pupils re-integrate back into school where needed.

Since the pandemic, the school has built on its close relationships with families and has continued to try to help them during this difficult time. For example, the school has delivered food parcels, Christmas presents and wellbeing packs where needed, and has run parent workshops and book clubs. The school is seen by families as a trusted source of information regarding the pandemic, and parents often ask the school for help and advice. A parent council is supported and the views of families on school procedures are sought through regular questionnaires.

As a result of the above measures, pupil attendance, though not as high as before the pandemic (around 95%), has been consistently over 90%. It is now unusual for the school to need to contact families because they proactively contact the school to explain absences. The school feels that this demonstrates the effectiveness of its supportive approach and its emphasis on building trusting relationships with families rather than using more heavy-handed approaches, such as sending formal letters. Pupils are rewarded for improved attendance rather than for the absolute level of their attendance.

### **Pontypridd High School, Rhondda Cynon Taff** - 860 pupils, secondary school

Before the pandemic, the school had been working hard to improve attendance and felt it had been making progress. Attendance had been steadily increasing towards a target of 94%. However, the effect of the pandemic on attendance at Pontypridd High has been to slow this progress and reduce attendance. The greatest effect has been seen in Year 11, with many of these students suffering from anxiety and stress, while in contrast there have been no long term absenteeism in Year 7.

The school undertakes detailed analysis of its attendance data, which shows that there attendance for learners eligible for free school meals has been significantly worse than for other pupils. Another pattern has been identified that shows that pupils who did not engage well with school work during lockdown are those who are finding it most difficult to return to full attendance now. Overall, attendance has dropped to around 91%, once absence due directly to COVID-19 has been disaggregated from the figures.

Senior leaders' central approach for dealing with the pandemic, is to build on and extend the good relationships established with families and support agencies prior to the pandemic. This included regular and detailed communication with parents. A wide range of ancillary workers from the school and from external support agencies were used to support learners and

their families that were experiencing difficulties, including counsellors, youth workers and emotional literacy support assistants (ELSA). This work continued when it was time to help pupils in readjusting to physical school attendance. As before the pandemic, making the school an attractive place to attend also continues to be a key school strategy for improving pupil attendance. For example, the option choices at key stage 4 are designed to be as relevant as possible and include vocational and Prince's Trust options.

Pre-COVID-19 attendance improvement practices have continued to be important for the school, including carrying out detailed analyses of attendance spreadsheets for early identification of attendance issues and intervention with individual pupils. There is a graduated response, coded red, amber and green. Access to Teams sessions and packs of teaching materials are prepared for learners who miss a lot of school, such as those refusing to attend because of raised anxiety. Previous practices have been adapted where this is considered necessary. For example, prize giving for attendance has continued but has been adapted so that pupils are now entered into a good attendance Christmas prize draw after discounting direct COVID-19 related absences.

### **Usk Church in Wales school, Monmouthshire - 275 pupils, primary school**

Usk School has found that implementing pre-COVID-19 good practice during the current period is important. Administrative staff and wellbeing practitioners are key to identifying and following up any absences immediately (additional Welsh Government funding has enabled some of these previously part-time staff to be made full-time). Pupils are contacted if absences persist and staff emphasise how much the school community misses them and would like to see them. This approach usually works and pupils are keen to return when they are better. Senior managers appreciate monthly meetings with the local authority Education welfare service. The meetings help to keep attendance high on the school's agenda and to structure and organise decisions. Individual cases are discussed and actions for the school and for the welfare service are agreed and recorded.

The school has evolved its approach and now employs a more supportive way of dealing with absence than before the pandemic. For example, they do not have an 'attendance cup' anymore as they do not want to encourage children who are genuinely ill to come to school or feel guilty if they do not. They appreciate that in a rural catchment that some children cannot get to school if their parents are unable to take them. The school strongly emphasises the importance of good attendance in all its communications with parents, and try hard to build an ethos that is welcoming. Engaging with parents and regular communication with them are high priorities.

The governing body also takes an active role in encouraging good attendance and the senior management team meet fortnightly with parent governors. To help governors understand the attendance data, senior managers have disaggregated COVID-19 related absences from the overall attendance data to show what attendance would have been without the pandemic. This allows

comparisons to be made more straight-forwardly with attendance data from before to the pandemic. Attendance currently is around 93% compared with just over 96% before the pandemic, and the disaggregated data is now steadily increasing towards the previous value.

### **Chepstow High School, Monmouthshire** - 850 pupils, secondary school

A Family liaison officer has been at the heart of Chepstow High's approach to improving family engagement and pupil attendance before, during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Two members of the senior management team had previously worked together at another school and had seen the advantages of this approach. Getting 'the right person for the job' was considered a key factor in the success of this approach - they had learned that the family liaison officer needs to have credibility in the local community and to know it well.

Senior leaders believe passionately in the importance of the school staff understanding the needs of the families in their catchment so that they can gain their trust and help them to overcome any barriers to their children's learning and the family liaison officer is central to this process. As a result of identifying the individual needs of the families in this way, the school has been able to help with supporting mental health issues and also helping with practical and financial problems such as providing uniform for pupils, and even buying a bed for a family in one case with the support of local businessmen.

Some of other factors that the school feels that are essential in improving attendance are: strong leadership and a relentless focus on attendance improvement; clear processes that are well understood by both parents and school staff; a whole-team approach involving all aspects of the school's pastoral team, including the ALNCo and the learning coaches; good relationships with external agencies including the police, and other schools as well as with local authority services and the town council; and improving the quality of teaching and the extra-curricular provision.

As a result of these approaches, attendance at Chepstow is now at around 92%, down only a little from pre-COVID-19 levels of around 95%. The decrease in attendance levels is greater for those learners who are eligible for free school meals and for Year 11 students in particular.

## Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the context of education research in general and for research into learner attendance in particular. The experiences of learners, families and staff during and in the aftermath of the pandemic has affected many aspects of learners' education, often in new ways, and has exacerbated existing challenges. Patterns of learner attendance have changed in the short term, and we do not know yet whether these changes will have a lasting effect, or if they do persist what are the underlying reasons for them, and to what extent previously identified best practice are still valid. Hence, it is unsurprising that the impact of the pandemic on learner attendance and on strategies for improving attendance are issues that the research and grey literature are only beginning to address and evaluate.

In this context, I am thankful to the Welsh Government Information, Library and Archive service for undertaking a search of literature on pupil attendance during the return to school following COVID-19 lockdowns. This was a high level search covering the last two years. The results included full text reports, government documents, papers, journal articles, news, blogs and web pages, which were categorised by priority and by date published. The full search results are in the form of a matrix available here - <https://documents.hf.wales.gov.uk/id:A38113140/document/versions/published>

Much of the literature found relates to the impact of COVID-19 in general rather than on attendance in particular, although attendance is often referred to in passing. For example, in Wales, the Senedd research briefing 'Back to school: education in the time of COVID-19'<sup>li</sup> lists the following potential impacts:

- 'lost learning' meaning pupils could underperform academically and have their long term prospects affected
- a loss of confidence in the examination and assessment system
- long term reductions in school attendance, a factor which we know is key to educational outcomes
- difficult transitions between school years and from primary to secondary
- challenges in re-engaging learners and addressing low motivation
- an unhelpful 'catch up' narrative about lost learning placing unnecessary psychological pressure on children and young people
- a negative effect on learners' ability and confidence to communicate in Welsh where they haven't been able to do so at home

Much of the research relates to the early stages of the pandemic, for example to the impact of lockdown and to initial efforts to encourage learners to return to school, including guidance on practical matters such as how best to reopen schools, see for example the NFER publication 'Returning pupils to school'<sup>lii</sup>. In 'A multi-tiered systems of support blueprint for re-opening schools following COVID-19 shutdown' Christopher A Kearney and Joshua Childs<sup>liii</sup> discuss multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) model that may serve to balance student educational progress with health and safety concerns. The article

identifies four main domains of functioning (adjustment, traumatic stress, academic status, health and safety) across three tiers of support (universal, targeted, intensive).

Any analysis of attendance data that goes beyond simple summary also related to the early stages of the pandemic, see for example the Education Policy Institute report, 'School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening'<sup>liv</sup> which shows how school attendance rates varied over a brief time after reopening in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and analyses the extent to which attendance varied across local authorities in Wales and Scotland. The report identifies variation across local authorities and countries, partly explained by a generally lower attendance in areas with high infection, but also identifies that the relationship between overall case numbers and school attendance is imperfect and may be a function of the age distribution of cases.

Some of the general reviews of the impact of the pandemic mention reasons for non-attendance. For example, Ofsted note in their report 'Education recovery in schools: autumn 2021'<sup>lv</sup> that schools say that much school absence is for reasons related to COVID-19, including:

- pupils testing positive for COVID-19
- COVID-19 related anxiety among both parents and pupils
- poorer mental health among pupils as a result of the pandemic
- parents rescheduling or rearranging term-time holidays
- children having low resilience due to setbacks or illness

They also said that there was more COVID-19 related absences among disadvantaged pupils, pupils with SEND and specific year groups and that leaders are tackling this through family support, designated staff members, follow-up phone calls or home visits, and clubs for those whose attendance is particularly low.

In 'Impact of COVID-19 2019 on school attendance problems' Gina Nathwani Adeel Shoaib el al.<sup>lvi</sup> identify that there are currently no studies directly addressing the effect of COVID-19 and school attendance problems (SAPs) on academic performance, or child mental health and functioning. However, they say children with SAPs seem to be more at risk of mental health issues, which may increase during the pandemic. They distinguish between four types of SAPs: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school exclusion.

The two most common themes in this research on the impact of the pandemic is the negative effect on learner wellbeing and mental health, and a concern that vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected. For example, the evidence surveyed in the House of Commons Research Briefing Paper 'Coronavirus and schools'<sup>lvii</sup> identified disparities in young people's home learning experiences during lockdown, and raises particular concerns about the impact on disadvantaged children. In England, the Education Endowment Foundation publishes a rolling summary of domestic and international research on the impact of the pandemic, 'Best evidence on impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment'<sup>lviii</sup>, which finds that the research examined consistently

shows that the current cohort of pupils have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups, and that there is a large and growing attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils.

Anxiety and mental health issues were widely reported to have increased during the pandemic. For example, the Mental Health Foundation reported that 'teenagers' mental health under severe pressure as pandemic continues'<sup>lix</sup>. Professor Ann John, Professor of Public Health and Psychiatry at Swansea University, is quoted as saying that 'the pandemic has exposed the deep inequalities in our society'. Many studies have shown the greater impact and widening gaps in mental health difficulties, educational attainment and more severe financial consequences for the young and those in living in poverty. In particular in Wales, the School Health Research Network (SHRN) carried out its two-yearly Primary School Student Health and Wellbeing Survey in 2021<sup>lx</sup>. The findings show large increases in clinically significant emotional difficulties and a clear increase in 'average scores' for emotional difficulties when compared with the similar 2019 survey<sup>lxi</sup> (while recognising the methodological changes made to enable the 2021 survey to be carried out in line with COVID-19 social distancing measures).

The association between anxiety and poor school attendance is explored by the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health<sup>lxii</sup>. Their findings from a systematic review of the literature suggest that anxiety may be associated with absence from school, including overall absenteeism, unexcused absence/truancy, and school refusal. However, they also identify a lack of high quality research in this field as well as little longitudinal evidence. This means that although anxiety and school absence may be related, we do not know whether anxiety comes before school absence, or vice versa. Nor do we know whether there is a causal relationship between them. They also note that there is little research that focused on associations between anxiety and overall absenteeism, or excused/medical absences, despite the latter being the most common type of absence in the UK and internationally.

The international research has similar findings regarding wellbeing and mental health. For example, the US Department of Education<sup>lxiii</sup> found that many learners struggle with mental health challenges that impact on their access to and participation in learning, and that these challenges are often misunderstood and can lead to behaviours that are inconsistent with school or program expectations. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, accelerating the need to provide school-based mental health support. They concluded that their top priority is to prioritise Wellbeing for Each and Every Child, Student, Educator, and Provider.

Where the research on wellbeing and mental health comes to conclusions regarding ways forward it is emphasised that promoting inclusion was key. For example, the Institute of Education<sup>lxiv</sup> discusses the danger in the aftermath of the pandemic of focusing on 'catch up' learning for the relatively advantaged and neglecting the long-term health, wellbeing, and competency benefits of inclusive education for all students, especially those who are poor and 'near poor'. The blog refers to the Institute's *Wellbeing and Behaviour: Identifying interventions for positive participation for young people at risk of*

*exclusion in school* study that analysed the relative importance of a range of factors concerning the social and economic backgrounds of children, as well as individual characteristics. While many of the factors were found to be important, 'school connectedness' was identified as a highly significant protective factor. School connectedness is a composite measure of items addressing whether children like school, think it worthwhile, are happy or unhappy at school, and whether they find school interesting. The study concluded that there is an urgent need to support schools in helping shape the child's perception of school and how it matches their needs and interests.

Some of the international research challenged fundamental assumptions. In 'Absenteeism Is the Wrong Student Engagement Metric to Use Right Now'<sup>lxv</sup> Sara Johnson, Annette Anderson & Ruth R. Faden consider whether we need a better measure for school accountability to promote educational equity. They suggest that we need to supplement absence-based school accountability measures with those that capture meaningful participation in learning, regardless of where and when it happens. Many students are still learning outside physical classrooms. As a result, they say, accountability metrics must evolve to capture students' participation, not just their presence, in school. By refocusing school accountability metrics to capture not just barriers to attendance but barriers to meaningful participation in learning, it is possible to reimagine ways to engage those typically called 'at risk' to become active agents in their own learning.

Jaymes Pyne, Elizabeth Vaade and Eric Grodsky in 'Why student absences aren't the real problem in America's 'attendance crisis''<sup>lxvi</sup> suggest that the attendance crisis in the US is about more than students missing class, but rather is a reflection of family and community crises students face – such as being evicted from the family apartment, fearing for their safety in their neighborhood or suffering an illness. They say that their evidence suggests unexcused absences are problematic, but for a different reason than people often think. Absence from school, and especially unexcused absence, matters mainly as a signal of many crises children and their families may be facing. It matters less as a cause of lower student achievement due to missed instruction. How researchers and the public choose to think of school absences matters for educational policy. National, state and school district attendance policies typically hold schools and families accountable for all of the days children miss, regardless of whether they were excused or unexcused absences. These policies assume that missing school for any reason harms children academically because they are missing classroom instruction. They also assume that schools will be able to effectively intervene to increase academic achievement by reducing student absences. The researchers find neither to be the case. As a result, these attendance policies end up disproportionately punishing families dealing with out-of-school crises in their lives and pressuring schools who serve them to get students to school more often. The research concludes by suggesting using unexcused absence from school as a signal to channel resources to the children and families who need them most.



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